Catch Your Breath
by Liangnui

Summary

FF.Net Summary: "Inspired by Silver Queen's "Dreaming of Sunshine." Ripples turn into waves and crash upon the shores of what is and what could be, and I was just someone else who got pulled under. I didn't realize that even a drowning person makes waves of their own. A SI OC story."

Cross-post for formatting shenanigans and discussion. Rating based on language.

- Inspired by Dreaming of Sunshine by Silver Queen
Chapter Summary

Hapless Idiot: Be reborn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What happens when you die?

Bit of a question for the ages, isn’t it? It’s one of those questions that’s followed my ancestors around ever since the first one dropped dead of a bad banana or something, and it’s pretty hard to say that there’s ever going to be a definitive answer. I’m not convinced that that Far Side cartoon was right, what with the surgeons faking out some poor guy under anesthesia, but whatever the cliché Hallmark thing that’s supposed to happen after death is, it didn’t happen to me.

Well, actually, since my family was varying degrees of Protestant Christian or Buddhist or some variation in between (don’t ask), I don’t think we really came to a consensus other than to say that we’d probably be reunited with grandpa and grandma and everyone else that died before us. Given that I was twenty-going-on-twenty-one last I remember, I figured I’d have a lot of ancestors probably demanding to know why I didn’t have a boyfriend yet, or maybe others wanting to know why I only got three-fourths of the way through a non-medical degree before dying. Sure, I wanted to be a teacher and got pretty close for being only two years out of high school, but I’m not sure my distant ancestors really cared and I’m almost glad I didn’t meet some of them—every family has its crazy people and some of them scare the crap out of me to this day.

For the record, my death was boring, pointless, and probably had people huddling in groups and nodding to each other about how expected it was. Doesn’t matter too much what it was—fact is, I still don’t know what happened. I was sitting at home watching TV, and then nothing.

That’s all in the past now, anyway. After all, I’m dead. Didn’t end up meeting any of those relatives—and I’m regretting some of that—before being dumped into some warm, if boring and occasionally thumping, darkness to await judgment day. Maybe? I’m not particularly religious in any organized sense—never have been—but I figured that’d be it for me and I’d…I dunno, just hang around. Maybe get ground up into the force which moves the planes of reality—yes, I’m a passing fan of Dungeons and Dragons and you can shut up now, because the fate of the Faithless is no goddamn joke when you’re possibly qualified for it. It was boring, but probably better than eternal damnation for not being a particularly good or bad person. Purgatory doesn’t seem to involve a lake of fire, and I’m okay with that.

Or I was. I guess I never really considered three really important points, in retrospect.

One: Never assume a given religion had it right. I’d made the assumption of figuring that all those stories about Grandma watching over us from heaven were true. Turns out it was the wrong family belief system to go with, at least for me.

Two: Infantile amnesia only works out if you don’t actually have the mental capacity to remember things. Hence, infantile amnesia and not general, all-purpose amnesia. I would kill to take this second
fact back to whoever made it up and throttle them with it.

Three: Any unexplained physical sensation after death should be investigated. I mean, now I know that the constant, faint itching sensation I felt must have been the development of my internal chakra circulatory system. It was building me up, so one day I’d be able to pull off the insane ninja magic bullshit that made this world work. The itch stopped being so intrusive later, when my coils stabilized from the rapidly developing stage they were in before birth. It was sort of like the development of neurons, I think—you’ve got the potential storage space for everything you’re ever going to have room to learn when you’re born, and they don’t grow back. If something had happened in utero, like what I now suspect happened with Rock Lee, I’d be permanently crippled as far as chakra goes. I always feel a little like there’s warmth under my skin that no one but me can know about, now. I can feel the same thing in other people, but it’s probably less because I’m actually talented in my new life and more because, when you get down to it, chakra was foreign. Like having an extra limb or the sudden ability to see the entire light spectrum. Magic ninja bullshit wasn’t exactly a staple of my old life, so of course I’d be extremely aware that now it was.

Er. Would be. I’m getting ahead of myself here.

Imagine this as an adult—suddenly the warm darkness is getting a bit too tight, a bit too unstable, and then there’s a pulsating wall of muscle forcing you to move around or be squished like a grape. It’s a little like how I imagined being eaten by a snake would be like, when I’d been five and too young to understand how snake jaws didn’t detach that much. All I knew at the time was that it was too small and I was too big and I needed to get away before I was turned into taffy. Funny thing about that, though, was that none of my limbs seemed to want to work the way I wanted them to and I ended up getting pretty squished regardless. And then I was out.

One of the things that I read about, before, was that a baby’s instinct was to inhale immediately upon feeling air on his or her face. It works pretty well for porpoises and whales, who are pushed up to the surface for their first breath by their mothers, but it was one of those things that nearly killed me twenty years early in my old life because the nurses hadn’t gotten the fluid off my face completely. My parents told me that story a lot growing up—I think they were amused by the whole situation, after the fact, even if they were terrified at the time. Now I got to experience it myself because my lungs weren’t quite listening to me just yet.

It is fucking terrifying.

But between the fact that the nurses here had been careful enough to clean me off and clear my airways, the warm if scratchy towel, the swaddling, and a bunch of hands on my body that were absolutely huge and lifting me up, my lungs got a pretty good workout with my first scream. I was genuinely terrified, even when the hands carrying me didn’t end up dropping me. I think I kept screaming even when I was placed on my new mother’s chest, until I started suckling. My body, unsurprisingly, still wasn’t listening to me.

I was effectively blind—though my vision in my old life was actually worse than what I could see now, with less light sensitivity and more depth perception—my hearing was hypersensitive due to what had been months of effective sensory deprivation, I could feel everything from the swaddling blanket to the heat of my mother’s skin, and my sense of taste was pretty much nonexistent.

And I that was how I was born again, more or less.

I’ll skip over the whole thing with potty training and stuff. Frankly, I’m almost glad that I didn’t have any control over my body then—the developing human brain isn’t designed to have the nerve impulses of a twenty-year-old human running through it anyway. I could at least justify the memories of needing an adult’s help for everything as being due to true helplessness. It made me feel more
grateful and less humiliated. My memories of that time are about as detailed as if I’d been an actual adult, but the sheer boredom means even my not-quite-physical adult brain and memories sort of let it all bleed together. It’s like anything else after enough time goes by—nostalgia essentially means filing off the edges of stuff that was boring or dull or mediocre, leaving only extreme highs or lows in its wake. So, out of it, I mostly got a deep need to be in control, to never be helpless again, and a fierce love for my parents for putting up with my needs for so long.

And a very strong conviction never to have children of my own, but that’s not exactly new for me. I’m still quietly terrified by the idea of being solely or jointly responsible for the future survival and happiness of another human being, but now I just added the whole issue of diapers to the pile of reasons to use birth control.

More on that later, though.

Originally, I’d been a fairly quiet child. I mean, I cried since that’s what babies do, but you weren’t going to be finding me screaming my head off at three in the morning as an infant in my last life unless something was really wrong. I guess I had my parents trained to respond to the little squeaks I made, sort of like how cats get their owners to do things for them. Here, I was still pretty quiet as a rule, but the feel of my chakra settling in my coils never stopped being there. It’s sort of like someone poking you every ten minutes or so, just to remind you they’re still around. Or maybe like having someone lean on your shoulder. It was annoying and only occasionally comforting, so I think I was a bit noisier out of sheer temper more than anything. I still tried to have a proper screaming match with the world only when I actually needed something, to save my parents’ sanity.

Mom was…I think she was ill somehow, honestly. As my vision improved and I could actually see the person carrying me, I’d look up and see Mom holding me most of the time. I’d gurgle at her, to say hello, but her smile back was always a little strained. She was paler than I remember myself being, once upon a time—and since I didn’t get out a hell of a lot, I think I might have been an expert on it. She was pretty, though. She seemed a little thin and waiflike, but her eyes were dark and kind when they weren’t sunken due to my periodic wakeup calls, and her hair was a straight black curtain around her face. She was delicate. I still loved her, though, in a way only children can, because she and Dad were my world and she loved me back.

Dad seemed older, a little wearier with gray already in his hair and scars on his jaw. He had a wider, more solid build and darker features, but I was wearing him down as surely as Mom just by being a baby. It was only because of him that I realized my predicament at all. He’d been holding me, since Mom was in the hospital again for some kind of post-birth follow-up thing. I had an idea of what that could entail, in all its gory detail, so I don’t think I would have asked even if I could have made my vocal chords work voluntarily. Dad was making faces at me, trying to get me to copy him, and I was waving my little fists around just because I could.

And I guess my vision was finally good enough for me to look at what I was holding, once I grabbed it. I had his forefinger in a chubby fist and I wasn’t about to let go, whether he tried gently pulling loose or not. It was an accomplishment! Baby steps toward success and independence happened all the time, and as an adult in a baby’s body I was going to enjoy as many as I could figure out.

Not like I had anything better to do, anyway.

It took me a while to recognize the vest Dad was wearing as a flak jacket, even when I was looking right at it—hell, if I hadn’t been familiar with the Naruto series as a whole, I doubt I would have realized what it was—and I only really got the totally unintended message when I caught the gleam of metal on his forehead. I couldn’t tell what symbol was on it, though—infant eyes aren’t good for distances of more than about eight inches or so.
I don’t think I panicked, but the thing with being a baby is that there’s only one reaction for anything negative. I started sniffling. Dad started panicking. Guess there was a reason Mom was the one who held me most of the time.

“Gekkō-san, daijōbu desu ka?” someone asked, and my dad’s head turned toward someone else. The rest of the conversation passed by a little too quick for me to keep up.

I was only a week or two old, all right? Cut me some slack for having trouble with a language I never learned before. Most of the other stuff I’d chalked up to just the fact that my new ears were a little sensitive and my brain was probably scrambled from being born. The fact that I know any Japanese at all is a miracle of coincidence and annoyance—watching subbed and raw anime wasn’t compensating for the fact that in my old life, English was my first language and my old memories were not helping me adapt at all.

They might actually be getting in the way.

“Daijōbu ka, Keisuke-chan?” Dad said, presumably to me.

…Yep. That’s my name: Keisuke Gekkō, born on July 10th. I even have the baby footprint and birth certificate to prove it. I found out later that Mom’s name was Miyako and Dad was Wataru. I get the feeling that my parents wanted a boy first. Don’t you? I also had the sudden feeling I would grow up a very angry child, like a boy named Susan or something. Maybe it would lead to me trying to destroy the world, like Mandark. I’d have to convince people to call me Kei or Keiko for the rest of my life.

Or maybe I could grow up into ten feet of anger in a five-foot frame for other reasons entirely!

I’d bet on the latter, personally.

Chapter End Notes

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AN [12/14/2016]: Hi everyone! Lang here, welcoming new readers into this...whatever this thing’s become over time. A doorstopper, certainly. It’s been about three and a half years since I started writing this fic, and you can pretty much see my writing from that time preserved for all eternity in the form of the first thirty or so chapters.

Long story short: I hate it, which is a sign that I’ve improved as I’ve gone on writing this story. While I can’t give you an exact date, at some point in the future this story is going to be getting a rewritten form. And what does this mean for you, the new reader who is probably considering backing out right now? Pretty much nothing. All I want is to see new folks enjoy this fic, even in its current imperfect form, after braving the gauntlet that is the early part of this story.

Some bits you find will be silly. Others may be the result of writing by the seat of my authorial pants. But a surprising number of people seem invested in this story, so if you’re one of them or are just stopping by, I nonetheless hope to work this thing into a form worthy of all of you in time. Please be patient with past-me and her shortcomings, and thanks for reading.

See you at chapter 118.
The thing about chakra is that it is everywhere. Sure, most of what sensor-class shinobi can perceive is generally human chakra, and that’s what makes them so useful. It’s all that most normal shinobi can sense, either, if on a lesser scale. But thanks to the Sage of Six Paths and the Ten-Tailed Beast, the entire world is infused with chakra that, if you touch it without the proper training, is going to mean being turned into a stone frog. The normal stuff is plenty dangerous for most people, who tend to stick to what works for them and won’t backfire horribly if they’re shinobi, and tend to go along in their boring lives without ever noticing it if they’re not. I can’t sense natural chakra, by the way. I only know it exists because I watched a certain TV show way in the past.

Anyway, how is this relevant? The fact is, though I don’t have any particular aptitude for natural chakra (and holy crap am I glad for that), I’m constantly aware of my chakra. While my body’s had it since before birth, hence all the itching, my mind keeps saying that this is not normal. I need to focus—a bit—in order to use my chakra, where most people just do it automatically. I’ll need to train as I grow in order to be able to do some of the other crazy ninja bullshit people like, say, Sasuke can do without even so much as thinking about, but I think I might have an advantage as far as initial control goes.

It’s a lot easier to manipulate something when you actually know exactly how much you’re messing with at a time. It’ll be an advantage later on, but as a toddler it just pissed me off.

Anyway, as a baby, I ate and slept and cried a lot. I mean, I love my parents here and I’m sure they made my infancy as comfortable as possible, but it didn’t make it any less boring. I couldn’t do anything on my own, other than babble like a brook.

This, eventually, led to me coming up with my first words. I think I was six months old—the same thing happened last time around. Unsurprisingly, my first words were “Mama” and “Dada.” In that order. Mom was serenely proud, in a kind of smug way, while Dad seemed to want to do some kind of victory dance because I’d actually addressed him on the same day.

I was sorta…toddling around by about a year old. I could only tell because of the birthday bash they threw for me—when it comes to babies, the waking world is pretty hard to keep track of. Days blend into weeks into months, mainly because not a whole lot happens from a deeply bored adult’s point of view. I was trying to get into things like cupboards or bookshelves, like children are supposed to, but Mom and Dad had apparently thoroughly child-proofed the house. The living room was the only place where I had the ability to roam, and certainly no one was going to let me do so without supervision—Dad’s a ninja, after all, and I sometimes saw Mom pull a practice sword from above the kitchen window.

I would gum someone to death for the opportunity to read something just for a distraction, even if relearning how to read would probably be triple the pain it was the first time. Didn’t have teeth yet,
then. Also? Teething is a pain and should never be voluntarily undergone a second time. Most people have infantile amnesia to thank for never having to deal with that. And I don’t.

A lot of toys got gummed to death, mostly to solve the issue of teething but also because I was bored out of my tiny toddler skull. Learning to read would be a bitch. Being a toddler at least gave me the option of stalking my parents and pestering them to read to me, though it’d be a while before I graduated from blocks.

Speaking of the birthday party, I guess Dad and Mom are pretty popular. I didn’t know the names Miyako and Wataru Gekkō from before, but they knew everyone with a kid around my age, or so it seemed.

The birthday party involved cake, though it had a kind of red bean filling that I know I hadn’t liked before being reborn. The adults stood around and talked shop, because that’s what adults do when the kids are apparently safe and well out of range of any weaponry, and I spent the party gnawing on one of my presents. Literally. Still teething and all that.

I think, in total, I ended up with a whole set of those pompom hair tie things, a teething ring, a rubber kunai (hint hint) that would probably also be used for chewing on (hint failed), three sets of baby clothes in varying shades of purple and pink (could be worse, like orange), a stuffed tiger I privately named Tigger (who was not orange), a new bottle, and a set of block puzzles. What anyone would want with that last item, I have no idea—I didn’t like those things when I was growing up the first time, either.

There were other kids there, too. I didn’t recognize Genma until his mother called his name—he’s around four or five—and I ended up crawling over and demanding that Ebisu play blocks with me. Not that he agreed gracefully—he’s three—but he could make a steadier pyramid than I could and tried to show me how it was done. I think he had the knack for teaching, even when he was little, though he was a little pompous about it.

Still ended up knocking the pyramid over, though it wasn’t his fault at all. Being a year old means being clumsy.

There were other children there, too, but I don’t remember seeing them often after the party. I guess Ayumi-chan and Miyuki-chan and Tatsuo-kun all decided to stay civilians. At least, I hope they did—the idea that they died is too ugly to linger on.

I think I might have seen Sakumo, Kakashi’s dad, show up and leave within a ten-minute period. I don’t think his social circle and my parents’ one really overlap, but he’s apparently a nice enough person to stop by and offer balloons and steal cake. Kakashi, if he was there, was probably the little white-haired bundle I only caught a glimpse of.

Balloons are the best thing in the world and no one can ever tell me otherwise. Especially when Dad did the helium trick and made all the adults burst out laughing.

As a side note? I’d figured out what time period I’d been born into.

When I burst into tears in the middle of my own birthday party, Dad panicked again and tried to soothe me while Mom politely ushered everyone else into the kitchen and then the yard, saying I was just tired from such a long and exciting day. It was even true, in a way, but that was nothing compared to the sheer magnitude of the situation I found myself in.

It’s one thing to think I’ve been reborn into a shinobi world, even with the sheer overkill certain people can sling around like nothing. It’s another to be born into Konohagakure, where most of the
main plot of the series seems to gather. It’s another thing again to be born during the gap between two Shinobi World Wars.

It’s another thing altogether to realize that my age group is going to make up the front ranks of the Third Shinobi World War.

Incidentally, that was the day I discovered my ability to suppress my own chakra signature down to below my parents’ sensing threshold, which freaked them out plenty when they realized that their kid was kind of a chakra void when upset. I think that after that, they started to realize that I was going to be a really, really weird kid.

Maybe that was why they tried for a second one.

Chapter End Notes

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I was waddling around the house at age two and some months when I finally got a good look in a mirror, and could see the person I would be. Before that, my hair hadn’t even bothered to grow in for some stupid reason, meaning that the only way I could tell what my hair color could even be was by looking at my parents and making a guess. I mean, I obviously wasn’t going to be blonde or a redhead, but I hadn’t been last time around either and I was curious to see what I was built to be.

My hair was short and kind of tufty, even if Mom had pulled it back into this dumb little ponytail that sat at the top of my head like a palm tree with pompoms. I wasn’t as pale as Mom, which makes me think that either my parents’ coloring was averaged out to get mine or that Mom really, genuinely was sick with something. I had a wide face, mostly because of the baby fat, but the way my face was developing would probably mean that I would have an average look to me, aside from my jet-black hair and dark eyes. Dad’s body type didn’t seem to be dominant, exactly, and it was hard to tell with toddlers anyway.

Oh well. I guess I’ll see when I grow up.

That was about when I heard Mom drop something in the bathroom. I toddled over to figure out what had happened—partly because I was worried but mostly because I was curious, as all children are, and said, “Mommy?”

Mom didn’t answer. Mom always answers, and yet this time all I got was a sob.

I headed for the bathroom as fast as my stubby little legs would carry me, bouncing off a wall or two along the way, calling, “Mommy? Mommy!”

I found Mom sitting on the floor of the bathroom with her hands over her face. On the floor in front of her was an open box, as well as a white-tipped stick that was starting to send a rather suspicious feeling through me. I wasn’t quite sure what to think, though, because Mom was both crying—a little—and smiling as she scooped me into her lap.

“Isn’t it great, Kei-chan? You’ll be a big sister soon!” Mom said into my hair.

I scooted around in her lap so I could hug her properly, listening to her heartbeat and imagining the heart of my new sibling—or siblings, if there were twins—beating along with hers and mine. “Does that mean Mommy and Daddy are going to love the baby more?”

“Oh of course not!” Mom said fiercely, surprising me. She pushed me back into the crook of her other arm, so she and I could look eye-to-eye without having to let go of each other. “Mommy will love you both with her whole heart! But I don’t want you to have to play alone anymore.”
It was strange, to be afraid of this new life as much as I wanted to hug it. I was a bit lonely—I can’t actually remember any point in time when I was without my brother, before I died—but it’s a child’s need to be reassured that kept me there, clinging to Mom. I did love her, because I could guess why she’d been crying—she was afraid that being pregnant again could endanger her and the baby, but she wanted to keep us all safe and happy so much that my heart was breaking for her. I didn’t want her to have to give up her life for that—it seemed selfish, I guess, because she obviously wanted the baby.

I honestly don’t even know what I thought at the time—in the end, it became more of this massive jumble of feelings that didn’t really end up proving anything to me other than that I was incredibly indecisive.

Still, if Mom wanted the baby, I wasn’t going to say no. I kept turning around and expecting find someone who wasn’t there, now that I was old enough to walk and wander from room to room. I kind of hoped for a brother, despite the ways it could all go wrong (excluding sibling fights, which were expected and normal).

In the end, it actually didn’t.

By the time I turned three, Dad had managed to get me to the point where I could read on my own. This was mostly because I had taken to bugging him half to death about it every time I could, since knowing that a sibling was on the way only increased my need to know about the world I was slowly getting big enough to explore. I’d babble about how I wanted to teach my little sibling everything ever, including what kind of book had the best pictures and which way was the best way to stretch and where the really nice food vendors were—the kind that would give free food to cute kids, of course. I was going to be the best sister ever.

I might have wanted a hustler for a little brother. Nostalgia was biting me pretty hard.

Dad was starting to teach me other things, too. Little exercises—cat’s cradle, stretches that I probably wouldn’t have managed to pull off in my old life, and so on—designed to test and enhance fitness. Though I think the whole cat’s cradle thing was for dexterity, and with hand seals being a priority for ninjas, I kind of wondered why I’d never thought of it before. It would be easier with a sibling to practice on, since Dad’s hands were so big, but it was fun anyway. He even gave me a picture book on more of them, and it wasn’t long before I was pestering him with new questions for the exercises in the book.

I think he started me on the chakra control exercises solely so I’d wear myself out. He was a ninja after all, and it can’t be fun to come home to a babbling three-year-old with severe word vomit after a long day at the outposts. I was in the “why” stage, even if I saw some civilian children who turned it all up even further than I did.

When it came to Mom, I noticed that she got tired more often and quicker than she used to. It scared me because I knew she wasn’t especially healthy, but she went to the doctor often and there didn’t seem to be any real problem. If I’d really been three, I think the other main thing I would have noticed was how Mom’s belly kept growing and her lap kept shrinking, until I couldn’t sit in it anymore and Dad would have to bounce me on his knee until I got dizzy.

On the due date, Mom went into the delivery room alone and Dad sat with me outside. I had my toys with me—I still liked to chew on rubber kunai, for some reason—but I just sat there and stared at them for a while. Even my book about the Sage of Six Paths and the Tailed Beasts (censored to hell and back, of course) seemed boring with all this nervous energy in the air.

I yawned, rubbing at my eyes and feeling my toddler body start to succumb to the inevitable—
mainly an early bedtime I’d never managed to get around, since I had ninjas for parents. Well, at least one ninja—I’d never seen Mom in a chūnin vest.

“Keisuke-chan, bring that book here and I’ll read a story for you.” Dad said. I crawled up onto his leg, book in hand, and he opened it to the page on the Sage and his two sons.

I was probably asleep before he finished the first page, but I woke up again when Dad carried me to see the new baby.

Only we didn’t end up in the maternity ward. We went to the Neonatal ICU.

Mom was there too, and though she was paler than normal and was being wheeled around by a nurse all in white. She looked okay, even though it must have been less than an hour since the birth, so what was wrong couldn’t have been with her. She’d be in the normal Intensive Care Unit or something otherwise. Instead, we all turned to the window and looked into the room full of incubators, though only three were occupied, and Mom held my hand, even though Dad was still holding me.

Dad said, “Keisuke-chan, do you see the box on the far right?”

I looked. I couldn’t read the writing on it from this far away with bad lighting, but I could see a tiny form in the plastic. There were two ports with gloves attached to them, so no one would get close enough to make the baby sick with adult germs, and I thought I could see enough of the wires and tubes running into the box to make a guess that something was very wrong.

“That’s your little brother, Hayate.” Dad said, and Mom let go of my hand so he could lift me onto his shoulders.

“Why’s he in there?” I asked, leaning over with my tiny hand fisted in Dad’s hair. “I wanna see him!”

Besides, the name Hayate Gekkō was setting off warning bells I hadn’t even known I had.

“He’s…he’s having a little trouble breathing right now. He’s a new baby—they’re pretty fragile.” Dad said, hesitant. “We’ll take him home as soon as he’s better.”

Little Hayate started coughing, sending the medics in the room into a frenzy of activity I couldn’t follow.

Of all the things I remember from my first life, the clearest memories involve my family. It’d taken two weeks before I even realized I was in Konohagakure, and some of the earlier details about the plot of the series had sort of fallen through the cracks. I knew that, for example, Kakashi was pretty important to the plot in a lot of ways—I have my favorites among the cast, after all—and that the story was ultimately Naruto’s, and so on and so forth. But if you asked me in my old life about some of the minor, one-shot ninjas—especially if they showed up in filler arcs or movies—I’d have probably needed a minute to exercise my Google-Fu and figure out who you were talking about.

But with the breathing tubes and the incubator, and the strange echo of a lower, more insistent cough running through my head, I knew then that my baby brother was the same person who ended up being the first named Konoha-nin killed for Orochimaru’s Chūnin Exam invasion, in the far future. He’d be a lamb to the slaughter, despite his skill and speed, and all for knowing just a bit too much. The man who killed him would become an ally, and no one would ever know he’d done it.

I don’t think I ever really knew what hate was, until that moment.
Or fear.

Chapter End Notes

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I started having chronic nightmares not long after we finally got to take Hayate home.

Children generally don’t become the center of their own unconscious narratives until they’re eight or so, when the world of me versus not-me is clearly defined and suddenly it seems like everyone decides to be the hero of their own story all at once. I still had the occasional dream where I was just watching the world go by, like clouds, but when Hayate finally replaced me in the nursery was when the dreams of my old life started coming back with a vengeance.

I don’t blame Hayate for it. He couldn’t help having sensitive lungs or being a baby. He couldn’t help being a part of my memories from before I died. The fact that my imagination wanted to combine my baby brother and the sight of the dead special jōnin on the rooftop, with blood everywhere and crows pecking at his thoroughly mangled corpse? Wasn’t his fault, but it ate into my brain all the same. Sometimes I’d wake up in the middle of the night, shaking with grief and rage too big for my body, and I’d creep into the nursery to make sure he was still breathing.

Mom and Dad both noticed that I wasn’t getting a lot of sleep—it’s pretty hard to get anything past a ninja when you’re barely capable of speaking in complex sentences—but I think Mom was just glad I wasn’t jealous of all the time she and Dad spent with Hayate as he got bigger. A normal child would have fussed, or whined, or maybe demanded a refund (which is really more my memories of my old life talking than anything). I wasn’t a normal, fussy little girl around Hayate.

I didn’t want to be a burden when Hayate needed them all hours of the day. I couldn’t do that to any of them.

Knowing my brother would (or perhaps I should say could) grow up to be a dead man walking killed any envy before it could pop up.

That said, when the all-consuming worry eased off a bit—which was mostly when I was awake and could see him wiggling around on the living room rug as he figured out how to make his limbs listen to him—I was hopelessly attached. Hayate wasn’t a big child at seven months, and he wasn’t quite as solidly built as I was, which might have been due to me being a first-born kid who’d had our parents’ undivided attention for almost three years. But he was curious and sharp-eyed despite the amount of time he kept himself and everyone else awake with his persistent little cough.

God, I hoped it wasn’t whooping cough. The doctors hadn’t freaked out the last time my parents took him to the hospital, but I’m also not sure if they know what whooping cough is. Granted, I’m not totally sure I do either, but suddenly all of those vaccinations I got as a baby started being really, really relevant and worrying in their vagueness.

“Haa-chan?” Getting his attention could be a pain, sometimes. He was sucking on a rubber kunai not
unlike my old one, mainly because it was too big to choke on while I was around and could get it out of his mouth, and occasionally gumming on it. If I’d really been three, I wouldn’t have been at all trustworthy when it came to my baby brother’s safety, but I wasn’t and my parents apparently figured that as long as one of them was in the house, we’d be okay.

Man, when he started teething for real it was going to be hell.

And all I wanted was to see if I could get him to grab onto a rattle. I figured, hey, he’s squirming around on the carpet and trying to grasp things with his tiny fingers anyway, so it had to be worth a shot. If I could get him to stop focusing on the kunai, anyway.

He looked at me at the sound of my pet name for him, at least. It was better than what Dad had managed—I think the way I’d been so hyper-aware as an infant had spoiled him on the whole child development thing. Hayate was probably at least a few months from being able to speak actual words, if he followed the normal progression for boys (as far as I knew, anyway).

“Rattle.” I said, waving it. He looked at me, then at the rattle. Then back at me.

Hayate made a complicated, indecisive sound around the kunai.

“Haa-chan, what?” I asked, and he spat out the kunai to wiggle after the rattle. I didn’t move it much—it’s not fair to tease someone who doesn’t really have any motor skills, even if he is my brother and will probably grow up to be a pain in the ass someday.

You know, if he doesn’t die before that. That thought scares me so much I can’t think sometimes.

“Kei!” Hayate said.

I blinked, pulling back a little. Had he just…?

“Haa-chan?”

“Kei!” Hayate said, starting to turn a little bit red from frustration since the rattle wasn’t in range anymore. I immediately gave it to him and he stopped pouting, waving it around as well as he could given that he was still a baby. I scooted over so he could reach me if he wanted, and he ended up drooling into my pajama bottoms a bit when he abandoned the rattle to gnaw on the kunai again. I didn’t really mind.

Okay, so maybe I was wrong about the talking thing. Hayate is officially a genius in my book.

“Mommy! Haa-chan talked!”

That night, at least, I didn’t dream about Hayate’s death.

Chapter End Notes

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During peacetime, the minimum age to enter the Academy is five. Or, failing that, a student has to turn five within the next calendar year. Generally, only students with parent endorsements head there that early, meaning that orphans, civilians, and people who just don’t want their kids to end up on the front lines before losing their baby teeth (i.e., most people) join later, with less experience. Most of the rest of us join at around eight or nine. Early graduation is possible, though uncommon, and passing by a ridiculous margin was the main reason for it. People like Yamato and Kakashi could do it easily, and I was worried to some degree because, while I grew up with ninja parents, I still didn’t consider myself especially fit or intelligent by the freakish standards set by people like them. The only reason I even considered the Academy at all was a result of a few thoughts colliding in my brain, when Hayate turned two and I was five-plus-a-few-months.

One: Even though I was probably being slowly driven insane by recurring nightmares of Hayate’s death, I couldn’t just let it happen. Not without fighting it. Hayate might have been just an unfortunate casualty of the plot a lifetime ago, but here he was my little brother and I would kill anyone who dared touch him. The ferocity of my love and protective streak surprised me at first, because in my old lifetime I’d been on more-or-less equal terms with my brother and never really needed to defend him from anything in the peaceful world I remembered. But the more I thought on it, the more it stayed with me.

Two: I didn’t want to be helpless anymore. Five years of essentially complete dependence on my parents had put me off the concept for good, even if Mom was starting to teach me kenjutsu using a pair of practice swords out in the training fields. I wasn’t great, but between that and Dad starting to teach me the basics of the Academy taijutsu, I was off to something of a head start.

Three: Despite what some members of the village could get up to, I really did love it in Konoha. It wasn’t the strongest village—that title belonged to Iwagakure or Kumogakure—but it was one of the vanishingly few places that didn’t fuck up quite as thoroughly as, say, Sunagakure. Konoha wasn’t perfect by any means, but I didn’t know enough about the other villages other than their treatment of their jinchūriki to really tell how they behaved. And that Minato Namikaze would end up slaughtering most of them en masse. I wanted to protect the village my brother and I would grow up in, because there was a spark here worth protecting. Hopefully I wouldn’t die in the attempt.

It’s probably one of the worst motivations for becoming a ninja: fear. It was still mine.

By the way, when I said I wasn’t great at kenjutsu or taijutsu, I’m not really sure what “great” even means. I’d never seen a shinobi younger than the age of eight in the field, even though I knew a couple of people who would be just that when they got to that age, and definitely no one with extensive kenjutsu or taijutsu experience. Hell, if it wasn’t for my parents, I have to wonder how I would have gotten any physical conditioning done. I’m more prone to worrying myself silly than training myself into a coma, as a rule.
On the other hand, Mom brought Hayate to training one day—apparently the supply of genin babysitters was running low, no matter how horrible that thought is—and that changed things up quite a bit. Not because of anything Mom or I did, though.

I’d only been training for about a week in kenjutsu, so we weren’t exactly going all out. I mean, I was completely getting my ass handed to me every single moment of it, and Mom wasn’t even winded, ever, but it was still clearly a step in the right direction.

“Again, Kei-chan, we’re sticking with shinai at this point.” Mom said, holding her shinai up like a teacher’s collapsible pointer. Mom didn’t look pale and tired like this. She looked like a female samurai, all pride and power and I-will-beat-the-shit-out-of-you-if-you-look-at-me-cross-eyed. I think saying that I wanted to learn kenjutsu put fire back in her, though my backside would probably live to regret it.

“Yes, Mommy.” I said, but I kept looking at Hayate, who was sitting underneath a tree and holding a shinai the approximate size of a wakizashi. He was swatting at the leaf litter with it. Mom’s shinai slashed through the air in front of my nose, nearly as fast as a real sword, and I squeaked.

“Here and now I am your sensei, Kei-chan.” Mom said seriously. She held her shinai in a ready stance. “If I didn’t think you could handle this, I would have let your father continue teaching you only chakra control and basic taijutsu, but as my daughter, I think you have what it takes to go all the way.”

I felt my face heating up at the praise. Yeah, I could do this. It’d be hard and painful, but I couldn’t give up!

“We’ll move on to bokken as you advance,” Mom continued, “because even if the bokken isn’t a katana, there’s plenty you can do with a solid length of wood and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“Yes, Mo—er, Sensei!” I chirped, excited. Sure, she’d probably beat me silly again, but that was part of the training.

“Good. Now, let’s see your stance.” Mom said.

The thing about kenjutsu—or at least the version that shinobi used—is that you need to be highly mobile. There is a starting stance, for the beginning of formal duels and for centering yourself, but by the time a shinobi was using a sword out in the field the rigid swing-snap-retreat routine was useless except for moving meditation. It was mainly used to build discipline and strength in new students, but the average genin was likely to have double or triple the physical strength of a non-shinobi once chakra enhancement came into play. There was no other way that we could send genin on bodyguard missions from bandits, given the average age of an academy graduate nowadays—they’d get slaughtered.

Feet apart, with the right leg ready to lead, hands placed well apart on the shinai’s handle for leverage, and chakra quietly reinforcing my muscles. That was the only way to practice, even if I wore myself out more thoroughly that way. I’m sure that any actual aspiring-shinobi kid wouldn’t have bothered with the chakra part, mainly because most of them couldn’t even feel it backing each and every one of their movements, but I need to make using it second nature.

I figured I’d actually move on to the mobile stuff once I had the basics down.

“Strike-one!” Mom barked.
I jumped to obey. “Hah!” I shouted, snapping the shinai out sharply and making it emit a slapping sound as the bamboo slats touched each other from the force of it.

“Strike-one! Block-one! Duck! Backstep! Backstep! Backstep! Strike-two! I didn’t hear a snap on that last one, Kei-chan! Strike-two!”

Mom was kind of a drill sergeant.

After a while, there was sweat pouring down my round face and I was breathing harder than normal. I wasn’t really fit—sure, I was more active than I had been the last time around, mostly because there was nothing else to do unless I wanted to move into a freaking library for the rest of my continued existence—but I was also five. I had a right to the baby fat I had, okay? And Mom was making me work myself to the bone for, hopefully, a bit of an edge when it came to the Academy.

Basically, my endurance wasn’t great and Mom called practice to a halt just before I collapsed.

“Well done, Kei-chan!” Mom said brightly, patting me on my probably sweat-soaked shoulder. I was wearing a training gi, but that meant pretty much nothing when there was lots of physical activity and Konoha had the kind of summers I was never going to like. Hot summers, to be specific. With no air conditioning in sight. “For someone who’s just started, you’re doing great.”

“T-Thanks, Sensei.” I said, panting.

“Hah!”

Mom and I both blinked at the sudden intrusion of a higher voice and automatically turned to see where it was coming from.

Hayate stood under the tree—somewhat wobbly, but he’s two and could be forgiven for many things—and snapped his little practice wakizashi out again. “Hah!”

The sad thing? His form, given time and another foot of height, would be better than mine. I could tell even then.

“Haya-chan?” I was incredulous. He was a toddler learning kenjutsu.

“Kei-nee! Mommy!” he called, running over to us unsteadily.

Mom picked him up automatically, smiling widely. I took the shinai out of his hands, so he wouldn’t make Mom see stars, but it was clear that she didn’t care too much about that. She lifted him higher, twirling and making him giggle.

“You want to learn kenjutsu too, Hayate-chan?” Mom asked, as she nuzzled his face and he played with her long black hair.

“Ken…?” Hayate asked, pausing in his ruffling of Mom’s ponytail. “Wha’s that?”

“Swords, Haya-chan!” I broke in, grinning. “You’ll be a big boy soon, and you’ll get to learn kenjutsu with me and Mommy!”

“I can!” Hayate said, though I wasn’t sure he knew what he was agreeing to.

“Mommy, let me show Haya-chan what to do, when I learn more! I wanna help!” I said firmly, more sure of this than anything in my life.

“Of course, Kei-chan.” Mom said, and hugged us both.
I don’t really know how much I’d ever really be able to teach him that he couldn’t surpass me at in short order. But I guess that the true mark of mastery is whether or not you know something well enough to teach it to someone else, right? Even if that someone else is my two-year-old brother who’s probably a blade prodigy and will be more dangerous with a katana than I ever will.

I was feeling pretty good about my goals in life, then. The Academy was going to be cake.

Then Hayate started coughing again and the magic was gone.

Chapter End Notes

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Lessons with Dad got more focused the closer we got to the year I actually joined the Academy. Sure, after a certain point he pronounced me sufficiently durable and skilled to keep up with the non-major-clan kids and flipped to focusing on chakra control, but I think he had his reasons, and those reasons probably revolved around not wanting me to graduate too early. I don’t blame him for it. The idea of being sent out on infiltration missions as a kid—and I hoped no one had ever looked at a six-year-old and thought they could do it, though with people like Kakashi and Yamato running around I really wouldn’t put it past the creepier assholes around here—scared the crap out of me. I was still planning on enrolling when I turned eight, and my parents seemed okay with that. That would give me anywhere from a year to three years to graduate, depending on both the how compressed the curriculum became as war approached and on my own completely-not-legit brilliance.

Anyway, around the time that Dad got around to asking me what I thought I wanted to do with all this chakra control, I’d been mulling the whole ninja thing over pretty much on continuous loop. Dad had noticed my very cautious use of chakra and eventually asked why I spent such a long time gathering it before ever even trying the leaf-sticking exercise, to which he got the answer of hyperawareness. I guess if Hayate got to be a kenjutsu prodigy—and as time went on and he soaked up Mom’s lessons like a sponge, I think any doubt about that faded from my parents’ minds—I could be a half-decent genjutsu-type kunoichi.

Er, shinobi. Let’s not get into how badly I suck at kunoichi-specific stuff just yet.

I was thinking about a possible specialization, since Dad asked and I hadn’t really thought about specifics before, and I ended up looking possible options up in books before I gave him an answer. Being a genjutsu-type shinobi, or a sensor, seemed well within my potential. If I had a sword for backup, then I could probably figure out how to take out an entire opposing team. A sensor’s range wouldn’t compete with a Hyūga’s Byakugan, but there were only so many Hyūga clan members in active positions, so I’d be able to find a spot for myself if I wanted. I was studying on this for about two days total, with the thought always in the back of my mind, when I got a wake-up call.

I’m not sure what brought it on. It could have been the heat wave we were having, or something in the water. I still don’t know. I wish I did.

Hayate and I shared a bedroom, once he was out of the nursery and my parents decided to revamp it into a playroom. It mostly meant getting rid of the crib and buying another bed for Hayate in my room. I slept across the room from him, still dreaming of his death every time my brain said he wasn’t breathing loud enough—blood everywhere oh god what happened to him no Hayate-chan please wake up—but it wasn’t as bad as before. I wouldn’t have to get out of bed to make sure he was still alive.

But one night, I was woken up in the middle of a perfectly normal dream. It was so hot then, hot
enough that I’d asked my parents for a bamboo mat to sleep on since the sheets were sticking to my skin, and Hayate’s breathing was a little more labored than normal. Mom got a mat for him, too, and a thin sheet so he could feel like he was covered up, and we suffered through it together.

Waking up from stage three sleep is a pain normally, but my heart was pounding in my ears that night. It wasn’t like I was sleeping well when the weather turned muggy, but it still shouldn’t have involved jolting awake like someone had stuck a needle in my foot.

I rolled over, sticky with sweat and feeling in dire need of a bath to wash the stress away, and looked over to Hayate’s bed. “Hayate-chan?”

Hayate was coughing again. I got up and walked over to him, feeling his tiny childish chakra blaring an alarm that must have been too subtle for my parents to detect. I brought a faint blue glow to my hands, which was kind of like my night-light, and looked at him. Then I turned on the light.

I screamed.

Hayate has weak lungs, relative to what you’d expect from the son of a pair of shinobi. He catches a cold every time any of our neighbors’ kids get one, and his is almost always worse. His breathing is abnormally shallow, though I’m not sure my parents can hear it with the same precision that I can. I’m the paranoid one when it comes to my little brother.

All I know is that Hayate was rushed to the hospital within two minutes by Dad. He even spent his third birthday in the hospital, sick with something that sounds like whooping cough crossed with pneumonia and maybe poison. His lungs were giving out on him and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it. Mom looked paler and gaunter than ever, like all the life she’d shown in training had been sucked out as surely as Hayate’s breathing hitched, and Dad seemed stretched-out and helplessly angry.

I sat by his bedside more often than not, reading either aloud or to myself. He had an oxygen mask on, with little tubes running all over his skinny chest and a couple in the back of his left hand, and he was unconscious most of the time, but I read anyway because even if he wasn’t able to hear my words, I thought he might be able to hear my voice. I tried telling myself it was like back before he was born, when the only things he’d really hear clearly were Mom’s heartbeat and the voices of those close to her, like me. Mom sat with me, picking up the story when my voice cracked, and Dad stopped by every hour on the hour, looking more and more haggard as he demanded to see someone or something. I couldn’t really keep track of it all.

I was six years old. My brother’s hand was so small and pale in mine.

Normal doctors didn’t have any real way to fix what was wrong with him. They prescribed medicines and hemmed and hawed about, but ultimately what they do isn’t healing. It’s an attempt to kill the possible bacteria or viruses that were killing Hayate, but he was three. The bacteria and viruses probably had a stronger hold on life than he did. I hadn’t been there for his vaccines so I had no idea what he was supposedly resistant to and no one was going to tell a six-year-old civilian girl anything.

Hayate was there for a total of two days before a medic-nin—I could tell by the headband, after—stomped into the room with a glare that was two degrees short of making things spontaneously combust. “What’s going on here?”

I squeaked and my free hand went scrambling for the shinai strapped between my shoulders before Mom’s hand closed over mine.
“Yamaguchi-sensei, is there anything you can do for my son?” Mom said sharply. I’d never heard her voice like that, all steel behind the weariness and stress. She had a champion glare, too.

Also, where the heck did she know this guy from?

“Hand me that chart.” Yamaguchi-sensei said, rather than answering. Dad snatched it off the foot of the bed, shoving it into the medic’s hands.

Yamaguchi-sensei’s eyes swept over the charts and all the notations, marked only by the occasional grumble. My parents’ eyes never left his face, but I turned back to Hayate and squeezed his hand. He didn’t wake up, but I thought his eyelids might have twitched a little. Heck, he was probably under so many different kinds of sedatives that nothing would wake him up.

“Yes, I can.”

Those were the magic words I’d been waiting—praying—for.

What happened next was a blur, due as much to my exhaustion as the medics’ speed. I was still a child, despite my adult memories and thought processes, and Dad had to pick me up so we could all get out of the way. What I remember involves four medic-nin bending over my unconscious baby brother—each with their hands glowing with pale green chakra that hummed to my advanced chakra sense—the tubes in Hayate’s chest being removed for some reason or another, and my parents leaving the room with me still in Dad’s arms.

I don’t know how long I was asleep—or possibly unconscious, given how hard I’d been pushing myself to stay awake beforehand—after that. But I do know that when I opened my eyes, it was because Hayate had stuck a tissue under my nose and was tickling me. He was sitting in Mom’s lap, while I must have been in Dad’s. There weren’t any tubes in him anymore, and just a few wires remained connected to monitors that were beeping steadily and without stress.

He looked paler than Mom and more worn-out than ever, his eyelids drooping, but his breathing sounded miraculously even. He was smiling at me. He let me hug him as hard as I could, even if I sort of made him squeak for air by the end.

When we could finally bring Hayate home—again—I resumed my ninja lessons.

“What is it, Keisuke-chan?”

“I wanna be a medical ninja.”

Dad didn’t argue with me about it at all. He got me books, since he wasn’t a medic himself, and Yamaguchi-sensei would at least stop by the examination room every once in a while to give me pointers when we brought Hayate in for check-ups. I wasn’t going to be the next Tsunade, but if I could keep people alive long enough to make it to a real medic, that’s what I’d do.
So, here’s the thing about medical ninjutsu: It’s all about control.

Not even joking. While some of the bigger techniques for worse injuries can require a medic-nin to pour chakra steadily into a patient for up to four hours at a time, the important part of rituals, seals, healing techniques, and the anatomical considerations involved makes everything come down to chakra control crossed with mental discipline.

“Kei-kun, stop bullshitting the fish test.”

“Yes, Yamaguchi-sensei.”

Mental discipline is not exactly something I have an abundance of. Neither is chakra, primarily because my physical body was still seven, and mixing my abundance of spiritual energy with my physical stamina basically had a lack of the latter as a limiting factor. Assuming that the levels of my spiritual energy remained consistent throughout my lifetime, as the lopsided data was likely based on my adult soul, I’d have to wait for another eight years before I was anywhere near my old potential power. It was worse than trying to figure out phosphorus fertilizer proportions necessary for maximum crop yield.

Not that I needed to know that in my new life. Or my old one. It was just a relevant thought. Making a mockery of science tests is fun.

Speaking of which, medical ninja training involves slightly less paperwork, studying, and knowledge of human anatomy than becoming an orthopedic or emergency room surgeon. I was only a year in, and I could already see my sanity going down the drain worse than usual.

I still had the dreams, which always ended in blood and screams and death. Maybe the familiarity was wearing some of the edges off, but at least my waking hours were less affected than they had been in the past. I had a feeling that it’d be the best I could do on my own.

Anyway, back to the fish test.

One of the earliest exercises in becoming a medical ninja involved trying to keep a fish alive out of water for about five minutes. A wannabe medic-nin ought to be able to keep the fish alive, healthy, and capable of returning to the water with no ill effects. We weren’t trying to raise the dead, which usually meant the damn thing was flopping around everywhere because that’s what fish do. It was smelly and slimy and an animal that didn’t want to die of asphyxiation.

Which was why I’d come up with what Yamaguchi-sensei called “bullshitting the fish test.”

I removed my hands from the trout’s gills and the water I’d held against them splashed uselessly to
the ground. The fish immediately flopped out of my hands, off the table, and back into the lake I’d pulled it from.

Cupping things—especially water, for me—with chakra was a basic exercise in what amounted to expulsion and molding. Most people chose water or dirt since those things stuck to skin anyway, and since fire or lightning would involve getting layers of skin or nerves being put through hell with no benefit in a medical sense. Wind would have been the easiest and likely the most useful in the field for medical purposes, but I used water because my subject was a goddamn fish.

Keeping the water oxygenated had been as easy as agitating it with my chakra. I wasn’t perfectly aware of the CO$_2$ levels of the water in my grasp, but I could adjust the cycling speed and watch my “patient” for a reaction. Was I doing it right? Was I killing it?

That said, because medical ninja were supposed to be able to pull oxygen into the fish’s lungs and blood manually via chakra control alone, my method was a cheat because I was making my fish do all the grunt work of respiration. I was only enabling it.

Oh, and sedating it, with my chakra slowing the transfer of signals in its fish-brain, so it didn’t freak the fuck out and flip all over the place. I didn’t have any interest in having to chase my fish around the shore.

Technically, I suppose that what I was doing might have been considered more advanced because of the multitasking I was doing, but it was still cutting corners somewhere.

“Begin molding chakra in your core, again.” Yamaguchi-sensei said. “Do not form any seals until I tell you to.”

I nodded and closed my eyes to focus. I also shrank my chakra signature to almost nothing to reduce the…well, the best way I can describe it is “noise.” In the electronic sense. Like radio static, or that stuff on a TV screen that says your signal’s shit and the digital device of your choosing needs a thumping. It was a lot easier for me to focus my own chakra to a knife’s edge when I wasn’t constantly feeling the random discharges my coils were prone to when I wasn’t paying attention.

“If there’s one thing you should take away from our lessons, Kei-kun, it’s how to approach a new case.” Yamaguchi-sensei said, walking around me as I stood at the table. I could feel the odd tingling sensation that made up his chakra signature as he went—he had a lightning affinity, he’d said, and he had to work around it every day he went into the Intensive Care Unit. “You will be thorough, you will be precise, and you will be right. You don’t get a chance to screw up in the field! If you do, someone could die.

“Hell, even if you get everything right, you may not be able to do a damn thing. You may fail to save a patient in the field—you will fail to save someone in your career. Failing is a part of life. Sometimes there just isn’t anything to do, and your patient is too far gone for anyone to save.” His voice went low then, like he was remembering something painful. “My goal is to make it so that you don’t make a habit of it.”

“Yes, Sensei.” I said, keeping my eyes closed.

“We will begin hand drills now.” Yamaguchi-sensei said, as though my voice had pointed him in another direction to rant. “On my mark, and do not channel chakra.”

“Yes, Sensei.”

“Dog.”
I folded my left hand under my right.

“Tiger.”

Thumbs together, index fingers raised with the tips touching, and the rest of my fingers interlaced.

“Ox.”

And so on. There are twelve basic hand seals, though anyone who pays attention to shinobi in fights (or is an Uchiha with a Sharingan) will notice that individual shinobi have their own particular variations. While these tend to vary based on village and clan, real modification of seals tends to mean something special. Techniques such as the Shadow Clone Jutsu use what I refer to as the Cross seal, while Haku Yuki’s claim to fame was his ability to use half-seals in combat as thought they were full ones.

What Yamaguchi-sensei understood, and what I did for different reasons, was that hand seals were primarily mnemonics.

The most dangerous advanced shinobi barely need to use seals for their favorite techniques. Orochimaru hadn’t needed the use of his arms to take on the other two Sannin and get away alive (with considerations made for drugging and phobias). They can pull off the same thing by merely molding their chakra the same way as a shinobi using seals. While undoubtedly slower without the memory aids, it had the distinct advantage of making it damn near impossible to predict or copy the technique involved unless one was both equipped with a Sharingan and either a sensor or blessed with a Byakugan.

So I guess that the hypothetical offspring of a Hyūga and an Uchiha would have a better shot at deciphering Orochimaru’s techniques than most.

I was learning, even at age seven, to dissociate seals from chakra molding. Not that I wouldn’t have probably done it anyway—my chakra sense made me all too aware of how my chakra was supposed to move for the techniques that I knew. Eventually, I might have been able to basically bullshit the seals to any technique as soon as I had the feel of it down.

You know, if I managed to live that long. Or avoided pissing off Yamaguchi-sensei too many times.

“Rat! Come on, Kei-kun, you can do it faster than that!”

Or if I managed to get through his training without wanting to murder him.

Chapter End Notes

Published sometime in August last year.

Note, because I forgot and I don’t think it even comes up in the narrative: Akihito Yamaguchi’s personality is some bizarre cross between Gregory House and Walt from Gran Torino, despite neither being in chronic pain nor being an angry Korean War vet. Aside from his gray eyes, he looks exactly like a generic medic-nin.

Also, this is the end of the first arc.
The thing about the Academy is this: while students do learn all of the necessary skills to become rather crappy genin, it’s also boring as hell.

Don’t get me wrong—ninjutsu (what there is of it), taijutsu (if your family style doesn’t blow it out of the water), and kunai throwing (which is something I resolved to learn, since Mom wasn’t exactly teaching me to throw things anywhere Hayate could see and then copy me) are all very important to a shinobi. The thing is, any kid with decent clan backing and enough ambition can cheerfully substitute the math, the weapons training, the taijutsu, and the chakra control exercises with their homemade schedule. The Uchiha clan’s training regimen—particularly when it comes to kids with a high chance of developing the Sharingan—is completely insane. Kakashi probably got trained by his dad starting from whenever he learned to walk. I don’t even know what the heck was up with Yamato and I really don’t want to.

It’s just that I was twenty-eight years old (if you counted both lifetimes) in my head, and an adult mind crunches through the text-based stuff way faster than the average eight-year-old. I wasn’t as quick when it came to things like taijutsu, since I sure didn’t have any memories to fall back on aside from Mom’s training, but that was okay. Everything else I could learn from Dad or Mom or books.

That’s what I tell myself, anyway. There are genuine geniuses here. I’m just not one of them.

I don’t think the other students knew what to think of this strange girl who could sleep through half the lessons and still ace the tests. Fact is, I wasn’t all that concerned with the tests—the only penalty for failing was in the class standings, not in real life just yet—and instead focused on my constant sleep deprivation. Even if I hadn’t been doing well by the books, I’d have needed to take naps to make up for all the nightmare interruptions I had to live with. When it came to naps, at least, I was home free. I don’t think I had enough time to drop into Stage Three, given the whole class schedule thing and the fact that the lunch was only an hour long.

Of course, someone had to stroll along and break the monotony that was my school life, and he did it by tripping over me as I snoozed on the playground. Eventually, I would get used to sleeping in trees solely so people didn’t trip over me ever again, but that wasn’t the day.

Anyway, the first indication I got that trouble was coming was when I felt a sandal scrape across my foot and totally twist it the wrong way. As a side note, I’m kind of a crappy sensor when I’m sleep-deprived. Which is all the time. This isn’t really saying much about my sensing abilities, now that I think of it.

Both of us ended up yelling “Ow!” at the same time. I pulled my foot back, because a tweaked ankle is no fun when taijutsu training is later in the day, and pulled my sandal off so I could get a better look at the damage. About a second later, I realized I probably should also take a look at whoever had just face-planted into a tree root or a swing, and was greeted by the sight of a boy’s butt sticking up in the air as he tried to get his face off the ground and do his own assessment of his injuries.
“You okay?” I asked. My hands were glowing a faint green as I preempted any swelling from my ankle—I was good enough with medical ninjutsu to manage that much, at least. I’d probably be able to make sure Mr. Awkward Landing was all right, too, assuming he hadn’t knocked a tooth out.

Then again, we were eight, so maybe that wasn’t even much of a big deal.

At the sound of my voice, he rolled over so he was sitting on the ground, clutching his face. He even had dirt in his spiky black hair. It was like instead of going for a faceplant, he’d tried to be an ostrich. “Ow... Man, if I didn’t have my goggles that would’ve been bad!”

My experience with fashion is and probably always will be limited. I nonetheless maintain that snowboarding goggles are not actually a reasonable accessory in Konoha, which hasn’t seen a snowfall in the course of known shinobi history. Land of Fire and all that.

The boy continued muttering, “Though I didn’t need goggle lines on my face like that...” All of a sudden, he glared at me and said loudly, “Hey! What were you doing sleeping here anyway?”

“I’m tired, the tree provides shade, and people usually don’t run around it too much, because of all the roots.” I suggested, looking over at him with half-lidded eyes. I was tired all the time, true, but that didn’t mean that I wasn’t aware of things when I had to be. “Anyway, are you okay?”

Sure, people tripped over me, but as far as I was concerned that was more their problem than mine. I wasn’t exactly napping in the middle of a hallway, after all.

“I’m fine!” he insisted, waving his arms for emphasis. “It takes more than a pratfall to defeat the great Obito Uchiha!”

Oh what the fuck.

On one hand, the kid in front of me was a genuinely well-intentioned if clumsy person. He was probably, at the moment, the only explicitly identified Uchiha alive (since I couldn’t remember if Itachi had been born yet) who wasn’t some kind of arrogant douche. He was kind, thoughtless in a kind of endearing way, and trustworthy unless it came to paying attention to a clock.

On the other hand, Obito could grow up to be Tobi.

For about five seconds, I just stared at him like he was from another planet.

I was also solidifying my reputation as a total space-case. Oh well. I don’t think Obito even noticed, and I think it was because his goggles had dug uncomfortably into the bridge of his nose, and he got distracted by the pain again.

“Seriously, though, that hurt!” Obito said.

I frowned. “Take those goggles off so I can see what’s wrong.” I said, getting up onto my knees.

“What? No, there’s nothing wrong!” Obito insisted. He might have tried crab-walking away from me if it wasn’t for the fact that the root he’d hit was in the way.

“If you want me to heal that, you have to stay still.” I said. He froze. I continued, “I know it’s probably not serious, but there’s taijutsu later. It’s no fun to fight when you’re getting a black eye.”

“What, seriously? Oh man, I didn’t know it was that bad!” Obito fretted, pushing his goggles up so he could touch his nose. Bad idea. “Ow!”
“Stop that.” I ordered. It must have looked odd to outsiders, if there’d been anyone looking at us. The playground was always busy with tag games, though. I wondered what Obito had been doing before tripping over me, but I never asked. “I’m gonna make it look less like you got in a fight, okay?”

It seemed, even then, like Obito had to be held by the hand to avoid hurting himself. I’m still not sure if it’s a boy thing or just an Obito thing—most of the boys I knew later had different takes on the whole self-destruction thing.

“Okay, fine.” Obito said sullenly, pushing his goggles up on his forehead.

It wasn’t really that bad—like with other bruises, it was just a matter of closing up burst blood vessels and urging the body to clean up the now-useless extra blood. It was only a bit worse than my foot, even if Obito’s issue was way more colorful. I was just speeding up what his body would do naturally over the course of a week, and it didn’t really take that much chakra to accomplish that on something so minor. At least he wouldn’t look like a panda, like me.

“That feels funny.” Obito said, closing his eyes against the green glow of my chakra.

“It’s supposed to feel better.” I said, taking my hands away. I felt drained—it took chakra to heal, and as an eight-year-old I didn’t have much in the way of reserves just yet. I would, though. Even if I had to train to exhaustion.

“Well, yeah, it feels better too.” Obito said. He opened one eye, seeming to check if I was done poking him, and then poked at his nose experimentally. “Oh! It doesn’t hurt at all!”

“And the bruise is mostly gone.” It would have been a pretty interesting bruise, too. Oh well. “You can check in the bathroom mirror later or something.”

“Nah, I trust you!” Obito might have been a bit too trusting, really. I hadn’t even told him my name. “So what’s your name? We can’t be friends until I know what I can call you!”

Obito wasn’t one for patience, I guess.

“Keisuke Gekkō.” I said, a little stunned by how fast he’d turned around from being a sullen klutz. After a moment, I added, “Though you can call me Kei, if you want.”

“Keisuke?” Obito paused, wrinkling his nose. “I don’t remember you being in any of my classes.”

“I’ve been sitting in the back of the room a lot.” I admitted. It’s easier to sleep there, without fear of someone shooting spitballs into the back of my head.

“Oh, you’re the guy who’s always asleep! Man, I know class is boring, but I thought it was just in class!” Obito said. He pouted. “But you’re higher in the class rankings than I am!”

Wait. What.

“Hey, do you want to play? I mean, it’s not much of a game of tag if we only have two people, but I’m sure I can find something else that we could both do.” Obito continued, oblivious to my growing dismay. He grabbed my hand, pulling me to my feet. “I think there’s still wooden kunai in the play shed and no one’s using the targets, and even if there are we can run them off.”

My expression went a little flat. “Obito, I’m a girl.”

That, and I still needed to put my sandal back on before I went running off into the wild. The rest of
the world has splinters in it.

Obito has one of the most luminescent blushes I’ve ever seen. “Oh, uh… But you have a boy’s name…”

“My dad wanted a boy first. Though I don’t mind playing with you anyway; it was an honest mistake.” I added, feeling my lips turn up into a slight smile. Even though I was tired, he was pretty funny. “Where’d you say the kunai were again?”

At my easy dismissal of his major faux pas, Obito grinned brightly and tightened his grip on my hand. Blarg. Sandal. Wood chips! “This way! Come on, I’m sure we can get Rin-chan to join, Kei!”

Huh. The other aspiring medic-nin in the class. I hoped Rin wouldn’t mind us crashing her jump-rope session.

Rin Nohara—Obito’s only love, the lynchpin to the Plot, and all-around nice girl in a bad spot. I didn’t expect to like her at all, given how little I knew about her other than the fact that she was probably going to be in the same graduating class and how her death made everything go straight to hell.

“Rin-chan, wanna practice kunai throwing with us?” Obito called out, bouncing over to her with me hopping on one foot in his wake. Sandal!

Rin, bless her heart, agreed despite how utterly weird we both were. And I eventually did manage to get my sandal back on, finally.

So, that’s the story of how I made my first friends at the Academy.

That night, I had a nightmare about Rin’s death and Obito’s psychotic break. My subconscious was officially becoming unmanageable. So instead of just carrying on as usual, I went to Dad.

Dad didn’t really have a study or a lab or anything, even to practice his sealing work. Dad used fūinjutsu only to make explosive tags, mainly by copying the mass-produced ones down to each separate stroke. He used his blood, or sometimes Mom’s, in order to get better results than the market standard, but he never did anything else with it. He didn’t have a summoning contract with any animals that I’d ever seen, and I think Minato and Jiraiya were some of the few people to really innovate when it came to seals. Nonetheless, Dad was up late all the time, just polishing up his equipment for a mission or reading things in a mission file, or other stuff I wasn’t really supposed to see.

I guess if I hadn’t been a chronic insomniac, I never would have known.

“Dad, what do I do when I can’t stop dreaming about things that haven’t happened?” I asked, rubbing my eyes in the lamplight. Another sleepless night and I’d probably collapse in the middle of class. Not that me being less-than-conscious in the Academy was new, but I didn’t like the idea of not being able to choose when to drop off.

Petty, I know, but after five years of weekly or bi-weekly nightmares that never seemed to lose their edge, I think that I probably earned whatever sleep I did get. About the only thing I can say is that the really bad ones only happened occasionally, though as long as Hayate didn’t have a crisis of some kind I could usually get at least six hours. Nine was a blessing, when it happened.

I was so going to be a stunted adult.

“What do you mean, Keisuke-chan?” Dad asked.
I’d never really told Mom and Dad the real content of my nightmares. It was easier for them to believe that I was afraid of things like the first day of school, of shots, or of visiting the dentist.

“I’ve been having nightmares since…I don’t know. Forever?” I was hiccupping. “Daddy, I want them to stop.”

“What are they about, Keisuke-chan?” Dad asked, picking me up and settling me in his lap. “Are you having a tough time at school?”

Forever, to a kid, could mean anything from a day to the rest of their lives. Children are prone to exaggerating so much as an hour-long car ride, because not being able to move around and affect the world is incredibly boring.

“No! School’s fine, b-but I can’t stop…I can’t stop seeing things,” I started crying. Dad, thankfully, didn’t panic like he used to. Much. “Haa-chan…”

“Does something happen to Hayate?” Dad asked, rubbing my back. I looped my arms around his neck and buried my face against his stubble, even though it tickled my face.

“They killed him!” I sobbed, “I keep dreaming he’s a grown-up and dead and I can’t stop! H-he was there, and they sensed him, and they fought and there were traitors and he died!”

It was like five years’ worth of fear and rage and grief were trying to tear out of me all at the same time.

Dad ended up taking me to see the Yamanaka clan the next day.
One of the questions to ask yourself, when you're awake at night and unable to get to sleep, is “what am I really, when no one’s around?”

It’ll keep a person awake if they’re anything like me.

This isn’t due to anything like guilt—I was eight, and it’s hard for an eight-year-old to be responsible for much when there aren’t even any pet fish in the house. If I felt guilty, it would be because I hadn’t told my parents what was worrying me to death and thus worrying them by proxy. It might have saved us all some sleepless nights, especially me.

It stuck in my head because everything I used to define my “self” in this world—Keisuke—was tied to other people, to this world. The rest—the laziness, the knowledge, the maturity? That was the stuff from before. And I’m not sure Keisuke Gekkō as everyone else knew her would have been the same without the rest of me.

Anyway, Yamanaka mind jutsu tend to leave the victim—or patient, in my case—unconscious. When they don’t want you to know what they’re doing, they don’t bother to knock and say hello or use mental manners in any way before tearing your brain open. Granted, most people the Yamanaka use their jutsu on are enemies, or maybe each other for the sake of practice, so politeness was never the first course of action. Killing stuff was.

I guess the first sensation I felt after I “went under” was the feeling that someone was knocking on my mind. It’s weird to be pulled out of the day-to-day workings of the body, like breathing and stuff. I knew the Yamanaka clan jutsu weren’t actually supposed to be lethal on their own—it was what the jutsu did to you that was the real killer—and so I tried not to worry about the basic functions of my body while my mind was off being analyzed.

Speaking of which, my mind is actually pretty boring. I mean, how many people really have a mindscape that looks like a completely white room, with random images floating through the air and a Freudian couch, coffee table, and high-backed chair in it?

“My brain is weird.” I said aloud, listening to my voice echo. It was actually a pretty cool effect, if I ignored how empty it made everything seem.

“I’ve seen worse,” said Inoshi Yamanaka. I think he might be Ino’s grandpa or something, though he actually has visible pupils and his hair is dark blond instead of Ino and Inoichi’s spun gold. It’s very pretty all the same, though. “Though I have to ask—why are there two of you?”

I blinked (insomuch as I could without real eyes) and looked over at the couch, where Inoshi was staring. And there, lying on the velvet, was a smaller version of me. She was about four or so,
looking exactly like I had at that age, and seemed fast asleep. A mirror floated by at just that moment, spinning lazily, and I got a look at my reflection.

I was an adult, with a fairly average, nondescript build. My face was somewhere between what I would look like as an adult in my real body (based on what I could understand about artificial aging and what I knew about my parents’ bone structure heritability) and a bit of what I’d looked like before, with the mole under my left eye that I’d had before I’d been reborn. I wasn’t especially sickly-looking, though I did have noticeable bags under my eyes, and my face seemed to have naturally downturned lips. I looked a little like a college librarian, if librarians wore Konoha flak jackets, had swords strapped to their backs, or wore bandanas with the metal hitai-ate plate on them.

Also, when the hell did I get glasses again? I must be the intellectual half, though fuck if I know how exactly there ended up being an intellectual half.

“I didn’t know I even had a split personality.” I said, frowning. “Or am I supposed to be the fake?”

“Neither half of a dissociation event is ‘fake’.” Inoshi corrected me. He looked very patient about the whole thing, considering that he’d gone into an eight-year-old child’s mind and found two different beings in it. “Now, how long have you been having these dreams?”

As if on cue, a dream fragment floated by. I caught it with one hand and brought it in front of me, flipping the planes of its surface so I could see it properly and not through a distortion that seemed like a TV viewed the wrong way.

Hayate, eavesdropping on Kabuto and Baki after Gaara obliterated Dosu for being a pest. Normally, that scene was the start of one of my most common nightmare episodes. Hayate would be discovered, Kabuto would disappear, and the fight would start. It only ever ended one way, and I never wanted to see it. But it was like watching a movie while my eyelids were taped open or cut off —nothing I could do could change it. It just went on and on, forever, and every time I saw this future I woke up crying.

Sometimes I wondered what it would be like to have normal nightmares, about dinosaurs and tornados and things.

But when I was like this, feeling and looking like an adult, the memory didn’t reach out and try to consume my consciousness. Instead, the younger version of me started to whine in her sleep.

“One thing that I obviously had a psychotic break when I wasn’t paying attention.” I replied, looking up. One of the dream fragments was falling. “Can you even have a personality older than you are? I never read anything about this before.”

“Normally, shinobi with dissociative identity disorder don’t develop their first split until after a mission gone bad. The alternate selves tend to be younger or older, depending on the trauma and
which age group might be better able to handle it. People vary.” Inoshi replied. The guy was completely unfazed. I guess that as a Yamanaka, that was the whole point when it came to mental stuff like this. “Otherwise, the cases we see have to do with children exposed to extreme violence at a young age—the kind that a, say, four-year-old is entirely unable to handle. The split happens to protect the child’s mind from the trauma.”

“…I guess constant nightmares about my brother’s violent death could do that.” I said, and I caught the other dream fragment as it landed.

This one featured Rin’s death. ANBU, Chidori, Wood-Release-wielding Obito and everything.

“This one’s about a pair of kids I just met, when I was awake.” I said, sending it spinning off toward the other side of the blank white space with a flick of my wrist. “But the other one was all about Hayate. The rest… I mean, how the fuck is it that I have that many triggers? I don’t even know a kid with white hair!”

It wasn’t really a question. I knew exactly why the visions were there. But even if I couldn’t lie in my mindscape, misdirection isn’t impossible. There was a reason the mind could be represented as a maze. And technically, I’d never met Kakashi. But I did know of him—it was hard not to know about the Hatake genius, who entered the Academy and graduated within a few months, and who made mockeries of all the clan kids in his year.

Little-me started to stir. I decided to call her Id. Most of the Id is sleeping under the influence of the Ego and Superego, after all.

“The subconscious doesn’t deal entirely in facts.” Inoshi said mildly. “How do you know who the subjects of your dreams are?”

“I just… know?” I paused. That didn’t feel quite right. It wasn’t a lie, exactly, but it wasn’t accurate either. “…Even in my dreams, I’d know Hayate anywhere.” True. But not Truth. “Wait, no… I think I recognize him by his chakra. The feel of it… it’s part of what makes him Hayate and not some asshole under a genjutsu or a transformation. I know who he is.”

Inoshi nodded. “And do you know yourself?”

Shit. This was how I imagined meeting Socrates would be.

“No.” I said. “I’m eight. Or at least I think I am.” I waved my arms, gesturing mostly at myself but also at a passing memory, of my eighth birthday party. “This version of me is twenty-something and she’s four. And our body is eight.” I paused. “This is so confusing.”

“The mind is always a puzzle.” Inoshi said. “Do you have any idea why?”

Because I’m the subject of a botched reincarnation? I didn’t say. I’m not sure he would have believed me. Then again… wasn’t this my mind? And wasn’t my current appearance that of an older kunoichi version of me?

“I keep getting these dreams,” I said distractedly, as an image—grainy and warped—passed by our faces. I think it might have something to do with the Fourth Hokage, but I didn’t get anything more out of it than that. “They don’t feel like dreams—they feel like memories, because I can still picture it all even when I’m awake. Dreams fade. Memories—visions—don’t work the same way.”

Nightmares didn’t fade the same way, though. Fear stays in the mind longer than anything other than pain, because the brain tries to remember so the cause of the pain and fear can be avoided in the future. It’s useful for survival in terms of inducing a kind of threat-oriented mindset, but PTSD still
has a major toll on mental health and the quality of life that follows after it develops isn’t really all that great. And it degenerates into paranoia all the fucking time, even though ninja are only paranoid when all of their enemies are dead. It’s not paranoia if they really are out to get you.

I closed my eyes. “I wonder, am I supposed to be…acting on them, somehow? I might be protecting myself from the pain…maybe I’m just a defense mechanism, and this is a warning for someone other than me. If I knew what was causing them, I’d be able to tell who the hell this is supposed to go to. Maybe they’re visions of a future. Maybe they’re nothing but utter paranoia.”

“And if they’re just anxious dreams?” Inoshi asked.

“Then I wish I didn’t have them.” I said, rubbing my eyes. Next to me, Id stirred.

“But you don’t believe that.”

“No, I don’t. There has to be a reason.”

I guess it was more accurate to say that I hoped there was a reason I had to remember all of this. Why couldn’t I have been reincarnated normally, and been born an average girl in an average world? Why here? Why now of all times?

“I wonder, am I supposed to see the future? Or is it just a possible future?” I mused aloud, with a sigh. “Is it just a fucked-up dream? Is any of this shit supposed to be real?” I waved a hand, gesturing to all of the cloud of memories and possible visions at once.

I was getting distracted. Id brought me back to earth, reaching up to grab my wrist without me noticing her move. I looked down.

For being a four-year-old version of me, she looked so tired I almost wanted to tell her to go back to sleep, but this was her mind too. Instead, I picked her up and held her, balancing most of her weight on the shelf of my hip. She clung to my neck.

“I don’t have any idea what I’m doing.” I said. I ran my fingers through Id’s hair as she sniffed. “But I don’t want Hayate to die. Or Rin, or Obito, or anyone else I might dream about. Maybe the stance I’m going to take is a selfish one—I’m really only protecting myself from pain, at the end of it all—but I don’t want to just sit on my hands and do nothing.”

Inoshi made a noncommittal noise.

He was the best sounding board ever.

The sad part is that, as the only soul of this body, I’m the one who created Id to protect me. She’s the child, the innocence, the carefree part of me who clings to her parents without ever thinking of the life I used to have. She’s the one who loves Hayate with a child’s understanding and easy affection. I love him with the fierce, defensive love of an adult with responsibility for his life. The same translates outward into the rest of our relationships with other people, because splitting our reactions means there’s no middle.

Both of these things are a part of me. I just partitioned them off like they were different countries because I’m an idiot and because I’m under stress.

I think.

“I wish I could take all of these and just…I don’t know, put them in an album or something.” I said, looking up at the seething mass. The cloud of visions and dreams seemed to titter, as though the
murmur of a crowd had suddenly increased to a proper speaking volume. “That way I’d be able to take them out, in order, if I wanted to see something. I mean, some of them could be like alarms, when they’re coming up, but some of them are just trying to turn me into a sobbing wreck.”

Not that they really needed to work at it.

God, I wished there was some kind of manual for being a half-assed retroactively precognitive crazy person. Though the fact is, if anyone else did manage to write it, I’d be too busy feeling sorry for them to read it. I’m terrible like that.

Then the cloud above our heads began to roar, as though a thunderstorm was building. There was the clashing of cymbals, along with the sound of a trumpet blast, and a line of the floating menagerie of images extended outward from its main mass. As I watched, the line morphed into a swarm as the rest of the visions followed along, almost as though something was sucking them away from the flock.

The lead vision was heading right for us, leading the horde.

I raised my free hand to meet it.

Inoshi and Id’s hands joined mine.

*Pain’s Almighty Push turns Konoha into a crater…*

*The Ten-Tailed Beast’s attack strikes the Alliance headquarters in Kumogakure, killing hundreds…*

“*Sakura. Thank you.***

*Kurenai’s eyes widen as Shikamaru tells her of Asuma’s death…*

“*…or your son dies at the ripe old age of one minute…***

“I’ll take care of the mess…”

I blinked. The white room’s customary haze of memory and prophecy was fading, leaving me sitting in the high-backed shrink’s chair without Id, feeling inexplicably shorter and glasses-less. The younger version of me was nowhere in sight. Inoshi was, though, and he sat on the couch with his legs crossed in front of him.

“Well, that was something.” Inoshi said.

I made a mild sort of noise and kept looking around for both the missing cloud and Id. There was this stupid fog everywhere. “Yeah, and now the other me is missing. Hey, Id!”

“Hello.”

Oh holy shit.

The result of the…storm, I suppose, wasn’t what I expected. I’d expected that Id would be there, and she was. It was just that there was also a new girl there, hovering in the center of her personal light-show—almost as though she’d picked up the Fourth Raikage’s Lightning Armor, if the armor could be made up of light, colors, and *sounds* that hit me like slaps to the face. She was older, looking around eight or nine, and she actually looked like what our real body was supposed to, if I could mentally subtract the light show, the way her eyes glowed gold, and the way her feet didn’t quite touch the “ground” of this mental world. And yet she was still *Id* in the way her energy still had that
childishness that mine lacked.

“I’m the Dreamer. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“…I’m just gonna take a guess and say that you’re basically everything I haven’t really been managing that well.” I said in a strangled voice.

“Yes and no. Neither of us are the ‘true’ Keisuke Gekkō, but she’ll make herself known in time,” the Dreamer replied. She didn’t move her mouth. It was a little disconcerting. “I am hope for the future. And your dread.”

I looked at Inoshi, who shrugged. I had no idea if this kind of thing was supposed to be normal.

“Okay, between the visions and the memories and the sleepless nights, I guess I should have figured that something else was going on.” I admitted. “So, which one of us is going to be the one to wake up?”

“You, of course.” I blinked at her. “You’ve done well. I’ll hold your visions back until they can be useful, and in return you’ll help me analyze them for clues.” The Dreamer smiled sheepishly. I couldn’t help but think that the expression didn’t belong on her face. “Two heads are better than one, right? I can’t claim to know everything that goes on when you’re the one doing the thinking.”

“Yeah, but usually the two heads in question aren’t in the same head.” I sighed, scratching at the base of my ponytail. “Why are you offering me anything?”

“You gave me love.” The Dreamer’s smile became sad. “All of your love is mine, too. And I’ll help you protect our precious people.”

“…oh.” I said in a small voice.

“After all, I’m a part of you, too.”

I nodded. Everything in the mind was representative of something, whether how someone viewed him or herself to deeply hidden and reviled issues. It was all symbolic, mostly, but I had a feeling that the Dreamer was more or less what I ought to have had a handle on to start with. She felt friendly, but she was young and despite holding my memories back, I knew that there had to be a reason for it.

I think she was supposed to represent my attachment to this world. All of it, good and bad alike.

“Inoshi-san? I think we have it together now.” I said, turning to the Yamanaka in our midst.

“Yes, that’s probably enough for now.” He held out both hands, offering. “Ready to come back to us?”

The Dreamer and I grasped one hand each at the same time.

I woke up in Dad’s lap just as Inoshi was pulling his hand back from my forehead. I smiled tiredly.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Doing better, Keisuke-chan?” Dad asked, pushing my bangs from my forehead so he could take my temperature, even if I didn’t have a fever. I guess that between my instability and Hayate’s chance of a relapse, Dad was always worried about at least one of us.
Was I really? Well, between the spiritual trip and meeting my other self, I think I managed pretty well! Sure, I wasn’t ever going to be a normal kid, and I’d probably worry my head off all the damn time because of both being a ninja and what generation of ninja I was going to be, but I was…okay. Yeah. It sounded right. No one else here fit my old definition of normal anyway, so I guess I was in good company.

“I’ll be okay, Dad.” I said.

(Or rather, I was pretty sure I would be. As soon as I knew for sure that what Inoshi had seen hadn’t been entered in any secret shinobi archives for later perusal by the Hokage. Except that I never would get that reassurance. Even confirmation was a long time in coming. Almost too long. But that can wait for another time.)

That night, I didn’t dream. Not a normal dream, anyway.

“Ready to give it a shot?”

“You bet.”

Chapter End Notes

Inoshi Yamanaka: Ino’s great-uncle. OC.
Of Things to Come: Links in a Chain

Chapter Summary

Kei: Socialize.

I didn’t have a plan.

I mean, I knew broadly that there was a point A (wherever I was in terms of the timeline) and a plethora of point B possibilities (the various visions). I even knew the details of some of them. But it had been so long since I actually saw some of the non-nightmarified quasi-future that I could only read them as though out of a book. Sometimes the specifics were missing. Sometimes very big details were entirely gone.

I still didn’t know when the Third Shinobi World War started.

The Dreamer’s job was partially just to hold back the stream of unnecessary images that had been driving me completely crazy over the past five years. The other part, which we worked on together, was in hammering out some kind of plan of action in order to make sure that we and everyone we knew made it out alive.

I mean, sure, the thing about life is that no one does, but I’d at least like to make it to twenty again. It’d be a shame to fail so hard at this ninja business that I couldn’t even beat my old record of time spent alive.

Sharing the burden over two people helped. I wasn’t drowning anymore. Someone had thrown me a lifeline.

We’ll be okay.

I sure hoped so.

I went back to school the following Monday, since Dad and Mom declared the next few days and the weekend after a family extended weekend. It was really just an excuse for them to watch me for any changes, but I had fun drawing with Hayate anyway. He was getting a lot bigger, and soon he’d be quicker on the draw than I was when it came to kenjutsu. About the only thing he couldn’t seem to figure out how to do for himself was cook, but since he was about three feet tall and I didn’t like to move the footstool, I didn’t mind taking over for him.

Besides, the day I let my five-year-old brother near a stove uneducated is the day I trip down a well and drown.

“Kei!” Obito shouted, bounding into the classroom well over ten minutes late. I wondered what he’d been doing beforehand that was so distracting, but it didn’t really matter. Obito was reliable in that he could always be counted on to be doing someone a favor. “Oh man, we haven’t seen you in forever! Were you sick?”

I guess the teacher was a bit too busy to note Obito’s entrance, even when Rin drifted over to us as though pulled by some strange gravity. After all, the Inuzuka in class was being overexcited again.
Koga was excitable in a totally different way than anyone else, though.

“Sort of.” I replied, resting my chin in one palm, elbow on the desktop. “I’m better now, though, and I don’t feel quite so tired anymore.”

“That’s good.” Rin said. “I was really starting to worry—I mean, we only met a week ago, but you seem like a nice person and it would be terrible if you were sick or hurt and we didn’t have any idea.”

I have a hard time believing that I’d be so openly compassionate about someone else a week into knowing them. But then, that’s why Rin’s Rin and I’m me. Rin’s too nice to really dislike, even if I wanted to.

“Thanks, Rin-san, but it wasn’t really anything big.” I said mildly. At their disbelieving looks, I added, “Dad just wanted me to take the rest of the week easy. And I haven’t fallen asleep randomly since!”

“So does that mean you’re actually going to listen in applied chakra theory period now?” Rin asked.

“No.” I replied. I’d done more chakra control exercises than the Academy could cover, period. It helped that I was aware of it, and the Dreamer tended to help just by pushing back at me so I’d have a better understanding of what and what not to do. It was like wearing training weights, but in my head.

Rin sighed, but Obito grinned. “Oh come on, it’s not like we’ll need to know how to stick leaves to our foreheads in the real world.”

I made a neutral noise and unloaded my school bag as Rin frowned. I was starting to think that having a conciliatory personality, when it came to being friends with someone like Obito, might not be the best tack to take. I wasn’t especially confrontational either, but that was more because of laziness than a desire to please everyone, most of the time. It just wasn’t worth jumping down Obito’s throat about things.

Then again, we were eight, and none of us were especially set in our ways (with an exception made for me and my habitual laziness).

“But Obito, it’s the first step toward learning some of the more useful exercises.” Rin said, looking a little disappointed that someone else wasn’t taking their studies seriously. It must have been trying to have two apparent slackers as friends.

My grades said otherwise, giving that I was sitting at the top of the charts. Obito’s…not so much. He’d just never been especially intellectual, from what the Dreamer and I had surmised. I theorized that he learned better through movement than books or lectures, like a few other people I’d known.

Of course, he could be genuinely slow, but I doubted it.

“I started there.” I offered, flipping my book open to the page on chakra pathways. I planted my elbow in the middle of it. “But Dad had me move on once I managed to do three at once and got bored.”

“Wow! You learn fast!” Rin said, surprised but pleased. I’d given her an easy explanation for my boredom in class. “How far are you now?”

“I was starting to work on tree climbing, but I don’t have enough chakra to do it much.” I admitted. My reserves weren’t ever going to be all that great. While I did have shinobi parents, and very good
chakra control, someone like Obito—who was descended from generations of ninjas—or Kakashi—who’d been training since he could walk and had the goddamn White Fang for a dad—would easily outdo me. Rin probably wouldn’t need huge reserves, though as an orphan it was hard to determine if she’d ever get them anyway.

Anyway, it wouldn’t be until we were about nine or ten when our cores started to really stabilize, according to the book.

“So, how long have you two known each other?” I asked, since I knew I hadn’t seen either of them when I joined the Academy.

“About three years now!” Obito said brightly. “Me and Rin joined the Academy when we were five!”

And yet I’m in the same class as both of them. Apparently my teachers paid attention only too well during the entrance examinations. I know I sure hadn’t been paying attention to the year ranking.

Don’t look at me.

“Huh. And I only joined a month ago…” I murmured, staring at my book without really seeing it.

“Really?” Obito sounded genuinely surprised. “That’s weird—I thought everyone joined up at five!”

“I think my parents held me back.” I said, though I’d been aware of it and had agreed at the time. I could see why they would want to—the older I was when I went into the field, the better chance I’d probably have of making it to being a sane and stable adult. I guess when it came to children from ninja clans, especially in wartime, the bars got set differently. Everything was about prestige and showing up everyone else.

That’s a lot of pressure on a five-year-old. No wonder people snapped.

“Huh,” said Obito. “Well, you caught up really fast! I wouldn’t want to have to teach you stuff just so you could catch up to our age group.”

“Obito!” Rin said, lightly scolding, and Obito wilted.

“It’s okay, Rin-san.” I said. “Neither of you knew. And I didn’t know it was a big deal.”

Actually, I was mostly interested in graduating by eleven. I probably should have taken it easier, though I don’t know how I could have. I was the class sleepyhead, after all.

“Well, we’re in our final year.” Rin said. “So you’ll be graduating with us, right?”

“I think so.” I said.

“It’d be so cool if we could be on a team!” Obito said enthusiastically.

I didn’t want to burst his bubble, but… “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a team with two kunoichi on it. Not to start with.”

“That’s just because fewer girls pass than boys.” Obito said dismissively. “You’ll do great!”

I doubted that. Rin and I either had or would have some of the same specialties—mostly in medical ninjutsu and genjutsu—and putting us both on a team with Obito would probably lead to a disaster of some sort. And Obito and Rin, at least in my head, were destined to end up on a team with Kakashi and be subject to all of the shit that would follow. With Rin, Obito, and Kakashi on Team Minato,
they made a pretty good generalist/fast response team, which was pretty rare. Most teams specialized, like the Ino-Shika-Chou trio and Team Kurenai’s scouting setup, or even Team Gai’s close combat assault team. But rapid response teams weren’t common.

I wondered what type of team I could end up on.

“I hope so.” I said. “It’d be a shame to skip three years and then fail the graduation test.”

“Hey, if you can skip three years, some lousy test is nothing!” Obito said.

“We’ll all do great.” Rin said, and we all shared a smile.

“NOHARA, GET BACK IN YOUR SEAT!” Takahashi-sensei yelled.

And then the magic was gone, but it didn’t die. Rin, Obito, and I were fast friends, and when it came time to fight over seating placements again the next morning, we all sat together.
Of Things to Come: Head Case

Chapter Summary

Kei: Chat with voices in head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On nights when, normally, I’d be due for another nightmare according to my once-a-week bout with precognition, I was dragged into my mental world. I honestly thought that I’d probably had way more conversations with the Dreamer than that, but like normal dreams, only certain things stuck with me. I think we put our heads together at night solely so I wouldn’t crack horribly in the morning, and the Dreamer paid me back for contributing to the collective and sharpening our abilities for the days ahead by erasing my explicit memories of the sessions after the fact.

If I’d remembered everything clearly, it would have been no better than the visions themselves. Less terrible, but no less taxing overall.

This is one of the ones I remembered:

The mental world I’d made had gotten a few new features since the last time I consciously recalled visiting. Where the floor had been a badly-defined white void that happened to let everyone feel like there was a floor to stand evenly on, with physics and everything, something had apparently sprung a leak. Where once there had been a white void, there was the usual setup of chairs and coffee table, but they were surrounded by soft blue-white light and the lowest six inches of everything happened to be underwater. There was the sound of dripping or sloshing water, everywhere.

Since I hadn’t learned the art of floating inside my head, I would have been wet up to the middle of my calves if this was real.

“How much do you know about the way that the world works?” the Dreamer asked, perching on the top of the high-backed Therapist Chair. Gravity, momentum, and the conversation of matter and energy sort of went out the window when it came to my dreamscape. Then again, dreams are weird in general. That’s the point. Neurons fire randomly when humans are asleep just to keep in practice, and then dreams follow.

After creating the Dreamer, I was starting to get more of those. Not visions.

I sat on the couch, legs crossed in front of me and Id’s head on my thigh, and said, “For a while there, I thought I knew at least a bit. Only being reincarnated and stuff threw that right out the window.”

“I didn’t mean cosmology, precisely. I meant this one. You know, the world you’ve been having visions about? That you live in?”

“Are we talking events or just the way this place is put together?”

“The latter.”
I lowered my chin into my hands, thinking. “The only reason this place is so weird is because of chakra, and that all came from the Ten-Tailed Beast. So, if it wasn’t for a giant unknowable monster whose death-slash-sealing became the source of all things natural energy, physical, or spiritual chakra, this would be like my old world.

“And yet, the Sage of Six Paths had to have figured out something beyond special to do anything at all to it, unless chakra’s somehow the local equivalent of radioactive fallout from the Giant’s existence, pressing down on the world and warping its structure. He had to have been the first—the Bruce Banner of the shinobi world.” I paused, thinking that over. “He made the beast’s energy his own. Only, from what I’ve seen, Tailed Beast chakra isn’t human enough to be used by humans unless there’s some kind of filter. Otherwise…”

The image of Naruto’s skin cooking off and regenerating and then burning again floated by, unnecessarily. And that was only from four out of the Nine Tailed Fox’s signature nine tails, and he’d been its jailor since he was born.

I didn’t want to imagine how much damage the Ten Tailed Beast could do just by existing.

As though on some kind of cue, a vision of the Tailed Beast Ball vaporizing Allied Shinobi HQ collided with the first image. The problems with thinking out loud in one’s mindscape were becoming obvious.

“True, the existence of the Ten-Tailed Beast did change this world from what we’d refer to as ‘vanilla mode,’ but its real value was in how it changed the creatures that live here,” the Dreamer said. “All humans are born with chakra. All beasts, birds, and fish are born with chakra. The air has chakra. The plants can grow exclusively off of it. This world is dependent on it, much like how life originally adapted to the expansion of oxygen supplies. If there is a resource, it will be exploited. Life finds a way.”

“Please don’t quote Jurassic Park at me.” I mumbled, massaging my temples. It would be some kind of world-ending paradox if I managed to get a headache inside my own head. “So, the world runs on chakra. We can’t say for sure, but if this world runs on chakra, there’s gonna be bad things if it suddenly doesn’t have it anymore.”

“Yes. You already know one form of it as chakra exhaustion. Or ‘death by chakra exhaustion,’ anyway. We won’t be allowing that to happen to us.”

“I don’t exactly have a large chakra supply.” I pointed out.

“That’s why I’ll be acting as your reserve.”

I blinked at the Dreamer, not quite comprehending. “Chakra is a mix of physical and spiritual energy. Like gas and oxygen, not enough of either or the wrong balance of both and there’s no ignition. And you don’t exactly have a body and it’s not as though either of us knows how the Yin Seal works.”

“You’re thinking of it a bit too narrowly,” the Dreamer said. “What are the elemental forms that chakra can take? Keep in mind that my being the storage center for your more detailed visions doesn’t mean I’m explicitly preventing you from using them if you want.”

Having the Dreamer in my head had reduced most of the visions to a feeling instead of a collection of possible triggers attached to a million flashbacks that kept going off every time my brain found a neuron to flip to On. If I focused, I could remember things like the first time I ever rode a bike. If I didn’t, I could still remember how to ride a bike, though there weren’t really any bikes in the new
reality I found myself in. It’s the difference between an explicit and an implicit memory.

“Water. Fire. Wind. Lightning. Earth. Then there are the advanced kekkei genkai fusion setups, like Ice and Wood. Or Dust Release, for a three-way connection and stupid levels of destruction.” Some of the kekkei genkai weren’t advanced nature manipulation. There was Kimimaro’s Dead Bone Pulse, along with Sakon and Ukon’s freaky not-actually-conjoined twin act. I’d never figured out the name for that one.

“You’re missing the two big ones.”

I frowned. “Well, there’s Sage Mode and natural energy and sage chakra, which can turn you into a frog if you do things wrong.” Yeah, not testing that. “It’s also used by the curse seals because of Jūgo.”

“Off by a mile.”

“What, then?”

“Try looking a little further back. What did the Sage of Six Paths use in order to distribute his human-filtered chakra? What was he so famous for, barring the creation of ninja techniques?”

A picture of the Sage, wreathed in darkness, with his hands glowing red and blue with chakra that didn’t look like any of the normal elements. A Hyūga clan member, likely a jōnin Neji, setting up for Eight Trigrams Sixty-Four Palms on a background of the Taoist Taijitu.

“Yin-Yang Release.”

“And I am almost entirely composed of Yin chakra. Yours, yes, but I’ve been saving it up.”

“I thought you were a mental construct.” I said, dumbfounded.

“That too. This is your mind. It doesn’t have to make sense except in the most roundabout, half-assed, illogical way possible.” She shrugged. “I am the multipurpose, artificial personality-slash-mental-construct whose whole purpose is to make up for the fact that your soul wasn’t scrubbed out right. You run the body.”

I’m pretty sure she was insulting my Wikipedia-esque thought patterns. I go on mental tangents and get lost a lot. Along with my existence.

“What would we be if I’d been incarnated normally?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t exist and you’d probably dead by twenty.” The Dreamer said it so matter-of-factly that I almost felt chills. “This isn’t an insult to your intelligence, but we’re not particularly driven people when apart. Or ambitious. With no outside pressure, there wouldn’t be any visible or tangible need to improve. We’d be behind the curve eventually, and then probably die.”

“Oh.” I said. At least she was being nice about it. “So. Yin chakra.”

“The birthplace of all genjutsu and medical ninjutsu. It’s about getting something from effectively nothing. Or making it look like there’s something. Honestly, if we had a proper chakra storage seal, I wouldn’t even need to multitask like this.”
“What’s that actually mean for us? I was already going to be a medical ninja, even if I stab people on the side.” I pointed out, ignoring her complaints.

“With a year’s worth of Yin chakra saved up, I could create a very complex genjutsu,” the Dreamer suggested. “Or maybe heal broken bones. You really don’t have a lot of chakra to spare, so I’ve been trying to only take what isn’t used and won’t be missed.” And letting go only when she felt like it, probably.

“I’m nine.”

“And growing up will help. But we don’t really have that much time.”

I knew that much. If Tsunade could get away with keeping her Yin Seal intact for decades or however long she had, and could release it complete with hilariously overpowered regeneration capacity and super strength, I wondered what we could be with four years’ worth.

Except that I was never going to be one for punching. Stabbing, maybe.

“How the pair of you and Rin, I’d say she’s the combat-capable medic with emphasis on the medical half. Or she will be—it’s hard to be certain of something when we never saw anything about her other than the Kannabi mission and her death.” The Dreamer sighed, “You, on the other hand, will be a combat medic with the emphasis placed on combat.”

Well, I’d already known that. I hadn’t been a doctor in my past life, or a biology major, or even a particularly interested chemistry student. I’d been a psychology major with an interest in ecology, history, teaching, and half a dozen other major fields. I wasn’t one for technical details in anything other than my field, and learning cellular energy processes in high school had nearly bored me to tears. I didn’t have enough of an inclination, even with my external motivators of a) death and b) possible death were strong enough to change the basic fact of the matter. I didn’t have a brain geared toward medical ninjutsu the way Rin did. Mine was all analysis, for some reason. Cross-discipline.

And Yamaguchi-sensei noticed that. He knew I was motivated by my brother, not myself. It wasn’t quite what he was looking for in a full-time apprentice, and therefore I wasn’t one. I learned on weekends only. It wasn’t like kenjutsu, where Mom drilled me into the ground every day and I was happy to let her.

“Counterintuitive, but it can work.”

It’s just somewhat depressing when your optimism shuts you down.

“So, I guess that means no Hippocratic Oath.”

“For the enemy, no.”

I paused. “Also, did you ever say why you were gathering all my excess spiritual energy and converting it to Yin chakra, or why it was even remotely necessary?”

“It’s because of your situation.”

Bwuh?

“I’m not sure if you noticed, but your brain and the age of your soul have never matched up.” The Dreamer sighed again. I think I was the kind of person who drew frustration out of people. “If the reincarnation cycle had scrubbed your memories clear properly, it wouldn’t even be
necessary. But how, exactly, did you think that you kept your adult mind when your baby brain wasn’t remotely capable of handling either the thought processes or memories?”

…I’d kind of just chalked it up to soul-body dissociation in the vein of Yu-Gi-Oh! and let it drop. I hadn’t had a lot of time to think on it, since I’d been a bit busy just trying not to freak out.

“So, chakra—one way or another, has been supporting my existence.”

“Chakra does the impossible. You’re an impossibility. The connection is a little obvious.”

The problem with arguing with yourself is that even if you win, you still lose. The other problem is that, because of the immense mental resources that had been entrusted to her, she was also coming to conclusions faster than I could. We were different, but the same pool of general information was there. I’d apparently handed analysis over to her for the course of this conversation.

“I give up.” I muttered, hugging my knees to my chest. I sighed. “So, we keep storing Yin chakra. We keep looking forward. We keep practicing. We keep hoping for the best.”

“At this point? Yes. It’s all we can do.”

With no actual evidence of anything, it’d be hard to convince anyone with actual power to act on my visions. Even Inoshi, who’d seen some of them almost a year ago, hadn’t seemed to really think anything of them. I didn’t even know if they’d stay accurate—you could be off by as little as half a degree, or less, but in the long run that was still a possibility for major changes. My visions wouldn’t change over time to reflect my existence. They weren’t, on their own, entirely reliable.

I could build on what I knew wouldn’t change. That was all. Everything else I’d have to play by ear.

Chapter End Notes

Metaphysics!
Of Things to Come: Unity

Chapter Summary

Kei: Pester Obito.

“Obito, what happened to your face?”

Not the most tactful thing to say, I guess, but I’d never seen Obito come to school with a bruise before. Especially not one in the shape of a hand. I mean, even in class spars we weren’t really going for knockout blows yet, since everyone involved was a kid and we were all future comrades. The bruise was bigger than my hand, which was on the upper range of fist sizes for our class, so it couldn’t have been a kid.

Not a kid our age, anyway.

“Holy—uh, Kei, did you want something?” Obito asked nervously, carefully angling his cheek away from me. I probably wouldn’t have even noticed the problem if he’d made a habit of sitting on my other side, but he was in Rin’s seat.

“I want you to show me what happened to your face, Obito. It looks like it hurts.” I said firmly. Rin wasn’t in yet, which I think was the only reason I got the obstinate expression out of him instead of a nod. He’d set his jaw and after that, only Rin would be able to get him to do anything.

Actually, the fact that Obito wasn’t late ought to have clued me in before I saw his cheek.

“No way! I’m fine, Kei.” Obito insisted.

“Then let me see your face.” I said.

“I’m fine!”

“No, you’re not!”

“What’s going on?” Rin’s voice came from practically nowhere and both of us jumped, though Obito immediately covered his cheekbone with his hand. “Obito?”

“It’s all good, Rin-chan!” Obito said.

“Then put your hand down.” I said.

Obito scowled, leveling a glare at me that looked more like a pout. “No!”

Every once in a while, I would forget that we were still eight, given that we were learning how to become killers while in school. Rin could be mature and modest, and Obito could take stuff seriously when he wanted to. And I was me, in spite of any craziness. Then stuff like this would happen.

“Obito, please don’t hide from us.” Rin said in a deeply disappointed voice. Obito wilted. “I’ll take care of you.”

Well, that could sure be taken a couple of different ways. I was suddenly glad that Rin was eight.
“Hey, I fixed you up the first day we met, too. Do you think we’re going to make fun of you or something?” I wanted to know.

“I know.” Obito groaned. At least he lowered his hand so Rin could get a look at it. “But it’s embarrassing.”

“I offered to beat up anyone who said anything about cooties.” I said. And I would, even if I had to smuggle my shinai into the classroom. Obito would just have to cough up the names.

Obito flushed, which looked pretty bad with the bruise. “That’s not the point!”

“This looks like you tried to block.” Rin said. When Obito tried to jerk away from her, she grabbed his chin. “What happened?”

“Uhm…Rin-chan…”

**Owned.**

Obito ducked his head. “It’s really nothing.”

I poked him in the side and he flinched. Bruised ribs, too? Had to have been a pretty bad beating. “That isn’t nothing, Obito.”

Obito tried to glare at me, but he gave up. He grumbled, without looking at either of us aspiring kunoichi, “It’s my asshole cousins, okay?”

At the word ‘cousins,’ I got the impression that the boys—probably boys, anyway—were older than Obito. They probably were embarrassed by Obito’s status as the class loser, ranked dead last in the academic standings, and of course decided that beating the crap out of him sometime before class was the best option to change that.

Sometimes I was really glad I wasn’t a part of one of the big clans.

Rin’s look made me think that she didn’t really know what was going on. As an orphan, she wasn’t exactly going to be missed if she died in the field—another thing that made me think that the ninja world was irreparably fucked-up even though it shared that with my old one—and she didn’t really have any major expectations riding on her shoulders like an albatross or a millstone or something. Heck, I didn’t really have any major discrepancy between my parents’ expectations and my accomplishments, unless you counted exceeding them in basically every way. Being better than expected was, while not perfect, a hell of a lot better than being worse.

Especially in the Uchiha clan.

Neither Obito nor I really wanted to have to explain it.

“You might have to go to the nurse’s office.” I said, my hands glowing green. I could fix a mild bruise like the one on his face without the teacher even noticing, but if Obito had any cracked ribs or damaged organs, well, I was out of my league. Granted, he probably wouldn’t have gotten to school at all of that’d been the case, but I still didn’t want to take any chances.

I also wanted to track those Uchiha punks down and beat the shit out of them, but that would have to wait until I was strong enough for my revenge impulse to be worth the name and not just a get-myself-killed impulse.

“I’m fine. I can skip if things get to be too much.” Obito said stubbornly. “Just don’t tell Sensei
“If you skip, I’m dragging your sorry butt to the hospital.” I said flatly. I remembered only too well where it was.

“Like you can.” Obito snapped back. He really must have been in pain. Obito usually didn’t snap at anyone—he just yelled.

“Between the two of us we might be able to take care of it.” Rin said after a moment.

Honestly, I thought she’d be the type to call on Sensei right away. Even if Sensei was an overworked chūnin who had so much trouble controlling thirty kids that he didn’t even notice the three of us conspiring in the back. He wasn’t even the first sensei we’d had, since the first three had been called to the front and killed or something.

“I don’t want this getting back to the clan.” Obito muttered sullenly. He didn’t look at either of us.

“…In that case, let’s ditch after lunch.” I suggested. At my friends’ looks, I explained, “Yamaguchi-sensei’s known my family since I was little, and he’s been the one teaching me how to heal. He might be a medic-nin, but he’s all ninja first and confidentiality agreements will help us.”

Obito asked, “Do you think he’d help us? Really?”

“I think so.” I said. I couldn’t really offer anything better. I tried anyway. “At least he’s better at healing than the school nurse or I am?”

“If we’re caught, we could say we were doing some extra work to polish up our scores.” Rin suggested. “Having a medic-nin cover for us would work, if we could convince him.”

Obito groaned. “I don’t have any choice in this, am I?”

“Nope.” I said, deadpan. “Just surrender to the loving care of your girlfriends and maybe we won’t break out the ribbons and glitter.”

“Kei-chan!” Rin said, half scolding and half laughing and all blushing.

Obito pouted, cheeks almost glowing red. “Kei, that’s mean!”

“I’m cruel to be kind.” I said loftily. Still, my expression softened. “We’re friends, so we’ll all look after each other.”

“Well, duh.” Obito said, rolling his eyes. “You two win this round.”

It turned out that Yamaguchi-sensei was pretty willing to take care of Obito for us, even if he didn’t exactly approve of the whole playing hooky thing and he was technically on his lunch break, too. We met him on the hospital roof, where he generally had his smoke breaks, and hiding from other people in the forest of drying sheets made it less embarrassing for everyone.

“I don’t even want to know what kids like you are getting up to nowadays.” Yamaguchi-sensei said, with Obito sitting on the concrete next to the chain-link fence that bordered the roof and kicking his feet idly. Rin and I hovered like overprotective parents, though we really weren’t being all that useful.

All the energy we had made us feel like sitting still was even worse, though.

“All right, so the obvious injury is the one on your cheekbone—I assume it was a sucker-punch.”
Yamaguchi-sensei said.

Obito mumbled something indistinct under his breath.

“If there really had been four of them, I hope you would have chosen to run instead.” Yamaguchi-sensei said, frowning. His cupped hand glowed green and Obito’s bruise disappeared under his fingers as we watched. “Unless you couldn’t.”

Obito shook his head minutely, scowling.

I wanted to shake him until his baby teeth rattled out of his head so I’d know who’d punched him and then would be able to plan my revenge. A few years down the line, anyway.

“Um, Yamaguchi-sensei, what technique are you using?” Rin asked.

“Mystical Palm Jutsu,” he replied, though absently. He wagged his finger under Obito’s nose and said, “Okay, you take off your shirt so I can see the rest of the damage. I don’t have enough chakra to heal broken bones at the moment, but I’m sure I can find someone who does and make them do it.”

As Obito grumbled but still shed his jacket and T-shirt, Yamaguchi-sensei continued, “I’ve been teaching Kei-kun here as much as she can handle for the last few years, but it’s always slow going with civilian children.”

It was my turn to scowl at him.

“You aren’t a ninja yet, so don’t you dare give me that look.” Yamaguchi-sensei said. He turned back to Rin and went on, “I take it you’re interested?”

Rin’s eyes lit up. “Oh, yes! If I could be as good as any medical ninja we have, that would be amazing.”

“Well, if you’re interested, I could spare some time. Kei-kun meets up with me on Sundays, mostly, but I could free up Saturday afternoons if you want. Unless you want to join her?”

I wondered how long it had been since anyone had given Rin a chance to learn one-on-one, and immediately tried not to think about it. Dammit, as an orphan Rin wouldn’t be missed by anyone other than us if she died, and that was so much less than the love she deserved. She deserved to reach for the stars like any kid, and Yamaguchi-sensei had offered her his regard inside of five minutes of meeting her.

I told myself not to be jealous. This wasn’t my show. I was not the center of the universe.

I felt envy anyway, since I always got a little possessive of people, which was stupid and irrational but still true. I’m still childish in some ways.

Obito gave a hiss of pain and I immediately stopped the pity-party to see what was wrong. And I winced.

Obito looked pretty bad. He had bruises on the outsides of his arms, on his back, and even one a little below his ribcage. He looked like someone who’d been knocked down and kept getting up despite or because of the curb-stomping session he’d been in.

I immediately started making the hand signs for the Mystical Palm Jutsu, even though I wasn’t exactly much in terms of chakra capacity, but Yamaguchi-sensei grabbed my hands and shook his
“This looks like it must have been one hell of a fight,” the medic said casually, already numbing the pain with medical chakra.

“Yeah, you should’ve seen the other guy.” Obito said, though most of his signature bravado was forced.

Uchiha clan kids are such shitheads.

“And I see you mostly managed to protect your face and ribs. It’s better than it could be.” Yamaguchi-sensei frowned suddenly. Given the harsh angles of his face and his gray eyes, it looked a little like a death glare without a target. “Let me see your hands.”

“Uh…” Obito hesitated, which meant that Yamaguchi-sensei grabbed his wrist and turned his hand palm-down. His knuckles were scraped up, but not as much as I’d expect from someone who punched training posts only every once in a while. There was blood under his nails, though.

I mentally smacked myself for not noticing earlier. *Check for defensive wounds, idiot!*

Obito wasn’t trained enough to punch people silly, though he’d be able to stand up to totally untrained idiots, and it confirmed my suspicions that the entire affair had been more of a desperate attempt not to get stomped to death. Obito would have been able to handle himself against pretty much everyone except ninjas. I was starting to see why the Uchiha clan had gotten such a shitty reputation in my visions, if this bullying was something they didn’t even bother to discourage.

“Officially,” Yamaguchi-sensei said in the driest tone I’d ever heard, “I’d have to tell you to go easy on training. Unofficially, I’d like to see what happens when Yoshi and Matsumaru Uchiha end up in the hospital in the future and spend their time strapped to their beds due to being a pair of flight risks.”

Obito flinched. “Ah, Yamaguchi-sensei, it wasn’t…”

“The two of them are thirteen years old and genin.” Yamaguchi-sensei said flatly. Okay, his glare was almost worse without a target to aim it at. *Brrrrrr.* “They should be disciplined enough not to pound on someone four years younger than they are who hasn’t even received his hitai-ate yet.”

“How’d you get their names?” I asked, crossing my arms.

“Some people come to the hospital with interesting injuries; nail marks, bites, that sort of thing.” Yamaguchi-sensei looked at me and said, “And you, Kei-kun, shouldn’t be spoiling for a fight you can’t win yet.”

*Busted.* I subsided, grumbling.

“Yamaguchi-sensei, um, what were the seals for the Mystical Palm Jutsu, again?” Rin asked.

Yamaguchi-sensei shrugged. “It depends on who’s using it. Personally, I use a modified Ox seal and then move to Tiger, but everyone I know bases it on what feels correct. Seals are just a shortcut in some jutsu, and when you have enough control over your chakra you can more or less do what you want. I’ve seen techniques with forty hand seals reduced to four.”

I was suddenly reminded of the Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet technique that Kakashi and Zabuza used against each other, and that the Second Hokage had been able to use without even really trying. I wasn’t sure if that meant that Zabuza, Demon of the Hidden Mist and master of the
Silent Killing Technique, wasn’t inclined toward water-natured chakra, or if that something funny had happened when Kakashi had hypnotized him. I supposed I would never know.

“Wow.” Rin said.

“And if you’re asking, you probably have pretty decent control already.” Yamaguchi-sensei went on. He nodded at me. “Kei-kun has similar levels of control to a chūnin or low jōnin, and she’s smart. While you’re somewhat shyer, I think you’ve got the same potential.”

One of these days, I’m going to stop talking about school friends to anyone who’ll listen. I didn’t expect Yamaguchi-sensei to remember the stuff I said about Rin and her possible awesomeness. Heck, Dad didn’t generally even remember that kind of thing, and I lived with him! Not to mention bringing Rin over a lot, both to collaborative studying and just to eat dinner with us.

“R-really, Sensei?” Rin’s lip was wobbling.

“You can do anything, Rin-chan!” Obito said, and I noticed that all of his bruises had faded to almost nothing. Yamaguchi-sensei was good.

“If nothing else, I can teach you enough to stand out.” Yamaguchi-sensei said. “That should also be enough to make sure you make it to genin alive. And even if either you or Kei-kun washes out of the Academy, I’d be happy to take either of you as apprentices as long as you keep striving toward fulfilling your potential.”

Well, given that I had no goddamn idea what I was doing, that sounded like a neat backup plan for me. It was also a perfect out for Rin, if something happened. She’d never be without a path toward the future. Maybe Rin would do better at it, ultimately—at thirteen, she’d been able to transplant Obito’s Sharingan into Kakashi’s eye socket without any tools and in a combat scenario. She’d be a genius if she had a chance to be.

“T-Thank you, Yamaguchi-sensei!”

“By the way, what’s your first name anyway?” Obito asked.

“Akihito. The name’s Akihito Yamaguchi.” The medic shrugged. “Who knows? I may even apply for sensei this year. I am a jōnin, after all. Anyway, back to the Mystical Palm Technique…”

So, he and Rin hit it off right away and he gave both of us pointers toward what would, eventually, become mastery of the Mystical Palm Jutsu. Rin wasn’t allowed to use Obito to experiment—Yamaguchi-sensei recommended fish and small animals, between each application of healing chakra—and I was still supposed to be volunteering in the hospital before he’d let me heal people on my own, but I think we learned a lot.

And Obito learned that we’d go the extra mile to look after him.
Chapter Summary

Kei: Grieve.

I missed about a week later that year, maybe three and a half months before the exams. It wasn’t because I was sick (since I had been known, even in my old life, to show up at school come hell or high water or family crisis), or because Hayate had a crisis again, or even Mom’s apparent anemia. I wasn’t pulling out of school due to financial problems, there hadn’t been any injuries, and my mind hadn’t decided to fracture again.

But a little after I turned nine, Dad died.

Later, I found out that his rotation at the border station had been overrun by shinobi from the Land of Earth. Not all of them were Rock ninja—some were from Kumogakure, apparently—but the reinforcement team dispatched from Konoha didn’t get there until the fight was long over. It was part of the reprisal attacks for things that happened a couple of years back, apparently, and ultimately marked the beginning of the Third Great Shinobi World War. Dad and his team were all killed, even if we got the bastards who did it and tore them to bits after. All of the bodies were recovered, though that didn’t mean much for the families.

There was barely enough left to cremate, in the end.

Mom held Hayate through the ceremony, and I think he was just old enough that he understood what had happened. All of us dressed all in black, and while the sky didn’t open up to cry with us, it was shadowed by dark, heavy clouds and I made up for it in gross sobbing—it was Dad who’d been reduced to just a picture in a frame, with flowers from us and his friends and fellow shinobi. I’d grown up practically on his knee, learning everything I could from his low, scratchy voice and feeling his warmth when I was inconsolable to Mom. Dad wasn’t mine like Hayate was, because ultimately I couldn’t be responsible for anything about his life, but he was family and now his place in my heart was empty and the hole was bleeding.

It’s not possible to go through a life like ours without losing someone, unless dying young was in the cards. The life of a shinobi is full of pain and loss if you live long enough. I just didn’t ever want to feel that pain, even if it was inevitable.

It was naïve.

The hardest part was being back in the house after the memorial service.

“Sis?” Hayate said as I drifted from room to room, like a zombie. He followed me on my circuit of the house, quiet as a cat except for his voice, and I stopped at our parents’ room. My hand formed a fist on the wood of the door.

“Yeah, Hayate-chan?” I sounded exhausted even to my own ears.

“Daddy’s not coming back, is he?” Hayate asked.

“No, Hayate-chan. Dad’s not coming back. He’s gone.” I replied, listening to Mom cry through the
I turned away, picking up Hayate on the way back to our room. With Mom like that, it seemed that it fell to me to explain things to my brother. She’d recover, but Hayate needed an explanation now and I was just on the odd little neutral zone between being all out of tears and collapsing into bed to sleep off reality. I could do it.

We both sat on my bed, up against all the pillows I used to throw at him when we were younger, and he curled up against my side.

“Where’d he go?” Hayate asked, and he looked like he was going to cry again. He understood when things changed permanently, but I guess he didn’t quite get the permanency that came with death. Not just yet. It was sinking into both of our minds, like water through the ground.

“He’s dead, Hayate-chan.” I said, squeezing his shoulders. I tucked his head under my chin, so he wouldn’t see me start to cry. “I don’t know if he went somewhere better, but Dad died protecting us and Konoha. And he won’t forget us and we won’t forget him.”

“Why couldn’t Daddy protect us and come back?” Hayate asked, sniffling.

I squeezed him harder. “That…I don’t know. They tell us in school that there’s always someone faster, stronger, or smarter than we are and,” I swallowed, “Dad couldn’t do everything.”

Hayate buried his face in my neck. “I wish he could. Then he’d be here.”


We’ll survive. The journey of life is not painless—but with luck, we’ll be okay. Cracked, but okay.

I closed my eyes and buried my face against his hair. The Dreamer was right, but I didn’t want to hear it then.

“It’ll be okay, Hayate-chan.”

Privately, I resolved to graduate the Academy that year. Mom was still listed as inactive because Hayate was so little, and no one thought they could let a nine-year-old Academy student take care of a younger kid. I could exceed that admittedly low bar, but not for the months a chūnin could possibly spend on a mission during wartime, and not without some desperate scraping for money. Mom would need to get a desk job despite how her skills were all for combat, and we’d still be in trouble, since Dad’s tag-making had been a pretty significant part of our income. We didn’t have any extended family to fall back on in tough times, just friends with their own problems.

It’d be easier for us to survive if I was a genin and had my own income. So that’s what I resolved to do.

I went back to school on Monday. I must have looked terrible, slumped over on my desk, and not showing half of the exuberance necessary to keep up with the rest of the class. I barely felt like I could breathe—the Dreamer stuck with me, whispering reassurances, but it felt empty. It felt like I was drowning by inches, even though I had so much I still had to do.

“Kei, where have you been?” Obito asked.

“We haven’t seen you in a week!” Rin said. “We thought something happened to you.”
I lifted my head out of the bowl of my arms.

“Oh no…” Rin said, looking horrorstruck at my expression.

“Kei, what happened?” Obito asked, much quieter this time.

“Dad died.” I said with my voice barely above a whisper. “It’s…it’s been a hard week.”

“How?” Obito asked, dropping into the chair next to mine. Rin sat at my other side, hand on my shoulder, and I sank lower into my seat.

“The border station got attacked. No one made it out after the hawk got sent.” I don’t know how my voice stayed steady. I felt like I was drifting in place, as though the world wasn’t quite real. “We got the news on Tuesday.”

I was drowning.

“Oh, Kei.” Obito didn’t quite seem to know what to do. Eventually, he settled for a one-armed hug around my shoulders. “Rin-chan…?”

“We’re here to support you, okay?” Rin said firmly. “If you need anything, come to us.”

“Thanks, Rin-chan, Obito.” I murmured. I put my hands over my face.

“You’re going to graduate with us, right?” Obito asked.

“Obito!” Rin began, but Obito scowled.

“I’m serious! If you graduate with us, we’ll look out for you, okay? No one will ever, ever say anything bad about you or your dad while we’re around!” Obito insisted. “That’s a promise!”

Rin nodded. “Right.”

There was no way I deserved such amazing friends.

**You’ll pay them back by doing what you can to save their future.** The Dreamer seemed to sigh. **We already knew we weren’t going to let them go it alone.**

“You two are the best.” I told them gratefully, hugging them both. “No matter who ends up on what team, I’ll hold you to that.”

The rest of the school day seemed to pass us by, even though it was one of the review days and there were pops and smoke from imperfect Transformation and Clone jutsu going off all the time. And when I went home that day, they followed me.

“Hayate-chan, this is Rin-chan and this is Obito-kun.” I said later that night. “They’re my friends from school.”

Hayate held up both of his hands. “I’ll show you where you can wait! Dinner’s almost ready!”

Bless them, neither almost-genin minded being led around by a kid who wasn’t yet six. And Mom, while not happy, exactly, seemed more animated when there were people to take care of.

For the first time since Dad died, I was smiling again. It was a little cracked and a little broken, but it was a smile nonetheless.
After all the drama of the year, the final exam was practically a cakewalk. Unless I horribly failed the practical—and I wouldn't, given that I'd practiced with Rin and Obito and…and Dad, back when he was alive—my scores would carry me through. I was easily within the top ten percent of the class in books and ninjutsu. My taijutsu wasn't as strong, but I hadn't been allowed to bring my shinai for the class sparring sessions. The teachers said it wasn't fair, even if the two Inuzuka clan kids were allowed to bring their dogs. The only thing I had trouble with, other than taijutsu, had to do with the special kunoichi classes, mostly due to lack of interest. In the last month, though, I had Mom and Rin help me polish up my feminine skills.

Hayate might be a bit traumatized in the future, given that I used him as practice for putting hairclips on someone else. Mom's hair was too full of ribbons.

Rin was less skilled in the physical realm, but she was better at the Clone Jutsu than I was. I think her brain was just generally more oriented toward genjutsu than mine was, while I had my former artist's brain backing me up for the Transformation Jutsu. Replacement was less than perfectly stable for either of us, but Obito had that more or less down.

Actually, the only one we were really worried about was Obito, since his test scores sucked.

He did have a very low intelligence rating before. The Dreamer wasn't being especially productive in her opinions, since we were rapidly approaching a pretty dangerous gap in our information. We needed to meet up properly and reassess our understanding of everything that happened or would happen over the course of the next year. I couldn't think of much.

Rin and I waited anxiously outside of our classroom for him, since his last name meant going way after either of us. Both of us had passed, so he was just keeping us in suspense.

On the other hand, Rin and I were sporting fashionable new headgear—we'd both passed easily, and while Rin had chosen a traditional hitai-ate, I preferred the bandanna style. It made me feel a bit more grown-up and fit better with my distinctly boyish hairstyle.

Hey, if I was gonna be named Keisuke for the rest of my life, I might as well get some amusement out of the endless misunderstandings.

"I'm sure Obito passed." Rin said, sounding unsure despite her words.

"He'd better hope so!" I said crossly, to cover my anxiety. After my test, all of the worry I'd failed to use on myself was apparently stored up for Obito's sake. "After everything you two have done for me, we're supposed to graduate together!"

And at just that moment, Obito exploded out of the classroom in the midst of a victory dance. "I PASSED! I told you I could do it, Rin-chan, Kei! Isn't this great? We might even get on the same team tomorrow!"
I punched the air, graceless in victory. Rin laughed with relief.

"So, ready to find an awesome sensei and join Team Awesomeness?" Obito asked, bumping shoulders with both of us.

"Is there even any room on Team Awesomeness for us?" I asked.

"You bet!" Obito laughed, throwing his arms into the air. "Come on, I'll buy us all lunch!"

"Buy me strawberries and we'll be even." Rin said, "It's too early for lunch."

"Dango for me." I said. "I'll even pay for enough for all of us."

"You haven't paid for any lunches yet." Rin teased.

"Strawberries and dango? Sure. I like those too. Sounds like a picnic! Anyone got a spare blanket?"

**Remember, these are the moments we're fighting for.**

Obito kicked the Academy doors open and we stepped out into the bright sunshine together.

In the Academy yard, there was a huge crowd of proud parents, siblings, and various other relatives. Since Rin and Obito were orphans, we'd agreed ahead of time that we'd all be celebrating together. I just had to find Mom and Hayate in the sea of people, while Obito would make his way back over to use whenever he calmed down enough to remember. He and Hayate would be the only boys. It was a good thing that Hayate liked him.

Speaking of which, it was pretty easy to find my family because Hayate was sitting on Mom's shoulders, putting him well above the average height of the crowd. Hayate had his child-sized shinai in his hand and a grin on his face, while Mom seemed to glow with pride. I danced my way through the crowd so I could greet her without making her set my brother down.

"Mom!" I called, waving my arms. "I passed!"

"I knew you would, Kei-chan." Mom said, and she looked a bit misty-eyed. "I just wish…"

"I know, Mom." I said. I didn't need to hear the words to know Dad would be proud, too.

Mom blinked a couple of times and finally let Hayate down. He bopped me with the shinai, but not very hard, and Mom said, "Hayate-chan, your sister is a real ninja now. Isn't that something?"

"I'll be a ninja too!" Hayate said. Bop.

"Hello again, Hayate-chan." Rin said, having decided not to risk bowling people over when it came to greeting my family. "Will you be joining the Academy soon?"

At age five, I suppose that Hayate could have joined, but I'm not exactly sure I would be content to just leave him alone if he did. On one hand, he'd be learning how to be a ninja. On the other, he'd be learning how to be a ninja. And earlier than I had, to boot.

If Mom hadn't taken any chances with me, she probably wouldn't with Hayate.

"Maybe." Mom said, discreetly directing Hayate's shinai away from Rin's face with one hand. "I like to be sure my students have the skills to be successful before I send them running off into the wild."

Unspoken: *Academy teachers don't bother, figuring the rest is up to the jōnin leaders of each team to...*
"Hayate-chan will probably be ready before I was." I admitted. "Give him a year and he'll probably be better than I am now."

"But he'll still be able to learn things from you." Rin reassured me. She was just a reassuring kind of person, I think. It certainly explained why Obito went after her.

Obito, as though called by the siren song of his name and the idea of things happening without him, appeared in a blur of blue and flailing limbs.

"Mom, we're gonna go get a snack. Can I bring Hayate-chan with us?" I asked.

Mom, occupied by Hayate's tug-of-war with the shinai, said somewhat distractedly, "Where are you all going in such a hurry?" she asked, "I thought that we'd have a proper celebratory dinner at home later tonight…"

"I'll be home in time and I won't spoil my dinner," I said, "but we're going to celebrate our last day of classes first, okay?"

"Well, I suppose that this is the last day before team assignments." Mom said. She sighed, "Dango?"

"Exactly!" I said.

"We'll try not to keep her out too long." Rin said.

"Yeah, Kei will be home before you know it!" Obito said, bouncing back into the conversation. "I promise!"

Are you marrying them or something? This sounds familiar. It ought to involve porches and shotguns and cars and meeting the parents…

"You both suck." I said flatly. "And Obito, you never get anywhere on time anyway! Don't talk to me about schedules."

Mom said, "Try to be home by five, and stay safe." Mom punctuated this by taking Hayate's shinai from him, but handing me a pouch full of kunai. "Run along now."

We did.

Later, sitting a riverbank next to what would, eventually, be the Team Minato training grounds, we had eaten our way through three sticks of dango each, along with a giant carton of strawberries. I'd have probably gone for ice cream, preferably of a green tea flavor, but we were content to watch the world go by otherwise.

"You know, as ninja we're going to be dealing with some pretty heavy stuff." I said after a while, the last dango stick still in my mouth. I liked having something to chew on, if possible. It was an easy distraction, and being able to throw stuff shaped like senbon as actual weapons, like Genma, sounded pretty cool.

"So what?" Obito scoffed. "We're Team Awesomeness and there's no way anyone can stand against the power of our teamwork!"

"I wonder who our sensei will be." Rin said mildly. She sighed. "We don't even know if we'll end up on the same team…"
"They're probably still going to stick with the two boys, one girl format. I think we have enough girls graduating for that, at least." I suggested.

What I didn't say was that, as the top two kunoichi in our year, Rin or I would probably end up with Obito one way or another, just because of tradition. I kind of hoped it would be Rin—she had the personality to deal with Kakashi and Obito without wanting to murder either of them despite the way they grated on one another. I loved Obito like a brother, but that didn't mean he wasn't capable of pissing me off with his antics. And Kakashi would probably drive me up the wall just by being himself.

Yeah, it'd be better if Rin dealt with the boys, and I stayed by the sidelines to help when asked.

Except if she did end up on Obito and Kakashi's team, she'd be dead before fifteen.

Fuck.

I was glad that Hayate had found the river utterly fascinating, because I didn't need him to see my utter failure to keep from breaking out into a cold sweat. I kept an eye on him and an ear on my friends, because the idea of Hayate drowning on my watch? So many levels of terror were involved there that I didn't have words for them.

"Well, even if we end up on different teams, we'll still be friends." Rin said.

"You're both allowed to come over to my house whenever." I said firmly. "Mom and Hayate-chan have pretty much adopted you two anyway."

"And you?" Obito teased.

"I wouldn't put up with you if you weren't pretty much family." I replied. Wait, no. "Well, actually, if you were enough kinds of crazy or asshole or both, I'd drop you like a hot iron and then beat the crap out of you."

"Aw, you can tell she loves us." Obito laughed. Rin giggled.

"Cruel to be kind, you said?" Rin mused. "It's amazing that we can even find you under all of those spikes."

I stuck my tongue out at them.

"So, if you're a sea urchin," Rin began, making Obito laugh and me smile, "what does that make us?"

"You're a stuffed animal, Rin-chan." I said. "With a set of lock-picks and a brick in it."

"Then what am I?" Obito asked.

Rin and I looked at each other.

"I don't know. He kind of reminds me of a tomato." I said.

"Hey!" Obito didn't seem quite sure if he was supposed to be offended or not.

"Um…maybe a puppy?" Rin suggested.

"You mean incredibly lovable and huggable?" Obito asked.
He's got it bad. And puberty hasn't even happened yet!

"Sure, let's go with that." I said.

Obito pouted.

Then it was time to go home. I fished Hayate out of the shallows, where he'd shucked off his sandals and been wading around chasing fish, and let him roll around in the grass until his feet were dry enough to accept shoes again. Obito packed up the picnic blanket and Rin took the basket, while I grabbed my brother's hand and we all walked to my house for dinner.

Like hell I was gonna leave anyone I cared about alone.
The next day, the only real reason to head to school was the prospect of team assignments.

I didn’t sleep well that night. Despite the Dreamer’s help, I couldn’t help having nightmares of Team Minato’s last mission as an unbroken team (no Obito please don’t die). And its last mission, period (Rin Kakashi oh god I’m so sorry). And I thought, when I woke up, That isn’t going to happen to me.

I didn’t really have any idea how to make that a reality, though.

Since Rin slept over at my house, we both wandered around to make sure Obito wasn’t going to be late. Mom had given us huge lunches, because of the chance that we’d end up on separate teams and possibly have to share with our less-prepared teammates, and aside from the usual business of herding Obito around, and we were feeling pretty optimistic.

“At least one of us will be with Obito.” Rin said, as we headed into the Academy. Obito hadn’t been spotted running errands for anyone, so we assumed he’d be more or less on time.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d swear he was trying to stay at the bottom of the rankings just for that.” Rin said.

I shrugged.

To my surprise, Obito was actually there before either of us. He waved, grinning. He was also almost vibrating in his seat from sheer excitement, which was slightly contagious. Rin and I sat on either side of him.

“So, this is the big moment.” Obito said, almost uncharacteristically serious. I guess he was a bit nervous too.

“PIPE DOWN AND GET YOUR BUTTS BACK IN YOUR SEATS!” Sensei shouted, because Sensei was an asshole who lived solely to shout at pre-genin brats and couldn’t actually control them worth a damn.

Considering that Rin and I weren’t exactly early, and since the rest of the classroom wasn’t full, I could only assume that about half the class had failed. Obito might have had reason to be nervous, but he had passed where some of our classmates had not. I couldn’t even feel any of their chakra signatures anywhere near the building, which was about the maximum range I had at age nine, so I wasn’t expecting any last-minute additions. Actually, if anyone had shown up late, I would have automatically guessed Obito, if it wasn’t for the fact that he had decided to be punctual for once in
his life.

I folded my arms on the table and rested my head on them. The other shoe was going to drop regardless of whether we freaked out, so I decided not to worry too much.

“We’ll be great.” Rin said, smiling.

“Of course we will!” Obito said, though there was a twitch in his voice that indicated he wasn’t nearly as confident as he acted. It’d been there for most of the time I’d known Obito, but now it was more pronounced. “Right, Kei?”

“Yes.” I said, though my voice was muffled by my elbow and somewhat distracted.

There was someone else nearby, and I didn’t recognize the chakra signature.

While normally I’d probably run into about thirty to eighty people per day and not actually bother memorizing their chakra, I could recall all of our classmates and our teachers, as well as my neighbors and everyone I considered myself close to. It’s like recognizing a face or a voice, though without using conventional senses. Everyone’s feels a little bit different, and I had an easier time distinguishing between people I’d mentally marked “unsafe” or “safe.”

Given that Konoha was a ninja village, the list of unsafe people was pretty fucking long. I hadn’t developed an actual ability to sniff out hostility, but anyone who felt anything like Orochimaru, Danzō, or too powerful to accurately gauge was automatically put on the “avoid at all costs” subsection of the list. I’d never actually met the former, but I figured that I’d know what his chakra felt like eventually and had a whole space in my head allotted for it. The latter I’d seen a grand total of once in passing, and I resolved to avoid coming to his attention more due to what I knew about him than anything I felt.

Yeah, relying entirely on foreknowledge or chakra sensitivity wasn’t going to happen. I’d use both and the Dreamer to figure out what I was doing. Even if it meant floundering around like an idiot without a lifejacket in a hurricane. Or even with a lifejacket—I’d need a real lifeline to make my way out of some of the shit I could get into as a ninja.

After about ten seconds of contemplation and suppressing my own chakra down to practically nothing to account for interference, I pinpointed the stranger in the hallway outside of our classroom. Whoever it was had more chakra than most of the students in the room, sans maybe the Akimichi kid, and the kind of focus that none of us did.

I memorized the feel of his chakra, prickling and sparking like a battery, and returned my attention to the teacher.

“Didn’t sleep well?” Obito asked me.

“Not really.” I said. “Nightmares.” I tapped my fingers on my arm; that chakra was making me restless, because I really wanted to go out and interrogate the interloper and maybe make him or her stand around holding water buckets for an hour for trespassing. It was annoying, like a fly buzzing around my head.

Never let it be said that I didn’t have it in me to do some pretty stupid stuff once I set my mind on it. Or, more likely, not doing the smart thing due to laziness.

Sensei had started reading out the names while none of us were really paying attention. All I’d been listening for were names, and only with half of my attention. So I was surprised when I heard, “… Satoshi Inabi, Rin Nohara, and Kōji Aida. Your sensei is Akihito Yamaguchi.”
Oh what the fuck. I thought, sitting up.

Well, we did realize this could happen.

“Dammit.” Obito said, dropping his head onto the desktop. Thunk.

“It’s okay, guys. I’ll be fine!” Rin said reassuringly.

I nodded. I didn’t know either boy that well—Satoshi had been decent at taijutsu and pretty good at all of the weaponry tests, while Kōji was pretty laid-back for a kid sitting barely above Obito in the class rankings. He was gifted with a large chakra supply for a kid, which mostly translated to insane endurance, but I didn’t think that either boy was really enough of a standout to be worthy of being on Rin’s team.

I might have been horrifically biased—Rin was kind of like a little sister, after all.

Obito slumped at his desk, not quite feigning crushing despair, but I ignored him and reached across his back to give Rin a reassuring squeeze on her shoulder. She smiled hesitantly back.

I wasn’t really worried about Rin—she could have made friends anywhere, with anyone. The fact that she chose to hang out with Obito and me was a blessing, and I was sure she’d be successful in the future. Besides, she had Yamaguchi-sensei as a new teacher. She’d be okay.

Eventually, more and more names were called and more teams were assigned.

Obito’s name didn’t come up, and neither did mine. The teacher even rolled up his list and chucked it into the trash bin, where it was promptly eaten by the remains of the previous day’s pranks and lunches and things. I think we were the first people in some time to feel their stomachs drop simultaneously. We could have made a synchronized sport out of our reactions to sheer dread.

And that strange chakra’s buzzing sensation didn’t abate in the least. I narrowed my eyes in its direction—I did not need a headache ever, but especially then.

“Keisuke Gekkō, Obito Uchiha.” Sensei began, as the rest of our classmates started to drift out of the room.

My head snapped up. “Yes, Sensei?”

I didn’t like the guy, but he’d had his fun. We probably both seemed like ADD-ridden slackers (despite my scores), but we’d passed, and therefore we needed some kind of team structure.

“After lunch, you’ll meet your third teammate and your new jōnin-sensei,” our teacher said. “I’m just not supposed to spoil the surprise.”

So he’s testing us this early? Bastard. I bet I know exactly who it is, too.

Not that I didn’t want to meet Minato and probably Kakashi, but I also kind of wanted to kill them both right then. There was no reason to test us before we even got to meet them. Especially considering that nearly everyone taught by the Third Hokage or Jiraiya or someone taught by their line tended to go with the goddamn bell test.

And then Sensei left, leaving us to our devices.

“Fuck it.” I muttered under my breath, standing even if I was in a pretty annoyed slouch. I was up, conscious, and had managed to quell my brief flare of impatience. “Come on, Obito. The roof’s nice
this time of year and Mom packed me a gigantic bento.”

Obito sighed. “Dammit, I wish we’d gotten Rin and not some mystery kid.” He paused, as though reviewing his words and his attitude in his head, and added, “Though you’re with me, so that’s pretty cool. I think we’ll make a pretty good team!”

“So do I,” I said, and we headed out of the room. “Thing is, we don’t train much together normally.”

“Yeah, but only because your mom doesn’t want you to break people’s arms.” Obito said. “As if I’d let you.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. “It isn’t about letting me do anything, Obito. I’m a girl. I do what I want.”

Obito snorted. “Oh, we’ll see. I’m too awesome to stay down for long!”

In the hallway, the crackle of strange chakra was stronger. I paused for half a breath, determining distance, angle, and strength, and noted that the stranger had moved to the roof. There was the faintest trace of chakra smoke in the hall, though Obito was too distracted to notice, and I bit the inside of my cheek in thought.

On one hand, we could avoid it and no one would notice unless it was some kind of unspoken test. On the other, biting the bullet appealed to me somewhat.

“What’d your mom give you?” Obito asked, distracting me.

“Dunno. I’ll check when we get up there and unwrap it.” I replied. “But you don’t get to complain because Mom packed it.”

“Like I’d ever complain about your mom’s cooking! She’s really, really good and she always makes the fish just right.” Obito replied, almost drooling at the thought.

I didn’t ask why he didn’t have a lunch.

We headed up to the roof, mostly chatting idly. While I was never going to be as close to Obito’s goofy open heart as Rin, I’d also never totally leave it. They’d known each other for years longer than I’d been in the picture, and I couldn’t begrudge them that. That said, Obito and I knew each other well enough to know what topics were safe and what was probably not worth talking about. As a result, most of what we talked about came down to current events.

“So, who do you think our third teammate is?” Obito asked once we’d spread the cloth cover of my bento box across the concrete between us. Mom really had packed a giant lunch—I’d never be able to finish all of the rice or fish alone, let alone the pickles. Why anyone would ever need so many pickles was totally lost on me. Luckily, Obito would eat anything.

“Maybe an older genin.” I suggested, spearing a slice of salmon because I was too lazy to eat it properly with two chopsticks. “You never know what kind of stuff goes down out there.”

“So you mean basically someone who was too stupid or useless to keep his comrades alive.” Obito said around a mouthful of onigiri. Mom had made them in the shape of a triad of pandas, apparently because even the family eye-bags were worth memorializing in food.

Mom had a strange sense of humor sometimes.

I felt the sparking chakra flare up as though in annoyance. I turned my head in its direction, briefly
ignoring Obito, and said, “You can stop hiding anytime you want, you know.”

There was a sensation that read, broadly, as surprise. Obito blinked at me and said, “Kei, who are you talking to?”

I ignored him again. “Sparky, I don’t know if you’re stalking us, but it’s not polite and we have a third onigiri panda if you want it.”

Obito narrowed his eyes at me, apparently for lack of any better targets. “Where is he?”

_Behind us._ I thought, and didn’t jump when a hand swiped our last panda while we weren’t looking. I could tell he’d done it, because Obito’s squawk of indignation was loud enough for anyone, and because my chakra sense let me know that he’d been within a foot of me when he’d done it.

“Thieving bastard!” Obito shouted as our third party member finally appeared in full view.

He was…small. Smaller than I remembered or expected—he was shorter than Obito, actually, even counting his spiky silver-white hair. His eyes were like river stones set in a pale face (or what I could see of it, anyway). He wore his signature mask, which had a bit of rice stuck to it, and wore a sleeveless navy blue shirt with what I would hesitantly categorize as arm-warmers. Man, I knew autumn in Konoha wasn’t exactly worth breaking out the sweaters for, but he dressed more like a girl than I did. He also had a kunai pouch strapped to each thigh and a pocket for scrolls on his shoulder.

“A ninja should be more aware of his surroundings.” Kakashi said. His expression—what I could see of it, anyway—was flat and unimpressed.

I rolled my eyes, chin in hand.

“So you’re the one who’s supposed to be our third teammate?” I could hear the scorn in Obito’s voice. It sounded weird—there generally wasn’t anyone for him to look down on in the Academy, and he didn’t even dislike most people enough to bother. He was too busy being excitable or ignoring the way other people mocked him.

Apparently Kakashi was exceptional in many different ways.

“More like I’m your babysitter.” Kakashi replied.

First impression of Kakashi Hatake: He’s a pint-sized jackass.

Then again, he was also a chūnin with hundreds of missions under his belt, who’d probably been killing people for longer than I’d been contemplating ninja-hood. He was, in a way, a stellar example of what happened when the shinobi system worked exactly the way the elders wanted it to—a powerful, competent child prodigy who could be sent to the front lines early and survive long enough to actually gain experience from it all. He’d never be ambitious the way that Danzō was, or even the slightly loopy way _Naruto_ was, and he’d always be loyal to Konoha despite what being a shinobi would cost him over the next twenty years.

It made me feel slightly ill, even though I knew what I’d signed on for. Or at least I thought I knew.

“You’re not a genin, are you?” I asked, though I knew the answer. “And by the way, I’m Keisuke Gekkō.”

Kakashi’s eyes narrowed a bit. The sad part was that I could manage a marginally better glare, almost solely due to the shape of my eyes and the persistent shadows under them. I kind of reminded myself of someone with a hangover when I looked in the mirror. “No. How did you know?”
“I guessed, since I don’t remember seeing you around before.” I said. “Also, a name would be polite. It’d be sad if Obito and I had to call you ‘you’ forever.”

Kakashi made a noise that made me think he didn’t particularly like the answer, but he wasn’t allowed to punch me for more information. “Kakashi Hatake. Chūnin.”

“Well, I’m Obito Uchiha!” Obito broke in, scowling impressively. “And I don’t like your attitude.”

*Double fuck.* Did they really have to start this now? I knew that Rin had a crush on Kakashi as a member of Team Minato, possibly starting some years beforehand, but I had thought that with me on the team and not Rin, they’d be less polarized. I didn’t want to have to choose between my best guy friend and the new kid on the first goddamn day.

“Hey!” I said. They both sent sidelong looks my way. “Seriously, hold off on the fights until after lunch. We’ll have loads of time to beat each other black and blue later.”

The siren song of food worked its magic.

Obito made a face. “But… Oh, fine. Your mom’s cooking’s too good to miss over a bastard like him.”

That was not what I wanted to hear, but at Kakashi’s thoroughly disdainful huff, I supposed it wasn’t being taken seriously anyway. I had a feeling I’d be spending a lot of my time and energy keeping the two of them from killing each other. Or rather, I’d be preventing Obito from trying to kill Kakashi. I wasn’t sure if the homicide attempts on this team would be mutual.

I pointed my chopsticks at Kakashi. “You ate one of the pandas. You have officially been recruited to the traveling circus in penance. Join us.”

“Aw, Kei, he doesn’t have to, does he?” I couldn’t tell if Obito was complaining on his behalf or on Kakashi’s from the way he phrased it. He still had a pretty amazing pouty face, though. I wanted to pinch his cheeks and tell him he was just adorable, but that I wasn’t going to fall for it and that he still owed me an unloaded dishwasher and a new bike.

I’d had cousins like that, before. They were terrible.

“You’re insane.” Kakashi said flatly, but he wasn’t running away. He ninja-poofed onto the railing between us, perching there like some kind of gigantic misshapen pigeon. It also put him well within food-swiping range, which I didn’t mind but Obito did, from the way his chakra flared.

“I’m a girl.” I replied, snagging the umeboshi before Obito could get it. He was too busy glaring up at Kakashi. “It’s the same thing.” I’d be on a team with two boys anyway, so it wasn’t like they could really dispute my claims without tracking down someone else as a counterexample who wasn’t Rin, and Minato would start dating the craziest kunoichi this side of Hidden Mist sooner or later. So sue me.

“…You’re a girl?” Oh, the deadest deadpan yet. I liked dressing as a boy.

“Bastard! It’s obvious that Kei’s a girl! You take that back!”

I decided not to say anything about Obito’s nearly identical faux pas a year back. It didn’t seem like the right moment, and I didn’t mind.

I gathered my thoughts as Obito was only barely dissuaded from attacking Kakashi via the sudden discovery of red bean mochi in my bento. Kakashi, for his part, had stolen a pickle via spearing it on
the end of a kunai. It was not remotely hygienic, but I supposed that Kakashi had seen or eaten his way through worse.

I said, “Since you’re our new teammate, I guess your sensei is ours now, too. What’s he like?”

There was the briefest flare of subtle chakra, almost like a breeze had blown through the area, and a yellow flash of light.

Our new guest was tall enough that even my head (since I was the tallest of the kids in the area) only came to about the middle of his ribcage. He had a crown of blond spikes, along with two longer sections framing the sides of his face. His eyes were a clear, sky blue and he wore a standard jōnin uniform, with additional white bands at his wrists and just below his elbows, to minimize wind resistance. If I had to guess at his age, I’d say he was about nineteen years old to our nine.

“Making new friends already, Kakashi?” asked Minato Namikaze.

"Sensei!" Kakashi almost chirped, and it was instantly clear that he respected his teacher far more than Obito or I had ever respected anyone. His tone was some odd combination between eagerness and embarrassment— I mean, I knew that Obito and I weren’t exactly impressive, but we really weren’t so terrible that even being seen with us was a bad thing. Unless a classroom had recently blown up, but that was never my fault.

I mentally equated Kakashi to a puppy, following his sensei around like he was always out for an extra treat or ear-rub, and left it at that. The mental image would make me laugh if I thought on it for too long.

Obito was openly staring, eyes flicking back and forth between on our new sensei’s face and Kakashi’s attitude, and his mental gears were clearly turning.

And then Kakashi caught himself and the magic died. He cleared his throat. “Keisuke Gekkō and Obito Uchiha, Sensei. Brats, this is my sensei, Minato Namikaze.”

Well, it was nice to know that he could figure out to how to be an awkward human being for small stretches of time. The rest of the time was going to involve me trying to separate the boys, I thought.

Also, he was a bit of a hypocrite.

Obito growled, “Who are you calling a brat, you bastard!” He was already on his feet, fists clenched, and I concluded that I really ought to look into making friends with less excitable people.

I was kind of glad that I had my bokken strapped to my back. According to Mom, it was amazing how much being confronted with a solid length of wood and sufficient skill could make even the most annoying people back down long enough to talk.

And if it didn’t, you could always hit them with it.

“Can we please go back to eating like normal people?” I wondered aloud.

The answer was probably “no.”

“Easy, Kakashi.” Minato said, but I thought it was a bit late. “Obito, you too. We’re all teammates here, and it isn’t worth getting worked up and drawing battle lines on the first day.”

Not that I really knew that much about being a boy, but I couldn’t help but think that Minato didn’t have a lot of experience with people with Obito’s personality type. Kakashi seemed to be his only
“Anyway, now that we’ve all met, I think we ought to have a chance to get to know one another better.” Minato went on, leaning against the railing and folding his arms. “So, what should I know about you before we start on the path to being shinobi together?”

I thought about it.

I’m Keisuke, though I mostly go by Kei. I have a second personality hidden in my head that’s composed of all the memories I have from before I died, any relevant information about this world that I can’t seem to remember consciously, and my attachment to things like friends, family, and country. Oh, and did I mention that I died? Because I did, and then I reincarnated, only I kept my memories and thus I have a mental age of about thirty. It’s why I have this urge to chase people around and mother them instead of acting like a normal Academy fangirl wannabe-kunoichi. I like dogs, cats, my family, and my best friends. They’re Rin and Obito by the way, and the former will be dead before she turns fifteen while the latter is probably going to go supervillain if that happens. I dislike a whole bunch of people you’re probably not going to live to meet and/or kill horribly, and I live in terror of the day that my brother gets eviscerated by a Sand-nin who probably hasn’t even made chūnin yet. My dreams for the future include locking myself in a room with a couple of therapists and maybe driving them crazy with all of this baggage.

Yeah, that probably wouldn’t go over well without some serious censoring.

“Well, I like dango.” Obito offered. “I also like my best friends, Rin-chan and Kei. I like making people smile—and as a shinobi, I can do more about that when I’m in the village than I could without training.” I had a sudden suspicion that we’d be doing D-ranks for a solid month. “My hobbies include helping people out when they need it, training, and hanging out with my friends. I don’t like stuck-up bastards like him”—here, Kakashi snorted—“or when I have to go to the hospital.”

A flash of amusement appeared on Minato’s face at that last comment.

“And you, Keisuke?” he asked.

“Um.” I thought my answer over again, mentally adding some things and subtracting the unhelpful sarcastic confessions. “I like Obito and Rin-chan, too, since we were all friends in the Academy. I also like my mom’s cooking, dogs, naps, and playing with my little brother. I don’t like swimming, or the hospital, or getting up early.” I clicked my chopsticks together a few times, thinking. “I have a lot of hobbies, but the ones that come to mind now are practicing medical ninjutsu, learning kenjutsu with my mom, and reading.”
Do I even have any dreams or goals that don’t have to be censored to hell?

“Eventually, I hope to get strong enough to become a jōnin.” I concluded.

"I want to be able to be Hokage someday! I’ll be the greatest Hokage ever!" Obito added. He turned to me. “What do you think, Kei?”

As a member of the Uchiha clan, I didn’t think it would be possible for Obito to get within ten people of the position in the current atmosphere, but I didn’t say anything about it. Politics and political alliances were something I didn’t need in my head at that age. Even if the Senju-influenced structure of the village and its leadership wasn’t a thing, there wasn’t much chance for Obito to be the next Hokage, who was basically sitting in front of us like a parent crossed with a cat-herder. Maybe there’d be time in the future, but not the near future, and not with the current batch of asshole elders running the show.

“I think if we’re thinking long-term, then fine.” I said. “We both have a long way to go before anything big happens.” I hoped.

Kakashi made a noise that said exactly how much he thought of our chances for achieving either of our dreams. And of how likely it was that he’d introduce himself the way we had.

“It’s good that you’re already thinking of the future.” Shinobi didn’t often actually get one, though. Minato went on, “As for me, I like inventing new jutsu, training as a team, and most of all, my girlfriend Kushina Uzumaki. You’ll meet her eventually.” He leaned forward. “Now, personally, my dream is also to be Hokage someday. I don’t know if we ought to make it any kind of race, but if I get the hat, I’ll be sure to have you all around as my lieutenants if you want to be.”

“…I think I’d pass on the responsibility, Sensei.” I said honestly. I was barely capable of being responsible for Hayate without scaring myself silly. The sphere of “things I feel like I can handle looking after” had just barely expanded to include Rin and Obito, and mostly took the form of harassing them into letting me make sure they were both healthy.

Having to look out for the well-being of the entire village would probably result in chronic ulcers by the time I turned fifteen.

“I wouldn’t! That sounds awesome.” Obito said.

I bit the inside of my lip and didn’t say anything. Responsibility: my greatest weakness.

Aside from possibly shrimp. I still hated them.

“Anyway,” Minato continued, “We’ll be having your real genin test tomorrow morning. Go to bed early and come prepared for a mission, all right? I think you’ll do fine, but it’s always worth seeing if our new genin have what it takes to work in the real world.”

*Triple fuck. It just had to be the bell test, didn’t it?*

“I thought we were already genin?” Obito protested.

“Yes, but if you fail, you won’t be working with Kakashi and I.” Minato replied. “Genin who prove that they can’t pass their jōin-sensei’s test either have to tough it out and find their own mentors, or they’ll be a part of the reserves forever. If you can’t hack it, we won’t be taking you into the field at all. There’s no sense in adding to the list of the dead for no reason.”

Rather chilling.
I nodded like I understood the whole idea, though it was possible that Sensei’s test would be
different from the one that Kakashi had created for Team Seven a lifetime ago. Sakumo Hatake had
died recently and I didn’t know how much his ideals had sunk into the village as a whole or Minato-
sensei in particular. It was cold to think of my new teammate and possible friend’s dad that way, but
I didn’t know Sakumo. I knew my dad, and that they’d once been close enough that Sakumo had
brought me balloons in congratulations for surviving to one year old.

This was going to involve tons of good memories. I could just tell. I made a mental note to speak
with the Dreamer about it when I got a chance to meditate properly, because being kept up all night
by visions probably wouldn’t be much good for my performance in the morning. I needed to clear
the clutter and have enough information to focus on, but not be distracted by.

“We’ll do great!” Obito said brightly, and I smiled somewhat hesitantly.

What can I say? I’m not much of an optimist.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter written before Kishimoto’s possible-retcon of Obito’s past. Not really sure
what’s going on there.
So, it turns out that Minato is a bit of a troll. Or maybe he just enjoys watching his students flail.

More on that in a minute.

On the day of the test, I walked halfway across the village to get to Obito’s before our new team was supposed to meet up. Technically, I could have used the shinobi “skyway,” also known as roof-hopping shenanigans, but if the bell test was going to happen later that morning, it would be best to save my chakra. Besides, I’d probably need to remember the way to the Uchiha clan grounds at some point or another from a ground-bound perspective.

Obito’s apartment was actually located on the far side of the Uchiha District from where I first entered. I’d had to stop an MP to get that much information—I’d never actually been to his place before. Not sure why. Just hadn’t.

Anyway, once in the Uchiha District, it paid to play it like a civilian. Generally speaking, only the Konoha Military Police or ANBU used the rooftops when in residential areas. It kept roofing tiles in place and road dust from picking up, and littering citations from having to be put on everything. I didn’t want to be the subject of any unusual attention, so I decided to hoof it. It took way longer, but by casting my chakra sense out as widely as I could and searching for Obito’s cheerful warmth, I could at least cut down on the time I spent searching for his chronically tardy ass.

(Sadly, shinobi are still human. That means trash finds its way everywhere.)

As I walked, I looked around a lot.

I knew, intellectually, that the Uchiha clan was one of the four noble clans of Konoha. It was in the history books (no matter how shitty those books were), as were the rough histories of the Hyūga, Akimichi, and Senju clans. Of course, clans with unique kekkei genkai—such as the Sharingan or the Byakugan—generally remained isolated at least in terms of marriage. Most of them lived in the district, as much because their clan liked to keep tabs on everyone as anything else. The further you lived inside, the higher rank you held and the older your family probably was. They weren’t especially social when compared to the Akimichi clan, who owned shinobi-approved restaurants all over Konoha, and it was said that the Uchiha clan signature popped collars were symbols of their arrogance. I personally thought they looked a little like the anti-bite cones people back in my old life had put on dogs, but I was never going to say that much to any Uchiha on pain of death. In their own way, they were worse than the Hyūga, despite the fact that the gene for the Sharingan seemed to be recessive to the Byakugan’s dominant.

And vanishingly few Senju still used their family name, so they were less a clan and more like everyone’s cousins. I think that, if I’d had an extended family, they might have been part Senju or something. Just about everyone from a shinobi family (but not a clan) in Konoha had some old clan blood somewhere, though the Byakugan could be seen six generations after the initial ancestor and most everyone else’s genetics were a little subtler.
For my part, I theorized that Mom wasn’t from Konoha initially. Konoha shinobi usually used kunai and shuriken unless they had special training or weaponry at their disposal. A ninja with a katana could be trusted to know how to use it, but most of our styles were sort of...well, we didn’t do schools. Ninjas taught their apprentices or maybe their genin teams, if the students had the knack for it. Otherwise, the style generally died with the ninja who wielded it.

Either Mom had learned from a school, given her method for teaching me, or she had learned from someone who had. It was also possible that she had developed her own, but it felt too polished for that. Too finished. A ninja, after all, was always learning. And probably compensating for having various extremities removed.

Anyway, this line of thought kept me occupied for most of the walk to Obito’s place, in between noting that my house was a hell of a lot smaller than most of the core Uchiha clan ones and wondering if there were any houses for sale. The buildings were older, the people more settled. No one seemed inclined to budge, in any sense of the phrase.

I felt like I was walking through the ninja equivalent of a gated community. It was probably about accurate, anyway.

Still, I could feel Obito’s chakra about a street before I actually turned and saw him. Noble clan or not, very few of them could suppress their chakra to the point that I couldn’t sense them. Obito was not one of those select few and I doubted he ever would be.

He was standing on the stoop of one of the larger buildings, the kind with three floors of apartments and a small Uchiha fan painted on the front gate, and speaking to a pair of older shinobi—they looked like genin, maybe, with unscarred hitai-ate and distinct swagger to their movements. Obito was an orphan within the clan and he didn’t have any siblings. I’d only found out by accident, but it explained some of the loneliness I felt from him, when the school yard grew quiet and Rin wasn’t around. He didn’t have a lot of peers who would hang out with him.

(I didn’t either, but I was a self-admitted freak, so who cares?)

I waved. “Obito!” If the other boys he was talking to were friendly, I’d know. Sure, their chakra supply altogether was actually smaller than Kakashi’s had been yesterday, shenanigans included, but killing intent and malice aren’t exactly subtle. Obito wasn’t broadcasting fear—he seemed uneasy, sure, but that could have had any number of causes.

He jolted, chakra spiking in clear dismay. The other two boys turned to face me, too. I thought I recognized some of their facial features, relative to Obito’s, but resemblances between cousins are somewhat hard to quantify and may mean nothing. I didn’t look like any of my cousins from my old life, for example. Given that there were two of them and Obito didn’t seem happy to see them, I took a mental leap and assumed that the unidentified genin in front of me were Yoshi and Matsumaru Uchiha. Also known as Obito’s asshole cousins.

Well, crap.

There were many ways I could play things. I could freak out. I could attack. I could do any number of things that would mean a morning spent in the nearest police department and not with our new teammate and sensei. All of them would suck and get us in trouble with too many different people.

Or I could give Obito an easy out.

I ran up to them, focusing all of my attention on Obito even as my chakra sense picked up the indignation from the other two Uchiha boys. “Obito, we’re going to be late!”
“Wait, what time is it?” Obito asked, as though he’d entirely forgotten about the other two. I knew he hadn’t, but I was a convenient change of topic in some ways.

“It’s eight forty-five.” I said flatly. I was pretty sure he’d genuinely forgotten, given that Yoshi and Matsumaru were terribly distracting. “We’re supposed to meet Sensei and Kakashi with all of our equipment at nine, remember? The one by the Memorial Stone.”

Obito’s expression shifted from mild surprise to “oh, shit,” in about half a second. He whirled on his two cousins, with a rapid, “Sorrygottagonowpeoplearegonnakillme.”

And then we ran like hell, chakra-enhanced speed and all.

We didn’t stop until we were well out of the Uchiha District, when both of us had to stop for air and explanations.

“So, were those the two assholes?” I demanded, once I got my breath back. While I was better than I’d ever been at running in my previous life, I still didn’t consider myself blessed with much stamina. At least I had room to improve, I supposed.

“Wha—oh. Yeah. Sorry you had to see that.” Obito said, wiping his face on the inside of his sleeve. He shook himself. “Anyway, what time is it, really?”

“Eight forty-six, now,” I said, glancing at a clock on the wall of a nearby shop.

Obito’s mouth dropped open. “Wait, you were serious? Oh man, we’re going to be so late.”

I wouldn’t have been, if I’d been able to trust that Obito would make it to the training grounds on his own and on time. But then his cousins got in the way, so I guess we were just going to have to be late together.

“We could use the roofs.” I suggested.


I had a sneaking suspicion that Obito didn’t know that there even was a training field next to the Memorial Stone, but I didn’t ask. We were both too busy bouncing from rooftop to rooftop like over-cafeinated gerbils to bother wasting breath on it.

We arrived a grand total of fifteen minutes later, meaning that we were about a minute late. I think it was pretty much a record for Obito.

Kakashi, of course, was there to greet us.

“You’re late.”

Of course.

I rolled my eyes and returned to breathing on manual mode, trying not to feel the unaccustomed burn in my thighs and calves. Roof-hopping was a lot harder at age nine than the prodigies made it seem. I could only imagine that it would come with practice, and made do in the meantime by walking around to cool down. Obito, meanwhile, had dropped more or less onto his face and had raised the middle fingers of both hands in Kakashi’s general direction without looking.

Minato-sensei appeared in a burst of yellow light about thirty seconds later. I had no idea how someone with teleportation abilities could ever be late.
Sometime afterward, I realized that Minato had marked the inside fold of Kakashi’s hitai-ate with a Flying Thunder God targeting seal. At the time, I could only think, *What’s the bombshell, Sensei? Because we’re fucked anyway!*

While Obito and I weren’t going to fall for the bell test’s most obvious trap, mainly because Obito valued my friendship too much and because I was cheating outrageously with my precognition (as well as being far too lazy to try and fight my teammates in addition to our sensei over *cat ornaments*), I didn’t know what sort of trick Minato would have. Kakashi, as a jōnin, had preferred outright lying, trolling, and being a jackass to his students. Minato-sensei had been straightforward, so I didn’t really know what to expect.

“Now that we’re all here,” Minato-sensei said with his arms hidden behind his back, “we can get started.”

I braced myself for the bad news. If I could feel the spike of chakra from the Flying Thunder God Jutsu, I could probably feel and interpret any kind of rising amusement with our inevitable fated beatdowns. I thought so, anyway. Obito, who was sitting next to where I was standing, mumbled something rebellious that I didn’t catch.

“No, Minato-sensei.” Minato-sensei said with his arms hidden behind his back, “we can get started.”

I braced myself for the bad news. If I could feel the spike of chakra from the Flying Thunder God Jutsu, I could probably feel and interpret any kind of rising amusement with our inevitable fated beatdowns. I thought so, anyway. Obito, who was sitting next to where I was standing, mumbled something rebellious that I didn’t catch.

“Here you go, Keisuke-kun. And you, Obito-kun.” I blinked. The next thing I knew, I was holding a manila folder in my too-small hands. “Our test today will be in information analysis and in forming conclusions.”

“Keisuke Gekkō” was written across the top in large black characters. The one Obito was holding had “Obito Uchiha” written on it.

**Okay, I give up**, said the Dreamer.

Well, at least I wasn’t the only one who thought this was kind of surreal. Kakashi also had one, though I’d totally missed the moment when Sensei had handed it to him. Going by the look on Obito and Kakashi’s faces, neither of them had expected the folders in the slightest.

“Sensei,” Kakashi began, but Minato clapped his hands.

“Right! So, the first thing we’re going to do today is check out the Hokage’s assessment of our skills.” Speaking of which, Minato *also* had a folder. “It’s like a report card for real life, in some ways.”

**I suddenly know why this man was so eager to become Hokage. He is the paperwork ninja.**

This is what I meant when I said Minato was a bit of a troll. I got all worked up over the idea that he’d probably give us a sadistic bell test, and here he was, handing out report cards. It was very, very strange, not to mention off-putting.

I opened my file. The top left corner of the first page was taken up by a picture of me, sans my new headband, that had been taken immediately after I passed the final genin test. It was a fairly lousy picture, since I hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before and my eye-bags were more prominent than ever, but it was apparently only for a year before the file would be updated. The photographers for our ninja registration paperwork were kind of overzealous, meaning that even Obito had managed to get his paperwork done yesterday before school, since the paperwork ninja in charge had probably been chasing him around to get it.

I sat down to read.
Name: Gekkō, Keisuke

Age: 9

Height: 120.3cm

Weight: 28.1kg

Blood type: O

D.O.B.: July 10

Gender: Female

Ninja Registration: 010871

Ninja Rank: Genin

At this point, I got bored and started to flip through the pages in the folder. I already knew my basic information, aside from my blood type. Since Hayate had AB to my O, I could only assume that our parents were heterozygous for types A and B, though I’d probably never have to know the specifics unless it was time to donate blood to someone. Unless it came to plasma—blood was almost never given whole in transfusions, since if O was the universal donor in terms of blood cells, AB was the universal plasma donor. It had something to do with antibody vs. antigen generation, and I wasn’t really interested in the details.

I kept flipping through the pages until I came to an octagon chart. I was strongly reminded of a stat block for Pokémon, and I glanced at the rest of the page to confirm that it was supposed to be a breakdown of our scores in all relevant and easily-quantifiable shinobi disciplines.

So this was how the Naruto databooks were supposed to be relevant to our lives.

I looked at the chart, and then at the total. It didn’t seem possible to have that much of the octagon in red at my age. But the numbers were right there, staring back up at me.

It was one of the few times that the Dreamer and I were in perfect agreement and synchronization.

Holy fucking shit.

Part of me, which I was pretty sure had to be Id or maybe an unnamed fourth personality, was gibbering in a corner of my mind and making a noise like “mimble-wimble.” Or maybe that was me. The world was retreating and I could see my future flashing before my eyes. It was going be short and explosive.

“Kei? What’s so surprising?” Obito asked, leaning over to see what I was looking at. He held up his chart for comparison, though I didn’t look at it then.

After a few seconds of my thunderstruck mumbling and some quick math on Obito’s part, Obito’s eyes went wide and he said, “What the hell? Eighteen?”

I made a whimpering noise and shoved my files into Obito’s hands. I didn’t want to look at them. Internally, I continued to freak out. Gotta keep it together, gotta take deep breaths. Just because my scores are insane doesn’t mean I’m going to have to take the Chūnin Exams! I don’t want to die on the front lines! I hid my face in my hands.

Yeah, I was panicking over getting an awesome score. Go me. The thing is that, well, I didn’t want
to be a super special ninja princess sparkly bullshit-meter-breaker. I wanted to have a chance to survive to see thirty, being an average cross-discipline shinobi the whole way, and maybe have enough strength to be useful to the people I cared about and keep them alive. People who stood out got knocked down like bowling pins, and I could name more examples than most.

I didn’t want to be Kakashi, in short.

(Sans the princess comment, anyway. He’d look adorable in a dress at this age, even if the mask would break the outfit’s synergy like a fortune cookie.)

“…This wasn’t exactly the reaction I was going for.” Minato-sensei said after a moment.

Kakashi made a dismissive noise that could have meant any number of things but probably came down to “I’m surrounded by idiots.”

A hand landed on my head. Going by chakra signatures, all of Team Minato were sitting within a five-foot radius of each other. Kakashi was probably reluctant, but I think he’d live with it.

“Easy, Keisuke-kun.” Sensei said, patting my head as though I was some kind of pet. I guess that’s what I get for being a kid. Still, he was just a teenage jōnin, so the fatherly angle didn’t work so well, and I didn’t have any idea what having an older brother would feel like. “Mind telling us what’s wrong?”

I groaned. I didn’t want to talk about it.

Look at it this way: Those are yours and mine, as well as that of our parents and teachers, the Dreamer suggested in the empty echo chamber of my mind. I wasn’t coming up with any clever ideas then, that was for sure. You’ve been keeping up with everyone by putting your mind to things, I’ve been helping most of the time I’ve been properly awake, Mom taught us kenjutsu, Dad taught us taijutsu and chakra control, and Yamaguchi-sensei taught us medical ninjutsu. We are the sum of our pasts, and three awesome teachers.

Okay. I could think of it that way if I tried.

“I don’t think I really deserve that score.” I mumbled, seeing the numbers dance on the insides of my eyelids. No one here knew how much of a leg up I’d been given. “I had more teachers than anyone.”

Ninjutsu: two out of five, due to medical training. Taijutsu: two, supplemented outside of the numbers with kenjutsu. Genjutsu: two-point-five, because it was hard to put a genjutsu on someone whose chakra was aligned to both cast and cancel them, based on sensitivity to foreign chakra. Intelligence: three-point-five, due to my adult mind and nighttime sessions with the Dreamer. Strength: one-point-five even with general chakra boosts. Speed: Two. Stamina: one-point-five, ignoring the Y’in chakra I could probably borrow from the Dreamer if I had to. Hand seals: three-point-five, because of loads of extra practice and hyperawareness of the way chakra moved in my body. Total: Eighteen.

I was all sorts of paper tiger, I thought.

“I noticed that, and I wrote a report to the Hokage on the topic of rotating specialists in the Academy, if that’s the result you got.” Sensei said. I looked up, and he didn’t seem disappointed or anything. To Obito and Kakashi as well as me, he said, “But it’s time that we break down our scores, now that we’ve taken a look. First, though, we’re going to pass our files around. Don’t worry if Kakashi’s and my files have a lot of redacted information.”
I rubbed my eyes and nodded. I hadn’t cried, but I needed a second.

We passed our folders to the left, which meant that I got a chance to look at Obito’s file first.

I memorized his blood type and birthday, which were O and February 10th, respectively, before looking at his assessment.

The first thing I thought was, That is way too low.

Ninjutsu and stamina were solid twos. Obito’s taijutsu, genjutsu, and strength scores sat squarely at one-point-five, while his speed and hand seal ratings were two-point-five each. His lowest score was intelligence, which sat at a rather dismal score of one. All in all, his score was fourteen-point-five. Even the test scores were calling him an idiot.

That is exactly what Naruto’s score was when he graduated.

Of course she would know that.

Personally, I was pretty sure there was a particular reason for Obito’s low scores, and it wasn’t just because he was slow. Obito could be remarkably book-dumb, but he was an awkwardly affectionate, sensitive person when he cared about someone and learned far more quickly when we were still attending taijutsu lessons at the Academy. He didn’t like reading, he didn’t like studying, and he didn’t like to be talked down to by people who did. But given that I’d managed to boost my scores through tutoring, I think it was more about what resources Obito lacked than any brainpower.

Obito, who was looking at Kakashi’s folder, scowled thunderously. Even though I knew Kakashi had to be impressive.

On second thought, that was probably the problem.

“What does it look like, Obito?” I asked, leaning over and passing Obito’s folder to Sensei.

Obito shoved it under my nose. Wow, he really was in a bad mood.

“Keep in mind that scores mean very little in the field.” Sensei said, as I scanned Kakashi’s file. Mine was in Sensei’s hands. “Numbers based on a single point in time can’t explain or really assess the effects of fighting under real battlefield conditions. There’s no place in these for willpower, determination, or the effects of morale levels.”

Kakashi had a total score of twenty-two-point-five, with three separate scores (intelligence, speed, and hand seals) rated higher than three. Barring strength, which was probably dependent on the fact that we were all nine years old and had the same one, none of his stats were lower than two. I doubted the numbers encompassed the stupid levels of experience he had even given how long he’d been a chūnin, but his mission records were entirely blotted out with black ink, so I couldn’t be sure.

“Here’s an example, Obito-kun.” Sensei held out my file, turned so that we could both see it. “See this? Keisuke-kun has high intelligence and hand seal scores, which make it easier for her to pull her nin- and genjutsu scores upward by learning them quickly. On the other hand, her physical scores—speed, strength, and stamina—are actually lower than yours when you add them up.” He flipped the folder over and handed it back to me, extending his hand for Kakashi’s file. “Now Kakashi was rated as less intelligent than Keisuke despite the fact that he’s been in the field longer than both of you, while you and Kakashi were both afforded the same strength and stamina score. Keisuke shares your strength score, too, which means that the physical limitations of your bodies are the problem, not you. You’ll all grow out of it.”
Kakashi rolled his eyes. I had no doubt whatsoever that he could take both Obito and me in a fight with his eyes closed.

“…Okay, Sensei.” Obito mumbled, and Sensei smiled.

“I didn’t set these out for you to fight over.” Sensei said. He flicked his fingers and all of our files vanished. His was still on the ground. “They’re not necessarily accurate, and can seem arbitrary based on things like observer bias and whether or not any of you were holding back for one reason or another. But the general trends—such as the fact that Kakashi needs to work on his genjutsu and Keisuke-kun has some trouble with her stamina, and that we can polish up everyone’s taijutsu? That gives us a place to start setting goals.”

That made sense. I just hadn’t expected that the future Hokage would be so obsessed with number-crunching.

“What are your scores like, Sensei?” I asked. After seeing what we were capable of, I had to wonder what Sensei could do.

Minato-sensei picked up his file and handed it to me. “Take a look.”

Turns out that they don’t just hand out jōnin report cards to anyone. Sensei’s stat chart had been left entirely blank, with only a lonely little number in the corner informing us that he had a total score of thirty-two.

I had a hard time believing that he wouldn’t make mincemeat out of literally everything once he got going.

“For today, we’re going to set goals and begin working out how to achieve them.” Sensei continued, “We’ll finish our training today with some sparring sessions so we can all get a feel for each other. Sound good?”

We all nodded, though I was pretty sure none of us really wanted to.

I’d hated setting goals before. It implied work.

You set goals with me.

That’s different.

The results of the planning session ended up being this: I’d be running up and down trees until I had more stamina, Kakashi would be trying to cast and dispel genjutsu while paired off with Obito, who also needed to work on his genjutsu, and then we’d have a three-way fight between us kids while Sensei corrected our stances and refereed to make sure we didn’t all kill each other.

(Given that Obito and I were completely okay with doubling up to take on Kakashi, this was a more equal prospect than even Kakashi had thought.)

Before we knew it, the afternoon was upon us and we were all hungry, dirty, and tired enough to stop. Except for Sensei. The guy always looked like he could go five more rounds and then kill a dragon at the end of it as a cool-down. It was surreal.

“At this point,” Minato-sensei said, pulling Obito and I back to our feet so we’d stop keeping Kakashi in the world’s most complex and pointless joint-locks, “Kakashi and I usually go grab a bite to eat before we work on meditation and strategy. Want to join us?”
Obito nodded, though not without a sidelong glare at Kakashi. “Sounds good, Sensei.”

For my part, I cast a glance the Memorial Stone. “Um. I’ll be along in a second. Gotta do something first.”

“Wha—? Oh. I’ll wait.” Obito said instantly, giving me a concerned look. I was grateful that he seemed to have forgiven me for my stupid display earlier, and silently promised to do everything I could to help him improve.

“It’ll just take a second.” I repeated, holding up one finger, and I walked over to the stone.

The Memorial Stone is one of several monuments to shinobi in Konoha’s history. There used to be an older version here, I’d heard, dating from the days of the First Hokage and the First Shinobi World War. It was just an oversized headstone, with plain stone sides and a space for names in the middle. The one that occupied training ground three, which had been put up since the previous one had started to crumble and had been moved to just below the Hokage Monument, was black marble polished to a reflective sheen. It was shaped like a kunai blade, standing on a three-sided brace of black stone surrounded by concrete and granite, flanked by silver flagpoles. The flat face of the blade had what seemed like hundreds of names written on it.

I could see my reflection looking back at me, around the shadows cast by the small, solid characters spelling out Wataru Gekkō. I placed both of my hands together and bowed my head.

Sometimes I couldn’t believe it had already almost four months.

I’ll make you proud, Dad. I’ll look after everyone, like you did for us. Don’t worry about Hayate and Mom. None of us will forget you, and we won’t make you cry.

Love you.

I wasn’t sure if he was listening. I wasn’t sure if he was even there. But I felt like, if nothing else, I could at least try.

Prayer finished, I turned around and headed back to my team.

“Ready?” Obito asked.

I slung an arm around his shoulders and squeezed, conveying a wordless I’m sorry and You’re still my friend. “Yeah. Just had to say something to Dad.”

Kakashi, I noticed, was looking pointedly away from me. Sensei had his hand on Kakashi’s shoulder. I knew why, and felt like something was squeezing my heart.

Minato-sensei sighed, but he didn’t seem unhappy. “All right. There’s this ramen bar I know…”
Genin Life: Ceasefire

Chapter Summary

Kei: Strike a deal.

I’ll be perfectly honest here: the only standards by which the brand-new Team Minato would not be considered a walking disaster were those set by the as-yet-unborn members of Team Kakashi in the future. I was pretty sure that the Sannin had a better record than we did at the moment, since if every minute of Team Hiruzen’s existence had been a disaster, they probably would have all been dead by twenty despite their skills.

Obito hated Kakashi. It was almost a given. Kakashi was stronger, had graduated younger, had apparently held the affection of every girl in their age group back when he and Obito had actually been in the same class (including Rin), was an arrogant little shit, and spent almost all of his time either talking down to us or beating the crap out of Obito. He’d kind of given up on pounding on me after I asked Sensei for permission to use my bokken, since it gave me range on him and Sensei hadn’t given Kakashi the okay to use his dad’s tantō. Obito, on the other hand, hadn’t received any specialized weapon training and was prone to getting the brunt of things because he was a boy and because of his personality.

Personally, I didn’t have anything against Kakashi. Most of his vitriol toward life in general was actually a reflection of how much of a fucked-up little kid he still was. But I didn’t like the way he treated Obito, and unfortunately my loyalty tended default to chronological order. Ergo, I’d protect my brother before Obito and Rin before Kakashi before anyone else (since most of the rest of the people I knew and cared about could take care of themselves). During practice, I’d have to remind myself that hitting the resident prodigy with a vertigo genjutsu while he was concentrating on Obito was not actually a good thing to do.

I don’t think Kakashi hated either of us. It would have required him to view us as more than bugs. Or maybe babies, I suppose. True, he didn’t lash out at me as much as he did with Obito, but I’m not sure if it was because I was a girl, because I was a prodigy in my own right, or because I just didn’t have Obito’s personality. I think he figured he had my measure and then more-or-less erased me from his personal universe.

On the other hand, Obito made Kakashi pay attention to him, if only because he hated being ignored slightly more than he hated Kakashi in general.

It took less than two weeks for Kakashi to give Obito a concussion. We weren’t even taking combat missions yet.

Sensei had to knock me on my ass to keep me from hurling myself at Kakashi when Obito just dropped, because all of my impulses were saying kill him and not holy fuck someone call an ambulance. Then, scooping Obito up from where he’d been lying dazed on the ground, Sensei vanished in a burst of white chakra smoke.

Well, I guess it was possible that Sensei didn’t have the hospital marked with a Flying Thunder God seal already. I bet he’d change his ways after this, though.
I sat there for a moment, staring blankly at where they’d both disappeared, and then I stood up. I grabbed my bokken off the ground, tossing its sling on over my shoulder. I dusted myself off. I readjusted my hitai-ate on my head.

Then I walked over to where Kakashi was standing, apparently not quite sure what to do at Sensei’s sudden disappearance. It was possible that he didn’t even know that head injuries were extremely serious, that anything more than a momentary stunning needed to be looked at in case of brain damage. I wasn’t sure what books Kakashi had read, or if he’d really even dealt with brain injuries. Most of the time if shinobi got stunned or knocked out in the field and there wasn’t any help nearby, they died. Sometimes horribly.

“Come on. We’re going to the hospital.” I said.

“Why should we? We can continue training just fine without them.” Kakashi said, eyebrows knitting together because of the “you’re a prodigy too” and “why do you even hang out with that loser” in his tone and the way I was frowning back.

I had this urge to introduce my bokken to his face. Or maybe my face. I wasn’t sure who I was angrier at.

I held out my hand instead. He and Obito hadn’t made the Seal of Reconciliation after the match, but I could at least offer it. It’d keep me from doing something stupid, at least.

“I wasn’t fighting you.” Kakashi said.

“If Sensei hadn’t been there, you would be.” I informed him.

Kakashi’s eyes narrowed.

Still, he did complete the seal. I think he had enough respect for shinobi traditions to at least allow that much between comrades, even if we weren’t friends.

“Anyway,” I began, shoving my hands into my pockets as soon as he let go, “I need to get a second opinion about something.”

Mainly, whether or not I’d be able to learn how to use chakra scalpels from Yamaguchi-sensei now that he had his own team. Unfortunately, this little episode proved that I was too aggressive when it came to people around me when I was stressed by someone else’s injury—too much Kabuto and too little Shizune, in a way. To protect people, I liked the idea of fighting more than I liked the idea of patching people up after, or even in the middle.

The best defense was a good offense and all that.

Kakashi grumbled something as we left the training grounds. We walked about four feet apart and he trailed behind me, apparently to give the impression that we weren’t really walking together. I wondered if he didn’t want to be seen with me or something.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that.” I said over my shoulder.

“‘I said, ‘don’t you already know medical ninjutsu?’” Kakashi said, more clearly. His tone still implied that I was a lily-livered wannabe ninja more than a peer.

“I know the Mystical Palm one, yes.” I said. “Along with a couple of minor healing jutsu, and lots of chakra control exercises.”
Someday, I was going to find a way to make the Bullshitting-the-Fish-Test Jutsu relevant to my life.

“What about you?” I asked, because it wasn’t as though there was anyone else to talk to.

“What about me?” Kakashi parroted, probably to be annoying.

I frowned, though he couldn’t see it. “I mean, do you know any stuff that’s particular to you?”

“Nature manipulation,” he said tonelessly. “Lightning.”

That actually brought up another point I hadn’t really considered.

I knew Sensei had developed the Rasengan as a teenager. There wasn’t really any other timeframe where he could pulled it off, given how he’d died in his early twenties, and even after making a stupidly destructive A-ranked technique that was literally all chakra control, he had to have known that his goal of a Wind Release version was years of refinement away from completion. Kakashi had developed the Chidori in a failed attempt to create a Lightning Release Rasengan variant, if I remembered right, even if he only demonstrated it as a teenager.

I wondered if Kakashi knew the Rasengan even at age nine. I also wondered if Obito or I would ever be able to learn it.

More than that, though, I was concerned that I was the only member of my team with no elemental ninjutsu. Obito had Fire Release jutsu to play with as a member of the Uchiha clan, even if he wasn’t particularly good at the Grand Fireball technique yet. Sensei probably had a little bit of everything, but mostly Wind Release. I already knew Kakashi was lightning-natured, both from my foreknowledge and the fact that his chakra felt like a sparking wire.

It was kind of weird to realize that I had no idea what my own chakra nature was.

“Is that the boy?”

I put my thoughts on pause, wondering why that voice had jumped out at me at all, vehement and yet whispered as it was. Being in the village meant that background chatter was a fact of life, and with Obito as a friend whispers had been following me for a while now, but I’d actually felt Kakashi’s chakra shrink back into his skin a little as soon as we left the training grounds behind.

“Such a pity…”

I looked back at him. “Kakashi?”

Kakashi’s body language was stiff, locked-up in a way that it never was when Sensei was around. He stared straight ahead, eyes narrow and dark with some unknown emotion, and he didn’t acknowledge me. He seemed to be looking at something over my left shoulder, and he kept putting one foot in front of the other and walking right past me when I stopped.

Apparently Obito wasn’t the only one with All of the Other Reindeer syndrome, even now.

Kakashi’s dad was barely six months dead. I didn’t know the exact date of the mission that went FUBAR, and I’m pretty sure even now that my parents had kept me close to home because they didn’t want me to see the fear, the resentment, and the rampant rumor-mongering that went on in a village that existed because of its secrets. I just knew that in the end, there hadn’t been anyone there to stop him from taking the only way out he had left.

Not even Kakashi.
I didn’t want to know the specifics.

But I couldn’t let him stew in it.

“You know,” I said lightly, “I never really wanted to punch people in the face until I met Obito.”

That was a complete and total lie. It was also phrased so ambiguously that only people who knew me would be able to see the truth in it. I’d never hurt Obito. I’d come pretty close to hurting the people who hurt him several times already, though.

And only the Dreamer had a handle on just how many people I wished dead, and how much.

Kakashi gave me a sidelong look, trying to gauge my honesty.

“And since I’m probably going to if we keep going this slowly, I offer you a proposition.”

One eyebrow went up.

Whack! My open hand smacked into his shoulder, shoving him off balance. And I had my revenge.

We were teammates, after all. Comrades. Putting him in the hospital didn’t seem like the right thing to do unless our team had suddenly morphed into the Sannin while no one was looking.

“You’re It.” I informed him.

Kakashi was faster than me. A lot faster, if he wanted to be. That was how I knew that, even as I leapt onto the nearest market roof, he wasn’t really trying to catch me.

It did give him an excuse to chase, though, and therefore an excuse to leave the whispers behind.

I wasn’t all that great at the kind, compassionate, serene temperament Rin could pull off as easy as breathing. I didn’t know how not to be mildly insensitive and prone to flashes of irrational anger. I didn’t know how to leave stuff alone.

Oh well.

We made it to the hospital within five minutes. I only got tagged twice, and I was still It when we skidded to a stop outside the door. Just being near the hospital was enough to put me on edge. Aside from the one time Rin and I had brought Obito to see Yamaguchi-sensei, I didn’t have a whole lot of good memories of this place. Hayate’s crises, periodic childhood shots, and having to follow doctors around like a nurse-capped duckling weren’t really the types of things that made up a good impression.

Going by the way Kakashi eyed the doorway, I guess he picked up on my apprehension. It was also possible that he expected Minato-sensei to swoop down on him like some kind of bird of prey and start lecturing him about Not Being A Dick.

Personally, I wasn’t convinced that it would take. Ever.

I walked up to the front desk and said to the receptionist, “I’m looking for a patient—Obito Uchiha.”

The receptionist glanced up, recognition in her eyes, and said, “Oh, Kei-chan. I didn’t know you were coming back.”

“Well, I’m not coming back to stay, but I am looking for my teammate.” I said, shrugging. “Sorry, Shirohana-san.”
“Oh, it’s no big deal.” Ayako Shirohana was one of the receptionists who had been around long enough for her to recognize me from my volunteer hours over the previous year. She wasn’t a ninja, but she was studying for her own internship as a civilian nurse and was at least ten years older than I was, with teal hair and brown eyes. I rather liked her, even if she did insist on making me fetch her coffee for her. “Uchiha, Uchiha… Ah! Here we go: he’s still in the waiting room. It’s just down the hall, though we’ve got so many people there at the moment that there’s interference everywhere. I’m sure you would have found him otherwise.”

The thing about coworkers is that they find out a bunch of your secrets, if you’re like me. I’d told Ayako that I was a chakra sensor mostly so she’d stop messing with the intercom when she wanted someone to take over for her when she went on break. All she’d have to do once I was around was flare her chakra in a shave-and-a-haircut pattern, and then I’d pop in to take her place for ten minutes or whatever.

Though we’d had to stop doing that once the head nurse found out that she was letting an eight-year-old sub for her.

“Thanks, Shirohana-san. It was nice seeing you again!” With that, Kakashi and I wandered down the hall. I knew exactly which waiting room Ayako had been talking about—I’d only had to clean blood and senbon and kunai out of the linoleum four or five times.

Mini-ninjas make pretty good manual labor, I guess. At least the major combat cases didn’t spend a lot of time in said rooms. Else they’d probably all die.

The waiting room was…well, I’ll put it this way: the waiting room to my old pediatrician’s office was worse. Slightly, and only because the place had involved clown wallpaper. This particular waiting room in Konoha General was almost offensively beige. The only spots of color were the bits where someone had apparently decided to stick free bandage samples, crappy outdated magazines, and a painting of a bowl of mangoes.

Almost all of the available chairs were occupied by someone in bandages or looking somewhat dazed, and Minato-sensei and Obito were on the couch. Obito had his eyes shut and was leaning pretty heavily on Sensei. Sensei, for his part, didn’t seem to mind all that much, but I noticed that he squeezed Obito’s arm to keep him awake. And that there was a bucket nearby, in case Obito had to throw up.

Concussions were nasty business, and the thing with head injuries was that they were a little too complex for my level of medical ninjutsu expertise.


Obito groaned. “I’ve got a killer headache, I’m tired, and I keep seeing stars. And I feel horrible.”

“All right, at the moment.” Minato-sensei said to me. “To be honest, I almost expected something to go wrong sooner.”

“You suck, Sensei.” Obito grumbled without looking. “You suuuuuuuuck.”

I was starting to see why Mom had insisted that Hayate and I train our butts off before we ever met our jōnin-sensei. I hadn’t realized that Sensei was still learning, too. He’d been promoted twice by the time he was fourteen, but it didn’t change the fact that he was still a teenager training kids.

I sat down to Obito’s left, while Kakashi flanked Sensei. He didn’t sit down, though. I wonder what his problem with hospitals was.
I bumped Obito’s shoulder, gently. “Well, we are training to be ninjas. Since you didn’t black out, I think you should probably be fine.”

Obito buried his face in Sensei’s flak jacket to block out the light, but I still heard his muffled, “Thanks, Kei.”

“You’ll forgive me if I want a medic to take a look though, right?” Sensei asked, teasing.


“By the way, Kakashi, you never did complete the seal.” Sensei went on, poking Kakashi with his free hand. Kakashi muttered something incomprehensible, sitting down next to Sensei to sulk, but Sensei said, “Come on, don’t be like that.”

I reached over, behind Sensei’s back, and poked him. “And you’re It again.”

Kakashi gave me an incredulous look. “What, you’re still doing that?”

“I never stopped.” I said.

“When did you two start getting along?” Minato-sensei asked.

“We didn’t. I just decided to bug him.” I replied. “In the name of vengeance.”

Obito snickered, though it was muffled by his mood and Sensei’s vest. “Your revenge is Tag?”

“Yep. If I beat the stuffing out of him before you could, you’d complain.” I said.

“Like you could.” Kakashi said.

“While I think the idea of fewer unsanctioned fights is a great idea,” Sensei began, “could you two please wait until we aren’t in the hospital anymore? The last thing I want to see is how much you can escalate things.”

“Oh, yeah. We can save that for training.” I agreed.

Minato-sensei snapped his fingers, as though remembering something important. “Speaking of which, Obito. No training for at least a week.”

It was Obito’s turn to mutter something distinctly unhappy and sullen.

“And if you fall asleep on me, it’s going to be two weeks.” Minato-sensei said. “Not because I don’t like you, but concussions are not something to fool around with. The last thing I want is to see if you can be the youngest patient in the hospital with a brain hemorrhage.”

“Yes, Sensei.” Obito mumbled.

“And as for you, Keisuke-kun, keep a handle on that temper.” Minato-sensei said. I blinked. “Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

Ehehe. Whoops.

“I’m not mad anymore.” I said.

“Well, no, or else I would have expected murder instead of Tag.” Sensei said. “But I have to ask, what set you off anyway?”
“Um.” I began. *Shiiiiit.* I looked at Obito, who didn’t look exactly conscious.

“He’s mostly out.” Sensei said, sounding a little exasperated. “We’ll start again with him in two weeks. Anyway, like I was saying…”

“Obito gets bullied a lot.” I said quietly, uncomfortably rubbing the insides of my arms. It hadn’t even been my intention to find out about his home life in the first place, but when he was one of my best friends, it happened anyway. “It didn’t exactly stop after he made genin, but…um. He shouldn’t have a record for it, but Rin and I had to drag him here to get healed a couple of times.”

Kakashi frowned. “The Nohara girl?”

I was kind of surprised that Kakashi even remembered her, but I just nodded. “I worry, okay?”

“Is that why you always show up together?” Sensei asked.

“Yeah. Obito gets distracted easily and he helps people with chores and stuff all the time, which means otherwise he’d be late.” I said. I looked at the floor. “And the first day, I…um. I cut in and dragged him away before it got bad.”

I wanted to rush back to the Uchiha District and beat the hell out of Yoshi and Matsumaru anyway. It had been a while, but it didn’t make the urge any less powerful.

“So that’s what I’ve been doing.” I concluded, hoping Sensei and Kakashi wouldn’t ask anything else. I only had speculation to go on past that point.

“…I’m going to have to talk to the clan about this.” Sensei said under his breath, though I could hear him perfectly well.

Ahahaha. *No.*

“You should probably ask Obito first.” I urged him. “He knows that I know and Rin might, even if she hasn’t said anything, but there hasn’t been as much trouble since we graduated.” Maybe it was just my habitual distrust of everything showing again, but I didn’t trust Obito’s clan at all. I didn’t really trust any of the big clans, actually, since that would require assuming non-hostility or acceptance from hundreds of people under one big, fat umbrella and, well…*no.*

That, and at seventeen, I wasn’t sure Minato-sensei had all the answers. Actually, I rather doubted it. Even though he was a jōnin and I was just a kid.

“I…I don’t know much about clans. Or about having a big family.” None of us did, actually. And I hated myself for stumbling over the words, “But for now, I’ve been dealing with it. Obito’s been dealing with it. It’s working so far.”

“It won’t work forever.” Minato-sensei said.

“I figure it’ll stop once he grows up into a kickass ninja.” I admitted. I hoped so, anyway.

Minato-sensei sighed. Kakashi looked away. A very small nurse (or perhaps an assistant) walked into the room with a clipboard, calling the next patient into the exam room.

I wondered if they were thinking about Sakumo.

“Kei-senpai?” It was the nurse-like figure, all dressed in white and…wait. That was Rin’s face and her purple tattoos.
I grinned. “Rin-chan! How have you been?”

Rin smiled. “Pretty well. You?”

“Okay. But, uh…” I made a helpless gesture at Obito.

To Rin’s credit, she immediately looked at Obito before anyone else. She actually ignored Sensei and Kakashi entirely, eyes dark with concern, and I pinched Obito (subtly) in an attempt to get him to wake up and say hello.

He blinked, but he mostly looked unfocused and annoyed and oh god why did we let him fall asleep.

“Rin.” I said.

Rin’s eyes went narrow and dark and Sensei was alert inside of a second. Kakashi was booted off the couch because I wasn’t feeling charitable at all and Obito needed the space, and Rin raised her hands. They were already glowing, but not with the faint green of medical chakra. Instead, there was a faint bluish screen between her hands, and she brought it to Obito’s head.

So that’s what the diagnostic jutsu looks like, I thought, memorizing the way it felt.

“…So, apparently Rin’s been busy.” I said, apropos of nothing. Rin seemed too distracted to offer a comment.

“Did she graduate the same time that you did?” Minato-sensei asked.

“Yep.” I was so far past freaking out that I was almost serene. I must have used up all of my anger, fear, and possessiveness earlier. “Though I never did get a clear picture of what happened after. She was one of the top two kunoichi in the class, but she wasn’t placed with Obito and me.”

Because Kakashi was.

“You seem to have had a very busy life as a student.” Sensei commented neutrally.

“I had really good teachers outside of school.” I said, not looking at him.

Mom. Dad. Yamaguchi-sensei. And the Dreamer, given how much I bounced ideas off of her.

“So I see.”

I think I could hear Sensei stepping up his training plans. Agh.

“I think you and Obito should start working on pair training, after he recovers.” Sensei said speculatively.

“What is that and why?”

“It’s specialized teamwork, and because you’ll both get much stronger.”

I was not convinced. Mainly because every time a ninja said “to become stronger” I kept thinking that someone was going to sell their soul to something. Such as a snake demon.

It was at about that time that I felt Rin’s chakra calming down again, so I decided to ignore my impending doom in favor of my friend. Obito, it seemed, had fallen back asleep without so much as a word in greeting.
“Obito will be okay, Kei-senpai!” Rin said, obviously stressed but not actually panicking. I figured that was enough. “It’s true that we don’t like it when concussed patients fall asleep, but it doesn’t seem as serious as it could be.

“In that case, I’ll let this one slide. And I’ll make sure to let Obito know we saw you and you’re doing great,” I said, distracted by another thought, “Also, when did you start calling me senpai and why didn’t I get the memo?”

“Oh! Um.” Rin leaned in, as though sharing a secret. “I’m Akihito-shishō’s apprentice now.”

I had officially blown a hole in causality and changed one of the subsets of my visions by existing. Go me.

“That’s great, Rin-chan! Though I have to hear how it happened.” I glanced back at Sensei and Kakashi, of whom looked amused and the other of the two looking apathetic. “Later. Sorry, Rin-chan. Anyway, these two are Minato-sensei and Kakashi. Though I think you already know Kakashi.”

Rin paused. “You were in our class when we were five, weren’t you, Kakashi-kun?”

So Kakashi still rated a “-kun” while Obito was just that? Crap.

“Probably.” Kakashi said with a shrug.

I sighed. “Anyway, Rin-chan, how long until Obito’s up and about?”

“About an hour, probably, and I would still recommend seeing Akihito-shishō or another medic-nin to be sure. He’ll want to sleep the rest of the day off, though.” Rin looked sad. “Though I have to ask, how did it happen?”

I pointed wordlessly at Kakashi.

Let it never be said that I wasn’t petty.

Later, I did manage to find out that Yamaguchi-sensei had utterly flunked his team. I didn’t hear why, exactly, but the boys went to the Genin Corps while he picked Rin as his personal apprentice. Since my sense of compassion was somewhat truncated when it came to people I didn’t actually know, I decided that the best thing to do would be to support Rin any way I could. She seemed happy, having a purpose in life and something she was really good at, so I wasn’t going to hold her back at all.

I still invited her home for dinner, though.
Genin Life: A Different Kind of Graduation

Chapter Summary

Kei: Be melodramatic.

I know I’m not sane. I knew it even when I was nine years old and still getting my feet under me.

Thoughts like that don’t just come out of nowhere. The split personality-slash-sanity-preserving-mental-construct that the Dreamer turned out to be hadn’t just come out of nowhere, after all. Neither had Id. Partitioning parts of one’s mind off from the rest is not a sign of a stable, well-adjusted individual. Just look at Dark Naruto or Inner Sakura and the way they were born of a disconnection between inner and outer selves that their originators denied but nevertheless still experienced.

Inner Sakura, I’ll admit, was probably more dramatic and less practical. Hide behind a mask for too long and you start to forget what’s supposed to be underneath it, unless you let it out to play every once in a while.

Dark Naruto had been a justified reaction to systemic rejection by Konoha as a whole. Whatever else I could say about the Naruto in my visions, “happy childhood” was not a thought that came to mind despite his habitual fox smile. Suppressing those feelings had probably been the only thing keeping Naruto from ripping the seal to bits and letting the Kyuubi loose again, other than ignorance. That, and hope that tomorrow would be better.

Precognition is the antithesis of hope.

It’s the precursor to fear.

I don’t think any normal older sister, particularly one who had breezed through the Academy with perfect scores inside of a year, would have reacted the way I did when Hayate and Mom announced at dinner that he’d be joining the Academy the next year.

“Sis, you’re gonna attend my ceremony, right?” Hayate asked,

I couldn’t help it. I froze up. My chopsticks stopped halfway to my mouth. My right arm started shaking so badly that the soba noodles flopped right off the end of them. I couldn’t breathe over the force of my own helplessness. The room was getting smaller, wasn’t it?

GET UP, HAYATE! PLEASE, GET UP!

In hindsight, I suppose it was somewhat fitting that my first reaction was fear and not rage. My first memory of Hayate had always been the worst. It was the fact that all I could do was watch…

“Kei-chan?” Mom asked.

I think I froze for about a total of five seconds before I was interrupted.

WAKE UP! the Dreamer screamed at me, giving me the equivalent of a mental slap across the face. This is not the time to get caught in a vision!
I blinked. Mom was standing in front of me, her hands on my shoulders, with Hayate by her side. I blinked at him, too, trying to shake the image of the dead special jōnin he might grow up to be. Then and there, he was too small, his face too round and unmarked, and he looked up at me in blank innocence, as though any protests against his decision to become a ninja were from completely out of context.

Which they kind of were.

Mom let go of my shoulders. “Kei-chan, are you feeling all right?”

“Just a little tired, Mom.” I said, hugging Hayate. He made a confused noise, but he let me do it. “Sensei’s been keeping us busy this whole month, and I haven’t been getting enough sleep.”

He had, actually. Whatever other adjectives could be used to describe Minato Namikaze, “lazy” was not one of them, and he didn’t like to see it in his students either. As for not getting enough sleep… well, I don’t think I’ll ever have enough sleep after a life like this. I’d been pretty bad before, too, but this was ridiculous as well as self-destructive. I’d probably head back my former habit of sleeping whenever I could, wherever I could, and I could already see that becoming a problem.

The visions had never intruded on my waking hours before, though.

The Dreamer replied, I hope you plan on training soon. Holding your visions back is like trying to plug a breached dam with your bare hands. I don’t have enough chakra to pull this off forever at your current level.

It would be really nice to know why the fuck I keep getting them in the first place, I thought viciously.

Setting my chin on top of my brother’s head, I said, “So, the Academy already? I was three years older than you when I joined up!” Funny how that had been only a year ago.

“He’s as good as any clan student at this point.” Mom said, ruffling my hair. She’d apparently decided to let the issue lie.

“I’ll be fine. If you could do it, so can I!” Hayate insisted, and he wiggled enough out of my grip that he could put his head on my shoulder. He squeezed my ribs reassuringly.

“Well, don’t try to graduate too early.” I said. I let him out of my grip so I could poke him in the forehead to keep his attention on me.

“Sis!” Hayate protested.

“I’m serious, Hayate-chan!” I said, “I barely got a year to learn everyone’s names and figure out who might be okay to be on a team with, and I got lucky. You should enjoy your days in the Academy, because I’m gonna help Mom drill you into the ground when you get home.”

“You’re the worst sister ever.” Hayate said, pouting.

“Speaking of drills,” Mom broke in, “Kei-chan, it’s about time that you had your second graduation ceremony.”

I gave Mom a strange look over Hayate’s head. “Um. What?”

“You can’t carry that bokken out into the field, Kei-chan.” Mom said patiently. “I know I haven’t had a chance to teach you much about the difference between bokken and a kodachi or katana, but I won’t allow you to take C-ranked missions without a proper blade.”
“Does that mean…?” I trailed off, too overwhelmed to speak.

“After one last assessment, I’ll determine which blade you’ll be using and buy one for you.” Mom said, nodding. “It won’t be the best quality in the world, but it should be enough to get you started until you can accept upper-level missions and afford a good one.”

Oh. I’d forgotten about the family money trouble for a while. I’m an idiot. Mom was killing two birds with one stone—with Hayate in the Academy and me as a genin, she might be able to reenter the active roster and actually get something like an income. At the moment, we were living off her and dad’s savings and I had no idea how much was left.

“Meet me at the usual training fields in an hour, all right? There’s still enough daylight to take care of this.” Mom smiled, and after we were all done eating like normal people, she disappeared. I only had to check the slot above the couch to realize that all of the training swords were gone with her.

Was I imagining things or did Mom look kind of bloodthirsty when she’d said that?

And then I realized that she left me with the dishes. Sigh. Mom, really?

Anyway, I grabbed my bokken and Hayate and headed to the training ground. Hayate wasn’t really on a set school or training schedule, so I guess it wasn’t any trouble that he tended to follow me. I figured he’d want to witness his big sister’s ignoble defeat at the hands of Mom, anyway, which would probably encourage him to listen to Mom forever. At least he probably wouldn’t cut his fingers off with his shinai.

…Though I might have been underestimating the ingenuity of small children on that count.

When we got to the training field, Mom was waiting for us in her training gi and the sun was starting to dip behind the tree-line. Hayate climbed one of the nearby maples and sat on the lowest limb, while I unstrapped my bokken and brought it up in front of me in a defensive pose.

“Remember, Kei-chan, this is your final test. Your task is to touch me three times, or else achieve a possibly fatal injury. Got it?”

I was going to get my ass quite thoroughly kicked and I knew it. Still, I nodded.

“You can do it, Sis!” Hayate called, and Mom charged while I was processing it.

Mom was fast. I still wasn’t completely sure of her rank, though at that moment I was thinking “special jōnin with a combat focus” and “oh shit.” Not exactly in that order, though.

I was blocking as soon as I could perceive the strikes, but she had the force of her chakra moving in perfect synch. I was being driven back not just by the weight and strength difference, but by the force of her chakra and her skill. I was practically skidding along the ground, too surprised to compensate by using my chakra to keep traction on the dirt.

**Damn it, I’m not losing without putting up a fight.**

The Dreamer chose that moment to jump in. **NOW!**

I focused my chakra into the bottoms of my feet and heaved. Mom was thrown back for a split second by the force of my chakra, but that was all.

I’d only won a second’s reprieve, so I immediately turned and bolted for the nearest tree. I didn’t have strength, stamina, experience, skill, or reach on her. All I had was my brain, and the Dreamer.
That, and a willingness to do a lot of stupid things.

I could feel Mom following me so, without giving her a chance to respond, I ran right up the tree’s bark and past Hayate, weaving between branches too close together for Mom to easily follow. I only needed a second to do what was necessary…

Mom appeared in front of me and *crack* went the sound of my ribs under duress.

Or, you know, that would have been the sound if I’d actually still been there.

I got a good look at Mom’s stunned face at my seal-less Replacement Jutsu from about three trees over. Suppressing my chakra signature to almost nothing. I used the bare minimum necessary for a camouflage genjutsu. It wasn’t strong, or even particularly useful in most situations, but seeming like I was actually crouching a few inches to my right thanks to simultaneous use of the Clone Jutsu could be a lifesaver.

Mom dropped out of the tree, spotted my clone, and the next thing I knew she was practically in my face, bokken chopping neatly through my illusion.

Yeah, I was really gonna have to work on my speed.

And that was about when I brought my own bokken crashing into her ribs.

*Bomp!*

Turned out Mom knew how to make shadow clones. Shit.

Thank the merciful creator deities of your choice for camouflage techniques, even if Mom probably knew where I was. Of the various clone techniques, shadow clones remained the only ones that transferred the information they picked up directly to their creators. They also required a massive amount of chakra to create in useful numbers, unlike the various elemental clones, but Mom demonstrated quite handily that most ninjas didn’t *need* more than one.

Guess Naruto was compensating for his early-series weaknesses, then.

**Our mother is too strong to take on directly or without distractions,** the Dreamer pointed out unhelpfully. **She’s to our right. Ten degrees. Fifteen meters.**

I had my chakra running slow and low, almost as imperceptible as natural energy to normal people, and I think that was why I managed to catch Mom by surprise with my second rapid-fire and seal-less replacement with a tree branch. I had enough chakra control for any jōnin, and it just barely made up for my total lack of chakra resources.

I was so out of my depth it wasn’t even funny.

Still. I didn’t plan on losing without a fight.

The second time Mom and I clashed blade-to-blade, it was in midair. I was promptly sent careening into the ground, though I got my feet under me in time and used the momentum to zoom off into the underbrush. The G-forces I pulled then were more than I remembered even in my old life, on a rollercoaster.

The funny thing about shinobi kenjutsu is how much time you spend airborne, really. And how much time is spent setting up or reacting to ambushes. When you get down to it, a katana was actually a handicap for a ninjutsu specialist, because of the basic fact that most shinobi need both
hands to do basically anything with their chakra. About the only seal most of us could make would be the Seal of Confrontation, which is supposed to be a half-seal and barely works in any sense of the word, even for activating exploding tags (unless you’re Deidara) or for focusing one’s chakra (unless you’re Deidara).

Or the Seal of Reconciliation, but that’s a ceremonial thing and not really relevant to my situation.

Fuck it. I cast outward with my chakra sense, confirming my mother’s position and that of another shadow clone.

**Eleven o’clock, seventeen meters,** the Dreamer confirmed.

I killed the clone with a thrown kunai before scurrying off into the underbrush to avoid Mom’s inevitable counterattack.

That was about when Hayate landed on my back, knocking the wind out of me and sending me crashing right to the ground. I actually face-planted in the dirt.

“Get off, Hayate-chan.” I said, my voice muffled by the ground.

Mom was *so* cheating.

“But I’m going to help!” Hayate insisted, getting off and drawing his shinai. “Mommy’s not being fair!”

Mom came rushing out of nowhere, smashing her bokken into mine as I barely managed to raise my arms to divert it away from Hayate. I was on the defensive, even with Hayate barking at Mom’s heels and swinging his shinai just after she’d moved out of the way or gotten her bokken up to deflect the blows. I aimed a thrust at her ribs, but she turned the tip of my bokken aside with barely a thought.

And then she cracked me in the ribs with it, which knocked the air from my lungs for the second time in five minutes. Hayate immediately went to fill the gap, blocking our mom’s swings with astonishing solidity for a kid.

That said, he was promptly knocked ass over teakettle when Mom swept his legs out from under him.

Okay, my little brother was adorable with his little training sword, but seriously? I was going to die if he kept it up. I didn’t have the skill to defend him and complete my test.

Maybe that’s the point.

…Mom had a bell test.

**GOD FUCKING DAMMIT.**

I stepped over him, planting my feet with chakra, and met our mom’s slash with everything I had. Behind me, Hayate got to his feet and threw his arms around my waist, bracing me as much as he was trying to just cling to me. He was shaking—he’d never seen Mom like that. I hadn’t either, but I had more of an idea of what to do.

Mom’s and my bokken started to crack at the point of contact.

“Why won’t you dodge, Kei-chan?” Mom asked, almost serene despite the countdown to splinters
“Like hell I’ll leave my brother alone!” I snarled back, chakra surging to reinforce my muscles. “If I dodge, Hayate gets flattened, or used as a kunai, and I’m not letting you!”

*Blood on the rooftop, wind blades whistling through the air, a choked-off scream…*

*Remnants of red sand and splintered wood, the metallic gleam of a dismembered Melody Arm weapon, the curl of blood and sweat and steel in the night…*

“You should have tried harder…”

For a second, I didn’t see Mom. I saw Baki, and I saw Kabuto, and I had enough hate in my blood for any Uchiha including Tobi. “I will never let anyone hurt him!” I threw everything I had into it. It wasn’t going to be enough. It wasn’t ever going to be enough.

But like hell I’d let that stop me.

Mom’s eyes widened.

Hayate squeaked.

I used the Replacement Jutsu. For me and for Hayate.

We both landed back in the clearing, since I’d replaced us with a couple of rocks and trusted that Mom could get out of trouble on her own. I was shaking, reeling from the effects of the vision crossing with my reality and from sparring with Mom at full tilt, and Hayate was sprawled across my ribcage. He didn’t seem like he was interested in moving, given how noodle-like he was acting.

“Sis?” Hayate mumbled into my shirt.

“Yeah, Hayate-chan?” I puffed.

“You scared me back there.” Hayate said, rolling over so he was lying with his head back against my stomach. “I’ve never seen you so mad.”

“I scared myself too, Hayate-chan.” I mumbled, ruffling his hair with my right hand. “And I hope I never do that again.”

Mom reappeared, standing above us with nary a scratch on her. She actually looked worried, and I realized belatedly that I was running worryingly low on chakra. Hayate was still a little unsteady, too. I don’t think he’d insisted on clinging to me so much since we were really little.

“Kei-chan? Hayate-chan?”

“We’re okay, Mom.” I said, sitting up with difficulty. Hayate managed to cram himself into the space between my side and my left arm and latch his arms around my ribs, which made it a little hard to breathe and made me feel like I had some kind of growth attached to me.

That was about when Mom swept us both up into a somewhat strangling hug.

I did end up getting a sword. It was a rather nice kodachi, for all that I was still a ways away from my full growth and full potential. I practiced with it for a week before Mom dared let me carry it without a bokken for backup, because she didn’t want me to cut my fingers off. She didn’t really seem to care if I cut anyone else’s fingers off.
It was a pretty nasty surprise for Kakashi the next time we sparred, though, to my everlasting glee.
Genin Life: Team Minato in a Nutshell

Chapter Summary

Kei: Do D-ranked missions.

In Team Minato, team practice went a little like this:

Obito and Kakashi always sparred first. I think Sensei was trying to see if he could wear them out before either one faced me, which was nice but probably not entirely necessary. I didn’t need to be coddled. It was a house rule of sorts that we could only escalate the fight to jutsu and weaponry if Sensei said so. And since Obito didn’t have a sword or any training in using one, and Kakashi only had a tantō, I didn’t get to use my kodachi as much as I’d have liked.

So, after Kakashi and Obito beat the crap out of each other, with Obito ending the match with the most developing bruises, I’d spar with one of the boys. If I still had any chakra to spare afterward, I’d also fix everyone up as best I could. Not because I was better than the hospital, but more because I needed the practice and because they were convenient guinea pigs.

I maintained that the only reason I ever won was because I was completely willing to be a cheating little shit and also because I bit people. It was easier than saying or thinking that either of my teammates had weaknesses.

“Well, I think we’re just about ready to take on our D-ranked mission for today,” Minato-sensei said after we finished. We hadn’t actually beaten the stuffing out of one another this time, so we’d probably make it through a D-rank or two without complaining too much.

Still, Obito groaned theatrically. I sighed. Kakashi made a noise in the back of his throat that made his opinion of having to do D-ranks as a chūnin very clear.

All things considered, though, I was kind of surprised that Sensei even stuck around for our D-ranks anymore. While I knew he was still a teenager, if an insanely talented one, I kept thinking that as Konoha’s Yellow Flash, he ought to be in the field doing things. Kakashi was probably used to tagging along as the world’s deadliest puppy, because I couldn’t see Minato-sensei being deployed anywhere without him.

I wondered if having Obito and me around was actually slowing down the war effort, given how deadly Sensei could be. Then again, I also didn’t know yet if Sensei even had his wartime reputation. I knew that he’d earned the nickname and killed probably two or three hundred enemy shinobi by the time Team Minato had their first casualty. That reputation was part of what got him sent on the mission to the front lines while Kakashi, Obito, and Rin got themselves nearly killed in Grass territory.

And that would all come to a head within four years.

It’d be nice to get my hands on a Bingo Book. Even if it was just a copy from Konoha, anyone more dangerous than the average chūnin was listed, just in case. Then I’d have an idea of who would be active and dangerous enough to either avoid or expend all of the team’s explosives allowance to kill.
Not that that would be enough for some of the freaks of nature running around even now. Kisame Hoshigaki kept coming to mind for some reason.

Leaving my worries of the future aside for a while, I trailed the rest of Team Minato as we headed into the mission office.

The odd thing was that, even in wartime, the Hokage always overlooked the entire room. While I suppose that leaving missions of critical importance was generally not the type of thing a chūnin could be trusted with, we were getting a D-rank. It wasn’t exactly a matter of national security, but I supposed even Hiruzen Sarutobi needed to stay in practice. He gave out really important missions from his office, and we hadn’t been called there yet.

Well, I’m sure that Kakashi and Sensei had, but Obito and I were green enough that it probably wouldn’t happen for a while.

“Team Minato reporting for duty, Hokage-sama.” Sensei said once we’d all trooped in. Kakashi’s back was as straight as a plank, always professional in the presence of someone who could call him on failing to meet expectations, while Obito bounced on the balls of his feet and I maintained my habitual slouch. Good posture was for people who thought they had a good chance of reaching thirty, or Kakashi.

I’d actually left my kodachi at home, because I figured—

“Your mission is to report to the hospital and assist the staff in any way necessary,” the Hokage said.

Yep. Chore mission, again.

Obito actually slumped, while I sighed inwardly. Every two weeks, like clockwork, it was time to head back to the hospital and get up to our elbows in trash bins, mops, brooms, and laundry detergent. I hadn’t liked that part of the job much even when I’d been volunteering with Yamaguchi-sensei and learning as I went. Whenever the hospital put out a request for an actual D-rank, though, I knew I wasn’t even going to get that much out of it.

At least we’d probably see Rin there.

When we got to the hospital, Ayako Shirohana met us at the front door. She shoved a mop into Obito’s hands, gave Kakashi a trash bag, broom, and dust bin, and I was loaded down with dirty linens. We were all promptly told to get to work until our jobs were over, at which point we’d converge on the rest of the laundry and beat it to death with sticks and soap. When I looked toward Sensei for confirmation, or at least sympathy, he was already gone. I could still sense his presence nearby, but I kind of wondered if he’d been drafted into patient-transporting duty.

So, all in all it was a pretty typical mission.

That said, I wondered why I was on laundry duty when Kakashi and Obito were more or less both put on cleaning duty, likely with overlapping assigned areas, but I supposed that they’d have to learn how to deal with each other somehow. I wouldn’t always be around to mediate or punch someone, and neither would Sensei.

Frowning, I made a mental note to check on the boys if I went twenty minutes without feeling something or other. I couldn’t entirely trust Obito to keep on task, and Kakashi would probably use his full ninja speed just to finish his assignment faster. So would Sensei, actually, and as far as I could tell he was at least still in the building.

I decided to leave it to him.
I made my way up to the roof about an hour later, gratified to know that at least Obito and Kakashi’s most recent spat hadn’t ended with anyone needing medical attention (because there was only so much damage a pair of nine-year-old children could do with dust-bins and buckets). I still had a basket of linens to hang to dry, and enough clothespins to suspend a small child up from a washing line with little trouble.

It’d have been a cinch if it wasn’t for the fact that there were about enough of said washing lines and linen sheets to qualify as a small forest.

I sighed. Might as well get started.

The Dreamer commented idly, **I find it hard to believe that Team Kakashi could enter the Chūnin Exams with dozens of this sort of mission under their belt and vanishingly few C-ranks.**

There wasn’t enough training in the world to make up for a total lack of field experience, in my opinion. I hoped Sensei would come up with something to bridge the gap, or else we’d probably all die on our first team C-ranked mission. I had no doubt whatsoever that, as the team partially composed of the walking neuroses eventually responsible for the Fourth Shinobi World War, our missions would not go smoothly once the risk of enemy ninjas became reality.

There was the brief puff of wind chakra and displaced air as Sensei appeared behind me. “Are you doing all right, Kei-kun?”

“Yes, Sensei.” I said without looking, shaking one of the sheets out. It was still damp and twice as heavy as it needed to be.

Flare out, snap, done. Clothespins next…

“You’re awfully quiet today.” Sensei commented.

I glanced at him. He was sitting on one of the overturned baskets that had been sitting up here since who-knew-when, as innocent as a puppy after demolishing its owner’s shoe collection. I didn’t trust that look. I said, “There wasn’t a lot to talk about. Ayako-san expects me to do a good job, Obito and Kakashi are busy somewhere else, and folding laundry means I only have pigeons to talk to.”

As though to illustrate my point, two of the aforementioned birds flew overhead. Thankfully, they did not do the typical pigeon thing and crap all over everything.

Sensei made a neutral noise. “You don’t have to be on the defensive.”

I sighed, returning to my sheets. **Shake, snap, flare…**

“On a related topic, I was going to ask you something.” Sensei said. I sensed him stand up and walk over to the basket, pulling one of the sheets out to help me. “So, have you considered the idea of doubles training with Obito?”

“I have, though I don’t have any idea where to start.” I admitted. To be honest, training to fight in sync with a specific partner was probably the solution to my problem with Obito’s combat skills. I just didn’t want to depend on anyone in a full fight, and I also didn’t want to exclude Kakashi from what amounted to our “in-group.” Sure, Kakashi didn’t appear to give a damn, but he was nine. Most opponents would be stronger, faster, and have more reach when compared to him at this age. It felt a little like I’d be leaving him vulnerable, even if I knew that Obito and I were the team’s real weaknesses. “The level of understanding we’d have to have, both about our mindsets and our
fighting styles… It’s pretty daunting.”

“But not insurmountable.” Minato-sensei pointed out, clipping the sheets onto the line well above my head.

“How many people have you known who have trained for tandem fighting?” I asked curiously.

“A few.” Sensei said lightly. It was not a helpful thing to say. “Most of them had at least one Uchiha or Hyūga involved, but I’ll grant you that it isn’t necessarily common.”

No shit, Sensei. Half of the point of the Sharingan was the ability to predict someone else’s movements, while the Byakugan made it possible to see everything in a range that was frankly kind of ridiculous. I remembered that Hinata, while not exactly having the best detail for an all-Jyūken tenketsu-maiming fight, still managed to see in a range of up to ten kilometers by the time of the Fourth Shinobi World War. “What makes you think Obito and I can pull it off?”

“It’s because you want to be able to do it.” Sensei replied, looking down at me fully. I blinked upward at his suddenly steely blue eyes. “Kei-kun, I know you have some trouble with how protective you are of Obito. But you both need to stand on your own two feet sooner or later.”

“I understand, Sensei.” I said. Sooner would be better, if the Kannabi bridge mission was still in the cards. A thought struck me. “We’re probably going to upgrade to C- and B-ranks soon, aren’t we?”

Minato-sensei paused. “What makes you say that?”

“Kakashi’s too talented to waste his skills cleaning hospital rooms.” I said, flicking another sheet out full-length with a simultaneous flick of my wrists. “And your score on the report alone puts you on par or better than most of the jōnin we’re fielding now, which means keeping Obito and me in the village to hone our teamwork is actually holding the village back a bit. Kakashi probably took missions with you before, and holding both of you in reserve… It’s a waste.”

Sensei’s hand landed on my head. On a related note, I hated being short.

“You’re too hard on yourself.” Sensei told me. “You and Obito both.”

I shrugged. “It’s not being unfair if it’s true, Sensei.”

Honestly, I think it was a little like Team Kakashi in some ways. While, granted, Sasuke wasn’t exactly on mini-Kakashi’s level, the fact remained that Kakashi was almost too valuable then to waste on training a gang of brats. I think it had mostly to do with the fact that, as a prodigy whose whole thing was information analysis and learning stuff faster than anyone had before, he’d probably never actually learned how to break down his techniques for someone else to learn. Teaching other people how to break down his best techniques was probably anathema to him. He had also never seemed super interested in the idea of actually teaching anyone anything, ever, and I wasn’t sure I could really blame him for it.

I’d have probably requested a transfer from Team Seven if they’d been my students.

I went on, “Also, while we’ve been training against each other, we’ve never actually fought anyone, genuinely.” I thought that over. “Well, I’m sure Obito thinks he has, but Kakashi isn’t ever really trying to kill him.” And my mom didn’t count, no matter what form her final test had taken.

Sensei sighed. He seemed like he wanted to ruffle my hair, like he probably did with Kakashi when Obito and I weren’t around, but my bandanna hitai-ate remained an obstacle. “You’ll do fine, Kei-kun.”
I sure hoped so, though I wasn’t at all sure it would go so smoothly.

“Hey, we’re done with the lower floors!” Obito said, bursting out onto the roof. I took one look at him and had to keep from laughing, because there was no way I was letting him anywhere near the clean linens with mop water all over him.

Kakashi, who appeared about a second later, seemed to have had a dustbin upended on his head.

It was nice to see the boys were getting along.

I said, “I hope you’re not planning on getting anywhere near the linen looking like that.”

Obito paused, assessing his condition and Kakashi’s in a quick glance. “Well, no laundry duty for us.”

Kakashi gave him a sidelong glare just as Minato-sensei said, “Go get washed up, you two.”

I made shooing motions with the sheet, just so Obito would get the message. He pouted at me. “Really, Kei? With the sheets?”

“I said. The boys skedaddled.

I saw Sensei open his mouth to say something, but I wasn’t really paying much attention to him because there was another chakra signature approaching at an insane speed. I snapped my mouth shut so quickly that I felt my teeth click together and turned to face the oncoming chakra monster. From the way it was moving, it was running up the side of the building…

The next thing I saw was green. Lots of it.

“DYNAMIC ENTRY!”

Sensei moved, grabbing the intruder out of the air and holding him up by his belt—a red-banded hitai-ate—before he could slam his feet into my face. I’d dropped into a defensive crouch, hand on my kunai pouch before I even really processed what was happening, and then I paused.

Unless there was another taijutsu monster in green running around, Sensei had caught a miniature Gai. The bowl cut and gigantic eyebrows (far dwarfing whatever issues I’d had with mine in another lifetime) made it obvious.

For a second or two, all three of us just sort of stood there like the world’s weirdest statue, and then Sensei dropped the genin Gai on the roof.

“While it’s nice to see you again, Gai-kun, Kakashi is actually a floor down at the moment.” Minato-sensei told the genin, mild as ever. “You just missed him.”

“Oh,” said mini-Gai. He paused, then he bowed deeply. “My deepest apologies for almost committing the unforgivable mistake of striking an unprepared Konoha ninja! I am Maito Gai! Who are you?”

“Keisuke Gekkō.” I said, holding out my hand. One of these days, I was going to contemplate the mystery of how Rock Lee and Maito Gai’s names were always in the same order. Then again, “Lee Rock” and “Gai Maito” just sounded weird. Maybe they were really titles? Hell if I knew.

He took it, shaking it enthusiastically. It almost felt like my arm was about to be pulled off after a certain point. “It is very nice to meet you, Keisuke-san! Are you my rival Kakashi’s new teammate?”
“One of two, yes.” Yeah, I was going to need my hand back sometime before my shoulder or elbow decided to pop out of joint. “How long have you been a ninja, Gai-san?”

“I graduated from the Academy when I was seven,” he replied cheerfully. “And you?”

“Obito and I just graduated in the last month.” I said, shrugging with my free shoulder. “We’re not exactly awe-inspiring yet, and—”

There was a muffled thud from the stairwell. Gai finally let go of my hand, distracted, and I clasped my hands behind my back so he couldn’t see me trying to massage feeling back into my fingers. Taijutsu was clearly his specialty already, if he could cause that without even trying.

“…And we still have our problems getting used to the new arrangements.” I concluded, glancing at the door. “Sensei, I’m not totally sure they won’t kill each other.”

“Then it’s my job to stop them, Kei-kun.” Minato-sensei replied, and he handed me another sheet so that he could do just that and keep me just busy enough that I wouldn’t test out Gai’s Dynamic Entry on Kakashi’s face if he turned out to have hurt Obito somehow. Then he disappeared down the stairs.

I looked at Gai. “Sorry, we’re really supposed to be on a D-ranked mission at the moment. It’s just that Kakashi and Obito are too busy trying to beat the hell out of each other to actually work.”

“Oh my eternal rival is slipping!” Gai told me. “He has never been the kind of shinobi to neglect a mission before!”

I held up a linen sheet dubiously and said, “I kind of doubt this is what he considers a real mission.”

“True! My rival has been on much higher-ranked missions before, but he is not lazy and it must mean that you and Obito-san are more interesting than missions, Keisuke-san!”

Well, that was one way to look at it.

About a second later, Minato-sensei reappeared with Obito and Kakashi in hand. Specifically, he was holding Kakashi by the back of his shirt and Obito by one ankle. They looked somewhat scuffed-up, but they were at least dust-free and didn’t seem to have thrown each other out any windows. It was about the best I could ask for.

“Hello again, my eternal rival Kakashi!” Gai enthused, making Obito blink at him even while upside-down. Kakashi just rolled his eyes.

“Kakashi, do you know this guy?” Obito asked in a strangely flat voice. I think he was in awe of the mystique of one Maito Gai, even if it sounded more like total disbelief.

“No,” said Kakashi.

It was the closest thing to a non-hostile interaction between the two boys in a month. Even after Sensei dropped them both and went back to hanging the laundry.

“Again with that cool and hip attitude!” Gai shouted. “I challenge you to a match of your choice! If I lose, I will walk five laps around the village, on my hands!”

I clipped another sheet up. Obito seemed too distracted by their bizarre male bonding ritual to remember that he was supposed to help me. “Go team.” I muttered.
In the end, the Duel of the Day was decided by Rock-Paper-Scissors.

Gai lost. We didn’t see him for the rest of the day.
The Dreaded C-Rank: Dive On In

Chapter Summary

Kei: Upgrade.

It took about two months for us all to get bored to the point of utter insanity. Sensei might not have liked the idea of having us on C-ranks before we could, say, beat the crap out of each other some more, but even he couldn’t deny that he was getting a little restless. Sure, we wouldn’t really be anywhere near the hellish warzone that the Land of Grass was developing into, or the mess that was the Land of Rain, but it would probably be best for everyone to get us out of the village to work off the excess energy.

That said, it wasn’t like the time we spent in the village was wasted. We took and completed dozens of D-ranks, including the dreaded pet retrieval missions. Tora hadn’t been born yet, I think, so at least we didn’t have to deal with him.

I went to Hayate’s Academy entrance ceremony, and I managed not to die of a panic-induced heart attack from sheer nerves. Going by who I’d seen in the crowd, it looked like Hayate was going to be in Iruka and Mizuki’s graduating class. I didn’t really see anyone else I recognized, but I also understood that it’d been forever since I’d seen half the “major players” in the plot and quite possibly wouldn’t recognize them at age five anyway. Since Hayate had elected to start a year late, he was one of the older kids in his year as opposed to the youngest, which really didn’t mean all that much. It made me feel better, though.

Aside from that, I was also able to start contributing to the family funds with all of those D-ranked missions. Sure, the pay wasn’t all that great and I was about two years from being able to afford my own shinobi-grade katana, but it at least took care of the question of my pocket money and took some of the burden off of Mom.

Speaking of which, I’d totally missed the fact that Konoha did, in fact, have a Widows and Orphans Fund. We didn’t quite seem to qualify, since Mom was a ninja too and the damn program had apparently been designed with civilian wives and children in mind, but we got something and it was enough to at least pay for food and basic necessities, while my extra pay and Mom’s savings took care of the more esoteric stuff. I’d never realized how much money went into paying for all the mission equipment I’d need for a real trip.

For reference, five thousand ryō was about the maximum anyone ever paid for a D-ranked mission, and even then it was split between Sensei, Kakashi, Obito and me. S-ranked missions, on the other hand, went for millions of ryō, depending on the specifics. Basically, the difference was generally in the number of zeroes tacked on the end, even aside from the fact that even inexperienced ninjas could generally be expected not to die on D-ranked missions and the fact that S-ranked ones tended to be handed off to jōnin and ANBU.

The fact that both Team Minato (then composed of two jōnin and two chūnin) and the Sasuke Retrieval Squad (with a new chūnin and four genin) would be sent on A-ranked missions anyway did not exactly inspire confidence in the system, though.

Aside from the dread, though, I was actually feeling okay on the day we went in to get our first C-
ranked mission. Even if we hadn’t been frustrated, I thought that Team Minato was capable of taking a C-ranked mission and not dying. Obito and I had been working for two months on nothing but coordination, even if we were mostly gaining ground individually. No matter what Sensei tried, he couldn’t quite get us to click as a duo, and we’d almost been killed by each other’s techniques once or twice.

Team Awesomeness (sans Rin) was still a work in progress, but at least we’d refined what we actually had. Obito had figured out the Grand Fireball and was working on the Phoenix Sage Fire jutsu. We’d burned through a month’s supply of straw dummies with that one and my Sensei-sanctioned exploding tags. I’d probably used up my allowance on that count, though.

As for me, I’d managed to get chakra scalpels down well enough that I didn’t need seals to form them. The ones I made without hand seals could only cut through things the way an axe did, though. Because they weren’t precisely solid, since the chakra cost of that would have been enormous, the damage could only be seen if I was able to practice on cadavers and maybe sides of pork. They left the skin mostly intact, but the results on the insides of soft targets were…messy. They weren’t so much chakra scalpels as chakra kitchen knives, but I could work with it as long as no one needed me to do any actual surgery.

When it came to Kakashi, it was hard to tell how much he made progress with. He rarely used anything but taijutsu in spars, even though I knew he had more to play with than just that. I was pretty sure he knew the Shadow Clone jutsu, though, if only because he had to learn it sometime and I knew he had it down by the time he turned thirteen. I knew his chakra capacity was expanding, like Obito’s and mine, but at a slightly slower pace. Then again, I seemed to remember something about how his stamina would never be more than average.

But hey, we’d been a team for about two and a half months and we were all still alive. Go us.

When we arrived in the mission office, the atmosphere was subtly different, even though Sensei still greeted the Hokage with a mild, “Team Minato, reporting for duty.”

We braced for disappointment.

The Hokage puffed on his pipe once or twice, exhaling a cloud of thick white-gray smoke. I narrowed my eyes a little—growing up with a smoker dad in one lifetime and a brother with what seemed to be asthma on steroids in another, I wasn’t exactly approving of the habit. I didn’t say anything about it, though, since it was the Hokage.

“Hm. Today, we have a few C-ranked missions available,” the Hokage said around his pipe. “Minato-kun, do you believe your team is ready for one?”

My heartbeat quickened. Really? A C-ranked mission?

Granted, the only C-ranked mission I’d ever seen in my visions had promptly gone A-rank, but I could at least hope for the best, right?


C-ranked missions could pay up to a hundred thousand ryō. This was balanced by the fact that they were a lot more likely to kill the shinobi involved than D-ranked ones. They were usually assigned to chūnin teams, or possibly jōnin-led genin teams if the mission risk was judged to be lower than normal. The Wave Mission undertaken by Team Kakashi was one example.

Before the missing-nin had gotten involved, anyway.
“Very well. At the moment…” He paused, looking through the scrolls for an appropriate task. “At the moment, we have three C-rank missions that are within your team’s capabilities. However, I believe it would be best if we kept it within the Land of Fire for now. It is your first, after all.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama.” Kakashi, Obito, and I said as one. Then we blinked and looked at each other, because that was kind of creepy.

Sensei snorted with laughter, hiding his mouth behind a hand. When we all turned to glare up at him, also at once, he moved on with a quick, “What are the mission parameters, Hokage-sama?”

“This particular mission is dependent on your ability to locate a band of merchants within the Land of Fire.” The Hokage unrolled it.

I looked up at the ceiling, thinking. In cheerful orange hiragana, someone had made a poster that said, “Do your best, everyone!” There was also a large black character for “shinobi” painted on the ceiling. It was like shorthand for the contradiction of our lives—we could be civilians living in peaceful ignorance, or we could be shinobi whose lives would have actual impact on the world, and probably die in the process.

Can I just say how utterly disturbing that was?

“Chinatsugumi is the name of a merchant caravan that operates within the borders of the Land of Fire. While not tied to any city, her merchants nonetheless provide the village with supplies in wartime and have for two generations.” The Hokage swept his gaze across all of our faces, to make sure we were paying attention. “With Kumogakure and Iwagakure increasing their aggression toward our borders, the lieutenant of the caravan’s operations and head of security has asked that we provide an escort between their home base of Mount Soragami and our village.” He flipped the scroll shut with a flick of his wrist and Minato retrieved it from its place on the desk. “The estimated length of the mission is three weeks if all goes well, and the most likely opponents will be bandits driven out of their usual hiding-places.”

“No enemy ninjas?” I blurted.

“No, Keisuke-kun,” the Hokage said with a grandfatherly smile. “Mount Soragami is well within the borders of the Land of Fire.” He paused. “But don’t take the risk of bandits lightly. As your first C-ranked mission, you’ll be learning as you go.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama.” I said, bowing.

On one hand, C-ranked mission! On the other, oh fuck, a C-ranked mission.

“How large is the caravan this year?” Sensei asked.

“There are approximately thirty members willing to venture outside of their stronghold at the moment,” the Hokage said. “Though admittedly the numbers may be skewed one way or another and may differ when you arrive.”

Sensei sighed. “All right then. Kids, we’re meeting on the roof in five. Go.”

And we left.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard of the Chinatsugumi.” I admitted, sitting on the concrete. The name wasn’t ringing any bells, and the Dreamer wasn’t coming up with anything either.

“Neither have I.” Obito said, frowning.
Kakashi sighed. “The leader’s name’s actually just Chinatsu. The locals around Mount Soragami just decided to call the caravan that because she’s the whole reason they exist. Mount Soragami has a bunch of small towns around it that depend on the money she gets from places like Konoha and Kusagakure, mostly by trading luxury items and food.” He assumed a pose I could only describe as “lecturer mode.” “I’ve taken two missions with Sensei as a bodyguard for that caravan, though we didn’t really end up doing much either time. She sticks to allied villages for the most part, so all we really ended up running into were two-bit bandits and maybe the occasional larger bandit group, since Chinatsu-san travels with up to forty other people, half of whom are normal security forces, and only needed ninja to fill a couple of reconnaissance gaps.” He stuffed his hands into his pockets. “It’s not really a high-risk mission, so you should be able to cut your teeth on it without losing any.”

Before Obito could decide whether or not to punch Kakashi in the face, Sensei popped back into existence in front of us in a burst of displaced air.

“Sensei?” Kakashi asked.

“It’s like before, Kakashi.” Sensei confirmed, which told me precisely fuck-all. Kakashi may have been a condescending jerk, but at least he explained things. Sensei clapped his hands, apparently to get Obito’s and my attention. “All right! This is going to be your first C-rank mission. Despite what the Hokage said, Chinatsu-san is generally pretty patient with new shinobi and doesn’t actually need genin most of the time. We do, however, have an agreement with her that says as long as we send a sufficiently experienced ninja along, we can all share defensive duty. That might not mean much to you right now, but it’s easier on all of us and it’s a gentler introduction to the shinobi world than most of us get.”

I think it was Sensei’s way of being protective of us, even if we were already pretty dangerous. Solely because Obito and I could use chakra and had a couple of jutsu to play with, we could already take on non-ninja fighters with relative ease.

In theory, anyway. Neither of us had ever been in really serious fights and personally, I completely expected to freeze and need someone to save my sorry ass.

“Anyway, you have the rest of today to rest, pack, and polish up your skills. We’ll be using the entire mission after we leave Konoha tomorrow as a training exercise, so we won’t be having our usual morning training. Everyone clear?”

“Yes, Sensei!” we chorused.

Minato-sensei smiled. “Good. In that case, you’re dismissed!”

Then Sensei and Kakashi were both gone.

“Well, that was abrupt.” I commented. I looked over at Obito. “So, want to get any last-minute training in?”

Obito grinned, now that Sensei and Kakashi were gone and we could hang out together. “Sure.”

That night, after training was finished, my bags were packed, and I finally collapsed in bed, I pillowowed my head in my folded arms and wondered about the future.

I didn’t ever really not wonder about the future, mainly because my odds of survival seemed to be dependent on how much I could predict and counteract with as much precision as possible. But
when my future knowledge wasn’t giving me any hints, I didn’t really have a lot of go on other than my own fear.

I didn’t know what Team Minato’s first C-rank had been in my visions, mainly because it had never been shown. I’d only ever seen two missions, both of which had ended in disaster, and a brief flash of two attempts at being promoted to chūnin. Come to that, I didn’t know all that much about Team Minato’s first incarnation, either.

Hell, I didn’t have anything in the Dreamer’s vision archive about Hayate’s life other than the way he died and the fact that he’d been in a relationship with Yūgao Uzuki. I hadn’t had any idea who our parents were, or their fate, or how Hayate had developed his signature cough. And yet, that hadn’t really bothered me since I always thought of the visions as events.

Discrete events could be directly countered. The details could be fudged. Maybe a lucky stroke would keep Archduke Ferdinand from being assassinated—that was the purview of speculative fiction writers. Maybe my existence had shaken up the status quo something fierce, at least for my family and friends. I’d never know for sure.

And yet, World War One would have still happened even the Archduke’s driver hadn’t made that one turn, because Europe had been a clusterfuck of alliances and intermarriages and utter stupid that had started long beforehand. The tensions weren’t any less real just because someone was or wasn’t getting their head ventilated. And twenty years later, there would have been a second World War solely because of how the “great powers” had handled the last one.

Ferdinand Foch once said, “This is not a peace. It is an armistice for twenty years.”

I stared at the face of my alarm clock and the Dreamer said quietly, Can we turn history aside? I didn’t know.

I didn’t know if having me around would make it possible for Obito to stay safe and sane. I didn’t know if Rin would survive the war, even if she wasn’t on Team Minato. I didn’t know if Madara would be able to find a way to start the Fourth Shinobi World War despite anything I did. I didn’t know if any of the changes I’d made—by existing, or through my actions—would kill people I cared about. There was just so much I couldn’t pin down for sure.

I did know one thing for sure, though: Even if I was so scared I could hardly breathe, I would try. And I’d keep trying, until there wasn’t anything left to try for.
The next day seemed to dawn bright and early, which put me in a somewhat crabby mood before I even left the house. Though Hayate seemed excited for me, Mom was undoubtedly worried, and she’d given me a sword-cleaning kit to make absolutely sure I was prepared for the next month or so of living on the road. I didn’t know if I’d even end up using my kodachi at all, since Sensei seemed to have mastered the trick of being nearly everywhere at once and Kakashi was combat-tested, but I appreciated the gesture and tucked it into my jacket pocket anyway.

“My little girl is growing up so fast,” Mom said quietly, hugging me.

“Not so fast. I’ll miss both of you,” I said, and as soon as Mom let me go I was hugging Hayate so hard he almost squeaked. “Be good for Mom and your teachers at school, okay?”

“You know I will, Sis,” Hayate said, muffled by my jacket, but I got the message. I love you, I’ll miss you, come back safe.

“I’ll be back before you know it.” Not because I actually would, but people said that kind of thing before heading out on long journeys, so it felt right.

I waved a final good-bye to my family before scurrying off to make sure Obito wasn’t late.

“Obito!” I called, having taken the long way around the district so I could hop on people’s roofs without getting a citation for it. I made pretty good time, and I found Obito on one of the main thoroughfares to the market district, heading back toward his house.

Obito looked up. “Bit busy, Kei!” he called back, and I blinked.

While usually he waited until the afternoon to run around helping people, I guess this was the morning when all of the older people in the district decided to do their shopping. Obito was carrying the older Uchiha’s bags for her, with two plastic bags with vegetables and tofu and fish on each arm. He had all of his mission equipment with him in a backpack that was bulging with its contents, but that wasn’t really the important bit. I hadn’t seen him with Old Lady Sayako while, it didn’t really change the fact that we had about half an hour to meet up at the gates and depart for distant lands.

Well, Mount Soragami was still within the borders of the Land of Fire and we probably wouldn’t be exactly charting new lands, but it was still something!

I thought about Kakashi’s reaction, and Sensei’s. Then I thought about how much time Obito spent just getting to know the people he lived with, and helping them with their problems as best he could.

I hopped down from the roof, backpack straps cinched across my chest and waist, and said, “Need a hand?”
Obito promptly dumped one arm’s worth of bags in my arms and said, “Yep.”

We ended up being about ten minutes late, which was pretty good time for the situation. We both got candy from Sayako Uchiha, who seemed to be very pleasant for a retired kunoichi with a bad leg, but that didn’t really mean much when Kakashi was waiting at the gates to make disappointed eyebrows at us.

Actually, I decided I didn’t care about that as much as I did when Sensei looked askance at us. Nevertheless, I just offered a shrug and commenced trying to figure out how to unwrap a piece of sweet rice candy using just my teeth and tongue. It was like trying it with Starburst, only the rice paper wrapping was edible too.

Om nom nom.

“Sorry about being late, Sensei, but there was an old lady who needed help with her bags, and Kei and I stopped to help because she’d bought too much food,” Obito said blithely, grinning.

Sensei just sighed. Maybe if I hadn’t talked to him in the hospital waiting room, there would have been a lecture waiting. But the journey to Mount Soragami was three days long at even shinobi speed according to a topography map Mom had found for me, and ten minutes meant nothing in the face of it.

“The mountain isn’t getting any closer,” Kakashi said bluntly.

I threw a piece of candy at him.

Sensei caught it. Turned out Sensei had a bit of a sweet tooth too.

“All right, since we’re all here, let’s head out,” Sensei said around his allotment of candy. Kakashi was giving Sensei a weird look, like he couldn’t quite believe that his teacher was giving us any slack at all, and I poked him in the shoulder as I walked past.

He almost instantly poked me back.

“Kids, don’t make me have to turn this squad around before we even get out of the gates.”

Obito snickered, and then I poked him. He squawked. “Hey!”

“Someday I will draw everyone into my web of tag games and you will all rue the day you met me,” I said dramatically.

Obito giggled and threw an arm around my shoulders. “So, what’s the policy on tag-backs?”

I grinned. “You’ll see.”

And then we were off.

“You know,” Obito said about five minutes later. “This is the first time I’ve ever been outside the village. What about you, Kei?”

“Same here,” I said. “There isn’t really a lot you have to head out of the village for, unless you’re on the active duty roster.”

We were moving in an easily-defensible diamond pattern, with Kakashi on point while Obito and I made up the somewhat more vulnerable middle, and Sensei brought up the rear. Granted, we were also moving at a speed of about twenty kilometers per hour, both because the shinobi scale of what
made an appropriate overland speed was somewhat advanced compared to that of untrained civilians and because we tended to travel by trees around Konoha itself. At least until the Hashirama trees ran out, anyway—most of the more common pines, oaks, and maples were more difficult to maneuver through. The trees that had, in a way, named our home village were really more like buildings than anything—traveling through them was less like forest exploration and more like an extended lesson in entirely pre-industrialized parkour.

I was still keeping an eye out for basic obstacles and possible trap-setting points, though. There were a lot of ways to horribly maim or kill someone moving at twenty to thirty kilometers per hour even without anyone inventing cars. Most of them, here, involved razor wire. And maybe explosive tags.

Sure, there was no reason there would be any this far out of the village’s range of defenses—I think we used seals for this particular area—and this far from the front lines, but I always expected trouble anyway.

Still, the rest of that day passed mostly without any incidents. Sure, Obito tripped and face-planted when we were getting close to our stopping point for the day, but he was fine and only took a little patching up on my part. We dug out the privy-pit, started a fire (with some happy assistance from Obito’s miniaturized Grand Fireball), and cleared the campsite of branches of rocks as Kakashi hunted for our dinner and Sensei set up a perimeter seal to make sure no one would trip over us at night.

“For tonight,” Sensei said, “Kei-kun has first watch. Kakashi, you have middle watch. Obito, dawn watch. I’ll be nearby in case something happens or you have questions, but this is really about getting into the habit of always having someone looking out for you.”

I gave Sensei a somewhat skeptical look, even though everything he said made perfect sense.

“And if you wake me up for no reason I’m tying you up in an ankle snare for an hour,” Sensei informed us.

Obito gulped.

I considered that warning. “Okay, but if we all die it’s your fault.”

Sensei ruffled my hair as soon as I took my hitai-ate off to sleep. I had the weirdest feeling he’d been waiting for it, because it was more a noogie than anything. He didn’t stop until I screamed, “I give, I give!” while laughing madly.

And then, since Obito had seemed like he was feeling left out, Sensei grabbed him too and did the same thing. He caught Kakashi by the ankle and managed to repeat the feat, even though he only had two arms and I hadn’t even moved because I was laughing too hard.

He might have been our teacher, but he was also pretty much an evil older brother.

The next day almost wasn’t even worth mentioning. We’d left the great Hashirama trees far behind, and the next major obstacle was basically hills. I think they might have technically been foothills, even if the mountains they actually represented were pretty far away and probably also volcanoes.

Actually, even from this far away, Mount Soragami—once it had been pointed out to me, anyway—reminded me of Mount St. Helens. In some ways, it was also a bit like Mt. Kilimanjaro in that there were no other comparable mountains nearby and the top was ringed with clouds in a normally-clear sky, but the western face had apparently been blown out sometime in the past by a massive eruption. It had snow on it, so at least it hadn’t been recent.
Hey, Land of Fire. Gotta take what you can get, I guess.

Personally, I suspected that there might have been some kind of hotspot under the continental plate, sort of like the one under Hawaii in my old life, since I wasn’t aware of any other volcanoes in the area. Granted, that could just be ignorance, because I was pretty sure that almost all of Japan, Hawaii, the Aleutians, and most of the rest of the Pacific Rim had been volcanically active one way or another. It was the Ring of Fire, after all.

I wondered again just how big the Land of Fire actually was, because I was pretty sure that even Mt. Fuji had been further inland. Sort of In some ways, a whole lot of Japanese people had more or less been living on it. Or at least the lava plain if it blew its top off, I guess.

Then again, given the magical physics-pretzel-making bullshit inherent to this universe, I had to wonder if Soragami was an artificial mountain. It was still in the classical cone shape of a stratovolcano, with considerations made for the fact that the western face was probably in a hundred trillion pieces and fertilizer for the foothills. I wondered what kind of jutsu could even begin to tap into the power in the world’s crust, and then I stopped.

If Madara could knock a fucking asteroid out of the sky to flatten the Shinobi Alliance, and the Sage of Six Paths had created the fucking moon, I guess the sky really wasn’t even a limit anymore.

Then again, since those things were mostly already there, I think it was more a matter of bringing stuff upward to play with. That said, creating a new volcano was nothing to sneeze at, even for the famed Lava Release users of Iwagakure, and it would probably involve the deaths of absolutely everyone in the area just because volcanoes brought so much else to the surface besides lava.

Poisonous gases, for a start, and some of those could actually catch fire once released into an oxygen-rich environment. I didn’t really give a crap if Mei Terumī of Kirigakure had Lava and Steam Release techniques, or if Mū and Ōnoki had Particle Release down pat—a volcano wasn’t something anyone could fight.

Redirect, yes. Fight? Fucking hell no.

Because shinobi are out of their minds as a rule, someone must have tried to do something with it.

“Sensei, how long has it been since Soragami erupted?” I asked.

“Going by the records the Chinatsugumi have for us, longer than there have been shinobi,” Sensei replied.

He glanced at me as we walked, since the foothills were a mite too dangerous to be using our shinobi speed without an experienced Hyūga on point. We could easily land on top of a battlefield or a bandit stronghold if we didn’t pay attention.

So, at least a couple hundred years. It didn’t really make me feel any better, since shinobi records were hilariously spotty because of the Clan Wars era. Still, someone would have noticed a volcano blowing up, so maybe it wasn’t down to overambitious idiots anymore.

I made a noise like “hm” and said, “I wonder how precise their analysis of the surface strata is.”

“What?” Obito said blankly.

“Basically, every eruption throughout history leaves a deposit of ash and other volcanic material on the area around the cone.” I explained, frowning. “I don’t know the specifics, but if you dug down far enough, you could probably find evidence that the dirt we’re standing on was once covered in ash from whenever the nearest volcano exploded. The ash layer doesn’t go away, so you can see
basically everything about the geological history if you know what you’re looking for and how fast soil layers accumulate on top.”

Kakashi and Sensei were blinking at me.

I grinned sheepishly. “Sorry. I know it’s not really relevant to being a ninja, but it’s interesting!”

It was my fault for being into volcanology as a kid, I guess. Seriously. I’d been fascinated by everything that could have made my world collapse in ash and fire, for some reason. Norse myths were a favorite for a similar reason.

The interest wasn’t as strong in my new life. I guess I had enough potentially fatal things to worry about the second time through to bother worrying about whether or not the local geology was going to decide to flatten us like ants under a flipped semi. That said, I still remembered.

The lava dome doesn’t seem to have built up again yet. It only took Mt. St. Helens thirty years to get back to full size, pyroclastic flow and all. The Dreamer seemed to frown. Save possibly Madara, Hashirama, and the Sage of Six Paths, there are literally no ninja in the history of this world that could play with a volcano and not get blasted to a fine grit. Sans perhaps Obito as the host of the Ten-Tailed Beast.

Of course, the Tailed Beast Ball makes the entire question rather academic anyway. Who needs a volcano when any hack with a Mangekyō Sharingan can just hijack a Tailed Beast and do the same thing with less collateral damage? Well, assuming no one needed that mountain range anyway.

I was already contemplating the pros and cons of setting a volcano off in the resurrected Madara’s face. I’d die a quick and fiery death, either at his hands or at the nonexistent mercy of a volcano, but the look on his face might be worth it if I could last long enough to see it.

I think Sensei was looking at me funny for the rest of the day, while Obito peppered me with questions and Kakashi pretended I didn’t have the ability to talk at all.

Yeah. Day two was kind of boring.

We did get into what amounted to an extremely vicious three-way game of exploding Tag—literally Tag with explosive notes and Replacement jutsu—in the clearing closest to our campsite. We stopped pretty quickly after Sensei caught us, though.

Anyway, there was always the third day to look forward to.

Speaking of which, the third day was the one where we finally reached the Chinatsugumi compound, about two hours before dusk.

It wasn’t…subtle. Not really. The city the Chinatsugumi used as their base was more of a fortress built on top of one of Soragami’s daughter peaks, with several tiered walls and buildings squished into the interim space. A giant pair of characters emblazoned across the front gates read “Sorayama-no-Sato,” or the Village of the Sky Mountain. The flag of the merchant house—or maybe it was a lot more than a merchant house, given the city-state they apparently occupied—was streaming in the mountain wind from the top of the largest, highest building. It was also written across most of the smaller ones.

At least they didn’t call the damn thing a hidden village, because it certainly wasn’t that.
Minato talked to one of the gate guards, both of whom were dressed like proper non-ninja soldiers and therefore could be easily bypassed the moment any of us felt like it. The guard he was speaking to, with a mustache like a pencil line and a beard to match, gesturing vaguely with his spear, and Sensei beckoned to us.

We trooped up to him in a neat little triangle. I was in the back this time, because apparently the total lack of hostile attention from anything bigger than a mosquito meant that I could at least be trusted with that much.

Speaking of which, I needed to remember to look up malaria and West Nile equivalents sometime soon.

“All right, we’re going to be meeting Chinatsu-san in the longhouse up top. The guards just gave us permission to take the shortcut over the roofs, so we’ll be heading in now,” Sensei told us. “Follow my lead.”

“That’s it?” Obito asked. “I thought there’d be a security checkpoint or something…”

Sensei shrugged. Then again, he had been here more often than Obito or I had just because he actually had been here before, so it was going to be in our best interests to follow his lead. “For now, yeah. Keep in mind that we’re on their territory now, and try not to leave any ration bar wrappers where they shouldn’t be.”

Obito and I nodded anyway. We followed Sensei and Kakashi’s subsequent leaps, though perhaps not quite so high or as easily.

Once at the longhouse—which really looked more like a castle that had decided to sit on top of a slightly larger castle and not a longhouse at all—we were escorted into the inner sanctum of the building. The buildings were wood and concrete with steel struts for support, with high, angled ceilings and interwoven four-by-fours providing the structural integrity of the roof. The main room was long, though that may have been as much a visual effect of the long green rug running the length of it as the real dimensions. Most of the guards seemed to be, while not exactly shinobi-caliber, at least experienced and confident even in Sensei’s presence.

Then again, he was a nineteen-year-old blond with a pretty face, no visible scars, a mild-mannered attitude to people he didn’t know, and a winning smile. The rest of us were nine and, by definition, not very impressive. Even if I carried my kodachi openly on my waist.

At the very end of the room, surrounded by a desk covered in paperwork and two rather harried assistants, was the person I assumed was the eponymous Chinatsu of the Chinatsugumi. Aside from the fact that she wasn’t wearing any kind of headgear—such as the Hokage’s hat or an elaborate hairpiece typical of a noble lady—she looked every bit the merchant queen. Her clothes weren’t overly elaborate, though they were very well-made, and her sleeves had been tied up so that she could work on the onslaught of forms without getting ink into the silk.

I tried to catch a glimpse of her face as we approached, even if it was mostly pointing away from us and at the desk-top. Her hair was lighter than Sensei’s, with the majority tied up in a businesslike knot on the back of her head and a fringe and two long side-locks framing her face. She didn’t seem to get out much, at least compared to Obito and Sensei, and was paler than both. She had calluses and burns on her manicured hands, though I couldn’t imagine where they’d come from.

She looked up once we got within about ten feet, and I blinked.

Her eyes were pale gold.
There were maybe three people I could name off the top of my head with gold eyes in all of my visions. Orochimaru had been one of them, but his had visible serpent pupils. It didn’t seem to be a dominant trait anywhere, really. This woman, however, made me think of a bird of prey. I had the strangest feeling that she was looking right through us, even though she couldn’t have been older than twenty-five and she didn’t seem to be a shinobi.

Also, I had the strongest feeling of déjà vu and I had no idea why.

“Misaki-dono, the team from Konohagakure has arrived,” said the aide on the left. I honestly couldn’t tell if either of the aides was a guy or a girl, and that meant something coming from me.

“So I see,” she replied, gathering up the papers in front of her and setting them aside. She looked back up at us. “You may approach.”

Sensei led the way, again.

“Team Minato, at your service,” he said, bowing.

Misaki nodded, shooing her aides out of the room with a dismissive flick of her wrist. “Hello again, Namikaze-san. It’s been a while since your last visit, hasn’t it?”

“Well, six months pass by quickly,” Minato admitted. “We’ve been a bit busy lately. So, how have the other teams been?”

“Decent, though not spectacular in any respect,” she replied, turning her gaze on each of us kids in turn. “Hello to you as well, Kakashi-kun. I see you have new teammates.”

Kakashi nodded.

Misaki looked from him to Obito and I.

“Oh! I’m Obito Uchiha, Misaki-dono!” Obito said, smiling brightly.

“Keisuke Gekkō,” I said a moment later, noticing how her eyes seemed to linger on me. “Um, I’m a kunoichi.” I added belatedly.

Misaki frowned. “Yes, I am aware of that. Is this a common misunderstanding where you are from?”

“Kinda,” I admitted.

“Hm. Well, no matter. My sister will be here in a moment to show you where you can stay for the night,” Misaki said, and retrieved a sheet of paper from her desk. “This is a copy of the contract for Konohagakure’s bi-annual business agreement with Sorayama as well as the Chinatsugumi. Due to recent considerations and increasing hostility from the forces of Kumogakure and Iwagakure, some aspects may need to be revised. Have you been empowered by Hokage-dono to accept or suggest revisions?”

Sensei’s eyebrows knit together. “Not as such. I was told only that we’d be working on the assigned C-ranked mission, but if you have a messenger hawk I can use…”

“Of course, Namikaze-san.” Misaki clapped twice and another aide, apparently interchangeable with the other two, appeared. “Fetch a messenger hawk for our shinobi guests, would you?”

“Yes, Misaki-sama.” And then the aide was gone. I suddenly had a sneaking suspicion that the aides were ninjas, even if no one else was.
That was about when the door at the far end of the room, the same one that we’d arrived through, opened again. Outlined briefly in the evening glow of the city, the figure strode into the room with long, self-assured strides and arrived at the desk in what seemed like no time at all.

My brain took a minute to work out a few things. One, the person in front of us was female and taller than Sensei by a good four centimeters. Two, she was wearing road clothes—meaning a practical, sturdy set of shoes, plain dark pants under a cotton skirt and wrap, and her hair tied back into one of the longest braids I’d ever seen. Three, her face was exactly the same as Misaki’s, sans makeup.

She also seemed extremely familiar for some other reason, though I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why.

And she was looking right at us. “So, you’re the most recent team to take the mission?”

“They are, sister dearest,” Misaki said, drumming her fingers on the tabletop. Was it just me, or did she sound just the slightest bit mocking.

Misaki’s twin looked at us again after the briefest frown. Then she shrugged. “You’ll do just fine.”

“I’m glad we meet your approval, Chinatsu-dono,” Sensei said mildly.

“I’m sure my approval doesn’t matter as much as you seem to think,” Chinatsu said, turning. “Anyway, come along and I’ll show you where you’ll be staying tonight. We’ll get that hawk for you in a moment.”

We followed her out, but all the while my head was spinning. I’d already confirmed that neither the Dreamer nor I had any idea of what was supposed to happen on this mission. We knew so little about Team Minato’s earlier exploits that everything would be a mystery at this stage. And for all I knew, my sense of familiarity was just because I’d seen a filler episode with this caravan. I probably wouldn’t remember that clearly, right?

After a while, though, I started to notice something else that set me a bit on edge.

Normally, I could sense civilian chakra signatures. I usually didn’t bother because, well, civilians didn’t generally have enough chakra to actually stand out all that much. It was a lot easier and more important to be able to sense anyone who trained their chakra, since that was the kind of thing that usually meant a threat or an ally were around, depending on intent. Either way, I could determine how to act on it.

But in the office with Misaki, Chinatsu, and the interchangeable aides, I’d only felt three chakra signatures at all. All of them had belonged to the aides. It was like Misaki and Chinatsu were ghosts, their chakra blending completely into the background buzz of natural energy.

I felt cold.

Either those two really were ghosts, or they had kage-level suppression skills. I didn’t really know which was worse.

Chapter End Notes

~Here I am again on my own~
It was kind of nice to get a chance to stay in a hotel. I mean, I’d been in roadside hotels and motels in my old life, but I’d never been traveling as Keisuke Gekkō before. I’d also never liked camping in my old life either, which meant that sleeping under the stars was kind of annoying. It was all in how much time I had to spend picking rocks out of my things after. I was used to my own bed, even if the mattress was starting to dip a little in the middle and some of the sheets were thinning out due to age.

I’d also never stayed anywhere with a traditional onsen. Swimming pools and hot tubs, yes, and even a hot spring pool once upon a time, but there was something special about being able to walk outside and realize that nature was providing all the hot water anyone would ever need. It was nice.

Of course, the springs weren’t for both sexes and the sides were separated by three-meter walls, but it wasn’t really a big deal to take a bath without my teammates around. Actually, from the ruckus coming from the other side of the wall, Obito had probably discovered that Kakashi bathed with a mask on and engaged in a water fight when he couldn’t wheedle Kakashi into taking it off. Sensei’s laughter made it obvious, even though the boys were loudly trying to drown each other.

Yeah, I was glad I wasn’t over there, even if I was curious about what his face looked like under it. I leaned against the rocks, enjoying the cooler night air and the way the steam from the water made everything seem kind of mystical. I closed my eyes, content.

Sure, tomorrow I’d probably be busy hating everything in existence because caravans were slow, but I could enjoy this moment.

And of course, the day started bright and early again the next morning. It was becoming extremely clear that the world was full of morning people. Evil, evil morning people who were completely willing to literally kick me out of bed if I didn’t get up on time. And then pester me for a goddamn hour to get ready, down to outlining the steps for getting dressed, getting breakfast, brushing my teeth, and putting my damn sandals on. And then jab me with a tantō when I took a swing at them.

As a side note, I made a silent pledge that the first sufficiently large bug or amphibian I found was going down Kakashi’s pants.

Anyway, I really ended up spending most of the morning watching the caravan get ready from a nearby rooftop. Since they took up almost the entirety of the main road out of town, it wasn’t exactly hard to find them, and it did make an interesting version of a traffic jam, in a world without internal combustion engines. Obito sat next to me, a lollipop between his teeth, and occasionally pointed out something interesting or someone falling down.

“Oh, there’s Chinatsu-san.” Obito said after a while, pointing at the blonde as she emerged from the longhouse.

While not dressed all that differently from any of the other merchants, she was still visually distinctive simply by virtue of being taller than nearly everyone while having boobs. I hadn’t met
Jiraiya yet because he, along with Orochimaru, seemed to be spending a lot of his time on the front lines, but I assumed that he’d be taller. Probably.

“Is it just me or is she looking right at us?” I asked, staring back. Of course, I didn’t exactly have the Byakugan or anything, but it still seemed like Chinatsu was looking me in the eye even from forty meters off.

Obito squinted, then said, “…It’s not just you. Man, that’s creepy.”

She waved before turning to talk to someone with an apparently bandaged head.

“Less creepy.” Obito said.

“I’ll take your word on that.” I said, and cast my chakra sense out in search of Kakashi and Sensei. Sensei, it seemed, was still inside of the longhouse. Kakashi was in the crowd somewhere, though I couldn’t get a fix on his position because someone else with lightning chakra kept running around and disrupting things. It didn’t quite feel like Kakashi’s loose wire impression—actually, I imagined that it would have been like the results of walking on a carpet with thick socks.

Bzzzt.

Then again, Kakashi was also heading our way, and had finally left the crowd behind to travel on the roofs.

“What are you two doing?” Kakashi demanded once he landed next to us. Neither of us jumped—we were getting annoyingly used to his drill sergeant routine. That, and Kakashi wasn’t quite as good at appearing out of nowhere as Sensei was, since I could always sense Kakashi when he was nearby and Sensei’s Flying Thunder God range was just slightly insane.

“Observing.” I said.

“Providing color commentary.” Obito added.

Kakashi made a complicated expression at us that was only complicated because neither Obito nor I could see half of his face.

“Sit down and pull up a roofing tile.” I suggested. “From the looks of things, we’re not going anywhere for a while.”

“You know you want to!” Obito chimed in, grinning.

“You two are a pair of disgraces.” Kakashi said flatly. He ended up sitting further up the roof, almost on the apex of the structure, and glaring down at the backs of our heads.

“I think we keep scaring him off because he doesn’t want to be overshadowed by our awesomeness.” Obito told me in a stage whisper.

“I think he’s just a stick in the mud.” I said.

“Well, he’s that too.” Obito agreed.

Kakashi grumbled.

Sensei’s chakra finally left the building and reappeared right next to Kakashi. “So, is everyone ready to go?” he asked.
I held up my pack, which hadn’t been used all that much in the past few days. I hadn’t even taken my spare weapons out. Obito grinned and said, “Whenever you are, Sensei!”

“Good. I was just speaking to Misaki-dono, and our treaty with the Chinatsugumi and Sorayama has been revised.” I saw Kakashi sit up as Sensei spoke. Minato-sensei went on, “This means that the Chinatsugumi will be dealing exclusively with Konoha and our allies, even after the end of the war. The hawks went out earlier this morning, so we might be seeing some hostile attention from any Rock or Cloud forces that have made it into the Land of Fire undetected, even if they might have ignored us before. As a result, the mission’s classified as a B-rank the minute we run into trouble. Do you understand?”

I thought I did. “So, does that mean that we’re going to be working on the security procedures with Chinatsu-san’s guards?”

“Actually, no.” Sensei replied. I blinked, and Obito and Kakashi looked surprised as well. “Not more than we already were. Leave that to me and Chinatsu-san to figure out—this is jōnin business.”

“But they’re not shinobi!” Obito said, apparently torn between concern and feeling insulted.

Sensei replied, “They may not be, but there are some things that aren’t our business to interfere in until someone asks. It’s a courtesy thing, for now.”

Kakashi’s eyes narrowed. “Are we going into this situation blind?”

“We’re not blind, Kakashi. We actually know quite a bit.” By which, apparently, Sensei meant that he knew quite a bit and his students got to feel stupid for a while. “I’ll explain more once we’re on the road.”

Sensei was met with the full force of our combined judgmental stares.

“We’ll be fine,” he said.

Given Team Minato’s future track record, I was inclined to increase the intensity of my glare.

Sensei responded to all of this hostility by booting us off the roof in rapid succession. By the time we’d gotten all sorted out from that, it was time to hit the road.

This time around, we weren’t allowed to take the overland route to Konoha. The same things that made it a decent and generally safe pathway for shinobi, moving through the trees or the forest floor at breakneck speeds as we did, made it borderline impassable to large groups of wheeled vehicles. Even if we’d had, say, a cattle train or something, it’d be easier to stick to open land and established roads, which sacrificed stealth and sometimes speed for security.

For our part, that meant the closest thing to a suitable road was the one that followed a river that flowed downward from Soragami and her daughter peaks.

“While it would be interesting to see you attempt to defend a caravan moving at one mile per two days, it’s a pointless and ultimately frustrating idea.” Chinatsu had said dryly to Obito when he complained within earshot. She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder at the lead wagon, which was about the size of a large pickup truck and pulled by oxen, and said, “That? That is not going to get through a gap between trees no matter what we do. I know it’s slow going—a single rider on horseback would make it to Konoha and back twice before we could, but we have cargo and people to move.”

Aside from that one rather pointed comment, however, Chinatsu-san mostly left us to our own
devices. She was busy all the time, with various advisors and wagon-leads always popping over to ask for advice on the occasions that we stopped to rest or change the oxen, and eventually ended up handing control over to her second just so she could eat lunch in peace.

Speaking of which, Minato-sensei was in the lead for most of the first day and walking next to Chinatsu’s wagon, to my mild surprise. I think he was trying to get a leg up on negotiations later by listening in then. Once again, Obito and I were on each side of the caravan, with me further toward the back of the train because there were twelve wagons to keep track of. Kakashi brought up the rear, hands in his pockets, and only had to walk a little to the left or right to keep track of everyone else.

The first day on the road passed without incident.

That night, we circled the wagons to make sure the oxen didn’t wander off while unharnessed. Most of the wagons kept to themselves, with the particular merchant families sticking pretty close together even when we had a bonfire going in the middle of our camp. At most, they sent a representative to Chinatsu for something or other, but they always returned to their wagons in the end.

The occupants of the last wagon—a married couple, it seemed—and the biwa-playing man in the second wagon, along with the strawberry blond man who sat next to Chinatsu most of the time, all gathered around their leader regardless of what everyone else did.

“They’re planning on setting up new shops within Konohagakure.” Sensei said, when I asked about the social shut-ins. “Sorayama, despite being protected by Soragami’s peaks and the fact that it’s well within the Land of Fire, isn’t quite the same as being protected by Konoha shinobi. I suppose that they think that Chinatsu may be disappointed in them somehow for making that choice.”

“Why do they live out here in the first place?” Obito asked. I imagined, personally, that a volcano was the kind of place the ancient Uchiha clan might have been interested in.

“It has to do with the seals put in place around Mount Soragami.” Sensei explained. Wait, what? Who the hell would put seals on a volcano? “It’s said that only the seal masters of Uzushiogakure understood the processes involved, but honestly? It’s a blood seal. If the last members of Chinatsu’s clan die, then Soragami erupts.”

“Well, fuck,” I thought.

“What clan is that, Sensei?” Kakashi asked.

Sensei shrugged. “I don’t know. That said, I also know that if they want, they can set off one of the minor peaks at will to let off pressure. Most people aren’t willing to risk that kind of reprisal and thus they’re usually left alone.”

Double fuck.

“If they can throw a volcano at someone who pisses them off, it’s no wonder they’re still there even with the war.” I said, frowning thoughtfully. “I’ve heard that Iwagakure has Lava Release users, but there’s a whole order of magnitude of a difference between a shinobi and the forces of nature.”

“And that is exactly why we won’t be seeing enemy shinobi for a while.” Sensei said.

*That doesn’t help much, if Misaki turns out not to care about a fuckton of collateral damage if she decides to go to avenge her sister.*

We’ll just have to make that unnecessary, then.
We ate dinner in relative peace, at least. I mean, Kakashi and Obito sat on top of a wagon together and didn’t try to throw each other off, and Sensei and I sat with Chinatsu and her party of four followers. Friends, maybe? I didn’t really ask, since I was a kid at the grown-up table and I’m not sure how they would have reacted to my weird comments. As it was, I caught Chinatsu staring at me almost every time I looked up. After a while, I scooted closer to Sensei and tried to forget about it. She stopped eventually, at least.

The feeling of déjà vu was still there. I’d seen her before, but I didn’t know where, and the feeling intensified the more the adults talked.

Sensei’s hand landed on my head again. He was getting used to using me as an armrest, I think.

“Easy, Kei-kun.” Sensei said quietly. “You’re safe.”

But everything still bothered me.

And I still couldn’t sense Chinatsu’s chakra.

“Kei, what’s got you so tense?” Obito asked once he made his way over.

“I don’t know, and that’s the problem.” I told him, still frowning.

“Just like an idiot to get worked up over nothing.” Kakashi muttered.

Sensei hooked his foot around Kakashi’s ankle and dropped him on his butt. Everyone over the age of ten tried politely not to giggle while Kakashi sputtered like an angry cat.

“Rikuto, do you have any songs for us this time?” Chinatsu asked once everyone was done eating.

Rikuto, the man with the biwa, was about ten years older than Sensei. He was deeply tanned, which made me think he spent a lot of time on the road regardless of whatever the rest of the caravan got up to, and he had short black hair arranged into loose curls. He also had a goatee, which was a little bit overgrown, and pretty big sideburns. Aside from the fact that he was wearing the caravan “uniform” of sturdy clothes and road dust, he really seemed more like he’d be the kind of person who would be happier on the road alone.

He grinned, showing off a mouth incongruously full of fangs. “What have you got in mind, Chi-chan? A love ballad?”

The strawberry blond to Chinatsu’s left started to choke on his tea.

Chinatsu slapped Rikuto upside the head before pounding on the other man’s back. “Stop getting so worked up over things, Akira!”

“This feels really familiar for some reason.” I said to Obito. “But I don’t know why.”

Obito shrugged. “I don’t know about that. Seems a bit like us, doesn’t it?”

As Chinatsu proceeded to attempt to choke Rikuto to death and Sensei kept snickering so much that I could feel him shake, I glanced over at the other two people at our gathering, who hadn’t said anything.

The impression I got from them was unusual. I mean, I couldn’t sense Chinatsu’s chakra, or Misaki’s, but I could sense something from just about everyone else I’d ever met. The couple I was talking about…one of them felt like ice, while the other felt like static. Neither of them were looking
“Oh, and these two are Shirozora and Nanami,” the just-identified and recovered Akira said, indicating the couple I was looking at. “For reference, Shirozora’s on the left and Nanami is on the right.”

Akira, for his part, was pretty nondescript. He had reddish-orange hair, with two braids running down the sides of his head, and a completely average build. He had gray-colored eyes, though they were downturned at the corners. Actually, aside from his hair color, he looked pretty much like any other perfectly ordinary man.

It set my teeth on edge for reasons I couldn’t name.

The just-identified Shirozora shot Akira a dark look. “I can speak for myself, you know.”

Nanami just sighed.

There was something oddly familiar about both of their faces.

Shirozora had white hair, which made me think that his parents weren’t terribly original, and gray-blue eyes. I didn’t see any pupils, but the Yamanaka clan didn’t seem to have them either, so it wasn’t worth worrying over. He had a build that reminded me a bit of Sensei, all long limbs and lean lines. I actually couldn’t see part of his face if he turned toward me, because his bangs were longer on that side, and his hair actually went most of the way down his back in a ponytail. He was also, somehow, paler than even Misaki had been.

Nanami, by contrast, had extremely dark green hair and green eyes. She was all sun-bronzed and actually rather pretty, though she didn’t seem inclined to talk much and hadn’t actually done anything that I saw. She was probably shorter than, say, Mom, and her clothes were a trifle more feminine than anyone else’s, since she actually had a skirt sans pants.

Speaking of pants, I was starting to get some idea of why Chinatsu didn’t wear kimono like her sister. It made it hard to kick people in the face.

I was reminded of Obito and Kakashi all over again.

“It’d be nice if we didn’t all fight all the time.” I said under my breath, sighing.

Obito bumped his shoulder against mine. “We’re fine.”

Yeah, no. We still hadn’t run into any trouble on this trip, Obito and I had only been shinobi for a couple of months, and our team cohesion was in the tank because we couldn’t get any time to practice as a unit. We also spent most of a given day walking some ways apart, which meant that if Sensei couldn’t keep an eye on us we’d be fighting four separate battles the minute we got attacked by something on the road.

**You need to stop taking such a negative viewpoint.**

I couldn’t really help it.

“Chi-chan…” Akira started. He was doing a rather oddly indecisive dance as he tried to figure out how to get Chinatsu off of Rikuto without actually touching her and flailing around in indecision at the same time.

I think.
“What?” Chinatsu, for her part, was totally casual about having Rikuto in a chokehold.

“Um. You asked for music before, and…” Akira trailed off.

“Oh. Yeah, choking Rikuto to death is probably somewhat counterproductive, isn’t it?” With that, Chinatsu dropped him like a sack of potatoes.

I don’t think Sensei stopped laughing even once.

After everyone had recovered, Rikuto finally started playing his biwa. Shirozora and Nanami produced a set of drums and a flute from nowhere, while Akira disappeared into the head wagon to retrieve a second biwa. I wasn’t at all sure how they could make a tune out of that mess of instruments, but they did.

Back in my old life, I’d been fond of a lot of different types of music. As long as the melody was good, I could listen to just about anything. Country, rock, pop, techno, metal—it was all good, really. I mean, I had stuff I hadn’t been all that fond of before, since everyone does, but I used to immerse myself in music. I used to sing, too, even if I hadn’t been all that great. Music just…it was one of those things that made me content, even if I wasn’t happy, because it was better.

Better than just being left alone with my own thoughts for hours, anyway.

In my new life, though, the main music I ran into was during festivals. Working songs, too, but they weren’t as common in shinobi districts. Civilians had more fun with them.

Before I even noticed what was happening, I was already drumming my fingers on my leg.

Sensei was humming. Kakashi groaned and clamped his hands over his ears. Obito started giggling, probably because of Kakashi’s reaction.

This is the ninja version of Kumbayah, isn’t it?

Even if it was, I didn’t mind.
The Dreaded C-Rank: On Being Invisible

Chapter Summary

Kei: Have a bizarre flashback.

Chapter Notes

Song ahead.

The next day, we were in the foothills. Watching the river next to us speed up was pretty interesting, since it reminded me of my once-home, a lifetime ago. There weren’t any salmon in the rivers that ran through the Land of Fire—I think—and the wildlife could get pretty oversized in places, but it was still something! Out here, the trees had turned orange with autumn colors the way they never did in Konoha, and some of the mountains had dark rings of clouds around them that signified snow.

I remember standing on the top of a hill, just looking back at the shadow of Soragami and wishing I could fix that moment in my memory forever.

It was just our second day on the road with the Chinatsugumi caravan, but we were already starting to fall into a pattern. Early in the morning, Kakashi would be on point while Sensei walked behind us the whole way until lunch. Then they’d switch. Obito and I would be wandering up and down the length of the wagon train, slowing down or speeding up whenever it seemed like we were needed. All the while, all of us were keeping watch.

Kakashi had a strong sense of smell from what I remember, so I guess he could have been sniffing our route out for us. Sensei just seemed to catch everything no matter where he was, though I wasn’t sure how. Obito, despite not having activated his Sharingan, was still an Uchiha and had very good eyesight even if his mental focus wasn’t great.

For my part, I just kept suppressing my chakra and searching for other signatures that I couldn’t identify.

The second day passed without incident.

That night, though, I asked if Rikuto knew any songs other than Ninja Kumbayah.

This, in hindsight, was a mistake.

“Well, yeah. I like to tailor my songs to the listener, though!” Rikuto said after we finished dinner. He whistled. “Hey, Za-chan, get off your ass and help me out with something!”

The woman who emerged from the fifth wagon was, in some ways, not all that dissimilar to Rikuto in looks. Like him, she looked like living outside in the sun was her favorite thing to do, and her hair was actually bleached by it—it was a kind of dirty blonde—and she, like Rikuto, had teal-colored eyes. She stared when she saw me, though I honestly was too busy wondering why she hadn’t
bothered to emerge from the wagons for more than a few minutes at a time so far.

The reason became obvious when I saw that she was practically waddling. In the back of my mind, I had to wonder who the hell would send a pregnant woman on a trip like this one.

Then again, if she was anything like Chinatsu, she would have made the choice on her own anyway.

“Oho! So someone needs my singing voice, do they?” the woman said, smiling broadly. “About time! I heard that racket last night.”

“Zakuro, try not to traumatize anyone.” Chinatsu said bluntly.

“No promises!” Zakuro said with a terrible grin, and then the music started.

Zakuro took a deep breath.

_Seems that I have been held, in some dreaming state_  
A tourist in the waking world, never quite awake  
No kiss, no gentle word could wake me from this slumber  
Until I realize that it was you who held me under

I froze. It was so…familiar. And far too close to home. I hardly realized that I was shaking until Sensei pulled me into a one-armed hug. His voice seemed to come from very far away. “Kei-kun?”

_Felt it in my fist, in my feet, in the hollows of my eyelids_  
_Shaking through my skull, through my spine and down through my ribs_

Rikuto’s eyes were boring into mine. Zakuro was staring at me, eyes wide open.

_No more dreaming of the dead as if death itself was undone_  
No more calling like a crow for a boy, for a body in the garden  
No more dreaming like a girl so in love, so in love  
No more dreaming like a girl so in love, so in love  
No more dreaming like a girl so in love with the wrong world

How did I know them? How did they know me?

My head was full of triggers and I couldn’t make the visions stop. I heard the Dreamer screaming her defiance at the weight of my memories, at something so deep and dark that it was blotting out the real world.

I dug my fingers into my hair, trying to focus on something else. Something was wrong, something was always wrong. The pressure was building.

_And I could hear the thunder and see the lightning crack_  
All around the world was waking, I never could go back  
Cause all the walls of dreaming, they were torn wide open  
And finally it seemed that the spell was broken

I blinked when the music stopped. Sensei’s right arm was clamped around me and around Obito, who had decided that I needed a hug around my ribcage. Kakashi was nearby, giving me and the merchants a pretty speculative look.

Chinatsu, it seemed, had slapped Zakuro across the face and kicked Rikuto into his knapsack. She had an expression like a thunderstorm as she bit out, “Stop. Traumatizing. Kids.”
I didn’t want to look up to see Sensei’s expression. Suddenly, I didn’t want to be anywhere near anybody else. Gently, I pried Obito’s arms from my waist and shrugged off Sensei’s hug. I got up, walked away from the campfire, and walked outside of the ring of wagons. Once I was out of sight, I dropped to my knees and slumped against a sack of rice someone had left out.

I needed to take a deep breath, so I did.

I needed to stop crying, so I dragged a sleeve across my eyes and called it good.

I needed a hug, but I’d left that option behind.

I was an idiot.

“Kei? It’s me.” Obito dropped to the ground next to me.

“Hey, Obito.” I said, turning to face him.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just…” I dropped my gaze for a moment, blinking my kneecaps back into focus. “It’s nothing.”

The look Obito gave me when I looked back at him said that he rather doubted that.

I sighed. “Look it’s…it just brought up some bad memories.”

Obito bumped my shoulder with his. “Like what?”

Might as well tell someone, right? It took me longer than it should have just to think of any words at all, though.

So Obito said quietly, “You don’t have to tell me.”

“No, it’s…I just don’t know how.” I said, “I’ve never…”

I’ve never shared my problems with anyone. I can’t…

I needed to stop assuming the people around me could read my goddamn mind. I had too many things in it for anyone to learn much of anything, much less what I needed.

We sat in silence for a while.

It wasn’t really hard to think of the ways my life could, ultimately, mean absolutely nothing. They say that the measure of a person’s value is in how they affected and improved the lives of those around them, and if the life, once lived and finished, made the world a better place. I knew that Rin hadn’t really done anything especially noteworthy other than be kind to Obito throughout their childhood the last time around, while Obito had carelessly shot his own life’s worth into some kind of infinite negative zone with no way out.

I didn’t know if being around was going to help anyone, and sometimes I felt like I had to do something, all the time, just to feel like I wasn’t being a dead weight. The thing about the world is that it keeps spinning regardless of any individual lifetime, no matter how cruel that sounds, and it was like running on a treadmill just trying to keep up.
Rikuto had stabbed at the heart of it. I wanted to save people from what I kept seeing as their fate, to prevent pain and misery. I wanted to help someone—anyone, even—live a little longer, or a little better. But this wasn’t, in the end, the world I remembered. I was an extra.

But I still wanted to help.

“When I was little,” Obito said, apropos of nothing, “I used to spend a lot of my time in my room. I just…I liked to imagine things. I still do, but I don’t have to do it a lot anymore, since I have you and Rin-chan and Sensei and I can live them.” He drummed his fingers on his leg as I looked over at him, expression blank. “Sometimes, I’d be so mad at everything I wished I could scream. I’d lock myself in my room and just…sulk, I guess.”

I wondered where he was going with it.

“I used to think, ‘I wish someone could see me.’” Obito said quietly. “I used to think, ‘I wish someone would save me.’ Being alone…it hurt worse than anything. So…”

So I wasn’t going to let anyone else suffer the same way.

I thought of dark rooms, of retreating when the world became too much. I thought about reading books about times and places I’d never have lived to see. I thought about the amber light from the streetlamps in my old life, highlighting rain as it fell. I thought about staring at my alarm clock until I was too tired to keep my eyes open.

The difference was that, in my old life and in my current one, someone always showed up in the end to make sure I was okay.

I didn’t think anyone had done that for Obito.

“When you’re upset, someone should always at least ask if you need them.” Obito continued, still quiet and unusually serious. “Even if they have to break the doors down to ask.”

“You’re a really good person, Obito.” I said, rubbing my eyes. “Thank you.”

“Ready to talk about it?” Obito asked. “You don’t have to, but…”

Like I wouldn’t, after you just bared your soul to me.

“Yeah, I…my brother was born when I was three, you know?” I said, looking up at the sky. “He wasn’t really that strong, but it didn’t seem to be a problem. But when I was six, he had to spend time in the hospital and no one was sure he was gonna make it.”

“Wait, is that how you met Yamaguchi-sensei?” Obito asked.

“Yeah. He’s the reason Hayate-chan is still alive.” I said, putting my chin in my hands. “Ever since…I worry. A lot. And I keep getting nightmares.”

“Is that why you asked Sensei for the dawn watch yesterday? You said something about more nightmares happening closer to sunrise.”

“Yeah. It didn’t really help much, though.”

I was such a fucking wreck.

“But…thank you. Obito, you really are the best boy I know.” I said, swiping the tears from my face with my sleeve again. “You didn’t have to come after me.”
“Yes, I did.” Obito said seriously.

Maybe he did.

I didn’t say anything about sensing Kakashi’s chakra eight feet above us, on the roof of the wagon.

But I did refrain from kicking Kakashi out of turn, in the morning.
The Dreaded C-Rank: Close Calls

Chapter Summary

Kei: Fight.

On the third day, we were out of sight of Sorayama and Soragami entirely by lunch. Our path had taken us into a valley, which meant that we really couldn’t see all that much of the horizon and that Sensei was on edge all while we were eating. A valley was, if it was any smaller, an excellent point for an ambush. The wagons couldn’t maneuver very well in the hilly terrain, hemmed in on one side by a river and unfortunately burdened by the limits of pre-industrial wheeled vehicles with cargo in unstable terrain. Then there was the fact that, for most of the length of our trip through the valley, it was a twenty-meter drop to the water. And the rocks.

If they went off the road, we weren’t gonna be able to get them back on it. And then we’d all be sunk.

It was about an hour after lunch before anything happened.

We had some warning, of course. I saw Kakashi’s head whip around in pursuit of some scent I hadn’t noticed, felt Obito’s chakra indicate that he was alert again, and I felt the maelstrom that was Sensei’s chakra begin to pick up. More than that, though, I felt multiple approaching chakra signatures, heading for us at a speed I could barely keep track of. They were coming from all directions, closing in on us like a ring of sharks.

And then a scream of rage sounded from the head wagon.

Part of what I’m going to describe was only pieced together after the fact. There are still gaps. I just remember enough to say that I had serious tunnel-vision when the chips were down.

I saw Chinatsu fall out of the first wagon, bearing a man I didn’t really recognize to the ground.

There was a pulse of heat from Obito’s side of the wagon, too intense to be anything like Obito’s Grand Fireball, and the sound of screaming and clashing metal. Behind me, Sensei sounded like he’d engaged half a dozen fighters at once, from the sound of ringing metal and the pop of the Flying Thunder God Technique’s usual displaced air. Kakashi’s segment, the head of the wagon, felt unaccountably cold, and I saw a spiky mass of ice and blood and human body parts fountain into the air.

Five mammoth chakra signatures had all made themselves known at once. One, creeping and merciless like lava from a shield volcano, must have been Rikuto. Another, howling like the Pacific in a full gale, was as much “Alaska” as “Hurricane Katrina,” and registered as Shirozora once filtered out. A third, while subtler, was no less deadly—like a thunderstorm churning the ocean’s surface in open water—Nanami. The fourth was wildly energetic, and I heard a screech like shearing metal from Rikuto’s section—Zakuro.

The fifth I’d never sensed before, but I could pinpoint easily. Chinatsu almost glowed with chakra, the excess wisps of it heating the air so much it distorted and looked like a mirage. The very ends seemed to actually catch fire. It was like watching someone unlock several of the Eight Chakra...
It felt like standing on the surface of the sun.

But I didn’t have time to dwell on any of that, because there were too many enemies. Last count had been nine—the number had doubled since. And almost all of them were shinobi.

My left hand closed around the end of my kodachi’s scabbard, thumb primed on the blade guard. My right was around its handle. My entire body was angled forward, low to the ground, with the curve of my sword facing downward.

I barely even realized what I was doing. Mom and Sensei had trained me only too well, even though my body was so small and fragile still.

The enemy I saw first was older than me by about four or five years, and he was about thirty centimeters taller. He had brown hair and a scar across one cheekbone, a white line against a tanned face. He had black eyes, like mine, and a grin that showed four prominent eyeteeth. He didn’t wear a hitai-ate, but I could sense his chakra all the same. He had curved kunai as primary weapons, and from his stance and chakra I could tell that he didn’t take me seriously at all. There were so many more dangerous people, after all. He thought I was the Achilles heel of the formation.

(I won’t say he was wrong—I was just insulted at the time.)

I drew.

*Gekkō-style Leaf Kenjutsu: Hunting Tiger Strike.*

Within the Land of Iron, a neutral country defended by samurai rather than shinobi, the most powerful techniques are those that are so fast that shinobi can’t counter them before being cut down. Given the speed of most shinobi, samurai *have* to use chakra in order to multiply the speed and force of their strikes or else they’d be sitting ducks for other things. Like getting pounded by long-range ninjutsu, which is sort of our thing. And yet the Land of Iron is still there, despite the pressure.

The catch, though, was that ninjutsu, genjutsu, and even taijutsu generally relied on the assumption that the shinobi in question had enough time to use their hands to form seals. Or, when facing skilled samurai on the warpath, *keep* their hands. Samurai didn’t have time to be slow, or indecisive. They had to pick an opponent out and *remove* them as soon as possible before the ninja magic bullshit popped up.

Some of the things Mom had taught me made me think that she, or her ancestors, had been samurai.

One of those things led to me cutting my chūnin-level opponent’s fingers off with a single swing. I had the blade flipped around and swinging upward at his throat before either of us really even had time to process anything.

*Gekkō-style Leaf Kenjutsu: Curve of the Moon.*

There was blood everywhere.

I didn’t have any time to stop and maybe freak out a lot—*oh my god I just killed someone*—because my opponent’s reinforcements were way faster than he was. Even as I was drenched in arterial spray, which neatly fucked over any attempt I could make to navigate the battlefield by sight.

**Enemy closing on your six!** The Dreamer screeched, clearly reading my own chakra sense better than I was at the moment, because *argh fuck blood in my eyes.*
In hindsight, I’d have to say they were chūnin, or maybe special jōnin without a combat specialization. Not that I knew that then. I just knew that someone tried to stick a genjutsu into my brain and the Dreamer was promptly distracted because she had to extract the foreign chakra from my system without any help from me. I was a little too busy trying not to die.

Even blinded, I at least had the advantage of knowing about the movement of my opponents’ chakra. It meant that I didn’t get myself cut in half or stabbed in the throat, at least.

But I also didn’t realize I was being herded toward the river until my foot slipped and I was already falling.

I tried blinking, tried to clear the blood from my eyes, but I didn’t have time. I hit the river hard, the freezing water closing over my head before I could do more than gasp for air, and then one of my enemies landed feet-first on my chest. A cloud of bubbles exploded from my mouth, driven out by the pressure and the shock, and hands closed around my throat.

There are no words for how terrified I was in that moment.

I was nine. I was barely a ninja. I was a girl who’d just killed a teenager with a sword. I weighed less than thirty kilograms. I had never learned how long I could hold my breath.

Can’t breathe can’t breathe can’t breathe can’t breathe can’t breathe…!

For a while, all I did was claw frantically at my enemy. I’d dropped my kodachi in the midst of my panic, my fingers occupied in trying to pry his hands from my neck and dragging bloody furrows in his unprotected hands. I could almost see his face, distorted by the water and the fact that I was busy trying not to drown.

The next thing I knew, I couldn’t move at all.

The blood was finally cleared from my eyes, though, and I blinked in an effort to figure out what the fuck was going on.

Okay, so I was still underwater. I could feel it, and my vision was predictably distorted. However, I was also apparently floating motionless in a bubble of water, while my enemy’s non-distorted arm was in front of my face. The rest of him, though, seemed to be above the surface—sort of, though for some reason my inner ear was still telling me that I was upright. My enemy’s arm was stuck in the side of the bubble.

I was stuck in my opponent’s Water Prison Jutsu.

I hate my life.

My eyes closed.

There are, technically, two variations of the technique. One is used for live captures, and thus automatically filters oxygen from the water to keep the subject alive (see also: Zabuza Momochi, The Wave Mission). The other isn’t, and therefore no chakra is wasted on keeping anything or anyone alive (see also: Kisame Hoshigaki-avatar, Kazekage Rescue Mission).

There are also two ways to disperse the technique. One, which was exemplified in the battle of Team Kakashi versus Zabuza Part the First, was to force the user to disengage and give up maintaining the technique. The other, as demonstrated by Team Gai versus clones of Kisame Hoshigaki, involved expelling chakra from every tenketsu at once in the hopes of disrupting the technique’s cohesion.
I didn’t have the chakra capacity necessary for the latter and I didn’t know if any of my teammates were close enough to do anything to help per the former. The chakra-infused water was screwing with my sensing ability, and I was having a hard time figuring out what to do in order not to die in the meantime.

**FUCKING MIST NINJAS.**

My brain, which was thankfully occupied by more entities than just me, flew into action.

I wasn’t going to be a helpless little girl. I’d gotten this far—on my illegitimate smarts for most of it, granted, but I’d done it—and I wasn’t going to let it end so soon. I had too much to do, and what I’d accomplished so far didn’t feel like enough. My successes needed sequels. I needed *more*.

And as a completely relevant side note, I’d finally found a way to make Bullshitting the Fish Test Jutsu relevant to my life.

Making a patient breathe in defiance of the laws of physics and their bodies’ capabilities was just the starting point for medical ninjutsu. I didn’t need to use hand signs for most of my techniques, and I sure as hell couldn’t make any at that moment even if I’d wanted to. No version of the Water Prison allowed movement, though it’d have been nice if this one had allowed *breathing*.

But as long as I was surrounded by my favorite medium for medical ninjutsu, I could at least take advantage of it.

Even the Water Prison has air circulating in it—only still water doesn’t, and the Water Prison relied on having a rotating sphere of water charged with chakra around the victim. If it was still, the jutsu would be extremely expensive to maintain and to no benefit—without chakra circulation, there wasn’t a lot of ways to maintain water outside of water. Disrupting the technique was based on knowing that much and on taking advantage of it with all the pragmatism being a ninja could offer. While it would be extremely chakra-intensive to force my lungs to accept water as a medium for oxygen transfer—not to mention the fact that I’d basically drown the second I stopped focusing, if I *let* more water in *willingly*—it would be much easier to force the air in the bubble to work with me.

*I’ll focus on channeling chakra into our tenketsu. Direct it!*

I could do that.

Bubbles streamed through the water, directing themselves toward my nose and mouth. I’d have enough for one breath—maybe two—and then I’d have to use that chakra I kept manipulating to fuck with the prison itself. It wasn’t a perfect plan, but it bought me some time to think and my team some time to possibly mount a rescue effort.

I looked out at the rest of the world. Apparently my captor had decided to put me on display like a crystal ball on a pedestal. Or a snow globe, I guess.

Part of the landscape was on fire, though I couldn’t tell if it was because of Chinatsu, Obito, or Rikuto. Half of the attacking group was already dead or in various states of grievous injury. At least one person had been swamped by lava, while the strange man from before had been literally burned to death by Chinatsu (probably). Someone looked like he’d been shocked to death—so was Kakashi a Hei-type lightning user? There were half a dozen dead soldiers around Sensei, who casually *destroyed* the seventh with an offhanded Rasengan.

I learned later that it had been the first time he had use more than two Rasengan in a single fight, and mostly because he’d been separated from his students.
And then there was the statue of ice and blood and chunks.

I had a sudden vision of November 11 wiping out his traitorous superiors by killing them with the flash-frozen contents of a bottle of scotch. Even if he’d died doing so.

It was at about that point that I determined that I was probably going loopy from oxygen deprivation.

**Breath one. Take it and hold it.**

*Got it.*

There was a pause. **We’ve got company.**

It’s hard to describe a chakra signature without comparing it to something else. Or at least it is for me—maybe other sensor-class shinobi have it easier. They’d been born with their chakra sense, or trained it, and didn’t really seem to have a concept of what it would be like to be unable to sense it at all. Point is, there’s a “feel” to everything and there was definitely a “feeling” that had decided to superimpose itself on the Water Prison, apparently without my captor noticing. It was focused mostly around my waist and back, swirling around counterclockwise to the jutsu’s clockwise.

Looking out at the road, I saw Sensei shout something. I saw Obito and Kakashi behind him, with Sensei’s hand out to hold them back, while Rikuto had a bow—a bow, seriously?—trained at my captor. Chinatsu was still doing her glowing thing, while Shirozora was standing on Sensei’s other side.

I was pretty sure he was the one that kept making gore-popsicles out of people. Having him looking at me was kind of a bad thing.

Then a lot of things happened at once.

The Water Prison jutsu exploded into what was basically a water ball of spikes and death, though I had no idea how or why. I think I saw Shirozora hold up his arms, like a waterbender, but when the water ball broke down due to lack of chakra, I was being held in someone’s arms like a sack of rice. I heard someone scream, though distantly, and the world seemed to pitch sideways. I was suffering from what felt like swimmer’s ear or something, because my head hurt and my lungs burned and my ears felt like they were full of water still.

**FOCUS, DAMMIT.**

Sound came back in a terrible rush. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, which was distinctly unhelpful for my headache.

Whoever had decided I made a decent stuffed toy had decided let my feet touch the ground, at least. I blinked once or twice and realized a lot of things at once.

One: I had killed someone.

Two: All of the enemy shinobi were either dead or suffering from various states of being frozen, burned, or dismembered. Sometimes more than one of the above.

Three: My team was crowding around me, even though I was just kind of sitting stupidly on the ground with another person for support.

Four: Chinatsu was biting Akira’s arm, and he’d helpfully rolled his sleeve up to let her. It had a lot of bite scars on it.
Five: Sensei was pretty much up to his elbows in blood. Kakashi had blood spattered on him, likely from arterial spray or something, while Obito was just a little scuffed up as though he’d taken a tumble in the dirt.

Six: The guy I’d fought first was lying headless on the ground next to the wagon-ruts. Holy shit.

Conclusion: The entire situation was a lot beyond my solo coping abilities.

“Kei, are you all right?” Sensei asked.

If I’d been a hardened shinobi, I could have probably chalked up my reaction to having exploded eardrums or something considerably less mundane. I didn’t have any real experience with killing, and on my old life I’d only thought vaguely about it. Not in the sense of “I will kill him,” but the more passive, “I wish he was dead.” Or “I wish [insert person here] was hit by a bus for being a waste of oxygen/pity/money/humanity.”

Anyway, my response was to throw myself at Sensei and hug him as hard as I could, burying my face in his flak jacket. And if I managed to get Obito and Kakashi as collateral huggees—which I did, since I was growing just a bit faster and turning out just a bit lankier at the moment—then I could force the reality of the situation away for a bit. Sensei’s arms, in turn, wrapped around all of us. I felt someone’s hand mussing my hair, but that was okay. I needed that.

“First kill?” I heard Chinatsu’s voice ask.

I felt Sensei nod.

“Ah,” she said. “Nanami, did you get her sword and the hitai-ate?” Nanami—apparently my rescuer—must have made some kind of affirmative gesture, because Chinatsu said, “All right, then. Kick the icicles in the river and bury the rest. Also, Shirozora-chan? Stop freezing people. It just makes a mess.”

And on and on. I didn’t care about her anymore. I didn’t care about any of their stupid déjà vu bullshit—none of that meant anything when compared to the fact that all of Team Minato was alive and together.

Though I was gonna get answers when I recovered, make no goddamn mistake. I’d waited long enough.
By nightfall, we were well away from the battle site. Between Rikuto’s Earth Release jutsu and Shirozora sweeping everything into the river with some strange Water Release technique I could only call “ninja waterbending,” the area was at least clear of bodies and blood. While any tracking-type group would have no trouble finding us, hopefully the bodies they discovered would deter any further attack.

We’d made…a bit of a mess. To say the least.

So, I found myself sitting with my team and Chinatsu’s inner circle when it was time to debrief everyone on the situation late that night. Granted, I was leaning pretty heavily on Sensei, since my childish stamina was pretty much bottoming out, but at least I was attending the conversation. Obito was on my other side, while Kakashi was by Sensei’s left, and the merchants-of-doom had apparently decided to make a semicircle around Chinatsu, who sat directly in front of Sensei.

Chinatsu tilted her head to the side. “Starting from my right, here, let’s have proper introductions this time. Name and kekkei genkai, for the record.”

Shirozora rolled his eyes. “Shirozora Yuki. My clan is originally from the Land of Water and our bloodline is Ice Release.”

The Dreamer mused, I wonder, are we looking at Haku’s uncle here or something?

*Haku’s psychotic uncle Mister Freeze, maybe,* I thought.

Nanami inclined her head, rather than being rude like her apparent lover. “Nanami Hōzuki. My clan’s ability is known as the Hydration Jutsu, which allows me to liquefy my body at will.”

“That explains how you rescued me,” I said, brows knitting together briefly. “And the strange chakra I sensed before the Water Prison collapsed.”

She bowed again. “Yes. Though Shirozora’s icicle spears dealt the fatal blow.”

“Well, I can go next.” Rikuto said, having raised his hand in a half-hearted wave. “Name’s Rikuto Tetsuyama, former Iwagakure jōnin and wielder of the Lava Release kekkei genkai. Ditched the rest of the world and the forehead plate about eight years back.”

…what the fuck?

“Currently, Konohagakure is at war with Iwagakure.” Kakashi said quietly, but in a very pointed tone.

“More power to you, then.” Rikuto replied bluntly. “I stopped caring and the village can go fuck itself for all I care.”
Chinatsu’s hand lashed out and *wham*, Rikuto was nursing a broken nose in no time flat.

“Uh…I can fix that.” I said hesitantly. I didn’t really *want* to get close to the guy who’d been a party to my freak-out the previous night, but I didn’t like *not* healing people.

“No need. He needs to learn to control his behavior around children sooner or later.” Chinatsu said, glancing at Zakuro briefly but significantly. Then her laser-like golden stare focused on Akira. “Your turn.”

“Ah, right!” Akira looked rather sheepish, actually. “I’m Akira Uzumaki—though really, I don’t have any special kekkei genkai other than a large chakra reserve. I’m not even a trained shinobi!”

Something in Sensei’s expression seemed to momentarily shift to shock, but it was gone pretty quickly. I think he must have been thinking of Kushina and her supposed status as the last daughter of the Uzumaki clan.

As far as Akira went, though, I *know* I hadn’t sensed him when the fight got rough. At the very least, everyone else in the area seemed to have him thoroughly outclassed. Then again, he was technically a civilian. He mostly felt like warm sunlight, though next to his burning sun of a lover I’m not sure how he *could* have really compared.

Zakuro raised her hand. “Oh, and I’m Zakuro Suzu, from the Land of Rice Fields. My clan isn’t really all that large or even that important, but our kekkei genkai is actually genjutsu-based. It’s called the Hypnotic Echo.”

Okay, that was a new one.

“What is that supposed to do?” Obito asked.

“Oh, it lets me tailor my genjutsu to whatever my target will find the most unsettling.” Zakuro said cheerfully. “I only have to aim for a mental state and the target’s mind does the rest! I have plenty of other genjutsu that are based on sounds and not hand seals, and actual sound-based attacks! It makes everything very confusing.” Zakuro went on, grinning. “I don’t even really have to hear what my targets do if I don’t want to!”

*Are you fucking kidding me?*

In summary, my brain had been turned against me and apparently the existence of genjutsu kekkei genkai made my genjutsu affinity *fucking worthless*. I’d essentially been made an accomplice in my own mind-fuck, which was all kinds of fucking crazy and I kind of wanted to punch someone.

“You used your genjutsu on me yesterday, didn’t you?” I asked, not quite accusing her of anything. I couldn’t keep the irritation out of my voice.

“Well, of course!” Zakuro said, oblivious. “I use it on everyone who travels with us! It’s how we can tell who we can trust or dump in a river.”

I didn’t have *words* for that.

“Oh, wait! I forgot something!” Zakuro said brightly, and clapped her hands.

Akira’s hair went from strawberry-blond to deep red, while Shirozora and Nanami swapped hair colors leaving him with green-black hair and her with white. Rikuto’s hair turned brown, while Zakuro’s hair reddish-orange.
“I also maintain genjutsu disguises for everyone!” Zakuro concluded.

“Moving on.” Chinatsu said dryly, looking rather like she was contemplating slapping Zakuro again. “My full name is Chinatsu Kasai. My sister Misaki and I are former kunoichi, though we both retired four years ago in order to pursue the success of our mother’s merchant caravan. I’m actually the third generation’s firstborn daughter bear the ‘Chinatsu’ name, though the Chinatsugumi-specific caravans are named after me. My clan’s specialty, rather than ninjutsu, was in fūinjutsu.” She rolled up a sleeve and Sensei leaned forward slightly in completely blatant interest now that the conversation had turned to his area of “expertise.”

Her arm was covered in five-point seals, the ink twisting out from the pentagram on the back of her wrist and curling around under her skin like a nest of thorns. The daughter seals were on her elbow and shoulder, with their own branches of ink. They were all tattooed on.

“A five-point seal.” Sensei said contemplatively. “They’re mostly used for chakra storage, though I guess you could make them work for weapons or supplies if you were really desperate. But I’m sure no one wants metal stuck in their arm, so…”

Chinatsu nodded. “My sister and I have mirrored seals, along the opposite sides of our bodies. My left, her right. Both allow us to store our chakra for long periods of time. Unleashing a single seal is like opening one of the Eight Gates.”

That explained the Super Saiyajin thing I’d seen. And how Chinatsu wasn’t effectively crippled at the end of the fight…though I imagine that she hadn’t been biting Akira just because. Unless there was some kind of sadomasochistic thing going on with them that I hadn’t noticed, I guess.

“Is that why I couldn’t sense you?” I asked, since apparently my tact was all used up for the foreseeable future.

“Yes.” Chinatsu said, though her eyes narrowed a bit. “The shoulder seal allows me to hide my chakra among the natural energy field of the planet. I had them added after visiting a Fire Temple and learning of the concept.”

So, Sage Mode chakra invisibility for the price of not actually being able to use Sage Mode. Good to know, I guess.

Oooookay then.

“Does that answer all of your questions?” Chinatsu asked, one eyebrow going up.

“For now, yes.” Sensei replied, rather than letting us form our own answers. He stood up, and we all took our cue from him.

Then Sensei’s hand landed on my head again. I was starting to think he was getting used to having me for an armrest. His other hand mussed Obito’s hair. “And for you three, Kei is on first watch. Obito, you’re on third watch, after Kakashi. Kei-kun, wake Kakashi up in a few hours and try to be exact about it this time.”

Sensei did not deserve to be a lousy morning person while still making us go on watch rotations.

Then again, I suppose we’d have to get used to the idea of running on little or no sleep if we were going to survive shinobi life. Then again, again, we were nine. I wasn’t looking forward to growing up stunted or maintaining my signature eye-bags for the foreseeable future.

I still ended up taking first watch without complaint, though. Not like complaining was gonna get me
anywhere.

About forty-five minutes in, when my team had mostly dropped off to sleep (sans Obito’s drowsy tossing and turning and occasional flopping limb that caught Kakashi in the shoulder), I sat on top of one of the wagons and tried to keep my eyes open. It’d been a long day, and I’d happily go to confront my nightmares if it meant I’d be able to get some shuteye. I just didn’t want to be awake to deal with shit.

There was the sound of a footstep behind me and, the next thing I knew, Chinatsu was sitting next to me, her legs dangling over the edge of the roof while mine were crossed one over the other. I didn’t jump, since she didn’t take me by surprise now that I could sense the chakra from her seals, and neither of us said anything for a while.

When the silence finally bordered on becoming oppressive, Chinatsu said, “I suppose you’re wondering why Zakuro targeted you, out of your team?”

I nodded.

The Dreamer gave me a mental poke. **Hey, wait…**

“This might require some background. Do you mind?” Chinatsu said.

“No, it’s fine.” I said. I mean, it wasn’t like having less information would help.

Chinatsu sighed. “All right then, kid.” She held up one finger. “Perhaps you’ve felt the first sensation—the strong feeling of familiarity between you and I, as though we’ve met sometime before and made an impression? Nod if it sounds familiar.”

I nodded.

“I’ve felt that déjà vu with nearly every person under my direct command.” Chinatsu said squarely. “In order, Rikuto, Shirozora, Zakuro, Nanami, and Akira have all felt extremely familiar to me since we met, and the feeling was mutual. You see the result.” She made an expansive gesture, clearly meant to include the entire caravan, and possibly its success. “We knew we could trust each other implicitly from the moment we met, like we were tied together by fate. Do you understand?”

I actually didn’t. The Chinatsugumi’s familiarity had actually been off-putting for some reason. It might have been the age gap.

Chinatsu must have seen my expression in the firelight, because she explained, “But when we met you, my sister and I, like our friends, felt dread. I’ve felt unrelenting hatred before, and acted on it, but you…you could be the cornerstone to something great, or a cause of nothing but pain.”

My blood ran cold.

**Hey!**

“I don’t know which path you’ll choose. I don’t know if it’ll even be a choice.” Chinatsu said grimly. “But my first idea was to ship you off to a Fire Temple and see what they’d make of you once your sensei loosened his control a bit. But it’s clear now that you won’t go.”

I looked at Obito and Kakashi, almost unwillingly.

Kakashi was an arrogant jerk and I wanted to slap him more often than not, but he didn’t deserve to be alone and miserable and hated. I wasn’t sure how much of an influence on him I could really be,
given that the catalysts for his attitude shifts had always been the deaths of those close to him, from what I remember. But I had to try, right?

And Obito... dammit, I wasn’t letting him go off and crash and burn without a fight. Ever. Between me and Rin, we might even be able to keep him sane. And maybe alive.

**Don’t you remember them? Ask her...**

But I already had an idea.

“What would you do, if you had to choose between love and duty?” I asked out of the blue, staring up at the starry sky. I had a hunch...

Chinatsu gave me a strange look. “You’re a pretty weird kid, even for a possible devil-child.”

“Yeah, I know.” I said.

“Well...since I’m here, I’d say love.” Chinatsu said after a moment. “I loved my family more than I loved being a shinobi.”

**And she made her own secure world out of nothing...** The Dreamer and I thought together.

...Akira the noncombatant healer. Rikuto the earth-aligned archer. Shirozora, king of mood swings and most prone to brutally murdering his opponents. Zakuro, the illusionist... Nanami, the wallflower with water powers...

**FUCK.**

I knew them. Not on a person-to-person basis, but more in the sense of “Mwahaha! Dance, my puppets!” sense.

While remembering non-Naruto or non-personal aspects of my life seemed to be a thing that came and went depending on what was triggered in my wacky headspace, I’d been a writer the last time I’d lived. Not a great one, or even a decent one with enough luck to get published, but I’d been one all the same. I’d lived inside my own head for at least a third of my waking moments, it seemed, which contributed to my unwillingness to do much in the world around me. I’d been a dreamer. I still was, but my dreams were much more practical than they had been, since I’d be dead by fifteen if they weren’t.

And I’d written the Chinatsugumi.

Not in their current form, not under these names, and not with this exact team composition, but I’d written about people with the same personalities and the same pasts. And their futures, and their children, and their ending.

In another life, I’d literally been responsible for everything that happened to them or anyone they knew. Good, bad, joyous, or fucking horrible. Ultimately.

No wonder we’d gotten a mutual sense of “oh fuck.”

“At the end of this mission, I’d like to stay in Konoha for a while.” Chinatsu said quietly. “You seem like a good kid. I don’t know if my presence will be good or bad for your development, but damned if I’ll let you let yourself destroy the world.”

“...Uh, likewise?” I said hesitantly. “I mean, um, it’s not like I’d say no, but...”
“I’d be staying regardless of whether or not you were some kind of hideous bomb.” Chinatsu said bluntly. “But you’ve made me interested enough to extend the trip. Misaki can get along just fine without me.”

“Uh. But isn’t it called the Chinatsugumi?” For a reason, even. Chinatsu shrugged. “It can be the Misakigumi for a few months.”

I thought about that. While I had a watchdog for my actions in my head already, for all that I was actually capable of affecting given my age, it’d be…interesting, to see what a supposedly uninvolved bystander would see. I didn’t know if she’d end up reporting to the Hokage or anything, but…

“I think I knew you too,” I said, watching the stars drift slowly by overhead. “But…look. I don’t trust you much. Not even based on a weird feeling.”

“Understandable.” Chinatsu said mildly.

“I feel like I knew you from…maybe a past life or something, but that doesn’t mean that much for this one.” Aha! A near-confession!

“So you’re saying that I’ll have to earn your trust. All of us will?” Chinatsu asked.

I said, “Yeah. Talk is cheap.”

“Talk is expensive if you do it wrong.” Chinatsu corrected me. A merchant to the core, then. “So, what do we of the Chinatsugumi have to do?”

I bit my lip. “Well…there’s this technique Obito and I are having trouble with…”

Chinatsu gave me a funny look. Then she laughed, quietly. “All right. Tell me about this terrible new skill…”

I did.

The next day, when we all took a break for lunch, Obito and I squared off. Rikuto dug his biwa out again, tweaking the strings. Chinatsu’s civilian began to clap for percussion, while Akira, Shirozora, and Nanami primed their own instruments and Zakuro took a deep breath. And then the music started.

We didn’t quite manage to stay in synch, but we were a lot closer than before.

Turns out that, for me anyway, the flash of inspiration for pair-fighting was based on music. It was a lot easier when I had some kind of external timer, and I guess that was why Sensei brought a metronome to our team practices after that.

Obito’s and my hands met in the center of the practice arena, perfectly in time after a couple of practice rounds, and we both grinned.
The Dreaded C-Rank: Leaving a Nest

Chapter Summary

Kei: Get dropped.

We got to Konoha within a week, thankfully. There were no other major distractions, though since Obito and I spent what felt like nearly every waking moment trying to get used to each other’s movements and time our attacks precisely (mostly using Kakashi or Sensei as targets), I could easily have missed something that one of the others saw, assessed, and dealt with. Rikuto’s stock of arrows seemed to shrink every time I turned around, though we ate pretty well with all the game he seemed to bring down as collateral. Not that any of us were incapable of hunting, but he seemed bored and our team was a little busy with multiple accounts of attempted murder.

I mean, sure, technically we were only ambushing Kakashi when Sensei was busy and we weren’t quite as dangerous together as he was alone, while jumping Sensei only took place at mealtimes. There was no actual killing intent involved.

Honestly, I think Sensei wrote it off as typical team roughhousing.

I kind of wondered what his team—the old Team Jiraiya—had gotten up to in the past, since I didn’t know anything about them other than what they had looked like in a team photo. I assumed they were all dead, though. All of Jiraiya’s students sans Naruto ended up dead one way or another, even though it was completely unfair.

And one of them had even ended up killing him. One of Minato-sensei’s students could end up being the cause of his death as well. Sasuke had attempted to permanently kill Orochimaru for power…

I honestly think the only Sannin not to pass down some kind of bizarre murder-succession ritual is Tsunade, though she only has two students total from what I remember.

Anyway, back to our triumphant return.

Sensei got the gate guards to open the door, while the Chinatsugumi and their wagons finally made it back to civilization. So did we, of course, but Konoha was pretty wild when you were a ninja. Not because it was dangerous to live in, as a rule, but there was always something going on and about half of it involved shinobi arts somehow. I could at least guess that half of the shinobi in town were probably training, recovering from training, or preparing for more training. Stuff was probably exploding or being stabbed in every single training area.

It was nice and sunny, though the angle told us that it was past lunch and also well past time to get some good old-fashioned comfort food in celebration of making it back from a B-ranked mission alive.

Or C-ranked. We hadn’t made the rank change official yet, we hadn’t gotten paid, and we hadn’t checked into the hospital to make sure we hadn’t all caught some kind of foreign death plague that only showed up after the infectious phase was over.

Okay, so I was paranoid.
“Obito, Kakashi, head to the Hokage’s office. I’ll meet you there in a bit.” Sensei said, once the last of the merchant wagons had cleared the gates and set off for the market district.

“Sensei?” Obito began, and Kakashi blinked.

That was about when Sensei picked me up by the back of my jacket like I was an unruly kitten. “I’ll be taking Kei-kun to the hospital for a quick checkup. As soon as I know for sure that our misadventures didn’t cause any trouble, we’ll join you.” Sensei waved with his other hand. “Try not to kill each other before we get back!”

And then we popped out of reality and then back in between blinks. We’d apparently traveled the entire length of the village and ended up in the hospital foyer due to the Flying Thunder God Jutsu. I guess it was nice to know that Sensei really did have the hospital tagged, for future reference.

“I hope you have a story for Mom about how I almost died.” I said, still being lugged around.

“As long as you get a clean bill of health, I think that’s your problem.” Sensei replied, carrying me over to the receptionist’s desk. Somehow, it was Ayako again.

“Oh, hello! How have you been, Kei-chan?” she asked, leaning forward over her paperwork. “And you, Namikaze-san?”

“I’m being a dead fish.” I said flatly.

“We just returned from a C-ranked mission and Kei had a mishap with a river.” Sensei replied. “I’d like to make sure my student’s all right before we head in for a briefing—I’ve heard that water in the lungs is a serious risk for pneumonia.”

“Oh! In that case, I'll get you checked into the mission-priority office right away.” She scribbled something on her paperwork and handed a clipboard to Sensei. “Fill this out in the third room on your right.”

Sensei nodded and I took the papers. He didn’t set me down once.

We were shuttled through the waiting room so quickly that I barely had the time to scribble my name into the Patient Name box. We ended up in one of the smaller examination rooms, since it wasn’t as though either of us were totally at our full growth, and because we were both conscious. Most casualties either weren’t or wished that they weren’t, and there were both stretchers and surgeries waiting for them.

“So, Kei-kun, how long have you been able to sense chakra?” Sensei asked, curious. I didn’t really sense any particular feeling from him, but I also knew that there were ways to get around my chakra sense, now. Mostly because I was inexperienced, but that was really all that was needed.

“Pretty much forever.” I said, shrugging.

Being able to sense chakra, while unusual, wasn’t precisely rare. It kind of depended on what sort of chakra and under what conditions. Most shinobi could, at close quarters, get a fairly accurate reading on their opponent’s level through concrete experience and because chakra could be felt, particularly through blows and through the usage of killing intent. But the range that I had, even if it wasn’t much when compared to a Byakugan’s much more solid and detailed perception, was abnormal. Sensor-type shinobi, at least in Konoha, tended to be Senju, Yamanaka, or Hyūga-descended. I was a kunoichi descended from two non-clan shinobi, and I hadn’t exactly made a spectacle of my usage of my chakra sense. It wasn’t the kind of thing that was, say, on the level of having a kekkei genkai or anything like that. It wasn’t flashy, but it was useful.
I mostly used my sensing ability as a way to make it so my chakra control was limited solely by my attention span, and to tell where people were without looking. It also made it somewhat easier to copy chakra control techniques off of people, since it wasn’t like I was really learning at the same rate or with the same material that my teammates were.

I was starting to see why most new teams were made of genin alone. The differing education and experience levels involved in our team were causes for frustration for everyone.

“Why didn’t you mention it before?” Sensei asked.

“It didn’t seem like a big deal.” I replied. And it hadn’t—most shinobi could tell enough from their environment based on other sensory cutes that my own extra perceptive ability was pretty much just compensating. That said, it was probably a little odd to see that awareness in a new genin, even if the chakra sensing was probably actually stunting my other investigative skills a little. “You and Kakashi do pretty much the same thing, though Kakashi uses his nose and I think you use seals somehow.”

Sensei’s left eyebrow rose. “Obito doesn’t have that ability yet, Kei, since he’s still new. You are too. And Kakashi and I have been in the field for a while.”

*No shit, Sherlock*, I thought in a burst of petulance. I didn’t want to be in the hospital again. Even if the chances of seeing Rin were higher than normal, and I could see Yamaguchi-sensei again (and get criticized), I was also rather tired of always being told to either explain myself or shut up or something in between.

**It’s at times like this that I wonder how old you are, and if you really did work in retail.**

“It’s not a criticism, Kei-kun.” Sensei said. “It’s just that I don’t see why you didn’t tell anyone.”

I frowned. “But…”

I stood out for enough reasons already, didn’t I? I was a genius according to other people, my stats were insane, I actually had a weapon specialization, and now I was a known sensor. I’d have happily never have gotten involved in the ninja business at all if I’d been born as, say, the ramen chef Teuchi’s first daughter. But I hadn’t and now I was neck-deep in the mess and a part of my brain that wasn’t the Dreamer or Id was telling me I didn’t have enough to make it.

I have some self-doubt problems. Always have. Seems like I always would.

Sensei patted my head. “Kei-kun, it’s all right. I was just curious.”

*No more dreaming of the dead…*

I drew my knees up to me chest, even though they’d been dangling off the side of the exam table, and wrapped my arms around them.

“Are you sure you’re all right, after what happened on the mission?” Sensei asked, concerned.

“I don’t know.” I said. “A lot of stuff happened…”

Our team’s first out-of-village mission, my first kill, my first near-death experience…

Man, what a shitty month.

“Does anyone even know what happened?” I wondered aloud, because I didn’t even really remember if I’d told my story during the early part of the debriefing. I’d been too tired to do or think
all that much for a while there.

“I have an idea.” Sensei replied. “You engaged an enemy shinobi in combat, and were captured. He was an upper-level chūnin, Kei-kun. It happens sometimes. That’s why we’re deployed in teams.”

No, that wasn’t… “There was another one before him.” I said, swallowing. “I killed him.”

Sensei said nothing for a long moment.

And just as he was about to say something, there was a knock at the door. “Hey, I heard my reckless former student was injured on a mission. Mind opening up?”

Good old Yamaguchi-sensei. But where did he get off calling me a “former” student? As far as I knew, I still wanted to learn medical ninjutsu, and I sure as hell hadn’t quit.

“Sure, you can come in.” Sensei replied for me, and the door opened, allowing both

“Kei-senpai!” Rin said, since apparently she’d also heard the news and decided to follow along. Or maybe she always followed Yamaguchi-sensei around—I didn’t know much about internships, other than the fact that Rin was in one and being an apprentice at the same time. I wasn’t sure if she was taking missions at all or if her apprenticeship counted for a lot of them.

“Hey, Rin-chan.” I said, uncurling from my defensive ball. “How’ve you been?”

“Good, but I don’t think I can say the same for you.” Rin said, grasping my hands in hers. “What happened?”

“Enemy shinobi, mostly.” I replied blandly.

“Somehow I doubt you’d attempt to drown yourself for fun.” Yamaguchi-sensei said dryly, fishing a stethoscope out of a drawer. He looked at Minato-sensei, “And by the way, where were you when my former student was getting herself killed?”

“Dealing with another seven of them.” Sensei said in a somewhat frosty tone.

Yamaguchi-sensei made the sort of face that made me think that he thought that wasn’t a good explanation at all. I guess he did like me. Kinda.

…Well, it wasn’t like this was exactly the Kakashi vs. Orochimaru confrontation over Sasuke, since none of us were psychopaths, Minato-sensei was a combat shinobi while Yamaguchi-sensei wasn’t exactly the same way, and I wasn’t going to go off on a crusade for power to kill a nonexistent older sibling due to a brain-frying tattoo, but I could still feel the tension in the air. Minato-sensei and Yamaguchi-sensei didn’t seem to be buddies at all.

Rin seemed cheerfully oblivious, at least.

“So, how’s your apprenticeship been?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s been interesting! I mean, I’m not out doing C-ranked missions or anything, but I do get a chance to help other teams out with D-ranks and I spend a lot of time learning from everyone in the hospital! Even the civilian doctors are really very good at what they do.” Rin said earnestly. “I’m learning a lot every day.”

I smiled back. “Well, it’s better than what I’ve been learning.”

I was sure I felt a spike of interest from Sensei.
“What?” Rin looked so adorably confused. She really was a nice kid, though she had some pretty major blind spots when it came to Obito.

Obito: Mr. Friendzone.

I was kinda hoping it wouldn’t stay true this time around.

“What, have I been skimping on your training?” Sensei asks.

“I still haven’t learned water-walking yet.” I replied. “It might have helped.”

Sensei’s eyes narrowed slightly. “You…are trying to guilt me into something.”

“Depends. Is it working?”

“Shut up, both of you.” Yamaguchi-sensei said. He looked at me. “And you, turn around so I can listen to your breathing.”

I found out later that, no, I hadn’t swallowed or inhaled harmful amounts of water and that Yamaguchi-sensei thought Minato-sensei was incapable of walking and chewing gum at the same time. Minato-sensei, meanwhile, had the completely accurate impression that Yamaguchi-sensei was an arrogant jackass with a soft spot for maybe three people in the course of ever. He usually wasn’t quite so bad, though I suppose that my promotion to Team Disaster had made my status as his student, as well as my mom’s and Minato-sensei’s, somewhat nebulous.

Then again, I’d been the informal type of student since day one. Sort of like the neighbor kid you taught how not to mow his legs off.

“Do you even want to continue with your lessons?” Yamaguchi-sensei had asked.

“I would, if I could find any time between Mom and Minato-sensei and missions.” I’d said. “Heck, even if I can only learn when Rin is and we have totally different lessons, I’d still do it!”

Yamaguchi-sensei had looked at me for a long moment. Then, “No.”

A cold ball of lead seemed to form in my stomach.

Wait, what? No! We need to learn, for when Obito and Kakashi need us the most!

“Kei-kun, you have mastered chakra scalpels and the Mystical Palm,” he’d explained. “There isn’t anything else I can teach you without having you enter a formal apprenticeship like Rin did, where you dedicate nearly every waking moment to medicine, and it’s just too early to risk your team’s dynamic. You’ve only been a genin for three months.”

“I…” I’d bitten back tears and said in a small voice, “Oh. Okay.”

Yamaguchi-sensei had given Minato-sensei a very cold look. “But for your sake, I’d better not see her in here for at least three months with anything more severe than a head cold.”

Minato-sensei had put his hand on my head. Again. “We’ll be fine.”

Yamaguchi-sensei made a dismissive noise and shooed us out.

Rin had followed, though. “Kei-senpai…”

“I’m not sure I’m your senpai anymore, Rin-chan.” I said around a lump in my throat. I was hard to
“Talk, then. “Not that I was for long, but…”

“You’re still my senpai.” Rin had said seriously. “And you should look after Obito and Kakashi-kun, because you’re there when I can’t be. And I can’t be there for you, either, so you have to take care of yourself better than you have been! A medic-nin can’t die until the last of her team is beyond saving!”

“…I’m not a medic-nin, Rin-chan.” I said.

“You might as well be.” Rin insisted. “You never studied the oaths or the precepts but you’ve still got healing jutsu and that’s enough!”

And then she hugged me.

“Thanks, Rin-chan.” I said. Then an idea struck me. “Should I hug Obito and Kakashi too? Saying it’s from you?”

“Why can’t they be from you?” Rin asked.

“Because I punch them and they’d believe you instead of me.”

“…Kei-senpai, you should be nicer to your teammates.”

“I agree.” Sensei had said. “Come on, it’s time for that delayed debriefing. The Hokage won’t wait forever.”

And then we were gone.
The Mission Assignment Desk was actually pretty crowded when we got there, since I guess it was the peak season for missions before the far inland parts of the Land of Fire finally realized it was late autumn. The Land of Fire, true to its name, was pretty goddamn warm all year round, but it shared some climate traits with, say, the Andes in some particularly high altitude places. It wasn’t much compared to the Land of Lightning or Earth, where mountains were the geographic feature of the millennia, but we had snow and actual winter in some places. A lot of merchants, not just the Chinatsugumi, were making their last trips of the year, and that meant a lot of money coming into town and a lot more local missions for those shinobi who could take them. There were a lot of genin teams there, along with the occasional reporting chūnin and a few lone jōnin.

I kinda didn’t want to ask what everyone above genin was doing this time of year. While Team Minato hadn’t been deployed to the actual front lines yet, the war was still on. We weren’t going to stay at home forever.

Some of the genin teams looked like they had already been deployed. A couple of them were missing members. Obito, Kakashi, and I were the smallest kids in the room, even if Kakashi had probably seen more action and more battlefields than all of us genin combined.

Sensei stopped a chūnin desk worker and said, “Team Minato, delivering a mission report and requesting paperwork for a mission class upgrade.”

The chūnin, who looked a little like Obito and therefore might have been an Uchiha (though I didn’t see the clan crest anywhere), nodded and pulled the relevant paperwork seemingly out of absolutely nowhere. “Here you go.”

Paperwork ninjas are a breed all their own, I swear.

“Thanks,” Sensei replied, and the chūnin just sort of seemed to disappear into the background buzz of the room. He turned to us. “I have three copies of the mission report paperwork here. While normally Kakashi and I would fill out our own sheets, I’ll be proofreading what we have before we file them. No making yourself out to be some kind of super-ninja unless you actually did something super-ninja-like, and no tangents. Try not to get a paper cut or something.”

Filling out paperwork with no embellishments is possibly the most boring thing in existence. So I’ll quietly skip over that part—it’s not like what happened isn’t obvious at this point, anyway.

After the paperwork was filed, and after Sensei attached a fifth form to justify the bump up in mission grade as well as pay, we all left the office entirely. We could have, technically, been debriefed by the Hokage if our mission had been particularly important, but it hadn’t so we didn’t. Anyway, despite Sensei’s obvious skill, he was a few years away from being made Hokage-to-be and we were a couple of years from being much more than dead weight.

As soon as we were outside in the late afternoon sun, Sensei yawned and stretched. Then he said,
“Well, at this point you’re all dismissed. There won’t be any training tomorrow, so rest up for the next big session and the next mission while you can.”

Internally, I was torn between whooping in joy and reflexive cringing. On one hand, I was back in Konoha and that meant my bed was well within walking distance. On the other hand, I was definitely going to have to explain the events of my mission to Mom. I’d tried lying to her before, about minor stuff like chores and the occasional “where did you get that bruise” during my school days, but if nothing I said would fly then, serious stuff never would.

_Dah-dah-dah-dah, we’re dead_, I thought.

**Lighten up.**

Bluh. I needed a distraction. Even if I knew Mom was probably gonna kill me for almost getting myself killed (and wasn’t that a stumper), I figured I could at least have one last hurrah.

Well, if my family’s financial straits had improved any I would have probably invited my team for dinner. As it was…

“What’s it gonna be?” Obito asked instantly, never one to turn down snacks or sweets.

“Well, we could go out for dango, but I can also get apples in the market.” I shrugged. Personally, I would hit my limit for dango in no time flat if I ate it like Obito did, but I hadn’t gotten tired of apples yet. I wasn’t sure if they were really a favorite food, for me, but I remembered vaguely that Kakashi disliked sweets.

Despite the fact that he and I didn’t get along, I didn’t actually want to exclude him from stuff. It just…kinda happened.

I think that might have been worse, in a way.

Besides, apples were cheap this time of year.

“Well, since you’re buying, I guess you get to pick.” Obito said after a while. I could tell that he was a little disappointed—he knew me well enough to know that I wouldn’t choose dango again.

“Apples.” Kakashi said instantly, and I think it might have just been to spite Obito. Of course, whether it was or not, Obito took it that way and glared.

It could also have just been that Kakashi liked apples more than dango. Slightly or otherwise.

“One vote for apples and two abstaining,” I concluded. “Apples it is. Sensei?”

“That sounds all right. So, should we meet around eight or so?” Sensei asked. “Training Ground Three is still open.

“Sure.”

And then we were all off to our various afternoon tasks.

For my part, that meant stopping by the market district and grabbing apples. I was pretty sure Mom didn’t have any stocked up, since Hayate and I generally were okay with whatever she put on the table and hadn’t really been much for special requests. I also knew basically nothing about buying apples, other than the fact that bruises probably weren’t going to be conducive to a long shelf-life and
organic stuff was the name of the game.

Oh well. No time like the present to learn, I thought.

In summary? Listen to the merchant who runs the fruit stall. That stuff is their livelihood, and they’d damn well better be able to figure out what is and what isn’t going to sell well and get them paid. Otherwise they’re lousy and they don’t get customers and they fail.

Also, talk to the old ladies who visit said stalls religiously.

So, I had ten (for safety’s sake) apples in two grocery bags when I made my way home at long last.

“I’m home!” I called as I entered, dropping my bags and my pack by the door. I’d started to kick my sandals off by the time I got any responses.

And it was like I had somehow picked up mole summons. Only they were my family and sticking their heads into the hallway—and Hayate seemed to have picked up a couple of extra voices or something. I couldn’t see the living room from my position, but I could sense extra chakra signatures easily. Hm. It bore investigation.

“Sis!” Hayate shouted, and promptly knocked me onto my back and into a pile of shoes. Now that I thought of it, Hayate didn’t own this many pairs of kids’ sandals and none of his were black heel setups. Even if they were tiny and the heels digging into my shoulders were nothing compared to the combat heels some kunoichi wore.

Now that was interesting.

I promptly noogied the hell out of him. I was learning something from Sensei after all!

“Nooooooo, stop it!”

“Welcome home, Kei-chan.” Mom’s voice said from the kitchen. I guess seeing that I was still intact enough to start play-fighting with my brother had assured her that I was also in good enough condition that she could return to dishwashing duty. “By the way, you can let Hayate-chan go now.”

I did so, and we giggled in the hallway like idiots for a moment. I put my hand on his head, notably not going straight to manhandling, and said, “So, how’s my favorite little brother been while his sister’s been away?”

“I’m your only brother.” Hayate said.

Pah. He’d still be my favorite if I had another brother.

I think.

You’re seriously trying to turn your brain into a pretzel, aren’t you?

“Details, details.” I said dismissively. “So, who are your new friends?” I asked, trying to get a better look at the source of the sudden squeaks I was hearing. Hayate was limiting my movements because he was still sitting on my leg.

“Come and meet them!” Hayate chirped, pulling me to my feet.

Well, he’d sure gotten stronger.

We stumbled into the living room once I’d ditched my sandals and pack and groceries, and nearly
crashed into our two guests. Score one for ninja grace and poise—but what the fuck, I was tired anyway and I was torn between wanting to meet Hayate’s new best buddies and maybe collapsing in bed for a nap.

The kids were both about Hayate’s age, give or take months either way, and thus shorter than me by about a head. They were skinny as heck in the way that ninja children tended to be (if they weren’t Akimichi clan kids), and stared up at me like I was some kind of ultra-badass superninja or something.

The first kid, a boy, was about Hayate’s size. He was tanned, like he spent a lot of time in the warm Konoha sun, and had very dark brown hair tied up in a pineapple-shaped tail, sort of like the Nara clan’s signature style. He wore a light beige shirt with ninja wire mesh underneath, and was missing two of his front teeth.

The second kid was a girl, with her purple hair tied up in a pair of adorable pigtails. She was actually bigger than either of the boys by a bit, with dark eyes and super-long eyelashes. She wore a white-and-blue dress with flowers on it, with standard dark blue shinobi leggings underneath.

I had a couple niggling suspicions that I knew these kids from somewhere, but my brain wasn’t attaching names to faces all that well.

“So, I know that you’re my brother’s friends, but I have no idea what your names are.” I began, even as I unstrapped my kodachi and stuck it on its holder well above the grabbing height of enterprising six-year-olds. I could walk on walls, but they probably wouldn’t learn until they were old enough to understand that real steel blades were not toys.

Hence why our family’s wall mounts for stuff were always at least a meter and a half off the ground.

“T’m Yūgao Uzuki,” said the girl, and my brain automatically conjured up an image of a purple-haired ANBU standing in front of the Memorial Stone.

The boy raised his hand, as though he was in a classroom. “Iruka Umino.”

Double dammit.

“Hayate-chan, you’re officially making friends faster than I am.” I dropped my hand onto his head, and he jumped. I grinned as he gave me a pout—he’d been expecting another wrestling match. “So, kids, how’s life been since I was gone? How are classes going? How are your families?”

While the kids talked, I thought.

Yūgao Uzuki, assuming she grew up at all, would be a very skilled kunoichi and eventual ANBU member. Her specialty had seemed to be kenjutsu, which she could have either learned from Hayate, from ANBU, or, in this new reality, from someone in our family. Eventually, she’d surpass Hayate in blade work, and remained a successful shinobi well past Pain’s hideous stomping match with Konoha.

Iruka Umino, as a chūnin Academy instructor, had been instrumental to the lives and sanity of several different kids in the future and more skilled than Anko. Despite being dubbed too nice to be a jōnin, not to mention lacking in any major trump cards aside from his exceptional intelligence, Iruka had been strong.

And my brother had somehow managed to befriend both of them and possibly a number of other kids in his class.
My graduating class was made of cannon fodder by comparison.

I was, of course, assuming that the skills that allowed them to survive the gauntlet of genin and chūnin rank stayed useful even in a warped timeline.

Anyway, Iruka and Yūgao hung around for a while, but I ended up sort of just falling asleep on the couch whenever they and Hayate finally decided to go outside to play. When I woke up, Mom had just dropped a blanket over me and made the couch rock by sitting down by my head. Hayate, it seemed, had taken off with his friends—I could sense his presence, but out in the neighborhood as opposed to inside the house.

“Kei-chan, what happened on your mission?” Mom asked.

…So, I wasn’t as good at acting normal as I thought.

“We got attacked.” I said quietly, wondering what had given me away.

Let’s see. I killed a boy maybe six years older than me, I nearly drowned, and I was mind-hacked by a crazy lady with a genjutsu kekkei genkai and a penchant for friendly fire. Oh, and Yamaguchi-sensei had told me to get lost.

…Yeah, maybe I needed to get a lot off my chest.

So I told her.

The whole time, Mom’s fingers threaded gently through my hair.

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked after I’d finished.

Mom said nothing for a moment. Then, “Kei-chan, you’re younger than I was when I killed someone for the first time. My situation was different than yours, but…” Mom paused. “Listen. And think. Ask yourself if there had been another, practical way to make sure you made it home safe. Think on whether you would trade an enemy’s life for your teammates or your sensei. Then you’ll know if you can live with your decision.”

I said nothing for a long time. And I thought, like Mom asked.

I wasn’t some kind of soldier fighting for some cause of a nebulous country or philosophy I didn’t give a shit about.

I wasn’t some revolutionary.

I wasn’t a mass-murdering psychopath.

I wasn’t a martyr.

I was just a girl on a battlefield.

And I fought for the people around me, so they’d have a better future. I couldn’t control the future, but…but I could do my best, and try to help everyone I could. I could only act in the moment, not the future or the past. I could only defend the people within reach.

I could live with that. I’d have to, but it wasn’t a hard decision on its own.

Besides, if I was gonna be much of a shinobi, I’d need to learn to stuff battle emotions away into a box for later sorting. Combat came with adrenaline and endorphins and fear and pain and anger, and
untangling that Gordian knot would take time and practice.

I resolved to talk things over with Mom as much as I could.

Later that day, after I’d showered and changed and eaten a bunch of onigiri that had been in the refrigerator, I headed out to meet my team. I stuffed the apples into my now-empty backpack, took my kodachi from the wall (in case of random fights), and took off.

“I’ll be back by bedtime, Mom!” I called.

“You’d better be!” Mom called back.

Konoha at night is actually rather pretty. I remember reading, somewhere or some-when, that some cities in World War Two used to turn all of their lights off after dark in order to try and baffle enemy bombers. The logic went that only factories kept their lights on, since their products would obviously need to be worked on around the clock to make their way to the front lines, and any bombers flying over cities would obviously target the light-show in order to cause as much damage as possible. It was the days before night vision eyepieces and things, and I’m not sure the strategy always worked.

The reason I mention this is because Konoha, despite being at war, doesn’t really act like it when it comes to the civilian part of the populace. Then again, airplanes don’t exist here and the number of shinobi who can attack from above in any strategically meaningful sense number in the single digits. The civilians were generally safe, if not content.

Besides, most of our fighting seemed to take place well outside the Land of Fire at the moment, despite Iwagakure’s repeated incursions. I don’t think any of the major villages get hit directly with much of anything other than infiltration attempts until Orochimaru’s attempted invasion far in the future.

Barring the Nine-Tailed Fox’s appearance after the war, anyway.

There were more than a few ways to avoid the latter, though they’re just theories and half-formed plans.

I ended up at Training Ground Three at about seven-fifty. No one was there yet, and I ended up hanging out next to the Memorial Stone for a while even if it killed my night vision horribly.

I hope I’m making you proud, Dad.

Miss you.

I had to wonder if Dad would have been proud of me if he could see what I really was. If he had, when he was alive.

I felt the crackle of Kakashi’s chakra long before he actually got close enough to see, in the dark. It made sense that he’d be the first one there, though being anal about mission start times and stuff was kind of missing the point of some of the shinobi regulations.

Ninja life was a long, long string of improvisations, panic attacks, stabbing, and maybe getting away alive.

I put my hand against the cool stone, tracing Dad’s name slowly. My reflection wasn’t clear in the dim light, but I thought I could see a little of him in the way my mouth was always a little downturned and the way my hair spiked like crazy while it was short.
Dad hadn’t managed to make it, but…I’d do my best to make sure I never had to choose between giving my all and coming home. I had to, didn’t I?

“Hey, Kakashi.” I said quietly, not turning to greet him.

“You’re early for once.” Kakashi said in a flat tone, walking up beside me.

I gave him a sidelong look. He wasn’t looking at me, but at the stone.

*Sakumo Hatake will never be remembered here.*

The Stone was for heroes who died in the line of duty. Most of the time, we’d never recover the body and any funeral was held with the monument and a photograph. If the timeline went the way it had “originally,” the Hokage and Sensei would end up as names under my fingers. So would Iruka’s parents, and Kushina (who I had yet to meet), and Rin, and hundreds of people I’d *never* meet. Obito would have his name here, too, but survive and twist into something horrible.

Sakumo Hatake was a goddamn hero, and yet at this time, in this place, he was *nothing*.

Spending too much time around the Memorial Stone was probably bad for my continued mental health, honestly. I knew it wouldn’t do Kakashi any favors later.

So, I tore my eyes from the granite and handed Kakashi an apple.

Our camaraderie was based on an awful lot of meaningful silence.

At least, I think so.

Sensei and Obito showed up eventually, in that order. I threw an apple at each of them as they appeared, and we got to eat together. We didn’t talk all that much—all of us seemed to be spending our time regaining our equilibrium after the mission—but it was kind of nice, all the same. Obito and Kakashi didn’t fight over anything—though they weren’t really talking to each other either—and Sensei and I got really into a game of I Spy after a while, with Obito joining in,

I hoped it wouldn’t take another disaster of a mission for us to be a real team.
Kei: Meet the Bloody Habanero.

Honestly, most of the next few months were basically a gigantic blur. We squabbled less frequently, we trained a lot more, and we went through a bunch of missions. None of our later C-ranks were turned into unmitigated disasters, though we toed that line a couple of times and we got more rank upgrades over time. While Sensei didn’t say much about it, I could see a line of tension in his back and a certain twitchiness in his movements that told me, at least, that he was more worried than he let on about the war. I was pretty sure that Sensei wasn’t supposed to be handling the bulk of the enemy combatants for a C-ranked mission.

About the only thing that changed for me over that time period, at least in terms of physical ones, was that I had longer hair and my jacket had full-length sleeves. I was also about two centimeters taller and a kilo heavier, which made me suspect that I was going to hit my full size before the boys did. In my old life, it had taken until I was thirteen or fourteen to be essentially finished growing, and I’d been somewhat taller than average. I had no idea how tall I could get, here—mainly because my parents were completely different and I wasn’t completely sure if Dad had been really tall. Being nine didn’t give me much in the way of perspective.

Obito, meanwhile, had also ditched his short-sleeved black jacket for one with sleeves long enough for thumb-holes and sturdy metal hand guards for the backs of his hands. He’d also gotten around to tying the standard dark blue shinobi pants down with bandages, like nearly every other boy did, and he might have been a little taller than he’d been at graduation.

Kakashi had invested in sleeves, too, though the shuriken-patterned scarf was a bit over the top. I couldn’t help but think it was about time—he actually looked more like a boy, now, even if he was practically swimming in his jacket, despite the ninja mesh undershirt. I kind of wondered about the weird trailing half-skirt thingy, though I think I’d seen something similar on Neji when the guy had been promoted to jōnin once upon a time.

One of these days, though, I was going to find out where my teammates bought shoes and go there instead. I could only find the generic ugly shinobi sandals, while Kakashi’s looked like a pair of heels I’d probably owned in my old life. Minus the heel bit.

But hey, at least Obito and I were getting better at that whole sync-fighting thing. We weren’t perfect, but we were learning and conversations with Kakashi had stopped degenerating into fistfights. I think we’d learn to compensate for our respective growth rates essentially as we went, and maybe all three of us could start becoming an actual working team.

And maybe pigs would fly.

It was after one of those mostly-interchangeable winter training days that Sensei, once again, decided to celebrate our success.

I think Kakashi was starting to learn to hate us and Sensei’s indulgence of us and everything else ever.
Sensei brought his hands together in a loud clap, signaling the end of the day’s attempt to give Kakashi third-degree burns. He grinned and said, “You’re all improving by leaps and bounds. I’d say this calls for ramen. We’ll be paid by the end of today for our last mission and it’s a couple of zeroes more than we’ve been getting lately.” Sensei said with a smile. “So, everyone know what they want? I can buy this time.”

Our last mission had been a bit of a clusterfuck. I mean, none of us kids had been in all that much danger, but any mission where Sensei had to solo a pair of enemy jōnin was the kind of mission that require serious decompression after.

Also, Obito had been getting frustrated with his lack of progress—mostly in the speed department—and with no Shadow Clone workaround I was kind of at a loss as to how to make more headway.

“I’ll go with beef this time.” I said instantly. I don’t know how I’d ended up with shrimp last time but I sure as hell wasn’t repeating that mistake. My brain insisted on making a series of connections that went basically like this: a shrimp is an arthropod, which is the same phylum as bugs, crabs, spiders, and lobsters (and I knew that several of the named categories had closer relationships to one or the others, but I didn’t care). I had a thing against bugs. Or anything with a texture that was anything like that of a bug.

I think if I went on vacation in the Land of Waves, Rivers, Water, or Rice Paddies, I would starve to death.

Not to mention possible Death by Aburame For Being a Bug Hater.

“Aw, but shrimp was good too,” said Obito, who had ended up with my order since I was busy being picky as only a child could be, then.

“Then you can have it.” I said. “But I’m not getting it again.”

Shrimp is my nemesis.

I could practically hear Kakashi rolling his eyes.

Sensei looked up at the sky, then at the shadows of the buildings nearby. “I think it’s about lunch time now, actually. If I remember right, there’s a friend of mine who ought to be around Ichiraku right about…”

“Hey, Minato!”

The “friend” in question was a kunoichi Sensei’s age with crimson hair streaming out behind her like a flag from the top of her head, and a grin that threatened to crack her face in half. She was wearing a short-sleeved variant of the Konoha uniform, with the more feminine (meaning skintight) pants available for mix-and-match. She had a hitai-tate tied across her forehead, above a pair of deep violet eyes, with two long side-locks of red hair in front of her ears. And she was moving at top speed.

Kakashi’s chakra was suddenly directly behind me, and then I was flying forward because he’d shoved me square between my shoulder blades. I was almost instantly swept up into a crushing bear hug that had probably been meant for the unrepentant coward behind me.

It didn’t save him, by the way. It might have bought him like, thirty seconds, and he wasn’t allowed to run.

“Minato, how could you hide your cute little students from me?” Kushina Uzumaki—seriously, who else could she be?—shouted, one finger wagging under Sensei’s nose. I was swinging from her other
arm like a rather large plush toy, both because I was kind of running out of air and because resistance
was futile. “I demand reparations in the form of ramen and foot massages!”

Okay, getting dizzy.

“Kei’s turning blue, you know!” Obito said loudly.

Oooh, pretty colors.

Kushina promptly dropped me. On Sensei.

Okay, so she kind of threw me in his face. Details, details.

Anyway, right after Sensei caught me and turned me upright again, she rounded on Obito and I was
pretty sure Obito went almost a whole step backward when he flinched away from her.

She followed, and pinched his cheeks once he was in grabbing range. Obito squeaked, too.

“So you’re Obito! Minato told me that one of his students was an Uchiha, but I can kind of see the
resemblance now that we’ve actually met,” she said sagely. “You look a bit like Mikoto, though
she’s a kunoichi and prettier and doesn’t get out often enough even if she’s going to be a jōnin
sometime.”

Bwuh?

“And you don’t look like Fugaku because he has a funny face and huge stress lines and you don’t.”
Kushina went on. “Who are your parents, again? I’ve met pretty much the whole clan at this point
even if I’m terrible with names sometimes.”

I wasn’t entirely sure Kushina stopped to breathe at all during that rambling mess of a statement.

“This, by the way, is Kushina Uzumaki.” Sensei said over the top of my head.

“Oh, I never did introduce myself to you two, did I? Whoops.” She let go of Obito, who scrambled
behind Sensei and me for safety. “Kushina Uzumaki, chūnin of Konohagakure! People also call me
the Bloody Red Habanero when they think I’m not listening, though.”

“Uh.” I said.

But Kushina’s attention was already off on an adventure.

“Kakashi-chan, what are you doing all the way over there?”

I could practically see his expression morph into the perfect example of a nonverbal “oh shit” in the
history of this lifetime. I say “practically” because, technically, I still couldn’t see half his face.

Eh. It was a riddle for another time. And maybe adulthood and alcohol and stuff.

And the next thing I knew, Kushina had Kakashi in a bear hug.

I was starting to realize that Sensei’s tendency to manhandle us kids had to have come from
somewhere. I just hadn’t realized that it might have been his girlfriend.

Then again, Jiraiya doing the same thing would have ended in a sexual harassment suit or something.
Jiraiya was like thirty-seven or something close to that number, while Sensei was still a teenager.
“Anyway, is the plan still to get ramen?” Sensei asked, finally setting me back on the ground. I promptly hid behind him with Obito, leaving Kakashi to his fate.

Some teammates we were.

Actually…

Since Kushina was apparently ignoring Sensei in favor of giving Kakashi the Lennie treatment (Of Mice and Men, 1937), I squeaked, “Uh, Kushina-san?”

“Oh?” Kakashi was looking distinctly like a pissed-off owl—though his hairstyle made it a bit hard to tell, sometimes—but Kushina’s smile was kind of…intimidating, over the top of his head. Basically, if I was given the choice of being glared at by a tiny chūnin or being given a mischievous smile by Kushina Uzumaki, I’d choose to invoke Kakashi’s wrath instead.

But hey, what were frenemies for?

“I think we’re all getting hungry…” I said.

Obito’s stomach gave an obliging grumble. He winced.

“Oh? Sure, we can go get ramen.” Kushina said, as though she wasn’t still squishing Kakashi like a plush toy.

She let go of him eventually. When we all sat down for ramen, all of us kids were planning on sitting together on the opposite side of Sensei from Kushina, just to be sure we had some kind of barrier. We didn’t exactly talk about it, but the intention was there and we’d planned for that, sort of. Or at least we tried to—Sensei grabbed the end seat and Kushina took the one next to that, leaving the three of us to have a quick Rock-Paper-Scissors duel over who got to sit furthest away.

Kakashi won the first round—which I attributed to the constant duels with Gai—and Obito beat me, which meant that I had to sit next to Kushina and be the sacrificial lamb to her affections.

I barely remembered what to order in the face of her overbearing personality.

“So, you’re Keisuke-chan, right?” Kushina asked, slinging an arm around my skinny shoulders.

“R-right, Kushina-san.” I didn’t even really want to correct her when it came to my name.

“R-right, Kushina-san.” I didn’t even really want to correct her when it came to my name.

“I’ve never seen you this quiet before, Kei-kun. Are you feeling all right?” Sensei asked from Kushina’s other side, looking curious.

The Dreamer said dryly, This is our submissive state. It helps us not get eaten by bigger and badder things.

Speaking of bigger and badder, as long as I was sitting this close to Kushina and not being occupied with the possibility of imminent suffocation, I could sense the Nine-Tailed Fox. There was no bigger and badder (chakra construct/beast/person/individual)…thing in the world at the time.

And no, I couldn’t sense it as well as I might have if it—Kurama—had been actively throwing its weight around, but there was definitely an undercurrent of this thing wouldn’t even have to chew to eat me and danger danger DANGER.

All wrapped into the five-foot-something frame of a woman who, if she killed me, would probably do it by accident.
“I’m fine, Sensei.” I forced out.

“Kei-kun…” Sensei said warningly, but Kushina cut him off, saying, “If he says he’s fine, let him be. You don’t need to hover, Minato.”

Actually, yeah, he kinda did. The thing with raising superpowered ninjas was that you kinda had to get them to that point and not get anyone killed in the meantime. Well, anyone you gave a shit about, anyway.

Also…

“Kushina-san? I’m a girl.”

“I thought I told you about this.” Sensei remarked into the sudden silence.

Kushina, for her part, seemed to have finally discovered a social faux pas she actually cared about. She blushed, embarrassed, and mumbled, “I was a little distracted.”

Too distracted to notice that we’re a little girl?

I guess most kunoichi wore skirts at my age.

“It’s okay. Just about everyone makes that mistake.” I said reassuringly, as Obito coughed and Kakashi looked pointedly away.

“Still.” She patted me on the head, which was considerably less suffocating than just about anything else she’d done. “Anyway, your birthday is July tenth, right?”

Um. Yes. It’s the same day every year and we’d just about gotten to Sensei’s birthday (January something or other) without actually discussing birthdays once. I was planning something for Obito’s, which was the month after, even if I had no goddamn idea what.

I nodded.

“Then we’re birthday buddies! I mean, sure, you don’t know me all that well yet, but I think you’re adorable and it’s always fun to celebrate with more people.”

Okay…personally, I would probably be happier if I could just get Obito and Rin and Kakashi all in the same room with Hayate and Mom and blow out candles and then go back to training, without any unannounced fights or catfights or Mom hitting people with a shinai. Partying with Kushina seemed like an unspeakably exciting idea.

And at this time, in this place, “visions” weren’t much of a guarantee that someone would live to celebrate their next birthday anyway. It was kind of why shinobi stopped caring after age fifteen or so.

Kushina is an extrovert.

I am not. At all. I scored a thirty on introversion in my last attempt at Myers-Briggs personality type indicator, at least back when I’d been an adult and had a non-ninja job and stuff. Introversion does not generally come any more blatant.

The only reason I kept hanging out with people in my free time was because I was scared of what would happen if I didn’t.

I was all too aware of how short our lives could be.
“Kushina, I think they might be a little young for that.” Sensei pointed out.

“Well not now, obviously, but I can get like, a cake and stuff.”

“My—er, our—birthday isn’t for seven months, though.” I said.

“Then we can practice on everyone else who has one in between, obviously!”

I think Obito might have winced again.

“Don’t get too ahead of yourself.” Sensei said.

“Says the guy whose birthday is next.” Kushina said, pouting.

Obito heaved a sigh of relief.

Sensei gave her an amused look. “Not what I meant. It’s just that…well, I was planning on entering them in the Konoha Chūnin Exams this month.”

Slow down, hit rewind. What the fuck?

The Dreamer squeaked, What?

*How did I not know about the Chūnin Exams?!*

“Really, Sensei? You think we’re ready?” Obito was almost shaking from excitement. His eyes were huge.

He nodded.

“YES! Kei, we’re going to be chūnin by this time next month!”

“Who’s going to be our third teammate?” I asked, because even Obito’s normally-contagious exuberance wasn’t making much of a dent in my attitude. “Kakashi can’t be—he’s been promoted for longer than we’ve been shinobi. It would be unfair to the other teams.”

“Oh, right! Hey, that means I don’t have to deal with you for a month!”

“Shut up, you useless idiot.”

“Why’d you hit me, you bastard?!”

To me, Sensei replied, “Oh, you’ll see. I’ve been in talks with another jōnin sensei for a while and we’ll be doing drills with your temporary teammate in the next couple of weeks.”

…Oookay.

On one hand, I was pretty sure that I could come up with something to pass, if the exams were anything like they’d been in the future (and wasn’t that just a mess of tenses). On the other, *we weren’t ready.* My chakra capacity was still shitty and Obito had consistently failed our shuriken and kunai throwing tests and we’d only been shinobi for about five months…

This was going to *suck.*

And then the next day…

“Obito! Kei-senpai!” Rin called, running up to us in Training Ground Three, “We’re going to be
taking the Chūnin Exams!"

Funnily enough, I wasn’t quite so worried anymore.
Chunin Exam Arc: Cliff's Notes Version

Chapter Summary

Kei: Scheme.

A full, international Chūnin Exam would have been a hilariously bad idea given the current state of affairs between the various elemental nations. If the Exams are supposed to be a substitute for war, and we were kinda at war and needed a whole lot of bodies to throw at the enemy…well. Suffice to say that if the “canon” Exams that Naruto and his fellow Konoha Twelve went through was the full and proper version someone ought to attend after nearly thirteen years of peace (though no Rock teams attended, because they suck and hate us), Team Minato/Yamaguchi/Awesomeness was taking the abridged version.

At least, that was what Sensei had told us. I don’t think he really knew what that entailed, anyway.

Mom’s reaction to the news was pretty straightforward.

“This is a terrible idea.” Mom said, over dinner. Hayate was at Iruka’s house with Yūgao, and had at least given me a quick hug before taking off. It was kind of weird to see him hanging out with other people, but I trusted the Umino family and wasn’t all that worried. He had to grow up sometime, right?

“I know.” I grumbled, propping my head up in my left hand. “But if I don’t enter Obito’s never going to forgive me.”

“It’d be difficult to forgive anyone if you all die.” Mom countered, obviously annoyed.

“Does it help any that it’s Konoha-only?” I asked. Sensei had told me that much, at least. While at war, Konoha didn’t have time to vet its supposed allies.

“Marginally. But none of you are old enough to have gone through sufficient levels of survival training to work well in the training ground most Konoha Chūnin Exams use.” Mom said, frowning over the top of her clasped hands. “What is Namikaze-san thinking?”

I had an idea.

“I think that he thinks we can do it.” I said, and then I paused to slurp up more soba. Training worked up an appetite, but talking about the possibly drastically shortened future countered it. As a result, I wasn’t really any more hungry than normal, but I needed a second to articulate my thoughts. “Maybe Kakashi spoiled him—I know that he passed on his first attempt when he was six.”

“Kakashi Hatake is a once-in-a-generation shinobi.” Mom replied. “Not even the Legendary Sannin were promoted so quickly, and everyone knows it.”

Yeah, that was the gist of it.

She sighed. “And yet…from what I’ve heard from you and what I’ve seen, it isn’t enough.”

I wasn’t entirely sure if she meant that our team wasn’t enough to take on the Exam—which I
happened to agree with—or that Kakashi wasn’t going to be able to carry the burden of being a shinobi on the front lines if us genin were counting on him. Of course, it could have been any number of other things, but those were the relevant thoughts in my head.

We were so dead.

Speaking of deadness, I was contemplating my team’s prospects as I walked to Training Ground Three a while later. I had my paperwork rolled into a tightly bound scroll, which I’d stuck in my kunai pouch. I hadn’t even really taken much of a look at it since Sensei had given it to me. It brought up a lot of horrible thoughts about the myriad ways we could manage to die before we turned ten, and I didn’t really need any more.

“Oi, Pint-Sized Prophet. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

Da-da-da-da, Rikuto Tetsuyama of the Chinatsugumi makes his grand reappearance!

It might have been a bit more impressive if he wasn’t carrying a pair of twin babies in slings, with one infant on his back and the other across his chest. Zakuro was walking next to him, looking distinctly amused even at my twitch of discomfort at being cornered, even if we were in the middle of a crowded street.

I did have a couple of things to ask them, though. Such as, in no particular order, what their kids’ names were, where the nickname had come from, when they were planning on leaving, and if they were planning on leaving at all now that their kids had been born.

So I did. All at once, and in one breath.

Not my finest moment.

“Miyu and Kazuki, because you are one, in about a month, and no.” Rikuto answered, smirking. Wiseass.

Hey, you did write him.

That was before I had to deal with him.

“I heard the Chūnin Exams were going to be in a week or so, and I asked if we could stay for a bit.” Zakuro said, grinning. “I hope you make it to the finals so we can watch!”

Yeah, I was starting to hope I didn’t.

On one hand: promotions.

On the other: promotions, gladiator matches, and yet more missions Team Minato’s current setup barely allowed for, with a much higher chance of death. All before hitting puberty.

Rikuto gave me a funny look. “What’s the matter?”

“A lot, but not anything you can fix.” I said. “I’m going to train.”

Rikuto made a contemplative noise. “Well, how about I trade you something? A bit of information, in exchange for some advice.”

I looked at him. Did he seriously believe I was a precog?
“Half-Pint, I’ve been getting a weird feeling from you since we met, and I’m sure Chi-chan gave you the short version for easy understanding.” Rikuto said in a voice pitched to be ignored by any civilians. I felt a subtle shift in Zakuro’s chakra and knew that no one would notice us.

I could be dead in the street in half a blink and only a Hyūga would even spot my corpse.

Cheery thought.

“But frankly, I just get the feeling that you know way more than you’re saying.” Rikuto said. When I said nothing in response, he added, “Take it from an old spy, kid. I’ll have a couple more tidbits for you if you do.”

Well…I could tell him a couple of things that wouldn’t compromise the village.

I looked at the twins. One of them—I couldn’t even tell which was which, honestly, since babies are pretty much the same at that age, barring a significant anatomical difference—opened an eye and I saw teal. “I can’t be certain, but…”

**Oh, it’s those two.**

I looked Rikuto square in the eye. “How many people can hear us?”

“None!” Zakuro said cheerfully.

“Don’t trust Orochimaru of the Sannin at all.” I said bluntly. “The Chinatsugumi has so many kekkei genkai users that he won’t be able to resist going after you. His primary ambition may involve the Sharingan, but he’s got so many irons in the fire that he could build a wrought-iron fence.”

Rikuto and Zakuro paused, exchanging glances.

“I take it you haven’t mentioned this to your sensei or anyone else.” Rikuto said slowly, but he didn’t sound skeptical.

*Old spy indeed.* Jiraiya was maybe ten years older, and *he* wasn’t presumed dead.

I’d checked Sensei’s Bingo Book. Rikuto Tetsuyama, also known as the Stoneshaper during the Second Shinobi World War. He wasn’t quite old enough to be a contemporary to the likes of the Sannin or the White Fang, but he’d been a rising star. And then he’d quit the battlefield, taking out thirty Sand ninjas in a suicide mission that had turned out not to be, I guess. Not bad for someone who had to have been about Sensei’s age then.

“Who’d believe me?” I asked rhetorically. “The Legendary Sannin are practically the Founders for the new generation, and I don’t have any evidence other than a lot of disturbing dreams.”

“Hm. Actually, it meshes with a few rumors out of the Land of Rice Fields.” Rikuto said mildly. “I think I’ll have to put out some feelers, but I could easily come up with something for Chi-chan’s sake.”

…Okay then.

“Anything else you’re dying to tell us?” Rikuto asked.

“…Keep an eye on Hidden Cloud.” I said. “They tried to kidnap a Konoha kunoichi less than five years ago for her chakra, and they have their eye on the Byakugan. I can only guess that they’d be after any kekkei genkai they can grab.” What else, what else… “Don’t trust Danzō Shimura either—
he might be an elder, and from a big-name clan, but he’s even more twisted than Orochimaru in some ways. He has a thing for traumatized orphans and not a lot of restraint in avoiding making them orphans. And stay safe. You’re the only people I’ve told this stuff to, so I hope you’ll be able to keep yourselves alive to act on it."

Rikuto patted me on the head.

Apparently I just attracted people who did.

“You haven’t seen how stubbornly people can cling to life until you’ve met a missing-nin, Half-Pint.” Rikuto said. “And here’s my advice to you: Nothing in this exam is worth dying over. You keep yourself alive, too.”

“Also, if you see Akira-chan,” Zakuro put in, “try to remind him that spending time with his cousin is fine, but Chi-chan gets lonely at night.”

Ahahaha, no.

“So, Kushina-san found Akira-san?” I asked.

“Within a week. It was kind of disturbing, really.”

And as though on cue, Kushina rocketed by while dragging Akira by one arm. I think I caught something about “cool jutsu” before they were out of hearing range, with Sensei and Chinatsu determinedly chasing after them. They were all gone in a cloud of dust in less than four seconds.

“This is one crazy village.” Rikuto said mildly. “I like it here.”

Since Sensei was going to be busy for a while, I went to go see what Obito and Rin were up to.

It turned out that the answer was “not a lot.”

Obito was skipping rocks, all while rapidly chattering about whatever topic came to mind, while Rin humored him. If they weren’t training, that meant that Sensei had either already dismissed them or he’d never gotten around to telling them which drills to run today, what with Kushina being the world’s biggest distraction and mobile dust devil.

Or something.

“Hey, can I cut in for a second?” I asked.

“What, are you gonna run away after?” Obito asked, and the rock he’d thrown shot across the water, bouncing a cheerful four times. “Yes! New personal best.”

Simple feats of coordination: Used to impress girls since time immemorial.

“Yeah, I just have a couple things and then I’m gonna go bug someone else for a bit.” I said. I decided not to bother about the paperwork, then. What would happen, would happen. No use getting my team worked up over it.

“What things?” Rin asked, standing up.

“Oh, just a couple of training ideas.”

I hadn’t just been sitting on my ass worrying, after all.
My idea was simple, though that didn’t really mean much for its utility. It’s just that we only had so many options at our age and stamina and we’d never run full combat drills without a target.

But hey, why not?

Obito hadn’t figured out the trick to water walking just yet, while Rin and I had to learn enough chakra control bullshit to figure it out ourselves anyway. So while Rin and I walked out onto the river, Obito stood back and stretched his fingers, waiting.

Anyway, for my plan, we needed a bit of flexibility and a lot of practice. The idea was that, since Obito was the only one of us who knew any ranged combat jutsu, he’d try to box our enemy in and keep them from maneuvering out of my range. I was the best close combat fighter we had—given that Kakashi had been essentially excluded from the roster for this month—and had the longest reach inside of that category with my kodachi. Rin, though she was good at dodging and smarter than Obito, didn’t really have much to her arsenal other than utility jutsu. She would need to stay out of the line of fire entirely.

So, we were learning—or making ourselves learn—the art of dodging fireballs. I knew it could be done, since Obito’s signature Grand Fireball was pretty much useless against faster opponents. It was just a matter of getting used to his timing.

And then using Rin’s and my skills to destroy anyone who was dumb enough to think that fire was all we had to fight with. Jutsu weren’t the end-all of lethal tools in a shinobi’s arsenal, even if they were a pretty good place to start.

We ended up stopping after I dodged a little too late and the end of my fledgling ponytail caught fire. I cut the chakra to my feet and ended up getting dunked, but at least I wasn’t on fire anymore.

I guess I was due for a haircut anyway.

“You aren’t seriously planning to use that in a fight.” Kakashi said as I emerged from the water, shaking myself off like a dog. I mean, it wasn’t effective at all, but then I started wringing out my hitai-ate bandanna and decided I didn’t care anyway.

“It’s a work in progress.” I said, and then I started shaking out the burned bits of hair with my fingers. Blackened, nasty-smelling fragments fell out. Ugh.

Squelching water out of my sandals before taking them off, I made my way back to the bank and proceeded to take off my jacket, my T-shirt, and all of my weapon pouches (including my kodachi). That left me in pants, aesthetic bandages, and an undershirt.

Then I pulled out a kunai and started trimming my burned hair. It didn’t take all that long, really.

“Kei, are you okay?!” Obito shouted, running over. Rin was at his heels, and whipped around to place a glowing green hand against the back of my neck to heal me. I could probably have done it myself, but my brain was running on autopilot.

“Hm? Oh, yeah. I’m fine.” I said. “The water took care of the fiery bit and the fire chakra limits the heat bloom from the fireballs. I shouldn’t get anything worse than nasty sunburn.” I turned. “And thanks, Rin-chan.”

“No problem, Kei-senpai.” Rin replied. “Though I guess this means I should stock up on burn medication…”

I shrugged, as Obito turned red.
I was taking things a bit too calmly.

**What, am I not supposed to be keeping you from panicking unnecessarily? Sheesh. That’s gratitude for you.**

*I’ll be fine, now. The shock’s over.*

Also, where the fuck had Kakashi come from?

**When a Mommy and a Daddy love each other very, very much…**

I took that as a hint to just ignore her.

“Anyway, how’ve you been?” I asked, since I hadn’t seen him for about two days and that was kind of a record since Team Minato had been formed. And also because some retail shit you seriously can’t deprogram. It’s freaky.

“Fine.”

**Fucked-up, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional.**

Do they make Adderall for split personalities?

“In that case, Sparky, do you have any pointers for us blundering amateurs? Preferably the easily-applied type of thing that means we don’t die.”

Kakashi gave me a baleful glare.

Then…

“It’d be a pain to break in new genin.”

Hahaha, predictable dickery! I’m onto you, Kakashi Hatake!

He did, in fact, give us a couple of very useful tips. Most of them didn’t actually have much to do with our technique (though he criticized that too), and more to do with the Exams in general and survival strategies. Obito bristled the whole time through, while Rin took mental notes and I continued to dry off, listening in a sort of meditation.

And then Sensei interrupted us. Yay, drill time.

You’ll just have to see what we came up with *later.*
Chunin Exam Arc: Bring It On!

Chapter Summary

Kei: Enter the lion's den.

In hindsight, it might have been a better idea just to take my entry form for the Chūnin Exam that year and burn it.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty, after all.

Anyway, the day of the Exam dawned bright and horrendously early. I had breakfast with Mom and with Hayate, before he went off to school, and crammed all of my rations and tools into a special storage scroll Sensei had given me the night before, all tucked inside a backpack. All I needed to do, if I wanted my stuff back, would be to drip blood on the central seal while using chakra to activate it, somewhat like using a summoning contract.

“I know I said that it’s a Konoha-only Exam…but try to keep your head on straight.” Sensei had told me. “After the last try we had at an international version, I don’t think you can be too careful of the others.”

Technically, it’d only been tried a few times, and never between the same two nations. The attempts had…not ended well. Assassinations and general infiltration of enemy spies everywhere anyone looked.

I guess it would take the shock of the Third Shinobi World War, in total, to get everyone to sit down and shut up for a while. Shinobi as a social class tend to be paranoid bastards, and cramming a lot of paranoid people in a small space and offering any confirmation for any of the suspicions…

Yeah, I guess the Third Shinobi World War would be a little like World War One. We might (not) get twenty years of armistice for this one, though.

Personally, I would have liked to know how to make my own storage scrolls. Sensei, being one of like three Sealing masters in the village, could make them pretty much anytime he sat down with enough paper and ink, but none of us genin could, and neither could Kakashi as far as I could tell. Oh, I knew that he’d pick up something of the art later, like he seemed to do with everything (like the Rasengan, specifically), but that didn’t actually help us at the moment and I thought I could at least be okay at it. Even if I never learned to use them on the fly, like Sensei did.

Dad had known how to create his own explosives, after all. He hadn’t really gotten me started on much more than just the calligraphy and a couple of basic forms before he died, leaving me without the tools or experience necessary to create my own seals just yet, but it was a thought.

A thought involving the equivalent of the part where, in Jaws, a guy shoots a scuba tank and the pressurized air and metal and stuff blows the shark in half, anyway.

After swinging by the Uchiha district to pick Obito up from apartment, we both grabbed Rin before making our way to the administrative building. There were about ten of them around the Hokage’s Office/Academy/Mission Assignment Building mishmash of a structure, and no one seemed to find
any reason to taunt the new prospective chūnin candidates.

I guess Kotetsu and Izumo were unique cases.

Granted, in the “present,” they were probably a year or two younger than my team, and therefore not much of a factor, but their genjutsu came to mind nonetheless.

I kind of wanted to know if that was just a thing for when there were foreign examinees or standard practice.

I cast my senses out as we approached the limits of my range (which was, depending on chakra masking or expression rates and wavelengths, about a hundred meters when in “active mode”), but I didn’t feel any active chakra usage. Well, that’s inaccurate, but genjutsu felt very distinctly clingy, and most of what I could feel was mostly like simmering water—it was probably the other examinees’ chakra agitated from nerves. I couldn’t get a lock on their location, mainly because I was too distracted by my own agitation.

“Nervous?” Obito piped up, making me glance at him. He was smiling, though it wasn’t quite reaching his eyes.

“Terrified.” I said bluntly.

The thing about kids is that they often rise to meet your expectations. They’re not often genuinely stupid; they just haven’t lived as long as adults have. Ignorant, rather.

Now, I’ll grant you that Obito has never been the sharpest kunai in the holster, but he’s not incapable of learning. He’d dealt with my intermittent freakouts long enough to get a handle on the pattern.

“What for?” Obito asked, rather than jumping down my throat about my lack of confidence in his or Rin’s skills.

“I’m a little nervous too, Obito.” Rin admitted. “We must be some of the youngest genin to make the attempt.”

“It’s not the young part that bothers me.” I said. “It’s the fact that we’ve only been genin for five months.”

I mean, shit, Kakashi at least waited for six with his genin team, later.

…Though that was due more to scheduling problems than anything.

“We have each other, though. That has to count for something.” Obito said, “And anyway, the exams are all Konoha genin only, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

The Dreamer commented sarcastically. **I suppose Neji almost killed Hinata by accident.**

I could actually think of a few people I’d like to get my hands on, but this just seemed…off. I mean, I’d like to see how far I could push Matsumaru Uchiha, for one, but solving my personal issues with someone who was nominally a comrade by punching them stupid just didn’t seem like the right thing to do. Call me crazy, but I was okay with fighting *enemies*. They were usually clearly indicated, what with the attempted murder right off the bat. But fighting fellow Leaf shinobi over something as trivial as a promotion…

The Dreamer asked, **What will happen if you’re matched up against Rin or Obito in the finals?**
…Shit. I didn’t know.

I’ll have to get far enough for that to even be a problem, first. I replied, Most teams didn’t even make it that far.

Seemed a little shallow to me, though. I was putting off the future in case it didn’t actually come around, but the possibility remained. If our team made it to the finals intact—though, granted, we’d have to survive the gauntlet of other genin first—we might end up squaring off against each other. I couldn’t say for sure how that would go, only that it would be difficult to put on a show with my stomach twisting in guilt and I should not be doing this.

What about a sacrifice play?

Also known as the other Big Problem.

I had a theory about the First Exam, even if I didn’t particularly want to voice it then, but the looming shadow of the Kannabi Bridge mission was still there, casting reality in a strange and terrible darkness. But…if it came down to one of us…

“I think we need to have a leader, before we go in.” Rin said as we approached, quietly. “So we don’t argue about what to do.”

“Like Sensei?” Obito asked.

“Or Akihito-shishō.” Rin agreed. “Just to keep us pointed the right way.”

This is going somewhere weird.

“Usually we either argue or Sensei just kinda leads us onward.” I pointed out. “Sometimes Kakashi does, but that doesn’t happen often and we complain when it does.”

Well, mostly Obito did.

“Still, it would make things simpler.” Rin said.

Jeez, Rin must have hated leading more than I did. I usually just went with whoever had the strongest personality, since most of what we dealt with as genin was low-risk enough to allow it. Thinking, management, and social skills didn’t necessarily factor into it. It was easier than making all the decisions and…

Obito frowned in thought.

Then he and Rin exchanged a look.

I had a sudden sinking feeling.

“No.” I said instantly.

“Come on, Kei! You can do this!” Obito wheedled.

“You’re putting your lives in my hands!” I hissed back, aware that we were still in the street and could be easily overheard. “That’s crazy!”

“Who else are we supposed to trust; the other teams?” Rin asked. I snapped my mouth shut so fast my teeth clicked. She had a point, and a look in her eye that was actually pretty scary. Obito probably barely knew that Rin had a core of steel, given that flashback sequence before his Tobi-
mask cracked off (another side, another story, and another life). “We’ll all be looking out for each other too, but you’re just going to call the fights before they start.”

“Look, Sensei and—and Kakashi aren’t here.” Obito said, scowling. It must have stung to admit that Kakashi was better at anything, even in the face of overwhelming evidence. His face relaxed. “I know we haven’t been friends for a super-long time, but you can do this.”

I wondered, in a somewhat distant way, if this was what having Naruto reassure you was like. It felt good, but kind of scary at the same time. Naruto was never really relying on the object of his attention/conversion attempt to save his life. Obito and Rin might be, later.

“…We’ll see how it goes.” I said, grudgingly. “I really don’t want to do it, but…”

Rin and Obito high-fived.

“You suck.” I said.

Then we made our way inside the exam building.

I’ll say this for Konoha—we know how to make a reception hall. Must be all the wood.

(Yes, this sounds like I’m damning my own hometown’s construction ethos with faint praise, but there’s a reason the building is important to me. Hang on.)

Honestly, if not for the desks lining one wall, we could have been in my old university’s meeting hall. The room was mostly wide open space, with wooden floors and smooth plaster walls and huge windows to let the sun shine in. Probably saved them a load on lighting bills. There was a raised stage to one side, with a wheeled podium for whoever felt like making a speech or taking cover, and the administration had helpfully put signup tables everywhere so there weren’t long waiting lines for the Exam. The room was pretty crowded despite that, with genin of every age and their jōnin sensei as well, and there was a steady roar of voices that echoed off the walls and high ceilings.

But if you looked closely, you’d see something a little less like a parent-teacher conference and something a little more like what it actually was. The windows had a strange tint to them that I was pretty sure meant shatterproof—or at least storm/jutsu-proof—glass, and there was a mirror against the base of the stage that might have been one-way. The doors themselves, unlike my auditorium of old, were lined with metal and I could see the faintest glimmer of shinobi wire. The building itself hummed with the chakra of well-maintained genjutsu traps in case of rowdiness.

Just from the entrance, I could see Gai and Ebisu with their teams. Gai was actually one of the shorter kids over there, though Asuma and Kurenai were in the room with their sensei as well. Going by the hair and the senbon, I guessed that Genma was the kid hanging out with Bandage-nose—oh, that was Raidō—on the edge of the stage. Hm. Genma wasn’t a chūnin yet, apparently, but Raidō was gonna be one of our proctors, going by flak jacket.

That kid over there seems to be Aoba Yamashiro. Second goofball on the right and straight on until you hit a wall. And…that guy looks like Ibiki Morino. You know, back when he had hair.

Instead of focusing on Aoba or Ibiki, I caught a glimpse of a man with red, ringed eyes that matched Kurenai’s perfectly, though I was pretty sure I wasn’t supposed to see him. There was the shimmer of a genjutsu around him, but my chakra sense and a silent kai had dislodged it. Maybe he was gonna be a proctor?
The Dreamer commented, **This is an auspicious time.**

*Nice of fate to get all our minor players in one place like that.*

Interestingly, it was a lot less hostile than I expected. While granted, this exam was pretty insular and I could name about a fifth of the participants on my own, I was still surprised to find that no one seemed to care all that much that rookies were entering the exam this time around. Actually, some of the looks I got from the other teams were downright respectful, which is something I am absolutely sure I could not have done anything to *earn* in the timeframe I had been a genin.

“Ah, Keisuke-san! Obito-san, Rin-san! I see that you have decided to join our most youthful exam event!” Gai shouted, making his way across the room with the kind of speed I doubted Kakashi could match.

“Hi again, Gai-san. It’s been a while.” I said, stepping forward.

“Far too long!” Gai agreed enthusiastically, taking my offered hand and shaking it every bit as hard as he did the first time we met. I wasn’t gonna have feeling in my fingers soon enough.

“Oh, you’re Maito Gai?” Rin frowned suddenly. “You’re a terrible flight risk at the hospital! The doctors and nurses complain that you always break out to go train more.”

“The power of youth cannot be contained by four square walls!”

“Or restraints, apparently.” I muttered under my breath.

Obito frowned. “Say, Gai, how many times have you taken the exams?”

“Only once, now!” Gai said brightly. “I have no doubt that we shall triumph as only those with true determination can.”

Well, I could honestly say that a lack of determination wasn’t going to mean much. In that giving up seemed more and more attractive the longer I thought of it, and that I was all kinds of dead the second I said as much. At least Gai was distracting.

I managed to spot Ebisu coming before he poked Gai in the shoulder.

Ebisu had grown up in the previous eight years. He was taller, obviously, and his hair was all swept out to one side like a J-rocker or an anime character. His cheekbones were just starting to become the jutting monsters they would be once he was grown up (I kid, I kid), and he seemed to have already started wearing the perfectly rounded shades he was known for.

“Gai-kun, if you don’t mind…” Ebisu said calmly.

“Hello, Ebisu-san.” I said. “Do you remember me?”

He adjusted his glasses with his index and middle finger, sort of like how I used to. “Have we met?”

*Kinda-sorta. Same thing with Genma.*

I said, “You’re in a picture my mom took of my first birthday. Your mom got me hairbows.”

Ebisu’s eyebrows rose, along with a faint flush in his cheeks. “Sorry, I still can’t recall meeting you before.”

“Since you would’ve been like three, I can see why not.” Obito said under his breath.
“Shush, Obito.” I said.

Gai had apparently had enough of waiting for Ebisu to get back to what he’d been trying to say before I cut in. “Obito-san, I challenge you!”

Obito blinked. Then, “Bring it!”

At least Gai had to let go of my hand to issue a challenge properly. I was really going to have to stop shaking hands with the guy.

“Oi, Gai, don’t go picking on the kids before the fights start up.” Genma called out from the stage.

I glanced his way. “Teammate?”

“Unfortunately yes.” Ebisu said with a sigh. “Our team’s roster has been…shifting, lately.”

Shit. Ebisu had managed to convey more than he thought, just with one sentence. Most of the time, genin teams were made up of kids who were around the same age, in order to account for things like differing promotion rates and (lack of) experience. Exceptions tended to be due to either exceptional skill or casualties—sort of the difference between the Sand Siblings and post-Kannabi Team Minato. Ebisu and Gai were close enough—two years difference, basically—but Genma was around thirteen. Maybe twelve. Raidō was probably fifteen, though I didn’t know whose team he was on. I had no idea if their original teams had suffered normal injuries, career-ending injuries, or worse.

The oldest likely-genin in the room was a Hyūga girl with long, purplish-bluish dark hair. She looked about sixteen or so, and was one of two major-clan genin around—the other was, well, Obito. I had no idea what team she was on, but I wondered if her team had died or simply been promoted without her.

I wondered if that would happen to our team.

“I’m sorry.” I said to Ebisu, empathy making my voice much more emotive than normal.

“It’s a part of life.” Ebisu said, frowning. “But I accept your apology anyway.”

“What are you two talking about?” Obito demanded, even though Gai had him in a loose version of a full nelson.

“Gai-san, let go of Obito!” Rin’s hands were glowing—if she wanted to, she could knock Gai silly for at least twenty minutes with a feather-light touch. That chakra was designed solely to incapacitate, though it had a tendency toward friendly fire.

“Give it a rest, Gai.” Genma said sharply, but no one listened.

There was a crack of displaced air, and suddenly Sensei was standing to Gai’s left. Kakashi was there too, sort of half-hidden behind Sensei, and he looked somewhat peeved. I just wasn’t precisely sure why.

“…Well, you’ve certainly settled in just fine.” Sensei said, apropos of nothing.

“Hello, Minato-sensei!” Gai said brightly.

“Hi again, Gai-kun. Mind letting go of Obito before he faints of oxygen deprivation?”

“I will not faint.” Obito argued, but Gai let go anyway. Obito rolled one shoulder, grimacing, and Rin immediately moved to take care of his (superficial) tweaked joints.
“Because blacking out is manlier.” I muttered, shaking my head. Oh well. “Anyway, Sensei, Kakashi, are you here to see us off?”

“Obviously.” Kakashi said, mostly under his breath.

I raised an eyebrow at him, while Sensei’s hand landed on his head. Sensei smiled. “Don’t worry, Kei-kun. He’s just worried.”

I looked at him. He…didn’t exactly look worried. More annoyed at being caught out being possibly worried because it would damage his street cred.

**Is that a blush?**

The parallels between Kakashi and Sasuke were looking stronger than ever, then.

“Really.” Sensei assured me.

“…Thanks, then. Anyway, are we gonna do this?” I asked.

“Yep.” Sensei replied.

“FORM UP, KONOHA GENIN!” someone shouted. Everyone in the room—particularly the older genin and some chūnin, who seemed a little keyed up—jumped. Sensei reached over and turned both Obito and Rin toward the stage manually, while I was already looking in that direction anyway. All around us, heads whipped around to where the red-eyed man was standing, center-stage.

He seemed to have kicked both Raidō and Genma off the stage pretty much just because.

“Welcome to the Chūnin Exams,” he said, much quieter now that we were all paying attention. “Some of you may have been here before, whether six months ago or longer. Some of you are new. I am Shinku Yūhi, and I will be the examiner for the Second Exam of this multi-phase single-elimination event.” His red eyes swept the room, searching for weakness. “But first, you must make it past my partner. And most of you will not.”

There was a steady buzzing sound, just hovering on the edge of hearing, and I turned my head toward what felt like a hundred thousand tiny chakra signatures grouped around a much larger one—sort of like ants around an anthill, or a termite mound.

And then, out of what seemed like nowhere, there was suddenly an additional special jōnin in the room.

He was taller than Sensei, wearing a high-collared coat that masked the lower half of his face. He had a pair of dark sunglasses over his eyes, and I thought I saw…yep. Those were holes. For the kikai insects.

Shinku Yūhi smirked. “Meet Shibi Aburame, the proctor of the First Exam.”

…You know what? **Bring it on.**
The thing about the Chūnin Exam is this—it is, ultimately, a test of squad leader aptitude. Chūnin-level shinobi can be trusted to lead groups of genin on C- and the occasional B-ranked mission with minimal loss of life and limb, make tactical decisions on a unit or squadron level, and have an understanding of what to do and how when worst comes to worst on a battlefield. Again, on a limited command level.

In my old world’s military parlance, genin were roughly analogous to privates—there were and pretty much always are tons of them, and they weren’t specialized yet. Chūnin were sergeants or perhaps lieutenants in major combat operations, usually managing squads of genin or less-experienced chūnin. Specialist or special jōnin were one step up, serving full jōnin in their specialized areas—often, they had roles not tied to the battlefield. Ibiki would grow up to be like that—master interrogator, but somewhat lackluster in open combat. Full jonin could occupy any upper-level command role depending on their experience and aptitude, from captain to major to colonel to general.

And I, a genin of five months, had been made impromptu squad leader—as though all of our superior officers had been killed by a mortar in the right place.

“Well, this is gonna be fun.” I said, my tone dripping with sarcasm. Obito grinned.

“Please report to the front desk for your seat assignment.” Shinku said. “After you get your number, get to your seat immediately. There will be points deducted for tardiness.”

In other words, Obito was screwed.

Everyone else seemed to be getting in line, though.

“Later, Gai. See you in the finals!” Obito said, lightly punching the much stronger genin’s shoulder.

“I hope to see you later in this exam as well, Obito-san! And you, Rin-san, and Keisuke-san!” And then he was gone.

I could only assume that anyone who pissed Kakashi off was Obito’s new best friend or something.

“At this point,” Sensei told us quietly, “Kakashi and I will have to leave you three here. If you pass the Second Exam, we’ll be waiting for you at the end. If you don’t…” Here, he winked, “Yamaguchi-sensei will see you in the hospital.”

Obito made a face. “Sensei, don’t you have any faith in us?”

Rin said, “I do.” It made Obito blush.

I sure as hell didn’t. But I kept my mouth shut.
“Kei-kun?” Sensei asked.

I could feel my teammates’ eyes drilling into me.

“What the hell.” I said. “Let’s get started.”

Rin and Obito gave a whoop and headed toward the line.

Then Sensei disappeared. Kakashi was still there, though.

Kakashi made a chuffing noise that might have been a scoff or a laugh, and said, “Don’t make me have to come in there and rescue you from all the bugs in the second stage.”

“Why, Kakashi, you almost sound like you care.” I said flatly. I spread my arms out wide. Funnily enough, I still had more reach than he did. “Hug for good luck?”

Kakashi made a face. “Not on your life.”

I stuck my tongue out at him.

And then he was gone. Stupid chūnin tricks.

Okay then.

“Name?” Raidō said, once I got to the front. He didn’t bother looking up.

“Gekkō, Keisuke.”

“All right. Seat sixteen in room 115. Get going.”

I didn’t actually leave until I was sure my teammates had gotten out of the crowd okay. Call me crazy, but I really didn’t want to see anything happen to them before stuff got serious.

“You don’t need to hover, Kei-senpai.” Rin said.

“The hell I don’t.” I said.

“Let’s just get going before we get demerits for being late or something.” Obito said, and ushered us kunoichi along.

“So, what seats did you get?” Rin asked us, once we were out of earshot of the assistant chūnin mob.

I replied, “Sixteen. You?”

“Forty-seven.” Obito said.

“Four.” Rin concluded. “We’ve been split up.”

Thank the gods that Obito had only been cursed with a short attention span. I don’t think I could have taken it if he’d also had a terrible sense of direction.

(Speaking of which, my sense of direction had actually gotten better since I had been reincarnated. Mostly because, now, I oriented myself by finding the strongest friendly chakra signature and heading that way, depending on the circumstances. It was like being a human-shaped homing pigeon.)

Anyway, we made our way to the room. It was on the first floor of the building, as the number
implied, and…going by the way the rooms were numbered, it wasn’t going to have any windows. It kind of reminded me of my old university building, where about half the rooms were built into the side of a hill. Only…there weren’t any hills in Konoha proper.

And, just to make things better, I could feel my chakra reserves depleting at a steady, if slow, rate.

The trick, which I always knew had to be there, started with the seat placements. Going by the general Konoha philosophy of “Teamwork Conquers All”—which was the sort of thing that, while safe and reasonable in my old life, was repeatedly shown to be bullshit by the \textit{Naruto} series proper—it made sense for most teams to stick together. Group work, group planning, group action, and occasional group punishment or annihilation. Go, team.

That did not seem to be the sentiment they were promoting today, exactly.

Add in the chakra drain, probably courtesy of a female kikai insect that had crept onto me at some point in the previous few minutes, and it looked like a stress-test was in order.

If the pattern held true from what I’d seen, this would be a test of resolve.

At least, I hoped so.

I hate pop quizzes. Forever and ever.

Anyway. We got to the room, we went to our assigned seats, and sat down. I think the room had enough space for about a hundred and twenty entrants, which left our crowd with plenty of room between each participant.

If this was anything like the Chūnin Exam that would take place fifteen years in the future, we’d have to have some kind of plan for possibly cheating our way out of the majority of the pressure. Teams that had successfully answered nine of Ibiki’s “ten” questions then could have been reasonably certain that they could face any hypothetical tenth scenario, even if most of them had to cheat to do it. I was, for my part, reasonably sure that Rin and I could answer most of the questions just because we’d been extremely good students before. That was probably our saving grace—neither of us had any extra skills that made cheating a viable option, and Obito hadn’t gained access to his Sharingan yet. As far as a covert team—at least in terms of gathering information in a rigorously scrutinized area with no real preparation time—went, we were sorely outclassed.

I’m pretty sure I could have snuck past chūnin with judicious use of Transformation, Clone, and Camouflage Jutsu, though.

Shibi Aburame stood at the front of the room, even though I was pretty sure none of us had actually seen him enter at all and he \textit{definitely} hadn’t been there when we started.

“Welcome to the First Exam,” Shibi said, in his barely-audible way. Everyone had to shut up—even if it was by force—just to hear what he was saying.

“Why can’t he speak up?” someone next to me muttered, and I turned my head to spot Genma Shiranui taking up space to my left, flicking a senbon from one side of his mouth to the other every few seconds.

I sighed internally and let my head drop onto the desk. I didn’t get anything \textit{like} enough sleep the previous night.

I’m absolutely sure Shibi said something about cheating. Though I can’t recall what. All I really remember about those first few minutes involves how sleepy I was, and how the walls didn’t quite
seem to be lining up with how I understood dimensions.

Release!

It was getting really, really annoying to find out how many genjutsu could sneak right past my defenses.

Though… Oh hell. The walls weren’t moving because I’d been poisoned with a hallucinogen, or because of a genjutsu—those were camouflaged kikai insects.

I don’t have much against bugs, personally. Like, I’ve never been stung by a bee or had much worse than mosquito bites. But that’s small peanuts compared to waking up one day and realizing that the entire room is covered from floor to ceiling in bugs.

Around me, everyone else seemed to be realizing the problem in a sort of ninja version of the Wave. Basically, one genin would freak out, followed by the closest neighbors, and so on. Mostly, the kunoichi seemed to be having the most dramatic reactions, sans Rin and the Hyūga girl (while Obito made up for them both with his enthusiastic flailing), but no one was taking it stoically.

Except the proctor, who commanded said bugs.

Shibi waited for us to quiet down before saying, “…Finally, if you cannot perform in an environment within which your opponent holds all the cards, you might as well roll over and die.”

Cheerful thought.

“You may begin your test.”

Speaking of which, the tests arrived on the backs of several large kikai-variant insects. Most kikai weren’t longer than the length of a fingernail, but these…I guess they might have been soldiers or something. Anyway, no one was dumb enough to squash them once the sheets were delivered. Not only was that bad manners (since there was an Aburame in the room), it was also pretty liable to get someone drained of all their chakra (since there was an Aburame in the room). Maybe a foreign team might have flipped out, but Konoha genin knew better, apparently.

After all that, I still wasn’t exactly sure there was a sleep genjutsu in the room at all. Maybe I just needed to invest in a white noise generator or something.

Too bad I couldn’t handle coffee as a kid.

I scanned the questions, thanking the kikai insects that were handing out pencils under my breath. No need to antagonize the chakra-eating monsters while I didn’t have all that much to start with.

Describe the strategies used by the Second Hokage during the first three months of the First Shinobi World War.

That was easy. The term I’d have used in my old life was a “Fabian strategy,” which basically amounted to tracking down and eliminating the scouts and/or foraging parties of a larger enemy force, never directly engaging the opposition while nonetheless wearing them down. A war of attrition, in a larger conflict that had put Konoha up against the superior militaries of Kumogakure and Iwagakure (though not their full might) as well as that of Sunagakure—at the time, we couldn’t afford anything else.

And yet we were still alive. Go us.
Name the four chokepoints used by…

Basically, there was a lot of history.

If a kunai is thrown from point \([x]\) to point \([y]\) while the target is moving at a rate of \([z]\) \(k/h\)…

And the kind of math that made me wish I had a calculator.

Name the second principle of medical ninja regulations as handed down by Tsunade of the Sannin…

And some stuff I was pretty sure a genin wouldn’t know solely because genin didn’t specialize to the same degree that chūnin did.

**Obito isn’t going to know any of this.**

But Rin would.

I’d have killed for access to, say, the Shadow Possession Jutsu. That way I’d be able to help Obito and Rin out as needed.  

But nope.

I wrote down all of my answers, at least. Yay, progress.

For the rest of the time, though, I decided to take a nap rather than get caught blatantly trying to help Obito or Rin cheat. Anyway, Rin would have to turn around, which was also hilariously blatant and therefore completely not going to happen.

It’d have been easier if I could somehow… I don’t know, translate chakra and ping my answers off Obito’s head or something. This would only have worked if several breakthroughs in the name of chakra communication and Obito’s brain happened in the next couple of minutes.

Or if I’d reinvented Morse code ahead of time.

Or if Obito was a Yamanaka, I guess.

About five minutes until the end, everyone was starting to sweat bullets if they hadn’t already. Next to me, Genma had tried to cheat off me twice (to no avail, because I was drowsing literally on top of my test sheet, which was face-down, besides), while I could sense a variety of chakra techniques being used to gather information. While we didn’t have the Suna genin in this exam, and the only Aburame was the proctor and not the examinee, we still had our share of inventive cheating techniques.

The Byakugan was in use, of course, as was something involving the mirrors on the ceiling. I think someone might have been casting a genjutsu on their teammate to get a message across that way, too.

Actually…

**How about Demonic Illusion: Hell Viewing Technique?**

The Dreamer knew the hand seals for it (snake, rat), and I was pretty sure I could control the images my teammates saw…

Pretty sure. Not exactly. I wish I’d remembered to get someone to “teach” me the technique, because frankly the seals and the name of the damn thing weren’t enough to go on. I’d only seen it used once, before my reincarnation, and that had been to expose one of Sakura’s then-worst nightmares (as seen
It ended up being something of a moot point, because that was about the time I felt an actual genjutsu settle over the entire room.

This time, I was ready for it. So was the Dreamer.

**Release.**

And then I cast outward with my chakra sense, searching for the likeliest source as well as checking the status of my teammates.

It didn’t quite feel like something Shibi would be willing to do, but I couldn’t dismiss the possibility that Shinku had once again stepped in on his fellow proctor’s behalf. Rin had dispelled the genjutsu near-instantly, going by the way her chakra was moving smoothly and without agitation compared to, say, Genma’s.

I guess genjutsu wasn’t his specialty. Either that or the pressure really was getting to him.

On the other hand, though, Obito’s chakra was moving oddly and I was pretty sure he was stuck in the illusion.

While area-affecting genjutsu were rare, as well as expensive to maintain, I think that the variant we were being hit with was self-sustaining once it had a hook in the victim’s chakra coils. Obito, having somewhat terrible control and lower awareness of his chakra’s feel, might have been more vulnerable than Rin or I.

There are, technically, two ways to dispel a genjutsu. One: Disrupt your own chakra. Usually, that’s where the whole chakra flaring dispel technique comes from, though suppressing it works just as well. Two: Disrupt your opponent’s chakra, usually by inflicting pain.

There was a third way, though. Sort of. It’s really more of a variation of the first, and has a range limited by chakra supply. I was already operating under the strain of a constant kikai drain, as well as the understanding that chakra flaring was hard. Basically, if the normal two methods were analogous to either pulling a fishing hook out or snapping the line, this one involved reaching out and pulling the hooks out of someone else.

And chakra, outside of the body without a specific shape, was a bitch to maintain.

But I wasn’t going to let Obito get beaten down by something like that.

**Here, let me help.**

The Dreamer’s chakra was all yin-aligned—spiritual stuff, genjutsu stuff, and maybe something involving clams.

Anyway, we reached out with our shared pool of yin-aligned chakra, which was a lot deeper than I’d expected after only nine and a half months, and basically slapped the genjutsu out of Obito’s chakra coils.

I am absolutely sure that the Hyūga girl knew exactly what I was doing.

Funnily enough, Obito didn’t. While his chakra was back to normal, he did spend a good few seconds being rather nervous about something.
Oh well. I’d let him know later.

Three minutes left.

I drew a rather crappy sketch of a pug stuck on a tire swing on the back of my test. Not because I was bored, exactly, but…okay, yeah, I was bored and impatient and it’d been ages since I had a chance to draw something silly.

The pug looked kind of like Pakkun. Only fat.

Anyway, the test ended. I think maybe half of the participants had therefore spent five minutes under genjutsu, without anyone to dismiss it for them or the training to recognize the problem. Then whoever had cast it—probably Shinku—finally let up.

There was a lot of blinking and general “oh my god did I really leave the last three questions blank” going on.

“The testing period has concluded. Please place your pencils on the desks—my partners will retrieve them as well as your tests.” Shibi said when the genin finally managed to focus on him. “And now, you will face your true test.”

There was a bit of a hubbub at that. Test? What test? Weren’t we already in one?

(Also, about twelve people had been disqualified for excessively obvious cheating while I wasn’t paying attention. I’d guess that at least three of them were chūnin plants, though, because their chakra coils felt different than most of the others’.)

I levered myself up so the kikai insects could take my test and pencil away, and then propped my head up on the heels of my hands. This could go any of a dozen ways…

“Perhaps some of you have already noticed.” Shibi went on, quietly. “Are you quite certain that the teammates you came into this room with are the same ones here now?”

Oooh, sneaky. Anyone without some genjutsu experience would be reeling from the lost time, while everyone who wasn’t could be under suspicion of being a spy. After all, Shibi still hadn’t given us permission to talk without losing more points.

Having been perfectly cognizant the whole time, I could state that, in fact, no one had actually moved around the room at all. No genin, and no chūnin. And yet, aside from the Byakugan, there was no way to be sure about that without being a sensor.

And sometimes even then. After all, the Zetsu clones had made a mockery of security during the Fourth Shinobi World War.

“Those teams that attempt to move on from here may attempt to correctly answer the tenth question.” Shibi said. “But if you pass, and your trust is misplaced, you risk bringing a spy along to the next Exam.” I wondered if he was smirking behind his collar. “Leave now, and you will have a chance to take the exam again next year—it would be rather difficult to do so after your traitor has dropped you directly into an enemy ambush in hostile territory.”

Ergo, half the training fields in Konoha. I swear we weren’t consciously trying to kill off our genin, though sometimes it seemed like criminal neglect. Shit happens.

Shibi gave us a few minutes to process that.
Someone—a chūnin plant to breach the dam—said “I’m out.” And he was escorted to the door by a swarm of kikai, along with his team. The insects actually seemed to be there to guard them from any attacks from the rear. After that, teams started dropping like—well, pardon the pun—flies. By the end, there were only sixteen teams left in the room.

Meanwhile, I was wrestling over which option was the right one. What was the lesson here? Trust in your comrades, or take time off to beat a potential spy for information? The latter, while significantly less child-friendly, was probably more practical.

Again, it came down to ideals.

I looked at Rin, who gave me a faint smile despite her nervousness.

I turned around in my seat and looked at Obito, who looked a little green around the gills.

I tried to smile for his sake, though my stomach was doing crazy flips.

While, technically, we can afford to screw up here, I’d really prefer if we didn’t.

That makes two of us.

Fuck it. I’d see this through. The worst they could do was make us take a year off from this examination bullshit, which was something we kind of desperately needed anyway. I turned back to the proctor.

Shibi turned his head slightly from side to side, examining us. “…So much naïveté.”

Not a good sign.

I gulped.

“…No one else will take the practical route?” Shibi asked.

No one said anything.

“I see.” Shibi sighed. “In that case, you are now qualified to take the Second Exam.”

“What?!” Obito shouted. “But what about the tenth question, or the spy?”

Shibi gave Obito such a long, considering look that he started to squirm in his seat. Then the Aburame adjusted his shades and said, “There was never a tenth question. Or a spy. The goal was to see who of our current class of aspiring chūnin would be willing to trust in their teammates for the foreseeable future. Without trust and teamwork, there is no team. There are simply overworked and underpaid shinobi with no loyalty, and will collapse under pressure.

“We cannot afford to be so divided.” Shibi said bluntly. “In war, we will either band together or die alone—we are not the most militarily powerful village, and it is only our trust in our comrades and the strength of our bonds that will keep our village strong.

“Remember that.”

Someone had taken Sakumo Hatake’s lesson to heart.

“And the genjutsu?” I spoke up, frowning. Not that I’d even seen anything in it…

“A cheap trick designed to play on your fears.” Shibi explained. “Suspicion and paranoia may
characterize some shinobi for their whole careers, but you cannot afford to allow yourself to be ruled by fear.” His insects buzzed against the walls. “That way lies madness.”

…I hate this time period.

“But—!” someone began, but Shibi shook his head.

“Spies are a fact of life.” Shibi told us. “But look to your friends and comrades here. Know their faces. Their habits. Their pasts. Trust in your team, and they will bring you home.”

…I still hate this time period. Just a little less so.

“Dismissed. You will be meeting Yūhi-san in the auditorium for your Second Exam.”

Needless to say, we kind of stampeded out of there.

“How did you know it wasn’t real?” Obito asked once we were out of earshot of pretty much everyone.

“Um, I’m sensitive to genjutsu.” I said. “Also, I thought the walls were literally closing in, which… was kinda funny. Not funny ‘ha-ha’ but more funny ‘oh shit.’”

“Same here, sort of.” Rin said. “Only I was focusing on the leaves…”

There had been leaves? And here I got the pot hallucinations, which had turned out to be totally real.

Obito flushed. “Oh, I…didn’t really see any of that. I mean. It just kinda ended. Out of nowhere.”

“Yeah, that was me.” I told him. He blinked. I explained, “I’ve never done a ranged dispel before, but I think I got it right. Right?”

“Oh, uh. Yeah.” Obito mumbled.

“What’d they make you see?” I asked.

Obito was quiet for a strangely long and incredibly awkward moment.

“Obito?” Rin tried.

And then, nearly so quiet as to be a perfect mimicry of Shibi Aburame, “I saw you die.”

…What, exactly, was I supposed to say to that?

“It wasn’t real, though.” Rin said. “And we’re fine!”

“Yeah, but I thought it wasn’t real because I saw that Kei was fine earlier and then the proctor was talking about a spy and…uh. Yeah. Not my best moment.” Obito said.

“Wait, just me?” I asked, frowning. “Because I thought for sure that it’d be both of us.”

Either that meant that Obito thought I was a more likely candidate for a kill-and-replace scenario than Rin, or I needed to invest in anti-paranoia meds.

“No.” Obito said.

“Maybe it’s because you two have been teammates longer?” Rin suggested, though she didn’t sound sure of herself.
“…I dunno.” I said. “But we’re wasting daylight.”

Unspoken…well, let’s just say I was glad it was a vision of me dying and not Rin. No telling what would happen there.

Or rather, I would really prefer if the possible consequences for that stayed the hell off my radar forever.
Chunin Exam Arc: Phase Two Begin

Chapter Summary

Kei: Take on the Second Exam.

We ended up heading back to the same room we’d started out in, since I guess there was really only so much you could do to shuffle forty-eight genin around. And yeah, there really were a full forty-eight of us, from the ages of nine—my team, as well as Team Asuma (since I had no idea who their sensei was)—to fifteen or sixteen. No sensei groups running around, though—Raidō was there, with a bunch of other chūnin assistants. I kind of wondered if there was some…faculty room solely for the jōnin who were waiting for their students to get their asses in gear.

Hm. I suppose if I ever got that far, I’d find out.

Anyway, Shinku Yūhi was on the stage again, saying, “The Second Exam will take place in one hour at Training Ground Forty-Four. All paperwork and registration will be completed on-site at the time of entry.” He glared out at all of us. Tardiness will not be tolerated. There will be no late entrants.”

…I was starting to get the feeling that Kakashi only got away with half the shit he did either because Shinku Yūhi was dead in the future, or because he was just that good. Sort of like Gai, but not.

Anyway, as the crowd thinned out, we of Team Minato filed out as well.

“That…could have gone worse, but it could have gone better, too.” I said.

“It’s not like we had any ridiculous cheating skills.” Obito pointed out.

“Yeah, I know, but it’d’ve been nice to be able to get more of a read on the other teams before we got shoved into the Forest of Death.” I replied.

“…The Forest of Death?” Rin asked.

“It’s a nickname.” I said as we walked. Obito was to my right, with Rin on his. We were kinda flanking the only guy on our team for some reason I really couldn’t name. “It’s a training field that’s about twenty kilometers across, with a river running through and a tower in the middle. Mom said it’s where they usually hold the Chūnin Exams. Or, well, the survival test part of it.”

Okay, so Mom never said that, but I was a busybody and could see (a version of) the future. I had connections that I had totally made up myself.

Or made up of ourselves, perhaps.

“How bad can it be?” Obito sounded like he’d like to scoff, but wasn’t quite managing it. The genjutsu must have shaken him up pretty badly.

“Three words: Three-meter centipedes.”

We all shuddered.
“Who—why do people even have things like that? Because you can’t tell me that having a huge forest full of super-bugs is a good idea.” Obito complained. “We could just, say, burn the whole thing down and start over without the huge bugs and whatever else’s in there.”

**That’d be like the Spartans handing one of their recruits a free meal, with no killing or cheating or stealing required. Too easy.**

I hated the whole ninja way of life sometimes.

“I think Training Ground Zero is like that.” I said, thinking of what amounted to killer wildlife—the kind that was totally trained to be killer wildlife. Boxing kangaroos and stuff. The only reason they were all still alive was because someone at some point had said, “BUT WHAT ABOUT THE POOR ANIMALS.”

(Personally, I thought that any animal that could beat a chūnin down probably needed a hitai-ate and a place in the chain of command, but that was just my opinion.)

So, no one technically trained there. It was a wildlife preserve.

Rin blinked. “We have a Training Ground Zero?”

I nodded. “It’s only called that because no one uses it. Ever.”

“Bah. If you want to train and there aren’t any public fields open, just come over to the Uchiha district.” Obito said, interlacing his fingers behind his head. “No one’s ever in the one near my house.”

“Aw, I might just take you up on that someday. Just to see your stupid cousins’ faces.” I poked Obito in the side, making him flail around. Like a lot of kids, Obito was ticklish. Horribly so. It was also completely hilarious.

“Kei, don’t do that!” Obito whined, having slapped my hands away.

I stuck my tongue out at him. “When am I gonna get a chance to tease you in the exam zone? Never! So I’m preparing.”

Obito made a face.

“Kei-senpai, stop picking on Obito.” Rin said. “You’re supposed to be the team leader now, and you have a responsibility to be professional.”

I thought about that. I really did.

“Nope.” I said, and slung one of my arms around Obito’s shoulders. God, the kid needed to damn well start growing or I was gonna be the biggest kid on Team Minato and be able to pull off being a boy forever and that would be tragic. “Professional stuff is for Kakashi, and he isn’t here. So clearly, I need to forge my own leaderly path.”

‘Leaderly’ isn’t a word.” Obito said bluntly, though he didn’t push me away.

“It’s a word if people say it enough.” I replied. “And anyway, do you feel picked-on, Obito?”

“I feel like an armrest.”

“So, you feel like me? Because I am Sensei’s favorite armrest.”
“Maybe Minato-san shouldn’t use you two as armrests.” Rin said.

“I dunno, I’d do it if I was taller.” I said.

“Me too.”

“…What happened to ‘treat others as you’d want to be treated?’” Rin demanded. Oh, we were terrible. Together and separately.

Obito shrugged with some difficulty, since I was still hanging off him. “I dunno, if I had a bunch of tiny bratty students I don’t think I’d be all that interested in pretending they were my height if they weren’t.”

I added. “Which is not, technically, about height and more about the fact that they’d be brats.”

“Pretty much.” Obito concluded.

Rin gave us both a funny look. “Okay, I know I wasn’t there for a lot of your training, but you really are acting in sync a lot now.”

Yay! That meant we could probably fight someone on a higher level than us for a while and not die. Most likely, anyway, since we hadn’t tested our coordination in a real fight yet.

You know that episode of Neon Genesis Evangelion where Shinji and Asuka have to play a DDR clone for hours? Just to get their attacks to sync up so they can destroy that weird twinning angel? Yeah, our lives had been a lot like that whenever Sensei got us to specifically practice pair fighting.

Well, we’d see how that would work out.

Anyway, it took us less than fifteen minutes to get to the “main” entrance of the Forest of Death. A bunch of genin teams had gotten there before us and were spread out all over the place, filling out wrongful death waivers and things like that. I managed to grab three separate sheets for us, which we filled out less because we actually thought we were going to be dying and more because they wouldn’t let us into the damn place without them.

(Well, I’m sure Orochimaru would have, but he wasn’t a proctor and the point was therefore moot.)

“Welcome to Training Ground Forty-Four. I will be the head proctor of your examination today, and as such, I will explain the rules.” Shinku had, once again, somehow found a podium thing. At least, he was standing on top of something, even if the crowd was a bit too thick to see exactly what. I like to think it was a soap box.

“This is another dual-purpose exam, as I’m sure you’ve come to expect by now. Behind me is the entrance to Training Ground Forty-Four, colloquially known as the Forest of Death. Once inside, you will be fighting for your lives against the hostile environment. In addition, you will be attempting to secure one of these.” Here, he held up a scroll that was marked with the kanji for Heaven and painted with two colored bands—deep, dark red. “There are two scrolls of each color, with eight colors total. One Heaven, and one for Earth. In order to advance to the next round, you must find the scroll of the opposite denomination in the same color as yours, and open them at the same time as the other team. The team with the opposite scroll will be your deadly enemies for the duration of the five-day span of the exam.”

Okay. A matching game as played by ninjas. God, we were terrible and my brain was incredibly so.

“Once opened, the scroll will summon a special jōnin proctor for your match—and without being
witnessed defeating the opposite team, you will not advance.” He flipped the scroll over. “All team members must be healthy enough to complete the mission by the time any team makes their final run at the tower. Teams with incapacitated or dead members will not be allowed to advance.” He went on sternly, “Opening the scrolls before encountering the opposite-denomination team will result in immediate disqualification. Leaving the examination area during the five-day period will result in disqualification. Arriving at the tower without the two colored scrolls and one victory scroll, from the proctor summoned to your match, will result in disqualification. Attacking a proctor will disqualify the entire team.”

The scroll vanished into thin air. “And, finally, teams that fail to either arrive at the central tower or complete their mission objectives at the end of five days will be disqualified, with a complimentary corpse hunt taking place during the day after the exams.” He shrugged. “Though by that point, I fully expect that there won’t be anything left to find other than bones. If that.”

“So,” I said to Rin as Kurenai’s dad (or, at least I thought he was Kurenai’s dad) went on to talk about the entry gates, “what do you think about taking care of the combat part as soon as possible?”

“I say we need a plan.” Rin said firmly.

The chūnin were directing people over to booths so we could be assigned a scroll color and kanji. I kind of wanted to hold back, since I had no idea what we were going to do in order to beat the crap out of another team if they turned out to be way more powerful than we were. Other than, you know, fight as hard as we could. The whole sanctioned match thing really threw a wrench in the idea of having traps and things set up in advance, which seemed counterintuitive to the whole ninja thing.

I frowned, thinking over how much stuff Sensei had packed into those sealing scrolls for me. “… Maybe we need to take inventory first.”

“Hey, Kei, Rin-chan.” Obito broke in, watching the other teams. “I think the Hyūga girl is…yeah, she’s looking at everyone with her Byakugan.”

Oh. I hadn’t thought of that, but it would make a lot of sense to have a Byakugan user figure out who had the relevant scroll so her team could target the one that was actually relevant to their goals.

Don’t just coo over how awesome it is. Can we do anything similar?

That, I didn’t know.

“Obito, how good is your eyesight?” I asked.

“Um, probably better than average.” Obito hedged.

“Well, then you try to figure out who’s carrying the other scroll, once we get a color.” I said. “I’m pretty sure my vision’s terrible.”

A lie. My vision before had been an unmitigated crippling weakness, complete with an effective range of…two and a half inches. At best. Barring glasses, contact lenses, or a surgical rearrangement of my eyeballs, anyway. It wasn’t bad in my new life, since I obviously didn’t need corrective lenses, but I was still pretty sure Obito’s was better.

“So, we’re planning on going after them right away?” Rin asked in an undertone as Obito scanned the crowd.

At the thought of spending more than a few days in the Forest of Death, I winced almost imperceptibly. “Our weakness is endurance, compared to the rest of the genin. And field experience.
We can’t afford to be stuck out there fighting animals for days on end.”

Rin pressed her lips together in a tight frown.

I just hoped that we ended up fighting someone who wouldn’t kill us all if they won.

Anyway, we ended up with a green-bound Heaven scroll. I still wasn’t sure who had the Earth counterpart, but at least we were kind of prepared for the idea of having to duel for dinner later. Granted, sixteen genin teams in, what, three hundred and fourteen square kilometers wasn’t exactly a crowded situation, but the forest was a minefield whatever way you looked at it.

“A chūnin will escort you to your starting gates. When the siren sounds, you may enter and begin your test.” Shinku told us all. “Good luck, and good hunting.”

He poofed away, leaving us genin to be escorted around the perimeter of the forest. It was a pretty tense walk, all told, and took about twenty minutes of shinobi-style running to get away from all the other teams heading around the same way. Then we were there. It all seemed to be moving too quickly.

My hands were shaking, so I clenched them into fists and stuck them in my pockets.

At least our first opponents probably won’t be human.

Not helping, I thought.

“I think,” Obito began as the chūnin left us at our gate, “we might be looking out for either Gai or Asuma’s teams. It was a little hard to make out, though.”

“It’s a good start.” I told him seriously. “Good job, Obito.”

Obito flushed a little, and Rin said, “Have you ever met them before, Kei-senpai?”

“Probably? I don’t really remember. Asuma’s one of the Hokage’s sons, though, and I know he has Kurenai Yūhi on his team. I think we might have been in the same kunoichi class.” Come to think of it, I really hadn’t bothered to associate with or befriend many people in school other than Rin and Obito. I sure hoped Hayate was being more sociable than I had been.

“There’s those two, yes, but there’s also Ibiki Morino.” Rin frowned. “I don’t really remember much about him specifically, but he’s not a pushover.”

“You mean he’s creepy,” Obito corrected.

“No, he’s pretty strong, too.”

“I guess we’re not the youngest team in the Exam, at least.” I muttered. I was pretty sure that Ibiki hadn’t actually been on the same team as Asuma and Kurenai in my visions, but…well, we were all about the same age and apparently none of us had been killed. Maybe there was more team shuffling going on than I thought.

Putting loads of kids under the age of ten on the same genin teams for a Chūnin Exam seemed kind of stupid to me, though.

Hypocritical, I know, but I also happened to think that Sensei was making a major mistake even giving us the option of taking the exams.

The siren sounded, cutting off any further team speculation.
And we were off.

I want to just reiterate this before the games begin: I hate camping. I can appreciate nature just fine without having to risk getting eaten by tigers by sleeping in what amounts to a blasted Hot Pocket wrapper. If I want to sleep outdoors, I damn well sleep in a tree to avoid ground-bound predators and traps and people’s feet. Also, there’s more comfy moss and fewer rocks the farther up you go in a decent Hashirama tree, which is nice.

We didn’t end up meeting any teams the first day.

To be perfectly honest, the forest was enough of a problem.

I mean, I sure sensed all sorts of chaos and as people got used to the whole issue of Oh god this place is actually actively trying to kill us. Some of the trees were scarred from old battles, with kunai and shuriken rusted right into the bark and huge chunks of wood just plain missing from a few of them. We ran past a skeleton entangled in tree roots, then doubled back to see if we could salvage any of his equipment—the answer was no, by the way. We fished a little, until some explosions got a little too close for comfort and we had to leg it back into the trees. I think I woke up that night with screams ringing in my ears, sounding like someone must have basically tripped over a nest of those evil Konoha winged tree leeches (which are totally a thing, if you’re stupid about campsites).

We slept in the high canopy, in shifts, and with enough ninja wire around our sleeping places to cut a man to chunky salsa if he ran into it fast enough.

It did mean that we fought with birds for space, but that was better than fighting for our lives.

On the second day, we spotted the Hyūga girl with her team far below, during the first couple of hours of daylight. They traveled in roughly the forest’s understory, some thirty meters below us, and Obito shook his head when I looked to him to see if we should engage them. Given that their team blew right past us even though I was sure they’d seen us, I guess we didn’t have the scroll they were out for. Even if Obito had it in his jacket, not a lot got past the Byakugan.

That was also the day we ran into Gai’s team.

That thing about chunky salsa and ninja wire I mentioned before? Well, Gai almost reduced himself to ground hamburger.

He probably would have actually done it if Rin hadn’t put one of his legs into a stasis mode—basically, it fell asleep on him and he fell and his face smacked into the wood about a foot short of what I mentally referred to as the “wood-chipper threshold.” They got more finely rated the closer you got toward the actual sleeping boughs we were using.

“Hi, Gai-san.” I said, watching Ebisu and Genma arrive a little after he did. No dynamic entries this time.

“Hello again, Keisuke-san! Hello to you as well, Rin-san, Obito-san.” Gai said cheerfully, heedless of the fact that he’d almost been killed by accident.

“Hold still, Gai-san.” Rin ordered, hands glowing green. While she reversed the damage, I turned to the rest of his team. Obito was above all of us, sitting on his heels on the underside of a tree branch, and I frowned briefly.

We were all in the right places to cause damage, even if we weren’t actually ready for a fight to start. Close enough, right?
Genma reached into his jacket and pulled out his team’s scroll. It’d be a challenge to beat him…

“Our scroll’s green, Shiranui-san.” I said bluntly.

Genma glanced upward when neither Rin nor I produced it.

Obito scowled and unzipped the inner pocket of his jacket, dropping it into my waiting hand.

Green, to Team Genma’s blue. Then I tucked the scroll away. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, black. Off by less than a quarter-turn of the color wheel. Just a few shades and we’d be at each other’s throats inside of a minute.

“Guess we all got off lucky there.” Genma said mildly. “Thanks for fixing Gai up, kunoichi-san.”

This last was directed at Rin. “Kid charges ahead too much.”

“What technique are you using, Nohara-san?” Ebisu asked curiously.

Hey, at least the tension was mostly gone since we didn’t actually have to be enemies. In the immediate sense.

“Any luck?” I asked Genma, since apparently everyone else was fawning over Rin’s cool jutsu.

“Not at all.” Genma said, shrugging. “I did see a team get picked off, but by giant tigers. Not something everyone expects to run into out here. You?”

I had to admit that I wouldn’t have really expected tigers either, mostly since I though the apex predators were bugs, but I just shrugged. “We haven’t been looking as hard as we could be.”

“Might want to consider it.” Genma said. “Thing is, you can’t pass without the other team at least living long enough to get their beating on record. Scavenging’s not gonna cut it.”

No kidding. The teams that failed were failing their enemies, too.

Fwip-fwip went the senbon in his mouth. “So…you might wanna track down the other team. Keep them alive long enough to get in a real fight. You’re not gonna get anything done if all you do is hide up here in this nest of razor wire.”

I had the strangest feeling that we’d probably have to do exactly that. “Thanks for the advice.”

Genma shrugged. “No problem. It’s not like we get points for beating you guys now.”

Ha. Ha.

“Anyway. Gai, Ebisu, we’re leaving. Gotta go find that other team sometime.” Genma ordered. As the oldest genin, I guess that was really all he was there for.

“Of course, Genma-san! I have already recovered from my most unyouthful mistake, and will be ready for anything!”

Ebisu said something to Rin that I didn’t catch, but since Obito just was frowning I guessed it couldn’t have been too bad. Really nasty stuff would have led to an instant fistfight. Then he straightened his shades and said, “Yes, captain.”

Genma sighed. “Whatever, just get a move on.”

I waved to them as they left. It felt kind of awkward, like someone had left me hanging without
returning my high-five. Weird.

“So. What do you say to leaving the whole turtle strategy behind?” I asked.

“I was getting bored anyway, Kei.” Obito said firmly.

“I wish Gai-san hadn’t run off before I was sure I’d actually woken up all of those nerve endings.” Rin mumbled, distracted.

…Yeah, I was just gonna leave that bit be. Hopefully their team made it out okay.

The next team we ran into was having trouble on day three. Technically, we probably hadn’t needed to take such a long time to find them, but as group sensor and leader I had an obligation to make sure we didn’t actually get into any fights we couldn’t afford to. If anyone was in severe distress or there was some kind of huge fight going on, we probably couldn’t risk actually intervening unless it was the team we needed to pass. We weren’t strong enough yet.

The cold mathematics of survival.

That said, I still used chakra in my feet to cling to a branch long enough to slingshot myself into a direct line of interception with the newest group. I only sensed one team, which was somewhat better for our chances of living to see next Tuesday, but I wasn’t at all willing to meet them on the ground until I knew who they were.

I was pretty sure that Team Asuma didn’t have any sensors, but they might not have needed one.

Then their team shot past us, about fifty-some meters below, and I corrected myself. Whether they needed a sensor or not, having one might have helped.

“Rin-chan? Obito? Get ready for a fight.” I said over my shoulder, looping around the branch. Pursuit mode, go!

“Which one do you want to take on?” Obito asked, frowning. “I think I might be able to take Asuma…”

“I’ll go for Ibiki, then.” I replied under my breath. “Rin-chan?”

“If I remember right, Kurenai-san was a genjutsu-type kunoichi.” Rin said, glancing up at me. “Either one of us might be able to take her on and win.”

**And maybe we'll finally see if you have any actual resistance to genjutsu.**

“Okay. I’ll hold you to that.” I began the descent, bouncing off trees with the practiced ease of someone who spent entirely too much time doing just that. It was a Konoha shinobi thing, I swear. We make better time through trees than on the ground.

The air rippled.

**Genjutsu. I’ve got this.**

The Dreamer, when not working in concert with me, uses a genjutsu-canceling method that feels a little like someone decided to take my nerves and chakra coils and twang them like a rubber band.

Highly annoying, but effective.

“That wasn’t nice, Kurenai-san.” Rin said as we finally landed within spitting distance of the other
All of us stuck the landing. I was absurdly proud for all of two seconds.

“It wasn’t really supposed to be.” Kurenai replied.

Kurenai Yūhi was a girl our age or so, with those distinctive red eyes that were, in defiance of all things rational, not actually a kekkei genkai of any type. She was really a cute girl, with a fair, round face and untamed black hair. She had a hitai-ate on her forehead, like she would as an adult, and dressed in a white-and-pink thorn-patterned dress that looked at least more practical than her adult version.

Then again, Kakashi apparently picked up a shuriken-patterned scarf and I knew that Rin had a dress with the same pattern in green, so maybe our team wasn’t really fit to judge that kind of thing.

Kurenai’s greatest advantage was her genjutsu.

“So, what color scroll did you guys get?” Asuma asked.

Asuma was a fairly big kid already—bigger than I was in the shoulders and in arm-span. He wore a short-sleeved shirt with a ninja mesh-lined black undershirt, along with black pants and a white belt, and had spiky black hair and sharp brown eyes. He was the Hokage’s second child, and perhaps a little rebellious as a result despite being nine. I didn’t see his signature trench knives anywhere, but I wasn’t entirely certain where he’d first picked up their use in the timeline.

“Green.” I said, holding it up.

“Ah.” Asuma said. He glanced at the third member of their team.

Ibiki Morino was bigger than Asuma, despite the fact that he was probably only a bit older than we were. He had silver-gray hair stuffed mostly under a bandanna-style hitai-ate, like mine, and a rather defined jaw-line for a kid barely on the cusp of puberty. He wore one of those beige utility-style flak jackets—the sort we had for people who wanted the protection but weren’t promoted yet.

The scroll was produced. It was green, too. Ibiki tossed it to Asuma, who held it up to mine.

“On the count of three, then.” I said.

“Sure. One, two…”

On three, Asuma and I both flipped the scrolls open. I hurled my scroll across the clearing, away from Asuma’s team, and Asuma followed suit with just a split second’s hesitation.

When the smoke cleared, there was a woman in the standard Konoha uniform with a huge dog standing there. She was at least ten years older than us, putting her at about Sensei’s age, and had literally the wildest hair I’d ever seen. She looked downright feral, with Inuzuka tattoos on her cheeks and a distinctive wolf-eyed look I’d never seen on a human being before. I liked the little touches, though—lipstick and eye shadow, mainly. It was kind of like meeting the Joker and then realizing a second later that oh, it was only the Creeper. Not much of a downgrade in terms of scary, but at least you probably wouldn’t die.

I guess that made the huge wolf-dog next to her—black and white, sort of like a Siberian husky—an Inuzuka soldier as well.

Damn, and I’d wanted a second to hug him. Irrational, I know, but dogs are pretty much my favorite
“I’ll be the proctor of today’s match between…what’s it say here…Team Minato and Team Sasukibe. Name’s Tsume Inuzuka, special jōnin. And this here is my partner, Kuromaru.” Tsume told us, in a tone that made me suspect that she was not the kind of woman anyone would be able to argue with. “There aren’t really any huge rules, but me and Kuromaru will be stepping in if it looks like anyone’s gonna die. Since you’re dead if your teammates are down, we’ll boot the losing team out of the exam area for free.” She rolled a shoulder. “By the way, you can start anytime.”

Us genin eyed each other speculatively. We were sizing each other up, trying to weigh pros and cons to each opponent.

“That means start now.” Tsume snapped, and we were jolted into action.
Chunin Exam Arc: Phase Two Complete

Chapter Summary

Kei: Make it to the Tower.

The thing about combat? It’s fast.

Unlike what movies and TV make it seem, any fight in real life is probably over in a matter of minutes, if not seconds. Most people don’t engage in hours-long drama-filled diatribes about their stupid tragic pasts while trying to beat the stuffing out of someone else. It’s a terribly efficient way to do things, only possible in the case of a hilariously lopsided power differential—and if you can beat your opponents that soundly, why bother? In fights where both sides were evenly matched, there wasn’t time to stand back and shout about how Mommy and Daddy didn’t love you enough.

We were exchanging blows before Kuromaru even got a chance to bark his assent.

I immediately leapt back away from the fight, while Ibiki took a swing with a kunai through the space where I’d been. Obito launched a two-meter-wide fireball down range, scattering their team, and Rin threw a tagged kunai into the resulting explosion before we all retreated.

Strike, retreat, regroup, strike…

The next thing anyone on Team Sasukibe saw was me, coming in low and nearly at top speed with my kodachi out and swinging. It took both of Asuma’s hands to block me, which was something of a mistake.

I still had another hand, after all.

While Obito ducked around Kurenai’s kunai throws and started lacing the battlefield with Uchiha-made ninja wire—which was, like steel wool, almost hilariously flammable—and Rin kept trying to get a hit in on Ibiki with her hands glowing green, I gave a savage grin.

While my right hand had swung my kodachi directly into Asuma’s paired punch-knives, my other hand had been pulling my sturdy metal sheath in turn.

If Asuma didn’t dodge, he would have avoided death by bisection only to get a broken rib as a consolation prize.

**Disengage, you punk. Or else eat Gekkō-style Leaf Kenjutsu: Double Tiger Strike.**

I felt his chakra flare.

**Replacement jutsu.** The Dreamer confirmed it, at least.

Asuma exploded into smoke and I ended up launching a log across the clearing at Kurenai. Whoops?

She dodged, at least, and that was when Obito picked up the ninja wire again and improvised a trip-line. Rin was already there waiting, and Kurenai spun in midair to land a kick directly on Rin’s crossed forearms. Then she bounced off, having shoved chakra toward her feet, and Rin was sent
stumbling at least a meter back by the force of it.

And then I was there, the same time as Ibiki, and while Rin bounced off my back and toward the fight between Asuma, Kurenai, and Obito, I ducked under his swing and skidded across the dirt, aiming a knee at the inside of his knee.

He promptly screwed that plan over by stepping over me, but in the time he was only on one foot, I whipped around and aimed for his supporting leg with my other foot.

Goddamn it, I was gonna knock Ibiki on his ass if it took all day.

Then Obito crashed into the fight again, tussling more amateurishly with Asuma. Obito was on top, at least, but Asuma weighed more than he did and the second Obito lost balance he was going to get his face pounded in.

I tossed a few explosive kunai at Ibiki to drive him back, then grabbed Obito’s jacket shoulder and heaved just as Asuma swiped at him with the punch kunai.

“Careful.” I said in Obito’s ear, and he gave me a cocky grin that I completely agreed with. We could do this.

“Rin-chan, Kurenai’s up to you, okay?” Obito called. He kept his eyes on Asuma and Ibiki, who had finally recovered enough to group up normally.

“Right.” Rin said, squaring off with the other kunoichi. One of Kurenai’s arms wasn’t moving correctly, which made me wonder if Rin had already used that odd stunning jutsu on her.

Obito and I exchanged looks. Rin would be fine, though we weren’t necessarily so well off.

Well. Taking stock, our team was probably going to have some bruises, but everything else checked out. Team Sasukibe was a little worse for the wear, what with the burns since our team insisted on making everything explode. If I had to guess, I’d say that we were ready to go another ten rounds or so.

Except Kurenai. Rin was going to beat her just fine.

That said, Ibiki and Asuma were the heavy hitters to Kurenai’s genjutsu support.

Well, time to put our teamwork to the test, then.

I charged, leaping at the last possible moment with my chakra slamming into the ground to give me just that much more speed.

Asuma had already seen my double-draw technique, and instead of a full block he tried to redirect my momentum. Not necessarily a bad plan, but that meant that he caught my knee with his shoulder at the same time that Obito ducked behind both of us and rolled. Where he went, Uchiha ninja wire followed. Ibiki wasn’t as fast as any of us, but he whirled on Obito with a brand new weapon—a thin, collapsible blade he’d pulled out of one sleeve.

We were all too close together for him to get a real swing going, and Obito planted one hand on the ground and launched himself to the side, still trailing wire.

For my part, I’d knocked Asuma on his back on that run, but I skittered away and around the fight to regroup with Obito.
I flipped the scroll Sensei had given me into Obito’s waiting hand.

“Oh, you’re kidding me.” Obito said in disbelief. “You had this the whole time?”

“Yep!” I said. “Though I don’t have the slightest idea what’s in it.”

“Well, one way to find out.” Obito said. He still had a bloody nose from his tussle with Asuma, and swiped the blood away with his thumb.

I moved forward again, channeling chakra into my feet for another hit-and-run.

I felt someone—probably Ibiki—try to place a genjutsu on me, but the Dreamer tossed it aside with a sharp, Hands off, you jerk.

Asuma approached from one side, Ibiki from the other. I don’t know if they were expecting me to be a sitting duck, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to let them get any free hits.

Asuma jabbed three times in rapid succession, but I redirected the first one and smashed his left arm aside with my sheath. Then I planted my sheath in the soft ground and leapt onto it, springing out of the way of Ibiki’s combined shuriken/blade offense. I spun in the air and aimed another slash at his back, but he replaced himself with a log.

There is a distinct lack of big jutsu in this.

We’re kids.

And then Obito broke the seal on the scroll.

Technically speaking, the only thing you should have in weapon scrolls is, well, weapons. Less sane ones are designed to launch their contents at a speed just short of “absolutely lethal,” and are thus incompatible with most other contents. A lot of people therefore don’t even bother with the things, and just pop a weapon out of a seal one at a time and toss them by hand. Even Tenten.

Someone must have forgotten to tell Sensei that, because the scroll disgorged enough camping equipment—tents, utensils, sleeping bags, packaged food, and canteens—for three people and fired everything the length of the clearing.

I was already in the air, at least. While I got a little tripped up and failed to stick my landing when a sleeping bag hit my foot, at least I didn’t get mobbed by a bunch of tents like Asuma and Ibiki did. They’d cut their way out in a second, but I could probably knock at least one of them out before then.

“What the hell was that?” Tsume demanded, though I wasn’t really listening.

“Obito?” I was about to punch Asuma in the head regardless of his answer, but I was still interested in hearing his opinion.

“You might wanna back up, Kei.” Obito said.

Oh. Plan A was still valid, then.

I backed up.

“Good?” I asked.

“Good enough. Go help Rin out, okay?” Obito said distractedly. He was finally out of Uchiha-
trademark ninja wire, but I’d handed over my allowance of explosive tags and he was already attaching them to kunai and wire and putting them everywhere in the time it took for Ibiki to resurface from under a tent. They were linked by plain wire, which could carry a chakra charge without exploding into flame, which was really the best part about it.

I checked the wires and the tags, briefly, before going over to see where Rin and Kurenai had gotten off to.

**Genjutsu, again.** The Dreamer reported, and my chakra shuddered.

And then, rather abruptly, Kurenai went tumbling past me as though flung there by a chakra-charged punch. I looked back in the direction she’d come from and saw Rin trying to massage feeling back into her fingers.

Rule one of genjutsu (or something like that): Dazing the user works just fine if you can’t dispel it normally. I could, but Rin’s intervention was nonetheless awesome.

“Got her?” I asked.

“Yep.” Rin said, and her hands glowed briefly green to close her split knuckles. “Just like Akihito-shishō said, it’s all in the timing.”

“Sorry to leave you without backup against her, anyway. Though you got everything handled just fine.” I said, but I was already thinking about the implications because I really didn’t have the power to turn my brain off. My mouth, yes. The hamster wheel of my brain, no.

Exactly how good did you have to be in order to use Tsunade’s super strength technique?

In a way, the version that Sakura ended up learning in the future wasn’t precisely the full potential of the technique. While her strength was dependent on precise release of chakra at the time of impact, as opposed to the usual “hold it and hit them with it” technique that most shinobi used to enhance their muscles, Tsunade had been renowned for her immense strength in general. That was a woman who could crush rocks with her bare hands at age ten, and only got around to doing things like swinging Gamabunta’s sword around long after that.

I wondered if that had to do with the Strength of a Hundred Seal and how it was designed.

Even the first stage had knocked Kurenai silly, so I guess that would have to be enough for now. Later, though, I’d have to ask Yamaguchi-sensei what he was teaching Rin. Then I resolved to ask Sensei for sealing lessons after the Exam was over. Not like Yamaguchi-sensei was interested in teaching me anymore.

“Ready, Kei!” Obito said in a maniacally cheerful sort of way as we joined him. We’d only been a few feet away, but it became clear that when Obito wanted to blow something up, he went all out.

 Seriously. A good four meters around Team Sasukibbe was a spider-web of two types of ninja wire, about fifteen kunai rigged to launch on hair-triggers, and all of my exploding tags.

“I’d suggest giving up, but that’d imply that you actually have a choice.” I said to the boys, since Kurenai was either out or effectively out, sliding my kodachi back into its scabbard so I could put my hands on my hips in a dramatic fashion. “Give up and you won’t explode.”

“You’re such a drama queen.” Rin said under her breath.

“Like hell!” Asuma snapped, but then one of the wires twched ominously, with a noise like a
twanging piano wire.

Obito gave me a thumbs-up, though all of his fingers were occupied. In my opinion, anyway, it was a bad idea to have the chakra-reactive wires wound around his fingers, but…well, it wasn’t my part of the plan anyway.

“We’ve lost, Asuma.” Ibiki informed us all rather gravely. Then again, I was also pretty sure he was the smartest member of the team as it was. You didn’t get to be the head of interrogation by age twenty-seven by being either a pushover or a moron. Sure, most of us didn’t have our careers set in stone at age nine, but Ibiki had the makings of a survivor.

Or maybe I was looking too hard for something that wasn’t even there yet.

Still, I didn’t drop my guard. I’d been hit with three genjutsu inside of five minutes and not all of them had been Kurenai’s.

“I’d have to agree there. Even if Yūhi wasn’t out of it, you’re up to our chins in razor wire, Uchiha flaming wires, exploding tags, and camping equipment. That Uchiha kid twitches wrong and everyone here gets blown into hilarious chunks.” Tsume grinned. “Or if he does it right. Either way you’re dead.”

Asuma looked at Tsume, then at us. I could draw my blade any second, and Rin had proved that that field medic training gave her lightning reflexes. We were pretty good to go for anything like a round two. Meanwhile, of us, only Obito had used chakra-intensive jutsu, while Team Sasukibe had been throwing around genjutsu and replacements all over the place.

I didn’t doubt that Asuma and Ibiki had more stamina than any of us, but we used our chakra more effectively. And if I had to punch Asuma in the nose with a chakra-enhanced fist to prove that point, I would.

“We…surrender.” Asuma said at length, looking as though the words were literally painful to spit out.

“Good choice, Sarutobi.” Tsume said. “Knew you were your dad’s kid.”

Asuma glared.

“Now, let’s pick our way out of this maze and get your whole team to a medical station.” Tsume continued, ignoring his pint-sized fury. “Mind if a clip a couple wires, Uchiha?”

“Yeah, that’s cool.” Obito said, already unwinding some of the less hopeless knots. “You don’t need to worry about more than like, ten of them. Most of the tags are duds.”

“What?” Asuma snarled. Not that I couldn’t take him on my own, but I didn’t feel like having him resent Obito forever and ever.

“My idea.” I admitted. “Sensei wouldn’t let us have more than about thirty tags between us, so I copied a crapton of them onto tracing paper and called it good.”

It’d only taken me three nights to do it. And some of them were still kind of shitty-looking if you paid attention.

Tsume threw her head back and laughed. “Well done, kid! Gotta admit, that was pretty clever. They even smell real.”
I shrugged. “I tried.”

“Yeah, yeah. All right, Team Sasukibe! Time to get the hell out and let the tricky brats move on.” Tsume ordered, clearly done with us. “Oh, and Team Minato gets a victory scroll.” Idly, Tsume reached into her vest and pulled out a scroll without any colored borders. She tossed it at us, and Rin caught it. “Now get moving. The tower’s a good ways away and there’s a lot of trouble in between here and there.”

They left in something of a lurch, since Tsume had Kuromaru carry Kurenai, but we didn’t mind. We still had to gather up all of the wire everywhere and re-spool it. We also stuffed all of our scrolls into Obito’s jacket, because he had bigger pockets.

“By the way, Obito, I lied.” I said as we extracted the last tag.

Obito, taking the wire from me and winding it around the coil, said, “About what?”

“Technically, the tags I made are real.” I explained.

Obito froze.

“Only they’re kind of shitty. They’re stable, though.” I held one of the tags up, wrapping it around the handle of one of my kunai. I could spare it for a demonstration. “Probably wouldn’t do more than burn your hair off if they got set off.”

“So, wait, you made all these working tags in less than three days?” Rin asked, frowning. “Why’d you tell us they were fake?”

“Because they’re shitty tags and I didn’t want you to be afraid to use them.” I repeated. I held up the armed kunai. “Watch.”

I slammed my chakra into the tag and hurled it across the clearing, where it imbedded itself point-first in a tree.

After about a quarter-second’s delay, the kunai made a crack noise and there was a lot of smoke.

And that was it. It might have scorched the linen wrapping of the handle, at most.

“See what I mean? They’re distractions at best.” I said, frustrated. “You need a load of chakra to activate them, they only make noise and smoke, they’re on tracing paper, and I can tell that I got the kanji wrong.”

“They still work, though.” Obito said. “I mean, a distraction in the right place is pretty good. When’d you start?”

“My dad used to make tags. I got one of his old designs out when Sensei didn’t give us enough for the plan.” I replied, suppressing the irrational flare of hurt that had come with opening that old box. “Most people can’t tell when a tag’s been made badly or not under pressure.”

Obito punched me in the shoulder, mostly to shock me out of my pity-party. “Hey! Don’t get so down about things. We’re halfway through the Chūnin Exams now because of those ’shitty’ tags, so don’t worry. We’ve got this in the bag.”

“Speaking of which, we should probably get going before anyone else gets any ideas.” Rin said, since we’d cleaned up.
“Yeah, okay. Too bad about the supplies, but I guess they sacrificed themselves for a worthy cause.” I added, shaking off my malaise with a rough grin.

Obito shrugged and said, “Not like we used them anyway.”

“True, but let’s not tell Sensei that.” I said. I shook myself to clear my head. “All right. It’s still the second day, so teams won’t be clustered around the tower just yet. Let’s book it before they do.”

“Book it?” Rin asked.

Whoops.

I waved a hand dismissively. “Beat feet, run like hell, move out, I don’t care. Let’s just go.”

We did, thank god.

The run to the tower was, thankfully, mostly uneventful. To be honest, after a certain point, some shinobi just aren’t worth intercepting if they’re going fast enough. Our team wasn’t one of them, but we had some of the principles down—presenting a small, constantly moving profile, and refusing to engage enemies unnecessarily. I took point again, leading us well around the other teams I could sense, and with Rin in the middle and Obito at the rear we were making pretty good time.

It was honestly kind of surprising when we made it to the tower in about twenty minutes.

Then again, with an effective speed of about twenty kilometers per hour and flinging ourselves around the canopy like a bunch of long-distance jumping monkeys on crack, perhaps it was really less unexpected than I thought.

I kicked the front door open and we scrambled inside.

It looked pretty much exactly the same way it would seventeen—maybe sixteen—years in the future. Aside from the metal stairs running up both sides and the massive statue with a poem on the wall over its head, the arena was pretty bare. Both the floor and ceilings were lined with square tiles, and I reached out with my chakra sense to confirm that there were, in fact, chūnin in the building somewhere. It’d suck to show up and then have wait around for so long.

“The poem on the wall…” Rin began, but I was pretty sure I didn’t really care. The poem was essentially pointless if you knew enough about shinobi life already, and I was curious about the “victory” scroll.

A sound soul dwells within a sound mind and a sound body…

Wrong show, but you can see what I mean.

“Obito, can I see the thing we got from Tsume?” I asked, holding my hand out.

“Yeah, but I thought we weren’t supposed to open it.” Obito pointed out.

“I’m not sure anyone actually said that, but I figure if we’re at the tower there can be exceptions.” I replied, and broke the paper strip on the scroll.

Then I threw that sucker right across the room.

Sparks from a busted wire…

“Sup, Kakashi?” I asked, almost before the smoke cleared.
Obito made a sputtering sound and growled, “That bastard won’t stop following us!”

“How’d you guess?” Kakashi asked suspiciously, thunder stolen.

I grinned. “Sensor-type shinobi, remember? By the way, you totally left me hanging on that hug.”

“One, you obviously didn’t need whatever ‘luck’ you claimed you’d get from it. Two, if you haven’t bathed in three days, stay over there.” Kakashi snapped, backing up in case I didn’t get the point.

Pfft. I totally stripped down to my skivvies in enemy territory to bathe.

Not. I like my blood where it is.

“Um, Kakashi-kun, what are you here for, exactly?” Rin asked, because Obito and I were off on tangents and needed to be redirected before we hurt ourselves.

“Tch.” Kakashi jabbed a thumb back over his shoulder. “See that? How much do any of you brats understand about what it takes to be a chūnin?”

“Watch who you’re calling a brat, Kakashi.” I said, equally blunt. I crossed my arms. “It’s simple enough. *If your mind is lacking, hone your knowledge. If your body is lacking, hone your strength.* A chūnin has to be balanced in the shinobi arts, adaptable, and a squad leader on missions that, sometimes, will come with a high probability of death. You can’t back down then, because your comrades are depending on you, and a shinobi carries their village with them on their shoulders.”

Kakashi gave me a flat look. “Thank you for proving that you have basic reading comprehension skills.”

“Welcome to the tower, anyway.” Kakashi said dismissively. “You heard the speech, and now you get a chance to rest and recover since you made it two days before the deadline. Have fun with that.”

“Yeah, no.” I said, and managed to grab his scarf before he could poof away. “No. We are having a team dinner and you are cordially invited to stick around.”

“Just let him go, Kei.” Obito said, but I could be stubborn.

Kakashi had a pretty good glare, I’ll give him that, but he didn’t try to pull away. “And why should I do that?”

“Because I need to thank you.”

I could practically hear the “What?” Obito said before he said it. Like an oncoming roll of thunder.

Kakashi said, “You don’t need to thank me for pointing out the obvious.”

“In that case, I really want to know how many genin know how to string together enough exploding tags to make a minefield in midair.” I said. The fireballs and the other distractions had been my decision, but that first spark of an idea had been Kakashi’s. “Look, Kakashi, just accept my gratitude and eat with us like a normal person. Unless you have some kind of urgent chūnin business?”

There. My olive branch. He offered one first, in his condescending way, but I could at least reciprocate that much in a more cheerful spirit than it was offered.

“Um.” Rin began, making me glance at her. “Maybe it’d be best to get cleaned up and settled in first. We did just spend three days in the woods.”
I blew out a sigh. “All right, Rin-chan, have it your way.”

Rin beamed.

“How come you can get her to listen but I can’t?” Obito asked Rin, probably because he thought I couldn’t hear him.

Eh. I could really have gone for a bath, I guess. For like the next three hours, just to get all the forest gunk stuff out.

Acknowledging the inevitable, I let go of Kakashi’s scarf. “So. Yes or no?”

Kakashi wound the shuriken-patterned mess back around his neck. “…Fine. Only if you promise to leave me alone for the next two days afterward.”

“Sure.” I said.

And then we parted ways, with him poofing away and me taking off at a brisk trot. If I had to fight Obito or Rin for hot water privileges, I’d probably curl up in a corner and cry or something. If it was any other team, though, I’d fight them for it. I still had chakra to spare, for once.

Dinner was awkward as all get out, even with Obito trying to take a peek at Kakashi’s face as we ate ramen. Rin might have been showing more interest than normal, but honestly? I was okay. I was almost happy. Everyone was alive, Sensei was probably going to visit on the fifth day, I wasn’t nursing a concussion, and the most lethal part of the exam was over.

Life is, I thought as I downed another cup of tea, pretty damn good.
For the next two days, Obito, Rin, and I killed time by any means possible. We managed to beg a set of hanafuda cards off of a passing paperwork chūnin, but ended up stymied by the fact that none of us knew how to play. The extent of my experience consisted of knowing about the Ino-Shika-Chō trio and watching *Summer Wars* once upon a time, which added up to “less than useful.” We gave them back to him before resorting to casual sparring to test each other, with me and Rin playing at medic duty on alternate matches.

All in all, we didn’t really need recovery time. We hadn’t been injured at all, and when compared to the stuff we’d either gotten up to before (which Rin and Obito knew about) or would probably get up to later (which I had a few theories about), the Forest of Death hadn’t really been all that bad.

I’m sure that if we’d been, say, taking the version that the Rookie Nine would, we would have been in much bigger trouble.

I didn’t end up seeing or even sensing Kakashi for that timeframe, which sort of made me wonder what he was doing during all that.

Anyway, on the last day of the exam—after the 120-hour time limit expired—all passing teams gathered in the atrium that we’d started out in. All told, there were six teams of three genin each, putting us at eighteen competitors. I spotted Gai’s team and the one with the Hyuga, but, to be honest, I didn’t really care about anyone else in the exam.

I can honestly say that I didn’t pay attention to the Hokage’s speech. For better or for worse, I was a lot more focused on keeping my eyes shut to block out excess stimulus (which, oddly, gave the impression that I was either thinking intently or about to fall asleep) so I could search for Sensei and Kakashi’s chakra signatures. It might sound cruel, or callous, but the gist of the Hokage’s speech could be summed up as “congrats on passing, now try not to die again.”

We were having *preliminaries*.

**It could be worse.**

*How?*

I admit to being less than creative at that particular moment.

**Kabuto could be here.**

…*Or Orochimaru, or Danzō, or half-a-dozen other potential threats.* I sighed inwardly. *Even without them, though, the whole thing is such bullshit.*

**Well, look at the brighter side of things. Sensei only just got here.**

I glanced up at the walkways lining the atrium. Yep. There Sensei was, waving with just his fingers
at us kids. He seemed rather...unenthusiastic, really. While he wasn’t like Kushina, with her cheek-pinchning and tendency to hug so hard that something sprained, he usually was a bit more approving whenever we did something worth praising. Openly proud, perhaps. I dunno.

That...was really not a good sign.

But I guess it could probably wait until we were all really done beating the crap out of each other for arbitrary invisible points.

The Dreamer suggested, If you manage to lose, he’ll probably hold off on whatever he’s upset about right now until he can stop being upset over you getting hurt, later.

If anyone ever asks me to think happy thoughts as a cure for anything, I am going to point to that sentence right there and say that it is just not going to happen. I am permanently cracked, I tell you.

Something, something, get your asses off the floor so we can have you beat each other unconscious...

Yeah. I didn’t care about the specifics, there. The spirit of it all came through loud and clear.

“Sensei, did you see how awesome we were?” Obito said, running up to Sensei where he—and suddenly Kakashi was there, too—was standing.

“Yep. You did very well for your first time in the Exam.” Sensei said magnanimously, but I kept feeling like I was hearing something in his tone that he wasn’t making really obvious. “We’ll discuss it after the prelims.”

…Dodged some kind of bullet there, I think.

“So, one-on-one matches…” Rin prompted.

“Right. No ties—only double disqualifications. Try your best, but don’t be too disappointed if you don’t make it past—you’re the youngest kids in the Exam.” Sensei replied.

I wonder if it’s possible to mess up the winner so bad that it’ll hurt their performance in the Finals. We’ll probably find out.

I’d just skip over the matches for people I didn’t care about, but as it happens, the first match came up about fifteen seconds after Sensei said that.

“Maito Gai versus Obito Uchiha. Please come down to the combat floor.”

…I think the proctor might have been a Sarutobi, but damned if I’d ever learn his name between my inattention and his probably-short expected lifespan.

Obito grinned, wider and yet fiercer than I’d ever seen him. He was still a kid, and a major goof, but he wanted to fight and win and his opponent was someone he actually seemed to like and respect (if only because Gai’s existence seemed to annoy Kakashi quite a lot), and now he had a real chance to test himself.

“Ready, Gai?” Obito called, pitching himself over the railing to land nearly in the center of the room. And we’d only just gotten up the stairs, too.

Did he seriously just stick the landing?
Yep.

Gai, for his part, vanished from the upper deck and reappeared in a swirl of leaves about three meters from Obito, which made me wonder where the leaves had come from. “I am always ready, Obito-san! Come, and let us do battle!”

Obito paused, nonplussed. “…Okay, sure. Why the hell not.”

**This is going to end badly.**

*Also yep.*

You sort of have to have a bit of context to understand my thought processes here, I think.

Gai is strong. As a genin, the only opponent who defeated him (as far as anyone knows) was a then-genin or newly-made chūnin Kakashi. In the story of *Naruto* as I knew it, Gai had gone with zero on-screen or on-panel defeats until running into Madara Uchiha during the Fourth Shinobi World War. Madara then, it should be noted, was *leagues* past where he would have been even in his prime—for fuck’s sake, normal people do not survive getting kicked in half by Lee, or being punched by Tsunade while she’s channeling her Strength of a Hundred technique, or any number of other things. Non-zombie shinobi have to deal with things like not having the Rinnegan, with being unable to use Wood Release, and having actual chakra limits imposed by their physical bodies.

The fact that Gai managed to run roughshod over everyone before *that* speaks volumes.

On the other hand, at this point in our lives, Gai has about as much tactical acuity as a thrown brick.

The same could be said of Obito, actually.

Obito was sort of the perennial loser in some ways—the klutz, the goofball, the non-Naruto dead last from a generation before. Loyal, headstrong, but not particularly adept at any shinobi arts other than teamwork, which was explicitly banned by the current rules. Naruto had least had the advantage of being able to make his own teammates. By the thousands.

Then again, he was the one to put our explosive deathtrap into motion. I’d trusted him with that. Rin had trusted him with that. We’d put our futures (or at least a small part of it) in his hands and he’d come through just fine.

“Obito is going to lose.” Kakashi said in an undertone, eyes locked on the slowly circling genin below.

My knee-jerk reaction was to deny it, but… *Gai*. There are some things a genin fresh out of the Academy isn’t meant to run into and someone who could keep up with Kakashi, like Gai, fell into that category.

As soon as the examiner’s hand sliced through the air, both of the boys were on the move. Gai was blindingly fast—even then, he was displaying the kind of speed that Lee would eventually learn from him, and the kind of combat aptitude that showed very clearly the type of shinobi he would grow into. If Obito had the Sharingan then, he would have been just as thoroughly outmatched as Sasuke was eventually, against Lee. Obito threw about six kunai in the process of hurling himself to one side, out of Gai’s attack trajectory. The difference between Obito and Gai was staggering.

The arena *exploded*.

It just so happened that Obito had never gotten around to redistributing all of that ninja wire and
those explosive tags we didn’t use. Including the crappy smoke bomb things I’d made.

The difference, it seemed, was staggering, but not quite insurmountable.

Amid all of the billowing smoke, I could feel Gai’s chakra swirl around in confusion before he leapt free of the chaos and stuck to the ceiling, trying to take stock of the situation. For someone without a sensing ability, I guess it was a lot more confusing to him than to me.

Obito had used the tags—my tags, specifically—as a smokescreen. I was pretty sure he’d attached some of them to the undersides of his sandals and to the backs of the plates over his hands, and activated them as well as the ones he’d thrown. The result was a lot of choking white smoke and the smell of something burning.

Kakashi looked vaguely ill, briefly. I guess his mask filtered out the worst of it, but having a dog’s sense of smell was probably a bit uncomfortable sometimes.

“Where did he get smoke tags?” Sensei asked quietly, making me blink.

There was actually a name for the weird scribbles I’d made? And here I’d just thought they were defective.

“Oh, Kei-senpai made them.” Rin said.

Sensei’s laser-gaze focused on me. For my part, I immediately looked away and down, to where the smoke was thinning out a bit and Obito was still determinedly not visible. I could sense him, though, on the underside of the catwalk we were standing on, but Gai couldn’t see him from the ceiling.

“I just…found some old designs Dad made.” I mumbled, torn between embarrassment and something that felt just awkward. One of these days, I was gonna stop drawing suspicion to myself.

“Senpai?” Rin felt confused, but I didn’t want to look at her.

“…Obito isn’t doing badly, for a rookie.” Sensei said, at length. “But let’s see where he goes from here.”

Obito, who was not as stupid as some people liked to assume, seemed to know better than to engage Gai in taijutsu. Instead, as the smoke dispersed and Gai finally realized where he was, Obito spun a web. A web of lies and deceit and…wires.

Gai charged, of course, because Gai is Gai no matter what the age involved.

“LEAF WHIRLWIND!” If Obito had actually still been there, I’m sure he would have lost instantly.

But as it was, Gai swung his legs through a rapid succession of basic Clone jutsu projections. They had no substance whatsoever and were about as obvious as could be—Obito had a knack, but they were still incapable of projecting any chakra—but they kept Gai distracted for just about two seconds.

Obito, who had picked up a thing or two in the past few months, skittered across the arena behind Gai, low to the ground. He was keeping his eyes trained on Gai, who had finally smashed through all the clones with completely unnecessary force, but he also unspooled a coil of wire as he went. I couldn’t tell if it was the flammable sort or the basic kind but it didn’t really matter. Obito had something like a plan and it would probably involve setting just about everything on fire.

And then the air was full of metal. It was also full of Gai, who was stupidly fast and could bounce
with the best of them.

From my perspective, it was actually easier to keep track of the fight if I just followed their chakra signatures instead of trying to use my eyes. I tried to keep my eyes open, though, since if Obito realized I wasn’t watching it might have distracted him.

Gai was fast, and strong, but Obito’s wires were absolutely everywhere and what I’d said about the wires before was still valid. If Gai wasn’t careful, he’d start losing extremities until he lost momentum, and none of us really wanted that to happen.

Obito’s chakra remained mobile, spinning out yet more wires wherever he scrambled out of Gai’s way. Some of them had tags attached, and after one of them exploded, I think Gai was a little more cautious about the whole idea of charging in.

Then Obito set a whole section on fire.

“Fire Release: Grand Fireball Jutsu!”

With one of the most useless fire jutsu in the history of fire jutsu. Some of the real tags refused to go off until Obito sent his chakra screaming down the wires, nearly timing it perfectly.

Of course, Gai got out of the way, but it was a pretty straightforward demonstration of what an Uchiha could do with some planning.

Stalemate—Obito didn’t have the explosive strength necessary to knock Gai out, while Gai couldn’t get close enough to demonstrate his skill at just that.

There was one major flaw in this plan.

Now, I don’t think there was really any way to win against Gai without some other overwhelming advantage. Ninjutsu or genjutsu would have had to have been the focus in any match with him, since Gai wasn’t particularly adept at doing anything along those lines. He wasn’t as bad at it as Lee, as evidenced by his later summoning contract with a turtle, but ninjutsu and genjutsu weren’t really his thing.

Fact is, they weren’t Obito’s thing either. He knew a grand total of five ninjutsu and no genjutsu and couldn’t perform any of them without hand seals.

And he’d never gotten around to manipulating all those damn wires without having them wrapped around his fingers.

Gai grabbed some of the wire and pulled.

Obito yelped in surprised pain and was summarily dragged forward out of his protective web of wires, meeting Gai’s fist coming the other way at slightly subsonic speeds, with his face.

Obito flew across the room and hit the ground shoulder-first before rolling to a stop. Rin and I both flinched.

He didn’t get up.

The proctor had barely gotten the words, “Maito Gai is the winner,” out before Sensei and I had both vaulted the railing and gone to check on Obito. I was trailing in his wake, really, since no one outpaced Sensei, but it was the thought that counted, right?
“Kei-senpai, don’t touch him.” Rin ordered in a low voice, making me stop just before I would have probably tried to roll Obito over. Sensei wasn’t moving him either, except to gently lift one of his eyelids to see if he was unconscious or concussed or both.

Probably both, or else that shoulder would have gotten at least a yell out of him.

I twitched with barely-restrained anxiety.

“Back up so the medics can get to him.” Sensei ushered us both away as he said it, while white-clad medic-nin bustled over with a stretcher between them.

“How bad is it?” I called to one of them.

“Nothing fatal, and that’s enough for now,” said the other. I guessed that any more news would have to wait until I could visit Obito in the hospital. Hopefully, I wouldn’t have to stage an escape from my own hospital room to do it.

Still, I reached over and clasped Obito’s wrist for just a moment. “See you soon. Get better, or else.”

I swear he looked like he heard me.

Once everyone was more or less settled back down again and Gai had apologized for kicking Obito’s ass (though I wasn’t really sure why), and so on, we got back to the matches.

I kind of zoned out for a bit, leaning against the back wall with my arms folded over my chest. I didn’t really care about the other participants, since I was more than a little self-centered. Most of them were fairly straightforward fighters I could figure out just from peripheral chakra sensing, and I didn’t really know them anyway. I was focusing inward.

_i don’t think I can be a medic-nin._

**What, because you’re not as calm as Rin?**

I watched quietly as Ebisu and his kunoichi opponent traded blows and eventually ended up knocking each other silly. Ebisu had the basics down pat, with no obvious holes in his taijutsu and enough of a cool head to recover from the kick to the back of his knee without being reckless. By comparison, the kunoichi—a pigtailed thirteen-year-old girl in green, probably with about as much clan backing as me or Rin—was a little too quick to attack.

_i don’t think that should stop you, given what we’re going to face in the future._

And it won’t. _But as far as career paths go, I am never going to be a medic-nin._

…So, what, you’re going to learn enough to transplant an eye and then stop?

_Pretty much._

I knew as soon as I thought that that it was a stupid, _stupid_ plan. Preparing to deal with the worst that could happen was _not_ what I was doing then. I…just didn’t want to do it. But I still needed to fulfill my role, didn’t I?

**What happened to wanting to help people? What happened to your promise to Rin?**

She was right, of course, which is exactly why I didn’t reply.
When Ebisu finally gave his opponent a knockout blow to the solar plexus about five minutes later, I wasn’t necessarily surprised.

When Ebisu collapsed two seconds afterward as a result of being poisoned, I was.

“Double knockout. For our next match…”

Above the proctor’s head, the screen began shuffling through the names left. The medics, meanwhile, hauled the two unconscious kids away.

Bing! went the screen.

*Rin Nohara vs. Genma Shiranui.*

...This is going to be less one-sided, at least.

I wasn’t so sure about that. “Rin-chan?”

“What is it, Kei-senpai?” Rin asked, already halfway to the stairs.

Nothing especially poignant was coming to mind, so… “Don’t get yourself too badly hurt, okay?”

“I’ll be…not fine, but I promise I won’t break anything.” Rin said, and then she was heading down.

Kakashi made his way over to the railing spot next to mine as Rin and Genma finally got to the center of the floor, in front of the proctor. So did Sensei—I wasn’t really sure if he was trying to make sure Rin would be okay (even if he had to leap into the fight and separate the combatants by force and disqualify Rin) for her own sake or for Yamaguchi-sensei’s. Between them, they pretty much had me boxed in.

Lecture incoming in three, two…

“Anything to share with the class, Kei-kun?” Sensei asked.

“Like what? I sort of know how Genma fights, and I definitely know how Rin fights.” I offered, sans any detail.

Kakashi poked me in the shoulder and I whipped my head around, opening my mouth to say something. The look in his eyes stopped me. “I know you weren’t made genin for a brain that thinks that is good enough.”

Bluh bluh.

Even though I was bigger than Kakashi, I still shrank away a little even if there wasn’t really anywhere to go. It was kind of funny, in hindsight. “Uh…”

**Hurry up and say something less stupid.**

“Well, Genma uses senbon.” I offered. “He’s bigger and stronger than Rin, which is going to mean a lot of running around, but it doesn’t seem like he’s a power hitter like Gai was. If I had to guess, I think he’s like Gai in that it’s taijutsu first, but I think he has ninjutsu backup where Gai just kinda beats people silly.”

To be honest, I really didn’t know that much about Genma’s exact capabilities. His two pre-timeskip fights had been skipped over, but the results were at least fairly telling: versus Baki during the Chūnin Exam invasion, he’d survived where Hayate hadn’t. During the beginning of the Sasuke
Retrieval arc, he and Raidō had fought well enough to force all of the Sound Four to use the second stage of their Curse Seals and partially tire themselves out, even if they’d lost. Sometime in the intervening seventeen years, he and Raidō had been taught the Flying Thunder God jutsu in their role as Sensei’s bodyguards, but they couldn’t use it separately. He could spit a senbon hard enough to deflect kunai thrown by experienced shinobi, and appeared to have a relatively calm and slightly snarky personality.

Whenever you’re done gushing, we can get back to the problem at hand.

…Uh.

I continued, as though my train of thought hadn’t just derailed and wiped out a small town of imaginary people, “Rin-chan should be smarter than him, though, which counts for a lot.”

“I heard that, you know.” Genma called up from the ground floor.

“And that’s why I’m talking about you and not Rin.” I shot back.

“This really isn’t the time for this, Kei-senpai!” Rin rebuked.

I decided to shut up.

About four seconds later, Sensei said, “I’ll talk to you about your performance later.”

“I haven’t fought yet.”

“I mean what you did during the Second Exam. Tsume mentioned it to me.” Sensei corrected.

“…Okay.” There was a very good chance everything I’d done in the past week would be (or had already been) picked apart by a pair of older ninjas, and I didn’t like that idea one bit. Not looking forward to that, but there was a good chance I could end up unconscious after this anyway.

Anyway, enough dilly-dallying. Rin’s match was starting.

“Ready?” asked the proctor.

Genma and Rin both nodded.

“Begin!”

It was probably the only match that whole day where both fighters initially moved away from each other. I mean, Rin and Genma both leapt backward to get enough room to throw something, but it didn’t change the fact that it was the first match all day where neither of the fighters had been hotheaded to push the issue anyway.

Genma had senbon.

Rin had shuriken.

Metal bounced with a ting.

Genma moved first, charging across the room while bringing a kunai up to slice at Rin’s face, while Rin immediately moved through the hand seals for a Replacement. Rin was no slouch, for all that she still used hand seals, and I felt her move from her position to nearly the opposite end of the hall.

Genma ended up stabbing his own backpack.
And then Rin came flying in, hands glowing green and white, and Genma made the mistake of blocking rather than dodging. I heard a grunt of pain and both Rin and Genma separated, landing in crouches some five meters apart, and the fight seemed to pause. Rin got back to a fighting stance first, and when Genma followed, his left arm was notably slower to respond.

Genma’s arm wasn’t moving right, and without a diagnostic jutsu I couldn’t tell precisely why that was. Either Rin had numbed that arm, or she’d stabbed him with a chakra scalpel.

“Man, medical ninjutsu at your age,” Genma grumbled. “What is it with this Academy class?”

Oh, right. Gai had joined the Academy the same year that Rin, Obito, and Kakashi had.

I guess Rin had chosen to numb his arm rather than sever the tendons in it. Good for her (and for him).

“Fight me and find out.” Rin said, and slashed again and again with her numbing jutsu.

Now that Genma had figured out her range, though, he was swerving this way and that and deftly avoiding taking any more hits. Except to his unresponsive arm, which probably couldn’t even transmit pain. Having never been under the influence of Rin’s jutsu, I couldn’t know for sure.

Rin addressed the issue of the slippery older genin by cancelling the jutsu on one hand, and then flinging kunai after him while she closed the distance.

Her hand glowed blue-white in my chakra sense. The scalpels had come out and I wasn’t sure if Genma noticed.

Come on, Rin-chan! You can beat him!

When Rin and Genma clashed next, he may have successfully kicked her in the ribs, but she also managed to sever something in his leg. He collapsed on top of it, making a hissing noise from between clenched teeth, while Rin stumbled around wheezing for breath. Then she collapsed, curling around herself.

“I think she might have broken a rib.” I said, frowning and leaning over the railing to get a better look. Sensei’s hand grabbed the back of my shirt so I didn’t consider flinging myself into the ring to make sure she was okay—well, maybe he just didn’t want me to fall, but that was how I saw it.

“If she has, she’ll have to live with it for now.” Kakashi pointed out, though I was pretty sure that he wasn’t as indifferent as he liked to act.

“I know, but…”

Rin was a kid. She was in tears from the pain, not to mention the whole I can’t breathe thing, and her chakra scalpels guttered and died as her focus lapsed. I jerked against Sensei’s grip—Rin needed help!

“Ow…” Genma forced his way back to his feet, trying to keep as much weight off his bad leg as possible, and it quickly became clear that most of both of their offensive potential was shot.

Genma was better off, for what it mattered.

“Ow, ow, ow…” Genma said under his breath as he limped over to Rin. “Ow! Nohara-san, can you move?”
After a moment, Rin shook her head. She didn’t get up.

“Rin-chan!” Dammit, you promised you wouldn’t get hurt!

“All right, we’ll call the match here. We’ll get you a medic real quick.” Genma glanced at the proctor, who nodded. Then he looked back down at Rin. “Nohara-san?”

“I-I give up.” Rin choked out, gasping.

Genma didn’t look happy about it, but he finally dropped to the floor next to Rin. “Okay, now give me your hand. The medics will be here in a minute.”

Sensei finally let go of me, so I was able to sprint over to Rin and Genma.

“Diagnostic Jutsu!” I said, hands blurring through the seals and I spread my chakra out between my outstretched hands. “Okay, hold still.”

“Not going anywhere.” Genma muttered, and I scanned Rin first.

Rin whimpered, but at least the scan confirmed that she’d only broken one rib. Genma had cracked another one as collateral damage, but it was still in place and would probably heal with minimal interference.

“Everything’s going to be okay, Rin-chan.” I said, taking a few deep breaths to steady myself. “Shiranui-san?”

“Yeah? I’m fine—I just can’t walk.” Genma told me, but I looked him over anyway. “And I think she’s breaking my fingers.”

Rin had managed to get one good cut in, which had only severed muscle and no tendons of note. Genma wouldn’t be walking or fighting well, but it wasn’t enough to keep him out of the Third Exam on its own. The numbness of his arm wouldn’t last another hour, either.

Genma’s hand would be fine.

“Move aside, please.”

The medics had arrived. They loaded both Genma and Rin onto stretchers, and I heard Genma say something about putting him next to Ebisu, with Rin ending up next to Obito. Gai, from across the catwalks, looked rather worried. After a second, he trooped off after Genma, since it wasn’t like he had to stick around for any more of his teammates’ matches anyway.

There were only four genin left in the room, and a couple of the jōnin-sensei had also taken off. I kind of expected to see them later, if any of their students had passed, so they’d know the tournament roster later.

“So, we’re zero for two, now.” Sensei commented. I couldn’t figure out what he was thinking from either his tone or his expression, which was worrying.

Given that having Kakashi for a teammate had made me rather good at interpreting expressions with minimal cues, that was one hell of a poker face.

Bing! went the screen.

Keisuke Gekkō versus Himawari Hyūga.
I looked across the room, to where the Hyūga girl was making her way down to the ground floor, and felt my hands start to shake. My first solo match, against the oldest genin in the exam, and without any real idea how to fight the Gentle Fist style. This was going to suck.

Damn you, Murphy!

“Everyone else, please get off the exam floor,” the proctor said.

Kakashi and Sensei left, leaving me alone with the Byakugan-user.

The Dreamer gave the impression of a grimace. This…is probably not going to end well.

No shit.

“Hello, Gekkō-san.” Himawari said. Damn she was tall—she was at least a head and a half taller than I was. I was a bit big for my age, but clearly seven years made one hell of a difference. She wore the Hyūga clan symbol on a sash around her waist and a hitai-ate around her neck. Her hair was waist-length or longer, and she had a sleeveless shirt with bandages wrapped around her arms up to her elbows.

I was getting a Neji vibe from her, honestly. She was a Main House member, sure, but since the other Main House member I really knew of was the as-yet-unborn Hinata, I guess the confidence was sort of throwing me off. Even if it seemed like Neji was more arrogant than dignified.

“Oh would you prefer if I called you something else?” Himawari asked.

“Uh, everyone else calls me Kei.” I said.

Himawari considered this for a moment, then nodded. “In that case, do you mind if I call you Kei-chan? I’m afraid I can’t get used to calling girls ‘-kun’ at all.”

I nodded.

“Well, in that case, you can call me Himawari-san or Himawari-chan, as you like.”

“Um. Okay, Himawari-san.” I said.

“Now, I know you’re a rookie, but we’ll be going all out for this match. Good luck, Kei-chan.”

“Same to you, Himawari-san.”

We both bowed.

“Ready?” the proctor asked.

I lifted my hand to my kodachi. Himawari settled into a basic Gentle Fist stance.

“Begin!”

I watched Himawari activate her Byakugan without hand seals and knew right then and there that I was screwed.

She charged, chakra swirling around her like an aura, and I was immediately on the defensive. I tore the scabbard from my waist and scrambled backward, trying to remember if Mom had actually said that any of my drawing techniques were useful against someone faster than I was, but I couldn’t think of any. Instead, I had to improvise.
Gekkō-style Leaf Kenjutsu: Double Tiger Strike—Claw!

I swung my kodachi, still in its sheath, with a chakra-enhanced speed I didn’t even know I was capable of before. Himawari blocked it, turning the weapon aside so that it swung over her head, but I yanked it out of the scabbard and swung again, this time with the blade.

It was ripped entirely off of something I’d seen on TV in my old life, taken to Mom for her opinion, and attempted to make into something more realistic.

That? That was Hiten Mitsurugi Style: Sōryūsen Ikazuchi.

Himawari ducked under the swing as though she’d known I was going to do that all along.

Shit, shit, shit, the Byakugan wasn’t supposed to do that—!

Himawari’s hand wasn’t glowing with medical chakra. It wasn’t glowing at all. I just knew that if I let her touch me, I was done. I’d never taken a Gentle Fist strike, but I wasn’t dumb enough to think that I could just tank hits like Naruto and his fuzzy little problem. The Dreamer was literally made of my Yin chakra, not that of a Tailed Beast, and wouldn’t be able to do anything if my chakra network was blocked off.

I panicked. I didn’t slash at her again. I planted one hand against the floor, coated with chakra, and hurled myself backward like I was being fired out of a slingshot. It was completely uncontrolled, meaning I went spinning around like an idiot for a while, but I managed to find my footing again eventually.

And when I did, she was barely a second behind me.

“Eight Trigrams Thirty-Two Palms.”

Replacement jutsu!

Genma’s backpack took another nasty beating.

“Eight Trigrams Vacuum Palm!”

I skittered away, using my chakra-enhanced speed to stay the hell out of range, and I felt the burst of chakra-infused air gouge a chunk out of the wall behind me. Shit, how was Himawari still a genin? It was taking everything I had just not to be taken out of the fight in one shot.

“Stop running, please.” Himawari said, and I took that as a sign to keep running.

Still, it wasn’t like I was going to be able to outlast her. I had a lot less chakra to start with, for one.

Focus on the fight!

In the end, it really seemed like what we were doing amounted to a retread of the Pain vs. Hinata fight. While I wasn’t anywhere near as nonchalant about dodging as that Rinnegan-wielding asshat was, the point was that Himawari was doing all of the attacking and I was doing all of the running the fuck away. I didn’t have any overkill jutsu to use on her to turn the tide—no Almighty Push or Amaterasu was going to make itself known in any of my fights.

FOCUS.

The Byakugan made my genjutsu useless because they weren’t going to affect more space than the
Byakugan could observe at once, not even counting the issue of how the bloodline allowed the user to literally see the flow of chakra. Clones weren’t useful enough to serve as distractions when Himawari was capable of blurring through them faster than I could make them. Medical ninjutsu was dependent on chakra flow and focus, which I wasn’t going to have much of in short order.

It was down to me and kenjutsu. It was the only thing I had that she didn’t.

*Gekkō-style Leaf Kenjutsu: Tiger Clan Attack!*

I slashed what felt like a dozen times in the span of a few seconds, burning chakra as I went. It was the first time I’d gone on the offensive during the fight, and Himawari was actually forced to retreat for a while, because blocking swords strikes with one’s bare hands was a really risky proposition at the best of times.

She took out a kunai and finally managed a proper block, but I came in low with the metal scabbard, aiming for her kneecap. In doing so, I had to stretch until my body and the angle of my legs was practically parallel to the ground, which is what, in the business, we call “hideous overextension.” I thought it was worth it.

Gentle Fist users don’t use their feet for anything other than maneuvering. There are no kicks in the Hyūga style, as opposed to Gai’s Strong Fist or the Uchiha acrobatic signatures.

Himawari leapt over my strike, twisted in midair, and brought her palm gently to rest against my left shoulder.

“Eight Trigrams Vacuum Palm.”

The world went white with pain. I heard the Dreamer screaming, distantly, before all that was left was a high-pitched whine.

I hit the wall, and then everything was blessedly dark and silent.
Chunin Exam Arc: After-Action Report

Chapter Summary

Kei: Wake up.

The Dreamer was the first living (kinda) thing I saw in what felt like a long time.

I was on one of the psychologists’ couches in my mindscape, watching water stream down from wherever the hell the ceiling was in a metaphysical place. The colors were oddly muted, like florescent light after a long stint in the sun, and the perpetual haze of memory fragments were clogging the water like a salmon run in September instead of flitting through the air on wings of color and light. I didn’t know how long I’d been there without being aware of it, or how much had really changed since the last time I consciously remembered it.

I looked over at the Dreamer and said, “Hey.”

“Hey yourself.” She didn’t put any particular effort into her reply, distracted as she was by the attempt to reattach her left arm. Instead of blood, the Dreamer’s wound was shedding stuff that looked like bad pixels—bluish-yellow sparking things that drifted upward and looked like they’d been cribbed from the special effects department of a cyberpunk movie.

I think the gears in my brain jammed for a second.

That is the only explanation I had for how calm I was about the entire situation.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked, concerned. I’d never seen the Dreamer wounded at all, and her body was so much smaller than mine—even at the peak of her overacting, she was only ever the age of our physical body. Nine, to my…fourteen, I think, after her awakening and reintegration of my memories. I could see our reflections in the water, despite the ripples that ought to have been there.

“Hold my arm here,” the Dreamer ordered, handing her detached arm over. She turned so that I could press the stub of the arm to the ruined shoulder it had come from.

The situation is just a bit sticky here, gents. I thought, absurdly. I could still think in British accents if I wanted to, dammit. “By God, sir, you’ve lost your leg.” “By God, so I have.”

Her natural light show intensified for a moment, though only at the point where her arm and her body connected. “Thanks.”

The light flared.

“That…should hold.” The Dreamer shrugged me off and resumed floating around the mindscape. Her reattached arm continued to spark and twitch as she went.

“So, what’s been going on since I took a dirt nap?” I asked, as though I hadn’t just been a witness to the strangest regeneration mechanic this side of Orochimaru.

“Nothing that I know of.” The Dreamer spun lazily in midair, glancing at Id with her glowing eyes.
“If you’re knocked out instead of asleep, I can’t do much at all. The fact that you’re here now means you’re on the way to waking up.”

“Oh, good. I can’t even tell how long it’s been since I got my ass kicked.” I said distractedly, “And I think I had incredibly bad reaction to the Gentle Fist—I can’t remember if there’s supposed to be some kind of timeframe for the effects to wear off, but it can’t be all that long.”

“You just had to reattach my arm.”

True. That was an important fact.

“I meant more that the Gentle Fist chakra blocks wear off a normal person in a few hours, if the damage isn’t too severe.” I paused. “Though, we aren’t normal and I think the Vacuum Palm is at least two steps up from the rest of the Eight Trigrams series. I think, at full power, she’d have killed me outright.”

“Neji was capable of killing Kidōmaru in the second stage of his Curse Seal. Hm.” The Dreamer shrugged the thought off. “Anyway, it’s time to wake up now.”

So I did.

In my old life, I’d never woken up at a hospital. That’s because I was a sedentary, risk-averse college student whose most dangerous activity on a given day was driving from place to place. Granted, American freeways and highways and parkways and so on are, in fact, hilariously ill-designed in some respects and thus dangerous, the risks seemed normal. I hadn’t hurt myself or anyone else (though my car had had a few mishaps over the years), and on the few occasions I had been to the hospital late at night I had been inevitably shooed out to go home when visiting hours were over. On top of everything else, I was usually too keyed up on free coffee and nerves to fall asleep anyway.

Yeah. I was a pretty boring person.

In my new life, though, I knew from the moment I decided to become a ninja that the hospital was going to be a home away from home, whether I liked it or not.

In conclusion, it wasn’t that surprising that I woke up in the hospital after the Prelims kicked my ass.

Now, I wanted to be mad. Waking up among the bleach-or-lemon-water smell and white linoleum meant I’d lost, which I’m pretty sure a nine-year-old boy or a real nine-year-old girl would be plenty pissed off about, out of wounded pride if nothing else. (Well, okay, maybe I was thinking more of the ten through twelve-year-olds I had once had more experience with. They were more competitive.) But there was a warm weight taking up space against my back, and I immediately moved to figure out what it was. So sue me for curiosity.

Turned out that Hayate had somehow clambered into my hospital bed and dozed right off.

I decided that being mad came a distant second to knowing the world hadn’t ended while I’d been indisposed.

Quickly, I decided to take stock.

Limbs: Attached.
Chakra: Acceptable.

Other chakra signatures: Mostly doctors and nurses and medic-nin. I could sense Mom moving around the building, probably in search of non-terrible hospital food. Hayate was next to me. It felt like Rin and Obito, as well as Ebisu, Gai, and Genma, were all hanging around. So was the Hyūga—er, Himawari. I wasn’t sure why, since I’d been knocked out five matches in, but I guess it wasn’t worth worrying too much over. Sensei and Kakashi were out of range, which meant they could be essentially anywhere.

I sighed inwardly.

**It’s a mess in here.**

*Does it have to do with the fact that you were missing an arm?*

**Sort of. Though *that* was more because the Gentle Fist attacks the chakra network and organs directly and I didn’t pull back fast enough. Or, you know, at all. Nothing we couldn’t fix, anyway.**

I somehow doubted that even she was sure what had really happened. Most of the time, the Dreamer’s Yin chakra remained gathered well under my normal chakra, which ought to have just meant that flow would have stopped. For it to have been severed, she had to have been either actively reinforcing me or actively pulling chakra away to form more Yin chakra and reinforce *herself.*

Then again, if one Gentle Fist attack was all it took to destabilize her, I guess I couldn’t be mad about that.

I put the issue out of my mind for the moment and scooted so that I was sitting upright. Hayate rolled over sleepily in response, almost flopping off the other edge of the bed, and I put a hand on his shoulder. “Hayate-chan?”

“Five more minutes, Sis…” Hayate mumbled, apparently still too drowsy to add two and two together to get four.

I smiled. “Hayate-chaaaaaan, naptime’s over.”

He reached out and blindly whacked me in the arm.

“Hey!”

There was a moment in which nothing happened. Then Hayate flipped over again as though someone had zapped him, clambering into my lap and then scrambling upward to throw his arms around my neck. “Y-You’re awake!”

“Yep.” I said, grinning despite the pressure, one arm around his ribs and the other hand ending up in his mop of hair. “I’m okay, Hayate-chan.”

“You’ve never stayed sleep for so *long,* though!” Abruptly, he pulled away, and started studying my face intently. It was actually kind of disconcerting to be scrutinized by a…Christ, he was already seven by then—by a kid. “Not even after you stayed up all night that one time.”

The joys of finding a time for wrapping birthday presents for ninja kids. That had not been a fun night.
“Well, you already know I was in the Chūnin Exams. Sometimes recovering after a real fight takes longer than a spar would.” I told him.

That, thankfully, sent him off on a tangent. “You lost.”

“Yep. Guess your big sister just wasn’t good enough yet.”

Hayate was immediately indignant on my behalf. “Well…whoever won must’ve cheated! You’re the strongest big sister ever!”

Point of order, kid: Tsunade would probably disagree. And Nawaki, if the kid wasn’t dead.

**Stop depressing yourself. It’s not healthy.**

“Sad to say that it’s not the case, little brother. Your big sister’s just not big enough or bad enough for promotion yet, even if I can do *this*.” I said, and started tickling him.

*Coochie-coochie-coo!*

“Ack!” He wriggled, trying to escape from my trap, but I was too strong.

“Tickling builds character!”

Whatever Hayate had been about to say dissolved into shrieks of laughter.

Unfortunately, the fun was cut short by the door slamming open. The bar-shaped handle just barely missed gouging a hole in the nearest wall, and the sound of it alone had me and Hayate both freezing in place. Sure, Hayate was still giggling breathlessly, but at least I’d let him go.

“You’ve only been awake for a few minutes and already you’re back to normal.” Yamaguchi-sensei said. He didn’t seem sure whether it was more important to facepalm or just sigh, so he did both.

“Well, you know me.” I replied, “And I guess I wasn’t really that hurt to start with.”

Yamaguchi-sensei approached, flipping through the clipboard in his hands before checking the chart at the foot of the bed. After a minute, he said, “It could have been worse.”

Well, that was not exactly comforting.

“How bad was it?” I asked. “I think I was out before I really realized what happened.”

“Aside from hitting a concrete wall, your opponent’s attack nearly made several key tenketsu in your arm and shoulder explode.”

…Meep.

“But with emergency care and some luck, it seems you’re going to be the same as ever.” Yamaguchi-sensei glared at me over the top of his glasses. “But, for the love of all that’s sacred, *don’t do that again*. If you have to fight a Gentle Fist user again, run the hell away or surrender if it’s viable. There are very, very few people who can take more than a few Gentle Fist strikes from a skilled practitioner and live, and I’d rather not see the crippled mess that’s left afterward.” Especially if it’s my student, went unsaid.

*I might have taken a bit of the stress off. But yeah, we’re not doing that again.*

I nodded, since they both were right.
Hayate looked rapidly back and forth between us. Then he crossed his arms and said, “I knew that the winner must’ve cheated.”

I ruffled his hair again. “Nah, she was just better.”

“So it seems.” Yamaguchi-sensei said. He placed the chart back on the end of the bed. “If you’re already so excitable, I suppose we can allow more visitors. From the records, your mother’s already been in—and I saw her downstairs, so it’s a given. And your brother, of course.” He nodded at Hayate. “Other than that, your teammates have all been in at least once and I’ve seen that airheaded sensei of yours around.”

…Even Kakashi? Praise the gods; he was becoming more human by the day!

“How long was I out?” I asked.

“About three days. Your teammates are up and about, but if Obito comes in again and starts acting excitable, punch him in the stomach for me. He’s not supposed to be straining that shoulder.” Yamaguchi-sensei huffed. “And yell at Rin-chan if she does the same thing. They’re supposed to be on light duty for the next month.”

My lips thinned. “I… I guess I knew they were badly off, but…”

“They’ll be fine.” Yamaguchi-sensei said. “Broken bones may be serious, but with the war on… well. I see worse. No one died in the Prelims this time, which is good enough for me.”

There was something vaguely depressing about that thought, but it didn’t really stand out from the shittiness of the whole war situation in general. Bluh.

“But you don’t need to worry about that just yet.” Yamaguchi-sensei told me.

“…All right, Yamaguchi-sensei.” I said eventually, though I didn’t believe that was the case. I’m sure he was being totally honest and all that rot, but just by being on Team Minato, I was pretty sure I’d sealed my fate from the get-go.

Yamaguchi-sensei gave me a scrutinizing look, then seemed to dismiss my weirdness from the list of things he cared about. “Anyway, I still have rounds to complete. Try not to strain yourself, eat what the nurses tell you to, blah blah sentimental drivel.”

Hayate and I giggled.

Yamaguchi-sensei walked right out after that. I heard him say something to someone outside of the room, and I felt Obito enter before I could stop giggling long enough to look up. In hindsight, I heard him, too—Obito crashed everywhere he went, sometimes.

“Hi, Hayate-chan! Hi, Kei! Man, it’s about time you woke up!” Obito enthused, hobbling over. He wasn’t on crutches, but I could tell that he was on some kind of painkiller for his tightly-bound shoulder and arm. He was little clumsier than normal. “That makes us three-for-three on the ‘now we can say we survived our first Chūnin Exam’ records. Like, there ought to be a Hall of Fame or something.”

“Maybe there is and we just never noticed?” I suggested.

We thought about that for a moment.

“Nah,” we said together.
“Yamaguchi-sensei told me you lost to Himawari. I guess it could’ve been worse, you know?”

I gave Obito a blank look. Next to me, Hayate inhaled sharply, probably with the intent of arguing. I elbowed my brother to distract him.

“How so?” I asked.

“Well, Himawari’s kind of scary.” Obito explained. “I mean, she’s supposed to be engaged to Hiashi Hyūga, right? And he’s the next head of the Hyūga clan.”

Wait. Slow down. Hold the fucking phone.

I got my ass kicked by Hinata’s mom.

…On second thought, that made a terrible amount of sense. She was only two years or so younger than Sensei, and I knew that Sensei would be a dad in…about four years, give or take. If Himawari was sixteen, she’d be about twenty or so when Hinata was born and her husband would be…eh, twenty-eight? I remembered that Hiashi and Hizashi were older than the rest of the parents of the Konoha Twelve—the ones had been given specific ages, anyway.

In hindsight, I guess I didn’t mind that much.

“Well, I guess that makes it a little less embarrassing.” I concluded.

“But you should be promoted, Sis!” Hayate protested.

I’m still not sure he understood what a promotion meant, then.

“I’m fine with being genin for another year.” I told him. Pointing at Obito, I said, “If I wasn’t a genin anymore, I wouldn’t be able to hang out with Obito and Rin-chan as much, and that’d be horrible.”

Hayate thought about that. “Well, Obito could play with me and my friends?”

Obito gave a choked sort of laugh. “Oh, so I don’t get to be promoted when your sister does?”

“No.” Hayate said clearly. “Because if you did you wouldn’t have time for anyone anymore.”

“Aw, Hayate-chan wants his big brother around?” I teased.

“He’s the only one who can really play ninja.” Hayate whined.

Obito and I exchanged looks.

I don’t know what he was thinking, but the thought in my head at that moment was something along the lines of well I know who I’m getting to babysit Naruto when he’s born.

That thought was built on the assumption that Obito didn’t go mass murderer on us, but…well, it was funny.

Funny, but sad.

“Kei-senpai!” Rin’s entrance was thankfully more restrained, but I wasn’t happy to see the reason for it—mainly, that she was still in a hospital gown and pants and looked rather pale. I could feel the faint tingle of medical chakra from Obito, because of his shoulder, but Rin’s ribs were making a sort of jangling sensation to my sixth sense. It wasn’t really bad, precisely, but it told me that it was going to be a while before Rin could join us in the field. She also noticed Hayate, “Hi, Hayate-chan!”
“Rin-chan, should you really be walking around already?” I asked.

“Actually, I’ve been cleared for light exercise.” Rin said. “Sort of.”

“Define ‘light.’” I said, as Hayate started climbing on Obito.

“No sparring, but I can run and stretch and things.” Rin said. “What about you?”

“I think I’m okay.” I replied, since Yamaguchi-sensei hadn’t mentioned anything about taking special precautions. “I mean, I feel…okay-ish, with no major weakness that I’ve noticed. I’m just a little tired. It’s nothing compared to busted ribs.”

Rin frowned. “But I heard from Akihito-shishō that your opponent nearly destroyed your tenketsu!”

“…Yeah, but she didn’t and I’m okay now.” I said. “It could’ve been way worse than it was, and I’m on the road to recovery now or whatever.”

“Hayate, would you please get off?” Obito said, because by that point the enterprising seven-year-old had clambered onto Obito’s uninjured shoulder.

Rin frowned more severely. “But Kei-senpai…”

“Don’t worry about me, Rin-chan. Worry about yourself and about Obito. I think Hayate’s going to break him.” And, because I’d said that, Hayate abruptly decided that today was not the day to conquer Mount Uchiha. This may have been because Mount Uchiha was starting to shake. An eruption was imminent.

Hayate ran out of the room, with Obito on his heels.

“…So, that was a thing. I think he’s going to use Mom as home base again.” I said, as Rin giggled.

“Sounds like a plan, I suppose.” Rin said. “Also, Kei-senpai?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for being our captain.” Rin smiled. “I’m not sure we would’ve gotten that far without you.”

_Actually, if Kakashi had been allowed into the Exam, if I’d never been born, and if you had all still been the same Team Minato, you might have made it exactly as far. I thought._

“It was really nice to be able to do that, if stressful as hell.” I admitted. Still, it could have been a hell of a lot worse. “Now, since I’m still not sure if I can leave this room without an official sticky note, could you please figure out where Hayate-chan and Obito ran off to? I’d like to see the hospital intact past noon.”

“It’s already three. But yeah, I’ll go get them.” Rin turned to leave.

“Thanks, Rin-chan.” I called after her.

When the door shut, it felt oddly final. Like I was closing the gates on something important I couldn’t recall, even if I tried.

**So the Chūnin Exams were a bust.**

_Yeah, but I think we already knew that when we were signing up. I thought. Team Minato didn’t get promoted until eleven in canon, barring Kakashi._
But no one died, we met some major players, and I think we made some new friends.

So it wasn’t a total bust, then. I paused, casting outward with my chakra sense. Gai and Genma and Ebisu are still in the building. Mom and Hayate and Obito are in the cafeteria, with Rin headed their way. Yamaguchi-sensei is somewhere on this floor, probably making the rest of his rounds. And that leaves…

“Glad to see you’re awake, Kei-kun.” Sensei said from my bedside, nearly making me jump out of my skin.

In a tone that made her a liar with a giggle-fit, the Dreamer said, That is not at all funny.

Pull the other one, it’s got bells on.

“It’s good to be awake, Sensei.” I told him, with my heart rate kicking up again as I remembered that he’d wanted to discuss something with me before I’d gotten myself knocked out for a day or two. I’d kind of hoped he’d forgotten the whole thing, but with Sensei right in front of me I was aware that my chances of avoiding a confrontation were shrinking rapidly.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit…

“Are you really okay, after all that happened?” Sensei asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“…Yeah, I think I am.” I gave a nervous, incredibly insincere laugh. “I mean, what’s a nearly destroyed core tenketsu to being up for promotion, right?”

Whoops. The sarcasm kind of burst through there.

“If you didn’t want to compete, you could have just refused to sign the forms.” Sensei pointed out. He was patting me on the head again.

Yes, I could have, which is exactly why I didn’t. I said under my breath, “I couldn’t do that to them.”

Sensei’s eyebrow went up.

“…Putting that aside for the moment, I have a few things to talk to you about, Kei-kun. I’m just concerned.” Sensei told me, though I was sure that he had just jotted down another mental note about my weirdness in that steel-trap skull of his. “Obito mentioned that they chose you as the captain of the team during the Second Exam. I saw the footage, after, and I spoke to Tsume once she’d escorted Team Sasukibe out of the training grounds.”

Sensei has this habit of giving you just enough rope to hang yourself with.

“What are you asking, Sensei?” Of course, I also tended to butt in before the question actually popped up, which was one of my failings.

“A lot of things at once, actually. I have a list.” And sure enough, he produced a list. It came on a scroll and he wouldn’t let me see it. I even grabbed for it and missed.

Why does he have a list?!

PAPERWORK NINJA.

“First off, you and your teammates made it through the Chūnin Exams alive. That’s better than anyone had any right to expect.” Sensei told me, leaning back so the List was out of convenient
reach.

Easy for the guy who fucking nominated us to say. WE’RE NINE YEARS OLD.

He didn’t seem to notice my directionless anger. It was neatly squashed when he finally looked up at me. I quailed under his stare. Meep. “But let me make this perfectly clear: despite the success you and Obito had with the explosive seals, never use untested seals again.”

“Eh?” I’d thought they were just duds, but…

Sensei emptied one of his flak jacket pockets and produced two crumpled paper tags—one of mine, done in scribbles and blood and ink and on rice paper, and a standard Konoha tag. “This is one of yours. This is one of the mock-ups I made of the Konoha standard—they have the same design, essentially. Mine’s a deliberately designed dud. Yours is an accidental dud.”

“…Okay.” I said, not sure where this was going.

Untested seal.

Like something from a memory long forgotten, the voice of R. Lee Ermey said inside my skull, “An ordnance technician at a dead run outranks everyone.”

…Well, I’m a fucking moron.

I facepalmed harder than I had at any point in this life before, and repeatedly. “Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

Sensei chuckled. “Well, at least I didn’t have to spell it out for you any more than that.”

“How could I be so blind?” I despaired, furious with myself and with my past self in particular for forgoing sleep to save a few ryō. Past Me was a stupid, stupid person. “Untested exploding tags? How did we not lose fingers?!”

“You were very, very lucky.” Sensei told me bluntly. Still, he didn’t seem quite as annoyed as he had before. “While it was a boneheaded move, Tsume tells me that it worked to scare Team Sasukibe into surrendering, which is probably the closest thing the Exams had to a bloodless victory this time around. Before you ever do that again, though, damn well let someone teach you more about sealing arts than just the form.”

Holy shit, is he saying what I think he’s saying.

“…Then can you teach me, Sensei?” I asked in a small voice.

Sensei smiled. “I was honestly waiting for you to ask.”

Yes, he is.

But I couldn’t have my “oh my god fucking finally I can get started on this preventative time travel/prophecy bullshit” moment. Not while Sensei was still being serious under the smile.

That was one item on the List.

In a way, I was glad that I was still in a hospital bed whether I needed it or not. Sensei would probably have just gone full Gunnery Sergeant With A Tack In His Boot if I had been hale and hearty and at the training grounds instead.
“Do you promise to actually pay attention, and to never use sealing techniques again until you actually know what you’re doing?” Sensei asked.

I nodded.

“Good. Then we’ll move on.” Sensei cleared his throat and unrolled the List a little more. “Under normal circumstances, most of what you pack for a mission falls under the category of ‘if it’s dead weight, leave it.’ A shinobi always has to be ready for a quick retreat, or a fight.”

“‘Never bring anything on a mission that you can’t afford to lose.’” I quoted, nodding.

“Yes, well.” Sensei looked sheepish for a moment. “I just realized I might not have actually told any of you how to get things back into a storage scroll. I honestly should have noticed earlier, but when you were playing with experimental tags it slipped my mind.”

I could feel the bottom drop out of my stomach. “How expensive was the stuff I ditched?”

“All in all, about ten thousand ryō or so. Some of it was yours, mind, so I’m sure you’ll have to explain that to your mother sooner or later.”

I’d have rather played fetch with a Chain Chomp. If I’d had the power, I’d go back in time to throttle Past Me.

After all the financial freakouts I’d had in this lifetime, after graduating early to take some of the burden off my mother, after holding back from buying the equipment I sometimes needed, I’d still do stupid things like that and it made me want to scream.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, STUPID.*

I didn’t realize I’d started to slap myself in the face again until Sensei caught my hand halfway there. I blinked at him stupidly, because he was giving me a sad look and I couldn’t, in that moment, figure out why.

“That’s enough.” Sensei said firmly, forcing my hand back down to my side. “You didn’t know, and I should have made sure you actually knew what you were getting into before I let you enter the Exam. Any tool you don’t understand well enough to use is a tool of the enemy, and I know you know that, Kei-kun. You didn’t know and you didn’t know to ask. That’s okay. That’s my fault. Next time, you’ll know everything you need to in order to earn that promotion.”

I nodded numbly.

“Which brings me to my last point.” Sensei sat back, letting go of my hand. But his expression was just as concerned as ever, and I didn’t get it because my brain was just refusing to make connections.

There was a silence that stretched just long enough to be awkward. I started twisting my sheets with anxious fingers. What could be worse than my idiocy, at least now that we were all out of danger?

“…What?” I asked at length, wishing I could sink into the mattress in shame. *Leave me alone, leave me alone…*

Sensei looked me right in the eye and said, “Kei-kun, you deserve to be here. Stop acting like you think you don’t.”

I immediately ducked my head, drawing my knees up so I could hide my face against them. Pat, pat. I probably ought to have told Sensei to stop treating me like a dog, but my throat was suspiciously
clogged.

“You make some bad decisions, Kei-kun. You don’t think so well under pressure. You don’t have much of an attention span for things that don’t interest you, and you pick fights with Kakashi whenever you think Obito’s getting the worst of his attitude.” Sensei told me, still petting away. “You don’t talk about your problems even when your teammates could help. You hate shrimp ramen.”

At that last bit, I looked up, and Sensei waggled his eyebrows. I gave a hiccupping laugh, somehow.

“Good, you can still laugh.” Sensei smiled, too. “Now that I’ve outlined your flaws, keep in mind that it’s not really possible to be all bad. You were placed on my team for a reason, and not just because Yamaguchi-sensei seems to think Rin-chan is the next Tsunade.”

I gave another strangled laugh, because I had my own thoughts on the matter.

“You’re intelligent and driven when you have a reason to show it.” Sensei leaned over, pulling a spare blanket from nowhere, and draped it over me so I could hide in it like a turtle. Then he went on. “You care about your teammates, even if you’re not much for balancing the strained egos that involves. You’re on your way to becoming a kenjutsu expert in a few years, and you’re a decent medic if Yamaguchi-sensei thought you could get by on what you know at age nine.”

But I shouldn’t exist here! I don’t know if I stole this life from a girl who should have been Hayate’s sister, if I stole Rin’s role in the world, if…I don’t know if I can ever do enough to make everything hurt less than it does.

The wreck of the Kannabi Bridge loomed at the front of my mind, a memorial to a long-lost bright future and meaningless deaths.

I don’t know if I can save anyone.

“But you need to learn.” Sensei put his hands on my shoulders, as I hunched down further. “And you can’t do that if you hide everything away in a box and won’t let anyone know what you can and can’t do. Kei-kun, I need to understand what it is that you need from me in order to be a better shinobi.”

I need to know how to seal a tailed beast. I thought, biting down on my lower lip. I need to know how to save the people I care about, and what use is this stupid foreknowledge if I can’t even figure out how to do anything once time catches up?

“Some of it will come with time, and with growing up.” Sensei went on. “But for now, just know that you’re better than you think. I’m glad you’re one of my students, and I’m sure Obito and Kakashi are happy they’re on your team. You’re not stupid or useless, you’re just inexperienced. And practice makes perfect, you know?”

I nodded again, not trusting myself to speak.

WHAM.

While Sensei jumped, I huddled deeper into my blankets and tried to sniffle less obviously.

“I’d like to hear a good explanation for why my daughter is crying, Namikaze-san.” Mom said, and I didn’t even need to look to know that she’d probably knocked a hole in a wall from the force she’d used on the door. The doorknob would never be the same.
“It’s f-fine, Mom.” I said, before she could break out the katana or Sensei could decide whether or not to just teleport away. I sounded terrible—that lump in my throat hadn’t gone away.

“Kei-chan?” Mom asked, and as Sensei got off the bed, Mom sat down. She immediately pulled the whole bundle that was me into her lap.

“Just a post-mission debrief, Gekkō-san.” Sensei told her, but that might have been the wrong thing to say.

I don’t think Sensei had a lot of experience with parents. His, or anyone else’s.

“I understand, Namikaze-san, but this is a hospital, and my daughter is currently a patient. If you want to raise her blood pressure, do so when she’s not hooked up to so many machines.” Mom said flatly, confirming the idea that Sensei had, in fact, said the wrong thing.

Using the Dreamer’s control over her half of my chakra, as well as mine, I worked on forcing my emotions back under control. Technically, it wasn’t really possible to meditate like this, but if I was careful I could kick-start the parasympathetic half of my nervous system. I could force normalcy, in a way.

By the way? Don’t try this at home. Get a glass of water and a hug like a normal person.

Forcing my mouth into a smile, because that helped too, I took a deep breath and said, “It’s okay, Mom. Sensei was just helping me with a couple of things.”

Mom stared at me. She looked at Sensei a second later, as though for confirmation, before looking back to me. “You’re sure, Kei-chan?”

“Yeah. Not everything you need to hear is sunshine and sparkles.” I dabbed at my eyes with the hospital sheets—which was probably unsanitary but whatever—and gave her a wobbly sort of smile. I repeated, “It’s okay.”

Mom hugged me right after that, Sensei teleported out of the room, and I had the weirdest feeling that I’d managed to avert World War Three.

“Don’t ever do something so risky ever again.” Mom said into my hair, squishing me against her.

“Not until I get promoted, at least.” I teased, a huff of laughter on my breath. My fingers tightened in her shirt. “Sorry for making you worry.”

“Oh, I think you’ll give me plenty of reasons to worry the longer you’re a shinobi.” Mom said. “You and your brother. Don’t apologize if you don’t plan to change that.”

I didn’t, and I’d stay on this path until it killed me. I buried my face in her shoulder and wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. So I did both.

Eventually, I must have fallen asleep. It was dark when I woke up again, and I faintly suspected that Mom had done some kind of weird parenting miracle thing where I could go to sleep in her arms and not even have a Dreamer vision kick me in the cerebral cortex.

No matter what happened, I woke up and wriggled in my blankets until I was more or less upright, looking out the window at the street lamps. It was raining, with the drops dancing in the faint bluish hue of the backlit night. I could see shop fronts closing for the night, the glow of lights winking out and hearing the sliding metal shutters.
I leaned on the windowsill, against the bug screen, and hummed.

*Made a wrong turn*

*Once or twice*

*Dug my way out*

*Blood and fire*

Going by the lack of their chakra around, I surmised that Mom and Hayate had gone home for dinner. Obito and Rin were gone too, and I hoped that they’d gone with my family and been able to get a decent meal. Sensei was out in the village—I wanted to say around the Hokage’s office or the Academy—and I could feel Kushina bustling about due to her immense reserves.

That accounted for almost everyone.

“Nice night, isn’t it?” I asked.

“I guess,” said Kakashi.

I glanced at him—aside from his hair, he was pretty much invisible in the darkened hospital room. I waved him over. “Come on, the bed’s big enough that you don’t need to hover.”

Kakashi made a noncommittal noise, but he still made his way over. He sat on the metal railing on the edge of the bed with one ankle hooked between the rails to keep his balance, which was just about as far away from me as he could get while being on the bed at all. Still. I didn’t ask him how long he’d been waiting for me to return to the land of the living.

“Thanks for visiting.” I told him. At his sidelong look—he was mostly looking out the window—I added, “Yamaguchi-sensei told me you visited. So. Thanks for that.”

Kakashi shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “Everyone else did.”

“You’re not everyone else and you showed up late, so shut up and let me thank you.” I said.

“Always pushy, aren’t you?” Kakashi replied, huffing.

“I can’t get anything done otherwise.” I looked out the window again, as people scurried out of the rain. They were the size of mice from up here. “...I’m glad we all made it out okay. I know we aren’t the best team, but it’d really suck if we weren’t anymore. You know?”

“Yes, I do.” Kakashi said, sounding a little unfocused. He looked at me again. “I did say that I’d hate having to break in another genin team, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, and I can’t really imagine you being as accepting the second time through.” I said, almost under my breath.

He hadn’t been, when Team Kakashi’s triad of walking disasters had come along. No one really gets over the loss of their first comrades, I think. Especially Kakashi.

“By the way, here.” Kakashi said, pulling something out of one of his many pockets. He tossed it idly at me, and I caught it without thinking, “It took me a while to find any that grew in the winter, but I guess that’s what I get for waiting so long. Figured you’d get sick of hospital food, if you aren’t already.”
It was an apple.

I rolled the apple around in my hands for a moment, contemplating.

*I guess this is contraband.*

**Tasty contraband.**

Kakashi raised an eyebrow at me. “Are you going to eat it or hide it away for six months like a squirrel?”

“Better plan.” I said, and focused my chakra into my right hand. Since I knew I’d taken the knockout hit with my left side and thus suffered the most damage there, I was pretty sure my right arm was working fine. I couldn’t feel anything wrong with it and the Dreamer would have spoken up if she had.

Without hand seals, I activated my chakra scalpel and sliced the apple in half by rotating my fingers around what, on a globe, would have been the prime meridian.

“You can use that jutsu without hand seals?” Kakashi asked, blinking.

Another secret out, I supposed. But anyone who watched my performance during the Chūnin Exams would know that I was at least capable of a seal-less Replacement, if not the other Academy jutsu.

“Yeah. I’ve been working on it with Yamaguchi-sensei since I was seven.” I told him distractedly, plucking seeds from the middle of the fruit with the same technique. I held up the half without the stem stuck to it. “Want any?”

Kakashi took his half wordlessly, and I turned away to watch the rain fall.
When I wake up, it takes me a minute to remember why there’s an elbow in my ribs.

If I was at home, all I’d feel in the morning would be my scratchy sheets and maybe some scrolls—I fall asleep at night looking at notes, sometimes. I guess sometimes the inkpot I use falls over, but that’s okay because the ink always dries up sooner than that. It’s not okay when the pencils I use other times stab the mattress, since it’s old and deserves better than stab somes. In the morning, sunlight gets in my room from the windows and it’s too bright to stay asleep for all that long, which sucks because I don’t ever seem to get a lot of sleep.

There’s never anyone in my apartment.

Just me.

It gets kind of tiring, being alone all the time.

I mean, I don’t clean my apartment much but I just don’t have people over. The place is okay. It’s not that big. Maybe I wouldn’t be able to have a game night anyway, without other kids having to sit on upside-down buckets and stuff.

I wouldn’t know, since I never have. You kind of need more than two friends for that.

Someone decides to kick in the door then. I roll over, grumbling, but the cast on my arm gets in my way and the sunlight beats down on my face like a hammer. Then I blink, because whoever opened the door also decides to stand over me and yank the covers off.

“Obito, Hayate-chan, Iruka-chan, it’s time to get up!”

Rin is the cutest girl in the entire world, but she loves mornings way too much.

“But Rin-chaaaaaan.” I whine, throwing my free hand over my face. “It’s way too early…”

Rin is already shoving the smaller kids out of the bed. Iruka flops to the floor with a thud, while Hayate manages to get his feet under him before promptly tripping over Iruka anyway. Rin doesn’t have to drag me out of bed because I’m not dumb enough to push my luck, but even when I’m upright I don’t feel too awake.
“Feeling any better, Obito?” Rin asks as the other two boys finally remember how to use their legs. Hayate is yawning and Iruka’s hair’s all over the place, but they’re up and a sharp look from Rin sends them scurrying out of the room.

“A little, Rin-chan.” I say, glancing down. My shoulder still hurts, but not as much as it had. I mean, I broke it earlier because Gai was a freak with super-strong punches, but after the medics took a look, I was okay. Rin hovered a lot and Kei kept pulling her brother off me and Kei’s mom made concerned faces at me when she thought I wasn’t looking, but I was really fine with that. That they were looking at all was better than being at home, you know?

“Let me see it.” Rin says, and I’m about to argue before I bite my tongue and just let go. She puts one hand on my shoulder and the other against the side of my neck, and I feel myself go warm where her hands are.

There are worse things than having friends around when you’re feeling like crap. It’s better when it’s Rin.

Rin has small hands. She always has a smile for someone who needs one. She cares, when a lot of people don’t. Recently she’s learned to use all of that and become a medic-nin, even if she’s still a genin like Kei and me. I still think we should’ve made it past Team Genma and to the finals, but I guess it’s not really gonna happen now. If we had, Rin could be a chūnin and get started on all the cool medical stuff Yamaguchi-sensei says she can’t learn until she gets older. She would be able to learn all the medical jutsu ever, if she was just a bit closer to being a grown-up, and then maybe we’d be able to get on the road to becoming really cool.

I still want to be Hokage. It’s just that I’m starting to get how long that might take. There’s a long road ahead of me, with pitfalls and roadblocks and things. After all, a real Hokage wouldn’t be beat up by Maito Gai. I think I might be able to take him if I train a lot more, but I can’t until my shoulder heals.

So, really, the first thing to do is let Rin check up on me and see if she can speed things up.

I can feel my face heating up, so I turn my head away so she can’t see it. It’s not cool to blush a lot around girls. They get nasty about it, and even if Rin isn’t like some other girls I know, I don’t like thinking about it.

There’s a knock at the door and Rin lets go of me. Getting interrupted in the middle of a checkup is so not cool.

“Hey, Rin-chan, Obito, it’s almost time for breakfast.”

“We’ll be out in a moment, Kei-senpai.” Rin says.

Kei chooses that moment to poke her head in anyway.

“Liar. If you’re looking at injuries, Rin-chan, you’ll be in here forever and breakfast will get cold and Mom will yell at me later about being a lousy host.” Kei replies, all in one breath.

“Your mom never yells at you.” I say, because I don’t think I’ve ever seen Miyako mad before.

“Not where you can hear it.” Kei says, smiling crookedly. “Anyway. Breakfast. Seriously, Rin-chan, we can get him to the hospital after we eat if you’re that worried.”

“If I was that worried, I’d think we should go the hospital now.” Rin says.
“Hello? I’m right here and I’m hungry.” I say, to keep them from arguing more.

“You okay with eating left-handed?” Kei asks.

I scoff. “Well, yeah. Been doing it since before you woke up.”

“Point.” Kei says. She leads the way out.

Kei always leads.

Sometimes I’m not really sure what I’m supposed to think about Kei. She’s not cute or nice like Rin, or at least not in the same way. She always looks tired out, like she just rolled out of bed, and she can be mean sometimes in a way that’s funny if it’s not aimed at you. She talks a lot if she knows you, and she gives nice hugs when I need them. She’s also stronger than me—or at least that’s what the reports on us said. She doesn’t act like it, though—if she did, it’d be like having two Kakashis on my team and I’m not sure I would be able to stand that. Instead, she gets into all kinds of fights with Kakashi and always is on my side.

I’m not sure how to feel about that. I’m not sure if she likes me more or thinks I can’t fight on my own. I’m not sure if I should be angry at her for being like that or at Kakashi for always being a bully.

Kei bumps my shoulder as we enter the kitchen. Somehow Rin’s ended up in front and Kei is back by me and there’s already a conversation going between Iruka and Miyako and Hayate and Yūgao and Rin. I can’t follow most of it because the littler kids always talk over each other about weird stuff.

“Something wrong, Obito?” Kei asks quietly.

Someday I’m gonna have to ask her how she always knows when my feelings aren’t making any sense.

“Nah, everything’s fine.” I tell her, and she gives me the look that lets me know that she doesn’t believe that for a second.

I’m not sure how to tell her that I’m tired of being weak and of being alone and now that I’m not alone on my birthday I’m not sure how to deal with it at all.

I’ve got dust in my eyes again.

Kei stops before we get within sight of the others, grabbing my hand to stop me, too. “Obito, I didn’t invite you over to make you cry.”

“I know that,” I tell her. My voice shouldn’t be squeaking but it is and I hate it.

She frowns. It’s not her “I hate you and everyone else” frown that she uses when she loses to Kakashi in spars (which is pretty much all the time because she can’t use her sword), or the frown she uses when she’s confused because Rin is starting to speak Medic and Kei never got that far into the whole thing. She’s thinking about something.

“Rin-chan, could I borrow you for a minute?” Kei calls, and I want to hit her for a second because I don’t know how to deal with this and Rin doesn’t need to see me fail at it.

“Yes, we were just—oh, Obito.” Rin doesn’t need to think before she takes my other hand, pulling herself in.
Kei puts her arms around my neck and Rin hugs me around my middle and I hug both of them unevenly because they aren’t giving me a lot of room and then I really start crying.

“Mom’s getting the kids out on the porch.” Kei says, almost like she was going to say it anyway and the fact that they’re hugging it out isn’t part of it.

“No one has to see if you don’t want them to.” Rin says, picking up the thread without pausing.

“Well, except Mom.” Kei says, and Obito can hear the wonky smile in her tone. “Mom’s been wanting to hug you for ages and—”

“No! No, no, I’m fine, can we just get something to eat?” I’m babbling, I know that, and Rin pulls back enough to give me a really disappointed look that sends my stomach somewhere around my toes. When Rin gives me that look it’s…it’s like all kinds of bad and I feel awful after.

I push my way free because I can’t stand it, being the one who always has to be picked up and put back together. On my birthday, too. I rub my sleeve over my eyes because it feels awful to cry over something so dumb even if Kei and Rin don’t make fun of me for it.

Kei’s gone and back before I even realize what she’s doing, while Rin sticks with me. Guess all that sparring with Kakashi meant something, because she has a bowl of steamed rice with fish and dried seaweed and egg in front of me. Chopsticks, too.

“Thanks.” I say, and settle down cross-legged on the floor. Kei and Rin are both giving me these looks, and I have to ignore them or I’ll start again.

Kei looks at Rin, who, after a moment, sits down next to me. Then Kei squeezes my shoulder before walking out of the hallway and into the kitchen.

I can hear her saying something to her mom, while Rin sticks to me like glue.

“It’s hard.” I say to Rin, not even trying to start eating. “I…I don’t know what to do with this.”

“With what?” Rin asks, and her fingers move mine so I’m actually holding the chopsticks.

“This is…I think this is the first birthday I’ve had with so many people around.” I admit.

Rin’s face…can’t decide if it’s sad for me or just sad. Maybe she’s feeling both.

Then she sighs, shaking her head. “Then you have to get used to it, Obito. Because me and Kei-senpai and Miyako-san and Hayate-chan…we’re never going to leave you alone.”

That doesn’t sound like a bad idea.

Kei comes back, leading her mom. She has the kind of look that says that she’s embarrassed because she feels like someone else should be embarrassed, not because she is, and I can’t see why for a moment or two.

Then Miyako hugs me, in front of Rin and Kei, and then I kind of want to turn red myself.

I’m ten now and way too big for being picked up like a little kid anymore, but it still feels nice to be hugged by someone bigger than me.

I don’t know what it feels like to be hugged by a mother, because I can’t remember mine, but I think I have an idea.
“Happy birthday, Obito-kun.” Miyako says.

“Thanks, Miyako-san.” I say shakily.

Miyako lets go of me, brushing imaginary dust out of my hair with a pat. “Now, let’s concentrate on what you wanted to do for your birthday.” She smiles, crooked like Kei’s but also warm. “Birthdays aren’t for sitting around in hallways. Let’s get to the rest of it before the sun burns out.”

You know what? I think the big thing to take away from here is to not sweat the small stuff. I mean, yeah, I’m not great at being a good person and I want too much stuff and I can’t deal with people being around all the time, but it’s my birthday. I’m surrounding by people I like, who like me back. Whether I got up with a foot that fell asleep on me, or if I was a bit twitchy? That’s all right. That’s okay. Because whatever I do next…well…

It’s going to be awesome.

Here’s to another awesome year with my precious people.
Making Progress: Second Time's the Charm

Chapter Summary

Kei: Take the Exams again.

Moving meditation is something that isn’t emphasized enough. Sure, I have a preference for sitting still whenever possible, but I’ve always been prone to pacing. I got it under control over the years—teachers tend not to like it when a student spends half the day walking around the classroom—but when at home or alone I still like to move to think.

In the end, I almost like shadow-boxing because it facilitates just that.

On rest days, Training Ground Three is a pretty nice place to do both—and, on top of everything else, to practice water-walking.

I drew my kodachi.

I shot across the river, weaving and slashing the empty air as I went. I might have needed a sparring partner any other time, for the sake of balance and safety if nothing else. But I didn’t want anyone to see me. Between constantly adjusting my chakra output as I moved across the surface of the water and throwing out punches and kicks exactly where I wanted them to go (and the occasional vicious slash of my kodachi), I practiced how to read the chakra in the air around me and my own body, so I could move blind if I have to. Since being reborn, my feel for my own body was much stronger—I could gauge distances and my strikes much better than I had ever needed to in my old life. But it never hurt to keep in shape.

After a while, I changed over from the Academy style, which is a warm-up at best, to the combination taijutsu/kenjutsu that my mother had taught me. It’s more acrobatic, requiring more flexibility as well as speed, and I loosened my control over my chakra’s anchoring properties to give myself more of a challenge. If I had to, I could slip across the water as though on ice skates, but I never thought of myself a great skater and it’d be better to hold off on that until I had a moment to grab Obito for the sake of comedy. He needed to laugh more.

In a brilliant moment of cosmic timing, I nearly ended up slipping and landing in the river. Somehow, my flailing translated to doing a completely unplanned frontal split (which, in my old life, I would never have even contemplated). Instead of taking a dive, though, I slapped one hand onto the surface of the river, chakra flaring, and executed a perfect double front handspring (which would have just been physically impossible for the old me). As I rotated through the air, I changed up my game and landed in a rough mockery of Kakashi’s freestyle taijutsu starting stance.

I had no idea what I was doing, but why stop when I was on a roll?

Kakashi’s style is faster and than mine, but it’s all about flexibility and unexpected angles. Kakashi was the only kid my physical age I’d ever seen attack from above, below, upside-down, a handstand, and from underground. He didn’t use his dad’s chakra saber when he could have—my kodachi is longer and more cumbersome in a style like his—but he used kunai similarly. From what I could tell, his style was really more about the ability to attack from any stance or direction regardless of the user’s size. It’s the exact opposite of Gai’s style at his age—the Strong Fist was basically about
turning the opponent into a quivering ball of agony in as few steps as possible—and thus better for me to learn.

I may have been a medical student for a couple of years, but that’s nowhere near enough to learn stuff like Tsunade’s monstrous strength. Honestly, I’ll probably never pull it off. I couldn’t say I minded all that much, because ultimately that technique didn’t really mesh with any of my other techniques—why be the queen of blunt force trauma when I was already on my way to being the hack-and-slash type? I figured I’d be fine as long as I learned a wide variety of techniques, which Sensei would help with if we both lived long enough.

I had my own take on one-hit-kill jutsu anyway, provided that I could make it as automatic as Kabuto did (or rather, would).

I sheathed my kodachi again.

*Tiger, horse, rabbit, rat, dog.*

Chakra scalpels flared to life over my hands, providing surgically precise offense (if I timed it right, anyway). I lashed out in a sweeping motion, using two fingers rather than my whole hand in order to maintain precision even at speed, and the air seemed to *split.*

If I had a choice, I’d still go for my kodachi first, but there would be times when that wasn’t feasible. I had to prepare.

I let them go after a moment or two. Chakra scalpels were my backup weapons, and they weren’t especially chakra-efficient. As long as I could call them up in a heartbeat, I at least had a chance.

I slowed down. I only knew two major types of taijutsu, and I wasn’t exactly going to practice my ninjutsu on the water if most of them were kind of useless. They weren’t for direct offense—distraction was always key.

Well, I thought, time for the airborne stuff.

I pushed off from the surface, launching into a cartwheel to build momentum. Twisting in the air, now leading with my feet rather than my hands, I executed a double back handspring as I went. I kind of hoped I wasn’t underestimating the width of the river (considering that my eyes were still closed), because hitting the bank now would suck and probably hurt, but it was too late for that. As my feet touched the water again, I sprung upward and bent my knees, swinging my arms along with them, and *there,* I’ve landed again. I went for one last rotation, leading with my head, and my legs splay out in the air into a very *deliberate* split. The fact that I probably got five meters of air on each move meant I was on the other side of the river by the end of the sequence.

I would never get over the sheer physical difference between shinobi and baseline humans. I went from average idiot in one life to someone surpassing Olympic-level gymnasts over the course of eleven years and one probable death.

And I wasn’t anywhere *near* the strongest one here. A sobering thought.

I opened my eyes to the sound of slow clapping. Glancing up at the sky, I guessed that it was about noon. I’d burned an hour flailing around on my own in Training Ground Three.

Good. That gave my interim sensei time to get back from a ramen run.

“Not bad.” Kushina said. She had the sarcastic slow clap down, but I didn’t think she was being sarcastic just then.
I bowed, hiding a grin. “Thank you, Kushina-san.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.” Kushina said, wagging one finger in a mockery of seriousness. “You still have a ways to go before you can face that Gai kid Minato keeps going on about.”

“I know. I’m not ready yet.” I admitted. It stung only slightly—Gai was simply better than I was. Still, it did say something about my progress that neither Sensei nor Kushina seemed to think I’d have any trouble fighting Asuma, who was my actual first opponent in two weeks.

Obito would be facing off against Gai first. I wasn’t sure how to feel about that, but at least Sensei and Kakashi were both on hand to help him train. There were four others in the tournament: Rin, Kurenai, Tonbo Tomitake (that one guy who wore bandages over the top half of his head) and Shimon Hijiri (the other guy with long bangs whose eyes somehow stayed invisible). I wasn’t really sure what to expect out of the latter pair, but I knew that Rin could do no worse than a draw against Kurenai.

Kushina patted me on the head, which made me briefly wonder if there was some kind of magnet installed in my brain.

“Well, even if you’re not actually read to face Gai—or you think you aren’t—don’t worry.” Kushina told me. I blinked up at her. “I think you are ready to be a chūnin. Everything else will fall into place.”

It was maybe the third time anyone had said that.

That I could be chūnin. First, Obito had said it two years ago. Then Mom, after I’d made it through the Second Exam again with my team alive and well. Sensei hadn’t said anything, but he might not have needed to—the fact that he’d asked his fiancée to train with me spoke volumes without any words at all.

Now Kushina.

I hoped everything would go as planned. It’d be nice to see that happen at least once.

“Now, let’s see where you’ve gotten with your explosive seals.” Kushina said, and we sat down together on the riverbank, poring over scrolls for the rest of the afternoon.

I’ll say this for the Chūnin Exam arena: it’s dramatic as hell. The only thing I ever thought was missing was a ring of fire separating the spectators from the fighters—that’s probably because I watched too many movies as a kid the last time around. There wasn’t enough of The Lion King’s atmosphere. It wasn’t raining, it wasn’t surrounded by fire and/or hyenas, and no one in the crowd had much riding on who won. Except maybe gambling money, because some things never change.

Then again, if there was, I guess that would make me Scar. I sure as hell wasn’t Simba.

I kept my hands at my sides, rather than reaching for the blade at my left hip. Even in official matches, “false starts” didn’t really mean anything, but if I punched my opponent in the face before the match started…well, let’s just say that I’d be on the Hokage’s shit-list for at least a month.

And besides, Mom and Sensei and Rin and Obito and Kakashi were all watching, which made me somewhat less likely to just haul off and sort my opponent out the way I’d liked to have.

“The first semifinal match will be Asuma Sarutobi versus Keisuke Gekkō.” The proctor—Tsume Inuzuka—gave us both a grin that threatened to crack her head in half. She seemed to be looking
forward to the bloodletting. Or maybe she wanted to see if I could mess with Asuma the same way I had two years ago.

Speaking of two years ago, both of us had gotten physically bigger. I’d put on a few inches and more pounds of muscle than I’d probably ever had in my old life (because I was a mouse potato with no real strength at all), and was almost tall enough that I could use a real katana smoothly. I was actually about the same size as Asuma, barring the fact that he was still wider in the shoulders. It wasn’t enough to intimidate him, though. Not after out-thinking him back then.

I was kinda glad that Hayate was stuck at school, though. Mom could have written him a note or something, but I guess her priority was a combination of “school is important” and “he shouldn’t see his big sister lose.”

I’d already put in my hours of practice and I could *almost* fight my teammates evenly. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to find her lack of faith disturbing or what.

And anyway, I wasn’t afraid of Asuma. I knew what he could do—I’d watched his match against Ebisu and hadn’t been all that impressed. Ebisu wasn’t the be-all and end-all of opponents, but he was tricky enough to at least force people to fight him with guile and tactics. I hadn’t seen much of Asuma doing just that—he was all power, and when you got down to it he wasn’t even *strong*. (Granted, that was a month ago, but I assumed there would be some consistency in how Asuma fought.)

Assuming I won, I was afraid of *Gai*.

(Seeing the ridiculous beat-down Gai and Obito gave each other an hour ago, my fear of one Maito Gai was renewed with a vengeance.)

If I didn’t, then…whatever. I didn’t see myself losing to Asuma, but if I did, Gai was *his* problem.

The arena went silent, waiting for the cue.

“Ready?” Tsume asked. Kuromaru lay by her feet, lips pulled back from his teeth.

*My greatest accomplishment in life is being quality entertainment for a giant Inuzuka dog. Clearly, this is the life.* I thought, crazily.

Asuma and I both nodded, though we didn’t take our eyes off each other. That would have been stupid.

“GO FOR IT, BRATS!” Tsume shouted, one hand slicing through the air like an axe.

Asuma charged.

I sure as hell didn’t.

Because of Kushina’s help, I mostly needed to stall to complete my plan. I was going to seed the entire arena with explosive tags and traps starting in this match, in case I moved on. They’d only respond to me, and I needed every advantage against Gai that I could get. The traps weren’t activated by physical pressure, but I still liked the idea of having enough explosives to make even Deidara pause. Obviously I wasn’t nearly in the Rock-nin’s league, but I figured that demonstrating some forethought would be a bonus in the eyes of the judges.

I slammed my palm into the dirt and shouted, “Explode!” with my chakra following the dormant lines I’d laid.
I closed my eyes against the dirt and smoke thrown up by the blast, but I could still feel Asuma’s chakra warp to the arena’s sole tree as he used the Replacement jutsu. Just as well, really—it would have been bad form to knock the Hokage’s son out in the first few seconds of the match.

I pulled my kodachi loose from my hip strap just as Asuma crashed back into me, kunai out.

I didn’t even have to draw to block—my metal sheath was enough. There was a bit of a scrape along the outside edge of the metal, taking off some paint and paneling, but not enough to compromise its structural soundness.

He was still in the air.

Bad idea.

Blocking overhead might have given me some leverage problems, but being in the air had made it so that the only leverage he had was based on his launch speed, vector, and weight.

Asuma hadn’t hit his growth spurt yet, and I was still on the ground.

My right thumb flicked my kodachi loose from the sheath, just as I planted my forward foot solidly in the ground with my chakra. With my left hand, I grabbed Asuma’s jacket collar as he passed overhead.

Twist aaaaaand launch.

Asuma went hurtling toward the far arena wall.

I straightened, kodachi level with his throat as he recovered and stood. I might have been too far away to directly threaten him, but I could damn well do it indirectly.

After a second, I finally thought of something to say, even if it was under my breath and incredibly lame. “And once again, Physics class rears its ugly head…”

Asuma scowled up at me, looking like a pissed-off lion cub. Even if he was from the freaking monkey clan.

Come on, Simba, remember who you are.

I grinned crookedly.

Come at me, kid.

I ducked under Asuma’s roundhouse, planting one hand and launching myself away when he tried to follow up with a stomp. His punches weren’t weak at all, but I’d been training with Kakashi and the long-established chūnin had long since decided that if I was going to try and really punch his lights out, he should get to repay the favor.

Too bad for him that, by that point, the gap between us wasn’t overwhelming. He was still stronger and faster than I was, but it wasn’t the kind of gap that, for example, existed between Minato and everyone else in speed.

And the difference between Asuma and I, when you got down to it, was about the same as the distance between Kakashi and I. But in reverse.

Honestly, half of my attention wasn’t even on Asuma at all.
It was on planting explosives all around the ring for the next round. While Sensei hadn’t gotten around to teaching me how to lay seals by touch and will alone (presumably because he thought I was going to get myself blown up by accident), I was pretty good at laying mini-tags everywhere if I had to. If a normal tag had the explosive power of a large grenade or a stick of dynamite, mine were very tiny chunks of C4.

By the time I finally got around to forcing him into a submission hold, outward curve of my kodachi resting against his Adam’s apple, I had enough explosive tags hidden all around the stadium to make my next match a little bit more even.

“EXPLODE!” I roared, slamming my chakra through the pre-prepared lines I’d woven through the ground.

Gai was launched skyward by the blast…only to explode into smoke and leaves as he used the Replacement technique.

Sonovabitch.

Gai, as expected, was a lot harder to deal with than Asuma had been.

The way my forearms were throbbing after blocking just one of his signature overpowered kicks…well, suffice to say that I sure as hell couldn’t beat him in a slugging match. He was at least as fast as Kakashi, if not faster, which meant I was lagging behind. He had twice the physical and spiritual endurance I did, whether on offense or defense. Sure, his taijutsu specialization meant that I could outrange him, but fuck if I could get away long enough to actually take advantage of that.

Still, he wasn’t quite as quick as some of the people I trained with. I felt his chakra shift farther away, but he still landed directly on top of another trap.

EXPLODE!

He wasn’t going to get another running start at me if I could help it.

“The hell was that, Gai?” I called. “At least dodge somewhere safe!”

I didn’t dislike Gai. I was just afraid of getting pounded into the ground. For some reason my mouth refused to listen to either distinction.

“Your concern for your opponent’s health does you credit, Keisuke-kun!” Gai said at the top of his lungs.

Once again, we were trading close-range blows and I felt my bones rattle under each strike. I could at least manage to turn his blows aside, which was better than nothing even if it hurt like hell. I ducked under a roundhouse and over a follow-up sweep, throwing myself into a back handspring.

Gai followed, and I leapfrogged over another would-be punishing kick.

“Thanks for the compliment, Gai-san,” I grunted, because a spin and a full-powered punch had followed immediately after and I blocked it badly. The strike drove my own elbow in a glancing blow against my side, making me wince.

I ducked again and drew my kodachi one-handed, slashing at his supporting leg.

My sword gave a hideous shriek as it met Gai’s leg weights.
I straightened, completely screwing up a blocking stand. Gai, being Gai, got past it easily.

And then Gai punched me in the chest.

Specifically, my developing eleven-year-old left breast.

Suffice to say I got the wind knocked out of me in short order. My eyes watered enough that everything was a swimming blur and I could just barely tell that Gai had slowed down quite a lot. In hindsight, I have no idea how I managed to avoid his much-slower follow-up punch, which should have left me unconscious. I just remember staggering backward, wheezing, and landing on my knees.

I even dropped my sword, curling inward around the brand new weak spot that puberty had given me.

After what felt like a while, my blood stopped pounding.

“—kun? Keisuke-kun? I appear to have done you a most unyouthful injury.” Gai was saying, sounding more confused than I’d ever heard him.

It was my fault for fucking up when I went for a block rather than a sidestep, but I was pissed off. It had less to do with feeling like Gai had landed a cheap shot (since, in hindsight, he hadn’t), and more that I’d been reduced to a kid in the fetal position in public. Shame burned me—I wanted nothing more than to destroy him for humiliating me like that.

What can I say? Sometimes I’m not a good person.

All in all, I was probably down for about ten seconds. About long enough for Gai to notice and then say something.

I sent chakra to my hands without any seals at all, and went for Gai’s face with my chakra scalpels.

He just barely jerked back in time. As it was, my glowing hands passed within centimeters of his nose, and I was too angry to care about anything but the fact that I’d missed.

I settled into my mockup of Kakashi’s style. Blood pounding in my ears, I was almost too angry to think. How dare you, I thought. How dare you?

It was like a mantra.

It was also an awful tack to take.

Gai was my friend. Maybe we weren’t especially close and maybe we weren’t the sort to see eye-to-eye, but if I’d been thinking straight I wouldn’t have risked our friendship over a promotion. Sorry, but no. Not that ambitious, normally.

“I am glad to see that your injury has not dampened your enthusiasm, Keisuke-kun, but—!”

“SHUT UP!” I shrieked, slashing again and again. I was too dangerous to block—I was acting more like Kabuto and less like Rin, only neither of them ever attacked in a blind rage. I was acting, all told, like Sasuke.

Sasuke of the far future, anyway.
I managed to stay pissed off for about another thirty seconds, by which time I’d cut muscle fiber in both of Gai’s arms, before my higher thought processes caught up with me.

Gai was looking at me like he’d just found out that his friend was a werewolf. And not the Remus Lupin type, either. Still, his weights were too thick for me to cut through, which means he could, in fact, block with his feet. It’d saved him from a thorough mangling.

I dismissed my chakra scalpels, pushing down a brief sensation of horror. What the hell was wrong with me?

Other than how I apparently could be pissed off enough by public humiliation to go on a revenge-bender for a minute.

“Keisuke-kun…was…are you a girl?”

…For God’s sake, Gai.

“…You are literally the last friend I have to realize that.” I told him flatly, in a voice that was still a little warped by residual adrenaline.

The Dreamer chose this moment to chime in with a cheerfully evil, THIS IS THE STUPIDEST THING YOU’VE EVER DONE.

Gai, I noticed, seemed like he was on the brink of some kind of shouting fit.

And I was too far away to stop his word vomit.

Oh hell.

“Forgive me, Keisuke-chan, for I have offered you unbelievable insult!”

Gai was like a speaker system at a concert. Loud enough to rock your bones. I was torn between clapping my hands over my ears or rushing over to slap him in the face, so I ended up being too frozen to do either.

“FIRST WAS THE TIME WE MET, WHERE I ASSUMED YOU WERE A BOY WITHOUT NOTICING YOUR UNDENIABLE CHARMs! THE SECOND WAS WHEN I CHALLENGED MY RIVAL TO A SUMO MATCH IN YOUR PRESENCE. THE THIRD WAS AT THE PUBLIC BATHHOUSES, WHERE—!”

I ended up contemplating a lot of courses of action while he was talking. Among them, ritual suicide.

I settled for slamming my chakra into my legs, launching myself at him like a rocket.

And then I kicked him in the groin.

It was quite possibly the stupidest match in the history of the public arena.

Overall, Gai and I decided we were even. Gai didn’t mean to cheap-shot me, and I didn’t really mean to try and take his nose off. He did, however, choose nearly the most embarrassing method of apology short of being Major Alex Louis Armstrong, and I definitely cheap-shotted him.

In penance, I agreed to be his sparring partner for two weeks (during the time he was developing the Primary Lotus). And he agreed to stop lamenting his past transgressions against a “flower of
Konoha.” Forever.

All in all the exams ended with my entire team being promoted—Rin, Obito, and I were all officially chūnin-ranked shinobi right on schedule. Gai was also promoted (based mostly on his match with Obito, I think), as was Asuma. Overall, we had a much higher proportion of graduates than most Exams did, but we needed them.

Either that or standards were lowered during wartime.

I sighed mentally. Chūnin at age eleven.

There were only two years until we were handed That Mission.

We’d just have to be ready.

To: Kei-chan/Half-Pint/Keisuke Gekkō/Squirt

From: Rikuto of the Chinatsugumi

(After a huge blotch of ink indicating someone’s failed attempt to cross something out without ruining a page…)

So…uh. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?

Shit. I keep thinking, well, you’re a kid and it’s not like kids grow that fast, right? I mean, you’re probably still knee-high to your sensei and barely capable of reaching the kitchen counter and stuff.

And then I remember that Miyu-chan and Kazu-chan are a hell of a lot bigger than they were when they got here, and then Za-chan had to go and remind me it’s been like two years already. Two years! Two damn years since you choked before the Chūnin Exam finals and saved me a thousand ryō I was gonna bet and then didn’t.

Got a runner to confirm it, after some bribery and also a punch in the face, but hey—congrats on your promotion. I’m not even sure if there was an Exam, and really, I wouldn’t have gone if there was since the twins are at that age when they start to try to gum me to death or get themselves ground to death in the wagon wheels because clearly walking is the shit. Going by the screaming an hour ago, Kazu-chan nearly did it again. Either that or he found out how I was getting ants into Nami-chan’s bags.

Uh, where was I… Oh, right. So here’s your stupid promotion gift from me, but if you tell anyone it was me I’ll be sure to come back from the dead and haunt your ass, until you gouge your own eyes out in penance for being a shitty secret-keeper.

P.S.: Don’t be surprised if your first attempt to call on ’em knocks you out.

- 

To: Keisuke Gekkō

From: Chinatsu Kasai

Rikuto isn’t as smart or as stealthy as he thinks he is. Even for a former Rock-nin, he’s a blockhead.

The first scroll—red ribbon—is a summoning scroll. I think it used to be Rikuto’s, but I haven’t seen him summon anything since I met him. Maybe he stole it. Regardless of what particular species this
scroll is tied to, they’re probably not battle summons, so make of that what you will.

The second scroll is green with gold caps, and it contains a number of sealing techniques that Akira has compiled over the years. Some of the seals, if written wrong, may take your hands off, so try to learn these with some kind of supervision if you must.

The last scroll contains a box with several basic elemental jutsu. Everyone contributed one, though it’s likely that Shiro-chan’s particular technique is useless to anyone without the Ice Release bloodline. Once again, only use while supervised.

Best of luck, congratulations, and happy belated birthday(s).
Making Progress: Welcome to the Real World

Chapter Summary

Kei: Report.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Unraveling Obito’s spool of chakra-sensitive wire had taken us five minutes.

Setting the charges: another ten.

Getting into position to wait: one.

Actually waiting: twenty.

During that time we’d checked and re-checked the lines as well as the charges, had a chance to grab a snack from our packs, and wiped out every trace of our presence aside from the trap itself. It was raining hard enough to chill us all to the bone and mask our scent, and our chakra was suppressed as much as we could.

I could feel at least six shinobi chakra signatures in the depths of the valley, clearly attempting to circumvent the front by taking a hazardous nearly-underground route through Kusa-Konoha territory.

Kakashi, under a camouflage genjutsu that made him hard to see from any angle but straight-on, raised one hand. Obito and I dropped onto our bellies, waiting for his signal.

Next to me, Obito pulled his ear protectors and his orange goggles into position. Kakashi also had earplugs, but he was mostly concentrating on the view below us.

“Boom.” Obito mouthed. Simultaneously, we ducked and he sent his chakra through the wires wrapped around his right hand. I did the same, though my wires were clutched in my left.

All of my pre-prepared paper tags went off at once. There were only thirty of them, strung barely under the first layer of muddy rock by Kakashi’s expert hand, but that’s a lot of boom for an enclosed space. The tags themselves were the strongest I’d ever made, and had been approved by Sensei for this mission.

The narrow canyon’s walls collapsed on top of and around the Iwagakure squad, not to mention below. If I had to make a comparison, I’d guess that it was like being inside a foxhole and not hearing “Fire in the hole” in time to do anything about it.

No one got away.

The next two minutes were spent salvaging any wire or explosives that we could.

And ignoring the bodies the best we could.
“We’ve achieved our objectives. Kei, do you sense anyone else?” Kakashi asked, checking for survivors and finding none.

“I can’t feel anyone besides us.” I replied, and then handed Obito’s wires back to him. “We’re good.”

Kakashi nodded sharply. “Back to base, everyone.”

Obito grimaced briefly at the blood on my hands, but he still tucked the spool back into his thigh holster. To Kakashi he said, “Right behind you.”

I spared one glance back for the corpses we’d made, and then followed my teammates out of the canyon. This particular backdoor into Konoha territory wouldn’t be one for much longer.

“Blow last charges,” Kakashi ordered.

I did.

The whole place collapsed in on itself.

A lot has changed in two years. Sensei is the new Hokage-to-be. Orochimaru deserted Konoha. I’ve started to grow boobs.

(Actually, that last one’s a lie.)

Let me start over.

A couple of months ago, Team Minato triumphed over the Chūnin Exams. It took us two tries, but Obito and I were both promoted. Rin was, too, but as a temp member of Team Minato, the main benefit to her is that she’s now allowed to learn more advanced techniques. Obito and I got our flak jackets in a ceremony that was at least half tongue-in-cheek and promptly hung them up in our respective closets to ignore.

(There’s such a thing as subtlety in enemy territory. Village-based uniforms are not it.)

The Hokage probably just wanted all of us to get the hell out of his office. Promotions are great, but they’re also less important to the war effort than, say, reports of the enemies’ movements.

Sensei was announced as the future Hokage pretty much the next day.

Not especially long afterward, Orochimaru fled the village after being caught performing horrific human experiments.

I could tell myself that one thing didn’t have much to do with the other, but that’d be a lie.

Orochimaru was a hero to the village. Everyone knew that. That’s why he became so infamous after he ran off to found Otogakure. He’s like Konoha’s version of Benedict Arnold (only a million times more successful). He’s like Voldemort. Saruman the White, maybe. He was great in a way that most of us normal people never would be—the man was one of the many heroes of the Second Shinobi World War. And then he turned to evil because apparently being good wasn’t the same as good for Science.

I hated him only slightly less than I was terrified of him. If Sharingan Kakashi plus Chidori wasn’t even a blip on the guy’s radar, then I was going to be absolutely nothing.
Basically, if and when Orochimaru came back for a dramatic homecoming, I was more than okay with the idea of killing his minions. If the man himself put in an appearance within a hundred feet of me, though, I’d probably hide under a rock.

Not that it’d help. But it was a thought that at least had some merit so long as I didn’t attract his attention.

It also took my mind off of what I was supposed to be doing.

At that exact moment, my team and I were deep in the interior of the continent, lying in ambush for a much less famous turncoat than Orochimaru.

Sometimes people turned, whether for money or fame or prestige. We’d only gotten the hawk the other day, and our mission parameters had correspondingly shifted to keep the traitor from getting where he was going.

While we hadn’t hit the border yet (and probably wouldn’t, unless the mission went horribly wrong), I couldn’t help but expect trouble from Iwagakure anyway. It wasn’t like there was some kind of wall that blocked our territory off from everyone else’s—the border between the Land of Fire and the Land of Grass was only a political boundary. Iwagakure had been making some incursions into land held by Kusagakure, but they had to fight Grass ninja from their shared borders all the way through their territory. We only had to worry about Rock-nin and maybe the occasional asshole from Takigakure, depending on which way they were swinging this week.

(Since Takigakure had neither invaded nor been invaded by any country in its history, I wasn’t sure they really mattered in the long run.)

Kusagakure may not have been big, but they were our allies and there were tons of Konoha-born ninja running through the country. On the whole, our nation still lagged behind Kumo and Iwa in terms of military strength, but we’ve always made up for that with numbers.

Where Kumo would plant a single shinobi in a traitor’s path and expect them to succeed (and they probably would, given the number of S-class shinobi they could field), Konoha preferred teams of four. We were the only team in the immediate area, and thus were scrambled to meet the new threat.

Hence, Team Minato running an ambush.

I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing up straight just at the thought. We hadn’t been in a border station for three days, but I couldn’t help but wonder if that was the last thing Dad ever knew before they were overrun. While I knew that the particular building had been blasted to ash, it was still eerie to realize that, four years ago, Dad would have been out here running similar, if not nearly so specific, routes. No one who had been alive then was assigned to the Kusa border, so I couldn’t even ask them about it.

I zipped my jacket all the way up under my chin, frowning to myself.

The chill that went down my spine had nothing to do with the cold.

Middle watch gave me far too much time to drive my thoughts in circles. I sighed inwardly, resisting the urge to swing my legs in restlessness. The last thing we needed was for our quarry to be startled away by me breaking a branch.

That said, sitting in a tree for an hour straight, even with my back to the bark, was making me more bored than I’d thought possible. To stave off the urge to regret my life choices (and the fact that the Game Boy Color wasn’t going to be invented in my lifetime), I looked over the edge of the branch
and down at my team snoozing below.

It was Obito’s turn to sleep the whole night through, and he hadn’t budged after bedding down. He’d accidentally taken two watches the night before, due to nerves and because we were so far from home, so he’d moved like a zombie all day. Luckily he didn’t snore anymore, or else the whole stealth thing we’d been training for would have been wasted. It had taken us almost two weeks to train him out of it, and we didn’t always succeed. He was still sleeping with his mouth open, but he didn’t do much more than drool.

Sensei was sleeping with his back against the tree trunk, with Obito and Kakashi bracketing him on each side like the world’s most belligerent pair of bookends (when they were awake, anyway). He’d taken his pack and mine and turned them into a sort of wedge pillow, so he didn’t wake up with a crick later, and had crossed his arms loosely under his ribs. Sensei, I knew, had been more or less running double-time since the Hokage had declared him the new heir, and in a way this assignment had been a way for him to relax and come to terms with the way his life was soon going to change. Weird how such a mission could almost be comforting in how routine it was for him, but with Sensei it didn’t always pay to question stuff like that. He didn’t often give straight answers if he didn’t feel like it.

Kakashi slept on his side, back to Sensei’s crossed legs. The way he had his metal armguards still on, even while pillowing his head on them, seemed a little uncomfortable, but he’d handed second watch over to me three hours in with no complaints. When asleep, he was less of a porcupine and more of a hedgehog, and I didn’t have to fight down the urge to make a smart remark if only because he didn’t start shit while unconscious.

It was odd how looking over my teammates was calming, in a way.

We were less than fifty miles from the front, and somehow just knowing that they were alive was enough to make the world less cold.

Wasn’t comforting enough for me to allow myself to fall asleep on watch, though. I wasn’t stupid, and it didn’t, ultimately, change the fact that the particular asshole we were looking for had already dodged two other teams.

Neither of those teams had a chakra sensor like myself, granted (which I think was part of the reason why we were tapped for it), but it was no small thing to avoid an Inuzuka.

Only the fact that Sensei had once again rigged up a security barrier prevented me from being jumpy enough to power a small electrical device.

If I had anything other than moonlight, I could have at least started looking over the scroll Sensei had given me after I got those letters from the Chinatsugumi. They’d arrived attached to a mid-sized package, which indeed contained three scrolls like the letters had said. Sensei had immediately confiscated all of them, and I guess he and Kushina had spent a week poring over them. While the Chinatsugumi had apparently meant them for me, it still made sense to have a couple of seal masters look over everything before handing them over to a barely-promoted chūnin.

Jutsu aside from the three basic Academy ones were rarely, if ever, available to the public. Shinobi preferred having absolute control over flow of information, which usually meant that techniques were passed from master to student and that was it. Konoha’s scroll of Forbidden Jutsu was more of a record than a how-to guide when it came to things beyond Shadow Clones. Having never seen it, I could only conclude that it existed mostly to provide counter-strategies to the techniques inside.
Here’s an example: While the Hokage would have undoubtedly seen the Impure World Reincarnation technique sometime before Orochimaru’s invasion, if Tobirama Senju had been nearly as fond of it as the other undead Kage had implied, the strategies against it were probably in that scroll somewhere. I doubt he got to practice them much, but out of the available options, three of which were nullified by a lack of prep-time and Orochimaru overriding the first two Hokage’s wills, using the Dead Demon Consuming Seal was the one most likely to succeed.

I didn’t even know where to get started on defeating zombie shinobi. Hopefully, my training in fūinjutsu would lead me to the right path. Eventually.

At least this wasn’t that war. Our opponents were going to be human.

Anyway, back to the topic of techniques.

The blue scroll focused on starting exercises and C-ranked elemental jutsu of all five types. I have no elemental jutsu, due to a lack of focus on ninjutsu as a whole. I guess the Chinatsugumi were interested in rectifying that, but many shinobi didn’t get started on elemental techniques until they were well into their careers. Sensei rarely uses the Wind jutsu I know he has, while Kakashi has at least a couple of C-ranked Lightning jutsu as a result of his being Sensei’s prodigy and because he’s a genius. Out of all of us, though, Obito uses his Fire jutsu the most. Elemental jutsu can be kind of situational, sometimes, and I’d gone for long enough without any that I was somewhat hesitant.

Besides which, learning elemental jutsu usually left you locked in with your affinity and maybe another set of techniques if you had time to practice. Unlike sealing arts, where you could learn nearly anything if you had the brains for it, many shinobi couldn’t use more than the bare minimum of techniques outside of their affinity. It was what made the Sharingan and the Rinnegan so special. Especially the Rinnegan.

It was why I was pretty sure I’d end up passing the damn thing around to my teammates in the hopes that someone else would get something out of it.

I still hadn’t gotten it back, though.

And the sealing and summoning scrolls? Forget it. No way was Sensei letting me mess with those until I finished puberty or something.

Mom had actually agreed with him, which made it worse.

Then again, while I was interested in the contents of the scrolls I got, I wasn’t willing to push against far more experienced shinobi about what they thought I could handle. The time to prove myself would come eventually, which was simultaneously gratifying and extremely worrying.

The scroll Sensei had actually let me take, by contrast, was about meditation.

Still. It’d be better than nothing, since no one was going to spontaneously invent handheld games anytime soon.

I reached out with my chakra sense, scanning for anomalous signatures. Usually, I didn’t have to focus at all—passive was good enough for advance warning about things we’d have to care about.

My shift, as it turned out, passed without incident. After lounging on the tree branch like a cat for what felt like hours (and probably was), I walked down the trunk and woke Sensei for his shift.

At a safe distance.
The next day was less simple.

We found our deserter, for one. Many famous villains came from Konoha, due to our tendency to produce stupendously powerful head-cases and only belatedly remembering to instill morals when it was far too late to matter, but our target for this mission was neither.

Ichiro Komaeda was a perfectly average chūnin-level shinobi. He even looked entirely average—brown hair, brown eyes, and an entirely forgettable face under a Konoha headband. If not for the fact that he’d been discovered leaking information to Iwagakure shortly after Team Minato was sent on our first border patrol, we probably could have passed each other on the street without noticing.

The problem is that he’d somehow picked up friends.

Instead of fighting a single intelligence-specialized shinobi, we were fighting a three-man squad of Iwa-nin escorting the lily-livered motherfucker out of our territory.

Combat-wise, the Iwa team was lackluster. I cut one man’s legs out from under him before following up with my version of Rin’s paralytic medical ninjutsu (which she had graciously taught me while I was floundering), while Obito set one of his friends on fire and Kakashi flat-out killed the last one. It was all over in just under a minute, counting the frantic stop-drop-roll sequence that helped exactly nothing when Kakashi killed him anyway.

In the end, all Sensei really had to do was stand directly in Komaeda’s path, and the guy froze up like a deer in the headlights of an eighteen-wheeler.

Kakashi, Obito and I finished securing the Iwa prisoner, but I stopped first. Sensei’s killing intent was swamping the clearing where the enemy had decided to make a stand.

“T-the Yellow Flash…” Komaeda was nearly squeaking.

“Hello, Komaeda-san.” Sensei said pleasantly, but I wasn’t fooled.

I didn’t want to see the look on his face, and the way Kakashi’s eyebrows knit together told me that he already knew what was going to happen. Obito blinked rapidly, staring at Sensei with a face nearly white with fear.

Sensei never felt like that before.

“One false move against my team, and I will cut your hands off.” Sensei continued, still in that polite way of his. “Hurt any of them, Komaeda-san, and your feet will follow suit. Do you understand me?”

…I’d never seen Sensei’s war persona before. I wasn’t sure if he was always like this, or if it was just because his students were at risk.

Komaeda nodded quickly, eyes never leaving Sensei’s face.

“Now, you are going to come quietly with us.” Sensei went on quietly, as though he didn’t have Komaeda practically pissing himself in terror. “We will be returning to Konoha, and you will cooperate. Or else you will understand how imaginative I can be.”

Almost without noticing, I reached out to Obito and squeezed his shaking hand. Both of our palms were damp.
There was something ironic in how the scariest thing we’d yet faced was our own teacher.

Kakashi’s hand closed over mine and Obito’s, briefly. Then he was off, idly disarming Komaeda and tying his arms behind his back.

I let go of Obito’s hand, standing and sheathing my kodachi as though nothing had happened. After a second or two, I even managed to force my voice to work. “Sensei, what do you want us to do about this one?” I asked, astounded at how calm I sounded.

“Is he disarmed?” Sensei asked, still using that uncannily even voice.

“Yes, Sensei.” Obito replied, instead of me.

Sensei’s expression, I noticed, had evened out somewhat. The killing intent had also dropped significantly. Probably because of that, I felt rather than saw Obito get to his feet behind me.

I still didn’t feel entirely safe turning my back on Sensei, and I wasn’t sure why. Kakashi had killed dozens of people in front of me, I’d killed at least ten already, and Sensei’s total probably wasn’t worth thinking about. Obito had killed too, though less so than the rest of us.

Why was this different?

“This won’t be the last one.” Kakashi said quietly, as Sensei began fiddling with some kind of seal he was drawing on the ground. I could only imagine that he was planning on transporting the two prisoners straight to the border outpost. Or, preferably, Konoha.

I gave Kakashi a blank look.

“The last traitor,” he clarified, as Obito joined us. “And it won’t be the last time we get so close to the front.”

Well, no shit.

“Or the last time we see Sensei do that.” Obito remarked, similarly subdued. Distantly, I was surprised they weren’t arguing.

I bit my lip. Now that we’d all been promoted, it wasn’t a game anymore. We were real soldiers. On a real battlefield. And someday soon, we’d be sent on a mission without Sensei, and we’d probably fuck up.

“Sensei is Konoha’s Yellow Flash. He’ll be called on more and more.” Kakashi explained. “And we’ll be caught up in everything the Hokage needs him to do.” His tone and expression were flat. “Deal with it.”

It made me wonder, briefly, if he’d ever seen Sensei carry through with threats of mutilation against prisoners of war. Because, no matter how we in Konoha tried to market ourselves to people, we were still a military village. We traded in secrets. We fought with them. And we’d kill in a heartbeat to protect them.

And Konoha, as a whole, despised traitors. Komaeda wasn’t getting out of this one.

I nodded absently, thinking.

So did Obito, though he looked a little green.

I didn’t…I didn’t like the idea. But I understood that this world didn’t work like my old one. Aside
from the lack of cars and guns, the society I lived in now placed much less value on human life. Why not, after all, when we’d barely had a handful of consecutive years of peace in our entire recorded history? The ends justify the means, right?

Well. Not in my head. But I wasn’t about to argue POW rights then.

Fucking hell, I prayed that Naruto’s generation would be able to do something about it. Because mine? Already screwed.

(Maybe not forever, and maybe not thoroughly. I’d have to see what this generation’s Narutos had to say about it.)

We ended up dragging Komaeda and the surviving Iwa infiltrator back to the border station, and from there we went home. The station itself provided an escort for the POWs, which left somewhat later than we did. I don’t know what happened to them afterward, but I didn’t think much about them, either. I tried not to. There are some things you don’t want to think your hometown is capable of.

But it is, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Minimal timeline fuckery involved--between the testimony that Yamato was one of the infants Orochimaru experimented on, Anko's experience with the Curse Seal, and the flashback pertaining to the time Sarutobi tried to arrest his wayward student, it's...somewhat difficult to tell when the hell Orochimaru took off.

All we know for certain that it comes down to "sometime before the series started."
A different month, another seasonal shift, and a lot of missions later, I got to do something a little different.

A couple of days after I got home (and I was willing to reenter the land of the living), Mom had me take Hayate and his friends to the public baths in order to get all of us out of her hair. I had been getting antsy, and a long soak in the springs would have done me some good in the relaxation department. Being the assigned babysitter put a damper on that plan quickly enough. As it was, I regretted the lack of public swimming pools for about five minutes and then decided to tell the kids to get their things together.

This being Konoha, we had hot springs too. So I went in that direction.

There were enough different springs and partitions at two in the afternoon to give me and my ducklings some privacy. For my part, I’d ordered the kids to bring their own towels since I didn’t feel like running back and forth between gender-segregated halves of a spring to make sure no one drowned. Also, Yūgao and I had exactly nothing in common to talk about anyway, besides Hayate. It’d be easier on my sanity to just keep them all in the same place.

Iruka dunked Hayate underwater anyway. Yūgao pulled Iruka off him by his hair. Shortly thereafter, a water fight ensued.

I held my book out of the line of fire and thought, Oh, to be a kid again. Never mind that I still was a kid.

Technically, I suppose I wasn’t even supposed to have the black book, never mind having it at the hot springs. Sensei had taken to giving me older editions of his Bingo Book, which were generally anywhere from six months to a year out of date, if not more. They were small enough to hide behind the pages of a weapon magazine I’d randomly picked out of the newsstand, which made covert reading somewhat easier.

I wasn’t even planning on going in the water—onsen were nice enough, but I’d much prefer to run up the water bill at home if I had a choice between public and private. The fact that I hadn’t even bothered to take my own bathing equipment did say a lot on that end. Lounging around in my oldest zipper hoodie, cut-off shorts, and a tank top, I felt like a cheap knockoff of James Bond on vacation.

Only I’m pretty sure James Bond would have made a terrible babysitter. And he’d never have been caught dead in anything less stylish than designer swim trunks.

Anyway, back to the Bingo Book. Silly name for a headhunting manual.

Sensei hadn’t seen any harm in letting me read about the bogeymen of this war, apparently because he figured my chances of actually encountering one of them were pretty slim. To be fair, it was true—as far as I know, Team Minato never did attract the attention of people like the Kinkaku Squad.
(okay, okay, so maybe that was the wrong war), even if Sensei would face off with A and B sooner or later.

I did find it kind of funny that Sensei had his own profile taped inside of the back cover. Flee on sight order and everything. The dork.

Flipping through the pages meant reintroducing myself to a lot of familiar faces. Also a lot of unfamiliar ones that I could only assume would get mauled to death over the course of this war, but that part was less important.

For one, I could see that A and B were making names for themselves. As the son of the Third Raikage, A was well on his way to succeeding his father and the rest of the world knew it. His Lightning Release Armor made him basically untouchable to Mist and Sand forces, which cut fully twenty thousand combatants out of consideration when it came to facing him and not dying horribly. Sensei could—and would—face off with him on even terms. The only question was when.

B, as A’s combat partner, adopted brother, and host of the Eight-Tailed Beast, was understandably no less dangerous. He was only a little older than Sensei, but much more excitable and also a hell of a lot slower. The Eight-Tails made him too dangerous for anyone short of a jōnin to face period, never mind the idea of a solo fight. Jōnin were often of vastly different skill sets and levels even within the rank, however, which told me that the only one I’d trust to face him now would be Sensei.

Jiraiya probably could take him, of course, and maybe the Hokage, but anyone else would probably not be walking away from that fight.

I pursed my lips thoughtfully.

I knew that the Eight-Tailed Beast’s host was always a member of the Raikage’s family. The fact that B had been adopted as A’s combat partner and brother merely solidified that association. Konoha had a similar, though much more accidental procedure.

Then again, Mito Uzumaki had been the First Hokage’s wife. There hadn’t been another host until Kushina, who had been forced, eventually, to turn Kurama over to her son.

Shukaku had had three hosts, the last being Gaara, the son of the Fourth Kazekage.

Rōshi, the current host of the Four-Tailed Beast, was likely still an Iwagakure powerhouse. The same could be said of Han, though I didn’t really remember anything about him aside from his steam armor and that he was from the same village.

Yagura, the future Fourth Mizukage, wasn’t a host yet.

Utakata, Yugito, and Fū were too young to take the field, I think. Sure, Yugito was at least my age, but I couldn’t see A allowing a half-trained jinchūriki of a lesser Beast onto the same battlefields that he and his brother did.

I couldn’t say if the First Hokage’s decision to distribute the Tailed Beasts to the other nations had helped or hurt the situation. It simply was, at this point. We had to live with it.

And that was about when I had to roll up my sleeves and walk out onto the surface of the hot spring to make sure the kids didn’t actually drown each other. While the book was safely inside my waterproof satchel, I pulled Iruka, then Hayate out of the water by one wrist each. Yugao followed a moment later, crawling out via the nearby rocks.

“Hey!” Hayate started to protest, of course, but the day I let my nine-year-old brother boss me
around is the day that I pledge my undying love of shrimp. No dice, little brother.

I hoisted Hayate over one shoulder, slung Iruka along under my other arm and dragged the boys back into the building. Yūgao followed, giggling like crazy.

In hindsight, I give my mom massive amounts of credit for being able to wrangle kids during bath time. I don’t remember giving her that much trouble ever, but apparently either Hayate was a more difficult child or he had a particular problem with me chasing him around with a shampoo bottle. In my old life, by the time I was old enough to be in control of a showerhead for the sake of another person, the only ones in my house small and/or unintelligent to require my assistance were my dogs.

That said, there was similarity between catching dogs for bath time and catching kids.

Also, I was a ninja this time around.

(Then again, so were they—mini-ninjas, to be more precise.)

By the time I got everyone on the path toward cleanliness, I was pretty sure we’d been gone for nearly three hours. Between the half-hour walk to the spring itself, the kids horsing around for another two hours, and however long it had taken me to corral Hayate and Iruka into finally submitting to the cleaning part of the program, the post-supper crowd was starting to move in. For my part, I was helping Yūgao comb out the last few knots in her long purple hair, and ignored the crowd of other Konoha citizens getting ready for a relaxing soak.

(Incidentally, I was briefly jealous that her hair stayed mostly straight apart from a few snags. I had cowlick problems and perpetual hat-hair.)

That was about when I felt a subtle, but still strong, chakra signature on the edge of my range.

By the time I tied her hair off and both of the boys were starting to remember to get back into their street clothes, the strange signature was a lot closer than it had been.

It was also near the women’s half of the baths.

_Hell’s bells._

**Ryō for your thoughts?**

Well, there were now two paths before me: One, I could go and bother one of the Sannin. Or two, I could ignore him entirely and just get the kids home.

Yeah, _nope_. I wasn’t Naruto, and therefore was not interested in pissing off Jiraiya.

“Come on, kids, time to head home.” I said.

_Nope, nope, nope!_

“Obito, Kei-kun, this is my teacher, the Sannin Jiraiya.” Sensei told us the next day, standing next to a white-haired man who was at least half a head taller than he was. They shared hairstyles, somewhat, though Jiraiya’s was an order of magnitude longer. He was at least wearing the standard Konoha uniform—his normal one, in the future, was so much weirder.

Imagine the look on my face. Put laconically: Pure, unadulterated, _What The Fuck Is This?™_.

“Hey, if you’re one of the Sannin, that means you’re super strong, right?” Obito was practically
trembling with barely contained excitement.

Kakashi was pointedly not looking at any of us.

“You bet, Uchiha!” Jiraiya said brightly. “I am the legendary Toad Sage!”

He was also the teammate of the Snake Sannin, by definition, and the Slug Princess. Their team was in shambles.

“You’re that pervert who was at the hot springs yesterday.” I said flatly.

“Wrong, boy!” Jiraiya said. “I’m a super pervert!”

This is sounding very familiar.

“My mistake.” I replied, unblinking.

Wow, I was turning into Kakashi.

“Sensei, I did mention that one of my students was a girl…” Sensei stage-whispered.

Click! went Jiraiya’s brain. I wasn’t quite sure what he had an epiphany about, though. Sensei could have told him anything about our team.

“Anyway, that’s not what I invited him for.” Sensei said quickly, holding his hands up to stave off any sort of commentary. He cleared his throat. “Jiraiya-sensei is the only other person who, due to a clear lapse in judgment, knows a technique I invented. He’s here to help me teach you the basics.”

Putting the issue of Jiraiya out of my mind, I focused entirely on Sensei.

No way…

There were basically two major techniques that Sensei had Jiraiya had in common. One was based on the summoning contract both of them had with toads. Not exactly something someone could just learn, what with the sapient beings hooked up to the other end. The other, and Sensei’s original technique, could only be…

Sensei held out his right hand, palm up and fingers curled inward. As we watched, chakra began to swirl around with enough speed and density that, in a burst of light and wind, a glowing blue ball formed in his hand.

“I don’t actually expect any of you to learn how to use the Rasengan in a month, or two months, or even three.” Sensei told us. “If I could create this technique, I have no doubt at all that all three of you can make your own as well. Of course, it took me three years. You don’t have to create an A-ranked technique, though.” He grinned. “Never underestimate the value of a surprise attack in the right moment, especially if it’s one your opponent can’t have ever seen before.”

I thought of the Rasenshuriken and nodded enthusiastically.

(I also thought of Bullshitting the Fish Test Jutsu and tried not to giggle.)

Obito was grinning. “Betcha I’ll have a super-awesome new jutsu before you do, Kei!”

“And I bet you won’t.” I said, barely resisting the urge to stick my tongue out at him.

Sensei proceeded to spend the next five minutes explaining how the Rasengan worked. Rotating my
chakra was something I already knew how to do, but compressing and intensifying the spin…well, I’d never really thought about learning the Rasengan, so I’d consequently never thought about it. Most of my techniques were based on precision application that put most people in the mindset of thinking about blades. Killer Frisbees were more the Rasengan’s way.

As Obito screwed up his face in concentration (while getting no visible results) and Kakashi was, of course, already halfway to a sphere, I stared at the palm of my hand and at the spiral squiggle in the middle of it. I wasn’t even channeling chakra—I was trying to visualize the technique. Kind of dumb, but I didn’t have the chakra to waste on half-assed attempts.

“Hey, Minato, mind if I have a chat with Kei-kun here?” Jiraiya asked Sensei after a while.

Sensei gave Jiraiya a flat look. “Don’t corrupt her, Sensei.”

“Sheesh, you say it like I could. Kid’s as cold as your other brat over there.” He gestured vaguely at Kakashi, who ignored him.

“Sensei…”

Jiraiya flapped a hand. “She’ll be fine, Minato. It’ll only take a second.”

“What do you need, Jiraiya-sama?” I asked, not getting up. I did, however, look up at him. I concentrated on the mole on his nose, because if there wasn’t some kind of levity within the next couple of seconds I’d probably be spontaneously itching to create some.

(Also, if I look right into people’s eyes, I sometimes get the urge to giggle. Or at least I used to.)

Jiraiya paused, realizing that he had both of my teammates’ eyes on him already. Then he shrugged. “Not many people can find me when I don’t want to be found. And I don’t remember actually seeing you yesterday, much less meeting you.”

“I’m a chakra sensor.” I told him, “And it wasn’t worth causing trouble when I had kids with me.” Besides, Tsunade used to beat him bad enough that even a lifetime of Jiraiya-grade perversion isn’t balanced out yet.

“You are a kid.” Jiraiya said.

“I’m a chūnin.” I said. “And if I’m going to pick a fight with one of the Sannin, it’s not going to be when my baby brother and his friends are right there.”

Sets a bad example.

Jiraiya didn’t question my knowing who he was, though we’d never met. Neither did Sensei. I’d gotten my hands on enough paperwork to know who he was without a problem, even if his combat prowess and lack of genin students kept him in the field just shy of perpetually.

This was the man who, in the end, could only say that his dream had been to have an awesome death. And he’d succeeded.

*Christ on a cracker.*

Then Jiraiya laughed.

I blinked.

“You’ve got an interesting pack of brats, Minato.” Jiraiya chuckled. He sat back on his heels,
holding out one hand. “So, Kei-kun, let’s see how you do on the Rasengan when you actually *try.*”

I frowned just for a second, because I wasn’t sure why he’d reversed himself so quickly, then started to channel chakra into my hand. Of course it fizzled out, but not until the chakra itself was visible and I could *definitely* feel the drain.

“Dammit.” I said.

“You’re doing better than I am, Kei.” Obito grumbled, making his way over. He sat next to me. “See, I can’t even get it to spin!”

“That’s because you’re not putting enough chakra into it, kid. Can’t spin if there’s nothing there.” Jiraiya told us.

Sensei, I noticed, had gone on to critique Kakashi’s wobbly, but somewhat solid, sphere.

“Well, how am I supposed to do it then?” Obito asked. “I gathered as much chakra as I can already!”

“Obito, let me see.” I sat up, hovering over his hand. His chakra wasn’t doing much more than ruffling my hair anyway.

Jiraiya sat back and watched us work it out for ourselves.

Sort of like a proud grandparent, really. An incredibly perverted badass grandpa, anyway.

Not a bad start, I think. Here’s to the future.

Obito tried for a couple of seconds to come up with something to say. After a while, he gave up and just went with the obvious. “…Sensei, there’s a dog on your shoulder.”

“So there is, Obito.” Sensei replied, as though having a pug on his shoulder like a furry parrot was an everyday event, and continued writing out an equipment storage seal as though none of us had said anything.

I, meanwhile, was barely tamping down on the urge to squeal like the worst sort of fangirl.

Lemme rewind and set the scene a little better.

Because we’d only just entered the chain of command, and because Sensei was who he was, we were easing into what I’d call an “active roster” sort of schedule. One month in (meaning we were more than likely to be sent on a mission that would almost kill us, or more than one), then a month off, then two months with a two-month break, and so on. I’d asked about it, and Jiraiya had told me that some shinobi could be sent to the front for up to six months once they got higher up in the ranks. The fact that I hadn’t met him until I was nearly twelve told me that he’d been gone for *way* longer.

Or that he’d never had a month off from being on-call that whole time.

Compared to the eighteen-month (or more) tours that soldiers in my old life had been prone to, it didn’t seem like much. That said, there was a difference between being an American soldier and being a shinobi—one of them was the fact that Konoha *was* being threatened. Sure, most of the time smaller countries took the most damage, but it didn’t change the fact that we were still in range of many attacks and our enemies *did* usually overpower us on a one-to-one basis.

Also, no cars, guns, or nukes.
Basically, during our one-month break, we worked on things we thought would make us more likely to survive our upcoming two-month run at near-death.

For Obito, trying to figure out how to use the Rasengan at least helped with his chakra control. He didn’t seem interested in the technique itself—it demanded more control than he’d have for a while—but since it was also about the time in his young life when all mini-Uchiha started to go a little pyromaniac, I was kind of glad that he didn’t even get close to trying to infuse his chakra nature into the technique. At least, not after he set his sleeve on fire the first time. None of us could quite figure out how he managed it.

As for me, I managed to come up with something. For one, Jiraiya took me aside one day and stuffed a slip of chakra sensitive paper in my hand.

“Honestly, I don’t understand how Minato could have you kids for so long and not check your chakra nature.” Jiraiya had grumbled. “You’re all chūnin now, and everyone knows that’s the time to do something crazy.”

“Given how much adult supervision we apparently need, I don’t think so.” I’d replied under my breath.

Jiraiya had snorted derisively. “Everyone’s got to leave the nest sooner or later. Now, channel a small amount of chakra into the paper. Carefully; it’s expensive. We’ll do the same for the Uchiha in a minute.”

I had agreed, and let my chakra flow into the paper.

It went damp and floppy in my fingers.

“Water… Not bad at all. You’re a medic, right?”

I’d wobbled a hand in midair to communicate “so-so.” I’d explained, “I got cut from my apprenticeship years ago. Everything I’ve learned since is based on that, and making stuff up.”

“You are so a medic, Kei!” Obito had shouted from halfway across the clearing.

“I don’t have a license!” I’d shouted back.

“Who cares?”

“Will you two just shut up?” Kakashi had demanded, from somewhere in between. The Rasengan fizzled out between his fingers when he looked up, so I guess we had to.

Uh, anyway. Summary of events: I learned I had water-natured chakra, Obito had an affinity for fire, and we both tried to work on Sensei’s super-special signature technique.

Kakashi…he mastered the Rasengan. But he didn’t use it in training or in combat, and probably never would. Because, as the perpetual overachiever, he immediately tried to come up with a way to infuse his lightning chakra into the technique.

And it kind of exploded.

So, uh. He wasn’t doing that again until his hand recovered.

Instead, I guess he got the urge poke through some stuff he hadn’t in a while. Without being able to
use his right hand, he had to come up with some other way to use the training time we all had left, and there are some techniques that skilled shinobi can use with little more than blood and willpower.

Such as summoning.

That, eventually, led to the reason why Sensei had a tiny pug on his shoulder in the training grounds. After a moment or two, Sensei gently scooped the little dog off his padded shoulder and offered it to Kakashi.

Kakashi said, “Sensei, Pakkun needs to get used to your scent as quickly as possible.”

Pakkun made a high-pitched growling noise at being separated from his perch, and Kakashi quickly took him out of Sensei’s hands. Pakkun immediately buried his nose into the crook of Kakashi’s elbow, clearly content to simply take up space in his master’s arms.

“Don’t you think he needs to meet your teammates, too?” Sensei responded.

The way Kakashi’s eyebrows knit together made me think he didn’t agree.

Then, “Here, Kei. You take him.” Kakashi said, and I took the pug puppy from him without even thinking about it.

Funny how, even after nearly twelve years without a dog, I still remembered how to hold them. My left arm stayed low as support, while I looped my right around so I could create a rough bowl between my chest and my arms. I rubbed the underside of his jaw, gently, with one thumb.

God damn, I missed my dogs. In this life, anyway, I’d known from the start that there wasn’t going to be any room in my life for pets. Between Hayate (who, in his early years, was really more a pet than someone to talk to) and my ninja career, I’d never be able to take care of anything more responsive than a rock. Dogs had been ruled out by how I hadn’t been born an Inuzuka—nin-dogs were the only accepted option for a career shinobi.

Pakkun wasn’t nearly as fluffy as the dogs I remembered, but he was tiny and adorable. He was a flat, plain brown color that wouldn’t stand out in the field, with a darker brown muzzle and facial mask. He had a long, straight tail rather than the tight curl I was used to, and pink paw-pads. He was also about the length of my forearm and wearing a blue vest with the usual scarecrow face outlined on the back. Definitely Kakashi’s dog, even if he didn’t have his own miniature headband yet.

The first words out of my mouth were, “He’s so cute.”

“Uh…Kei?” Obito sounded odd.

“He can’t talk yet, but he can understand us.” Kakashi said, but his tone was also off somehow.

I ignored them. “From the looks of it, you’re about eight weeks old. But since you’re Kakashi’s, you’re probably closer to a year or two, right? Ninken live so much longer than civilian dogs, and you’ll be able to use chakra just like your master soon enough.” I forced a giggle back, but was only partly successful. “We’ll be counting on you!”

“Kei-kun?” Sensei patted me on the head, as though to make sure I was still capable of focusing on reality.

My head snapped up. “Yes, Sensei?”

Sensei looked like he was trying not to laugh. “Come on, Pakkun can’t fall asleep before he gets a
I glanced at Obito, who was hovering at my left elbow. “Do you want to hold him? Only, don’t hold him like a baby—I’ve never met a dog that liked that.”

Reluctantly, I let Obito hold Pakkun—though not after critiquing him thoroughly on how he was doing it. By the end, only the fact that Pakkun had his jacket between his little puppy teeth kept Obito from immediately trying to give the puppy back to me out of sheer nerves.

As it was, he ended up holding Pakkun up and against the side of his neck, sort of like a baby after all. Pakkun responded by sticking his nose against Obito’s collar and going to sleep again.

“He’s adorable.” I said, barely resisting the urge to pet him again. Puppies need their sleep!

“Heh, yeah, I guess he is cute.” Obito said, but he was giving me a weird look. “Kei?”

“Yeah?”

“...I guess girls really do like dogs.” Obito said, teasing grin already in place.

I replied, “Hey, I like dogs because they are both adorable and kickass. I don’t know about Rin-chan.”

Obito turned red. “T-That’s not what I was talking about!”

“I know, I know.” I said. It’d been ages since I’d called him out on not telling Rin about his crush on her. While I’d thought that she would have picked up on it eventually, I couldn’t exactly criticize someone for not noticing another person’s romantic feelings.

Long story, there.

Sensei had long since given up on holding his laughter in. It was amazing that he hadn’t smudged the seal he’d been working on. Especially since we were all sitting around it like the overgrown schoolchildren we weren’t anymore, cooing over a puppy.

 “…I checked the scroll.” Kakashi said after Sensei got his breathing back under control. “There are eight dogs, total.”

**Pakkun, Bisuke, Bull, Guruko, Shiba, Akino, Urushi, and Ūhei.** The Dreamer sounded almost giddy.

“Are they all still puppies?” I asked.

Trust me to ask the important questions.

“...Yes?” Kakashi said.

I don’t think I ended up getting anything done that day. But who cares?

**PUPPIES!**
Making Progress: Paper Trail

Chapter Summary

Kei: Realize.

Walk-stab-walk.

Clearing battlefields just sucks, okay? All active-duty shinobi have, at some time or another, had to clear the dead guys off a battlefield before they rot. Since fighting doesn’t stop until everyone’s dead or one side’s retreated, given how many shinobi fight just as effectively at night, Obito and I weren’t allowed anywhere near the main body of the attack until Sensei’s corps had already routed the enemy. Kakashi was with him, since he was technically one of the senior chūnin involved (even if he was still short).

It was only when the folks still fighting were more than twenty kilometers away that rookies like Obito and I were allowed to see what carnage was left.

The worst part is the silence.

Well, actually no. The worst part is the actual physical job of dragging corpses to the mass graves that used to be defensive trenches half a day previously.

Obito and I tended to stick together even on jobs that awful, and we both grabbed one of a dead Iwa-nin’s ankles to drag him toward the nearest pit. Alive, he might have outweighed us by thirty to thirty-five kilos each. Dead, it seemed more like sixty.

It probably would have been easier to stick him a corpse scroll, but Sensei hadn’t gotten around to teaching me how to make one and I didn’t have nearly enough scrolls for all the corpses lying around.

And once he was in the pit, we went back for another body.

Aside from collecting the wounded (and occasionally being called on to help keeping them in the land of the living, or not), that was our day. It sort of bled into the next day, and the day after that, until the smell of blood and rot and feces and acrid smoke practically clung to our clothes and hair and I wanted nothing more than to dive into a river and scrub.

It wasn’t until we were about to leave to head back home, with our cleanup mission completed at last, that I actually got a chance to sit still. I was packing my bag, glad to be finally getting the hell out of the junction of nowhere and hell on earth. That I happened to be doing it inside of a medical tent was less because I cared about anyone inside and more because it had started to rain.

There was only one almost-dead guy around, and he was easily ignored.

He looked...normal. Not like a bad guy, really. He’d gone white under his tan and looked more corpse than man by this point, lips chapped and expression pained if he was conscious. Aside from the remnants of an Iwagakure flak jacket, he really could have been just anyone (with a handlebar mustache). I didn’t care. I was so far past caring that he was around—besides, he wouldn’t be for much longer.
It was the last tent. End of the line. He was just the only one left of the fatally wounded that was taking three days to die. The rest had already been buried.

He coughed. I didn’t look at him. Instead, I gave a sharp whistle designed to alert the head medic that his patient was dying on him, finally.

But once I was done packing, I stood up. The head medic—a man named Hisoka something or something Hisoka—stuck his head into the tent and was leaning over the patient while I shuffled around, going about my business.

Obito, as it happened, also stuck his head in. His spikes were lying almost flat on his head because of the rain, but he’d packed and seemed ready to go.

“Good to go, Kei?” Obito asked.

“Yeah,” I replied, slinging my pack over my shoulder.

That was Iwa-nin on the cot coughed, “Yellow…Flash.”

Obito and I both looked at him.

He didn’t…exactly have the look that most of Sensei’s victims did. Ergo, he still had the ability to talk—Sensei had a tendency to go for the throat in most cases that didn’t involve the Rasengan, and the guy’s innards were also mostly on the inside. I could only guess that one of the other jōnin had gotten him—there was a through-and-through pair of stab wounds in his stomach and chest, but nothing else.

(Of course, he’d been bleeding for days on end and his injuries already smelled awful, so I guess it didn’t matter that no one else had decided to end his misery.)

(The fact that he’d been interrogated in the field, with all that entailed, hadn’t helped at all.)

Hisoka rolled his eyes. The expression didn’t really sit well with him—he looked, honestly, like what happened when one’s sideburns and beard took over one’s face in brown hair. He kind of looked like Hagrid, but short.

Oddly, the almost-dead man was looking right at us. Obito and I, I mean.

Something was flickering in those fever-clouded eyes. Something I didn’t like, which spoke of recognition.

How the hell does this guy know who we are?

“Y-Yellow Flash…childr…” He started to sit up. His eyes were laser-focused on us, and Hisoka was a second too late to push him back down.

I never want to see a man look at me like that ever again, as long as I live.

Obito grabbed my hand.

What the fuck?

“…K-kill…cap…ture…”

Then a kunai whipped past my head, so fast that I only belatedly realized Sensei had arrived right behind me in a burst of chakra.
1. The Iwa-nin reeled backward, a kunai embedded up to the handle in his eye. He was definitely dead now.

“Oh, ick.” I heard myself say, numb. Obito was tugging on my hand insistently by then, but I hardly even noticed.

Sensei wordlessly grabbed both of our shoulders and steered us out of the tent. I caught a last glimpse of Hisoka waving his hands in frustration at being deprived of a patient (or victim), and then we were off into the dreary, never-ending rain.

We found Kakashi under a tree, arms crossed and visible expression grim. He looked tense. Most of the time he was bored or frustrated or maybe even unwillingly entertained when Obito and I were around, but the stiffness in his posture went up a notch or two when he spotted us.

I agreed, even if I wasn’t quite sure what I was agreeing with.

Sensei ruffled Kakashi’s hair when we finally reached him, which struck me as odd even considering the events just beforehand. When Kakashi didn’t lean away or bristle, I knew we were in trouble. Obito and I kind of slunk over to his side like chastised puppies—he did, in fact, scoot away from us. But not by a lot, and not obviously.

Sensei crossed his arms, looking at us with a completely expressionless face.

Uh-oh.

After a few moments, I guess he felt we were aware of the gravity of the situation and broke the stare-off by reaching into one of his vest pockets and pulling out bloodstained, jet-black book. It was only the size of a pocket calculator at most, and probably about fifty pages thick, but I still recognized the symbol on the spine.

An Iwakagure bingo book. You don’t think…?

I do.

“Over the past couple of weeks, I’m sure you’ve been wondering why I’ve only let Kakashi into the field with me,” Sensei began.

Obito nodded, but I shook my head.

Of course, not wanting to be on the battlefield meant I was really more inclined to count my blessings when I was allowed to stay back with the Medic Corps.

“Here’s the reason.” Sensei opened the book, flipped a few pages, and finally tore one up. Then he flipped a few more and tore that one out, too.

He let me have the first one.

**Name: Konoha’s Yellow Flash**

**Distinctive Characteristics:** Blond hair, blue eyes. Attacks in an instant using teleportation.

**Orders:** Do not approach. Flee on sight.*

*Note: The Yellow Flash is often accompanied by three children, assumed to be his students.

**Orders:** Live capture; kill as last resort.
There was the sound of a page ripping, again. I looked over, and noticed that Kakashi had already shredded the sheet he’d been given. His chakra was agitated, but he was hiding his anger better than I would have.

“They mistook him for the White Fang last time.” Sensei told us.

Obito looked blank. I bit my tongue to keep from saying anything.

Sensei sighed. “For the next stretch, I’m going to be assigning you a different mentor.”

I felt a protest well up in my throat—no, no, *that’s how we’ll get killed*—and Obito actually said, “But Sensei—!” I felt Kakashi’s chakra jump.

“That’s enough.” Sensei snapped.

We went quiet, wide-eyed.

“You’re chūnin now.” Sensei said, calmer. His gaze lost its laser focus as he looked at the three of us, and his tone softened somewhat. “I’ve taught you all since you were brand-new genin. You’ve come farther than I’d ever…oh, that isn’t important.” His eyes were dark. I could only imagine what he was remembering. “Iwagakure knows you’re my students. So, Kumogakure will know soon enough. If they don’t already. If they can’t get to me—and they can’t—they’ll come after the three of you in the hopes that hurting you will keep me from fighting. I won’t stop until the war’s over, and you know that, but they don’t. Or if they do, they won’t care.”

...That must have been why Minato couldn’t reach Rin and Kakashi after the Three-Tails was sealed inside her.

My blood ran cold.

Rin’s death was the catalyst for Tobi’s birth.

And hadn’t Spiral Zetsu said that Minato was stuck on a separate mission, just before the moment of truth and despair?

He’d been fighting *A and B* at the time. Kumogakure shinobi.

Kiri had been backstabbing us.

Sensei went on, “I’ll be taking solo or group missions from now on. I should have done this before—now that you’ve been promoted, you should have been shuffled around and allowed to gain experience alongside older chūnin and learn what the rest of your graduating class has to offer in terms of teamwork, talent, and personality. You’ve been isolated by sticking close to me, and…we can’t afford to be that lenient anymore.”

In a way, it was almost a repeat of the time Yamaguchi-sensei cut me loose. “You’re doing so well, you don’t need me anymore,” in a nutshell.

But that was a *lie*. A damn, dirty lie. It didn’t feel like an accomplishment—it felt like abandonment.

It felt like a death sentence.

“They won’t stop trying to kill us.” I heard myself say, distantly. I crossed my arms, mirroring Sensei and Kakashi and also trying to stave off the cold. Everything felt *wrong*. “It’s not going to stop them.”
“Maybe it won’t.” Sensei murmured.

I suddenly wondered if that was why both of Sensei’s genin teammates were dead. Maybe someone had gone after Jiraiya, or even Sensei, and settled for the next best thing.

Sensei had scars too, even if he’d hidden them so well that I’d have never known they were there, if I didn’t think to look.

“We’ll still be training together.” Sensei told us. He frowned. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re still my students, and I’m certainly not going anywhere. But for now, I’ll ask that the Hokage keep you a little closer to home. If you get any missions without me, Kakashi’s in charge unless there’s a senior chūnin. Understood?”

“Yes, Sensei,” we chorused.

I mean, it wasn’t like we could exactly argue with him. There’s a difference between arguing with a big brother figure and arguing with a superior officer, which was the role he was stepping into. We gave in without a fight and were eventually shoved off on other shinobi for the sake of mystifying our enemies, which we hadn’t actually even earned on our own merits.

Or so I thought.

“Now, listen closely.” Sensei told us a little later. The three of us stood at attention, and Sensei went on, “In a month, I’ll be off the roster for a few days. If we can get together in time, I’ll put you three to your final test.” He scratched the side of his face, sheepish. “I really should have done this right after you were promoted to the same level, but…things happen.”

“What kind of test, Sensei?” Obito asked. “I mean, the Chūnin Exam would’ve counted for fighting against opponents of the same level, and the writing part was evil.”

“You’re right, Obito.” Sensei said. “But it’s not that kind of test.”

“You want to know if we can handle ourselves against a much stronger opponent.” I suggested after a moment, since Kakashi didn’t seem to have any input.

Then Kakashi said, “The bell test.”

The side of Sensei’s mouth quirked up. “Did you really have to spoil the surprise, Kakashi?”

“Yeah, he probably did.” I murmured. “So, what exactly is the bell test?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.” Sensei told us. “Now, get moving.”

We skedaddled.

Thinking about it, I supposed that the infamous bell test didn’t necessarily make sense for genin unless the goal was explicitly to screw them over. New genin, in particular, had all of the normal issues with attachment and getting along with strangers. It was just amplified by the nature of the challenge.

Still…the idea of fighting Sensei set my heart pounding.

We’d all sparred against Sensei before—it’s a basic part of shinobi training, to get us used to fighting people taller or stronger than we were. He’d always given us a challenge, sure, but he fought us one-to-one and generally the others were waiting in the wings for their turn. He never had to take us
seriously, or as a group.

It was strange, but I wanted to test myself against the Yellow Flash. If I couldn’t test myself, I’d never know if I could go the distance.

…Wow, I sound like a Disney movie.

Okay, to be honest, I was kind of terrified too.

Who wouldn’t be? I knew Sensei was capable of more things than I probably ever would be. He was capable of fighting A and B at once, of beating the Nine-Tailed Fox down to a draw, and of out-speeding any shinobi alive. He knew timing and precision inside and out, could wipe out an Iwa contingent so quickly that most hardly realized they were dead before the flash of yellow, and had a dozen powerful jutsu he’d never used in front of us.

The idea of facing someone like that was daunting and thrilling in nearly equal measure. He was our teacher, after all. And our hero.

When I got home, I got started on the explosive seals. A month wasn’t that long.
Making Progress: Wherein Kei Misses the Point Entirely

Chapter Summary

Kei: Be oblivious.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I swung experimentally, readjusting to the balance of a bokken after years of swinging a kodachi. It was easy enough to bring the blade to a snapping halt, even going fast enough to make the air whistle. I swung again, one handed, and batted a falling leaf out of the air.

“I see you’ve been keeping in practice.” Mom said, even as she had most of her attention on gently correcting Hayate’s stance with her own bokken.

“Not entirely.” I admitted.

I was no Miyamoto Musashi—even if I was pretty good with a sword, I still preferred carrying steel to wood when it came to real missions, and that required some adjusting to weight differences. Musashi, by comparison, had been famous for taken a bokken to every fight ever and winning. Also, my bokken was actually my mother’s spare, and therefore the size of a katana. I’d never gotten around to using one of those, and I had the oddest feeling that I’d be paying for it shortly.

…Come to think of it, carrying a bokken around would be a pretty neat tactic for someone with the Wood Release bloodline. I’d have to remember to mention that to Yamato, if I ever met the guy.

As it was, I rolled my shoulders and tried not to think too hard about being turned into my brother’s graduation exam.

Hayate swallowed nervously as Mom stepped away, and his chakra gave an anxious flicker. He didn’t look happy with the idea of sparring against me instead of Mom, and I fought down a grin in response. It wouldn’t help him any if I acted like a fox preparing for a henhouse raid.

“Stand and face me on your own two feet, little brother.” I said quietly, almost inaudible.

Hayate’s attention snapped to me anyway, and I briefly wondered if Itachi felt this—a surge of protective instinct and pride—when Sasuke confronted him after five years of planning revenge. Without the hatred and pain, of course.

From now on, your brother will measure his progress against yours. Mom had told me that, while I was still getting into my hakama for the day’s training. He’s young, but I expect you both to rely on each other as you get older.

How delightfully ominous.

“I want you to do everything you can to defeat Kei, Hayate.” Mom said as she paced between us.

…Yeah, bad idea to tell that to a ninja kid. Just saying. I narrowed my eyes.
“You can do this,” I said, and leveled my bokken at his face.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” Hayate mumbled.

“You probably won’t be able to, even with handicaps.” I replied, and one side of my mouth quirked upward. “Chūnin, remember?”

“No ninjutsu, genjutsu, or taijutsu.” Mom reminded us. “Pure kenjutsu and physical conditioning, like we practiced.”

Still, there was a significant gap between my skill level and my brother’s. Blade prodigy or no, Hayate had never used his kenjutsu in the field. He’d never been allowed to so much as touch a steel katana, per Mom’s orders. I’d been training with a team on my level—prodigy chūnin or mini-jōnin or whatever—and had been keeping up for years.

The real question was how hard it’d be to avoid stomping him.

I didn’t think that Hayate was anything like post-Massacre Sasuke—what with the ping-ponging self esteem and inferiority complex—but generally speaking, completely overpowering a nearly-ten-year-old boy was hardly going to go over well. Also, Mom was there, which meant I wouldn’t expect to win by that much.

I completely expected Mom to intercede on Hayate’s behalf if she had to.

“If you perform well, Hayate-chan, I’ll allow you to carry a bokken to school.” Mom told him. She was smiling, like there was no way he could disappoint her. “And when you graduate, I’ll see if I can get another kodachi for you.”

“R-Really?” Hayate stumbled, wide-eyed. “Really?”

I hid my own smile. Oh, brother, you don’t think it’s going to be that easy, do you?

“And all you have to do is last long enough against your big sister.” I added in a teasing tone, unable to resist.

Remember, don’t be too terrifying, the Dreamer put in dryly.

…I wasn’t sure if that was something to worry about or not.

“Begin!” Mom shouted, and the game was on.

Hayate attacked first, swinging high toward my head. I blocked, letting his bokken slide along mine and sending him sprawling past me. He’d overestimated how strong he was and underestimated the size difference between us.

Then, I was twelve and he was nine-and-a-bit. I’d hit the start of my teenage growth spurt, meaning that I was head and shoulders taller than him and probably outweighed him by ten or fifteen kilos.

I have to be honest here: as far as I could remember, this was basically my first time fighting someone smaller than me by that kind of margin.

I whirled on the spot, meeting Hayate’s second charge with only one hand on my bokken this time. I smashed his blade downward, throwing myself into a forward airborne flip over his back as he hit the dirt again.

Hey, I could show off if I wanted to. A little. I couldn’t resist, really.
¡Olé!

Honestly, most of the rest of the match went like that. Using bokken stripped us of some of our more advanced techniques—for example, my iaijutsu—and basically forced us to try to trip each other up or beat each other into submission. I let Hayate do things like launch attacks from overhead, or from behind, but ultimately he wasn’t getting anywhere.

Frankly, keeping up with Kakashi had made everyone else seem a bit slow.

(Except Gai. And Sensei.)

In the end, Hayate collapsed in a heap, exhausted. I was okay, even given how I wasn’t really trained for long fights, but I admit that my sword arm was a little numb.

Mom gave Hayate permission to carry a bokken to school after that, anyway.

“This is bullshit.” I said flatly.

Kakashi ignored me. “If I can write my name with shuriken, so can you two.”

“Says the guy whose name is the least complicated,” Obito complained.

Kakashi huffed, and Obito and I glared at the metal characters against the bark.

Oh, it was easy enough to hit bull’s-eyes at this point. We had a baker’s dozen of beaten, stabbed, and gutted wooden circles all over the forest pretty much just to prove that point under varying circumstances. Obito and I could both hit dead center of any of the rings while running, leaping, or while sliding past, and even while upside-down and being propelled by the force of an explosion/leg-up/sheer terror.

We weren’t necessarily perfect, but we were good. Guess all those late-night practice sessions paid off.

Anyway, Kakashi’s name was written as simply as possible with kanji. Out of all the possible characters that could be put together to make the same sounds, they required the fewest strokes I’d seen. They required fewer strokes than just writing the word “scarecrow,” which should tell you a thing or two.

Obito’s wasn’t that much more complex, actually, but he hadn’t decided to learn how to spell his name with shuriken solely to impress people. Starting cold always sucked.

And in my case, my parents had decided to use the most complex characters possible. Every one of them required at least five strokes of a brush to accurately recreate. Starting cold and burdened with a visually complex name. Ugh.

“Recreating your signature can’t be that hard.” Kakashi said.

I was saved from having to articulate my point more eloquently by a flare of chakra. All three of us immediately whirled to meet the new threat, and were greeted instead by Sensei’s carefree grin and the sort of huge hug that knocked all of us off our feet.

I don’t know about you, but there was going to be a time when Sensei wouldn’t be able to tackle all of us like that.

With Kakashi and Obito’s pointy elbows digging into my sides, I almost hoped that time would
come sooner rather than later.

(But then, I didn’t. It’s complicated.)

Sensei let us up eventually, and I took note of his appearance. Konoha uniforms are fairly dark, all told, but I could still see bloodstains on the lower edges of his sleeves and the fabric of his flak jacket was slightly scorched and torn. His hair was more mussed than usual, which is saying something, but he nonetheless seemed pretty cheerful just to be back.

“I hope you three have been training while I’ve been gone,” Sensei said rather brightly, and I wondered if he’d already gone to see Kushina.

…Was that a lipstick mark above his eyebrow? Well, I guess he had.

“We’re ready for anything, Sensei!” Obito insisted, looking more enthusiastic about the upcoming test than I felt was justified.

There are no words for how much I’d hated pop P.E. tests in my old life.

“Good! Because you’ll be tested beyond your limits.” Sensei’s smile went crooked and I thought, oh shit, which was partly fear and partly dread. “What did you expect? You’ll be facing a jōnin.”

“You say that like we haven’t been preparing all month.” Kakashi said.

You know, when we weren’t running minor missions.

(Also, it was amazing how quickly a mission with Gai could turn into a farce. More on that later.)

“I think we’re as ready as we’re going to get.” I said. “Also, what has you in such a good mood?”

“Can’t I just be glad to be home?” Sensei asked me, and I gave the lipstick mark on his forehead a skeptical look. “Oh, all right. I discussed things with Kushina-chan and we’ve set a date.”

…Whoa.

“Congratulations!” I said. Sensei and Kushina were both about twenty-two or so, and I’d only vaguely heard of some of my former classmates getting married that young in my old life. Of course, I’d been a civilian in a world where just about everyone was getting married later than they used to. And I didn’t really know that many people, when you got down to it. “Though…what does this have to do with our training?”

Then again, I knew both of them pretty well and could honestly say that they would be happy together.

“Absolutely nothing, aside from how I’m not going to go easy on you regardless.” Sensei informed us.

“Okay, Sensei. Not like we expected anything less.” I replied.

“When are we going to do this?” Kakashi asked.

Obito said, after a moment, “And do we really have enough space here? Or are we gonna get to use the jōnin training fields?”

Sensei briefly brought a fist to his lips in thought, then said, “We’ll meet here tomorrow at seven o’clock. Then I’ll show you the training field we’re really going to use—and hopefully barely avoid
destroying.” He winked.

Joy of joys. I needed more explosive tags to do that, though.

Lacking any destructive jutsu other than my tag-making skills, I really didn’t have a choice if collateral damage was the goal. And anyway, Obito’s fireballs had gotten big enough that my explosives were basically small change in comparison.

Personally, I can’t make a fireball the size of a house even with my biggest and most overcharged tag. Obito can.

“I suggest that you start making your plans now.” Sensei told us, still disturbingly cheery.

**Is it wrong that I find that smile terrifying?**

*That makes two of us.*

“Why tomorrow? Why not now?” Kakashi asked, and I abruptly realized that this was also the same kid who found joy and pride in testing himself against his teacher. Repeatedly. Until he won (which would only come about on the tenth of Never).

I’d rather have stayed a genin, almost. Ambition is not really in my nature. Mainly because, in this case, ambition means being kicked around like a football.

“...I just got back from the front and am really interested in spending the evening with my fiancée,” was the response.

I think Kakashi ended up biting back his first three thoughts so he could say, “Fine.”

“By the way, what were you three doing when I got here?” Sensei asked, waving a hand at the tree with *Kakashi* outlined in shuriken.

“Kakashi had a dumb idea and was trying to get us to do it.” Obito put in.

“If you can’t write your name with shuriken, you don’t understand accuracy.” Kakashi sniped back.

“So basically, yeah, it’s a dumb training exercise for impressing girls.” I concluded.

“...So, like this?” In an instant, Sensei had nearly forty shuriken in the air and all of us scattered, avoiding flying metal by a hair.

There was an avalanche of **thunk** noises.

I was the first one to look up, but Obito found the tree Sensei had used for target practice.

*Minato Namikaze* was written in matte black metal.

“Dammit, Sensei, you’re making us look bad.” Obito grumbled.

“I happen to think it’s a good exercise.” Sensei told us airily.

Kakashi almost glowed with pride.

“...So, what, are you expecting us to be able to do this by the time we’re jōnin? Because I’m pretty sure you didn’t practice that.” I said, getting to my feet again.
“Never underestimate a teenage boy with a girl to impress.” Sensei said, and then walked off.

Most of the shuriken poofed out of existence as soon as he was gone. So, on top of everything else, they were the products of Shadow Shuriken Jutsu and not just ordinary metal.

**Basically…yes, he did that to show off.**

*Now that means I actually have to work on it.* I sighed. “All right, Kakashi, you win.”

Kakashi gave me a look that said, *As if there was any doubt.*

Some things never change, it seems.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Kei’s name is written two different ways, due to her samurai heritage.
Katakana (like everyone else in Naruto-land): ケイスケ
Kanji: 恵丞
Hayate’s would be 疾風 if his name had a canonical kanji spelling. Instead, it's ハヤテ.
Making Progress: Growing Strong

Chapter Summary

Kei: Take the Bell Test.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Like all good days, it began with an explosion.

Okay, so maybe that was a lie—for one, I have had plenty of good days without ever having to blow something up before teatime—but there was nonetheless an explosion involved. Also, it wasn’t my fault.

What can I say? Obito’s been getting better.

But it’d been a while since we got to really play with Sensei, and we made up for the time lost with enthusiasm. Kakashi was more serious about it than the wording there implies, but I knew for a fact that he’d been toying with the lightning-Rasengan theory all month and wanted to show and tell.

Or show and stab, as the case may be.

For my part, I was basically a walking landmine-generator.

In my opinion, the best plans are the ones that mean you never once have to confront the enemy directly. This is as much cultural conditioning as it is practicality—if your enemy never knows you’re around, he can’t hurt you. He also can’t do much about getting blown into the lower stratosphere. I was good in close-combat, but laying exploding seals all over the forest meant that I’d be able to put off facing Sensei directly. Given that Sensei was faster, stronger, and more experienced than all of us, it seemed like the best option.

Never let it be said that U.S. military doctrine wasn’t good for something, even in my new lifetime. When in doubt, strategically placed explosives are your friends.

I’m very aware that all of this makes me sound like a total pyromaniac/Deidara wannabe, in case you were wondering.

But hey, even tiny explosions are pretty distracting. They were also my new contact-based variants—ergo, chakra mines. As long as I didn’t let any of my teammates stray into the killzone, I could basically make Sensei’s trip through the forest as loud and inconvenient as physically possible. I wasn’t under any illusions about actually being able to hurt a guy who teleported for a living.

The initial phase of our day basically went like this: Meet up at Training Ground Three, follow Sensei to Training Ground Thirty-Five, and then commence laying traps. Sensei promised to give us a two-minute head start with which to play around and booby-trap everything. Kakashi immediately went his own way once the timer started, though, and Obito muttered something about lone wolves and stupid people in response. I just tried to lay as many of my new traps as I could.

Sensei made good on that promise, as far as I could tell. Two minutes into our training session, my
bombs started going off.

Obito had split off from me about when I started laying traps—I knew where he was the whole time, though we hadn’t talked much about where to meet up afterward—and another huge fireball plowed through the forest at about…hm, I think it was about parallel to my path, going the other way and about a hundred meters off my right side.

Sensei must have been over there.

I stopped for a second, looking over my pre-prepared tags for a bit of inspiration. Hm…

The Dreamer asked, What’s the likelihood that you can herd Sensei toward Obito or Kakashi?

Pretty good, if I knew what I was doing and if the boys continued being distractions. Kakashi was darting here and there, probably running interference for Obito by accident (or by “accident”). I couldn’t quite tell what the boys were doing from so far off, but from the random flares of chakra everywhere (and also random fireballs), a fight was already ongoing.

Sensei was already in the right place, more or less. I just needed to keep him there and distracted.

I pulled a scroll from my hip pocket and started on my way.

One of the first things you learn about being on a team with a scent-tracker is to approach from downwind if you want to catch him by surprise. What goes for hunters goes for shinobi, really. I wasn’t precisely hiding from Kakashi, but any hint that he knew I was around would probably be picked up by Sensei. And even then, Sensei probably had some basic understanding of scent-tracking and sound-tracking that made keeping my distance a good idea.

I think a better question would have been, “How can I keep Sensei in enough hot water that Obito and Kakashi can take him?”

Realistically, there wasn’t a way for me to do that. If he’d been going full-force, Sensei would’ve probably summoned Gamabunta and squashed us all, or else just stopped pretending that he didn’t have each of us marked with the Flying Thunder God Seal. It’d be over in seconds.

But as long as he was still playing around, I could do something.

First, though, I needed to corral him. Then I’d need to get back on the same page with Obito.

Easy enough.

Or easier said than done. Not sure which, yet.

The scroll in my hand was relevant to that, in fact—it was basically an entire slew of explosive notes in a portable form. Sort of like paper towels, the edges of each note were perforated so they could tear free easily—at the very least, I found it more useful than the twenty-packs I usually had to make up in advance.

I could also blow the lot in one go if I wasn’t careful, which was why I was saving it for Sensei.

He’d shown me how to make them, so I figured he wouldn’t mind getting them back, too.

I found them quickly enough, even if I traveled on the forest floor rather than in the trees, for once. Kakashi was still taking Sensei on with taijutsu, spinning round and round and also upside-down, while Obito dodged this way and that in an attempt to get a better angle to set Sensei on fire.
I untied my scroll and, grasping it by the loose end, started unspooling the paper across the nearby trees. Frankly, the whole clearing was going to look like it’d been hit by teenage pranksters, but it’d be worth it.

…I think it says something about me, as well as about the boys, that Sensei didn’t react to me at all. If he had, he probably would have gotten a flying knee to the face, courtesy of Kakashi. Kakashi wasn’t a jōnin yet, but he was damned close to being promoted, and it didn’t pay to underestimate someone with a few things to prove.

And then I did my own ducking and dodging and scrambling, making my way to Obito.

“Hey, having fun?” Obito said with a laugh in his voice. He really did look happy, even though we were still probably going to lose.

“You bet.” I checked his chakra levels quickly, then did another sweep over Kakashi—both boys had more chakra than I would have, if I’d been the one taking Sensei on directly. Of the pair, Obito had been using the bigger jutsu and thus had less to spare. But he wasn’t down for the count yet.

And as for Kakashi…well, if he hadn’t busted out the Chidori yet, I figured the situation was under control.

I thought of the Chidori as a kind of checkpoint, plot- and timeline-wise. If Kakashi could actually pull it off, we were getting close to what I thought of as crunch-time.

If he couldn’t…well, who knows? Maybe that meant I’d been having a detrimental effect on said timeline and ought to punch myself in the face or something.

I was pretty sure I hadn’t managed to destroy the canon timeline yet.

“Anyway, fall back.” I told Obito, since my explosives were already laid. Either Kakashi would break off from the fight and follow us to plan (while I blew the clearing sky-high), or he’d continue attacking like a bullheaded idiot (and I wouldn’t blow everything up).

“Why?”

Okay, make that two bullheaded idiots. I had no interest in fighting Sensei in hand to hand. Or kunai to kodachi—Sensei may not have ever demonstrated proficiency with longer weapons, but any shinobi worth their headband knew how to fight them. At least in theory.

“We aren’t getting anywhere.” I told him, and we both ran off into the bushes. I had another signal in mind to tell Kakashi to break off, but unfortunately Obito had all of the smoke pellets I’d managed to gather. Kakashi probably had some of his own. “Obito, once we’re clear…”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.” He spun on his heel and hurled a pair of smoke pellets—really egg-sized chemical containers that expanded in air—back toward Kakashi and Sensei. They only inhibited vision, which meant that Kakashi would be able to track us down easily as soon as he realized what was going on.

As soon as the smoke filled the clearing and Kakashi was out of the way, I hurled a kunai with a lit explosive tag back at where Sensei was. I wasn’t quite sure if he was in one of the booby-trapped trees, but I think it was a close thing.

Kakashi dropped out of the canopy, practically on top of us, and we all ran from the impending fireball.
And then it went off.

And I must say, the fireball would have probably been glorious. If, you know, we weren’t running from it. As it was, the blast knocked me off my feet and into Obito’s back. I think Obito tripped Kakashi, but he recovered gamely and was gone inside of another second.

“Well, that was fun.” I said once I got my breath back. He got to my feet a little after that, helping Obito up.

“Maybe to you,” was Obito’s reply as he picked bits of charred wood out of his hair. He shook himself, trailing bits of ash. “So, where’s Sensei now?”

I closed my eyes briefly, concentrating.

Five o’clock, two hundred meters. Guess we scared him quite a bit.

And wasn’t that saying something?

“Not far enough that he can’t get at us.” I went through a mental tally of all of my explosives. I was just about out, by that point. It was a little like having a box of fireworks on the Fourth of July—two hundred bucks for about an hour of entertainment if you were enthusiastic about it. I certainly hadn’t lacked for that.

Pity Sensei’s top speed was nearly in the triple digits.

“We’d better get to Kakashi. He’s…that way. Sixty meters and popping a lightning jutsu.” I leapt into the lower branches of one of the nearby trees, Obito on my heels. I was still half-focused on what my chakra sense was telling me, so I wasn’t up for naming cardinal directions. I just needed to get to Kakashi. Then Sensei’s chakra signature was also over there. Whoops. “Correction, Sensei is going after him and he needs backup.”

“Are you sure about that?” Obito asked plaintively—while Sensei hadn’t gotten around to tagging us out yet (because this really was basically ninja tag with explosives), we certainly weren’t cut out for fighting him directly. “Kakashi can take care of himself, can’t he?”

“Nope.” I replied, and we burst into the relevant clearing just as Kakashi’s shadow clone got its head kicked off.

Not that I was opposed to seeing Kakashi get taken down a peg, but really?

Kakashi appeared behind Sensei, on a higher branch, and I…

Well, I’ll put it this way: the Chidori is the kind of thing you can feel with every one of your senses. Even half-charged, I could practically taste the metallic buzz and the chirping of a dozen starlings seemed to fill my head. My chakra sense went briefly haywire, making me stagger. It was like getting every single sensation from a concert—the lights, the sound, the smells and thud-thud-thud of the bass line—all crammed into the space of about half a second.

Move it!

I pushed my way past it, unsteady, but by then Obito was already halfway up the tree to distract Sensei, Kakashi was getting ready to charge…

And then Obito crashed into me, knocking both of us down and driving the breath from my lungs, and Sensei had hurled Kakashi into a tree trunk.
Ouch. For both of us.

By the time Obito and I managed to get our limbs sorted out and Kakashi was dropped unceremoniously on the ground by Sensei, it was pretty much a given that we’d lost.

Sensei landed next to us in a crouch while we spent a minute or two trying to just get a breath back.

“So…that went well.” Sensei told us, looking absurdly pleased with himself.

“Says you,” Obito wheezed, and I tapped his shoulder with chakra racing up and down my arm. I had plenty to spare, in fact, and healing him of residual soreness and more legitimate injuries was no big deal.

I added, “None of us managed to get the bells.”

“Well, no. But you came very close, in your own ways.” He held them up for emphasis. “I have to admit, I expected slightly less in the way of attempted murder—Kei-kun, were you even trying to get the bells, or were you planning on salvaging them off my smoking corpse?”

I shrugged. “Six of one, half-dozen of another.”

Obito made a grab for the bells just then—Sensei was faster, of course, but it was certainly a game attempt.

“Nice try. I didn’t say the test was over, did I?” Sensei was grinning.

“No, you didn’t.” Kakashi told him seriously. His eyes were still on the bells.

“Well, if that’s how you feel.” Sensei stood up, tying the bells back onto his belt. He paced the clearing a little, eyes never leaving us. “How about round two? Try to stick to taijutsu this time—don’t think I didn’t notice you both hanging out in the back, Kei-kun, Obito.” His grin widened. “I will, too. Let’s see some teamwork!”

I wasn’t quite sure how my overuse of traps didn’t count as teamwork, but I guess getting a second chance was good, too.

I got to my feet, right hand on the handle of my kodachi. Obito was up, too, in the loose Uchiha starting stance. Kakashi hardly looked like he was ready at all—which was kind of the point.

Sensei laughed. “Sudden death mode, go! Get the bells if you can!”

I went low, Obito went high, and Kakashi went sideways.

By which I meant that I tried to cut Sensei’s legs off, Obito went for his face with a giant foldable shuriken—and damned if I knew where he’d gotten that, given that our packs were elsewhere—and Kakashi tried to flank him.

Of course, it didn’t work. This was Sensei.

I fell back, skittering around the edge of Kakashi and Sensei’s continued clash, and Obito’s arm met mine.

Without so much as a glance at each other, we went for Sensei’s legs. Kakashi was in the middle of a front-flip axe-kick at Sensei’s head, which he blocked with both arms, and Obito and I were just fast enough to hit him in the backs of both knees.
That Sensei didn’t topple like a felled tree had a lot to do with his freakish reflexes—he shoved Kakashi backward and rolled with the impact, launching into a back handspring. Obito and I didn’t even get a proper grip.

I flooded my hands with chakra, securing a solid grip on the ground, and swung my legs around to try and sweep at Sensei as he landed, while Obito raced around me and attacked with a pair of kunai. Kakashi struck from above, twisting in midair to build momentum. Sensei was still in midair and I already knew we simply weren’t fast enough.

Round two was going to be kind of disappointing.

It passed quickly, at least.

While Obito and I were coordinated—we’d learned to read each other and certainly didn’t have any mistimed attacks today—and Kakashi was both fast and aggressive, there was just too much of a gulf between us and Sensei.

Though, when you think about it, the list of people whose asses Sensei had kicked was pretty long. At least we were in good company.

About ten minutes later, we still didn’t have the bells, and on top of that had pretty much used up our chakra and bruise tolerance for the day. It’s one thing to say it’s a bloody three-on-one match, and quite another to actually try to fight someone who outclasses you by a league and a half. In a world without ninja powers, those odds might have worked out all right—I mean, obviously three nearly-thirteen-year-olds weren’t necessarily going to win against a single highly skilled fighter, but it would’ve been more even.

Sensei had faster reflexes than was physically possible for the average human. Seriously.

Most shinobi do, but there was…well, Sensei.

He still played nice at the end.

I dropped onto my butt with an “oof,” feeling every muscle ache all at once. I was down for the count even if I didn’t have a concussion. Kakashi was still on his feet, in a wobbly kind of way, but Obito wasn’t in much better shape than I was. In fact, he was probably worse off—a bad block had sent his own fist back into his cheek, giving him a big red mark that was probably going to bruise badly.

I wiggled my fingers experimentally, trying to either get feeling back into them or use medical ninjutsu, but no such luck. Obito was just going to have to deal with it.

“Better, but I see that I still have the bells.” Sensei told us cheerfully. He waved Kakashi over. “Come on, sit down. We’re having a team meeting.”

“Aw, Sensei. Do we have to?” Obito groaned, flopping sideways so that he was resting most of his weight on my shoulder. I briefly debated shoving him off, but we were probably equally sweaty and gross anyway.

“Yes, we do.” Sensei sat down with his ankles crossed in front of him.

Kakashi visibly debated where to sit for a second, then settled down on my other side. It put him about as far from Obito as possible without being especially awkward about it.

I sighed, leaving Obito to pout about things. Best to get it over with. “So, what’d we do wrong?
Well, more wrong than normal, anyway.”

“I actually think you all did rather well, considering.” Sensei looked a little disappointed with my pessimism.

“We didn’t get the bells.” Kakashi pointed out.

**Thank you, Captain Obvious.**

“I didn’t really expect you to.” Sensei said, shrugging. He looked at me rather pointedly. “Even if a certain someone took that as an excuse to blow up half the forest around here.”

“Guilty as charged.” I replied, grinning crookedly. “You’re too fast for me, Sensei.”

“Too fast for anyone, I hope.” Sensei told me. “That would have killed nearly anyone else you could be facing at this level, though. Keep it up.”

**If the Explosion Corps can do it, so can we.** Sure, a good chunk of them were basically Deidara but more loyal, complete with explosive clay, but I could certainly do a lot of damage if I had some time to prepare.

“That said, try to coordinate more with your teammates.” Sensei continued. “I didn’t even see you until the last few minutes of the first match, and that stunt with the scroll could have killed Kakashi if you timed it wrong.”

True. I scratched the back of my head. It hadn’t killed him, but sometimes it was hard to remember how dangerous we all were. I certainly had more firepower going for me than Rin did, and it’d pay to remember that. In the future, I was gonna have to save the big bombs for when we were starting to retreat. No more timing-dependent stuff.

Also, I wasn’t going to time it wrong if I could pinpoint his location. The Chidori would throw a wrench in that plan, though…

“What was that jutsu, Kakashi?” Obito asked. “It was loud enough that I think I felt my ears bleed.”

“Your ears weren’t bleeding.” I said.

“I said it felt like it, didn’t I?”

Kakashi drew himself up, seeming to inflate with pride. “It’s my own original jutsu.”

“It was bright and lightning and also really freaking loud. And really impractical if it’s as strong as it felt.” I commented. Kakashi glared at me. “What, did you expect me to not notice how it also drained half your chakra in one incomplete shot?”

“She has a point, Kakashi.” Sensei tilted his head quizzically. “That said, while the jutsu could use some refinement, I think you’re well on your way to coming up with a very useful jutsu.”

“Then I’ll just practice.” Kakashi said. He sounded kind of huffy, really.

Sensei mimed a wince. “Well, be careful about it. I’d prefer if I was able to sit on at least one of your training sessions—if the technique is anywhere near as draining as I think it is, I might be able to help mitigate the damage.”

“Damage?” Obito asked.
“High-powered techniques can have blowback problems.” Sensei nodded at Kakashi, and I noticed the bandages peeking out from under his dark gloves. “It’s nothing out of the ordinary, really, but you do have to train that kind of sloppiness out. And…hey, have you named that jutsu yet?”

“It’s called the Chidori.” Kakashi replied, looking away. I wasn’t sure why.

Obito, however, was looking at his hands. “Well, maybe the Chidori is gonna give you these kinds of burns eventually.”

He held up his hands, which were shiny along the inner edges of his fingers from old burns—the results of his long struggle to master the Grand Fireball technique. All Uchiha had them, to a greater or lesser extent, and Obito’s were fairly minimal—Rin had gotten around to working on them eventually. And none of them were recent.

For my part, I mostly had little nicks—mostly from my first couple of weeks with a kodachi. Before that, most of my blade-work had been done with wood, so I supposed that the worst I could have possible sustained would have been a cracked bone. Since I probably would have remembered that kind of thing, I had to conclude that I’d never really sustained injuries more serious than bumps and bruises throughout my childhood.

Sans, I think, the moment when I nearly drowned on that first mission.

And the time I fought Himawari.

Maybe I was making light of things.

“Do they hurt?” I asked. I mean, I didn’t have much in the way of chakra to spare, but I could dredge up some of the Dreamer’s Yin chakra if I really had to.

Hey! This is kind of a waste, don’t you think? I mean, we’re how close to the village?

She had a point.

“No.” Kakashi said.

Sensei shook his head. “Well, burns sting for a while, but at least they don’t open your whole hand up. It’s easier to control the charge with a lightning nature—wind nature? Forget it. Hope you like paper cuts.”

“Oh.” I said, all sympathy.

Hey, in my old life it was about as serious an injury as I got regularly.

Aside from crashing into things. I was kind of clumsy.

Obito shifted against my side—afer a second, he ended up mostly lying down, with his head resting on my thigh. I absently patted his hair, trying to ignore the urge to shove him into the nearest river. Best friend or not, I could feel his sweat soaking through my pants. Ugh, ugh, ugh.

“We can continue this later, you know.” Sensei told us. He looked amused and sad all at once, and I ignored a spike of dismay that came from Kakashi.

Gah, no one could ever accuse me of being that much of a teacher’s pet.

“But Keiiiiiiii,” Obito whined, and I pulled one of his ear covers off his head, almost dragging him up by the rubbery band. Then I let go, and it smacked him in the head. “OW!”

“Up.” I commanded.

Obito took his goggles off as he got to his feet, unsteady as he was. He rubbed his ear. “That hurt!”

“We’ve done worse. Mostly to each other.” I said.

“…True. But that was still mean.” Suddenly, Obito’s face lit up. “Oh! I can visit Rin-chan for this!”

Wait, wha—?

And then he was gone.

“…Well. Guess I don’t have to ask if he still has a crush on her.” I remarked to the space one Uchiha boy had recently occupied. I shrugged to myself, untying my headband and wringing the cloth out. My hair was a wreck—between my hat-hair problem and the exertions of the day, I think any resemblance to Sasuke’s infamous haircut was no longer a coincidence.

Or flattering.

“Gah, I need a shower.” I glanced back at Sensei and Kakashi, who were still sitting.

“Leaving so soon, Kei-kun?” Sensei asked.

“Yeah, I think I’d better let you two get on with your training stuff.” I said.

“Hm,” was all Sensei said at first. Kakashi was just ignoring me again. Then Sensei added, “In that case, I’ll make a suggestion.”

I paused.

“If you can, try focusing on your medical ninjutsu a bit more.” At my raised eyebrow, he went on, “So far, I’ve seen plenty of growth on the kenjutsu and fūinjutsu fronts. But I think you shouldn’t let your third major talent go to waste before you even make jōnin, Kei-kun.”

…I wait.

“You think I’ll get promoted again?” I asked.

“Eventually.” Sensei shrugged. “You’re not ready yet, but who knows what the future’s got in store? Just keep working at it.”

“All right. Thanks, Sensei.” Inwardly, I was giddy. But I had too much pride to let it show.

And then I ran off.

To: Pipsqueak

From: Rikuto of the Chinatsugumi

I got your letter—hell, I should’ve figured that pretty-boy sensei of yours would confiscate the scrolls. Tough luck, kid, because I’m not getting another scroll of dangerous forbidden knowledge for you. Used up all of Chi-chan’s good will on that one, you see. Even if it’d be funny.
Anyway, you’ll be glad to know that there are indeed more bouncy baby bratlings running around—Shirozora and Nanami had a boy, and our fearless leader has a niece to spoil rotten now. Who would’ve thunk it—Misaki, with a kid! They’re both a bit wobbly and all that, but I guess that’s what they get for trying to follow Miyu-chan and Kazu-chan around! Neither of the twins are spitting lava yet, but you just wait.

Speaking of which? Turns out Nami-chan’s boy is like his dear old dad. Never seen a tantrum that ended in icicles for everyone, but turns out it was typical or something technical. I wasn’t listening—it’s a lot more fun to get little Kaito to ice people. Misaki’s girl is normal enough, though with a name like Aiko, I expect either a tomboy to end all tomboys or the pretty little princess I think we have instead.

Anyway, sorry to cut the fun parts short, but I kind of have a schedule to keep.

Things are heating up, as you probably figured. Hell if I ever know what Ōnoki is planning, but the old bastard’s weak points are starting to show even from where I’m standing. Guess that means an offensive, sometime in the next month. Could be Konoha, could be Iwa. All I know is that none of us are going to be anywhere near the blast radius when it all goes down. Chinatsu’s pulling us back for the next year—no more carnivals and whatever other cheerful bullshit we put on for the kiddies. We’re preparing to have to hide out, and you know what that means.

Hand this over to your sensei, or maybe the Hokage if it bothers you. I’ve got a reputation to keep and whining in public ain’t a way to do it.

Look: I’m sorry we can’t help more, but we are retired. I like you, and maybe your idiot teammates, but we are not getting involved in a major dustup between two countries that can’t keep to one side of the bedroom. Been there, done that, burned the hitai-ate.

Anyway, good hunting, kid. Keep your blades sharp—when the earth moves, you might not feel it coming.

And I hope the politicians choke on it.

[The remainder of the letter is unintelligible. It seems to have once been attached to another slip of paper, and eventually burned after being thoroughly soaked.]

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title partially owed to the Tyrells. :)

Chapter title partially owed to the Tyrells. :)
It’d been a while since I had a chance to see the stars out in the wilderness. Even the training fields don’t count—Konoha is close enough that the light can blot out some of the cooler stellar configurations. I have to get much further out—kilometers upon kilometers—before the stars are really shining. But this time, there wasn’t any real time to enjoy it and try to figure out constellations. Such was the life of a shinobi on a mission.

It felt weird, really. I’d never been outside of Konoha without my team, and without the constant back-and-forth sniping between Obito and Kakashi, and Sensei’s muffled laughter, everything seemed…off. Like looking at a picture frame on a wall and trying to figure out if it was \textit{really} level. Or coming home and discovering that all the frames in the house suddenly \textit{weren’t}.

Today—tonight, rather—I was well outside of Konoha and in the middle of the Land of Fire. My team and I were arranged around a smokeless campfire, well-hidden in a grotto surrounded by trees and more rocks. Two of us were asleep, and two weren’t. I should really have been on watch, but between the perimeter alert seals Sensei had taught me and the fact that half the area was mined, it felt safe enough.

“And…hold it there.” Rin said, surveying my work with a critical eye.

I let her poke and prod, and eventually pull out a diagnostic jutsu in order to figure out the technical details. At least she didn’t actually touch my hand at all—if she had, it’d be down to my reaction time to keep her from possibly losing a finger.

“This was a lot more fun in theory.” I said, watching her work.

“You did ask for my help, Kei-senpai. I’m just doing it my way.” Rin replied, then she clapped her hands together and the diagnostic jutsu faded. “Okay. Let it go, then try again.”

I nodded, letting my chakra settle back down.

“Use the seals this time, though,” she added, and I complied.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, though, there wasn’t much in the way of progress. An extra two or three centimeters, maybe.

“Dammit.” I said. I cancelled my chakra scalpels again and scowled, clenching my fingers. “I don’t see why I was able to pull off the first stage of the Rasengan and not this.”

“With the Rasengan, it sounds like you’re trying to keep the chakra rotating, right?” Rin asked.

“…Yeah. I mean, chakra circulates in our coils like blood, so it’s not like it was made for sitting
still.” I shrugged, disappointed. It just…I’d been capable of creating chakra scalpels since I was nine. I was thirteen, now, and realizing that Sensei’s lecture on jutsu creation was still relevant was kind of annoying. I’d only been working on extending the range of the scalpels for about a month and a half, and that simply wasn’t long enough.

“True, but I think the problem you’re running into has to do with keeping the edge.” Rin told me, sitting back on her heels. “Too much chakra, and it’s like hitting someone with a paper fan—it’s difficult to keep solid, you know? I know some medic-nin who only use two fingers so they can keep the edge compact.”

Well, that meant my plans to create an in-universe lightsaber were unfortunately put on hold. I didn’t quite have the level of shape transformation control that was necessary in order to perform the Flying Swallow or Samurai Saber techniques, or at least I thought that was the problem.

It was also possible that I was just shit at controlling my chakra once it left my skin.

I drummed my fingers on my thigh. I knew I could, say, dispel genjutsu at a distance. I could plant chakra mines on anything solid. I knew a dozen different types of seals and had been on the same team as one of the most terrifying prodigies Konoha had produced in recent memory. I could use kenjutsu well enough for a teenager with an undersized blade, and I knew most basic medical ninjutsu. Thing was, while my inherent chakra control had helped, I’d also worked at all of them for…well, I wasn’t done yet. But the point was that I’d been at it for years and logically couldn’t expect to just be good at something the first time I did it.

“Guess I’m just going to have to work at it.” I said. Or maybe harass Asuma into helping.

“It’s not such a bad thing,” Rin said, half-teasing. At the look I gave her, she giggled and added, “It’s all right! These things just take time and hard work.”

“Thanks for your help, Rin-chan.” I said. Rin giggled again—apparently my frustration was amusing—and headed over to pull her bedroll out of one of my spare supply scrolls. I’d packed pretty much everything I could get my hands on for this trip, and then packed all of it into scrolls to save weight.

Seriously, I don’t know why Sensei didn’t teach me storage seals first. It’s like having the whole of Capsule Corp. at my fingertips.

Once Rin was settled (which took some doing, since the poof of white smoke woke our teammates up briefly), I climbed up into a tree for my watch. I had a better vantage point to see the stars from up there.

Aside from the chance to stretch my legs, getting out of Konoha was a mixed bag. On one hand, we were heading for Mount Soragami. I’d gotten lots of letters from the Chinatsu暑期 over the years, but I hadn’t visited, and it’d be neat to see how things changed over time. On the other, I’d never been outside of the village with this particular cast and crew.

Rin was familiar, at least—she was brilliant as ever and would be our designated medic. I really wasn’t sure how she’d even gotten on the mission roster, given her lack of an established team despite her rank, and wondered if Yamaguchi-sensei was waiting back in the village to bite both of our heads off for running off. I think that was what surrogate dads were for, right? I mean, I hadn’t seen much of his apparent flip-out over her decision to start wearing blouses and skirts that made her look less like a mini-medic and more like a young lady, but I was sure that they were having some kind of argument.

Yamaguchi-sensei might have been just a tutor for me, or Hayate’s doctor, but he was practically
Rin’s dad. I figured they both were justified, no matter how the snit-fit turned out.

**It's interesting to see how things change, isn’t it?**

It was.

My other two teammates…well, at least I could say I’d met them before.

Genma Shiranui, now age…seventeen, I think. He was the senior chūnin on this mission. He was taller than the rest of us by head and shoulders (or more), but he was also probably the most laid-back guy we could have been partnered with. Aside from being taller, though, he pretty much hadn’t changed. I’d only seen him fight twice since the Chūnin Exams where he beat Rin, but he had deadly aim with senbon and the tiger had never stood a chance in hell. Neither had the bandits.

And as for the last person on my team. Well.

Anko Mitarashi was something else, let’s be honest. She’d been Orochimaru’s student before the world found out how much of a sociopath the guy was, and he’d ditched her after sticking a cursed hickey on her neck. If there was anyone who had a right to be pissed off at him, it was her, and I admired her for standing up every day and facing the world. I’m not sure if I could. She was cute and enthusiastic and a brilliant student when she’d still had a teacher, but his shadow hung over her.

The investigation may have cleared her of any involvement in Orochimaru’s schemes, but that left a ten-year-old genin to the whims of a village with a bad record for social ostracism.

I was kind of hoping that the Hokage had sent her with us because we were, on average, pretty open-minded. Genma was calm and collected even under fire, Rin had been working on the same shift when Anko had been brought in, nearly dead, and…well, I was me.

And the story behind that one was embarrassing, anyway.

Suffice to say that while this wasn’t the team I’d have gone to hang out with after school, I was okay with things as they stood.

The next day dawned bright and early, and we set off in various states of sleep deprivation. While normally, camping in our own territory should have been secure enough, none of us were willing to risk a Rock-nin onslaught by being careless. We never knew where everyone in the Land of Fire was, and there was a half-decent chance some of them were hostile.

After I resealed everything into my various scrolls, we at least had relatively light burdens.

“What are they like?” Anko asked as we walked, with her bouncing ahead of the pack by a few paces. “You’re the only one who’s been out there, right? Hey, Gekko-san, I’m talking to you!”

“It’s just Kei. Keisuke-san if you’re feeling super formal, I guess.” I corrected mildly. “And anyway, the Chinatsugumi are pretty cool with Konoha-nin. “ Sans Danzō’s gang of psychos and Orochimaru himself, anyway. “They’ll probably have a couple rooms at the inn open for us, along with dinner.”

“Do they have dango?” Anko prodded. I couldn’t blame her—Konoha’s was the best, of course, but her parents had certainly named her aptly.

“Yeah. Remind me to tell you about the time Obito—” And I stopped, because Rin poked me in the shoulder. Fine, fine, no more giving up blackmail material. “Er…well, the food’s good and the people like us most of the time. Good enough, right?”
“Sounds like it.” Anko agreed, and went to bother Genma.

I’m convinced that the only thing that’ll really make Genma lose his cool is the Sound Four, so I decided not to mediate.

We only got attacked by bandits once the whole way to Mount Soragami (which was quickly sorted out with extreme prejudice), so all in all I’d have to call it a nice, peaceful trip. We arrived sometime in the late afternoon on the third day out of Konoha, and I was struck by how little the mountain fortress had changed. Sorayama-no-Sato was maybe a little smaller than I remembered it, though that was probably because I was about twenty centimeters taller, and maybe the flags looked a little more worn. Other than that, though, I wasn’t seeing much change.

We walked up to the gate guards and I was once again struck by déjà vu. Sure, Sensei wasn’t around at the moment, but the protocol was mostly the same.

“All right, pass on through,” said Pencil-Mustache. Being a gate guard for four years had to suck, I thought. He’d probably go gray early.

We walked under the gates, since I didn’t hear anything about rooftop racing this time around, and we headed for the main building. Hopefully, Chinatsu or Misaki were around.

Anko was looking around at the town, brown eyes wide and curious. Genma idly dropped a hand onto her head, steering her back toward the main thoroughfare when she tried to dart off to explore. Rin was looking around, too, but she wasn’t ten and I’d seen pretty much everything worth noting the last time I was here. I was more focused on my aching feet and the idea of a bath at the onsen, to be honest.

“You’re no fun.” Anko complained, pushing Genma’s hand away.

Genma snorted. “There’ll be time for fun later, Mitarashi. For right now, just follow my lead.”

I rolled my eyes while Genma wasn’t looking. Aside from Konoha itself, Sorayama was one of the least dangerous places for a Konoha-nin. Rin pinched my arm, though, so I stopped being a brat.

We managed to make it to the main office before anything unexpected happened. I could see Chinatsu and Misaki at the opposite end of the impractically long hallway, with Chinatsu sitting on her sister’s desk, and one of the three interchangeable aides hovered at a nearby doorway.

The guard who’d been at the office door followed us in and announced, “The Konoha shinobi have arrived as requested, Misaki-sama.”

“Welcome back, Keisuke-kun.” Chinatsu remarked, inclining her head toward me. I nodded back, and she added for the benefit of my team, “My name is Chinatsu Kasai, of the Chinatsugumi merchant group.”

Misaki finally looked up from whatever she’d been signing to say, “And I am her sister, Misaki Kasai. Chief of the financial end of things, if you must know.” Then she went back to scribbling.

“Genma Shiranui.” Genma said, bowing a little.

Anko puffed herself up and said, “Anko Mitarashi, genin of Konoha!”

“And I’m Rin Nohara. It’s nice to meet you.” Rin, unlike the rest of us, actually did a full bow.

Chinatsu waved a hand. “Feel free to rest here at the inn. We’ll have the delivery ready for you
Yep. Four Konoha ninjas on a week-long trip to a merchant caravan’s home base…to pick up mail.

Okay, okay, so it wasn’t just mail: Sometimes, local seal masters and blacksmiths weren’t sufficiently insane/available to provide everything necessary for the war effort. While there were no AK-47s or ammo stockpiles in this universe, the Chinatsugumi were capable of providing reusable storage scrolls, food, explosives, kunai, shuriken, and swords in massive quantities. Personally, I never quite figured out where or how they got all of their stuff, and I never asked.

I think this shipment included solid explosives, for one.

(Paper tags and chakra mines are great and all, but sometimes you just need to make Iwa’s Explosion Corps cry.)

“Please show our guests to the inn, Itsuki-san.” Misaki said to apparently empty air, and then, quite suddenly, a fourth near-interchangeable aide pops up out of nowhere. I could tell the first three apart from this one solely because she was a woman, as opposed to the three rather feminine men. It’s all in the shoulders, really.

“Follow me, please.” Itsuki said, and my team complied.

I hung back for a moment, looking at both of the Kasai twins. “Did you need me for anything? After the mission scroll…”

It was weird for me to be specifically requested for a mission. Maybe if I was famous, I wouldn’t have the strong urge to check for an ambush. Or maybe it’d be replaced by a stronger one, even if I knew the Chinatsugumi were mostly harmless.

“Ahh, yes. Actually, Keisuke-kun, Rikuto requested that you meet someone with him.” Chinatsu said, finally getting off the desk. Misaki ignored both of us. “Just follow me and we can get this over with.”

Ominous…

The hallways weren’t getting smaller, at least, and I could still sense my teammates. So I was pretty sure she wasn’t going to shove me into a side room and brick up the entrance—would’ve been bad PR.

“As it happens, I don’t think you should be anywhere near this part of the complex.” Chinatsu commented, not looking back.

I didn’t reply.

“But he seems to think it would do you good.” Chinatsu shrugged, and we came to a door that led outside. I could hear afternoon crow calls seeping in through nearby windows—the light from outside looked rather orange, too. She slid it to one side and stepped through.

I hesitated—I was feeling a good half-dozen chakra signatures at least, and I didn’t really recognize most of them—before following.

I don’t know why, but I never thought that Misaki or Chinatsu were very interested in gardening.

The garden itself was beautiful—maples reigned supreme, with cherry trees slightly closer to the compound’s walls. They were out of season, but with Cherry Blossom Boulevard as one of
Konoha’s many attractions I could at least recognize the trees. The terrain itself sloped upward and downward in perfectly sculpted miniature hills, lined with gravel-and-slate paving to delineate a path for the best view. There was a gazebo to one side of the garden, connected to the path by a short wooden bridge and otherwise standing on six thin legs. The koi pond in the middle of the garden was long and gently curved rather than circular or stubby, with a tiny stone lantern house suspended over it by a cobbled arc. The trees were lined with lanterns that had apparently just been lit, with more sticking out of the ground on pikes and making the garden glow.

For a moment I just wanted to sit and stare.

Then I finally paid attention to my tingling chakra sense and shot Chinatsu a look. She shrugged and walked on, heading toward the gazebo. From what I could tell, that was where the chakra signatures were hanging out, and I could hear faint, high-pitched laughter coming from that direction.

It wasn’t until I made it to the gazebo itself that I realized what—or rather, who—I was looking at.

One of the other aides—and I swear I’ll try to learn their names eventually—was sitting in the middle of a rug, surrounded on all sides by children. For a second, I didn’t really know what to say.

The oldest two kids were probably around four or so, with brown skin and jet-black hair that was more wavy than straight or spiky. I had a feeling that they were the infants I’d met once before—Kazuki and Miyu, the fraternal twins Rikuto had briefly introduced me too. They were both listening to the story the aide was telling, though I could tell just from my chakra sense alone that one of them was rapidly getting bored.

Another child—a black-haired boy, probably around the same age as the twins—had fallen asleep on a cushion well away from the others, and was curled into a blanket like it was a nest and he was a tiny bird.

The next one was a toddler with greenish-black hair who might have been two years old, at most. Rather than listening, he (or she?) was curled up on the aide’s lap, and drooling into the man’s pants. Next to him was a little blonde with big gray eyes, with her hair in a pair of tiny pompom-ridden pigtails. She was chewing on her fist, looking around when she heard newcomers.

The last kid was pink-haired and rather smaller than the others, snoozing the afternoon away on the aide’s calf. I wasn’t sure who she (he?) belonged to, but I could make a guess at most of the others.

Chinatsu and I sat down on the rug, and the blonde toddler immediately wobbled over to her much bigger blonde counterpart.

“Auntie!” the little girl said, raising her arms, and Chinatsu automatically lifted the girl into her lap.

“What’s her name?” I asked quietly, while the toddler twisted her tiny fat fists into her aunt’s long hair. I also noticed that the two younger napping kids were starting to wake up, though the boy in the corner snoozed on.

“Aiko-chan. She’s my niece.” Chinatsu told me. She pointed to each of the other children with her free hand, saying, “You’ve met Miyu-chan and Kazuki-chan.” I nodded, and she went on, “Then there’s Kaito-chan—Nanami and Shirozora’s son.”

My eyebrows shot up. “…I didn’t really think they would have any kids, come to think of it. Shirozora’s…the way he is, after all.” It didn’t seem polite to say “one step down from axe murderer on a bad day.” Then, thinking about how she and Akira had seemed so close, I started to say, “So, you and Akira-san…”
Chinatsu shook her head. “Not yet. Maybe not ever.”

I didn’t want to know how she discovered that, though I could imagine. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.” Chinatsu ignored any twinge of pain I might have caused her and went on doggedly, “The other two are foundlings.” She paused, briefly. “War never really changes.”

No, it doesn’t. And there’s no mercy for those caught in the wrong place.

“Roku-chan is older—he remembered his name, at least.” By that, she seemed to mean the kid who’d turned himself into a burrito. Chinatsu continued, “Unfortunately, Tayuya-chan is still a baby, so we renamed her. I think it suits her.”

…Tayuya?

I thought, I might have jinxed myself with that Sound Four comment, before.

We don’t really know anything about the Sound Four, other than their personalities and their devotion to Orochimaru, the Dreamer pointed out. Kimimaro was picked up after his clan got themselves massacred by Kiri, and the three Sound genin were taken in from the street if Zaku is anything to go by. There’s no reason he might not have managed to find more orphans elsewhere—or make them.

What is it with this universe and Vengeful Orphan Syndrome?

But…we also don’t know if Tayuya of the Sound Four was ever adopted by the leader of a merchant troupe, in the old timeline. The Dreamer scratched her head, inside of my head. Talk about a trip. There’s just so much that was never covered…

That’s putting it lightly, sadly.

I have no idea how I managed to keep my voice steady, but “I’m sure they’ll grow up strong” came out perfectly even, as though nothing was wrong.

I needed to talk to Rikuto. Where was the superstitious missing-nin when I actually needed him around? Sadly, he didn’t appear like Beetlejuice would have, and I ended up spending the rest of the reasonable hours of the evening with Chinatsu, the still-nameless aide, and the kiddies.

I spent a lot of that time being drooled on, to be honest. I knew more or less who these kids would grow up to be, if they had the chance. Like Chinatsu’s generation, theirs would be fraught with the sort of danger and misery that only really seemed to happen to protagonists. Kaito would probably be mouthy and emotionally dishonest because distance, in his mind, would keep him safe. Aiko would probably be pretty normal, and the moral center of any group. Miyu and Kazuki would be forever at each other’s throats if things went as they had once before, but they’d always find a way back to each other and their family. Roku would be…something. I wasn’t sure.

At least, that’s how they’d turn out if they followed the stories of those they reminded me of.

Tayuya would probably be an exception, if she did end up as a member of the Sound Four—at least, her misery would be short and end in one last blowout.

Later that night, I spent a long time in the bath, just thinking about things. It must have been at least an hour, since time slips away when you’re daydreaming. Eventually, Rin knocked hard enough on the bathroom door to rattle it and asked if I’d drowned.
Fat chance.

“Just thinking, Rin-chan.” I called back.

“How about you think out here before you turn into a raisin?” Anko’s voice demanded.

I laughed at myself, just for a minute, and obeyed. There had to be a more proactive way of doing things.

Well, actually. I already knew there was. I just wasn’t willing to chance it, most of the time.

The primary value in my foreknowledge was in how relevant it was. The second I started telling people about it, it’d start depreciating. Like a new car off a lot, really. And I wasn’t willing to risk my foreknowledge affecting people I knew were central to the Plot, not yet. If I couldn’t predict anything, any changes I made were up to fate. And Fate, as everyone knows, is a gigantic bitch.

I felt safer throwing things out in the open with the Chinatsugumi—specifically with the ever-irreverent Rikuto—mostly because they were generally further removed from events and didn’t seem to have much effect. Only…now they might.

I bit my lip.

It’d be a good idea to start here.

Of course it would be. It was small-scale.

Once all my teammates were asleep, I went looking for Rikuto.

He was in the city. He just wasn’t around the kids when I was, probably because of one errand or another. I didn't know what'd take precedence over attending a meeting he'd been interested in, but I decided it wasn't important. I left a note stuck to one of the main house windows before heading back to the inn, back through the same garden I’d used to sneak out.

Almost as soon as I reached the inn’s garden, I felt a gentle pop of chakra and then Rikuto’s magma-like chakra signature was barely ten meters away. I looked over at him, squinting in the darkness, before wandering over to one of the wooden bridges. The inn garden was a lot smaller than the one for the main house, but it was pretty enough and included a type of privacy seal that made conversations inaudible to anyone more than five meters away from the speaker.

“Evening, Pipsqueak.” Rikuto said as he approached. He sat down on one of the lower steps on the bridge, back to me, and said, “You got taller.”

“You got older.” I responded, but there wasn’t any heat in it. I sat down, too, and crossed my legs in front of me. “I met Miyu-chan and Kazuki-chan. They’re cute, like you said.”

Rikuto made a noise like “hah” and nodded. “Yeah. Can’t tell you how many former comrades would’ve pegged me as dead by twenty. And here I am, pushing thirty-three and a father of two.”

I swallowed. “Yeah, I…I’m glad you’re happy.”

“Nice sentiment, Half-Pint, but I’m betting you didn’t ask me out here for good news.” Rikuto said. “So, what is it?”
“I…” It was like the words got stuck in my throat. I swallowed hard and I think my voice came out strangled, but… “I think Orochimaru will come after you, sometime in the next five years.”

Rikuto froze.

“I don’t know when.” I said bleakly, looking up toward the slightly-dimmed stars. In a lantern-lit garden, the interference from ground lights was too strong. “Tayuya—the baby—I dreamed about her as a teenager. As…as the second-in-command of one of Orochimaru’s hit-squads. I know it’s her, but I don’t…I don’t know how it happens. If maybe, in my dream, Chinatsu never found her.”

“Why?” Rikuto managed.

“Orochimaru looks for bloodlines.” I said, refusing to look at him. “Maybe it’s because of that. Maybe you get in his way. Maybe it’s because you’re friendly with Konoha. I don’t know.

“Or maybe I’m wrong, and you leave Tayuya out in the wild to fend for herself.” From the way Rikuto actually flinched at the suggestion, I decided it was unlikely. Even knowing the baby could be a sign of bad things to come. “All I know is that Tayuya-chan is a cute little baby girl that Chinatsu cares a lot about. And, in my dream, she’s running with Oto and there’s no mention of the Chinatsugumi at all.”

For all I knew, a similar group had existed somewhere in the blank spaces of Naruto canon. And then…nothing.

For a long time, neither of us said anything.

“…It’s a hell of a thing, Half-Pint.” Rikuto sighed, shoulders slumping.

“What?” I was confused.

“It’s interesting, you know. Chi-chan probably talked to you about the feeling we get, around people we feel like we should know?” At my nod, Rikuto continued, “Ever since Miyu-chan and Kazuki-chan were born, I knew they were my blood. My children, mine. Chi-chan talked with Misaki about getting the same feeling with Aiko-chan and I know Shiro and Nami-chan felt the same for Kaito-chan.” He dropped his chin onto the heel of one hand. “Akira felt it, too, and I swear the man’s about as competent as a brick.”

“…I don’t see where this is going.” I said quietly.

“Chi-chan found Tayuya-chan in the burned-out wreck of a border village about two months ago.” Rikuto told me. “And I didn’t get any ping off her.”

“Maybe it’s because she’s adopted?” I suggested.

“Except Roku-chan is too, and all of us felt that one.” Rikuto corrected gently.

Well, yeah, I thought. Tayuya was one of the Sound Four—she was never a part of your story.

Until now.

“Not getting a déjà vu feeling isn’t a bad thing.” I said. “You probably meet tons of people who don’t stick out one way or another, all the time.

“Never said it was.” Rikuto said.

I frowned. “This isn’t Tayuya-chan’s fault.”
“You don’t think I don’t know that? How the hell can it be a baby’s fault that we get targeted by a crazy Konoha missing-nin?” Rikuto ran a hand through his hair. “What’ll he do to her?”

“…She’ll be a loyal minion, up until the day she gets killed.” I said. “That’s why…it’s probably going to happen in a few years. If she gets too old, she’ll remember who killed her family.”

“Hah, yeah. Can’t have that happen.” Rikuto said bitterly. “If she was old enough to remember that, he’d just kill her and save himself the trouble.”

Or use her in horrible experiments. I still hadn’t met Yamato, but I knew he’d already met Orochimaru.

“Shit.” Rikuto said.

I agreed.

“Hah. Look at me—barely four years younger than that snake and I already know I can’t fight him.” Rikuto’s voice was strangely flat. “None of us can.”

“I’m sorry.”

Rikuto sighed again. “No, no, I’m glad you told me.” He looked back, teal eyes seeming to glow in the dark, “I just need you to tell me anything you can about him. Can you do that for me? Even if none of us can face him and win, it…it might help some of us survive.”

I did. I told him everything I could remember—the Curse Seals, the white snakes, the body jumping, the experiments I knew about. Every single damned jutsu and summoning contract I could find, anything about his obsession with kekkei genkai. Any scrap of his physiology I could remember went into the pot, too, and I hoped it would help. Anything and everything my dream-memories had supplied, I told to Rikuto.

“Tell you what, kid,” Rikuto began, as I finally ran out of steam, “I’ll write a letter to your sensei.”

“What for?” I asked.

“This is too important to just keep to the Chinatsugumi, and you can’t be the one to break the news. You’re a kid, still.” Rikuto said. I winced and nodded. “It’ll be anonymous, but take it back anyway. It’ll have everything you just told me, all right? All his weaknesses, all his jutsu, and all packaged into a neat little bow for your Intelligence department. It won’t even look like your info—it’ll look like mine. Just promise me one thing: Do your level best to get that bastard killed, whether he does us in or not.”

“I…”

“You’re not strong enough to do it yourself and probably never will be. Hell, you’re in good company—most people won’t.” Rikuto shook his head sharply. “Take it to your sensei or the Hokage and tell them we’ve been doing an analysis on everything to come out of Oto—at the very least, we will be once I take this to Chi-chan.” He patted my on the head. “Understand, Keisuke?”

“…”

“…” Yeah.” I swallowed. “Thank you.”

He gave my hair one last ruffle before running off.

I sat there in the garden for a long time, looking up at the stars and hoping that, between the training my team had done over the past four years and the information Rikuto was going to parrot back to
Konoha, I’d know I’d made the right choice.

The hand’s been dealt, now.

Two months after I gave the letter to Sensei, telling him it was some kind of report, my name came up again. Along with my entire team.

I ran a quick Mystic Palm jutsu over my scraped and bleeding knuckles healing the damage in one swipe. Nearby, a training dummy lay in pieces in the ruins of another one, shredded where it stood by a hurricane of chakra.

Obito grinned at me, giving me a thumbs up for my success. I didn’t feel much like smiling, though I did anyway.

It was December, almost a year before Naruto will be born.

While Obito went home, I went shopping for a present. Kakashi was going to be officially promoted in about a week, after all. It wouldn’t do to show up short a gift.

And then…well, then we’d face the gauntlet of Kannabi together, or die trying.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title owed to the house motto of the Tullys.
Kannabi Bridge Arc: Descend

Chapter Summary

Kei: Embark.

Things fall into place with startling ease, sometimes.
It’s actually rather surprising, then, how easily they fall apart.

Kakashi’s promotion was actually fairly similar to the businesslike meeting in which Obito and I made chūnin two years previous, according to what I heard about it. Sensei told me that the order was handed down from on high, and we ended up having about two days to celebrate the occasion before he actually outranked us.

I went out shopping with Rin in order to find something suitable—mostly because I still hated shopping and needed motivation in the form of another person in order to do it—and while he could afford anything I could give him, I just needed something to customize to give to him. Hearing about his promotion, Rin also decided to chip in. It was a bit of a rush job on both of our parts, but we pulled it off.

The day Kakashi’s promotion was made official, he got a customized med-kit from Rin (though she gave one to me and there was another to give to Obito, which lessened the novelty somewhat), a Flying Thunder God kunai from Sensei, and a black utility belt from me. The belt had built-in pouches I’d practically covered in security seals, making it so that he’d be the only one able to open them without getting a high-powered lightning jutsu in the face when they were active.

Well, I assumed it’d be lightning jutsu—the seals were supposed to be somewhat customizable.

One of the side effects of pulling out most of the stops for Kakashi’s gift, though, was forgetting to grab Obito from the Uchiha district.

And he arrived late, with precisely fuck-all in the way of congratulatory gifts.

Exactly as expected.

“Will you just give me a break? I’ll get something for you later!” Obito snapped, flushing red with embarrassment and frustration.

*There might not be a “later” for us,* I thought morbidly.

Kannabi began today.

I spent most of that team meeting feeling vaguely ill.

“Better to get nothing than something from you.” Kakashi sniped back.

I also had a steadily growing headache.
Over the past few months, we’d finally picked up what I considered our iconic outfits. Well, at least Obito and Kakashi were—I didn’t, by definition, have one.

I was still wearing a jacket and standard shinobi pants, but I’d managed to cram a flesh-toned mesh shirt under everything. I also wore shinobi mesh under my pants, which extended down to the tops of my new open-top sandals. I had a strap slung across my back that kept my kodachi between my shoulder blades, and my jacket had a tail that hid both of my supply pouches from cursory sight. Other than a small scroll holster in each sleeve and one hidden across the small of my back, that completed my ensemble.

Obito was dressed in blue edged in orange. Actually, there was more blue than I’d seen since the last time Sensei took his flak jacket off—it had the effect of making the wearer look a little blob-like, if not for Obito’s white belt. The Uchiha fan was huge and bright on his shoulders, which gave me a weird feeling just at the thought. He was otherwise equipped mostly with standard gear—like the other members of our team, he wore two shuriken pouches rather than the one that most genin (who were less confident in their weapon ambidexterity) stuck with, a kunai holster with room for at least four, and metal guards over the backs of his hands.

Kakashi, for his part, was decked out in darker colors aside from the white stripe along his sleeves and his elbow-length metal armguards. He had two brown straps that crossed his chest and served as a mount for his tantō holster—to a blade he used maybe once in a bloody blue moon. He had two pouches for shuriken, though I was also pretty sure his kunai holster had a scroll instead of the normal blade allotment. It seemed like all of us were going to be equipped to kill a platoon.

“Kakashi, Obito…” I could hear my own voice rise into a snarl, rather than my usual detached sarcasm, and stopped short. Both of the boys were looking at me. I sighed. “Look, not now. We can do this ‘dance around the problem and eventually have a slugging match’ thing later. Sensei, what were you going to say?”

“I’ll explain as we go, Kei.” Sensei told me. “Everyone got everything they need?”

“Yes, Sensei,” we chorused, because some things never got old.

I remembered watching Kakashi Gaiden a couple of times as a twenty-year-old social shut-in. It wasn’t hard to tell where this mission was going to get us. Oh, sure, Sensei just told us to meet up for a mission briefing and it just so happened to fall on the same day Kakashi was officially promoted… bah. It was a waste of time to be bitter. Events were already in motion.

I traveled relatively lightly—aside from the contents of my pockets and pouches, everything else was sealed into storage scrolls in my pack. I’d offered to do the same for Obito and Kakashi, and ended up with their bedrolls and about eighty percent of our food. They kept the rest. Without the weight of a full pack to distract me, I spent a lot of time looking around at the scenery and trying to keep my emotions under control.

We were well into our trip before I felt anything like normal, and even that was a tentative thing.

“So, a mission with Kakashi as team leader.” I mused aloud. Not like that was new. “Well, at least it’s something we practiced. Kinda.”

“Like hell we did.” Obito muttered.

I punched him in the shoulder, in a friendly kind of way. “Come on, Obito. Quit sulking.”

“It’s always about Kakashi, though!” Obito made a helpless sort of gesture with his arms, frustrated.
“Ah, just let him have his day. We can always jump him later.” I suggested, smiling crookedly.

“I heard that.” Kakashi shot back at us, from where he was leading our formation.

“But you didn’t hear a date and time and therefore that means jack.” I told him.

Kakashi gave both of us an exasperated look, then looked to Sensei. Sensei shrugged and held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “You’re no help.” Kakashi complained.

“I’m just an innocent bystander,” Sensei insisted, and Kakashi huffed.

“Okay, yeah, I feel a bit better.” Obito said to me, too quietly for Kakashi to hear.

“Good.”

It wasn’t until Sensei had us stop for lunch that we finally got a look at the strategic reasons for the mission.

Sensei pulled a map out of his pack and laid it flat on a rock, while the rest of us gathered around him. He traced a line with one long finger, passing the old line that delineated the front lines as of a week ago, and tapped the symbol representing Kusagakure. “As of one week ago, Iwagakure has launched a full-scale invasion of Kusagakure territory. So far, the village itself hasn’t fallen and many Konoha and Kusa-nin are fighting within this territory. Reports suggest that we’re looking at an invasion force numbering over a thousand.”

I frowned. I hadn’t seen a thousand shinobi in one place since the day Sensei’s Hokage candidacy had been announced, but I did have an idea of what scale the *Naruto* world tended to work on. To devote this many shinobi to any single cause…Iwagakure had to be both sure of a counterattack and very, very interested in making sure they prevailed.

“Where are they getting their supplies from?” Obito asked, scanning the map. “You can’t feed a thousand combat shinobi on bamboo and grass seeds.”

I stifled a snort. True.

“I’d bet on a massive supply train, possibly crossing from Iwa territory by bridge.” Kakashi said, and he brought two fingers down on Kannabi and one of its sister structures, further from our location.

“I’d bet on Kannabi.” I put in, and Kakashi removed one finger, leaving only his index on Kannabi. “It’s close to the front lines while being in more heavily-Iwa-held territory than the other Kusa-Iwa bridges.”

One of the many, many, many topics covered in the Academy included tidbits about other countries that I think that they thought we wouldn’t know. Kusagakure, as a semi-permanent ally, had entire units devoted to its geography in case we someday needed to travel there. I supposed that no one had ever thought we’d need to infiltrate Kusa territory for the express purpose of blowing up something that big, but I was also pretty sure the Kusa-nin wouldn’t hold it against us as long as the Iwa-nin suffered for it.

I also couldn’t help but think that it’d be much easier if someone in our roster was flight-capable, like Deidara. The idea of a B-29 bomber run was really appealing just then, rather than the idea of playing at being French resistance fighters.

“That’s what the Hokage thought, too.” Sensei told us. He looked pleased, but under it was a kind of concern I hadn’t seen in ages. He exhaled, long and slow, before going on, “Team Kakashi.”
“Your mission is the infiltrate Iwagakure-held Kusa territory and destroy the Kannabi bridge.” A trio of black spheres appeared in Sensei’s hand—concentrated high explosives. I felt my jaw drop. Sensei went on, “As a small unit, you have a better chance of getting these in place. Blow the bridge and get out as fast as you can, understand?”

“What are you going to be doing, Sensei?” Obito asked as we all nodded our assent.

Sensei’s expression was deadly cold. “I’ll confront the enemy directly. The front is only a few days from here and twelve hours from where you’ll be going. Our friends need all the help I can give them.”

That, alone, told me that Sensei would have another hundred kills under his belt before the week was out.

Sensei handed the explosives off to Kakashi—while I felt my fingers twitch with envy—and started folding up the map. “That’s it for now. I’ll be tagging along for the next day or so, to make sure we get past the border patrols safely. I’ll be doubling back after that, and I hope I’m enough of a distraction that no one wonders what a few Konoha-nin are doing so far into their territory.” He smiled tightly as he said it, but I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d just jinxed us.

As he turned to get one of the food storage scrolls out, though, he added, “And Kei—no using the high-grade stuff before you get to the bridge. And no stealing them off Kakashi for it, either.”

I tried to pout, but my heart wasn’t really in it.

_Fucking hell, if we screw up here we’re all dead._ That one fact kept floating around in my head, pressing down on everything else. _And if we don’t…I have absolutely no idea._ There was always a possibility that succeeding could end worse than fucking up. I wasn’t sure how, but I wasn’t willing to discount the possibility out of hand.

Lunch passed quickly, and even though I downed half my canteen’s contents, my mouth still felt dry.

It didn’t really get any better when we entered the Forest of Oversized Trees and What the Hell Do They Feed Those Mushrooms. The entire forest was dim from the sheer volume of foliage in the canopy, and the fact that the local were fungi was both big enough to stand on and solid enough use as a bludgeon didn’t help much. I could sort of tell what time it was thanks to what light peeked through the trees, but it wasn’t especially relevant.

The chakra signatures I was picking up, on the other hand, were downright unnerving.

_I knew_ there weren’t that many Iwa-nin in the forest. All of the signatures but one were far enough off that they weren’t really distinct, so I figured only the nearest was a problem. He was suppressing well, but I needed only a moment to pinpoint him and, at the very least, puzzle out how to neutralize him.

I stopped dead in the middle of our formation, eyes narrowed. If I could just pick that asshat out of this gigantic compost bin…

“How many, Kei?” Sensei asked quietly, hand on my shoulder.

“One.” I whispered back.
Ahead of me, Kakashi threw one arm out, clearly either smelling or hearing our mysterious guest. Obito bumped into Sensei’s back with a squeak before he realized that we’d stopped.

Sensei let go of my shoulder and signaled for Obito to look around. He did, but since he wasn’t a Hyūga it wasn’t going to mean much unless the guy actually entered our line of sight.

My head jerked up as I felt one of the chakra signatures spike in fear. My eyes closed, I could make out the enemy about fifty meters off along a diagonal z-axis—probably thirty meters above us.

All of crouched together in a circle, behind a huge fallen log that would cut off the enemy’s line of sight. I kept half of my attention on the forest even as Sensei got ready to explain our findings.

“All right. There’s one enemy—” Sensei began, but he cut himself off just as I felt nineteen more problems pop out of nowhere. Fucking shadow clones. “Careful, everyone. Twenty, now.”

“Clones.” I supplied, tracking with my eyes still shut. I could only assume that Sensei could do something with air currents, because I was pretty sure he wasn’t a sensor. “Shadow clones, most likely.”

“Agreed.” Kakashi said quietly. I opened my eyes as he got into a runner’s starting stance, and I felt a flash of fear. “I’ll lead the attack. Please, back me up.”

This was, of course, coming from the fastest of the three teenagers in the squad. Sensei would be his reinforcements/follow-through for this bout—Obito and I were backup dancers at best.

“No, Kakashi. I’ll lead today.” Sensei said, but it was clear that Kakashi wasn’t interested in hearing that.

“Sensei, I’m a captain today, too.” He was already halfway through the seals for the Chidori. “I want to try the Chidori out in real combat—I’ve been working on it for months already.”

I felt the enemy’s chakra spike again as the Chidori’s harsh blue light lit the area around us and its shriek started to become audible.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. I knew how this was gonna end.

“Kakashi, I reserve the right to say ‘I told you so.’” I informed him in a flat tone, pulling my kodachi out of its sheath.

Kakashi ignored me. “Here I go.”

Sensei’s arm snapped out ahead of him, stopping him short.

“Sensei, I can do this.” Kakashi insisted. “I can take any number of enemies out with this jutsu, just like you.”

“Fifteen says he’s never killed even one person with it.” Obito muttered, barely audible to me over the buzz of the Chidori.

I agreed, but decided not to say as much.

“You told me that as soon as we entered Kusagakure territory, I was captain.” Kakashi went on. Oh god. “The rules clearly state that the team needs to obey the captain’s orders, Sensei.”

Sensei wordlessly pulled his arm back, looking like he was going to pinch the bridge of his nose.
Okay, yeah, kodachi out. I signaled Obito to follow my lead, though I wasn’t planning on tearing after Kakashi. Sensei would be able to handle that—if Obito and I were going to stay on the ground, though, we needed to be prepared for a fight.

So, showing that even geniuses occasionally had moments of more pride than sense, Kakashi tore off through the log we’d been using as concealment, punching a hole the size of a manhole cover through the middle of it.

Obito immediately moved to my back, heels briefly touching mine so he could confirm where I was without looking. Sensei, nodding to both of us, disappeared in pursuit of his wayward student.

From the sound of flying metal, I could only assume that Kakashi was doing the really dumb thing and rushing right down the middle. Of course. The Chidori had a neat effect where it effectively increased the user’s speed in order to make the kill more likely—sort of like a watered-down version of the Third Raikage’s Hell Stab and Lightning Armor techniques.

Only Kakashi, like anyone without a Sharingan or the correct usage of Lightning Release, simply wasn’t fast enough to keep up with the speed of lightning.

Sensei was the one, glorious exception.

While Kakashi played pop-the-clone, Sensei was throwing shuriken to counter the Iwa-nin’s kunai with the kind of deadly accuracy that made signing his name in shuriken look amateurish. None of the weapons got within a meter of Kakashi, which made his self-imposed mission a lot simpler.

I looked away then, counting on my chakra sense to figure out where the idiots got off to, and concentrated on the clones that would inevitably come for Obito and me instead.

Right on cue, a clone popped up out of thin air and went for Obito’s face.

Obito leapt back, knowing that I had a technique primed and he didn’t, and I dove into the gap he left. The enemy clone took a kodachi to the eye socket and exploded into white smoke. Even as I was following through with my thrust, Obito was running through the hand signs for the Grand Fireball in preparation for the next round.

A clone obligingly showed up and was set on fire.

“Doing all right?” Sensei asked, warping in with kunai in both hands.

“Fine.” Obito replied, kicking dirt into the flames left over after the clone’s horrible death.

“Good.”

The forest was filled with the sound of exploding clones—Kakashi was mowing through them faster than expected. Sensei vanished again, leaving Obito and I to handle ourselves for a bit.

We only got one more clone before the buzzing of Kakashi’s Chidori finally fizzled out. I felt my breath catch for an instant—what if Sensei didn’t grab him, what if, what if—and by the time I got myself under control again Sensei and Kakashi were both there. Sensei lowered Kakashi to the ground carefully, which said more for the injury than it did about Kakashi’s reaction to said injury (mostly grimacing).

“Iaijutsu?” I asked, peering at the slash wound. It looked a little like something I’d tried before, actually. Mostly on training dummies and a couple of guy’s I’d killed—whoever this Iwa asshole was, he was fast. Even as Obito forced Kakashi to stay sitting by grabbing his shoulder, I looked at
Sensei for a second.

Sensei’s expression was like ice.

I looked away, attention on my patient as though we weren’t still in a fight. After all, it wasn’t really much of one with Sensei around.

The Iwa-nin was dead. He just hadn’t stopped breathing yet.

Between Sensei dropping his bag and the bag hitting the ground, the enemy’s chakra cut out.

Cheerful thought.

“Stay still.” I said to Kakashi, scowling even as I knit muscle and skin back together. The blade had cut a wavering line from the outer edge of his right pectoral to a slightly deeper slash along his triceps. It’d have been easier to fix if the damage was contained to one muscle group, but between the advances Rin and I had made in our medical techniques, there wasn’t much chance of permanent damage.

After a while, I pulled back. Healing techniques weren’t perfect, of course, and the muscle would be weak for a while before natural healing took hold properly. As long as he didn’t strain himself—which, I had to admit, was actually pretty likely—he’d be fine.

“I told you so.” I muttered, irritation fighting worry.

“Kakashi’s injury is serious.” Sensei said, dropping out of the trees. There was no sign of blood on his sleeves, which mostly made me think that he was rather good at disposing of evidence by this point. Also: No fucking shit, muscular damage is serious. “We’ll retreat and set up camp.”

Finally, Obito gave up on stabilizing the injury. Kakashi rolled his shoulder, wincing as the injury stretched and I made the sort of gesture that suggested I was about to backhand him across the face if he did it again. The look Obito shot me over Kakashi’s head told me that he was going to say his piece, though, teammate’s blood literally on his hands or no.

“I’m fine.” Kakashi insisted. I kept from slapping him, though I wasn’t sure how.

Honestly. Wasn’t almost getting killed once enough for this mission?

“No, you’re not.” Obito argued. “This is all because you ignored Sensei’s orders and charged in there like an idiot!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you.” Kakashi snapped back, “You, the elite Uchiha who always brags and gets nothing done. Weren’t you crying back there?”

My eyes narrowed. “Kakashi, this is for your own good.”

And I hit him in the face.

Kakashi reeled and landed hard on his rear, left hand flying up to his cheek. Sensei had my wrist in a grip like steel immediately afterward, but I wasn’t planning on a follow-up anyway.

“Obito did exactly as we trained to do.” I said coldly. “Don’t make this about him.” My nerves were frayed—fuck, fuck, fuck we’re all going to die—and I think that one moment showed everyone exactly how I felt. “The twenty-fifth rule of shinobi conduct may say to never show tears, but I think it’s more about knowing when to save emotions for later and when to think about now. This means
you shut up, and he shuts up, and I shut up and we get moving.”

Obito was looking at me like I’d grown an extra head.

I stood, Sensei’s grip still cutting off blood to my hand. I looked at him. “You were saying.”

Sensei let go of my wrist. “That’s enough from all three of you for today.” He crossed his arms. “Kakashi, rules and regulations are important, but I told you before that you also have to step back and adapt to the situation as it is.”

“Told you.” Obito couldn’t resist a parting shot, and Kakashi glared wordlessly at him.

“Obito, stop.” Sensei ordered. Obito shut his mouth with an audible click. “There are enough enemies in this area that we don’t need to give them an upper hand by antagonizing each other. Save it for later.

“And Kei—” Here, I bowed to the inevitable and felt my stomach drop. I didn’t want to see Sensei’s disappointed expression. “Never strike a superior officer. If you have to, make your point and live with the consequences. But keep your fists to yourself.”

I closed my eyes, wincing, and nodded. Idiot, idiot, idiot!

“Finally…Kakashi, don’t use the Chidori again.” I looked at Sensei just as Kakashi’s head shot up, and Sensei went on, “It’s a powerful technique, but despite its strength and speed factors in a fight, by the time you get anywhere near an opponent you can’t see what they’re doing anymore. If you’d been able to react normally, you wouldn’t have been injured at all. It’s still an imperfect jutsu.”

Sensei sighed. “Now, before we move on, let me say one last thing. For shinobi, the thing above all else is teamwork.”

I sighed inwardly. Way to go, team. First semi-solo mission’s already a fuck-up right out of the gates.

I just…let go of it. The impending freak-out, the frustration, the shame, and the urge to scream into a pillow. It could go and hide under a rock because there wasn’t time to deal with it all now. I’d be able to cry myself to sleep later, once Kakashi’s shoulder was fully wrapped up and Obito had his revelation and whatever else needed to happen…happened. I don’t know. Just…later. As long as there was a later.

Kakashi needed his arm patched up, so I opened one of my scrolls and extracted a roll of bandages to bind his arm for the night. I also had enough antiseptic to put a small clinic out of business, which I used to sterilize both the wound—making Kakashi wince in the process—and the inner layer of bandages before I tied the whole mess off.

“Sorry about earlier.” I told Kakashi.

He huffed and looked away.

We all had dinner together, but it was a quiet affair and none of us were really all that comfortable talking about the day. After Sensei decided that he had first watch, Obito, Kakashi and I agreed to the second, third, and fourth shifts in that order. I got another scroll out and unsealed all of our bedrolls, took off my hitai-ate, and curled up to await my shift.

I didn’t end up crying myself to sleep that night, in fact. Too much to do, even while unconscious.
My mindscape that night looked like someone had drained all the water, at first. Looking around, I spotted the usual floating cloud of memory fragments, hovering close together above my head. In the distance, something huge groaned and cracked—the water, it seemed, had retreated to form a glacier.

I floated upward, looking for the usual Freudian setup of chairs and coffee table, and spotted them on the top of the glacier. The Dreamer was there, sitting on top of the table while Id snoozed in the high-backed Victorian therapist’s chair.

From my new vantage point, I could see a vast expanse of dark water churning just beyond the edge of the ice. Looking around, I noticed that the water was caught between two barely-connected ice shelves that looked to be slowly, inexorably drawing apart.

After a moment’s thought, I had to agree that it encompassed my mental state rather well.

I floated over to them, donning my biggest, goofiest possible pair of glasses. I like to think that I looked incredibly stupid, if only for the purpose of startling a laugh out of the Dreamer.

It didn’t work.

“We have a problem.” The Dreamer looked tired, and I didn’t have to ask why.

The memory cloud had become something more akin to the combined voices of a thousand shrieking starlings, all babbling at once. Then there was the terrible noise of the glacier—representative of my emotional repression, I think—adding to the cacophony. I was agitated, but the memories of my old life were doubly so due to their sudden relevance.

Sadly, I knew more of the story from here.

I bit my lip. “I don’t know if someone getting captured is inevitable. But if it’s a given…I’d be the best choice.”

“And there’s a very good chance that if you are captured, you won’t survive.” The Dreamer looked sad and exhausted and I knew I wasn’t making my case very well.

“I’m—we’re—just a girl.” I looked away, toward Id. “There’s nothing special about us, outwardly. But Kakashi looks like his dad—fights like him—and Obito…”

Obito wore the Uchiha fan across his thin shoulders like a cape, or maybe a bull’s-eye. And thanks to Madara’s actions back when the First had been trying to get everyone to the conference table alive, everyone knew that sigil. If the enemy realized what clan he belonged to, they’d pull his eyes out and leave him to rot if they didn’t torture him to death first. Kakashi would be at risk of the same, sans maybe the eyeball-extraction. At most, I expected the same genjutsu-torture that they’d treated Rin to, once upon a nightmare.

“I can’t let that happen.” I said quietly. “I can’t.” Just like I couldn’t even bring myself to think of killing Obito before the risk he represented became reality.

My heart was a traitor.

“And if you can change his fate?” I knew exactly who the Dreamer was talking about, and it was agonizing to think about Obito like that—crushed under ten tons of rock, helpless, as his team abandoned him to Madara’s schemes. Hindsight made it unimportant that Rin and Kakashi and Sensei couldn’t have known. As a sensor, I would or I will or whatever tense I was using today.

I wasn’t scared, you see.
I was terrified.

“If I can, I will.” I told her. If only I was really as confident as I sounded.

“Then we have to plan.”

You know what they say about the best-laid plans of mice and men, right?

I woke up for my shift with tears in my eyes.

I scrubbed at my eyes before the boys could see me, but I was sure that Kakashi did anyway. Oh, whatever—it wasn’t like he hadn’t seen me have a meltdown before. It’d just happened when I was awake last time around.

“Thanks. Catch what sleep you can.” I muttered as he crawled into his bedroll. I climbed up onto the rock we’d been using as a wind-break, rubbing my arms for warmth.

He grumbled something I didn’t quite catch and dozed off.

Despite being barely awake, I still jumped when, a few minutes later, Sensei plopped down next to me and said, “Your turn, Kei?”

“Nah, Sensei. You don’t need to worry about me.” I mumbled, dropping my chin onto the heel of my left hand. “I’m f-f—” I was cut off by a jaw-cracking yawn. “—Fine. Sorry.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe a word of that.” Sensei replied.

“Yeah, well, it’s not the best time.” I muttered, looking away.

“Kei…”

“Look, I’m…” I swallowed hard, running a hand over my face. “I’m terrified things will go wrong. It’s…it’s our first mission in enemy territory, and you’re not going with us, and Kakashi’s brand new at this captain thing.”

Look at me, I’m a sea cucumber! I spill my guts at the slightest provocation.

“…I can’t tell you everything will be all right.” Sensei said, after a pause.

If he had, I would’ve had to call him a liar.

I gave a soft, fake laugh. “Yeah, I…I know. No guarantees in a shinobi’s life.” At least my breathing was still mostly even.

Sensei tugged me against his side, and I briefly hated myself for so outwardly unstable that everyone apparently knew it. Inside…well, the dam was still there. Creaking, but there.

“Trust in your teammates, Kei.” Sensei told me. “They’ll lead you through hell itself and out the other side.”

Or just into it.

“Good talk.” I muttered.

“Kei—”
“No, Sensei. I know this. I just…need time to think on it. Sorry. Not much for rational conversation right now.”

Sensei said nothing for a while.

Then, “All right. Night, Kei.”

I think I spent most of my shift shifting between checking perimeter seals and trying to meditate. It helped, a little, but my nerves were only barely settled by the time my teammates actually got up for real.

“Looks a lot better than it did yesterday,” I said to Kakashi after breakfast, dismissing my diagnostic jutsu and moving to re-wrap his arm. The line on his pectoral wouldn’t even scar, so I left it as-is.

“Try not to strain yourself, though.”

Kakashi made an agreeable noise and, as soon as I was done bandaging him back up, pulled his shirt on over his head.

Yeah, he still wasn’t talking to me. It was getting kind of annoying, even if I knew it was my fault. I’d have to apologize again sooner or later.

“Ready to go?” Sensei called, hoisting his pack onto his back. Nearby, Obito was kicking dirt over our cooking fire. Once I stood up and Kakashi had pulled all of his clothes back on, it was just a matter of getting all of our stuff in order.

“Think so, Sensei!” I called.

And…Kakashi and Obito weren’t looking at each other. Great. Just great.

We ended up stopping in a bamboo forest that set my teeth on edge, sometime in late morning. Crunch time approached, and I sort of wanted to say something irreverent that would have gotten me some weird looks. Guess that was what the internal monologue was for.

“The enemy we encountered yesterday was a lone scout. From here on in, we can expect to be fighting teams. Be careful.” Sensei told us, something flickering behind his eyes.

Obito crossed his arms behind his head. “Well. Let’s get going, captain.” This last was addressed at Kakashi, and I hid a smile.

Kakashi shook the shock off after a second and nodded sharply.

“All right, let’s go.” Sensei cut in before the boys could get into a staring contest.

We said together, “Yes, Sensei.”

Sensei shot us one last look, sort of sad and yet proud. “Scatter!”

We did.

And we made it a total of four hours away from Sensei before I started getting really bad vibes.

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Normally, I think I would have appreciated the scenery. Bamboo forests remind me of the trip I took to China once, where the stuff grew like some weird combination of saw-proof weed and picket
fence, and of the time I got to see a panda in person. Hell of a time, that was. Walking across streams and rivers cut down on wading time by one hundred percent, most of the foliage was huge, and I was physically fit enough to actually kind of enjoy the walk.

But after we crossed the second stream, I realized that we were really not in Kansas anymore.

Obito and Kakashi didn’t have the eyes for it, not yet, but my chakra sense picked up two hostile presences at about the same time that we made the decision to slow to a walking pace to cross a river. There was nothing special about the site, other than how the water moved slower and the bamboo curved overhead in such a way that the “clearing” was barely any lighter than the forest proper.

Obito saw me tense up first, given that he was taking rear guard again. I signaled two enemies—two fingers—to him with one hand behind my back, feeling my heart hammer in my chest and hoping I’d make a difference. In front of me, Kakashi stiffened suddenly as the wind changed, holding up a hand for us to halt.

It did make the difference. I didn’t know it then, but it did.

Obito was halfway through the seals for the Grand Fireball before it started raining bamboo spears. And then everything was on fire.

I could feel the bigger Iwa-nin moving in behind our group even as the one with two sleeve-blades popped out in front, and I spun to face the invisible guy even as Kakashi moved to engage the one we could actually see. Obito followed my lead, rather than Kakashi’s—whether we could see our enemy or not, we could always find him.

His back to mine, my eyes closed…well, it wasn’t orthodox.

Obito still managed to land a roundhouse on Mr. Sneaky, even without seeing him, as I started the spin for Gekkō-style Earth Tiger Strike. The technique wasn’t meant to be used on the water—it was a heavily modified Earth Release technique, basically the For-Dummies version but for samurai—but the splash threw up enough murky river water and debris for Obito to spot our opponent even as he tried to maneuver around us, based on the shouting.

“Got you now, you bastard!” Obito shouted, and I could feel the fiery chakra of his Phoenix Fire Jutsu engulfing the shore. The Iwa-nin was shouting something, probably curses, and I felt him retreat sans camouflage.

I opened my eyes again, looking for the other fight because Mr. Sneaky was heading that way.

“Obito—!”

“On it!”

Usually we didn’t need to talk, but we needed to warn Kakashi that his deadly dance of steel was going to get a few more partners. Kakashi and his opponent were bouncing from bamboo spire to water to rock and back again—again with the jōnin showiness.

I took a second to catch my breath, trying to figure out where Sneaky had gone, and managed to catch the tail end of the fight. I was on Obito’s heels within a fraction of a second, though, because jōnin had freakish reflexes and I was not going to let him charge into the lion’s den alone.

I was just in time to see Kakashi smashed out of the air by the guy with two blades. He hit the ground hard—
No!

Kakashi didn’t hit the ground. He sank *through* it for a second, and I saw Sneaky rising *out* of it at the same time and crack him over the head with both interlaced fists.

Kakashi slumped.

Obito started to charge at Sneaky, spitting fire, but Two-Blades skidded in front of him and Obito nearly lost his nose. I skittered by, trying to stick my kodachi into the face of at least *one* of the Iwa bastards, and Two-Blades *broke my sword between his*.

The rest of the fight was a blowout—smoke bomb city. It was the nasty, clinging kind that burned like hell in the eyes and I dropped through the surface of the water to get it off. Obito didn’t, though, and he hauled me out after a moment of frantic flailing.

And then…

Obito and I stood there, stunned. The clearing was in ashes, the water was dark with burned wood, metal shards lay everywhere and the handle of my kodachi was still clutched in my whitening fingers. And *Kakashi was gone*.

I had to…I had to…

“They just…” I started, and couldn’t finish.

“We’ll get him back.” Obito said with a voice like steel. The look in his eye was more like Sensei’s than I’d ever seen on him, and it was enough to snap me back to the present. “We’re going to save him, Kei.”

A tiny part of my brain was in awe—*this* was what Obito had become, in the four years I’d known him? But I had to shove that thought aside and into deep storage, because there wasn’t time.

Right. Right. Freak out later. *Always* later.

I slid what was left of my kodachi back into its sheath, hand shaking the slightest bit—but with *anger*.

Anger stoked by fear, but anger nonetheless. I could use that.

I exhaled, commanding my shaking hands to *stop*. “Right. Let’s get our captain back.”
Kannabi Bridge Arc: Things Fall Apart

Chapter Summary

Kei: Do the wrong thing.

Chapter Notes

Previously on...Catch Your Breath!

Team Minato embarked upon a mission to destroy the vital Iwagakure supply bridge, Kannabi. Faced with challenges both from within the team and without, Team Minato's mission becomes a disaster when the team captain, Kakashi Hatake, is kidnapped by enemy ninjas!

Kei and Obito launch a rescue mission at the same time that, elsewhere, their teacher Minato is turning a last stand for Konoha into a rout against Iwa. Working together, the chunin pair defeat stealth expert Taiseki in a high-stakes battle! Though Kei is injured, Obito activates his Sharingan and the pair is still primed for round two! Kei and Obito then take on Kakko, their captive captain's captor. After a short but intense fight, Kei kills Kakko with the Samurai Saber Technique. Now, Obito and Kei check on their teammate...

(Good god I sound like a Dragonball Z announcer.)

Neither of the Iwa-nin seemed to think that we’d willingly go after them after our abrupt defeat and the loss of one of our team members. Many ninja villages won’t go after a downed teammate, for various reasons. I remembered that Kakashi gave the POW justification—while Konoha and Iwa certainly don’t have any accord along those lines, it’d make sense to treat a medic like Rin well and have her heal their soldiers instead of ours. That was common sense. Use your resources to their fullest.

Only Kakashi hadn’t planned on the two Iwa-nin being complete dumbasses with no idea of what tactical value a medic-nin would have, even under duress. If not for Obito’s loyalty, Rin might have died in that other timeline. Or, alternatively—if Kakashi hadn’t gone to reinforce Obito, Obito would have died there and there would never be a Tobi problem.

Here, Kakashi hadn’t anticipated being double-teamed by stronger opponents.

I hadn’t planned on being enough of a pain in the ass that they’d go after the lone fighter instead. I’d just assumed that I would be the best target, based on being female. I hadn’t accounted for the variables—my heightened combat skill and what that meant for my viability as a target, Obito’s combat synergy with me, and our paired perceptiveness and reaction time. I didn’t think that, what with my relative androgyny and chakra sensor capability, I wouldn’t actually stand out as a weak link in the team. I didn’t think, I just was.
That, apparently, was enough.

One thing hadn’t changed, though: they hadn’t bothered to hide their tracks.

I don’t know if they thought we’d be too afraid of them to act. They were both jōnin, of course, and Obito and I were merely chūnin on an infiltration mission. There wasn’t any way for them to know that, though, which made their lack of caution more confusing in hindsight.

Arrogance, I suppose. They were strong and, if not for Obito’s sudden activation of his Sharingan in canon, they might have been too much for Team Minato to handle.

But by the same token, I like to think that Team Minato was stronger now than it had been in the old timeline. Rin had been taken because her situational awareness and the enemy jōnin’s stealth capabilities were a very bad mismatch. My awareness was heightened, and thus I wasn’t taken by surprise and neither was Obito.

Kakashi, though…I wonder if they were just trying to prove that they could outmatch us in a fight.

Or if the Plot was.

“Do we have a plan?” Obito asked as we followed the trail the blockheads had left. To Konoha-born ninja, tracking through a forest was child’s play, enhanced senses or not. “Because right now ‘kill them and salt the earth’ is looking pretty good.”

“It depends on which one fights us first.” I admitted, having the Dreamer queue up a series of memory fragments.

Team Taiseki consisted of stealth expert Taiseki, also known as Sneaky, Kakkō of the two sleeve blades, and the several-days-dead Mahiru, who Sensei had taken out in about two seconds. They were all jōnin-ranked, but Kakkō was the strongest out of the pair we’d be facing. Taiseki was the least dangerous in canon, due mostly to Obito’s sudden onset of additional Uchiha bullshit powers, while Kakkō was the hardest to kill of the lot. He had strong nin-, gen-, and taijutsu skills, and could hit hard enough to break both my kodachi and, at one point, Kakashi’s White Light Chakra Saber.

I dreaded the thought of facing them together—hopefully, Taiseki would take the same tack as he had before and try to kill us on his own. I didn’t know if it’d be best if he assumed we were talentless hacks and walked into the fight with the expectation of an easy kill, or if he tried to take us seriously.

Kinda hard to be wary of someone half your size, I guess.

We can’t kill Kakkō without the Sharingan or a sneak attack.

I agreed, much as I hated it. I said aloud, “Best bet’s to play dumb.”

Obito shot me a look. “And if they don’t fall for it?”

“Then I’m just going to have to rig up a little surprise for them.” I said, and popped the catch on one of my sleeve scroll holsters as we rocketed through the forest.

The scroll in my left sleeve was small and slim, but contained a good dozen of my tear-away seals. This particular scroll was full of mines—since I couldn’t create many spontaneous seals, pre-prepared jobs like this one were very important to the aspiring demolition expert. They may have had an upper limit on force, which was why Sensei had given Kakashi solid explosives, but they could kill you just as dead.
And…wait.

“Kakashi has all of our viable demolition charges.” I said, eyes narrowing.

Obito gave a harsh, sarcastic bark of a laugh. “Well, we weren’t gonna go complete the mission without him anyway.”

Not like we could have if we wanted to.

The main reason I was running through so many rational justifications for our actions went thus: I was fucking terrified, and distractions were a great idea.

I spun the scroll in my hands, detaching five tags, and tossed the rest to Obito. “Remember how to hide these?”

“Of course.” He tossed me a smirk, but I wasn’t really feeling the banter at that moment.

I hadn’t asked him to do it often, but there were times when it wasn’t practical to do all of the trap-setting myself. To be fair, this was going to be about the trickiest attempt we’d ever made, but I’d try to booby-trap Orochimaru himself if it got us out of this alive.

If I thought about it too much, I’d start shaking again. I pushed the worry away as best I could.

Instead, of course, my mind got caught up other possible complications.

**Even odds on torture by this point.**

Yeah, I didn’t need to think that.

_They may only be some fifteen minutes ahead of us at most, but we have to consider the possibility that he’s already dead. Kakashi is no medic, and Kakkō recognized his fighting style in the old timeline. He’s also already injured._

I did not need to think about the possibility that our self-imposed mission would be rendered null.

My brain was not feeling obedient, and neither was the Dreamer.

**We have to consider it!**

_Nope. Not happening._

“Obito?” I began.

“Yeah?”

“…If something bad happens, get Kakashi out.”

“…No. No, you don’t get to play hero and die.” Obito’s voice was low and cold, but there was an undercurrent of anger. “We’re all getting out and we’re completing the mission and we’re _going home._”

I bit my lip.

There was a very real possibility that we were running to our deaths.

“Hey, wanna play tag?” Obito asked, and his voice had the edge of desperation in it that I didn’t
have to listen for to hear. “It’ll take your mind off things.”

“…Not really.” I muttered.

The rest of the treetop chase was spent in relative silence, oddly. Obito got quiet when I didn’t respond to his slightly manic observations, and I felt a steadily increasing dread that creeped up my spine the more I recognized the area. We were long out of the bamboo thicket and into a true forest, with trees so thick that barely any light even hit the understory. I was in the lead solely because my chakra sense was an accurate first-alert setup, and I had their signatures memorized.

With a broken sword and a crapton of set-and-hopefully-remember explosives, I was mostly nullified in terms of long range offensive capability. We had to consider the possibility that the enemy would be able to hear us approach, and plan accordingly.

Thing is, no plan ever survives contact with the enemy.

Ours, not being an actual plan as such, had less than a snowball’s chance in hell.

I landed on all fours on a tree branch just outside of what looked, honestly, like a jutsu-made cave. It was far enough from the tree line that I was leery of getting any closer, and signaled to Obito to meet up slightly further away. We didn’t want to be heard before we were prepared. Obito hit the new branch a second later, equally silent, and I signaled him to start planting tags with my free hand. He nodded and disappeared into the canopy with hardly a whisper of rustling branches, while I pulled a second scroll from my other sleeve.

This one was a supply scroll, and I bit my thumb in preparation for a very rapid and possibly very stupid mass unsealing.

With my hand poised above the first seal, I waited for Obito to finish.

When he was, he dropped back onto the branch with me and gave me a silent thumbs-up.

Bomph.

On cue, I felt both of the enemy chakra signatures within the cave jerk to attention. Kakashi’s chakra remained dull and didn’t so much as twitch, even as the enemy started to move. I was pretty sure he was still conscious, but I’d need to get closer to tell if that lack of response was due to genjutsu or… something else.

Only one shinobi came out to say hi.

And given that I couldn’t see his ugly mug, I’d have to go with Taiseki.

My line went like this: “…I probably shouldn’t have just done that.”

Because there was something hilariously predictable about enemy shinobi with stealth capabilities, I heard Taiseki say from behind me, “No. You shouldn’t.”

I was gone—Replacement jutsu, motherfucker—by the time he got around to actually sticking a kunai in my back. At the same time, Obito whirled away from Taiseki’s follow-up with a second kunai, missing impalement by centimeters. His eyes were locked on Taiseki, tracking faster than should have been possible, and the jōnin had made the mistake of uncloaking for what looked like a perfect kill.

I shot downward from the branch I’d swapped out with, hitting the “mass release” seal of my opened
A hail of metal rained down, but it turned out that we weren’t the only ones to understand the principle of basic Academy jutsu. I landed among all of the kunai and shuriken embedded in the bark, eyes closed to track Taiseki’s movements more accurately.

Obito landed next to me, facing the other way.

“He’s regrouping.” I murmured. “Thirty meters, twenty, ten…”

An explosive tag—one of my larger mines, specifically—promptly exploded when the enemy stepped on it.

Taiseki started swearing, just loud enough to hear.

Kakkō, though, didn’t make an appearance.

Stalemate—I was pretty sure that between my chakra sense and Obito’s ability to read my movements, we were okay facing Taiseki, who would have pulled out more tricks if he thought they’d work. Kakkō didn’t seem willing to leave Kakashi unsupervised, even to reinforce his teammate. I couldn’t tell if it was because neither of them especially gave a damn about the other or if whatever information they were looking for was just that important.

I mean, I knew that the info we were carrying was important. I just didn’t know if they knew that we were carrying anything significant in the first place.

Taiseki made a couple more passes, always countered by either my explosives or Obito’s taijutsu, or both. He was testing us.

Then a lot of things happened at once.

From what I pieced together later, it went a little like this:

Taiseki created a pair of Earth Clones, though he kept them hidden underground for his plan. Obito and I were running out of pre-planted tags, and Obito was wrapping another one of my higher-output tags around the handle of one of his kunai. I had my right hand on the handle of my tragically-shortened kodachi—ten centimeters of blade was still more than any of my kunai had, so I figured I could use that—and prepared for the next round.

At the same time that Obito finished preparing what was basically a hand grenade, Taiseki made his move. I drew my shortened kodachi, preparing to meet his charge even with my broken blade.

Obito threw the kunai, and a second one hit the forehead of the Earth Clone in the shadow of the first, exploding in its face and mouth. Taiseki met my kodachi, blazing with chakra in a way that doubled its length and cutting power, and exploded into a dust cloud.

I coughed, trying to pinpoint him again when my eyes were streaming and he’d pulled two replacements in seconds.

Obito’s side. Closing…

I maneuvered Obito out of the way, planning to block again even if it knocked me right off the branch.

All of that flew out of my head when I felt Kakashi’s chakra scream.
That split-second of hesitation—immediately looking toward where I’d felt the jolt—cost me precious reaction time.

Then pain.

The next thing I knew I was on my back, choking down on a scream of my own, both hands empty and pressed to my face as warm blood gushed out. The world became nothing but sensation—of my kodachi scabbard digging into my back, of the ache of my chakra going briefly berserk as my concentration shattered, of the white-hot brand that had been dragged across my face and left me reeling.

Between the blood pounding in my ears and the blinding pain, I could hardly hear Obito’s shocked, “Kei, no!”

No, no, no, I am not dying on my back. If I have to die I won’t be a dead weight!

I was already on my knees by the time I felt the Dreamer react in full, with Obito’s arms helping me stay vertical. I could feel him saying something, but I wasn’t listening that well.

Yin Release: Pain Binding Jutsu!

The Dreamer’s Yin chakra shot through my coils, forcibly restoring order. It wasn’t healing me—instead, I could feel the pain fade to manageable levels and my chakra come back under my control. She was selectively cutting signals to my brain from my face and arms, with the clear intent to remove the blocks once I’d gotten my act together.

I made a hissing noise between my teeth, carefully removing my hands from my face and seeing red when I looked.

With both eyes. I could hardly stand to open my right, given the blood running down my face, but I could and my left was untouched.

For a flash, I felt like laughing. Lucky I hadn’t lost an eye like Kakashi had, right? Given the angle of the strike, I could've lost both if I'd been any slower.

And then my face reminded me why that was a bad idea, muscles screaming and still weeping blood. Testing my chakra again, I brought up a Diagnostic Jutsu with one hand.

The ragged kunai slash extended from the forward edge of my left cheek, sweeping over my cheekbone and a little above the bridge of my nose and tearing a chunk out of my right eyebrow, before finally ending on the right half of my forehead, nearly to my hairline. I’d been retreating when I’d felt the first flash of pain, and as a result most of the damage was relatively superficial. I didn’t think the kunai had scraped bone, but it was a close thing and head wounds bled like hell regardless. My hitai-ate looked to have taken a hit, too—given that I found it on the branch with the metal plate and cloth split.

Mystical Palm Jutsu. I thought, and started to seal the wound mechanically. My chakra sense, though, was still scrambled. “Don’t—” Talking pulled at the wound and I winced. “Not dead, Obito. Neither is he.”

“You don’t think I don’t know that?” he hissed back, eyes wide with dismay and self-blame.

“Not your fault.” I said, trying to scan the trees while healing and also trying to get my chakra sense back in order. “The enemy…”
“I know.” Obito said, voice tight with strain. With one last squeeze of my shoulder, he stood up.

“Obi—” I wanted to warn him—Taiseki was *that way* even to my thoroughly scrambled chakra sense, but there wasn’t time.

Obito whirled.

Taiseki’s chakra sputtered. “H-how…could you see…me?”

I stared. Taiseki was easily half again Obito’s height and probably outweighed both of us, and Obito had stopped him dead.

Taiseki’s face showed only uncomprehending shock. “What…what is…that e-eye?”

Obito jerked his kunai free, letting the enemy jōnin fall. “This time, I’ll be the one protecting you, Kei.”

For a moment, neither of us said anything else.

Then Obito turned back to me, and I saw his eyes.

“Congratulations on activating your Sharingan.” I said, smiling despite the residual pain. My injuries had stopped bleeding, at least. All I needed to do was bandage them—while it was possible that I could have just closed the wound entirely, I wanted to save both my and the Dreamer’s chakra for Kakashi. It wasn’t like a facial injury was going to kill me.

“Yeah, thanks. It’s…wow, seeing how chakra flows is *weird*.” Obito said, and he reached into his back pocket to pull out one of the duplicate med-kits Rin had made. I could only guess that he’d decided not to give it back to me for sealing because of the possibility of disaster.

Well, he was right.

He crouched next to me, holding the kit out to me with one hand while his other gripped my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Only mostly.” I admitted. Ow. The slash wound wasn’t *serious*, but it was certainly distracting.

“Then let me help. Then we’ll save Kakashi.” Obito said, and pulled a roll of bandages from the kit when I broke the seal.

Luckily, Rin had included butterfly stitches in the kit, or else it would have just been a mess. As it was, I had a series of the strips gently holding my probable new scar shut, and a sterilized bandage over the lot of them to wind around my head and secure everything. I also cleaned the excess blood as well as I could with Obito's help, though by that point I probably looked like a horror movie victim. Too bad my hitai-ate was a loss, else I would have tied everything down that way and just said to hell with the rest of it.

At least I didn’t have any blind spots (unless I tried to look directly across the bridge of my nose at my other eye, which was a dumb thing to do anyway. One weakness eliminated or avoided, I supposed. It had been very, very close.

Then we gathered supplies—or rather, got more weaponry out of my pack—and set off for the cave.

It was a deathtrap and we knew it, but like hell we were leaving Kakashi there.
The cave hadn’t changed any in the previous five minutes. I had honestly expected *something* out of Kakkō, but apparently he was too busy picking on Kakashi to bother. It seemed weirder than it needed to be—Kakkō was now the sole survivor of a three-man squad, though I recalled that he wasn’t going to be nearly as affected by Taiseki’s death as...well, just about any other person confronted with the death of a teammate. Iwa might have been kind of shit at the whole teamwork and camaraderie thing.

Obito and I dropped to the ground and bolted into the entrance, hardly leaving even a whisper of our presence for anyone to follow. There *were* other Rock-nin around, though damned if I knew where when my chakra sense was being disobedient. We were well into enemy territory by this point.

But to be honest? I didn’t care. I was almost too angry to care.

The inside of the artificial cave was very dark, and we were back-lit by the entrance. Nothing else was even in the cave, though I wondered if it was supposed to be some kind of shelter. Maybe that’d explain where all the Iwa-nin came from, and why they’d come back eventually.

I could see Kakkō with his back to us. As I watched with fury building slowly in the back of my mind, he turned gave us a dismissive sort of glance over his shoulder.

“Tch. Everyone else is useless.” Theory confirmed—Kakkō didn’t care that both of his teammates were crow food.

A little voice in my head kept up a constant chant: *Kill him kill him kill him—*

Behind him, I could barely make out Kakashi’s outline against the back wall. He wasn’t moving.

Obito’s eyes narrowed, spinning slowly. “Kei, there’s something wrong with his chakra.”

“Genjutsu.” I replied. God, I hoped it was just genjutsu. Kakashi had the most freakish mental endurance ever seen in a human being—if the Tsukuyomi couldn’t break him, I doubted an Iwa-nin’s best shot would work either.

“Seems you’re not just kids…” Kakkō began, a smirk crawling across his face.

“Careful, he’s fast.” I said, widening my stance and drawing my broken kodachi again. I slipped the scabbard into my other hand. Halfway-solid chakra shaping or not, it was better than a kunai for this kind of thing.

“I remember.” Obito said in a growl, a kunai appearing in his hand.

Kakkō charged, blade sliding out of his sleeves. Obito and I followed suit.

Kakkō spun, blades cutting through the air almost too fast to see. I deflected, allowing the kodachi scabbard to take the hit and be shredded instead of my blade, while Obito leapt over the strike and rolled to a stop behind the jonin.

Obito reversed his momentum, lunging at Kakkō’s back while I bounced high and away, out of range.

Kakkō’s first blade went up, scraping against Obito’s blocking kunai with a metallic screech and a shower of sparks, pushing him back. The Iwa-nin’s second blade lashed out, sweeping over my head and allowing me to get inside his guard with a kodachi slash.

He slashed at me again and again, while I deflected left-right-left with my sword squealing under the...
strain.

Obito dashed in again, trying to impale Kakkō through the thinner side panel of his flak jacket, only for the jōnin to flip over him with minimal effort. I leapt, trying to catch him off guard, but the jōnin knocked me aside again and I landed in a crouch with full intent of wheeling, charging, and staking him to the ground with blade or with scabbard.

Kakkō turned all of his attention on Obito, both blades ready to open his throat like a reversed pair of scissors. Obito threw himself backward, under the swing, and I closed the gap.

I could already tell that Kakkō wasn’t a prisoner of his momentum—he could reverse his swing and *did*—but I was too angry to care.

I wasn’t going to content myself with a shallow swipe across his chest like Kakashi would have—I was going to *kill him*.

Obito saved me from the “suicide” part of my attack, slamming his heels down on Kakkō’s wrists even from his disadvantageous angle.

Kakashi would have gone for a swing. I went for a *stab*.

Both of my “blades”—one ten-centimeter job with a ragged broken edge and one scabbard that *ought* to have been *blunt*—sank into Kakkō’s flesh as though his vest wasn’t there. I’d been in the middle of a roll across his back when I launched my killing strike, meaning that they were embedding themselves deep into his rib cage through his back and punching a hole through each lung.

I left my weapons where they were once Kakkō hit the ground under me. When I was *sure* his chakra had sputtered out, I followed Obito to Kakashi’s side. I didn’t bother retrieving my weapons, not after feeling both of them start to crack in my hands. He was the only Iwa-nin I could sense, and he was busy being dead.

“He’s…” Obito began, tipping Kakashi’s head upward.

The genjutsu was gone, dismissed by Kakkō’s death or otherwise. His headband was gone. As Obito made a distressed noise in the back of his throat, words failing him, I wondered if the Iwa-nin had cut off Kakashi’s fingers or removed his nails.

It would have matched his left eye.

Or the bloodied socket that remained.

“Kakashi…?” I heard myself say distantly. *Oh god, oh god no…*

Without even really realizing it, I took Kakashi from Obito, supporting his weight on my arms and shoulder. I felt along his still-covered neck for a pulse, ignoring the feel of blood seeping out of the fabric and onto my hands—they were bloodied enough that I hardly would have noticed anyway.

Obito got to business faster than I did—I was semi-aware of him cutting the ropes keeping Kakashi’s arms tied behind his back, of him helping me lay our teammate flat on the ground.

“Kei! You have to help him!” Obito’s voice… I looked at him, and saw tears streaming down his face even though his eyes were still the blood-red Sharingan. His voice was cracking, like it hadn’t in months, and he looked younger than he had since this clusterfuck of a mission had started. *Help him, help us, make things better!*
Why was it always me? Why was I apparently the axis on which the entire fucking world turned? I couldn’t fix things because my existence threw things into chaos that I could barely compensate for! I could heal injuries and punch the right people, but it wouldn’t matter because there was always something bigger and badder that could eat me for breakfast.

Why was I even on the fucking team? Rin hadn’t had to do anything other than stand there and her team would make it through with fewer injuries! So what if she fucking died down the line? In the immediate sense she didn’t do anything and made it out all right and argh why was I being such a bitch.

Now, not then. The Dreamer was barely audible. Do the job in front of you.

I found the lever for my emotions—needs versus wants—and crammed everything into a new mental box. Later. Always later.

Hopefully I’d be alive to see it.

“Mystical Palm Jutsu.” I murmured.

I didn’t need to use it for long. I just needed Kakashi stable enough to move, because there was no way we were going to stay here. Whether this place was Iwa’s forward base of operations or not—and I was leaning toward “yes” out of the two options—we couldn’t afford to be caught anywhere we’d be outnumbered. All three of us versus two of them had ended with one kidnapping, while two-on-one confrontations resulted in two wins. Neither Kakkō nor Taiseki had demonstrated the variety of techniques that Mahiru had yesterday, but I couldn’t assume that would be the case for everyone.

At the same time, I was performing a diagnostic scan the best I could.

Aside from his eye, Kakashi was also missing all the fingernails on his right hand. Someone had reopened the slash on the underside of his arm, too, and it was bleeding sluggishly despite all the healing chakra I’d put into it over the last day. I could feel the bruise I’d given him yesterday, and there was a possibility of brain swelling thanks to Taiseki cracking him over the head. I didn’t know if he’d woken up at any point between then and now, which made little alarm bells go off inside my head.


All of the medical jargon was a way to keep my mind off the specifics. Ergo, who was so badly injured. I didn’t know how to deal with that.

“Is he going to be okay?” Obito asked, and I noticed his Sharingan spinning in what I assumed was a nervous tic.

I’d stopped the bleeding by then, and snapped my fingers experimentally in front of Kakashi’s nose. No reaction. “I think so. At least we can probably move him now.”

Obito gave a laugh that was a shadow of the real thing. “Never thought I’d be glad Sensei made us do all those carry exercises.”

All you need to know about “carry exercises” is as follows: Any two of us can carry Sensei or Kushina, and any one of us can carry any of the others for at least a hundred meters at a significant fraction of our top speeds.
It was easier to think about that than about what we were using that training for.

“Well, when I get him patched up we can think about that.” I replied, and I pulled a third scroll from my kunai holster. One unsealed med-kit later and I could get to work.

I brushed Kakashi’s hair out of the way with my free hand, preparing to clean the wound site where his left eye had once been. Mystical Palm Jutsu had stopped the bleeding, but the injury was still raw and vulnerable to infection.

That was when Kakashi’s uninjured hand shot upward and caught my wrist in a grip strong enough to grind the bones together.

I had so many conflicting feelings crashing around in my head just then—fear, relief, pain, joy—that whatever I meant to say got stuck in my throat. The predominant words that came to mind were “ow” and “augh!” and neither got out.

“Kakashi, it’s just us.” Obito said, as quiet and unthreatening as possible. He didn’t move to stop Kakashi from breaking my arm, instead curling his hands into fists against the tops of his thighs.

Kakashi looked up at Obito with one scarily focused eye, then up at me. Then at where he was grinding all of the bones in my wrist together. I slowly reached up with my left hand to make a gesture of surrender. Sure, my wrist hurt like hell, but there were another couple of warring impulses to consider—the winner specifically wanted to avoid fighting or otherwise hurting Kakashi any more than Kakkō had.

“I…” Kakashi’s voice cracked and he blinked again, rapidly. Then, as his near-neutral expression morphed into dawning horror, he let go of my arm and his hand shot toward his empty eye socket.

Obito stopped him. “Don’t! You shouldn’t…”

“…I can’t see out of my left eye.” Kakashi’s voice shook just the slightest bit. “What happened to my eye?”

“It’s gone, Kakashi.” I said, finding my own voice at last. “I’m sorry. But I need you to hold still until I can finish healing what I can so we can get out of here. We don’t have any time.”

Kakashi closed his remaining eye for a second. He was apparently rallying, despite the loss. “…Okay.” I could see him shoving the thought—I’m half blind now, what use am I?—aside for later. Always later.

“Can you even move?” Obito asked, even as he helped Kakashi sit upright.

From the way he slumped even while leaning against Obito, I assumed that Kakashi was feeling at least a bit wobbly.

“Nnno. Not well.” Kakashi mumbled.

**We need to give his chakra levels a serious boost to compensate.** The Dreamer even helpfully provided a mental item catalogue of one of my other scrolls. I had food pills somewhere in one of them, but using that sort of metabolism stimulator on someone who had recently been bleeding all over the place didn’t strike me as a good plan. A blood replenishing pill would be a better choice—less chakra, but more, you know, blood.

“Obito, search this scroll.” I said, handing him a fourth scroll I’d stowed away in my clothes. This one came from the brace on my lower back. “The blood pills should be close to the edge. I’m pretty
“Sure I packed a bottle, at least.”

“Probably.” Obito said, and he broke the wax seal on the edge of the scroll to take a look despite the fact that mine was also unsealed. I needed it open anyway—my med-kit’s bandages had all been used up—and caught the bottle he tossed at me a moment later.

The benefit of having a lot of small scrolls was, well, in always having relevant items on hand. The disadvantage was that most people only had two hands with which to use them.

(I packed a total of eight, four of which were on holsters on my hips and forearms, and there were redundancies of everything.)

At the very least, patching Kakashi back up was straightforward. Winding the bandages around his head was easier than it had been with my own, even using Mystical Palm Jutsu to close things further as I went. I was just finishing up on the bandages around his fingers when Obito made a quiet noise of triumph.

I tore open a packet of glucose and salt as Obito found the pills for me, spilling its contents into the mouth of my canteen. It was still mostly full, and together with the pills it could make a sort of emergency consumable IV. While everyone on our team sans Sensei had the same blood type, I wasn’t willing to risk any transfusions in the field. Guess Kakashi would just have to deal with the nasty taste, though.

Kakashi remained very, very silent the entire time. He drank the contents of the canteen in a flash—I mean, I was sure Obito saw his face but I just so happened to be looking away to re-seal my supplies. When I looked back, Kakashi was holding the canteen in front of my face and the blood on his face had smeared a bit to show that he’d removed his mask and put it back on in a fraction of a second. He was also sitting up on his own, which was something a fair bit more minor.

He must have been feeling better to pull that off.

“What’s the mission’s status?” Kakashi asked, only a little rougher-sounding than usual.

“A mess.” Obito said bluntly.

“Yes, I gathered that.”

“I’m down two supply scrolls and missing a bit of my face, you’re missing more of your face, and I have no idea where our explosives went.” I summed up quickly. Situation normal: all fucked up. One of these days we were going to have a mission that doesn’t devolve and we’d die of heart attacks from shock.

Kakashi’s remaining eye narrowed suddenly. “I thought—”

And that’s when all of us heard the hissing.

Saw the black ink spiraling outward from Kakkō’s corpse, trailing blood, into a pattern I remembered and suddenly wished I didn’t.

Solid explosives were related to, and yet distinct from, explosive seal tags that I’d been working with for years. They were dense with chakra and chemical components that were most often found in dynamite, and often too dangerous to handle until coated in sawdust and plastic. A stray flame wouldn’t set them off, but a concentrated chakra charge or a Fire jutsu would cause a chain reaction within the structure of the device. It would happen slowly at first, subtly, until it had thoroughly infiltrated the surface it was attached to and lit the area up like a glowing spider web.
Then the ink would appear, a last-second warning that could only be disarmed by the chakra and blood of the person who had first set it.

They were bombs for shinobi without access to Explosion Release jutsu and exploding clay. Time bombs.

I should have known that Kakkō would be familiar with them. I just couldn’t tell you if his plan would have been to rig Kakashi to explode once the interrogation was over—maybe he would have just killed him. It didn’t matter either way, anymore.

All that mattered was that we were all going to die.

All of us got to our feet instantly. Obito may not have known what the problem was but he was good at reading people and even better with his Sharingan at last.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck—!" was my initial response, faster than I’d ever spoken before, even as I lurched to my feet. I started making seals with my bloodied hands, back against the wall. “Obito, it's a bomb. It's our bomb. Kakashi, please, I need you both up—I can't make a wall and I need time—"

Kakashi and Obito began making seals almost faster than I could force my chakra to listen to me. I knew that Obito had never learned Earth Release at all, but apparently having Kakashi around and having the Sharingan made the entire question moot.

They slammed their hands down together, and the ground rumbled. "Earth Release: Earth Wall!"

As the wall was rising, I could feel the chakra of the bomb start to condense still further in the nearby rock. With blood already on my hands, all I needed to do was take my completed seals, one of my scroll, and a bit of cover. I slammed all of them down on Kakashi and Obito’s wall. "Sealing Art: Reinforce!"

Ink lines wrapped around the makeshift barrier, glowing slightly purple, and I felt the earth harden into solid rock in the center. Hopefully that would be enough—

The explosives fanatic in me was extremely appreciative of the bomb itself when it went off. The rest of me was in mindless panic mode because we weren’t supposed to be that close aaaaaaaaaugh…

I remember an explosion, and hitting something.

That’s it.

It was dark.

I blinked a couple of times, thoughts moving slowly and bouncing around the inside of my head—or at least the headache made it feel like it. Light-dark, light-dark. Oh. Yeah, my eyes were still working. And most of my back felt like it was on fire, which was a nice bonus to the “fuck you” vibes the universe seemed to be sending me lately. Something wet was seeping down my neck from my hair, and the inkling that it was yet another head injury didn’t go away the longer I tried to think my way through the fog.

When I tried to move, I was briefly confused—what the hell was on my back?—before I cracked my eyes open again and tried to lever myself up onto my hands and knees anyway. I saw white, and after a second realized that Kakashi was lying limp on top of me. The explosion seemed to have thrown both of us into a heap of sprawling limbs.
I just hoped that nothing was broken. I could feel Yin chakra pumping around my coils, speeding what healing it could, but Kakashi was in for his second concussion of the day if he was out again. At least he was alive, though—

I wiggled out from under him, trying to figure out what the hell had happened since the bomb went off, and heard a faint rustle of fabric that was slightly too far away to be me or my unconscious teammate.

I didn’t need to consult my fractured chakra sense to have an idea of what I’d find if I looked. Heaving myself onto all fours, I looked around. And saw almost exactly what I expected. "No...no, no, no, no, this can't be happening, it's not real it's not happening it's just a dream oh god no..."

The boulder was different, not as big. It looked like part of our own goddamned wall had collapsed, pinning Obito under slightly less in the way of raw tonnage. He was still stuck, still bleeding sluggishly as half his body was trapped under rock. Part of his head, his entire right half of his torso. Legs were free, though.

I could still hear him say, haltingly, "...Kei...please...d-don't give up..."

"Obito?!" I burst out, scrambling over to him.

He looked up at me, visible Sharingan still spinning a little. He almost smiled, and it would have been marginally comforting if he wasn’t coughing blood out of that collapsed lung. “H-Hey...you're alive, right?"

I drew a shuddering breath. "...Yeah. Me and Kakashi both. We're alive. T-Thanks to you."

"That's good...Kei, I can't...I can't feel much of anything, now..." No, no, you're not allowed to say that, stop it!

"I..." I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted to curse the gods and the demons and everything I could think of, but the words jammed up under my collarbone and I could feel my chest constricting under the pressure. I wanted to throw up, even, but I'd just choke and make a mess and be fucking useless.

I grabbed Obito’s hand, putting the other over my mouth because all that was escaping was a high-pitched whine of I can’t do anything.

Distantly, I heard Kakashi stir.

"Wha...” He groaned, rolling over, and I heard him make a choked-off noise. He lurched up onto his feet and ran over, dropping to his knees next to us. I could see him put one hand on the rock, the other on the ground next to my leg. He could see Obito clearly. “Obito?! This... No, no, this can't be happening..."

Obito made a noise that was half laugh and half choking on blood. "Hey...you jerk. Finally awake, h-huh?"

Kakashi’s expression was one I’d never wanted to see, and I froze up. He pushed against the rock pinning Obito with all of his strength, to no avail.

It didn’t even twitch. After a moment of pointless struggling, Kakashi slipped to his knees as the enormity of the moment finally hit him. His fist met the rock again, this time in a futile gesture of defiant, helpless anger. “DAMMIT!” He was crying. “Why can’t I—if I’d never been captured, you wouldn’t be—you shouldn’t have come back.”
Obito’s hand tightened around mine, just a bit. "Hey...I finally thought of something..."

Kakashi’s voice was nearly a howl. "What could you possibly be thinking of at a time like this?"

I closed my eyes, hardly aware of the tears tracking down my face. My voice didn’t seem to be worth much, even in my head. *We’re twenty meters underground in hostile territory. Shout some more, will you?* Real helpful, that.

Obito gave one of those laughs again. It was *awful.* I looked up when he sprayed blood across our joined hands. "Your present...for becoming a jōnin. Remember?"

"No..." From the look on Kakashi’s face, he’d forgotten entirely.

I didn’t blame him. Trust Obito to remember something like that. I only did because of what it *meant.*

Obito went on doggedly, as though Kakashi hadn’t said anything. I wasn’t even sure how much he could hear, anymore. "I promise it's...not a burden. I-It's useless to me, now...Kakashi. Take my Sharingan..."

Kakashi stared. "But..."

Obito’s Sharingan focused on me. I stared back, feeling my stomach settle somewhere around the center of the earth. *It’s happening.* "Kei...do this for me...okay? Kakashi...needs a sharp left eye...someone looking out for him..."

I nodded, even as I felt my throat constrict completely.

Obito smiled, even as blood stained his teeth red and tracked its way down his jaw. "I-I know it'll hurt...I'll be fine."

"F-Fine. Fine?! You're..." I forced it out, barely, and my free hand formed a fist in front of my mouth. *No no no no no—*

His smile was so *sad.* "I-I know."

I swallowed hard, feeling a hiccups build in my chest. "Obito...what...what do you want me to tell Rin-chan?"

"...T-Tell her... No." Obito grimaced, and I saw him make an abortive motion that might have been a flinch if he could move. “Don't...don't tell her anything that w-will hurt her..."

_Fuck you fuck you fuck you._ I clamped down on that though, trying to force that helpless anger back. I said, very quietly, "...You love her. I'll tell her that."

Obito looked at me like he’d never seen me before."Kei...don't."

"Fuck you, fuck you for dying on us,” was my half-shrieked reply, and I was crying everywhere, “fuck you for going away without even telling Rin-chan you love her more than anything! You don't get to die without settling things with her!"

For a long moment, neither of us said anything. Obito squeezed my hand gently, and I tried scrubbing at my eyes with my other sleeve. It didn’t really work.

Obito choked out, "...T-take my goggles to her. Tell her..."

"...Yeah.” I drew a shuddering breath, “Yeah, I will.” His goggles had been dropped in the debris—I
could see the orange from where I was sitting, out of the corner of my eye.

"Now...my eye. Please, Kei..." Obito’s voice was pleading.

Kakashi made a choking noise of his own. "Obito..."

Obito wheezed. "Kakashi...listen to me. P-Protect Rin-chan and Kei...with your life." No, no, don’t leave us. “Please, p-promise me you’ll protect them...with my eye. Please, Kakashi..."

Kakashi’s hand closed over both of ours, and I bit my lip hard. Kakashi was saying, "I'll protect everyone, Obito. I promise. I'll protect them with my life...” Another strangled noise. “…like you should have been able to. Like you did and still are..."

Obito coughed blood again. "Heh...I'll...I won't forgive you...if you don't..."

It took me a long moment of internal struggle to get myself to let go of Obito’s hand. I stood, trying to settle my nerves. It wasn’t working and I knew deep inside that it wouldn’t, that nothing ever would. I couldn’t admit that. Couldn’t let them down.

I felt the Dreamer queue up as much Yin chakra as she could spare. For once, it was without comment. I turned back to the boys, to where Kakashi was still clutching Obito’s hand. "...Lie down next to Obito, Kakashi. I'll...I'll make this as painless as I can."

Extracting an eye wasn’t hard. Kakashi and Obito didn’t let go of each other’s hands, and I could see the pain make Obito’s whole body seize up for a moment. It should have freaked me out more that that was the case, and I was sure it’d hit me later. My hands glowing with medical chakra to keep the Sharingan alive, I gently pulled the eye free.

Obito gritted his teeth.

I’d already undone the bandages around Kakashi’s head. The gaping bloodied socket was staring up at me, making my stomach briefly turn over. The optic nerve dangling from Obito’s Sharingan was swinging, ends seeking connectors. I had to connect Kakashi’s severed nerve with the Sharingan’s, and brought my other hand down on Kakashi’s forehead to open the connection. The myriad muscles around the eye would follow suit afterward.

Nerve first. Eye in a bit.

I was going to throw up once it was actually convenient to do it.

Snip. Snip.

With Obito’s eye safely in its new home—*augh*—I brought both hands together over Kakashi’s face. My hands were glowing green and I could feel the muscle in his face knit itself back together, despite brief hesitation around the Sharingan’s alien nature. *Oh god, oh god.*

Eye surgery should not be that easy. It was almost like the Sharingan *wanted* to…

*Nope, not having that thought.*

As I finished, I felt my chakra sense reorganize itself into something sensible. I’d been ignoring the feedback it’d been getting, being the mental equivalent of a speaker shrieking in my ear, but even as I let Kakashi sit up and reclaimed my place at Obito’s side, I could feel the whispers of incoming enemy chakra signatures.
A lot of them.

“How many?” was Kakashi’s response to my sudden twitchiness. He was already standing, if leaning against the boulder. God, if he looked like such a wreck, I didn’t want to see a mirror for a while. All of us were so fucked it wasn’t even funny.

“More than we can take.” I said quietly, feeling the dread chill of death settle in my bones.

We were all dead. Our “defensive position” was a half-collapsed artificial cave that had once been Iwa’s forward operations base, with Obito down and both Kakashi and I on our last legs. The Dreamer had gone quiet, now that she was depending on a bare minimum of our stored Yin chakra to maintain coherence.

Kakashi gave both of us a long look—pain, regret, fear—and then he turned away.

Oh god. He was going out there.

And I couldn’t leave Obito alone.

I didn’t stop him and immediately wondered why the fuck I wouldn’t. And then I felt Obito’s hand tighten on mine and I remembered and felt horrible about it.

"Kei...go.” My head whirled back toward Obito so fast I nearly got whiplash. I couldn’t look into his eyes—eye—anymore but reading his chakra told me a story on its own. He was so afraid, but his voice didn’t betray any of it. “Please...don't let him die. He needs to...to keep his promise."

"N-No, I can't..."

Obito laughed and it was an awful sound. I could hear the fluid in his lungs. "...I'm not going anywhere, Kei..."

"...I'm so sorry.” I said, leaning in close. “I'm sorry I couldn't... I should have done something! You shouldn't be stuck here..."

Obito’s laugh was hardly audible at all. He was still smiling. "Heh... That's just I-like you, Kei...” Please don’t leave me alone. “G-Go. Move forward..."

"I...okay.” Hot tears tracked down my face. “Okay. You win.”

Obito didn’t let go. Not just yet. I wasn’t sure I could have taken it if he had. It would have been too much like goodbye. "But...wait. Take my headband...yours was torn..."

His hitai-ate had come mostly undone after the rock-fall. If he wanted me to, I could carefully work the metal and the fabric out from under the stone without hurting him any more than...well. I bit down on my lip again before finding something to say. "...Your gift to me, huh? K-Keep giving things away and there w-won't be anything left..."

"I know..." I'm sorry.

"Oh, Obito. I'll...” Why couldn’t I stop this from happening? “I'll treasure it.” I had to say something or else I’d just start blubbering and be in no shape at all to help anyone. Only after I’d extracted the hitai-ate, I leaned in and kissed him on the forehead, above his eyeless socket. My hand was still clutching his. "Sleep well, Obito... I...we'll see each other again soon.”

“You...know it.” Obito murmured, and let go.
If only he know how true that could turn out to be.

I left, after grabbing his goggles where they sat and slinging them around my neck.

It took almost all of the self-control I had left, but I left Obito there and leapt for the outside world. His headband’s metal plate cut grooves into my hand, I was clinging to it so hard, and landing next to Kakashi gave me a perfect view of what would have, at one point, been Kakkō, Mahiru, and Taiseki’s reinforcements. Twenty Iwa-nin of various shapes and sizes, looking down at us from the first rung of the canopy with various levels of interest and/or sadism.

We were on the ground, looking up. Kakashi was still as stone, newly-implanted Sharingan whirling as he tried to pick out the best idiot to start on. I could feel all of their chakra, and the prognosis wasn’t good.

Then the cave collapsed behind me, and I tried very hard not to think about it. If I thought about it, I’d break. Instead, I tied Obito’s headband in place, where mine once would have been.

If I look back, I am lost…

Everyone seemed to be waiting.

"...We’re outnumbered." Kakashi commented. His tone belied the way his chakra was in utter turmoil. He wanted to kill everyone and knew he couldn’t. It was just barely keeping him from trying anyway.

My voice was astoundingly steady, and I could feel the same sensation burning in my chest. "Yeah. We’re pretty much fucked."

He looked to me, with Obito’s eye. "...Kei. Is Obito...?"

"...Soon, if not already." I said, staring right back.

"I’ll protect you.” Kakashi said, looking away. He was watching one of the Iwa-nin to his right, who had gone for a weapon. “Stay back.”

"Not a chance."

Kakashi looked at me again. "That was an order." He was already working on the Chidori’s seals.

I slipped into a ready stance behind him, trying to focus for the Rasengan. Ahead of us, the enemy shinobi began to fan out. "I don’t care. Rank means nothing when you’re dead."

"...On my mark." He gave in without a fight.

I closed my eyes briefly. "Right."

We were dead.

I went first, counting on Obito’s eye to give Kakashi an edge in following my movements. I was outwardly unarmed, sans a kunai in one hand and a budding swirl of chakra in the other.

The first enemy lunged, but I was ready. I’d only have two shots, max, but I was ready. "Rasengan!"

Behind me, Kakashi met someone else with the metallic shriek of the Chidori.

I was about to meet the second guy, since I was about to go out fighting anyway, when my vision
was obscured by yellow.

No...

Sensei had found us. Sensei had found us and he pushed me to the ground and started killing Iwa-nin like he was a fox in a henhouse and all the chickens had less than two seconds to realize that they were on the menu.

NO, YOU DON’T FUCKING GET TO DO THIS, I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU—

Dying would have been easy. I’d done it before.

Living…I didn’t know if I knew how.

And I couldn’t feel Obito’s chakra.

We killed every last one of those motherfuckers. Kakashi got two before he dropped like a rock, and I ran back over to him without even going for the guy who, honestly, should have probably been my next target. Sensei killed him anyway, so what did I care? Sensei could kill every single one of them and I wouldn’t care at all.

My legs turned to jelly right when I reached Kakashi, rolling him over to check his pulse (okay) and chakra levels (argh fuck). He’d be okay. He had to be okay.

I was trembling.

Sensei landed next to me a minute later, flicking blood from his kunai. He crouched over Kakashi, but he was looking at me. "Kei-kun, where's Obito? What happened to all of you?"

I stared at him. Thought about the bandages over my face, about my flagging chakra levels, about Obito and his fucking eye and Kakashi and the Iwa-nin who were so thoroughly dead. I thought about everything. Everything I’d been trying to put off. I croaked, "...You're late, Sensei. You're too late."

Sensei put his hands on my shoulders, trying to get me to make sense. I wasn’t making sense at all, was I? “Kei …please. Tell me what happened.”

“…Obito’s dead.” I said it and it was a lie and yet it wasn’t, because I didn’t know if the Obito we knew would ever survive to come back. “Kakashi was captured and tortured by Iwa-nin. I…I’m in…I’m okay, but all of the explosives are gone.”

I could see the storm looming and couldn’t get out of the way.

Sensei’s voice went very quiet. “…No.” It sounded a little like how I did when I really meant to say “oh god no, no, please” and I wished it didn’t.

"...He wanted..." I was shaking under Sensei’s hands. “…he wanted us to go home safely. We can still complete the mission. I...I'm fit for duty."

No, I wasn’t.

Sensei unintentionally echoed me with, "...No, you're not."

Sensei looked down at Kakashi, who was entirely out cold with a chakra system that looked like a well in Death Valley. Then he eased his arms under Kakashi’s shoulders and knees and lifted,
carrying him against his chest like he was a child. I sat there amongst the bodies and the blood, thinking in circles.

Wasn't he a child? Wasn't I?

"Sensei?" I said blankly.

“Come on, Kei. Just follow me.” Sensei told me. His voice was so soft and…and it felt like he knew I was breaking.

I agreed, and obeyed.

I didn’t remember much of the trip away from that thrice-cursed place, after the fact. I mostly just remember stopping for the night somewhere else, putting one foot in front of the other the whole way. Kakashi didn’t wake up and I mostly just followed Sensei’s back. I had no idea where we were going until we stopped.

Sensei reached a tree and set Kakashi down among the roots. They were big enough that the hollow underneath was shelter and not just a terrible lean-to. I followed and dropped next to him, resting my arms across the tops of my knees. "We're going to stop, rest, and reevaluate. We're going to plan. We will **not** let Obito die in vain."

I said distantly, “Understood, Sensei.”

It was getting dark and cold out and I was still covered in dried or drying blood. I wasn’t in the best shape at all, and I couldn’t bring myself to care.

Sensei’s hand dropped onto my head. I blinked up at him, even as he sat down next to me and kept his other hand on Kakashi’s forehead."...I'm sorry, Kei."

"For what?" I asked. “We fucked up, Obito's dead, and our mission's done for. Our fault.” **My fault.**

Sensei’s eyes were so dark. He almost looked away, but stopped halfway and looked back. "...If I’d let you have that summon scroll earlier, none of this would have happened."

"...No," I heard myself say, hearing my tone pitch upward and unable to stop, “no, that can't be—Sensei, it's my fault, I'm sorry, I should have known we were heading for a trap—"

I didn’t realize that I’d started to pull away, to lash out, until Sensei caught both of my wrists in his hands and I couldn’t do it anymore. "No, Kei! Listen to me!"

I swallowed hard, protest dying on my lips. "I..."

"Kei...that scroll was for a minor crane summon.” Sensei pressed on, even as I was shaking my head. “It wasn't anything you couldn't handle. I was planning on letting you sign it after we got back..." **Oh god what have I done.** “And if I hadn't wanted to wait, you would have been able to find me before this. I'm sorry, Kei-kun. I'm so, so sorry.” The next thing I knew, Sensei was crushing me in a hug that didn’t help at all.

I went limp. "...I don't want to talk about this anymore," I whimpered into his flak jacket. **Leave me alone, please!**

He didn’t.

I cried myself out, screaming inside my head and into Sensei’s vest, pounding my fists against his
chest. I was flat-out sobbing, sides heaving as I howled my grief. It felt like bleeding, only it wasn’t real and instead of getting weaker and dizzier all I could feel was the sensation of being drained. I was distantly surprised I was still in one piece after.

I ran out of tears eventually.

It was a long time later, when the moon was out in full, that Kakashi finally woke up. I was standing out in the middle of the field next to our campsite when I heard him jolt awake, and didn’t look back for a long while. Sensei was closer, anyway.

I rubbed my hands together and wished that something, anything would take the dried blood away. We weren’t near a river, though, and our canteens were empty. I felt it under my nails and coating the ridges in my hands and fingers, crumbling as it dried. I just…didn’t care about much else.

Kakashi made his way over to me, slowly. He stood at my right side. "...We're still alive."

I closed my eyes."Yeah. Sensei...found us."

"...And Obito?" Kakashi asked hesitantly. As though he didn’t already know the answer.

"There was nothing we could do. He was too far gone."

"...I thought so.” Kakashi murmured. He didn’t look at me. “What are we doing now?"

“Tonight? Nothing.” I’d heard that from Sensei, though I couldn’t remember much else that he’d said. “Tomorrow, we’ll complete the mission.”

Kakashi said quietly, “Just like he wanted.”

I nodded, one hand resting on the goggles dangling around my neck. I didn’t see the world go black at the edges. I didn’t see anything at all. I just felt…a warm nothingness, reaching. I didn’t fight it.

My knees hit the ground, and that’s the last thing I remember.
Kannabi Bridge Arc: Aftershocks

Chapter Summary

Kei: Break down.

Chapter Notes

If someone said three years from now
You'd be long gone
I'd stand up and punch them out
Cause they're all wrong
I know better
Cause you said forever
And ever
Who knew

~ P!nk, "Who Knew"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I don’t remember very much from the next couple of weeks. What I do, though, I can at least record so I can try and wrestle with it later. Maybe never. Dunno yet.

It feels like looking through a scrapbook or an old photo album—context comes back when you’re looking directly at it, but they’re still just snapshots when you get down to it. The connective time is missing, and sometimes you don’t have any idea where it goes.

I have my own theory, and it involves a blanket fort, but that’s just me.

Training Ground Three hadn’t been my first choice for it. Hell, there wasn’t a “first choice” at all—if I’d had the choice, I wouldn’t be the one delivering the news of Obito’s death to Rin. But I had promised to carry news back after browbeating Obito into telling me what to say, and it wasn’t fair to ask anyone else. Still, I probably would have gone to Rin’s apartment and not the field next to the Memorial Stone.

It felt…well, it felt like the last bastion of happy memories, despite what the place really represented in the larger picture.

If Rin hadn’t come looking for me and Kakashi, I don’t know what would have happened.

Seeing Obito’s goggles in her hands made it all real. I bit my lip, fighting not to look away from the expression on Rin’s face. It was slowly morphing into the same dawning horror and grief I’d felt when I woke up in that collapsed cave, and Rin’s fingers clamped tight over the durable plastic.

“So it’s true.” Rin murmured, clutching the goggles to her chest. Tears slid down her face, dropping
toward the ground from her chin. “I-I thought, when I didn’t see his name…I hoped…”

Only two members of Team Minato had checked into the hospital that day. And Kakashi sat next to me, new hitai-ate slanted sideways over Obito’s eye and expression totally blank. That the three of us were sitting together was a minor event all its own, because someone very important left a palpable hole in the scene.

My hands twitched badly before they went still on my thighs, white-knuckled. I was looking down, and I had plenty of time to contemplate my epic fuckup that way.

I should have been able to do something.

But no—between my traitorous soft heart and how I was cracked in the head, between the changes I’d made and whatever the hell popped up in response…Obito had been buried.

And I still didn’t know for sure if he was dead or alive. I hadn’t felt his chakra and if he really was dead then everything would be different. If he wasn’t, I’d left my best friend to die. If my chakra sense hadn’t failed me then…

“—I’m sorry.” I choked out, blinking rapidly. I hadn’t realized my throat was so constricted until I tried to talk through it, and then it hurt. “You…you wanted me to look after him, right?”

“I wanted…you to look after each other.” Rin corrected, scrubbing at her eyes with her sleeve. It wasn’t helping. “I wanted you both to come home. I wanted you to be safe.”

“I couldn’t—shouldn’t have promised that.” Did I even promise that? Or was it just implied? “I can’t say anything that could…I’m sorry, Rin-chan. I can’t do anything else.”

“Yeah, it’s too late, isn’t it?” Rin gave a hiccupping laugh that came with still more tears. “I just…thought he’d be late, like usual? If you were here and he wasn’t…”

“Oh, Rin-chan…” I reached out, offering a hug or something, but Rin shook her head.

“And I know—I know you were there too and it’s not fair to cry like this—” Rin was still crying.

“Why the hell would I be mad at you?” My voice rose in pitch and volume, but it wasn’t really yelling. Gods above, I felt horrible too. “You’re allowed to be sad—”

“All of us are.” Kakashi said in a murmur, and I stopped.

“…Right. Right. It’s okay to be upset and mourn.” I said, refocusing. I drew a shuddering breath. “He—I promised to tell you—”

“He loved you.” Kakashi put in, gently, and Rin stared back and forth between the two of us.

Then her face crumpled. “Then why couldn’t he come home?! I’m—I’m not angry at him but—” Rin hiccupped. “I…I would…”

Can you accept these feelings, knowing that he might really be gone forever?

Why were my hands shaking?

Oh, right.

I hugged Rin tightly and held on for as long as she needed me to.
But life always had to come back, in the end. And there were consequences to everything, as I was learning.

The Hokage could generally be trusted to make hearings as painful as possible, being a military leader in a nation under fire for five damned years. To that end, rather than taking place at the Mission Desk or the Hokage’s office like most ordinary debriefings would go, we’d been called to the Council room. The room itself was designed a little like how I’d imagined the Wizengamot chambers to be, with one of jury-box-like structures to each side of the Hokage’s podium. The central chamber floor was sunken into the ground, meaning that those on trial would always be looking up at their accusers.

“This is the special hearing with regards to the joint mission recently completed by Team Minato and Team Kakashi.” The Hokage wasn’t smoking, just then. His expression was pinched and grave, and the shadow of his hat made anything else difficult to determine. I *knew* he was worn down, by age and the nature of the Hokage office, but at that moment he looked and felt like the war leader he’d pretty much always been.

I felt very, very small.

Sensei stood behind Kakashi and me, hands clasped behind his back. Kakashi was to my left, in the same position and with Obito’s eye closed. I tried not to squirm, shifting my weight subtly from foot to foot despite my best efforts to stay still. I was caught between swaying in place due to fatigue and fidgeting—never a good combination. Both of us had only recently (as in three hours beforehand) been discharged from the hospital, but Kakashi hid it better.

The chamber’s box seats were full, with representatives from the Uchiha clan making up fully one-half of the right side. The rest were assembled from various other groups in the village—the Intelligence division, the Hyūga clan, half-a-dozen jōnin, someone who was probably from ANBU, and the two members of the Konoha Council—Koharu Utatane, Homura Mitokado, and Danzō Shimura.

And on the floor with us, either acting as legal representative or on-hand interrogator, was Inoshi Yamanaka.

“We will begin now,” the Hokage ordered, narrow-eyed glare sweeping the chamber.

I wondered, in a distant sort of way, if Fugaku or one of the other older Uchiha had said or done something before the trial started that had irked the Hokage, given how the Uchiha clan’s corner was literally all theirs.

Or maybe I was reading too far into things.

The Hokage said, “Team Minato, begin your report.”

I was staring at the floorboards with the intent to try and sink to the center of the earth, and so Kakashi stepped forward in my place even though he shouldn’t have. Captain or not, he didn’t *know*.

“Four days ago, my team split off from Sensei in order to infiltrate Iwa battle-lines and destroy the Kannabi Bridge in Kusagakure territory.” Kakashi’s voice was steady, but his chakra was in severe emotional turmoil. “In our initial contact with Iwa forces, we killed an advance scout. Once our team was on the move, we encountered his reinforcements.”

“Bingo book profiles list the three Iwa-nin as Mahiru, Taiseki, and Kakkō—all jōnin.” Inoshi put in, when Kakashi momentarily drew a blank.
Kakashi hadn’t seen much of Kakkō or Taiseki, in comparison to Obito and me.

Kakashi went on, “In the ensuing fight, Keisuke and Obito managed to fend off Taiseki. However, I was captured.”

“Captured” implied a lot of things, some of which I’d seen and would swear an oath about in the coming days. But for the moment, it was nicely vague and left the rest of the narrative to me.

Kakashi would probably be ordered to meet with the Intelligence division at some point, for information about Iwa’s interrogation techniques and possibly for (something like) counseling since Sensei was shit at it. Sensei is a lot of things. A child therapist is not one of them.

I took over. “We immediately made the decision to abandon the mission and pursue.”

I could feel everyone in the room disapprove.

Kannabi had been a vital chokepoint for our offensive. Failing to destroy it would have cost lives in the sort of numbers comparable to Sakumo Hatake’s blunder five years ago.

“Kakashi, prior to the start of our mission, had been supplied with all high-grade demolitions equipment capable of damaging the bridge.” I continued in a monotone. “If we couldn’t retrieve him—or at least recover the explosives—our mission was automatically doomed to failure. Further, if he broke during interrogation, all future expeditions against Iwa forces in the area would be at an increased risk of failure.”

I could feel the eyes of everyone in the room, sans Kakashi and Sensei, on me.

“We laid a trap for Taiseki in order to counteract his demonstrated stealth skills.” I kept my gaze fixed in the middle distance, but my voice was clear. “Between my explosive tags and sensory skills, and Obito’s reaction time, we held out as a distraction for nearly four minutes. During that time, Kakkō made no move to reinforce his teammate.”

A lifetime when in combat against a jōnin.

“I was injured.” I said, and knew that everyone was looking at the scar on my face. “And Obito killed Taiseki when his Sharingan activated in the aftermath.”

I felt a flash of…something…and Fugaku. Pride, maybe?

“After administering basic first aid, we continued our self-imposed rescue mission.” Kakashi’s nearest hand twitched. I tried to ignore it. “Obito and I engaged Kakkō in close combat—the space inside the cave was too small for his larger Fire Release jutsu. I killed Kakkō in the end, with Obito providing the opening.”

“I regained consciousness shortly afterward.” Kakashi said quietly. “Kakkō had extracted my left eye as part of his interrogation when genjutsu torture failed, even after reopening my injuries from the first fight and removing fingernails.”

And if Kakashi did break…well, no one knew. Kakkō certainly wasn’t going to go reporting anything to anyone, now. But I didn’t doubt that at least a few people in the audience were already trying to figure out what that would mean for his mission viability. People who were bleeding out were generally more susceptible to a lot of things, and that probably would have brought most people to their breaking point when combined with the other stuff Kakkō might have done.

Unless, apparently, your name was Kakashi Hatake.
I tried not to look at his hand. It was still bandaged.

“While we were trying to stem the bleeding and stabilize him, I realized that we hadn’t actually managed to recover the explosives.” I picked up the thread, unwilling to let Kakashi stay in that dark place if I could help it. I closed my eyes. “Kakkō had taken them, and rigged them on a dead-man’s switch tied to his chakra. We managed to organize a shield wall, but…”

“The blast knocked all of us unconscious.” Kakashi filled in. “When we came to, Obito was lying under a boulder, half-crushed but still alive by some miracle.”

Or curse.

Sensei’s chakra was leaping all over the place—it was the first time either of us had talked about Obito’s last moments. Still, he didn’t lose his straight-backed military stance.

“Obito…asked to make up for not giving me a promotion present.” Kakashi’s voice hardly wavered. “He begged Keisuke to transplant his eye.”

*The last time they had a full, decent conversation, and it was a fight.*

“And I did.” I tried not to remember. “We were immediately confronted by somewhere between twenty and twenty-five enemy shinobi upon leaving the cave, which collapsed on Obito. During our fight with them, Sensei arrived.”

“I neutralized all enemy combatants.” Sensei told them. “We rallied, completed the mission, and returned home.” I could only assume he had given his *actual* report while we were in the hospital.

After that, the room was silent for a while.

Then the Hokage nodded. “The floor is now open to question.”

“How did you know that Obito Uchiha was dead?” Fugaku asked sharply.

*Dammit. Give me a question I can answer.*

“Three pints of lost blood, a crushed lung, and ten tons of rock.” Kakashi said levelly.

That did not cover the mysterious lack of his chakra signature—which could have been because he was dead, or because he wasn’t there anymore. Or even because my chakra sense had been hideously unreliable on the mission. I didn’t *know*.

“Then did you recover his body?” Fugaku asked.

“No.” Sensei replied.

The Uchiha sector didn’t look at all happy. I couldn’t really blame them. For different reasons than they had, I kind of felt the same way.

“How did you know you could transplant his eye?” This came from Danzō, even as Fugaku was about to ask us something else.

“I didn’t.” I said quietly, forcing myself not to shake. *Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck*— “But he asked me to.”

I did *not* want to look into Danzō’s face, regardless of how it’d be impossible for him to have already acquired Shisui’s Sharingan. Fucking *nope*. Putting myself on his radar by accident was bad enough,
holy shit.

That silence stretched for a while, too.

“What reason did he have to give up his eye?” Fugaku asked.

*Well, to paraphrase, “Someone needs to watch out for Kakashi. Needs a sharp left eye. Also what use is a Sharingan to a dead man?”*

“He said that he didn’t need it anymore.” I said. “That Kakashi…needed someone looking out for him.” *Literally.*

Kakashi grimaced under his mask. “He may have felt some misplaced guilt about my capture. Or about the argument we’d had earlier.” Clear in his tone is the note of *but I don’t understand why.*

Obito had the biggest heart out of any kid I’d ever met. That was why.

“What right did he have to ask for the transplant operation?” Fugaku continues as though I didn’t say anything.

“Uchiha-dono.” Inoshi got the full force of Fugaku’s glare for interrupting. The older blond man merely blinked and commented, “This line of questioning is unproductive. But I might have a solution.”

“Yamanaka-san?” The Hokage raises one graying eyebrow.

“I’ve used my family jutsu to enter Gekkō-kun’s mind before.” Inoshi said in a mild voice. “I can do it again and confirm everything we’ve discussed.”

**I think I can point him where he needs to go. And away from where we don’t need him to go.**

Reassuring, I guess.

“This will be easier with your cooperation, you know.” Inoshi said, and I got all kinds of weird pings between his tone and his chakra.

Or maybe it was just the fact that I didn’t want *anyone* poking around in my head ever again. I was okay with prodding my own soul and my other personalities to see what made them tick and had even figured out most of it and could use them as backup chakra seals or something. But while I’d let Inoshi in once under extreme stress, I certainly didn’t want to *repeat* the experience with the Council as the primary goddamn reason.

If Inoshi had been hostile, he could have destroyed me five years ago. And he still could. Fu would *eat my brain.*

**I’ll make a note about mind probes under duress.** The Dreamer winced. **At least it’s Inoshi.**

“I…all right.” I saw Kakashi twitch again, out of the corner of my eye. I didn’t look at him.

I knelt.

Inoshi put his left hand on my head and his right formed a seal.

I closed my eyes.

Then *white.*
Obito’s voice.

“I promise it’s...not a burden. I-It’s useless to me, now...Kakashi. Take my Sharingan...”

Kakashi’s.

"I’ll protect everyone, Obito. I promise. I’ll protect them with my life...like you should have been able to. Like you did and still are..."

“K-Keep giving things away and there w-won't be anything left...”

...

That's enough.

Someone knocked at my door while I was in bed like a lump, feeling sorry for myself and also mentally apologizing for existing.

Going over Kannabi hadn’t helped my mindset much. At all.

I...to be honest, I had probably been building up to a breakdown for the better part of eight days, by that point. I’d held my feelings inside when Rin got her chance to let go. I’d held it together for the council hearing. I’d even held it together long enough to almost interact normally with my family (though Mom wasn’t fooled).

And then, come day nine, I refused to leave my bed.

It was a shitty time all around—Hayate didn’t really understand what was wrong with me, despite hearing the news about Obito, and Mom had her hands full just trying to get me to eat. I wasn’t hungry—everything tasted like ash, when my stomach didn’t just try to crawl back up my throat for some godforsaken reason. And I wasn’t interested in dragging my ass out of bed long enough to take medication for that sensation, either.

Everything was just too much effort.

About the only positive thing I can say about that time is that I never picked up sleep-talking. From what I understand, the worst noise I’ve ever made is either a hideous snore or a sort of subsonic growl in the bottom of my chest that would wake up anyone next to me. It was a toss-up sometimes whether Obito would wake me up via pillow to the face or not, when we were on the road.

I didn’t want to think about him, or about anything.

And then there was someone banging on my door anyway.

I made a noise that could only grudgingly be called human.

The knocking continued.

I rolled over and pulled my blankets over my head.

The door opened.

“Kei?” said Kakashi’s voice.
Okay, that was a surprise, but I still wasn’t interested in hearing anything he had to say. I wanted to sleep and pretend nothing bad had happened yet. Or ever would.

And then Kakashi went on, speaking in a quiet voice I almost had to strain to hear, “I asked your mother if I could come in and try talking to you. I was there when Obito died—I thought…maybe I could help, because we’re feeling the same way. I guess she believed me. She let me in, even if I’ve never spoken a civil word to her before.”

“I’m…not good at words.” I felt Kakashi sit down on the side of my bed, his weight causing the mattress to sag. “So.”

A flare of chakra followed. And then there was one more dip in the mattress, and the new one was sniffing around my hiding-spot on four wobbly legs as the springs shifted.

And then a tiny tongue licked my exposed hand.

I wiggled partly out from under the covers, because apparently nothing was as motivating as a small furry animal, and surrounded the half-grown pug with my arms. He didn’t seem to mind being stuck between my crossed forearms and my neck, and folded his legs neatly under his body before sticking his nose against my shoulder.

I stroked his now-stiff fur, chin resting on the scarecrow face on his jacket. He made a whining noise.

I still wasn’t looking at Kakashi.

We sat in silence for a long moment.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.” I said, staring at the wall.

“…it wasn’t.” Kakashi agreed quietly.

“We were supposed to come home.” I whispered. “All of us.”

It would be hard to describe how I felt at that moment. It wasn’t nothing, but I…was kind of in two minds about everything, which was terribly unhelpful for record-keeping after the fact. Numb, yet aware that so many feelings were waiting to turn me into a sobbing wreck. Angry, yet also grateful to Kakashi or being willing to reach out.

“I…” Kakashi paused. “I’m going to visit the Stone, later.”

“I’ll come with you.” I said, closing my eyes. “I need to say goodbye. And attend the service.”

Kakashi’s weight shifted a little on the mattress. His chakra was uneasy, but I didn’t look at him.

“Okay.”

I sat in my room with Pakkun in my arms for a long time even after that, listening to the sound of gentle breathing and waiting for Kakashi to say anything, and let the thoughts slide together until something pinged off of some other important idea. I wasn’t in any hurry.

Eventually, I got up. I had shit to do. Funeral to attend—Obito was an orphan, we were his family—friends to visit. I kicked Kakashi out of my room so I could change, though he didn’t leave the house.

I got dressed in funeral black, for what seemed like the first time since Dad’s death. Sensei, Rin and
Kakashi were the only ones I really cared attended with me, even if I know that my old classmates were probably going to attend if they could. I didn’t think about the Uchiha clan much. I tied Obito’s headband around my arm. I finished the knot slower and more carefully than I would otherwise, and headed out.

Kakashi was sitting at the kitchen table with Mom and Hayate, both also dressed in black. Pakkun was on the floor by his feet, and before we left our street, the other seven ninken had joined us. They were all half-grown, but bigger than Pakkun, and each one is aware of the gravity of the situation.

My brother rode on Bull’s back, silent for once, and Mom guided us through the streets. Sensei joined our procession after a while, warping out of nowhere without a word. He briefly squeezed my shoulder, before drawing Mom aside for a quick, whispered conversation I entirely missed.

I picked up flowers from the Yamanaka shop. Sensei got aster blooms and Kakashi took the daffodils. I kept the daisies. The lotus flowers were for Rin, when she joined us. There were early cherry blossoms, too, but they were for whoever else ended up attending. The stuff with meaning—and sometimes I wondered how Inoichi knew—was for our team alone.

Rin showed up then, Obito’s goggles around her neck and incense in her hands. I slung an arm around her shoulders and tried to keep everything from showing on my face.

It didn’t rain, but it was cold.

There were probably a total of fifty people attending. Gai, Kurenai, Asuma, Aoba, Ibiki, Iruka, Anko, Yūgao, Genma, Ebisu, Yamaguchi-sensei… While the majority of the ranks were made up of Uchiha clan members, it was clear that Obito had touched many lives. Maybe not always significantly, or in a positive way—but they understood self-sacrifice and the pain of coming home one man short. Maybe some of them were just there for us, not Obito.

Funerals, memorials, and wakes… they were for the living, after all.

Sensei carved his name into the stone, while Kakashi, Rin and I placed flowers. I had a photo of our team from the first day we were made official, and I had kept it safe for years. I placed it at the base of the stone with incense and my sweet peas. I wanted to leave the headband there, too, but couldn’t make myself part with it. Rin didn’t leave his goggles, either, and I felt a mix of guilt and relief for that.

—should have been stronger faster better—

In the end, it was over all too quickly. The crowd broke off with some general condolences and Sensei had to leave, because the world didn’t stop spinning for a single life. Kakashi, Rin, and I stood there for a long, quiet hour, with Mom and Hayate in the wings and Kakashi’s dogs surrounding us like an honor guard.

It was there that, in front of what would have to serve as Obito’s grave—for now—I decided that I was going to change. I couldn’t just rely on Sensei or Kakashi to save the day, or even to take care of themselves. So obviously, I was going to have to pick up the slack.

And when training resumed and both Kakashi and I were taken off medical probation, I damn well signed that summoning scroll.

Tsuruya is the new girl’s name, by the way. She’s a passenger-flight-capable battle crane with feathers like swords.
We started running messenger and scouting missions that month.

Chapter End Notes

And I could hear the thunder and see the lightning crack
All around the world was waking, I never could go back
Cause all the walls of dreaming, they were torn wide open
And finally it seemed that the spell was broken

And all my bones began to shake, my eyes flew open
And all my bones began to shake, my eyes flew open

No more dreaming of the dead as if death itself was undone
No more calling like a crow for a boy, for a body in the garden
No more dreaming like a girl so in love, so in love
No more dreaming like a girl so in love, so in love
No more dreaming like a girl so in love with the wrong world

~ Florence and the Machine's "Blinding"
Intermission: Preptime

Chapter Summary

Kei: Devolve.

Shaking off that negative mindset took a while. I’m naturally prone to brooding, which doesn’t help when the problem is all in the mind, and being forced to relive Kannabi thanks to Inoshi’s jutsu and the memory swarm going berserk didn’t help much. I didn’t blame him for it—Fugaku had asked for the account, after all—but it was still unpleasant and the effects clung.

Suffice to say that that period of my life is not one I especially want to revisit.

But I had something concrete to do, which helped.

Having missed my first chance to prevent the rise of the interim Big Bad before Madara would appear, I decided to focus on the second option.

Intervening on the second botched-as-fuck mission required precise timing that, frankly, I didn’t really have—the image of Obito post-squashing and pre-Kannabi was different enough to imply a several-month hiatus before things went to hell. Once Rin got kidnapped—which I only knew about because the characters had talked about it, not because I’d seen the scene—there was a limited timeframe in which anyone could intervene. Sensei certainly wasn’t going to be available. I didn’t even know if I was going to be around, since Kakashi had been the only one who had responded before.

I didn’t have much time or much information.

So… I made do.

Sensei had finally given me all of the scrolls supplied by the Chinatsugumi—basic elemental ninjutsu, fūinjutsu, and the crane summoning scroll.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, I’d torn open that last one and signed it immediately with both spellings of my name, with Sensei standing over my shoulder in case something went wrong. Training Ground Three was perfect for our purposes, given the wide-open clearings and nearby water in case the crane was interested in wading.

The resulting explosion of smoke revealed an oversized crane—red spot on the forehead, white wings with black secondary feathers, long black legs, and a black streak running from its lower beak to the back of the base of its neck. It had the wingspan of a large hang-glider or a very small airplane, and stood taller than Sasuke’s hawk summon would ever be. It was looking down its long gray beak at Sensei and I, then bowed with a flourish.

“I am Tsuruya,” it—she—said in a distinctly female voice. She sounded a little like how I imagined Mito Uzumaki’s would; calm, and full of wisdom. “I ask of you: Are you my master?”

“Yes,” I said. “I am Keisuke Gekkō of Konohagakure.” Sensei poked me. “Do you have a test I need to pass before I can summon you in battle?”
If it was down to drinking contests and endurance tests, like Gamabunta would ask of Naruto in the future, I’d have to pass.

Tsuruya seemed to smile, despite her lack of lips. “No. What is your command?”

I paused. “…For right now, I want to know what you can do.”

What followed was something like a weapons test.

Tsuruya leapt skyward, swooping upward on the barest gust of wind. While summons that could use various forms of elemental manipulation weren’t uncommon—just look at Temari’s personal summon, for example—I hadn’t seen one in person. Tsuruya was using some kind of Wind Release technique in order to make herself more maneuverable in the air.

Sensei and I had set up straw targets in advance, either anticipating a practice spar after dismal failure or the need for convenient things to shoot at. Tsuruya flapped twice to stall her progress, then nearly slammed her wings together in the general direction of the targets.

There was a controlled rain of feathers that sounded like Tenten had set up shop.

“Her secondary feathers are made of steel!” I nearly squeaked in glee, picking up a feather that had landed near us. Oh, I could wreak so much havoc with this power…

“Close.” Tsuruya said, flying back over to us. She tilted her head. “Tell me, Keisuke-sama, do you know anything of kenjutsu?”

“Yes, I do. I…” I paused again, feeling myself freeze up, and a shadow crossed Sensei’s face. Then, “I used to have a kodachi. I haven’t gotten a new sword yet.”

Tsuruya nodded. “Then, when you do find a new sword, I can spar with you.”

“…I’ll have to clear that with my mother, first.” I admitted. “But I’m sure you two will get along just fine.”

“I’d recommend you introduce Tsuruya-san to Kakashi, too.” Sensei suggested. At the curious look the crane gave us, he added, “Her teammate. I assume you’re familiar with the team structures of shinobi nations?”

“I may be a little rusty in that regard.” Tsuruya commented, and I had the feeling that that phrase meant more to her than to either of us. She bobbed her head and folded her wings against her sides. “Keisuke-sama, I am willing to meet with anyone you wish.”

“Well, uh…” I looked at Sensei. “Do you mind getting Kakashi to come here? I don’t think I’m allowed to let a battle summon walk through Konoha.”

“I could always fly.” Tsuruya suggested.

“I’ll bring him here.” Sensei agreed, and poofed out of the clearing.

…Typical.

“So, what do you like to do?” I asked Tsuruya as the huge crane decided to sit down on the nearby riverbank, folding her legs underneath her.

“Hm? I enjoy reading poetry, if I have the chance.” Tsuruya said, “Along with swordplay and silk-weaving.”
“How do you weave?” I asked. I had a theory, mostly because I’d played *Okamiden* in a certain significant past life, and could notice mythological references when they were shoved in my face. Also, I wasn’t sure if she used her feet or her beak to manipulate the cloth—unless she had the third option of Donald Duck digits.

“That is a secret.”

Of course it was.

“And you, Keisuke-sama? What do you do?” Tsuruya asked.

For a moment, I was stumped. I was about to say that I liked reading books, or that I enjoyed feeding stray animals, or hanging out with my friends. I…just hadn’t done a lot of any of those, recently. Oh, Kakashi and I were training partners when he wasn’t getting caught up in some jōnin thing or another, and Rin and I certainly practiced medical ninjutsu and experimental use of chakra projections, but the fun had gone out of things.

I spent a lot of time practicing seals and jutsu on my own, now. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d gotten to spend a worry-free moment doing something entirely mundane. I had too much to do to prepare for Obito’s possible return.

For fuck’s sake, I wasn’t even sure if he would.

I shrugged, and Tsuruya let me get away with that.

As it happened, Sensei didn’t show up for another half-hour, which was something of a record in tardiness for him. By that point, I had progressed to sitting next to my new summon animal with the Chinatsugumi ninjutsu scroll unrolled on the ground in front of us. Even if Tsuruya couldn’t use any of the techniques from the scroll, due mostly to lacking hands, it gave us something to do.

We didn’t talk that much.

Though I think Tsuruya was already developing this habit of poking me in the head with her beak, sort of like Sensei seemed to think I was some kind of dog when he wasn’t paying attention. I was convinced I had some kind of magnet in my head by the time I’d spent five minutes with her.

Sensei was accompanied by both a grumpy-looking Kakashi, slung under his arm like a sack of rice, and a cloud of paperwork that fluttered to the ground at their landing point.

Which was basically me.

Yes, my teammates landed basically on top of me and Tsuruya, who made a furious squawking noise.

After we all managed to get our limbs sorted out and Tsuruya stopped muttering about bent feathers, I also got to remove the paper that was stuck to my face.

“We’re back.” Sensei announced unnecessarily, dropping Kakashi. “And I have news.

“Good news or bad news?” I asked.

“…Both, sort of?” Sensei tilted his head.

I winced.
“On one hand...I know it hasn’t been long since Kannabi.” Sensei told me, in a low voice that I was sure everyone heard anyway. “But the Council wants both of you back on the mission roster as soon as possible. We can’t afford to have you on the sidelines.”

“Yeah, I get that.” I said, looking at Kakashi instead of Sensei.

Kakashi’s visible eye was closed, and he didn’t feel especially happy either.

“I’ve managed to narrow down some of the options.” Sensei explained, indicating the paper everywhere. Both Kakashi and I helped Sensei gather them. Sensei rubbed the back of his neck. “Hopefully, you can work with a couple.”

I spotted Rin’s name on the sheet sticking out of the back.

“Is Rin-chan an option?” I asked. I didn’t really want to hear a positive answer in that case.

Sensei gave me a strange look, then realized where my eyes were.

…I wasn’t really sure what response Sensei wanted out of me. On one hand, Rin was my friend and very nearly a sister to me.

On the other, it was another reminder of what had happened to Obito.

On a third hand, putting Rin on our team put us at risk. Mostly her, yes, but I still would have been happier if it’d been Gai. I could at least trust Gai to kick his way out of basically anything—I wasn’t even sure Rin had been taking combat missions recently.

(Well, okay, as a medic-nin she wasn’t supposed to be in the thick of things anyway, but still.)

“I… I’m not entirely sure about that. By all accounts she’s a brilliant medic-nin, and you both know her well enough.” Sensei frowned. “But Rin was just as close to Obito as any of us. It might not be a good choice to stick her in our team, even if Yamaguchi would allow it.”

“Then who is?” But when I said that, Kakashi looked over his shoulder as though he expected someone else to show up in a “speak of the devil and he shall appear” sense.

Sensei replied, “Gai, probably. Well, assuming that the paperwork goes through.”

…Well. Speak of the devil indeed.

I cleared my throat. “Anyway—Kakashi, this is my summon, Tsuruya.”

Tsuruya interrupted her meticulous rearranging of her flight feathers to give my teammates a respectful nod. Then she went right back to what she’d been doing.

I went on, “Uh, could you introduce your dogs, Kakashi? It’s best if we all know who’s who on the battlefield and not find out at the worst possible time.”

“Right.” Kakashi said. He pulled a kunai from his holster and pricked his thumb—I doubt Kakashi would ever be the kind of shinobi to use his teeth. Then, “Summoning Jutsu.”

And a lot of smoke.

And then eight dogs of varying growth levels and sizes.

“Kei-chan!” Pakkun said.
…Um.

Sensei and I looked at Kakashi.

Kakashi looked away. He said to the dogs, “Pakkun, Bull, Ühei, Guruko, Bisuke, Urushi, Shiba, Akino, meet Tsuruya.”

Neither dog pack nor giant crane said anything for a moment.

Then, Tsuruya stretched one wing out. “You…are all adorable.”

Nice to see that Tsuruya and I had something else in common. The dogs swarmed her, with the smaller three climbing onto her back and Bull, in particular, nudging his way under her wing and against her side.

…Well, anyway, that’s the story of how a pack of ninja-dogs ended up befriending a giant not-yellow bird, and also the story of how my giant bird friend ended up with eight furry babies to brood over. Even if they weren’t actually puppies anymore and the entirely wrong genus was involved.

I happen to think that her favorite dog was either Bull or Pakkun. Bull, because he was a mobile heater even when only halfway to his full size. And Pakkun, because that dog is the one that talks the most.

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*Current research into barrier seals indicates the unmitigated superiority of a multi-pronged structure, activated by multiple users. According to Kimato and Ryujin (56), a single seal collapses under the weight of a single B-ranked elemental ninjutsu of the appropriate counter-type, inhibiting attacker momentum and chakra transfer by 25% at maximum allotted power…*

Over the next month, I increased my study of seals and continued to train myself into the ground. I was neglecting kenjutsu a bit, despite discovering that Tsuruya could fight Mom almost on an even keel. As I hadn’t been able to afford a replacement kodachi yet, it seemed to be a lower priority than ninjutsu and fūinjutsu training. Kakashi and I beat the crap out of each other on a nigh-daily basis, and I remember bringing Gai and Rin to separate days just to see how we all fared.

…Suffice to say that Gai did a hell of a lot better than I did. Rin inevitably did worse. We still went on missions anyway.

I admit to being less than focused. I had my own issues. Which, for a reason that is not much of a reason in hindsight, I didn’t really talk about to anyone.

How am I supposed to prep all the seals I might need?

The sealing scroll the Chinatsugumi had sent me had a lot of interesting ideas. Something called the Red Strength Blood Seal looked like it had plenty of battle potential and that it might have been similar to what the Kasai twins used for their chakra suppression. There was also a much less chakra-intensive version of what was called the Evil Sealing Method—a seal slapped on top of unwanted effects, like the Curse Seal of Heaven or maybe someone’s troublesome kekkei genkai. Then there was what looked like a version of the Chakra-Suppressing Seal, strong enough to use even on a Naruto busy going berserk under the influence of four tails’ worth of chakra. Hell, there was even a compacted version of a barrier seal, which I thought was definitely a thing I needed to look into.

And not one of them was the kind of technique I could sustain with my own chakra levels as low as they were. *And* they weren’t designed to be used collaboratively.
I chewed on my thumb, staring at the scrolls spread out over my bed-sheets. I could probably find a workaround with the Chakra-Suppressing Seal, if only because the drat thing was similar in form to the explosive tags I was so fond of, but the rest would be tricky. Half of the effectiveness of the Evil Sealing Method was the strength put into it by the user, not to mention the intense prep-work for a non-paper seal.

I would definitely need to talk to Sensei about these ones. Even if he asked me why the hell I’d need to know any of them—all of them were probably too advanced for basic chūnin missions.

The confounding variable was the fact that we wouldn’t be facing normal missions. Normal missions were for people who didn’t attract danger like flies to honey. Normal missions didn’t involve the possibility that someone would come home with an additional hundred-meter passenger in their head—though, granted, I don’t think that rescuing Rin had really been a mission in any official sense.

…I hoped that the Evil Sealing Method provided by the Chinatsugumi would be enough to suppress the Three-Tailed Beast’s will. Or that the Chakra-Suppressing Seal would be. I didn’t know which would work, but hopefully I was covering all my bases.

I rubbed my eyes.

No more excuses.

I’d prepare everything I could get Sensei to approve me to carry. Everything I could explain to Kakashi in four sentences or less, if I even needed to. I’d make at least a mock up of every seal I knew. I’d train, I’d bring Tsuruya around to meet everyone I cared about, and I would strangle Fate as thoroughly as possible.

I couldn’t plan for everything that could possible happen, but I could damn well try.

I threw myself into my work.

I think that Kei-chan isn’t coping well. She doesn’t talk as much anymore, and when I see her she’s always very pale, like she hasn’t been outside very often. I overheard her mother talking about how little she’s eating, and her brother doesn’t seem very happy either. We lost Obito, but…none of us seem to have any direction anymore, least of all her.

I don’t know what to do.

Akihito-shishō isn’t being very helpful. He keeps saying that Kei-chan needs to work out her own problems, and rise above them. I’ve asked Kakashi, and he doesn’t know what to do any more than I do. His sensei doesn’t help much either. Gai, Kurenai-chan, and Asuma don’t really know her the same way I do.

No one seems to understand what Kei is doing to herself. This isn’t like her. She’s getting more and more secretive, and she loses herself in whatever work she’s doing.

I’m scared.

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BONUS SECTION:

=>> Be the androgynous moron.

Your name is KEISUKE GEKKŌ.
You are a REINCARNATED ADULT in a CHILD’S BODY. You are KIND OF A NINJA but also kind of not, since you are sure that ACTUAL NINJAS are better at their jobs than you are. This NOT-TIME-TRAVEL BULLSHIT is not helping your STATE OF MIND because you were normal, once. You had normal inspirations that did not involve SEALING DEMON GODS INTO THINGS. You still use sarcasm as a DEFENSE MECHANISM because your sense of humor is terrible and because RAGING OUT is not a valid move.

You are NOT SURE what you’re supposed to be doing aside from ADAPTING because you have a tendency toward PROCRASTINATING LIKE A BOSS. Before you were reborn, you had DREAMS about being a BADASS BITCH that you never lived up to because you were a GIGANTIC NINNY. You are still that way, but not as much, because your life choices will KILL YOU if you let them.

You know you have HELLS OF ISSUES and that you are not getting past them. Your BEST FRIEND is kind of dead or something, because your life is not complete without some agonizing over SCHRODINGER’S NINJA. You are making a plan for a WORST-CASE SCENARIO because you are not dumb enough to believe THINGS WILL BE OKAY.

You are TERRIBLE AT PLANNING. If this BLOWS UP IN YOUR FACE, you can’t say you’ll be surprised.

(You kind of get the impression that YOUR WRITER HATES YOU.)
===> Be the Cute Medic.
Your name is RIN NOHARA, and you are currently FREAKING OUT.

I normally have nothing to do with the front lines, ever. That was one of the things Akihito-shishō promised me, back when I first decided to take him up on his offer to join the Medic Corps. I would have a safe space to perfect my medical ninjutsu, and never have to worry about fighting anyone other than my fellow apprentices.

But by joining Kei and Obito’s team to take on the Chunin Exams, I think I might have jinxed myself. Or them. I don’t know. Did they have insane missions before I joined? If so, neither of them really said anything to me about it.

Oh, that just makes me worry more.

Working in the medical tents isn’t so bad, really, but I keep turning around thinking the next body they drag in will belong to someone I know.

Nothing yet.

…I also worry, just a bit, that the next person to come through the tent flap will be an enemy. I’m the best out of my group at the hospital when it comes to dodging, but the medical tents are rather small compared to the fields we practice in.

I also know some things that aren’t…well, Kei figured them out, but I’m not sure if that means anyone else knows how to overclock chakra scalpels. At least, that’s what she called it.

They’re really good for peeling oranges, too.

My mind is still wandering a little, under stress, when the next person opens the tent flap.

“Still hanging in there, Rin-chan?” asks Kei.

“As best I can, Kei-senpai.” I tell her, popping the joints in my hands one at a time. It’s very tedious to stay in the same position all afternoon, and my back is also aching. “How was patrol?”

“Paranoia-inducing.” Kei says. “With just me and Kakashi on this run, it started to feel like Kumo-nin were waiting behind every bush.”

“But they weren’t?” I mean, it didn’t seem like she was hurt…

“Not a one.” Kei shrugs, crossing her arms over her chest. “Honestly, it’s making me edgy.”

I frown. “I think that not encountering any enemies would be a good thing.”

“But we know they’re out there.” Kei blows out an angry breath. For a moment, it looks like she’s going to say something else, but she shakes her head. “Look, just keep your guard up.”
“We’re so far back from the front lines, we should be safe.” I point out.

Kei blinks. “…Two of the people confirmed on the enemy’s line are A and B. You know, the Third Raikage’s sons?”

“Well, I still think you and Kakashi should be all right.” I say, though it sounds hollow even to me.

“Yeah, well.” Kei mumbles, and trails off. She sits down on an empty, though slightly bloodstained cot, and pinches the bridge of her nose.

After a moment, I go back to rolling bandages. I may be a certified apprentice medic-nin, but there are plenty of people in the field who aren’t going to be anywhere near a medic when they get hurt. If we have any idle time at all, the field medic in charge is very clear about our orders to keep busy. I can think and talk while rolling bandages, while I’m not sure everyone can.

Kei isn’t an accredited medic by any means, but I think that she’s good enough for emergency response. I…just don’t know if I would really trust her in surgery. She might not have the chakra capacity for that (and to be fair, neither do I. I just work better with my fellow medics after years of knowing them and their chakra).

But sometimes, I wonder if the stress of being a medic-nin would be good for either of us in the long term. Kei doesn’t look like she’s slept very well since…well, since Obito’s death, and I know I’m not feeling on top of things. It feels like every time I have to rest or take a break, the future slips through my fingers.

And if I feel that way, chances are someone’s dying.

Kei takes off her hitai-ate—Obito’s, because she hasn’t gotten a bandanna replacement or remounted the metal plate—and re-ties it around her neck. Then she runs both hands through her hair, ruffling everything as though she had fur instead of sweat-spiked black hair.

“Me ‘n Kakashi are heading out again in ten, Rin-chan.” Kei mumbles.

“Isn’t that too soon?” I ask.

“Probably is, but…” Kei pauses, and both of us hear the sound of muffled screaming. We wince together. “Traps along patrol routes mean not everyone’s going to be able to run a second one.”

I purse my lips. “You should do your best to stay safe, not to run the fastest.”

Kei nods.

“Where’s Kakashi?” I ask.

“Reporting,” she shrugs. “Probably getting something to eat while he can.”

I tilt my head to the side, struck by an interesting thought. “Um…Kei-senpai, have you ever seen his face?”

Kei pauses. Then she shrugs again. “…Nope.”

“Really? But you’ve been his teammate for years.” I…kind of want to know what’s under Kakashi’s mask that he’s so afraid to show. A cleft palate? Fish lips? Buck teeth?

“Yeah, and it never really came up. Kakashi and I have whole conversations by not actually saying anything.”
That…is really very odd.

“Shouldn’t you want to know your teammate better?” I ask.

“Yeah.” Kei says, looking away. I hear her mumble something that sounds like a meaningless string of syllables, but don’t ask about it.

Then, while Kei is starting to nod off while sitting up, the tent flap opens. I look up.

It’s Kakashi.

“Kei.” Kakashi says sharply, ignoring me.

“What,” Kei says in a tone that doesn’t even really sound like a question. She sounds grumpy.

“We have our new route.”

“Additional squadmates?” Kei asks.

“None.”

It’s a very terse conversation, almost like they don’t like to talk at all. It’s really kind of sad.

“Stay safe, you two.” I say quietly.

Very briefly, Kakashi nods at me. So does Kei. Then they exchange looks and head out together.

I go back to rolling bandages and hope that they won’t be the next ones to need them.

Eventually, I get away from bandage duty. While rolling linen is all fine and good, I think my fingers really can’t take any more today. Oriko, a green-haired, bespectacled medic-nin who has to be at least nineteen, takes over for me instead, and I’m just glad that it’s over.

I hear Oriko make a hilarious squeaking noise when she realizes how much linen still has to be turned into supplies, but I have no intention of heading back. About the only thing more boring is working in the Konoha Hospital’s laundry room. Sorry, Oriko-san, but I really don’t want to have anything more to do with chores today.

I make my way to the mess tent, such that it is—we haven’t got very much in terms of utilities out here. I mean, there’s a command center and Ryusei Kiyotaka (tall, lanky blue-haired man with sunglasses) is probably manning the desk for the third time this week despite being in charge, and a weapon’s tent and a medical tent, but…well, we’re a small forward base. I haven’t seen anyone more famous than a minor Yamanaka clan member out here so far.

It’s been a dull week.

We’re just far enough back from the combat lines that we avoid enemy action, and close enough that the injured can be brought back from the brink if their medical escort runs the whole way. Other than an awful lot of injuries, we haven’t seen hide nor hair of the enemy. Our scouts do, and often, but no one’s been stupid enough to attack a forward military base with a scouting patrol. At least, so far.

I’m just sitting down, trying to figure out how to make a bowl of plain rice more appetizing, when furious barking splits the wary silence over the camp.

Everyone immediately jumps to attention. I ditch my bowl of rice and try to track the sound, only it’s
coming from two—three—directions at once.

Then a small brown blur rounds the corner and darts to the command tent. I catch a glimpse of a hitai-ate and a blue vest, and it immediately makes me think of Kakashi. That dog is followed shortly by a larger hound with brown ears and a white muzzle, and then a third dog with spiked fur along his head.

They’re all Kakashi’s dogs, but where—?

The base siren starts going off, and suddenly everyone is armed.

The nearest jōnin—Junpei Akasaka, twice the size of every other man in camp and outrageously mustached—waves me away since I’m in the open and unarmed except for my chakra scalpels. He has a pair of curved kunai, painted stealth-black, and his eyes are on the direction the dogs came from.

Something explodes in the distance, throwing a massive cloud of dust into the air over the tree-line. Just as the debris almost reaches the edge of camp, two figures burst into view. I can recognize Kakashi immediately, and he’s moving faster than I’ve ever seen him, with a fourth dog—huge and jet-black, with a wrinkled face and massive jowls—just barely a step ahead. Gripping his trailing hand like a lifeline…that’s Kei.

Even from this distance, I can tell she’s not moving correctly.

Junpei surges forward as I skip back, trying to get a bead on whatever’s following them.

Kakashi shoots past Junpei with Kei in tow, not stopping, and other shinobi move to reinforce the older jōnin.

It isn’t until he reaches me that he slows down. Kei lands on her back first, legs giving out briefly, then rolls to a stop. She glares up at us both, but mostly Kakashi.

“Paralytic gas,” he says, eyes already back on the impending fight.

All right, I know how to deal with that. “Skin contact?”

“No, inhalant.” Kakashi begins to make seals, and I can’t see who he’s staring at. I’m busy pulling on a pair of gloves just in case.

…Maybe the dust cloud is hiding some kind of genjutsu? He has Obito’s eye out…

“Kiri?” I jolt, whipping around to find Base Commander Ryusei looking at Kakashi speculatively.

“Yes, from their hitai-ate and uniforms.” Kakashi says shortly.

As though on some kind of cue, four forms shoot out of the smoke and dust. Junpei cut one down immediately with a Wind jutsu, and three of Kakashi’s dogs latch onto the second, bringing him back down to earth with tooth and claw. I look away, back to Kei, who looks more and more unhappy with the situation the longer she can’t move.

“Just hold still, Kei-senpai. We’ll be able to get you back into the fight in no time.” I tell her, bringing up a diagnostic jutsu. First off, the paralytic seems to be plant-based…

Kei makes a noise that tells me what she thinks of my word choice.

“Get her out of here.” Kakashi snaps, once Ryusei darts forward to assist Junpei. How are there
enough Kiri-nin to be a viable threat? Isn’t this supposed to be a patrol area? How could they amass this many shinobi without us knowing?

“Got it, Kakashi-kun.” I reply, and grab Kei’s arms. I can’t carry her outright, and she doesn’t seem to be capable of helping…

Kakashi gives a grunt and charges, hands sparking with white lightning.

“I can help!”

I turn, spotting green braids just in time. The other medic’s sense of timing was perfect. She also had more upper-body strength than I did, which was going to work out well. “Oriko-chan, thank you!”

“It’s no problem,” Oriko picked Kei up without any hesitation. I saw Kei make a face as best she could, but as long as she couldn’t move at least she wouldn’t start yelling at Oriko or anyone else.

“You’ll be fine, Kei-senpai.” I say as calmly as I can. “I might not have the tools to help here, but I’ll be fetching supplies. You’ll be fine before you know it!”

…Well, if the backup medical tent wasn’t across camp, I think it would be faster just to fish the paralysis on the spot. But since the main one had all the vital supplies and the Kiri-nin and our shinobi were duking it out almost in the foyer…well.

Resolve made, I dart around the fighting to look for the crate of antitoxin. I am pretty small—Kakashi, Kei and I are the youngest here, and I’m only a chūnin on loan from the hospital, after all—so I usually can move around mostly unnoticed. There’s a lot of noise, but as long as I’m not in the thick of things I’ll be fine.

And…oh no.

A Kiri-nin corners me almost immediately.

I’m…not a bad fighter, exactly? But I’m certainly not the best, and there’s a reason for that. Most of them center around the role of a medic-nin on any team of mixed range combat shinobi. I remember the tenets of being a medic-nin clear as day:

First clause: No medic ninja shall ever stop medical treatment until the lives of their party members have come to an end.

Second clause: No medic ninja shall ever stand on the front lines.

Third clause: No medic ninja shall ever die until they are the last of their platoon.

Fourth clause: Only those medic ninja who have mastered the Strength of a Hundred Technique of the ninja art Creation Rebirth are permitted to discard the above-mentioned laws.

I put almost all of my training time into evasion as a result. Between Kei and Akihito-shishō and even some training with Kurenai-chan, I could dodge better than even my shinobi rank implied.

I duck under the Kiri-nin’s swipe almost as an afterthought, before feinting left and leaping right an instant later. Barehanded…what is he trying to pull? Can he use chakra scalpels too?

Well, if he can, I’m almost certain he can’t do what I can with them.

Kei may get easily frustrated with herself, but she can teach willing students just fine. I understand chakra manipulation theory a different way than she does, but we both get to the same place
eventually.

I create a chakra scalpel—seal-less, like Akihito-shisho insists—that sprouts seven invisible centimeters past my fingertips, and slash down.

The Kiri-nin howls in pain.

Kei taught me how to do the same thing with my elbows, but there’s no way I’m letting him get that close.

And then a huge black bulldog lands on him and kind of…eats his face.

…I just sort of scurry off. I don’t want to know what Kakashi’s been teaching his dogs to do.

As the fighting starts to die down—mostly because there are a lot of dead bodies around, oh man—I make my way back over to the backup field hospital. The antitoxin comes in the form of a saline bag—I mean, the human body will fight things like that off eventually. It’s just a question of giving a little more protection to nerve endings, like dealing with snake venom neurotoxin sans some of the urgency. The oxygen supply in the backup tent should be okay for everything else…

But when I do make it to the tent, it’s empty.

Shelves are all in order, nothing amiss…but there aren’t any people around.

I look down.

Oriko-chan hadn’t been wearing her glasses, when I saw her. Now I know why. And why I hadn’t seen any other medic-nin moving through the camp.

It’s hard to remember to wear glasses when they’re snapped at the bridge.

Or when one’s head is twisted all the way around.

Or when my fellow medic-apprentice has been replaced by some kind of shape-changing imposter.

Something explodes nearby and I have to turn away from the corpse, trying to push the image out of my head and do something.

“Nohara, we’re leaving.” Kakashi says out of nowhere, and I jolt again. How does everyone keep sneaking up on me?

“Where—?” I begin, but Kakashi shakes his head.

“No time.” And Kakashi grabs my arm and we’re off.

“I know, Pakkun has her trail.” Kakashi snaps. “Now we run or we both die.”

We run.

I just…kind of sit there in the trees for a minute once we’re out of the line of fire. The camp is on fire and everyone’s scattered, trying to make sense of the attack and regroup, but there are secondary
explosions and attacks going off all over the place. I can feel myself start to shake—nervous shock, I can diagnose that even in myself—and signal for Kakashi to start explaining what the hell happened.

He clearly doesn’t want to sit still to do it, but…I can’t. Can’t do things right now.

He whistles, high and clear despite his mask, and a fifth dog (…why is it wearing sunglasses?) barks up at us from the ground.

“Akino, get Bisuke and Ūhei. Find Sensei and tell him what happened here.” Kakashi tells him, glancing around to find the other canines.

“You got it!” Akino barks back, “But shouldn’t someone go after Kei-chan with you?”

“I’ll take Pakkun and Bull.” Kakashi replies. “Tell the other three to stay here.”

Akino barks a third time and runs off. The camp’s in pieces and who knows how many of our comrades are dead, but Kakashi just keeps going. I don’t know if Ryusei is dead or if he’s hurt but if anyone should be able to do something, I should, right? Kakashi just doesn’t seem to be thinking of that, though.

…He’s going after Kei. Oh god.

“We can’t leave!” I say, and oh is that ever the wrong thing to say.

“Nohara, our base has been destroyed. We can’t stay.” Kakashi argues. He kneels next to me, eyes narrowed and tone harsh. “Until we can regroup, it’s against anything like regulations to stay in an area that’s already been hit by what looks like Wood Release and high-grade explosives.”

But that can’t…

I can’t…

I can’t stay here. We have no idea what enemy forces will be linking up with patrols and investigating. I’ve never been in the field except for the time I took the Chūnin Exams. I can tell that I’m not suited for it, not now. I should be somewhere safe so…so Kakashi can go on his rescue mission.

Even thinking that makes me feel bad, despite how useless I might be.

But Kei…

Then, “I’m going with you.”

Kakashi blinks, taken aback. “What?”

“If Kei-senpai is hurt, you won’t be able to move her without medical help,” I say, and look down at the camp. “And I can’t stay here, like you said.”

Kakashi goes silent, weighing options. I don’t know what kinds of things he’s thinking of. I hope it’s not Obito.

“Then keep up.” Kakashi says.
Minato: Get mad.

I am the fastest man alive.

That’s what people tell me, at any rate. I know that there’s a difference between speed and speed.

Teleportation is one thing. Specifically, it’s my specialty. Most people can’t fight it effectively, or mimic the split-second timing that is required to fight using space-time ninjutsu. Lightning-powered battle armor in the vein of the Third Raikage’s is another thing entirely. The Eight-Tailed Beast’s chakra cloak is an out-of-human-context and nearly unique conundrum. Fighting both with no backup is a situation that I’ve actually been in twice.

This is the second time.

This particular stretch of forest is about fifteen kilometers from the nearest field hospital. I should know—between my jutsu requirements and the fact that Kakashi and Kei are both stationed there, it’d be remiss of me to forget. High-speed shinobi can cross that distance in a short enough time that I was asked to join the interception squad. Kumogakure in particular has a lot of them, so it made sense to put myself on the front line.

The last two confrontations have been inconclusive, with no casualties on either side. I doubt anyone in B’s squad is dead, or else he probably would have tried to attack in spite of operational sense by now. His brother might be there to hold him back, but Tailed Beast hosts can be unpredictable and occasionally as unstoppable as the sea.

I should know. Kushina told me what she was when we were fifteen, even if she didn’t demonstrate the Nine-Tailed Fox’s power, and I haven’t looked back since.

Gaku Inuzuka stands in a ready crouch with his huge brown partner, Aomaru, fifteen meters behind me. Kurojō Furude and Dōtō Akimichi are five meters from him on each side, fanning out in a
roughly triangular formation. I’m on point, turning the triangle into a diamond. Under normal conditions, we would be long gone, and Aomaru would be in the lead instead.

We’re only not moving because we’ve run into a Kumogakure group.

Just our luck that A and B are both here, I think dryly.

At least both Kumo-nin are probably going to focus on me. Perks of being famous, I suppose.

A and B are both twenty kilograms heavier than me in terms of muscle mass, at least. Dark-skinned and white-haired, they’re both wearing the Kumogakure single-shouldered white flak jacket. B’s white hair is covered by a white-backed Kumogakure hitai-ate, and he wears sunglasses that don’t quite suit the locale. I can see the Iron Seal on his right shoulder, but I just make a note about it. While the seal would be a massive weak spot if I was willing to risk releasing the Eight-Tailed Beast, it would be better to save that particular last-ditch effort for another time.

A is actually bigger than B, with a narrow strip of cloth rather than a bandanna, and his hair is slicked back over his head and down his neck. Going by the new gauntlet-bracer combination he’s wearing, I have to be careful that he doesn’t land a punch. It looks like he could knock me either flatter than dead or right through a tree. From what I remember, though, he doesn’t have the same hole-punching power that his father’s Hell Stab did.

At least Wind beats Lightning.

“Yellow hair and the Body Flicker jutsu,” says the third Kumo-nin. “No two ways about it—that’s the Yellow Flash! They say escape’s the only option with him.”

…One of these days, I’m going to have to sit down with someone from either Iwa or Kumo and ask why everyone seems to mistake the Flying Thunder God jutsu for the Body Flicker one.

A, sounding much calmer than his compatriot, says, “So, he’s the shinobi that stopped the Nine-Tails abduction mission singlehandedly.”

While I know I’ve actually foiled more dastardly plots in my career than most people have fingers, I was thirteen then. People in other villages really don’t keep up with the news much.

“You’re the Raikage’s son, then—A the Unruly.” I say, utterly calm. “Rumors say you’re quick on your feet.”

B, crouching somewhat further back and with two red-handled blades in his hands, puts in, “If Bro and I are together, we can take ya, ya dumbass phony.”

“Nobody move,” I order my teammates, Flying Thunder God kunai raised. None of them need to risk getting into a fight here, particularly with these two Kumo-nin. “Leave them to me.”

My other hand, though, slips into my hip pouch. In an instant, my special kunai are out and in the air, embedding deep into bark and soil all around us.

My eyes narrow, and lightning explodes around A like an aura. Crackling blue chakra lights up the clearing, making the shadows dance strangely. Lightning Armor…hm. Perhaps his father had passed on more than expected. Whether this has any bearing on the man’s mastery of Black Lightning, well, I can’t say. Either way, he should be a difficult opponent.

I can hear Aomaru whine, briefly, and then the ball drops.
A charges, leaving a trail of chakra that raises the hair on the back of my neck even ten meters off. He’s certainly fast, too.

I watch his approach without blinking, simultaneously feeling and seeing his fist headed right for the bridge of my nose.

*Fwish.*

I pull a Flying Thunder God kunai out of a branch. A keeps going in a straight line for a while, back on the ground.

I stab downward, practically curled into a ball and lashing out with all the force my uncoiling body can muster.

And my momentum meets tentacle instead of A’s back. A is bashed out of the way, and I cut halfway through the slippery, rubbery mass before my momentum stops.

It at least confirms without a doubt that B is the Eight-Tailed Beast’s host. I know it already, but it also reduces the chance that my teammates will jump in. No one wants to face off with a demon host with the ability to manifest tails. It always implies the ability to manifest other things.

“No way…” Dōtō mumbles, sounding numb with shock.

“That tail…that has to be the Eight-Tailed host!” Gaku growls, and Aomaru mimics his partner’s low tone.

Well, it’s not as though it could be the Two-Tailed Beast. It hasn’t made an appearance yet, but everyone who follows historical records knows that Kumogakure was given two Beasts to Konoha, Taki, and Suna’s one apiece.

I lay my hand on the tentacle, transferring the tiniest possible amount of chakra necessary to create a Flying Thunder God seal unnoticed, and then warp out of the way before B shifts.

“Sorry, B. That was a mistake.” A says, rejoining his combat partner.

A shrill metallic whistle slices through the air, and Gaku shouts, “That’s the retreat signal!”

I pause, briefly. Does the Kumo patrol still plan to attack? I don’t know enough about A’s personality to say for sure. They are *not* under orders to cease hostilities and break away.

Then a second whistle sounds.

*Retreat/regroup; attack warning.*

I have a Flying Thunder God tag on the camp. I *could* warp over and see what was wrong, but that could mean running right into an ambush if I’m not careful.

And still, Gaku says, “Minato, we’ve got to fall back for now!”

Thankfully, the other three (and Aomaru) leave before the Kumo-nin can decide to attack anyway. I gather up what kunai I can—sometimes, it’s easier to warp them to me rather than the other way around—before turning to cover my team’s retreat.

“That’s nothing,” B says, and I glance back. "Learn it by rote. I'm Killer B and the Hachibi's my high note."
Well, I can't let that go unanswered. From what I've seen, there's a lot more to B than what he's implying. There's something a little sad about seeming to consider the Tailed Beast his only selling point. I say, "Your valor is most impressive. Not as the Hachibi, but as a shinobi, it seems you possess something very powerful."

The tentacle moves, retreating as B pulls the beast's power back.

A points at B, sounding at once proud and threatening, "If you're talking talent, he's even better than me."

Hah. No. Why do shinobi always seem to think that battlefield strength is the key? That way leads to megalomania. "No, that's not it. He already has something more important than that."

The tentacle is still moving. On some level, I still expect one of them to notice the seal. Their teammate, meanwhile, seems to be a non-factor in this confrontation.

A is staring at me.

He doesn't get it.

I stare back, eyes narrowing slightly. "A. You have good friends and a family. I do, too." Kushina, Sensei, Kakashi, Kei… I hope they're all safe. I can't fail them again. "Either way, when we meet next, we'll probably both have the title of Kage." I hope he improves his attitude by then, or else works with B as a person more. Flawed as my own approach to team-building may be, I have no interest in seeing other people fail. A seems like he could be a great Raikage, but he needs to work on a few things. "If you don't realize soon what's important to your brother, you'll lose him both as a jinchūriki and as a person."

I've said my piece. I hope he takes it to heart.

Then, "You can try to confuse us with your blathering, but I won't let you get away."

…Well. A hardly seems to have listened. In one ear and out the other, as Sensei used to complain. Hah.

I watch A look back and forth, trying to understand my Flying Thunder God technique before he makes another move. It's a good plan, but he's falling for the same assumption that many other people do—he thinks that the kunai are the only markers.

Neither one of them has noticed the seal on B.

Lightning flares around A once again. I'm going to have to remember to introduce the idea to Kakashi, when I get back. Perhaps he'll get something out of it to improve his Chidori.

I have time to say, "I have my own burdens to bear." Such as survival, and figuring out what happened back at camp.

There is no way I'm going to allow myself to die here. Even if A were capable of killing me—and he is, given the gap in physical strength between us—I always have a way around a problem if I can't go right through it.

And then he's pretty much within spitting distance. Half a meter of leeway, at best.

It's almost like he's daring me to jump to a kunai. His arm isn't even fully pulled back for his signature haymaker.
Well, I can certainly warp to another kunai, but that’s far too easy. He won’t get the point I’m trying to make unless I do something unexpected.

The element of surprise may be a great equalizer, but among S-rank shinobi it’s more than that. 

*Fwish.*

A scans the area even as he begins to reverse momentum, trying to figure out where I’m headed.

I’m already there. Just not where he wants me to be. As it is, I’m poised over B’s bent back, kunai raised to strike thanks to the seal I put on him. Amazing, how much people don’t notice when there’s someone with lightning jutsu to watch.

B should never have assumed that I would leave him out of the fight. At this point, it’s a debate technique. Killing him would be easy, and both of them realize it now.

As much to B as to A, I remark, "I won't fail."

Not here. Never again.

For A, the ball finally drops. He releases his technique and whirls on me, furious.

A and B’s teammate—a black-haired man who probably also has a single-sound name, makes a surprised choking noise followed by, “Huh? That's...” I have to say, the moment he realizes the danger is actually kind of funny. It’s not his life at risk at the moment (at least not as obviously). “The technique markings are on the Eight-Tails’s tentacle!”

I can hear A growl, more at me than at himself. At least, I think so.

If B hadn’t been quite so quick to draw his spare blades, he would have been defenseless. As it is, he can probably gut me at nearly the same time as I can plant a blade in his spinal column. I stop mostly out of respect for his determination—it’s not as though I don’t have all the leeway in the world to kill him anyway. There are far more seals than even these, and the principle of always having a getaway route is one I know all too well.

(For one thing, I still have a seal on Aomaru’s collar and he’s not out of range yet.)

Still, B says, "Ready to die together? I am. Got my dagger all prepared to jam." His left-hand blade is reversed and poking into my flak jacket.

Hah. Well done. "You're my enemy, but I do like you." I know that many shinobi harbor nothing but hatred for other villages, but that always struck me as unproductive. It’s perfectly natural to have respect for one’s enemies. “You truly move like a shinobi killer.”

Odd, how A hadn’t reacted nearly in time.

Hopefully, he understands why.

I smile a little, and then *Fwish.*

“Minato, there you are!” Dōtō says as I land almost on Aomaru’s back. Almost. I stick the landing otherwise. Not bad for a moving, nonessential target, really.

Also, it puts people at ease if they think I can make mistakes. It also makes them a little less shocked when I inevitably do.
“There shouldn’t be any additional pursuers,” I tell my team with a nod.

“Ah, yes. Well, that’s not what I was going to say.” Dōtō says.

“You have a message.” Gaku puts in, and he’s four meters away, holding a pair of dogs that certainly don’t belong to him. The third is on the ground near him, staring at me.

Akino, Bisuke, and Ūhei.

“What are you three doing here?” I ask. They’re half-grown, still—I wouldn’t expect Kakashi to summon them in combat just yet, even if puppy teeth hurt like hell. I feel a sense of dread building, far more than I felt during the confrontation with Kumo.

“Camp burned!” Ūhei barks.

“Kei-chan’s been kidnapped!” Akino adds.

My stomach fills with lead.

No no no no no no no...

“Kakashi and Rin-san went after Kei-chan!” yips Bisuke, kicking his legs in midair with the urge to run.

Shit, shit, shit.

The Nohara girl is Kei’s best friend, and will follow along on any rescue mission she can without being ordered not to. But Kakashi…after Obito, Kakashi will chase her to the ends of the earth. My students didn’t tell me what Obito’s last request was until far later, but I’d made a guess before.

Kakashi will get both of them killed before turning back. He’ll think it’s fair for him to trade his life, after Obito did it before.

“Show me.” I say before I have a chance to think.

“But Minato—!” Kurojō cuts himself off, catching the look on my face.

I feel cold. Cold, and very, very angry. I want to break something; I’m terrified that this is going to be a repeat of Kannabi. I’m furious at myself for letting it happen again—but this time, the message is here. I know what’s going on. I’m not running to the rescue half an hour late. This won’t be like when we lost Obito.

I won’t let it.

“Head back to camp with Akino and Ūhei.” I order them. “I’ll be back shortly.”

Or not.

Might take longer to make sure my kids are still in one piece. Might take longer to kill everything at fault. Might take longer to bring my kids back safely.

I am going to kill everything between me and them.

The rest of my team is giving me dubious looks.

“Go.” I snap, eyes narrowed.
“Yessir.” Dōtō says quickly, and Gaku and Kurojō follow as fast as they can. Aomaru bolts out into the lead before they’re out of site, along with Akino and Ūhei.

I turn to Bisuke, the last dog. He may not have the best nose out of Kakashi’s pack, but he can find his summoner anywhere.

“Lead on,” I tell him. Once I’m in range, I can just warp the rest of the way.

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**Rin: Enact redundant rescue.**

Kakashi and his dogs lead me farther and farther away from the ruin that used to be our base, until I can’t see the smoke even if I turn to look. The trees would get in the way normally, sure, but I think we’re honestly too far away.

We’re heading in a direction that seems to be between northwest and just west. Roughly. I don’t understand what Kirigakure would be doing with a base this far away from their home territories, even if we hadn’t known they would be betraying us. It just doesn’t make any sense. But Kakashi said they were Kiri-nin, and I knew the symbol on the headband of the man who attacked me in camp…

Something about this just feels off.

Kakashi signals for our group to come to a stop just as Bull and Pakkun start to slow down, and the constant growling abates a little. The dogs are both furious, but I don’t know how much they’re going to help. They’re still small, from what I can tell from how Inuzuka dogs are supposed to be. I haven’t seen any of them use jutsu, or even walk on water.

Kakashi, meanwhile, has just finished a string of patrol missions and could be short of chakra for a full-out fight.

This doesn’t look good.

We land in the thickets, rather than the trees, because tree cover is spottier up ahead than brambles, and no one wants to land in that. Ahead of us is the well-hidden mouth of a cave, if not for the faint light peeking out of its depths. It’s faint, but I can also feel a faint buzz of chakra in the air—that explains why the dogs are on edge. If it’s strong enough that I can feel it, it must be hell on them.

I’m not familiar with Kusa-Konoha geography, as such, but I’m also not sure how Kiri-nin would find this kind of place, barely an hour away from our camp, and set up their camp without us noticing. From the way Kakashi tenses, I’m not sure if he’s angry about not noticing or about something else entirely.

No one had ever…told me how Obito died. Not exactly. Maybe this has something to do with that.

“Stay down.” Kakashi says in a whisper. “Kiri patrols should be in the area.”

“They would have already heard us heading this way!” I hiss back.

“…any force that kidnaps a chūnin should have guards.” Kakashi says, and his eyes are distant again.

True. I pull Obito’s goggles up from their resting place around my neck and put them on properly. This is probably going to get uglier before it gets better.
“I can hear something going on,” Pakkun mutters, nosing up against Kakashi’s forearm. “Kei-chan is in there.”

Kakashi scratches Pakkun’s ears.

Next to us, Bull’s hulking black form is lying flat on the ground, ears perked up as far as they’ll go. He kneads his claws in the dirt, as though waiting for a signal.

“We’re going to have to break in.” I murmur, feeling my pulse quicken just at the thought. I am not trained for this.

“Follow my lead—” Kakashi begins, but a lot of things happen right then.

Bull hurls himself forward and clamps onto the leg of a Kiri-nin that bursts out of the cave right at us. He stops the first enemy shinobi’s movement, but he can’t go after the other five. Kakashi goes high and Pakkun goes low when it comes to the next two, biting at ankles. Kakashi aims a kick at a man’s head, and I duck under and around a pair of quick jabs.

The enemy seems to consist of hunter-nin. We’re so dead.

I have to conclude that this is the worst rescue mission I’ve ever been on. Also the only one, but that part’s not worth mentioning. I think.

And then an explosion sounds from the cave, blowing the last hunter-nin off his feet with the force. I stumble a bit, but I don’t fall.

And then, flying out of the smoke like a kunai, Kei bolts into view.

She looks awful. There’s blood splattered all over the front of her jacket and her pants, and her jacket’s got a big ugly slash across the front. She still has Obito’s headband, but it has a new dent that didn’t used to be there. Her expression is cold and almost dull, as though she’s not really seeing anything that’s going on even as she ducks around another enemy attack.

Then her eyes focus on us.

Kakashi shakes off one of the ANBU, rendering the bigger maybe-jönnin into a twitching heap thanks to his lightning strikes. “Kei!”

Bull intercepts a Kiri-nin that tries to get between Kei and me, bone crunching under his jaws. Kei flips over him, skidding around the bare dirt on her hands and sinking her foot into the stomach of one of our attackers. The man falls and Kei rights herself in a moment, scrambling toward us.

When did Kei learn to create chakra blades with her feet? I don’t remember her showing me that last month!

“We’re getting out of here.” Kakashi almost whispers, or maybe I just can’t really catch what he says. He’s moving so fast, keeping the enemy shinobi from getting anywhere near either of us.

How long can he keep this up?

Kei shoves my shoulder, ignoring the blood on her and what’s transferred to my sleeve. We can’t stay here, but how badly is she hurt?

Kei grimaces, giving Kakashi and the dogs a quick scan. Then she slams her left palm flat against the ground, even as she’s already springing forward and towards me.
She’s left seals on the ground. Ink spreads like water, twisting outward in a massive spiral that almost touches the lip of the cave.

As Kei grabs my hand and drags me out of the clearing, with Kakashi and his dogs hot on our heels, I recognize the seal.

We’re clear of the blast radius before it goes off, diving through the trees well ahead of our pursuers, but the sheer size of the fireball is unbelievable. Kei doesn’t have this much chakra—and I still have her seal scroll, so it’s not like she’s just spontaneously sticking them anywhere her hand goes! She should still be limited, right? This doesn’t make any sense.

And she’s still not talking, even as the ringing in our ears dies down and I can actually sort of hear things again. Her movements don’t quite seem normal—sometimes she freezes for a nanosecond, as though thinking too hard about how her body works, and other times it’s like she’s following a script. Lightning-quick and stalled by turns, where she should be as fluid as Kakashi is.

“So we’re the Tailed Beast Host now?” Kakashi demands over the sound of us all crashing through the canopy. I can almost hear our pursuers, but hopefully being Konoha shinobi gives us an advantage in forested terrain.

“What happened, Kei-senpai?” I ask, stomach clenching in fear. She should be talking right now if she’s okay! What did they do to her?

Is this even Kei?

Kei’s jaw works and she makes a noise in the back of her throat that doesn’t sound happy at all.

“Smells like her.” Pakkun comments, just as we break through the tree line. I think our pursuers are too far back to hear, at least.

This area is so desolate. It’s all rocks and twisted trees, dead from drought or fire. There’s no cover here—if we’re cornered, we’re dead.

Then, Kei turns her head to face us. Slowly, as though still trying to work her way past the frustration building in her chest, she opens her mouth to try and talk for the first time since…since before the paralytic, probably. Is she still being affected?

Then her expression goes flat. It just looks weird.

Also creepy.

Blink, blink. “Hello. We’re, ah, experiencing technical difficulties.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Kakashi demands.

“We’ve lost…equilibrium.” Kei says. She shakes her head, “Before, we weren’t a Tailed Beast Host. Now we are.”

“What the hell?” I squeak.

Kakashi hardly looks any less surprised.

And we’re still being pursued by enemy ANBU. Oh god. Kei has to have a breakdown now? Is it even a breakdown? And a Tailed Beast?! I take back everything I ever said about Kei’s missions even if I never said them. She’s too calm for this!

Kei tilts her head again, like Kei always does when she’s confused or just stalled out. “We have to
get away from here. Find Sensei. He’ll fix us.” Pause, again, even as we run. When she starts again, her voice sounds much more normal. “Between the Three-Tails, the compulsion seal, and the noise, I’m not going to be very coherent. Sorry.”

She holds up a hand when she lets go of mine, letting me run on my own. Three fingers are raised. “We were kidnapped by a shapeshifter—probably called Zetsu, likely artificial. Sealing the Tailed Beast inside us allowed another seal implant, which was placed over our heart. The Puppet Master Seal demands that we head for Konoha and unleash the Three-Tails on it.”

Kakashi goes pale under his mask, and I feel the bottom drop out of my stomach.

Kei goes on, “We’re not going to let that happen.” She almost smiles, but the expression doesn’t reach her eyes, “Because neither seal was designed for a shinobi with multiple personalities, like us. Even if it results in a war on three fronts.”

“…Who are you?” Kakashi asks.

“The Dreamer. Nice to finally meet you.” She glances back at the trees before continuing, “Data storage and processing, but not interaction. That’s not my job.”

Kakashi comes up with a response first. “What’s Kei doing right now?”

Kei—the Dreamer—says, “Running interference. The compulsion affects the dominant personality—the kunoichi you both know. She is stalling. As for the Tailed Beast, the Three-Tails activates hindbrain impulses toward destruction and rage in order to weaken the seal, personified and confronted by Id. I am neither, and have been forced to act in their stead until the situation can be resolved.”

“We need to get you out of here, then.” Kakashi says, all business. Both of us look at him. “I don’t have enough experience with seals to help right now.”

“Hm. I do, sort of, but I lack materials.” She lifts her arms to show that her sleeves and hip pouches are all empty. “All of my supplies and weaponry were either confiscated beforehand or destroyed in the escape. Else I would be able to use pre-prepared scrolls.”

“You prepared for this? How do you even prepare for becoming a Tailed Beast host?” I ask. It seems impossible.

“It was necessary.” The Dreamer shrugs, then, and we have to give up asking her things because it turns out our enemies are faster than we are.

The Dreamer blocks for me when someone tries to stab me, redirecting the man’s momentum as though he didn’t outweigh her by some twenty kilos. I can almost see Obito’s influence there—I remember watching Kei and Obito spar together, throwing each other all over the place. I remember Minato-sensei’s tendency to toss his students everywhere, to avoid hurting them with joint locks or anything like that.

But the Dreamer’s follow-through is sloppier. Less practiced.

“Muscle memory,” she explains in a dull tone, as though she doesn’t really see what’s going on. “Chakra sense helps.”

She’s never been in control? Oh god.

We’re outnumbered twenty-to-three by Kiri ANBU and who even knows how many enemies
waiting in the wings, and we’re three kids. There’s no cover, because multiple ANBU have cut off our escape route into the next chunk of woodland. Not that I’m sure we’d be able to run even if we could reach the forest—many shinobi are trained for that terrain, much as I hate to admit it. Kei’s a jinchūriki and in the middle of an identity crisis, Kakashi’s used up who even knows how much chakra, and I’m not rated for close combat.

Kakashi lashes out, striking one man in the temple while his dogs take out the same target’s legs. The Dreamer darts around me as though I’m some kind of signpost, while I duck and blood flies. I have to be away from the fighting and have a chance to examine Kei to do the most good, but in the meantime I can certainly dodge.

I throw myself backwards, toward Kakashi even as Bull bowls another man over and crams his entire head between vast black jaws.

Kakashi’s hand sparks with white chakra and someone else is suddenly short an arm. It’s not a full Chidori, but Obito’s eye is out and spinning so I know it’s not far away.

A Rasengan forms in the Dreamer’s hand, then vanishes and reappears at her elbow just in time for a cross-blow that sends the man rocketing across the clearing with the force of the combined strike.

Wait. What?

Maybe a lack of access to the physical world equals more chakra control? I can’t be sure until we have time to talk, and I don’t think that we’re going to get that anytime soon.

“Kakashi,” I hear the Dreamer remark, “Kei wants you to know something important.”

“What?” Kakashi bites out.

“If…we lose control over the Three-Tails, she wants you to use Obito’s eye,” the Dreamer ends up back-to-back with Kakashi for an instant. “All Tailed Beasts have a Sharingan weakness, and you’re the closest thing to an Uchiha around.”

I can see Kakashi turn the info over in his head.

“Better idea,” Kakashi begins. As he and the Dreamer move almost in sync, with him flipping a kunai into her expectant hand without a word, “We fight together.”

The Dreamer’s expression changes from neutral to mildly surprised. It just looks weird on Kei’s face.

I get it. “Kei-senpai, you lead. We’ll follow.” Kakashi can predict her movements with the Sharingan and I can dodge with the best. She’s still having trouble, so…

Kakashi nods, though a second later he’s fending off another ANBU kunai strike with two shuriken to the mask’s eye-slits.

“…I see.” The Dreamer turns away. “Eyes on me, everyone.”

We move. The Dreamer rips through enemy fighters first, burning massive amounts of chakra by using contact explosive seals and miniature Rasengan copies from her hands and fingers. Kakashi moves next, tearing the gap wider with the initial phase of the Chidori and lightning-charged projectiles. I move last, between them with chakra scalpels extended.

We’re not really moving, as such. We’re fending off attacks. We’re standing our ground.
But our strategy depends on being too dangerous for the ANBU to try to grab, and we can’t do that forever. All of us have finite amounts of chakra (except maybe Kei, now).

And ANBU are older than we are. More experienced. Less motivated, yes, but all the teamwork in the world doesn’t make up for an ANBU wetworks squad facing down three teenagers.

And especially not when they’ve bolstered their numbers with Water Clones.

As we go, we’re accumulating small injuries. A rip in cloth here. A slash there. Chakra overextension somewhere else.

I hope Kakashi’s dogs find Minato-sensei in time. Otherwise we’re not getting out of this alive.

I’m not going to tell that to Kei though. She doesn’t need to hear it from me. And anyway, she probably already knows.

I feel a hand close over my arm and even as I turn to slice—

Lost boy: Wake.

I’ve been here for months.

“Here” is…kind of underground. So I don’t really know where I am. I know it’s kind of a cave and kind of an underground base, and that I can’t leave because there’s a huge boulder sitting where a front door should be. It’s probably not too far from Kannabi, though. Since I woke up the first time minus an arm and like, half my ribcage, I don’t think I’d have made all that far away without insane amounts of help. And, to be honest, nobody here really looks like a medic. Or acts like one.

There’s a creepy old man in here, who calls himself Madara Uchiha and can only move a few meters unassisted. He’s got these huge gray tubes linking him back to a creepy-looking statue. Zetsu said it’s called the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path. I can’t help but look at it and think it’s a gigantic kindahumanoid desiccated corpse, like what happens to dead people in deserts. Only huge. There may or may not be multiple misplaced eyeballs on its face.

It’s taken months for this…transplanted white flesh stuff to feel normal. Or natural. Even though it’s not either thing, and looking like Guruguru is kind of scary even when you know the guy. Chalk-white doesn’t suit anyone and it looks really freaky even though I’m used to Zetsu, too. It really is. Maybe Madara ripped Zetsu in half to give me a new arm. I don’t really know, and I sure don’t plan to ask.

But I’ll be able to leave soon. I’m stronger than I used to be. I’ll be able to move that rock, and damn Madara for thinking I couldn’t!

I’ll be able to go home.

I’ll see everyone soon. Rin-chan, Kei, Kakashi, Sensei…

I miss them so much. I want to go back, to tell them I’m sorry for getting trapped and for making them worry. If I have to I’ll beg them to forgive me for not…I wanted to go home. I did! But I couldn’t let Kakashi and Kei get hurt after the rocks fell. If I was the only one up, I was the only one who could make a difference! So what if I lost some things! They’re okay. I just need to break away from the insane babysitter and his lackeys to get home.

I can still remember Kei’s face like everything’s burned into my brain, promising to tell Rin how I
felt about her. I can remember Kakashi, before I gave up my eye for him, looking like his world was ending. I remember visiting Rin at the hospital, hanging out for an afternoon of strawberries and dango. I remember Sensei pulling me to my feet and into a hug after a long day of training, like he was a big brother.

There’s a sound like wood twisting and I blink, sitting up. Half of Zetsu is sticking out of the boulder in front of what used to be the entrance to this stupid place, about ten meters up.

“I was just outside!” Well, that’s new. Or not. Stupid Madara won’t let me out yet, even if his lackeys can go wherever they want to just by floating through the ground or something! “Your friends are in trouble! Rin-chan and Kei and Kakashi—all of them!”

Okay, no, *this wasn’t the plan what happened?* “What happened?!”

Zetsu leans down, gap-toothed mouth wide, “They’re completely alone and surrounded by Kiri-nin!”

No, no, no! I need to get out of here fast. I need to help! I’m going to go out there and save them and damn the consequences because *I am the consequences.*

I leap out of what’s been my bed for the last few months—more like a huge slab of wood plus blanket than anything—hard enough to crack the structure underneath my foot. That doesn’t matter, though because I need to get out of here.

And then I skid to a stop, in front of the boulder.

I can’t break the wall. Boulder. Thing.

*God dammit.*

Guruguru wanders over while I’m standing around like an idiot, ready to scream in frustration. *This isn’t how it’s supposed to go!* He comments, “You can’t break through boulders with that body yet.”

I am currently resisting the urge to punch him in his stupid hollow head. I know that and that’s why I want to punch this stupid wall hard enough to break my own arm off. But I won’t. Kei’d be pissed at me if I hurt myself trying to be a hero, again. My new hand clenches hard enough that, if it was still flesh, I’d be bleeding. “I…I need to be out there. I have to save them.”

There’s a noise like someone pulling a zipper open, and Guruguru unravels in midair. As I watch, dumbstruck, he says, “Why don’t you wear my body?” He’s already wrapping around me, and I’m too surprised to say *uh, no, that’s creepy as all get out.*

There’s also another kinda important concern, and I blurt out, “But you guys serve Madara. You sure about this?”

Zetsu chimes in with his two ryō, “He’s…a good boy.”

…I think Kei would have something really sarcastic to say there. But I’m not gonna get to hear it if I never see her again, so I just look up at Zetsu. Then over my shoulder, back at the apparently-snoozing Madara.

Guruguru said in a sharper tone, “Don’t you want to help Rin, Kei, and Kakashi?”

No *shit.* Might as well not look a gift horse in the mouth. I clench my fist, just to make sure it still works properly through Guruguru’s…stuff. Then I stretch my arm out and roll my shoulder. Okay. Still got it. “Thanks, you guys!”
Then I line up a shot at the wall. I put all of my strength into it, but I can also feel Guruguru pulse around me and add his power to mine.

The rock *explodes*, showering chunks of stone harmlessly all over the place. I mean, I’m not in any real danger inside of Guruguru and I’m not sure Zetsu can be hurt and Madara was too far back, but still!

Damn, I could’ve used this a certain couple of months back. Oh well, I have it now!

“You kept the root tethered and used the statue’s power? Nice!” Oh, so that was what happened? Thanks anyway, Zetsu.

Guruguru seems cheerful enough, commenting, “Pretty good, huh?”

Yeah, I think this’ll do. I pull the tether attaching Guruguru’s head to the creepy hell-statue, tearing us both free. I am *not* sticking around.

Madara pipes up from the back of the cavern, “So, you’re going?”

“I’m grateful that you saved me.” I hedge. Wow, I am *not* happy about being stuck in a friggin’ hole in the ground for months on end. Counterpoint. I take a deep breath, looking back at the old man. “But I’m leaving. I have to go.”

The look on his face probably couldn’t have been more disapproving in a crotchety old-man way if he *tried*. And I’ve helped out my share of seniors, so I know what I’m talking about here. If he really is Madara, then he’s about the crankiest old man in history. “You’re being too hasty. It may be premature to thank me.”

…but what exactly are you planning, old man? Still, I shake my head. “I’ll probably never come back here. Everything I need is out *there*. But thanks for everything.”

His expression doesn’t change. “You…will return. And that’s when I’ll get your true gratitude.”

…I don’t care anymore. Yeah, I’m done with him. *Forever.*

Instead, I turn my attention to the guy who’s kind of the ultimate fly on the wall. “Zetsu! Where are my friends? Take me there right now!”

“What you’ve got on your body is a clone of mine.” *Not* the question I asked. Zetsu goes on. “And we can talk to each other telepathically over limited distances. Others of us are scattered here and there underground. We’re able to exchange intel. I’ll use them to guide you.”

Guruguru unravels a little, letting me turn my head fully. One of his white tendrils extends and pokes me in the head. “First, we need to get outside.”

Gotcha! “I’m counting on you.”

I make sure to grab a cloak from what looks like Madara’s old living room, before I go. I have no idea how long that stupid boulder’s been there, but I figure if I show up looking like a white mummy-guy I’m not going to get the best reception.

And then we’re off, heading toward the forest as fast as Guruguru and I can manage. As we move, I ask, “How are the others doing right now?”

Guruguru sort of throbs against my shoulders. I think it’s a shrug? “According to the others, it looks
pretty bad. They’re talking about some Kiri test subjects, but I don’t really understand.”

*Test subjects? Kei, Kakashi, what have you two gotten Rin into now?*

Guruguru continues, oblivious, “Anyway, it seems like they’re totally surrounded. And they’re saying they all look like jōnin or ANBU.”

Oh man. I need to hurry. Kakashi’s a jōnin but he’s also a *kid*, and I don’t even *know* what the girls have gotten up to since I went under.

We break into the tree line, rushing through the undergrowth. Much as I hate it, all I have is time to talk to Guruguru until we get somewhere he can navigate. Meanwhile, I’m biting my metaphorical nails to the quick because these are my *friends* in trouble.

An idea strikes me. “Where’s Minato-sensei?”

“Who’s that?”

I raise my voice, more out of frustration at the situation than anything. “I’m asking you what Konoha’s Yellow Flash is doing!”

After a moment, Guruguru says, “Seems he’s on a different mission.”

}*What, again?! Dammit, Sensei, why can’t you stick by your students?!*

*Kakashi, you made a promise you’d protect them! Please... Please protect Rin and Kei somehow!* I take a deep breath. “I’ll be right there!”

Does this forest go on forever? I can’t even hear any big jutsu going off, so it’s not like I can decide where to go while Guruguru is being quiet about things.

“Obito, it’s probably going to turn into some kind of battle.” Uh, yeah, that’s what I’m counting on. I didn’t spend months stuck in a rehabilitation program for broken shinobi just to *not* fight when my friends need me. If I have to I’ll fight half-freaking-naked while Guruguru stands by with a megaphone for encouragement. Guruguru continues, “So I want to tell you a bit beforehand.”

I am pretty much out of patience. “What is it?”

“You’re not as strong as I am.” Like I care. “And right now, it’s like my big body is wrapped around your little wounded body.”

Scratch that. *Now* I’m out of patience. “*So what?!*”

“I think it would be better if I do all the fighting.”


“Remember what Madara said?” I reply, drudging up some not-so-distant lecture from the old man himself, “That a pair of Sharingan together is when they’re at their greatest power? Kakashi has my other eye, and he’ll be on this battlefield. We’ll be unstoppable together!”

And besides, it’s not like I didn’t spar alongside Kei for *years*. We have this doubles thing down, and I’m still the one with the Sharingan on this team (plus one, because Kakashi exists). It’s going to be *awesome* when we can show each other what we’ve learned. I’m sure not letting them fight alone!

I brush aside his warnings with a sharp, “We’ll all work together and protect Rin!”
Guruguru says nothing for a while. Then, “…Well, you do have Hashirama’s cells implanted now. A whole new strength may also appear when you combine Senju and Uchiha powers, but…”

Why does he have to start mumbling in typical Madara mode? And why can’t I hear him despite being inside him? This makes no sense. “What was that?”

Then drops of water start to fall, quick and unusually fat. I hold out a hand, watching them splat on my…not-my skin, as though someone decided to blow a huge lake into the sky or something. Distantly, I can hear the rumble of something that definitely isn’t thunder.

Together with Guruguru, I vault into the treetops to see what the hell is going on.

Off in the distance, against a backdrop of darkening sky, massive plumes of water explode out of pretty much nowhere.

I press my lips together, thinking. *This isn’t rain. Not even close. I wonder…*

Guruguru breaks into my thoughts with a somewhat hesitant, “I just got word from one of my guys. It seems…that’s the location.”

More explosions throw up enough water to drench us again. Well, I know where Kei is now.

I clench my fist. “Let’s go!”

Dashing through the woods is doing nothing for the worry curled in my gut. My heart pounds up against my ribs. It just doesn’t seem possible, that I’m almost back home and yet it’s like I’m gonna lose everything again, like Kannabi. I can’t let that happen and I don’t know if I’m going to make it, at the same time.

And then left eye socket starts to throb.

*What the hell?*

Parts of the forest go dark and red in alternating colors. It’s like the world’s made of brick and someone just replaced a bunch of random ones with supplies from another building, so things stand out. What I’m seeing is as much part of the scene I understand has to be real, and yet… It’s like my left eye’s still there, but not really. It’s seeing a place and image that doesn’t make sense. It’s like I’m looking past a wall set up to align with where I’m standing—one side has a building and the other’s just woods. They don’t sync up.

Only…

Are these visions?

If so…why’s Kei wreathed in red?

And that…that’s about when the pressure hits.

Killing intent floods everything. I see the phantom part of my vision blink in and out, forcing scarlet chakra to overlay what I see from my right eye. Distantly, I can hear a roar. My left eye throbs again.

…Kakashi?

Oh, hell.

*Hold on, guys! I'm almost there!*
Guruguru and I reach the edge of the forest—

And that’s when I feel chakra so strong that it’s almost like heat. Like I got too close to one of my own fireballs. The wind stirs up in a way it hadn’t before, with the explosions, and with it there’s that sense of being tiny. There’s a faint red glow up ahead that seems to be the source, and I head for it. The dome of power the thing’s broadcasting is transparent and bubbles a bit in my Sharingan sight, but more than that it feels evil. Oppressive. Like the time Sensei used his killing intent next to us, but inhuman.

It’s Kei.

There are Kiri-nin everywhere but they’re backing away, ignoring me and keeping their eyes on the girl standing in the middle of the clearing. Kakashi’s kneeling next to her, next to a limp dark shape that I really hope isn’t Rin, but his eyes are on her too.

“The Three-Tails is going to escape!” screams one of the Kiri-nin.

“Kill her!” shouts some other man, and I remember his position and his mask pattern almost automatically. Commanding officer. “Kill her and take the beast back before it escapes!”

My empty eye socket throbs again, and I get a glimpse of Kei from Kakashi’s standpoint.

She’s glowing with orange-red chakra that is in no way human. It just looks like a flame from here, flowing outward from a point on her chest. Her jacket is torn open and all of her clothes are spattered with bloodstains. Her eyes are closed, but her stance is actually relaxed.

“KEI!” I shout, drawing attention from the Kiri-nin but fuck them.

Her eyes open.

They’re gold-on-red and suddenly wide, looking toward me.

Kakashi’s vision immediately shifts and then I can kind of see myself, clamping a hand over my empty socket.

“Uh-oh,” says Guruguru.
Rashomon Arc: Be the Snarktacular Team

Chapter Summary

Be the snarktacular teen.

If, a couple of hours ago, I’d known I’d be the target for cruel and unusual experimentation instead of Rin, I probably would have hyperventilated for a minute or two.

As it was, I didn’t have time to do that.

Patrol with Kakashi should have been boring. We didn’t have dogs on the route, which means that it was just me and him, giving each other the silent treatment followed by field sign language. Much as I hate to admit to sometimes, we work very well together and understand each other’s tendencies on missions. Kakashi may have to rely on Obito’s eye more than Obito did when he was around, but natural genius also bridged the gap formed by several years of cooperative combat.

Anyway, back to the point.

Much like the rest of the Land of Fire, this particular chunk of territory was heavily forested. The trees were a lot smaller than they were in Konoha itself. The First Hokage probably had something to do with that particular ecological quirk. Out here, where presumably he’d never bothered to get in a tree-based fight with anyone, the trees were normal. Twenty, thirty meters. Just small enough that some branches would break under our weight. Not exactly conducive to stealth, that.

We were, in fact, eventually confronted by Kiri-nin. That was something I’d expected, since a conspiracy ended up being the thing that ended Team Minato in the old timeline. I’d known Kiri-nin were in the area, at least theoretically.

The fight was short and we ended up running, but not before I breathed in some kind of yellowish gas that made it harder and harder for me to move on my own.

Should have seen that coming. It was yellow and just…ugh.

At least it was some kind of muscle relaxant and not acid. The things I learned from Pokémon…

I ended up being dragged by Kakashi. Thankfully, I could run long enough that he didn’t need to slow down too much, at least until he hit the camp. Increased respiration through physical activity finally caught up to me about when I met up with Rin again, which just so happened to be when the camp was under attack by our pursuers. At least I didn’t face-plant, right?

Speaking of, one of the things we ended up getting hit with was Wood Release. I could see that much, even while being lugged around like a sack of potatoes. It’s kind of hard to miss the roots, to be honest, when they’re towering over the camp and reaching down and smashing the hell out of every structure taller than a thirteen-year-old girl.

Wood Release, at that time and place, could only mean one thing.
Zetsu.

(Okay, so technically Yamato could have been involved. Theoretically. But generally speaking, Konoha tends not to allow ten-year-olds to run assault missions against our own bases, no matter how powerful Wood Release might be. Also, Yamato didn’t have the chakra capacity for that scale of chaos, even as an adult.)

The green medic-drone picked me up when Rin got distracted, supposedly to carry me off to Medical, but that didn’t work out that way.

Since I was still perfectly conscious, I got to watch as medic-drone dragged me out of camp and handed my useless carcass off to a Kiri-ANBU before turning into a Zetsu and melting into the ground. His chakra entirely disappeared, which struck me as kind of unusual, to say the least. This, for some reason, didn’t prompt any comment from the Kiri-nin, which was setting all kinds of alarms off.

My tone was off, by the way. I had managed, through some finagling on the parts of enemy ninjas, to pass through anger and terror entirely and into the kind of Zen calm on the other side. The stabby sort of Zen, really. You know, if I could move.

Basically, I was a little bit out of my mind.

Zetsu, from what I remembered, would serve Madara’s goals over all others. That included Tobi’s, toward the end—I remember something to do with a Black Zetsu takeover, as far as that goes. And If Madara was involved…well, I was fucked. That’s the long and short of it.

I wouldn’t give up just yet.

Joking.

The Kiri-ANBU carried me for what seemed like a long time. I wasn’t exactly able to complain about it, since the paralytic hadn’t worn off yet.

Four other masked Kiri-nin arrived to meet my captor, just outside of some weird cave. Two of them took me from Asshole Alpha, hoisting me into the air between them. It probably wasn’t necessary, though there was the chance of the paralytic conveniently wearing off to worry about, on their parts. While I hoped that’d be the case, it wasn’t.

At best, I was able to glare up at them with a growl building in my throat.

“This the one?” the Evil Bookend on the Left asked.

“The other was too fast,” said Asshole Alpha, leading the way. Probably talking about Kakashi. Only other idiot in the field and all. “We’ll take what we can get.”

When I got out of this, I was going to kill them. I was going to pop Left and Right’s heads off and kick them across a field. I was going to cut Asshole down to size, too. Even if I didn’t know what they wanted, there was a good chance it’d be revenge-worthy and I’d be obligated to repay them tenfold for the slight on my honor. Like a good Uchiha (which I wasn’t, but revenge had always been something solidly Uchiha in my mind).

I refused to consider the possibility that I was going to die down there.

Still, my heart pounded and I could feel sweat break out on my forehead, under Obito’s headband. As the goon squad manhandled me down a sloping tunnel, I was getting more and more certain that
the entire situation was going to end a certain way. As in, I’d end up a Tailed Beast time bomb and have to avoid the huge bloody pitfall known as That One Time Kakashi Punched a Hole in Rin. Or not avoid it, and save Obito a mental breakdown.

Sarcasm as a defense mechanism: exhibit A.

Alpha said to one of the others, who I privately called Squiggly-Line Guy, “Get the monster.”

…Fuck, it was what I thought it was.

Just my luck.

Left and Right Bookends lowered me to the rough dirt floor, and I ended up with my head turned to the side a little, even as I’m spread-eagled on the ground and unable to do anything about it. It didn’t help—the cave was dark, the walls were bare aside from mold and one lousy lantern, and the floor had ink scrawled up and down every surface. I couldn’t see what the entire seal looks like, but I could make a guess—spiraling, since of course Kiri would rip some of their sealing techniques off of old Uzushio.

Right Bookend pulled one of my sleeves up and drew a line of black ink down my arm, from the inside of my elbow to the end of my middle finger. He looped the line around my hand, before leaving a big dab of ink in the center of my palm. I could feel Left Bookend doing the same thing with my other arm. In both cases, my forearm scroll holsters were removed.

Speaking of, my hip and thigh pouches were also gone. I forced down a brief flare of panic. Not that I’d be able to do anything with them, what with the security detail, but I wanted them around. That was where I’d put my backup plan.

So much for that.

And then Squiggly started pulling my jacket zipper down.

I made a keening noise, alarm klaxons in my head already blaring. I didn’t have enough motor function to move, much less punch him in the face and run, and my jaw clenched and unclenched almost at random. My heart hammered against my ribs as I heard the little teeth scrape, cycling the poison through my bloodstream still faster.

Stay calm!

*How the fuck am I supposed to stay calm?!!*

Just as Squiggly sliced my mesh shirt open halfway down to the bottom seam, Left and Right Bookends’ knees slammed down on my wrists, cutting off what little feeling I was starting to get back. Purple light flared from the ink all around the chamber, and then it…well. The poison wasn’t an issue. The fact that I was stuck to the floor like a fly to a spider web—that was a problem. The Bookends got off, and disappeared out the tunnel as far as I could tell.

Alpha was holding something. Just barely, I can twist my head to get a better look at it.

It was an ancient clay jug, with ceremonial rope twisted around the neck. The rope itself was red and trailing little paper tags, like they had on shrines. On the jar, in ink that shouldn’t be fading, was a paper seal that runs from the front of the vessel and up, over the cork, and back down to make a solid binding. There were also bells tied to it that jingled faintly as Alpha steps closer.

The less obvious problem with it, perhaps, is the fact that Alpha’s hand was channeling chakra
directly into the seal.

And a certain something inside was reacting.

Squiggly stood over me, then pricked his exposed thumb with the tip of a kunai. A tiny bead of blood welled from the cut.

…He’s going to be the dead guy, then? The Dead Demon Consuming Seal required one sacrifice mostly because it invoked the Shinigami, but whatever Chiyo had done to seal Shukaku into Gaara hadn’t done the same. And I had no idea about the Iron Seal.

To be perfectly honest, I was hoping that he’d get eaten.

Then Squiggly held his hand over my face, with his bloodied thumb presumably leaving a red mark between my eyebrows. Once he pulled back, he drew a straight line from there, down my face, chin, and throat to the middle of my sternum, though there was no way a blood smear had lasted that long. I tried to glare, but it wasn’t terribly effective.

“Is the Three-Tails ready, captain?”

“Yes. Complete your seal.” Alpha ordered.

Squiggly placed his right hand across my forehead, and two fingers poked just above my heart. I could feel the chakra building in his core, spreading outward.

What—

“What the hell is this thing? It…whatever it was, it took up space in my head with a sensation like the hum of distant power lines, after the first wave of pain subsided. The chakra leaking from it started from my heart, even as I was gasping for air. I could feel it sending out little feeler tendrils, anchoring itself into my system. The weight in my chest didn’t dissipate—if anything, the mass of evil chakra sank its hooks in deeper and got comfortable. It was like it was building a lair, like it’d hollow me out and wear my skin like a suit.

There was no suppressing the exhausted, terrified shudder that followed.

Still, I could follow the trail of breadcrumbs when it was right in front of my face.

Ergo: Evil chakra in me. Evil chakra in Squiggly’s arm. Evil chakra not in the rest of Squiggly, or in the ominous glowing sake jug.

Conclusion: Squiggly’s arm was an anomaly. Alternately, chakra transfusion. Theory: Chakra transfusion provided by the evilest crotchety old bastard this side of Kakuzu—one Madara Uchiha, since everything else seemed to be courtesy of his schemes.

The day was just getting better and better, I thought dizzily.

“Next.” Alpha said sharply, though Squiggly was a little slow to react this time around.
Alpha ripped the seal off and, to my chakra sense, that was the moment when all hell broke loose.

The Nine-Tailed Fox was the only Tailed Beast I’d ever sensed before this, and even then he’d been bound up in Kushina’s stomach somewhere. His chakra had been compressed and hardly any of it was circulating in her system due to the difference in seal designs between the Uzumaki seal and the Dead Demon Consuming Seal. If I stood by Naruto, some ten years from now, and he had the fox sealed inside him, I probably would have been much more conscious of the kaiju in his guts. Kushina’s seal was older, as well as the sort that could be created over years of patient experimentation with Uzumaki methods.

Mito had had that time. Sensei and Kushina hadn’t.

Wouldn’t.

The Three-Tails wasn’t the biggest or baddest of his siblings. Not by a long shot. But in close quarters, I felt like the mouse that had just brushed the barn cat’s whiskers. If I could move I would have run, and damn whoever got in my way. I needed to get away.

I suspected even before then that humans in this world were predisposed to a primal fear of giant chakra monsters. It just sucked to have it confirmed in the worst way.

The next thought that hit me between the eyes was this: It won’t fit.

The Three-Tailed Turtle might not have been the most powerful of its siblings, but even the weakest Tailed Beast had way more chakra than a human did. They were living chakra—energy made solid, even, if human chakra could be compared to a gas in a lot of really tiny tubes. Only the most exceptional human beings ever came anywhere near attaining a chakra capacity comparable with a Tailed Beast.

I was in no way exceptional. And even half-depleted, my chakra coils had never had room for that much energy.

The Puppet-Master Seal hasn’t been activated yet, the Dreamer was saying, distractedly. Anti-suicide, anti-deviation, chakra hooks for some…thing…

Shut up!

Squiggly started making seals: Rat, Dog, Bird, Ram, Dog. The transferred chakra was staying put—it looked like this one was going to be all him.

I am so f*cked.

I honestly think my ears popped from the change in air pressure in that room. The jar was open and I swear I could see a face peeking out of the hazy cloud of red, lined with spikes and scales and one glowing golden eye. The red chakra bloomed, like algae or a cloud of radiation, saturating the air with stuff that honestly hurt to breathe. If I squinted, I could see the skin of Alpha’s hand start to warp under something that wasn’t heat but burned all the same.

“Spiraling Blood Seal!”

There was red. Then white. Then ringing, and then silence.

And then I landed on my head, on a couch, and bounced into ankle-deep ice-water.

Woo, mindscape.
“Get up!” the Dreamer buzzed by my head, almost invisible in a cloud of frantic gold and blue sparks. I sat up, sputtering, and looked around.

My mindscape was bigger, I think, but that was an adaptation to circumstances. Our little therapy setup was still sitting on top of an ice shelf next to a glacier-blocked lake. Two glaciers meeting tends to involve a couple hundred thousand tons of ice, which is enough to stop the water from moving. I remember something about a prehistoric ice lake, back home, and the effects when the dam broke. The bowl of ice was keeping the water from rushing out and possibly destroying the ever-present memory-cloud, which was hovering around below us rather than above, like a particularly stupid flock of birds.

They’d been shunted out of their usual place by a massive cloud of red energy, which was more like an actual cloud in terms of size and behavior than the memories were. Over the crack where the two glaciers met, straining upward at the cloud, was a gigantic black thing that looked as much like a Hell-octopus as anything. Only it lacked features, other than four long, barbed tentacle limbs around a central round bulge, which contained a purplish-gray Rinnegan eye. Its hooks were dug deep into the ice.

Just looking at it made me sick.

The Dreamer floated by, prodding at the hooks with her Yin-aligned chakra and watching them dig in deeper. The ice started to fracture, just a bit.

Instead of helping her, I focused on the solidifying, angry cloud of red chakra as I floated away from the Freud couch. And on physics.

Let’s just say you don’t drop a giant demon turtle into a lake any more than you drop a moderate-sized car in a swimming pool. At a hundred and twenty miles per hour. From a cargo helicopter.

The memory-cloud was preemptively getting out of the way.

Also, where was Id?

CRACK.

FSSSSSSSSHH!

“Elvis is in the building!” shouted an unfamiliar, slightly squeaky voice from what seemed like far away.

…Well. Id was also awake, and had manifested somewhere on the Three-Tailed Beast’s back. Speaking of which, apparently displaced air made a noise like a gigantic firecracker going off.

I probably should have been more interested in the fact that Id was awake for the first time I could remember, or maybe I should have been paying attention the fact that she’d talked in more than sleepy mumbles. But there was a gigantic demonic turtle hanging out in the glacial lake like the ultimate rubber duck, which sort of took up most of my attention.

“This is in no way what I signed on for.” I said, as Id danced through the air in front of the Three-Tailed Beast’s nose.

“Look out!” the Dreamer called to me, and I dove out of the path of a long black tentacle. I threw the couch in the way, and watched things get smashed to bits. Even the coffee table.

I leapt off the side of the glacial wall and flew out over the thrashing Three-Tails. Overhead, huge
red cracks had started to form in the sky.

“What the hell is going on?” I said to the Dreamer, hanging in midair.

“The seal is after you. She,” and this seemed to indicate Id, “can get close to Isobu without being burned.” The Dreamer seemed to be fading—half of her sparks had disappeared, and so had her left arm and leg. Her face was following suit. Id, meanwhile, actually seemed to be getting stronger. Though I couldn’t be sure, what with the layer of agitated spray between us and the turtle monster, it seemed she hadn’t let go of the spike yet. That was a good sign, if weird.

“I assume the seal will rip you right in half, then.” I said, thinking aloud for a given value thereof. I paused and swooped away from another attempted tentacle strike. As I rejoined the Dreamer, I went on, “Okay. The seal wants to grab me, which means I’m the target personality. It’s ignoring you, and Isobu is…”

Isobu was roaring and trying to shake Id off by diving. I could have told him that he’d have to do better than that to dislodge a freakishly determined mental construct while splashing around in my mindscape, but I didn’t. Not that he would have heard me.

“Isobu is busy. I’m a tentacle-magnet—and I’m aware how wrong that sounds. You’re literally half dead and I have no idea how that happened!” I summed up. “Do you think you can, I don’t know, take over for me so I can concentrate?”

“Take over?” the Dreamer repeated, stunned. “Now?”

And then another of the tentacles shot toward me. We shot out of the way.

“Yes, now, because I really don’t want to see what that does if it goes active and it does what I think it does.” I said really quickly.

Like mind-controlling me into exploding in Konoha. That would just ruin everyone’s day.

“You’re not a target.” I told her, spinning out of the way of another strike. But every time, the spindly hell-tentacle was getting closer. It was learning my movements. “I’m delegating!”

“I’m not sure I support the kind of delegation that has me on the front line.” The Dreamer scowled, despite the fact that her head was half missing. “In fact, I’m sure I don’t.”

“Too bad! Remember, right-left-right!” I said, just as one of the purple-black tentacles hooked around my left ankle. “Oh, shit.”

“Good luck!” The Dreamer called.

And down I went, screaming all the way.

Blink. Blink.


Masked Kiri ANBU detected: designated Tango 1 through Tango 5. Tango 1 designation reassigned —addendum, Tango Alpha.

Blink. Inhale. Exhale.
Recalibrating…

...Ouch.

“Go to Konoha,” whispers Tango Alpha.


Ineffective.

“Break the seal,” he continues.

Assessing seal strength…

Moderate and gaining, but misused. Target of seal: designated primary personality. Threat assessment: High.

Conclusion: Break binding seal. Creative reinterpretation required…

Tango Alpha leaves. Tango 1 through 4 follow. Tango 5 stays, kneeling.

Target in range.

Engaging remaining Yin chakra. Shoulder, bicep, elbow, forearm, palm, index finger…

Never needed to move before. Don’t now.

Seal broken. Hand up, to Tango 5’s throat. Black chakra lines spread. Tango 5 falls, chokes.

Blood splatter. Main seal lines broken.

Close enough.

Query: Remnants of seal in Tango 5? Analyzing… Conclusion: Tango 5 carrying related mind-altering seal. Query: Other Kiri-nin?

Not important right now. Filing it away as evidence.

Flagged for further review: Multiple instances of Puppet-Master Seal. Self-replicating???

Stand up. Stagger. Rebound off wall.

Recalibrating…

Fluidity is the goal here. Motor control is the goal.

Accessing…

Combat protocol engaged. Speech protocol loading…

Priority: Combat protocol.

Priority order processed.

…Okay. Time to kill our way out of here.
Holy crap it’s dark in here.

Like, really, really, really dark. I not only can’t see my hand in front of my face, but I can’t even be sure I have a hand. I’m even trying to kick my legs and snap my fingers and…nothing.

…Crap. Where am I?

…Is there even a ‘me’?

This is the weirdest version of an out-of-body experience ever.

I need to get out of here. The Dreamer can’t do shit for me in here, and I don’t even know if handing the controls over to her is the right choice. Maybe I’d be better—she has Isobu’s ear. Er. “Skull protrusion that conducts sound,” anyway. His chakra would be enough to save everyone!

…And also probably kill everyone. Bad plan. Not handing reins of giant monster over to someone with the emotional maturity of an actual thirteen-year-old might have been a better one. Too late now, though.

I really need to get out of here.

And there’s only one way to do that.

Hey, Madara-based jerkwad! Fight me!

It was like someone, somewhere, said, “LET THERE BE SOME DAMN LIGHT IN HERE.”

I turned my head as soon as I was sure I had one again, watching as my arms and legs rematerialized. By the way, don’t do that if you have a chance. It’s creepy in the kind of way that makes a little voice in the back of my head scream. And I was also naked, which was kind of par for the course for this stupid literalized extended metaphor.

As soon as I thought that, a gray hoodie and pair of jeans materialized on me. Out of habit, I stuffed my hands into the shirt’s central pocket. It made me look like a social shut-in, which was really rather nostalgic. You know, despite the fact that I really talk a lot. Or at least it seems like it…

Well, well, well.

I stood on a tiny gray island in a brilliant white vista that was, as usual for my mind, also an ocean. The gray dipped into water that was blinding via reflection, and I was alone. I was also pretty sure that if I wanted, I’d be able to shout and never hear an echo. The space was just that big, on top of being bereft of macroscopic life aside from me.

…Who am I kidding?

I’m never alone in here.

“Oi.” I said.

Somewhere in the distance, something huge and black exploded out of the water.

“Yay, hell-squid.” I muttered. I wished I still had Obito’s headband in here, but since I didn’t and it didn’t appear when I thought of it, I shrugged and moved on. I was so far past freaking out over all of the events today that I’d gone right into a Zen mode of calm, and it hadn’t worn off yet. “Today is just getting better and better. First the kidnapping, then the demon…”
There was a bulge in the water indicating that something very large was moving very, very fast right below the surface. It was heading my way.

When it hit my little island full-force, the water leading the charge split in front of my face like there was an invisible wedge in the way. And in that moment, I got a better look at the thing that had infested the open ocean of my mind.

…It was a parallelogram with a great, pulsating Rinnegan eyeball on it, with four stringy tentacles wiggling on the end of each corner. Given that the rest of the world was kind of in three dimensions, it was, effectively, like looking at a cardboard cutout the size of a billboard. It was not, in fact, a squid. It would have had to evolve another plane of existence before it would get close to qualifying as a squid.

“Somehow, I figured your avatar would be a little less literal.” I informed the thing looming over me, with a tone that could have been used as a knife.

“I’m Kei.” I said with a shrug, ignoring its mandate. “The first. Probably also the last, barring shenanigans.”

“Nope.” I said. For once, I was the spare. The distraction. And if that meant holding a conversation with a non-sapient seal, possibly while getting squashed—an imminent possibility—then I would keep it up.

Metaphysics. This whole situation was such bullshit.

I sighed. “So. What am I supposed to be doing here?”

“Shut up.” I said, tucking stray strands of hair behind my ears. I needed something to do with my hands…

Obey.

I glanced at the monster looming over me, as though it was an afterthought. I didn’t give a flying fuck about it since it didn’t do anything. It wasn’t Madara. It couldn’t even think. “Fuck off.”

The black abomination shuddered, folding inward. I caught little sparks of red, flashing in the white void. The red reached down, falling like dust, and surrounded the burgeoning cube. The Rinnegan eye was still looking at me.

…I may have pissed off a tiny, artificial, but nonetheless existent eldritch abomination.

Or maybe the Tailed Beast had co-opted the seal. Needed to make a note about that. You know, if I got out of this.

…I also probably needed to remember to make a will.

The black stuff swirled like a tornado, twisting with enough force to toss me off the little gravel island and into the water.

If I hadn’t already known the trick to water-walking, I probably would have had a very splashy landing. It would have been undignified and probably would have resulted in my immediate death.

Crouching on the water’s surface, I watched as the tornado of darkness reformatted itself.

When the water was finally calm again, there was a figure standing in the middle of the gravel island
where I’d been.

It was entirely normal, aside from the glowing eyes with red irises on black sclera. From head to toe, it appeared to be my height, my rough configuration, and wearing my clothes.

It looked like an older version of my physical body, complete with scars and accessories and swords.

I, on the other hand, pretty much felt like my old physical body. The one with long hair, a retainer, and stupidly thick glasses.

(Speaking of glasses, a pair appeared on my nose. Boop.)

And despite the script I’d just walked into, I was more annoyed then afraid. Isobu, it seemed, was sufficiently on board with the “squash Konoha” plan that he’d gone so far as to reinforce Madara’s mind control. Maybe it was a Rinnegan or Sharingan thing. Maybe it was a Tailed Beast thing. Maybe the concentrated power of my self-loathing had decided to take the mental attack weaponry for a spin.

Or maybe I was reading the situation wrong and the existence of a Dark Kei was somehow analogous to something else I’d never heard of.

…Though Dark Naruto was related to the boy’s suppressed resentment after a lifetime of neglect by his hometown, apparently common with all Tailed Beast Hosts. Like I was, now. For about five minutes.

What did I have that was so devastating?

And then she opened her mouth.

“Useless.”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Four years of planning, and it amounts to nothing,” she hissed, stalking toward me. I backed up, confidence neatly punctured. “Training. Fighting. Making friends. And nothing you did kept him safe.”

…Oh hell.

“He nearly died. He should have died. You had the fate of the world in your hands and you let him live.” Dark Kei snarled.

I skittered backward. “Obito is my friend!”

“What is one life in the face of those he’d kill if he grew up? The formation of Akatsuki, the Nine Tails attack? The Uchiha massacre, the fall of Kirigakure into the Bloody Mist, the Fourth Shinobi World War? How does the life of one teenage boy match up to the deaths of half a continent?” She was furious. “Why let him live? Why not slit his throat the minute he’s squashed? Why didn’t you kill him?”

“Oh, so we’re going around killing kids now?” I snapped back, anger boiling in my chest. “You want me to kill my best friend, because he might be a monster?”

Dark Kei circled around me, hissing, “He is one!”

“But not yet!” I didn’t lash out. I could have lashed out. But old-me had only ever slapped bugs. Dark
Kei was very, very different. “Obito isn’t a monster yet. And if I have anything to say about it, he won’t be.”

“Then you should have killed him when he was helpless.” Dark Kei scoffed. “Could you even kill him now?”

I scowled. “So this is what it comes down to? Why I haven’t punched Fate in the face? Or why I’m still friends with Obito?”

“You have done nothing.” Dark Kei repeated, eyes glowing.

“Excuse me? Canon looks like the fucking Flying Spaghetti monster from where I’m sitting.” I snapped. “Madara is to Obito as Darth Sidious is to Anakin goddamn Skywalker. But he hasn’t crossed the threshold. Rin isn’t dead.” He hasn’t started killing kids.

“How long do you think you can keep it that way?”

“A hell of a lot longer if you would let me!” I shouted.

“And if you fail?” Dark Kei asked quietly, beguiling.

Fucking bitch. “Then I’ll…”

Then I’ll...what?

Fear stabbed at the core of me, like an ice pick to the chest.

When it came to the Plot, Obito was the equivalent of a nuclear bomb over Hiroshima. Everything short of Madara’s manipulations could be traced back to him. Or more specifically, it could be traced back to a combination of Rin’s death, the patented Uchiha genetic psychological and physiological vulnerability to insanity, social isolation, broken promises, and skilled emotional manipulation by a geriatric nihilist. Obito simply acted, based on the busted hamster wheel in his head. It was also becoming clear that Madara’s spider-web was broader and more subtle than I’d expected, which was another nail in our collective coffin.

And yet at the same time, his massive body count could have been even more devastating. He could have neatly sidestepped any need for the Akatsuki just via his Kamui ability. He could have just grabbed Naruto ten or fifteen years before the Fourth Shinobi World War and kept him in a box, and never had to fight a war. It wasn’t like fucking dimension hopping was a thing anyone but Kakashi would be able to fight on the level. And he hadn’t been able to do that until he was thirty.

And Obito, even as early as age fourteen, could have reduced Kakashi to compost in two seconds flat.

I pressed my lips together in a thin, whitening line.

And yet he hadn’t. He’d displayed a bizarre mix of villainous competence and childish amusement in screwing with everyone from his subordinates to the Five Kages. He could have stolen every Tailed Beast host in approximately an hour, barring shenanigans.

He could have crushed the world under his heel.

…And he didn’t.

I could just say that he was a moron no matter how old or evil he got, but that didn’t feel right.
…Though it’d be accurate for a couple of people I knew…

“We haven’t hit the point of no return yet.” I said quietly. “If I fail to protect Rin, I’ll still try to bring
Obito back.”

“Why? Why not kill him and save yourself the trouble?”

Because I had to start as I meant to go on.

Premise: I kind of want to keep the world from getting more fucked up, or even fixing it a little.

Okay. So. How do you bring about a kinder world, without using really freaky methods such as the
Eternal Tsukuyomi, which are reflective of a profound disillusionment with reality? How do you
change people? How do you make things better?

Well, going by the previous era, cynicism and the cycle of revenge hadn’t worked out for anyone.
Suppose the Uchiha wiped out the Senju, or vice-versa? Different clan would pop up to take their
place. Same shit, different day. Hashirama Senju’s willingness to work with other clans, to take them
into the fold, and to make alliances where before there was neutrality, had build Konoha. It’d built
the shinobi system which, while flawed, was better than the old ways.

Madara had been a walking snag in that plan. Maybe if Hashirama had killed him properly, I
wouldn’t be here.

Killing Obito wouldn’t prevent Madara from finding another cat’s paw. And I wouldn’t be able to
locate Madara without Obito’s help. At least I knew that Obito had been Madara’s flunkie.

And unless I planned on waiting until Naruto was a teenager, I had to start now.

…The only potential snag in this was the possibility, however narrow, that Obito had died.

In which case I was probably fucked, because ANBU.

Though Madara wouldn’t have needed to set all this shit up if Obito wasn’t still kicking.

“I won’t deny that killing certain people would make everyone’s lives easier.” I said after a while. “I
just don’t think Obito’s one of them.”

Dark Kei hissed, “Excuses! You saw—!”

“I saw a lot of things. And despite that, I’m on Team Minato.” I said. “I was there when Obito was
crushed. I was kidnapped. I was made into the Three Tails’s host. All of those were things Rin was
supposed to do.”

I wasn’t looking at things the right way. I had assumed that Obito was the same, despite the
differences in our lives. But who could be? We are defined by the events in our lives and our
reactions to them, and they’d gotten off-track somehow.

I met her eyes. “Thing is, I also don’t remember anything about Hayate having a family. I don’t
remember Kakashi being kidnapped. I don’t remember the Chinatsugumi.” I spread my hands out,
shrugging. But I got it. I understood. And the thing I understood had gotten bigger without me
noticing, much to my pleasant surprise. “It might not seem like much of a difference. But it never
does at the center, does it? But if I chucked a rock into a lake, the ripples end up quite a lot bigger
than the rock.”
I almost smiled at her. At her existence, bound up around fear and pain.

“T’m the rock.”

Nearby, water started to gently flow around us.

“But still, I need to own that.” I remarked, to Dark Kei’s turned back. “I’m not helpless. Not useless. But I think I need to keep you on board.”

Nothing good has ever come from denying parts of yourself that do, in fact, have a point.

“Or at least your advice.” I hedged, lowering my arms to my sides. I didn’t need to hurt her. I didn’t want to hurt her anymore. I probably wasn’t capable of it anyway.

“What makes you think you can change anything, after four years of nothing?” Dark Kei demanded, but her voice was so much smaller. She was less threatening, too.

I paused.

Great Man theory of history, or did I take a populist stance? Was influence over the world opportunistic, or inborn?

“I don’t think that history is made solely by big names.” I said carefully. Though here, it might be, there was a whole world of human beings who contributed to the way things went. Madara wouldn’t have become the threat he was without the contributions of his clan and its history, or the Sage of Six Paths. The shinobi system wouldn’t exist without the people in it.

And yet, what would Madara have been if he’d been born a member of the Kaguya clan? Or if he’d been born a no-name civilian child, like Rin? Clan, talent, historical placement, and luck had all been a part of his rise to notoriety.

There were astoundingly exceptional people in this world, yes. But I think that they owed something to their bloodlines, at least here. Or they owed things to the people who never made it into history books—the farmers, the soldiers, the cousins, the lovers. Everyone around them, who had a hand in their continued existence, was owed some of that credit. If not everything.

And I, reborn into the body of a child from a no-name family, had been lucky or unlucky enough to end up standing on the fulcrum on which the world balanced.

(I was holding the gun that could kill Archduke Ferdinand and his wife. Would I? And would it matter if I didn’t?)

Madara’s particular plot for the world would keep going if I didn’t find a way to nip it in the bud. I wasn’t sure I could do that alone, or at that exact moment. It didn’t seem like an immediate thing.

But could I remove Obito from the line of fire?

One way to find out.

“When I get out of here, I’m going to make sure that Sensei knows what’s coming.” I told her, looking down at the ripples spreading below my feet.

“You aren’t going to live long enough for that.” Dark Kei said sharply, fists clenching.

“And you don’t get to decide that.” I replied. “Whether you’re the Three Tails or Madara’s seal or a bizarre amalgamation of both, there’s enough going on right now that if I do get killed, I expect it’s
going to be because of the assholes outside of my head.” There were probably enough of them that they outnumbered the voices bouncing around in my skull. Simple statistics and all that. “But if I can’t do shit on my own, then I need to find people who can.”

Though didn’t I already know that?

_Thanks, Rikuto._

I held up my hand. So did Dark Kei. She kind of looked like she was gonna slap me, but I was more going for a formal oath. Oh well. Hopefully, I wouldn’t have to hug her—she probably would have stabbed me.

And then the sky started falling. As pieces fell away—like crashing wallpaper to something as big as an ant—crashing into the water a long ways off, the pattern underneath was pulsating red-orange.

_Rin goes limp, head snapping back and her nose trailing blood into the air._

Then everything went red, backed only by the sound of screaming.

---

I slammed back into control of my body with the rough impression that I’d been caught in an especially aggressive revolving door. I’d gone through and come out the opposite side of where I’d come in, sort of dizzy, and the Dreamer’s Yin chakra left a sort of trailing line of string back through the hell-device in question. Maybe from an unraveled metaphysical sweater.

…I’m probably misusing the word “metaphysics” at this point, so I should stop.

“Kei?” said Kakashi’s voice.

Also, I was on fire.

Metaphorical fire, but still. And had a couple of slash wounds I couldn’t quite remember getting. The Dreamer really wasn’t ready to take the old meatbag for a spin, I suppose. _Push past it, push past it…_

I shook my head to clear it, but it mostly made my head bang like a drum. Ow. I blinked, twice, and everything was bizarrely orange-red. Other than that, though, I could see everything more clearly than I had in some time.

And I could feel everything. Tailed Beast chakra in my coils where it bubbled and burbled where mine had been gentle to the point of being unnoticeable sometimes. I could feel other chakra signatures even without trying, pinpointing twenty normal human signatures and a bizarre seal on each one that marked each as not-us, not-ally.

It felt like the seal clamped around my heart.

I blinked again. Looked down.

Immediately, I brought up a diagnostic jutsu on the unconscious kunoichi in Kakashi’s arms, as though nothing at all had changed. My chakra seemed to sputter, as though Isobu couldn’t believe his chakra was being used for non-stabby purposes.

“Kei.” Kakashi said again, and his hand closed around one of my wrists. I looked at him over the top of the screen—_mild concussion, broken nose_—and remembered.

…I probably needed to focus on the threat. Kill everyone, _then_ heal Rin if possible. Okay. I could do that. The hell-creature essence pounding through my chakra coils would help. I could sort
of feel it bubbling along aggressively, as though pleased that I was t-minus five seconds from committing horrible violence.

I dropped the jutsu. I placed my other hand over his, just for a second, and he let go. I stood. Felt Isobu’s chakra pulse. Felt someone else’s chakra get close.

Lashed out with one fist and hit someone hard enough in the chest to make the rib cage give way. I could feel it when he bounced off the ground twice, and went still. And when the seal in his chest died with him.

Kakashi still had Obito’s eye trained on me. He didn’t look at the guy I’d smashed. He did, however, look really surprised anyway.

“Hey.” I told Kakashi, while also listening to my own voice and being surprised by how deep and guttural I sounded. “I’m…I’m back now.”

“…Right.” His voice was a little too confused to be truly skeptical.

“I know things have been strange lately.” I said, keeping half of my attention on the enemy. “But I promise, I’ll explain later. Keep Rin safe.”

Kakashi’s eyes narrowed and he gently eased himself out from under Rin. His chakra was slighter and more subtle than the cauldron boiling in my chest, but I could still feel it and I could see the anger in the way he moved. And aside from Rin, he was the only uncorrupted person in range.

The only person not carrying Madara’s little helper around in their chest cavity. Hell if I even knew what everyone else’s did.

Mine seemed to involve a possession attempt and (at the moment) an awful lot of internal screaming matches with a giant turtle.

Kakashi’s hand remained on Rin’s shoulder. But…

“No more suicidal heroics on this team, Kei.” Kakashi informed me. Obito flashed through my head, not for the first time that day. I frowned. “We’re all going home this time.”

“…I’d like that.” I admitted, looking down at Rin even as our enemy was busy trying to figure out the best way to flank us. “Thank you.”

And if things went wrong, then…well, Kakashi’s Sharingan ought to give us a measure of control. For a bit.

Then, just as I got ready to lead the way, I felt the faintest trace of a very familiar chakra signature.

Obito!

And that is exactly when I heard a wonderfully familiar voice shout, “KEI!”

…the only problem was the fact that the owner of both that chakra and that voice was also carrying around two alien presences.

One, a near-match to the thing that kidnapped me.

The other, a copy of the thing sitting in my chest.

Oh fuck.
Even as my head twisted his way, I knew we were in for a hell of a ride.
Rashomon Arc: Deceleration

Chapter Summary

Kei: Maintain a constant state of loopy competence. How do you even do that?

I don’t care who you are—if a thought-dead teammate pops up out of fucking nowhere, you stop and stare a bit.

That said, I’d solved the issue of Schrodinger’s Ninja, which had only been a debate in my head. It was just a stunner to everyone else (conscious). By which I meant Kakashi. Rin didn’t count, and the Kiri-nin probably didn’t give a fuck. Obito was alive, Rin was alive, and Kakashi was conscious. All of the Kiri-nin were wary of me, which meant they’d stay out of immediate stabbing range. So far, I was doing a lot better in my corner of the universe than canon had!

Basically… I rolled with it. If you don’t roll with things, you tend to get run over anyway. “OBITO, GET YOUR ASS OVER HERE!”

Kakashi made a choking noise. The figure by the tree-line, while his chakra jumped in shock, was already dashing across open ground toward us.

And everyone who tried to stop him got punched ten meters through the air. It was a change—in canon, Obito’s Mangekyō had been active by now, so he would have gone right through people. But even in our little pocket reality, one of the guys who got punched by him was never going to get up again, since a bit of Zetsu’s Wood Release grew through his body and roots burst out of him.

…Zetsu was a game-changer, all right. I couldn’t help but imagine that he’d do the same to any of us if the urge pinged off something important in his freaky mutant brain.

Kakashi overcame his shock within two seconds—it wasn’t like I’d told him Obito wasn’t really dead (since I hadn’t been sure anyway), and immediately whistled his dogs over. Bull let go of someone’s leg and bounded over, Pakkun on his back, and the two of them clearly planned to stand guard over Rin.

Well, if it was going to be down to puppy-guarding a downed teammate…

Just as Obito reached us, arms whirling as he skidded to a stop before crashing into Kakashi, I swiped some of the blood from my shoulder wound off onto my index and middle finger. Good enough.

I slammed my palm to the ground with a sharp, “Summoning Jutsu!”

Tsuruya appeared out of the smoke, towering over us by at least two meters. Immediately, she jabbed at a Kiri-nin’s mask with her beak as he tried to get behind us—he fell back, screaming about a mangled eye. Her wings also blocked incoming kunai, with a sound like rain on steel siding.

(I finished that guy off. Six down, fourteen to go or so.)

“Whoa. What have you been doing these last few months?” Obito asked.
“Recovering.” Kakashi said bluntly. When Obito blinked at him, Kakashi went on, “So. This is a new record for tardiness.”

Obito, even though his head was in the middle of Spiral Zetsu’s unfurled spines and he obviously hadn’t had a haircut in the months he’d been gone, still managed to look quite indignant. “Oh, come on! You can’t blame me for this one! How’s Rin? Is she okay?”

“Unconscious, but she’s fine.” Kakashi said. As though to prove him right, Rin made a noise that probably meant she was going to be wobbling to her feet soon enough.

Obito’s lone eye lingered on his goggles, which Rin was still wearing. The edges might have gotten a bit chipped or cracked, though. He gave me a blank look, eye focused on my forehead, which I ignored.

“Do you need me to guard her, Keisuke-sama?” Tsuruya asked.


Thank goodness for team training and not having to use full sentences anymore. “Pakkun, Bull. Stick by Rin.”

“You got it, Kakashi.” Pakkun said.

“So…I guess we just need to kill our way out of here now?” Obito asked. “Just like old times!”

“Probably easier said than done, but yeah.” I said. “You and your suit up for it?”

“Sui—oh, Guruguru? Yeah, we’re going to be fine!”

Not yet. I still needed to figure out a way to kill that thing.

Speaking of killing things, the Kiri-nin looked like they’d recovered from the bizarre introduction of two extra fighters. They still outnumbered us, but between the dogs and Tsuruya’s towering height, it wasn’t like they had more range or reach anymore. Rin groaned by our feet.

…Damn, I wish I had a new kodachi. Too little, too late.

“Obito, take the lead.” I said, thinking aloud. Guruguru wouldn’t let him die—at least, I thought so—and Kakashi’s chakra was flagging. My own was unstable, and I’d prefer to choose how close I was to everyone when it inevitably blew up in my face.

…And I needed to look in my scrolls. Screw the Kiri-nin for confiscating them—I didn’t even know which asshole had them.

“You got it, Kei!” Obito seemed cheered, at least.

I nodded at him, but I held my hand out to Kakashi. “Kakashi, do you still have that scroll I gave you?”

Kakashi pulled it out of his thigh holster and flipped it into my waiting hand.

“Thanks.”

Hopefully, something in here would be able to shut Guruguru down. And me, if it turned out that two Sharingan eyes wouldn’t cut it.
Overhead, Tsuruya leaned back and flapped her wings, sending a flurry of steel down-range to scatter the enemy. Under the cover provided by flying feathers, Kakashi and Obito both charged.

I unrolled my scroll on the ground and silently despaired.

Only one compacted Evil Sealing Method variation, and one Chakra Suppressing Seal. I bit my thumb, thinking. I...might have been able to seal Obito’s mind control thingy, since the easiest access to the heart for sealing purposes was the sternum and that would just mean getting Guruguru out of the way. But for me, that would mean putting a seal directly over Isobu’s seal—interference would render the effects of either seal useless.

Then there was the conundrum surrounding the Evil Sealing Method as a whole. Was it actually capable of so much as holding back the Cursed Seal of Heaven? On a non-Sasuke subject, in particular. If it really was based solely on willpower, then keeping the “destroy Konoha” suppressed would be no problem. If it wasn’t…

“Ow...” said Rin’s voice.

I ignored my scrolls for a moment. “Hey, Rin-chan. You feeling all right?"

“...I feel like I got hit in the face by a flying clipboard...”

…I have to ask, someday, exactly what she does at the hospital. But at that moment, it wasn’t important.

“Well, your nose might be broken, so that’s one point in common.” I replied.

“...What about you?”

“...Eh, demon container status confirmed. I also have a bunch of voices screaming in my head, my chakra feels funny, and I’ve finally been outed as a shinobi with split personalities to my friends.” I shrugged, trying to be as blasé as possible. I put all the irreverence I had into that. “Also? I think I need that scroll I gave you.”

“Um. Okay, here.” Rin sat up with some trouble, leaning on Tsuruya’s leg, but she did give me the scroll she’d stowed away in her pockets. Tsuruya paused in her metallic feathery onslaught for long enough to reach down and nudge Rin’s head with her beak, but that was all.

“Okay, now we’ve got two of these seals...” I muttered. “And no explosives.”

“Kei-senpai...you can just fight with them.” Rin said, indicating the boys. Probably. “I would just slow you down.”

I looked up.

The best way to describe how Obito and Kakashi fought, together, would have been “cleaning house.”

When I was still an ordinary college student, I’d seen episodes of Naruto where it seemed like every single person on the show was psychically predicting the moves of people on their side. The Sharingan pretty much embodied that, which was why it struck me as odd that people didn’t use it to enhance their intra-team coordination as much as they tried to out-awesome each other. It was perfect for teamwork and no one used it that way!

Over the previous few years, Obito and I had trained for a kind of pair fighting based more on
kinesthetic awareness, since he hadn’t had his Sharingan then. He had to know how I moved, fought, and even thought in order to do what was necessary. I had to train for the same thing. Kakashi and I hadn’t, but the eye had made up for it.

And now there was nothing to compensate for.

Aside from maybe the fact that Obito-plus-Guruguru was taller than Kakashi by about ten centimeters.

*Long time no chat. What’s going on in there?*

…*Nothing good. The seal’s going insane.*

*Which one?*

*Both of them, really. Id is still busy turtle-wrangling, but the other one’s starting to deconstruct things around here. We only have so much time.*

*Dammit. Then what was all that “Chat in the Center of the Mind” shit for?*

*That bought us time. And then we paid you back. But this can’t go on as it is.*

“Is…Is that Obito?” Rin asked, sounding more hesitant than ever. Still, she successfully jolted me out of my thoughts.

I nodded.

Rin’s expression was blank and disbelieving, despite the evidence of the boy’s movements, shouting, and chakra signature. Okay, so maybe that last bit was just me. Rin swallowed hard and said, “*How?*”

“Gonna have to ask him that.” I said. I tucked the scrolls up my sleeves, though only loosely. Fucking Kiri-nin broke my safety catches.

I knew, of course, but I also wanted to know what had *changed*, since obviously Obito was running around and Rin was still alive. That had *not* been a part of Madara’s game plan—it wouldn’t make sense. If he was also responsible for Rin’s capture in canon—which was a possibility I was warming up to—then there had to have been a reason for it. The Kiri plot could have easily been an excuse for…well, for picking up a Robin to his Slade. An Anakin to his Darth Sidious.

Seemed convoluted, but *anything* to do with the Uchiha clan got way more complicated than necessary.

Rin’s fingers clenched around the goggles she wore round her neck. “Do you think he…?”

That question, sadly, had to go unfinished, since a pair of Kiri-nin had gotten past the boys and was heading right for us, with some kind of paper seal in hand.

Sometimes the fun moments are interrupted by people who need to be punched in the face. That was one of those situations. There were, after all, still a significant number of hostiles around. Even if, since I was channeling Isobu, everything seemed to be moving a little slower than average.

For a turtle, Isobu’s chakra somehow still included a noticeable speed component. I’d have to ask him about that later. Assuming I lived.
I punched one of them in the face hard enough to send him skidding toward the tree-line. Sooner or later, I was going to regret hitting anything that hard, but for the moment Isobu’s chakra was keeping up with the strain I was putting on my body. Even if he had to shave the ends of my cells’ telomeres to do it. Nothing about cellular regeneration was free.

(I was trying not to think about that part, but of course that meant I thought about it more.)

The second one, though, got two dogs to the knees. Then I kicked him in the chin.

**Can I just remind you that the seal on Isobu isn’t especially stable?**

_Much as I hate to admit it, I actually can’t do anything about that._ For one, even theoretical Tailed Beast sealing was beyond me. I could only suppress chakra using the seals I had, and that was the sort of thing that would knock me out since I _also_ happened to be channeling Isobu at that moment. For another, repairing a seal on your sternum is just asking for a screw-up, based on the awkward angle involved.

Of all the times to hate the fact that Sensei hadn’t gotten around to formalizing any kind of advanced apprenticeship...

Never mind that.

Anyway, the herd was thinning. Astoundingly, the boys’ teamwork was cutting a bloody swath through the Kiri-nin, which would have been impossible just a few months ago. A punch from Obito could launch someone skyward or implant a horrific root monstrosity in the vein of something dreamed up by Yōko Kurama, depending on which arm he used. Kakashi’s Chidori-charged kunai were more energy-efficient than the Chidori itself and no one among the Kiri-nin had the know-how to block them.

Or maybe no one was wind-aligned. Dunno.

With Tsuruya guarding Rin, I kind of felt like not joining in on the fight was a cheap way out. Sure, I’d been captured and kind of tortured a little and certainly put in fear for my life, but I was also carrying around a monster made of pure chakra. Tailed Beast Hosts were rightly feared on the battlefield, since most people didn’t _expect_ to have to deal with one due to our rarity, but I was feeling like I didn’t really merit that much of a threat.

…Eh.

“Rin-chan, are you okay here?” I asked.

“I…I think so. If they need help…” Rin trailed off.

Seal of approval! Yay!

Also, Isobu’s chakra was a bit like an adrenaline high in that I could _already_ tell I’d regret hacking my way through these guys. In both a physical and a mental sense.

And funnily enough, Isobu was one of the Tailed Beasts who didn’t have claws and therefore couldn’t grant any to his host if he wanted to. He also didn’t have rear legs. Amazing, the kinds of things that shoot through one’s mind when stress and adrenaline are having a punch-up in the back of one’s head.

So, chakra scalpels it was.
At that moment, two Kiri-nin rushed me.

Isobu’s chakra boiled up inside my chest, spreading like translucent reddish gas over my vision and the immediate meter or so of air directly around me. Then it solidified, condensed, and an orange thing swept across my field of vision from the left—

—oh hell it’s a tail when did I get a tail—

—and smashed tip-first into them, sending the first man slamming into the other and shoving them both across the clearing at speeds that would have made Sensei proud. When the orangey chakra limb pulled back, I could see spikes forming along the length of it, with the end spines curving into what looked like a caricature of a human hand.

…Okay. Autonomous demon chakra cloak. Great. Clearly I needed to be ready for my flesh to start boiling off any minute.

I swallowed hard. I was…almost sure I shouldn’t have been entering Version 1 Chakra Cloak or growing tails until I was angry. And, well, I was but I wasn’t. Adrenaline was probably making a mockery out of me, but I was sure I wasn’t feeling anything like what Naruto had gone through at the Valley of the End. There was no way.

End it quickly.

…Okay. Yeah, whoops, running out of time. All of it.

“Tsuruya, hold down the fort.” I told him, and damn if my voice didn’t sound like I’d been a smoker for ages. Woo.

“Of course, Keisuke-sama.”

I didn’t want to see the look on Rin’s face. Not when I was starting to feel my skin burn.

I charged.

The first Kiri-nin to get in my way got smashed flat against the ground by my brand new chakra appendage. He might have survived, I suppose, if I hadn’t dragged my chakra scalpels across his face and throat a moment later.

I spun, Isobu’s chakra flowing in weirdly unsynchronized movements that were alternately too fast or too slow by bursts. As a Kiri-nin’s blade passed overhead, I went low and introduced him to a double-mule kick that probably didn’t need to be reinforced with Tailed Beast chakra but was anyway.

Brained the next one with a backhanded punch.

And by that point, I had made it over to where Kakashi and Obito were continuing their do-si-do session against the idiots in flat masks.

“Kei!” Obito said, once he spotted me—not hard, given the “perpetual motion murder machine” impression—and Guruguru had shot a spike of his own flesh through the clingiest Kiri-nin. There. Free of enemies for a moment.

I smiled weakly. “Hey, Obito. Long time no see.”

“No kidding! Um…wait.” He paused. Then, “What the hell is going on?”
Oh, Obito.

And, well, Kakashi. Gotta take care of that. Kakashi’s final opponent was smashed off-course and
into a tree trunk by the chakra tail I had at hand, while he stood there with his next kunai raised and
sparking. Then he lowered his hand and turned back to me.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, he was looking at me like I was about to explode at any second. Probably
actually a thing!

Still. Obito. Been out of the loop for months. Filling him in, right.

“That…is a very long story.” I said. “But the short version goes like this: I was kidnapped by a white
not-human thing that knew Wood Release, Kakashi and Rin-chan busted in to save me, turns out I
am the current container of the Three-Tailed Beast as of ten minutes ago, we were fighting the
guards and stuff, and now you’re here. And not dead. How the hell did that happen?”

I got all of that out in two breaths and felt immensely, disproportionately proud of myself for a few
seconds.

“…What? Man, what the hell!” I wanted to hug Obito for his sheer indignation at the entire situation,
though Isobu’s chakra would probably make that a bad idea. “I’m gone for a few months and this
happens?”

“This had nothing to do with you.” Kakashi said, but he sounded more tired than anything, really.

“It has everything to do with me!” Obito argued. He was getting angry. What? “The only guy I
know who has Wood Release is Zetsu, and he’s creepy and white and talks about poop with
Guruguru and he was the one to tell me you guys were in trouble.”

…What the fuck.

“We would never do something like that!” Guruguru protested, spines wiggling.

I was glad Obito was in the middle of an astonishing epiphany that took me a while even though I
had all (most of) the goddamn cards, but maybe it wasn’t a good idea to have it when he was
wearing the thing that had helped him massacre the Kiri-nin and could easily do the same to all of us.
You know, just for safety’s sake.

“If it helped the old man keep me there, you would.” Obito said darkly.

His eye was spinning.

Kakashi’s was, too. “…So this is what attacked the camp and is responsible for this mess?”

…For some reason, I couldn’t stop myself from putting my two cents in. “I’m not even sure what
Kiri had to do with it. The mind-control seal I have is the same as the one in all of them.”

Kakashi’s expression was downright murderous.

That was when Guruguru spat Obito out, launching him at me. I managed to shove Isobu’s chakra
aside in order to catch him without burning him, but my sealing scrolls slipped out of my sleeves. At
the same time, Guruguru threw himself backward and started to reassemble himself into a vaguely
humanoid shape, while Kakashi tore after him, Chidori sparking.

Crap, crap, crap. Time to put all my excess energy to good use. I shoved Obito back onto his feet
and concentrated on keeping the bubbling Tailed Beast chakra from affecting my thought process more than it already had.

And... Kakashi shouldn’t have been doing that.

Isobu’s chakra slammed down between them, forcing Kakashi to skid to a halt even as Guruguru’s spikes shot through the empty space he would have occupied. As it was, the tail absorbed the hit and started to burn through the spiraling spines, forcing Guruguru to stop attacking too.

The Zetsu variant’s hollow eye socket was burning into both Obito and I.

“I am so glad I was training that whole time.” Obito stage-whispered in my ear.

“You’re taking this well.” I replied, eyes still on the living suit of armor.

Kakashi skirted the edge of Isobu’s chakra and made his way over to us in a deadly silence. I withdrew Isobu’s tail, and watched as Guruguru melted away into the ground.

“What is that thing?” Kakashi asked, his tone as cold as I’d ever heard.

“It’s, uh—he’s kind of like a clone.” Obito said. “He works for Madara, so—”

“Madara?” Kakashi demanded.

I shook my head and he bit down on whatever else he was going to say.

“—So he’s way stronger than he should be.” Obito finished. I wondered what he was thinking of. Any particular incident. “Tsunade-strong.”

“Tsuruya, get Rin off the ground!” I roared, and watched as my summon immediately snatched the concussed medic up and onto her back. Tsuruya was in the air in seconds, even with Pakkun and Bull riding shotgun on her back and keeping Rin on board.

“What are we going to do?” Obito didn’t have the kind of visual range we needed—though, to be more accurate we needed someone with a Byakugan looking straight down.

Sure, Kakashi and Obito might have had a sort of Rinnegan multi-vision-thing going, but…

And then an echoing voice said, “Spoiled little children should learn to play by the rules.” Guruguru surged out of the ground behind Kakashi. Everyone jolted in shock and we all nearly made it out of his reach, but his hand still managed to close on Kakashi’s shoulder.

Guruguru only needed contact to kill.

I saw red. Isobu’s chakra reached out, twisting one tail into two, coming at the Zetsu clone from both sides—

—Kakashi was already moving, Rasengan in his hand—

—And Obito was moving, too. I could feel his chakra twist—the betrayal, the anger, the no I need to be stronger faster better—and knew his eye was evolving because so was Kakashi’s, like a mirror, and—

Two tanned hands, one over the other, came to rest on Guruguru’s back. The faint sound of crisp paper was all that told me that there was a paper seal involved. Mine.
“Chakra-Suppressing Seal.”

And it was Sensei, oh god, how did he fucking do that.

Guruguru spasmed, releasing his hold on Kakashi just in time to take a Rasengan to the face-analogue because our team’s mini-jōnin played for keeps, making his body explode from the neck on up. Sensei ducked underneath Isobu’s tails, as though he played Limbo with Tailed Beasts all the goddamn time, dragged Kakashi out of the way, and Guruguru got smashed between them. Obito shot over it all, tucking and rolling in midair and landing on the opposite side of the subdued and possibly dead Zetsu clone.

At most, Isobu’s tails might have clipped the ends of Sensei’s hair. Oh, and killed Guruguru. That was cool too.


…My brain was fucking fried.

“We don’t have enough chakra to survive this.” The Dreamer’s voice was saying.

And why the hell was my mindscape dark?

Wait. Back up. Turn the damned lights on!

Oh, hey. I blinked.

Lights went on. Cool. Distinctively red light, since Isobu was now in residence, but it was light even if it wasn’t steady and it really reminding me of a submarine’s warning lights—like, before the vessel sunk. In a terminal sort of way.

The Dreamer was barely more than a shattered torso and half a head, with all of her limbs drifting off into scattered motes of dust. She looked like…I don’t know, like any Claymore after fighting Priscilla, like what happened when someone took machine gun fire across the torso. Only, you know, no blood was involved. Id, somewhere below us, had lost her human form and morphed into a sort of humanoid thing with massively extended, rubberized arms that circled Isobu’s neck and head twice or more. I could only tell what she was based on the process of elimination.

“…Um.” I said, feeling very stupid.

“I’ve crossed the event horizon already.” The Dreamer drifted along, upside-down. Her remaining eye wasn’t tracking my movement at all.

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked, even though I was already almost sure of the answer. But I had to ask.
Some things have to be said aloud.

“…I expended our combined Yin chakra to maintain control over the Three-Tails and over Madara’s seal.” Her voice was distant and fading. “…my existence is at an end.”

Oh.

Given that the Dreamer had been my backup (in the electronic sense as well as the figurative one), a sort of reminder app and a sounding board, I could guess how that would work. I’d lose everything that made me more than just Keisuke Gekkō, chūnin-level shinobi of Konohagakure. I… didn’t necessarily know what that meant—I mean, I was more than just a collection of pop-culture references. I was more than my “foreknowledge.” I didn’t know what being really reset to age thirteen would mean.

Nothing good, probably. And there would be problems if it meant me-at-thirteen or Kei-at-thirteen. Without my context, Kei was someone entirely different from the girl my teammates knew. But without Kei’s context, I would be useless.

“I….I guess we find out what happens when I lose my adult mind, huh?” I said, numb.

“NoT qUiTe.” Id’s voice was hideously distorted, and she shot up toward us without letting go of Isobu’s head. It was the kind of thing that would have fit in well in, say, One Piece, but reminded me of Slenderman instead.

The Dreamer’s sole remaining eye blinked, once. “…she’s correct.”

Id’s voice was still disturbing, as was the way her grin stretched a little past what would have fit on her face. Oh dear. Alice in Wonderland indeed. “We ArE pLaNnInG sOmEtHiNg FoR tHaT. eVeN tHoUgH wE wOn’T eXiSt AfTeR…”

One of the Dreamer’s arms came back together, though it still looked like a visual glitch. She put that hand in mine. Id, on the other hand, grew another jet-black tendril that looped around my other wrist like a bracelet.

“…Goddamn it.” I said. I had an idea of what they were going to do, and couldn’t even decide what part of myself to be angry at.

“…my chakra will reinforce our seals. Both of them…” The Dreamer’s eye went unfocused again. “…I’m sorry it has to be like this…”

“hEhEhEh! I’m NoT! tHe WoRlD iS wAiTiNg FoR yOu.”

The memory cloud, buzzing around us, condensed.

"...Preparing data dump."

…this was going to hurt.

There was a sensation like a sledgehammer to the head, and a bubbling in my veins. Then falling.

I woke feeling like someone had run me over with a truck.

Worse yet, not all that much time had passed. I could still feel the aftermath of the power high kicking around—ergo, I hurt like hell, and was shaking rather badly. So I hadn’t been out that long.
If I’d managed to be transported home and to the hospital, I probably would have just felt like lead. As it was, I was sort of regretting the fact that this was not the case.

I sat up anyway, though, since I could feel a branch underneath me instead of bare stone and need to figure out why that I had changed.

And…I kind of cracked Kakashi in the forehead in an impromptu headbutt.

“Of all the stupid—quit standing over me!” I hissed, clutching my head. Ow, ow, headache from earlier emphatically not gone, ow.

But instead of running away like he usually did, Kakashi immediately squished me in a hug.

…Bwuh?

I looked over his shoulder, to where Sensei was sitting with Obito and Rin and Tsuruya was standing over them all like a gigantic living umbrella. They were well within reach, and were facing my way. Obito also kind of looked like he wanted to get in on the hug business, but since Rin was also kind of glued to his side and Sensei had one hand clamped down on his arm, that didn’t seem to be in the cards.

“I’m okay.” I told Kakashi, patting his back awkwardly.

“…We’ll see about that.” Kakashi allowed, and gave me one last squeeze before letting go and sitting back on his heels. That gave me enough space to try and get my bearings properly, at least.

Yeah. Gonna have to be sure. “Sensei, I…I think we need to use the other seals.”

Sensei nodded, and held up one of my scrolls. It was blank, used up. “Evil Sealing Method? Already done.” At my blank look, Sensei continued, “Kakashi told me about the mind-control seal. Ingenious but evil, and also easily shut down.”

He patted my shoulder, but my mind was already whirling as I looked down at the exposed strip of skin on my chest. I couldn’t see anything aside from the barely-visible seal holding Isobu back, which was already fading into invisibility as I watched.

“It’s on your back, Kei-kun.” Sensei told me.

…Well, I knew who I’d bet on if Sensei ever had to throw down with Orochimaru.

“And the Three-Tails?” I asked.

“Modified the existing seal with a couple of safety releases. You’ll hold until we get back to Konoha.”

…Well, damn. There went most of my immediate personal worries.

Still… “What about Obito?” I asked sharply.

“Obito?” Sensei’s expressed shifted to concern in an instant and he pulled back from his sole shirtless student to get a better look. Rin also moved out of the way to give Sensei a better chance to examine Obito.

“Kei, I feel fine! There’s nothing…” Obito began, then stopped at the look on Sensei’s face. I was sure that mine and Kakashi’s matched it.
“Actually, there is. How could I have missed this…?” Sensei ended up trailing off into a mumble. “Kei-kun?”

“Sensor. Also got a look at like twenty other ones.” I wobbled a hand in midair to indicate ‘more or less.’ I’d initially been in blinding pain, after all. “The Kiri-nin.”

“Well, now they’re all too dead to be much use for templates, but I see what you mean.” Sensei replied. He seemed to bite down on the inside of his cheek, thinking carefully. “This isn’t the place for this discussion. Now that everyone’s awake, we need to get out of here.”

“Are we going home?” Rin asked, her voice very small and a little strained.

“Yes, via someplace else.” Sensei stood. “All right, everyone up.”

We stood.

“Link hands.”

We all did. Tsuruya also ducked her head, resting her beak on my shoulder.

“Reverse Summoning Jutsu.”

…There was a sensation like going through a Portkey—yes, the iconic fishhook behind the navel, yay—and then a crapton of smoke and also feeling like gravity was out to lunch for a moment. Then Kakashi and Rin’s hands left mine and, quite suddenly, I smacked face-first into a turf while my sense of balance was still shot. Blech.

Suffice to say that I was never summoning Tsuruya frivolously ever again.

“Rin-chan, Kakashi, Obito, Kei-kun, Pakkun…” Sensei was muttering as I got up, sounding like he was trying to keep track of a kindergarten class on a field trip.

As I started to pick grass out of my clothes, Kakashi was chatting with both of his dogs in a very low voice. Rin swayed, only to be steadied by Tsuruya’s wing, and Sensei’s hand was on Obito’s shoulder again. We all felt tired—well, us kids more than Sensei, for all that he’d done three sealings in less than an hour and probably been fighting before that—and I was mostly just glad that I couldn’t feel anything remotely related to a Zetsu in the area.

…Speaking of which, aside from us, there weren’t any human chakra signatures either.

Looking around, I was left with the impression that I’d dropped into Alice in Wonderland by accident, or perhaps ended up somewhere in Kusagakure again. While there was short grass, some of which had gotten in my face, mostly the stuff that stood out included oversized leaves, brightly colored toadstools, and the sound of distant running water. And not just streams—I was thinking of an actual, worth-putting-on-a-map waterfall.

“Sensei, where are we?” Obito asked, looking up at the nearby stone monuments through his bangs. In fact…

Wait. He would have had to arrange it ahead of time, but…

“Welcome to Mount Myōboku, home of the toads.” Sensei told us, grinning.

Tsuruya shook out her wings, looking around. “This place is much larger than I expected…”

“Some of the toads are pretty big, too.” Sensei’s gaze swept along all three summons in our group.
“Can you all get home from here?”

“Easily.” Tsuruya said. She twisted her neck around so that she could see Pakkun and Bull. “Do you mind if I fly you home?”

“It would probably be best.” Pakkun said, before nosing his master’s palm. “Later, Kakashi.”

Kakashi nodded.

As the dogs scrambled up onto Tsuruya’s back, Rin moved over to lean on me, instead. The huge crane gave us all one last bow before running off, flapping her wings in long strokes that quickly lifted her skyward. Within moments, all three of them were out of sight.

“…Is there any chance that the toads could think she was a bug?” I asked.

“No.” Sensei gave me a funny look. Well, better than a suspicious look…

“Why here, Sensei?” Obito broke in, before pausing to blow his bangs out of his face.

“It’s the safest place I know of.” Sensei told us. “Not to mention, I managed to send Kōsuke to Jiraiya-sensei, so he should be ready to summon us back to Konoha when we’re finished here. Gama should be able to give us a hand.”

“Gama”? Or Gamabunta? Hell if I knew. With Gamabunta being a boss summon, I’m still not sure if he would take issue with being used as a glorified taxi, but it ended up not really coming up.

Sensei led us past the groves of gigantic foliage, even if he ended up having to carry Rin on his back. Obito seemed okay—Madara’s seal wasn’t kicking in, despite Sensei not dealing with it yet—and stuck close to Sensei anyway. I was itching to examine his discolored arm, because I wasn’t sure if that was something Madara had ripped off of White Zetsu or if it was something else. I didn’t, though. Kakashi stayed pretty quiet, but I reached out and he took my hand for at least a couple of seconds, so at least I knew we were doing all right.

I still owed him an explanation, and I doubted he’d forgotten.

And then we got out of the forest.

As the environment really opened up, I was struck by how extreme the topography was.

The path Sensei had been following ended when the oversized toadstools and clover did, fanning outward and a little as though we were walking through a giant toad’s footprint. I looked up, and in the distance could make out a mountain that seemed more of a perfect cone than any lava-spewing geological feature would ever be. There were more of them all around, reminding me of the time I’d visited southern China and been baffled by the limestone pillars that made the region so distinct. Much closer, though, were gigantic gold-yellow shafts of what looked like bamboo arced overhead, before disgorging hundreds of gallons of water from their tips.

“This place is weird.” I said.

Sensei bit down on a snicker.

“Are we going to see the Grand Toad Sage?” Kakashi asked.

“Mn, no.” Sensei shifted Rin’s weight on his back, but didn’t complain that she’d fallen asleep again. “We’re going to meet up with Gama and possibly Gerotora to get a ride home.”
…Wait. Gerotora was…that scroll toad thing. Huh. What the hell was “Gama,” then?

…Eh. I decided I didn’t care. To be honest, tragedy only ever hit our team like a tire iron whenever Sensei wasn’t around, so I wasn’t worried that we’d end up with a horrible fate while walking among the toad clan. No Velociraptors here!

And the more I thought about topography and genetically-modified dinosaurs, the less I had to think about the eerie silence inside my head.

Of course, thinking about not thinking about it didn’t work. Never does.

The problem with letting my mind wander while adjusting to new formatting, though, was that it was very easy for my crazy thoughts to ping off of something suspect. My headspace was full of memory fragments running loose like sheep without a herder, and it was only a matter of time until one of them tried to butt me back over the fence.

I was mixing metaphors a lot there, but it had to do with my scrambled state of mind. My mind was so scrambled, in fact, that I must have zoned out for quite a while.

For one thing, I ended up feeling Kakashi try to get my attention while my brain was on walkabout before I noticed his chakra move, mainly by prodding my arm. For another, I walked right into Obito’s back.

“You all right, Kei?” Obito asked, catching me when I wobbled.

I bonked him in the shoulder with my forehead. “…no.”

“Do you need someone to carry you?” Obito scratched the side of his nose with his left hand, as though he still wasn’t entirely used to his artificial right arm yet.

“…no, thanks.” I wanted to drop off to sleep, even if doing so would probably herald the first night terrors I’d had in years, if things were going to revert to before Inoshi walked around in my head. Also, my pride wouldn’t let me do that.

“Kei-kun.” Sensei said over his shoulder, but when I looked up he was giving Kakashi a wordless order.

“You can’t walk without hitting something.” Kakashi said.

“Can too.” I said.

“Can’t.”

“Can!”

“Kei-kun, just let Kakashi lead you. All right?” Sensei interrupted before we could really get going, sadly.

“…Fine.” I sighed. Okay, back to hand-holding, but with more belligerence!

I felt like I’d been demoted to preschool.

Though the first time Kakashi yanked me back upright when I slumped, accompanied by a toneless, “We don’t need you cracking your head open on a rock,” I at least tried to pay more attention.

So…fucking…tired…
There was no answer.

It was about then that I realized that Kakashi hadn’t actually lowered his headband. In fact, his three-tomoe Sharingan was locked on me, spinning. I compounded my mistake by making eye contact with it.

SON OF A BI—!
I woke up *again*, feeling less like roadkill.

I was three-for-three in passing out, flipping out, or otherwise losing the thread of reality. Having noted this pattern, I decided that the best thing to do would *not* be to sit up and possibly hit a certain asshole mini-jōnin in the face, but instead to lie on whatever I was already lying on and try to take stock without opening my eyes.

Okay. So.

I was lying on something that felt like a gigantic leaf, at least without any additional visual info. My outer shirt and jacket were gone, and I could feel something wrapped around both my arms, and something else stuck to my back. Flexing my fingers and toes was easy enough, though I felt stiff and I didn’t have my shoes or forearm holsters on for whatever reason. After a second or two, I prodded cautiously at the world around me with my chakra sense.

Rin was lying down, curled onto her side with her back to my right side. From her chakra, she was relaxed and exhausted but not asleep, and not in any particular pain. Small mercies, I suppose.

Sensei was…somewhere about ten meters away, and his chakra was jumping a little as he (probably) talked to one of the Mount Myōboku residents. Ergo, some kind of giant frog, given the shape it had. Kakashi was close to him, probably close enough to be soaking up whatever relevant information there was, like a sponge.

I was distantly glad that Kakashi was out of reach, because I *kind of* wanted to punch him into the sun. You know, in a “I am going to do something I regret if I am tempted” kind of sense.

Obito, on the other hand, seemed to be…kind of putting himself through some kind of exercise regimen, alongside yet another toad. For some reason, the toad that came to mind was big and green and wore lipstick, though damn if I knew why. Not all of my disorganized memories had slotted into place yet. I’d have to get up and check to be sure, and I didn’t really want to do much moving around anyway.

I kind of wished I’d gotten around to writing them down, but then, anything I wrote down could be decoded or stolen. And that wouldn’t do anyone any good.

I opened my eyes.

Okay. Lying *under* a big leaf, too. Lilypad? What do I know about toad architecture, anyway? I decided not to worry about it.

…Turns out sitting up, on its own, gave me a lot to think about. I bent my knees in order to sort of
roll upright as I swung my legs, but stopped halfway to get a look at myself. Resting my forearms on my bent knees and feet flat on the ground, I tried to take stock.

I was bandaged from my knuckles to the lowest curve of my shoulders, and moving my fingers confirmed the feeling of burn cream and herbal medicine dried onto my suspiciously-pink skin. I was wearing nothing shirt-wise other than a training bra and had more burn medicine smeared across my stomach and chest. There were adhesive gauze patches stuck to the left side of my ribs, my right shoulder, and the side of my neck. There was another large, flat gauze pad stuck to my back, directly spanning the space between my shoulder blades. And if I moved my legs, I could feel more bandages and more burn cream on my legs, under my pants.

About the only particular patch of skin that wasn’t in some way treated was the center of my chest, which was where Isobu’s seal was a washed-out gray on my skin.

Looking at it, even upside-down, I could confirm a couple of different things. One, the seal had originally only had four “locks,” shall we say. Sealing large or powerful things required a minimum of three “corners” on which to rotate the prisoner’s chakra and maintain seal stability. Four was barely above that, but it was also indicative of a different sealing style. If I remembered correctly, four was the base number that Uzumaki sealing styles used, and more durable for it.

Naruto’s seal had comprised eight trigrams, was composed by one of the greatest seal masters ever, and had Shinigami backup. Mine was stuck at four, sealed by an asshole who didn’t even have the decency to die in the process, and designed to be temporary. The four alone might not have been enough to hold off Isobu’s mental influence, though, so Sensei had added the Five Elements Seal on top.

…Which had the neat and rather depressingly effective ability to fuck with my chakra control like no one’s business.

I’d have to ask about getting it removed. Hopefully, Sensei would have better options for reinforcement.

Looking around, I quickly located my jacket and my mesh shirt. After some consideration, I left the jacket—which had been somewhat thoroughly shredded, even if I couldn’t remember quite how—and pulled the shirt over my head with minimal difficulty. And since for some reason my shoes were nowhere to be found, I got up and walked barefoot out into the sun. Rin could nap without me, I reasoned, and I needed to know things more than I needed to spend the rest of the day snoozing.

Though I admit that it would have been nice.

Also, no one was telling me not to get up and walk and I wasn’t in much pain, so I suppose it was all right.

The sun felt nice, really. It was another way, for me, of confirming that I was still alive and also not in immediate danger of losing that status. Hopefully.

I mean, it was the region owned by toad summons. People couldn’t get here without a map, a compass, a guide, and a sextant. I was pretty sure that meant that Madara couldn’t have seeded the area with spies, or done the Orochimaru thing with the seals Obito and I were still probably carrying —why would he?

…Speaking of which, I had a theory about why Sensei had brought us here rather than straight back to Konoha.
Sometimes I wished I could turn my brain off and watch TV like I used to.

It took a bit, but eventually I found all the boys.

Obito was indeed mimicking a big green frog with lipstick, Sharingan out and spinning as he copied the katas. I couldn’t remember his name, but he didn’t seem to be half as resentful of Obito’s spirited mimicry as he would with Naruto during Sage training. Maybe it was the fact that Obito was laughing at himself the entire time, flailing around in a shirt that was two to four sizes too big for him and probably belonged to Sensei. The ends of the sleeves flopped around well past his fingertips, and he seemed thoroughly distracted.

Kakashi was sitting on a huge curved leaf, sort of like the one that Rin and I had been napping under, and watched Obito and his new frog buddy dance. From his chakra, I could feel a bizarre mix of mild envy, lingering surprise, and a sort of belated happiness, which I decided made sense. I still wanted to punch him into next week, though, and didn’t go talk to him. I only met his eyes for a moment, and he looked away first. I didn’t need to talk to him.

Instead, I headed toward Sensei.

Sensei was, for his part, talking to a triad of toads. One was a large, orange-and-blue-striped creature with prominent spikes over both eyes. Even sitting, it was about three times as tall as Sensei was and a good dozen times as wide, if not more. It wore a ceremonial necklace with beads as large as a man’s ribcage, and had a belly band running across its midsection. He also wasn’t talking. But on his forelegs, dwarfed in comparison, were two tiny toads that were oddly familiar.

Shima (off-yellow with purple highlights and lipstick) and Fukasaku (green with a goatee, fuzzy eyebrows, and a topknot)—also known as two of the most powerful masters of toad Sage arts, and some of the only people alive who could call Jiraiya “-chan.”

“…Minato-chan, your student is right behind you.” Shima was saying.

Well, so much for being able to eavesdrop. Oh well.

Sensei turned and blinked at me for a moment, before saying, “I didn’t expect you to be up already.” He knelt next to me as both cat-sized toads hopped off of Gama, making me feel a little cornered. He had my wrist in his hand practically before I noticed, and turned my arm carefully. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Stiff, and my chakra control’s awful.” I said bluntly. I tapped my chest with my free hand and Sensei had the decency to look a little apologetic. “But I’m not on fire or melting, so I guess that’s okay.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” He let go of my wrist and, somewhat hesitantly, ruffled my hair again. Back to old times, really.

“You set very low standards.” I told him.

“True. But I think that I’m justified.” Sensei nodded at Obito, who was laughing at Kakashi, who had been the victim of a Water jutsu from the lipstick frog while I wasn’t looking. I could only imagine what had triggered it.

“…Point.” I gave up. Then another thought hit me. “Wait a minute. I still have all my skin. How did that happen?”

“You had help, Keisuke-chan.” Shima piped up from around shin height.
I sat down so she could speak to me eye-to-eye, since I didn’t want her to have to climb on Sensei. “I didn’t know toads had medics.” I admitted. Most of the toads Jiraiya and Naruto favored were powerful fighters, rather than supporting units.

“Well, of course we do.” Shima patted my bandaged hands. “And of course little Rin-chan helped. Wore herself out that way, sadly, but you’re both fine.”

“Being a jinchūriki helped.” Fukasaku added. He crossed his arms. Forelegs. Whatever. “A normal human probably wouldn’t have lasted so long, and definitely wouldn’t recover quickly.”

At that moment, I was sort of belatedly trying to decide whether to take offense or not. The word “jinchūriki” was used to mean “Tailed Beast Host,” but its literal translation was “power of human sacrifice.” Often, the people carrying Tailed Beasts around weren’t considered human, and treated accordingly. At most, a lot of hosts had lonely, miserable lives if their status was known, and a number of them had gone berserk. It reinforced the public perception of hosts as inhuman monsters. Whether the incidents were due to seal degradation or accumulated mental trauma, I couldn’t really say. I only had about, what, ten examples? Much as I hated to rely too heavily on scientific methodology when it came to people, I didn’t know enough about seals, people’s lives, or the effects of one on the other to be sure.

I was currently Isobu’s metaphorical landlord, so I got an automatic pass into a club I wasn’t sure I wanted to be in. Too late for that now, though. Anytime I talked about the issue, I’d have to use “us” instead of “they.” It hardly made sense to disqualify myself from host status when I knew I’d start hearing Isobu eventually.

“Kei-kun, are you listening?” Sensei asked.

“Not really.” I mumbled, balancing my head on one hand. Shima let go of my other one, though my brain decided to continue spinning even with both hands to support it.

“As we were saying, Minato-chan, it really would be best if we could get everyone together again.” Fukasaku said, as Shima climbed up to sit on my knee. “The Great Toad Sage may not be as quick as he used to be, but he did say there was something important we had to all know.”

My train of thought basically went “Great Toad Sage equals prophecy equals important therefore Jiraiya.”

…Or, in a more coherent way, everyone involved with the toad summon contract was usually obligated to shut the fuck up and pay attention. I didn’t know how many prophecies the gigantic old toad usually made, but he was famous for being accurate. Far beyond the usually Harry Potter sort of way that most fortune-tellers had. Or the Oracle of Delphi, I suppose.

“Who did he ask for?” Sensei asked, brows furrowed.

“Jiraiya-chan, of course, and you.” Shima said. “But also your students, and a girl with long red hair. I don’t suppose you know someone like that?”

Sensei, I noticed, had gone a little pale.

“…It’d be best if we sent a messenger to Konoha.” Sensei said, closing his eyes. “Kōsuke, if he’s back already, or maybe Gekomatsu. Have him ask Jiraiya-sensei and Kushina-chan to come along. We…may be here a while.”

“What about Rin-chan?” I asked. Both of the sages looked at me. “Rin isn’t one of Sensei’s students, but…”
“She can stay.” Shima said firmly.

And that was the end of that.

Messages were sent, and people were summoned through bizarre methods I would have to research later. We didn’t see much in the way of results for a while, though, so that meant waiting.

Also, Obito finally had a chance to vent while we were waiting.

“I can’t believe he thought I was going to fall for that!” Obito was saying, waving his arms with the sleeves of his shirt rolled back to his wrists, so he could gesticulate properly. “I mean, yeah, maybe I owed the old man a thing or two since he pulled me out of a rockslide and stitched me back together, but that’s not enough to excuse anything he’s done.”

Rin had gotten up at some point and was sitting between Kakashi and Obito. I could feel her attention jump back and forth between everyone in our little circle, since Sensei was off arguing with a messenger toad about summoning weight limits or something.

I was lying down, eyes closed, and trying not to think about the knot in my stomach. I was a little distracted by a feeling of impending doom, but I didn’t mind letting him ramble.

“I told Sensei everything I could remember. The network of Zetsu clones and, um, then there was the thing about the statue. What was that thing, anyway?” Obito then abruptly switched to, “And I guess Madara’s gotten so old he really is senile, because his evil master plan is a dream world. Like a permanent genjutsu, but powered by the freaky old statue? If it could boost Guruguru, I guess it could give more power to a genjutsu, but…”

Thank the Powers That Be that he hadn’t managed to lose his optimism after months in that pit.

“But telling Sensei kind of doesn’t work ‘cause I already did it and then I remembered about the Zetsu clones.” Obito frowned. “I don’t know how many there are, and there’s a good chance one of them saw our fight and told Madara to leave. I mean, I don’t know if he can but that’s the idea. He’d probably break a hip. Better to let the statue do everything.”

“I just don’t see how a huge evil statue makes any sense.” Rin said. “At all.”

“Well, it could move. It was really freaky when it moved, since it spends all its time with its hands over its face, but it’s not really a statue either.” Obito paused. “Maybe a really weird summon? Kei, what do you think?”

Well, having an idea of what statue Obito was talking about… “I think that if there is a thing that exists at the end of the universe and eats time, that statue is its bastard grandchild.”

“…What?” Kakashi said.

“Never mind.” No one here had heard of Weeping Angels. Or of Anima. And no one there had heard of the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path.

Kakashi’s chakra maintained its nonplussed sensation.

“And it had ten eyes.” Obito went on, as though he had never asked for my opinion. “And it looked like those mummies, you know, from the reports about people who get hit with Scorch Release
bloodlines? Only it was even bigger than the Hokage Monument!”

“You were in a cave.” Rin pointed out.

Obito pouted. “It was a big cave.”

I also thought that the aforementioned statue was basically a gigantic Diglett. Tunneled like a champ, but through space-time. I didn’t share that thought with them, though.

Or maybe it was the thing under a Diglett. No one ever checked.

“So, anyway, I didn’t wake up and see all of that for a while. I mean, it wasn’t so long that my hair grew out—that happened later—but I think Madara must have used the seal then. When I think about him sticking his claws…” Obito trailed off, shuddering.

“The seal doesn’t actually require open heart surgery, Obito.” I told him.

“Doesn’t matter!” Obito argued. “You weren’t there and I didn’t wake up for a while and augh.”

“Didn’t Sensei take care of it?” I asked Kakashi, since Obito seemed to be in the middle of whatever he was doing. Histrionics, probably.

“He did. Then he went back and tightened the securing seals on yours and told us to wait for a second opinion.” Kakashi answered. I still wasn’t actually looking at him, because that would probably remind me to attempt murder.

No, I still wasn’t over the hypnosis thing.

“Will you stop moping? Kakashi used the Sharingan on you like you asked!” Rin said.

What?

When…did I…?

“When your second personality took over, she made a request.” Kakashi said. It wasn’t really an explanation, but I was filling in the blanks anyway.

That bitch. That horrible, stupid, brave…

“Whoa, what? Kei, you don’t have a second personality, do you?” Obito asked.

I opened my eyes and sat up abruptly. I looked around at my friends, who were giving me various degrees of the Funny Look, and said, “I never told her to do anything other than keep us alive.” I held up a finger. “Further, just because she and I shared a body doesn’t mean she gets to call the shots after she’s dead. Further again, yes, they’re both reincorporated, and shut up.”

And then I flopped back down, unsure why the hell I was even angry but prepared to wallow in it anyway.

“…How long have you had other personalities?” Rin wanted to know.

“Since I was eight and my dad took me to a Yamanaka and the mind technique he used did weird things,” was my response. Accurate as anything. Probably more accurate than whatever I’d theorized before, even. Yamanaka mind-walking plus weird shit equaled weirder shit.

“So, wait, you’ve been walking around with extra voices since we met?” Obito looked stunned.
“No, it was after.” Which wasn’t the point, and I could see that he didn’t appreciate the technicality.
“Look, yes, I’ve had two extra personalities in my head for a while and thanks to pressure from the
events of the last day or so, they’ve been squashed back into me. But up until then, I never lost
control or blacked out unless you count occasional sleepwalking.”

I’d never sleepwalked, actually, but let them believe that I had and maybe they’d stop being so nosy.

…if the Dreamer hadn’t reincorporated, I would have wondered where this sudden urge to explain
things came from. As she had, I didn’t.

“But that doesn’t make any sense!” Rin argued. I blinked at her. “Why would your dad take you to a
Yamanaka if you were fine before? Was there some reason you needed to be put through that?”

“Rin-chan… I’m not sure you noticed, but I am okay. As in, ‘not dead’ and ‘not on a murderous
rampage,’ sure, but they helped out.” Because I could channel aggression away from my mind and
leave the unbridled energy that made me chatty for the twenty or so minutes Isobu had been raging,
and the Dreamer had done her job in the end. Protected us. “It’s fine.”

“Why do people insist on defining ‘okay’ like that?” Rin muttered.

“Uh…” said Obito, who had fulfilled disqualifying one condition or the other in a different timeline,
without his knowledge.

“I’m more interested in why you needed to see a Yamanaka in the first place.” Kakashi said bluntly,
and yet still not meeting my eyes. He was staring off somewhere to the left, like whatever was over
there had given him personal insult and he was about to demand a duel at dawn.

On second thought, maybe it was better that he was glaring at a rock.

And, of course, he asked the big question.

“…Constant night terrors made it impossible for me to sleep at night.” I said after a moment. “They
started a little after my brother ended up in the hospital for the first time.”

Aaaaand he was looking at me instead of whatever stupid target had earned his wrath first. Great.

I rolled back into a sitting position, forcing myself to loosen up a little. Still not supposed to choke
him for being annoying and not apologizing since anyway I was doing the same thing. Two wrongs,
etc. I let myself sit cross-legged and supported my head with one hand, elbow on my thigh. “It was a
difficult few years.” But obviously the concerned faces around me weren’t going to be satisfied with
that.

…Crap. I obviously couldn’t tell them the entire story. But…

They’d waited long enough, in some respects, for the story of a lifetime. Just not theirs.

“Why didn’t you tell us about any of this stuff?” Obito asked, looking hurt.

“After about the fifth time I dreamed Rin-chan was dead and you were drenched in blood, I figured
Dad’s idea of mind-walking had more merit.” Whoops, honesty. Sort of. “Of course, I say that now,
but I was eight and still figured Dad knew what to do.” And I’d been so desperate that I’d been
willing to trust a mind-reader. Clearly that had been a wonderful, wonderful time. I closed my eyes
briefly. “I went to him to get the nightmares to stop, and he did.”

“…I’m almost sorry I asked.” Obito said quietly.
“Don’t be. It’s not like you knew me that well back then.” I shrugged. Kakashi was still staring at me. “And I didn’t know you, Kakashi, so don’t even start. I got used to the idea of not actually needing to think about it.”

“But Kei-senpai…” Rin looked so disappointed that I almost stopped.

Besides, I was a lot better at being disappointed in myself and at that point it had turned into a sort of motivational kick in the pants.

I crossed my arms over my chest, muttering under my breath. “Right. Well. Here I go.” Wow, why was this so hard? Oh right, soul-baring time. Crap.

“What?” Obito asked.

“I’m going to tell a story.” I said, looking between Kakashi and Obito and Rin and hoping I was doing the right thing. “All I ask is that you don’t interrupt, and that you hold questions until the end.” Not like I knew what the end was.

“Am I missing something?” Sensei asked, and every single one of us jumped in surprise, whirling on our butts to look at our newly arrived Sensei.

Well, Sensei plus guests—he was carrying Kushina, and Jiraiya was holding onto his sleeve.

I found my voice first and said, “Well, you’re just in time for the confessional.”

“What’s a confess—OH MY GOD, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?!” This last was directed at Obito by a surprised and actually rather angry Kushina, who immediately targeted the wayward Uchiha for a cuddle-tackle.

Obito lost.

“I have to admit, Minato, I never expected one of your students to come back from the dead.” Jiraiya was saying, though I could just barely hear him over the noise generated by Kushina throttling Obito and including Kakashi in the freak-out just as collateral damage. Rin was spared.

I didn’t expect either of the boys to be especially coherent afterward.

“Are you all right?” Sensei asked.

“I’ve been asked that a hundred times today—the honest answer is ‘no,’ but I keep answering ‘yes’ anyway.” I said.

“And you.” Kushina said, leaving the boys where they were. I made a noise like “eep.” I could sass Sensei, but Kushina…haha, no. She’d kill me.

“Uh.” I said.

She hugged me. “Oh, Kei-chan. It’s going to be all right.”

I looked at Sensei over Kushina’s shoulder, who held up his hands to ward off any possible wrathful response and said, “I had to tell her what happened.”

“And you didn’t tell my mother.” I said flatly.

“Oh no, we did.” Kushina interrupted, giving me another squeeze. “And let me tell you, I can see why Minato’s afraid of her.”
“Am not.”

“Are too, infinity.”

Sensei groaned.

“Settle down, kids.” Jiraiya was chuckling, though, which defeated any kind of serious air he was trying to achieve.

At least Kushina didn’t get to go on about “the first thing you have to know about having a demon in your head.” That would have been bad. Also awkward, even though everyone here probably knew and they’d partially been called in to check on the seal.

Shima and Fukasaku had also come back. I didn’t even know where they’d gone, actually—between the two of them, they were probably our babysitters. I remembered vaguely that Shima in particular was one of the greatest sensors alive (with possible allowances made for those whose species couldn’t live for centuries), so it wasn’t like we could have wandered out of her range by accident.

“Can we do something before we go to meet the Great Toad Sage?” I asked everyone.

Jiraiya blinked. “…Why?”

“It’s kind of important and you arrived in the middle of the beginning.” I said, as Kushina finally stopped squishing me. “And…well, you probably deserve to know.”

“I doubt the Great Old Geezer will notice if we’re late.” Shima said, shrugging. “Go on, Keisuke-chan.”

“Uh.” I’d never quite expected to get even that much of an endorsement. “Okay. Everyone sit down first.”

They did. Shima and Fukasaku decided to sit on Jiraiya and Sensei’s shoulders, respectively.

“I’d better start at the beginning.” I muttered, half to myself.

“Is this where you explain why you were carrying around chakra suppressing and seal-canceling seals?” Sensei asked. All of us looked at him. “I just want to point it out. Every other mission has involved explosives, with minimal storage seals. There must have been a reason for you to change your preparations.”

If Sensei wanted to hand me an opportunity, I guess that meant I had to take it, right?

“That’s because I had a hunch they’d be needed.” I said.

“…Huh?” That was Obito.

“You knew there was a chance you’d need to suppress an active seal?” Kakashi demanded.

“Yes.” I said.

“But that’s impossible.” Rin said. “You can’t see the future.”

“The fact that the Great Toad Sage is known for his prophecies says otherwise.” I countered, vaguely aware of the look on Jiraiya’s face. He didn’t exactly seem confused… Well. Anyway. “Remember those dreams I used to have? Well, it turns out that what I was seeing was a combination of the future and the past, usually of people I hadn’t met. And please, can we go back to that thing
about not interrupting? That’d be great.”

Everyone decided to stay quiet.

“Starting from about when I was five, I’ve had chronic nightmares. At eight, Dad took me to see Inoshi Yamanaka, which got them mostly under control.” I paused, thinking. “By age nine, I was starting to understand what I was seeing.”

Luckily, Jiraiya was here. Made things a little easier.

“Jiraiya-sama, you had three students in the Land of Rain before the end of the Second Shinobi World War.” I said, and watched Jiraiya blanch. The events of that time had been before I’d ever met anyone connected to the Plot, and should have been impossible for me to know. “Their names are Yahiko, Konan, and Nagato, and Nagato carries the Rinnegan. You thought he was the child of prophecy, because that bloodline was a throwback to the time of the Sage of Six Paths. He and his friends are in the middle of a civil war in Rain, but if things go the way they did when I saw them, only two of them are going to make it out alive.” I looked down. “Yahiko dies to save Konan, who is being held hostage by shinobi from both the Land of Rain and Konoha’s ROOT division. Nagato kills every last one of them, and they never report back to Danzō or Hanzō. Nagato goes on to kill every living person with any connection to Hanzō, completing his takeover.

“Eventually, the organization that those three founded—Akatsuki—will become known as one of the most notorious criminal gangs in the history of the Five Elemental Nations. Their goal is to collect the Tailed Beasts in order to create a superweapon—at least, according to Nagato.” I wasn’t looking at anyone. “Nagato masters the Rinnegan in time, and when it comes time to capture the Nine-Tailed Fox, attacks Konoha. But not before killing you, Jiraiya-sama, when you try to chase down rumors that your students are still alive.

“He, along with Konan, flattens Konoha over the course of an hour. In the search for the then-current host of the Nine-Tailed Fox, he and Konan kill hundreds of shinobi—Kakashi included. The Hokage falls into a coma.” Kakashi’s chakra jumped. I kept going. “And then the Nine-Tailed Beast’s host arrives to see the damage and the death toll, and goes berserk.” Kushina winced. “He’s talked down, though, and beats Nagato into submission instead of killing everyone. He…I guess he’s something else. The child of prophecy, I mean. He talked Nagato out of his plan. Then Nagato dies, using his Rinnegan abilities to revive everyone he killed at the cost of his own life.

“And later, when Konan takes Nagato away for burial and can finally give up the insane dream…the man behind everything appears, and kills her. He takes Nagato’s eyes. He goes on with the plan as though nothing happened.”

I took a deep breath. “That vision doesn’t change. It doesn’t account for change—already, hundreds of parameters have shifted and in all likelihood nothing will turn out that way. But the fact that I was able to act on some of the knowledge I did have—with regards to Tailed Beasts and conspiracies—and change something means that my vision of the future was rigid and is rapidly becoming useless.”

“While that’s an interesting story, Kei-kun, I’m not sure how—Sensei?” Sensei blinked as Jiraiya’s hand came down in front of his face, cutting him off.

“Keisuke,” Jiraiya said to me, “do you have any idea how rare that information is?”

“Yes, actually.” I frowned. “The only people who knew about those three Rain kids were Orochimaru and Tsunade. I know that.”

Jiraiya’s frown was all-encompassing. “What does your gift have to say about the rest of us?”
…Well. Awkward. “You already heard how you died.” I said after a moment. “When they called the Sage of Six Paths that, they weren’t just talking metaphorically. Rinnegan-users can puppet other bodies to use in combat, and at least one of them has the ability to revive the other five if they get disabled. There are six fakes, and one real one.” I’d only seen it twice, but it was enough to guess that the six-spare thing was a rule. “You…didn’t know that. Shima-sama and Fukasaku-sama were with you almost to the end.”

I bit my lip. Kakashi was still staring. “Kakashi, you died of chakra exhaustion. Technically.”

“You’re kidding.” His voice and visible expression were equally nonplussed.

“There was a team of six or seven shinobi trying to take on the Deva Path at the same time. That one had the ability to…well, push things really hard.” I tried to think. “When I say ’push,’ I really mean something more like ‘manipulate gravity.’ You died buying Chōza Akimichi and his son time to escape and warn the rest of the village about his power limitations.” Which didn’t amount to much.

“What happened to Minato and me, though?” Kushina broke in. I gave her a blank look and she said, “You said the host of the Nine-Tailed Fox was a boy. And…and I’m the host now. What happens to us?”

Ah, fuck.

Sensei looked worried. “Kei-kun?”

“In the dreams I had?” I said bleakly. “You were both dead before Kakashi turned fifteen.”

"WHAT." Kushina, again. She struggled for a couple of seconds to get her anger under control before demanding. “How?”

“In about six months, a masked man appears just after your son is born.” I said, imagining the moment even as I spoke. “The…the seal on the Nine-Tails is weaker, after labor, and he broke the seal. Killed everyone in the room just before, so neither of you had backup. Sensei fought him and chased him off eventually, but he controlled the Nine-Tails with his Sharingan and set it on the village.”

“Is that how you knew a Sharingan could control the Three-Tails?” Kakashi asked.

“No. That was a different thing.” For one thing, there were historical records of Madara Uchiha controlling the Nine-Tails in his climactic fight with Hashirama Senju, before Mito Uzumaki sealed it into herself. That last part wasn’t common knowledge, though. And for another, Sasuke of all people had managed to disrupt Naruto pulling out the Nine-Tails’s chakra during their first meeting in Shippūden. That kind of shit was distinctive. “And besides that, I think it only works for three-tomoe Sharingan on up.”

“Uh, Kei, that’s kind of the definition of a fully-evolved Sharingan.” Obito said.

“The Mangekyō Sharingan says otherwise.” I said. I shook my head. “Anyway, Sensei beat it back with Gamabunta. Kushina, you used your chakra chains on the Nine-Tails and tried to pull it back, trying to make it die with you…but it wasn’t enough. You were dying and Sensei was the only one who could…could make the choice.” I blinked rapidly. “You both sealed the Nine-Tails into your newborn son.”

Sensei didn’t have to die that day but he did and they could have saved Kushina too and argh fuck that entire sequence of events with a cactuar.
Sensei and Kushina had both gone deathly white. Rin had both of her hands over her mouth. Kakashi was stock-still, and Obito looked sick. Jiraiya, I noticed distantly, had his hand clenched over his knee.

“I…you knew I was pregnant. That I’d have a boy.” Kushina said after a moment. “That… everything might happen after.”

“I knew you’d have a son, if things went the same. But they won’t.” I looked at Rin. “Rin, did you want to know what happened to you?”

“…No. Not really, but if it helps…?” Rin’s voice was very small.

“If we go by the visions, you died four hours ago.” I said, and pulled my knees up to my chest. “Just goes to show, they really don’t account for variation.”

“What about you?” Kakashi asked.

I smiled darkly. “Funnily enough, I don’t know. I don’t know what the Powers That Be were thinking, showing a girl visions of every single person around her dying horribly, but not going to the normal nightmare stuff.” The persistent nightmares about velociraptors, sadly, were a relic of my old life. The fact that Jeff Goldblum was in them was a hint.

Kakashi frowned anyway. What was his problem?

“How did I die?” Rin asked. Her brown eyes were wide.

…Dammit. Should have bugged Kakashi anyway.

“...Instead of me, you were kidnapped and made into a Tailed Beast host.” I began, hesitant. Well, at least that kind of seemed like it was within the realm of possibility. “You got the same treatment I did, with the mind-control seal, and they told you about it. If you made it back to Konoha without neutralizing it…well, it would be bad. And you’d die anyway, because broken seal or not a Host can’t survive if the Beast is removed. Kakashi was the only one on the rescue mission and he got you as far as we did, this time, before you were both cornered.

“When Kakashi was going to try and fight them off, buying you some time until hell if I know, since it wasn’t like you could run with that many guys on your tail, you…took a different way out.” I swallowed hard. “It turns out that the Chidori can kill a Tailed Beast Host. Especially if she throws herself on it.”

Simultaneously, Kakashi and Rin both paled.

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“Obito, when you broke the tree line and yelled at us? It happened then. That exact second.” I watched Obito turn red.

“That is bullshit.” Obito snapped. “That didn’t happen! You were there, and—!”

“But that’s the point.” Kakashi interrupted, still a little shaky. All of us blinked at him. “Kei, your visions don’t account for your own existence.”

“…Well, yes.” I said blankly. I’d kind of taken that as a given, since I knew the origins of my visions. Of course they wouldn’t account for me. “That kind of plays into the answer to Obito’s question.

“In my visions, I don’t run in the same circles as any of you do.” I said nonchalantly. I’d come to
terms with everything quite some time ago, really. And had come up with a talent for understatement that made everything seem a little less horrible in the meantime. “I effectively don’t exist. Instead of Team Minato being made up of Obito Uchiha, me, and Kakashi Hatake, Rin was there instead.”

That sank in. Slowly.

“While I don’t know Rin-chan so well,” Kushina said after a moment, into the silence, “I’m not sure how much that changes the story. She’s a smart girl and a talented medic, and I suppose that none of us would miss you, Kei-chan, because none of us would know there was someone to miss.”

“Exactly.” I agreed. But Rin was normal and I was a specific kind of head case.

I sure as fuck wasn’t normal. Normal only survived so long.

“Strong emotional surges made the visions impossible to control.” I continued, “Even though I had two personalities as pressure release options, it did fail me at least a couple of times.” When Obito got crushed. Mostly just that. “Anyway, I did get a series of compounding bad feelings about Kannabi before we were even really on that mission. Thought I could do something about it. Failed.”

“Kei…” Obito began. I didn’t know if he was going to try to absolve me of blame or what.

“That’s not the worst part. I failed to make a difference while acting on my visions.” I talked right over him. Probably would need to apologize later. “Thing is? The string of events that led to Rin’s death in my visions started there. And what I did— what I failed to do, “—wasn’t enough.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “If I was so sure that Kannabi was a keystone, I should have done something to keep you away from the rocks, or gotten us all out sooner, or something. Instead, I let my freak-out take over and lo, we all nearly got killed anyway. I was sure you were dead, Obito, and if you could see the things I did…”

“Kei, what happened to me?” Obito asked. “What’s so bad that you’ve skipped over me twice and can’t even look at me right now?”

“…Obito, what do you think would have happened if you had showed up just when it looked like Kakashi was killing Rin-chan?” I asked bleakly, and Obito went pale. “If no one had been able to tell you about the seals, or the kidnapping, or anything about what really happened? What would have happened if you didn’t realize Madara was playing you?” I paused. “Keeping in mind that I effectively didn’t exist in that world. I didn’t know you and you didn’t know me. But Madara knew how the Mangekyō Sharingan can destroy an Uchiha’s sanity when it activates, and it did.”

“Let me show you something.” I said, and sat up a little so I was on my knees instead of my butt. I started drawing a sequence of circles in the dirt—Sharingan designs, from left to right. The leftmost one had only one tomoe, the next had two, and the third had three. The fourth, fifth, and sixth ones rapidly developed into some of the Mangekyō designs I’d seen over the course of what seemed like hundreds of nightmares. Itachi’s—simplest by far, but also overused. The one after that was the one that Kakashi and Obito shared, with more bladelike structures in black than Itachi’s had had, and finally Madara’s Eternal Mangekyō variant. “These are the most prominent Mangekyō Sharingan designs I remember. The middle one is yours.”

“…But I don’t have one.” Obito said weakly.

“And you might never.” I said quietly. “But if you do ever see your Sharingan evolve again, this is what you’ll see in a mirror.” My fingers curled into a fist in the dirt. “It’s…probably one of the strongest ones I’ve ever heard of—it’s the only technique that can stop Madara dead aside from Sage powers. But the cost…”
One dead girl. One dead friend. A few souls, nothing major.

I hated Madara, but losing Izuna broke him as sure as losing Hayate would break me.

“I’m not planning on killing anyone for an eyeball upgrade.” Obito snapped, startling me. As I sat there, sort of surprised that he knew what the cost was, he went on, “Every Uchiha who makes chūnin has a chance to look at clan historical records. I might not be the best Uchiha ever, but there was no way I wasn’t looking up things about my Sharingan even before I got it. I was always worried about falling behind, but the cost of some stuff is just too high.”

“No kidding.” Kushina murmured, shaking her head.

“Why are you only telling us this now?” Jiraiya asked.

“As of about four or five hours ago, we passed the ‘crisis point.’” I said, making air quotes with my fingers. “At least that’s what I called it. At everyone’s blank looks, I explained, “Rin-chan’s death leads to a series of disasters in my visions. Since you didn’t die there, Rin-chan, my visions’ version of events becomes useless.” I shrugged. “Basically, if Rin-chan died, Sensei and Kushina-san would be next. Then Jiraiya-sama, then Fukasaku and Kakashi. Only that didn’t happen, so damned if I know what Madara’s going to do now.”

“So, you’re saying that in the sequence you saw, Madara was the root of everything.” Jiraiya mused. “Is he still alive?”

“He was the last time I saw him.” Obito said, indicating his replacement right arm. Jiraiya fixed him with an intense stare that he ignored. “He’s the one who gave me this arm and put that seal on me. Unless he had Zetsu do it, which is really the same thing…”

“He’ll die sometime in the next thirteen years, if we go by the visions.” I frowned. “Though… I don’t really know if old age finally got him or if he just gave up. In the other world, he had an apprentice to pick up the slack.”

“…God, that Obito you saw must have been an idiot.” Obito huffed.

“No more than anyone at the lowest point in their life, I think.” I offered.

“No, really. Kei, how lonely do you have to be to go crazy like he did? What happened next?” Obito demanded.

“…It took some time, but eventually the other Obito—who I’ll call Tobi, since that was what he called himself—came back to Konoha.” I said after a while. “During the night that Kushina-san’s son was born.”

“…Damn.” Obito said, which seemed to be a severe under-reaction going by everyone else’s faces. “He really did get Tobi good, didn’t he?”

“That might be an understatement.” I said. “So, he broke the seal, set the Nine-Tails on Konoha, and started that.”

“But if our Obito is here, then that won’t happen.” Kushina said.

I shrugged. “Probably.”

“Then why did you even need to tell us any of this?” Rin asked.
“Because even if the events are off, some stuff stays the same.” I looked at Sensei. “Remember that letter the Chinatsugumi gave you, a couple of years ago?”

“…That was you?” Sensei looked stunned. “It outlined more information about Orochimaru’s combat abilities than we’ve gotten in months.”

“The Chinatsugumi have a vested interest in not getting killed by him. And for whatever reason, Rikuto-san figured out that I knew things most people didn’t…pretty much when I was nine. He confronted me about it just before the Chūnin Exams.” Sensei looked like he couldn’t decide whether to be retroactively worried or what. “After some other stuff happened, I told him about Orochimaru during the mission to Sorayama seven months ago. His idea was to give the info back to Konoha, since it’d sound more real coming from an adult.”

Sensei ran a hand through his hair. “Or an established missing-nin, like Orochimaru.”

“What would make a missing-nin from Iwa care about what happens to Konoha?” Jiraiya sounded more curious than outraged—I imagined getting the exact opposite reaction from anyone else in Konoha’s upper command division, because fighting the same assholes for years on end tended to foster resentment.

…I wondered if I should be worried that Rikuto’s attempt at faking his own death would probably need an encore if Iwa got anywhere near Soragami.

“Recently, Chinatsu-san adopted a little girl. While I know there are probably other girls named Tayuya on the continent, I don’t think the others are the right age, with pink hair, and happen to be outside of any shinobi village.” I hesitated. “…In my vision, Tayuya is the second most powerful of Orochimaru’s child soldiers—she, with her comrades, can take out a team of adult special jōnin at age fourteen.”

“So can we.” Kakashi pointed out.

“Under the right circumstances, or with a Tailed Beast, yeah.” I allowed. “But even aside from that, in the vision, she and her teammates were instrumental to the death of the Third Hokage.”

“…Well. I think that’s enough for now.” Rin said, and all of us blinked at her.

“…Rin-chan?” Obito began, but Rin shook her head and turned to Sensei.

“ Didn’t we have an appointment with someone very important?” Rin asked.

Jiraiya smacked his forehead with his hand. “Yes, yes we did. All right, kids, up and at ‘em. We need to get the Great Toad Sage’s input before we all run off and decide to ruin the possible future.”

“All futures are possible.” Shima argued, “You’re just not wise enough to see it yet.”


“I don’t think I’d live that long even if I wasn’t due to get killed by one of my own students.” Jiraiya griped, but he threw me a reassuring wink before bounding off, both toad elders in tow.

I sat there, rooted to the spot in a sort of stunned silence. I’d done a lot of talking, and it was just hitting me how I could definitely have done that better. But…somehow, the world hadn’t ended. No binding seals, no blunt censure… What the hell?

“…Believe it or not, Kei-kun, that wasn’t the biggest news I’ve ever heard.” Sensei told me, as he
and Kushina also stood up to go. Quickly, all of us kids hurried to follow them. Revelations or not, no one wanted to be stranded in toad country.

“Or maybe you’ve had so many shocks recently that you’ve run out of potential heart attacks.” Kushina quipped. She grinned, quite gleefully despite the circumstances, and began ticking items off on her fingers, “Becoming next in line for Hokage, losing a student, getting that student back, finding out you’re going to be a father…”

Sensei’s expression went kind of dopey.

“…I think what they’re trying to say is ‘roll with the punches,’ Kei.” Obito said, as the happy couple sort of wandered along in Jiraiya’s wake.

“Does anyone else get the impression that there is literally too much crap going on for people to process?” I mused aloud.

Kakashi gave me a look that said, “No shit.” But silently.

I opened my mouth to say something else, as Obito punched Kakashi in the shoulder with his normal arm and started a chase between them that felt…relieved, and stopped. Rin put her hand on my shoulder.

“They just need time to think, Kei-senpai.” Rin said.

“…I sprang this on them at a bad time.” I mumbled.

“Well, yes, but we’ll recover.” Rin poked me. “By the way, are you sure there was nothing about you in the visions?”

“…There was, actually.” I said, fighting the urge to sigh. “It was…just not very interesting. I was a civilian with no power or impact on anything, and if I died it was like that.” I snapped my fingers for emphasis. “I’ve been trying to do more, since finding out…” …That I was stuck in a bloody TV show.

“Oh.” Rin looked a little disappointed, like she couldn’t believe my life was that mundane. Had been, was, wasn’t anymore! “Then I’m glad you did decide to come with us. The world without you didn’t seem like it was going anywhere good. I’m glad I got to live this one. I like having you as a friend.”

“…Thank you, Rin-chan.” I said, and waved her on. I could follow in a minute.

Whenever I stopped tearing up.

I could tell when I recovered when I shot Obito’s headband at the back of his head and called him out for letting a loan go unpaid for that long. It only took five minutes of walking or so, with Rin at my side.

“I think we’re beyond owing stuff, Kei.” Obito said, rubbing his head. He grinned. “Hey, now me and Kakashi can match!”

“Are you sure you even want to?” Kakashi asked.

“…Eh, not really. Hm, maybe a mask?” Obito rubbed his chin contemplatively, but there was a spark in his eye that put me at ease again.

Rin jumped in then, with, “Boys, boys, settle down.”

“What about an eyepatch?” I suggested.

Obito balked. “What, and look like a pirate? Who would choose a pirate Hokage?”

“Since Sensei has that job locked up for the next twenty years, I think you’d better start choosing an image now.” I mused. “Hm…”

“What about ‘Undying’?” All of us looked at Rin. She flushed. “You’re alive, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” Obito frowned in thought. “Hey, Kei, what did the other me have as a special power?”

“…It’s something called Kamui.” I said, surprised that he was already willing to mine the other universe for ideas. Especially about something so, well, traumatizing. In context. “It let Tobi look like he was walking right through solid objects—actually, he would shift parts of his body into a shadow dimension only accessible through the eye. The other Kakashi could do the same thing, but only at range and only on offense. Tobi was mostly defensive, and he had to touch someone to use his power on them.”

“And this is all based on the Mangekyō he had, right?” Obito asked.

Kakashi’s eyebrows knit together. “And both eyes had the same power.”

“Yes and yes. Sort of.” I hedged.

“Well, in that case I’ll make up my own name!” Obito said, cheered.

I blinked.

“For Tobi’s power?” Rin asked.

He nodded. “Yeah! If he can be Tobi or whatever, then I can be Phantom Obito!”

“…Huh?” Rin and I exchanged blank looks. Kakashi just stared.

“Well, if he didn’t use the obvious nickname, then I should get to.” Obito huffed. “He’s an asshole anyway.”

“He’s also you.” Kakashi said.

“Yeah, right. And you’re the guy who dies of chakra exhaustion.” Obito sniped.

In a way, I was almost glad they could make fun of their counterparts’ fates. I didn’t mind it, really. I mean, the more they distanced themselves from the wreck that was the other reality, then maybe they’d be less likely to follow that path. It would help. It would maybe stop the vision problem I was probably due for, once I got to sleep naturally. I wasn’t looking forward to that, but being able to have something concrete to fight them with would be nice.

“I don’t think you get to choose your nickname, Obito.” I said, “And Kakashi, the other-you’s death was way more badass than it sounds.”

“Well, if he gets to die in an awesome way, then I get to choose my nickname anyway. But really, chakra exhaustion?” Obito glanced at Kakashi, who glared back.
“Anyone who managed to stall Nagato for more than two minutes counted as a badass.” I pointed out. “Even the Nine-Tails host breaking out Sage Mode and manifesting eight of nine tails almost lost.”

Kakashi appeared mollified at that, at least. We basked in the warm glow of non-dysfunctional friendship for a while, even though a toad the size of a skyscraper was waiting at the end of our path. Though I guess I was the only one who knew that. At least Sensei and Kushina and Jiraiya would be there.

“Speaking of weird things,” I said, breaking the companionable silence, “are you all really okay with this?”

“With what? The fact that you know a future?” Rin asked.

I winced internally. “…I was really going to talk about the whole ‘I am carrying a Tailed Beast in my chest’ thing, but that works, too.”

“Kei, we already know you.” Kakashi said flatly. “All I saw when you were using the Three-Tails’s chakra was someone hopped up on caffeine and a power high. You’re still the same.”

“And I guess the vision thing makes sense, you know?” Obito added. “You were always more grown-up…though some of that was the swearing. Is that where you learned it?”

“Uh, yeah. Sorry about that.” I rubbed the back of my head. “Though, thanks for the ringing endorsement.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Rin advised. “Minato-sensei should be able to get everything fixed, now that Kushina-san and Jiraiya-sama are here.” She paused. “Though I suppose they might have to be reminded. A lot of important things happened.”

I sighed. “I doubt they forgot. Let’s just get to the Great Toad Sage before they have to come looking for us.”

And we were off.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone is really good at suppressing their reactions, huh? We'll see more from them in the next chapter!
Chapter Summary

Kei: Cause problems.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is that one song by Neon Trees.

So, prophecies. Just thinking too hard on that word brings half-a-dozen examples to mind.

*Neither can live while the other survives.*

You know, if it weren’t for the fact that I was not and am not a boy and that my name has never been “Harry Potter,” that would be almost pithy. After all, that tends to be the way a lot of shinobi grudge matches go—beat each other until one side falls down for good. Pretty straightforward and full of pointless bloodshed. It did kind of describe Naruto and Sasuke’s relationship in the later parts of the manga, if only on Sasuke’s part.

*Fire alone can save our clan.*

Yeeeeeeah, no. Not a cat. And again, not a boy. Though I suppose if I twisted the words a little and ignored the context, I could make the argument that the Uchiha clan would find that prophecy relevant. Speaking of which, I had to figure out if there was going to be anything we could do to mitigate some of the fallout from the Nine-Tails’s attack, which had canonically eventually gotten around to killing them.

*If you attack, a great empire will be destroyed.*

Not a king! Also, not an authority figure. I’m sure there are plenty of other people who can come up with fun ways to destroy their own countries but I’m not one of them. Mostly because of the whole “not actually owning a country” thing.

I knew way too many people who could totally fulfill that. In spirit if not in fact.

*Disturb not the harmony of Fire, Ice, or Lightning…*

Oh, if only I was a Pokémon trainer and not a shinobi. I’m almost certain that my life would be filled with a lot less fighting and death. Or maybe lots of fighting and no death. Still, I’d probably more likely to get jumped by some douchebag with a team of uber-monsters and beaten up for my lunch money, which would be downright embarrassing.

All of the examples I have refer to men or boys. Except the one about the Witch-King of Angmar. That one was pretty damned cool. Hehehe.

Look, the point I’m trying to make here is that prophecies are a writing tool that comes a dime a
dozen. Every heroic fantasy story or whatever includes a Chosen One and a Fated Girl or something along those lines. Or maybe even a Prophesized Plague. Hell, the world I was in had like five of them. The vehicle for distribution tidbits about the future was different, but the spirit of it stayed the same.

I ended up wondering, really, what the procedure was for meeting the Great Toad Sage. The guy was the size of Gamabunta, meaning that our entire party could probably dance a merry jig in the space between his eye-ridges and not touch either the edges or each other, and I couldn’t help but think that would make conversations awkward. We’d certainly have to crane our necks a lot if we wanted to look him in the eye, even if that would also be weird according to a few protocols I’d learned about foreign dignitaries. Couple that with the fact that the Great Toad Sage was old enough to have spoken to the Sage of Six Paths, and it felt like…I don’t know, like trying to talk to the Lincoln Memorial. Or the Statue of Liberty. Or that huge photo of Chairman Mao in Beijing.

Only no one here would think I was especially crazy for chatting with the Great Toad Sage, aside from the likely breach in protocol and lack of respect “chatting” implied.

I resolved to just follow Sensei’s lead, just as we caught up with them.

“What do you think the Great Toad Sage will be like?” Rin whispered. We were shoulder-to-shoulder at the back of the group, which made quiet commentary easier than it was most of the time. I’m sure that if I tried my theater-whisper technique, I’d have been fine. After making allowances for enhanced shinobi senses, anyway.

(Yes, yes, special hell and all that. Guilty.)

“Big.” I said in quiet voice that matched hers.

She pinched me. “Not what I meant!”

“Wise?”

Another pinch.

I mock-slapped at her hand, saying, “Hey! I’m still re-growing the skin there.”

Rin immediately looked ashamed.

While milking the injury was very in-character for the old me, because I was a bit of a crybaby anyway, I just clasped Rin’s shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze despite the bandages running up and down both of my arms. Besides, I think Isobu’s chakra was taking care of the critical stuff. My skin probably wouldn’t have fused with the bandages. I trusted both Rin’s expertise and Isobu’s self-preservation instinct. More the former than the latter, though.

“We’re here.” Shima said, turning herself around on Jiraiya’s left shoulder. “So quiet down for a little while, children.”

I nodded, deciding not to add the reflexive, “Yes, Shima-sama.” She may have been the size of my head, but she could kick my ass up one side of the mountain and down the other. Besides that, she kind of had told me to be quiet.

We were inside of a temple. Well, I’m going to call it a temple, anyway, because calling it a cave would be to downplay the obvious signs of stone masonry and to call it a shrine would be to understate the sheer size of the place. It was kind of dark, and damp in a way that said “yes, everyone who lives here is an amphibian,” in case it wasn’t obvious. There were no torches or open
flames anywhere—probably a fire hazard with the number of oil-spitting toads around—instead, there was the light cast by the entrance way. Nothing more.

In the center of a dais, at the back end of the hall, was a toad easily as big as I expected Gamabunta to be. He sat in the middle of what looked like a gigantic bathtub, marked with the kanji for “sage.” I’d sort of expected a faint sheen of slime, common to toads, but his faded brown skin and white belly both seemed dry. His eyes were nearly shut from the weight of the wrinkles around them, but I could see them shift a little as we approached and both Fukasaku and Shima disembarked from Jiraiya’s shoulders.

They hopped onto two separate raised platforms, to either side of the Sage’s knees.

The Great Toad Sage wore one of those hats that reminded me a little of the graduation caps I’d expected to be able to wear in my old life—a professor’s hat, with faded red tassels and topped with the biggest crystal orb I’d ever seen. He wore one of those big bead necklaces, too—the kind with the crystal in the middle, like the Jewel of Four Souls, but his had the kanji for “oil” in print large enough to dwarf even Jiraiya. To either side of him were massive scrolls the size of buildings—or maybe they were pillars, and I was just being dumb. At his right elbow, someone had placed a bottle and a glass for what was probably liquor.

We approached at Shima and Fukasaku’s signal.

The Great Toad Sage leaned forward in his seat. The movement was slight, but for someone that big even shifting his weight made everyone edgy. Or maybe that was just me.

Tsuruya was the biggest animal I’d gotten used to recently, but there was a whole order of magnitude of difference between Tsuruya and the toads and again between the toads and the really big ones. I was in dire need of a reframing of my internal reference points for the word “big.”

“Greetings, shinobi.” The Great Toad Sage’s voice was…actually kind of high, given the size difference between us. Jiraiya’s was deeper by at least an octave, but the honored elder’s voice was clearly audible and at a higher volume than I’d expected. This close, I could also see the wrinkles around his mouth that, again, highlighted his immense age.

There was a long pause.

“Oh, I remember now,” the Sage nodded slowly, as though trying to play off the fact that he’d forgotten anyway. Then again, he only had to remember two names. He’d genuinely never met the rest of us. “Er…and the rest?”

“Kushina Uzumaki, sir!” Kushina seemed cheerful enough for five people. I was struck by the thought that she did know the Toad clan. She’d been in a relationship with Sensei for years, after all.
That thought quickly made me wonder if they were planning on having Shima and Fukasaku at the wedding, since most of the other toads were too big. “Remember me?”

“Oh, yes, Kushina-chan…” The Sage rumbled, nodding.

“Sound-off.” Sensei ordered, in a stage-whisper.

“Kakashi Hatake.” Kakashi piped up, from the front.

“I’m Obito Uchiha! Remember that!” Obito said, bouncing on his bare feet.

“Rin Nohara.” Rin said, bowing. I thought I saw the Sage’s eyes focus on her, but it only lasted a moment and it was hard to tell what he was looking at through all those wrinkles.

“Keisuke Gekkō,” I rounded us out, bowing as well.

“Now, that’s rather odd…” The huge toad shifted his weight. “I don’t remember seeing you, Keisuke-chan…”

“We’ve never met.” I said, keeping my head lowered.

“No…I mean more that I don’t recall seeing you anywhere.” The Sage corrected gently, and ice went down my spine.

But I’d already known that, hadn’t I?

“And I don’t remember your friends here, either…how strange.” The Sage seemed to direct his attention toward Sensei. “Minato-chan?”

“It’s a long story.” Sensei offered. Jiraiya gave him a sidelong look that was exasperated at best, so he went on, “I think one of my students may have the same gift that you do, Gamamaru-sama.”

That was probably the best way to put it.

“Oh, I see.” The toad’s huge head slowly turned toward me. “I’ll simply have to do another reading for you, then. It’s very rare that a human has the gift of seeing events in their own lifetime, you know. I shouldn’t be surprised that you acted on them, eh, Rin-chan?”

Sweatdrop round two! Rin giggled behind her hands, while I tamped down on the urge to sigh. “My name’s Keisuke, Gamamaru-sama.” I said, wincing at the way my voice came out a little higher than usual because of my skyrocketing stress levels.

“Right, right.” The Sage nodded, though I wasn’t all that sure if it stuck. Wisdom and short-term memory apparently didn’t always go hand-in-hand.

With the not-slow-at-all sluggishness of magma or a mountain on the move, the Sage lifted his hands and removed the crystal that had been sitting on top of his hat. At the same time, Shima and Fukasaku summoned a gigantic cushion (complete with chakra smoke explosion common to summoning anything) to hold the orb, since it was far larger than either of them and would probably have been rather inconvenient to hold. It hit the cushion with enough force to dislodge a huge cloud of dust—testimony to how long ago the previous reading had been.

“You’ve changed a number of things, haven’t you?” The Sage said, sounding slightly amused despite the trouble I was causing for him. Had caused. Whatever. “I so very rarely see faces, and yet I know that you were not involved before, Keisuke-chan.”
A nervous sort of chuckle escaped me despite my best efforts. “Yeah, sorry about that…”

Sensei prodded my shoulder. “Shhh, give it a minute.”

“How accurate is the Sage, normally?” Rin asked quietly, seeming directing her question at Jiraiya.

Jiraiya gave her a cheerful grin that, frankly, I’d always associated with Naruto’s “promise of a lifetime” tendencies. But before I could dwell on that and drive myself into a downward spiral of depression, he said, “He is the best there is, Rin-chan.”

“There we are.” The Sage said, silencing the peanut gallery.

Both of his long-fingered frog hands hovered around the crystal ball, and I could feel a huge swell of chakra that dwarfed most things I’d felt in the past six months aside from Isobu himself. If I paid very close attention, I could feel it flow from the Sage’s belly and up along his ribs until it entered his arms, then surged into the crystal. Not very clearly, mind, but if there’s a lot of chakra on the move anyone can get an idea that something’s up.

“Obito Uchiha.” At the sound of his name, Obito immediately stood up straighter. The Sage smiled and said, “You will bring hope to your clan by being kind to the right man at the right time for the right reasons. Watch yourself—not everyone can be trusted—but know that your future is bright.”

“Thank you, Gamamaru-sama. I’ll keep it in mind!” Obito said brightly.

I’d honestly thought that Obito’s grin couldn’t get any wider, but apparently I was wrong. Even after everything that had happened recently, we were all okay and I guess the months of virtual isolation could be played off if they led to a moment like this? I didn’t know for sure. But if Obito could be happy, then I would be happy with him.

I’d just have to keep an eye out for any ninja psychologists, just in case. Frankly, that needed to be a field and soon. And not just in the “Yamanaka does a mind walk and shit sorts itself out” way. Too much magic, not enough interaction. While that had worked out for me as a result of a fortuitous mix of coincidence and bungled use of chakra resources, it wasn’t like it was a cure-all. I’d argue that it was nearly the opposite—there was a reason that there were a number of Yamanaka clan members in both T and I and in the various internal offices among ANBU.

“Rin Nohara.” The Sage said, and Rin’s spine immediately went ramrod-straight. I could feel her chakra fidgeting even if the rest of her wasn’t.

Odd how I could sense that, even with my chakra control scrambled. I’d have to look into the methods other people used to sense chakra when I got home, assuming I wasn’t immediately tossed into a containment room by Danzō and his cronies.

The Sage leaned forward. “Those you love will always breathe easily around you.”

…I wasn’t sure if that was supposed to be figurative or literal.

Very fortune-cookie, nonetheless.

After a second to let that sentence sink in, the Sage added, “And remember, all medicines are poisons.”

…What?

“I’ll remember, Gamamaru-sama.” Well, apparently Rin got more out of it than I did. I was too busy
fussing over literal or figurative meanings of the prophecies to really take comfort in much the Sage was saying.

Such was my curse.

“Kushina Uzumaki.” Kushina straightened, too, and I wondered if she really had forgiven me for telling her all that crap about her possible future. Selfish, I know, but sometimes I get really self-centered like that. “Your chains will set you free.”

There was at least one really obvious meaning for part of that, and based on the Uzumaki family jutsu to boot. I just didn’t want to think about it.

Kushina bowed anyway.

“Kakashi Hatake,” the Sage continued, “you will befriend a sapling.”

Oh, what.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing as I watched Kakashi’s thoughts crash to a halt. It wasn’t the kind of thing that would have been obvious to a random passerby, but I knew him well enough to see it in his body language and see it in his chakra. He was so confused.

Ten-to-one odds that the “sapling” was Yamato, at least in my mind.

I was still probably going to get him a bonsai when we got home. Odds were he wouldn’t manage to kill it.

“I didn’t manage to see that one clearly. My apologies.” The Sage seemed to frown. “Perhaps I’ll have a more profound vision later…”

“It’s nothing to worry about, Gamamaru-sama.” Kakashi said quickly, and I wasn’t sure if it was to avoid the embarrassment or because he really didn’t want to see what the Sage could come up with, given time.

“Keisuke Gekkō.” I admit it; I froze up at the sound of my name despite the tension-breaker Kakashi’s prophecy had been. Sure, the prophecies were generally positive, but there was such a thing as dramatic tension. Like being called on in class when you don’t know the answer to the question because you were too busy reading a book under the table. It felt like the world hung on a thread even if the “world” honestly couldn’t give less of a fuck.

I swallowed hard and waited.

“You will teach three dragon hatchlings to fly.” Then the Sage paused, tilting his head and looking at his crystal ball as though wondering where the hell that had come from.

I wasn’t aware that this universe even had a concept for “dragon” other than what the Uchiha used to name their bigger techniques. Though, given the size of toads and snakes around here, maybe there was a place where dragon summons had once roamed. Or something. Maybe they’d been eaten by the snakes. The home of Manda and the other snake summons was called Ryūchi Cave, wasn’t it? But I couldn’t see Tsuruya approving of me deciding to subcontract to the serpents.

Metaphor, then.

If the crystal had been a snow globe or a Magic 8-Ball, I could totally see him shaking it to get another, less-stupid answer.
“Lastly, a prediction for all of you.” The Sage inclined his head to Sensei and Jiraiya, which seemed to surprise them. “Beware the man in black.”

…What? That could only refer to, I don’t know, half of the shinobi population. A lot of us, as it happened, dressed in or accessorized in black, and most of the big bad jackasses did too. Hell, I liked dark colors too, because I was an unfashionable hack.

“Old gods still dream.” The Sage concluded.

Again, what? I know I’m saying that a lot, but there’s something of an upper limit of fate and stuff I can really react to with a five-page essay in 12-point font. I have an innate aversion to being told what to do from on high—it’s different, I guess, to be told what to do in a shinobi context. Being told that I’m going to be doing something by a higher power…not so much. Maybe it’s because divine mandate hadn’t been an explicit thing in my old life.

Or maybe I just always despised that “chosen one” trope.

Also, I was pretty sure that this setting didn’t have Reapers.

…At least I hoped so.

Metal squid monsters would be bad. While a number of shinobi had really big techniques with which to hit people (and here, I was thinking of Madara’s meteor strikes), Reapers had unfortunately always been in their own weight class.

Anyway, enough of that.

“Thank you for everything, Gamamaru-sama.” Sensei told him.

The Sage inclined his head. “Go, then, and…er, what is your name again?”

Group facefault!

“You can leave now.” Fukasaku stage-whispered at us.

“I’ll escort you out.” Shima said, and hopped over to Jiraiya again.

I turned to Sensei. “So…how are we getting home?” I asked.

“Reverse-summoning in the other direction. A messenger’s already gotten through to Konoha by now.” Sensei said, as we followed Shima and Jiraiya back out into the sunshine.

I could see the sun start to turn the sky sapphire-blue and the sunlight itself fall bright and intense as afternoon began to give the slightest bit way to early evening. The wind shot through the deep canyons and nearby peaks hard and fast enough to ruffle my sweat-stiff hair, and Obito’s head briefly became engulfed by his own un-maintained locks. If I had to guess, it was four or so. Too early for dinner, but I was hungry anyway.

I missed home.

We decided to gather around another one of those strange bamboo-fed ponds, which conveniently had worn away the rock with the weight of water over the years. It made a small beach, and there were plenty of rounded rocks for seats for anyone who didn’t want to sit on the dirt/sand/leaf-fall combination underneath us.

Shima and Fukasaku had somehow had a reunion while I wasn’t paying attention and sat on Jiraiya’s
knees. At least the whole crew was together.

“What about Madara?” Obito piped up once we were all seated.

“We were discussing that.” Jiraiya answered, before Sensei could. He rubbed his chin. “After we get back to Konoha, we’ll have to organize a task force to assess the threat. Never would have thought Madara Uchiha would have lived this long, but if there’s a chance . . .”

“There is. It’s more than a chance, Jiraiya-sama.” Obito said, rolling back the sleeve on his right arm. Even without the white bands Sensei used to tie his shirt-sleeves down, it was easy to see the sharp contrast between his replacement arm and the rest of Obito’s skin, even if he’d lost some (or most) of his tan. “Whoever managed to do this didn’t have the skill or resources of an ordinary ninja.”

The replacement arm didn’t even have visible veins. It was just . . . white. Like putty or paste.

“Even if that wasn’t the real Madara,” Obito was saying, looking contemplatively down at his arm, “I don’t want a man who could plot like he could to just run free. He couldn’t even leave the cave and we still nearly all died.”

“Well, we did.” I said, and Obito blinked. I clarified, “It’s definitely the real Madara, sadly. And his plot was to make Obito his puppet by cutting away his supports. Which we are.”

Obito nodded. “Kei, what does he do after this part?”

“Dunno.” Obito blinked. I continued, “I know that Madara finally dies of old age sometime within the next few years, but whatever he did after Rin’s death in the other timeline is a total blank.” I paused. “Further, I know that either Orochimaru picked up a sample of his DNA or else he deliberately passed it off to someone.”

“Why is that important?” Rin asked, looking blank.

“There’s this technique called Impure World Resurrection.” I said, frowning. “It was last used by the Second Hokage, I think, but the worst part of the whole thing is that it pulls dead people out of the afterlife to use as foot-soldiers.”

Everyone, I realized, was looking at me.

“That’s an S-ranked forbidden jutsu, you realize.” Sensei said dryly.

Kushina needled him with, “Why is it that I’m getting used to the things she knows faster than you are?”

“I’m not . . . not used to it.” Sensei said after a while.

“Shut up.” Kushina said. She snapped her fingers to catch my attention past my anxiety. “Go on, Kei-chan. I realize this is forbidden, but why is it important to you?”

“The Fourth Shinobi World War is fought with them.” I held up both hands, to represent different sides. “And I mean us versus them. Dead shinobi from every country and their summoner and one other guy—” one hand waved, “—versus every shinobi country we could recruit.” Other hand! Woo.

“How far back are we talking?” Kakashi asked.

“…At least as far back as the First Hokage.” I said. I could feel everyone wince. “And Madara. And
the Second and the Gold and Silver Brothers and…I’m just going to stop talking now.”

“If this is how you act when someone’s in on the secret, I’m starting to think that Obito isn’t the only one I’m going to have to place in protective custody.” Sensei muttered, rubbing the bridge of his nose as though to stave off a headache.

“Does that still mean I have to talk to Fugaku-san?” Obito asked.

“No.” Sensei replied. “No, I think we’re going to have to have a long talk with a lot of people about informational security and about planning for a possible doomsday scenario.” He sighed. “Not exactly how I wanted to start my run as Hokage…”

Jiraiya whacked Sensei on the back in a playful way, at the exact same time that Kushina decided to. Consequently, Sensei stumbled under the weight of both blows.

“Too bad, Minato.” Jiraiya said, with the kind of cheer derived from another’s suffering. “You’re the one who said yes to Sarutobi-sensei’s nomination.”

Obito slung his normal arm over my shoulders. “So, we’re going to be prison-buddies!”

I couldn’t pretend to be enthusiastic about that. Instead, I asked Sensei, “Am I going to be able to see my mom and my brother?”

“Probably.” Sensei allowed. He sighed again. “Sometimes I wonder if students exist to raise their teacher’s blood pressure.”

“So, Kei-chan, who do you think is the biggest threat?” Kushina asked. “Within the village, of course.” She wobbled a hand in midair. “The rest of this is sort of iffy, as far as control issues go. If Iwa decides to explode a mountain pass, well, that’s not our deal, but if there’s another Orochimaru running around…”

Well, who was? Itachi was all of five years old, Obito was with us, Kabuto had probably already been recruited by ROOT.

Well…

“Danzō Shimura.” I said flatly.

“You mentioned that he’s the head of ROOT. What is that?” Obito asked, but all of the adults immediately looked rather less than happy. He looked guilelessly around at them. “What?”

“If ANBU is already secretive enough,” Jiraiya said, “ROOT is the secret division within ANBU. They report directly to the councilman, rather than the Hokage.” Jiraiya frowned. “All of the Hokage have had a spymaster of some sort, but ROOT was very much Shimura’s design.”

“The Third Hokage disbands ROOT after the war is over.” I added, nearly growling. “But only officially—turns out that if you have a secret shinobi army loyal to only one man, they don’t have to listen when the Hokage says ‘jump.’”

“ROOT members are traditionally embedded in other groups of ANBU.” Sensei looked worried all of a sudden. “Jiraiya-sensei, do you think that the Hokage…?”

“Tossing Shimura out on his ear is going to be nearly impossible.” Jiraiya told us. “He’s discreet and unquestionably loyal to the village, and his expertise will be invaluable if Sarutobi-sensei is really going to drop you in blind. Which I doubt, but Shimura is going to be around until you install a
replacement commander of either ANBU or ROOT. It’s just that Shimura won’t be letting go of ROOT unless he’s dead.”

“Which is pretty much exactly what happened in the non-future,” I added.

“Hush, you.” Jiraiya said. His attention was still mostly on Sensei and Kushina. “We’ll talk more about this later, once the Madara situation is addressed.” He glanced at the four chūnin in the group and said dryly, “I hope you all know that this information is confidential. Until Minato is Hokage, you’ve gone through more promotions and security authorizations, and maybe you’re old enough to drink, none of you get to talk about this to anyone.”

“Let the adults deal with things, right?” I quipped.

“You should hope so.” Jiraiya said. “If the fate of our village falls on a bunch of half-grown chūnin, we’re doomed.”

“...Would it be a good idea to seal our memories?” Kakashi asked.

“Why would we do that?” Obito argued instantly. “I have to know where Madara is because otherwise no one will be able to find his base!”

“But what about after that?” Kakashi crossed his arms over his chest. “Do you want to know who’s pulling the strings, when knowing makes you a target and you can’t fight them off?”

“Then I’ll just get stronger!” Obito snapped.

Rin, who had been sitting pretty silently for a while, sighed. “We’re not the Sannin, Obito.”

“There aren’t three of us, but I think we could make it work!” Obito countered. “Didn’t you hear about how strong we got in that other world?”

“We all died in that other world.” Kakashi said crossly.

I had a building headache.

“Slow down, everyone.” Sensei told us, using his commander voice. He didn’t look unhappy or disappointed despite the arguments—mostly, he seemed resigned to whatever he’d decided to do. “The first thing we have to do is get back to Konoha. Everything else will follow.”

“Who are you going to hand the kids off to?” Kushina asked.

Sensei suddenly looked rather sheepish. “Well…”

“...Dammit.” Kushina said. “Why do you always give me the tough jobs?”

“Consider it horrible, horrible practice for when your son becomes a teenager.” Jiraiya suggested.

“You are all awful people.” Kushina grumped. “Fine, fine, I’ll get them to the Hokage. We’ll lock things down.”

“I’m not sure that your son could ever be as bad as we are right now.” Rin said. “At least about all the trouble we keep running into…”

I said, “I wouldn’t put money on that.”

There was trouble. That’d be things like missions involving someone breaking a leg or maybe
skipping a watch. Maybe that’d involve not paying rent on time. Something mundane.

Then there was Team Minato trouble, which meant kidnappings and violent physical revisions to our bodies and maybe more than a little mental instability.

And then there was Naruto. And everyone around him.

(Granted, I’d probably have to revise my problem assessment scale if Team Minato would go on as we started.)

(We probably would.)

Kushina gave me a smirk. “Oh, really?”

“How bad could he be?” asked Rin.

Rather than answer directly, I said, “Do you want the chronological or categorical list?”

“That bad, huh?” Obito actually had the gall to grin.

I hoped he’d end up babysitting Naruto, a lot. It was petty and vindictive but, frankly, I figured they’d get along great.

“Worse.” I said theatrically.

“Enough about the nonexistent future universe.” Sensei interrupted. I wasn’t sure if the talk of the nebulous other story was getting to him, or if he was just tired of us constantly wandering off topic and into a conversational minefield. Maybe he was just worried that his son was going to be the parenting equivalent of getting a cherry bomb in the mail. He said to me, “We need to take a look at your seal.”

I’d almost forgotten about that, despite my total inability to use my chakra at the moment.

“As it is, it’s secure enough for now. You may be unable to control your chakra properly, but no one is going to die because the Three-Tails found a gap to slip through.” Sensei explained. “But I’d still like to have at least some idea what to do when we get back from the front.”

“And of course, as the two other resident seal masters in Konoha,” Kushina added, “Jiraiya-sama and I are the perfect sources for a second opinion.”

Before they asked, I pulled my mesh shirt off over my head. Above the bandage-and-bra line, Isobu’s seal looked like an old, faded tattoo in dire need of a touch-up. It hadn’t changed much since earlier, at least, and I hadn’t heard Isobu roaring or anything.

Kushina was immediately in my space, and I barely resisted the urge to flinch backward. Not that I’d have gotten away—her hand was vice-like on my bandaged arm, too tight to pull out of. It was mildly terrifying how quickly she could switch from teasing and silly to deadly serious.

Everyone leaned in to see if they could get a better look. Obviously, the adults had priority.

“I see that you put the Five-Elements Seal over…” Kushina frowned, tilting my head back because apparently I was in her light. “Ah, a knockoff Uzumaki seal. Kiri-derived, probably. You did mention the enemy shinobi were Kiri-nin, right?”

“Under compulsion seals,” I felt compelled to add.
“At least it’s not a Kaguya-clan variant.” Jiraiya said.

I wasn’t aware that the holders of the Dead Bone Pulse bloodline even knew what sealing was. They were, after all, the only clan with the dubious honor of being wiped out by Kirigakure’s central government after their coup attempt. How very Uchiha of them.

…Eh. I gave up on following their discussion of seal pedigrees pretty much at that point. The words “derivative” and “traditional” and “spiraling trigrams” cropped enough that I knew I was up a creek without a paddle. Judging by Obito and Rin’s faces, so had they. Kakashi was a little better about his poker face, what with not actually having much of a visible face anyway.

“…I’d wait to deal with this one.” Kushina concluded, eventually. At my expression upon hearing that, she elaborated, “I have the supplies and setup we need back at the house, not here. And if catching Madara is really as time-sensitive as I think it is, we won’t have the hour needed to redraw the seal or anything fancy. It’ll hold for weeks like this, Kei-chan.” She turned to Obito and said, “And I want you to tell Minato and Jiraiya everything you can remember so we can get you home safe sooner rather than later.”

“Got it.” Obito said, and he was sort of drawn off from the main group to have a more intense conversation with the sole two jōnin not named Kakashi in the group. Kakashi, frankly, didn’t need to be in any more fights or involved with stuff beyond his clearance level today. We were all tired, except maybe Obito, and tired chūnin were trumped by fresh jōnin every time.

I had a real problem with not being able to use my chakra properly for the aforementioned “weeks,” but catching Madara with his pants down mattered more than even my prospective job security. Heh. If we could catch him here…

“Does Akihito-shishō know what happened?” Rin asked.

“We didn’t go out of our way to find him, but there’s a chance that Gekkō-san would have.” Kushina shook her head. “She shouldn’t have, but things have a way of getting around. Operational security trumps rank and even family ties, with something like this.”

“Is there actually a rule in the book for this?” I wondered.

“Not in so many words.” Kushina admitted. “But I think we managed to get the interception mission rating bumped up to at least A, if not S, which shoves Yamaguchi-sensei off the list. Need-to-know missions are, by definition, not exactly supposed to be leaking details everywhere.”

“…And you still told my mom?” I said blankly.

Kushina’s expression turned sheepish. “She caught us before that part. She was also threatening to gut Minato if he’d come back without you, so…”

Of course she would. Of course she—she was my mother, yes, but she’d also basically adopted Obito and Rin and she’d been at the epicenter of the shitstorm all those months ago. She didn’t want to live through that again. It’d be worse if it was me and Rin, at once, after Obito. Like we’d followed him down into the dark, somehow, and if Kakashi was gone too…

“She was afraid.” I said quietly. “She saw what happened when we thought Obito was dead.”

“Afraid or not, I don’t think Minato wants to be on the wrong end of her temper again. And since he’s not going to be coming with us directly back to Konoha, he gets to sit out the initial blast wave.” Kushina snickered. “For all the good it’ll do him.”
Rin looked to the side, “Kakashi-kun?”

Kakashi gave her a sidelong look. “What?”

Whatever Rin wanted to say was cut off by Obito bounding back over to us and knocking Kakashi onto his face. I wasn’t sure if it was supposed to be a really enthusiastic hug or if it was a deliberate attempt to keep Rin from talking to Kakashi for any length of time. Either way, Obito seemed cheerful.

“I’M GOING HOME!” Obito practically shrieked, squeezing Kakashi to the point that I could feel the young jōnin’s palpably mounting frustration. Some things never really changed, I guess. Why Kakashi, of all people, seemed to be one of those mysteries for the ages. I’d have thought that Rin or I would have been less spiky or stabby targets.

Jiraiya and Sensei followed at a much slower pace, and didn’t end up knocking us around like bowling pins. More power to them.

“Jiraiya-sensei and I will head back to the forward base and scramble any capable fighters.” Sensei told us without preamble. “Much as I hate to admit it, we don’t have any other forces close enough to make a difference, particularly if this statue actually can maneuver.

“The rest of you are heading to mine and Kushina’s house in Konoha. The Hokage should already be there, Kei-kun, along with your mother and at least some medical staff. Whether he’s informed Fugaku Uchiha yet…I can’t say. But Shimura should be aware, for better or for worse. Kushina-chan…stall him. Or all of them, if you have to.” Sensei gestured to Shima, who had been waiting rather patiently on his shoulder for him to finish.

“I’ll be taking you back.” Shima told us. “Kōsuke-chan and I have a relay set up, and believe me when I say that an uppity councilman is a few hundred years too young to be getting past me.”

“Sensei.” I said, just as they were about to go teleporting around the continent again.

“Kei-kun?” He…hadn’t lost patience with me. Thank goodness.

“If you do fight Madara, Sage techniques are your best friends.” I told him. Oh god. Ohhhhh god; they were about to try to short-circuit the Plot. Oh god. “I don’t know if you have any, but he won’t have seen frog katas or anything before and hopefully that’ll be enough.”

Sensei’s ruffled my hair. “Don’t worry, Kei-kun.” His eyes were clear, even if his chakra was somewhat less than calm. “Your sensei’s the fastest man alive, remember?”

That won’t be enough! I wanted to say, but the words got stuck behind the sudden lump in my throat.

“See you all soon.” Sensei said.

And…we left. Shima stuck with us and Fukasaku went with Jiraiya and Sensei and then there was just smoke.
Ripple Arc: Hit and Miss

Chapter Summary

Kei: Be sidelined.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title comes from some song or another with that title. There has to be at least one, right?

“Minato, you’re not doing yourself any favors by panicking about this,” Jiraiya-sensei says as we teleport toward the front lines once again. It takes about five jumps, and I can feel my chakra start to flag a bit as we get closer. Reverse-summoning would have been easier and would have spread the cost between two or more toads instead of just piling the long-range space-time ninjutsu drain on me, but arranging that kind of relay takes time. Using Flying Thunder God seals with a passenger is harder still, but damned if I’m leaving Jiraiya-sensei behind on a mission this important.

I’m not feeling patient enough to take the time to prep everything anyway, and Jiraiya-sensei knows it.

We don’t have time if our opponent really is Madara Uchiha.

We only pause briefly between jumps. It’s long enough for me to get my feet back under me, figuratively if not literally, and long enough to argue. Fukasaku has remained pretty quiet thus far, apparently because he knows that Jiraiya-sensei and I need to hash things out. Just his presence keeps us from arguing, at least.

I’m almost anxious to try anyway.

“My students are all disaster magnets and apparently Kei-kun has been hiding the ability to see the future for years,” I say, showing more worry than I’d have allowed in front of my students. But Jiraiya-sensei is safe in a way that even Kushina isn’t, sometimes. He’s seen me at my worst, too. I bite the inside of my cheek anyway for a moment, then continue in a more measured tone, “I’m not sure this is the sort of thing I should be nonchalant about, Sensei.”

Jiraiya-sensei gives me a dirty look I can practically feel burn into my brain, though we’re running through trees to the next seal’s range and can hardly maintain a visual on each other half the time. Bless and blast trees, depending on your preferences.

“Nagato has the Rinnegan,” Jiraiya-sensei tells me. I abruptly feel a pang of guilt—it’s not like he’s ever talked about the… I don’t know, the Ame kids? As a name as any, really. But he doesn’t talk about them. Like how he doesn’t talk about Haruka or Satoshi, and neither do I. And those kids—adults, now—are in just as much trouble as my students are. “According to your student, he, Konan, and Yahiko are all going to end up dead.”
I remember that. But I don’t want to think about it.

I’m starting to see why Kei has such explosive emotional breakdowns when she does. Building up pressure like we have been, whether by deferring emotional catharsis or suppressing emotion entirely, isn’t healthy.

“Though, that said, that doesn’t mean your students are in any less danger,” Jiraiya-sensei continues after a moment.

“Keisuke-chan was clear about the timeline,” Fukasaku says, still clinging to Jiraiya-sensei’s shoulder. “While we may not be aware of all the variables, we can make an educated guess. Obito-chan told us enough, too.”

Obito told us enough to be able to work backwards from the site where Kei was captured, at least. I’m still not entirely sure what to make of what he said about a strange statue, but the issue of a living Madara (no matter his age) with an army of cloned creatures is pressing enough that letting them be is not an option. I don’t care if Madara drops dead of old age in five minutes—the man is too much of a threat to even allow the possibility that he might not have.

It’s one thing to curse the First for, I suppose.

But before we can launch an assault on Madara’s hideout, we need more people to help. There are more than a few Konoha teams in the general area, if we seek them out, and I have every intention of doing just that.

Which is why we’re traveling to the secondary base, since—as Kakashi mentioned—the forward post has been all but obliterated by those strange white soldiers Obito and Kei described.

The newly-named forward base is actually a fair bit less exposed than its predecessor—rather than being located in thick, Kusa-like forests or in a glade filled with Hashirama trees, the new base is carved into the side of a mountain some fifty feet above ground level. While shinobi have no trouble traversing that kind of distance, tunnels are somewhat more daunting for most people.

Normally, Konoha shinobi favor forests because we’re familiar with them. But we’re not above taking things that Iwagakure leaves behind in our territory.

If it’s closer than I’d like to where Obito said Madara would be…well, it won’t matter.

“Hold on!” says the shinobi at the entrance. Blue hair and sunglasses mean he’s the previous base’s commander. Bandages and an impromptu eye patch indicate that he didn’t give up that position without a fight.

That’s a worrying thought.

“Ryusei, it’s me,” I say, holding both hands up. Jiraiya-sensei lands next to me a moment later with Fukasaku sitting on his head, but Ryusei can’t seem to spare them a glance.

Ryusei narrows his eyes anyway. “Security code, now.”

…That is not a good sign.

I hold out my right hand, palm-up.

In less than a second, a fully-formed Rasengan is spinning in my palm.
“…Good enough,” Ryusei allows, and backs down. He sighs. “Sorry, Minato—it’s just been a really, really shitty day.”

I nod. I can guess, and also mentally kick myself for leaving the battlefield even if it was to make sure my students made it home safe.

As Ryusei leads us into the cave system, Jiraiya-sensei asks, “How many survivors are there?”

“Enough,” Ryusei says with a grimace. The expression deepens after a second. “I didn’t notice until after, Minato, but we lost your students in the fight. And when your team came back without you…”

“Minato’s students are fine,” Jiraiya-sensei cuts in. “Just tell us the situation here, Kiyotaka.”

Ryusei gives Jiraiya-sensei a dubious look that I don’t appreciate much. But there’s nothing we can do now but focus on the present—neither of us is willing to snap at him over brusqueness. The situation is tense enough as it is.

“You’ll be glad to hear that Dōtō, Kurojō, and Gaku made it back in one piece, with Aomaru and two summoned dogs,” Ryusei says after a moment, turning left at a new hallway under the cliffs. If this area didn’t have a bizarre proliferation of glowing cave moss and the occasional manmade torch to dot the walls, we’d be going in blind. “They’re both gone now, though.”

“They’re Kakashi’s,” I say quietly. “What about the rest of camp?”

“We lost people, Minato. I won’t deny that,” Ryusei sighs.

Ryusei makes it maybe half a meter down the hall before he abruptly jerks and falls back, giving me a perfect view of the kunai imbedded between his eyes.

My kunai is up and raised in a block before the attacker comes barreling down the hallway via the ceiling. The air shifts in a small space like the tunnels, giving me more than enough warning (but apparently not Ryusei).

Then Jiraiya-sensei and I throw ourselves to the sides of the hall, because something is seriously strange here.

The attacker lands on top of Ryusei’s body and immediately yanks her kunai out of the corpse, then offers it handle-first to me.

“Makoto,” I say, voice entirely flat. “What is going on here?”

Makoto Kiyotaka, Ryusei’s red-haired younger sister, snaps, “Take a look yourself, Minato.”

Gleaming against the dull grey of the kunai’s steel is a gooey white-orange substance that is definitely not blood. Under her foot, Ryusei’s corpse goes white and vaguely doughy before turning into something that certainly isn’t a human corpse. If anything, it reminds me of the strange substance that that spiral-clone-thing was made out of. Obito’s replacement arm is similar.

We’ve been infiltrated.

I construct the Rasengan with my left hand this time, and I can see Makoto relax slightly.

“How do we know you’re who you say you are?” Jiraiya-sensei asks. He also has a Rasengan, but in his right—and Jiraiya-sensei doesn’t look like it’s going to be a technique just for show.

Makoto pulls a long, needle-tipped hairpin out of her orange-red spikes and pricks her thumb.
Normal, *human* blood wells from her finger.

Everyone exhales.

Makoto Kiyotaka is a little older than I am, and about five years younger than her brother. She wears the black overcoat of an Intelligence officer on top of her Konoha uniform, and is one of the most discerning sensors the department’s had in years. For being a tiny, spiky, and occasionally vicious spitfire of a kunoichi, she seems to have the best idea of what’s going on.

“We’ve had repeated incursions from shape-changing monsters since the attack on Site Nine,” Makoto tells us, even as she stomps on the corpse of the…what did Obito call these? Zetsu-clones? Her sandaled foot caves its face in as though it were made of dough. She growls, “The easiest way to tell them apart is based on security codes, but since we discovered one of them *eating* Junpei, we’re not taking any chances. We have no idea what they can learn through chakra or blood transference.”

“Have they been using their victims’ jutsu?” I ask.

“No,” Makoto replies. At the looks on our faces, she adds, “Oh, it’s not like they haven’t *tried*, but they don’t have the same level of experience.”

Even more worrying.

“I’ve received reports that they have the ability to travel underground,” I tell her, “Or that they’ve been used as an underground information network. Possibly both.”

Makoto stares. Then, “Well, that explains quite a bit. What sort of structure do you think they have?”

Even as she talks, Makoto walks briskly down the tunnel.

“I’ll tell you once we’re in a secure location,” I tell her.

“If they’re anywhere near as competent as ‘underground information network’ implies, then no location is safe. Unless we change countries,” Makoto says. Her green eyes narrow. “Look, I accept that we’re facing a challenge. But one of them broke my brother’s leg so badly that he’s likely never going to be able to walk again. Half of the base’s original roster is dead. We lost enough ground that Kumo could walk in and have a dance party on the ruins and we wouldn’t be able to respond. I want to know who’s behind this.”

She has a point.

“Allegedly, Madara Uchiha,” Jiraiya-sensei says.

Makoto stumbles and I hear a sharp inhale, but that’s about it. Besides, we’ve reached the center of the base.

Unlike the other parts of the mountain, this particular cavern is actually brightly lit behind the rock-over-steel-door that we’ve used to conceal the entrance. Someone, at some point, had decided that installing horrible fluorescent lighting was the thing to do, and the interior decorators might have been on strike when it was designed. The chamber was a stark, plain pocket in the mountain that had one half designated for command coordination and the other half for a medical center.

The medical center was more crowded than the communications area was.

Ryusei Kiyotaka is lying on the first hospital cot, with his left leg practically mummified and elevated on a stack of cheap cushions. His shades are nowhere to be found—except perhaps on the Zetsu mimicking him, even if Makoto had split them at the bridge—and his usual samurai topknot is in
disarray. He doesn’t seem conscious, which could be due to blood loss or chakra drain or any number of other things.

In the next cot, there’s a familiar face. Or muzzle, rather. And next to Aomaru’s bed, a man sits.

“Minato!” says the man by the second cot. It seems that Gaku got out of the clusterfuck alive. He’s not in great shape, but at least he apparently still bleeds red, going by the bandages. “Did you get your students back?”

“Yes, they’re fine,” I say, grasping Gaku’s offered hand.

“Good. Tell Kakashi his dogs are life-savers,” Gaku tells me. A shadow crosses his face. “If not for them, I would’ve lost Aomaru.”

“I will. But are they okay?” I ask.

“Should be. They un-summoned themselves a little before we got here.” He gestures at the next bed over, where Kurojō is helping a heavily bandaged Dōtō sit up to greet us.

“Are any of your team fit for combat?” Makoto asks.

“I’m well enough, even if Aomaru can’t follow me this time,” Gaku says.

“Same here,” Kurojō adds, and Dōtō subsides after a brief wave.

“And I am, of course, ready to kill something that bleeds actual blood,” Makoto concludes.

There are maybe four other shinobi capable of fighting at the moment.

Maybe this is a bad idea.

Jiraiya-sensei pats my shoulder.

Oh, the joys of command.

“Fukasaku-sama, please take the injured to Konoha,” I say.

“Of course, Minato-chan.” The old toad looks at me seriously, though, and I pause. “But if you need any reinforcements, please call on Shima and me before you get into too much trouble.”

“I’ll make sure to do that,” I tell him, and the sage immediately hops off to start gathering casualties together for a reverse-summoning trip. It’s going to be incredibly unpleasant, but it’s better than coming back here and finding out that our entire base has been eaten.

I’m still not sure if I should take Makoto’s account as absolute truth, but there are some things shinobi just don’t deal with well. Seeing comrades die that way has to be the top of the list.

There’s a reason that no one likes the few Kiri-nin who’ve figured out how to summon sharks.

I take a deep breath.

Fact one: We’re maybe ten kilometers from where I think Madara is hiding out.

Fact two: Makoto Kiyotaka is a stupidly advanced sensor who hasn’t been killed by Zetsu clones.

Fact three: Jiraiya-sensei and I are both on this team and he hasn’t used up much of his chakra today.
Fact four: There’s an army between us and the probably-still-combat-capable target.

This doesn’t look great, but I think we can minimize our exposure time. That’ll have to be enough to get us there.

“Everyone here is clean,” Makoto answers my unspoken question. “Even if I had to stab them myself to make sure.”

Ryusei raises a middle finger at her, though he’s still pretty wobbly. Everyone else seems fine with the hairpin-pricks, at least. Or maybe we’re all too keyed up by the thought of near-flawless infiltrators to be worried about Makoto’s stabbing tendencies.

Fukasaku warps out as soon as he’s gotten all the casualties secured.

That leaves me with a group consisting of Makoto, Jiraiya-sensei, Kurojō, and Gaku-sans-Aomaru.

It’ll have to do.

We move out.

We also hit the first wave of Zetsu clones almost immediately. The surge of white bodies is nearly like a flood, and none of them have bothered to disguise themselves this time. As a result, there are an awful lot of green-haired, yellow-eyed, naked, one-armed putty-creatures heading our way at what can only be described as homicidal speed.

Between the five of us, though, and two of Jiraiya-sensei’s summoned warrior toads, we clear them out in short order. Makoto captures two of them in specialized sealing scrolls I tossed her way earlier, then breathes fire on the one left in front of her. I dart through the crowd, cutting throats and impaling hearts as I flit from kunai to kunai. Jiraiya-sensei coordinates with the toads, mashing the Zetsu clones into paste under their collective weight on more than one occasion. Gaku launches into a single–person version of the Fang Over Fang Inuzuka technique, while Kurojō manages to lead a number of them into a cloud of corrosive gas.

“This should be enough to argue your case to your superiors,” I comment to Makoto as she hands one of the capture scrolls back to me.

“I don’t think it’s my superiors I need to convince.” She says it so seriously that I blink. “Are you the next Hokage or aren’t you?”

Well…

I grin sheepishly.

“Minato, quit walking around with your head in the clouds and confirm we’re on the right track,” Jiraiya-sensei shouts at me.

Hm. Based on the remnant Flying Thunder God kunai around here, Obito’s testimony, plus the evidence of Wood Release jutsu…

“Yes. This way next,” I say.

The rest of the journey is…well, ten minutes of anxiety followed by two of excitement, mostly. Not that I wish we had more Zetsu clones to beat to death, but it’s starting to become apparent that they’re not really as powerful up-front as their stealth record allows them to be. Perfect infiltrators they might be, but having Jiraiya-sensei and me here has tipped the scales in our favor. It helps that
they’ve been apparently giving up on the idea of disguising themselves, or else Makoto would have to put her security protocol through a few more paces.

The last one falls to a Rasengan that makes its head explode like that weird, hollow Zetsu clone Kakashi killed.

On that note, I think we’ve found the place.

I haven’t seen a cave that big since the last time I poked around the evacuation shelters in the Hokage Mountain. The entrance matches it, bizarrely, which is actually even more worrying.

Either something really big burrowed out of the formerly-modest entrance, or Obito’s account of the strange statue enhancing the Zetsu clones’ strength is all too true. I signal for my team to hang back if at all possible, though I don’t expect for a second that Jiraiya-sensei will listen to me.

Then I head in, ready to summon Gamabunta if this turns out to be a trap.

Not that I’m entirely sure that I have the chakra to do so, but…well. No one needs to know that, and Jiraiya-sensei is half a step behind me at most.

We make our way inside, our path lit only by a chemical glow-stick.

And there’s nothing there.

Let me preface this next section by saying that I am grateful for my families in both of my lives. While I may not always get along with the members thereof, I’ve never been abused or neglected or made to feel unwanted. I’ve always had a loving home, which has contributed significantly to my mental stability over the thirty-odd years I’ve been running around with roughly the same soul. This, on its own, puts me at a significant advantage over most of the people I’ve met in this lifetime. I can never thank Mom or Hayate or Dad or my other family enough to establish how grateful I am for that.

This does not change the fact that Mom scared the ever-loving crap out of me.

Immediately after leaving Toad Mountain behind, my vision had filled with smoke and I got that hook-behind-the-navel sensation again that told me we were all on the move. When the smoke cleared and the world spun a lot less, I could identify a bunch of chakra signatures I recognized and a room I didn’t.

I’d never been in Sensei’s house, as it happened. In four bloody years of knowing him, I’d never so much as stopped by to bug him in his off-hours.

Sensei and Kushina’s shared living room was actually pretty messy, considering who lived here. Sensei may have been an expert at paperwork, data, and crunching numbers, but he’d never struck me as an obsessive housecleaner. Somewhat understandably, the living room was actually strewn with papers and half-filled scrolls over a neat if misshapen coffee table, a couch with mismatched cushions, and a stuffed bear that was obviously well-loved once-first-date material. Other than the Sensei-derived mess, though, everything seemed to be in order. There were red-framed photographs on the walls—Sensei’s team photo with us, Sensei and Kushina on a date, Kushina and Mito Uzumaki, Sensei and Jiraiya. I got the impression that the house was actually a lot bigger than that—there were way too many doors and halls leading off from the entranceway for a small, modest sort of place. Their house took up the entire top two floors of a building, if I remembered the TV show correctly.
All of that I had to establish over the previous few seconds.

The reason for that involved my mother.

Mom was in the room when we appeared out of a fold in space-time, which I realized immediately. The number of total occupants of the house had increased by six—Shima, Kushina, Rin, Obito, Kakashi, and myself—in addition to the three already around. I identified them as the Hokage, my mother, and a woman who seemed vaguely familiar and was about twice my mother’s age.

Mom immediately rushed me. Before I could react, she was kneeling and had dragged me down to her level with her hands clamped around my face. As she obviously checked me over for injuries, I was also observing her.

She looked pale with worry—paler than usual, anyway—and wore a Konoha uniform instead of her usual lavender yukata. Her long black hair was tied up and braided and crammed up against the base of her neck in a knot, and a Konoha headband looped around her neck like Hinata’s had in the future. There was a full-sized katana strapped to her back, over the shoulder pads of her chūnin flak jacket, and her long dark blue sleeves were rolled up to her elbows.

Also, she was squishing my face.

“Kei-chan,” Mom breathed, and bumped her forehead against mine. I closed my eyes. I basked in the feel of her chakra and, yes, even the fact that she was suddenly hugging the stuffing out of me. I could breathe later, right?

Hell and high water came and went, and I was home.

After a long, silent moment, Mom pulled back and—while still leaving one hand clamped onto my shoulder because I sure as hell wasn’t going anywhere—finally looked around. I felt her chakra wobble in relief when she saw the rest of my team still intact, and then stop dead upon recognizing Obito.

By the time I really processed that, she had dragged me over to Obito and pushed his hair out of his face with her free hand, as though to be sure it was really him.

“Obito-kun?” Mom asked, immediately focusing on the pressure scars around his remaining eye. She traced one line with her thumb, almost absently. I noticed belatedly that she had let go of my shoulder and tried massaging feeling back into it. “How is this possible?”

Obito gave a sheepish sort of grin. It was the kind that made Sensei want to pull his hair out when we downplayed sprains or cuts with a stupid, stupid smile. My blood refused to boil at that moment, though. The gleam had worn off of things. “Uh, the rock didn’t do it?”

Kushina tugged on a lock of his overgrown hair. “Obito,” she reprimanded.

“Ow!” Rubbing his head and leaning away from Kushina, Obito held out his artificial right arm for Mom’s discerning eye. Mom prodded at it curiously, so Obito explained, “I, uh, I got a spare and I’m really okay. Really.”

Kushina tugged on a lock of his overgrown hair. “Obito,” she reprimanded.

“Then where have you been?” Mom asked, and there was an undertone to her voice that implied threat. I just wasn’t sure to what degree.

“Um…” Obito said.

Kushina, thankfully, saved his bacon. “Gekkō-san, I completely understand if you’re feeling
frustrated,” Kushina said, redirecting Mom’s anger from Obito to being patronized by Kushina. The redhead held up both hands in a placating manner. “I didn’t know he was alive until Minato told me a couple of hours ago.”

“Though I suppose he could have written from that hole in the ground,” was Shima’s mildly sarcastic comment.

Mom didn’t say anything.

Then, just when I was about to wonder if I should have asked Obito and Shima to dive for cover before Mom exploded due to suppressed outrage, Mom deflated. The tension went right out of her frame and everyone in the room relaxed a little, even the severe-looking brunette woman standing by the Hokage. I wasn’t sure that the Hokage had been anxious at all. Shima either.

Mom ruffled Obito’s hair—and wow, I hadn’t even thought about how long it’d been since he’d had a shower with soap—and said, “It’s good to have you back.”

I made a mental note to bully Kakashi into getting Obito cleaned up, if no one else would do it. Or maybe Mom would take Obito back under her wing. Then I wouldn’t have to worry about it.

“I’m glad to be back,” Obito said, and I pretended not to see when he wiped his face with those too-long sleeves. I wanted to hug him, but I wasn’t sure if he could take it if I did it while he was crying—even if it was because he was happy.

Mom hugged him. After a second or so, Obito’s arms came up and his hands clung to the back of Mom’s flak jacket. I could see the tendons stand out on the backs of his hands—even the Zetsu one.

Kakashi looked away, and Rin brought her hands to her mouth to keep from saying anything.

I decided to join in on the hug, making “come over here” gestures to Rin and Kakashi. In both of my lifetimes, I’d been lucky enough to be born into physically affectionate families. No one else on my team had, and it showed. Oh boy, did it ever.

I didn’t even know if any of them remembered what it felt like to be held, except by each other. I hugged Obito semi-regularly and so did Mom, and both of us hugged Rin at least once every time we saw her.

Kakashi was ignoring me.

…Since he’d hugged me earlier, pulling him into this one to be squeezed to death by Mom would be fair game.

Kakashi abruptly changed tack to glare at me, as though reading my thoughts. Sourpuss.

Unfortunately, we had to cut the group hug session short (meaning after Rin had joined, but while Kakashi and I were still in a stare-off) because the brown-haired woman in the room cleared her throat loudly. After a second or two, we came to the collective realization that we were not the only people in the room, and that two of the others were the freaking Hokage and a woman I suspected was his wife. The group embarrassment was almost palpable.

Well, unless your name was Miyako Gekkō.

My mother’s face was as still and blank as stone.

“Sarutobi-sama, Hokage-sama,” Mom said, in a tone flatter than a dead note on a piano. She only
spared a glance for Shima—I guess she didn’t know who she was.

“I think we need to explain a few things,” Kushina said, stepping in before Mom and Biwako Sarutobi could even think about getting snippy at each other. There was something disarming about Kushina and her smile, no matter how sheepish it was. It was a trait that her son had definitely gotten from her, for all that his looks were pure Namikaze otherwise. “Gekkō-san, I mentioned that Kei-chan had been in an altercation with Kiri-nin…”

“So you did,” Mom replied.

“I left out a few things,” Kushina told her. She nodded at the Hokage, adding, “May I, Hokage-sama?”

The Hokage clasped his hands behind his back. “Proceed, Uzumaki-san.”

“Thank you,” Kushina straightened, making the gentle bulge of her pregnant belly a little more obvious. I’d never really given much thought to Kushina’s pregnancy, but it was already July, and I was going to be fourteen in about a week. Naruto was damn well on his way. The world would tremble.

…As long as I hadn’t managed to invalidate his existence. Oh, that wasn’t much of a comforting thought…

“Keisuke Gekkō, as a result of her recent patrol mission and interference from Kirigakure, is now the host of the Three-Tailed Beast,” Kushina said, as though she hadn’t just opened the bomb bay doors on a B-52 of revelations.

(I’m a bit of a hypocrite that way.)

Mom went even paler than usual.

Oppressive silence!

“It’s true!” Obito broke in, shattering the suffocating silence as things sank in. I wasn’t sure what he was thinking, but he had a determined look on his face anyway. “There was this awful chakra, and her eyes were this weird gold-on-red and there were tails.”

Rin shook her head. I wasn’t sure if she was disappointed in us or if it was just an admission that she didn’t really have much to contribute to the testimony about my ninja turtle problem. She’d kind of been unconscious for most of the chakra brawl.

I always thought I was more a Donatello than a Leonardo, at least back when I’d been able to watch cartoons. Now Rin had that role, I guess. That meant that one member of our team had to be Michelangelo, if Obito didn’t have that role. Then again, with Kakashi as Raphael…

Well, now I’d never be able to stop comparing Sensei to Splinter.

“This is why we were supposed to debrief first,” Kakashi muttered.

“Then you take a stab at it,” Kushina said, raising her eyebrow expectantly.

Kakashi gave her a long look, and I felt a brief flash of surprised annoyance from the way his chakra twisted. It was gone in an instant, but I sure remembered it. I wasn’t really sympathetic. If he hadn’t wanted to be called to the floor, he shouldn’t have said anything.
“Keisuke became a jinchūriki as a result of a plot against Konoha by Madara Uchiha,” Kakashi said clearly. He closed his visible eye. Apparently ignoring the way the Hokage’s mammoth chakra signature jumped, he went on, “Further, Madara Uchiha’s plot involved rescuing and subverting Obito’s sanity through six months of isolation, without our knowledge. Thus far, we haven’t determined the depths of his motivations, but Sensei and Jiraiya-sama have gone to confront him on their own initiative.”

“…That’s an awful summary,” Obito said.

Kakashi glared sidelong at him. “It’s not my fault that the situation became stupidly complicated as soon as too many Uchiha were involved.”

“HEY!”

“Is this how briefings would go if Minato-sensei wasn’t around?” Rin asked me in a whisper.

I nodded. Eventually, I explained things. Obito hadn’t been there for most of it, Kakashi had missed the crucial part, and Rin had been unconscious. I was really the only one who could explain what had happened. I even had the sealing background to explain what had happened in terms that made sense to every adult in the room. And besides, hearing everyone else try to explain for me made me feel weird and oddly irresponsible.

I mean, it wasn’t like the sealing thing was anyone’s fault but Madara’s, and he wasn’t really around to catch all the slinging blame. Somehow, that translated to Obito and Kakashi getting snippy at each other instead of plotting horrific revenge together on a scheming war criminal.

These boys, I swear. They never learn.

Ten tons of rock didn’t seem to change anything, and neither did the ritualistic exchange of eyeballs, so I was at a loss to find something that would. They were basically blood brothers at this point, but apparently also still eternal rivals.

When I was done explaining…well, everyone needed some time to think. The Hokage and his wife were going to have a quick talk with Mom and with Kushina, which I wasn’t allowed to hear. Apparently, the rest of us were put on R-and-R duty. I didn’t even know that had to be a thing.

“While the adults are talking,” Kushina said, with a sort of cheerful malice, “your job is to get cleaned up.”

“I’m a jōnin and the rest of my team is composed of chūnin. Is our security clearance not high enough?” Kakashi wanted to know. At least he was the one asking—it was a big turnaround from Mr. Sensei-Knows-Best from even a few months ago. It could be a good or a bad thing. Right then, it was a thing called “semantics.”

“Yes and no.” Kushina held up two fingers. “I’m a specialist jōnin, and so is Gekkō-san—even if she’s retired. But it’s not about rank. It’s about the fact that the Hokage said so, that Minato said so — ” I guessed that meant Kushina was using what authority Sensei had given like a sledgehammer on Kakashi’s sense of What Should Happen— “and because you’ve had about the longest day anyone can think of and we all want you to take a freaking break before you fall asleep standing up.”

“Don’t we deserve to know what’ll happen to us?” Obito demanded.
“Sure. Once we’ve decided what that is,” Kushina said. She pointed toward the washroom. “Get moving.”

We tried to appeal to Shima, who had hopped on top of a bookshelf and been oddly quiet for the past few minutes. Puppy-dog eyes, in my case.

“Don’t look at me,” Shima said, giving us the look that a lot of parents had. The kind that said you were on thin ice. It just looked weird on a frog. “I am waiting for Fukasaku and Jiraiya-chan. In the meantime, I’m deciding the futures of a gaggle of mudpuppies.”

That was about the least subtle admonishment and dismissal I’d ever heard from a frog.

And see, we did that. We really did try.

We ran into a snag almost immediately though.

“Exactly how long is your hair now?” I asked, tugging on the end of Obito’s formerly-spiky hair.

“I don’t know,” Obito said, twisting around to check. He reached back and found the longest tip of his hair after a second or two. Since I could see it, I was even more baffled. His hair had somehow gone from about three centimeters to reaching almost to middle of his back in six months? Zero to emo in no time flat, seriously. “This long?”

“Oh, whatever,” I grumbled. Not my problem. At least he wouldn’t have to deal with male-pattern baldness, right? “Just don’t use up all the hot water.”

“Excuse me?” But Obito was grinning. “Who, exactly, hasn’t had access to hot running water in six months?”

I made a gagging noise. “Okay, no, you’re going first and I don’t care how long it takes. Just go.”

While Rin took over the other bathroom—turned out that the apartment had three bedrooms and two full baths and took up enough space to make my old house’s square footage look modest—Kakashi and I went scrounging for spare clothes and medical supplies. It wasn’t like I had anything else to do, since my toothbrush and other toiletries were all in my scrolls and I’d lost half of those over the course of the mission from hell.

I also noticed that Kakashi knew his way around, and said as much.

“I had to stay here before I got an apartment,” was all Kakashi said in response, before opening the door to what I assumed was the guest bedroom.

It wasn’t.

It was the nursery.

Maybe “nursery” was too charitable of a term. I could at least say it was certainly in the process of becoming one. The room was about four meters by five meters, and partially painted a very pale yellow over what had once been white walls, going by the blank parts. Some parts of the walls were marked off for murals, and I could see that Kushina had already gotten started on a painting of a giant white spiral. A large black bookshelf was sitting next to the window, with some well-loved children’s books already hiding in what slots weren’t taken up by scroll-work. A partly-assembled crib was shoved into one corner of the room, to make way for drop-cloths and a rug that was still rolled up. There were also a number of bins in the room, labeled things like “diapers,” “toys” and “baby clothes.”
…It seemed like Sensei and Kushina couldn’t quite decide what part of the nursery-assembling stage they were on.

Kakashi closed the door. “They changed guest bedrooms,” he said.

I didn’t have anything to say in reply, so I followed him down the hallway.

I didn’t have the space in my head to worry about yet more reminders of Kakashi’s horrible past. I would after, say, fifteen hours of sleep, but at that moment I could feel my brain slowing to a crawl.

The next room was smaller, and further away from the master bathroom (where Obito could be heard swearing at the knots in his hair). Kakashi opened the door anyway and went inside straight away, even though I wasn’t sure what he was even seeing.

The actual guest bedroom was about half-a-meter smaller in both length and width, and apparently had been the designated dumping ground for Kushina and Sensei’s baby-fueled remodeling rampage. There were, for some reason, two queen-sized beds crammed into it. They were both shoved together to make a sort of super-bed, with half of the resulting structure decked out with red comforters and one in blue with a shuriken pattern. The room also contained another bookshelf (almost inaccessible because of the beds), a desk with more ink stains than my house’s dining room table, and a gigantic oaken dresser.

Kakashi made a beeline for the top drawer of the latter.

While he dug around in it, I looked at the walls and wondered why the walls had needed to be plastered. The ceiling, too. The plaster didn’t even match.

Then Kakashi disturbed my contemplative moment by throwing a paper-wrapped package at my head. I caught it, but the thought counted.

“Take those to Obito,” Kakashi said, while I shifted the package in my hands. It felt like…yep, a pack of clothes. Wrapped in that weird water-resistant field paper, too. “They might fit him.”

“You have a spare set of clothes here?” I asked, and immediately felt stupid. Of course he did. The two most stable adult influences in Kakashi’s entire life lived here. Why the hell wouldn’t he?

“Yes, I do,” Kakashi said, in a tone that implied my mental self-flagellation was exactly the correct reaction.

“Fine, fine. I know when I’m not wanted,” I grumbled theatrically, stomping out of the room.

And it wasn’t like I could kill more time by going into the living room to bug Kushina and Mom. I could feel the electric buzz of privacy seals killing any sound that tried to escape the living room, which was so not the right place for that kind of discussion. But it wasn’t like there were really better options for privacy. I imagined that between Kushina and Sensei, their house was basically a sealing equivalent of Fort Knox. I wasn’t sure what that meant for the structural integrity of the building, but it had to mean good things for our chances of going undetected by Danzō or the Council. At least for the night.

It wasn’t like we were going to get out of here before then.

I made my way back to the bathroom Obito had colonized and pounded on the door. “Hey, Obito, I’m leaving a spare set of clothes out here!”

“That’s—ow—great, thanks,” Obito said. The hairbrush was apparently putting up a fight. “Um, you
might not want to come in or anything.”

“No shit,” was my dry response.

I may have seen both Obito and Kakashi shirtless at some points during long missions, but I wasn’t his mother. If he was going to get into a fight with grooming equipment and lose, I was going to let him. I’d probably just tell him to cut that extra hair off anyway.

“Screw this,” I heard Obito mutter. Then the water started running. “Kei, if you’re still there, you should probably go check on Rin. Didn’t she get hurt?”

“Yeah,” and damn, I’d forgotten about that. I skedaddled. With my chakra bottled up inside me, I was only going be able to do the most basic examinations to make sure Rin wasn’t still a little concussed. I decided I’d better get started.

Anyway, that kept me busy for the next few minutes. Rin was fine, as it turned out.

“You worry too much. Fukasaku-sama and Shima-sama know what they’re doing.” Rin said when she emerged. She gave me a fondly exasperated look. “Try to relax, Kei-senpai.”

Easy for her to say.

I wish I had a pithy saying for the sheer amount of stress I was under and attempted to avoid with minimal success, but I don’t. Maybe that’s insensitive of me, but over the previous eight or nine hours I’d had enough emotional highs and lows for a month, was facing the possibility that my mom would never let me see my brother again and, oh, had been turned into a Tailed Beast Host.

I felt a brief flash of hatred for just about everything in existence.

Then I claimed the bathroom for myself, stripped, successfully resisted the urge to break the fucking bathroom mirror (since it showed me my reflection and that damned seal), and stepped under the showerhead in short order. I cranked the water as hot as I could make it and tried to boil my stress away.

Not literally, but I think I was the one who killed the water heater. Luckily, Kakashi was in and out of the other shower in a lot less time and probably didn’t notice anything amiss.

I emerged from the bathroom dressed in spare clothes from multiple donors, including my mother (who had apparently slipped out and back with a spare set apiece for me and for Rin). My clothes almost felt like they didn’t fit right anymore, even though I always wore a t-shirt and shorts to bed. That might have been just my imagination, though.

I didn’t break the mirror on the way out, either. Go me.

I found everyone in the guest bedroom, plus Kushina.

“Hey, Kei-chan. Come in!” Kushina said when I approached.

Somehow, the desk in that room had been covered in newspaper and a half-dozen little bottles of shinobi-grade nail enamel. Kakashi, Rin, and Obito sat on the shoved-together beds in their pajamas (nightdress for Rin, boxers and tank for Obito, and a no-sleeved version of Kakashi’s usual mask/shirt combo with sweatpants) and were eyeing the bottles and Kushina with varying levels of excitement, apprehension, or disdain. Pretty easy to guess who felt what, right?

“So, what are we doing now?” I asked.
“I’m going to make sure that none of your nails chip or split ever again,” Kushina said, in a tone the Great Toad Sage didn’t quite compare to.

Female arcane wisdom (or whatever it was that Kushina was advocating) being beyond me, I blinked stupidly at her.

Kushina promptly grabbed my wrist and dragged me onto the bed with the rest of my team.

Once I was seated cross-legged next to Obito on the comforter, Kushina unscrewed the top of one of the bottles of base coat and began to talk.

“So, this is your debriefing.” Kushina cocked her head to the side briefly, and then she gestured for Rin to look over at the bottles. “Pick a color.”

“Um…purple?” Rin said hesitantly.

“Sounds good,” Kushina said, and began applying a base coat to Rin’s nails. “Won’t be able to apply a reflective top coat, though. You know how it is.”

The rest of us were too apprehensive to say anything.

“Since you’re all being so quiet, I’ll start,” Kushina said, not missing a beat. “The short version is that you’re going to be here for at least until Minato gets back.”

“Makes sense,” I muttered, ducking my head when Kushina looked up at me. “I mean, with… everything.”

“Especially you, Kei-chan,” Kushina told me seriously, and I looked up again. She at least didn’t seem upset with me. “I’ve spoken to your mother and the Hokage, and we’ve agreed that it’s best for you to stay here until we can prepare your family’s house with some security seals. As interesting as being a jinchūriki is, it does make you a target.”

“We already were targets,” Obito said. He scratched the base of his still-damp ponytail. “I mean, what with being the Yellow Flash’s students.”

Kushina nodded. “Right. But you were legitimate combat targets. While being Minato’s students did make you more valuable, let me just tell you now that there was no way an enemy would sneak into the village to take you from us.” She finished with Rin’s right hand and held out her own hand to receive Rin’s left. “But if you’re carrying a Tailed Beast around, the game’s different.”

If Kushina had been kidnapped out of her own house like in the flashbacks I’d seen…well.

“Your mother agreed to the security upgrades,” Kushina said to me. “That’s good. It means she still wants you to stay in your family home.”

Just like that, I felt like a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Provisionally. Provided I didn’t fuck up or Mom didn’t change her mind or Hayate didn’t develop a turtle allergy or…something.

I didn’t want to have to make Mom choose between my sanity and Hayate’s safety. I didn’t want to screw up. I didn’t want to lose control or lose my family or let anyone down. Of course, I wasn’t much of a threat with my chakra control shot to hell, but the thought lingered anyway.

I leaned against Obito. “Hey, Obito, if Mom kicks me out anyway, can I move in?”
“I don’t have an apartment anymore, so you’re asking the wrong guy,” Obito said, trying to be funny and failing. “I’m pretty sure the lease expires if the landlord has your death certificate.”

“Crap, you’re right.” I blinked.

“Obito’s staying with us until we can find him a new place,” Kushina interrupted smoothly. She finished Rin’s nails with a flourish. “There. Kakashi?”

“…Base coat only,” Kakashi said after a while.

“Furthermore, the Hokage’s taken your assessment of Shimura under advisement. Which would be why we need to wait on Minato,” Kushina went on. “We need to push his inauguration through as quickly as possible.”

“I’m surprised he believed me.”

“He did when Shima-sama was the one talking,” Kushina said. “The Great Toad Sage took you very seriously, even if it didn’t seem like it. He had Shima-sama tell the Hokage everything as though it was his own vision.”

That…made things easier. And harder, in a way.

Everything was going to change.

“Further, we’ve classified your status as a provisional S-class secret,” Kushina said casually, and I felt my blood turn to ice. “You can tell whoever you want, but everyone else here is sworn to silence. We’ll have an ironclad decision when Minato comes back, but it means that in the meantime you can’t tell your other friends or your brother about things.”

Not really a problem, when I thought about it. I didn’t know how Hayate would react anyway. If Mom was going to act like nothing had happened, I could deal.

For a while.

I guess it wasn’t the first time I’d kept a major secret from my brother. This time, though, the secret wasn’t just mine. And it had teeth.

“I kind of wonder what’d happen if it was public info that I was a host,” I mused aloud. “I mean, there’s Killer B of Kumogakure—”

“Who is at least in his twenties and the Third Raikage’s son,” Kushina countered. “I’d much rather wait until you’re an adult and strong enough to deal with all comers.”

“…Does anyone know about you?” I asked.

“Nope. I decided I didn’t want anyone to, other than the Hokage and his wife.” She smiled faintly. “Of course, that didn’t stop Minato from finding out anyway.”

I kinda wanted to hear that story, but maybe later. Like when I wasn’t caught up in my personal drama.

“Anyway, the mission itself is also S-ranked. However,” she paused, finishing up Kakashi’s right hand and then looking over at Obito, “Obito’s status is going to be A-ranked.”

“You’re kidding!” Obito said. “Why?”
“Well, we obviously have to cover up the months you spent with Madara, and then there’s the issue of the six months you spend legally dead.” She let go of Kakashi’s hand and gestured for him to hand over his left. “Too bad you’re too young to be in ANBU, and that ROOT is sort of persona-non-grata right now. That’d be an easy excuse, if a horrible one.”

Kakashi said, “So how are we going to explain how he’s not dead?”

“And why don’t we just bring the Madara thing up?” Rin asked.

Well, because the entire shinobi community would freak the fuck out, children. Not to mention that since the war was just winding down, Madara’s theoretical survival could be used as an excuse for rearmament and lo, we’d be in another war damn near instantaneously. And Sensei’s inaugural issue-solving (in this case, dragging Iwa and Kumo to the negotiation table) would be tanked.

Kushina paused. “I don’t think any of you really understand the reputation Madara Uchiha built.” Her chakra felt heavy, solemn. Even the Fox seemed to be a little more restrained than usual. “You’re too young. But when we talk about Madara as a historical bogeyman, the story doesn’t even compare to his reputation when he was active in the world. The possibility that that man could come back from fighting the First…doesn’t really bear thinking about.” She finished with Kakashi’s other hand. “My great-aunt was the First’s wife and fought the man himself. I think I understand better than most.”

“That isn’t the half of it,” I muttered.

“Kei, pick a color,” Kushina said.

“Uh, dark blue,” I said.

“Moving on,” Kushina said, with my right hand in a grip like a vice, “It makes more sense to play up the prisoner-of-war angle. People don’t tend to ask who grabbed you. They can assume it was Iwa—when you get down to it, they’re more likely to understand and less likely to treat you like an unexploded bomb.”

“That isn’t really a better pill for Intelligence to swallow,” I said.

“It is, but you can’t see the difference yet. If it’s Iwa at fault, or maybe Orochimaru, then Minato can hold the wolves off because they’re known factors. If it got out that it was Madara, no. Not even the Hokage would be able to keep you out of Interrogation’s hands. And from there, ROOT,” Kushina explained patiently.

“I’d think Orochimaru would explain the arm better,” Obito admitted, “But doesn’t he have a thing for the Sharingan?”

“…Yes. Damn. Iwa it is,” Kushina said, and finished my hand with a flourish. “There!”

So, now the nails on my right hand were blue. Kushina got started on my left.

“Leave them to dry for at least two hours,” Kushina said, which would have been too little, too late if she’d done Obito’s first. “Obito, what color do you want?”

“Eh, I don’t know,” Obito shrugged. “Something dull.”

“Steel gray it is,” Kushina said.

“Also, two hours?” I asked.
“More like three if you do multiple layers. Shinobi-grade enamel is one of those ‘you get what you pay for’ things. On the upside, the day it chips without your nail coming off is the first sign of the apocalypse,” Kushina said cheerfully.

This, I think, would be the point that sane people would pop Gone with the Wind or The Lord of the Rings: Extended Edition into the DVD player/Blue-ray thing/PS3/whatever. Since we lived in a world where VHS security tapes were still considered state-of-the-art, I wasn’t exactly jumping for joy at the idea of having three hours to do fuck-all.

…Wow, there were so many movies I wouldn’t get to see, now. Like the Hobbit sequels. No more Richard Armitage-as-Thorin. Or any more Marvel movies. No Sebastian Stan as the Winter Soldier. No Avengers sequels.

And Homestuck was never going to end.

“Oh, on the upside, if you want it to dry faster you can always stick your hands in the freezer,” Kushina went on, oblivious to my miniature existential crisis.

Kakashi got up and left the room immediately.

“…He walked right into that one, didn’t he?” Obito snickered.

“Maybe,” was Kushina’s response.

“So what are we supposed to do while Kakashi’s getting frostbite?” I asked.

Kushina shrugged. “No idea. I figured you kids would mostly want to sleep the day off. Now that the fate of the world is one of those things that gets tabled until Minato gets back, I imagine you’ve had an adrenaline crash coming for a while now.”

“Yeah. Guarantee we’re gonna screw up the polish things while we sleep, though,” Obito said, and then was overtaken by a jaw-cracking yawn.

Kushina waved her free hand vaguely. “It’s fine. I was just helping you all unwind, anyway.”

Right. Sure.

Personally, I was too keyed up by anxiety to do much other than fret. Sleep was a distant dream.

“I’m going to go make sure the nighttime security wards are all up, then I’ll take an early night myself. It’s what, eight? Nine on the outside, I think.” Kushina wandered out, after only finishing the polish on Obito’s human hand. The Zetsu arm had nails, but I don’t think anyone was especially interested in getting too close to it. I’d seen Obito punch people through threes with that arm. And punch people full of trees. Fucking weird shinobi genetic bullshit.

Well then.

“Today was just awkward as fuck and I’m glad it’s over,” I said, flopping onto my back and making Rin bounce on the mattress.

“Kei-chan…” Though I wondered if she was planning on admonishing me for use of rude language, she shook her head. “It’s been a long day.”

“And we’re under house arrest,” Obito added. He sighed. “Man, this sucks.

Kakashi reappeared, carrying a bucket of ice water. “This is faster than waiting.”
I eyed it suspiciously. “Well, if you say so.”

He sat down on the bed next to us, looking at me. “Kei.”

“What?” I asked, almost challengingly.

Oddly, Kakashi was calm in the face of my issues bubbling up from who-knew-where. He patted the mattress next to his thigh and I felt a flare of chakra, and then—

Oh, hey. Pakkun!

If it weren’t for my drying fingernails, I would have picked him up immediately to snuggle. As it was, he padded across the mattress to me and decided to lie down against my side.

“You are not being subtle,” I told Kakashi seriously.

He shrugged.

If he’d made a move toward lifting his headband again, I probably would have punched him in the face. I didn’t need another Sharingan sleeping pill substitute, I remembered the last time he’d pulled that trick, and I hated the idea of repeating the experience.

As it was, I was cool with the dog.

The rest of the evening was spent quietly. We didn’t talk much about what had happened that day—frankly, it’d been talked to death—but there were little things like birthday plans and missed gifts and other stuff to think about. Normal things. Civilian normal, even. Damned if I remember any of them. I was too busy thinking of what I’d have to do when I got up in the morning—probably writing up profiles for every single villain I could remember from the old TV series. Hopefully, it’d be a start to earning my way back into people’s good graces.

I was tired enough that I was the second one to fall asleep, after Rin. Kakashi and Obito might have kept going for a while, but I missed it.

The first thing I did once I woke up in the morning—before pretty much anyone else, sans Kakashi—was to grab the kitchen table for myself and start spreading paper and pens out on the surface. I had a lot of information to get down, coded or not, and I couldn’t afford to wait. As such, I conquered the table and then set myself to writing about everything I could remember on explosive flash paper.

If I had to destroy all of it, I would. I could start over again.

Kakashi sat down next to me with a mug of tea in each hand. Careful to avoid the piles of paper, with my progressively messier handwriting detailing at least half-dozen of the major players in the possible future, he pushed one of them in my direction.

I blinked at it stupidly, still bleary-eyed with my pen hovering over the entry about Kakuzu of Takigakure. Not exactly an essential figure, true, but after spending half an hour trying to remember all of Nagato’s Rinnegan bullshit and still feeling like I was forgetting something, I figured it’d be a nice break. After all, Kakashi had killed him in the nonexistent futureverse.

Then I looked out the window and realized that the sky was finally starting to change color. The sun was on its way.
“Crap, it’s five already?” I muttered.

Kakashi nodded. Then he looked over the profiles I’d already finished.

“You have Kakuzu listed twice,” Kakashi said after a moment.

“I—wait, I do? Dammit.” I scrambled for the extra sheet, scanning it for errors as soon as I had it clenched between my thumb and forefinger. “Crap. This one’s supposed to be about Kisame Hoshigaki.” I’d gotten halfway through writing just that, in fact, before it had devolved into a list of Kakuzu’s capabilities again. With a frustrated sigh, I sent my chakra surging into the paper—since my control was still terrible—and it puffed away into white smoke and sparks.

“Combining fatigue and reports isn’t the smartest thing I’ve seen you do,” Kakashi commented dryly.

“Well, I’m the only one who can. So I’m going to anyway,” I snapped.

Kakashi’s mug was abruptly half-full. How the hell did he drink that so fast without scalding himself or letting me see his face?

“…Oh, who am I kidding?” I grumbled, and the second Kakuzu profile flashed into smoke under my hand. I didn’t really intend to do that, but as long as it was something I could easily remember and I didn’t leave scorch marks on the table, I wasn’t going to get wound up over it. “I can barely think.”

Kakashi pushed the mug closer to me.

Finally, I gave up and grabbed the handle like a lifeline. “Thanks.”

Kakashi resumed reading profiles—apparently Zabuza Momochi, this time—while I buried my face in my folded arms. The calm quiet continued for a while, with the sun sliding unnoticed into the sky for…I don’t know, maybe half an hour. I dozed even with my mug of tea cooling beside me.

Then I sat up abruptly without really realizing why, at first.

Then I realized that Sensei’s chakra was at the door and leapt out of my seat in my haste to answer it, upending a chair and making Kakashi jolt in surprise at my antics. Jiraiya’s chakra was there too, but only for a heartbeat. He was gone by the time Sensei started messing with the front door lock and the dozens of layered security seals controlled by it.

“Did you get him?” I asked as soon as Sensei was inside the threshold.

Sensei, sitting down on the foyer’s step and having some trouble taking his sandals off, shook his head.

My heart sank.

Now that the initial disappointment had a chance to sink in, though, I realized that Sensei’s chakra was flagging badly. He was exhausted, after a day and a night of—I didn’t know, maybe chasing ghosts or arguing with the Hokage or something. What right did I really have to be disappointed that he hadn’t pulled off the damn near impossible?

I sat down next to him.

Now what?

“We have three Zetsu corpses in T and I now, the Hokage’s getting ready to issue a statement, and
you’re all safe,” Sensei says, patting my head. “We may not have bagged Madara, but I think we did pretty well.”

“…You’re right.” I paused. “I’ve been working on combat profiles for every bad guy I could think of, but I think you might need to go to bed before you read them.” As I spoke, Kakashi appeared at Sensei’s other side, apparently without traversing the space between the foyer and the dining room table. Just there and then here.

“Sounds good, Kei.” Sensei ran a hand over his face, then stood up somewhat unsteadily.

Kakashi and I exchanged glances, communicating concern without words, and escorted Sensei to the master bedroom. Once he was sawing logs next to Kushina—who hadn’t woken up while we had a very quiet argument with him—Kakashi and I headed back to the table and resumed our struggle to find meaning in the wake of everything that’d happened recently.

Maybe we’d be able to put our heads together to make something coherent before the rest of the world woke up.
Obito stumbled out of the guest bedroom sometime around, oh, let’s say ten in the morning. I guessed that he missed having an actual bed enough that sleeping for fourteen solid hours was of no consequence. Since I seemed to be returning to the two-hour-chunks-of-sleep-at-a-time problem I’d had as a kid, when the not-quite-visions were still pretty overwhelming, I was briefly jealous. Being able to sleep a night through did not seem to be a thing for me anymore. The barrier that the Dreamer and I had been was gone. Which sucked and made me crabbier than usual for early mornings. Then Obito commandeered the rice cooker and got started on making breakfast, so I forgave him.

I put my head down on the table and listened to the sounds of the household. Obito pulled a bag of rice out of a cabinet and dropped it on his foot, swearing. Kakashi turned the tea kettle back on and read my somewhat spotty reports on random future threats. Rin was in the shower and dropped a shampoo bottle with a tremendous series of bangs, amplified by the acoustics of the bathroom. Even as far away as we were from the master bedroom, I was pretty sure I could hear Kushina snore.

“When did Sensei get back?” Obito asked, having eventually wrestled all the ingredients he needed into some kind of order. From the looks of it, that list included some of Kushina’s store of fresh herbs, chicken stock, eggs, and entirely too much tap water. After a second, I realized he was making okayu.

Well, if all of us were pretty damned tired and Sensei was also chakra-exhausted on top of that, maybe the rice porridge of the ill and toothless (whether because the subject was in infancy or had lost all of their teeth to age and cavities) wasn’t a bad idea. I could remember a different variation of the same basic dish—called congee then—but I figured the general rules still applied.

“Yes.” I said, sitting up. I yawned and then decided to stretch until I could feel my joints pop. Given shinobi flexibility, that took a while longer than it would have in my old life. Then I got up to go bug Obito. “Need help, Obito?”

“No, I’m good.” Obito said, and damned if he didn’t know his way around a kitchen for simple stuff. “I got a clan caretaker when I was little, and she made sure I knew how to make really basic stuff.” He paused. “…Oh, hell. What are we going to actually tell the clan when I stop pretending to be dead?”

We’d kind of talked about that last night, but it’s not like we’d really come up with a script. And anyway, the whole discussion had been vetoed until Sensei got back. Now that he had, he was apparently too tired to spend much time in the land of the living. Blar.
Though I hated how we couldn’t seem to make a decision without him, the fact that Sensei was going to be Hokage soon enough meant that we were a lot less likely to face political repercussions for pretty much anything. As long as he was around, anyway—after October tenth, I’m pretty sure the other Kakashi would have been pretty hard-up for political influence before he established his combat reputation. Hence why Danzō had been up for Hokage, too. Rin had been too dead to care and Obito had been dead inside.

“No idea, other than ‘hey, I’m not dead’ for a start.” I told him, shrugging. Then I grabbed the lid Obito had been searching for and plopped it onto the countertop.

“That’s not really helping, Kei.” Obito told me. He handed me a wooded spoon. “Here, your turn.”

“Fine.” I said, and Obito went over to the kitchen table to look at the glorified pamphlets with Kakashi. I prodded at the rice soup and put the lid on the pot after a moment’s thought—if I remembered right, okayu needed half an hour to cook down anyway. Congee would have demanded four hours or something.

“What in hell is the Jashin cult?” Obito asked, reading over Kakashi’s shoulder.

“I’m not really sure.” I admitted. “I mean, I know that the only cultist Konoha forces ever ran into was…kinda special. Hidan managed to kill Asuma, but then he went up against Shikamaru and Kakashi and Shikamaru dismembered him for killing his teacher.”

“Shikamaru…are we talking about a Nara?” Obito asked.

“Yeah. Shikaku’s son.” I paused. “Hm. He hasn’t been born yet.” But a lot of the Konoha Twelve had.

…Crap. I counted quickly in my head. Sakura was the oldest student on Team Kakashi, since she was born in March or April to fit with the spring theme she had going, Sasuke was a July baby, Naruto was of course born on that one really shitty day in October… Then there was Team Gai, and all of those kids ought to be turning one year old soon if they hadn’t already. Um, I think Kiba was born in the summer sometime, while Shino was born in mid-winter…

At least I knew for sure that Hinata and Naruto weren’t born yet, right? So sue me for not memorizing birthday charts for twenty different characters. I barely remembered my own team’s birthdays sometimes.

“Who’s gonna be on Kakashi’s team?” Obito asked.

“Huh?” Kakashi said.

“Well, if Asuma gets a genin team I don’t see why you don’t.” Obito said reasonably. “Obviously, I don’t count since Tobi is kind of batshit, but I think you should. Right, Kei?”

“More or less.” I shrugged. “Kakashi’s team consisted of Sensei’s kid, Sakura Haruno, and Sasuke Uchiha.”

“Who’s Sakura Haruno?” Obito asked. “I mean, obviously Sasuke is totally a distant cousin or something, but I’ve never heard of the Haruno family.”

“Sakura is the daughter of…uh, Kizashi and Mebuki Haruno.” I shrugged. “I think Sakura’s first-generation shinobi on both sides, but her parents might be genin or retired or something.”

“Huh. How’d she get on a team with Sensei’s kid?” Obito wondered.
“The Academy groups students by performance.” Kakashi remarked. “So, obviously Sensei and Kushina’s son would be at the top of the class, with the Uchiha boy in the middle and Haruno in the bottom rungs.”

Ahaha, no.

“Move stuff around a bit and you’ve got it.” I said, making swirling motions in the air as though to reorganize refrigerator magnets. Then I realized that was dumb and grabbed my pen and a spare sheet of flash-paper and wrote down my revised ranking. “Put Sasuke at the top, Sakura in more or less the middle, and Naruto in dead last.”

“How the hell does that happen?” Obito demanded, and Kakashi blinked in surprise. “Sensei and Kushina would never—!” Obito’s mouth closed with a snap.

“…Yeah, that.” I muttered.

“Tobi ruins everything, doesn’t he?” Obito grumbled. “Okay, fine, let’s talk about Sasuke. Whose kid is he?”

…Wow, not much of a happier topic. “Sasuke is the second son of Fugaku and Mikoto Uchiha.” I said. I scratched the back of my head, thinking. “I’m not actually sure if Itachi has his little brother yet. But anyway, he turned out pretty driven and more or less worked his way to the top of the class through sheer stubbornness. He felt that he had to, to live up to the expectations an Uchiha has.”

“But…didn’t the Great Toad Sage say something about having to save the clan?” Obito wondered aloud. I blinked, and he said, “Well, obviously I wouldn’t have to save the clan from anything if there wasn’t any kind of threat, right? Since Tobi would probably be more likely to set people on fire than help them in the other world, no one would have gotten that prophecy. So the threat would’ve happened anyway. What happened over there?”

“Uh.” Shiiiiiiit. “Remember when I said Tobi cracked?”

Obito gave me a “well, duh” sort of look.

“I’m not entirely sure why, but Tobi took the role of Madara at the time.” At Obito’s blank look, I could only shrug. I didn’t necessarily have all of the connective tissue between scenes sorted out. I probably would once the Dreamer fully reincorporated, but until then I was left with the feeling that Kishimoto hadn’t actually planned the Tobito plot twist that far ahead of time. “Between him and Danzō and the Elder Council and the rising feelings of discontent in the clan and a brewing coup, all the pressure fell on Itachi when he was about thirteen and an ANBU captain.” I drummed my fingers on the table. “And, when forced to choose between the welfare of the village and the welfare of his clan, Itachi chose the village.”

I understand why Itachi would choose to kill the clan, rather than risk civil war.

I understand, and yet I don't.

I'm...not precisely a cynic, not precisely a realist, and not an idealist, either. I want people to be kind and rational and to think better of their fellow humans. I want people to be safe, loved, and happy—mostly the people I care about, but that's just me. At the same time, I have to look at the world I've been born into and realize that, frankly, I can see the seams. Shinobi society is civilization plastered over a boiling pot of all of humanity's darker impulses. One cannot have something good and be devoid of jealous neighbors. Unless there are no neighbors at all. I want to say that humans can rise above that, could possibly form a society where people don't have to die every five goddamn minutes
for money or hatred or sheer mindless idiocy. It wouldn't be home—home is different, stranger, more unknowable than this place where everything is the result of direct human effort—but it could be better.

Since the founding of the Five Elemental Nations, it's been about five generations. Less than a hundred years, all told, but it's amazing that we made it this far at all with as much horrible history as we have.

In that time, there have been three Shinobi World Wars. Tens of thousands of people—shinobi and civilian alike—are dead because of them, without even getting into the issues of border skirmishes and all the missions we shinobi take against other villages, against towns, against cities, and against single targets. And yet, it's nothing compared to the Clan Wars era.

Anytime civilization falls, due to infighting or civil war, the death toll mounts. Any era wherein the rulers are more interested in killing or subjugating each other than protecting their people, the world goes to hell. What the Warring States era of Japan was to the Japanese, the Clan Wars were to us. But we aren't samurai, and that made everything worse.

The Third Shinobi World War is, ultimately, the conflict that defines me and my generation.

As the Second defined my mother and father's generation—the White Fang, the Sannin, and Salamander Hanzō. The destruction of Uzushiogakure. The coup d'état where Akatsuki first came to power.

The First marked the end of peace as interpreted and dispensed by the First Hokage—Danzō, the Third Hokage, and a number of elders owe their defining moments to this war. It was the war that killed the Founders—Hashirama and Tobirama Senju—and the war that redefined the supremacy of any village in the face of overwhelming force. It was the war of the first jinchūriki deployed deliberately to a battlefield.

It's very hard to describe these conflicts to someone who didn't live and breathe battle during them. It's harder to admit how much the experiences scar us, even those whose wounds can't be seen. And once we were baptized in fire and blood, there was never any turning back.

Itachi, despite having been barely four years old at the climax of the Third Shinobi World War, remembered. He remembered losing cousins and aunts and uncles and friends and everyday faces, all to the front lines. He remembered the devastation in the aftermath. He remembered the terrible war-worn shocked state the village was stuck in for such a long time afterward, magnified by Sensei’s death during the Nine-Tailed Fox's attack. When our village seemed to snatch defeat from the arms of victory, and we were crippled enough that even Kumogakure, after three extra years of war and one bloodily-earned peace treaty, was too terrible to face.

And he would never allow Sasuke to grow up under that shadow.

“I’m not saying that Itachi made the right decision. But I’m not sure that, under the circumstances, he was even within spitting distance of realizing there was a better option.” I concluded after a long while.

Obito stared at the table. Kakashi stared out the window.

Rin came out of the bathroom, shedding steam everywhere. Into the awkward silence imposed by my thoughts once voiced, she said with her arms crossed over her chest, “Okay, what the heck is going on now?”
I considered that. I considered making the awkward turtle hand sign just to screw with everyone. But what I actually said was, “We’ve been waiting for our princess to hold court.”

“I don’t think we have one of those.” Rin said, not at all mollified. “Come on, what’s going on? And if you say ‘team meeting,’ I’m going to make a disappointed face.”

“Oh, we’re just trying to figure out what genin team Kakashi might get.” Obito said, recovering too quickly to be entirely real. “And then Tobi ruined everything.”

Rin looked at me.

“Uchiha clan, coup, retaliation, everyone died except Itachi’s little brother and then him.” I said. I paused. Wait, no. “Except after a while it got narrowed down to just Sasuke Uchiha and Tobi. And that isn’t a good combination. I think Itachi caught some kind of tuberculosis thing.”

“Why does the weird future universe suck so much?” Obito grumbled.

I decided not to say how it could have been worse. Because, frankly, there were worse things. While the fact that Naruto and his friends had managed to have a lot of fun between the life-or-death missions and things didn’t mean their world was peachy keen, it wasn’t the Clan Wars era. Most of us didn’t really need to worry about being killed by the guy next to us at the ramen stand if his last name happened to be different.

“Can I just point out that the fact that you’re not Tobi has already thrown a wrench in that stuff?” I asked.

“It might be a better idea just to concentrate on the good things for now, Kei-senpai.” Rin said, seeing that I wasn’t all that great at cheering people up.

“Well, Gai gets a team, too.” I said after a second or two. How could I forget about Lee? “One of his students is pretty much his biggest fan—has the same haircut, dresses the same, knows how to use most of the Eight Gates by the time he’s thirteen. They have very dramatic moments together, and if I recall correctly Lee managed to kick Madara in half during the Fourth Shinobi World War.”

“…What.” Kakashi said.

“The future is also the best time for silly things to happen.” I concluded. Perhaps not justifiably, given all the shit we’d have to wade through to get there, but it wasn’t like the future was all grimdarkness and pain. “We do get sixteen years of peace.”

Particularly since just having Obito here would cut down on a lot of the pointless deaths. Maybe we couldavert the main event, too.

“It’s kind of hard to talk about future good things when Kakashi’s the only one who gets that far.” Obito commented. He was inspecting the nails of his new hand, which were kinda…nebulous. “I need to start wearing gloves…”

…Well. A glove, maybe. Like Michael Jackson.

Kakashi got up about then and checked the okayu. The pot bubbled happily and smelled pretty good, even from where I was sitting. “Another ten minutes, I think.”

“What about Sensei and Kushina?” Rin asked.

“If they wake up, they wake up.” I said, feeling my stomach growl. Green tea hadn’t filled my
stomach any, and the pear I’d taken from the fruit bowl hadn’t sufficed either.

It was more or less the same policy I’d followed with my parents in my old life. Unlike Mom the special jōnin, they’d been about retirement age when I’d dropped off the face of the universe. My mother here was thirty-eight to my fourteen.

…Damn, I needed to figure out why she’d retired. Thirty-seven really wasn’t that old for a shinobi. That was Jiraiya’s age for Pete’s sake.

“How are they?” Obito asked, since he hadn’t been awake when Sensei had stumbled in.

“Sensei’s tapped out, chakra-wise.” I said. I frowned. That had never happened before, as far as I knew. Sensei’s teleportation jutsu weren’t individually taxing, and his use of the Rasengan was super-efficient considering that it was an A-ranked jutsu. He’d have had to be really spamming those moves to be this worn out.

“Well, at the very least we’ll have breakfast ready for them.” Rin remarked. Then, “Wait, do we have enough food for six people?”

“I hope so,” Obito said, and went over to where Kakashi was apparently dissecting the burgeoning rice soup with his mind to judge how many servings we had. Both boys exchanged looks before Obito said, “Well, not if Sensei’s gonna eat like a horse.”

“So, like you?” Kakashi sniped.

“Hey, who here is the ramen-eating champion?” Obito snapped back.

Considering they were talking about Kushina, I wasn’t really following their argument.

“You two have the weirdest, stupidest fights.” I said.

“Yeah, well.” Obito shrugged. He clambered up onto the countertop and started exploring the cabinets for bowls and teacups. “We should be fine.” And then he started tossing his findings across the room.

Rin, showing that medic reflexes had more than one use, caught and placed each bowl, soup spoon, and cup as they arrived in her hands. Lightning-quick, the table was set. Not a single item chipped or cracked in the course of their flight, thank goodness.

I’d snatched my papers off the table and to safety before she got that far.

Six places at a table, when I was used to three…

I sighed. Not for the first time, I fought down that ache of homesickness. I was in the general radius of home and I knew my mom and brother were safe, but I still wasn’t sleeping in my bed or eating my mom’s cooking. So close, yet so far.

“Do we have anything to eat with this?” Kakashi asked.

“No. If you want extra stuff, make it yourself.” Obito said. “You were here the whole time.”

Kakashi made a grumbling noise.

There was a loud thump from the bedroom. Then a groan, then the sound of someone getting up and bumping into a doorframe.
Well, Kushina and Sensei’s chakra was awake now, though Kushina hadn’t moved and apparently Sensei was stumbling around like a drunk. He made it as far as the master bathroom before I felt his chakra flicker in frustration—probably with the cold of linoleum, or with the bright bathroom heating lamp. Then there was the rumble of the water heater getting back in gear and rushing hot water through the pipes.

Okay, that was one nominally responsible adult awake and up, out of two.

I didn’t have the Byakugan, but my chakra sense was one of the few things with chakra that I could do at the moment. I was reading it better than normal.

Then Kushina started stirring properly, too, and I turned back to my team to say, “So, that’s our adult backup awake.” I set my flash-paper profiles down on the coffee table. “You know, if we were worried about not preparing enough food.”

“It seems a little inconsiderate to make her cook as soon as she gets up.” Obito said.

Just then, though, Kushina came barreling down the hallway like Dr. Jones with a boulder on his tail, skidded on the turn, and came to a complete stop with her hands coming together in a loud clap.

“Morning, everyone!” she said cheerfully. Her hair was a mass of knots, there were bags under her eyes, and her clothes were rumpled from sleep, but hey. She was awake. And a better cook than any of us were. Salvation! “Move over, kids, we need side dishes!”

There was already tea from earlier, and I think that Kakashi had claimed the kettle as his personal territory. Still, Kushina had no problem wresting control of the kitchen away from us and moving most of our stuff aside. Obviously, she left the okayu alone, but any extraneous equipment went flying into the sink.

Rin and Obito sat down at the table with Kakashi and me, and my fingers itched for a pen. There was so much crap I had to write, still. I felt a little like I was supposed to be writing an essay that I’d forgotten the night before.

“So, how did you all sleep?” Kushina tossed over her shoulder.

There were two nearly identical grumbles from Kakashi and me, a “Fine!” from Rin and an “Okay,” from Obito.

Kushina made a noncommittal noise. “Well, I slept all right, too. Though I don’t think Minato’s going to be up for much today.”

“Did you kick him?” I asked.

“Yep.” Kushina said. She was gesticulating with a soup ladle. “But even before that, he felt pretty dead to the world. But he has a meeting with the Hokage in an hour, so he doesn’t get to lie around.”

Dead… What if…?

I felt my blood run cold.

Zetsu clones could mimic chakra signatures. They could pass basic security checks, like passwords or team composition questions. They weren’t skilled, necessarily, but their brute strength made them hugely dangerous to anyone they caught off guard. Which was pretty much everyone. They had enough guile to make an utter mess of the command structure that the Shinobi Alliance had relied on, at least until Naruto had popped out of nowhere and forcibly tilted the scales the other way.
I hadn’t made sure that the Minato Namikaze who walked in our door really was my teacher.

That was when Sensei exited the bathroom with tissue paper stuck to his face by little dots of blood. Apparently, sleep deprivation, chakra exhaustion, morning meetings, and disposable razors did not mix well.

Come to think of it, the fact that Sensei was always clean-shaven should have told me something.

And besides, Zetsu clones didn’t bleed red. They bled orange if they got cut or sliced, or they collapsed like someone put a fist through a tub of melting ice cream.

“Minato-sensei, you…don’t look good.” Rin said hesitantly. I wasn’t sure if she was talking about his very apparent exhaustion or the fact that he’d managed to nick himself half a dozen times. For someone whose primary weapon choice involved blades, it indicated a worrying lack of control.

But he wasn’t a Zetsu. There was no way.

A Zetsu clone would have killed all of us in our sleep. Or taken Obito back to Madara for reconditioning. Or maybe both if it was feeling ambitious. They didn’t sleep or require any basic chemical components (such as food or water or air) in order to survive. If our guard was down, the only warning the village would get would be a plague of broken necks among the members of this improvised, temporary household.

I swallowed my hammering heart back down. It wouldn’t do to have a heart attack before lunchtime. Lunch probably would involve enough sodium to finish the job, anyway.

Sensei shook his head. “I’m fine, Rin.” Then, rather than making his way over to the kitchen table, he dodged it entirely and flopped down on the couch. “Ow…”

“Sensei, what happened?” I asked.

Sensei sighed. “Where do I even start?”

Still, he did tell us.

For a start, they hadn’t found Madara at all. They hadn’t even found that gigantic fucking statue, which confirmed that it was basically a huge Diglett. They had found a hole the approximate size of the entire Konoha administrative center at the back of the cave, which quickly angled underground.

Said hole spat out Zetsu clones. And not just any Zetsu clones, even. These new clones had been more like putty than the rest, and fused into some kind of horrific hundred-Zetsu monstrosity that took over an hour to kill even with everyone using their strongest jutsu and barely avoiding being squashed.

And then Gamabunta had stomped on it, which had solved the issue but also left them with their original problem: That gigantic hole.

The longer I listened, the more I came to the conclusion that if the Statue wasn’t a Diglett, it was Vegnagun. A human-derived monster in some sense of the word, given that the Sage of Six Paths had been instrumental in turning it into a combination of the moon and the nine other Tailed Beasts, that’d need to be activated before it rampaged, but would otherwise do so basically unchecked. And if that made Madara a desperate wraith fueled by his long existence of cruelty and hatred…

Well, it was accurate enough. Pity there was no Lenne to talk him down before he tried to murder the entire planet.
Once Sensei finished his story, I crossed my arms and said, “So, now what do we do?”

By that point, Kushina was portioning out the okayu and the side dishes—something to do with duck and maybe more tea. Despite the siren’s call of food, though, Rin, Obito, Kakashi and I were all hovering around Sensei. Kushina would probably beat the crap out of all of us if she thought we were insulting her or her cooking, but she gave us a pass that time.

He gave me a tired smile. “I was hoping you’d have some insight here. I have an idea, of course, but a second, third, or thirteenth opinion never really hurts.”

I thought about it. I noticed Obito adopt a sort of parody of a thinking pose, knuckles to his lips and a frown twisting his face.

“I need my seal taken care of.” I said finally. I sighed. “I’m a late convert to this whole Tailed Beast business, but the longer I put off dealing with him, the less stable I’ll be. And besides, it’s not like I’m a stranger to having an extra voice in my head.”

“And I need to let the rest of the world know I’m not dead!” Obito said immediately afterward. “It’s harder to get disappeared by all the conspiracies if you’re super-visible, right?”

…True, but also kind of depressing to think about. “Rin, Kakashi, any ideas?” I asked.

“We need to hold Sensei’s coronation and consolidate power before anyone else can get in our way.” Kakashi said bluntly.

Rin nodded. For not actually being a member of Team Minato, she was definitely a team player. “Further, we also need to examine Obito’s arm and see what kind of information we can get. I remember seeing you use Wood Release, Obito. There are rumors that there’s another boy who can use the same kekkei genkai, and we shouldn’t pass up a chance to solidify your alibi.”

“Orochimaru again?” Obito whined, slumping in exaggerated defeat.

“You have to admit that it makes the most sense.” Rin pointed out.

“Or we could just hold off and claim amnesia.” I suggested, apropos of nothing. When the others looked at me, I added, “I’m sure there are ways to make Obito’s memories resistant to probing. Or, you know, the whole Sharingan thing takes care of that.”

“Mind-reading is a Yamanaka thing, not an Uchiha one.” Obito said, frowning a little like a thought wasn’t forming up right. “I mean, I think I heard something about other Uchiha being able to hypnotize people, but that’s a different thing. Yamanaka mind probes don’t joke around.”

“Sharingan bullshit is not to be underestimated.” I argued, because I’d seen some of the crazy shit the various levels were capable of. Kakashi’s and Obito’s Sharingan, in its non-Mangekyō form, could implant mental suggestions and knock people out for hours. Sasuke’s, though not yet at the level of hax it would later achieve, could make the Nine-Tailed Fox sit down and shut up. And that didn’t even cover the ability of all of said eyes to copy other people’s techniques.

Jeez, just talking about it was going to make me mad. So I stopped.

“Look, you don’t need to worry about that.” Sensei interrupted before I could (accidentally) start another argument. “That’s my job. Or it’s soon going to be.” He sat up slowly. “I mean more suggestions for yourselves.”

“…Well, I kinda need the back-pay from my monthly stipend.” Obito said after a bit. He scratched
the side of his cheek. “I know I got tossed by my landlord after the whole dead-for-six-months thing, and most of my stuff probably went in the trash, too. So I need more clothes and stuff.”

“Do you even get money from the financial department after you become a genin?” I asked.

“No,” said Rin.

“Ah, no. It’s a clan thing, and it’s related to your mission income.” Obito said, looking a little embarrassed.

Inversely, I bet. Though I obviously didn’t have any first-hand experience, it made sense for large clans to keep track of their members and make sure that they all had enough money to survive.

“And I’m sure six months of inactivity accumulated with interest will make the Uchiha clan spit fire.” Sensei said, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Figuratively. Maybe also literally.”

“Well, unless the clan’s accountants killed my account,” said Obito, but then he sighed. “They probably did.”

“At least you don’t need to worry about rent for a while.” Rin said, patting his shoulder sympathetically.

“Were you paid up before Kannabi?” Kakashi asked.

“Yeah, and through the next month. That doesn’t account for the other five.” Obito groaned.

I felt a little at sea during that discussion. You know, what with not actually having to pay rent or live in an apartment or anything. Not for the first time, I felt slightly guilty about actually, you know, having a family and a house.

“Obito, you can stay here until you get another apartment.” Sensei pointed out.

“Thanks, Sensei.” Obito said, with the air of someone being offered water in the Sahara. Or maybe a lifeline during a storm.

“Anyway, that’s enough of that heavy talk.” Sensei concluded. Though still tired, Sensei managed a smile and hopped over the back of the couch, scattering us. As he approached the table, he said, “Let’s eat!”

“Breakfast is courtesy of Obito, Kakashi, and yours truly.” Kushina said, gesturing with a wooden spoon. “Dig in, everyone. We have a long day ahead of us!”

That we did.
Ripple Arc: Fooling Mode

Chapter Summary

Kei: Go shopping. :D

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After team breakfast (which was one of the best I'd had in a while), we pretty much got to sit around for the next two hours and be bored as fuck.

By that, I mean that Sensei took off as soon as he was done eating and in his actual jōnin uniform, sparing time to give Kushina a kiss on the cheek and telling us, "Stay put until I get back, everyone." Then he was out the door and f\textit{wish}, gone.

Kushina, for her part, didn't seem to take that as the kind of command that applied to her. We helped her clean up the table on a station rotation (with me on washing, Kakashi on drying, Rin on sorting, and Obito on cleaning the actual table).

"I'm going to go grocery shopping." Kushina said, even as she was heading toward the master bedroom. "You kids can look at the seal theory books on the table or play cards. Just don't leave the house!"

Once she was gone, Kakashi went back to the guest bedroom for a late-morning nap. Obito, who hadn't seen the flash-paper profiles I'd written, starting reading them with commentary since that was the kind of person he was. Rin and I played War, which is one of those games that gets ungodly boring very, very quickly.

Then we played 52 Pickup with Obito, trying to see if he could collect them in order of suit and value.

He couldn't, as it turned out. Not yet.

"Even if we are under house arrest, it's kind of nice to have a chance to do things like this." Rin said, as Obito progressed to grabbing all fifty-two cards before they hit the ground.

It was fascinating seeing how quickly an Uchiha could learn. Obito had a mature Sharingan, yeah, but he also had had it for like twelve hours. And he only had the one. It was still a noticeable jump in reaction time.

"You mean play?" I asked.

"Yeah, that." Rin frowned. "I'm going to have to see Akihito-shishō right after this. I...I really want to go home."

"That's okay, Rin-chan." Obito said. He grinned sheepishly. "I still need to get actual clothes. But we can all hang out once all this stuff is figured out!"

"I'd like that." Rin said, and the frown eased off. She sat down on the couch, interlacing her fingers
and resting her chin on them.

I sensed that she wanted to think for a bit and promptly distracted Obito.

"Hey, Obito. Do you want to come to my house first? I need to talk to my mom, but I should be free to help you shop this afternoon." I said.

"Sure!"

Well, that settled that.

Luckily, Sensei arrived back at the house before I could come up with a dumb idea to alleviate what remained of my boredom. Given time, I'd have either actually attempted to make some of the seals described in Sensei and Kushina's books, or maybe tried to wake Kakashi up without using a stick to keep out of arm's reach. The latter was probably slightly more dangerous.

Even better, Sensei came with more people: Jiraiya and Kushina, specifically.

Since Rin and I were back to playing Go Fish on the carpet and Obito was trying his hand (or eye) at card-counting, Kushina dumped her groceries in Obito's arms, and the weight of them nearly sent him stumbling into the couch. Overall, any entrance of a group including Kushina Uzumaki is going to be big, loud, and keep the room swept out of her way.

Kakashi emerged from the guest bedroom about then.

"Well, Kei-chan, now we can finally fix that rush-job seal of yours!" Kushina enthused, clapping her hands. "Clear out, Rin-chan! We're using the living room floor for this one."

Rin bolted.

"The shirt has to go, Kei-chan." Kushina said. "The seal's in a weird place, and I'd rather not have to saw through the fabric."

Rin had second thoughts. She came back, grabbed Obito's sleeve, dragged him toward the room where Kakashi was still peeking out past the doorframe, and shoved them both back inside. Then she sat down with her back to the door she had probably just locked on the boys.

"I'm wearing a training bra, Kushina-san." I said. I was already sitting down, at least. Rin would have already knocked me over in her haste, otherwise.

"Oh," said Rin, and her sheepishness increased when Obito thumped the door indignantly. There was the slightly muffled sound of Kakashi snapping at him for it.

Kushina flapped her hands. "Enough about that! Lie down, Kei-chan, and we'll get started!"

Jiraiya shrugged. "Should be simple enough. The beast is already sealed, technically, so it's just a matter of strengthening the seal without the side effects of the Five Elements Seal. I've got the unlocking seal if you have your reinforcement one, Minato."

"I'm good to go, Jiraiya-sensei." Sensei told him.

I pulled my T-shirt off over my head and complied, lying flat on my back with my arms at my sides to let the experts work.

"I'll be holding your existing seal steady while the other two work. My chakra chains are best suited
for this sort of thing, don't you agree?" Kushina was still grinning.

…Eesh. Talk about disconcerting.

"And if you have any questions, speak now or hold it until we're done, okay?" Kushina went on, as though my internal cringe moment hadn't happened. "And just remember: Don't push!"

What the *fuck*.

"Okay, Kushina-san." I said quietly.

"Removing the seal…now." And Jiraiya brought his hand, flaming blue, down to my chest so that each of the seals slapped on top of my original was covered by the corresponding elemental key. He didn't hit me like he did to Naruto in canon, at least—I imagined that a hit like that to the rib cage instead of the gut wouldn't end well.

I didn't feel the chakra locks disengage. What I *did* feel was what had been hiding underneath it.

Isobu's chakra.

**What did I ever do to you?**

*Hey, long time no see.*

Or something like that.

Isobu's voice was actually a bit higher than I expected, given that it was coming from a creature with the sort of bulk I could compare to an aircraft carrier.

*It's always the same. I haven't been free in over a hundred years, and things haven't changed at all since that human…*

Hashirama Senju, probably. I remembered enough between the history lessons and my visions to know that he'd had the power to control the Tailed Beasts. And that he'd distributed them among the then-new Hidden Villages like they were pups from a new litter.

They *were* from the same litter, if you could consider the Ten-Tails's defeat and manual dismemberment a mother of sorts.

But they weren't dogs and *not* something he had had the right to hand off like that.

*I'm sorry about this.* I told him, wincing internally. *But if you break out now, I'm going to die and you're just going to be sealed up again.*

But I'm not sure if he heard me at all. I felt his chakra surge in rage and despair, and then my chest constricted horribly as I felt Kushina's chakra chains clamp down on that energy. Because Isobu and I were linked, I could feel his pain surge through our shared chakra. I might have screamed a bit. I don't really know.

But then Isobu's voice was gone, and I came back to reality.

"Kei-chan, blink twice if you can hear me." Sensei told me.

I blinked twice.

All three of the seal-masters sagged in relief.
Sensei said, on the exhale, "Oh, good. You had us worried there for a minute."

"What happened?" I asked in a rasp. Okay, whoa, maybe I had screamed.

"Well, it turns out the seal they used had degraded a bit." Kushina said, sitting back. "I suppose they only ever meant it to be temporary. Anyway, the Three-Tails tried to escape."

Yes, well. That was kind of the basic modus operandi of a Tailed Beast. Not that I could really blame him. Isobu was one of the nicest of the lot, too.

"I'm assuming he didn't, since I'm still alive." I said dryly.

"And you're right." Sensei said, sitting back. "The seal looks stable."

I sat up as the three seal-masters gave me space, and then I looked down.

For the first time, my seal was entirely invisible on my skin. I knew it was there, and so did everyone else here, but I didn't have to look at it anymore. After a moment or two, I pulled my T-shirt back on and got a chance to stand up.

"Okay, you can come out now." Rin was saying to Obito and Kakashi, finally letting them out of the guest room.

"Finally!" Obito said, waving his arms theatrically. Kakashi had to duck out of his way. Then Obito turned to me. "Kei, are you okay now?"

"I'm good." I told him. Wait… I turned to Sensei. "Right?"

"Right." Sensei said with a nod. He tilted his head to one side. "Though we're going to have to work on your control of the Beast later."

…Okay then. If Isobu started talking to me again, though, I owed him a conversation.

"Sensei, did you have a discussion with the Hokage?" Kakashi asked.

"I did." Sensei stood up, and adopted what I thought of as his lecturing stance.

Jiraiya sat on the couch to watch the show. He wouldn't have looked out of place with a bag of popcorn in hand, I thought.

"As of one minute after midnight, on the day after tomorrow, I'm officially the Hokage." Sensei told us, and received a smattering of applause in return. He grinned at us. "The war is also ending in about a week."

I felt my knees go wobbly. The Third Shinobi World War…almost over? I'd lived my entire second childhood with the shadow of that war—well, and the one before it—over my head.

"But you didn't hear that from me." Sensei said. "The Hokage has been working on negotiations for about a month now with Iwa, but he's finally got the leverage to pull it off."

And if I understood politics well enough, using Sensei's advance to push Iwa into a retreat would do the same thing to Kumo. Kumogakure, while the strongest of the various elemental villages, still couldn't sustain a war engine sans allies. Sensei's presence as a political mover and shaker could make Iwa's situation untenable. Sensei alone was worth an armed division in some ways, and the momentum from ending the war during his first month in office would give him the political clout to punch out some of his opposition. Danzō included, perhaps.
Though even if he wasn't Hokage yet, I didn't envy the people who got in his way.

Call me cynical, but popular opinion was a zero-sum game from my perspective. At least Sensei was already a powerhouse physically and politically. It made the rest of us a little less likely to get disappeared by secret factions within Konoha.

Kinda funny how I kept going back to Danzō as the ultimate roadblock. Logically, there were a lot of other problems in a hidden village, but he rose to prominence anyway because he was the guy who'd tried to hypnotize the Five Kage Summit attendees.

"And Obito, you're reinstated." Sensei went on. "Officially, the information is going to be distributed via ANBU to the Uchiha Military Police over the next hour or so, but I'll run over to the Uchiha administration building myself this afternoon. I owe Fugaku a more in-depth explanation than what nearly anyone else is going to get."

"So, uh…" Obito trailed off.

"So you're free to leave the house." Sensei concluded.

"So, does that mean I can leave, too?" I asked.

"Yes, you can. All of you can." Sensei held up one finger. "But keep out of trouble, will you? I got the Hokage to assign you all ANBU security for now. Two per each of you, in fact."

Well, well, well. I wondered who we were going to get.

"If you do manage to get in trouble even with ANBU guards, maybe you should join up and teach them a thing or two." Sensei continued in a sarcastic mutter.

"Also, you can come back for dinner if you want! It was kind of nice having so many people in the house for once." Kushina said, grinning.

"We'll keep that in mind, Kushina-san." Rin said, answering for all of us. Kakashi stood back from the rest of our group, arms crossed, while Obito seemed to be slowly building up to a hyperactive victory dance. Not for nothing was he originally written as a ripoff of Naruto, the real McCoy of sorts.

I looked at Jiraiya. "Jiraiya-sama, what will this do to the mission rosters?"

We weren't due for a break in patrol missions for another two weeks. Taking us off our patrol schedule entirely, even for a bit, could cost some other people vacation time. No one would be happy about that.

"Leave that to me." Jiraiya said. He rolled one shoulder until the joint popped. "After everything that's happened on that front recently, we need to reorder everything anyway. Or…" he trailed off for a moment, then, "but since your sensei is about to be Hokage, maybe it should be his job."

"I was already in charge of Sectors Nine and Ten anyway…" Sensei mumbled, thinking.

"And I bet no one was happy when you took off. So it's now your problem." Jiraiya concluded, with the kind of cheer I always associated with finding out it was a snow day. In college. Subtract some of the childish glee from the initial mental image conjured by "snow day" and then remember it's sort of like just not coming in to work.

"Well, if I move what's left of Ryusei's squad to Makoto's, then I reorganize Sasukibe's platoon…"
Sensei went on.

Kushina made furious shooing motions with the hand Sensei couldn't see, indicating that we should beat feet before Sensei remembered who else was in the room. Or worse, involved us somehow.

We fled.

Our team had a really quick meeting pretty much as soon as we were out of Sensei and Kushina's neighborhood. Kakashi seemed to be preoccupied with getting back to his apartment, and Rin lived in a totally different part of town compared to the rest of us. Since Obito didn't have a place to stay besides Sensei's place and that wasn't an option at the moment, he and I decided on my house instead. That decided, we bid each other fond farewells (by which I mean Rin actually said "see you later" and Kakashi just disappeared while we weren't looking), and went our separate ways.

We took the rooftops. I was feeling a little stir-crazy from all the time we'd been in Sensei's house and was rejoicing in being able to use my chakra again. And if I was feeling that way, Obito had to be feeling worse—he'd pretty much been stuck in the same cave, unable to see the sun, for six fucking months.

If he gave a gleeful whoop once we managed to get major air, I wasn't going to begrudge him that.

Unlike every other quick trip across the village I could remember, I was very aware of our assigned ANBU bodyguards following at a distance. Since I could only sense two chakra signatures blinking in and out of the edge of my range as we went, I had to wonder if the other two we were allotted were on break or something.

Or if I just couldn't sense them.

That was a disturbing thought. I'd been reading chakra signatures practically since I was born, and no one thus far had managed to outwit it entirely.

…Except for the times it freaked the hell out on me.

I probably needed to get that checked at some point, in fact.

Taking advantage of my distracted state, Obito beat me to the front door of my house. He skidded a bit, waving his arms wildly to avoid losing his balance and looking like an idiot, but it was still a win.

Outwardly, it looked exactly the same as I'd left it a month back. Maybe one or two of the flowerpots out front had been replaced—plants tended to look the same to me unless they had medicinal uses—and I guess somebody had left a couple of toy kunai next to the front step.

To my chakra sense, though, I could tell that a sealing array was keyed to each and every probable entrance to the building. The welcome mat had some kind of seal trap that only responded to certain chakra signatures or weights, the front door knob had a seal over the handle, there were lines of invisible ink running throughout the foundation, and someone had written all around the walls with strengthening seals and the sealing equivalents of at-will mood suppressors…

I whistled. Sensei had not cut any corners. Thankfully, most of them at least weren't armed. It wouldn't do to blow up houseguests.

At least not during daylight hours.

"What?" Obito asked.
"Oh, Sensei just put up all those seals. Quickly, too." After a second or so, I shrugged to myself. Then I knocked on the front door. "Mom? I'm home!"

Her chakra was in the house, as far as I could tell. Sensei didn't seem to have put up the chakra dampeners I'd expected, but—

The door opened and Mom grabbed Obito and me off the threshold and into a crushing hug.

It was several minutes later before any of us were super coherent. By that point, we'd relocated to the kitchen and Mom was bustling around as Obito and I had our third cups of tea of the day. In my case it was more like my fifth, actually, but I didn't tell Mom that. I wasn't about to throw off her domestic groove.

"I'm sorry, Kei-chan." Mom said, rubbing at her eyes with her sleeve. "I heard Uzumaki-san say she and Namikaze-san would correct your seal this morning, but I never…I was worried it would go wrong somehow and I would lose my only daughter."

I couldn't really think of anything to say to that.

"These kinds of things tend to work out, Miyako-san! Especially when Sensei really is around and not off on some other stupid mission or whatever." Obito said, apparently unaware that attaching so many qualifiers didn't actually help his cause.

"You're one to talk, Obito-kun." Mom said, shaking her head.

"I'm back, aren't I?" Obito looked a little sheepish under Mom's sharp stare. "Ah, sorry. Too soon?"

"Very much so," she replied. Mom looked at me, then, and said, "Kei-chan, were you planning on spending the afternoon with Obito-kun this afternoon?"

"Yeah, Sensei said we should get him some more clothes and stuff." I replied.

Obito slowly started to turn a bit red. It was as though he had only started to realize that maybe going shopping with a girl his age would be immensely awkward. On his part. I didn't really care about that kind of stuff.

Mom made a noncommittal noise.

I thought of something else, though, and turned to Obito. "Though…Obito, I know Sensei said your account's unfrozen or something, but we don't really have any money right now."

"Oh, man. I still need to talk to the financial department or something about that." Obito said, with a sort of dawning horror.

"I think you'll find that you do have some money." Mom said.

"I do?" Obito blinked.

"You will when I lend you some." Mom smiled, then went a little stern. "It is a loan, though. Pay me back when you get back on your feet, Obito-kun."

"But—!"

"Further, I'll be coming with you." Mom started for the front hall, where we'd all left our shoes. "The Academy is getting out early today, oddly." Probably because they were trying to plan Sensei's Hokagehood ceremony. "And Hayate-chan will want to see his big brother and big sister as soon as
he can."

Was it just me, or was Obito tearing up a little? He was.

And, well, so was I, so I didn't say anything. Mom was okay with things! She would never have let me within spitting distance of Hayate if she didn't think he'd be safe. It was one of those things I wasn't super comfortable thinking about, but I think I'd agree. As a grown shinobi (...more or less), I didn't need as much looking-after as Hayate did. I'd survive on my own.

It'd kill her to do it, and it'd hurt me a lot, but I could see Mom choosing Hayate over me and me agreeing with her if she had to.

It hadn't come to that, though! Joy of joys.

I went to my room to see how much pocket change or how many mission paychecks I'd forgotten to cash, if any. And I could also pick out different clothes today if I wanted to! Maybe even find a spare headband…

"Kei-chan," Mom said when I came back with a spare hooded vest. I looked at her to show I was listening and she said, "Do you know how many people are aware of Obito-kun's return to the village? And what story have you been telling everyone?"

"We were gonna go with the truth." I said, "Or a modified version, maybe. But now I'm not sure if we're supposed to claim amnesia, Orochimaru, or extended medical leave. I suppose we could ask the ANBU following us."

"Let's get that sorted out before we leave." Mom said. "It'd be better than giving several people different stories because we didn't compare notes."

Obito and I nodded.

I went out to meet the nearest ANBU, who happened to be hanging out on the roof.

It was easier to find him than it could have been, given that I recognized his chakra and he wasn't really hiding. Otherwise, I was sure that even if I could sense him I would have trouble actually tracking him down. If an ANBU couldn't hide, they could generally run well enough that my sensing ability was rendered slightly moot.

Like Lee said to Sasuke, it doesn't matter what you can see (or sense) if you're not fast enough to do anything about it.

"ANBU-san," I called, waving.

Apparently nonplussed, the ANBU waved back for a second before remembering he wasn't supposed to be interacting with the subjects he was guarding. His hand disappeared back under his black cloak and he seemed to stare balefully at me through the holes in his mask for making him mess up.

I revised my opinion of what experience he brought to the table. No full ANBU member would have done that. I guessed that, instead, he was a recruit under observation by the second member of our security team.

And by his chakra, he was also Raidō Namiashi. I calculated really quickly and guessed that he was about twenty or so by now, ten years older than my brother and probably already a special jōnin.
"Could you tell me what we're supposed to tell people about Obito?" I asked blithely, because I could and he hadn't told me to run off.

The ANBU-who-totally-wasn't-Raidō shook his head.

"...Well. That doesn't mean anything good for security." I muttered. "Thanks anyway, ANBU-san."

I wasn't sure if Raidō had a strong opinion about me one way or another, since we'd never talked, but I was pretty sure I'd just tipped the scales slightly toward "weird." Regardless, I slipped back inside the house via my bedroom window, closing it behind me.

(For some reason, insect screens weren't a thing in Konoha.)

I announced to Mom and Obito, "Shopping trip is a go."

"Are you sure?" Obito asked, giving me a doubtful look.

"No, but the longer we wait the less likely we'll catch Hayate-chan getting out of school." I paused, thinking. Granted, my brother had spent the previous night at Iruka's house, but surely Mom would have told him to wait... And then another thought struck me, derailing things. "Wait, Mom, didn't Hayate say he didn't want to be '–chan' anymore?"

Mom smiled placidly, but I was pretty sure she was rolling her eyes inside. "That he did. But you can't expect me to stop, can you?"

Hayate, for a ten-year-old, seemed convinced that he needed to grow up fast. I sure had, but half the reason I'd jumped into shinobi work was because my maturity was outright bizarre by comparison to my civilian age-mates.

Well. At least it was one of the many, many reasons I'd decided to join up. It was hard to pick out just one that ruled all others, especially considering the future universe I hadn't wanted to get involved in at first.

But hey, whims of fate.

Mom activated all the security seals in the house before she finally locked the door. I imagined that the ANBU on the roof experienced a sudden need to run the hell away, and not just because he needed to follow us.

The Academy was still pretty crowded when we got there.

Granted, I think we'd actually left the house a little bit late, meaning we failed to beat the crowd, but Mom, Obito, and I weren't too worried about being at the head of the pack. Actually, Mom kept Obito by her side and Obito had his hood up and hair down—which had the effect of softening or hiding the edges of the pressure scar that made up the right side of his face. They weren't trying to attract attention, even from Hayate.

But I, on the other hand, made my way to the front of the crowd with all the subtlety being a chūnin had afforded me. That mostly meant I didn't step on toes or anything clumsy—instead, I think it would have qualified as a champion crowd-dodging run.

Hayate spotted me almost as soon as the Academy doors opened, sending what seemed like an endless tide of small children out into the yard. He was actually near the front of the pack and—
"Sis!" Hayate shouted, and barreled right into me.

And there went all the air in my lungs.

I stumbled backward with Hayate's arms clamped around my ribs like a vice and his face buried only a little above Isobu's seal.

"Missed you." Hayate mumbled into my collar, before pulling back a little so I could actually see his face. His lower lip wobbled a little.

…So I ruffled his mop of dark brown hair hard enough that it was nearly a noogie. All because the idea of making Hayate cry was massively uncomfortable for me.

"Ow! Sis, stop!" Hayate yelped, quickly jumping back out of reach. He scowled at me in his childish way and complained, "My hair is fine without you doing that!"

I chuckled, saying, "I think you might need a haircut, Hayate-chan."

"I'm not little anymore, Sis." Hayate whined. "And don't call me that!"

"Okay, okay. Sheesh, you got pushy when you got bigger." I said, looping an arm around his shoulders to steer him through the crowd.

While it was possible that the rest of the crowd would give us trouble over starting a sibling argument routine in public, I could not give less of a crap. I noticed Iruka's parents and Yūgao's mother waiting in the general vicinity of Mom and Obito, based on chakra signature locations, but I couldn't tell if they'd started talking yet. I imagined there'd be some talk about Obito and maybe a bit of panic if they had, though.

"How was your mission?" Hayate asked. He bounced a little even in my grip, probably trying to see past the crowd and spot Mom. His attention was all over the place.

Just how honest could I be with a ten-year-old Academy student, anyway?

"I think it went all right." I said, after a moment's thought.

And, in a way, that was the honest truth. We'd all nearly died, but Sensei was going to be Hokage, Obito was back, Kakashi and Rin were both alive and more or less unscathed… I could accept becoming a Tailed Beast Host for a result like that. Maybe not again, but I didn't mind the result at all.

But there was no way that Hayate would let a vague statement like "fine" stand while still riding the high of getting me back. "Well, what did you do? Did you beat up the bad guys? Who was there with you?"

…Er.

"Well, Rin-chan and Kakashi were both there." I said as we emerged from the edge of the crowd. "We sure beat up a lot of bad guys," and killed them all with no major casualties aside from me, "and we're back with one extra person."

Hayate fixed me with a stare before starting in with questions, "Really? Who? Are they new to Konoha? Do we have to teach them to be ninjas?"

"Only one, Hayate-chan." I corrected gently.
"I know that. And don't call me '-chan!" Hayate said, puffing out his cheeks in a pout. "So, who is it?"

I looked up, realized that Mom was chatting with Iruka's parents and had yet to draw Obito into the conversation, and said to Hayate, "Look at the boy standing by Mom."

Hayate squinted in the bright sunlight, then said, "Who's he? Is he the boy who came home with you?"

"Yep. Let's go say hello." I said, leading the way.

"Is he your boyfriend?" Hayate asked suspiciously.

I gave him a flat look.

"Guess not." Hayate concluded. He broke free of my grip and rushed over to Obito, lunch bag swinging in the air as he ran. "Hey, weird boy! My sister says you came home with her! Did you?"

"Eh, kinda," said Obito, pushing his hair back from his face and leaning over so Hayate could look him in the remaining eye.

(We'd found a spare bandage to put over his empty left eye socket.)

Hayate stared, eyes wide. "But…"

"Sorry for making you cry, before." Obito said softly. "And I'm sorry I'm so late."

Hayate backed up a little and bumped into me as I walked up, then attached himself to my side like a limpet. "Y-You're a ghost, aren't you? Obito's dead."

Crap. Now Hayate was going to cry.

"We thought he was." I told him, rubbing his back. "But he's back now, and he saved my whole team."

"Really?" Hayate asked. Then he gave Obito an appraising look, as though Obito hadn't been a major part of my former genin team for years by that point. But then, I couldn't quite remember how I'd explained Obito's "death" months ago either. Maybe I'd been too depressed to make things less terrible.

"Yeah. We had a pretty close call while on patrol." I said.

Mom broke off her conversation with Iruka's mother to say, "Umino-san, you remember Obito-kun, don't you?"

Iruka's mom's eyes flew wide.

Considering that he'd been standing right there for a while, I was kind of surprised that Iruka's parents had missed him entirely. He didn't look that much like a random teenager, did he?

"I…how is this possible?" Iruka's mother said, hand over her mouth. Vaguely, I remembered her name had something to do with aquatic wildlife… Ashika, probably.

"Did you really save my sister?" Hayate pressed, ignoring her.

"Well, I think she saved us a bit, too." Obito said modestly. "There was a lot of saving going on, and
then Sensei popped in and we *stayed* saved, you know?"

"Umino-san, Obito's survival is a super-long story that I don't fully understand." I said, cutting across her so Hayate didn't lose momentum in the conversation. And it was kind of true—what the hell was that about the Kamui activating in that weird flashback, anyway? I'd never asked about that… "But the Hokage reinstated him himself."

Or Sensei did. Same difference.

"I see." Iruka's mother said. She did, however, leave the conversation alone. Then she went to greet her son as he approached at top speed, throwing himself at his parents like a ballistic missile.

With the Umino family thus distracted, I also turned my attention back to my own family.

Hayate was tracing the whorls on the scarred half of Obito's face with his index finger. He said, "This is so *weird.*" My brother, at least, seemed fascinated instead of disgusted. He seemed pretty cool with the entire situation, actually.

Obito seemed okay with Hayate being a highly curious ten-year-old, but I could also pick up some anxiety that didn't quite fit with my brother being, well, himself. There weren't many people who were really nervous about interacting with him.

I hadn’t been watching Obito's face closely, what with being concerned with Ashika Umino's reaction, but I could feel his chakra get a little agitated the more people started turning their attention to him. While the Obito I knew fought long and hard for acknowledgement from the entirety of the village, I had a feeling this wasn't the way he'd wanted to get it. Even if he had joked about being the Phantom before this.

Maybe I should have thought about the months of what was effectively social isolation *before* I dragged him out on a shopping trip.

"Hey, little brother of mine," I began, as Mom began broadcasting a not-super-subtle aura of "go away" with her chakra alone toward the rest of the crowd, "we're going shopping with Obito after this. You in?"

"Of course I am!" Hayate said instantly.

"Obito?" Yūgao wandered over, flanked by her mother and by Iruka on her other side. "I…"

"Thought I was dead?" Obito filled in. His smile was a little strained. "Yeah, I've been getting that a lot lately. It was one hell of a close call, you know."

"But where have you been?" Iruka asked.

And now the entire Obito fan club was back in force. Population: three pre-genin.

Both Obito and I looked at Mom. Then I looked up, to where Raidō was sitting in the tree as though uniformed ANBU trainees did that all the time. He twitched a bit when he realized I'd spotted him so easily.

"Classified, sorry to say. That's what happens with ninja missions sometimes." Obito said. "But hey, now that I'm back I can definitely spend more time in the village."

I agreed inwardly; there was no way Sensei would allow Obito out of sight of the village for a while.
Speaking of...hm.

I'd have to ask Sensei later if talking to him after that clusterfuck of a mission counted as a debriefing. And if we'd have to see Intelligence about any of it. Ever.

I sure hoped not.

"Are you two coming along on the shopping trip?" I asked them.

Iruka turned back to his mother with, "Mom, can I go?"

"Ask your father." Ashika said, but her eyes were glittering in amusement. Iruka immediately ran to his father, jumping up and down excitedly.

Yūgao only needed to turn puppy-dog eyes on her mother to get a reluctant "yes, you can go" out of her in half the time.

"And that's a party of seven, all ready to go." Obito said, once both of Hayate's friends had come back with their parents' permission. "Kei, mind if I lead this squad?"

"Go ahead." I told him. "I figure you haven't had time to lead much of anything in a while."

"All right then!" Obito's right arm was covered from shoulder to fingertip in bandages to disguise the Zetsu arm he'd picked up somehow, but he pumped it like his normal arm anyway. He was definitely channeling a bit of Gai or maybe Naruto in that moment, whether he knew it or not. "Let's go!"

Of course, while we all agreed to let Obito lead, it wasn't as easy as all that.

I thought of Obito's reaction to being back in society as being similar to that one boy from *Hatchet*. I mean, he hadn't been *alone* down in that hole in the ground and it wasn't like he'd been starving the whole time even if the other residents of said hole didn't eat, but Obito had lost a bit of his knack for crowd navigation. A lot of shinobi were used to using people as camouflage better than any terrain type, but Obito had lost a bit of that edge. With its departure, Obito had picked up a different habit—mostly, stopping all the time to stare at things.

It wasn't like he was staring at the shelves in a market. He just...sometimes needed to sit down and watch the crowds for a bit. Some of them would stare back, since his facial scar wasn't exactly subtle, but I'm not sure he really noticed that part.

He was a little overwhelmed.

With subtle nudging from Mom, though, we managed to keep moving at a pace that wasn't any slower than normal. Though Mom wasn't really tall, she could steer Obito from one storefront to another with the ease of someone who'd been doing it all her life.

...I mean, I knew I hated shopping on principle (and in both lifetimes), but I wasn't aware my issues had given her time to *practice*.

"You should get at least one formal outfit." Mom was saying as we walked past a very, very traditional-looking storefront. I got odd vibes from it—while there was little chance of the shopkeeper being a member of a major clan, since it was pretty far from the clan grounds, it looked like the kind of place where the Uchiha or Hyūga clan members would shop. Ergo, kimono everywhere.
For comparison's sake, I owned exactly one kimono. More specifically, it was my mother's old furisode, last worn at her coming-of-age ceremony however many years ago in another country and stuck in her luggage ever since. I was supposed to inherit it, I guess, but I was already getting too wide at the shoulders to fit it. Unless I had to go to a wedding ceremony or something in the next year, I probably wasn't ever going to wear it.

Hayate didn't have any really formal wear, probably because he was ten and because Dad hadn't owned kimono before he died. Konoha wasn't really big on kimono as a rule, anyway, and a shinobi uniform could suffice in most cases anyway.

But Obito would need to meet the head of the Uchiha clan properly, in a ceremony, if he wanted to really get his spot in the clan back. Being an orphan from a really minor branch of the clan, he hadn't bothered to get one before.

"I should probably get one from the clan grounds, though." Obito said. "Clan members get a discount, and clan sigils are hard to get otherwise."

"Wouldn't that be viewed as presumptuous?" Mom asked.

The kids were running on ahead of us, as an aside. I trusted Hayate and his friends not to smash into anybody, but Obito was distracted enough that that kind of thing might have actually been a problem.

Or walking through people in a literal sense, if he'd had his Mangekyō Sharingan. That would've been hell to explain.

"I don't think so." Obito told her, but then he frowned. "I don't know. Kei, what do you think?"

"I think we need to concentrate on getting you extra outfits that won't break our budget." I said, shrugging. "I'm sure Sensei has a plan for the other stuff."

Okay, so maybe that was a bit of a lie. I just hated the idea of having to sit in a tailor's shop for that long.

Obito tugged experimentally on his overgrown bangs. "And I think I need a haircut."

"Yeah, you probably do." I agreed.

"…While ordinarily I wouldn't mention it, I think you have more split ends than whole hairs, here." Mom said critically. "Fine. Haircut first."

Off we went to the salon.

More specifically, Mom and Obito went into the salon, while I herded kids. With a bit of my own money, I managed to steer Hayate, Iruka, and Yūgao toward a dango stand and buy them all an afternoon snack. It wasn't festival time, but I figured sweets were never inappropriate for children unless they were at the dentist's office. Once we were all settled on benches outside of the salon and listening to the hairstylist critiquing Obito's total lack of style, we ate.

"So," Hayate said around a sticky mouthful of sugar and rice flour, "is Obito staying at our house?"

"Nah, Sensei has him covered." I said, then popped the last mochi into my mouth. "Did you want another roommate, Hayate-chan?"

Hayate glared at me. "No. And stop calling me ‘-chan' already!"
I ruffled his hair again. Of course, since it'd happened so often to me, I'd picked up the same habit. Curse you, Sensei!

"Sis, where'd your headband go?" Hayate asked once he stopped being angry at me (which took about two seconds).

"I gave it back." I said, shrugging. "It was Obito's to start with."

There was something kind of sad about how Rin and I had clung to the two items I'd brought back from Kannabi. It felt weird to be going around sans headband in the village, but that was such a small price to pay for having Obito back that it didn't even count.

Isobu, less so, but I wasn't about to tell Hayate about that.

Hayate looked thoughtful for a moment. Then, "Does that mean you're going to get a new one? 'Cause I liked the one you had before that."

"Yeah, I think so." Not like my uniform would be complete without one. If I wore a uniform.

…And I needed a new jacket. Great.

"What kind of headband would all of you get?" I asked all three of my dining companions.

"I want a bandanna." Hayate said instantly. I wasn't sure if it was just because bandannas were awesome or if it was because I wore one.

"A normal one." Iruka said, before Hayate could go into more detail.

"I don't know." Yūgao said, kicking her legs out of apparent boredom. "I think I'll decide when we graduate."

Yeah, it wasn't the most scintillating conversation ever.

Luckily, a distraction followed shortly thereafter.

It was green and moving at about fifty kilometers per hour.

"KEISUKE-CHAN, YOU HAVE RETURNED FROM YOUR MISSION!" Gai said in true Youth mode, pumping my arm in a congratulatory handshake before I could get away via ducking behind my brother or something.

"That I did." I said, feeling my shoulder start to rattle in its socket from the force of Gai's enthusiasm. The kids—meaning the mini-ninjas who were too cowardly to attempt to distract the juvenile Green Beast—had already split for the hair salon in search of shelter. "How've you been, Gai?"

"I have been doing well! My last mission was a rousing success and there has been talk of an early promotion to jōnin if I continue to succeed!" Gai said, still not letting go of my hands.

"That's great!" I wasn't terribly surprised—Gai was one of the so-called "genius" generation of shinobi, and the hardest worker I'd ever met besides. He probably wasn't going to make full jōnin for a bit longer, but I'd bet he'd make it before twenty at the latest. The world was full of opportunities for someone with intense personal drive and the ability to kick things to death. "I'm glad you're doing so well. It's something I know you've worked hard to achieve."

"Yes, I have always given my full effort!" Gai paused, but it was only long enough for me to notice before he went off with, "And Keisuke-chan, is it true that your teammate Obito Uchiha has returned
“...Well, it turns out he wasn't dead, but yeah. He's back. And in there.” I said that last bit while waving toward the salon with my free hand. I could feel the kids' chakra quail in despair since I pointed Gai in their general directions. "The details are classified, though."

"Oh, I am very much aware!” Gai said brightly, and finally let go of my hand. I could feel the bones try to head back into their proper positions and scream all the way. "I have been delivering the wonderful news all across Konoha, but I wanted to hear it from you yourself before I could celebrate properly!"

Gai, I realized belatedly, was crying tears of joy.

Uh.
I hadn't realized he cared that much.

"I have to go and say that I am overjoyed at his return!” Gai said, lip wobbling and big, glittering tears racing down his face. "Only then will I return to completing my mission!"

Gai promptly disappeared into the salon.

He and Obito promptly got into a shouting match, before being overridden by Mom and the hairdresser in about five seconds.

I was left with the dueling impressions of "holy hell, Gai should be hired as the God of Overacting" and "oh my god did I seriously make Maito Gai cry" and was still dealing with them when Genma showed up.

"Hey, Gekkō-san. Have you seen Gai?” Genma asked, strolling up the street toward me as though he had been chasing his errant teammate across the rooftops all over town. When his chakra and breathing told me he had.

Genma always did seem to put more stock into looking casual than most.

Wordlessly, I pointed at the salon.

Through the front window, I could see Mom with her arms crossed, standing over Gai as he bowed repeatedly in apology to the hairdresser. Hayate and Iruka had managed to take over the next two spinning chairs and were testing how much torque they could put it through, while Yūgao was helping a beleaguered-looking man with a broom sweep up Obito's former hairstyle. Obito himself, rather than being meek and looking chastised, was leaning over the back of his chair and snickering at Gai.

"...Should I be glad that he didn't decide to go with flowers this time?” Genma wondered aloud, shaking his head. "Sorry about this. We really are glad to have the Uchiha back, though.”

"Wait, Gai hands out flowers? Since when?” I asked, having gotten stuck on the previous statement.

"Sometimes. I think his dad got him into the idea that every celebration needs a bouquet." Genma said evenly. "I'll tell him to save it for the welcome back party."

Gai's dad…

Dai, I think his name was. And like a lot of other father figures in this universe, he was dead.
It fucking figured.

"Welcome back party, huh?" I mused, trying not to think about the tragedies everyone I knew seemed to accumulate. "Where are we going to hold it?"

"No idea." Genma shrugged. "We've heard that something big's happening in the next couple of days, so maybe we'll just hold a dinner party or something."

Yeah, like Sensei ascending to Hokage-hood. That would require a venue and a crowd and a lot of confetti pretty much by default. Probably the street in front of the Academy and the administrative center, like Tsunade's…

I'd have to ask Obito if he thought he'd be able to stand that.

"He likes street food more than restaurant stuff." I offered, after a bit. "I admit we haven't really thought about who'd attend this kinda party, either…"

"Leave that bit to us." Genma said. He looked through the salon window, a distant look on his face. "I don't know the whole story, but it can't've been easy for him. Whatever happened."

"…Yeah. Thanks, Shiranui-san." I said.

"Genma," he corrected, shifting the senbon in his mouth from side to side.

"Then call me Kei. Fair's fair." I said, offering a handshake.

He took it. "All right then, Kei-san. Tell Obito that the rest of us are rooting for him, all right?"

"Rest of who?" I ask before I think about it.

"Everyone, basically." Genma shrugged. "Mostly from your class, like Gai, but by now half the village is probably gonna be talking about the miracle survivor coming home. I know Kurenai and Asuma are in on things, and I heard them grabbing Aoba before we left the communications center for the eastern district. Not everyone's gonna be happy, given politics, but we're all hoping it's gonna work out."

"Sensei won't let it go any other way." I told him. "And you can count on that."

Genma's eyebrows rose a little; I wondered if he was making connections between us, Sensei's moniker, and maybe the "big news" brewing in the village. If he was still friends with Raidō—who was still following our group around—I didn't see why not.

"All right. Take care, Kei. Hope to see you 'round the training grounds again sometime soon." With that, Genma stuck his head into the salon and yelled for Gai, who trooped out after him like a chastised puppy.

Then they both took off.

"Is he gone?" Iruka asked from the doorway, eyes wide. I assumed he meant Gai, who could be kind of overwhelming in person. Or a lot overwhelming.

"For now." I shrugged. Steering Iruka back inside, I went into the salon, calling, "Obito, you'd better be done with getting your hair cut by now! We still have shopping to do!"

"Only a little longer," said the hairdresser, who was in the process of forcing Obito back into the spinning chair. "Finishing touches, you understand."
"Ugh," said Obito, but he obeyed anyway. "Kei, why do you want to see me suffer?"

"You're getting rid of mats and split ends and an extra kilo of insulation you don't need in July." I said. "You'll feel better afterward."

Obito grumbled, but knew better than to shift when a pair of scissors was that close to his remaining eye.

"Also, Genma says the rest of our year is planning a welcome back party for you." I said, and watched as Obito's reflection in the salon mirror gaped like a fish.

"I…you're serious?" Obito said, as the hairdresser snipped away at the last couple of chunks of spiky Uchiha hair.

"Yeah. The plans are a little vague right now, but if Genma says so, I'm willing to bet on it." I said. "Wow." Obito sounded genuinely awed, like he hadn't realized how many people would miss him if he was gone.

…That was kind of like Naruto's story, too. By the end of the first half of the manga, the rest of his friendships were solidified and his comrades looked forward to his eventual return even if he himself was still kinda insecure about everything ever. Sans Sasuke, anyway, but there were people waiting for him, too.

Funny how that worked out.

"I'll pass along any messages you want, about food and stuff." I offered.

"Ah, I'm sure whatever they'll come up with is fine." Obito said, turning a little red.

"Finished," said the hairdresser, and finally let Obito up.

"Oh, I gotta see the back." Obito said, and snatched up a mirror from the counter as the same janitor walked by and started sweeping up the hair on the floor.

For a short description on Obito's new-old hairstyle, I'd have probably said "Naruto's Shippūden haircut, but with a fringe that angled to the right," in black rather than bright yellow. It was honestly cute on him, though you'd never hear me say that aloud. Not as short as his old style, but nowhere near as long as Sensei's and still a fair bit shorter than Kakashi's. I was also pretty sure the hairstylist had used a tiny bit of gel for the sake of it, but it wasn't like shinobi needed it.

Kakashi was an excellent example, there.

"I like it!" Obito said, and bowed to the hairdresser. "Thank you very much!"

"It was no trouble," said the hairdresser, and moved to the cash register. "Shinobi-san?"

"I'll get it." Mom said, and headed over.

"I didn't realize how hot it was." Obito said. Then he ran his fingers through his newly-short hair extremely quickly, ruining the gel but also shaking any loose bits out. He grinned when he was done, examining his handiwork in the nearest mirror. "Better."

"Once again, Rin has the longest hair on this team." I nodded sagely. "As it should be."

"Can we go now?" Hayate asked, nearly whining.
It turned out that we were done and out the door in about a minute after that. And then, finally we were able to properly go shopping for replacement stuff for Obito.

That night, after a long day of making sure Obito was kitted out for the next week…well.

I stepped out into the perpetually-dripping glacial space of my mindscape and said, "Hello. I'm Keisuke. What's your name?"

Isobu roared.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from the Naruto OST.

Also I found out about Gai's dad hella late and wasn't able to figure out how to reference him until now. Oops?
Ripple Arc: Must Be Dreaming

Chapter Summary

Kei: Run into a setback at full tilt.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kushina's advice when dealing with Tailed Beasts was pretty simple: Don't.

The longer form of it went like this: Don't make deals with a Tailed Beast for power, because it only wants your body.

…Wow, that could have been put better.

Anyway, that wasn't the purpose of my visit to my mindscape.

I floated down onto the ice, looking around.

My mindscape had changed a lot in the last five years. What had originally been a calm, white void with the trappings of a coffee shop or a therapist's office, complete with fainting couch, had become a little more wild. In fact, all of the furniture was gone—probably either reabsorbed by the Dreamer or smashed into nothing by Madara's seal during its rampage. The ice around the glacier was cracking, as glaciers did, and pooling far below in a sort of bay that reached off into oblivion. I could see the ice fields stretching off into forever the other way, and the faintest outlines of mountains rose in the distance against a sky that was mostly white and gray.

Isobu swam in circles far below me, corralled by golden naval chains that looked thick enough to crush me under a single link. All three of his tails churned the water as he moved around, looking a little like a boat with three rear motors stuck in a glorified fish tank. About the only thing I could say was that it was marginally less depressing than the Nine-Tailed Fox's (current) seal.

Near him, encased in black ice and glowing red ink, was Madara's mind control seal. Its Rinnegan eye was closed, thanks to Sensei, and I shuddered to even look at it.

I stepped off the edge of the glacier and plummeted toward Isobu's kiddie pool.

I jerked to a stop about two meters above the top of the tallest ice floe, having reasserted control over my mental gravity.

Isobu's sole gold-on-ringed-red eye focused on me. His eye alone was taller than I was, and I felt a little like those kids in the Jurassic Park movie when they were confronted by the adult female T. rex. Only, you know, more so.

I was pretty sure Sue wasn't a hundred meters tall.

If Gamabunta was only the size of the Nine-Tails's torso…

Hoo, boy.
I swallowed hard, feeling my stomach sink to somewhere past my toes.

Isobu exhaled, shooting water off the edges of his facial spikes in a manner that reminded me of a whale. My hair flew back from my face with the force of it and I had to close my eyes.

When I opened them, Isobu was still looking at me.

"Uh." Great start, stupid, I thought to myself. "Hello. My name's Keisuke. What's your name?"

Isobu's huge eye narrowed, and he roared.

And through that roar, while I had my hands clamped over my ears, I heard a voice say, GO AWAY.

"It's pretty hard to go away while you're stuck in my chakra system!" I screamed back, even as the echo of Isobu's roar caused a collapse in the glacier that snatched all sound away.

Isobu settled back, still glaring. And whose fault is that?

"Madara Uchiha, if you wanna get specific." I snapped, then smacked myself in the forehead. "Okay, no, we're not starting this off like this. This is stupid." I rose a little in the freezing air, angrier at myself than I was at Isobu. "I'm sorry you're here. I'm sorry this seemed like a good idea at the time. Nothing would make me happier than if we were off in our own little worlds."

But we aren't. Isobu grumbled, sinking further into the water.

That was kind of a quick turnaround.

I said, "I know for certain that my death, one way or another, will set you free."

Why did I say that?

Because Isobu needed to be thrown a bone. He was in a worse position than I was, being unable to see, hear, feel, or smell the outside world or influence any of it, and guaranteed to stay that way as long as I was still alive. As long as I didn't use his chakra.

I know that, Isobu replied, unhappy. But your death, human, would only send more humans chasing after me. What is the point of being free if every spare moment will involve being hunted?

…Gah, I did not need to feel the urge to hug a kaijū.

"Look, that's not going to be all there is. Not forever." I drew my legs up and floated into a meditative position, hands on my knees. "If we can work together, we can change things."

Isobu glowered. He couldn't kill me and he knew that much, even if Kushina's chains weren't there. He'd be re-sealed in minutes with Sensei and Jiraiya in the village, and I could call up any number of memories to back that theory up. Isobu simply didn't have many options here. I would like to see you try.

Well, well, well. Wasn't that a challenge?

Then, Why did you ask me for my name?

"Because you have one and it's polite to ask." I said, floating upside-down now. It was such a
strange thought, still, to think aloud in my own head. That was totally what I was doing, though. "If you can think and talk, you have a name. Three-Tails is a descriptor, not a name. It just makes you one of nine, and while you are one of the nine Tailed Beasts, that's not the whole story."

Hmph. Isobu turned away, sending water washing over the bay as his tails churned through saltwater and ice. Go away. I'm done talking to you, human.

"Right." I muttered. "Good talk. The name's Keisuke, if you ever feel like using it."

And then I opened my eyes for real.

"How was the second attempt, Kei-chan?" Kushina asked as I started to flex stiffness out of my legs.

What? Sitting still for half an hour would bug anyone. Meditation is annoying like that.

Much as I disliked the idea of having to rush right back into the thick of things, Sensei's orders had been absolute: Train with Kushina or go on leave for however long it takes to reconsider that decision. Fed up with being stuck inside, I'd gone with the easy way out. With Obito off with Sensei for the day—probably meeting up with the Uchiha clan or something—Kakashi disappeared to parts unknown and Rin back in her hospital rotations, that left me with the village's only other Host in an attempt to figure out how to wrangle a hundred-meter chakra monster.

Easier said than done, of course.

Regardless, that meant spending the afternoon at a training ground I'd never been to before. It was surrounded on all sides by massive Hashirama trees, which may or may not have contributed to why Kushina thought it'd be the best place to train. If Hashirama Senju could control the Tailed Beasts and Yamato could shut Naruto down when the kid was channeling Kurama, then maybe the trees had something going for them, too.

Or maybe it was all psychosomatic and I was being dumb.

"Better than last time. I got words out of that roar." I said, shrugging. I sat up fully, cracking every joint I could manage. Then I leaned against the tree at my back, a little relieved. "But he's probably still not happy with me."

"You don't need it to be happy with you." Kushina said. "You just need it to stop trying to steal your life."

…Eh. That was…one way to deal with a Tailed Beast. Probably just about the least effective, though.

I bit the inside of my cheek and didn't say anything, but Kushina caught it.

"You think I'm doing something wrong?" Kushina asked.

"…Yes?" I hastened to explain, "You've been carrying the Nine-Tails around longer than I've been alive and I respect your experience with him. But dealing with him like he's a common feral dog isn't a good tactic."

The seal she used, after all, hadn't been hers to start with. Nor her design. I wondered, briefly, if she'd ever seen how humiliating her seal really was to someone as prideful and angry as Kurama was.
Kushina tilted her head to the side and sat back, looking more curious than affronted. "What do you mean?"

"The Nine-Tails is kept chained up like a prisoner. In my seal, I can see the Three-Tails paddling around in the same fishbowl of a bay, but he can move." I said. "Aside from keeping the Tailed Beasts caged, our seals are nothing alike."

"I keep the Nine-Tails caged the way it is partially because Great-Aunt Mito had no other choice." Kushina told me, patient as she could be. "She pinned it down and sealed it into herself to keep Madara from using it against Konoha ever again."

Yeah, that'd worked out great.

"If I try to change the seal now, it might escape." Kushina continued, eyes dark. "And no one can afford to let that happen."

True. And untrue.

I weighed both options, thinking.

The Nine-Tails is ungodly powerful and sealing him had killed both Sensei and Kushina. Kurama's crappy mood could beat Pain into the ground even before fully manifesting, never mind most of the village. Sensei had contained him, but between Tobi and the village there was just too much going on to allow Kurama to go on his merry city-stomping way.

But Naruto had talked Kurama down in the future. He'd beaten his darkness, and eventually wrestled some modicum of respect out of the fox after years of mutual distrust. They'd fought in the Fourth Shinobi World War together as partners, at the end, even…

Even if I didn't know what happened after Tobi became something that looked like Jenova on a bad day.

Though the manga was more idealistic than made sense, sometimes, there was no real reason that people couldn't cooperate with Tailed Beasts given time and trust. Killer B had already proved that much.

"I think," I said carefully, "I need to think on it more. For now, we'll agree to disagree."

"Kei-chan." Kushina said sternly. "Is this another one of those dream things that is really, really important?"

"Yeah." I said.

"Well, out with it." Kushina said, leaning back on her palms. She looked a little annoyed, but not that much. Maybe she just wasn't used to me arguing with her?

"All of the Tailed Beasts have names." I said bluntly, since I was a little annoyed, too. "The Sage himself named them, and they've gotten nothing but crap from humans ever since."

"That doesn't—" Kushina stopped herself. "They'd destroy entire villages if we didn't seal them into humans, Kei-chan. They needed to be stopped."

"Yeah, but how did they get that way?" I asked bitterly. "Look, all nine of them can cooperate with humans and everyone involved gets stronger for it. I'm going to be working with the Three-Tails my way, and I'll earn his trust. It may take years, and for all I know I'll die trying. But this is something I
have to try before I can just write it off."

Isobu was stuck with me until I died. As far as I was concerned, that was reason enough to try and make something out of the situation.

"I tried asking the Three-Tails’s name, but he doesn't trust me enough yet. That's okay. It makes sense." I went on, voice low and still upset. "But the Nine-Tails has been with you for ages. The least you can do is try to unscramble some of the mess we've made." Then I sighed. "It'd be better if we could manage it before your son is born, but that's probably cutting it too close to the wire. We don't have enough time."

"...Kei-chan, how old were you when you died in your dreams?" Kushina asked.

"Twenty-something." I said, shrugging.

Kushina shook her head. "Drat, you killed the joke." When I looked at her, she said, "I was about to say that you're the oldest teenager I've ever met, but that's not really accurate." She twisted a few strands of her long red hair between her fingers. "I can't promise to modify the Nine-Tails’s seal. I need to look into it. But I will think about what you've said."

"That's all I can ask." I told her.

"Don't you ever get tired of that kind of attitude?" Kushina asked incredulously. I blinked. "Don't you ever wish you could go out and just do things?"

Denying it would be a lie, so... "Yeah, but I'm a little worried about the crazy people who actually run this village."

Though it would be great to actually be able to start on some of the ideas for social reform I'd had on boil for...ages, by then.

"Well, Minato is going to be one of them in about three hours." Kushina remarked.

In unison, we shuddered.

Now that was a scary thought.

"Anyway, Kei-chan, you're dismissed. We both have a lot to think about, now." Kushina said. She smiled, though, and I reflexively smiled back. "Don't try to carry too many burdens by yourself, all right? Though we aren't all dealing with these secrets well, it's still better than having only one set of shoulders for this, isn't it?"

...Kinda?

I'd have to think on that one.

I ran home for lunch before anyone could call me back. I had a lot of thinking to do, indeed.

By noon, it seemed like the entire village had piled into the three streets nearest the village's administrative center. For reference, the core of Konoha—meaning the bit protected by the walls themselves—has the approximate population density of Seattle and more colorful characters than most places have stand-up comedy acts. Ours, you see, are free.

I'm getting off-topic, though. Basically, this was a big day and I hadn't seen a crowd this dense since my old life. This, of course, necessitated finding my group in the crush somewhere and trying to find
a decent vantage point to see Sensei up on the roof.

And he was there, both hands on the railing and looking down on all of us with his chakra nearly fizzing with nervous excitement. I could tell that at least two of the Elders were up there with him, along with Jiraiya, Kushina, and Hiruzen Sarutobi. There might have been other people, but I was a little busy trying to find someone I knew with whom to enjoy the show.

With a bit of shoving, I managed to make my way over to the nearest familiar chakra signatures.

It just so happened that this crowd was mine.

"Hey, Keisuke-chan!" Kurenai called, flagging me down before I jumped toward the next pocket of people.

"Kurenai-san," I said, jogging over.

Actually, it looked like my entire year-group (and the ones immediately around it) had decided to form a crowd of our own. I could see Ibiki and Asuma hanging back a bit, with Genma apparently having a whispered argument with Raidō over something I was not going to investigate. Anko was sitting on Aoba's shoulders, apparently because she could and because she was too short to see over the crowd otherwise. There were a pair of goofballs messing around near the rear of the pack—Kotetsu and Izumo, if I had to guess.

And finally, up front—

"You made it!" Rin said, jumping up to hug me. I returned it and she said, after, "Wait, where's Obito?"

"Late as usual," muttered Kakashi, who had approached while I had a thirteen-year-old girl hanging off my neck and was thus distracted.

"I have no idea." I told Rin, ignoring Kakashi entirely. "Mom and Hayate and his friends should be around here somewhere, though."

"Pretty much everyone already is here." Asuma said, brow knitting. I couldn't tell if he was annoyed because he hadn't had a chance to strangle Obito for the whole "we thought you were dead" thing or just because it was that important of an event. Probably both. "Where the hell is that Uchiha?"

There, I thought almost before I realized what I was sensing. I looked up with eyes narrowed in a squint against the afternoon sunlight, and kind of wished I had binoculars or the Byakugan. His chakra was dwarfed by the signatures around him, but… "Obito's on the roof." I said.

"Eh?" Gai—and where the hell did he come from?—looked up too, raising one bandage-covered hand to shade his eyes. "Oh! OBITO-KUN, WE ARE DOWN HERE AND HAPPY FOR YOUR WONDROUS RETURN!" He waved enthusiastically.

Obito didn't wave back, but then, none of us could see him anyway. I wasn't sure if he would be able to hear a small explosion from the ground, given the noise of the crowd, and Gai wasn't quite that loud. Even besides that, Obito wasn't supposed to be visible from the ground—the only one who was, in fact, was Sensei.

Speaking of which, I felt Sensei's chakra shift a little, as though he was preparing a jutsu.

"I think it's starting soon." I said, craning my neck to see.
Behind me, Hayate latched onto my waist and I felt Mom and Hayate's friends gather around, pushing into the formerly all-shinobi crowd. No one seemed to have any problems with it, even though I was pretty sure he was attempting a badly-done Heimlich maneuver. I had a couple of seconds before I was going to have to twist his ear to get him off.

Anko, being their age and a girl, climbed off Aoba and started talking with Iruka about something I couldn't hear over the buzz of the crowd. After a second or two, Hayate let go of me and clustered with his friends and Anko. I exhaled with a sense of relief and vaguely thwarted vengeance. The ensuing snickers were worrying, but I decided to leave it for later.

Though there were four of them, I was still a chūnin and had other shinobi as nominal backup.

If they felt like it.

Then I felt Sensei's chakra flare in tandem with Sarutobi's and Jiraiya's, and everyone in the crowd older than the age of five went silent. The remaining group of spectators was shushed by their parents, and I wondered if the village would ever install a proper PA system.

Sensei was practically glowing because the moment would go to anyone's head. From this distance, though, I could feel flickers of nervous energy coming off of nearly everyone in range.

The silence held until Sensei broke it.

(I realized later that acceptance speeches in ninja-land were apparently supposed to be just as abrupt as the way we fought.)

Louder than seemingly possible, his voice rang out across the entire crowd, clear and confident. "From this day on, I shall protect Konohagakure as the Fourth Hokage!"

Cue the crowd.

It took a couple of minutes for things to settle down after that. Between Sensei warping to the front of the administration center because stairs were for squares and accepting congratulations from everyone from Kushina (who kissed him), to Fugaku of the Uchiha clan (who did not), for a while it seemed like the crowd was going to cut off whatever else he had to say. But the little black-clad shadow by his side, it seemed, wasn't meant to go unnoticed even if he was still adjusting to humanity again.

"And finally," Sensei was saying to Fugaku, "a war hero makes his return. Obito fought his way back from the brink of death and saved his comrades, Uchiha-dono." He had his political smile plastered on his face, the shell thick enough that only those who knew him extremely well would notice.

He squeezed Obito's shoulder for emphasis, and Obito started turning red in a sort of mortified embarrassment that came with being praised for things you weren't sure were actually your doing. Or, you know, were embarrassing.

I made my way closer, in case Obito needed some kind of moral support or something. Rin followed along in my wake.

Kakashi, somehow, was already at Sensei's other elbow like a second shadow.

"I hope you would be willing to accept his return, Uchiha-dono." Sensei concluded.
Fugaku briefly closed his eyes, and then said, "That was never in doubt, Hokage-sama."

Peeking out from behind another nearby Uchiha, oddly, were two familiar faces—a tiny Itachi and a slightly-less-tiny Shisui (and had his hair always been that curly?). If I was any judge, I'd have pegged Itachi at about age five and Shisui at maybe somewhere around seven or eight.

I felt a pang of sharp regret for what both boys' futures had been like before the timeline had been turned into an interesting pretzel by Obito's sudden grasp of common sense. Funny how the Uchiha clan's salvation and destruction always seemed to hinge on the cooperation (or not) of clan members with unique eyeball powers. Even if none of the boys near me had done the discovering part of the equation for ultimate in bullshit powers, we'd already taken the first step toward preventing that miserable vision from coming true.

I still had to tell Sensei about it. Soon.

It was also kind of funny to realize just how little all these major players were, in comparison to me and my friends and what we had all accomplished so early.

And Mikoto wasn't anywhere in sight. I guessed that if I was nine months pregnant, I wouldn't want to get out of the house for anything short of the end of the world, either.

"So I can come home?" Obito asked, wide-eyed.

"Of course." Fugaku said in a tone that didn't make it sound like he was contemplating paying unforeseen bills. It was a close thing, though. "Regardless of whether you have found allies in other places, the clan was always your home to return to."

I tilted my head to the side. That was…not what I was expecting. Good, of course, but I had only seen glimpses of the Uchiha clan since meeting Obito and his experiences had been pretty uniformly chilly. While Fugaku had not been precisely welcoming, I had kind of been expecting a flat "oh, you're back" kind of response. Sensei being in directly front of the Uchiha clan head and on Obito's side apparently changed everything.

Oh, and Sensei being Hokage. I wasn't sure about some of the stuff Obito and Sensei had discussed on their own time—people didn't tell me everything, even if I could guess a lot—but I had the feeling that this wasn't the first time Sensei had confronted the Uchiha clan about Obito somehow.

Kakashi tapped out a quick code on the back of my right shoulder once he was close enough for it to appear casual. I spared him a glance, because Sensei and Fugaku were having a stare-down over Obito's oblivious head, and then thought about his message.

Ally suspicious, teammate at risk Y/N?

I flicked his fingers off me, a lightning-fast rhythm on our nails. Hold.

It wasn't a denial.

Acknowledged.

I felt Rin's chakra flicker in response, too.

We'd side with Obito first, long before the Uchiha clan entered the picture. And he'd probably return the favor if it came down to it.

"I should get an apartment back in the district, then." Obito mused aloud. He paused. "…Though I
kinda need to talk to you or to the administration center about that and not right now."

 Sensei nodded. "All right. Obito, Kei, Kakashi, you can run along now. Just remember that you have team training at two with Kushina."

 Glancing at Obito's outfit—basically a black variant of the Konoha dark blue standard, plus his long-unused flak jacket—I decided that the best option after that point would be to go home and change before I could ruin everything I owned again.

 So maybe the last mission had been a spectacular fluke. My point stands.

 "Yessir," I said, fast enough that the words got crammed together.

 Mom caught up to us before we were able to ditch the We-Have-A-New-Hokage party.

 "I'll stay here for a little longer," Mom said, holding Hayate by one ear.

 I didn't want to know what he'd gotten up to. At least not in public, with Kurenai having a whispered argument with both purple-haired girls he knew and with Iruka being scolded by his parents. I would totally needle him later.

 "Okay. I'm gonna have to head home to get changed," I told her, since my teammates had already disappeared for just that purpose and I had to tell people about things before I just took off.

 "We'll see you at dinner, then." Mom's eyes crinkled at the edges as she smiled. "I have been waiting for the proper moment to give you your birthday present, and I don't think there's any harm in handing it over early."

 Holy cow!

 "I'll be there!" I said, practically bouncing in place. "Thank you!"

 And then I was gone, too.

 So, training.

 Shinobi tended to use sparring as a sort of informal fitness assessment even among each other, with casual meetings. We were obviously terrible at this "mental health" thing and didn't see the problem with allowing an eight-year-old who'd seen his entire family slaughtered to live in the same house he'd lived in before the massacre, in an abandoned district. So, in the absence of a centralized system or any study of psychology beyond what was required to break people, most of the expertise we gleaned was haphazard.

 Hence the use of sparring (a deeply ingrained aspect of our culture's militant history) as a diagnostic tool for almost everything that wasn't death.

 I arrived at our team's usual training spot about ten minutes early and immediately walked to the bridge we usually used for meetings. There wasn't anything really special about it, but I was feeling nostalgic and twitchy and looking at the river tended to help soothe my nerves a bit.

 …This was going to be a long few months.

 I wasn't just thinking of the Uchiha thing. Whatever Obito did involving his clan was mostly his business unless it abruptly changed into a problem for the whole team, so I couldn't really worry about that as long as he was happy with how things were going.
Oh, no. My problem of the day was about Naruto's birth.

I didn't believe for a second that Madara and his legion of Z-Putties would just let us go on our merry non-murdered way.

The only question, then, would be what to do about it.

The obvious answer would just be to pawn the entire thing off to Sensei. I didn't have a way around that—when you got down to it, there just weren't a whole lot of ways to prep for a disaster on the scale of the Nine-Tailed Fox's escape without involving someone who could muster an awful lot of ninjas really quickly. Even then, it'd be close.

But that couldn't be everything I could do. Sure, I was just a random chūnin who happened to be well-connected to most people in the village, but I also knew a hell of a lot and could probably (eventually) draw on Isobu's chakra. Actually, I could definitely draw on Isobu's chakra. Controlling it was another story entirely.

I looked down into my reflection's eyes, vaguely expecting to see Isobu's strange gold-on-red eyes staring up at me.

Nope. Just me.

I mean, I was a few days short of fourteen and was starting to outgrow my mother in some ways. If I kept up the growth rate I'd been showing thus far during puberty, I'd be mistaken for a man pretty much for the rest of my life. The facial scar from Kannabi was also still pretty obvious, and if it'd lightened a little over time it sure hadn't gotten shorter. I looked like Squall Leonhart had had a run-in with Seifer a second time and gotten the same stupid scar lengthened at both ends.

Still. I wasn't exactly the thing people thought of when they thought "political powerhouse." Or any kind of powerhouse, really. I just looked like a slightly depressed tomboy/young man with a really obvious scar.

"Ah-HA!" Obito's voice called as he bounced into view with his chakra buzzing happily. "I'm not late, Kei!" He looked around the area quickly, Sharingan active, before declaring, "Take that, Kakashi!"

Obito was actually taller since the last time he'd been in Konoha, and he'd grown up a bit. Wearing black and his Konoha vest from ages ago made him look a lot older than he actually was, even if he only came up to about Sensei's neck, and the bandages running the entire length of his right arm seemed to add weight to that assessment. He'd also taken to wearing an eye-patch over the last couple of days, which looked less odd than Kakashi's perpetually-crooked headband.

All of that affected his behavior precisely not at all.

"So, feeling better about being back in Konoha?" I asked, smiling faintly.

"Hell yeah!" Obito looked kind of sheepish and said, "I just talked to Granny Sayako and she almost blew up at me for being gone for so long. It was great but also kinda terrifying. I mean, it's nice to know people care."

I gave him a long look.

"It still feels a bit weird to be back, but I'll get over that." Obito elaborated, shrugging. "It's more good-weird than bad-weird, you know?"
"I could guess.

"What are you going to do after this, Kei?" Obito asked suddenly, looking rather serious.

"After what?" I asked, blinking. That question didn't sound like it'd come out of nowhere.

"After we grow up, obviously," Obito said, hopping up onto the bridge's opposite railing so he could pace and practice his chakra control at the same time. At least, I thought so. "I didn't really think about it before, but Sensei's sending out runners to the border stations to announce stuff to Iwagakure and everything's, you know, winding down."

I gestured for him to go on.

"But like, I don't know… I noticed the Ino-Shika-Chō guys are all married and expecting kids now, and I think some of our age group's joined ANBU already." He continued to pace. "I think Rin-chan is going to stick to being a medic-nin, but she wasn't really ever officially assigned to Team Minato, and it seems like Gai wants to shoot for jōnin soon…" He paused again, thinking. "What are we gonna do when we aren't a team anymore?"

"Why would you think we're going to not be a team, Obito?" I asked. For the most part, the only major shinobi teams that failed to be best friends years after the fact were the ones where one or more members died or defected. As a result, Konoha shinobi could be a pretty tight-knit community. "As far as I'm concerned, just because we take separate missions sometimes doesn't mean that our genin team isn't special."

"Well, what about if—" Obito began, but I wasn't about to let him go off on a tangent about that. I grabbed the trailing edge of his leg bandages and yanked, forcing him to sit down probably more abruptly than he'd have liked.

While he was whining about rough handling, I took a deep breath and said, "Obito, you are my best friend."

Obito went very still.

"I absolutely promise you that this is the complete, unvarnished truth." I went on, meeting his eye directly. "I can't tell you to stop doubting how much everyone cares about you. That wouldn't be fair, because it's an order and there are some things you can't order someone to do. But even if we have to go on separate missions for a really long time, I promise that if we meet up at Ichiraku's, it'll be like no time passed at all. Understand?"

Tobi or not, shinobi or not, and reincarnation or not, I'd owed him for years. He'd always had my back, and the least I could do was have his.

Well, the absolute least I could do was haul his ass out of the fire every time he got in too deep, but I was more of an accomplice than a babysitter. That was Kakashi's thing.

Obito started wiping his eyes on his sleeves.

"Hey, hey, you don't need to cry." I said somewhat frantically. Ugh, what was it with me and making people cry that week?

And then the inevitable hug happened since I'd started the waterworks, was sympathetic, and was in range. We were still hugging—well, I was side-hugging Obito and we were sitting on the bridge railing and Obito was finally done crying—when Kushina showed up.
She waved off any explanations Obito was about to give—he'd never liked being called a crybaby—and said, "It's always all right to cry when you're happy. And Kei-chan is here, so it's not like you're risking anything by being emotional."

…I wasn't sure what to say to that.

Obito sniffled a bit more, then shook himself and stood up.

"So, what we're going to be doing for this training session is…actually, no. Wait."

"Okay, it's two in the afternoon and I can't see Kakashi anywhere."

A quick check with my chakra sense confirmed that.

Okay, that? That was weird.

"Where the hell is he?" Obito demanded, Sharingan active again because as soon as he had a new power he had to practice with it as much as possible. Even though the Sharingan wasn't meant to be used at range and Obito wasn't a sensor to compensate.

Somewhat luckily, Kakashi showed up before I had entirely thought through my plan to send Tsuruya on a scouting mission after him.

"You're late!" Kushina said gleefully.

Kakashi's chakra flickered strangely for a moment in a way I thought was highly concerning—what the hell was that emotion?—but he just lifted his chin and fixed Kushina with a distinctly annoyed glare. "I get a penalty for being the late one for the first time ever?" he asked.

"Eh…" Kushina thought about it. "I can let it slide this time. But I want to know why you were late!"

"I was talking to Sensei." Kakashi replied, calming down again.

I reminded myself that there was literally no reason this Kakashi would ever have to become the man who gave shit excuses for the time he lost staring at a memorial. Or I hoped that was the case.

Gah, who was I kidding? Kakashi grew guilt complexes like petri dishes grow bacteria.

"That's okay then." Kushina huffed, crossing her arms. "Now, get started!"

"So you're only supervising?" Obito asked her, even as we were making our way to the much-used field nearby. Destroying the bridge would be a dick move, and we'd probably have to replace it anyway.

"Well, yeah."

When she put it that way…

"I'd rather just try out a jutsu exhibition first." Obito said, lifting his right hand to about eye level. His chakra surged up his arm and…it's hard to describe what happened. I realized later that the sensation was Wood Release-aligned chakra, which had been effectively extinct in Konoha before Obito's return. There was nothing to compare it to.

As we watched, a woody vine snaked out of his sleeve and wove into a twig globe around his hand.
Kushina's jaw dropped. "Is that... Obito, is that Wood Release?"

"He was doing the same thing on that last mission." I offered.

"Only more violently," said Kakashi.

"That was mostly Guruguru, not me." Obito frowned, shaking his arm and dislodging the jutsu. The wood created from it just kind of withered, dropping to the ground as though as dry as tinder. He looked up and said, "It's based on the arm.

"Well, if you can still use it, it's a start." I said. "But does it tire you out faster?"

"Not really. Not the little things, like this." Obito looked at Kakashi, asking, "What about my Sharingan?"

"...It could be worse." Which, while accurate, did not seem to be the answer Obito had hoped for.

"Are you all seriously just going to stand there and talk?" Kushina demanded.

If saying "yes" gets me extra crappy missions, I'm just going to keep my mouth shut.

"I was just training with you this morning," I pointed out. Though that had been about Host powers and the accessing thereof and not about actually fighting anyone yet. And I didn't really want to do any sparring if there was a chance I'd start leaking Tailed Beast chakra everywhere.

"So?"

Okay, no sympathy there. Got it.

"Kei and Kakashi, you're up first." Kushina put her hands on her hips, glaring at our defiance (of...I don't know, denying her a show?). "If you're not going to manage a three-way fight yourselves, then I may as well call the shots. Go!"

Fighting dreamers—hah, no. Clearly, I needed to stay in the moment.

Then Kakashi aimed a kick at my head, and I ducked under that strike to go for his supporting leg's knee. Kakashi shot backwards, darting out of range for easy pummeling and more importantly avoiding my kick.

I threw shuriken in his way, leading him when he was going in a straight line. Which was almost never, because Kakashi wasn't stupid so much as unwilling to break out the big jutsu that might have killed me, but since I waited for those moments at least I wasn't wasting ammunition.

Never let it be said that I didn't know how to disable enemies. Especially now, after it seemed like all of our fights had become life-or-death and there was never any room for hesitation.

The weird thing about our match—well, aside from the fact that Obito was a spectator and I wasn't dead despite taking Rin's role in this stupid timeline—was that we were pretty equal.

Oh, Kakashi was faster. He didn't do fixed stances. But even his recent growth spurt only put him even with me in terms of taijutsu stopping power.

Granted, neither of us was using our actual specialties and we seemed to have come to a wordless agreement that big jutsu were out of the question, but I would have honestly expected him to outpace me easily. He did have the Sharingan, after all.
Even if he wasn't really using it.

"Put your back into it!" Kushina shouted. I wasn't sure who she was talking to.

Then Kakashi pushed his headband up.

Ooookay then. Clearly we were moving onto the part of the program where I got my ass kicked. Joy of joys.

"Oh, that is bullshit." I growled under my breath.

It was like a spark. Red light in Kakashi's eye and—

Chakra surged. And it didn't belong to either of us. It was red and angry and seemed to coat the inside of my lungs with the air I breathed and shut the fuck up, dammit!

Deep in the center of my chakra coils and the bottom ring of my mind, Isobu roared.

Oh fuck no.

I hit the ground, digging my fingers into the grass. "No, no, no, no, no! Kakashi, keep back!"

I kept forgetting—I wasn't truly stable.

Not if I'd apparently managed to give Isobu PTSD at the sight of a Sharingan. Not a bad instinct for a Tailed Beast to have, but it hadn't cropped up with Obito's remaining eye or with Uchiha clan members whose eyes weren't active, and I had only one guess as to the difference.

Kakashi had actually used the eye on me before.

I remembered it only as something to be pissed off at Kakashi for, but apparently Isobu didn't see it that way.

I could hear yelling and above the hubbub rose Obito's voice, saying, "Kei, hold still!"

Kushina's chakra chains wrapped around me just as Obito grabbed me in a hug and held on with his strange Wood Release arm flaring chakra all over the place.

Isobu's chakra receded, and then Kushina's chakra chains dissolved.

I blinked, pulling back once I was sure I was totally in control. I wobbled a bit and had to pinch the skin on the inside of my elbow to get completely back to reality.

I caught a glimpse of Kakashi looking at me in wide-eyed horror for just a second. Then he was gone.

Suffice to say that that training session was a total wash.

Not for the first time, I hate how slow I can be.

I'm not fast. Kakashi is fast. Kakashi is quick. I'm just really good at somehow not being totally outpaced and stabbed to death. Only Kakashi is weighed down and his chakra's flagging and I've got a stolen katana in each hand and all I can think is that we're dead.

"Fucking hell, they're gaining on us." I barely hiss the last word out as fire rips up my right arm; of
course getting stabbed earlier hadn't helped our odds of survival any, but I hardly needed the reminder.

"I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry—!" Rin says, panting and barely hanging on even in Kakashi's grip. They're hobbling along compared to our usual pace, and I cannot for the life of me think that this is going to end okay.

"Focus on just getting out of here." Kakashi snaps, and I can practically feel his nerves stretching and fraying.

We're dead. We just haven't stopped moving yet.

We break the tree line and all the warning klaxons are going off in my head even before I see where we are.

White-trunked, ashen trees and the faintest plinking of raindrops overhead. A cold moon and stars disappearing behind gray clouds. The buzz of enemy chakra behind us and the roar of Tailed Beast chakra in our midst.

This is the killing field.

Rin twists out of Kakashi's grip as my brain stutters in sheer horror, hitting the ground hard and failing to roll with the impact.

They'd cut her Achilles tendons. She can't run and the Beast won't need her to. Chakra hammers down on us like heat from all directions and I can feel my chest heave in half-induced panic. Madara's seal is bright and cold like an alien star, standing out in Rin's chakra system.

"Please, Kei-senpai. We can't keep going like this and I know what's going to happen if we try." Rin is crying. Big, ugly tears track down her face. She can't move on her own.

The right thing to do would...would be...

I don't know.

Kakashi tries to pick her up again, but she bites his hand and snaps, "No! You can't take me back to Konoha! I won't destroy the village!"

We won't get that far, I think.

Kakashi looks at me like he expects me to say something different. Like he expects me to pull Obito's speeches and spirit out of my sleeve and make them both believe things are going to be okay when they never fucking were.

I'm not him. But I can do one thing, I think, to make sure I can do somethong with this worthless life of mine.

"Kakashi, take Rin." I say, inspecting my stolen steel instead of looking at him. "I'll hold them off."

"Kei, no!" But Rin's voice is very small compared to the future I can almost help save and I can ignore her. I can.

"Kei, this is insane." Kakashi says, both eyes wide. His chakra lurches, but there's nothing he can really do, is there? He can't make me change my mind without using his Sharingan, and he doesn't have enough chakra for that and he barely knows how to really use it.
He promised Obito to keep me safe, yes, but he also promised the same thing for Rin and I wasn't the one with two useless legs.

There was a chance, however slim, that I would merely be captured instead of killed. Rin, though. Rin. Kakashi.

No.

I wasn't going to let them die here.

"My mind's made up." I say, smiling faintly and sadly because there was never another option. We're out of time and out of options and I'm not the first person to die to protect her friends. Sometimes, I think it takes a bit of blood to get things rolling.

And Kakashi runs.

It hurts him. It tears his heart out to do it. But between saving the helpless teammate and sticking around to get killed and lose Obito's eye and probably die horribly, I can't blame him.

It was what I wanted.

I watch them disappear, feeling like I want to cry but entirely unable to.

No time.

The first of the Kiri-nin appears out of the opposite tree-line, spots me, and moves in for the kill.

I cut him down even as I sidestep his strike, slicing his head from his shoulders and allowing his decapitated corpse to fall where it would.

Two more.

These are cleverer, and take longer to kill. Perhaps they're learning by example, and the impaled and split corpses I am left with bleed more profusely from more wounds.

How many can I face?

Four come next, and I have to dart from foe to foe at Body Flicker speeds just to keep them from moving around me. They're fast and coordinated, but I can keep them at bay as long as I keep my head on straight.

This isn't a true chokepoint. I need their eyes on me.

I sprint right and there's a fifth, bringing a hand reinforced by steel and chakra down on my left forearm.

I feel the bone crack and drop the first stolen sword and kill him with the other.

Pain. Lightning races to my brain from my leg as an enemy blade cuts into my calf and brings me to the ground hard.

I lash out on reflex and kill him, too. Even in the hands of a wounded opponent, a katana is nothing to scoff at. Even if I'm slowed down now, even if I'm bleeding out by inches, I plan to go down fighting as hard as I can.

Distantly, I can hear screaming. Maybe it's mine or maybe I'm hearing things. There's a rumble
underfoot that makes me wobble worse than normal and I can't get to my feet.

I wonder if this is what it felt like to be on the receiving end of Order 66 as the blaster fire poured in.

The more that hit you, the more that will.

I am almost on my feet now, using the katana as a cane and realizing that wow, I'm dead. I'm so dead I can barely feel the agony of my chakra coils draining when there's so much I have to do before the Kiri-nin catch my friends.

The screaming gets louder and it's definitely not me. I can't get enough air for that.

And then, as the noise seems to translate to physical force, I can finally see beyond the fight and understand what's going on. There are enemy ninjas dying all over the place now and it's not my fault.

Obito.

As soon as I think that, two blades slide home. There are swords jammed between my ribs and I can almost feel my heart stutter. Opposite sides. Two through-and-throughs. I can't breathe. Everything hurts and I can't breathe and I can't let go of the sword.

I blink.

I fall.

And I don't hit the ground this time.

I look up, strangely aware of the blood trailing out of the corner of my mouth. I'm bleeding from everywhere, I'm sure. Everything is red on black and somehow I'm not dead yet.

Plink, plink. Rin's crying again. It doesn't hurt to cry and I can't feel anything anyway, so I look up at her with my lungs working at breathing and failing to do more than wheeze faintly.

I feel Rin's arms around my head and neck and I can hear her say, "Kei-senpai…oh, no…"

She's hurt, though. I remember that.

She shouldn't be here.

Her hands cast a green glow and the blood on her face might be mine. It's black in the light.

I'm bleeding into her dress, I think vaguely.

"Kei-senpai, please…” Healing chakra isn't worth it anymore. It doesn't feel like it's worth it.

Plink, plink.

I let go of the sword.

My vision's turning black at the edges but I can still move.

I raise my hand to one of Rin's. She grasps it with both her hers, and the healing chakra stops flowing. Silly. Should save it for yourself.

I stare at our joined hands.
Can’t let go yet. Still have something left to do.

_Evil Sealing Method._ My chakra lances up through her arm and over two different Gates before grabbing at the _thing_ clamped over her heart.

I won’t let _that man_ win. Not even now.

Rin screams.

Everything goes black and white and dim and then nothing as Rin falls and I thump limply to the wet ground.

It's probably my blood anyway.

Hands pull at me, pull up and pull at the swords but they don't matter.

Nothing matters.

The world turns red and gold and then I die.

And that was about when I sat up, blinking in the dark and wondering where the fuck that had all come from.

I turned over and checked my alarm clock.

3:46 am.

_GOD DAMMIT ISOBU._ I mashed a pillow onto my face to muffle a scream of frustration.

So, it turns out that the source of my recent nightmares is a chakra leak from Isobu. Also known as that one turtle with a pocket dimension in his stomach and a tendency to generate _horrible hallucinations_ as an automatic defense. The only worse option I could think of at that moment, while sleep-deprived and pissed off, would involve Shukaku and another substandard seal.

Trust a Tailed Beast to get the last word in. I wasn't even sure if he was doing in on purpose.

And the week had started _so well._

…No, it hadn't.

I sighed and ran my left hand over my face. I swear I could almost feel the phantom pain of my arm breaking.

At least the treaty with Iwa was valid now. Go Team Future. Here's to not dying in three months.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is from a Frou Frou song.
Ripple Arc: Passing Notes in Class

Chapter Summary

Kei: Lose a month.

My birthday was quiet compared to everything that had happened before.

Turning fourteen was apparently a milestone in my mother's mind, so she presented me with a gift that she'd quietly let me forget during the events of the earlier part of the week. I hadn't been in a helpful or appreciative mood and had thrown myself into meditation, so opportunities for revelry had been scarce. I'm sure I would have been a total Debbie Downer during that phase, so in hindsight I was glad that she waited to shock me out of it.

Mom, in her wisdom, had me sit down at the kitchen table before she pulled an item storage scroll out of her sleeve and unveiled her gift in a burst of smoke.

It was a katana.

Hayate was sitting next to me, but I kept him from grabbing for it with a sharp look.

"As far as I'm concerned, you shouldn't get this for another year." Mom said after a moment, as I tested the weight of the blade and its scabbard. It was heavier than I was used to and would take some extra training to adjust to. "But with recent events, you're more an adult than I would have wanted for you this early. It isn't a bad thing. I just wish you had more time to be my little girl."

"I'm still smaller than you." I told her, putting the katana down on the table. Then I hugged her as hard as I could without being an attack. "And I'll always be your little girl, won't I?"

"In spirit," Mom agreed quietly, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"When do I get one of these?" Hayate asked. He was slowly reaching out for the sword, sort of like a dog trying to sneak past its owners to grab an errant treat.

"When you're older." Mom and I said in unison.

Hayate huffed.

Other gifts were less emotionally significant, but still important. Kushina got me a new set of chakra-neutral sealing inks (and I sent Kushina that old book on Tailed Beasts and the Sage that Dad had once read to me when I was little) and Sensei got me the accompanying new calligraphy brushes. Obito got me a blue and orange birthday card with an IOU for steel-reinforced forearm guards tucked inside. Rin gave me what she called a deluxe medical kit (because "You keep getting into bigger trouble than these things are designed for!"). Yamaguchi-sensei gave me a set of wooden focus beads because apparently I needed help meditating.

And then, in an unmarked box, I got a set of adjustable training weights that could be activated or deactivated by a snap of chakra.

Considering that I didn't see Kakashi for about a month after that disastrous training session, I didn't
really have to guess, in hindsight, who it was from.

That month (July to early August) tried to sneak by us, but we caught it by the coattails and made it work. What follows after this point is a summary, sort of.

I trained in speed.

With Gai.

Gai was, to be fair, a jōnin candidate. He pushed himself harder than anyone else in the entire village. He also expected the same kind of effort from those who trained with him, and could cheer the other person on if he didn't feel like things were working out on their own.

"KEISUKE-CHAN, YOU CAN FOLLOW ME TO THE TOP OF THIS PILLAR ONE-HANDED OR I WILL ACCOMPANY YOU ON TWO HUNDRED LAPS AROUND THE VILLAGE ON OUR HANDS!"

Well, he gave encouragement in his own Flames of Youth way.

I got a lot of use out of those weights, with the caveat that someone who didn't regenerate muscle mass probably should have thought twice about my methods. Gai didn't have a lot to say about the weight seals, though he used similar ones, but he waxed enthusiastic about his training methods and the amount of time he spent on it.

"Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise," right? I'm nearly certain Ben Franklin said that. And that he lived in an era before fluorescent lights.

"Buh." I'd said after my first training session with him, lying slumped on the ground in a slug-like state. I was face-down and couldn't make much more sound without having to move, so I didn't.

"Keisuke-chan, are you up for phase three of our training?" Gai had asked, walking over to me on his hands.

Yes, we really did the village laps. They sucked.

"No." I'd moaned, rolling onto my back with difficulty. Ow, ow, ow. "Gimme a sec."

Gai did a quick twist and ended up on his feet again, then sat back on his heels next to me. "What should you be doing right now?"

"Getting up." I'd grumbled, then lurched upward and nearly elbowed Gai in the face. "Fine, fine. Everything freaking hurts anyway; how much worse can it get?"

"Let's find out!" Gai had said cheerfully.

Joy.

If my limbs turned to jelly for as long as it took for Isobu's chakra's regenerative properties to kick in, I wasn't really complaining. The initial pain was of course horrible, but I didn't have to experience it for nearly as long as I would have if I wasn't a Host.

Speaking of Isobu, I changed up my nightly schedule.

Every single night before I went to bed and every morning before starting out for a new day of training, I sat on my bed with my worry beads in hand and meditated to talk to Isobu in my
mindscape. This, of course, didn't actually stop Isobu's nightly punches in the brain from happening, but I tried. After all, I could hardly say that I had tried until he got so pissed off by my friendship assault that he tried to eat me.

My mindscape still looked like Hudson Bay in the winter, but Isobu seemed to have come to terms with his confinement and was doing laps in the water whenever I arrived.

It wasn't until attempt forty-nine that we got anywhere. Well, from my perspective, anyway.

You keep coming back here. Isobu said flatly, still swimming around while I floated along behind him and dodged the occasional swatting tail. Why?

"Probably because I need to." I replied, spinning slowly in midair. "And because I've always done it and because you haven't tried to eat me yet."

Should I have? Isobu asked.

"Nah." I did another loop-de-loop.

...Why do you spend so much time in this...space? There's no reason for you to talk to me when you know I hardly want to speak to you. Isobu told me, swatting at me with one scaled tail.

"You aren't the first roommate I've had in here." I told him, and I felt his huge eye focus on me. I raised two fingers. "I used to have two extra personalities. You might remember them."

Vaguely. Isobu's gigantic spiked head tilted as he followed my movements. I haven't seen them since the day I was sealed.

"Yeah, well, Id and the Dreamer got crammed back in here." I thumped my chest with the palm of my hand. "I think they knew they weren't going to win a fight for floor space with you."

Isobu gave a neutral rumble. They would not.

"Yeah, well." I paused. Actually...why the hell not? It wasn't like Isobu was going to tell anyone and, frankly, he deserved to know.

I floated out over his head, pulling on the structure of my mindscape and seeing what unraveled.

There was a noise like paper scattering crossed with the sound of a gigantic zipper sliding shut, and the air cracked. I saw double for an instant, seeing plain empty air out of one eye and out of my other one was a string of colored paper cranes extending outward from my sternum like a pull-string on a doll. When reality resolved the paradox, I was left with the line of cranes ran out in front of me and toward Isobu before detaching and fluttering off into the air.

When I looked closely, catching a crane in my hand and pulling it open.

It was a photograph. Of the kind that moved, like in Harry Potter.

It showed Team Seven stalking Kakashi in an attempt to figure out what he looked like under his mask. Particularly, the part where they were hovering around Ichiraku's.

While cute, it wasn't the memory I was going for.

When I let go of it, it folded itself back into a paper crane and flew off to join the flock of memories buzzing overhead.
What is that? Isobu demanded, looking up at the circling swarm.

"Those are my memories." I said, descending to his level. I took a deep breath. "What I'm about to tell you can be used for good or evil, but I'm telling you anyway if you want to hear. It's a heavy burden."

Heavier than being a jinchūriki? Isobu asked.

"I would have to bear it anyway." I told him. "Frankly, I walked into the thing with you with the understanding that if I didn't do something about you, I was dead. So, I accepted the risk."

Isobu seemed to frown. I don't understand.

I smiled. "I'm a lot older than I look."

I floated upward, wheeling around in the empty air above Isobu's head.

Isobu was not impressed. So what does that make you? The oldest brat in existence?

I laughed out loud, though it wasn't supposed to be a joke. "No. No, that'd be too easy. Let me try again." I spread my arms. "Starting from when I was born, I remembered my last lifetime."

Isobu stared. What.

I settled into a meditative stance, bobbing up and down in front of Isobu's nose. "My name is Keisuke Gekkō. But it didn't use to be." No one I'd talked to about my visions had actually asked if I'd been the same person last time. "Fourteen years ago, I died and reincarnated into the body you're sealed into right now. Before that, I was a civilian woman who watched the world burn."

Through the safety of a TV screen, granted, but it was certainly their world and it had certainly burned.

"After my death, I watched as a little boy grew up with the Nine-Tails sealed inside of him." I said.

Obligningy, an origami memory flew over to my hand and I unfolded it. The image on it was of an infant Naruto on the Reaper Death Seal ceremonial altar, screaming his lungs out with the Eight Trigrams seal on his stomach. It was not a happy occasion.

I flipped the photo over and it multiplied in size by a factor of ten so that Isobu could see it clearly.

"I watched as he fought his way to the top of the dog pile." I explained, sending another unfolded memory his way. "As he befriended the Tailed Beasts and learned your names. As he fought the Ten-Tails and united all of the disparate shinobi countries for one final war."

Who is this boy supposed to be?

"His name was Naruto Uzumaki. Or maybe I should say 'will be,' since he hasn't been born yet." I told Isobu, smiling faintly. "But it's my goal to make all of that as superfluous as I can."

…Damn, that sounded arrogant.

I thought that over. "Well, to be more accurate…I hope that if I intervene now, he'll never have to be the one to save the world. Because it won't need to be saved."

Isobu was giving me the blankest blank look I'd ever seen. Including those normal for actual turtles.

I blinked.

**You—it's so human.** Isobu sounded *tired*, even though his tails were whipping through the water and smashing ice floes to bits. **Why do humans always try to tear into the threads of fate?**

**Prophecies exist for a reason.**

"At the risk of invoking Greek tragedy…" I tapped my chin in thought. "Frankly, there's no reason that the prophecies I've heard *can't* come true. I just see no reason not to change up the details."

Like Naruto growing up with his family and not as an abandoned child. Or Kakashi having actual not-dead friends. And Obito not being psycho.

**How much can a human's strength really change?** Isobu wanted to know.

"I don't know, a lot?" I hummed, thinking. "Thus far, I seem to have saved a few lives, killed a few people, influenced others, and kept one person from going evil."

A memory crane flew by and a flash of its wings revealed Obito's face, transposed with Tobi's mask. Then it flickered and there was Yagura, framed by Isobu's afterimage from some flashback I couldn't remember.

Isobu's eye widened slightly. **That boy…**

I nodded. "Could have gone evil." Spectacularly so.

Then Isobu's eye went narrow. **You can see the future.**

Uh, yeah. I said as much before.

Well, kinda. Hedging, I explained, "In my old lifetime, I wasn't just a civilian. I was a civilian who saw this entire universe in the form of a TV show."

**I don't know what a TV is.**

"Ehhhh…think of it as a way to experience a story." I flicked my fingers and another memory crane flew by, showing me in my old life dressing up as a shinobi for fun. For someone like Isobu, the cracks in that image were obvious. For me, back then, it'd been a game.

It sure wasn't now.

"The story probably ends at some point after my death in that world." I said. "But I know enough about writing and about stories to know how much stays the same despite my abrupt insertion into a timeline I'd thought was fixed."

More memory cranes descended.

"My body didn't have enough capacity to contain my spiritual energy alone when I was younger, which caused feedback that I couldn't easily handle." Another crane flew by—and the odd thing about them was how I could always tell what they contained. It was like they were more holes in reality, peeking into some unmoving background, than they were solid images on their own. "Which is why my mind splintered when I was first approached with a mind jutsu—the Dreamer was a fragment of my identity for the purposes of siphoning off and storing chakra as it formed. Yin chakra was the easiest to form with a minimum of my physical energy, which I didn't have much of. It could
easily be partitioned off and stored inside of my coils.

"It was a balance enforced until you appeared." I told him. "Since the Dreamer was the curator of these memories and I no longer needed her to keep my soul in balance, I'm still around and whole." I paused. "Though I'm a hell of a lot chattier than I remember. Reintegration is a messy process."

If it hadn't been for Isobu and for the Dreamer coming home to roost properly, I might never have told anyone about even a fraction of what I knew. At least, not without being forced to do so. And possibly after epically screwing up and/or doing something that literally couldn't be explained by what I should logically know how to do.

As for Id…

Well, I seemed to be a lot more touchy-feely lately.

Finally, I shrugged. "I've had a lot of interesting experiences. For a uniqueness factor, at least I know that other people do become Hosts and have for a while. Otherwise, though…I'm weird enough on my own that more weirdness is just icing."

You…are a very strange human. Isobu said. I wouldn't have expected any human to remember life after death. You do die permanently, don't you? The soul of a human should be expunged, not left to reform.

"How the hell do Tailed Beasts just rematerialize?" I asked. I frowned, realizing, "I was never clear on that."

We were created from the chakra of the Ten-Tails, though I don't remember the actual moment I was born. We're made of chakra made solid. Isobu's tails lashed. Our souls are our bodies, unlike with you humans.

Wait a minute. "…And souls themselves can be split or modified or stuck in a Reaper's belly, but they can't be destroyed." I made a face. "Ugh, now the Impure World Reincarnation thing is even worse than I thought."

I assume that refers to a technique that allows humans to do the same thing.

I wobbled a hand in midair. "Kinda. But it only works with dead people and the summoner has to trade one human life for every soul pulled back from the afterlife."

Hardly a surprise. Isobu sighed, blowing ice across the surface of the bay as though someone had loaded a cannon with it. Humans.

"Tobirama Senju was kind of a dumbass." I agreed.

But you don't seem anything like a Tailed Beast. Isobu shot upward then, churning water so that his eye was even with my floating form. You're too small. Too short-sighted.

It wasn't like I could really deny that last bit to a creature with an eyeball bigger than I was. "And I'm pretty sure the regeneration and coherency after death was a one-time thing."

…Interesting. Isobu sank back down, bobbing gently in the bay.

"The feeling's mutual!" I told him seriously.
...Human, you asked for my name the first time we spoke.

"Yeah." I said, floating in front of his nose. "And you said no."

I did not. His huge shell looked even bigger as I wove among the spikes while he talked and swam on in a figure-eight pattern.

"...Look, if you didn't say yes I was just gonna assume it was a no." I said. I'd had enough of "consent" to last a freaking lifetime and having people assume shit. I didn't have permission explicitly outlined and I wasn't going to risk being told I'd been in violation of some subsection of a Tailed Beast Host code of conduct thing.

...Hm. I wondered if Isobu was feeling any of the frustrated affront or whatever that I felt just then, but he didn't comment on it.

Then, Who was that boy?

"Obito or Kakashi?" I asked. Two memories flitted into view, one showing each of my teammates. They were just a bit behind Isobu's ear, which made them harder for him to see.

Which one used the Sharingan on us?

"Kakashi."

Isobu gave a terrible rumble that I realized later was him trembling. Given that for most people, Tailed Beasts were basically made of fear and primal terrors, it just looked strange to see Isobu afraid of anything at all. At any point he wanted, he could have swatted me like a bug hovering around a lamp. There were no cage bars keeping him from doing so, and I floated too close to the water to escape quickly.

But he was afraid and damned if I was just going to leave it at that. Or worse: gloat.

Teach me to resist it. Isobu demanded, but there was the slightest quaver in his voice.

Easier said than done, since I didn't know.

But...

I crossed my legs in midair and rested my hands on my knees. Memory cranes swarmed around me, calling up images of Killer B and other jinchūriki over the years.

"Well, I've heard that the Eight-Tailed Beast and his host are immune to genjutsu, which seems like a good place to start..."

Oh, and I still had missions. Small missions for once—courier missions that stayed within the borders of Konoha basically counted as light duty—and I ran half of them solo because there wasn't any combat requirement. A chūnin doing what were effectively D-ranked missions would have come across as a waste of resources, but I guess Sensei was pretty firm on his decision to keep my teammates and I out of trouble for a while. I couldn't stop taking missions, since I was still on call, but Sensei apparently wasn't above restricting my mission rankings to the bottom feasible rung on that ladder.

It got frustrating as soon as I felt I'd gained a bit of a rapport with Isobu. Ergo, week three. I held on for another week of kenjutsu re-learning with Mom, meditation with Kushina, and pain endurance
with Gai before I lost patience.

On an early August day, when the sun was busy baking summer rain out of the village, I went to Sensei with the explicit goal of getting a mission to get me out of the village for a bit.

Because of a number of compounding factors—Hayate was testing out advanced kodachi techniques, I'd been missing Kakashi by a hair for nearly all of July, and my realization that if I was going to have any time at all to actually do things with Isobu's chakra, I couldn't be in the village—I walked into the office with my spine rigid and my head full of questions about what I could possibly be facing next.

I was also a bit stir-crazy, which contributed to the events to follow.

"Ah, Kei, you have good timing." Sensei said, looking up from the pile of paperwork on his desk. Behind him, two of his shadow clones were sorting through the mission scrolls that had flooded in since the end of the war. Weeks later, and he was still getting through the backlog. Of course more had rolled in, but the bulk was just because of the effects of a peace treaty on local economies.

"I do?" I asked, surprised. Generally speaking, walking in on Sensei during paperwork time was not "good timing."

"Yes. I actually have a mission you would be well-suited for," he said, and a paperwork chūnin appeared at his elbow to take the proffered scroll to me. It was obviously a C-rank, but the red band around both caps indicated a travel mission.

I held it in my right hand without opening it, still looking at Sensei curiously.

"What's with the suspicious look?" Sensei asked. "Open it."

I did, and noticed the Sorayama seal sitting right inside the slit. Then the ball dropped. "Oh! The Chinatsugumi want me to come back?"

"Yes. They specifically requested you." Sensei gave me a look over the top of his latest document/petition/whatever the hell it was. "For safety's sake, I want you to take at least one teammate along."

Well, my first choice would have been Obito, but I wasn't sure if he was still caught up in Uchiha administrative crap or in another mission. It could have been anything—it only took Obito about a day to get involved with (or caught up in) everything and then I wouldn't see him for days even if he never left the village.

Second choice: Kakashi. But I had no idea where he was. Every time I caught a whisper of his chakra, he was gone again before I could catch up. Even with Gai's…training…

…Wait a fucking minute.

I smacked myself in the forehead. "I'm a moron."

Sensei looked nonplussed at best. "What was that about?"

"I haven't seen Kakashi in a month and I was going to ask about that, but I should have asked Gai where he was two freaking weeks ago." I said, groaning.

"Kakashi isn't available for this mission," Sensei said apologetically. "Neither is Obito—I think he said he was trying to take an entrance exam for the Military Police."
"And Rin's back on hospital rotation." I paused, thinking. "Well, crap."

"Tell you what," Sensei began, looking over a sheet of paper that had appeared from somewhere in the avalanche of other ones. "I'll send someone to take you there on a way to another mission."

Another idea hit me between the eyes. ". . . Actually, Sensei? Tsuruya and I could just, er, fly there." Tsuruya had been the summon of one of the Chintatsugumi, maybe? I assumed she'd know where the hell she was going, since I wasn't going to be able to use ground-bound landmarks like distinctive trees to navigate.

And luckily, Tsuruya had proved that she could carry the weight of both Rin (who was my size, roughly) and two of Kakashi's dogs, which might account for one other person if we were lucky.

Sensei gave me a look. I . . . kind of missed whatever implication he was going for. "Given your unique circumstances, the list of people I'd allow on your missions is fairly short."

Well, until I managed to work with Isobu and become the first-ever Tailed Beast therapist.

"So, I'm sending Jiraiya-sensei with you." Sensei told me, scribbling something down on an empty sheet of paper. He handed it off to the slack-jawed chūnin assistant, who took off to deliver the presumed message after tripping on the threshold. "He'll be taking care of his own missions after you arrive."

I did a bit of mental arithmetic. Pakkun's weight plus Bull's weight didn't fully account for Jiraiya. He was one of the biggest guys both vertically and in terms of mass in the entire series, actually.

Hoo boy.

Tsuruya wasn't going to be happy with me.

"Understood, Hokage-sama." I said, bowing.

". . . Kei, you don't need to be that formal." Sensei jerked his head to indicate our utter lack of an audience, other than Sensei's clones. "And you already know Jiraiya-sensei, anyway. This should be a relatively straightforward request."

"I'm not nervous, Sensei." I said with a shrug. Actually, I was a bit apprehensive about my first true solo mission, for all that I'd probably spend entire trip with half-a-dozen bloodline-blessed powerhouses. But it didn't have much to do with the people involved. "And I need to remember to be formal for when there are witnesses."

Even if Tsunade had let Naruto get away with calling her Granny for ages on end.

Sensei shrugged, too. "If that's how you feel, that's your choice. Regardless, your mission starts as soon as Jiraiya-sensei arrives at the village gates tomorrow morning. Pack everything you need, because I expect this mission to take a maximum of three weeks."

. . . Okay, I had to re-read the Chinatsugumi mission parameters because wow, that didn't sound quite normal. The last mission had been a week, and that'd been a wartime escort mission...

"Sensei..." I began, as another thought came to mind. "I need to talk to you about something really quickly."

"Oh?" Sensei leaned forward a bit in his chair.
"...We need to increase the budget going toward village-run orphanages, now that we're not pouring all of our resources toward war." I said bluntly.

Sensei's eyes seemed to glint in the shadows cast by his hat. "I assume you had a particular orphanage in mind, then?"

"There should be one run by a former ROOT operative and ANBU captain named Nonō Yakushi." I sighed. "It's not that she's... argh. Look. I have a bunch of really selfish reasons to want that place taken care of regardless of what other people say has to happen."

If—and it was a big *if*—I could somehow keep Kabuto's mother from being sent into the field again, there was a chance he'd retain some semblance of sanity and *not* leap into Orochimaru's arms. And maybe that way, the Sand/Sound invasion would be off to a much shakier start. Maybe Kabuto would never become as twisted as he had through ROOT if there was someone calling him home.

...And maybe my brother wouldn't die.

It was stupid to think like that—there were any number of things that could kill Hayate before then—but Kabuto had been one of two instigators for Phase Two of the Fourth Shinobi World War. I didn't have direct influence on anything, but Sensei did and I at least knew who could grow up to be a time bomb. Hell, Hayate could break his neck falling off the Academy roof next week and I'd never really have any options to avert it.

But Kabuto was young—he couldn't be older than seven right at that moment—and there was a chance. As long as he hadn't killed Nonō yet.

As long as Danzō hadn't gotten to him first.

Anything past that was really up to him and the Lady, and everyone knew how *she* hated to be invoked on purpose.

"If something awful happens to families in Konoha," I told Sensei after a long moment, "I want to know that there are resources in place for everyone. Even the kids too little to decide anything on their own."

"And the selfish reason?" Sensei asked. I felt the security seals in the office snap into place, making the room the sealing equivalent to Fort Knox.

"Twofold—one, there's a chance a boy there will grow up to kill my brother," I explained flatly, watching Sensei's eyebrows climb toward his hairline, "and I'd just as soon *not* see that happen. Besides that... there's at least one timeline out there where your future son grows up in an orphanage, too. They'd better be better than they were, then."

Sensei didn't say anything for a while. Then, "I'll look into it. Don't forget to take your scroll, Kei."

I left Sensei's office with a lot to think about, but I didn't open the mission scroll all the way until I got home again and reactivated the security seals. I also headed to Mom's bedroom for security's sake—Hayate didn't have the clearance to requisition a toothbrush, much less see a mission scroll—and unrolled it.

A note fell out.

*To: The kid who keeps getting stuck with us*

*From: Rikuto of the Chinatsugumi*
…Sounded like Rikuto, all right. I continued reading.

_You are cordially invited—and here, it looked like he'd taken a couple of tries to decide on the right word—to Sorayama to celebrate a whole bunch of things. Like your sensei's inauguration, or maybe your birthday? When the hell even is your birthday, exactly? If not your birthday, I'm sure we've got a couple of those kicking around anyway and this is just an excuse._

Anyway, Chi-chan says we're supposed to be inviting you to check out of the shinobi lifestyle for like a week or whatever. I guess you have member access to our training grounds and gear now, since Chi-chan is apparently really, really sure you're the real deal when it comes to being a decent person. She wants to talk to you when you get here, too. She probably won't bite your head off—her mouth's not big enough.

_Huh. I'm kinda running out of things to say here. What to write…oh! For some reason, everyone's really anxious for you to meet the kiddies properly. They're all talking intelligibly now—well, except Tayu-chan, but you already knew that—and Shiro (for all that the guy's got about as much personality as a post) keeps saying that his kid'll be your favorite! What the hell, right? Everyone knows Kazu-chan and Miyu-chan have the best shot!_

The paper looked a bit wrinkled past that point, and spattered with ink as though someone had been fighting over it.

_We'll be proceeding with advanced combat training once you arrive. Something has changed, and we cannot risk being taken unprepared._

_Chinatsu Kasai_

…Okay, ominous.

And I was still going to visit them, because I was crazy.

I packed up the scroll and also grabbed the training ones I'd gotten years ago, when I was first promoted to chūnin. Even if I had no idea what I was really walking into, I could at least grab the scrolls they'd given me and thank them for sending them at all.

The sealing scroll's seals especially, in particular the Evil Sealing Method compacted design and the chakra-suppressing seals. If not for those designs, there was no way we would have gotten past the fateful mission alive. Guruguru might have been disabled using another method, but the seal had given Sensei precious time and there wasn't a shinobi out there who understood the value of timing better than he did. Tsuruya's summoning scroll came in a close second for protecting Rin and being the sanest member of the team.

"Mom, I've got a mission tomorrow!" I called as I left her room and headed down the hall. I needed to get my shoes and make my goodbyes before I flew off to the middle of the country.

"How long are you going to be gone?" Mom asked, leaning back against the sink and drying her hands with a dish towel.

…”Crap, I needed to remember to do the dishes myself when I got back. I should have remembered last night, and the quirk in Mom's eyebrows said she wasn't terribly pleased with my forgetfulness. She'd let it slide as long as I really did have a mission—saying something along the lines of national security risks was actually a common excuse among shinobi who still lived with their parents at higher ranks.

"Three weeks, more or less." I said, wobbling a hand in midair. "More on the 'less' side, I think."
"And the rank?" Mom asked.

"Eh…C, for the most part. I suppose there's a chance for a B-rank out of this, but I can handle things now." At Mom's sharp look, I hastened to add, "Mom, Jiraiya-sama is coming along with me to make sure I stay out of trouble. I'll be fine."

Mom looked skeptical.

…Actually, I felt a little dubious about it, too. But I guess that, ultimately, there really wasn't much trouble I could get into at this point that one of the Sannin wasn't going to be able to get me out of. Unless somehow we ended up fighting Orochimaru (unlikely in terms of geography, at least for a while) or Tsunade (unlikely unless Jiraiya deliberately pissed her off) or both (unlikely because none of them got along anyway).

Basically, I was going to be okay.

Maybe if I kept saying that enough, it'd become a sort of universal truth.

I smiled. "I have to get ready to go, but I'll definitely be home through breakfast tomorrow."

"I hope so." Mom said. "I was planning on having you help Hayate practice the Hunting Tiger technique before breakfast."

I ran the hell away before she could come up with anything else.

My problem with Hayate's kenjutsu training wasn't that he lacked in talent or motivation. Far from it. As far from it as Pluto, really. The real problem was—crap, how do I word this diplomatically?—actually the enthusiasm itself. Being excited about kenjutsu was great, but...

Frankly, Hayate seemed dead determined to use me as a way to measure his progress.

Which meant sparring.

And fighting.

And getting ambushed by a tiny murder machine (what felt like) every single time I was trying to do something that didn't involve swords.

Yes, that included my training sessions with Gai. Dodging a ten-year-old wielding a kodachi while walking on your hands after hours of various Gai-inspired exercises is a lot harder than it sounds.

It wasn't dangerous, at least not to me, but it was irritating. I happen to like the idea of having actual time to myself, and not the kind that required Hanzō-level paranoia to get.

Mom hadn't told him to stop, either, and I kind of wondered if she'd expected the same kind of overcompensating and highly reckless behavior from me back when I was that age. I hoped not.

I made sure to scribble a note to Hayate before I left the house, on the off chance it took me the whole afternoon to get things done, and then I ran.

*Gonna be gone tomorrow, Hayate! I'll be back in September, I think, and I expect to see you master the Hunting Tiger Strike by the time I get back with Mom focusing on you!*

*AND STOP TRYING TO STAB ME.*

*Biggest, Baddest Sis*
While I'd originally wanted to tell Obito about my mission, it turned out that when the Military Police say they're holding an exam, they really do mean it.

According to Chiharu Uchiha, whom I asked about it when I was barred from entering the police academy, prospective new recruits were put through a preliminary, formative, and summative examination in as many areas as the MPs could think of. That included village law, clan law, procedures for handling at least a dozen different scenarios, and a special two-day training camp that was about nonlethal takedowns and straight-up combat evaluations.

And Obito had started at about seven that morning, after being late for the six-thirty appointment, so I could expect to see very little of him for the next few days.

"If he's doing well, he should be moving on to weapon evaluation by one." Chiharu offered.

I replied, "I'd prefer not to distract him during his lunch break."

"Who said anything about lunch?"

Yeah, I kinda just left after that. I mean, I left a note (reading *Sorry I'm gonna be gone for a month on a mission, but you're busy too and I didn't want to tell anyone to interrupt you. Tell me EVERYTHING when I get back!* - Kei) with Chiharu in case he saw Obito before I did (likely), but I really couldn't spend that much time waiting around.

Next stop was the hospital, where Rin was on-shift and nearly ran me over with an empty gurney. She didn't have a lot of time to talk, either, and was polite but obviously rushed when I told her I'd be gone. With the head nurse glaring at me over the top of Rin's head, I left that place behind, too.

Last stop…

For the first time since I'd met him nearly five years previously, I headed to Kakashi's apartment.

He wasn't there, of course.

I honestly didn't know what I expected by that point.

I left him a note, too, and slipped it under the door past the security seals he apparently set before leaving home. I'd be gone for a while and, well, if he ever stopped avoiding me then maybe we'd be able to talk.

*Hey, Kakashi!*

*If you were planning on talking with me, I'm gonna be outside of the village for a while. I'm sorry about whatever happened that made you stop talking to me, and don't even dare think it was your fault! This might be the only way I can talk to you, but I just need you to know that. What's going on with me is pretty much never your fault. Shit happens, and we both walked into it this time. Just stop avoiding me so we can get things straight between us!*

*I hope I'll see you when I get back!*

*Kei*

Then I went home.
The next day found me and Jiraiya standing just outside of the main gates of Konoha at around nine in the morning, since there was no real reason not to get on the move as fast as we could. For one, I hoped that I hadn't somehow managed to gain airsickness as a biological failing since my reincarnation—even if we wouldn't be going nearly as high up as a commercial jet and I'd packed ginger candies just in case. Shinobi life wasn't conducive to keeping a motion-sick person alive for long periods, so I was probably safe barring a vertigo genjutsu or something.

Still, never hurt to be safe.

For that reason, I'd bought a set of goggles—not unlike Obito's—for the trip. My pack was full of adaptive equipment like that, really.

Gathering chakra in my right hand, I waited for the buildup to reach the optimal level before bringing my focus to a razor's edge. It was harder than it had been, since Isobu joined the team, but I could still call myself good at chakra control if I could just…

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Bam, a couple hundred pounds of giant waterfowl!

Tsuruya bowed deeply, folding her huge wings against her side with a clatter like a shaking cutlery drawer. "Keisuke-sama."

"So this is your personal summon?" Jiraiya asked, a note of approval in his voice.

"Yeah. Tsuruya, this is Jiraiya-sama—he's one of the Sannin." I said as Tsuruya lowered her head to about my height to get a better look at Sensei's sensei.

"I am honored to meet you, Jiraiya-sama." Tsuruya said.

"Nice to meet you, too. You're a very dignified partner." Jiraiya said. "I'm sure you keep Kei-chan here safe as you can."

"I do try." Tsuruya said. She focused back on me and said, "So, Keisuke-sama, what is my task?"

"Well, actually, we were planning on flying with you to Mount Soragami. Are you up for that kind of trip?" I hadn't actually cleared it with her ahead of time, because I was occasionally really, really dumb.

I think Tsuruya would have smiled if she'd had lips to smile with. "Of course. Let's be on our way!"

For the record?

Flying—and real flying, not just the type you get to experience from a plane—is pretty freaking awesome.
Kei: Experience shenanigans.

Luckily, Tsuruya knew where we were going. Shinobi were certainly trained to identify locations based on maps, on local landmarks, and on the general traces of other human activity in a given place, but not many people really got to see a topography map in full HD high definition. Frankly, flight was such a rare power that the people who could achieve it independent of summons could be counted on one hand. Identifying stuff from the air just wasn't a skill we needed to learn most of the time, since those of us who couldn't fly certainly couldn't jump high enough to make it count.

As such, Jiraiya was nearly as enthusiastic about flying with Tsuruya as I was.

"You know," he said to Tsuruya, as I hung onto his flak jacket with both hands, "I can see why you insisted we wear goggles."

We were too high up for most bugs, but not being able to hear each other's words clearly was a small price to pay for not having to deal with unseasonable high-altitude chill. Wind, for all that it was helpful in hot Konoha summers, was kind of a bitch to deal with constantly in thin air. Wind burn was definitely still a thing, too, which meant loading up on coats and scarves given the lack of a windscreen.

I felt more like I was attempting to walk into a snowstorm than doing anything in August.

"Humans often underestimate the power of wind so far from the ground, even after experiencing it through ninjutsu." Tsuruya replied, leaning slowly to the right as we started, however vaguely, to see Soragami in the distance. It kind of looked like a very foggy cone the approximate size of my little finger.

Her back wasn't big enough for me to maneuver much, so I sort of resigned myself to sticking to Jiraiya like a limpet for a couple of hours.

Apparently, the kind of trip that took us two and a half days on foot would take five hours with Tsuruya's wind-shaping chakra usage and bloody huge wings.

Briefly, I wondered how Tsuruya compared to Deidara's clay bird or Sasuke's possible future hawk summoned animal, or even someone like Konan. While obviously any races would be difficult to set up, it'd be interesting to find out.

"Or hurricanes!" I said, cheerful despite the biting chill and the way the wind snatched my words away.

"Indeed, Keisuke-sama. Have you ever been in one?" Tsuruya asked, which kind of implied that she had.

"Nope. I just know what happens when they hit a coastline." I unhooked my right hand from Jiraiya's vest and gestured, though it wasn't like Tsuruya could see me twirling my finger. "All the kinetic energy of hundreds of miles of wind and water, concentrated in the world's biggest spiral! It's
exciting and completely terrifying."

Jiraiya glanced back over his shoulder at me. "Interested in weather, Kei-kun? Minato said something about volcanoes when he first got his team."

"Weather is all right, I guess," I told him. "But natural disasters were sort of my focus."

Well, at least they had been. Back when the only real disaster I could face was a seventeen-car pileup and the subsequent traffic jam, or maybe a freak windstorm taking out a power line and killing the wi-fi.

"I saw lightning fly back into the clouds, once." Tsuruya said. "Another time, a volcano caused a thunderstorm that burned down an entire forest."

Astoundingly, it turns out you can talk about bizarre and unfortunate natural phenomena for ages if you have enough examples to draw from. And if not, there's always the topic of how these patterns affected missions, followed by insane mission stunts as long as they weren't classified. Tsuruya in particular had a lot of stories of near-misses and near-death due to living on the wing, but Jiraiya had a plethora of "things going wrong" stories that were based on comedic mishaps. You know, instead of horrible war stories.

By the time we arrived, Jiraiya was talking about making his Ame apprentices dress up like frogs and I was sort of dozing with my arms locked into a strap around his flak jacket.

Then it started getting warm again and the wind got a little less intense, so I pulled one arm loose and pushed my flying goggles up on my head to test the wind speed.

Given that my eyes watered almost immediately, my verdict was "too fast." I pulled them down again.

Then my stomach seemed to do a loop-de-loop and oh hey, we were descending at bullet speed. Or at least it felt like it. It was a little like being on a roller coaster, only there were no safety belts and the only reason I was still on Tsuruya's back was because Jiraiya was really determined not to fly off and I was clinging by an arm.

Tsuruya snapped her wings out at the end, about a hundred meters from the ground to bleed off speed. I heard her feathers rattle a bit—what the hell did she even do with her feathers to make them like steel?—before they stopped. She beat her wings only a little at the end, to flutter to a stop in a manner that didn't suit such a large bird at all.

Then her legs hit the ground, rattling me and Jiraiya down to our bones, before saying, "We're here."

I have never been so glad to hit the ground since…I don't even know. While flying on an airplane is annoying as crap, mostly based on the presence of other people, flying via giant bird is a lot more like horseback riding sans saddles. It's really cool, yes, but by god I was saddle-sore and stiff by the end.

I hit the ground butt-first and the jolt up my spine was nearly pleasant given how numb the rest of me was.

And while Jiraiya was pulling my stuff out of Tsuruya's belly-netting, apparently unaffected by staying in the same position forever, I pulled my new headband out of my jacket pocket and pulled my goggles off entirely. Then I put the bandanna on.

If I had to deal with the Chinatsugumi, I wasn't gonna look like a boy who got caught in a wind
tunnel. I was going to look like a boy who, despite being caught in a wind tunnel, still managed to suppress the inevitable horrible hairstyle under a hat.

"Hm..." said Jiraiya once we were mostly unloaded. He was looking up at Sorayama's gates, and the lone man standing by its open doors. For some reason, the guards were standing entirely aside, while the ponytailed guy looked down the path at us.

It took me a second, but I recognized his chakra—Shirozora.

I didn't remember his hair being green until Zakuro had flipped a genjutsu switch, but I couldn't sense her at all. I guessed that, instead, that actually was his hair color.

Huh. I guessed that I'd have to take notes on the color switches I'd see.

Tsuruya ducked her head and picked up my backpack in her beak, while I grabbed my largest sealing scroll and slung the strap over my back. I'd brought it along to store all of my other ones, which should have involved a bag-of-holding/portable hole paradox that caused a hole in space-time...but didn't. Much to my relief.

Jiraiya patted Tsuruya's wing. "Thank you."

Tsuruya bowed. "It was my pleasure to bring you this far, Jiraiya-sama, Keisuke-sama."

Then we headed up the hill.

"Keisuke Gekkō from Konohagakure," I said in one breath, "escorted by Jiraiya of the Sannin and Tsuruya of the crane clan, reporting for a C-ranked mission."

"Acknowledged." Shirozora gave Jiraiya a long look. Given the lack of visible pupils on gray, rather than white, irises and dark (green) hair, the Yuki clan member looked a bit like a very, very distant Hyūga cousin. "Jiraiya-san, are you going to be staying overnight?"

"If you'll have me," he replied, smiling though Shirozora's face was as blank and intractable as rock. I could feel metaphorical icicles forming.

I...may have told Jiraiya that Sorayama had hot springs.

Not sure if that was a mistake or not.

"Very well." Shirozora nodded at Tsuruya and told me, "Dismiss your summon and follow me."

"Tsuruya...?" I prompted.

Tsuruya dropped my pack into my waiting arms, then poofed back to wherever she'd come from.

Then we followed Shirozora as asked.

"Jiraiya-sama," I began as we walked, "have you spoken to Chinatsu-san?"

"Ever? Yes. Recently? Not especially. The Chinatsugumi seemed to be doing well enough that I was never asked to sort out their security problems during the war." Jiraiya shrugged. "Thanks for the lift, by the way. I don't have access to a flying summon animal."

No, but he did have stealth toads.

"I don't even know where you're going." I said. "But I'm happy to help even if Tsuruya did the
"heavy lifting."

"...Was that a crack at my weight?" Jiraiya asked.

I opened my mouth to answer, but didn't get to. We'd reached the main longhouse's doors by then, and Shirozora kicked them open with a deafening bang, probably flattening the guards waiting on the inside of them.

"For crap's sake, stop doing that—!" said Rikuto's voice, since apparently he was one of the near-victims. Then his gaze fell on Jiraiya and he trailed off into dead silence.

"Rikuto Tetsuyama, right?" Jiraiya asked pleasantly.

"...Er. And you're Jiraiya of the Sannin." Rikuto paled even as he spoke. His chakra retreated entirely inside of his skin, pulling back into his core. It felt like the last thought left in Rikuto's head was "which direction should I run?"

"Jiraiya-sama..." I said warily, and he cut out the staring contest instantly. I continued in a totally level voice, saying, "Rikuto-san, I was going to ask Chinatsu-san about what I was supposed to be doing, exactly? There's a lot we have to talk about before Jiraiya-sama goes on to complete his mission. And this is actual talking, not the kind with knives."

"Are you sure you can trust a missing-nin?" Jiraiya asked lightly, as though it didn't really matter.

Well, it probably really didn't. He was just screwing with Rikuto.

"I don't know," I countered. "I've had clandestine meetings with him before and neither of us died."

Jiraiya gave me a flat look.

"It's fine, Jiraiya-sama. He's been in on the vision thing for a while now." I said, deeply sarcastic. When he looked at me for an explanation, I shrugged.

"Then why are you so close?" Jiraiya wondered.

I was about to say something to that—I kind of felt like explaining myself today—when we were interrupted by something else.

Only this time, it was Chinatsu herself. She nodded to both of us as the guards closed the longhouse doors behind us and she approached from a side room. I still couldn't sense her, but I was used to things by now.

"Jiraiya-san, Keisuke-kun," Chinatsu said, gold eyes seeming to cut through us both.

Well, at least I felt like that.
"Come to my office." Chinatsu said in a way that wasn't really a suggestion. "Apparently, we have a lot to discuss."

I had the rough impression of being asked to come to the principal's office after a prank war between two other kids and bopping them both with a ruler. Except I was a chūnin of Konoha and, when it came down to it, an adult. I shouldn't feel dread, since obviously Jiraiya was perfectly okay with any situation he could kill his way out of. I could do the same now, right?

I just didn't feel quite like that. Just no.

Once safely ensconced in Chinatsu's office—apparently mostly made of heavy teak wood, rice paper, and enough sealing ink to choke a horse—we sort of just gathered around her desk. It was a nice desk, but the other reason we did that is because her office only had one chair, and it was the kind that forced the person in it to sit ramrod straight in the chair and apparently both Jiraiya and I were habitual slouchers.

Chinatsu leaned back on the wood, crossing her arms, and said very bluntly, "What do you want, Jiraiya-san?"

"I want to hear what Tsunade's been up to for the past few years." Jiraiya said, nonchalantly enough that I almost didn't catch what he said. It hit me when I replayed the sentence in my head.

Tsunade? This early?

Getting Tsunade on anyone's side would be difficult, particularly if the person trying to do the persuading didn't have anything over her head. I liked to think that Naruto would be the only person who could win her over, but that sounded odd—obviously, he wasn't available and there certainly were more optimistic kids running around when you got down to it.

The question, though, was why Jiraiya was going after her now.

I probably had something to do with it, somehow.

"Gambling her way through her grandfather's inheritance, likely as not," was Chinatsu's response. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Buy up her debt." Jiraiya said.

Chinatsu stared. "She is, at the least, hundreds of thousands of ryō in the hole. How exactly is this a feasible business strategy?"

"We can discuss that in private, Chinatsu-san." Jiraiya said, glancing at me. "Kei…"

Well, I knew when I wasn't wanted. "Got it, Jiraiya-sama. Leaving now."

"I'll catch up to you at dinner." Jiraiya said, waving me off. "Have fun."

What with?

Anyway, I left. I sort of explored a bit after that, though, since none of the aides came to collect me. By "explore," I mostly just wandered around and took a look at all the wall hangings and things in the longhouse for a while. Oddly, there were a lot of them.

I was reading the description of a silk-screen painting, which apparently depicted…someone's flight from Uzushiogakure, going by the whirlpools, when, well—
Who even are these people?

I jumped a bit, and maybe squeaked in surprise.

**The seal isn't weakening. Don't even ask.** Isobu grumbled. I could feel his chakra circulating, but none of it was heading into my coils. **We're just more in tune.**

*Oh.*

Which was totally believable coming from a gigantic demon turtle that was *barely* out of range of people who could shut down his rampages with extreme prejudice. That, of course, assumed that Jiraiya wouldn't be interested and I'd have to steer toward Konoha to find someone who was. If Jiraiya was willing, Isobu could be stopped here…

What was I worrying about, again? Aside from my life, anyway?

There were so many things to choose from that I gave up and tossed the whole lot out a mental window.

*The Chinatsugumi are people who've reincarnated, too.* I told him, figuring there was no real point in keeping it a secret. I didn't really realize that was how the afterlife literally worked here, so I made the mistake of assuming that I was unique up until I met them.

**Should I be surprised?** Isobu asked bluntly.

*Well, maybe not.* I walked down the hall, stopping next to a screen that showed Mount Soragami spitting lava in a manner not unlike that of Mt. Kilauea back on Earth. It didn't really make sense for a stratovolcano, but I supposed that a lot of things could change when shinobi started screwing around with the laws of nature. Maybe Soragami had been different back whenever Chinatsu's ancestors had started putting up anti-eruption seals? *I get taken by surprise a lot, really.*

**So, these people…remember their previous lives?** For a Tailed Beast, the concept was probably quaint—they never truly died, and of course the Beast that formed later was merely the old one after a long reassembly stage.

*Yes and no. From what I understand, they only remember about as much as they need to identify each other on sight. And me.* I explained. *They view it as a sort of déjà vu, only with people.* Apparently, Chinatsu-san has been able to use it as a sort of litmus test for people who want to join up.

**And I suppose you knew them.**

*…Kinda? When I was a normal human civilian moron—which is a lot of modifiers—I used to dream about writing my own novel. I had characters and a plot and even a setting that had a lot of thought put into it. The current roster of the Chinatsugumi, or at least the ones in charge, happen to behave very similarly to characters I used to write about. They don't have anything to do with this world, normally. Er. Formerly—they obviously do now.* I corrected. *Going by the multiverse theory, it was always possible that they existed somewhere. And going by my existence, there is no actual ban on reincarnating from nominally disparate timelines and universes.*

*…What.*

*That was my reaction when I recognized Chinatsu-san.* I paused. *Well, there's certainly a possibility that I'm wrong and that they really have nothing to do with the novel I was writing at the time I died,*
but I can't imagine why the hell they'd recognize me as a probable doom-bringer otherwise. In this world, I wasn't even alive when they first started gathering strength.

After all, technically an author is responsible for everything that happens in a story, right? Good and bad. It's their fingers on the keyboard, after all.

"You've been staring at the wall for five minutes," said Shirozora's voice, dry as dust. "And I really doubt maple paneling can possibly be that interesting."

I jolted back to reality to find him standing about ten feet away, leaning against a giant urn of some kind. It was intricately patterned with red vines, but otherwise unremarkable aside from its size. Shirozora gave me a long look, arms crossed and expression blank.

Then he straightened up and said, "Misaki wants you to sit in on one of the children's lessons. They will be in the garden in ten minutes. Don't be late."

Then he walked away.

I facepalmed. Clearly, I needed to work on my situational awareness.

**He didn't even ask what you were doing.** Isobu made a snorting noise. **Idiot.**

I wasn't sure if he was talking about me or about Shirozora.

I nonetheless headed out the nearest door and took to the roofs—outsiders weren't allowed to stay inside of the longhouse or Chinatsugumi compound, but I was pretty sure there was a comped hotel room with my name on it at the nearest inn. I just had to go and find it and stash my stuff before Shirozora went all hall monitor on me.

"Ah, you've made it." Misaki said.

I made a noncommittal noise, surveying the room.

It was a large training hall, made of slightly yellowish wood worn down by lots of bare, calloused feet over time. There were waxed-over scuff marks almost the whole length of the room, and rice paper screens serving for inner doors. I looked around appreciatively—if Mom could have afforded a dojo like the big clans had, I think she would have liked this kind of building. And possibly more students—one didn't just find a well-worn dojo anywhere.

In the center of the room, there was a crowd of kids and two adult figures, spinning around seemingly aimlessly.

With Akira—red-haired today, apparently—thumping out a simple, straightforward beat on a set of drums, Nanami was apparently leading a dance class. Instead of playing the flute like I remembered, she was swaying along with the beat and showing the smaller kids how to keep their balance while moving. It was honestly rather cute to watch, though I figured it wasn't terribly well-organized since, frankly, organization came second when kids were involved.

Fun came first.

Speaking of kids, the crowd was pretty much made up of the usual suspects. Kaito, green-haired and sort of wobbly, was clinging to his mother's skirt and determinedly moving along with her instead of the other children. Miyu and Kazuki, at least four years old apiece and running literal circles around the smaller children, were bouncing around like pinballs with Aiko trapped between them. Roku, by
contrast, was nearly asleep against Akira's thigh even if the rest of the group was being noisy. Little Tayuya was hanging onto Miyu's shirt and giggling like a hyena while she was mostly just being pulled along for the ride.

Misaki—who still freaked me out a bit, let's be clear—clapped her hands sharply.

Everyone stopped.

"Nanami, Akira." Misaki said tonelessly. "I'm sure you remember Keisuke-chan?"

Thank you, zombie lady, for that wonderful introduction. I waved awkwardly at everyone else.

The kids, I noticed, had hidden behind Nanami and Akira as soon as Misaki made her presence known. Well, except for Aiko—as Misaki's daughter, she was probably immune to the blonde woman's glare of death.

If she wasn't, well, that wasn't terribly surprising. Misaki's glare could strip paint.

"Have fun." Misaki said, and swept out of the room imperiously.

Once she was gone and probably out of earshot, I held up a hand to wave and said, "Hi, everyone!"

**Brilliant.**

**Shut up.**

Nanami approached first—Akira was trying to get Roku off his leg—and smiled at me, "Hello, Keisuke-chan. You've met these children, haven't you?"

"Of course I have." While they were extremely distracted, true, but I had. I also recalled losing a cheap pocket keychain to their toy chest, somehow. I nonetheless got down on my knees so I could look them in the eye. "Do any of you remember me?"

"No." Kazuki said bluntly. "You look funny!"

Well, he was four and neither of his parents were around.

"I do." I said cheerfully.

"Could you read to them while I get dinner?" Nanami asked, and I noticed her start to wring her hands a bit. At the same time, Kaito was scrunching her skirt between his tiny fingers and hid his face against her leg.

She'd only get a break from them for a few minutes, but I could handle small children for that long. Like it or not, I'd taken babysitting missions before and I had done all right. Better than my team's mini-jōnin, at least, back when he'd been a kid.

Most five-year-olds, as it turns out, don't really respond to military command procedures or structures. Kakashi had indeed been a very bizarre kid.

"I wanna read." Roku mumbled, rubbing his eyes. He blinked up at me curiously. "Are you shinobi?"

"I have a shinobi book!" Miyu said instantly. "It has real shinobi!"

"In that case, let's go get that book. Akira-san, if you could lend a hand…?" I trailed off. I didn't
know where their toy chest was, or if they had some kind of collective library.

"It's no trouble, Keisuke-san." Akira said. "I think I know which book—"

"Why?" Kaito asked after a long moment, while his mother was busy trying to extract her leg from his grip. His green eyes were locked on my flak jacket, which made me glad I'd decided to leave my stuff in my room. As early as I'd been introduced to kunai and shuriken, I knew how to handle them instinctively. I was aware that this was not normally the case.

"Why what?" I asked.

"Why here?" Tayuya's high-pitched voice asked from about knee height. She'd gotten close and was in the process of wrapping her arm around my leg. "Why?"

"I don't know." I told her. To Kaito, who was about three and had successfully been detached from his mother, who made her escape, I said, "Chinatsu-san hasn't told me yet."

Akira, meanwhile, ran off in search of the book. That left me with six small children to deal with on my own. If I'd been a real fourteen-year-old (as opposed to a very strange counterfeit), there would have been a very real risk to the kids in some way, shape, or form. The collective troublemaking abilities of a bunch of pre-K kids often outpaced adult caretakers, much less a teenager.

Let's see…

I sat down properly and crossed my legs in front of me, yoga-style. Tayuya immediately scrambled onto one thigh—apparently, she was used to being picked up—and I looped my left arm around her back to keep her steady. "I'm going to bring someone else here. Is that okay?"

"Guess so." Roku said, looking around for this mysterious extra person.

*Summoning Jutsu!*

With a burst of smoke, Tsuruya appeared in a crouch next to me before sitting down with her long legs tucked neatly underneath her. "You called, Keisuke-sama?"

"I did." Flourishing as well as I could while pinned by gawking children, I said, "Kids, this is Tsuruya. Tsuruya, these kids are Aiko, Kaito, Roku, Tayuya, Miyu, and Kazuki."

"Charmed." She even punctuated it with a little bob of her head.

"Anyone have any questions?" I asked, grinning.

Six little voices piped up at once.

Half an hour later, after I'd gotten the book on shinobi (which was *The Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi*, to my pleasant surprise) and read through it, Rikuto and Zakuro finally showed up to pick up their kids from Kei's Improvised Small Child Caretaking Service. They were in the process of eating their dinner at the time, though so perhaps I should have appended "plus catering" to that description. And Nanami and Akira were finally around to help me herd children, so I'd have to change that too.

All right, maybe it needed some work. Since German didn't exist here, it'd be tough to explain the term "pre-kindergarten" anyway. And I didn't have the supplies for a full daycare.

"Hey, kid." Rikuto said, sitting down next to Kazuki as his wife went to go play with Miyu. "How's
it been?"
"Fine."

Rikuto raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, not fine. But the bad part's mostly behind me by now." I amended in an undertone.

"If you say so." Rikuto said. "So, which kid is the cutest?"

I paused at that. "...You were serious?"

"Yep." Rikuto said cheerfully.

The last thing—okay, maybe one of the last things—I needed was for Rikuto to decide to channel Maes Hughes. I shrugged. "...Dunno, ask me again in a few hours."

There really wasn't a better term for it—Rikuto pouted.

"I see you've gotten over the thing with Jiraiya." I commented, unimpressed.

Rikuto blanched just at the name. "Not really." Rallying, he went on, "I have to ask, though—what possessed your Hokage to send one of the Sannin here?"

"I don't know." When Rikuto gave me a look of pure skepticism, I told him, "Believe it or not, I don't always know what Sensei's thinking. I was going to ask Jiraiya myself later, but then I got interrupted by just about everything."

"Daddy, come ooooooon!" Kazuki, it should be noted, had been tugging on his father's collar for at least fifteen seconds.

"All right, all right," Rikuto said, finally deciding that interrogating me wasn't worth ignoring his kid. "We'll talk later, Half-Pint. Okay, Kazu-chan, what did you want to show me?"

I managed to escape the improvised playroom a little after that.

"Jiraiya-sama, why were you really sent with me?" I asked much later, once I finally got back to the inn.

Jiraiya looked up from the table, where he was apparently working on his next dime-store novel—sorry, masterpiece—while his dinner went stone cold by his left hand. It'd been a long, long time since I brought a notebook along for a mission, even to take actual notes about things (because it was a lot easier to just pick the thing up in a specimen storage scroll and take it home), but I supposed that Jiraiya of all people could complete a mission while still giving his writing all the attention it deserved.

...Maybe that was backwards.

Up until I'd asked the question, the room hadn't felt too secure by shinobi standards. From the futon I was sitting on, I couldn't sense any more than the basic security seals I'd expected from a public building with shinobi (or shinobi-like) patrons. They mostly just kept noise from one suite from bothering the next one over.

In a flash, Jiraiya's hand was flat on the table and powerful noise- and chakra-cancelling seals spiraled out like living ink from his fingertips. I watched with interest as they wove around the room
and under the fixtures in it, until we were both contained in a cage that reminded me of my house after Sensei got done with it—a panic room, in fact.

God damn I wished I knew how to do that.

Since I'd been cleaning my katana up until then and abruptly realized that maybe asking that question with a weapon in hand hadn't been the best idea, I slid it back into its sheath and left it on my futon. Then I went to sit across from Jiraiya.

"I probably shouldn't have asked, right?" I muttered, annoyed with myself.

Jiraiya shrugged. "Probably not. But you did."

"Is this supposed to be beyond my clearance level?" I asked.

"It's an S-ranked mission, so I assume it would be if you were normal." Jiraiya crossed his arm, pen tapping against his bicep. "S-ranks are eyes-only, and only the Hokage's eyes at that."

Welp.

"That said, Minato reshuffled your clearance level in light of recent events." Jiraiya told me. "Operative Crane from ANBU has much greater access to information, and the Hokage's implicit trust."

I blinked. "Wait. So you mean…"

"Congratulations, you're an honorary ANBU operative." Jiraiya said, going back to his book. "Don't get the tattoo, though. It'll ruin your cover."

"...It'd be nice if Sensei had told me that before I left." I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. Then, "Any other perks? Or is this just one of those formality things?"

"It's a formality. It also keeps you from becoming a target." Jiraiya said. He was apparently finishing up a paragraph even as I was trying to interrogate him. "We tried to think of something for your Uchiha teammate, but we couldn't think of an animal. Therefore, the two of you share the cover and no one is ever going to see Crane reporting to the Hokage."

"Well, what about Kakashi and Rin?" I asked.

Jiraiya shrugged. "I'm told that their situations are going to work themselves out. Believe it or not, even I don't need to know everything."

If he didn't, it was a given that I didn't either. At least by Sensei's standards.

"So, anyway. The reason you're here?" I pressed.

Jiraiya glanced at the security seals again—luckily, the "ink" they were made out of would disappear when Jiraiya wanted it to, or else we'd be faced with a very angry innkeeper come morning—before leaning back a little from the table. Then he said, "Minato thought I could use your future-seeing power to recruit Tsunade again, and maybe defuse the situation in Ame."

...Sensei was fucking nuts.

"I'm pretty sure my mission doesn't put me anywhere near Amegakure." I pointed out, suddenly very worried indeed.
"Which is why I'm picking up Tsunade as soon as possible. As far as I'm concerned, once she's with me and I can leave you to do whatever you need to here, the mission has a much higher chance of success. Hanzō was strong during the Second Shinobi World War, but he's not strong enough to face an angry Rinnegan user and two of the Sannin. Not now." Jiraiya said. "I've got a few contacts here and there to confirm which buttons I should push, but it's hard to be sure after so long out of the game."

"...She also has Shizune with her." I said. My mind immediately reoriented toward finding what I could remember about Tsunade's return to Konoha and the people involved in making sure she actually did do so. "You have to consider the chance that she won't go on a mission even if we do have all the cards from last time that worked to make her choose to be the Fifth Hokage. The situation now is a lot different than it might be ten years from now."

"I'll have to take that risk." Jiraiya said, deadly serious. "Minato agreed that letting Nagato go on his apparent destined path was a gigantic waste of lives. I have to try and steer him clear."

And with Sensei on the "peace" platform and this early in his Hokage career, it wasn't like he could just redeploy everyone to some backwater to punt Hanzō off his throne. Though the man himself was dangerous, Amegakure wasn't important enough on a worldwide scale to justify intervention in its civil war by an outside power—especially one that needed its internal resources to combat internal threats like ROOT and (possibly) the Uchiha clan. It just so happened that, in fact, the results of Ame's "backwater skirmish" would come back to haunt the entire world.

Hence, using Jiraiya.

"What do you need me to do, Jiraiya-sama?" I asked.

"Tell me everything you can."

Where to start?

"First thing's first—Nagato's Rinnegan isn't his." I shrugged when Jiraiya looked like he was going to ask a question. "Don't ask me how—that's just what Madara told Obito, only Obito didn't know enough to tell anyone what it meant. Thing is, I've seen stuff from a different perspective than he has and Nagato was the only person with the Rinnegan I'd seen up until that point." I looked up at the ceiling, trying to piece together a sequence of events. "From what I know, Tobi would have come into contact with Akatsuki sometime within the next year or so and killed most of the non-core members to help Hanzō's forces corner Yahiko, Nagato, and Konan. He'd only know about Nagato because Madara told him—Obito was too young to know about them and you'd never tell anyone who the Akatsuki were.

"Danzō's ROOT agents will be there if things run the same, trying to corral everyone. I don't know if it was because he's got more irons in the fire than a blacksmith, or if he'd heard of Nagato's Rinnegan and wanted it, or whatever." It was hard to assume anything but malice aforesight when it came to ROOT, really. "If...shit. I can't remember much of the detail around the situation if you want to talk logistics. I know Akatsuki were the main rebel faction in Ame at the time and that Hanzō wasn't originally hostile toward them. But if you want to ask me how they got cornered, I can't tell you much besides what I've extrapolated."

Actually...wait.

"Jiraiya-sama, is..." Cutting myself off just felt awkward, but words wouldn't easily describe what he needed to know. Further, he was a veteran shinobi of thirty years in the field and more. He'd be able to get more out of my visions than I could, if I could only just get the information into his head. I
continued hesitantly, "Uh, is it all right if you can teach me a low-level visual genjutsu so I can show you?"

"...You're telling me that Minato let you get promoted, go on A-ranks, and become a Tailed Beast Host without teaching you how to project basic genjutsu?" Jiraiya asked, deadpan.

"...Yes?" And I was reworking my genjutsu resistance, too. What? It'd been a busy couple of years.

Jiraiya muttered something under his breath, then said, "Fine. Have you heard of the Demonic Illusion series?"

"Yeah. I was thinking about learning it for my first Exam, but I forgot to ask Sensei." Story of my life, I swear. "So I used advanced dispelling instead."

"I'm not sure how those two connect, but I'll get that story later. So, to use the genjutsu you just need to understand how the Rat seal gathers chakra and have an image in your mind..." Jiraiya went on to explain a bit about seal modifications—apparently the one-seal version was less detailed or expansive, and in fact easily cancelled in comparison—while I looked on with a sort of starry-eyed wonder.

Sure, this wasn't exactly rocket science and I'd trained with him before, but it was nice to actually *finally* get a goddamn breakthrough with a jutsu. Even if it was as simple and easy as the world's most basic genjutsu.

"When you get serious, go to Horse after Rat." Jiraiya told me. "That should mitigate the worse effects. I don't actually plan to spend five minutes drooling into the floor if I can help it."

"Why would it be that strong?" I asked blankly. "You could just dismiss it since you know it's coming anyway."

"If you use any of the Three-Tails's chakra, it's not going to be quite that easy. Be careful. We're only doing this once, and it's all one-way." Jiraiya said, resting his hands on his lap. "Go ahead."

...Well, okay. I forced Isobu's chakra threads back, while he was still griping about things like not getting to have any fun. Then I formed the Rat seal, followed by Horse. "Demonic Illusion: Vision Quest!"

I made a point on concentrating on the most pertinent memories I could find, even if they were still in animation format. To Jiraiya, they'd probably look like nothing so much as moving paintings, but if it worked now I'd at least have a way of conveying my suspicions to people like Sensei in an easy, simple way.

A minute seconds later, Jiraiya's eyes opened again and he seemed laser-focused, looking at me as though expecting me to come apart at the seams or something.

"That was...interesting." Jiraiya said after a long, awkward staring contest.

"Yeah." I said lamely. "So, uh, that's what I've been going off of."

"I can hear an apology in there—don't worry about it." At my surprised look, Jiraiya shrugged. "I'd have liked to hear all of this earlier, or see it, but at this point there's still time to fix some of what could go wrong." He actually smiled. "A chance is better than nothing."

"...True. But I should have told you earlier." I could have done a lot of things earlier, come to that.
"Then keep on top of things with Minato and don't let yourself slip now that you've built better habits." Jiraiya went back to writing in his book after a moment's thought. "I'll be leaving tomorrow, but I expect you to stay on the straight and narrow while you're here and be a good kunoichi. Learn more jutsu so you stop yourself from falling behind."

He had a point. If a disaster could be avoided with such a small amount of fuss, I really ought to have kept abreast of events a lot better than I had. And picked up genjutsu, since apparently it only took me about a minute to learn the simple ones. "Understood, Jiraiya-sama." Pause. "Can I ask Shirozora for help, then?"

"The white-haired guy, right? I guess he'll make a decent substitute if I'm not around." Jiraiya said.

Uh. "...Shirozora's hair is green."

"...What?"

"I don't see him much, but the first time we met Rikuto's wife Zakuro hit me with like three different genjutsu. I didn't feel anything this time and he didn't flicker at all." I explained.

"Hm." Jiraiya rubbed his chin. "Well, either your resistance to genjutsu is a little higher than mine or that's not what's going on here. I'll have to take a look when I have time."

Bizarrely, even a backhanded compliment—which was still probably more than I deserved—made me feel a bit better about my chances of not dying in the next few years.

I fell asleep that night wondering about potential. Mostly mine, since I was selfish, but also about what Jiraiya and Sensei would do once they had all the information they needed to succeed.

The future was out of my hands and I couldn't have been happier to see it go.

Of course, I had cause to regret that idea a little later.

Learning elemental manipulation is a little harder than it looks, Tailed Beast Host or not. Even with an Ice Release user yelling encouragement from the riverbank (as thanks for referring to his son as the "cutest" of the kids, apparently winning some kind of bet), I wasn't necessarily making the most progress.

I stood on the riverbank just outside of the walled-in Sorayama, sweat pouring down my face as I tried and repeatedly failed to meet my own expectations.

I could make a really tiny water dragon if I pushed myself, in pursuit of the Water Dragon Bullet Jutsu, but my control would fall apart a bit when I tried to scale up because Isobu's chakra would bleed into mine. When sculpting huge water constructs, control needed to keep that power back. I just...hadn't quite learned how to do that yet.

And I wasn't used to pulling on huge amounts of chakra, either. Even my seals or the Rasengan didn't really require me to hold something in a shape for very long—though the Rasengan had a windup time that I hadn't cut down on yet, either. Maybe it was easier because I'd learned to use it before Isobu had come into the picture?

I swear I spent a week on what, for another person with Water Release chakra and more actual experience, would have been really simple progression from D- to C- to B-ranked elemental jutsu. By day seven at Sorayama, I had hit a brick wall at B and wasn't looking forward to attempting A-
ranked jutsu.

I dropped the water jutsu. I sat down on the riverbank, on a rock the approximate size of a minivan, and started thinking on it. After a second, I rolled onto my back and decided to look at the early afternoon clouds rolling overhead.

Also, I'd found out why I was there in the first place.

"I don't know what's been happening in Konoha, but I thought you could use a break and have time to learn from some of us." Chinatsu had said, when I'd asked. "Further, I think it's best if you're where I can keep an eye on you. Keisuke-san, you're a force of something at this point, but I'd like to be sure you stay away from your darker potential."

Despite what I said to Isobu earlier, I didn't necessarily think that Chinatsu was going to get any kind of priority when it came to managing my theoretical batshit episodes. I'd been told by Jiraiya to play nice. I liked most of the people I'd been hanging out with lately. I hadn't had to worry about an alarm clock since getting to Sorayama. I'd spent nearly five years as a shinobi.

I. Was. Fine.

And Chinatsu was late to the watchdog party if she thought she could get in on managing my instability this late in the game.

Even if I knew them from another lifetime, the fact was that I just didn't really trust them as well as I did my friends back in Konoha. I could share doomsday prophecies with Chinatsu and Rikuto because they accepted that kind of thing. But I couldn't, say, talk to them about a crappy mission I'd had. We just weren't that close.

Obviously, Water Dragon Bullet wasn't going to just come to me if I kept getting distracted by literally everything.

A hawk passed overhead, heading either for Mount Soragami or Sorayama. Happy hunting, tiny brown cousin of Tsuruya. Clear out those goddamn pigeons.

"Done for today?" Shirozora called from the opposite bank. "So early?"

"Probably!" I responded. As much as I was interested in learning, my chakra was flagging. And I wasn't sure if I could entirely trust Isobu's.

**That was hardly called for.**

Which was not the same as "uncalled for," mind.

Shirozora bounded over the river's surface coming to a stop next to my rock. "In that case, look after the children for the afternoon."

Frankly, I gave him the stink-eye.

After a week, I was a lot less impressed with his lack of respect than I might have been if he aimed it at people who weren't me. I got the impression that, rather than not being afraid of Jiraiya because he was strong, Shirozora was actually just kind of dumb.

"While the kids are adorable, I'm not—" But I didn't say anything else. Shirozora wasn't paying attention.
Because I'd been cut off by a loud explosive noise and the way he was focusing on a green-smoke flare sailing far overhead.

"You have mail," he said.

…So, green meant Konoha? Okay then.

Within two minutes, I'd packed up all the stuff I needed for my next mission and was on my way to Chinatsu's office, since apparently all the mail got rerouted through there. I passed Misaki's desk on the way, which was occupied by both the usual death-glare-packing blonde woman and her daughter, who was trying to figure out how to juggle stamps and failing.

(…You know, I never actually asked who Aiko's father was. Probably wasn't important.)

When I arrived, Chinatsu handed off my letter to me immediately. Then she walked out of the office and closed the door behind her without a word.

…Weird.

Then I examined the letter more closely, and the hawk on the perch by Chinatsu's desk. The hawk wore a red band on its leg—priority order from the Hokage. The letter itself had the Hokage's seal stamped firmly on the paper, clamping it shut.

I opened it, of course.

Kei—

You'll be joining Team Honoka at the village gates of Tanigakure, in the Land of Rivers, for their mission. Be there by the 14th of August. Mission is A-ranked, details to be provided by Honoka Uchiha upon arrival. Ears only.

Minato Namikaze, Fourth Hokage of Konohagakure

The entire last line was stamped on, with Sensei's craptastic signature underneath it and taking up half of the remaining space on the page.

I grabbed a sheet of paper off of Chinatsu's desk and scribbled a reply—Orders received and acknowledged—and tied it to the hawk's leg before letting it out the office window.

So much for a three-week C-ranked mission.

I went to go say my goodbyes and pack for a new trip.
Fun fact: I had no idea where Tanigakure was. It's one thing to say "go here" and quite another to provide a GPS or Mercator projection absolute location. If I was going to go poking through every valley in the entire country for the Hidden Village and asking passers-by for directions, I would miss my deadline by a mile. Most shinobi villages weren't truly hidden—Taki was, if I remembered right, but most others were just annoying to get to—but the only things I knew about the Land of Rivers involved half-remembered geography lessons and the Rescue Kazekage arc.

Not a great place to start.

Pulling Tsuruya aside after the kids were done climbing all over her, I asked, "Do you know how to get to Tanigakure?"

"No, Keisuke-sama." Tsuruya told me. She tilted her head to the side. "Perhaps you should ask Rikuto-san. He was originally deployed against Sunagakure, wasn't he? He may have a map."

I tried to visualize the Land of Rivers, which sat between the Lands of Fire and Wind. Sorayama wasn't located in the dead center of the Land of Fire. It was actually west (and south, but mostly west) of Konoha by a fair margin. If I kept going that way, I would hit the borders of someone else's country eventually. Sane people would need to cross the Land of Rivers to hit up Suna for a cup of sugar, but I could fly.

Flying was awesome. The only problem was the idea that, somehow, I would make a mistake with directions and end up too close to Amegakure.

"I'll do that." I said. My mental image, for all of its glorious speculation, frankly just wasn't detailed enough to go off of. I ordered Tsuruya to wait for me at Sorayama's front gates, while I got our gear and packed my bags properly.

Then I went looking.

I found Rikuto at the bottom of a dog pile four kids deep, in the dojo. It wasn't until the other parents retrieved their children that I had a chance to talk to him properly—though he still didn't stand up. I sat back on my heels and leaned over him, with Miyu trying to climb up my flight jacket.

Rikuto, as it happened, didn't have a map. On him or in general. "Misaki probably will. I've never been to the Land of Rivers, actually. My missions put me through the Land of Stone instead."

"Well, rats." I muttered. I pried Miyu off my vest and placed her on Rikuto's stomach, making him exhale with a "whuff" noise.

Once he got his breath back, Rikuto shrugged. "Ask Misaki. That woman collects paper like a pet
"I will. Thanks anyway." I said, turning to leave.

Then Rikuto's voice said, "Wait."

"Wait for what?" I asked, looking back over my shoulder.

"When you go see Misaki, try to make sure you're still getting paid for the babysitting mission." Rikuto told me, "Since technically it's being cut short by a priority order, but you still flew out here as asked."

"Will Misaki have a problem with cutting things off?" I asked.

Rikuto shrugged. Then Miyu accidentally rolled off his chest and landed on his face, cutting off any response he might have made.

I left after that.

At least Misaki did have a map. It was a topographical map with a political map on the next page, which gave me a better idea of the terrain I would be expected to recognize as we flew over it. It wasn't perfect—sometimes the political one only showed a pretty pictographic representation of places like the Valley of the End—but the topo map had a scale. I showed it to Tsuruya once I was back outside of the city gates and we spent a while trying to make heads or tails of it.

"I think we should expect his journey to take two days of eight-hour flights." Tsuruya said after calculating the distance in her head. "But I believe we can cut that down to one if the weather holds and if I am able to use Wind Release manipulation for the duration."

"Were Jiraiya and I cutting down on your flight range? It makes sense, based on weight." I guessed, folding the map.

"Less than one would think." Tsuruya said. "While it is true that weight does make a difference, my primary concern is wind-shaping and how having two passengers would affect my aerodynamic profile. My range is mostly determined by my chakra usage when it comes to transportation." She bowed her head to pull at the cargo netting still on her belly. "I can easily fly ten hours per day unburdened, but I worry about you freezing if I do, Keisuke-sama."

Touched, I lifted my hand to her beak. "Thank you. But since today's the twelfth, I don't think we have a whole hell of a lot of time to waste."

Tsuruya's huge dark eyes shone with determination. "True. Please complete your final preparations, Keisuke-sama."


I pulled my flight goggles on over my eyes and tugged my shirt collar up over my face. Even if I could heal wind burn easily enough, I'd still rather not get it in the first place.

Then I climbed onto her back and secured my legs to the saddle. Even if it would suck, we were going to try to make the trip in one day.
Man, oh, man, it was gonna suck.

"Good to go, Tsuruya." I told her.

"We will stop in three hours, then. Hang on, please." Tsuruya said. I felt all of her muscles bunch up underneath me and the jolt as she jumped to catch the wind. Her wings flared, then began to beat powerfully downward.

As soon as she straightened out, we were already ten meters up and climbing. By then, we were on our way.

It took us the full ten hours to get to Tanigakure. That included breaks for lunch for the both of us (a bento for me and four large fish for Tsuruya), two bathroom breaks (for me), and the final twenty minutes I spent on Tsuruya's back in the dying light with a flashlight, trying to figure out where the bleeding fuck the actual village was supposed to be. The evening lights hadn't been turned on yet, you see—most villages didn't bother with street lamps given how fragile our power grids were even in the big ones. Konoha was an exception—I could probably see the lights from the Hokage tower from miles straight up if I ever tried.

The thing about the Land of Rivers was that it also included a truly irritating number of essentially-identical valleys that could have all held a Hidden Village. It was in the name, really. And I didn't feel like searching from source to mouth on every single river to find the one I was looking for. We ended up flying over roads and trying to track them as they got thicker—hopefully, that'd help us find the right path.

It wasn't until dusk was nearly over that we found it. By that point, both of us were tired and it was getting really hard for Tsuruya to see anything, what with being a diurnal bird—and then my chakra sense finally started to catch the signs of active shinobi in the area, even from our cruising altitude.

Then, as we approached the village itself, my chakra sense seemed to light up like a pinball machine.

"Found it, Tsuruya! Think we can land in this gloom?" I called, unzipping my collar a little so I could be heard. I immediately regretted it—even if we didn't have as much forward momentum as before, the wind up here was cold.

"Just aim for the gate lights, yes? I can do that." Tsuruya sounded tired—most summons couldn't be kept on the battlefield for thirty minutes, much less ten whole hours—and I could feel her flagging as we descended.

I patted her back. "Thank you so much for getting me here in time, Tsuruya. You deserve a break from all this after we land."

"It was my pleasure, Keisuke-sama." Tsuruya replied.

Before I knew it, we were on the ground. Once again, as soon as the jolting stopped I slid off her back and landed on my butt like a champ, then flopped over on the ground.

I could not feel my legs.

"You are being very dramatic, Keisuke-sama." Tsuruya informed me as the gate guards rushed over to us. They didn't feel hostile, at least.

"Knew that." I raised a hand and waved vaguely. "Go ahead and dismiss yourself. I can take it from here."
"Very well. Do not hesitate to call on me tomorrow if I am needed."

With that, Tsuruya disappeared into a big white cloud of chakra smoke and I sat up just as the guards arrived to help me up.

"I gotta ask—this is Tanigakure, right?" I looked up at both guards hopefully.

There had better not be more than one Hidden Village in this blasted river country.

"You're in the right place," said the guard on the left with the impressive handlebar mustache. He helped me to his feet before his partner, a much smaller and skinnier man with a strangely mousy look to him, got the chance. "Name and origin?"

"Keisuke Gekkō of Konohagakure. I'm meeting with Team Honoka, of the same," I told him easily. Luckily, I'd decided to wear my headband prominently in its proper place, so they could check the sigil.

"I see," said Handlebars. "Check the Akabeko. I've heard that a shinobi team set up there."

"Gotcha." I said. "Thanks for the help!"

I ran off pretty quickly after that. "Akabeko" put the image of beef hot-pot in mind, so I decided to zero in on some dinner. Then I could find the inn Team Honoka holed up in. I wasn't technically due 'til tomorrow anyway.

…Though that would be irresponsible of me.

I went into the Akabeko after stripping off my outer layer of flight gear and sealing it away—there was no reason for a shinobi mock-up of a bomber jacket to be worn at ground level, when it was warm enough at night for no sleeves at all. I checked and re-checked my stuff, making sure that my katana was secure at my waist and that I had my scroll on my back.

Then I went in, because I was a nervous moron and knew there was some kind of privacy barrier thingummy that kept me from sensing anything inside and that was driving me crazy in a bad way.

Oh, yeah. Privacy seals.

Suffice to say that any place with a significant number of shinobi patrons knows to invest in those. Most of them also had the side effect of suppressing chakra signatures a bit. Made the clients hard to identify from outside, and since restaurants nearly always meant witnesses, it actually cut down on the cleanup costs.

So, yeah. In.

The Akabeko was pretty crowded and pretty warm, too. While I couldn't make out words because the privacy seals had an inverted maximum range (meaning that nothing inside of a certain radius got out), once I was inside the front door I could sense chakra signatures easily enough. Most of the people inside were shinobi of varying skill levels, from genin to jōnin. Tanigakure seemed a bit small for their own version of ANBU, since larger villages tended to get the bulk of the missions requiring that kind of expertise, so I wasn't able to say for sure if there was anyone inside matching that profile.

From Tani, anyway. I could spot two exceptional jōnin-level shinobi hanging out at the back of the restaurant, and a third who was special for different reasons.

Kakashi.
I could only guess that there was enough scent and sound interference from the hustle and bustle of a restaurant to foil his split-second recognition of me. I hadn't actually laid eyes on my genin teammate for a month, to my oft-stated aggravation, and wasn't passing up this chance.

I headed over.

I could see the moment Kakashi realized I was there, even without my chakra sense confirming the jolt of shock. He made to get up and probably exit the building post-haste, all without looking at me, but the person sitting next to him at the table merely reached out and snagged his flak jacket. I didn't hear what she said, but he sat back down and stared at the tabletop for a bit like I was his executioner.

"Hey," I said once I was finally within the privacy seal's range. "Keisuke Gekkō, reporting for Team Honoka."

"Hey yourself," said the woman who'd caught Kakashi. "Honoka Uchiha. That guy's Ensui Nara. And I'm assuming you know Kakashi-kun, here."

I gave both of my actual new teammates a long, close look.

Ensui Nara was, well, pretty typical-looking for a Nara man. If I had to guess, he was about Sensei's age or a bit older. He was pretty well-tanned, since most clan members didn't bother getting out of the sun during their designated naptimes, with his stiff black hair pulled back into a ponytail that made his head look like a pineapple. He had a very thin, scratchy-looking goatee, too. He had what seemed to be shadows under his eyes, but on second thought they looked more like eyeliner or tattoos since they were green. He was wearing the standard Konoha flak jacket and uniform, and his beady eyes were assessing me even as I was trying to get a handle on him.

Honoka Uchiha, by contrast, was a woman who reminded me more of Tsume Inuzuka than of the polite if distant Mikoto Uchiha. Her black hair was done up in long, gel-reinforced spikes, with her hitai-ate front and center on her forehead. She also had a short ponytail, but only out of the hair caught below her headband. She wore the Uchiha high-collared shirt, but had cut a V-shaped section out of it that ran down to her collarbone. It was also sleeveless, but she had some kind of pressure-applying material covering her arms. She apparently used a shinobi mesh instead of bandages to secure her forearms and calves from bladed attack, too.

Kakashi was smaller than Honoka or Ensui, but he'd hit the start of his adult growth spurt with a vengeance, if I was any judge. Bafflingly, it looked like he was taller than I was already. He was actually wearing his flak jacket and uniform for once, too, with the straps for a tanto’s sheath crossing his chest. I thought, idly, that he needed a haircut after however long he'd been in the field. He was also determinedly not looking at me, even as I sat down across the table from him.

All in all, an interesting team.

"Specialization?" Honoka prompted.

"Kenjutsu, fūjinjutsu, and sensing." I said, snapping my attention back to the team's leader. She had to be a jōnin if she was leading over Kakashi's head. "I got here via summon, so that's another option, but she's exhausted after today. I also know a few healing jutsu, if we need them."

Honoka nodded. "Still sounds like plenty to work with." She tapped her own chest. "Ninjutsu and genjutsu specialist. Might have been able to peg me as soon as you heard the name for all I know." She gave me a shrewd look. "Sent in a request for you specifically, so we'll see if you live up to the hype."
"Hype?" I said blankly.

"You'll hear more as you go. Ensui?" Honoka turned to address our last teammate.

"Tactics and traps." Ensui said, crossing his arms.

Which, as a Nara and a shinobi trained for it, he undoubtedly excelled in. Possibly to hilarious levels. I would have either a lot to learn from him or a lot of seals to make for him, when it came to traps. Probably both, since it was cheaper than buying exploding tags out of pocket.

Kakashi, meanwhile, was a kenjutsu expert with summoning options, Obito's eye for genjutsu and for copying everything Honoka did, and also kind of a tactical genius in his own right when he wasn't being a jerk. Our team would have been overloaded on combat options if not for Ensui, who was probably a better supporter than a fighter if he followed his clan's patterns.

Still, I was the only chūnin on a team of jōnin, and I was not looking forward to being the gofer.

"Now that that's over with, let's eat." Honoka said.

While the waitresses brought out the ingredients for shabu-shabu-style hot-pot, I ran through a few hypothetical scenarios in my head.

What possible mission would require all three of the jōnin at the table and me?

We were in Tani, but if I had to guess I'd say that my teammates had been in the country a lot longer than I had. Whatever mission they'd been running before had put them out here, and maybe Honoka had requested my presence because there had been an unexpected follow-up. Perhaps they'd simply picked up another mission from Tani's head ninja because they were in the area and Tani wasn't known for powerhouses.

What were we planning on doing, breaking into a fortress? Killing a missing-nin?

"Save the questions for after we eat." Honoka told me. She had already broken her chopsticks apart and was tapping them impatiently, waiting for the pot of stock.

"Can I even ask what you why you need me here?" I asked anyway.

"Nope. Shop talk can wait until dessert." Honoka said.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, everyone checked the broth (and all of the other ingredients) for poison as soon as it was all on the table. I checked the rice myself, using a series of paper seals I'd written up for waterborne illness that could do double duty in a pinch. I tested the broth again, too, since broth was technically water. Ish.

We were still in the field, after all.

"Well, if we're not dead in six hours I'll call that a success." Honoka said. She snagged a long strip of beef from the serving plate and dunked it in the broth.

Even if the food in question was good, I was still sometimes surprised by how much most shinobi could eat if given the chance. I was hungry, sure, but Honoka attacked food like she had a grudge against hunger and was going to begin her vengeance by defeating her own. Ensui was a lot quieter, even if bits of rice occasionally flew across the table at him (only to be swatted out of the air by his chopsticks). Kakashi, well, he was doing his food-teleportation thing. One second the bowl of rice he had was full, and the second it wasn't.
I ate at a much more sedate pace because I didn't want to get a massive stomachache later.

By the time we were finally done eating, Ensui was practically falling asleep where he was sitting out of sheer boredom and it was pitch black outside. Kakashi, Honoka, and I finished the broth between us. Honoka paid the bill, commenting that it was one of the better takes on hot-pot she'd had even in Konoha and making the waitress blush.

Kakashi hadn't spoken a single word to me the entire time.

Then we piled out of the Akabeko and headed for whatever inn Honoka had paid for. I had to wonder what her expense report for this mission would look like. Like, "sorry, mission-desk-nin, but I just couldn't pass up a chance for hot-pot!"

I could barely make out the words "Aoiya" on the front sign. It seemed like a shinobi-friendly inn for some reason. Maybe the way the gutters and roofing tiles seemed reinforced from here.

"The inn has pretty good shaved ice." Honoka said when we approached.

"Nope." I said. "I'm not eating anything else tonight. I'll explode."

Ensui looked at Kakashi.

"I'm not interested." Kakashi said.

"Outvoted." Ensui concluded.

"Fine, fine." Honoka said. "Let's just get our rooms. Share or split?"

"Split." I said. "As long as they're adjacent." If something happened at night, we needed to be able to reach each other fast enough to avoid getting confused about friendly and unfriendly fire. If I attacked, say, Kakashi, I'd want it to at least be on purpose.

"Three to a room would be difficult." Honoka commented. She was still waiting for the hotel's receptionist to come back with a report on the rooms. Ergo, how many were available and where. "Kakashi with you and Ensui with me should work."

"I thought you'd want to split along gender lines, Honoka." Ensui said.

Honoka paused for a moment, then her eyes went Sharingan red as she looked at me. Then, "Ah. Whoops, my mistake. Are you comfortable with that arrangement?"

I had the feeling that Honoka had only just realized I was female. So much for the solidarity of another androgynous kunoichi, if even she couldn't tell. I'd need to check in with people like Fū and Kurotsuchi someday and see if the same thing happened to them.

"Yeah, it'll work." I said.

Kakashi might have had a problem with it, though, if the way his chakra was twitching was saying anything.

"Again, sorry. Bit of a coin flip since most teams only have one kunoichi and that's not guaranteed. Already knew Obito and Kakashi here, so you were the only one left." Honoka said. Her Sharingan had gone inactive again by the time the receptionist came back.

"It's fine. It happens a lot." I said.
As it turned out, we did get adjacent rooms. Kakashi and I were assigned to the one on the end of one of the inn's second-floor hallways, giving us two windows to trap instead of just one. Ensui and Honoka were in the one next to ours, and had set up the expectation that if anything *did* happen at night that they would come straight through the wall to help. Apparently, it was a common arrangement for shinobi.

I dumped my stuff on the first futon, which was closest to the door and the bathroom. Kakashi silently claimed the one closest to the two windows, dropping his flak jacket and tantō sheath straps next to it.

You could cut the atmosphere in that room with a knife.

*Can you do this?* I asked Isobu.

**I think so.**

If Kakashi and I started talking, there was a non-zero chance we could start arguing. This could mean, frankly, anything from a permanent team breakup to an Isobu incident.

I *wanted* to be careful, but pussyfooting around hadn't gotten me anywhere. In fact, between Kushina's due date and other issues, it had in fact cost me a whole month I could have used an extra head in the game. Kakashi was a planner, sometimes, but what he really offered was *perspective.*

"Why have you been avoiding me?" I asked, because by that point going for the throat looked like a good idea.

Kakashi shot me a brief glance, but all he said was, "I've been on missions."

The hell he had. I was willing to give him this week, and maybe last week, but I had felt him in the village before that and I wasn't about to let him get away with it.

"Try again." I told him.

For a long moment, Kakashi and I were caught in a staring contest with our chakra levels steadily rising in challenge. He hadn't pushed his headband up, meaning he didn't think a fight was going to break out, and I was peripherally glad that he hadn't. The last thing we needed was Isobu joining in.

There was a thump from the other side of the wall, making us jump.

"Save it for tomorrow!" was Honoka's muffled order through the drywall.

Kakashi used my moment of distraction to slip out of reach and into the bathroom. I heard the lock click behind him.

Dammit.

I *could* pounce on him the second he came out, but that reminded me a bit too much of Gai's usual tactics. Instead, I searched around in my things for my clothing scroll, which had a set of pajamas in it somewhere.

If he wanted to put things off, I wasn't gonna wait on him forever. *I was,* however, going to get to the bottom of things by the time the mission kicked off properly. If, you know, I knew what the hell I'd been called out here for. Honoka still hadn't explained that.

I ignored Kakashi when he got out, except to head past him into the bathroom.
See if *he* liked being avoided.

When I got out, he was pretending to be asleep. I decided to let him.

After we had breakfast the next morning, Honoka finally decided to explain what the mission was.

Tanigakure, in the Land of Rivers, was actually a pretty small village as far as shinobi villages went. It was smaller than Kusa, Taki, or Ame, though marginally larger than Yugakure. As such, they had a much smaller number of missing-nin than any of the other militaries in their immediate area. They didn't really have ANBU, or at least not the same way that we did, and they didn't have Kiri-style hunter-nin either.

And unless they sent the head ninja himself into battle, they couldn't handle missing-nin from other countries.

"We're looking for someone who seems to be a missing-nin from Shimogakure, though the rumors are spotty." Honoka explained as we headed out from the main gates on foot. "From the description we were given, our target is an effeminate blond man with green eyes, standing about one-point-eight meters tall and weighing about sixty-eight kilograms. Tani forces think he has some kind of mind-control jutsu, since they've been attacked by their own shinobi on two occasions so far."

"That sounds like a Yamanaka." I commented, and Ensui frowned.

"A Yamanaka wouldn't have allowed Tani to take their shinobi back." Ensui corrected.

"Soooo…dead or alive?" I asked.

"Dead." Kakashi said, still not looking at me. When I glared at him, Honoka waved me off.

"Specifically, Tanigakure asked us to make an example out of him." Honoka said to my sudden look of blank incomprehension. We…we didn't do that. Konoha didn't employ terror tactics openly, not like Iwagakure. ANBU, sure, but…

"Stop being dramatic." Ensui said. He had his hands shoved in his pockets and still looked tired, even after a full night's sleep.

"All right, fine. Really, we don't need to go overboard." Honoka said. "The problem with this particular guy is that he's got a hardened fortress out here somewhere, layered in powerful genjutsu. There won't be anyone near it—apparently he's been letting loose by killing villagers in the area."

"I'm still not seeing why Tani shinobi couldn't take this guy out." I said.

"I think they would if they could find it." Honoka said. She pointed to Kakashi, then me, then Ensui. "Tracker, sensor, and a Nara. Tanigakure doesn't have this level of specialized skill in the entire village."

…That explained a lot.

Even if they *had*, sort of like how Ame had produced Salamander Hanzō, it didn't mean much if they couldn't maintain their strength over time. And wars cut down on a lot of that.

"That's kind of disappointing." I said. I sighed. "So, what's this mystery guy's name? How are we planning on taking him out?"

"Frontal assault's probably out." Honoka mused. "Too many traps. Hm…"
"We were planning on reconnaissance for the first two days." Ensui said, explaining where the hell that thought had been going.

"What do we know about enemy reinforcements?" I asked, glancing at Kakashi. He still hadn't spoken directly to me in front of Honoka or Ensui, which I imagined had to be raising red flags for them. What if we couldn't work together?

"We have unsubstantiated reports of at least two minions." Honoka said. "One of them uses fire jutsu and the other one uses wind and genjutsu, but there may be more. Tani really didn't get a good look at them before calling for help."

Well, at least having an Uchiha on the team would neutralize some of that. Isobu could (probably) take care of my issues with genjutsu, but I wasn't sure of that just yet.

And as a side note, my opinion of Tanigakure was in freefall. I supposed there must have been a reason that Akatsuki ran roughshod over them and established a base in the country in the future, even aside from the fact that Amegakure was so close.

"Can't crack the place like an egg—no Sannin around." Honoka went on. Most teams, to be honest, didn't have the resources for the powerhouse domination method of combat. Hell, most of the time even Tailed Beast Hosts weren't used that way—we were a lot more effective while in the open and steamrolling people outside of their fortifications.

"And we have nowhere near the resources for a siege." I said, thinking of how little shinobi cared for staying in one place for too long. Fortresses were meant to be infiltrated or exploded, depending on the skills of the attacking force. Alternately, shinobi could simply wait out the defenders, but it went against our penchant for garroting people in the dark.

I'd go with "exploded"—I was pretty sure I could draw a seal on nearly any door to blow it right off its hinges.

Though obviously I would have to get well clear of the site if I was going to be blowing apart a castle's gates, I was still curious about what, exactly, I was expected to do on this mission.

"Ensui and Kakashi will work together to make a plan." Honoka said, winking. "Consider it a test."

Kakashi straightened a little.

What the heck.

"With help, of course." Honoka said.

What the heck, again.

Much like most people, I didn't like it when people had entire conversations in subtext right in front of me without cluing me in.

"Are you deliberately messing with me, and does this mission have some kind of hidden purpose everyone except me is in on?" I asked bluntly.

Honoka grinned. "Good, you're catching on."

I gave her a flat look.

"Oh, don't worry about it."
Of course, her saying that only made me worry more.

I let it drop, though. I still remembered Sensei's impromptu lesson about not punching out annoying senior officers, after all. Even if the lack of information could get everyone (okay, me) horribly killed. We continued walking in pairs—Honoka boisterously talking my ear off, Ensui and Kakashi exchanging significant looks—for most of the morning and into the afternoon after lunch.

Summary: Find this guy named Sho, kill his minions, and then kill him, whereby the entire region around his hidey-hole shall breathe a deep sigh of relief and we will get paid.

It'll do.

Chapter End Notes

Song title pulled from A Great Big World.
Chapter Summary

Kei: Clarify some things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So, uh. Fun facts about fears.

Everyone has them. Ghost stories prey on them. Boggarts feed on them.

I swear this is relevant, just hang on.

As we headed into the lowlands, traveling at shinobi speed once we were off-road, I started getting pings off of the surrounding environment.

Genjutsu traps were rare when compared to snares, pitfalls, and mines. I didn’t generally think about them much, since Kurenai was one of the few people I knew who had any inclination to make them. I mean, shinobi could make them using seals and I’d toyed with the idea, but self-sustained genjutsu trap seemed more trouble than it was worth. I had a thing for just killing people if the other option was snaring them in a genjutsu. There were other ways to catch a mouse.

Part of the problem existed only because I’d had no idea how to produce proper genjutsu until about a week ago.

The point is that we suddenly started running into a minefield of them. And that, even if I hadn’t been somewhat on edge from the thing with Kakashi and the many unknowns of this mission, made me jumpy. I alerted Honoka as soon as I realized what I was feeling, but she just had us press onward.

I know Konoha can play a little fast and loose with individual lives, but really?

Out of all my myriad fears, uncertainty was the one that came to mind then. It’s in my nature to doubt—more so now than ever, when the future seemed to be up in the air. It was out of my hands (not that it had ever been in them), which opened a Pandora’s box of possibilities.

And if you give a genjutsu an opening, you’re dead.

Well, if the caster knows.

Since it’s a lot harder to hit targets of multiple species, we went through our search with all eight of Kakashi’s summon dogs patrolling around us and Tsuruya flying high overhead—well out of range of most genjutsu. Animal brains are wired differently than human ones, obviously, and chakra interacts with their senses to a different degree. Illusions with no scent components weren’t going to fool shinobi on most days, but it got about a thousand times harder to fool a dog if one was around. Same thing for birds, but with sight and air currents.

Basically we had enough anti-genjutsu tactics on our team to make Kurenai scream with frustration.
And I still got that weird itch between my shoulder blades that told me I was being watched by unfriendly eyes. That sensation was followed very shortly by Tsuruya’s chakra dropping from cruising altitude toward us, and Pakkun bounding back towards our group.

Oh, and the distant sensation of hostile human chakra.

*Here it goes, here it goes again,* I hummed mentally, as Pakkun barked and Kakashi signaled that enemies were inbound. In another few seconds, I confirmed that there were two attackers total at the same time Honoka’s hand signs indicated just that.

Since my katana was at my waist, I preemptively wrapped my left hand around the steel scabbard, thumb against the guard. I was itching to try out my mother’s style with a full-sized sword in real combat.

I know they tell people not to go looking for a fight, but a fight was about to find us. That made it all right, in a layman’s karma sort of way.

*How fast?* Kakashi asked with his hands, shooting a glance at me even as his other seven dogs converged on our position.

I thought about it. *ETA 45 seconds.* That gave us enough time for a rudimentary trap.

All eight of Kakashi’s dogs vanished into the underbrush at their master’s soft whistle, suppressing their chakra signatures better than most humans ever could. Kakashi made a darting motion with his hand that I didn’t understand, but Honoka and Ensui took off as soon as they saw it.

So much for knowing him. I didn’t run off mostly because Kakashi motioned *stay, follow* in quick succession.

Strategically, it made sense to get the Nara out of the line of fire. Kakashi and I generally fought at a range of less than three meters if we wanted to remain effective, while Ensui’s shadow techniques needed space and shadows to really be dangerous. As our group’s strategist, he also needed to be outside of the main brawl to see what the hell was going on.

As for Honoka, well, I kind of assumed she would have the knowledge and the chops to set the entire area on fire if I didn’t do it first. All to give us a chance to bug out if things got too metaphorically hot.

I settled my stance, weight mostly on my back leg.

Our pursuers were not really making any effort to approach stealthily. That could be hilarious or really bad, depending on…

Tsuruya blew into the break in the canopy, wind-shaping chakra whipping air everywhere, just as a massive fireball came roaring down on us from above. The fireball hit her wind-wall and exploded like a tomato on concrete.

Kakashi and I both shot toward the left-hand trees as Tsuruya launched a brace of knife-like feathers into the woods ahead of her. Then she rocketed into the air again, leaving us to our devices.

I caught the underside of a branch and spun on it like a gymnast, thanking the stars for my thick flying gloves. While upside-down, I caught a glimpse of the fireball-thrower and made a face at him even as flaming leaves cascaded everywhere.

I could be childish sometimes.
First glance: Average red-haired yellow-eyed muscle-bound tattooed jackass. His partner was similar, only smaller because apparently they cut down on steroid use for kunoichi, and with white hair and a spectacular tan.

Second glance: *Wait a fucking minute.*

The thing about *déjà vu* and combat is that one doesn’t have to affect the other if you don’t let it. I’d gotten used to fighting the Chinatsugumi over the last week, even if it was just in sparring. It wasn’t a big deal—they didn’t remember things, thank god, and frankly I was starting to forget the specifics of their stories. It was more like fighting neighbors than anything.

And just because I’d run into more ghosts didn’t mean I had to stop and give them the time of day. If they were trying to kill us, they got exactly as much sympathy as they deserved—ergo, none.

Third glance: *If these idiots are who I think they are, I’m not going to regret that decision.*

I let go of the branch and took off like a shot after Kakashi, making sure to whip it back into my pursuers’ faces.

The branch exploded as soon as I was out of range.

It was followed by nearly everything I’d touched in the last fifteen seconds. The ground, drifting leaves, *the tree*…

Kakashi gave me a *what the hell was that* look when I caught up to him via copious use of explosives.

Funny how I hadn’t remembered how to do that until a full month after getting Isobu. I never *had* done it before, had I? The Dreamer had pushed me further than I had expected she would be able to, only to drop the information in our collective consciousness with everything else. I’d had to go digging through the accumulated pile of random stuff we’d thought together before I could even get close to finding it. Sort of like finding that toy you forgot about years ago under your bed, really.

Touch explosives were a pretty cool perk to get out of all of that mental trauma, I have to say.

In the background, the Terrible Twosome routine was screaming their heads off at us.

…Hm. In hindsight, maybe baiting them to us via attempted murder wasn’t the best way to make sure they followed. Sure, it *worked*, but there was a pretty good chance they would have come after us just for running. Shinobi had a chase instinct that put a hound’s to shame, sometimes.

It was another thing to add to my mental notes for the after-mission debrief.

As for Kakashi, I shrugged by way of explanation.

He rolled his visible eye.

I felt Honoka and Ensui rushing ahead on our left flank, faster than I would have thought possible for ordinary shinobi. If I had to guess, Honoka was probably carrying Ensui or somehow augmenting his speed or something. Either way, our new friends were going to get an unpleasant surprise when we let them catch up.

Speaking of new friends, they were moving relatively slowly for shinobi.

After a certain point in the speed game—with the obvious exceptions of Sensei, A, and Nine-Tails
Chakra Mode Naruto—everyone at a certain level fought at effectively the same pace. Faster than anyone who didn’t deserve to be in their weight class, of course, but if you put the adult Yamato up against Kakashi you wouldn’t really be able to say either of them got the edge in reaction time or anything, as long as you didn’t let Kakashi use Obito’s eye.

And these two were either an order of magnitude slower than we were, or they were toying with us.

In the heavily forested valley walls common to the Land of Rivers, there were always places where the canopy threw the shadows on the ground into sharp relief.

Ensui’s shadows slunk around us as we made it home free and crossed the kill-zone unscathed. In our mad dash, we passed Honoka crouched in a tree, her hands locked into the final seal for what felt like a killer genjutsu and leapt over Ensui in the underbrush, lying flat with his hands in the Rat seal.

We ran on like we hadn’t seen anything, of course, but our pursuers weren’t so lucky. Just as we broke off—left for me and right for Kakashi, with Tsuruya making a long, slow turn overhead toward my new position—and started the process of flanking our targets, Team Rocket plowed into the trap.

The kunoichi stumbled first, momentarily, but that was all it ever took. When her muscle-headed partner pulled up short on his approach, Ensui got them both.

If I was a betting sort of person, I’d have made money on him saying, “Shadow Possession complete.”

It seemed to be a thing with field-operating Nara clan members.

“Nice catch.” Honoka didn’t bother to emerge from the trees. Following her lead, neither did anyone else.

From the way that the pair’s eyes were roaming around, Honoka had done something involving auditory input—they looked a little like people trying to find out where a sound came from in an echo chamber. Neither of them seemed to have keyed into the fact that their reactions didn’t match. If the man twitched right, the woman twitched left.

I narrowed my eyes. Some skills carried over, didn’t they?

If so, well, I was going to get a chance to see what my foreknowledge meant in this spotty not-future I’d made by accident. Kakkō had been a trial run in comparison. I’d known, yes, but Obito had gotten a convenient power boost and we’d run headlong into him before we got around to putting him in the ground. There hadn’t been time for events to shift and change his reactions, not really.

These two…these two would be a sort of test of their own. How much could someone change within the same basic parameters? The more time passed, the less I’d really know.

Well, in my head, anyway. In my gut, things were a little spottier.

Rikuto still used bows.

Shirozora froze things.

And this kunoichi…

Her eyes snapped back into focus. Before I could do anything, her chakra boomed and Ensui swore and all of us immediately scrambled to our fallback position as fast as we could. I felt the instant that
her partner also got loose—turned out he had more chakra than she did.

Not more than I did with Isobu, of course, but going on the whole S-rank secret thing meant I wasn’t exactly willing or able to bust his chakra out of storage. For one, I’d probably die. For another, everyone around me would probably die and then our mission would also fail and I’d never be able to get Kakashi to actually talk to me again.

Yeah, not happening.

Kakashi signaled with his off hand, *Engage*, even as he drew a kunai with his right. His dogs were running around again, crashing through the brush to mask the sounds of our approach. Tsuruya soared over all of our heads, and I could feel her eyes on us.

Honoka dropped from the canopy next to me and landed in a crouch practically on top of me.

I glanced up, waiting for the Uchiha’s input.

She mouthed, *Go*. Profound, that.

Well, if both of the Sharingan-users on this team wanted us to beat the Gruesome Twosome into submission, I wasn’t really in a position to argue. Even if neither of them necessarily knew that. I certainly wasn’t going to fill them in. Kakashi already had enough to go on.

All right, up and at ‘em. Five meters off, I could feel Kakashi do the same thing. Ensui and Honoka were apparently staying out of the thick of things, again.

And then I rushed in, because apparently I’d been voted “best tank” at the last cosmic game of D&D and Kakashi wanted to let me trip over the first part of the fight and be the best distraction ever. Which was bullshit. But anyway…

Launching directly into shinobi speed and using Mom’s advanced draw techniques at a run was one of those things that should have made mincemeat out of most opponents. Using chakra scalpel shaping to add an edge? Should have done more.

Only all of that means jack shit when you miss. Like I did.

Well, I missed the guy, anyway. The kunoichi blocked instead, with solid steel tonfa, and throwing all of my weight behind the blow only sent both of us skidding toward the trees.

I recovered first and made sure to step back out of her range.

Tonfa are cool, yes, but they have really short range in comparison.

While all that was going on, Kakashi and one of his dogs—Bisuke, going by the voice—were keeping the guy from smashing into my back. Going by the noise, and by the fact that Kakashi’s chakra didn’t seem exceptionally strained, he was handling himself just fine.

“Who are you supposed to be?” my opponent sneered—and it was a really good one, as sneers went. A-plus for sheer disdain, body language and all. C-minus for getting knocked around by a fourteen-year-old.

I sheathed my katana in preparation for a second draw. I didn’t say anything and my face stayed blank. I wasn’t on a team with Kakashi for nothing, after all.

“The strong, silent type, huh? Typical.” My opponent tossed her head, sounding more irritated than
anything. “Why can’t I ever get the pretty ones?”

A split second later, her second tonfa slammed against my scabbard when I blocked her “surprise” attack. I felt the ground slide under me a little—she could hit pretty hard—but just digging my toes in kept me from losing balance.

“Stop taunting the little bitch and help me!” snapped her partner, who—from what I could sense—was getting a giant bird, several dogs, and one teenaged jōnin to the face all at once.

“Oh, and just because you’re outnumbered suddenly you start screaming for Mommy?” she made a scoffing noise. “All right, fine.” To me, she said, “Hate to cut and run—”

I caught her thrown kunai one-handed, without waiting for her to finish such a corny one-liner.

“Buzzkill,” she grumbled. Then the woman in front of me melted away into so much mud.

…I hate Earth Clones.

Meanwhile, the fight between Kakashi and Thing One and Thing Two was a little more even than Thing One versus everyone. Even as I rushed to join the resulting fight and make it a four-on-two rather than a three-on-two match, the guy lashed out and kicked Pakkun into the undergrowth. Bull’s jaws got caught on the woman’s tonfa, unable to bring their full crushing power to bear, and then the guy focused on Kakashi properly.

Initial assessments were off—I hadn’t realized it before, but he was easily twice Kakashi’s size and about as tall as Jiraiya. He was also inked up from both sets of fingertips to the base of his neck, in patterns that looked a lot like seals to me. My chakra sense wasn’t getting an accurate bead on him, since there was so much flaring off the seal patterns on his arms and just kind of in general.

As for the woman, she was only a little taller or broader than I was, and had a oddly skinny frame that made her look like she was stretched out on a skeleton a little too big for her. Both of her tanned shoulders had additional sealing work that looked like it was the same as the man’s, but it was a lot less intricate and spat out less chakra.

Together, they were actually comically unbalanced as a duo (and put me in mind of Bulk and Skull, for what it was worth) and I was still pretty sure they were gonna take a shot at killing us.

Kakashi and I exchanged looks. We might not have known our enemies’ capabilities or even their names, but we did know each other and our fighting styles. We’d figure it out.

I went high; he went low. It was a well-thought-out strategy that took us moments to execute that had absolutely nothing to do with the relative positions of our summoned animals.

A couple of Kakashi’s dogs remained resolutely out of the fight while Guruko was our ground-bound backup and Tsuruya rained steel feathers down around us. I slashed and caught nothing but empty air as Bulk jerked backwards like he was attached to some kind of chain. Skull looked like she was about to bat me out of the air, since being in midair meant being vulnerable, but Kakashi grabbed her trailing leg and pulled it into a joint lock and knocked them both to the ground.

I rolled when I landed and was almost immediately on the defensive—Guruko had taken a punch to the face that had exploded and I didn’t know what the heck had happened.

“Guruko!” Kakashi yelled, but two of his other dogs had already started steering their stunned brother toward the woods, even as Tsuruya came crashing down through the canopy to keep our enemies from finishing what they started. Fifteen meters of wingspan and who-even-knew how
many kilos of gigantic bird made an effective roadblock.

Don’t let my casual caustic critique of this situation fool you—I was fucking pissed off.

*No one* hurts a dog on my watch.

**Exploding punches?** Isobu asked in a bored tone.

*Probably.*

Yes, I could see where the seal lines would conveniently converge on the man’s knuckles…

Right, then.

I opened my kunai holster and pulled out a pre-prepared, sealed kunai. Assuming his seals were contact-based, I was probably going to test the explosion-resistance of those hands by stacking explosions and seeing what gave out first.

I’d put my bet on bone rather than steel.

While Kakashi popped off two lightning-enhanced kunai and both missed, I threw my own and hit one of his in midair, making it bounce back toward the right target. Mine, on the other hand, went toward the kunoichi and exploded in midair.

“What the hell kind of kids are these?” the man snarled, since he was suddenly missing a chunk of his shoulder. Go, Kakashi.

“Who cares? Kill them!” the kunoichi snapped back, and blurred out of sight. Body Flicker, probably, and I leapt back to figure out where she went.

Then I got a length of steel to the back of my left leg.

I went down hard on my back, but I didn’t really get the wind knocked out of me. Practically one of the first things you learn in the Academy is how to fall without hurting yourself, so that wasn’t a big deal. No, there wasn’t a problem with the impact or with pain or anything.

But then my brain froze up because, as I theorized later, turtles and being flipped over didn’t really mix well.

It took me a bit longer than normal to get back to my feet, mostly because I was having trouble breathing and Isobu’s chakra was running through my coils with enough force and intensity to imply it was trying to set my blood on fire. You know, the usual stuff. Funny how being a jinchūriki didn’t actually mean I was immune to the new chakra signature in my coils.

Isobu must have been afraid of *everything*.

By the time I was up again, if shaky, there was a bone-rattling explosion. And it wasn’t one of mine, since I knew better than to target Kakashi. Speaking of whom, he went rolling across the clearing—slightly on fire—half a second later.

From what I pieced together later, Kakashi made the mistake of trying to block Tall, Dark, and Punchy rather than just dodging. Probably because the kunoichi was boxing him in. I didn’t see that part, but it was kind of implied since I was on the ground being useless instead of a target.

He stopped rolling once he’d reached my feet and beaten the flames on his sleeve out. Overall, Kakashi was a bit singed while I was a little bit on the bonkers side (yay, Isobu), which was certainly
not how I’d have wanted the fight to go. I was also a bit confused—at the beginning of all this, Punch and Judy hadn’t been this strong. Or maybe they’d been going easy on us?

Fear hadn’t settled in, though. Not since Isobu’s outburst.

“Shadow Clone Jutsu!” yelled the shinobi, and then suddenly we were surrounded on all sides by weaker copies of the guy in question.

For fuck’s sake.

Kakashi and I stood back-to-back and got ready for the crowd fight.

Spamming clones wasn’t a viable tactic for anyone not named Naruto, so I had to wonder what their plan actually was.

The kunoichi started giggling.

…double fuck. *That* was never a good sign. Nor was the fact that the clone to my left had started to glow a bit.

“Clone Great Explosion!”

*Triple* fuck.

Kakashi and I linked hands as soon as the second clone lit up, with my reaction time marginally outpacing both the impending doom and Kakashi’s split-second twitch/retreat impulses. *That*…was a question for another time, preferably when we both weren’t about to die.

*Replacement Jutsu!*

And, to make a long story short, I learned right after that why they generally don’t encourage Side-Along Apparition ninja-style. For reference, it feels a little like being punched in the teeth. Even for as short a distance as I was traveling, even if Kakashi was *also* using the exact same technique but with a destination about half a meter away, and even if Honoka and Ensui stood guard over our endpoint…ow.

For the second time in five minutes, it took me a bit to get reoriented. And to stop feeling terrible.

But hey, it was still better than being exploded.

“Disappointing,” Honoka’s voice said as I sat up.

Kakashi was already up by then, but he wasn’t looking at any of us. I could only guess at what he was feeling in that moment. I was certainly ashamed, but my feelings were a jumble at that moment and picking just *one* out of the mess was tough going.

Honoka shook her head. “Ensui.”

Ensui nodded.

And with that, both of them waded into the battlefield we’d just vacated.

I sighed internally, even as Honoka set the entire clearing on fire with ninja wire and all of our summoned animals had to flee the immediate area.

“Care to explain why you didn’t use Obito’s eye at all back there?” I asked, because it had been
bothering me. With the Sharingan, Kakashi could make me look like a rank amateur in sheer speed and probably run rings around me while making it look easy. Without…well, we were nearly on par. Maybe I had the edge while Isobu was freaking out and the dice fell my way, but that worked on the assumption that I wouldn’t just freeze up in pain or induced fear.

“No.” Kakashi said bluntly. He got up and set off into the trees, probably to circle around the fight.

Well, that was another opportunity wasted.

I was about to continue in that vein for a while—probably should mention that mental self-flagellation was a hobby of mine—when I felt a surge of chakra that was, for once, not an explosion. All the exploding things were the other way, and most of that had to do with Honoka and Uchiha fire jutsu and overcompensation for something. The chakra I’d felt was more likely genjutsu than ninjutsu.

And like the idiot I was, I went off in search of the source the sensation.

So, back to the connection with genjutsu traps and fears and all the wonderful/awful things you can run into as a shinobi.

Kakashi was standing stock-still in the shade of one of the big broad-leafed trees in the area, apparently either super-focused on something or possibly frozen in place. As I approached, I watched him shake off whatever it was—felt like a genjutsu—just as the last flares of wild chakra finally died down. Then both of us looked toward where Ensui crashed through the woods a moment later, accompanied by two of Kakashi’s dogs.

I could only assume that the others had de-summoned themselves by that point.

“Both of you need to learn how to interrogate a prisoner.” Ensui said flatly.

“Really?” I asked reflexively. Because, as everyone knew, field interrogations were by necessity often…messier…than what Torture and Interrogation could do. Mostly because field teams often didn’t have Yamanakas handy, like we didn’t.

Well, to be more precise: We got less out of them. Obviously in an actual torture chamber, Konoha would get everything.

Kakashi rolled his eyes at me. “Come on.”

“Ordinarily, you would be able to take a prisoner back to Konoha for information extraction.” Ensui said as we walked. “Other times, it’s not an option.”

I was getting a very bad feeling about the entire situation.

Ensui either didn’t pick up on my discomfort or didn’t care. Bit of a coin toss, there. “When you’re in the field, compensate using your team’s abilities.”

The battlefield, such as it was, had been almost entirely leveled since Kakashi and I had made our daring escape. Tsuruya stood to one side, wings neatly folded and another dog—Bisuke again—on her back. Across the torn earth and occasional flaming bush tableau, Honoka was standing over our former opponents. Both of them seemed to have taken Tsuruya’s projectile feathers and Honoka’s kunai to the legs, and had other holes in them courtesy of what looked like Shadow Sewing and more than a few ninja-wired shuriken.

“Just in time.” Honoka said to us. Or to me. It was never really clear. “Help keep them from bleeding
Oh. I hopped to it when she added a glare for emphasis.

“Save your chakra.” Honoka told me sharply. “Use bandages instead this time.”

I pulled a roll of bandages out of my hip med-kit and got to work. Mostly it was going to be tourniquets. If Honoka didn’t want these two alive…well, I didn’t have a lot of pity for them. Not if they’d stayed consistent across reincarnations like the others.

…I still didn’t know their names, here.

“You don’t want to take them back to the village?” Ensui asked.

“Nah. No point—their boss is in the area if they’re both here.” She loomed over both of her prone captives. “Isn’t he?”

Dead silence. Defiant silence, possibly, but the longer they kept it up the more likely it was going to make the transition to “dead.”

I mean, it would anyway. But there was no real reason to speed it along.

“Not gonna talk, huh? No problem.” And with that, Honoka stood over the man, jerked his chin up, and activated her Sharingan. Eye contact was probably going to prove fatal. “Kid, get the other one.”

“No, don’t you dare”—the kunoichi began, but Honoka caught her flailing arm and broke it in one swift motion that made me wince in sympathy even if she had been trying to kill us earlier.

For a long second, nothing happened. You know, aside from the muffled screaming.

Honoka blinked and the red-haired guy collapsed like his strings had been cut. I…didn’t really want to see what a fully mature Sharingan could do to someone without any mental defenses. Hell, they made mincemeat out of people who did have them, as Future-Itachi was so fond of proving.

“And…?” Ensui prompted.

Honoka shrugged. “Their names are Hidari and Migi. Pseudonyms, but who cares? They work for Sho, like I suspected, and we’re about ten kilometers away from his stronghold.”

“Left” and “Right”? Really? Even for stage names or whatever, it just contrived to sound stupid. Neither of them had addressed each other in the fight, though, so I didn’t know who was who anyway.

Kakashi, meanwhile, stood like a statue over the kunoichi. At no point had he even lifted his hand to his headband.


Kakashi still didn’t move.

Honoka sighed. “This’s clearly been building up for a while.” She turned to Ensui. “Survey the area. There might be more flunkies in the area, or genjutsu traps, or something.”

I felt Ensui’s hand come down on my shoulder even as he was nodding assent. With zero subtlety, the Nara steered me away from the former battlefield and from the two prisoners. Or one. Depended if the other one recovered before bleeding to death.
“What was that about?” I asked, though bits of what I was pretty sure was the answer were starting to assemble in my head. Like jigsaw puzzle pieces.

“Honoka needs a minute to speak to your teammate.” Ensui said. Which was fucking obvious, thank you.

“That’s not what I meant.” I said.

No, what I meant was that Kakashi was acting oddly enough that I would have recommended him for a psych eval if he had been literally anyone else. It wasn’t like he was in a downward spiral like we’d both been stuck in after Kannabi. It seemed more like the situation with that one training accident and his constant avoidance of me were starting to affect his performance in the field. Which, from what I remembered of his canonical character arc, was usually a major warning sign for a mental breakdown if it went unnoticed. Kakashi was uncannily strong in terms of resistance to physical and/or mental torture, but he had limits when it came to his frankly overwhelming guilt complex.

I was pretty sure that, out of the events of Kannabi that could have been immensely traumatizing to anyone, Kakashi blaming himself for Obito’s “death” did the most damage to his mental state. It was the same way for me, but I hadn’t been tortured.

“I know. But that’s not your business right now.” Ensui said.

It would be, if this pattern held up and something stupid happened.

“Fine, then. What do you need to talk to me about while Kakashi’s getting yelled at?” I asked, crossing my arms defensively.

Ensui raised one eyebrow pointedly.

“From what I’ve heard, you and Kakashi both have access to powerful A-ranked ninjutsu.” Ensui remarked. “I didn’t see even one in that last fight.”

“I’ve been having issues with chakra control lately.” I admitted, a little annoyed. I couldn’t tell him about Isobu—well, technically I could—but chakra control was a major reason not to use upper-level combat ninjutsu. A shinobi wasn’t worth much in a fight if he got ‘sploded by his own techniques.”I can’t tell you what Kakashi was doing, other than not using his Sharingan. It’s a major contributor to the whole ‘this kid has A-ranked ninjutsu’ thing.”

Unless he was Deidara, I guess.

Basically all of it came down to technical difficulties. In every sense of the phrase.

Ensui paused. “What kinds of issues?”

“Turns out the upper-ranked mission I took did funny things to my chakra coils. I’m not allowed to say more than that.” I replied. Technicalities everywhere!

“I’d advise you not to say that to Honoka while she’s still upset.” Ensui said with a sigh. “This may be a light mission for us, but taking along a walking liability was not what we planned on.”

“It’s not like I knew what would make it worse.” I said. At his surprised look, I added, “I was on leave when Honoka called me up, and kind of in physical therapy. The Hokage’s letter made it clear that I was supposed to report in despite whatever else was going on.”
Ensui wordlessly pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Sorry.” I added with a wince. “I thought you knew.”

“No, don’t apologize.” Ensui sighed. “I’ll see what we can do to get you back on track, even if this was a failure. As an apology from me, if nothing else.”

Uh…okay?

“This whole thing is really about Kakashi, isn’t it?” I asked.

Ensui gave me a “what do you think?” look.

Point taken. I honestly should have figured that out yesterday, but that wasn’t relevant anymore.

Well, time to get to the part that was still important. “I pegged you and Honoka as ANBU-level in skill the minute I walked into the Akabeko. You’re scouting Kakashi.”

“And if we were?” Ensui asked. Genin-level redirection. Obviously, he just didn’t give a shit that I’d figured it out.

“Then I’d ask what I could do to help.” Well, kinda. Kakashi in ANBU had been devastatingly effective and still could be. A lot of series badasses were former ANBU, too. ANBU missions were a crapton more dangerous than normal ones, but frankly Team Minato had weathered worse than the standard mission-load just because of who our sensei was. At peak performance, I wasn’t too shabby myself. But Kakashi’s mental state at the moment was best described as “liability,” possibly more than mine was. I, for one, wasn’t up for possible recruitment.

Er, I think.

Kakashi in ANBU. I knew what I thought about that—what I felt was more ambiguous.

If this last month was any indicator, the idea of Kakashi avoiding me—or simply being unavailable for shenanigans—was not going to be any more fun than it had been. Even if he’d be on missions rather than simply trying to put as much space between us as the village could physically allow. After spending a significant chunk of our careers together, not running missions with the full Team Minato was going to be an uncomfortable transition.

One I’d already been unwillingly making, yes, but still not fun.

“At the moment, nothing.” Ensui said. At my skeptical look, he said, “Honoka is handling the situation.”

Riiiiight. This entire thing was going to explode in our faces sooner or later. I just knew it.

“At this point, I wouldn’t trust Sensei to handle him.” I said flatly.

Ensui raised an eyebrow. Impertinent, yes, but I think it got the point across.

“Well, maybe him.” I admitted after a second. “But not anyone else, and definitely not in the field. So what are you really going to be testing him on out here?”

Pffft, yeah right.

“You don’t need to know that. Just follow the mission and it’ll become clear.”
I didn’t have the clout to overrule that order, though. The best I could do would be to confront Kakashi on my own and figure out what was going on myself. Regardless of the other circumstances, it all hinged on him.

…Shit.

At about that point, Honoka and Kakashi trudged through the now-destroyed woods to meet us. Kakashi was staring resolutely at a point somewhere over my right shoulder, while Honoka put a hand on her hip and said flatly, “We’ve got a location. We’ll hit them tomorrow, understood?”

Yes, ma’am. Of course, knowing how soul-searching tended to go in Team Minato’s experience, I imagined that there was no way Kakashi or I were going to get out of this mess (even before it became a mess) before we’d accumulated a crapton of injuries or maybe an epiphany or two.

Knowing our enemy specialized in genjutsu, I would also make a bet involving the confrontation of our deepest fears, or maybe moral failings or something. Illusion arcs tended to do that.

I sighed inwardly. Maybe I could try to convince myself that my greatest fear actually was being flipped on my back like a turtle. Hopefully any genjutsu would jump on that instead of what actually mattered.

Chapter End Notes

Communication Breakdance is probably a song title somewhere.
Chapter Summary

Kei: Be very, very frustrated.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After we disposed of the bodies, we spent the rest of the day setting up for the assault. By which I mean that Kakashi and I buried what was left after Honoka torched them both, Honoka ate four ration bars while reading a map over Ensui’s shoulder, and Ensui actually figured out what the blinking hell we were going to be doing later. Tsuruya and the dogs all de-summoned themselves, except for Pakkun, and we swept the area for any observers or interesting chakra signatures well into the late afternoon. By the time Honoka called it off for dinner, I was up to my elbows in tree sap and Pakkun had eventually decided my shoulder was more comfortable than the forest floor.

Kakashi, well, he still wasn’t talking to me. I think he went off in the opposite direction most of the time, even if Pakkun stayed with me.

Anyway, we were having a really light (and really tasteless) dinner of ration bars while Honoka and Ensui hemmed and hawed over the map. Then apparently a metaphorical light bulb went on. The two adults in the group looked at each other with an air of triumph, while Kakashi and I sat back and concentrated on eating.

That didn’t last.

“All right, listen up.” Honoka said with her arms crossed.

Kakashi, Pakkun, and I all looked at her. Ensui looked like he was about to fall asleep.

“You two,” and by this she apparently meant us teenagers, “are going to infiltrate the fortress.”

Riiiiight. Because we hadn’t almost died earlier due to carelessness. Our own carelessness, mind, not someone else’s. I managed an expression of deep skepticism.

“Stop doing the thing with your eyebrows; it’s rude.” Honoka said instantly. When I didn’t, she rolled her eyes. “Ensui and I will be running distraction duty with as many summons and exploding tags as you can spare. With any luck, you’ll have a relatively open pathway through the castle he’s holed up in. He has no other guards besides the idiots we killed earlier. Whatever you face in there will be all Sho, and he’s made of paper in comparison. Simple.”

And he was a noted genjutsu expert, which meant that not only did we have to contend with the idea of the bloody walls coming alive in the middle of the mission (for real or not), we also had to deal with Honoka’s careless invocation of Murphy’s Law of Combat. Ergo, if that was a plan, it would not only fail to survive contact with the enemy; it would probably fall apart before we got anywhere near the guy.

I put my head in my hands.
If only this wasn’t a mission about Kakashi, I could have been on distraction duty. I could have been great at that, with my exploding tags and the other fun things I could probably come up with. You know, without the pressure of being in an enclosed space with someone who set up genjutsu traps all over the bleeding countryside.

“…On second thought, no, Ensui goes with you two.” Honoka said after a second or two of theatrics. “Meanwhile, I get all of the summons. Except the pug.”

“You don’t like Pakkun?” I blurted.

“I like him fine. But he’s portable, so he goes with you.” Honoka replied, looking amused at my outburst. “If something goes wrong, I need to know. And my summon won’t work.”

“What summon do you have?” All of a sudden, it seemed like we were running into tons of people with summon contracts. Technically, future-past-Obito had had a summon contract too… to the Nine-Tailed Fox…

Yeah, getting off that thought.

“A short-haired badger about the size of a small building,” Honoka said with a shrug. “Big, strong, but slow and prone to berserk fury. I’d need Kakashi’s dogs just to keep him pointed the right way, and we’d all have to get out of his line of sight right after that.”

“Ah.” So…

“Knock a hole in his walls with one of these,” and here, Honoka produced one solid explosive sphere (which gave me the heebie-jeebies even though I hadn’t seen one in months) and handed it to Ensui, “and give me all of your explosive tags so I can make the distraction count. If nothing else works, well…” She tapped the side of her head, next to the outside corner of her left eye. “I have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

…No. “You can use the Mangekyō Sharingan?” I asked blankly.

Honoka’s face froze up for a moment before she slowly nodded. “Right. Your Uchiha teammate must have told you.”

…Kinda. Like, he’d known and I’d known but the sources of said knowledge had not had a damn thing in common between us.

Anyway, agreeing to follow Honoka’s plan meant that our respective load-outs looked something like this:

I had Kakashi, Pakkun, Ensui, whatever explosives I could plant with my bare hands and remaining chakra control, solid explosives, and my katana.

Honoka had Kakashi’s seven other dogs, Tsuruya, a giant badger, all of my pre-prepped paper exploding tags, and apparently her very own Mangekyō Sharingan.

Tomorrow, anyway.

I sighed inwardly. This wasn’t gonna be fun.

“Take the rest of the night off and think about how today could have gone better.” Honoka suggested. Then she thought better of it and added, “Never mind, it’s an order. Think things through.”
With that, I was dismissed to bug Kakashi (or something) and Kakashi was dismissed to go AWOL as far as I was concerned. Again.

I was going to talk to him somehow, even if I had to booby-trap his bedroll.

…Actually, that was a good idea.

Long story short: I found out that Kakashi wasn’t afraid of stag beetles in his bedroll. Pity.

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How do you even get started on breaching a hardened target?

Well, if you’re a shinobi with access to explosives and the commanding officer’s permission, the options are a lot broader than one would think.

At about four that morning, just as the sky was beginning to look like it might consider lightening up, Honoka took off with a jaunty wave and enough summon animals to kill a platoon. Tsuruya gave me a backwards glance before launching herself skyward, clearly reluctant despite her body language. I hoped, vaguely, that Honoka would still be able to command the lot of them for however long we were gone.

And all seven of the dogs Kakashi was leaving for the mission? Whined. In unison. Quietly, of course—they were still intelligent summon animals, but I probably would have given in to their demands to stay with their master, since I was a dog person and a soft touch besides. Honoka, who was apparently not a dog person, just shooed them on with encouragement from her badger.

Apparently, his name was Mamijo, and being the size of a house did nothing to deter that typical badger spirit. Ergo, he would not only dig holes, but he didn’t apparently give much of a fuck about what he had to tear through to get underground.

I figured he was at least half honey badger in nature, while the other half was European badger. Pretty sure honey badgers didn’t accept chin-rubs…but I was also pretty sure that European badgers didn’t have tempers quite that bad or hides that thick.

(I saw a landmine get in his way. Whatever way you looked at it, the explosives lost.)

Honoka flounced off into the sunrise with enough animal power to make me genuinely worry for the surrounding environment, if it hadn’t already been overrun with genjutsu and littered with corpses.

Yeah, turns out that Sho had been busy while reports were still wandering in from the outskirts of Tani’s territory.

Even in the wee hours of the morning, we’d come across more than one destroyed village. They were intact, disturbingly—apparently a combination of the powerful self-sustaining genjutsu, mild sedatives, and perhaps a spot-check by Sho’s few underlings meant that half of the countryside in the area had been depopulated. Possibly over the course of a week or a month, and mostly from dehydration from the looks of the bodies.

It looked like everyone had just…fallen asleep and not gotten up again.

Kakashi breathed pretty shallowly through most of our scouting attempts. Dead was dead once enough time had passed, even if swords and jutsu hadn’t been the causes that time. The smell was still the kind of thing that burned into your brain.
I picked up Bisuke after one of those mini-missions, after we reported to Honoka. I just held him until I stopped feeling sick.

Even if our mission parameters required us to kill Sho and all his asshole minions, I had just been going along with things until then. After the villages, though…well. What is it they say about villains and reasons to hate them? Because I wanted to kick him up and down the stairs of his precious fortress after that. It was one thing to do enough to make a Hidden Village decide to off you (and often it didn’t take much more than stepping on the wrong toes). It was quite another to…well.

Even most missing-nin wouldn’t attack villages with the intent to kill everyone inside. Extort? Sure. Rule? Yeah. But usually not kill them down to the last little kid.

(Unless your name was Hidan, apparently. But that hadn’t happened yet.)

Sho’s fortress, from the looks of it, was a repurposed castle from the Clan Wars era. Sitting out in the middle of a split in the largest river around, its exposed foundation bristled with massive wooden spikes that had clearly been made out of whole tree trunks and hacked into shape to discourage climbers. The walls were smooth stone from what I could tell, but they also sat on top of gigantic sloping stone walls that would have made a proper climbing attempt impossible. Even if, you know, the attackers didn’t get taken to pieces by the arrows coming out from slits in the walls and boiling oil or hot sand coming down on top of them. There was only one entrance—a wooden bridge that extended to land and seemed to be rigged with the ninja equivalent of det-cord. The fortress also featured two major towers—one watchtower opposite the gate’s observer box, and one central tower that would have once been used as the resident lord/clan leader’s home. From the looks of it, the island also held its own ironworks, its own supply caches, longhouses, stables…it’s own town, really.

That would have been the extent of the defenses back in the day, if you didn’t count on shinobi occupying the place. Humans who went untrained in shinobi arts were cheaper and more common than shinobi were, but by god we could break a hardened target like an egg. If it took three thousand ordinary men to crack this fortress, two teams of four shinobi each could do the job several times faster. We didn’t need to be able to outfight everyone—we would just outmaneuver them and kill the entire chain of command until someone finally surrendered.

“What do you sense out there?” Ensui asked me, and I shook myself to bring the world back into focus. Binoculars could be awesome, but I had the attention span of a gnat and the eyestrain of a lifetime night owl.

Sensing, sensing…bluh, the only thing I could sense was also the biggest thing in the area. So what if I could sense things next to me? Fucking hell, I was supposed to be an alert system, not a thermometer. “Every inch of that outer wall is covered in genjutsu and defensive seals. Getting a grip on it is going to be nearly impossible.” Maybe not for someone like Tsunade, who could make her own handholds by punching stone into submission, but most of us didn’t have options other than the usual wall-walking techniques we were taught as genin. We generally didn’t need them.

“Which is what the explosives are for.” Ensui said, nodding. Then, “Kakashi, you’re in control once Honoka gives her signal.”

“Understood.” Kakashi said immediately.

“Do I have to ask what the signal is?” I asked anyway.

Ensui made a face. I stared at him for a good ten seconds before he said with a sigh, “Honoka…is not subtle. Watch for the explosion. Or explosions.”
I had the sudden impression that Ensui was the Pepper Potts to Honoka’s Iron Man or something. Grade-A enabler, or perhaps the one managing the paperwork end of things. And I had forked over all of my explosives to her.

Uh-oh.

About five seconds later, the entire front half of the fortress lit up in a series of retina-searing explosions. The sound hit us after, the bang-bang-bang-DOOM noise that said the biggest tag had gone off last and taken out anyone with functioning ear drums much closer than we were. I hoped that Honoka and her badger had dug out some kind of hole or other shelter to keep from being flattened. Maybe earplugs. By definition, they were a lot closer than we were.

“Go.” Ensui mouthed as branches, dirt, and the occasional rock rained around us.

We moved in single file—Kakashi led, with Pakkun carried under one arm and my hand on his opposite shoulder to keep from losing track of him. Ensui trailed us, with me caught in his shadow so he could follow along just as easily.

We kept that up until we broke through the trees and had a chance to dash out onto the lake. Explosions were still going off, disrupting the wall’s defensive seals and occasionally blasting chunks of mortar and plaster hundreds of feet into the air.

I had a feeling Honoka hadn’t given me all of the solid explosives.

Kakashi reached the island first and paused, looking contemplatively up at the barrier of spiky wooden death just above our heads. He put Pakkun down, letting the pug scout on his own for a bit.

We were in the shade, under the wooden hell-structure, and Honoka was making the very air explode on the other side of the island. That was probably enough to give us time to think.

It didn’t end up taking that long.

“Climbing?” I suggested.

Kakashi nodded. “Everyone, up.”

Pakkun leapt onto my back and clung to my sword straps with his teeth almost immediately. That left my hands free just in case I really needed to think my way through my path. I doubted it would be necessary—anti-cavalry/infantry fortifications didn’t tend to do much against single determined intruders like us—but the thought counted.

Sapping this stupid fortress was probably still easier said than done.

I was also sure that there was a name for the spiky tree barrier we climbed up just then, but damned if I could remember the term. The pitfalls of not using English for fourteen years, I guess.

Ensui ended up standing on top of the last row of logs before Kakashi or me, peering up at the main castle. After a second or two, he shrugged and left things to Kakashi’s judgment.

The younger jōnin stared up at the remaining earth-and-rock foundation—still rippling with chakra to interfere with attempts to scale it—and signaled for Ensui and me to wait for a signal. What, I wasn’t sure, but it would have to happen soon.

Pakkun repositioned himself on my shoulder and put his paws over his ears. While that would have been a hint, I wasn’t looking the right way.
I did, however, sense the buildup to the biggest explosion yet just as it went off and shook the entire castle down to the wooden anti-siege fortifications. I stuck my hand to the wall with chakra to stabilize myself, and then realized what it all meant when the chakra defending the walls started to come apart at the seams.

“And there goes the structural integrity of the anti-us seals,” I muttered. Who knew? Not me, though maybe I should have. Structural integrity of buildings had an upper limit. The destructive potential of shinobi…kinda didn’t. In the long run, anyway.

“Kei.” Kakashi said sharply.

I pulled the solid explosives from my equipment scroll after only a moment of fiddling around. I hadn’t been willing to carry them like kunai and risk a premature detonation from chakra contamination, given that big jutsu seemed to just happen around me, but I definitely had them close at hand. I only had three, so I had to make them count.

Looking at the wall…hm.

After a second, I took the first sphere, climbed as high as I could on the foundation, and started to shape the charges.

Aside from being activated by chakra, solid explosives behaved rather similarly to C4 while inert. They could be pulled apart and shaped, to direct the mayhem in a specific direction, and could still be activated at a distance with shinobi-grade wire in the same manner as tags. I pulled a large rock—about the size of my torso—out of the loosened mortar of the foundation and commenced digging out a large enough gap to start compromising everything.

I mean, in ordinary military parlance I was pretty sure that the method I was using would best be termed “excessive” given that mouseholing almost never needed more than two chunks of comparatively-mild C4 or other plastic explosives and a lot of planning.

If two solid spheres could destroy the entire Kannabi bridge, and one could flatten an entire forward base if you used it right (or wrong, or very wrong), suffice to say that I was dealing with something that could make the difference in this fight. Easily.

Aaaand then I started to have second thoughts.

It was four-thirty in the morning. The sky was a sort of dawn/pre-dawn haze of gray and bluish bullshit that I’d never fully gotten used to. I certainly couldn’t see very well with this kind of lighting. I’d always give props to people like Obito (and I guess the Hyūga clan), who could, but I didn’t have that trick to play with. With Honoka blowing up the entire front of the fortress, we ought to be able to just sneak in over the walls and save the explosives for a different target. Preferably one that we couldn’t scale.

I resealed the hesitantly-shaped charges into the scroll they’d come from. I gave the other two to Kakashi and to Ensui with only the slightest reluctance, born from an intense interest in things that could split rock.

Kakashi gave me a long look. I stared back, shaking my head ever-so-slightly.

Despite whatever difficulties we’d been having lately, Kakashi still seemed to trust my judgment.

Some days, I really didn’t know why he would—it wasn’t like I really made better decisions than he did. Unless the theme of the day was “emotional competence” or “being a semi-functional human being.” In the wild jungle of mystery that comprised Kakashi’s idea of such, he couldn’t find his ass
with both hands and a map.

Regardless of my musings, we still had a mission to complete.

“Up and over.” Kakashi corrected himself, returning his attention to the wall.

With Pakkun still clinging to my jacket by nearly the literal skin of his teeth, all of us did so. Even if the chakra in the wall hadn’t been fully dispersed, there were enough “cracks” in it to allow us to get a foothold and then handholds and then just slip over the wall like burglars.

I’m really not sure, in hindsight, why Pakkun couldn’t just go over the wall himself. I mean, *ninken*. Really?

Anyway, we ended up landing just behind an ancient, unused storehouse that had gone unmaintained for so long that there were trees growing on the roof. We were entirely hidden from the view of the main tower, at least—I was pretty sure that Sho should have been there. My view on the inside of the castle was *mostly* green, in fact—sort of the way that Chernobyl was mostly green after being abandoned for thirty years, only I was pretty sure radioactivity wasn’t the problem here.

Er. Yeah, getting off that topic *now*.

**What is radioactivity?**

*You don’t wanna know.*

“Central tower?” I asked, as Pakkun dropped from my back and started sniffing around for signs of any other living human. “Living” because we were 0 for about 100 in terms of finding anything human with a pulse around here.

Dark, I know, but it had been a shitty few hours.

Kakashi shook his head. “We’re downwind.”

Meaning that if Sho—or anyone else still alive—was in the tower, Kakashi and Pakkun would have known almost instantly. For a second I was jealous that he and his dog could both pick up something so quickly, while my chakra sense was still apparently too short-range to be of any help, but then I remembered the whole issue with oversensitivity and stopped that train of thought dead. Corpses plus a canine sense of smell…yeah, no.

Looking around, I noticed that the impression of abandonment in the area also pertained to the number of bodies around—ergo, none. There were certainly cups, clothes, bowls, and various other objects pertaining to daily life just sitting around, if in a state of decay. But I couldn’t find any of the people. Not even when I reached out with my still-on-the-blink chakra sense.

The place was fucking creepy.

Kakashi gave a short whistle, calling Pakkun back to him. Then he gestured with his off hand and the pug made and abrupt detour to sit at Ensui’s feet. Then he signaled to *me* that our group was going to be dividing up.

**Why the fuck—**

This was going to turn into a fucking *Scooby Doo* episode. I was about to actually *say* something along those lines, scrubbing stupid references as necessary from my impending rant, but that was when the explosions from the front of the fortress abruptly trailed off into silence.
Silence on a battlefield, while you’re the team not doing the distraction bit, has a way of killing the very idea of conversations. Team Honoka was in charge of explosions. There were supposed to be explosions. So why weren’t we hearing any?

I shut my mouth with a click of teeth.

Okay. So. I could feel chakra practically dissolved into the castle’s foundation. It was creepy—chakra was not radiation, not really, or magic—and reminded me that particle physics was something I had never really studied much. It was as ubiquitous as air or water or face-mauling jackasses on a battlefield, seeming to drift upward from the ground and right through my sandals.

And then I felt it move.

Really, genuinely move with intent. It’s the difference between a harmless log and a crocodile. Purpose made the difference, and today’s goal seemed to be “fuck with the Konoha-nin."

“Everyone off the ground!” I half-shrieked, leaping toward the roof of the abandoned ironworks.

Kakashi and Ensui, having watched my whole body go rigid and felt the shifting rock deep underground perhaps more accurately than I did, were already moving. Pakkun darted out of sight, silent aside from his claws on dirt, and I was briefly very relieved at that.

And then the ground—shit, half of the entire island—gave an almighty whomph and seemed to implode all at once.

And not a single member of our team was clear.

We fell like leaves—every one of us ended up down in the damp dark, passing debris and plants and dust and still utterly failing to get out of gravity’s grasp.

We fell, and fell.

And then I wake up with a jerk, curled on my side with a comforter up to my nose and wondering why I still feel cold.

I roll over, burrowing into my blankets and scrunching my eyes shut against what little sunlight makes it through my blinds. Ugh. Ugh. If it’s already nine I’m going to kill someone with a fork. I don’t have class until noon on…what day is it?

I roll over again, worming up out of the blanket burrito I’ve somehow created. Fumbling for my glasses, I make a great show of looking exactly like Velma and sucking at life, because it’s not like glasses are colored differently in real life to reflect how much they stand out on an animated canvas.

I manage to put my glasses on and peer at my alarm—a first-edition iHome, because if it isn’t broke (or an alarm clock from hell), I’m sure not gonna replace it.

8:46, July 11, 2013.

…Eh?

Something about that doesn’t sound right. But at that moment, I’m too busy stifling a groan at the fact that not only have I panicked for no freaking reason, because it’s summer, I’ve also woken up before noon on a day when I have jack shit going on.
Another minute’s ceiling contemplation gives me time to think, *Welp, no helping it now.* Then I roll out of bed and promptly step on a shoebox.

My room is in kind of terrible condition all the time anyway. Whatever.

I amble out of the room, straightening my black t-shirt and pajama shorts, and then make a beeline for the coffeemaker. No morning starts without caffeine. Or at least it hasn’t since spring. God, *fuck* college courses and workloads that go with them. They can all just get bent, especially since the trauma lasts for an extra couple of months. Ugh.

I tie my hair up in a thick ponytail even as I turn the coffeemaker on, since it’s gonna get too hot to leave it down soon enough. If there’s one thing you can trust about summer, it’s the fact that the sun hates me and the house’s idea of climate control.

Then I head to my laptop. It’s an ancient piece of crap I’ve had since high school, but it’s mine and come hell or high water this thing *is* lasting until I get my undergrad degree. The summer weather hates it, too. I’ll probably have to migrate into the basement by midday to keep it from overheating horribly.

I live on my computer. I’m sure no one’s surprised.

Bluuuuugh summer coma.

I live on my computer but I hibernate in bed. Summers are great for sleeping in, but my house’s lack of air conditioning makes that difficult. Blankets are the best, but blankets also mean overheating if I try to sleep past noon. Dilemma.

I try to boot up the old Toshiba.

Nothing happens.

So much for wishing this thing would work. “Dad, I think my computer died!”

—*why would he know that—*

“What?” Dad calls back, and I wince preemptively at his tone even though I know he’s not mad at me.

“I think it’s the hard drive again!” I have to get up and yell down the stairs, since he’s old and a bit deaf when it comes to things he doesn’t want to hear. Typical dad things.

Blar, another hundred bucks down on this stupid thing.

“Hang on, I’m coming to take a look.” Dad says as he trudges up the stairs. He moves slowly, methodically. Another tumble down the stairs would probably break his back again.

I scramble over and we fuss over the dead machine, which boots to a black screen. Obviously the battery works, but anything else is a gamble that neither of us have the expertise for. Sadface.

We’re pulling our hair out over that for a while.

Then Dad sighs. “I don’t know what to tell you. It might be time to get a new one.”

Yeah, and me without my backups. Shit.

“I was planning on going to the beach with Mom today.” I say.
“Well, then you’re just going to have to leave this thing behind. Not that you should’ve wanted to take it anyway.” Dad shrugs. “It’s not a one-day problem.”

“Ugh.” I groan theatrically. “Yeah, I’ll get started on looking for replacements and maybe parts. The warranty shouldn’t be totally finished…” Oh, who am I kidding? The thing’s a fossil in computer terms. The nebulous “they” probably don’t even sell aftermarket parts for it.

“Go find your brother and tell him to get moving.” Dad suggests. “I’m sure he wanted to go with you and your mom. Unless he’s planning on disappearing into a gym for eight hours again.”

“He might have work, but I’ll ask.” I say. I take my laptop with me—glorified doorstop though it is—and detour to my brother’s door with an obnoxious four-knock sequence that was guaranteed to piss off any teenagers in the household.

Joke’s on him. He’s the only one.

By the time I dump my laptop on my bed, I can hear him stirring through the four-inch dividing wall between our rooms. Dad’s going back downstairs, so he won’t care (or pretend not to hear) if I decide to be really annoying.

“Hey, you up yet?” I call.

“Whaddaya think?” he grumbles, sounding like he was about to begin a doomsday plan to prevent me from ever waking him up again.

—that is/isn’t my brother’s voice—

—I shake my head to clear it.

“Whatever, Mom’s probably either running or watering the garden. You have until she gets in!” I call, and run to the shower.

Thirty minutes later, I tie my wet ponytail back and wander out of the bathroom in search of breakfast. Croissants, croissants…

“Anyone ever told you that you are hella slow?” my brother asks, drawing out the words for maximum sarcasm.

“Just you.” I say offhandedly as he grumbles and lays claim to the vacated shower.

Yeah, my family doesn’t go anywhere fast. Dad just plain old doesn’t go anywhere. Especially not the beach. He’d turn into a lobster.

I wasn’t even sure why I was preparing for the beach, in the back of my mind. It isn’t like I can swim worth a damn, and it’s early besides.

“Are you kids ready for clam-digging?” Mom’s voice floats in from the front garden.

Right, that’s why.

One two-hour car drive away into the future, and there exists an opportunity to sneak up on clams, crabs, and probably get our feet cut open by said monstrous would-be seafood.

But hey, at least it’s sunny out.
My dogs assemble in the kitchen as I rip into my croissant with the gusto learned from a lifetime of public education, hoping to catch crumbs as they fall to the floor. The oldest one is brown and skinny and bossy enough to earn the dual literal/metaphorical title of “bitch,” but she’s getting on in years and keeps getting knocked out of prime begging position by the other two. The sole boy is fat and fluffy and the approximate color of a marshmallow, and has the squeakiest voice by a huge margin. The last girl is black and white and oblivious all over, and bowls the other two over and out of her begging space almost without thinking about it.

—what are their names—

I try to walk over to the kitchen table and the black-and-white one hits me in the back of my knee, making me stumble. I catch myself no problem, even if I step on one dog’s foot because by god do these little furry piranhas swarm if they sense weakness. Particularly sensitivity to the dreaded puppy-dog eyes.

Getting ready takes at least one more circuit of the house, trailing furballs all the while. My brother drops a shampoo bottle and it thumps on his foot from the sound of things, but by that point I’m pulling my shoes on and obviously not going to help. Or comment.

The black dog jumps onto the couch because it gives her more opportunities to either harass me for treats I don’t have or because she likes to prop her butt up against me. It’s hard to tell sometimes.

Once I’m done with my shoes, I start scratching behind her ears. “That’s a good girl. Good Oreo dog.”

She leans into my hand and gives me a soulful look, like “you could be doing more for me than that.” Possibly even “Your dad’s head-scratches are superior” or “I enjoy making sad faces.”

My brother finally emerges from the bathroom, fully dressed and shedding steam everywhere.

—that is/is not my brother—

And I shake my head again.

“Where’s Mom?” he asks.

“Outside.” I say, standing. “Probably waiting.”

“Are you kidding? She always takes way longer—” my brother pauses and looks out the window to be sure, “—and right now she’s still coiling up the hose.”

—what is his name—

I pinch the bridge of my nose. Crap, I need coffee for this headache or my whole day’s shot.

“Mom! Are we ready to go or what?” my brother shouts.

Somehow, the drive to the beach passes in a blur that looks a lot like the back seat of the family Hyundai. All the whole, I can feel myself fading a bit. Headaches fucking suck—I bet my period’s just around the corner. Thank the relevant authority for pain pills, hot tea, and pads.

I blink and I must have dreamed—my brother’s not that small. Hasn’t been since I was five.

 Fucking hell, dream-brain. The drive isn’t that long!

Bluuugh, this is already looking like a miserable day and I’m not even sunburned yet.
“Get on your ugly shoes.” Mom says, and my brother and I obediently slip on old tennis shoes for the actual sandy bit. There’s gotta be a way for us not to end up with sand in our socks, but frankly I don’t think I’ll find it before my shoes hit the beach.

We’re unpacking from the car when the ground starts to shake, rattling a crappy plastic bucket right off the asphalt and down toward the dune-grass.

“What the fuck.” I mutter, looking around at the nearby dunes. There’s no way…

“Earthquake,” my brother says, shrugging.

I’m looking past the dunes. Toward the beach. Toward the water.

Why the fuck is the water retreating.

**WHAT ARE YOU DOING? Who do you think you are?**

Without even realizing, I fall to my knees. There’s something out there on the water and it’s huge and spiky and green and Jesus Christ that thing cannot even pretend to be an oil tanker. It’s…it’s not…

“Hey, what’s wrong?!” Is that my brother or my mom? The voices…they aren’t clear anymore. There’s a feedback, there’s an echo…

My eyes are still on the horizon. The thing is getting closer and I can’t run, I can’t move my legs and I can’t feel anything around me anymore. The car. Where’s the car? What is a car? “Shit, shit, shit…”

The voice in my head is like falling drumbeats, in a language I shouldn’t be able to understand. I don’t know Japanese. The language I speak and have always spoken is English. So why do I want to answer?

“Boku wa…boku wa…”

**How dare you forget?** The beast in the bay seems to be roaring at me. Very distinctly at me. **How dare you forget your promise to me, human?**

The world is gray and falling. Pieces of it break and fall and my family shatters with them like a cracked mirror. The waves and the wind and sun have all gone still.

This place…it isn’t real.

Tears well up.

This world isn’t real. It had been—it had to have been—but now it effectively wasn’t and I wasn’t letting go of the dream because I was a coward.

Wasn’t. Weren’t. Shit.

I screamed, feeling my chakra move with my anger like a forgotten, familiar friend.

My mother was Miyako Gekkō.

My brother was Hayate Gekkō.

And I’d nearly forgotten them. And for what? A dream I’d lost before I ever met them, really. Before I ever had a chance to learn what I should have given more time. I lost things, yes, but I gained them
too and my family was still here in a way.

And yet a part of me still wanted that carefree, civilian life.

I’d just have to put it away, wouldn’t I? Until I could make a new one, here. If I had any idea what “here” was, until I gave up this fake world.

I brought my hands together into a seal. “Kai.”

The beast in the sea seemed to sigh.

I woke up face-down on a dusty hallway floor, every bone in my body seemed to scream at me at once. Ow.

_Fucking ow, what, did I land on my face?

Then my stomach caught up with events, slightly before my brain, and I had to scramble to get up and empty the contents of my stomach to the side instead of directly where I was lying. I felt like compacted dirt and possibly bile that I’d just heaved up, after drying in the sun and possibly being scraped up to go for a spin in a washing machine.

I knew that made no sense, but anything sounded like a valid comparison after a trip like that. Genjutsu or not.

How could I underestimate Sho?! Shit, we hadn’t even seen the guy yet and I was already more on the receiving than giving end of a thorough ass-kicking.

After another second of feeling either very sorry for myself or else attempting self-castigation in my head, I gave up and got to my feet in the wobbliest manner of any sober person I had yet met. Genjutsu had a wonderful way of messing with mental _and_ physical equilibrium, which was already at a bit of a premium in my case to start with. Any balance I had was hard-won, and I’d just lost a real chunk of it to a guy using genjutsu. Which was, according to my paperwork, supposed to be one of my strengths.

Yeah, right.

Not since the Dreamer. Not since my chakra sense started going kaput. Not since Isobu.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my gloved hand. Ugh, ugh, ugh.

After a second of curling my nose at the smell left behind, I stretched my right hand and wrist experimentally. Then I made a fist.

No pops, whether from long-abused joints or carpal tunnel syndrome.

Not a genjutsu this time, then.

_No, it isn’t._

_Yeah, and thanks for that._ I remarked to my guardian turtle. Isobu was still more trouble than he was worth, most days. But he’d helped here. _...Also, what promise?_  

_You told the host of the Nine-Tails that you would befriend me?_  

...Yes?
I'm waiting.

Uh...tabling that for now.

Okay, panic over. Now what?

I looked around, trying to get an idea of where I was. I confirmed that I was, in fact, in an abandoned hallway that looked either like it’d been forgotten by the servants or perhaps halfway converted into a mine, given the dust content of the air. Looking up, I could see little flickers of what might have been daylight, making me wonder if I was either trapped underground or perhaps the roof had just fallen in. If there was a roof. And some of the sparkles weren’t just light.

Blinking rapidly, I could almost see seal lines running off into the distance—the ink was fading rapidly even as I peered at it through the darkness—that may have been involved in whatever genjutsu I’d sat through. Or maybe it was the result of spending...however much time...in the genjutsu and having some experience with the root cause of it. Still, what a wonderful time to develop synesthesia. Or hallucinations.

Of course, it seemed like half of everything that used chakra also glowed for stupid reasons, so maybe I just shouldn’t think about it at all.

I leaned heavily on the nearest wall, trying to think. The wood was as cold as the grave, but I was more comforted than disturbed at that moment. If there was any time when I’d be okay with seeing ghosts, it was at that moment.

None appeared, though.

Obviously, I needed to find my teammates. Ensui was probably fine if he got hit with a similar mind-whammy, given that he was smart enough to catch the first thread and just unravel the lie instantly, without being blinded by emotional attachments. Pakkun was a dog—not a lot affected them, genjutsu-wise.

But Kakashi...

I frowned internally.

Maybe I was being paranoid. Maybe I was just worried because he was a kid like me (though thankfully there weren’t really any kids like me) and because he had a lot more gaping holes in his heart and head. Maybe I was just emotionally compromised myself. It was, after all, astonishing that I could still function given what had just happened.

Or maybe I’d made my peace with everything ages ago, mostly. I had to wonder what would have happened if I hadn’t.

I still needed to get back to the group and make sure everyone was okay.

One foot in front of the other, come on...

I walked into the dark.

Several minutes later, my main thought pattern was along the lines of “where the hell was I?”

Obviously, I was still underground. I had no real sense of time without the sun as reference, but I was pretty sure it was still morning. If I’d been mind-whammied for more than seven hours, then I probably would have been reduced to a drooling vegetable. Remembering how to walk would have
been challenge enough.

I kept one hand on the wall, trying to track lingering seal lines through my fingertips and what chakra I could feel in the dank wood. At some point, the dust had converted itself into some kind of mold I couldn’t identify, but I had to admit that a respiratory infection would probably kill me later than whatever my teammates were dealing with. Even if it was black mold, I’d still put “thing that could blow up islands” on a higher point on my internal threat meter than “inert, though toxic, organisms.”

Speaking of, I still didn’t know what exactly had done the exploding. It didn’t feel like Honoka had the power for it—even with the Mangekyō Sharingan, most Uchiha went for fiery death in precise doses rather than one gigantic bang. Madara being an exception, I guess.

About then, I hit my first patch of water.

I’m pretty sure if I was, say, Lara Croft, I would probably end up having to wade through some kind of underwater cesspit or something and get gunk everywhere, because the vanilla human beings of most dimensions could not walk on water.

I decided to skip the mess part. I popped a seal scroll out of my sleeve and retrieved a glow stick. I cracked it with one hand, spinning the scroll back into place with the other. As I stepped cautiously out onto the water’s surface, it was dead still aside from me.

Gah, I did not want to know what was under my feet even as I walked.

It didn’t take me that long to find dry (-ish) land again. I guess this place’s glorified cellar wasn’t really that big, even if I kept my pace slow to compensate for not being able to see much of anything.

(I know shinobi are supposed to be able to navigate and fight in pitch darkness with earplugs in or something, but there was combat and then there was “I have no earthly idea where the crap I am, or any convenient reference points.”)

Then another glow stick—this one blue—crackled to life in the hand of the figure up ahead, making him look a little like a ghost. “Hello?”

Honestly, at this point I was about immune to ghosts. Zombies, though… “Right here, Ensui-san,” I said, rushing toward him.

Ensui was covered in dust, dirt, and splinters that even got into his hair, but otherwise seemed unharmed. Tired and kind of pissed off, but he didn’t have a limp or anything. Of course, the lighting was terrible, but that was my initial impression regardless.

“I’m fine.” I said before he could ask, even though it was kind of a lie. Genjutsu were not fun. “Have you seen Pakkun or Kakashi.”

Ensui shook his head. “Not yet.”

Yeah, that didn’t do much for my stomach’s stability. At least this time it was nerves rather than vertigo. “Oh.” I shook myself. “So, we fell through some kind of hole in the foundation and now everyone’s been scattered and maybe mind-whammied.”

“Pretty much,” he said, dryly.

“Hang on, what’s that?” I asked, having spotted something on his shoulder.

Ensui blinked and picked up the little specks, then held his hand out to me.
In his hand were what looked like a pair of crushed butterflies, though their wings had fallen off and the bodies had been a little bit pulped by Ensui’s vest. One had a wing pattern that looked like a combination of dirt and maybe lawn trimmings, while the other was black-on-white in a way that looked kind of familiar.

He dropped the black-and-white butterfly into my hand. “Take a guess.”

“I don’t…” I held the severed wing up to the glow stick, trying to see more clearly. *Oh.* Oh shit. “Since when are there *seal butterflies*? I mean, wow, the Aburame clan would love them, but oh crap. It seems like something that can’t even happen naturally.”

Ensui shrugged. “Flip it over and it does something different.” He indicated the mossy, innocuous-looking bug still in his palm.

I flipped the wing over and it seemed to *shift*, almost vanishing against my fingers. I could still see the shape of the wing, but it was imitating my skin tone pretty well. If I didn’t know to look… “What the fuck.”

Ensui said, rather than commenting on my choice of words, “Did you happen to run into a genjutsu before this?”

“Yeah.” At least he didn’t ask for details.

“So did I.” Ensui reached back and batted at his ponytail, upon which another black-and-white butterfly fell out, dead. “These things were probably involved.”

Hm… “They probably drain chakra, maybe to perpetuate the genjutsu.” I guessed. Kikai insects plus self-perpetuating genjutsu. Maybe.

Even for a non-scientific theory, it felt…well, plausible? I would have to ask an Aburame if it was possible, but there wasn’t one available at that moment.

“They also swarm.” Ensui said. He was frowning.

Yeah, and so did kikai insects. It was just that you at least knew that an Aburame was around if your chakra was getting leeched away by a beetle with a couple hundred friends. Butterflies generally didn’t swarm like, say, locusts, but I did remember something about monarch butterfly migration. Not much specifically, other than that butterfly season in Mexico was a lot more interesting than it was in my old home.

“I didn’t see any of them back that way.” I murmured. “If they swarm half as bad as kikai insects, I would have expected to wake up dead.”

“Maybe they didn’t like how you tasted.” Ensui suggested.

That was certainly a possibility, and kind of a worrying one. I decided to ask Kushina about that when I got back to Konoha.

“Let’s hurry up and find Kakashi and Pakkun.” I said, dismissing my worries.

“Agreed.” Ensui said, flicking bug bits away.

Here’s to hoping that Kakashi doesn’t wake up covered in these stupid things. Not because he was afraid of bugs, but…well, Kakashi didn’t have the biggest reserves. And apparently I was like a natural butterfly-repellant. I was hoping that we still had enough time. That he had enough time.
Argh, I didn’t know.

Speaking of not knowing, I didn’t know where all these stupid tunnels went or who they’d been made for. While the wood in the last area had indicated a maintained tunnel (until it either collapsed or flooded), Ensui’s section of the tunnels was mostly mud and gravel with the occasional support beams.

By mutual silent agreement, Ensui and I headed into a third tunnel in the hopes that it would at least lead us somewhere new. The only thing worse than trudging through mud and much was trudging through old mud, particularly when the exit could be nearly anywhere. I didn’t have a clue where the way out could be, barring application of explosives in a confined, dusty/damp place. Which was not a good recipe for survival.

Theoretically, I could also blow up a tunnel wall using the Rasengan, but I’d been having enough trouble with big jutsu to make it worrisome. Plus, I couldn’t tell if the walls were keeping back, say, a deluge of suffocating mud.

On one hand, I wished we were in an active mine, because water wouldn’t be a problem (to the same extent). On the other, no mine gases as far as I knew of.

“We’re going up.” Ensui commented, holding out his hand for my glow stick.

“And I can’t sense anything.” I shook my head at myself even as I handed the light over, keeping my other hand on the wall. Maybe when we got closer.

Ensui made a noncommittal noise and let me lead.

**What is your name?** Isobu interrupted.

*Keisuke*, I answered without thinking, then paused because I *did* have another name, even if no one had used it recently.

Isobu, however, didn’t care. He had other things on his mind. **Then why isn’t he using it?**

I felt hairs rise on the back of my neck.

I hadn’t acted on imposter protocols. Neither had he. Even though our team had been split up and my chakra sense was on the fritz, I hadn’t listened to my training. And now I didn’t know if Ensui was really who he said—perhaps *hadn’t* said, given that he hadn’t even said his name—he was. I’d only gotten simple sentences and obvious observations out of him since about five minutes ago.

Oh, boy.

I considered my options.

I channeled Isobu’s chakra down through my legs and into the ground, creeping toward Ensui until it touched the bottom of his food. For a long moment, Ensui didn’t do anything to indicate that he had felt it.

Then the wave hit, when Isobu’s chakra went a little bit crazier.

Turning, I saw his face flicker black-white-scribble like a sketch. The effect ran from the top of his head to the foot that Isobu’s chakra had hit first, then up again. I watched him ripple like water or a drawing halfway animated by someone with zero attention span, watched the seams come apart.
Then Ensui burst into a cloud of butterflies that had mimicked a man far better than a hive mind of horrible little monsters should have been able to.

The swarm danced around me, just out of reach, and I looked around at the flapping, fluttering storm.

My eyes narrowed. *A little more help here. Just a little.*

And when Isobu’s chakra seeped into my coils just a bit more, channeled toward my eyes and making them itch, every single one of the camouflage butterflies fled up the length of the tunnel.

Isobu’s chakra retreated, and I sighed into the void. It was dark, I’d spooked a bug-clone, and I still didn’t know where anyone was. They might or might not have been spiders somewhere, because there were spiders everywhere and unpleasant thoughts were *really* easy in the dark.

After a moment of moping more, I decided to do what Ron Weasley never got to do: follow the (hell) butterflies.

Chapter End Notes

*Title taken from the Prototype OST.*
Scouting Arc: Superstition

Chapter Summary

Kei: Be useful!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Butterflies are an abomination. They have weird stringy proboscis mouths, they fly unpredictably, and they may or may not taste like trying to eat milkweed. They also piss me off on a personal level that seems to be spreading to my perception of butterflies in general.

Well, these ones do.

I walked through the lonely darkness and mostly thought about what I was gonna do to Sho once I found him. The majority of what I was thinking ran along the lines of "kick him in the balls and proceed from there" at first. Obviously I would have to either beat him into submission or get someone else to do so, but that was going to require me to start finding people soon. Whether Sho or my teammates didn't matter.

It really did matter, but I wasn't being terribly productive if I just worried the whole way through the tunnels.

I sighed. Okay. I need to have some kind of idea what the crap I am going to do when I find someone, regardless of whether or not the butterflies are eating them.

Obviously, Kakashi already knew about my turtle-shaped problem. He wouldn't be surprised to the same degree if I started using Isobu to chase butterflies. I couldn't necessarily say the same thing about Honoka and Ensui, and the fact that it was the S-ranked secret of the day made me a little nervous about letting them know. Even if they were the ranking officers here.

...Whatever. I'd burn that bridge when I came to it.

Eventually, I came to a dead end made of rock and mud and assorted rubble, and wondered if the butterflies had conspired against me and come up with a fake obstacle. It wouldn't be the first time they tried tricking me—though the only successful problem had been the genjutsu mine that I'd apparently just landed on, meaning less work on their part. I probably needed to think on that more, and confirm with Isobu how long I was in dreamland.

I put my hand against it and it flew apart—literally, and complete with a rather testy swarm of butterflies orbiting me before rushing up the tunnel again. Another round of insects trying to fake me out before fleeing in terror.

...This was easier than I thought it would be, and that worried me.

I ran after them.

You were unresponsive for two to three minutes. Isobu provided after a moment, sounding a bit grudging. I fixed the skull fracture you gave yourself.
...For that kind of injury, I'd have expected to be helpless for longer than that. I guess that explains why it felt like such a long time in there. I commented, But dreams and time aren't really on speaking terms, so I suppose it makes sense regardless. Leonardo DiCaprio had...er, explored as much. Kinda. Thank you for helping me.

...What is "Inception"? I know what the word means, but that is not what you're thinking of.

Long story. I'll explain that later. Way later, probably.

Surprisingly, Isobu seemed to accept that. His chakra subsided a bit, and in my mind's eye he went back to circling the bay in my mindscape. Apparently the novelty hadn't run out yet.

A little after that, I caught up to the tail end of the butterfly swarm before they could make a new illusory wall and ended up just kind of running through it. While they had put up a good front, Isobu's chakra was apparently anathema to their taste and perhaps like citronella candles on steroids. Regardless, I was able to run through the center of the swarm and into the hallway they'd been trying to hide.

And it was a hall—apparently I'd left the abandoned mining sector behind. There was just as much dust, since there wasn't anyone in the entire castle town that was cleaning this place, but it was kind of nice to be in an area where there were (sadly unlit) torches lining the walls properly and where I was walking on wood instead of on glorified gravel.

(Though I was also now aware of how many rocks I needed to remove from the bottoms of my sandals.)

Okay. Castle. I was in the castle. Now the question was where everyone else was.

I put my left hand on the wall again, trying to trace the movement of that monstrous chakra I'd felt before, that had shifted and then dropped half of the structure on us. It was still there, though the butterflies had been a part of it and probably also been the part that had exploded, going by the seals they could make from their wings.

I frowned. Judging by the vague signs of maintenance past, I was probably running around underneath where the walls had been or in an extensive cellar. Which meant that, if I felt like it, I could probably blow the ceiling out and end up someplace that wasn't underground. Or I could squish myself under structurally compromised rock.

Or I was on the set of a reproduction of The Cask of Amontillado and I needed to find everyone before they were incorporated into the walls.

...At least butterflies didn't have thumbs.

Let me try. Isobu said, rousing again. You don't have enough energy to explore the entire structure.

That, at least, was true. With the barest second of hesitation, I agreed. Mostly, I was banking on Isobu's goodwill lasting until I could find someone with a Sharingan to make sure nothing else happened. It would probably mean traumatizing Isobu again.

...ugh.

I channeled the thinnest possible filament of Isobu's chakra down my arm and into the wall, cutting through the native chakra like razor wire to establish our hold. Once I had a root, I sent our combined power spiraling up through the castle and went on the hunt for anyone whose chakra I could actually
recognize. In a fond way, not via deep-seated terror or "argh, fuck, not that guy again."

The chakra I found belong to a small body that didn't have opposable thumbs about twenty meters off on a z-axis, but I was happy to have found him anyway. As I tried to find a way up to his floor, I could hear Pakkun bark both with Isobu's and my chakra and with my actual ears. Clearly, there was a stairwell or something pretty close by.

Hell yeah! Progress was being made.

As soon as I found a staircase with Isobu's chakra, I let go of the wall, Isobu's chakra pulled back into the seal, and I ran the hell toward there.

The stairwell was clear, so I took the steps up about ten at a time (since shinobi leaping skills were awesome in enclosed spaces) and landed in a roll on the next floor up. The new hall was one that had rooms I wasn't about to go into, the occasional forgotten trinket, and a pug that shot across the wood and threw himself at my face.

I caught him on the way there and hugged him as fiercely as I dared, letting him rub his face against mine. He licked me, too, and I have never felt a rough dog tongue almost go up my nose with more fondness than that moment. Yeah, weird, but Pakkun was awesome and holy shit I had not seen a single thing I could trust in nearly fifteen minutes and the nothingness was almost worse than actually knowing the stupid butterflies were out to get me.

"I've been looking for you, Pakkun," I said, once we'd both calmed down a bit. "But I didn't see anyone else. I'm sorry."

"Well, you're human too, Kei-chan." Pakkun said, "Nothing else I've run into has been."

"Wait, you've been seeing those hell-butterflies, too?" I hadn't expected them to go for Pakkun, not when he probably hadn't been trapped by a genjutsu like I was. But then, I was probably the only one who tasted like the equivalent of ghost chilies.

"They've been coming after me a lot." Pakkun admitted. "But then your weird chakra showed up in the walls and they flew away." He sneezed into my jacket. "They make it hard to track things."

...Hm. Butterfly wings were made of overlapping, powdery scales... "Yeah, I get that. But if I scare them off, does it help you find Kakashi and Ensui?" I asked.

"Maybe." Pakkun said. Then he leapt out of my arms and sniffed experimentally at the floor. He sneezed again, but said, "I think I have Ensui now. Kakashi is...fainter. Closer, but…"

Right, Pakkun could smell chakra. Since my senses apparently depended on a giant turtle, I was willing to let him take the lead.

"Let's find Kakashi first." I concluded. "I…" Fuck, what did I want to say? Kakashi was Pakkun's master, and I was obviously more worried about him than Ensui. For more than one reason. Pakkun probably shared my anxiety, even if he was hiding it well. "I think we need to make sure he's all right. Ensui is stronger, right?"

Pakkun nodded.

"Okay. In that case we're going to find Kakashi, find the bugs, and do what we can to get this mission back on track." I said. "When we find him, are you okay with going after Ensui after that? I can give you some tags or something that might help you chase the bugs away." ...I wondered what would happen if I used Isobu's chakra to build a disruption tag? Not that I had time for it, but still.
We had to find Kakashi before there wasn't anything left to find. I was starting to build a really horrible picture of what had happened to the villagers, but I wasn't going to be voicing that in case I jinxed myself.

My hands shook.

"Follow me, Kei-chan." Pakkun said, and he trotted ahead.

I in no way had anything better to do or any better plan, so I did.

Pakkun's nose led us down the new hall, then up the staircase at the other end. It was dark as all heck and made me annoyed when my glow stick died, but Pakkun wasn't that hard to follow. His little claws clicked against the wood as we ran through the building.

At the top of the staircase was a door, which I promptly smashed open. I then spent the next couple seconds blinking in the early dawn, while wondering how the sun had gotten so high in the sky in the missing moments I'd spent in the catacombs.

The courtyard of the fortress was nearly large enough to contain its own fields. We'd emerged from what seemed to be the underside of the wall, such as it was. The collapsed section was entirely on the opposite side of the island, and had turned into a kind of depressed bowl of water and rubble. Between that and us, I saw at least ten buildings of various sizes, including the central tower and the ironworks. Aside from the massive dust cloud that still hadn't dispersed from Honoka's earlier bombing, I could see most of what was going on. That was a change from earlier, much as I was annoyed by it.

I blinked again as Pakkun pressed on, realizing that it was probably still only about five in the morning, then followed the dog.

Pakkun ran about halfway across the grounds before he stopped and barked back at me, "He's this way, Kei-chan."

Apparently, I wasn't following him quite fast enough. I rushed to catch up.

...He was heading to the tower.

My hand shot to my katana. I could...probably break a door, even as thick as the average keep door, wide open if I channeled my chakra correctly and increased its cutting power. I didn't really want to test things like that, but desperate times and desperate measures. I didn't have the Rasengan on call or anything at the moment, since I was a bit worried I'd blow my own arm off.

And seals could probably be messed with if this stupid place was infested with seal butterflies. Which it was. Stupid castle.

We reached the door, which was more of a gate and made of heavy wooden planks besides, and Pakkun had to stop because he didn't have the strength to just tear through solid objects.

I did. With one smooth motion, I gripped the hilt of my katana and the mouth of the scabbard, sweeping outward with the cutting edge even as I channeled my chakra down the entire length of the blade. Before, I would have been able to extend chakra scalpels through the steel and enhance cutting power that way. Today, I spun another filament of Isobu's chakra and decided to brute-force the issue. CURVE OF THE MOON.

The door didn't quite slice under my strike. It was more that it splintered along fault lines that I had put there a fraction of a second before. It shattered, more than anything.
"Kakashi!" Pakkun said, rushing through even as wood fragments still cascaded down from the wreck of the foyer doors. I returned my katana to its sheath before I followed him.

The chakra in that room was huge. Maybe a quarter of it seemed to belong to the seal butterflies—it felt like them, at least—while the rest was a horrific abomination of what felt like a concentrated aura of despair. It pressed down on me—help me save us no no no no how could this happen let us go mother father no not the children—with enough force that I stalled out in the middle of that hallway, my brain caught between the chakra and Isobu rearing up in my head, roaring defiance. It was too much, too soon, and I couldn’t—

"Pakkun, wait—!" But I was cut off by Pakkun's wordless snarl of rage.

Then Isobu snarled. This will not defeat us!

I blinked rapidly, eyes readjusting to the gloom. I couldn't stop here. Pakkun was further in and I couldn't stop before I found who we were both looking for and then Ensuï and then Sho and then kicked the shit out of him. The anger, as much Isobu's as mine, cleared my head enough for me to realize what else I could feel.

It took me a second to overlay what I saw—about a million more of those stupid bugs—and what I was feeling. They lined the walls like moss or ivy, making the entire foyer look like the walls were alive and flickering. A group of them seemed to slink down from the walls and reach out toward a heavy-duty genjutsu trap in the middle of the floor. Chakra swelled in that room, from the seal and the bugs and from the mass of them in the middle that seemed to be the most active.

And underneath the swollen, bloated chakra of the monster I couldn't see, was Kakashi's weakly flickering spark.

Pakkun leapt for the mass on the floor. But a second later he yelped and skittered backward, trailing butterflies from his nose and eyes because they could be aggressive little shitheads. I told Isobu, Get them out of our way.

The burning sensation started in my chest, making my breath catch in my throat from surprise. Then it angled outward, crawling over my sternum and over my collarbones, creeping around my shoulders and spreading from there. Chakra surged down my arms and back and torso and legs and then it started to detach from my skin. Slowly at first, but then—

WHOMPH.

Turned out that Tailed Beast hosts had some control over local air pressure. The butterflies scattered like leaves in an October windstorm, and the pressure wave smashed them back against the walls with enough force that their severed wings rained from the ceiling.

I had never empathized so much with the inventor of the flyswatter before.

Isobu's chakra remained, making my eyes itch a bit even when he played nice with my chakra coils. Checking on Pakkun briefly (and discovering that he was angry, but otherwise okay), I rushed across the room to where Kakashi was still lying on the floor.

Rolling him onto his back, I found Kakashi's eyes closed and his headband still in place. He didn't so much as twitch even as I checked his pulse and then pulled up the lid to his normal eye to make sure his pupils were still dilating. His pulse was fine and he wasn't concussed, but that wasn't nearly enough to reassure me. I checked his breathing by bringing my ear close to his nose—normal sleep pace, I thought. But there was nothing natural about this.
Then I changed tactics with my mainstay when things ended up stumping me: the diagnostic jutsu. It was rougher than normal—Isobu did power, not control (yet)—but I could still make out two major issues. One, his chakra levels were dangerously low. Two, he was trapped in a genjutsu.

I sat back.

If Kakashi was trapped in a genjutsu anything like mine had been, then I had to wonder what he was seeing and if I could get him out of it without having to stab him. The seal on the floor also seemed, well, *hungry*. It had its fangs in him and it looked like I'd been suddenly appointed animal control officer of the day.

Pakkun arrived at my side about then. He nudged Kakashi's limp right hand, whining quietly. After a moment, he bit Kakashi's hand with his mostly-outgrown puppy teeth hard enough to draw blood.

...Okay, so stabbing him wouldn't work. Shit. And I'd hoped to be able to get things over with quickly.

I ran my hand over my face. An Isobu-powered chakra pulse hadn't worked. Pakkun biting him hadn't worked. The only thing I hadn't tried was breaking the seal powering the genjutsu, but that would take time and we could be attacked by bloody near anything while I tried to think my way through the problem. I wasn't familiar with this seal and there wasn't any real opportunity for practice.

"Pakkun, go get Ensui." I said through my fingers.

"Kei-chan..." Pakkun trailed off, probably at the sight of my gold-on-red eyes and the stink of Isobu's chakra still pouring off me.

"I'll do my best to help Kakashi, but I need someone to watch my back and we need someone else to help. Please, Pakkun." But how was I going to keep the butterflies off Pakkun? Argh.

Pakkun gave me a long look. Behind him, the survivors of Isobu's chakra wave were starting to try and fly away.

I pulled a kunai out of my pouch and channeled chakra into it. My low-grade explosive seal would make the surviving butterflies regret having done so if they came within four meters of me.

I looked at Pakkun. "*Run.*"

Rather than running, Pakkun exploded into a cloud of white smoke.

...Well, that was one way to do it.

I tossed the kunai into the corner of the room, where it exploded and took out about a quarter of the remaining butterflies in a shower of metal shards and falling wings. Then I picked Kakashi up with only minor difficulty (which was standard with unconscious passengers) and carried him out of the seal array so I could see what the hell I was doing.

Unfortunately, simply removing him from the array didn't seem to change anything.

I sighed inwardly—of course, nothing that happened to Team Minato could be *easy*—and unrolled a scroll from my right hip pouch. With a poof of chakra, the scroll coughed up my sealing kit and a reference book so I could try to interpret what the fuck the array was doing and how to make it stop. Preferably without exploding it.
Okay…

…Somehow, it seemed less complicated than I'd have thought before standing over it with a primed ink brush. With a few deft strokes, I severed several important support lines for the array's chakra storage and redirected everything toward the floorboards instead of whoever tripped over it. Once the chakra built there, I siphoned off the resulting mess with a long, roundabout edition of a chakra neutralizing seal that utilized its own energy in a positive feedback loop.

By the time I completed the seal ring around the array, it just about melted away into the air.

Hah! Score one for Sensei's teaching methodology and adrenaline rushes.

At that moment, Kakashi sighed. Given the sheer silence in the area, it still made me jump and quickly rush over to him.

He sat up about a second later, seeming a little unsteady and with his visible eye squeezed tightly shut against…I dunno. Sunlight? Horrible, horrible reality? Sudden nausea associated with the first two factors?

"Kakashi, are you—?" I was about to ask him if he was all right. This, it became clear, was probably not the smartest remark I could have made and thus the universe was spared extra stupidity when I stopped myself. I kinda had to.

Kakashi had his hands clamped around his upper arms so hard that his knuckles were turning white. He was shaking a little, in the barely-noticeable way of a person trying way too hard to hold things together when they were really going to pieces in painfully slow motion. Even through the fabric of his mask, I could see the muscles in his jaw and neck straining as he clamped his teeth resolutely together.

Of course, he wasn't okay. I didn't know what he'd seen, but it was obvious that whatever it was had screwed him up. I was afraid to touch him in case he punched me in the face or dissolved into a complete wreck right in front of me, and I couldn't say if I was going to make it better or worse.

"Hey," I tried again, softer. I sat down with my legs folded underneath me, hands a little above my lap in case he needed me to go the fuck away or maybe catch him before he dropped.

"…Kei. Just stop." Kakashi said in a strained voice.

I nodded and pulled back, and that was when Pakkun came dashing back into view.

"Kakashi, Kei-chan!" Pakkun called, dashing right up to us and stopping at Kakashi's knee. He putted his head against his master's arms. "Kakashi?"

Right after that, Honoka and Ensui appeared as well, trailing the seven other dogs as well as Tsuruya, but not Mamijo. I guess there wasn't much call for a giant killer badger when everything that needed to be killed was about an inch long and awful hard to dislodge from fur. But what did I know?

"Everything all right out there?" I asked quickly, before Honoka could say anything about Kakashi.

"Could be worse." Honoka rubbed the back of her neck. "Area's lousy with genjutsu traps. All triggered and useless now, though."

"I ended up outside of the castle." Ensui said. He shook his head. "Took a wrong turn after waking myself up and landed in the lake. I decided to meet up with Honoka and describe what we'd found.
What about you?"

"...Eh, more traps. They're taken care of." I said, as Kakashi got to his feet with Pakkun in his arms and the other seven dogs clamoring around him. Every single one of them could sense that something was wrong with him, but we didn't have any time to actually address it. "Did anyone else see those hell-butterflies besides me and Pakkun?"

"What?" Honoka looked blank.

On the other hand, Ensui's frown deepened. "Yes, I did. If I'd been any slower, they probably would have drained me completely dry."

Tsuruya flapped her wings and landed practically on top of me, even if she had to duck to get through the door. She leaned in to whisper, "Keisuke-sama, are you all right? Your eye..."

"Am I bleeding?" I asked.

"Er, only from one eye. I think you may have burst a blood vessel somehow." Tsuruya bonked my head with her beak, in what was half a reprimand and half relief. "Keisuke-sama, you should be more careful!"

Probably happened while channeling Isobu. Welp.

"I'll heal up when I have a chance, Tsuruya." I said.

"So, has anyone found Sho yet?" Honoka asked, viewing the reactions of Kakashi's and my summoned animals with a slightly critical eye.

"No, I got knocked into the sub-basements and just found sunlight again." I said, pointing toward the tunnel I'd first emerged from. "Pakkun, Bisuke? Anyone smell anything?"

"Not anything alive, besides those butterflies," said Pakkun. He promptly sneezed again, this time into Kakashi's face. To his credit, Kakashi didn't really react other than having preemptively closed his eye.

...Though that might also have been a bad sign.

I tried to ignore that. I also changed the subject rather ungracefully, but I think they'd forgive me. "There weren't any corpses on the ground when we got in here."

"Plenty of those outside, but..." Honoka trailed off significantly. "Hard to tell if Sho kept servants. Migi and Hidari didn't know of any."

"I don't think he did." I had a shell of an idea. I didn't want to jinx myself, though—it was hard to say what was real and what was just pants-on-head crazy in this place. In tone and terms of the shit of we kept running into, I got Matrix and Scooby Doo vibes, plus a dash of Inception or maybe The Thing. I wasn't about to discount the idea that the mastermind, in fact, had no earthly idea what we were doing.

"We need to get to the top of the tower." Kakashi said bluntly. He looked pointedly up at the ceiling. "Our answers are up there."

"Oh?" Honoka said. Her eyes went red, and then twisted along the ring of her irises—her Mangekyō was apparently based on the number four rather than the more common three—and I got the very distinct impression that she was giving Kakashi a once-over because his behavior was off. Which
made sense. It was just kind of horrible, knowing that she could pretty much stick a person's brain in a metaphorical blender by staring at them really hard.

"It's the hub of the only human scent in the entire area." Kakashi said, his normal eye narrowed right back at her. "Everything else is too old to possibly be him. By weeks, if not months."

"Well done, then." Honoka blinked and the Sharingan disappeared. The veins in her eyes stood out a bit, sort of like what happens to normal people after getting out of a swimming pool, but at least it wasn't the Sharingan. Having not detected any creepy swirling chakra around her eyes, I made the hesitant conclusion that she hadn't actually done anything despite the intimidation factor.

"Stick together and just bull-rush things?" I said, since apparently no one was thinking of how we'd actually do this.

"No." Honoka started walking back out of the building. "This way."

Oh, goody. We were going to run up the walls and assume that hitting a vertically-aligned genjutsu trap wouldn't probably kill us. "I hope you're going to be preemptive about this." I muttered, even as the menagerie followed her. Me included.

Honoka either didn't hear or pretended she didn't. Either way, she didn't respond.

"Out here, you can actually see the seals before tripping over them." Ensui explained. "I noticed it in the fields as well—while the arrays can be different shapes and sizes, they're almost always visible if you have a sharp eye."

I looked at Kakashi, who looked back and didn't raise his headband. Riiiiight, the Sharingan thing and wow, we hadn't even dealt with that yet.

_Are you still having issues with the Sharingan?_ I asked Isobu.

...**Perhaps,** he said, somewhat grudgingly. **The woman's was more dangerous to me, from what I've heard. She hasn't acted, though. He has. I do not want him using that eye on me.**

_Is that what happened when we were training with him?_ Because wow, talk about an overreaction. Valid, but Kakashi hadn't been trying to knock us out at the time. Not in front of Kushina.

...**Yes. We hadn't spoken yet.**

Yeah, because we'd been stuck together for less than a month at that point. Roommates tiptoed around each other in the first couple weeks, a lot of the time, but in this case one of them was a giant turtle monster and the other was a squishy human. If Isobu was in a supremely shitty mood, our burgeoning partnership could quickly devolve into a game of cat and mouse.

I looked speculatively up in toward the tower's top room. I mean, I couldn't see it from the the ground, since Japanese-style castles had prominent curved eaves that made seeing much of anything kind of difficult. There could be seals literally everywhere.

Still, seven stories was nothing.

"Tsuruya." I said, "Get ready to start blasting Wind jutsu."

"Of course, Keisuke-sama." Tsuruya said. Then she bonked me in the head with her beak again.

"On my mark." Honoka almost snapped, making me wince a little. This mission had become a
clusterfuck somewhere along the way and I guess that made her temper shorter than usual. I could sympathize, since, well, I was one of the casualties thereof. But not that much.

I looked back at Kakashi, who was still swamped in canines. Pakkun was sitting on his shoulder, while the others formed an apparent honor guard around him. It would be surprising if he could make the climb unhindered.

I nodded at Pakkun. Good dog.

Then I hopped onto Tsuruya's back, retrieving my flight goggles from a pocket. As I slid them on, I honestly felt a little better. I'd be in the air. If nothing else, I could act as backup if someone got caught.

Ensui tilted his head, looking between Kakashi and me with an unreadable expression. "Honoka…"

"Go." Honoka said, ignoring him.

As Tsuruya and I started to circle the tower, the rest of our team practically teleported to the top of the tower. As I watched, Ensui and Kakashi blew out the wall with the solid explosives I hadn't used, spewing wood and plaster debris out across the courtyard. As the dust started to clear a bit, Tsuruya stooped as best a crane could and shot into the newly opened gap in the wall.

As soon as we were inside, she flared her massive wings and, on the final downbeat, smashed the entire top floor with a massive gust of wind. I slid off her back in her wake, landing on all fours and trying to pinpoint any problems before someone with a butterfly vulnerability entered the room.

...Well, that's a rare sentence.

Anyway, butterflies were indeed a factor—the raining wings and the sound of Pakkun sneezing confirmed that once. Yay.

Tsuruya beat her wings again and the dust was blasted out of hole in the room. I think I heard Honoka swear, but I was a little more focused on what was in front of my eyes.

I pushed my goggles up on my forehead and just kinda stood there and blinked for a moment.

Standing right in the middle of the room, relaxed as you please, was a willowy blond man who could only be Sho. He was very pretty, in a kind of ethereal way that made me want to hold up a mirror and see if he had a reflection. His hair was bound in a braid that probably ran all the way to the floor, and had green eyes that seemed to stare vacantly into the air. He wore a green formal kimono with enough embroidery to bankrupt a small town, with a heavy silk fan that was probably also a weapon somehow.

But something still wasn't right here.

Probably-Sho was entirely unruffled by Tsuruya's room-clearing jutsu or the blast of bridge-destroying explosives that should have basically leveled the top floor of the building. He didn't have so much as a splinter on him.

"He isn't human." Honoka said from behind me, and I looked back over my right shoulder to see her Sharingan active and spinning slowly. She frowned. "These are those butterflies, right? It moves like a bug clone."

"You're referring to its chakra." Ensui murmured.
Kakashi sidled up to my left, silent, but I nonetheless reached out and tapped his shoulder gently with the back of my hand.

He glanced at me.

I gave his headband a pointed look.

He shook his head.

Well, that was a productive exchange.

"It smells like a corpse." Kakashi said, turning his attention back to Probably-Not-Sho. I guess the mask had some benefits, given that Bisuke sneezed a second later.

All of us looked at Sho, who continued serenely fanning himself.

...He was not blinking.

"If I may." Tsuruya said, leaning over my head and toward Sho with her long beak. And then, as I put my hand against her chest, I felt a sub-vocal thrummmmm that traveled up my arm and made my teeth feel funny.

"Oh, another summon contract?" Sho said. Since I was looking closely, I saw how his mouth movements didn't quite match up to what he said. It was a little like looking at a bad dub.

...Maybe this was why Aburame clan members wore high coat collars.

"So you're a summoned creature." Ensui said quietly.

"We are, yes." Sho said, seeming pleased that we'd figured it out.

"Who was your master?" Ensui asked, raising his chin so he could look Sho in the eye.

Sho seemed to tilt his head to the side, coyly, before he briefly flew apart at the seams down to his belt and we got a good look at the butterflies that made up his ghostly appearance. Underneath it was something small and dark and withered, and topped sparingly with wispy blond hairs barely clinging to a dry, patchy skull. There was a stained, red-ribboned scroll clutched in his gnarled claws. Distantly, I noted that Had-Been-Sho had at least had good teeth before he'd been turned into a mummy.

Then the butterflies came back together in a whirl of color and Definitely-Not-Sho stood exactly where he'd been, smiling placidly.

"His name was Sho Kobayashi," murmured the bug-clone. "He still holds our contract."

...Yes, in his skeletal hands.

"...What happened here?" I asked after a moment. Tsuruya could blast the clone and the corpse apart in seconds if it was necessary, which didn't even get into the possibilities that Honoka could bring to the table. There wasn't really any harm in asking.

"...We can show you." Sho said, and gestured with the probably-nonexistent fan in his left hand.

From a formerly-closed hall, a stream of butterflies swept into the room and started orbiting us. Their wings flashed black and white, and then the room seemed to dissolve into an ink painting. As we watched, the butterflies started to melt together as their illusions worked in concert. It was a little like
looking at an old-timey film reel, too.

Kakashi’s back bumped against my shoulder as he retreated, and I indicated to Tsuruya that she might want to keep an eye on him with a quick head-bob.

Tsuruya bonked her beak against Kakashi’s shoulder. He nodded absently and ran a fingertip along the underside of her beak to reassure her that he was all right.

I looked around.

Slowly, the butterflies and their seal-lined wings began to make a story. It went...well, kind of like this:

Once upon a time, there was a man with long yellow hair who fell in love with a girl he could not have. He wished with all of his heart that he could become a noble, so they could marry and live happily ever after. But because he was lowborn, he could only wish and wish. Typical fairy-tale stuff.

One day, the young man tried to gain power through a summoning contract, though he hadn't formed a partnership before. I think. The jutsu teleported him to a deep, beautiful jungle where he appeared at the feet of a rainbow-winged butterfly about the size of a kaiju. Going by the pictographic representation, anyway. The butterfly and her children entered into a contract with the man, because they were touched by his plea.

(I'm still not sure how you can touch the heart of a giant bug by ranting like a stalker, but apparently time had blurred the details.)

So, anyway, he reappeared in the castle town with a cloak of the butterflies and the power to sway anyone to his cause through their illusions, changing into a powerful lord almost before their eyes.

But before he and his bride could wed, tragedy struck.

Not understanding his bargain or his contracted creatures, the man failed to realize they fed not on flowers but on energy, which the townspeople were to provide. As the summons devoured the energy they could find to sustain the man's dream, eventually even his bride's family was caught in the swarm.

Everyone but Sho himself died.

But the butterfly queen regretted the death and destruction they had created, and so they cloaked Sho in a world made of his finest dreams. Eventually, though, he faded away as all of the humans brought close to them ever had.

I raised my hand. "When did he actually die?"

Tsuruya hummed again. The butterflies, now settled on the wall or on Not-Sho and made a part of the bug clone, flapped their wings back in concert.

"...About a month ago, going by the moon." Tsuruya said. Right, right. Moths and butterflies used the moon to navigate, right? I guess a month or two would be pretty long in an insect's abbreviated lifespan.

Honoka made a disgusted noise. "So the culprit for all the deaths has been a bunch of bugs."

Ensui looked more intrigued than unnerved. Also bored. "I'm sure the Aburame clan would be
interested in seeing your contract. An interview, perhaps. If nothing else, we could run comparisons
to the kikai insects we already have."

"Then there's the seals. They seemed effective." Honoka said after a while, though grudgingly.

"Yes, we can form most images we remember." Not-Sho said. The butterflies on the walls tittered.

"How do Hidari and Migi fit into this?" I asked.

"The mercenaries." Not-Sho looked blank. This was not as much of a change from his normal look
as that comment might have suggested. "We needed to keep humans away. We can eat the energy of
trees and animals, but humans…" He made a "what can you do" motion. "We cannot help the urge."

_They're bugs. They don't have the capacity to think clearly solo. Still, what the fucking fuck?_

They were also apparently vampires. Shit.

"Here's an idea," Honoka said brusquely. "How about we take your contract back to our village so
you can find a new contractor?"

"...Would that be acceptable?" Not-Sho asked, hesitant.

"Probably, since I'm the one saying it." Honoka shrugged. "As long as you can dismiss yourselves,
we can get you a new contractor. And one that knows what to do for insects that eat chakra."

Not-Sho smiled, or something similar. Then he, along with all of his butterfly friends, promptly
exploded into smoke.

The corpse of the actual Sho dropped to the floor and smashed into pieces, though the summon scroll
was still clutched in its bony hand.

Honoka reached down, grabbed the scroll, and shook it until the hand fell off. She blew the dust off
of it, and then tucked it into her kunai holster. "It's over."

What an anticlimax.

Still, with the scroll in hand, we could probably contain the butterflies and keep anyone else from
being hurt by them.

I sighed. _Job well done, I guess._

**Let's get this over with.**

We left. Honoka burned the tower to the ground along the way, and then we got started on body
disposal for the rest of the surrounding area. It was the least we could do for not getting here sooner.
With Mamijo, we at least spent only the rest of the day digging graves, with me occasionally
dismantling down the remaining genjutsu traps. It could have been so much worse.

That still didn't mean things would be okay for a good, long while.

Chapter End Notes

Remember that Stevie Wonder song? Yeah.
And then we were on the road again, heading toward Konoha. Apparently, the fact that we'd started this stupid mission in Tani didn't mean we had to report back, since Honoka didn't seem to really care. I supposed that since Tani hadn't specified what to do with the troublemakers other than to kill them all, to the victor went the spoils. Yay, us.

I got first watch for the night. Not because there was any particular danger—I was hardly the one with the best reaction time—but everyone else seemed a lot more worn out than I did. Even Honoka, who hadn't been exposed to the chakra-eating butterflies, had used a lot of big jutsu during the mission and seemed to not be interested in doing much more than just eating three ration bars and going to sleep. Since I wasn't particularly tired, I volunteered.

Our campsite was thirty meters from the nearest road, with thickly overgrown trees and brambles serving as our camouflage as much as it was an animal deterrent. I climbed up into one of the trees and sat back against the trunk as comfortably as I could without having to remove branches. At least nothing this far away smelled like rot and death.

If I pretended the events of the last week hadn't happened, then it could have seemed fairly peaceful.

I ran my hand over my face. Peaceful. Hah.

I looked down at our group.

Honoka and Ensui were sleeping peacefully enough, in bedrolls on opposite ends of camp from each other. Thinking about it, it made sense to have the two veteran shinobi spread out to increase their combined coverage of the area. Ensui fought at range (ish) while Honoka could pretty much kill everything just using her eyes creatively.

Kakashi, meanwhile, was lying in the middle of a puppy pile. Using Bull as a pillow and with Pakkun sleeping on his chest as a portable heater, Kakashi was bracketed on both sides by dogs. Urushi, Shiba, and Akino slept on one side, all of their noses aligned toward Kakashi's arm. Ūhei, Bisuke, and Guruko were on his other side, though Guruko was upside-down and more lying on top of the other two than anything.

...I sighed soundlessly and shifted around on my tree branch until I was lounging like a particularly lazy leopard. Today had not been fun.

I guess that until the butterfly vision, I hadn't really thought about how much I'd changed since dying and reincarnating into this world instead of as, I dunno, a cat in my old one. I'd ignored the signs of an active genjutsu even as I was in it, while either my subconscious or Isobu's echoes had been picking it apart. Those details hadn't fit Keisuke, as opposed to the old me.
And then Isobu happened. Way to be a Trespasser rip-off, turtle dude. Wasn't like my world had Jaegers, either.

All in a good cause, though. I hadn't been under long and Isobu's chakra kept the butterflies off me, so I could find Kakashi when I did and not, say, ten minutes later.

That...would have been bad.

It only had a little bit to do with the "nebulous not-future," as I was pretty sure Sensei had put it at some point. Kakashi was a cornerstone in a lot of that story, whether as an ANBU or as a mentor to a pack of hellions. He was an adult who had done more before hitting thirty than most people did in a lifetime.

But he was also the kid who snuck into my hospital room to give me an apple, knowing that the hospital's idea of food was as tasteless as the walls were white. He'd helped Obito and I perfect our tactics for the second stage of the Exam the first time, though it didn't necessarily benefit him to do so. He trained with us all the time. I'd known him for five years and while we hadn't necessarily gotten along, he'd somehow managed to become as much a cornerstone in my life as Obito and Rin and Hayate and Mom and Sensei.

It'd taken him longer to act the part, and me longer still to admit it.

And I knew about how well I'd react if I lost him, since I had Kannabi and losing Obito for reference. That was when I'd known (or at least strongly suspected) that we'd be reunited again later. If in horrible circumstances.

I sighed again.

The more I thought about near-misses, the more upset I got. Therefore, the logical thing to do would be to stop. Or else I'd turn into Kakashi and never have a night's peace ever again.

...Speaking of which, I had successfully managed to jinx myself. Because of either karma or perhaps a malevolent deity yet unnamed, I heard Kakashi's breathing start to hitch even from my perch. I leaned over the edge of the branch, peering warily down into the gloom in case he suddenly got up, noticed me, and possibly decided to stomp off in an affronted huff.

He didn't do any of that, though.

Pakkun shifted on his chest, moving slowly enough that it was apparent how exhausted the pug was, and tried to dig his nose into Kakashi's collar in hopes of soothing him. He hadn't yet progressed to the point of getting up and walking over to lick Kakashi's face, and ended up not doing so when Kakashi abruptly jerked awake. Pakkun went rolling off his master's chest with a surprised squeak, and I was pretty sure Kakashi accidentally hit Akino in the side.

Kakashi stumbled more-or-less vertical after a moment, on his knees and a little wobbly besides. Then, shaking himself out of whatever nightmare-induced rut he'd been caught in, he got to his feet and set off in the opposite direction of my tree.

By that point, the other dogs had started to move and stretch as they were rudely jostled awake. I saw Akino try to grab Kakashi's pant leg before he could get out of the circle of fur, only to miss and watch as Kakashi disappeared into the woods.

Akino turned to Shiba, who looked at Ūhei and then suddenly the whole pack was just kind of exchanging confused and worried glances.
Then Pakkun looked up at me. After a second or two of more staring at each other, all seven other dogs followed suit.

...Well, that was *one* way to say "not It."

"All right." I said in little more than a whisper. I knew when I was outvoted. I slid over the side of the branch and silently dropped to the forest floor, with maybe a crunch of a leaf underfoot to give me away if someone was actually listening. To the dogs, I pointed at my eyes and then at theirs.

If they wanted me to take over their duty as therapists, then they had to be my eyes out here.

Pakkun nodded for all of them.

Well, okay then.

Then I set off after Kakashi.

I didn't really make any attempt at real stealth. Kakashi either knew I was heading his way or he didn't, and if he didn't want to see me, then that was just too bad. From long and arduous experience, I knew that getting actual feelings talk out of Kakashi was a lot like trying to move the metaphorical immovable object.

I guess frustration was slowly turning me into the unstoppable force in that equation. I hoped it didn't result in a world-annihilating explosion, but that would just be our luck.

...Honestly, I wasn't feeling the whole "humorous ramble" at that moment. More like a downward spiral. The forest was dark and eerily silent without the Konoha-based cicada background buzz. Kakashi wanting to be out here to stew in his thoughts wasn't a good sign.

At about that point, I found Kakashi.

He was on top of a giant white rock, which was half-engulfed in the roots of a second-generation tree. An older tree had collapsed at some point, and the new one had a cage of roots suspending it partially in the air. Somehow, Kakashi had found the only patch of stone that was relatively flat and shelf-like, giving him a chance to sit down and just *stop* for a while without losing feeling in his butt.

He looked up when I approached, looking down with his sole visible eye. It was difficult to read Kakashi's expressions at the best of time, but all I saw in that eye was a weary sort of darkness. Like he couldn't even see why I'd bothered coming after him, whether for good or bad.

I had never seen Kakashi look so small and defeated since Kannabi, and hope never to see it again.

I could feel myself try to smile reassuringly and fall short, because there were some times when smiles hurt more than they helped. A sad smile, then. Probably didn't reach my eyes. Or it did and there was a traffic accident because some jackass was going the wrong way on a two-lane road at a hundred kilometers per hour. Ten car pileup, clogs the roads for hours.

And I was being stupid and trying to distract myself with terrible extended metaphors, because filling the tense silence was almost too much.

I held out my hand, palm up. I took a deep breath and said, "Hey, Kakashi. Talk to me?"

Silence and stillness reigned for just long enough to make me wonder if I was making a totally hopeless gesture. If Kakashi didn't want to talk, then there wasn't really anything I could do to make
him. I'd already run in circles with him months ago after Kannabi, for all that I'd been the one on the
defensive back then. Should I have pushed at all?

Then he took my hand. He slid down off the rock without letting go and, once on the ground,
nodded once.

He let me lead up into the branches of a nearby monster of a tree, with lower branches so large that
each one of them could be turned into a park bench with little modification. I cut excess branches off
the main one so that we could have a private place to talk, sound masked by the other branches and
leaves around us.

I would have gone for a riverbank, but there weren't really many of those and, despite the dramatic
element, sound carried over water pretty easily.

Anyway, once we were safely set up, I asked, "Do you want to talk about what happened today?"

Kakashi gave me a weary look.

Right. Probably could have picked a different question to start off with. Er… "Kakashi, I'm not
going to make fun of you or anything. But I'm worried about you and I'm not really sure what to say
to make things better."

Kakashi blew out a frustrated breath. "Why should I, when you haven't said what happened to you?"

"…Huh?" I blinked.

"You were using the Three-Tailed Beast's power. It's why your eye is like that." Kakashi said flatly.
"What made you do it?"

Making allowances for the circumstances, it was about as scathing of an indictment as he seemed
able to manage. I'd almost forgotten that people tended to be afraid of the roommate taking up space
in my chakra coils. Or soul. Depended on how you looked at it, really.

"…I couldn't get out of the genjutsu trap on my own." I said, sighing. I drummed my fingers on my
knee, trying to think of what to say. "I saw a peaceful life, with Dad still alive"—well, one of them
—and my brother and I all grown up. The worst thing I had to worry about was whether I'd get
sunburned on a given day, or if I was going to land a job as a civilian teacher." I laughed, sudden
and faintly bitter. "We even had enough time to have dogs. It was pretty hard to leave behind, even
knowing that my life really isn't like that."

It wasn't now, anyway.

"So, he saved me. I mean, he did it in about the worst way I could think of short of eating my dream-
family, but I'm here." I tried playing it off, shrugging. "Then I ran around finding out what those
butterflies were capable of. No big deal."

Kakashi was silent for long enough to make me nervous. Then, "I saw my parents, too."

"…What were they like? I never asked." I regretted that, but how many opportunities did I honestly
have to talk about the subject of families in a team full of orphans? (Sensei almost being a father
notwithstanding.)

Kakashi sighed. "My father was Konoha's White Fang. I'm sure you knew that. He was…strong.
Stronger than the Sannin were, back then, and loyal to a fault." He took a deep breath. "He trained
me. He was always patient, steady. Like I couldn't make him angry if I tried."
And look how the village had repaid him.

"In the genjutsu world, he was still alive." Kakashi rested his chin on the heel of his hand. "Mother, too."

…I had to admit, I knew precisely fuck-all about Kakashi's mother. As far as the manga's narrative went, she might as well have not existed, which was worrying on several levels.

"What was her name?" I asked quietly.

"Satomi. She was a member of the Inuzuka clan." He shook his head. "She died when I was three, so I don't remember her very well. She had a partner named Asagi, who died in the field with her. The woman I saw in the genjutsu…she was very kind. My life was different with her there. I was…happier."

I said, "She sounds like a great mother."

"I wouldn't know." Kakashi said tonelessly. "…How did yours end?"

"The genjutsu?" I sighed and stared into the middle distance. "My family was at the beach, and the Three-Tails came charging out of the surf. I realized the world wasn't real, and it came apart. It started collapsing even before I dispelled it." I picked absently at my fingernails. "I should have known better. But it felt like a good dream, you know; the kind you wish would last longer."

Kakashi made a neutral noise.

I reached over and offered my hand again. After looking at it as though not sure why I'd bother, he took it.

"You were the one who broke the genjutsu, right?" Kakashi asked. It seemed like he already knew the answer, but had to ask anyway just to confirm.

"Yeah. You didn't wake up when Pakkun bit you or when I moved you off the seal, so I had to dismantle it the long way." I explained.

Kakashi blinked, slowly. "…I see."

"Did it cause some kind of backlash?" I asked, worried.

"Yes."

Crap.

"Genjutsu often have secondary effects, if they're powerful. Try to think your way out without canceling it, and sometimes it tears into you to keep you." Kakashi murmured. He wasn't looking at me. He was kind of just staring at nothing out ahead of him.

I bit my lip. "I'm sorry, Kakashi. I didn't know."

As though he couldn't help himself, he said, "It showed me Kannabi." His eyes were dark and strangely blank. "Or at least, Kannabi if you and Obito had just let me die and moved on with the mission."

Oh, no.

I imagined it almost automatically. Stupid overactive brain.
Kakashi, kept under genjutsu torture until he broke or died or his captors got tired of his resistance and just killed him. Not-Obito and not-me coming back with Sensei in tow and pulling his mangled body out of that cave, slashed throat and empty eye sockets bleeding all down his front long after his heart stopped.

Kakashi, bleeding out in the dark because no one in Iwa gave a shit about medical care or POWs and definitely not both together. Dying alone and by inches, knowing that rescue, if on its way, would get there too late. Feeling his heart slow, beat by beat.

Kakashi, being brought back to Iwa and kept like some kind of sick trophy because of whose son he was, or whose student, or just because he was a captive jōnin and would probably break free if they didn't break him to heel. Screaming and struggling against new tormentors and new tortures every day, until something gave.

Kakashi being picked up by Madara and either twisted into a monster or being eaten by a Zetsu for not listening to a geriatric lunatic's dreams for vengeance. Disappearing under a swarm of hungry, fanged mouths, until nothing was left but a bloodstain and a memory.

I felt my stomach turn over.

"Kakashi—" I began, but he didn't want to hear it.

"If I'd died there—really died—you would have been able to go home. There was nothing keeping you from leaving me behind and just completing the mission." Kakashi pressed on. "I probably…if it'd been Obito instead of me, I would have left."

No, he wouldn't have. Not when I charged in or Obito had his heart-to-fist-to-face conversation with Kakashi and changed his mind. Kakashi was a lot of things, including occasionally a jackass, but he wasn't cruel.

"Well, I don't think you would have." I said firmly. "Whether it was me or Obito or Rin, it's not something you're capable of."

"But—" Kakashi began, but I talked right over him in a vehement whisper.

"Kakashi, there was no way Obito and I would leave you, either. You didn't see our end of things, when you were taken and we were left with a mission objective and a missing captain and we both realized we couldn't function like that." I blinked rapidly, trying to figure out when I'd started feeling like I was going to cry. "We just wouldn't do that."

"You did in the genjutsu." Kakashi squeezed my hand. "I didn't mean it like that, Kei. I know you'd never…"

"Yeah, well." I rubbed my eyes with the back of my free hand. "Good."

Kakashi gave me a long look. "…You were worried about me."

"Well, of course I was." I frowned. Was that unusual in Kakashi's world? "I've never seen you shaky like that before. And knowing what my genjutsu was like, I wasn't gonna take any chances."

Kakashi was silent. Then, swallowing thickly, he added, "That…wasn't everything."

I nudged him with my shoulder, wordlessly encouraging.

"The worst one—two—images came up at the end." Kakashi said, with some difficulty. "One of
them was what would've happened if, back then, you'd been a bit faster. Or slower."

"Faster" would have meant he kept his original eye, or at least I thought so. I didn't say as much, though—Obito's Sharingan activating had been a stroke of luck that it didn't pay to jinx even long after the fact.

"Even if I'd lived, I…I don't think I would've been able to live with the idea that,"—and here, Kakashi paused again, squeezing my hand a little tighter—"that my stupidity would get the whole team killed. Or captured, which is close enough…”

...Funny how that had been my own thought process before Kannabi even happened. Instead, it had played out in a way that broke us both without actually taking us out of the picture. Not funny "ha-ha," but more funny "are you fucking kidding me, RNG."

We sat there in the tree for a while without saying anything, killing time by stewing in our own thoughts. At least, until a thought hit me and I had to voice it. Tact, thy name is not Kei.

"…Can I ask you about something else, while we're here?"

Kakashi nodded.

Okay, time for the slightly older nagging worry. "Why haven't you been using the Sharingan on this mission?"

Kakashi blinked. "Sorry?"

Perhaps out of newly-renewed concern for his feelings, I added, "I mean, yeah, it might have helped, but I'm mostly just curious at this point. You don't need to apologize."

"No, I mean…” Kakashi trailed off, but not out of distress. If anything, he just seemed confused. "I thought you were afraid of it."

…Huh? "What do you mean?"

"After that training session, when you pulled on the Three-Tailed Beast's power, I thought it was because you were afraid or angry because of me. It felt like that was how it worked before." Kakashi explained, still confused. "And then you used its chakra again on this mission, and you said you were worried… So, I thought you only pulled on its chakra when you were afraid of something. Or for someone."

"Oh! Oh, no, that wasn't because of me." Well, not completely. "Remember when you used the Sharingan to put me to sleep when I was being stubborn, after we got Obito back?"

"Yes." He looked like he didn't know where I was going with things. Sort of a failing of geniuses—either assuming everyone thought the same way, or assuming they didn't.

"Well, the Three-Tails was the one who was afraid, not me. And it was ugly—he's afraid of being controlled, since he's seen in my head that it's possible." I gave Kakashi a lopsided smile. "We've been trying to work through it since, and it's not like he's reacted like that to Obito or Honoka. It's, well, just been you because of that time."

"I didn't realize that Tailed Beasts were smart enough to be afraid of anything." Kakashi admitted.

**Only because humans seem to assume we're beasts of burden. Or natural disasters. Isobu paused. Odd how you never did, even considering your…eccentricities, human.**
Different upbringing, I guess.

I turned my attention back to Kakashi. "They are. It's just that people don't assume there's anything to them. And when I told you how to shut him down, I admit that I wasn't being fair to him. Or you. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"It's fine." Kakashi looked at me curiously. "Can you…talk to it—uh, him?"

I nodded.

"...Well, tell him I'm sorry. I thought it was for a good cause, but using the Sharingan on you—both of you—wasn't really called for." Kakashi said, dead serious.

Well?

...I'll think on it. Isobu grumbled, wary. Just don't do it again. Ever.

"He says he'll forgive you if you promise to never do it again." I told him. I shrugged. "I don't really expect him to let go of his hatred for humans all at once, but it's still progress."

Kakashi inclined his head. "I'll keep that in mind."

More silence.

I was definitely learning to hate silence.

"Is it all right if I ask what the other nightmare was?" I asked hesitantly, because there was such a thing as pushing too far and I never learned where the line was.

"Same as the last image," Kakashi said, a little bitterly. "And related to the Sharingan thing, since we weren't talking about it."

And a problem ignored in perpetuity got along with "mental stability" about as well as a broken foot got along with "triathlon."

I nudged him again.

Kakashi sighed, as though to say "Really, Kei?" But instead of just ignoring me, which he had managed to do quite well with Obito in years past (barring special circumstances), "...I dreamed that the Sharingan burned the you out of your body and the Tailed Beast just went berserk. I wouldn't...I couldn't kill you when I'd done that, and Obito..."

I could guess. Obito, soft-hearted as Kakashi thought he was, probably wouldn't have gone through with that either. Not even in Kakashi's head.

"Sensei had to put you down, but by then..." Kakashi shook his head. "There wasn't anything left of our team."

"...No offense to your subconscious meant, but between the promise you just made and the fact that the Three-Tails and I get along okay, I think we'll be all right." I said mildly. "Not that it's bad to worry—I've heard the stories before, and without the Sharingan involved—but I'll do my absolute best to not let that happen."

Kakashi looked at me for a long moment before sighing and rolling his visible eye.

...Well, that was settled remarkably painlessly. I had fully expected a shouting match. Still, I said, "I
can believe you were avoiding me for a month over *that*. We really need to talk things out more."

Kakashi made a noncommittal noise. It could have been "sure," "eh," or even "whatever" said without syllables. Then he looked down at our joined hands, as though wondering why I was still holding his.

Well, if he was back to his usual closemouthed jackass self, then I really didn't have anything to complain about. Other than the jackass-ness.

I shifted my grip on his hand so, instead of just holding on, our fingers were interlaced. "Oh, one last thing." Because why the hell not?

Kakashi had about enough time to wonder what the fuck I was doing before I reached over and enveloped him in a quick hug. Just for good measure, I kissed his cheek—granted, over the mask. Mom would kiss me and my brother on the cheek when we were little, as much for reassurance as to remind us that she was the one who looked after us when we inevitably got into scrapes. In both lives. Guess I learned something from that fucking genjutsu after all.

Kakashi let go of my hand and brought his up to his cheek with a poleaxed look, but I was already sliding down off the tree. "Promise me we'll talk if something comes up, all right?"

Kakashi nodded, looking a little like he'd been thrown off-kilter, and I headed back to camp. He'd find his own way, probably.

Jackass he might be, but Kakashi was Team Minato's jackass and we wouldn't trade him for anything.

Anyway, the rest of the night passed without major incident.

Kakashi wandered back into camp about five minutes after I did, and went right back to the puppy pile of dogs, who clamored (silently) for his return. Within another fifteen minutes or so, he was asleep, and I was able to resume my watch shift in piece.

An hour after that, I woke Ensui for his shift and bedded down myself. While it hadn't been the kind of night where we had to get up in the middle and fight off attacks of hungry midges or something, I was still exhausted emotionally through the power of sheer *relief* at getting all of that emotional stuff out of the way.

Hopefully, tomorrow would be a better day.

In the morning, I woke up with Bisuke treating my stomach like a bed and Shiba's mohawk poking me in the nose. When I sat up a little, I realized I'd been incorporated into the puppy pile rather thoroughly—perhaps for a job well-done?

I guess things worked out after all. At least, for a bit.

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We got home within the next week mostly because we ran most of the way. Not a lot happened on our way back, really. The weather was fine and we didn't get stopped by the Land of Rivers' border patrol or anything, beyond a cursory check from thirty meters off. If I wanted, I could sum it all up in a single sentence, like so: we hoofed it the whole way, rescued a little girl (without getting paid for it), and also had another round of hot-pot at some border town barely sixty kilometers outside of Konoha.
The cause of that last one was Honoka getting "incredibly hungry" in the middle of the day, and apparently ration bars by the handful didn't fill her stomach that well.

It probably wasn't worth it to question the commanding officer's quirks while she was still in charge, so I didn't.

By the time we got to the village, it was the twenty-second of August and summer was apparently not only in full force but also taking its vengeance upon the Land of Fire. Konoha specifically, of course.

"Identification?" asked the gate guard as we signed back in.

"Team Honoka plus one, reporting from Tanigakure." Honoka said, glancing at me.

"Keisuke Gekkō, returning from Mount Soragami via Tanigakure." I added.

"Reporting to the Hokage?" the guard asked, scribbling rapidly on his spreadsheet.

"Of course." Honoka said.

About twenty seconds later, the reply we got was, "All right, head on through."

And then we were on our way to Sensei's office. Honoka and Ensui took off on ahead, pouring on the speed for some reason Kakashi and I weren't let in on. Instead, the two of us took a more sedate route and didn't have to dodge quite so many bugs to the face.

What, you think moving super-fast through the market district doesn't mean bug splatter? Most shinobi didn't have goggles either, for some reason I was finding stranger and stranger the longer I thought about it.

Regardless, we got to Sensei's office more-or-less on time. In fact, we were just in time to see Honoka and Ensui enter the room a hair's breadth before us. When we tried to follow, though—

"Kei, Kakashi, I'm going to have to ask you to wait to give your report." Sensei said, blocking the door. He wasn't wearing the official Hokage hat and robe, but Tsunade basically never had while she'd been in her office, either. Apparently the Third's insistence on doing so hadn't actually been a requirement of the post.

"This is another one of those security things, isn't it?" I asked.

"Exactly. I'll take your reports separately, so please wait outside for a bit." And with that, he shut the door in our faces. I felt the office's security seals go active a second later.

Okay then.

The Hokage's office didn't really have a waiting room—just a hallway—so Kakashi and I took up positions on the opposite sides of the door like we were guards ourselves. Theoretically speaking, every world leader did have guards, but shinobi tended to find out that usually the VIP was the most dangerous person in the immediate area, at least when it came to the various whatever-Kage. It made me feel a little less awkward about being made to sit outside of the room like a disobedient school-kid, so I did it anyway. Kakashi was probably mostly showing solidarity.

Besides, I liked to think that Kakashi and I could manage a pretty intimidating image between the two of us. I was a kunoichi with a huge scar across my face that I had obviously survived, and Kakashi stood out in a crowd thanks to his mask and slanted headband and the fact that he grew like
a weed.

Heh.

Regardless of our (my) posturing, Sensei opened the door again about ten minutes later.

"I'll get their written report later. Kakashi, if you would," he said, letting Kakashi enter the room first. But before I could enter, he said, "No, Kei, not yet."

Kakashi looked back at me, expressionless, before the door closed in my face again.

For fuck's sake.

Another round of waiting ensued.

"Kei-senpai!"

Or not. Just as I was about to see how bored I could get before starting to pace, Rin appeared around the corner. Almost immediately, Obito's head appeared right after her, along with the rest of him.

I was immediately hugged by both parties, and hugged them both back hard enough to make Rin squeak.

Rin had apparently taken to wearing purple hairclips since the last time I'd seen her, and was wearing a V-necked black shirt with a silver vine pattern running up the side seam. She still wore thigh-length black socks, but today was apparently dark blue pencil-skirt day. Around her arm, pinned to her sleeve, was an armband with the Konoha General logo stitched onto it in black. And while she was wearing her headband as usual, Obito's goggles also retained their resting place over it.

Obito, meanwhile, had mostly decided to just dress like an ordinary chūnin would—flak jacket, dark blue uniform pants and shirt with sleeves rolled up—with the minor addition of a proper medical patch over his missing eye. He was more tanned than he had been, had apparently bought a new pair of goggles with white rims and orange plastic lenses, and had a pressure glove visible on his right arm that covered it from fingertip to elbow. The other detail I noticed, when I had a moment, was that the red spiral of Uzushiogakure—common to all Konoha uniforms—had been replaced by the Uchiha fan on a four-pointed black star.

"So, you,"—here I addressed Rin—"got promoted to lead field medic on mission rosters while you"—and here, Obito—"got into the Military Police? I was only gone for couple of weeks."

"Well, technically I—" Rin began.

"Actually—" Obito started, at the same time.

Then they stopped, looked at each other, and burst into giggles.

...Something had obviously changed.

I crossed my arms and shifted all my weight to my back leg, like I was some kind of disapproving schoolteacher. "I'm waiting, you two."

"I'm sort of in the, uh, probation period?" Obito gave me an "I dunno" look. I kind of agreed—but then, maybe Obito had done something during the test that he didn't want to tell me about. "I asked, but I'm not gonna be allowed to do more than shadowing and assisting with arrests and patrol until I'm fifteen."
"And I have been working with Akihito-sensei. He says he's thinking about retiring from being an active practitioner since the war is over, so the hospital is putting all of the field-qualified medics through as many examinations as we can. I was promoted during the last round." Rin looked almost like she was going to burst from happiness. "I'm working on a restorative jutsu to help with Uchiha eye strain for right now."

And if she succeeded—if it was the particular eye strain I was thinking about—then the Uchiha clan would just about demand that she married into the clan to keep her. Or perhaps pay her an entire mountain of gold. Depending, of course, on whether or not it worked.

"Compared to all that, I don't feel like I'm exactly doing much." I admitted after a second or two to absorb all the new info.

"Didn't Sensei tell you yet?" Obito asked, sounding surprised.

"Tell me what?" I raised an eyebrow. "He's asked everyone on his last mission to report separately. I haven't even talked to me yet."

Obito seemed like he was about to say something, but Rin put her hand over his mouth and said, "Then we won't spoil the surprise."

"But what happened on your mission, Kei?" Obito said from behind Rin's hand, before pushing her arm away. "Sensei only said you'd been reassigned, but he didn't say why or anything."

"Tanigakure." I shrugged—wasn't like that particular detail was classified or anything—and went on, "Things got weird, and Kakashi's in there giving his report."

"He is?" Rin shot a glance at the door. "Were there any injuries?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle." And nothing a therapist didn't deserve first shot at.

"Kei-senpai." Rin said disapprovingly, like she knew I was hiding something. A lot of somethings, perhaps. Which, because of who I was and how I'd chosen to behave, I always had. The "what" varied by person.

"Why would Sensei make everyone give separate reports?" Obito asked instead.

I shrugged again. "Dunno."

I had theories, of course. It may have had to do with Kakashi's ANBU candidacy. It may have had something to do with how Honoka and Ensui were likely members of ANBU and had different clearance levels. It may have had to do with the fact that I carried Isobu with me, or with the events of the mission when we brought Obito back. Because of all that, each of us would probably end up with enough loose ends in our respective stories for Sensei to knit a sweater.

 Basically, it was easier on Sensei if we just kept to ourselves about those things and let him (or his backup paperwork ninja squad) figure out the real meaning behind everything.

"Well, it sucks that they're keeping you waiting." Obito huffed. "How long do you think it'll take?"

"It might take a while." Meeting Rin's eyes, I said, "It's complicated and probably halfway classified."

Rin frowned. "But Kei-senpai, the Hokage already—"
At that point the door opened again and Sensei poked his head out. He looked a little surprised to find all three of us standing in the hall and chatting, to be perfectly honest.

But the expression was wiped away by a smile almost as soon as it appeared, and he said, "Your turn, Kei."

I sighed inwardly. I wasn't exactly looking forward to a potential feelings-biopsy. "Rin-chan, Obito? Track down Kakashi and invite him for lunch or something. I'll pay you back later."

Both of them looked really concerned when I said that. What could have possibly happened to make me ask, they probably wondered.

I'd tell them if I got permission. Not before.

"All right, Sensei." I said, and stepped into his office.

Looking around, I had to admit that the Hokage's office was neater than it'd been since the Third had been the one wearing the hat. Sensei had a stack of paperwork to one side of his desk, upon which the official hat sat, and a lunch tray (mostly untouched) on the other. One of the windows was open, and even at that moment Sensei crossed the room to close it.

Since privacy seals didn't work when locations weren't mostly sealed shut, I had to conclude that when shinobi didn't feel like using the stairs, the windows of even the Hokage's office became viable options.

Sensei sat down at his desk, picked up a pen, and met my eyes evenly. "Report."

"Did Kakashi tell you what happened?" I asked, though it was against protocol.

"...Yes." His blank expression softened a bit. "I sent him to Kushina, and I think that Rin and Obito will be good for him, too. Don't worry about him right now, Kei."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from responding to that out loud. Kakashi was far enough from "okay" that he couldn't see it with a telescope. I wasn't going to just stop worrying.

I looked at the ceiling, trying to think…and promptly let out a bark of startled laughter.

There, on the overhead fluorescent light, was a piece of paper that had been thoroughly taped to said light. It read, "Your answers aren't up here."

"Like the addition?" Sensei asked knowingly. "Kushina thought of it."

"Yeah, I"—had seen the same sign in my old life, somewhere—"think it works." I shook myself, then settled in place with my hands in my pockets. I really did feel better, even if I'd only laughed a bit. "Thanks, Sensei. I'm ready to start."

"Begin wherever makes sense." Sensei suggested.

I did.

"I spent a week in Sorayama, as a part of my mission for the Chinatsugumi." I began. I had technically been on a different mission than Team Honoka until we got to Tani, after all. "Jiraiya-sama informed me of his mission's parameters and consulted with me, as well as telling me about, uh, Operative Crane."

Sensei nodded. So it apparently was a thing, and not just because Jiraiya felt like reassuring me about
"I spent most of that time trying to relax, and to train." I sighed. "I discovered that the more powerful jutsu I have are, uh, mostly uncontrollable now. I could train myself up to B-rank in Water Release if I pushed myself, but the further I went the more likely it was that the Three-Tailed Beast's chakra would try to push through the seal or something. I'm pretty sure I've lost the use of the Rasengan, and I was performing at half-capacity through most of the mission with Team Honoka, by my estimation."

Of course, without Isobu I wouldn't exactly have been able to survive using too many high-end jutsu very often. Even as he increased my effective (and personal) chakra capacity, he punched reckless holes through my control apparently by accident.

I held out my hand to Sensei, showing him my palm. "I also discovered that I can lay instant seals, as long as it's just the explosive type. I'm sure if I asked Kakashi about the last mission we were on before this—and he wanted to talk about my blackouts—then I'd know more. But it was like I just woke up and could pull it off."

Sensei's brows knit together worriedly. "While I'm glad you've found a new talent, how long has this trouble with your chakra been happening?"

"Since…a little before I left." I bit my lip. "My chakra sense has also been spotty lately, but I don't know why. I mean, I'm used to not being able to think past the feedback I get if a jutsu is too strong, but…"

Sensei hid his alarmed look rather well, except for the bit where his eyes went a bit wider than normal. "Continue, please."

"Then I got your letter, telling me to meet up with Team Honoka by the fourteenth. I did, with Tsuruya's help, and was told that our mission was to investigate the countryside around Tanigakure for some kind of bandits, I think.

"Obviously, I wasn't told everything that was going on." I bit my lip for just a second. "But what I heard was that we were going to be stomping on a local warlord and his lackeys until he died, and clearing up the genjutsu minefield around his territory. It seemed straightforward, given the genjutsu resistances we all had. We should have been fine."

"But you weren't." Sensei filled in.

"No, we weren't. Honoka and Ensui assured us ahead of time that the mission would be nothing we couldn't handle, but there must have been false information in the chain somewhere." I shook my head. "We killed both of the enemy's enforcers, and we got a location out of them. But when we got there, everything was dead. The villagers, the supposed bad guy…and we decided to assault the fortress anyway."

Funny how I could have flashbacks to something that had happened barely a week ago. "Turned out that the entire territory was overrun with chakra-eating butterfly summons, who had devastated the area. There were only about fifty genjutsu mines—the rest were exploding seals, and we found out later that the butterflies had the ability to mimic seals, complete with effect. The originals, though, were what Kakashi and I were hit with."

"Are you all right?" Sensei asked.

"…It hurt, I guess, but the Three-Tails managed to get me out of mine inside of five minutes. I found
out that the Three-Tailed Beast's chakra made me repel the butterflies as soon as I got too close, so I had plenty of chakra." I rubbed the back of my neck awkwardly. "I ran around inside the castle trying to find everyone after that, and I found Pakkun. Pakkun led me to Kakashi, and..." I swallowed. "I think he might have found out where the supposed mastermind was, but he got caught along the way. The butterflies were trying to eat all of his chakra, and once I got them off him I found out why he hadn't chased them off."

"Caught in a genjutsu." Sensei guessed, though it didn't really sound like a question. "He told me."

"...Right." Not sure if he'd told Sensei what he saw. From Sensei's expression, though, it looked like he had. "I disrupted the seal lines to break the genjutsu trap, but it may have made the effects worse."

...Because, honestly? The more I talked about it, the more the genjutsu sounded like a starter version of the Eternal Tsukuyomi. And felt like how that technique was described, up until Isobu had crashed the party.

"Anyway," I continued, "we found the supposed mastermind a little after that. That was when we found the butterfly summon contract, which Honoka thought the Aburame would like to experiment with. Turned out they weren't malicious." I shrugged. "We took the scroll, did our best to clear the surrounding area of bodies and various trap seals, and came back home."

Sensei raised an eyebrow.

"On the way back home," I went on obligingly, "we found and rescued a little girl who was probably from Jōmae and likely a spy in the making." I shrugged. "I don't know, it was just something we did an extra twenty minutes."

"Kei." Sensei said flatly.

So much for keeping private conversations private.

"Okay, okay." I sighed. "A little after we recovered the summon contract, I noticed Kakashi was having nightmares. His dogs volunteered to take over my watch shift so I could go talk to him outside of camp." I looked at the ceiling again, but it wasn't as funny the second time. "We ended up talking a lot about what he'd seen in the genjutsu. I...I didn't know his mother's name. I knew about his father, but..." I was wringing my hands by that point. Noticing that, I stopped. "Kakashi grows guilt complexes like weeds. He doesn't talk about his feelings much, but..." Agh, dammit. Sensei might as well have been Kakashi's second father.

"Kakashi believes that Obito and I—and maybe others—would have been happier if he'd died at Kannabi. If we'd left him behind." I closed my eyes briefly, swallowing hard. "And he blames himself whenever the Three-Tailed Beast's chakra acts up while he's around, to the point of not using his Sharingan around me even when it would have helped us. I did my best to set him straight on that, since the Three-Tails and I have been working together without too many problems recently."

Sensei said nothing for a while, apparently turning that over in his head. "You've been working with the Three-Tails."

"...Was I not supposed to?" I asked blankly. "Because there's a giant three-tailed turtle in my chakra coils and working without him is pretty difficult."

"I'd hesitate to say 'no' in this case." Sensei replied carefully. "But just in case, report to my house at noon tomorrow. Kushina and I need to take a look at your seal and see what we can do about your chakra control. In the meantime, meditate and try not to use your chakra too much."
Great.

Sensei glanced at the clock on the wall, frowned for a split second, and then said, "You're dismissed for now, Kei. I expect a written report on the Land of Rivers mission by the twenty-fourth."

With that, Sensei stood up from his desk and walked around it so that he was standing directly in front of me. Then, very slowly and carefully, like he was afraid I might object, Sensei enveloped me in a hug.

"As your sensei and not your Hokage," Sensei told me, "thank you for looking after your teammates, even when they make it difficult. I'm just asking you to be careful with yourself, too."

I hugged him back, fiercely. "I will, Sensei."

And after that, I went home.

Chapter End Notes

"Rather Be" by Clean Bandit was the song on loop this time.
Here's an easy example of how time flies: Naruto was due in less than two months.

How's that for a timeline stepping up its game?

I prodded disinterestedly at my bowl of somen noodles, not feeling all that hungry. Birds were singing in the trees, the sun was shining, and I'd just gotten back from a mission that had cost a good chunk of chakra to survive. By all rights, I should have been devouring anything food-like with the same enthusiasm an Akimichi did. Somehow, my appetite remained nonexistent in the face of that one fact.

August twenty-third, and there was still so much to do to prepare.

"Kei-chan, are you going to be able to watch your brother this afternoon?" Mom asked from the front hallway, where she was putting on a pair of non-shinobi sandals.

"Only until about noon." I told her, finally getting up from the table and deciding to dump the noodles back into the pot on the stove. I hadn't touched them except with chopsticks, so they were probably fine. "Then I have a meeting with the Hokage."

"Oh, that won't work." Mom said, halfway under her breath. She poked her head into the kitchen a moment later. "I'm going to be running errands all day. Akane Shiranui also invited me for lunch."

I wasn't aware that…wait, no, I'd just forgotten that Mom knew Genna's mother. Must have been infantile amnesia kicking in, entirely too many years too late.

"You can't take Hayate with you?" I asked.

"Not if he's going to be off with his class at four." Mom said.

I frowned. My brother was almost eleven years old, and about to embark on the only field trip of his school year, which would take place in the forests inside of the village's walls. It was more like a survival mission for children than anything, since they'd be able to hunt their own food and have to set up watch rotations. It was a new program, so I hadn't been on the trip, but apparently it was still a big deal for the mini-ninjas.

At least, that was what the release form had said.

"I'll keep track of him until noon. After that," I said evenly, "he's going to be spending the day with Iruka."

Mom didn't say anything for a while. Then, "You haven't been spending very much time with your
brother lately."

...Um.

This was one of those conversations that could easily turn out to be a trap. If I said I was busy with shinobi things (which I was), Mom could argue that I had a responsibility to make sure that my brother was as prepared as I had been to enter that strange and chaotic world. If I said I was too caught up in the whole "Sensei is Hokage" thing, Mom could say that I was abandoning my family a bit for the sake of politics. Either way, the results would be less than ideal.

Now, there was no guarantee that Mom would be upset at my lack of time spent with Hayate. She hadn't sounded like it. She knew I had a busy life and that it had changed a lot in the last two months. But I felt my stomach twist anyway.

As much "fun" as I made of Kakashi for his guilt complex, I was the only one on our team for whom "being guilt-tripped into things by Mom" was actually a problem. Mainly because I was the only one with a living mother.

That was about when I gave myself a mental punch to the face and then focused on how to respond.

"Is there something you need me to teach him?" I asked hesitantly. I rinsed my bowl in the sink before turning back to face her.

"No." Mom was giving me a quizzical look. "I just want you to spend time with him."

...My shinobi paranoia did not have an off button, apparently.

"Okay." I said.

Mom sighed. After a moment, she crossed the kitchen and give me a quick hug. "I'm not upset, Kei-chan."

Well, I was.

If I got so caught up in trying to change the future that I forgot about the present, what the hell kind of person was I supposed to be? Naruto was coming, yeah, but I'd been neglecting Hayate while waiting for Fate's other shoe to drop onto my head.

Mom left, after making sure that Hayate would have a packed lunch for the afternoon and being sure that I'd look after him until he had to leave. Or I had to leave. Whichever.

Hayate finally got out of bed at around nine, at which point I let him eat breakfast before going into our family's plan for the day. I ended up eating a bunch of strawberries just while waiting for him to finish, which probably wasn't the healthiest option available. I just didn't care much.

Hayate said something around a mouthful of noodles that I didn't catch.

"Huh?"

Hayate swallowed and said, "You're usually gone in the morning, Sis."

"Oh, yeah." I shrugged. "No team training this morning. I'm not meeting up with anyone until later."

He looked around. "When did Mom leave?"

"Half an hour ago, maybe." I replied. "Finish your breakfast and we'll see what we can do this
morning."

Hayate's eyes went wide. "Really?"

…What the hell kind of sister was I? Because from the looks of things, I was starting to get Sasuke vibes from my own brother, and not in the "vengeance" sense. Pre-Massacre Sasuke had been a devoted younger brother with enthusiasm for his older brother for so much as existing. I was suddenly more than a little worried that I'd been neglecting Hayate enough to look like the Itachi in this relationship.

"What are we going to do?" Hayate asked.

…Good question, little brother.

"My first suggestion would be to go out and eat something, but I think my timing's off." I shrugged. "What do you want to do?"

Hayate seemed to think about it, even as he started to eat faster and faster. He looked like he was eating quickly so that he could have more time with me, which was kind of cheering. If he was willing to risk throwing up later, I guess that counted as enthusiasm.

"Don't go too fast. I'm not going anywhere for another three hours, little brother." I told him.

Hayate finished a moment later, breathing a little harder than normal. As I snatched his bowl and chopsticks and started to wash them in the sink, he said, "Can you please show me how to walk on water?"

"Why water-walking?" I asked, glancing at Hayate curiously.

"It's cool!" He tilted his head to the side as he thought further about the topic before saying, "And none of the kids in my class can do it, besides maybe Tokuma, and he doesn't count."

Tokuma…Tokuma… "Who's that again?" I asked.

"He's a member of the Hyūga clan." Hayate said. "Everyone says his chakra control is really good, and he has a lot of it."

I hadn't learned water-walking until his age, for all that I'd had effectively perfect chakra control back then, mostly because I didn't have anyone to teach me or the reserves to pull it off for long. While my chakra control had obviously suffered since then, I was still happy enough that Hayate wanted to learn.

There was a pond somewhere in this district…

"All right. Get dressed and"—and here I had to pause, because Hayate rushed out of the kitchen with all the shinobi speed he could muster. To the figurative dust cloud he left behind, I said, "Sheesh."

"I'm almost read—ow!" Hayate shouted, probably tripping on a discarded shirt or something. His room was a bit of a mess. "I'm okay!"

I finished with the utensils and with cleaning up the kitchen table just as my brother ran back into the kitchen, appearing around the corner before skidding to a stop. At least he didn't break anything when he stopped.

My brother was dressed in an old, paint-smeared t-shirt and swim trunks, and had a towel slung
around his neck.

"You're being slow!" Hayate told me, even as he fought to get his sandals on.

"Sure thing, Hayate." I replied easily. I put everything away, then headed to my room to get ready for my own sake.

Granted, I didn't need to worry about getting dunked in a pond, but Hayate tended to splash a lot when there was more than a centimeter of water in any one place. I still grabbed some old pants with the knees practically worn through, a faded black t-shirt with both sleeves ripped off, and both of our lunches. And a duffel bag, which had spare clothes, towels, and a very small medical kit.

We ended up heading to training ground three, mostly because it was convenient and because I didn't feel like facing the crowds around the other major rivers today. Mostly because of the presence of the memorial stone, most teams didn't rent out Team Minato's usual training grounds much.

I threw the duffel onto the riverbank, and Hayate tossed his towel on top. We managed to get set up quickly, since there were only two of us and there was no special equipment to fish out of summoning scrolls or anything.

"What do I do first?" Hayate asked, practically bouncing in place.

"The first thing you're going to do is warm up." I told him, crossing my arms over my chest.

"But that's the boring part," he grumbled.

"If I have to run you through all of Mom's drills because the Academy teachers aren't being mean enough…" I trailed off ominously.

"Fine, fine!" Hayate jogged off, mostly traveling the edge of training ground three's signature clearing.

Trained shinobi could fight from a cold start, but we were kind of weird as far as human physiology went. While I certainly wasn't the greatest shinobi ever, I didn't require warm-ups so much as warning—usually from my chakra sense. A jolt of enemy chakra was like a shot of adrenaline for me, and when combined with the frankly superhuman levels of skill, speed and strength that shinobi could reach…well.

…I had to admit that I viewed Hayate's future as a chakra-powered soldier as a double-edged sword, but there wasn't much I could do about it when he was within a year of being there.

And even if he was just a kid at the moment, he was still a shinobi in training. That meant that he looped the training field a lot faster than his ten-year-old legs would have otherwise been capable of, in a universe where humanity had to obey mundane physics.

"I'm—hah—back." Hayate only panted a bit, which was to his credit.

"Try using more chakra next time. Otherwise, well done." I said, watching my brother's face light up.

I obviously had a guilty conscience, since just seeing how happy he seemed from that made me feel like I'd been a terrible sister.

"What now? Is it like the leaf exercise?" Hayate had learned the leaf-sticking exercise, but it was a lot easier to stick a leaf to your forehead than it was to suspend yourself on water through chakra
alone.

"Eh, kinda. Sit down over here." I said, and led my brother over to the riverbank. I let my feet dangle out onto the water concentrating chakra carefully.

"Okay. Now what?" Hayate said. His feet, though, were sinking into the water.

I thought about it.

I took my sandals off and dropped them on the grass. "First thing's first—it's easier to practice if you're not wearing shoes, at least when you're starting out."

Hayate was already copying me.

"All right. Now, just hang on a second." I got up and stepped out onto the river, with perhaps a little more hesitation than usual. My control held, though. A good sign, given that I'd thought my condition was getting worse exponentially.

Then I turned back and faced Hayate, who'd stood up when I had. He seemed a little hesitant to try the walking part yet.

"Now try concentrating chakra into your feet." I said, watching him carefully.

Hayate brought his hands together into a seal—Bird—to concentrate. Even without my chakra sense at its best, I could tell that he was using too much and it wasn't going toward his feet at all. I remembered vaguely that people said chakra was hardest to mold with the bottoms of one's feet, but it'd been a while since I'd seen a concrete example thereof. Whoops.

"Try it now," I said anyway.

Hayate did, and promptly jerked in surprise when he fell through the water's surface anyway. At least we were only on the riverbank—he only got wet up to the tops of his feet.

"It didn't work!" Hayate frowned. "Why didn't it work?"

"Well, what did you do?" I asked, rather than answering.

"I used chakra like you said!" Hayate said, but he sounded more confused than angry. "...But I'm not sure it went to my feet."

"Channeling chakra to the bottom of your feet is supposed to be the hardest of the common chakra exercises." I said, tapping my big toe against the surface of the river. It was one of those basic skills that became second nature, like wall-walking and stabbing people. "It takes a long time to get right, but you should still perfect it while on your genin team."

"I don't see why I can't get it right now." Hayate said, hopping back onto the bank. "I'm going to try again."

"Go slower this time." I suggested. "I'll see what I can do to help."

"Okay." Hayate started concentrating his chakra again, gathering it in his core. That kind of thing was standard, as far as early education went—keep building pressure in your hara until you could finally feel it. I hadn't needed the practice, but it worked as a focusing technique.

"Stop and hold it there." I ordered, putting my hand against my brother's stomach, right above the pool of chakra I could feel. As soon as I felt his chakra stabilize where it was, I said, "Now, follow
my finger down with your chakra. Push it down your leg, slowly."

Sweat broke out on Hayate's nose. I had to wonder how hard this was for him. Still, he said, "Got it."

I traced a very slow line down from my brother's stomach, down to his hip, down to his knee, and then down toward his foot. Along the way, his chakra sputtered and flickered hesitantly and often tried to vent out of a tenketsu in his leg—I wasn't quite sure where the tenketsu were, but I could guess.

Still, it got there in the end.

"Think you can do the other one on your own?" I asked.

"Uh-huh." Hayate said. He straightened up and shook out his leg, since chakra could leave a funny tingling feeling if you were doing something wrong.

"All right. When you're ready."

I don't know how long I spent with Hayate on the riverbank, just getting his chakra to listen and then taking a few hesitant steps out onto the river. I didn't correct him much, unless something was really wrong, and just kept him on task.

However long I spent, though, was probably too long.

Just as Hayate started wobbling on the water's surface, partly because he had made progress and partially because his chakra was getting pretty low, I felt a puff of chakra from a ways off. I automatically looked in that direction, though not out of alarm. More like curiosity.

"Kei, where have you been?" Obito called, jogging over to us.

"Where ha—ah, shit." I bit off the curse, though a bit too late. "Is Sensei mad?"

"I don't know, since I left like ten minutes ago." Obito said, shrugging. "So, ready for the meeting?"

I looked down at myself. A little waterlogged, dressed like a hobo, and definitely not in uniform. Glancing at Hayate—smaller hobo, or perhaps enterprising house-painter—I had to sigh. Fine. Whatever.

"Can you take Hayate to Iruka's house?" I asked. "Somehow I don't think anyone's going to be happy if I took the long way around Konoha."

Obito blinked. Then, "Well, sure. As long as you take this."

A kunai appeared in his hand, and he tossed it end-over-end to me. When I caught it, I immediately noticed that it was one of Sensei's three-pronged Flying Thunder God ones, which made me stifle a groan.

Of course he'd waste chakra like this.

"See you in ten, Kei!" Obito said cheerfully.

Just as Obito picked Hayate up like a sack of rice, grabbing our stuff as an afterthought, my world disappeared into whirling colors and a squeezing sensation.

Sensei was nowhere near above abusing the benefits of his signature technique, even if it effectively
meant that everything he touched had some bizarre two-way summon contract with him.

A while later, I was lying on the floor of Sensei and Kushina's living room, with all the furniture pushed mostly out of the way. It probably should have been more intimidating than it was, given that I was shirtless except for a backwards hospital gown, and because I was undergoing a pretty thorough medical examination, but it somehow wasn't.

Kakashi was sitting on the upended couch, pretending not to pay attention to anything other than the spiral painted on the ceiling, while Obito had disappeared (from my perspective) into the kitchen for ice cream. Rin knelt by my left knee, peering at me anxiously, while Kushina bustled around on the floor with her sealing kit. Sensei sat by my head, chewing on the wooden end of his brush as he thought.

"Can I just point out how awkward this is?" I asked plaintively. The ceiling had gotten boring after five minutes.

"You said that a minute ago, Kei-senpai." Rin said distractedly. "And the minute before that. You're lucky this examination doesn't hurt."

"…True." I sighed. "Any conclusions yet, Rin-chan?"

"A few, but the tests aren't complete." Rin sat back for a moment, readjusting her hairclips so her hair didn't fall into her eyes. Then she said, "Kushina-san, could you please hand me another of those readout seals? I need to confirm something."

"Sure, Rin-chan." Kushina said, another of the seals appearing in her hand. I guess if I hadn't had one of those stuck to my forehead for a full minute, I would have appreciated their craftsmanship more.

Readout seals were sort of like the paper version of the diagnostic jutsu that Rin and I favored, only they could be read and copied like any other piece of paper instead of being limited to the user. The hospital used them for record-keeping, mostly, and apparently my particular problems had pinged enough of Sensei's CLASSIFIED warnings to make him decide that an in-(a)-home examination was the best idea. Hence Kushina creating her own.

Rin stuck the paper to my right wrist, activating it. I felt a bit of a drain as the tag latched onto my chakra, but not much else.

This is humiliating. Isobu grumbled, turning this way and that in my mindscape.

"At least it's probably only going to take another few minutes." I replied.

"I just got another spike in the Three-Tailed Beast's chakra." Rin said, frowning in concern at the seal.

"He and I talk a lot." I replied.

Sensei just made a noncommittal noise, showing that he'd understood the reply but hadn't come up with a response yet. Or maybe that there wasn't an appropriate response.

I was getting the impression that no one here approved of my survival strategies, as far as the whole "using demonic energy" thing went.

"How long have you been talking to the Three-Tails?" Obito asked, more curious than concerned.
"Because, well, I remember the whole panic thing a month ago, and it wasn't really something I thought you'd be okay with risking again."

"You'd be amazed how many problems can be solved by talking instead of stabbing." I muttered, shooting Kakashi a quick glare. So much for the apology to Isobu, if he was just gonna run to Sensei behind my back.

…Though, when I felt like being honest instead of irritated, I had to admit that he had a point.

From his perspective, I might as well have been preforming satanic rituals or feeding my brain to some kind of abomination. So much for convincing him that Tailed Beast rights were a valid thing to fight for.

"You're taking this remarkably well." Sensei commented, re-checking the seal on my chest for about the eighth time. "I expected you to be much more upset about the ambush examination, Kei."

"What, because you think I'm doing something stupid and I don't?" I sighed, looking at the ceiling. "I'm okay with people occasionally doing things for what they think is my own good. I mean, obviously I'd be a lot angrier if we were having this conversation in the hospital's basement or in ANBU headquarters, but we're not."

"That's, um, one way to look at it." Rin said, sounding both reassured and a little confused. She glanced down at the seal still stuck to my arm, before saying, "Also, I have the damage report for your chakra coils."

"Is it bad?" I asked from the floor.

"...Surprisingly, no." Rin said, sounding surprised. "I mean, obviously there is something weird going on with your chakra and you should be careful, but I can't find anything that shows you've been badly hurt by the Three-Tails."

Huh.

"What? Let me see that!" Kushina said, and snatched the seal off my wrist. I felt her chakra flare as she reset it, then a flash of annoyance as she put the stupid thing on my forehead.

"Which Gate are you—?" I started to ask.

"Shush! I'm trying to concentrate." Kushina cut me off.

For a bit, no one said anything.

Then, Obito said, "So, Sensei? Did you ever tell Kei about the thing?"

"The thing?" I asked blankly.

Sensei paused and then smacked himself in the forehead with his free hand. "I completely forgot."

"Stop talking!" Kushina told me sharply, casting annoyed looks at everyone.

Then Rin said hesitantly, "Hokage-sama, if I could…?"

"Hey, Kakashi, did you know about the thing?" Obito asked.

"No." Kakashi said, without looking up from a magazine he'd procured somewhere.
"You didn't even ask for a hint! Do you even know what I'm talking about? It's a big deal!" Obito protested.

"Hence the 'no.'" Kakashi said.

Kushina looked like she was about to just randomly start slapping people to get them all to shut up.

"Well, I don't see why not." Sensei was telling Rin.

Meanwhile, apparently Kakashi and Obito were going to have their first knock-down, drag-out brawl in months because they had too much energy for a small space. And maybe because they were both bored as heck.

"Will you all be quiet before I have to resort to random violence?" Kushina demanded. "You," by which she apparently meant me, "are up for consideration for a promotion to special jōnin, and as a member of the Hokage Guard Platoon. He," and here, Kushina indicated Kakashi while gesticulating with a calligraphy brush, "is going to be in ANBU by the end of September, if not sooner. Meanwhile he," this time, Obito, "is probably going to be jōnin by seventeen if he keeps breaking course records willy-nilly and Rin-chan is going to succeed that prick Yamaguchi by age twenty if she lives that long."

With that, Kushina pulled the seal off my forehead and concluded, "And your chakra is unbalanced by an overload of spiritual energy that makes absolutely no sense!"

I looked up at everyone. With the exception of Kushina, they all looked a little sheepish.

Huh. What would it be like to be a special jōnin? Hell, I hadn't really planned on being promoted at all. For a while, it seemed like my skills would level off at chūnin level and I'd be able to say that I was qualified for teaching small children how not to kill themselves with knives. Being a part of the Hokage Guard Platoon also sounded interesting if hilariously unlikely until a minute ago, since Sensei didn't need a guard. He'd never needed a guard. There was literally nothing a guard could do—other than be there—that Sensei couldn't do by himself with more force and more style.

...Also, spiritual energy? That had been a recurring problem, if I remembered my childhood all that well. I mean, I'd been reincarnated and obviously my mind wasn't exactly a perfect fit for my body, but that part of things had...oh.

Hard to say that part was the Dreamer's responsibility when she wasn't around anymore. Funny how, as a teenager, my spiritual energy was just fucking with my chakra control. What once had meant uncontrollable visions now meant collapsing control. Which, given the consequences for lousy chakra control, seemed worse.

...It still didn't explain why Isobu's chakra acted up anytime I tried to use a technique above B-rank, though.

"Oh, and my baby is going to be here in October and I fully expect all of you to babysit when I feel like pulling my hair out." Kushina added, "So be prepared for that."

"Can I talk now? Or sit up?" I asked. Not that the floor was dirty or anything, but lying on it for half an hour and talking to my examiners like I was getting brain surgery was not my idea of fun. Not that it probably mattered, but I still felt like I had to at least make my feelings known.

"You can obviously talk." Kushina said. She stuck the readout seal over my heart chakra, though, and said, "But don't get up right now, because I need to check on a few more things."
"So, you didn't seem surprised by the spiritual energy imbalance." Sensei commented, as Kushina muttered something inaudible to herself.

"I've kind of always had that problem." I said. "But I think that I've gotten lazy about managing it."

"Does this have anything to do with the whole vision thing?" Obito asked.

"It did." I replied. "Until I was eight and got my personality splintered by accident. Then the Dreamer managed it."

"...I still don't understand how that worked." Obito said after a moment.

"Wait, since when has Kei had a split personality?" Sensei looked a little like someone had pulled the rug out from under his feet.

I gave him a weird look. "Didn't I tell you about this yesterday, Sensei? Or even before that?"

Because, frankly, I was almost certain that I'd mentioned the voices a while ago, even if I hadn't framed it in terms of alternate personalities...

"No, I think I would have remembered that," was his reply, and his voice was a little sharper than usual. Oops. "Kei, I thought you meant you'd lost consciousness because the Three-Tails was stealing parts of your memory! Blackouts are one of the first signs of a Tailed Beast seal breaking down into uselessness."

I said, in a very small voice, "Oh."

Kushina burst out laughing.

Sensei sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "...How do you even...?"

"She told us the story before you got there, Hokage-sama." Rin said. "And after what happened, I guess we all forgot that none of you had been there. Jiraiya-sama didn't know either."

"And I obviously didn't." Kushina added, still grinning. "Well, Kei-chan, looks like you have some work ahead of you."

"...So, wait, this entire thing was pointless?" Obito asked.

"Well, no. I also found another thing." Kushina said. She held up the readout seal again. "Remember that black seal you both got from the creepiest old man ever?"

"Um, yeah." Obito said.

Kushina stood up, looming over the room despite actually being pretty short overall. "Both of you need to meditate to maintain the Evil Sealing Method variant that we used on it!"

"Meditate?" Obito looked blank. "But I thought that it was, I dunno, a one-and-done kind of deal. Like Kei's other seal."

Kushina took a deep breath, Lecture Mode engaged. "Not if you don't maintain it! The thing is, the Evil Sealing Method and seals like it are maintained by willpower! Madara's seal represents a constant struggle against the power of an evil jerk, even if you can't feel it all the time. It's only in stasis as long as both of you make sure you can fight the compulsion with your own chakra!"
I thought back, trying to remember how that had worked out for Sasuke and the Curse Seal of Heaven. Something, something, two Chidori in a row and then suddenly an effect like having tadpoles wiggle around under the skin like living tattoos…

"So, what does that mean when he has a Zetsu-cloned arm and I have a Tailed Beast problem?" I asked.

"Basically? You need to meditate anyway, since you're unbalanced in at least two senses of the word." Kushina said blithely, making me grin. "Obito, you always need to work on your chakra control, even if you can just copy jutsu off people now. Don't get lazy!"

Why was it that Kushina could always sum up the solution in five seconds when it would take anyone else five hours and a PowerPoint presentation?

"You heard her." Sensei said, and clapped his hands to snap us all out of our stupor. "Everyone up. Kei, get your shirt back on. I'm going to talk to you in a minute, but we need to clean up here so it looks a little less like a cult set up shop." He paused, probably for effect. "Well, get moving!"

We spent the next few minutes cleaning (after I'd put my shirt back on and taken the hospital gown off) before we were able to do much of anything. Rin also remembered that she had an afternoon meeting of some kind to get to, which meant she took off. Obito said something about patrol, which meant he escorted her out. Kakashi hid in one of the bedrooms, though I didn't really know why. Maybe he still felt raw after the mission.

"Am I gonna get a lecture?" I asked, once I'd noticed that basically everyone had vacated the premises except for Kushina and Sensei.

"…I was certainly thinking about it." Sensei sighed, cleaning his sealing kit's brushes in the sink. "I hope you aren't planning to make a habit of scaring me every time you turn around, Kei."

"I wasn't planning anything, which was kind of the problem." I said, scratching the back of my neck. "Sorry."

"If you expect to be a special jōnin, you're going to need to think things through more thoroughly." Sensei shook his head. "I can't believe you never told me about your blackouts."

"I didn't have any until that mission." I protested. "I've always had a voice in my head, though. For a while, it seemed like I was just getting a chance to control my weird circumstances and I could literally devote part of my mind to managing it. The Three-Tails is just less friendly." Then my train of thought looped back around, so I said, "Until that mission, I'd never been incapacitated on a mission without being rendered unconscious, so I guess things just happened."

"I meant more that you've apparently had the personality split since before I ever met you, Kei." Sensei told me.

"Same here. I have to admit, I didn't really think you'd have needed one." Kushina put in. "Most people who have splits usually, I don't know, have some kind of weird technique that goes with it. Like the Kurama clan."

"…I would be terrified to find out that I was a Kurama clan member, even if I did get an edge in genjutsu." I said. "I barely remember scraps about them from the anime and from my history class. Most of what I did remember—truly violent and often dominant alternate personalities plus Uchiha-level genjutsu hax—wasn't exactly flattering."

Sensei started drying his supplies. "Are you sure?"
"I think someone else would have noticed." I said, shrugging.

"Kei." Sensei snapped.

I gulped so hard I felt like I almost swallowed my tongue. Sensei didn't exactly use that tone often. "Yes, Sensei."

Sensei sighed again, deeply. "I expect you to hold to that."

"Yes, Sensei."

"And to keep me informed of new information that might help the village."

"Yes, Sensei."

"And to keep yourself safe and healthy, since you haven't been doing the best job recently." Sensei paused, thinking about what point he wanted to make next. "So, I have to ask—where did you get your sensor ability? Everyone I know had to train to become proficient."

How did I even begin to explain that?

"I think I was born chakra-sensitive. Or oversensitive." I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to come up with something other than "oh look, squishy non-shinobi human born into alien universe has an allergic reaction." "Though I guess that must have been a part of the energy imbalance, since it wasn't until losing that edge that I started seeing a real problem."

Sensei led me to the kitchen table, and we both sat down. Kushina took over the sink and the stove and started making tea, I think.

"If you were truly oversensitive, you would never have been able to use chakra in the first place." Sensei said. "Ever felt a horrible burning sensation, followed by hospitalization or death? Because that's what that means."

Oh, so chakra allergies actually were a thing? And about as dangerous as peanut allergies in a JIF factory, apparently.

…Eek.

"My sensor capability is based on what Sage training I have." Sensei continued, looking at me curiously. "You're sure you've never been trained for this?"

"Even when I went to Inoshi Yamanaka to get my head put on straight, I didn't get any help." I said. "It's just something I do, I guess."

And the impending loss of my chakra sense might have something to do with acclimatization kicking in hella late. Maybe Isobu had prompted the backsliding.

"That's just the weirdest thing. Like how you seem okay with being a Tailed Beast Host!" Kushina interrupted.

"That was because of the visions." I said firmly. I looked at Kushina and asked, "So, is there a chance that the Three-Tails has something to do with my loss of control or my chakra sense going kind of dead?"

"Yes, though I would imagine that part of it is just laziness." Kushina held up a hand before I could say anything. "Hear me out. The Three-Tails is a massive boost to your total chakra capacity. You're
used to working with a lot less, and of course your control is shot. Not just control—your perception
of how much chakra 'works' is probably off, too, since most shinobi judge jutsu by how much they
cost and Tailed Beast Hosts don't. I tend to use what chakra I do based on, um, how much relief it
gives me." She looked rather embarrassed for a moment. "I mean, my chakra isn't infinite, but I
sometimes feel like I have literally too much for anyone and I just overcharge some of the usual
ninjutsu. And, well, you have to adjust your usage accordingly."

Sensei had been nodding along and added, "It's also not uncommon for shinobi to take a while to
train back up after an injury or severe shift in capability. None of us saw Obito power through
physical therapy—something I guess we can thank Madara for—but I don't think he learned to use
that arm in a day."

"Where was all this friendly advice while I was lying on the floor like a pancake?" I asked, surprised.

Kushina put three teacups down in front of us. One, presumably, was hers. "We had to make sure
you weren't being taken over by the Three-Tails."

*I'm kind of hoping that that ends up being nothing to worry about.*

**You knew the risks better than most when you faced me the first time.**

"So, what else did you want to ask about, before I have to go back to work?" Sensei asked.

Well…

"Is there any news about the orphanage?" I asked.

"Yes, actually." Sensei looked surprised that I'd remembered. I didn't really blame him—I hadn't
exactly been the model of cognitive function over the last…well, ever. Memory, maybe, but more
Epimetheus than Prometheus in terms of action. "Nonō Yakushi was surprised that I bothered to visit
or pull funding out of the village coffers, but I hope it made her life a little easier."

But the way that Sensei spoke made me wonder if we'd been too late.

Kabuto…well, he'd been a snake. But there were ways to head that kind of thing off at the pass. I
just might have been born too late to do it.

"Kabuto is well-remembered there, but apparently he disappeared some time ago." Sensei's
expression seemed a little closed-off, like he was wondering what he could have done, even if he
hadn't known that it was important. "I'll do what I can to keep Nonō from dying, but she's former
ROOT, if there is such a thing. There may not be a way."

I nodded, staring at the tabletop for what felt like an uncomfortably long time because there wasn't
much to say. ROOT needed to be ferreted out in order to secure the village's future. But damn were
there people who deserved better.

I hid my face in my hands. There was no guarantee of anything, this late in the game.

"Kei-chan." Kushina said, concerned.

"I keep feeling like I should be able to do something, but I either don't know enough or I'm too weak
or I'm too late." I said dully, not looking up. "You don't—we were so lucky when Obito came back,
after everything that happened. I-I can't expect to ever be that lucky again."

"…On another note," Sensei said cautiously, "Jiraiya-sensei went chasing after Nagato and his
friends. I stopped short of ordering him to stay here—not like he'd listen, after what happened to my team—but Kei? You can't control what other people do."

Sadly true. I bit my lip for a moment, then looked up.

There was tea on the table, so I drank some.

"...And besides, I can." Sensei said. "Not perfectly, of course, but being Hokage gives me a few more options than a soon-to-be guard. Speaking of which, Kei, do you actually want the position?"

Did I want to be tied to the village and the Hokage forever? Did I want to be the first line of defense if something happened around Naruto, or if Kushina wanted a babysitter? Did I want the promotion? Did I want to be the one people came to if Konohamaru or one of the other high-born kids eventually became a teenage pain-in-the-ass?

Hell yeah, sign me up!

"Actually? Yeah, I do." I said seriously. I paused, chin on the heel of my right hand. "I was a bit worried, I guess, that I didn't really have plans for the future like everyone else. This is a great idea."

Not what I thought I'd be interested in on Career Day, but then again I'd never attended one around here. Shinobi had continual aptitude testing through combat, so I guess the career evaluation options around here were usually more immediate. Accurate evaluation at a higher risk of death. Sounded promising!

"That's good, since I was planning on introducing you to your teammates later this week." Sensei told me.

"What would you have done if I said no?" I asked him.

Sensei shrugged. "Found a plan B. Since the team is partially assembled anyway, I'd have expected to have the last person trained up regardless of who joined. I hoped that you would, though, since you're already familiar with my sealing methodology and Kushina knows and likes you."

"Don't say that like you'll never need a guard." Kushina countered. "Or that I'll need security forever."

Before Sensei could respond to that in a way that probably meant Kushina wouldn't talk to him for a while, I said, "Sensei, Kushina-san, would it be all right if I tried to show you some of what I saw?"

Sensei looked blank for a while before the figurative lightbulb went on. "Wait, did you learn a genjutsu while I wasn't around?"

"Yeah, and Jiraiya-sama taught me." I gave both of them a quizzical look. "So, uh...?"

"If you could include anything I've been missing recently, it'd be appreciated." Sensei said dryly.

The thing about me and spilling the beans was that I was a miser with them. I spilled literally one metaphorical bean at a time, and I think I'd gotten away with spilling maybe twelve even during the big revelation a month ago.

Some people had no fucks to give. I, though, kept secrets like squirrels hoarded nuts. Including the Big One—that I was currently living in a universe I had thought of as a TV show. Somehow, I'd been very successful with hiding that one fact.
Still, I could probably come up with something that Sensei would be able to use.

I leaned forward and made the appropriate hand signs (since I still didn't trust my chakra enough to try a seal-less variant), and tried to see if I could exposit clearly through a repurposed genjutsu.

The room seemed to melt a bit at the edges, like that Salvador Dali painting with the squishy clocks. Except for us, the world went gray and still, and the floor lit up like an Apple commercial. While Sensei and Kushina looked around with mild interest, I visualized a series of hovering images, arranged into a glowing circle of head-sized sections. After a second or two, I brought up a series of screens more like the startup menu of a tablet than anything, cramming memories behind each "icon" for easy organization.

And apparently my brain organized by character rather than by timeline order.

"Um, do you want to look at something in particular?" I asked.

"Hm." Kushina looked curious. In front of her was a picture of Naruto's face as created by the official animation team, though obviously a little exaggerated given the difference between 2D and 3D. "Is this our son in the future? He has Minato's hair and eyes."

"With your facial structure and your smile." Sensei put in. He frowned a little. "Which is the most relevant part, Kei?"

"This one." I swiped my hand across the empty space in front of me, though I probably didn't actually need to. It was my genjutsu, after all. "Here we go."

Four icons came up—one with Tobi's spiral mask, and three more with Sensei, Kushina, and Naruto's faces. "These ones represent the trouble we might have on the tenth of October this year. Granted"—and here, I drew an X over Tobi's icon—"I don't think Obito will have anything to do with it. But this is the version I saw."

"Can you just activate it?" Sensei asked. "I think this is something I'll need to see for myself."

"Ourselves, Minato." Kushina corrected, crossing her arms over her chest. "I think I kind of have to be there when my son is born. This is definitely also my problem."

I cut off their possible impending argument by hitting the not-quite-existent "play" button. Then I dropped out of the genjutsu and let the ball get rolling.

As though I'd queued up a DVD playlist, I presented several events tied into that quartet of characters—people.

First, the events of the tenth of October, up to Sensei and Kushina's death. Probably fragmented, given that there had been multiple cuts during both the manga and anime editions of the scenes involved, but better than nothing. At least they'd probably understand why I hadn't been too sure of much of anything.

Second, glimpses of the lead-up to the Uchiha Massacre as I understood it. I admitted to mentally footnoting the heck out of that section, because there were parts I had only read about and others that were based on my observation of social patterns around major clans. And about the Sharingan, which was probably classified unless you had an Uchiha on your team.

Third, a flash forward to Naruto talking with the assembled Tailed Beasts and Hosts in the bizarre pocket dimension during the Fourth Shinobi World War. All of them were named and characterized during that scene, or at least until Tobi had ruined everything again.
Fourth, Madara's plan as far as I understood it. Complete with cloned Zetsu armies, the Moon's Eye Plan, the Eternal Tsukuyomi, the existence of Black Zetsu, and everything else I could think of that seemed halfway important. Oh, and the fact that the guy died somewhere in the middle.

About a minute later—by which point I had finished my tea and was washing out my cup—Kushina finally blinked and stopped staring into space as my genjutsu finally fizzled out. Sensei followed, shooting a glance at me that I couldn't read.

"...That was interesting." Sensei commented after a moment. He drained his tea a moment later. "It's a lot to take in."

I nodded.

"And you can't visit, say, Inoichi Yamanaka for a full mind-scan?" Sensei asked.

"Probably not. I'm not sure how the Three-Tails would react." I hedged. At the same time, though...

**Does that mean I can eat everyone who tries to get into your mind?**

*Absolutely.*

Transparency was one thing. Casually causing existential crises seemed beyond the pale. And, well, I frankly hated the idea of losing that last secret and thus all of my credibility. And I had a right to a certain territoriality for my own mind.

…Kind of hypocritical of me, but there were some things I didn't care to share.

"I thought you were getting along with him." Kushina said. "Don't you already know his name?"

"So?" At Kushina's look of surprise, I explained, "The Three-Tails hasn't actually told me his name. Just because I already know it doesn't mean I can just use it without permission."

…It's Isobu, by the way. Isobu-san if you really care, though I don't expect you will.

Yeah. Sorry about screwing up the sequence of events there. I told him, wincing internally.

**It could have been much worse. I'll forgive you this time.**

"But back to your other point—I don't have control over him. I have a working relationship. Anyone else who tries to get into my head isn't a part of the agreement, and you saw how mad he was after Kakashi," I struggled for a proper metaphor for a moment, then decided on, "essentially flipped a switch in my head and turned me off."

Kushina frowned. "And you think you've got it under control after that?"

"We're talking now. It's a start." I argued. "He didn't need to save me from the genjutsu trap last week. But he got me out soon enough that I could still do something to salvage the mission."

**It didn't occur to me that I could ignore it. We'd gone over genjutsu resistance before that.** Isobu commented. **I just didn't expect you to be caught first.**

*And again, thanks for the save there. I didn't expect it either—though saying I thought Madara would show up in the flesh just makes me sound paranoid. I sighed inwardly. But let me just say I'm perfectly willing to repay the favor.*
I would hope so.

"I suppose that's something." She still sounded skeptical, but frankly I didn't expect anyone to actually approve of my plan to befriend the biggest turtle I could find.

...

I swear we went about three minutes without anyone talking.

"You know what, Kei? Take the rest of the week off." Sensei said finally, after the pause had transcended the word "awkward" and become "profoundly uncomfortable." "I still expect that report, and for you to show up on Monday to meet your new team lineup."

"Where and when?" I asked.

"Seven, at Training Ground Forty-Four." Sensei stood up and added, "Dismissed."

I took off as fast as my feet could carry me.

Summary of the remainder of August:

Hayate's field trip was a success, even when he tromped home covered in mud and telling stories about catching a squirrel and eating it with his friends. Apparently, Yūgao had actually skinned it (along with her rabbit) while Iruka looked a little green the entire time. I got to hear three solid days of stories about maybe twenty hours of real time, and I was pretty sure he'd made up a bit of it by the end. I didn't call him out on that kind of thing, though.

I meditated more deeply than I ever had before. Obviously, I couldn't make up for a month of laziness in a week, but I did manage to find something weird at the bottom of my mindscape. Put bluntly, it was a dead zone where Isobu and I could speak face-to-face with zero interference from the outside world.

(This is weird.

You're the first human who's been down here in a while.

Do you ever get visitors or see your siblings down here?

Not often. They all seem busy in their own corners of the world.

Shame.)

After that incident, I found that Isobu's chakra had pulled back and that my own felt a bit tingly. At least I could sense things again, though keeping Isobu's chakra out of my human supply while using large quantities remained an issue.

(If you wanted me to stay out of your business, you could've just said.)

I wrote my edition of the report. Since my writing style could vary between bullet points and a terrible mockery of Tolkien, I eventually decided on writing out my feelings as I experienced the events of my mission. There were footnotes and asides almost everywhere, linking different moments of my narrative together via commentary about future events and people I hadn't met in the flesh just yet. And since every event needed to be explained, I also ended up writing out what some of those references meant. Mostly if they had to do with techniques, or kekkei genkai, or bizarre leaps of logic.
that only made sense to me.

It kind of looked like a Wikipedia article on paper, with color-coded extra pages instead of blue hyperlinks. I even attached a write-up about the various possible members of Akatsuki or Otogakure, and theories about how the Aburame clan might be able to use the summon contract we'd received. And other things. I was good at generating paperwork, apparently.

Once done with all of that, I turned in my multi-page report and got a pay slip back from the mission desk—Sensei wasn't in—and brought the resultant financial statement back to Mom so we could start budgeting for next month. Given that I had somehow gotten full mission pay for both, we actually came out ahead by a fair margin once we got to the bottom of the spreadsheet. As in, we had actual spending money even after all of our expenses were taken care of.

With Mom's permission, I went out and bought a new set of steel-ceramic-what-the-heck forearm guards with Obito's IOU (by dragging him along), and then got an accompanying new set of clothes to go along with them. They weren't particularly fancy—jacket with hood, new mesh shirt, different-colored pants, etc.—but were made of sturdier, shinobi-grade material in the hopes that I'd stop shredding my stuff. I also got a new uniform from the requisition depot, since my last one had been too small.

Regardless, I went to the meeting at the Forest of Death in full Konoha uniform, plus my new armguards and a special belt designed to act as a scroll holster. I brought along my explosive and weapon storage scrolls in a doubled holster on my right hip, with a larger utility scroll across the back of my flak jacket. My sword was on my left hip, since I drew right-handed, but I could have easily worn it on my back if it became necessary.

I hadn't exactly been told where I was meeting anyone, but I could track familiar signatures easily enough through the dense wood. Most of the stuff in there with chakra was obviously non-human.

As it was, though, I found a human one and just headed in that direction around the ten-meter-high perimeter fence. They weren't they for keeping animals in as much as they were for keeping humans out. The huge tigers and things in there wouldn't normally be stopped by fences, but jutsu could shut them down quickly.

Since the meeting place was so potentially hazardous, I mentally crossed everyone under the rank of chūnin off the list of potential teammates. That idea had been tentative at best, but it was nice to be validated even a little bit.

Before long, I found my target outside the thirty-fifth gate into the forest, where he was leaning against the concrete and looking bored by everything.

I waved and called out, "Hi, Genma!"

"Hey, Kei-san." Genma said as I approached, the ever-present senbon doing a quick circuit of his mouth as soon as he stopped talking. Then, "So, you're joining up?"

"Yeah. Unless you're here on some kind of wildlife conservation mission, in which case my answer will be to shove you in there so you can get on with it." I said, jabbing a thumb at the forest.

"Very funny." Genma snarked back. He glanced at the trees anyway, though. "Any idea how many members we're expecting?"

"Nope." I started methodically cracking each knuckle on my hands. Better to be maneuverable than stiff. I could make up for any loss of strength through chakra usage. And besides, most shinobi could
crack all of their joints with a noise that chiropractors probably heard in Hell, so it wasn't like I was annoying Genma that much.

Genma's question ended up being answered by a noise not unlike a firecracker going off, about three meters away from both of us, complete with giant plume of smoke. As the smoke cleared and I felt another familiar chakra signature.

"Hey, I know you." I said, giving our new arrival a sidelong look. "We've even talked."

"Don't remind me." Raidō said. I hadn't explicitly identified him as my team's rookie ANBU stalker, but he clearly knew when the game was up. "Sensor, right?"

"Yep."

Raidō sighed. "Figured."

Genma looked between the two of us for a moment, mulling something over, before clearly deciding that whatever it was didn't concern him. Instead, he said, "You're telling me you just got called out by someone you didn't even know?"

"Anyway, I'm Raidō Namiashi. Nice to be formally introduced." Raido said finally, though he was busy giving his friend a quelling look.

Genma sniggered.

"This can't be everyone." I said, apropos of nothing.  

*BOMPH*. And then we had another smoke-filled intro, right on cue. I knew who it was almost before I felt the actual live wire sensation of his chakra.

Kakashi landed on top of the gate and dropped down to the rest of us without a word.

In the last week, he'd apparently decided that yet another outfit change was in order. Frankly, he looked like an ANBU trainee given that he was wearing a version of their white armor and heavy-duty fore- and upper-arm guards that made mine look cheap. He carried a relatively short, straight-edged sword—a chokutō?—with an exaggerated hilt that might have been concealing a second, smaller blade. At least he didn't bring the cloak or mask along.

And that made three out of four members of this team male. Leaving me on my lonesome. …Jeez, talk about a sausage fest.

"And four." I said, nodding to Kakashi.

Kakashi nodded back, but apparently didn't think there was anything important to say. If he did, he didn't care to share. Either way, he just readjusted his position and braced his shoulders against the concrete of the gate and contrived to look immensely uninterested in anything.

Typical Kakashi, then.

Raidō muttered something about Kakashi making him feel underdressed for the occasion somehow, even though I was pretty sure Sensei hadn't said anything about a dress code.

Anyway, it was about a minute after that that there was a huge—though collective—chakra signature that appeared in the middle of the field outside of the Forest of Death, more or less directly in front of us. Since it was accompanied by another huge burst of smoke due to the Body Flicker used
concert, I at least didn't have to tell anyone about it ahead of time.

I felt everyone's figurative hackles rise at once, mine and Isobu's included.

Once the smoke cleared, I started picking individuals out of the crowd more by chakra than by appearance (though there was a bit of that).

The group of people who appeared out of the smoke was, to be honest, kind of ragtag if you went by appearance alone. Missing-nin tended toward wearing whatever they could afford to maintain and thus tended toward heavy fabrics that were not armor but could pull double duty in a pinch. Their weapons were simple, for the most part, and often cheap due to a lack of logistical support in any sense.

That said, the group was being masked by a mass genjutsu. At least on the visible spectrum.

It's that woman from before. The Uchiha. Isobu stirred from his constant laps inside my mindscape, sounding interested.

A man stepped out of the crowd and the genjutsu faded around him so I could actually see what he looked like.

He was of average height, with straight black hair that fell to his waist and a blindfold over his eyes. Based on his build and his chakra, my gut said "Hyūga" almost before my brain caught up. The blindfold, therefore, meant exactly jack shit. I would have pegged him at about age thirty, given the lines around his mouth and air of experience.

He said, "My name is Yatsu Inuzuka. Welcome to our war game."

Oooh boy.

"We are representatives of the surviving members of the previous Hokage Guard Platoon." Yatsu said clearly, even as the group behind him began to approach us. "As prospective members, you will face us in a scenario that will test your skill as bodyguards against the level of opposition you will face on a regular basis. While Minato Namikaze may be the Fourth Hokage and Konoha's Yellow Flash, all shinobi have blind spots and weaknesses. We exist to cover them."

I got the impression that I was joining a cult. Maybe.

Behind Yatsu, I began to pick out the individual shapes and signatures of the presumed veterans of the Hokage Guard Platoon. It didn't matter if they didn't drop the genjutsu. I was already gathering information.

An Ino-Shika-Chō trio, though I imagined they were part-timers.

An Inuzuka besides Yatsu, plus eight dogs.

Honoka Uchiha.

An Aburame, likely jōnin-level.

And a couple other people I couldn't peg based on their chakra quirks.

My eyes narrowed. This would be very interesting.

Told you.
"You are going to be acting as guards facing a superior force, while your client will not act in his own defense." Yatsu put a hand on his chest. "If I am forced to act in order to defend myself, you will lose."

Obviously.

An escort mission. Ugh. Not uncommon for lower-ranking shinobi, but the likelihood of being attacked by overpowered assholes was a lot lower than in most other mission types. Generally speaking.

Then again, Suna had lost a Kazekage to ambush and Orochimaru had flounced off with the guy's face, so obviously we were important even if we didn't necessarily have to win. Surprise could carry the day, someday.

I crossed my arms over my chest and waited for the end of the exposition flood.

The gist of it: Let's see how you screwballs do against a group that probably knows all your tricks before you can even use them. Or think of them. Because we're the freaking SAS and this is Selection. Or Hell Week. Nice knowing you (not)!

Just, you know, for the Secret Service. Yay for mixing metaphors.

"You will have twenty-four hours." Yatsu said.

Just then, there was a fwhish noise as air was displaced and then suddenly Sensei was there, one hand on Obito's shoulder as they popped into existence just next to Kakashi.

Kakashi somehow managed not to even twitch in surprise.

"Sorry we're late! I had to track down the errant fifth member of the rookie team." Sensei said, grinning sheepishly.

"You didn't even tell me there was a meeting." Obito argued, though quietly. He at least noticed that we had an audience. "You just said 'oh don't you have somewhere to be' and poofed us both here."

"You're ruining the moment, Hokage-sama." Yatsu said in a long-suffering tone.

"Oh, it's fine. I'm sure you can scare the new blood just as easily without the fancy genjutsu or dramatic speech." Sensei waved it off. "Anyway, see you tomorrow!"

And then he teleported right out again.

"Kakashi, what the hell is going on?" Obito asked in a manner he probably thought was subtle.

Kakashi muttered something back.

Yatsu put his head in his hands. "Let's…just get started before something else happens."

On cue, the entirety of the enemy team vanished into the woods. Ahead of us. When they had more experienced hunters and at least two team members whose whole job was to set up ambushes and…

Fuck.

"You must escort me to the other edge of the forest. This is the twenty-third gate, and I will consider
the exercise a success if I leave through the first gate."

…That was still only ten kilometers. Even with that many enemy combatants with that level of experience, any shinobi worth a damn could cross the entire area in less than an hour at a dead run, despite the terrible terrain.

It was probably going to be one of those tests where they changed the rules halfway through.

"—seriously?" Obito was whispering furiously with Kakashi, but I could still catch snatches of what was being said. "—just bought these—"

"Is anyone here taking bets on whether or not he"—Genma indicated the placid man who was standing in our midst—"is going to completely screw us over while we're in there?"

"Sucker's bet." Raido muttered back.

Yatsu said, while apparently waiting for all of us to make up our minds, "You now have twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes. Or fifty-four, now."

I sighed inwardly. Clapping my hands to get everyone's attention—clap, clap, clapclapclap—and feeling like a schoolteacher all the while, I said, "All right, everyone. You heard the man."

We headed into the forest.

Chapter End Notes

Song by Florence + the Machine.
Also, this chapter brought to you by a malfunctioning mouse that likes moving text around to random other places and shorting out in the middle of a sentence.
The Forest of Death hadn't changed much. Maybe there were fewer giant tigers roaring in the distance, or maybe the local centipede population had exploded sometime in the two-and-a-half years since I'd said hello. Those differences were negligible, at least when compared to the certainty that the forest had not become any more welcoming. It was still dark, dank, full of spiders, and about as hostile to human life as it had ever been. There was a reason that most of Konoha didn't stray into this forest, and dealt with anything that crept out of it with extreme prejudice.

Of course, I say that as someone who had managed to avoid most of said dangers at the age of nine. Most Konoha shinobi could. The trick, instead, was facing off against other teams. Or the overgrown wildlife. Or, worst of all, the enemy teams joining forces with the wildlife and making everyone's life very difficult.

I glanced at Yatsu.

"So, I don't get why you can't just fly him to the other edge." Obito said in a whisper, leaning over my shoulder. He probably knew he wasn't being subtle, but most civilians were worried more about bandits than what their shinobi bodyguards could be talking about.

Obito's solution would, I think, count as cutting the Gordian knot.

"Too simple." I muttered back.

"Kei-san, do you have a summon animal?" Genma asked, looking curious.

"Yeah," I said, "a crane, big enough to carry two or three people."

Genma, Obito, and I looked over at Yatsu, who was pretending to be a hapless civilian. Which, in his world, apparently meant needing Kakashi and Raidō's help to cross a stream that was less than a foot deep.

There was a tree root that extended over the river about ten meters away, but Yatsu was exercising his right to be a complete pain in the ass. Clients could be useless.

It went on until Raidō got impatient, grabbed Yatsu by the back of his jacket, and hauled him over the river with one quick leap. Barely a hop by shinobi standards.

Genma went over mostly for the purposes of pointing and laughing, but I could see intent in every line of his body. He was going to talk to Raidō as soon as there was a spare moment and the "client" wasn't listening in.

Kakashi rolled his visible eye and came over to talk to Obito and me, radiating agitated lightning
chakra just at the edge of my senses. It stopped before he got close, thankfully, and he visibly relaxed a bit.

"I'll take charge on this mission." Kakashi said quietly—softer, in fact, than he'd ever said those words. He didn't expect anyone to argue on this count. It was simply a statement of what was going to be.

Obito nodded, though only after a short delay. Kakashi hadn't raised Obito's hackles yet, at least.

"We don't know enough about Shiranui and Namiashi yet to establish who will command if something happens." Kakashi explained quietly. "So we'll discuss it when we need to take a 'break.'"

"But for now…?" I prompted.

"Right now, I trust both of you more than I trust them." He appeared to flip a mental coin, looking back and forth between us. Said mental coin must have landed on its edge, since Kakashi just closed his eye and said, "We'll deal with it in a few minutes."

"Can we even talk around him?" Obito gave the Hyūga/Inuzuka a dubious look. "Playing at being an idiot doesn't mean he can't talk to other members of his team. Somehow."

"That might be outside of his role as observer, though." I said quietly. I flexed one hand while gripping my wrist with the other. There was a trick here, but I wasn't sure what it was.

"Well, I can ask." Obito suggested, since neither of us were coming up with brilliant ideas. But Kakashi immediately shook his head.

"Most shinobi don't have experience fighting an aerial opponent." Kakashi remarked. He had both hands in his pockets, and he was looking in the direction of the forest's heart. The Tower, too, for all that it mattered. "We'll see where the idea takes us. Kei, you had a point about Tsuruya…"

Cutting the Gordian knot sounded appealing. But leaving my team in hostile territory—particularly when outnumbered and effectively outgunned—did not strike me as a good plan.

Sure, ten kilometers was nothing in terms of distance when in the air.

Sure, half an hour wasn't really that long.

But ten kilometers on the ground in this fucking forest was like trying to work through a maze that also had a very high probability of being strewn with landmines.

And half an hour in a shinobi battle could mean the difference between life and as many hilarious deaths as there were team members. Hell, fifteen seconds was the difference between "oh shit we're all fucked" and "oh Sensei killed everyone."

Sensei might have been such an outlier that any sane statistician would have chucked his numbers, but the point remained.

"I can hear everything you are saying." Yatsu informed us tartly. "I am blind, not deaf."

Welp.

"Further, clients who do have large numbers of trained shinobi out for their blood, generally speaking, have large entourages." He held his arms out, as though to say, "I literally cannot make this more obvious for you," and went on, "How well do you think they or their mundane guardsmen
would react to being thrown astride a bird summon?"

Then, into the silence as we considered that, he added, "Also? I am slightly acrophobic."

I winced internally. "All right, no flying."

"Having thoroughly broken character," Yatsu continued, "I'm going to have to ask you to forget the last thirty seconds."

While the tongue-lashing was at least a bit called-for, Obito didn't seem to think so, "So are you going to actually stay in-character this time or are you going to be feeding info to the other team?"

Yatsu's jaw clenched, briefly, and I saw him tense up. "That would completely invalidate the test!"

…Seriously? That was what he was going to get upset over?

"Well, we can't have that." Genma muttered, but not very quietly.

Raidō tilted his head curiously. "Assuming you're telling the truth, then you can't inform on us to the other team. Or vice-versa." After a moment, he rubbed at the scar stretching across his nose, apparently without realizing it. "Except in ways that clients do, unintentionally."

Like being jumpier than average, or maybe just by existing. Only so many shinobi could land missions involving guarding really rich clients. Who were, generally, also the most useless of the lot.

"Of course." Yatsu said, frowning.

Kakashi glanced at Obito and me again, then shrugged to himself. "Kei, Obito, guard the client. You can trail by fifteen meters at most, so be ready to move." Then he turned his attention to the two oldest members of our team. "Namiashi, Shiranui. Come with me."

I watched the lightbulb of understanding flick on, just behind both teens' eyes. Kakashi was probably going to needle them about their specialties, but didn't want to take the risk that Yatsu would break his word and somehow inform the opposing force about what we were capable of. Then again, regardless of our confidence in Yatsu's honor, there were some things that we just didn't talk about when civilians were around.

Kakashi, Genma, and Raidō leapt up toward the nearest tree trunk and started climbing basically by running right up the bark.

Figuring that "fifteen meters" meant straight up as well as lateral distance, I took point for the ground team. Such that it was.

"Moving in two teams?" Obito looked speculatively up at the canopy, and then gave Yatsu an appraising look.

"Don't even think about it." Yatsu replied.

Obito shot me a sidelong glance, eyebrows waggling.

I hid a smile. Then, as a thought occurred to me, I said, "So, Obito, you never did tell me what made you decide to join the Military Police."

He blinked. "I didn't?"

"No, you didn't."
"Heh, whoops!" Obito rubbed the back of his neck, going a little red at the tips of his ears. "Wow, that's embarrassing. I should've remembered…"

"We were both busy." I said, even as I took the entirely unnecessary step of helping Yatsu around a pit full of punji sticks. Honestly, people just left their trap trash everywhere…

"Yeah, but I still should've remembered to tell you." Obito argued. Somehow, he ended up walking in front of me. Probably because of the pit. "I mean, from your perspective it probably looked like I was in the test just because I got bored, and then suddenly I'm on the force. No gory details or anything!"

"…True."

Obito shrugged. "Thing is, this forest has like a million ears. I don't feel like I should say anything until we get out."

"Also true." I could feel my lips curving upward, but I stopped myself because I could feel chakra buzzing at the very edge of my range.

Obito went still as soon as I did, flinging one arm out to stall Yatsu where he stood.

"Thirty-five meters, ten o'clock. Obito!" I immediately shoved the irrelevant bits of banter aside and started calling shots.

Obito shot me a quick grin, turning to meet the enemy as they arrived. "Got it! Get down, Yatsu-san!"

Even as Obito was lining up a shot of what would probably be a Fire Release jutsu, I caught the taller shinobi and knocked us both prone.

Just in time. A Fūma shuriken—the big, foldable quad-blade monsters that only saw real use in the Land of Rice Fields—spun down out of the trees at a ludicrous speed. It curved in the air as it flew, swinging to my left so that its shot was lined up with where my head would've been about ten seconds ago.

Obito stopped it dead in a single smooth motion that was too perfect to be spontaneous. Even as he was sliding under its arc, his Zetsu arm cut through the air at the exact moment that the central ring of the shuriken flew over his head.

The sudden stop, contrary to what I would have expected, left the shuriken spinning ominously around Obito's wrist. With a quick flick, he had it in his hand and neatly folded up.

_How the crap did Obito do that._

**Obviously, he practiced.** Isobu rumbled. **Though I don't understand what you mean by it. Clearly, this is a physical feat that can be learned by humans. What's so surprising?**

It's Obito **we're talking about here!**

So? From what I've seen, the Obito in your memories and the one you actually interact with are different people.

_Never mind._

I cleared my head with what might've seemed like a random burst of chakra. Then I cupped my
hands around my mouth and shouted, "Kakashi, we've got hostiles inbound!"

Obito turned to look at me with his Sharingan still spinning rapidly, though he didn't focus my way for long. No, it turned out that his actual focus was on where Raidō landed a second later, rolling with the impact and clearing the way for Genma and Kakashi.

Kakashi landed closest to me and got back to his feet almost instantly, headband up and Sharingan almost glowing in the forest gloom. He had Raidō at his left—generally speaking, not a disadvantage for a kenjutsu expert who could draw from either side. It'd mess with my groove, but Kakashi's blade was on his back.

Genma, meanwhile, helped Yatsu and me to our feet again. Totally unnecessary, but nonetheless polite.

Kakashi turned that laser-focused eye on me for a moment, but nothing happened on Isobu's end. Good. And Kakashi, while generating enough lightning-aligned chakra beneath his skin to power a small house, said, "Kei, Obito, take point." He glanced up—Genma and Raidō were taller than he was—and added, "Genma, take the client to Point Gamma. Raidō, with me!"

With a flick of his wrist, Obito brought his new Fūma shuriken to bear. The blasted thing was nearly a meter across and as sharp as a razor, painted nearly solid black and apparently sturdy enough not to fly apart under its own momentum. I had no idea what Obito expected to be able to do with such a weapon that he couldn't do with his bare hands and complimentary ninjutsu.

Served me right for not keeping up with his training.

Raidō removed a single seal tag from his pocket and channeled chakra into it. In a brief burst of gray smoke, the seal spat out a sheathed katana with a belt clip that Raidō quickly attached. He drew the blade itself immediately, and I just sort of stared for a moment. It was jet-black with chakra channels inscribed into the blade somehow, meaning that the blade would be much stronger than any normal one. Including mine.

I let my left hand drift to the hilt of my own katana, almost unconsciously. As always, my first resort.

Genma merely reached over and grabbed Yatsu's elbow, saying around the senbon in his mouth, "Get ready."

Why relegate Genma to escort duty?

I ended up not having a lot of time to worry about that, because the tree at ten o'clock crashed to the ground a moment later. Between the falling branches and scattered leaves and everyone's chakra exploding everywhere, I spotted our first opponent.

Think Sonic the Hedgehog. Then scale it up by a factor of ten and remember that Akimichi clan members do nothing small-scale.

As big as an SUV and about as fast, the Human Bullet Tank jutsu, true to form, proceeded to almost-literally steamroll the clearing with brutal efficiency even without a Nara using it as a yo-yo. It was inspiring, if in the "if only it wasn't trying to kill us" kind of way.

We scattered, of course. Kakashi and Raidō shot up the side of the same tree, coming to a stop on the underside of different branches. Genma stayed on the ground, merely sidling backwards out of immediate murder range with Yatsu in tow. After all, Obito and I were point-men in this scenario.

I shot left and Obito, from my right, skidded backward as the Akimichi rotated slowly on the spot to
track me instead.

Exposing his or her flank to Obito.

I spotted his crazy grin just before he shouted, "Hey, jerkoff! Eat this!"

And then the Fūma shuriken shot across the battlefield again, swerving around the fallen tree and toward the Akimichi's side thanks to some clever throwing.

I hit a tree with my back foot and immediately scrambled up the bark in a movement best described as a gravity-defying backwards somersault, letting the Human Bullet Tank hit the trunk just shy of me and killing momentum just as the shuriken hit home.

—Or not.

Black lines seemed to peel off the forest floor, reaching up and snatching the shuriken out of the air mere centimeters before it hit the Akimichi. The shadows stretched, angling over the still-spinning Akimichi, and then the shuriken was suddenly going back the way it came, double time.

Before the shadows disappeared, I tracked their movements both with my eyes and my chakra sense and called out, "Nara at three o'clock!"

"Well, that was cheap." Obito caught the shuriken again, one-handed, and folded it so he could clip it onto his belt and pull a scroll out of another pocket with his free hand. "On it, Kei!"

And then there was suddenly a storm of metal heading the Nara's way, entirely too many to stop with Shadow Gathering alone. Obito had clearly learned from the last few times I'd screwed with weapon scroll designs. I was just surprised that he kept one of them.

I felt the Nara run away for a bit, then start to circle around us. Score one for Team Noob, at least for a minute.

*Come to think of it, did I ever tell my team what I learned about the opponents in here?*

*No.*

...*Oops.*

The Human Bullet Tank reversed momentum and decided that today was the day for an Obito pancake, since he was the only one on the ground and was yelling something like "Neener-neener-neener" at the giant pinball from hell.

Kakashi, Raidō, and I dropped back to the forest floor to help Obito keep from being run over. It turned the fight from an open reenactment of an Indiana Jones movie to something more like a giant game of Whack-A-Mole. Genma, meanwhile, retreated to the trees.

While the Human Bullet Tank was often pretty fast, maneuverability was something that all incarnations had somehow failed to account for. It was yet another reason that the Akimichi generally worked with the Nara *and* the Yamanaka clans, in addition to the Sarutobi. It sucked to be turned into the slowest guy on the battlefield, just because everyone else knew the meaning of the word "dodge."

From his place on a tree branch on the opposite end of the battlefield, Genma idly unpacked a box from his kunai holster, made a hand-sign, and chucked it into the Akimichi's path. The box exploded, disgorging caltrops as big as a man's head.
And the Nara, who had been stuck maneuvering around the fight within my range, finally came to a stop. Upwind.

Too bad.

"If they've got a Nara, you know what that means..." Genma called down.

"Raidō, deploy smoke bombs." Kakashi said sharply.

Thanks to the Nara techniques running on a combination of shadow and light, fully removing one or the other could make them considerably more difficult to use. A smoke grenade would make the Nara clan member's job a lot more difficult than it had to be.

"On it." Raidō pulled a pair of gray spheres out of a sleeve and tossed one at the Human Bullet Tank and the other one right at his feet.

And he must have brought the good kind, because all I saw after that was matte gray.

I closed my eyes and ducked toward the nearest tree, even as I felt the Akimichi stop rolling in confusion and my teammates likewise scattered.

I felt Obito shoot upward, running around a tree branch twice and helping Genma keep Yatsu from dropping into the smoke and giving our opponents an unfair edge. At the same time, Raidō booted the idling Akimichi from the battlefield with a series of localized explosions that must have come from explosive tags.

And then Kakashi went after the Nara, shooting enough lightning everywhere that I could see it behind my closed eyelids.

Yeesh.

Then the lightning popped out of existence—a clone?—and Kakashi reappeared at my right shoulder. Since I hadn't drawn my sword, it was riskier than it could have been. Mom would've had him gutted on reflex.

"Kei," Kakashi whispered into my ear, "light it up."

"Gotcha." Music to my ears! Taking a deep breath, I placed my palm flat against the tree bark and started channeling my touch-based explosive seal down through the entire area.

Charges set!

"Get lost or get splattered, jerks!" Obito called down to the enemy, a laugh in his voice. At that exact moment, a fireball streaked down from the canopy, as a sort of chaser to the fiery death in everyone's imminent future if we didn't skedaddle.

And then everyone voted for Obito's first option and ran the fuck away, including us.

I didn't know where, exactly, we ended up after that. A quick check from the forest's canopy confirmed that we were closer to the tower than before the fight, and I couldn't sense anyone immediately around us. Since the Forest of Death wasn't exactly known for its scenic landmarks, I decided to just leave it at that.

I dropped back down to ground level, where Yatsu was sitting on a log and being stubborn. Something about being hauled around like a sack of potatoes, even if the world had been about to
explode around him at the time.

"Maybe this would be a good time to go over what we've learned." I said as I reached my team. I still felt a bit guilty over my brain-fart earlier. Might as well rectify that as soon as was practical.

"You figured some stuff out?" Obito asked. He had the Fūma shuriken in his left hand and was idly flicking it open and shut with a noise that sounded like knives being sharpened.

I tried to ignore it. "Yeah. Obviously, they have a full Ino-Shika-Chō team—"

Kakashi interrupted with, "—Along with at least one or two Inuzuka clan members. I could smell several dogs. Eight, I think." He had long since pulled his headband back down over his Sharingan, but he seemed a little worn around the edges despite that. "Plus an Uchiha woman that Kei and I have met before."

And I had to wonder how long he'd spent with any Inuzuka clan members. Eight for only two of them was...well, it was insane. Absolutely dead-on, but no one familiar with Inuzuka soldiers would assume that any one of them had more than one dog. It just didn't happen.

(Though Hana would...eventually.)

"This is surprising." Yatsu said. He sounded a little impressed. Just a little. "You figured out that much from just the initial meeting?"

"Uh, and the last two minutes, unless those didn't count." Obito said. He stopped playing with his new projectile just for a moment as a thought occurred to him. "Speaking of, we should probably assume they're going to put up a better fight next time. I didn't see anyone get knocked out in that—and it took five of us to stall them out."

Raidō, silent up until now, said, "And Yatsu-san? If the Yamanaka tries contacting you or something, say we're not open for business."

Yamanaka... Oh, right. I'd forgotten that their mind jutsu combined with their sensor tendencies basically translated to "living radio." At least, it did if they were really, really good.

I weighed my options silently. Was there a chance that this Yamanaka was as good as Inoichi? Well, if he was a part of the Hokage Guard Platoon and had survived...

"We might just have to assume the Yamanaka is good enough to get around that." I said with a sigh. "But I think we need to clarify a couple of things before we get jumped again."

Kakashi nodded. "Genma, Raidō, stay with Yatsu-san. Kei, Obito, come with me." He headed for the understory, ricocheting off a tree trunk to gain height. Not that he probably really needed it.

"You two gonna be okay here?" Obito asked, looking between our remaining two teammates with probably unwarranted concern.

"We'll be fine, Obito." Raidō replied easily, even as he was inspecting his sword for scratches. "It's not like we've never pulled guard duty before."

"Well, all right." Obito said dubiously. At Genma's faintly annoyed look, though, he headed after Kakashi.

"See you both in a bit." I said, and followed.
We ended up stopping in a tree with a trunk that had apparently been twisted around by something massive. I couldn't say for sure by what, but the bark spiraled and seemed to have split to do so. Somehow, the tree's crown had also grown into a cage of branches and leaves, isolating the little alcove from everything else.

Kakashi was waiting on one edge of the resulting bowl of branches, sitting sideways along the outermost branch with his left leg braced on the wood and right leg dangling over the edge. He had his arms crossed over his chest, looking for all the world like this was just some casual secret meeting between friends.

Obito sat cross-legged on one of the other branches, one arm on the branch behind him and the other relaxed over the top of his thigh. Sort of like he was relaxing on a couch.

I too my place across from the two of them, folding one leg under me and leaving the other out in front. I braced my hands and leaned forward. "So, what did you tell Raidō and Genma before this?" I asked.

"I've informed them about everything that was relevant." Kakashi said.

"That's not all that specific." Obito complained. "Did you tell them about, uh, Kei's pet turtle or this thing?" He flexed his right hand and a dozen tiny pink buds started to grow up and out of his sleeve.


"Well, then what did you say about my arm?" Obito asked, accepting that my turtle problem was really not something we should talk about casually.

"I told them to expect you to be able to stop an Akimichi Human Bullet Tank jutsu dead if you put your mind to it. And to stay out of your way in case you decided to try it." Kakashi said.

"I've never done that before. Why would you think I could?" Obito asked blankly. "I mean, there was that thing with Guruguru, but I wasn't—"

"I looked up your records in the Konoha MP's initiation challenge." Kakashi said. He was looking at the nails on his left hand. "They never noticed the break-in."

"While I'm pretty sure that wasn't just because you were curious…" I began, before grinning suddenly. "Spill it! What did you find out?"

The tips of Obito's ears were going a bit red, and he sat up straight. "Aw, come on…"

"Obito," Kakashi said, "made such good use of his arm and the knowledge gained by using his Sharingan that some of the higher-ranking officers thought he was a plant. I believe the most impressive feat involved literally punching one of the examiners' earth clones into the next block, straight through the observation box."

Obito was really red now. "I still wouldn't have been able to do it back when we first met up again…"

"Right, because it hadn't set yet." I nodded. I recalled something about the alternate Obito accidentally punching his brand new arm right off, and had concluded that the transplant needed time to settle and harden. Like cement. "But now that you're really ready for combat…"

"Well, I could do that kind of thing. If I had to." Obito scratched the side of his cheek. "But I don't really want to when this is just an exam. I mean, even the thing with the earth clone was an accident,
"The MP committee didn't believe it was just a fluke." Kakashi pointed out. "Which is why you're the youngest member of the Military Police since its founding, even if you're on probation right now. Some of them were especially adamant about keeping you—they said something about ANBU not getting all the good ones?"

"Yeah, well, I could never see myself in ANBU." Obito shrugged, still a little embarrassed. "Not really my style." He paused. "Kei, how did you know about the, uh, set time?"

"Same way I know pretty much everything else to do with it." I said. Like I was gonna mention that when the enemy was still out here somewhere with a Yamanaka.

"...Oh. Well, then what did you tell them about Kei?" Obito asked, changing the topic with no grace whatsoever.

Thankfully for him, Kakashi was willing to go with it. "Kei is a kenjutsu specialist who can heal to some degree. She also specialized in fūinjutsu, and has a number of powerful ninjutsu that I decided not to be specific on."

"...They'd probably still sense it if I busted out any really weird attacks, though." I said. Like using Isobu's chakra at all. Most people could sense that whether they were trained or not. And Honoka probably already knew or suspected what I could do, given that she was ANBU and pretty sharp besides.

"Probably. But until we've completed this test, they don't have the security clearance to know about it." Kakashi tilted his head to the side, as though a thought had just occurred to him. "Unless you want to tell them?"

"Uh, no. Not yet." I said, shaking my head.

"You might want to think about it, though." Obito said.

I blinked. "What for?"

"Well, the two of us are going to have other jobs within the next year. We can't be Hokage guards all the time. But you will be, and Gemma and Raidō are going to be on your team." Obito explained. He looked a little surprised that I hadn't thought of all of that before he did.

Truth was that I had thought about it. Just. Um. Not very hard. "Well, yeah…" My eyes narrowed. "When you get down to it, I will, but not right now. Not when we're still being tested."

Obito and Kakashi exchanged a look. Then Obito said, "It's your choice. Just let me know if you need someone's teeth punched in."

Kakashi nodded, too.

It was touching. In a Team Minato kind of way. "So, what do we need to know about Gemma and Raidō?"

"Raidō is an assassination specialist, from what I can tell. Better on offense than defense as a rule. Kenjutsu seems to be his specialty, same as you and me." Kakashi explained. "Also, that sword of his is poisoned, and probably nearly impossible to break. I heard meteoric iron was used to make it."

Of course. Damn, I wished we could compare notes! It sounded like such a cool weapon…
"And Genma?" Obito asked.

"Utility ninjutsu, unorthodox weapons, traps, and occasionally sealing. Different branch than Kei, though." Kakashi glanced down at the forest floor again, like he expected the rest of our team to get attacked while they were alone. "I think he's better at barrier fūinjutsu than creating unique seals or explosives, but he can use them nearly spontaneously. Also, he's learned to use Wind and Earth Release jutsu, and seems like he's working on Fire."

"Sheesh." Obito muttered. But then he said, "You know, this actually seems like a pretty strong team. Makes me wonder what the enemy has in store."

"At least two Inuzuka, like Kakashi said." I said. "Honoka-san, too, and there was also an Aburame in there somewhere."

"Who's Honoka again?" Obito asked.

"An Uchiha." Kakashi said, eyebrows knitting together. "One with the Mangekyō Sharingan."

"Holy shit." Obito stared at us both for a long moment, then said flatly, "You're serious."

"Yep." I said. "We're gonna have to plan around everyone."

Obito looked grim, but he nodded. "Right. Well, let's get back to the others. We've got a lot to think about."

We got back to the others pretty quickly. Not much had changed, thankfully, and I gave everyone a quick look-over.

Kakashi's chakra was lower than I would've liked, though he wasn't hurt. Genma had barely expended any chakra (or indeed, any effort whatsoever) in the last fight, so he was fine. Obito, despite letting off a massive fireball and played the world's deadliest game of Frisbee, was also in top shape. Raidō was also just fine.

And as for me, I had Isobu's chakra reserves backing me up in case I needed them.

I'd say we were still up for going a few more bouts. Lucky for us, that was exactly what was lying in wait for us.

"Pressing on?" Genma asked Kakashi as we got ready to change tactics.

"Yes. Raidō, carry Yatsu-san. We're going faster." Kakashi ordered, tone brooking no argument at all.

Raidō nodded. "All right, captain."

Genma shot Raidō a quick smirk.

"Shut up," said Raidō.

"How far do you want to get?" I asked Kakashi.

"Within a kilometer of the tower in the middle." Kakashi replied, looking out ahead of us and into the forest. "It's loaded with traps from previous Chūnin Exams and combat trials, and even the enemy team is unlikely to be interested in staying in the kill-zone there. We'd only have to guard one side if we went that way and circled the tower."
"What about just running around the circumference of the forest?" I suggested. "I mean, I'm pretty sure that the trip might be half again as long, but there's less time for the enemy team to set up. Also, we'd be able to see them coming, and they'd only be able to attack us from one side."

Kakashi paused.

"I feel like I should remind you that you're disqualified if you do leave the examination area." Yatsu said crossly.

Of course. New rules as the DM demands. Railroading jackass.

"And it'd be all too easy to be shoved out of bounds at the edge." Genma sighed. "Really?"

Yatsu crossed his arms and stayed silent this time.

"Somehow, I bet that it's exactly what they plan on doing." Obito said with a groan. "Okay, question. Who here has any kind of long-range sensing ability?"

Kakashi and I raised our hands, but so did Genma.

"Seriously, Genma?" Obito said with some surprise.

"I have decent hearing." Genma replied. That, apparently, was all the explanation we'd get. ...I hoped he hadn't heard our conversation, because that'd be what experts in the field of social sciences would call "awkward."

What the heck.

I think the Nine-Tails has a similar power, if more advanced. And you can do it, too. Is this ability supposed to be unusual among humans? Isobu asked.

...I'm getting the impression that the answer is "no," regardless of what I've been taught.

"And I'm sure Yatsu-san has something similar." Obito commented. "Though, um, I'm not sure how that interacts with the Byakugan."

"I'm a blind former member of the Hyūga clan. Further, I am not on your team." Yatsu reminded us.

Obito frowned. "At some point, I'd like to hear that story."

Kakashi shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Where are we headed, captain?"

Raidō answered for us all, probably a while after Kakashi expected us to focus. "We're splitting the difference. Kei, Obito, you have point and rear guard. Genma, last line of defense for the client. Raidō, stick with me." Kakashi ordered. "Kei and I can charge straight in if needed, but I'd prefer that we get some warning. Obito, range or melee?"

"Up close and personal sounds like it's just my style." But then Obito paused. "Actually...I was about to say something about dogs, but I think I can deal with them, too..."

"If we run into the Inuzuka, I'm going to hold you to that." Kakashi said.

"Hey, no problem. Just, uh, try to keep out of range. It probably won't be any more fun for you to get caught in it."
I would've loved to know what "it" was before we had to use it in combat, but that just wasn't the way the dice were falling that day.

"Are we running along the perimeter?" Raidō asked.

"Maybe a quarter-kilometer inside of it. I'd prefer if no one could see us coming." Kakashi glanced at Yatsu. "I'll be disregarding your rule about high speed transportation. If your nonexistent baggage train can't keep up with a running shinobi, that's their problem."

"But no flying." Yatsu argued back.

"That'd make it too easy." Obito said, grinning. "Let's do this!"

I have to admit, we probably weren't as cautious as we needed to be.

The thing about traveling at tops speeds through the trees is that a significant fraction of the time spent traveling is spent in the air, meaning that there wasn't any way to dodge or alter direction in midair if someone decided to take a shot at us. Even moving in a sort of pyramid formation—me in front, with Genma and Yatsu directly behind me and the other three fanned out at the rear—we were trading speed for vulnerabilities to direct attack.

As we ran, we mostly had the benefit of a cross-breeze knocking our scent away from the central areas of the forest. Kakashi ended up directing from the rear with Obito, and he called out headings as we moved so that we always got either a crosswind or tailwind, making it a lot harder to sneak up on us from the side or rear.

I mean, as point-woman I obviously didn't get to reap the benefits of this arrangement, but Kakashi was banking on my sensing ability being of most use out in front. And, uh, the whole "killer turtle" thing.

Probably.

The forest didn't get too much worse, thankfully—the worst of the insect nests and various other endangered monstrosities tended to stay near the tower, since that was the traditional killing ground and featured older trees than the outer forest.

We still killed giant centipedes. Just fewer of them than perhaps we otherwise would've.

I think we managed maybe half an hour and five kilometers of rough terrain and Yatsu passive-aggressively complaining about being lugged around like an invalid. At that point, the wind shifted and I felt Kakashi's chakra jolt abruptly in surprise.

He stopped, and Raidō followed suit, looking back in the direction we'd just come from and (in Raidō's case) dropping Yatsu on the branch. Genma landed on a tree midway between Kakashi and me, scrambling up onto a higher branch and signaling for dead silence.

I placed my left hand on my katana's hilt and closed my eyes. Come on, come on…

Would you say that's about two hundred meters and closing? Isobu asked.

Actually, yes, but I'm pretty sure they'll figure out that you're extending my range.

I'm not. That's all you. Isobu informed me tartly.
Oops. That's, um, a little surprising.

You're overcharging the technique because my chakra has changed your body's limitations. Something odd was bound to happen, Isobu said. At least you still have control over it. But we should probably wait to try anything else.

Right. I have a fight to win.

"Kakashi, hostiles at"—quick calculation based on the fact that we were nominally being attacked from the rear (except that everyone had turned that way already), and the fact that one hostile had morphed into ten—"two o'clock. Ten of them at one hundred and fifty meters and closing rapidly!"

"Acknowledged," Kakashi said, and our team geared up again.

Surreptitiously, Genma pulled Yatsu out of the line of fire. As he moved out of immediate targeting range, he called, "It's the Inuzuka."

"It is?" Obito yelled back.

"I can hear the dogs! They're pretty hard to miss!" Genma replied, and was gone.

Ping. PingpingpingpingpingPING.

And we now have seven more problems, somehow. Isobu said.

For fuck's sake.

At least most of the new chakra signatures were small—uh-oh.

"Kakashi, we've got at least one more person and six summons incoming!" I shouted, and that's when something small, gray, and very fast shot past my head.

I felt my cheek sting and didn't have to touch it to know that I was bleeding.

Obito's right arm lashed out and picked another one out of the air, smacking it into a tree trunk in an explosion of feathers and then smoke as it de-summoned itself. Or maybe died.

"Was that a swallow?" Raidō asked.

"Yep." Obito almost growled. "Kakashi, keep your eyes peeled!"

No sooner had Obito said that then, well—

"FANG OVER FANG!"

Oh, shit.

Ten—ten—tornadoes of screaming furry death came shooting across the forest, enough for each of them to double-team all of us and reduce us all to paste. A pinkish streak and a greenish one shot in my direction, sending me literally running for the forest floor while they smashed into the trees where I'd been. As bark rained down and I landed on all fours in a pile of shed leaves, I got a look at what everyone else was dealing with.

Three of the dogs went after Kakashi, apparently, since the tree he and Genma had been standing in was all but demolished. Raidō was sent running, carrying Yatsu over one shoulder and trying to fight one-handed.
Speaking of running, Obito and Genma were not doing just that and were in fact playing a really dangerous game of Tag with four separate Inuzuka blurs. And only one of them could see the enemy clearly, given the speed levels in play.

**Who let the dogs out? What is supposed to be so mysterious about that?**

*Oh god, don't make me laugh right now. We'll both die.*

Okay, so. Inuzuka clan jutsu. Strong, yes, but based on the ability to fling oneself headlong into nominal certain death while shielded only by spinning chakra. Also, I had no idea how the heck they were doing that without getting our scents first.

One of the dogs chasing me had stopped upon smashing through a tree and hitting the ground, and the other spun to a stop right next to it.

One dog looked like a Japanese Spitz—kind of small, but incredibly fluffy. This one seemed pink, but it was an optical illusion because the little terror wore a pink scarf. The other dog was a Pointer with a green scarf, with long narrow legs and a squared-off head.

"Catch me if you can, furball!" I heard Obito yell from on high, and he was still being chased by two angry, furry tornadoes of death. I could at least tell that one was reddish and the other was kind of blue.

The Spitz shot at me again, teeth bared.

I clubbed it in the nose with my sheathed sword, forcing it to back off with a horrible yelp of pain. The pointer surged in right after that and grabbed the sheath in his jaws.

Shit.

Well, now or never.

I charged the Rasengan in my free hand, even as I kicked the Pointer away and pulled my katana loose from its sheath. Bloody dog could have the sheath.

The Pointer's jaws crunched the thin steel and lacquer between long white teeth.

…Oh boy.

The Spitz came at me again immediately, and I ducked under its leap before smashing the half-formed Rasengan into its stomach. The dog was blown nearly straight up, bouncing off a tree trunk before hitting the ground.

And then the Pointer, again.

At that point, Raidō dashed between us at top speed while being chased by one Fang Over Fang-using dog and one pissed-off Inuzuka man. The Pointer had to stop before it hit either of its teammates, killing its momentum.

He didn't look nearly as old as Yatsu. I caught a glimpse of jet-black hair, red tattoos, and oversized canines before he slowed to a stop. Okay, Konoha uniform, bigger than I was, more chakra than I had (that didn't belong to Isobu)…

Upon seeing the unconscious Spitz, said man immediately turned his attention to me. So did the dog as soon as it released the jutsu—and it turned out to be a Rough Collie wearing a purple scarf.
I decided that this was as good a time as any and channeled chakra down my legs. Black seal lines spread all over the visible patches of forest floor, making both dogs and owner leap backwards in sudden fear. Raidō, I noted distantly, had skittered around the kill-zone and back toward the rest of the fight.

"Later, Fido." I said, and Replaced myself with a tree branch before I'd even finished talking. And then the clearing exploded.

In hindsight, it was kind of amazing that this enemy team had fallen for the same trick twice in a row. Were they not sharing information?

I popped back into the battle right next to Kakashi, who had punched another dog—a red-wearing Shiba Inu—in the head with a lightning-charged fist immediately before I landed. He had his dogs' summon scroll in his other hand, but stuck it back into his kunai holster on second thought. I thought I saw him stuff something else into a pocket, but it was hard to track Kakashi's slight-of-hand tricks on a good day, and this was not a good day.

"How many dogs?" Genma asked out of apparently nowhere, scaring the heck out of me. Turned out that he was just behind me. Somehow. "At this point it's basically all just noise."

I extended my chakra sense outward and forward, scanning for anyone who had tried to get past me before.

Ah-hah!

"Eight dogs, four shinobi." I said, eyes closed. "One of the shinobi is about three hundred meters that way, and has summoned swallows to monitor the battle. The other is about the same distance away, but directly below the first."

"Raidō, take them both out with whatever you have." Kakashi ordered.

"Whoa, wait"—actually, better idea—"let me send Tsuruya with you!"

"That won't wear you out?" Raidō asked sharply.

I gave him a faint smile. "Nothing much does." I swiped a thumb across my cheek and channeled chakra into my hand before slamming it into the tree.

Tsuruya popped into existence in the air right next to us, already hovering in place. "Keisuke-sama?"

I said quickly, "Go with Raidō and take out the other bird-summoner."

Tsuruya gave Raidō an appraising look. Then as she descended slightly, she said, "If you could come with me, Raidō-san?"

As soon as Raidō climbed onto Tsuruya's back, she took off in a spinning arc that led her right over the canopy with enough speed to knock both Kakashi and me out of the tree from the displaced air alone. We managed to catch the branch below that, at least.

"So, how do we stop them dead?" Genma asked. "Because Obito is down there and…wait, he can't be…"

Down below us, Obito had somehow managed to be cornered by all six of the remaining dogs and both of the Inuzuka clan members. He was down on one knee in the center of the clearing, right hand down on the ground and breathing heavily enough that I could tell even from this far up.

…Though given what was happening, perhaps he was the one doing the cornering.
To my chakra sense, the entire forest had come alive in the way that spelled disaster for the Inuzuka force. Obito's Wood Release chakra had attached itself to all of the trees, and I could feel him piggybacking off the energy of the local Hashirama trees. The result was a near-literal minefield of Wood Release growth that reached upward from the ground and ensnared every foot on it except for Obito’s.

"Holy shit." Genma said in a voice numb with shock.

"That's impossible!" Yatsu said, though hell if I knew how he knew what was going on.

Kakashi stepped off the branch and dropped to ground level, both hands sparking with white lightning.

"Obito?" I heard him ask once he landed.

"You're good to go, Kakashi." Obito said, grinning.

Kakashi nodded. And then the clearing, for lack of a better term, went kind of crazy. My chakra sense did the equivalent of going flash-blind—sending me to my knees from the feedback alone—before I managed to pick out the key sensations. Namely: Chidori, screaming, and ow.

You'd think I'd get used to that sensation after the sheer number of times Kakashi had used Lightning Release near me, but apparently this new jutsu was something special.

"—Right? Are you all right, Kei-san?" Genma asked, even as he thumped my back once or twice to make sure I was still responsive.

"...Yeah, I am." I got back to my feet again, and then spent a moment trying to figure out what had happened.

I hadn't missed much, time-wise. Maybe four seconds at most.

And yet in that scant timeframe, the tag-team of Kakashi and Obito had somehow knocked out every single person at ground level aside from themselves. With Obito holding everything hostile down with his bizarrely non-stabby Wood Release move, Kakashi had the perfect setup for a devastating Lightning Release jutsu that I hadn't seen before.

The dust from the discharge was still settling.

Kakashi wobbled on his feet a bit, but Obito hardly seemed any better. The main difference, from where I was standing, was the fact that Obito was visibly grinning so hard that it probably hurt.

I dropped down to the ground and managed to catch up to both of them quickly enough to catch Obito’s left arm. Kakashi managed to stay standing, but I had a knack for predicting when Obito would do something dumb.

"That was even more awesome than I thought it'd be!" Obito laughed, even as he finally flopped over and just descended into adrenaline-fueled giggles. "I can't believe it; all that practice was worth it!"

"You doubted me?" Kakashi scoffed. "Idiot."

And then, out of nowhere, a gale-force wind slashed through the forest. Obito, Kakashi and I threw ourselves flat on the ground, and Genma and Yatsu joined us a moment later as the wind knocked both of them out of the tree—though less gracefully than they probably would have preferred.
Once the sudden windstorm was over, at least a minute later, we had a chance to get up and take stock of what had happened.

And then Raidō and Tsuruya landed in the middle of the clearing, complete with two passengers. Raidō slid off of Tsuruya's back, and then she reared up and dumped the other two unceremoniously on the ground.

Two women, both wearing the village uniform.

One was purple-haired and wearing a Konoha bandanna the same way I did, with two huge hoop earrings in each ear. She was pretty in a classic way, but had apparently been hit in the face with something small that traveled very, very fast. Like maybe a flying swallow chucked back into her face at high speeds.

The other was mousy and brown-haired with thick black-rimmed glasses and a Konoha headband around her thigh, and for some reason was coated head to toe in animal hair. Was there another summon I hadn't been keeping track of?

"What'd I miss?" Raidō asked, looking around at the carnage. He had something in his left hand…

I did, too. Unconscious dogs everywhere, two Inuzuka clan members shocked literally senseless, scorch marks up and down the scenery… Heh. We'd made a bit of a mess.

"Who've you got there?" I asked, since no one else seemed to be focusing much.

"These two? Both of them are special jōnin I've seen around the village. Mitsuru Jishin is the one with the glasses. The other one is Sora Hayabusa. One summoned swallows and the other had a giant mole. I'll let you guess which one had which."

"Was it a difficult fight?" I asked. Tsuruya had lowered her beak to about shoulder height, so I smoothed down her head feathers while I had the chance.

"No. Actually, Tsuruya-san here took care of almost all of it." Raidō thumped Tsuruya's shoulder affectionately with one hand. "I only had to deal with the mole, and that didn't take long."

I let Tsuruya poke me in the side of the head, grinning. "I can't believe Sensei called you a 'minor' crane summon. Looks like we proved that wrong."

"Of course we did, Keisuke-sama." Tsuruya said. "But now, what do we do with them?"

"Gekkō-san, could you please check on everyone?" Yatsu asked. His voice was tight with tension.

I blinked, looking around at the casualties. "Um, sure! Er…they're not going to just get up and attack in a minute, are they?"

"No," Yatsu said flatly. "I am the sole judge on affairs relating to this mission, and they've been defeated." His mouth twisted. "But, on a more personal note, I'd like to see if my family is still alive."

"On it." I said.

On just a surface scan, everyone was still alive. Just unconscious, since we hadn't exactly been aiming for headshots here. But because my chakra sense had limits when it came to being used as a medical device, I broke out the Diagnostic jutsu twelve separate times. I also made some use of the Mystical Palm jutsu for the more bruised and battered cases.
After the first four, Genma and Raidō at least started moving patients to me instead of just waiting for me to come to every single one of them. What else were teammates for?

The Inuzuka woman was actually awake by the time I got to her. Since she didn't seem interested in receiving any assistance, I had to go over and figure out what was going on.

She was sitting up when I arrived, with the Boxer's head cradled in her lap. The big gray dog whined as I got closer, though I didn't remember anything about hitting him. Two other dogs, yeah, but not him.

"Are you this team's medic?" the Inuzuka woman asked.

She was probably in her late thirties, with long black hair that was wild and loose and ran halfway down her back and also formed little triangular tufts right above her ears because of the erratic cut. Her eyebrows were more narrow black dots than anything, in the style that some noblewomen wore in the Land of Fire. Her eyes were also as dark as mine were, but somehow less feral-looking than was common to Inuzuka clan members. She had the signature triangular tattoos that most Inuzuka clan members shared, too.

"I am. My name is Keisuke Gekkō." I said as I knelt next to her and the Boxer and called up my medical ninjutsu. "What's yours?"

"Fuse Inuzuka." She smiled, despite the fact that we'd beaten her team pretty much senseless, and said, "You've already met my husband and my brother."

Yatsu, by that point, had come back with the unconscious Shiba Inu and was holding her very carefully in his arms. "The brother-in-law would be over there, just so you know. His name is Shippō Inuzuka."

"We fought your whole family?" Obito asked, surprised.

"Yes." Yatsu replied.

I sat back, having been using my Diagnostic jutsu all the while. "Well, I think you're going to be just fine. In fact, I'd expect—"

It was at about that point that every single one of the dogs, as well as the just-identified Shippo Inuzuka, started to wake up. One or two of the dogs also started whining. And the two special jōnin also started to wobble upright.

"And they were unconscious for what, a minute?" Genma mused aloud.

"They should still be able to get out of this forest." Kakashi said, looking speculatively out at the sudden crowd. "Fuse-san, can you lead them out safely?"

"Yes." Fuse said. She whistled sharply as she got to her feet, making eight separate pairs of ears stand up.

"We've already lost?" Mitsuru asked faintly, still looking a little dazed.

"We did." Fuse said, with the Boxer leaning on her leg quite a bit. "Thank you, everyone, for trying your best."

I felt Genma's hand on my shoulder, but didn't turn to look and figure out what that was about. Not yet. I did stand up, though, and his hand didn't move.
"You did pretty well." Shippō said grudgingly as he got to his feet. "If you can make mincemeat out of the veterans like this, I don't think you'll have much trouble with most enemies. But watch out—the rest of the team is no joke, either."

Fuse nodded. "Be careful, children. And try to keep my husband out of trouble."

Yatsu pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation.

The dogs and their handlers (or humans and their handlers) disappeared in a whirl of fur and comments like "I think I broke my glasses..." Not the most dignified exit in history, really. But maybe it didn't matter.

"Kei-san, are you sure you shouldn't be taking a break?" Genma asked finally, drawing my attention back to him.

"Why?" I asked.

Genma frowned. "You just used two huge explosive seals, one of the Hokage's signature jutsu, you summoned a giant crane, you used twelve different charges of that diagnostic technique, and you healed some of them enough that they don't have horrible concussions. But I'm not sure how you're still standing."

"Genma, I know my limits." I said, brushing his arm away. I turned to face him fully, arms folded across my chest.

"The Keisuke Gekkō I know would be sleeping on her feet right now." Genma insisted.

I remembered belatedly that Genma had actually seen me fight in a Chūnin Exam before, as a member of the audience (since he'd been busy in the hospital wing during the time we actually fought in the same one). The matches I'd fought hadn't been perfect indicators of chakra levels, but I wasn't exactly known for being an endurance powerhouse. Not like Gai or even Asuma.

"The Kei you knew was nine." I said.

I felt Obito walk up next to me, and then he broke into the conversation with, "But wait, didn't you have questions about the thing I pulled off?"

"I do, but that's secondary to the bigger issue here." Genma said. He turned to Kakashi. "How much didn't you tell us, before?"

"A lot." Kakashi said flatly. He had both hands in his pockets and appeared unconcerned by Genma's frustration. "And you still don't have the security clearance to hear the answers." And then he gave Yatsu a pointed look.

"I missed whatever happened." Raidō said. "Care to fill me in?"

"Long story short, I have more chakra than Genma expected and Obito can use Wood Release." I explained quickly. "But we don't really have time for this."

Yatsu interrupted just then. "You have twenty-one hours and fifteen minutes. You also have another team of opponents to get through, and I do not expect you to succeed."

Thanks for the vote of confidence, jerk.

You didn't use any of my chakra today. That should be something, right?
...True. Thanks, Isobu-san.

Obito stuck his tongue out at Yatsu.

Genma facepalmed.

Finally, Raidō sighed. "You're sure about this, Kakashi?"

Kakashi's gaze cut like a laser. "Absolutely. I know exactly where each of them got their powers. And they know where I got this eye."

"Speaking of, Kakashi, you should probably lay off the more powerful jutsu for now." I told him, half of my attention on his chakra levels. "Actually, most of us should…"

"I feel fine, Kei!" Obito protested.

"And your chakra is down to half capacity." I told him bluntly. "Be careful." I paused. "And that goes double for you, Kakashi." Because of that eye, you won't be standing if you use the Chidori again. Even if I don't know what the hell that electric explosion actually was.

Genma bit the inside of his cheek, obviously barely keeping himself from saying anything.

"I'll be fine." Kakashi said. He pulled his right hand out of his pocket and there was a brief blur—and then, somehow, he was holding a small medicine bottle.

"…Don't tell me you ripped off the Inuzuka clan." Genma said flatly. "Can you even use soldier pills?"

"Most people can." Kakashi said, spinning the bottle between his fingers. "But this is an emergency option if my chakra fails me. I'll be sure to pay Shippō-san back later."

Obito immediately looked worried. "Are you sure those are even soldier pills?"

Kakashi responded by tossing the bottle to me. "Kei?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Yatsu sigh. Apparently, Kakashi couldn't be bothered to read the freaking label. Oi…

"I'm pretty sure if I take one of these, the results will be horrible." I said, prying it open. Inside were a number of little brown pills that, for now, I could probably identify as soldier pills. Though I'd prefer to have Rin look over them and then disassemble one for testing, they probably weren't dangerous. To Kakashi, at least. I'd probably explode.

"Too much chakra?" Obito asked.

"Yeah." Mostly because of Isobu and not because of chemical stimulants, but the sensation had been pretty memorable. "Been there, done that. got the T-shirt. I'm not doing that again."

"If we're all calm now," Raidō said evenly, "then maybe we should think about leaving?"

All right, all right. Point friggin' taken.

We hadn't used much in the way of actual supplies in this fight, except in the case of weapons. Genma gathered up some of his senbon, while Kakashi and Obito started retrieving kunai that littered the battlefield. Raidō hadn't lost anything, so he was keeping track of Yatsu, but I managed to find the splintered remains of my katana's sheath.
I sighed. There was no way I was getting much use out of it now. I took the top half of what was left and secured it to my belt again.

"Kei, are you ready to leave?" Kakashi asked.

"Yeah." I brushed the dirt and splinters from my clothes before standing up straight again, tucking my sword very carefully into the remainder of the sheath. Nothing like getting stabbed by twenty-five centimeters of exposed blade to ruin my day…

"Knowing that Honoka is on the team…" Kakashi murmured, "I'd say our best bet would be to stick close to a river. Kei, do you have any Water jutsu?"

"Yeah, though they stop at B-rank and I'm not sure how useful they'll be." I said.

"Doesn't matter. Obito and I can copy the jutsu. Three users is better than one." Kakashi said.

Oh, goodie. Training in the middle of a mission.

"Kakashi, I wasn't kidding when I said you need to watch your chakra levels." While my control was still spotty with the upper-level Water Release techniques, I could basically keep using the ones I had mastered all day. Isobu was water-aligned, too.

Kakashi gave me a long look. I stared back, undaunted.

I didn't know how to easily convey how worried I was, especially in front of witnesses. Kakashi as an adult had never been an endurance fighter when it came to ninjutsu, but he had the know-how to make it work. But he'd still collapsed after a combination of using moderately powerful Water jutsu and keeping his Sharingan uncovered for what was probably about fifteen minutes in real time. At age twenty-six. Against an opponent he could have otherwise dismantled in four moves. I didn't have an easy baseline comparison for Kakashi at age thirteen.

"I promise I'll be careful." Kakashi said finally. "But for now, we move out."

I was probably going to have to live with that. At least until I could get Rin's help. For now, though, I fell in with the rest and we headed ever onward.

Chapter End Notes

Today's song is...Beatdown, from the Homestuck soundtrack. :D

The dogs' names are as follows:
Reikō (Pointer), Shinkō (Boxer), Chikō (Japanese Spitz, female), Kōkō (Rough Collie), Teikō (Tosa-Ken), Gikō (Sakhalin Husky), Jinkō (Shiba Inu), and Chukō (Kai Ken).
Kei isn't familiar with all of these breeds, so she named the ones she did know.
And yes, this is a deliberate reference to Okami.
Forty-four hand-seals is entirely too much to deal with. Ever. Even for a B-ranked technique that was, in fact, pretty cool. At the same time, the boys needed to see the biggest Water Release jutsu I could manage, which was the cool one. Somewhat unsurprisingly, it was also the one that had stalled me out two weeks ago: “Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet!”

The river water spiraled up and out of the current, forming a thin twister of water capped with a tiny set of jaws and glowing yellow eyes in a misshapen face. The longer I held the technique, the thicker the dragon’s body became. The edges of its face and eyes became more distinct, too.

And then the blasted thing imploded.

I wasn’t really any better, when you got down to it. My water construct fell apart the instant I tried to push more chakra into it so was actually an attack, but by that point the two Sharingan users who were focused on me had gotten what they needed.

“I think I’ve got it.” Obito said, Sharingan fading back into its passive state. He rubbed the back of his neck. “We’re not going to have a lot of time to practice this.”

“It’ll have to be enough. Just get it right on the first shot.” Kakashi said, pausing a moment to pull his headband back down. He hadn’t actually tried the technique, but did he have to? This Sharingan bullshit was so contrived, I had no idea what to expect when I actually got to see the copying part in action.

Stupid time-skips.

Raidō, sitting on the riverbank next to Yatsu, asked, “So, what do we expect to see?”

“From who?” Obito headed over to him, while I was trying to shake water out of my sandals. Kakashi was likewise packing up some of his equipment, but with more poise. “Because I can guess for like, half of the team.”

“Everyone.” Raidō replied, frowning a bit. “And maybe a half-arsed explanation so Genma stops sulking.”

Even from across the river, I could feel Genma’s quick glare. Sound carried across water pretty well, and my chakra sense had pretty good range nowadays.

I walked across the water’s surface to where Obito was trying to have some kind of whispered conversation with Raidō, Kakashi following along in my wake apparently out of a lack of better things to do.
I thought about the situation and Raidō’s request. For a bit.

Then I rolled my eyes. This was getting out of hand and had to be sorted out now. Sure, I didn’t know Genma as well as I did Kakashi, but leaving things to fester right before a huge fight? Genin-level pointlessly dramatic bullshit: Exhibit A. Which I wasn’t going to allow to happen for the second time in a month, especially since the previous run-in with said situation involved almost getting killed.

“All right, all right,” I waved Genma over. “Team huddle time, now."

“You’re sure about this?” Kakashi asked.

I shot him a disgruntled look. “Yes. Kakashi, take Yatsu over there. You’ve heard this part before, and I need Obito here to explain his part.”

He shrugged one shoulder, doing as I asked. I had about a quarter of a second to be surprised, but had to shove it away.

I sat down on the riverbank with Obito, Genma, and Raidō, and tried to think of what to say.

I was mostly eloquent in my own head. When I tried talking, I usually realized that other people couldn’t follow my insane thought processes about five minutes too late to take it back. I was the queen of exposition and somehow traumatizing people second-hand.

With the boys looking at me like I had an actual plan, though, I had to come up with something.

“All right, so you want to know why Obito and I are weird now.” I asked, probably sharper than strictly necessary. “Ask.”

Genma wasn’t an Inuzuka, but it was pretty easy to tell when his figurative hackles rose defensively. His chakra is strangely solid—feels like walking around barefoot in the summer, but now the ground’s dried up and cracked. Snappish when stressed, sarcastic, but well-intentioned and meticulously polite to comrades most of the time.

Raidō was calmer—his chakra trends toward Earth, too, but with no heat behind it—and I got a different series of impressions from him. Patience, restrained anxiety, and waiting for the cue to trust. He wanted to trust Obito and me, but we hadn’t exactly given him a lot of opportunities.

“How did you use so much chakra in one shot?” Genma asked, sitting back a little. His voice came out calmer than his chakra felt—a good sign, maybe?

“I’ve been training a lot since I was eleven, Genma.” I said, trying not to be snippy and failing by the thinnest of margins. I took a breath and tried again, “Okay, no, that’s a bullshit answer.” I started picking at my nails. “Look, I’ve faced some freaky things since the last time we fought. Sensei—Hokage-sama—helped me work on a way to store chakra so I could use it in one huge burst. But I have to be careful, and the buildup takes months to be worth it.”

Technically true. Isobu’s seal was a massive vessel of chakra I couldn’t afford to use much, which Sensei had helped me stabilize. And the Dreamer’s storage of spiritual energy had been used after a significant charge time, at least on a few occasions. It’s just that the former was why my chakra reserves had expanded and the latter was the one I’d been building for most of my life. And the change-over had indeed been because of “freaky things” of a nondescript and thoroughly classified nature.

Jedi truths in a nutshell.
I could practically feel Kakashi side-eyeing me, and he was (supposedly) too far away to hear what I was saying.

Genma just gave me a flat stare. “You’re seriously going with that?”

“I’ve heard better.” Raidō looked very, very slightly annoyed.

Obito eyed the two of them and said quickly, “Kei, you’re sure you don’t want me to—?”

Fuck this. Fuck the entire idea of a nice, compact answer for these two. I could feel my teeth grind—not all of my temper was due to Isobu, but his chakra made me tetchy and rude if I leaned on it too much.

And…well, I was just tired of having to beat around the bush. My own mother didn’t know the extent of what I had been through, and I had never been Catholic. Confessions only happened when it was a matter of closing the barn doors after the horses got loose.

I wasn’t even pissed off at Genma and Raidō. I was just pissed off in general.

(Which was probably another sign that, despite acclimating to Isobu pretty well, I had plenty of issues sticking around for the long haul.)

“I. Am. Fine.” I bit out, which was of course not an indicator of being “fine.”

Obito didn’t seem to agree. To be fair, I wouldn’t have believed me either.

“Kei.” Obito said quietly.

I exhaled loudly and slowly. Stupid hammering heart. “No, Obito, don’t worry about it.”

I leaned forward. Genma, looking a little uncomfortable, leaned back. Raidō, at least, was dead calm. Must have been the ANBU thing.

“You want the truth?” I asked, voice surprisingly calm. Well, not “calm.” More “steady,” because I was still upset and any idiot could hear it.

Genma nodded, jaw set.

“I am the host for the Three-Tailed Beast.” I spat. And then I stood up with my spine ramrod straight with tension, still fuming, and walked over to where Kakashi was still babysitting Yatsu.

I sat down on that side of the river and ground my teeth, trying to control the sudden surge of Isobu’s chakra deep inside my coils. He was being defensive—I was being defensive, and Isobu wanted to see if he could act on it—and nothing was helping.

Kakashi put his hand on my shoulder. “Do I need to pull rank to get them back in line?”

“Don’t know. Ask when Obito’s done.” I growled, glaring daggers into the forest. Fuck if I was going to look at any of them.

I put my hands over my face, fingertips together and pressing into the bridge of my nose with both index fingers. If I gave it a second, either I’d stop feeling like I was going to cry or I’d progress to digging my fingernails into my face.

“Kei.” Kakashi said it carefully, like he kind of expected me to jump up and either bite his face off or start bawling. Ugh. “Sensei wouldn’t have chosen Raidō and Genma if he didn’t think they could
handle this.”

That…what? “What are you talking about?” I demanded, tilting my head back so I could look up at him. At least I didn’t feel all wobbly anymore.

“Not everyone is suited to bodyguard the Hokage and his family,” Kakashi explained. “You are, since you’re probably going to be hard to kill and Sensei knows you’re not the type to be bribed or threatened into turning. He trusts you.” Kakashi sighed. “But because you don’t trust most other people completely, he had to make sure that the team you’re working with will be able to handle the caginess and the stuff you actually tell them.”

…Okay, yeah, I was an overly defensive idiot.

I’d never really thought about why Raidō and Genma would be on the Hokage Guard Squad, considering everything. There was no reason for them to be a part of the team again unless something had stayed consistent between universes—and Sensei had trusted them enough to show them how to use a version of the Flying Thunder God technique, hadn’t he? I doubted they knew about Kushina’s condition, exactly, but I couldn’t remember Genma being snippy toward Naruto during the boy’s run at the Chūnin Exams either…

Great. I’d rage-quit a conversation with two people who might have otherwise been unbiased about Tailed Beast Hosts, and was otherwise being irrational.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Hopefully they’ll accept an apology.”

Kakashi didn’t say anything. And I couldn’t hear what Obito was whispering to them across the water. At least someone knew what information security was. I apparently didn’t.

And then Obito gave a shout that sounded like, “Hah!” and then burst out laughing. Going by the sudden lack of tension in both Genma and Raidō’s frames, I guessed that Obito had managed to say something that turned it all around.

Thank all the merciful higher powers that he was on our side. That kind of power, turned to evil, would be horrific. And it had been.

Kakashi braced his foot right between my shoulder blades and pushed, so I ended up staggering to my feet a moment later. “Get over there and find out what happened.” Kakashi ordered.

“All right, fine.” I said, somehow not snapping at him. Maybe I did need a figurative kick in the ass.

Kakashi left me to it.

And I am proud to say that I didn’t completely chicken out like the gigantic ninny I actually was.

I had both hands in my pockets to keep from wringing my hands together as I approached the other three members of my team. I probably looked like the picture of embarrassed, formerly-angry contriteness—I might have a pretty dull face, but body language is pretty obvious when you have the training to read it.

Genma and Raidō probably both did. So I was definitely an idiot.

Genma got up and crossed the remaining distance to me as I shifted my weight from foot to foot awkwardly. I…wasn’t good at apologies.

We stared at each other for a long moment.
Then Genma sighed, shook his head, and held out his hand. His middle and index fingers were extended, in the Seal of Reconciliation. Which, due to circumstances, I hadn’t seen in what felt like months.

I stared blankly at him.

“You could’ve just told us, Kei-san.” Genma said, by way of explanation. “I don’t know if I should be offended that you thought we were that shallow, or maybe just mad at myself for giving you that impression.”

“Six of one, half-dozen of the other?” I suggested. I gave his hand another speculative look before saying, “Well, I’m sorry for getting so angry over nothing.”

“Not sure how much of that was ‘nothing’.” Genma said. “But I accept your apology as long as you accept mine. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” I said, and clasped fingers with him.

With that settled, we had a chance to discuss things without the potential danger of a rage-based explosion. Or a panic attack. Or anything similar.

While Kakashi was dragging Yatsu back across the river to join us, with Genma’s belatedly offered help, I asked Raidō, “No reaction?”

“I already knew.” Raidō replied. Must have had something to do with his ANBU membership. Maybe. “After you’ve run into the Four-Tails Host and been nearly killed by him, then we can talk about keeping secrets.”

Or not.

“Um.” I said.

Raidō shrugged. “Somehow, I’m a lot less afraid of a Konoha-nin with demon powers than I am of an Iwa-nin with the same tricks.”

…Still, um.

“And you and I both know who was assigned as your bodyguard for a week.” Raidō said, quieter.

Obito looked between us and sighed. “And I thought we were all getting along without the vague threats…”

Kakashi interrupted, thankfully, before we could all talk ourselves in circles. “Does anyone have any suggestions about how to defeat the remaining members of the enemy team?”

**What was that strange spinning jutsu?** Isobu demanded from his corner of my mind, apparently sitting up and paying attention for the first time in at least an hour.

*The Akimichi Human Bullet Tank jutsu. It’s pretty devastating, but it’s often the slowest attack available.* I told him.

**It looked familiar.** Isobu grumbled. **Apparently your Hokage isn’t the only person who has been stealing power from the Tailed Beasts.**

What the heck?
The Rasengan is not exactly on the same scale as the Tailed Beast Ball. I said.

**Doesn’t really matter.**

After a second or two, I finally made the connection Isobu had suggested.

“The first thing we need to do is neutralize the Ino-Shika-Chō team.” I announced, startling Obito a bit. “We can shut down the Akimichi by redirecting him at the right time. That would give us more time to work on the rest of them.”

“And not Honoka?” Obito asked. “She sounds pretty tough.”

“Honoka can’t be everywhere at once.” I said, getting a proper feel for the idea. “The thing is, the Yamanaka effectively can be, if we don’t keep out of the way of things like the Mind-Body Disturbance jutsu. There aren’t enough of us that we can afford to fight each other. And then there’s that stupid Human Bullet Tank.”

Raidō rubbed his scar thoughtfully. “Genma, do you know the Earth-Style Wall jutsu?”

“Yeah. It’s not going to stop a Human Bullet Tank at full speed, though.” Genma replied, eyeing Raidō curiously.

“We might not need it to.” Raidō looked back up at Kakashi and said, “Leave the Akimichi to us. The Nara, too.”

“Honoka should be down to me and Obito.” Kakashi suggested, arms crossed. “We should be able to keep up with her.”

“And she’s never fought me before, either.” Obito said. He grinned, “It’ll be fun!”

Yeah, it probably wouldn’t, but that wasn’t my call.

“I’ll take the Aburame and whoever else I can manage.” I said after a second. “I…think that my weirdness may make me harder to tag with kikai than the rest of you.”

Yatsu stayed silent during all of this, as though giving us rookies some breathing room.

“And who’s going to guard Yatsu-san?” Obito asked.

“Tsuruya, hopefully.” I said, pretty much just on the spot. Screw Yatsu’s acrophobia—if he wanted to be in the middle of a jutsu death-match, it was going to be the last mistake he ever made. Especially if Obito’s grin meant anything—he had entirely too much chakra for the kekkei genkai-based damage he could do. “Otherwise we’ll have to take turns as best we can.”

“I am still not interested in flying.” Yatsu replied peevishly.

“Too bad!” Obito said, cheerfully sadistic about it. “It’s that or dying or getting kidnapped or something.”

“Pakkun will stay with you.” Kakashi added. Looked like he wasn’t a lot more sympathetic than Obito was.

Yatsu subsided, but grudgingly.

Kakashi looked around at all of us. “Are we ready?”
“…Maybe.” I pulled both of my right-side scrolls out of their holster and held them up for Genma and Raidō. “Explosives or weapons? Last one’s got medical supplies, but those probably won’t be immediately useful.”

Genma selected the weapon scroll after a brief internal struggle that I could just barely sense. “Raidō?”

I flipped the explosive-storage scroll into Raidō’s waiting hand. “They’re pull-and-set. You can also destroy the entire scroll at once, but I don’t recommend it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Raidō said, pocketing it.

“Now we’re ready, Kakashi.” Obito said.

I should hope so.

Getting Yatsu onto Tsuruya had required a bit of extra incentive. I had to use my utility scroll and break a seal on a bird-adapted saddle I’d used not too long ago, and then set up all of the straps so a supposed civilian could stay on-board in case of combat maneuvers. Pakkun had declined any special accommodations, citing that he was a skilled shinobi in his own right and had no intention of dying via *falling*.

“Are you sure?” I asked, just in case the pug changed his mind.

“I’ll be all right, Kei-chan. Worry about the client instead.” Pakkun replied. That was the last thing he said before hopping onto Tsuruya’s back alongside Yatsu, fixing his teeth into the leather.

Once Tsuruya and her passengers were flying higher overhead than most jutsu could reach, I breathed a sigh of relief. Former shinobi Yatsu might have been, but it was a lot easier to think about enacting a strategy when the sole “civilian” member of our party was out of immediate danger.

And then I guess it was time to face the music.

As a result of careful scouting and not a little dumb luck, the actual site of our battle would be a riverbank. Specifically, it would take place on the opposite side of the tower than we had started on, about nine-tenths of the way to the first gate. The river on this side of the tower flowed southward, where our goal was in the north, and did so slowly—for some reason, the river was half a kilometer across and rather shallow at this part of its path. Our battlefield would stretch the entire visible area and into the trees around us. There was no cover, really, but plenty of water and earth to use to stifle Honoka. Also, very few shadows.

We could have picked better, probably, but it was also the area where the Aburame bugs would be least effective—it was hard to trap open water with underground kikai, since they generally drowned as easily as every other insect.

Honoka stood upriver from us as we left the forest, dressed in Uchiha blue that was visible from even that far away. From her stance—hands on hips, chest out—she not only expected us to challenge her, but also expected to make utter mincemeat out of us. You don’t stand like Superman unless you think you really can take your enemy’s best shot.

(People like that are usually proved wrong.)

She was the only opponent in sight, but none of us believed for a minute that she was the only person around. That would have made it too easy—she’d be free to spam AOE attacks, while we’d
be free to target her if we could. I wasn’t banking on it. Sensei had to have told her to play nice.

“Been a while, kiddos!” Honoka shouted, though she probably didn’t need to. It wasn’t like she had much competition from anyone else.

“Honoka-san.” Kakashi said, when no one else wanted to give it a shot. “Your team is the last obstacle in our path.”

“Always were a smart one, weren’t you, Kakashi?” Honoka replied, wearing what could only be called a smirk. She pulled a katana from a scabbard strapped across her back, in traditional Uchiha style. I wondered briefly why she was acting so close to the clan’s party line. Maybe it was because she was in the village? “Ready to face me?”

“You bet, Cousin.” Obito said, stepping forward to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Kakashi. Because of course he would.

Honoka’s eyes flickered to Obito, gleaming red in the light reflecting off the river.

I didn’t have to see Obito’s eye to know that he was trying for a Sharingan staring contest.

Honoka burst out laughing a moment later, free hand belatedly covering her forehead. Obito’s chakra buzzed in sheer agitation as she went through laughter, and into guffaws, and then wheezing. The rest of us just stared at the jōnin for a while, as she laughed until she cried.

Then Obito, figurative steam shooting out his ears, threw a kunai at her.

The world flipped over and it got crazy for a bit.

Honoka exploded into flame that instantly burned out and left the kunai red-hot—a Fire Release clone. Then, over the crest of the nearest hill, a gigantic Human Bullet Tank—with kunai spikes everywhere for grip and maneuverability and also pain—bounced over the riverbank toward us. So much for a jutsu that was easy to dodge. At the exact same time, both riverbanks burst into flames as though coated in some kind of oil, bracketing us on both sides.

Kikai insect buzzing started about then, from far enough away that I realized they’d been hiding in the trees on the far side of the river in a concentration of…let’s call it one per meter. If that. I wondered if they were supposed to be some kind of detection system—one that I wasn’t equipped to smoke out.

Haha, smoke. While we were at a risk of being burned to death if we didn’t get pancaked.

“Oops.” Obito mumbled.

I mostly ignored that. I was more worried about the fact that I could feel both the Yamanaka and the Nara setting up on us, just beyond the wall of flames. Technically speaking, fire was only an obstacle to one of those two clans. With no bodies between us and them, chances for possessions or various mind-vooodoo were high if we didn’t move.

Most of those thoughts occurred only in hindsight, but the planning undercurrent of my subconscious was running double time and spat out an answer.

Too bad we hadn’t discussed this particular strategy for dealing with the problem. Oh well!

“Obito, up!” I barked as the Human Bullet Tank bore down on us, bending my knees and cupping my hands one over the other.
Obito probably figured out what I was doing after he ran to comply.

Once Obito’s lead foot was in my hands, I tapped into Isobu’s chakra and, as the Tailed Beast chakra dyed my eyes red and slammed into my coils, threw Obito more or less straight up. Between Isobu’s strength, Obito’s training, and a not-insignificant panic boost, he gained enough air to clear the top of the Human Bullet Tank by a massive margin.

After he hit about ten meters and kept going up, shouting something along the lines of “waaaaaaaagh” all the way, I turned my attention to the Akimichi again. I let Isobu’s chakra slip out of my reach and lowered my head mulishly, acting like I was simply going to stand there and take the hit.

Genma and Raidō both bolted in front of me, their bodies nearly parallel with the ground. As the tank approached and both of them completed their hand seal sequences, I ducked. I had lost track of Kakashi almost immediately, but I didn’t feel like I had to worry that he had forgotten the plan.

This one would be one for the books, assuming we did it right.

I heard Raidō’s voice shout, “RAMP!”

Overhead, two massive earth walls came together at an angle, creating a funnel of sorts. Going by the chunks Raidō and Genma had torn out of the ground, they had also had the foresight to create a forty-five degree angle.

The ground shook as the Bullet Tank thundered overhead, shaking the improvised defense and making me immediately worry if I was about to be pancaked along with three-fifths of my team.

But apparently someone had forgotten to tell the Akimichi when to stop. The Human Bullet Tank shot off the end of the ramp and into the air.

Straight at Obito.

“Obito, SPIKE HIM!” I roared, Isobu’s chakra curling around my lungs and ribs. I was louder than expected and Genma and Raidō both jumped a bit, but hey. Could’ve been worse.

“Okay!” Obito, having hit the apex of his jump a bit ago and commenced with the falling part of the program, made some quick hand signs I didn’t see him complete before the Human Bullet Tank eclipsed him. For a moment, I was frozen with sudden fear—what if this didn’t go as planned? What if we messed up?—before I decided that Obito’s fate was up to him.

Just as I was about to head out from cover and perhaps punch the Yamanaka in the mouth, the Human Bullet Tank came speeding back at twice its original rate and smashed into the right-hand wall of flames. As the flames guttered out, I saw Kakashi dart past—beyond the former (literal) firewall—and disappear. I also felt the Nara and the Yamanaka run off as their teammate crashed into their previous location.

Okay, time for a counterattack.

I stalked under the cover of the rocky barricade, keeping low, and flipped my utility scroll into my hand. Target acquired—the Aburame. The man’s bugs were literally everywhere, but I had a few countermeasures.

The Aburame was tall and wore a long white coat with large pockets, his dark hair almost perfectly vertical through the power of hair gel. Like many Aburame clan members, he wore dark, goggle-like sunglasses, but his hands were covered by loose bandages instead of gloves. If he hadn’t been
wearing a green silk scarf, with a yellow butterfly pattern, I would have written him off entirely on the basis of appearance. Typical Aburame, blah-blah-blah, nothing to see here…

I popped the catch on my scroll and reached for a storage seal. One that contained an aerosolized can of bug spray.

As the kikai approached, I unsealed two of the cans and threw them directly at their host’s head.

Then Genma threw two explosive-prepped kunai at them and hit his mark squarely. The cans popped under the pressure of their own contents, spraying poisonous chemical mist everywhere. While the Aburame tried to steer his insects around the cloud of death, the aforementioned kunai detonated.

…Next time, I’d probably tell Genma to use a slightly weaker set of seals. As it was, I’m sure the insects and their master felt like the air had caught fire.

Meanwhile, the Akimichi finally rolled to a complete stop and shrunk down to normal with a loud crack, flopping to the ground with ropes and kunai falling all around him. I could only wonder what Obito had hit him with.

“How many do you think that was?” Raidō wanted to know, though I wasn’t sure if he’d stay for an answer. He was already halfway upright, barely poking his head over the bizarre earthen barricade we’d made, eyeing the newly-clear riverbank with an expression that suggested imminent attempted murder. Probably a mutual feeling.

I spared him a brief shrug. “We saw the Aburame and the Uchiha. Anything else is up in the air.” I didn’t know for sure where the Yamanaka and the Nara had gone. A thick cloud of smoke, punctuated with massive chakra discharges, obscured half of the battlefield. The chakra explosions made it harder for me to get a bead on what I was trying to find.

But Kakashi was in there and fighting.

Obito shot past me. As he went, his right arm was still shedding bits of what looked like it’d been a gigantic Wood Release mallet. Apparently, when I’d told him to pick something that could take a hit from a Human Bullet Tank, he’d interpreted the statement with the addendum of “and hit back.”

I was moving to go help him, already thinking of what kind of explosive I’d like to use, when Raidō suddenly gave a shout.

At this point, I’d suggest paying attention. Isobu snapped.

Okay, okay… My chakra, tinged faintly with Isobu’s, flashed outward as I tried to figure out what the heck was happening.

Kakashi was in two places at once. One of the two Kakashis was more lightning-y than the other, which made me wonder if there was a Lightning Release clone running around.

Genma had finally broken off from my position and was going after the Aburame for the knockout blow. Given the fact that the Aburame seemed to still be reeling from the attack earlier, I decided I could safely cross him off the list.

Obito was screwing around with the Nara, punctuated occasionally by explosions and loud thuds that might have been the Wood Release hammer coming down.

The Akimichi was unconscious already, due to genjutsu. I’d had no idea Obito had any, but there
may have been something else going on there.

Raidō was the only one still near me. He was waiting on my cue.

I could work with that.

I drew my katana. “The Yamanaka’s at thirty meters, ten o’clock. Come with me?”

Raidō nodded, drawing his own sword. “Left or right flank?”

“I’m right-handed.” This apparently earned another nod, and Raidō stood up so that he was positioned to my left and about two meters behind me. He needed the space to react in case I started growing chakra tails or something, which I wasn’t about to begrudge him.

And then we, under the cover of one of Raidō’s weaker genjutsu, skirted the edge of the battlefield.

I’d never really thought about what it would mean to fight alongside another kenjutsu specialist. I mean, Kakashi could use swords as well or better than I could if he wanted to, despite preferring wakizashi-length blades most of the time. Obito had probably copied more kenjutsu from me than he’d ever actually think about using, what with his apparent fondness for straight ninjutsu. Fighting around someone else who used full-length katana like I did was a new experience.

(Keeping in mind that “specialist” wasn’t really a term that applied to me much anymore.)

And Raidō’s sword was cool, which was a neat bonus.

Anyway, Raidō and I managed to maneuver around the battlefield and finally get a good look at what was going on.

The difference between jōnin and chūnin is supposedly vast.

Honoka isn’t seeing it.

Her little cousin and little recruit, quick and bright and agile. Maybe alone she could smash them to pieces, but together they leave no gaps in their defenses. Kakashi may be jōnin but Obito is only chūnin. This should be easier than it is.

Clenched teeth, Sharingan spinning, redirecting artificial wood and screaming lightning with strategic blasts of wind jutsu and fire. Hands blurring, chakra burning, lungs expelling flame.

Honestly, what are they feeding the kids these days?

Honoka feints right and stabs left, point of her blade glancing off the side of a kunai. Kakashi is quick on the draw, trying to tear into her exposed bicep.

Not fast enough. Bend the elbow and there’s a gap, not enough for Kakashi to pull back and slice, armor rolling into position, blow redirected to armguards. Reach down length of blade, grab for the collar inside the guard position.

She barely has her fingers in the smaller jōnin’s collar, yanking with intent to drive her knee into his nose when she spots trouble coming the other way. Her little cousin again, Fūma shuriken bearing down on her arm.

Teeth grind. Nothing is easy.
Letting Kakashi stagger backwards, darting out of the way.

Setting an explosive tag under the other Uchiha’s feet, forcing him out of immediate melee range. Might have caught fire. Not sure.

Lunge forward, plant one foot immediately in front of smaller jōnin. Twist and reach, grabbing shoulder straps and hauling him forward into a punch with the katana hand.


“Yes.” Body language relaxed despite circumstances. How? What is Kakashi planning?

Drop sword, twist arm around, grab his forearm and pull. Smash younger jōnin into dirt via wrenching arm caught in lock.

“Was this?” Can’t be. Must be a bluff.

“Yes.” No, no, no no no no! Tricky little rat—

Little jōnin explodes into lightning, little bolts running up and over metal armguards and a scream in her throat.

Honoka hates smart opponents.

Snatch up sword, block incoming Wood Release strike—

When we arrived, which couldn’t have been more than five seconds later, Obito and Kakashi were trying to contain Honoka’s immense Fire Release talents between them and not doing the best job—which was why the non-liquid parts of the river and surrounding area were on fire.

The Yamanaka was apparently trying to line up a shot on one of my teammates while not getting Honoka caught in the mess somehow. He was probably about thirty-five or so, with long blond hair in a ponytail and a scar that puckered one side of his mouth. He looked like someone I did not want to mess with. But the Mind-Body Transfer and Disturbance jutsu had certain limitations in a close combat scenario and couldn’t be used beyond a certain range either. He had to stay close enough to act and far enough away to not get instantaneously gibbed by the random attacks coming off the figurative dust cloud of violence that the three Sharingan-users were caught in.

The Nara was waiting in front of him, the ground lined with black from her shadow jutsu. She was a woman about the same age as Honoka, with cartilage clasps as well as the usual Ino-Shika-Chō earrings and a triangular chunk missing out of her beaklike nose. Dark-eyed and dark-haired with very sharp features, she focused on the fight between kekkei genkai users with intensity that I didn’t trust.

I didn’t believe it would be that easy to get past them.

That was about when an explosion—Genma really needed to be reminded to play nice, especially with weapons he hadn’t prepped—and the Aburame actually went flying despite the Earth Release shield he’d apparently managed to put up at the last second.

Though the most I got to see of all that was when said shinobi crashed right in front of me, totally out cold.
And then the genjutsu died. Which meant that the Yamanaka looked *directly* at us.

Raidō and I decided (by mutual, silent consent) to cut our losses and just deal with the (relatively) long-range fighters as quickly as we could.

I went high, Isobu’s chakra thrumming in my coils, and then barely avoided the explosives-laden log that the Yamanaka Replaced himself with. Kicking it away took time and I’m sure my mother would have been disappointed in me for falling for *that* trick.

Going by Raidō’s grunt of frustration and the sudden lack of a Nara woman a few meters away, I could only conclude that our opponents had thought of the exact same trick.

Fighting teams with high teamwork ratings? Hard. Very, very hard.

“Twenty-six meters, seven o’clock. Next to the willow.” I muttered under my breath, hoping that Raidō was listening closely.

“Not going that way.” Raidō said. I could see why—too many shadows among the trees. There *was* such a thing as tempting fate.

We ended up not having to worry about that. Well, not immediately.

At that point, Kakashi, Obito, and Honoka’s fight had finally drifted over in our direction. And it was the kind of fight I would never have voluntarily wandered into.

I hadn’t been paying too much attention, because the chakra expenditure in that fight made me feel like someone had replaced my mind’s eye with a kaleidoscope and my head with a drum, but I had to when a kunai flew by and nearly gave me a nose to match the Nara’s.

Then Raibo and I both retreated to a safe distance and tried to stay out of the way.

Obito’s Wood Release jutsu was slower than Honoka’s Wind or Fire, but Kakashi could force his way through Honoka’s guard if he just followed the paths Obito’s tree branches made for him. Every miss, from Obito, sounded like boulders tumbling down a mountain as the artificial trees smashed through mundane rock, earth, and water below him. Kakashi’s Lightning Release screamed loud and high, following paths made by the river water being kicked up and following Obito’s branches. Honoka moved like a snake, weaving through the attacks with terrifying precision and a quick blast of Wind here and there to scrape *just* enough leeway out of the attacks and get away.

All the while, it seemed like a dance. Obito and Kakashi weaved perfectly around each other and had no qualms about tearing into Honoka’s back if one of them distracted her or in using each other as platforms. The slashed, stabbed, kicked, wheeled, attacked again, in a clash of blades and bodies so fast that it sounded like a solid, single din.


Shadows lashed out, almost hidden underneath all of that *noise*, and Raidō’s hand landed between my shoulders and shoved me a few stumbling steps forward. *He* hadn’t been distracted by a screaming chakra sense and the fight itself.

Which was why he was the one with two-dimensional hands crawling up his legs like ink. And I wasn’t when I turned to look.

The Nara had line-of-sight and Shadow Strangulation jutsu. Off in the trees to my right, I could feel the Yamanaka lining up a shot.
Raidō’s face told me to run and leave him for later. Genma and I could come back and pull him loose, but not fast enough that the Yamanaka couldn’t possess him. I might’ve had the power if I tapped into Isobu, but there was also a chance I would tear something of his (like, I don’t know, a limb) off in the removal attempt. Nara weren’t known for giving up their prey.

And the thing with the Yamanaka clan was that they really had no compunction against hijacking a body for five minutes and going for a spin that led to a tumble off a cliff.

I wasn’t going to lose one of my teammates. Never again.

Fuck that.

When I felt the Yamanaka’s spirit make a hasty exit through the jutsu and beeline right for Raidō, I threw myself right into it.

Iso—

—I WILL DEVOUR YOU!
—I—

—bu?

And then I was climbing to my feet again, hearing the Yamanaka give a scream of primal terror. I missed a step and stumbled, but that was nothing compared to the time I got from letting the Yamanaka be a giant, screaming distraction as he scrambled away from me.

The Yamanaka was pale and shaking, clutching at his eyes and curled into the fetal position. He’d stopped screaming, but that was about all I could say.

I didn’t have much time two dwell on that. Before the Yamanaka could recover or the Nara could take advantage of the distraction, I threw a kunai straight at the Nara’s head.

When she ducked backwards, Raidō mirrored her movements and would have taken my leg off at the knee if I hadn’t dodged sharply—turned out that the awesome black sword was pretty sharp! Who knew?

And then the kunai exploded, because I’d had a bit too much fun and had not given Raidō all of my explosives. Especially when it came to stuff I could actually touch and focus on.

Then Genma finally rushed over with a smoke bomb, finally breaking the shadow the now-dazed Nara woman had been using to try and choke Raidō unconscious. That, along with the Yamanaka’s freak-out and the various other shenanigans our team had gotten up to, left the enemy team with only Honoka upright and kicking.

And boy, was she kicking.

Even as I turned away from Raidō punching the Yamanaka man’s lights out (which was as much a mercy as a security precaution), I felt a familiar swell of chakra from Honoka’s location and threw my arm over my eyes just before the cloud of smoke appeared.

Then I was scrambling backward, snagging Raidō’s collar along the way and dragging him behind me, as Mamijo’s huge, clawed paw came down right where we’d been standing. Genma, fortunately, ran the other way as soon as he realized what Honoka was doing, and thus avoided an embarrassing death by house-sized badger.
His face—which was, in fact, taller than I was—was barely a meter from mine. His breath was disgusting and came out hot enough to form a cloud of steam even in the August sunshine. Raidō and Genma at least had the good judgment to get out of the way—instead, I had Isobu’s chakra pounding through my coils in affronted anger, pushing me to punch Mamijo’s nose out through the back of his skull.

On occasion, Tailed Beast instincts weren’t terribly productive.

From behind Mamijo, I heard Honoka shout, “Earth Release: Rock Blast!”

And then the ground underneath me did the exact opposite of giving way. As though the immediate area was on some kind of fulcrum and I was on the far end of the lever, the ground heaved with Mamijo’s weight and shot up like a rocket. With me on top.

Thanks to the wonders of chakra-assisted physics, I flew, screaming louder than Obito had. At least half screaming of that was because of more affronted rage—what was this, a cartoon? And my katana even flew out of my hand, to add insult to likely-forthcoming injury.

“Wind Release: Overpressure!” And apparently, out of all the wonders today had in store for me, the last of them was that Honoka had the skill and the chakra to create a localized tornado. Which headed right for me even as I righted myself in midair and tried to figure out how to land safely without abusing Isobu’s chakra.

I must have taken too long, or else forgotten the basic physics behind tornadoes, because I was sucked in and helpless before I hit the ground.

I clapped my hands over my nose and mouth as soon as I felt myself change direction in midair. Tornadoes could suck the air right out of your lungs, impale you with interesting objects ranging from hay to steel girders, or otherwise ruin anyone’s day. But at least Isobu’s chakra, running fast and thick and hot along my coils until it manifested as something nearly solid, could protect me a little. Given that he was a turtle crossed with a crustacean, I felt like I could at least rely on his shell of chakra for a while before I had to panic for real. I probably wouldn’t be punctured by pebbles while he was still interested in protecting me.

I couldn’t hear much of anything while caught in the swirling vortex, but I could at least sense things other than the jutsu. Like feeling my inner ear go bananas.

I hadn’t ever been prone to motion sickness, but this was definitely pushing any known limitations of the human body.

Even while being swirled around like a sock in a washing machine, though, I could still feel chakra outside of the funnel cloud. And a pretty large chunk of it, which was awfully familiar, was heading my way with intent.

And then the funnel cloud, with a sound like sheet metal tearing, exploded into nothing more than a mid-air bust of leaves, dirt, random other crap, and me.

I didn’t manage to fall that far—between Isobu’s massive chakra tails manifesting through my panicked oh shit I can’t fly moment and shooting toward the ground to keep me from free-falling, and Tsuruya appearing just below me at precisely the right time to catch my flight-impaired ass, I ended up being okay!

Though I had to wrestle Isobu back into some kind of order to keep from burning Tsuruya, even as she hovered below me patiently. Once Isobu’s chakra was less volatile and more confined to my
chakra coils again, I plopped unceremoniously onto Tsuruya’s back just in front of Yatsu and Pakkun.

“What,” Yatsu began in his precise, irritated way, “was that?”

“Long story!” I informed him, manic cheer in my voice. Holy shit. I was neither dead nor non-lethally perforated. This was a good day.

Thank the merciful gods that it’d just been a jutsu.

I looked down. Well below us, the former slow-moving river had turned into what looked a lot like a scene out of, I don’t know, some huge war movie or something. Huge chunks of the riverbed had been smashed into so much mud, by either massive twisted tree roots or the results of a lightning jutsu going off and killing half the fish. What was exposed to the air was either on fire, flammable, or scorched and quickly extinguished. Someone had ripped up a whole tree and apparently tossed the stupid thing across the river. Mamijo’s work, probably, but I wouldn’t put it past Obito to pull it off somehow. And then there were the places where a still-active Water Dragon Bullet had obviously stirred up the riverbanks.

My eyes were still a near-perfect copy of Isobu’s when we finally got close enough to the ground that I could safely slide off Tsuruya’s back and rejoin the fight. Tsuruya handed my sword back to me—apparently she’d caught it by the handle in one foot, even after all that maneuvering—as I did so.

As for the Tailed Beast chakra and the detection thereof, I could tell by how twitchy Yatsu looked; and anyway, using almost any amount of Isobu’s chakra resulted in an eye color change. And more importantly, using any of Isobu’s chakra at all would make every sensor-type ninja (and many who were not) immediately hone in on me.

…In hindsight, maybe I’d been too blasé about the whole Tailed Beast Host thing.

It also took me an additional fraction of a second to realize that everyone was staring at me like I’d grown an extra limb—which I had, as a matter of fact. The temporary nature of said limbs was a secondary concern.

Honoka, Obito’s ankle still caught in her right hand and Kakashi’s sword against hers, just sighed.

“Do you surrender?” Kakashi demanded anyway.

“Think I have to, at this rate.” Honoka said, shaking her head. She let go of Obito, who had since started to wave his arms in fear of losing his balance, and spun her blade free of Kakashi’s before sheathing it across her back again. “Honestly, kids these days…”

Honoka crossed her arms as our team, however temporarily, decided to stand down. And Genma and Raidō and Tsuruya and Yatsu all came back to join us. Honoka’s badger summon was nowhere to be seen, though I suspected the house-sized mound of tangled thorns (which had appeared out of nowhere) was partially to blame for that.

I gave it a closer look. Mamijo was…probably under that. I shuddered in sympathy.

Honoka snapped her fingers and the lump trapped under said thorns proceeded to disappear, leaving the mound to look like a deflated balloon once Mamijo’s mass was removed.

“Explain.” Honoka ordered, apparently directing the question toward me.
Kakashi not-so-subtly moved so that he was standing between me and Honoka. So did Obito, though he wobbled a little, and I was reminded just how much chakra both boys had used today. Maybe Kakashi had surreptitiously swallowed one of the Inuzuka food pills he’d swiped, but even so…

I looked directly at Honoka, whose eyes were once again a plain, flat black, and said, “This is something for the after-mission debrief, Honoka-san. And here and now, you are not my superior officer. Kakashi is.”

Honoka pursed her lips, apparently weighing her options, and then gave a slow nod. “Acceptable. Yatsu?”

“I’ll record this as a victory, Honoka.” Yatsu said, sliding down from Tsuruya’s back stepping forward. His hair was still in complete disarray thanks to Tsuruya’s aerial hijinks, and he fused over it as he talked, but he was otherwise unharmed. “Any enemy force put up against, er, what youwere”—unsubtle Tailed Beast reference, yay—“would likely have broken at this point.”

I scratched the back of my neck awkwardly. There wasn’t really any chance that Yatsu wouldn’t be referring to the members of Team Minato in this case. Genma and Raido were competent, but there was competent and then there was hilarious overkill.

Honoka nodded again. “Retreat, then.” To us, she said, “Continue the mission.” Muttering under her breath a bit, I watched her create several Shadow Clones—ordinarily a massive chakra expenditure in combat, but hey—and then she and her clones started collecting her unconscious teammates.

I sat down on a rock and swiped a hand under my left eye to check for—oh, yep. Bleeding from the eyes again, and this time more severe than the last. Drat. I went looking for bandages inside my remaining scroll, figuring that I could staunch what bleeding there was.

Once Honoka and her team were finally limping off into the distance, I heard Obito say uncertainly, “Hah, we sure showed…them…”

He trailed off in mid-sentence and promptly collapsed on his face from chakra exhaustion. Genma managed to catch him before he hit the ground.

“Out cold.” Genma reported, even as he pulled Obito’s eyelid back to check for a concussion. I assumed that what he found was reassuring, because he said, “Otherwise, he’s fine.”

“Idiot.” Kakashi muttered, but that was the last I heard out of him for a bit. Mainly because he fell over right after that.

Raidō managed to catch him by his ANBU-styled flak jacket before he face-planted in the river—what there was of it, anyway—and drowned in less than five centimeters of water.

“Does this happen a lot?” Raidō asked, sheathing his sword one-handed before pulling Kakashi over his shoulders like a killed deer.

“This is the second time I’ve ever seen it happen to Kakashi.” I said. The mission with the butterflies hadn’t counted. “And I don’t remember Obito ever doing this before.” Not since he was a lot smaller and a lot less skilled, anyway.

Despite two teammates collapsing, we had actually done astonishingly well.

I mean, Honoka was still conscious to haul her teammates out of the former battlefield with shadow clone assistance, Obito and Kakashi fell over in synchronized dead f opps right after she left, and I
was bleeding from both eyes by the time I dismissed Isobu’s chakra entirely…but we won! A bunch of kids with less than a decade of shinobi field experience between us, and we’d still beaten out the parameters of the test through excessive firepower even against a team with an Uchiha.

I was feeling pretty good about that, honestly. Even after having to hold bandages against my eyes for a few minutes until I could heal them.

Eventually, we got up and kind of limped our way out of the forest. After the show we’d put on, none of the wildlife wanted to be anywhere near us, which saved us the trouble of having to kill them. Even if Raidō and Genma were weighed down by my teammates and Tsuruya was staying on the ground to accompany us, we made good time. Especially since Tsuruya had allowed Yatsu to ride again and was handling his security concerns on her own.

And we left through the first gate just before noon.

Once we dropped Yatsu off with his somewhat scuffed-up wife and their eight (eight?) dogs, who’d been waiting outside the gate for him, I de-summoned Tsuruya and offered to carry one of the boys for either Raidō or Genma. It probably wasn’t quite fair to make them carry my teammates to the hospital, after everything that’d happened. And besides, I had chakra to spare (in a certain sense).

Genma declined. “Don’t worry about it, Kei-san.”

“I’m not exactly made of glass.” I retorted. And besides, I’d been my team’s medic for a while. While I didn’t think that Kakashi or Obito would go into chakra shock or anything, it still made sense for me to stick close in case things got worse suddenly.

“I don’t think that’s what he meant.” Raidō said. Since it took two arms to carry anyone unless the style involved was “sack of potatoes,” Raidō couldn’t gesture to emphasize his point as he said, “They’re our teammates too, now.”

And when we got to the hospital, Rin was around and on her lunch break.

“What happened to you, Kei-senpai?” Rin exclaimed, getting to her feet and flinging her bento box onto the ground.

I looked down at myself. On a lot of my exposed skin—face included—I felt a little like I’d gotten sunburned. I also knew I’d gotten a little scraped up in the tornado, and I had bruises pretty much everywhere as a result. But really, I wasn’t that badly hurt even if I looked like it.

Rin caught my face between her fingers and pulled one of my eyelids back without so much as a how-you-do. But given the recent state of my eyes, her concern was probably justified.

Not that I was going to let her prioritize that. I pulled out of her grasp and said, while gesturing quickly, “Kakashi and Obito need a chance to rest, Rin-chan.”

Rin frowned slightly. “Between all five of you, I would’ve expected the other side to need all the medical care.”

Rin effectively had one of the highest security clearances in the village for her rank. I mean, medics saw a lot even if they weren’t generally allowed to make a big deal out of it. Further, Rin had to know about Isobu given what we’d been through, and sometimes tougher or more dangerous cases got forwarded to her. The only thing she generally wasn’t allowed to know was the identity of an ANBU patient. But then, no one was.
Anyway, she was in deep enough to make both of my new teammates give her odd looks.

“To be fair, they do,” I interjected. “But after we won, they both fainted.”

“Obito pretty much carried the team until then, though.” Genma remarked. Obito was drooling onto Genma’s shoulder pad, though, which somewhat ruined the gravitas of the moment.

Rin gave Obito a fond look. “I believe you, Genma-san.”

“Kakashi’s also earned a long rest at this point.” Raidō added, “But we really need to head to the Hokage to report in at this point. Are there any spare beds available?”

There were always extra beds in the hospital.

Active shinobi had free healthcare, too, so we were able to hand my unconscious teammates off to the much-maligned Konoha General hospital (and to Rin). But because, technically, we’d been up for a mission and a promotion and weren’t wounded, the remaining trio consisting of Raidō, Genma, and me were all bound for the Hokage’s office. Again.

Honestly, I was getting a little sick of getting called up—and yet my ideal job required it. I really did want to be a Hokage guard, even if it would be inconvenient sometimes. Funny how that worked out.

Anyway, we entered Sensei’s office maybe three minutes later, ushered in by a harried-looking secretary. When we got in, it became apparent why.

Honoka was red-faced, Sharingan spinning, and arguing with Sensei in the middle of his office.

“—could you even say that?” Sensei’s voice rose into something like a snap, but that was impossible. Sensei hardly ever even got annoyed, much less started yelling at people.

Honoka growled. “A known Tailed Beast Host, Hokage-sama! If the girl lost control—when, even —everyone would have died.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and mumbled under my breath, “We’re doing this again, aren’t we?”

“Honoka-san,” Raidō began, but lost momentum when she whirled on him in a rage.

“Did you know about it?” Honoka practically screamed in his face.

Oookay, delayed reaction there. I’d have expected the freak-out to take place in the field, where punching people was a valid response to being startled. But it sure wasn’t once you got in front of the Hokage and the punch-ee worked for him.

Just to be safe and discourage Uchiha rage, I got in front of Raidō.

Honoka flinched so hard she actually took a step back.

“You and Kei worked together for almost a week before this,” said Sensei, before the Uchiha could get her balance back. He walked out from behind his desk, his own eyes a little narrower than they would be if he’d been calm. “I wasn’t aware it was an issue.”

“I didn’t know.” Honoka snapped over her shoulder at him. Lower, she said, “I suspected that someone had experimented with Tailed Beast chakra, but to have the entire monster…”

“Kei-san isn’t a monster.” Genma said flatly. “Or else I’m sure we’d all be dead by now.”
“Then what the hell did you do to Inosuke?” Honoka snarled, and this time she definitely directed it right at me.

Oh. So all of that rage was because her teammates got hurt and…well. Not like I could blame her for that one.

What did you do?

**Forced him to leave.**

Not very informative.

“Inosuke Yamanaka, right?” Honoka nodded stiffly. I explained in as even a tone as I could manage, “Inosuke tried to use the Mind-Transfer jutsu on Raidō while one of your other teammates had Raidō trapped. I…was pretty sure that I could take that kind of hit better than Raidō could, so I jumped in the way.”

“And then the monster tried to kill his soul.” Honoka snapped.

“If he did, it’s because no one and nothing should be inside my head except me and him.” I retorted. “We’ve been on the wrong end of that type of attack before and I am not going through that again.”

“You actually think that thing is smart enough to distinguish the difference between a spar and a mission?” Honoka sneered—and wow, I could definitely see why people would think the Uchiha clan had a congenital predisposition for being arrogant. “Because I don’t believe that you can, given your performance lately.”

What the hell? “How about you pick just one of us as a target for personal attacks?” I growled. “Either insult me or insult the Three-Tails, but pick one.”

“The report you gave me indicated that Kei acquitted herself well on the last mission you were on, Honoka-san.” Sensei pointed out. “You said that she was vital to the mission’s success.”

Honoka’s jaw clenched.

(Also, what? That mission could have been handled by someone else, right?)

“But it’s not that simple, is it?” Raidō frowned, crossing his arms. Distantly, I was a little surprised that he was sticking up for me. Honoka was probably one of his superior officers. “Because Kei hurt one of yours, you have to hurt her back or it’s not ‘even.’ Even if it was justified under the circumstances, the new information colors everything you think about Kei-san, whether past or present.”

I swallowed whatever I’d been about to say before Raidō jumped in. It probably would’ve been more yelling. Instead, I said in a tight voice, “Look, I’m sorry about what happened to Inosuke and I’m willing to do whatever I can to get him on his feet again. I didn’t mean for him to get hurt—I was just trying to keep Raidō safe.”

After a long, tense wait, Honoka’s eyes went flat black again. She ground her teeth for a moment or two and said, “I don’t like that you kept secrets, Gekkō.”

“That goes above your head, Honoka-san.” Sensei said flatly.

“Does it really?” Honoka crossed her arms over her chest, still obviously pissed off. “Who do you expect to be on the front lines when Kirigakure figures out where their weapon wandered off to?”
Kirigakure had been given the Three- and Six-Tailed Beasts—Isobu and Saiken—as a sort of bribe for peace, back when the First Hokage was still running things and his ability to control them was unique. By choosing to distribute them across several villages (with the occasional observation that some villages had captured their own first), the First thought that he'd found a way to guarantee a balance of power between each of the five Elemental Nations. But if anyone found out that Kirigakure had lost their weaker Tailed Beast, or that we had him...

It would mean war. And there was no way we could afford to fight again so soon.

My thoughts must have become visible in my expression somehow, because Honoka said, “You didn’t think of that. You didn’t think.”

*It was kind of hard to think of that at the time, dammit!*

**Do you regret it?** Isobu asked.

*No…but I do worry about the consequences. Especially right now.*

“Honoka-san.” Sensei said, in a voice that was almost pleasant, “At this point, I’d like to remind you that S-ranked secrecy exists for a reason.”

Sensei, like most politicians and every person who worked a retail job, had an expression reserved solely for difficult people and things that ought to die but couldn’t be forced to do so in the next five minutes. Sensei’s looked completely pleasant—he was a dork and had an honest face, relatively speaking—but that had no effect on the miniscule amounts of killing intent that leaked out of him when he used it. He might’ve looked obliviously happy, but the smile was the kind that didn’t show teeth because otherwise the owner would be tempted to bite someone’s face off.

Honoka seemed to shrink in on herself a little. “But…”

“Inform your team that they will tell no one what they learned.” Sensei went on as though she hadn’t said anything. “I’ll discuss the issue with you when you resume normal duty. In the meantime, concentrate on resting and seeing to your team. I’ll send Kei along when or if she can be of any help.”

Honoka shot me a glare, but left the room at the clear dismissal.

For a moment, none of us said anything.

Then Genma said, past the senbon in his mouth, “So, execution order? I had no idea you were this popular, Kei-san.”

Raidō whacked him in the back of the head.

“Just saying.” Genma muttered, chastised.

“Actually, the gag order doesn’t apply to Kei herself.” Sensei said, reshuffling some papers that had been knocked askew by Honoka’s minor rampage. “I assume she told you.”

“Didn’t have much choice.” Genma muttered. At Sensei’s raised eyebrow, he added, “I was a bit insistent on hearing the truth after what she did.”
Sensei frowned. “Only good things, I hope?”

“Kei-san did well,” Raidō said. “The original problem was that we didn’t understand the source of her increased endurance.”

“But they’re both cool with it.” I said before anyone could go around digging themselves into deeper holes. “Right?”

Raidō shrugged just one shoulder. “I already knew. And it makes sense.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t and I didn’t necessarily maintain total cool.” Genma admitted. He sighed. “Water under the bridge now, though.”

Sensei looked up at the ceiling, as though mulling over his answer over. Then, “Two out of three isn’t bad, right?”

Losing Honoka’s respect bothered me, but I still nodded. “I can’t always please everyone.” Still… “I’m still going to do what I can to help Inosuke when I can, though. Is that okay?”

“You’ll have to ask his clan. And his teammates, probably.” Sensei pulled a manila folder loose from a pile. “By the way, did you want to see the names of your opponents? It might be interesting.”

“…Uh, two questions before we get off-topic.” Genma said with a cough. “First, did we pass?”

“Yes.” Sensei replied, looking amused.

Genma’s senbon made a quick circuit of his mouth again. “Second, then; did we get promoted?”

“Also yes.” Sensei said, and he was definitely amused. Then he tossed the folder to me so I could see what treasure trove of data hid inside.

_Inosuke Yamanaka_

_Shikane Nara_

_Chōku Akimichi_

_Honoka Uchiha_

_Fuse Inuzuka_

_Yatsu Hyūga-Inuzuka_

_Shippō Inuzuka_

_Shimika Aburame_

_Mitsuru Jishin_

_Sora Hayabusa_

The rest of the names were canine ones, or at least I guessed as much. And that was it.

"Bit of an anticlimax, Sensei." I informed him.

"At this point, I think that all of you need to unwind." He paused, as though something had just occurred to him. "Actually…where are Obito and Kakashi?"
If I had been sufficiently animated, I would have face-faulted. Instead, I resumed pinching the bridge of my nose, waved Raidō and Genma off with my free hand, and began with, "It's a long story…"

Something like two hours later, I tracked both Raidō and Genma down at Ichiraku's and gave them a hug each.

"Thanks for believing in me." Even if I hadn't been giving them the best reasons for it.

"You're our teammate now, Kei-san." Raidō said once I let him go, as though it was just that simple. "And our friend, I think. Unless you object."

Genma grinned, spinning his senbon between his fingers. "So, what do you say?"

I held out a fist each, which got me two fistbumps. "Definitely friends."

After I left them to their late lunch, I swung by a local (non-Yamanaka) flower shop and commenced the self-appointed task of visiting everyone in the hospital. I owed my boys in particular and everyone else in general.

Life was (mostly) looking up. Just one month and spare change until showtime. And then I'd know for sure if I was gonna crash and burn.

See you soon, Naruto.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter brought to you by a 30 Seconds to Mars song.
Intermission: What Does the Fox Say?

Chapter Summary

Kei: Hand the story to someone else.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

==> Be the foxy lady.

You are now KUSHINA UZUMAKI, the village's FOXIEST LADY BAR NONE. Not just because you're a CHAMPION PRANKSTER and SMOKING HOT, but also because you have the Nine-Tailed Fox SEALED IN YOUR GUT. This makes you own that title, literally and figuratively. Though some parts of your life have sucked, you've managed to keep afloat with your CAN-DO ATTITUDE and your propensity for KICKING ASS SANS NAME-TAKING. When would you need to remember those losers' names? Never, that's when!

That said, you have pretty much been suffering forever because you are TEN MONTHS PREGNANT and the baby is TAKING HIS SWEET TIME. You're pretty sure you're having a son, anyway. To go through all the prep and then be proven wrong would be TRAGICALLY HILARIOUS.

You have just woken up from ACTUAL HONEST TO SOMEBODY'S GOD SLEEP. You are amazed this is a thing that can still happen. With that part out of the way, you feel the urge to DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT TODAY. Like climb a mountain or get into a fight with a bear or maybe write in your diary.

What will you do?

==> Kushina: Expound upon shenanigans.

January 30

Minato tells me not to worry, and then he goes and…and…

Fuck.

I'm crying all over this STUPID page and I just…

[mass of scribbles]

Minato lost one of his students two days ago, on a mission to the Land of Grass. We all knew there were risks on a mission that far from home, but from the way Minato told me what happened, it was all because of some stupid mistakes.

Or maybe that's the guilt talking. No one else is.

I haven't seen Kakashi sleep or eat since he got home. I know he must have—Minato wouldn't let
him just wither away—but it hurts to see him like this. After what happened to his father, I kept hoping that he wouldn't lose anyone else close to him. That we wouldn't lose him to himself. It barely makes sense but it's true. He's still here by force of will and that promise he made to Obito, but I wonder if it wasn't a closer thing than Minato thinks.

I've been looking after this boy for years. I should know him, right? I'm just worried that I'm not doing enough to help him. Maybe it's just callous of me to worry about my reactions...

I don't…it's been a long time since Uzushio. A very long time. I'd hoped that I wouldn't have to draw on it again...

Kei isn't really doing much better. Since the inquiry, I expected Minato to check in on her a couple of times, but he keeps getting stuck at the door—

February 8

We had the funeral.

February 23

Training, training, and training! So much paperwork, too. Some days, I think Minato takes all this stuff home because he actually likes it, not because he's just an idiot at delegating.

I've officially been banned from the mission roster entirely. I'm only seven weeks pregnant and I won't show for months, and apparently…

Oh, who am I kidding?

Not being allowed to train or take missions sucks, but I'm PREGNANT! Me! Oh, sure, Biwako-sama says I need to "be careful" and "avoid stress" but honestly, who the heck keeps track of that stuff?! Minato and I are going to be PARENTS.

I'm never going to forget the look on his face after I got home from the doctor! I wish I had a camera and could've taken a picture and everything!

...Also, we need to figure out if we're going to get some kind of ceremony sorted out or wait until after the baby's born to do it. Because according to Biwako-sama, by the time any wedding thing gets done I'll probably be too fat to fit in my dress.

Maybe just a private ceremony? I definitely want a big wedding bash, but I'm not sure how we'd pull it off in time...

Argh, maybe I should just ask Minato to step up the schedule? But when would we even have time?

...And I need to go to the memorial. Maybe Obito will forgive me for being a little late myself. I'll be sure to tell him the good news.

March 6

It snowed today. Not much, but what the HELL is up with this weather?

May 2
Kei came up with some kind of strange seal today, though I'm not sure where she got the idea. She said it had something to do with barrier ninjutsu, but I've never seen this design before. Maybe Akira-chan had something to do with it?

I need to get out a new sealing notebook. I know I'm not supposed to be using chakra while I'm carrying a baby around, but I'm sure there's no harm in just checking someone's work...

---

June 10

I think the baby kicked my kidney. I woke up in the middle of the night and nearly punched Minato in the back of the head, so I think that's a sign, right?

---

July 7

HOLY SHIT. It seems impossible, but our little lost lamb is BACK. I have like half an idea of where he's been this whole time and it's not pleasant and I'm sorry about that BUT HE'S BACK. I am SO throwing a welcome-back party as soon as I can get my hands on enough people to move shit for me since my ankles are all swollen now. Stupid third trimester.

Oh, and Kei turned out to be some kind of seer. I think we have those—Gamamaru-sama, right?—but I didn't really understand her explanation any better than anyone else did! I think she has prophetic dreams or something and then she doesn't anymore? I would've talked this over with Minato, but he's been gone all night and who even knows when he'll be back.

---

July 8

MINATO IS GOING TO BE HOKAGE!

---

August 10

I didn't realize Minato was planning on calling Tsunade-sama back to the village. She's probably the queen of medics, ever, but I remember when she ran off and it WASN'T pretty. What in the world could Minato say to get her back?

"I'm only asking you to come back to Konoha once. For a month. Either you do it and leave at the end, free to go wherever, or I have you listed as a missing-nin. Sarutobi's lenience ends now."

Yeah, I'm not sure that'll work. Tsunade-sama doesn't respect people who threaten her, but I get that Minato's desperate. Between the stuff Kei said and the thing with the weird clay-men, we're running out of time.

So I pulled Jiraiya-sama aside and told him to try something else.

"Tell Tsunade-sama that this is a request from her cousin—I want her to be there when Naruto-chan is born."

Might be a low blow—Mito-sama married into the Senju clan, but she was still Tsunade-sama's grandmother and my clanswoman. Tsunade-sama respects those family ties, though. And that way she'll resist the temptation to kill Minato.

Somehow.
September 1

I'm not much for writing, normally. There just never seems like there's that much to say—life happens, I react to life's happenings and then it just goes on from there. Time moves only in one direction.

I think.

Look, if there's a physics lecture in here somewhere, it's going to have to wait until I have another pen and maybe a cup of coffee. Or might have, but I can't have coffee since that might hurt Naruto. Personally, I'm not sure anything can hurt the baby after ten months of percolating in my belly with the Nine-Tailed Fox's chakra in my seal and my chakra coils, but Biwako-sama insisted. No caffeine for me!

...Okay, no, that's not what I wanted to write about. I mean, I guess I've been super stressed about Naruto lately. These last few months of carrying him would've been bad enough if I just had to worry about not being able to see my feet or sleep on my face or any of those normal things that pregnant women worry about. But now, on top of all that, I have to worry that someone is going to come after my baby!

That's also not what I wanted to write about. Ugh.

I was GOING to talk about seal theory but I'm not feeling it. Without breakthroughs, it's less fun!

September 15

FINALLY. We've had a real breakthrough with the Reaper Death Seal—or rather, NOT using it. I think we really have a shot here! Combining this weird Red Strength Blood Seal that Kei found in one of her scrolls with the Eight Trigrams longhand—

...Wait. Yeah, not writing this here.

At the very least, we should be able to do something a lot less dangerous than what Kei showed us. Honestly! If there's time to prepare then I don't see any reason why I can't get all the grunt work of a Tailed Beast seal out of the way BEFORE I have to die to do it!

Oh, and we had a party for Kakashi today! I mean, we didn't do anything TOO insane because Kakashi isn't a party animal. But he and Kei and Obito and Rin all got a home-cooked dinner and we handed gifts out too. I made sure to give him a blank storage scroll—meaning he can store anything in it with a minimum of fuss, not that I gave him a lot of paper with nothing on it. That'd be rude.

I don't remember what anyone else got him except for Minato—some kind of customized sealing inks? I'm not sure when I'll have time to teach him properly—it's one thing to have Kei working with Minato, but I'm going to be in the village and Kakashi isn't really going to be unless his missions slack off.

I don't think I have enough time to give him a crash course in sealing. I might with Obito, but his handwriting is kind of iffy and that would take forever to correct! ARGH! I want an apprentice too!

Well, maybe after this. If I'm still alive. I still have a few things left to do, after all!

The world is a soft shade of yellow.
Actually, that's not quite true. I cast a long, thoughtful look up at the stone and faux-steel structure ahead of me, past a winding granite staircase suspended in the open air. The air is thick with the sound of labored breathing to a pair of lungs larger than I am by orders of magnitude, of giant diamond-hard chains creaking as their captive twitched.

I walked up the stairs.

The Nine-Tailed Fox—Kurama—is suspended overhead like a massive, furry, furious scarecrow, nailed to the sealing stone with giant chakra-cancelling rods and secured with adamantine chakra chains. One chakra-cancelling spike through its hand-like paws and its rear feet, one through each of its tails, and the chains wind around everything with brutal efficiency.

I never thought of it as brutal or inhumane before. But given what happened with Kei and her Three-Tails, maybe I should. I need a chance to find out for myself if that kind of—of trust, I guess—is even possible now. I'm not sure if it's possible at all. But I have to try.

I reach Kurama's stomach in just a moment, my hair flying back in my face with the force of his breath as he starts to growl. I can feel him getting angrier and angrier the longer I stick around.

"You little insect." Kurama snarls in the bottom register of even his sonorous voice, teeth showing from behind his black, doglike lips. "Why are you here?"

"I'm here to talk with you, Nine-Tails." I say, putting my fists on my hips. "And we're going to talk, this time!"

"Why should I talk to something like you?" Kurama snaps, twisting his head toward me as far as he can. With the chain around his throat and two loops through his long ears, it's less than adequate.

Why do I want to talk to him?

I have a lot of reasons. Not all of them are good reasons, but they're mine.

I don't want Minato and Naruto to have to fend for themselves just because I'm damn near dying of chakra drain and the strain of containing Kurama while giving birth. I don't want to be helpless in the face of danger when my son will be the only one who has any reason for it.

I want access to Kurama's chakra as soon as I can, and not just because I need that power boost. I only caught scraps of Kei's explanation of Kurama's powers, but his Evil Detecting Aura seems like the best ability I could use without time to practice. If something happens in the village, I'll need as many ways of finding trouble as I can get my hands on.

"You don't have to talk to me, really." I backpedal after a moment, because all that justification isn't what Kurama wants to hear anyway. My fists clench. "But there's someone else you should talk to, and you need to see him right now and I'm going to help you."

Kurama makes a terrible rumbling noise—it takes me a second to realize he's laughing, darkly. "There is no one. No one and nothing that I want to see. Leave me!"

Yeah, I'm not taking that for an answer. I need him to move, not to sit there like a lump.

Which would be made easier by, say, changing the seal parameters. I might suck at hand seals and ninjutsu, but I know fūinjutsu inside and out. And I know that I have something Kurama wants, even if he doesn't think he'll get it.
It only takes me a moment to construct chains out of my chakra, the links spinning outward from my abdomen and twining with the chains keeping Kurama in place and the stakes through his spiritual form, anchoring themselves like the lines on massive cargo ships.

"What are you doing?" Kurama jerks his head against his restraints, huge white fangs bared. "I will kill you, you wretched hairless monkey!"

"How about you shut up and let me work?" I snap back, grabbing my chains in both hands and checking their grip on the chakra-canceling stakes with an experimental tug.

Kurama's chains and stakes all groan at the strain, and the fox himself gives a sudden jolt of surprise that runs up the chains and into my whole body. The sealing stone quakes under the strain of both of our movements and our accidental tug-of-war.

I send more chakra surging down my chains and they thicken until the most distant links are almost the size of Kurama's eyes. I swing my arms around the chains, securing them to both my hands and forearms.

I look up and stare directly into Kurama's huge, red, slit-pupiled eyes. "Ready?"

"For what? For some novel torture method dreamed up in your miniscule brain? Don't make me laugh." Kurama growls, but the raw hatred and malevolence in his chakra seems somehow smaller. My chains work better on him than perhaps anyone's power has a right to. Or maybe that's just Kei's weirdness rubbing off on me.

"You'll find out." I say under my breath, and heave on the chains.

The chains groan, cutting into the chakra-canceling stake through Kurama's abdomen. Shards of it crumble loose from the main body, showering Kurama's fur with black fragments. There is a second thunderous crack as the stone starts to give way to the force of my will alone. Then a noise like grinding stone, as the rod is painstakingly pulling free and Kurama thrashes against his remaining chains and freaky body piercings.

"Give me a second and I'll have this out!" I shout over the sound of a titanic monster shrieking in pain. "Hold on, Kurama!"

Additional chains shoot from my stomach to the chakra-canceling stake, anchoring themselves with hooklike points. Come on, dammit!

Sweat breaks out on my forehead. Kurama shrieks again, pulling his chains taught. I feel my feet start to slide underneath me, but it's coming out. Slowly. Painfully. But I'm making progress and it's only going to be a little longer—

Come on, come on, come on—

When the stake finally pulls loose, the dozen other stakes disintegrate and so do the chains anchored by them. Which means Kurama falls.

Kurama hits the ground at the same time my knees do, panting heavily and landing mostly on his left side. He makes a much bigger thud, sounding more like the top had come off a mountain and gone rolling downhill to squash the countryside. The "ground"—what there is of it—buckles and rocks under Kurama's weight and stays that way, leaving a gigantic crater than I barely avoid.

And then the force of Kurama hitting the ground makes me bounce hard enough to eventually land
on his head with a thump.

Luckily or unluckily, I'm barely any taller than Kurama's gigantic red eyes, so my impact doesn't hurt him at all. When I get my feet back under me, instead of landing and rolling ass over teakettle until I hit the ground, I slide down Kurama's bright orange fur until I reach the ground. All via sliding down the side of his face.

I'm standing next to Kurama's head and I reach up so I can touch his heavy fur. His breath is hot and disgusting, but I can tell that he's as much in shock as I was, say, a few months ago. I hadn't thought then about what could happen if I undid part of Kurama's binding—but then, I hadn't thought of him as having a name. Or a will of his own that didn't involve killing things.

His massive chest heaves. I pat the underside of his jaw, trying to be comforting and mostly failing because he's a giant fox monster and I'm not. It was probably like being treated with great sympathy by a baby mouse or something. I'm not sure that he would have appreciated it if he could even feel me doing anything at all.

"Come on, Kurama," I mutter, wondering what I'm supposed to do next. I don't really have a plan, as such, and it's taking longer for Kurama to recover than I would've thought.

What would Kei do? What did she do? I'm pretty sure she tamed—or at least de-fanged—the Three-Tails and there must be some way to be able to get my feelings across to him. Even if those feelings involve a lot of kind of frustrated apologizing.

Both of us have too much pride, I think. Kurama and I.

Kurama's huge red eyes open and he twists his neck so he can see me, in the way that dogs do when they're lying on the floor and too lazy to get up and give humans funny looks. His tongue is still hanging out of his mouth, and his breath is still coming faster than it should, but at least he's not hanging in midair by stakes.

I pull my hand back.

His ears stand up, twitching a little in my direction.

"Don't touch me again." Kurama growls, but he doesn't get up.

"You aren't even going to ask what I just did? Or why?" I ask, putting my hands on my hips. "Really?"

"I thought it was obvious." Kurama's eye—the only one I can see all that well from this side—closes. "You broke part of the seal."

"And you don't ask why?" I demand.

Looking at him critically, I have to admit that I can understand why he isn't. Even though I removed the more obstructive seals, heavy ink lines show that my chakra chains—no, Mito's chakra chains—have practically burned themselves into Kurama's body. Though I pulled him loose from the part that left him hanging from the "wall," suspended by chains and stakes through his body, he's not really much more capable of acting out against me than he ever has been. Some of the seals even indicate that I can shove him into a sort of seal cage…which I haven't seen yet.

And in the meantime, they seem to be making him a hell of a lot more sluggish than an un-caged Tailed Beast should be.
I frown. *Aunt Mito was more thorough than I thought. I need to show this kind of seal progression to Minato.*

Kurama gives a sub-vocal *thrum* that might grow into a snarl if he put more effort into it. "**Why should I care about what a little hairless monkey does to its chakra? Since you are so insistent in loosening my chains, you should not expect my gratitude. This is your doing and yours alone, rat.""

He has to know about the secondary seal.

And what Minato's doing in the outside world.

My temper flares, because of course it does, and I bellow, "Dammit, Kurama, I'm trying to apologize here!"

Kurama's eyes open again. "**Do you know why?**"

"I do, actually!" I snap. I can feel my hair starting to stand on end—literally—as my chakra rises in response. Before I know it, I'm practically waving my arms in frustration. "I'm sorry you've been stuck up there for nearly sixty years, and I'm sorry I didn't see anything wrong with it before! I'm sorry for only ever calling you 'Nine-Tails' and using your chakra without asking! I mean, you've made a lot of this kind of really difficult, but I'm apologizing anyway!"

I pause, trying to think of something else to say.

"**Human sentiment.**" Kurama grumbles, turning away. He acts like an old man—too stiff or too cautious to move quickly.

"…I also don't get why you haven't tried to eat me." I admit, letting my arms fall to my sides.

Kurama rolls over. Not toward me, but so that his back is facing me. Sort of like when Minato gets mad at me, but I never let him stay that way for too long.

It's a little like staring down a gigantic furry wall.

Dammit.

"**Where did you hear that name?**" Kurama asks, his voice making the ground shake.

"Eh?" I shrug. "I got some insight a little while ago. I...didn't realize you had a name, before. So I'll use it."

"**And you just knew it was mine?**" Kurama scoffs.

I wave my hands vaguely, mostly because I have no idea what to say. "No? I...uh." Wait. "I know someone—the host for the Three-Tails."

Kurama snorts in obvious disdain.

"And I got to see the moment when you were all named by the Sage of Six Paths." I add.

I see all nine of Kurama's tails go perfectly still. He sits up, like someone trying to haul themselves up from a bed, and locks his supporting elbow even as he looks over his shoulder at me. Then he heaves himself to his paws, towering over me more than even the Hokage Mountain. Or at least it feels like that.
"What," Kurama growls, "are you talking about?"

I stood up straight, crossing my arms over my chest. "You heard me."

"The Three-Tails...he's gone soft." Kurama spits, teeth huge and white and disturbingly close to my face in short order. "How dare he?"

"He didn't tell me." I correct immediately. "I didn't explain properly." As Kurama's eyes focus on me again, I say, "Come on, I want to show you something so it'll make more sense."

"I am going nowhere with you." Kurama snarls, lowering his head and assuming a fighting stance.

I concentrate on my chakra. "Actually, yeah, you are."

A chakra chain shoots out, looping around Kurama's wrist, and then the "ground" drops away below us both.

For a long moment—maybe not just a moment—we're falling together.

And then we hit the bottom of wherever-this-is, with Kurama landing on all fours first and with me bouncing down his fur like it was some kind of hill and I was a five-year-old rolling down into the river. Only I think a river would be more fun and less grumpy.

I land on his back. And then the ground, eventually.

Once I manage to remember which direction is up and which is down, and I find the floor with my feet, I release the chain around Kurama's wrist and let it dissolve into the empty air.

I get up and dust myself off, even as Kurama lurches back to his feet and starts growling all over again.

Honestly, I wonder if he doesn't get a sore throat with all that aggression.

Across the way, where I didn't look before, was a mountain-like creature with a pale blue-green shell and a craggy face with no visible mouth. Its single visible eye was a ringed, red-and-gold series of loops instead of Kurama's animalistic eyes, and its arms were as human-like as Kurama's, but stubbier and covered in both spikes and heavy hide. Its belly was striped and folded, like a whale's, and three shrimplike tails curled off into the distance, barely visible behind the spiky shell.

And on its hand, sitting with her legs folded meditatively and a pair of thick glasses on her nose, is Kei.

"Uh, hi, Kushina-san." Kei says, looking sort of stunned as she looks up at Kurama's crouching form. "Uh...I think you've got a guest?"

"Obviously!" I say, and I hold out a hand toward Kurama. "This is Kurama."

"We know." Isobu replies, closing his functional left eye with a sigh. "I see you are every bit as proud as I remember."

Kei looks between Isobu and Kurama once, then twice. Then she sighs. "Great."

I jog over to her while the Tailed Beasts are still squaring off. Hopefully, they won't try to kill the crap out of each other while I'm busy. I mean, I can probably keep Kurama from beating Isobu up, what with the chakra chains and all. But I don't want to test myself against two Tailed Beasts at once
"And find out on the spot that I'll lose."

"So, what have you been doing in here?" I ask, while Kei pulls the glasses off her nose by the arm and pinches the bridge of her nose.

"I've been showing Isobu-san some future events." Kei replies carefully. Any evidence she's actually been doing just that? Gone, if it ever existed. Good girl. "Kushina-san, did you do the thing?"

"Of course I did. He doesn't have holes in him anymore, for one." I wave vaguely at Kurama, who plants his forepaw on Isobu's head and commences roughhousing because he's a jerk. I mean, Isobu's shell will probably protect him from a lot of things, but Kurama has more tails and is stronger pretty much by default. I think.

"Get off, Kurama!"

"Make me, Three-Tails!"

"It's Isobu, you—!

And then there's a lot of roaring and the ground rolls like in an earthquake.

"Don't make me come over there!" I holler over at the tussling Tailed Beasts, then slap my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing.

I'm a babysitter to world-ending monsters. How isn't that funny?

Kei doesn't seem to agree. "Kurama-san! Did you want an explanation for what Kushina-san did?"

"It's Kurama-sama to you, bug!" Kurama roars at Kei, as Isobu's tails wrap around his throat and start to choke him. He reaches up with both forepaws and claws at Isobu's tails while the turtle tries to force him into a triangle choke.

"…Yeeeah, no." Kei mutters under her breath. "Anyway, Kushina-san…"

"It's interesting, Kei-chan," I interrupt, "how the Tailed Beasts act more like people after you show up. He's not exactly the living embodiment of malevolence…"

"Neither is Isobu-san." Kei replies. "But I wasn't talking about that…"

I frown again. Kei isn't paying any attention to me—rather justifiably, she's got her eye on the tussling Tailed Beasts.

And, oddly, the fact that they're both slowing down.

"What's going on?" I ask, but there turns out to be no time for an answer.

Kurama stumbles to a stop, panting like he's just run a marathon and with black lines spreading out from the chakra chains linked into his fur. As we watch, he gets slower and the lines get thicker, dripping down from his fur like they're still made of ink and leaving a huge pool of blackness directly underneath him, high enough to reach his ankles.

Isobu scrambles out from under his sibling, three tails thrashing free from the seal.

(I don't want to imagine what would've happened if he got stuck.)

The darkness reaches upward, simultaneously stretching and twisting into something with a hundred
upward-facing bars. Some of the lines curl around Kurama's long limbs and wrench him off his feet, pinning him to the ground on his side as he snarls defiance. Others continue climbing, pooling above his head like the roof of some kind of structure.

"Kushina-san!" Kei shouts in protest.

It's a cage. Or it's going to be a cage.

A freaking birdcage.

How about no.

If this is my seal—and it is—I should be able to control it. With or without Aunt Mito.

Chains shoot out of me again, this time pulling on the bars of the new cage. This stupid fox will be the death of me. And probably everyone else, after.

"Isobu, please—!" Kei is waving her arms and the Three-Tails slides toward Kurama on his stomach, charging a pitch-black ball of Tailed Beast Chakra in his suddenly-very-visible mouth, lined with spike-like teeth.

"Sorry, Kei-chan, but it looks like we can't play today." I murmur, looking over what seals I can see and reading them as much through my chakra chains as with my eyes.

Under the current seal parameters, I can't bring Kurama too far out of the seal without risking a security measure or two. Some seals—and the Mangekyō Sharingan, apparently—can modify a Tailed Beast's behavior against their will. Whether that means knocking their stamina down to nothing, almost removing their agitated temperaments, or enacting some kind of Tailed Beast catnip, anything is possible.

And it looked like Aunt Mito had found a way to do it.

I feel my stomach turn over. Kurama...isn't nice, to say the least, but that isn't him. And I'm sure he knew it, too. Even while high on what must have been the sealing equivalent of a moderate dose of opiates. I can't leave him like that.

As Kurama roars and smashes against the cage, reaching out toward me with claws larger than I am, I bring my own chakra to bear against the seal, against this strange shadow-plane, and against everything else I can think of. If the seal won't let us out, fine. We can always try again later.

And then, I open my eyes to see the ceiling of my bedroom, and feel Minato's hand in mine.

I ended up more falling out of meditation than drifting out, the way I was supposed to. I mean, I hadn't known if the thing Kushina and I were trying would work, and I didn't know if it had in spite of that.

But hey, one attempted Tailed-Beast-to-Tailed-Beast conversation was nonetheless attempted. For Konoha, that was a first.

I sat up on my bed, kicking the covers off, and peeked out the window at the early September sky. The weather is nice enough, the leaves won't turn colors for another month or more, and I didn't spar with Gai yesterday (and thus don't feel like secondhand roadkill). I didn't have a mission for at least two days, I liked both of my teammates, and the only chore on hand for the day involved getting my brother to work on the next few kenjutsu techniques he had to learn before Mom would consider him
Sooner or later, I'd need to get some kind of day planner just to keep track of it all.

The bedroom door was open, somewhat unusually. I kind of expected to wake up automatically whenever someone so much as touched a doorknob in my presence, but maybe being at home put me at ease in a way that my mission self would never tolerate.

"Sis, are you done medi—me… Meditating?" Hayate asked from around the corner somewhere.

Or maybe it was because my brother was in the kitchen (and not ambushing me), and thus I had nothing of importance to worry about. Besides, meditation didn't count as sleep even if you hopped into a pocket dimension to say hi to the residents.

**I heard that.**

Was Kurama too rough? I asked.

He was more or less the same as I remember. If exhausted. Isobu said, giving the impression of shaking his head in disapproval. Back then, there was no way Kurama would ever be caught in a human's ninshū trap.

What is—or was, I guess?—ninshū?

The art of using chakra, back before humans corrupted the Sage's teachings. A spiritual path.

And if there was one thing I knew about enlightenment, humans, and the interactions of both in this particular world… So, of course people fucked that up.

Yes. Isobu paused, though I didn't really know if he was going for effect or just because he didn't quite know what to say next.

...The Sage probably wasn't human, was he? I asked after a long mental silence. You said that we corrupted the Sage's teachings, but it doesn't seem like he could be lumped in with the rest of us. Of course, he was the Sage and apparently the pinnacle of everyone ever...

I don't know if you would consider him more or less human than you. Isobu replied. There are very strange people in this world, and we consider them all human anyway. That shark-man in your memories, for example.

Kisame...is a standout example of something. Genetic diversity, maybe. I shrugged mentally. I couldn't really tell you. But I suppose that after all the weird shit running around in this world, one more weird mystery doesn't really make any difference. I mean, I talk to giant animals and chakra monsters and so on and so forth all the time. And Kumo is allied with an island turtle, I think, and... well, this world is strange.

Isobu huffed. Regardless. Do you think that woman will continue to attempt to win Kurama's favor?

I don't think I can stop her at this point. I told him bluntly. And neither can Kurama. Between Kushina and Minato, and maybe Naruto someday, Kurama is just going to have to get used to being out-stubborned by idiots.

Isobu made a noise that might've been a laugh.
At that point, Hayate appeared in the doorway and finally seemed to have come to the conclusion that I was asleep sitting up. I mean, I tend to meditate with my eyes closed and it wasn't like there was anything of Isobu to see if I decided to open them.

So Hayate hit me in the face with a pillow.

Later, Mom came home from early-morning grocery shopping to see me whacking my brother over the head with the pillow from the couch.

Needless to say, she wasn't happy with me.

Sparring kinda sucked that day.

Chapter End Notes

Any and all romance in this story will take place in the distant future of the in-universe timeline. Much like the original Naruto series, romantic relationships are tertiary to the plot except where they inform characters' interactions. At least for now.

And as a digression: Sorry about the delay, everyone. But this is finals week (month) for my degree program. I barely got enough free time to write this much, honestly.

NEXT TIME ON CATCH YOUR BREATH:

===> Be the other half of the hand-holding business.

You are now MINATO NAMIKAZE, and you are GETTING YOUR HAND BROKEN.

Okay, maybe this particular transition didn't work so well. You probably need to be somewhen else.

===> Be the other half of the hand-holding business, but SEVERAL DAYS AGO.

Well, at least you're not getting bones crunched.

You are now MINATO NAMIKAZE, by this point known variously as the ONLY BLOND HOKAGE, KONOHA'S YELLOW FLASH, and KUSHINA UZUMAKI'S BOYTOY. Honestly, you're pretty happy about all of those things, because you're easy to please like that. You are an EXPECTANT FATHER, though the baby moves at no one's pace but his own, and anyway most people aren't supposed to know that.

There are times when you COULDN'T BE HAPPIER and then there are times when you just want to CHOKE SOMEONE OUT.

Like right now.
Minato: Plot like your life depends on it (because it does).

**Minato: Be the other half of the hand-holding business.**

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Okay, maybe this particular transition didn’t work so well. You probably need to be somewhen else.

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There are times when you COULDN’T BE HAPPIER and then there are times when you just want to CHOKE SOMEONE OUT.

Like right now.

Unless someone is coming in to announce the end of the world *right now*, I don’t really want to hear it.

Normally, paperwork is soothing—there’s a reason that Sarutobi-sama commissioned an official stamp for the office—and easier to sort with Shadow Clones than it would be otherwise. I tend to get headaches after leaving the office for the day, no matter how late or how early it is, but at least I know that the majority of that is due to feedback from the clones dispersing and not because I hate my job enough to grind my teeth at work.

But today, not so much. It’s been months, but the full autopsy results from the “Zetsu” organism are finally back. And I need to create a plan for every shinobi in Konoha to deal with them. The sheer volume of the main sample, along with the particular way I first presented the initial corpse to Sarutobi-sama—which involved dumping a corpse scroll out on his office floor in a fit of frustration—had something to do with the delay. Pulling the merged “Zetsu” beast apart had taken quite a while on its own, too, even if the blasted thing didn’t rot and had to be carved into pieces with bone saws.

Not that I’m admitting anything.

I *should* be using my fancy official pen to sign off on more of the endless reams of paperwork that clutter my office on bad days, but today is a slow day and I’m busy trying to balance it on my upper lip. If the Hokage’s chair spun, I’d probably be spinning around until I get dizzy.
Today isn’t really a day for concentrating, and it gets back to the Zetsu thing I mentioned before.

I close my eyes and can almost feel the words marching across the insides of my eyelids.

Subject: “Zetsu”/“Guruguru”

Species: Genetically human

Gender: Unknown

Acquisition Details: Acquired July 7—

What am I going to do?

From what Kei’s shown me and what Obito and Rin have said, each Zetsu is capable of moderate to powerful Wood Release techniques that don’t appear on the autopsy report. They don’t have bones or organs, they can be smashed into a putty-like substance but get up again later if they know the attack is coming, they can mimic chakra signatures of people they attack, and they apparently operate in massive groups. I don’t know for sure if the Zetsu army of the future exists now, but there’s a possibility that they are.

If so, no one is entirely safe. I need to talk to the barrier team and get them to arrange for underground scans or a double work rotation for the next two weeks. Or train more people.

I lean back in my chair, looking up at the ceiling, and put my feet on the table.

Plotting, counter-plotting, counter-counter plotting…

I sigh.

I have plans in place to deal with Madara if he makes an attempt on the Nine-Tails, even if I don’t know exactly what he’ll do. If Kei’s visions stayed accurate, I would be trying to out-think both Madara and a version of Obito with uncanny skill in space-time ninjutsu. But with the events changing, I expect something else entirely—maybe a Zetsu attack, given what I know about them and how it felt to fight them. There’s also no way for Madara to know that Kushina’s seal will be weaker, unless Obito told him and hasn’t informed me yet.

Somehow, I thought that I’d be doing less campaign planning once the war ended.

Not the first time I’ve been wrong, but it’s still difficult.

There’s a knock at my office door. “Hokage-sama?”

I snatch the pen off my face and sit up straight before I call, “Yes?”

“The Council has arrived.”

Fucking perfect.

I deliberately do not sigh again, because they’d be able to hear me, and hear myself say, “Send them in.”

My secretary—Sora Hayabusa, special jōnin but probably still sore over the beating my then-future Hokage Guards gave her team—is the one to open the door.

I grab the report on the Zetsu entities and tuck it into a filing cabinet before the door opens. This
particular flock of vultures will receive the information through official channels, not by stealing my paperwork. I’m sure Danzō will find out whatever he needs to know through his spies, but I don’t have to make things too easy for him. The cabinets in the office have heavy-duty security seals that can take the fingers off of anyone who doesn’t have the key—a function that’s mostly occurred at night, when the office itself should have been sealed.

He probably wouldn’t take me seriously if I did. Not that he does now…

I sit patiently behind my desk as the Council file in. While thinking of candidates to replace each of them with people more inclined to think like me—in the grand tradition of politicians everywhere—I paste on a smile and try to stay very still.

It’s difficult to channel natural energy on the move or while enraged, which is more or less the way I think I’ll be by the end of the meeting.

Homura Mitokado, Koharu Utatane, and Danzō Shimura. Two of them are Sarutobi-sama’s former genin teammates, and the last is a childhood friend, and I can definitely see why he trusted them on the Konoha Council. It’s just that I don’t, for reasons that I can’t explain in public or even outside of a secure location, and I probably never will.

Danzō is to the left, Koharu to the right, and Homura in the middle.

“Hokage-sama,” Homura speaks first, apparently elected spokesman for this meeting. “You have prepared for our meeting?”

I incline my head to acknowledge his role. Though it’s hard to have avoided prepping for dealing with the Konoha Council—there are entirely too many years of experience behind them for me to underestimate their guile. “To the meeting room, then.”

Inside the Konoha administration center, there are several secure meeting rooms that I’ve personally improved to the point that their seals are almost as dangerous as the ones in my office, my house, or on Kei’s house. If the seals are active, nothing gets in or out without demolishing the entire building to get through the anchor points for the seals.

Sarutobi-sama preferred the Blue Room, which is fairly sedate as meeting rooms go, unless someone has a deep phobia of blue government carpeting.

I prefer the Red Room, mostly because I dislike the Hokage’s chair in the Blue Room (due to a certain broken spring) and haven’t managed to get someone to replace it yet. And besides that, I’m not Sarutobi and I don’t think I should give the Council too much ground to think that my will is just an extension of his. Sarutobi had his own goals—and mine have changed in the months since I took office.

I may be nearly young enough to be their collective grandson or nearly so, but it won’t benefit anyone if they don’t respect me.

Well, it might benefit Danzō. But I would make him regret it.

“I see you’re settling in well, Hokage-sama.” Koharu says, surveying the room carefully for any kind of untoward seals, surveillance methods, or maybe even cameras.

Like I’d leave them in plain sight.

“I am,” I allow, finally choosing the chair I want to use and settling into it. The others follow suit—one advisor to each couch. At least they can’t whisper to each other. It’d be beneath them. “So.
What’s on the agenda for today?”

Homura sits back, clasping his hands in front of him. “It’s about the jinchūriki.”

My eyes narrow. “Which one, Mitokado-san? Killer B of Kumogakure? Han and Rōshi from Iwagakure? Anyone else I’m forgetting?”

“I meant your student, Namikaze-sama.” Homura corrects me, without sounding too hostile. I could have been facing down the full force of his arrogance if I pushed it.

“What about Keisuke, Mitokado-san?” I ask instead.

“What are you planning to do while Kushina-san gives birth? Two active jinchūriki with weak seals will be more than this village can take.” Homura explains. “You should—”

“I’m not taking suggestions on this matter, Mitokado-san.” I interrupt. “The issue is already being taken care of.”

“You weren’t going to inform us?” Koharu asks, already-narrow eyes turning into near-invisible slits.

“No.” I reply evenly. “I have my own plans in place. Keeping Keisuke away from Kushina is just a precaution, but I have more efficient ways of doing so than would be feasible for ANBU or the Military Police.” I pause for effect. “However, my method is most effective when as few people know about it as possible. So while I thank you for your concern, it’s unnecessary.”

And…now I’m going to have to explain that part to her. I make a mental note to do so as soon as I can before focusing on the conversation again.

“Furthermore, I’m expecting your backing when it comes time to backing the Barrier Team.” I continue without allowing anyone to respond. “I expect them to pull double or triple shifts until the thirteenth to ensure that nothing gets close to interfering with Konoha. Councilman Shimura…”

About two hours of rapid-fire negotiations that oughtn’t have been quite so tedious, I head back to my office alone. I cross the room and sit back down in my chair, retrieve my pen, and commence the very serious responsibilities of my role.

I lean back in my chair, put my feet on the desk, and look up at the ceiling in thought. Then, I say, “Kei, report.”

Kei drops from her vantage point in the ceiling, landing in a crouch in front of my desk. She glances at me, curious, before standing up and to attention. “Sensei.”

“Did you get everything?” I ask.

“Yes.” She reaches into one of her weapon pouches and retrieves a black video cassette—or half of one, given that the attachment for actually viewing the tape wasn’t a part of the recording process. “I’ve also managed to confirm times and dates with the ANBU liaison, as requested.”

“Good.” I take the tape and tuck it into my desk. A little tighter, and my net would close around Danzō.

Working against a conspiracy within one’s own village requires more subtlety than most people can manage. I needed data to make any kind of accusation, or to force him and ROOT to back off
completely via blackmail and strong-arming. I don’t have that kind of clout, yet, but I was finding very suspicious gaps in ANBU mission records that were starting to make a very incriminating picture.

Missions into Iwagakure’s territory, reaching back years before I was born. Intelligence reports that were uncannily thin, even given that we had agents in nearly every shinobi village (and they did in ours). ANBU-run border incursions around Amegakure and Kusagakure that didn’t look sanctioned by any Hokage’s seal.

I just need a little more time to confirm what I know.

“…Also, why do I need to stay away from Kushina when Naruto is born?” Kei asks, presumably after watching me balance a pen on my nose for a while.

“There’s a chance that being anywhere near Kushina will mean that the Nine-Tails’s seal destabilizes faster than normal. I’m just not willing to risk it.” I admit, staring up at the ceiling. Then I sit up, sighing. “I’m sorry, Kei. I know you wanted to—”

“To be there when Naruto’s born? Actually, Sensei, I think that’s something I can miss.” Kei says wryly. She scratches the back of her head, just below the knot in her hitai-ate. “I mean, I look forward to meeting Naruto-chan when he’s finally here, but I’ll just have to live with not seeing the actual screaming birth part.”

“Oh, really?” I ask, amused.

“Yeah.” Kei shrugs. “But hey, you can tell me all about how Kushina breaks your hand after it’s over.”

“How generous of you.” I give a brief huff of a laugh, then focus properly. “You haven’t asked where I’m going to put you.”

“I figured you’d know, and I’d find out on the big day, like I do with all of my missions nowadays.” Kei replies, smiling somewhat sheepishly. “Not that it’s a slight against you, Sensei, but…”

“A Hokage guard must always be prepared for the silly whims of their employer.” I chide gently.

Kei sighs. “So, where are you sticking me?”

I drum my fingers on my desk, eying her carefully. I watch as Kei starts to lose her nerve a bit under my persistent stare—need to work on that, for intimidation purposes. “How does ‘Mount Myōboku’ sound?”

“…You’re serious?” Kei’s voice is almost totally flat barring the barely-audible questioning tone, and her face is slack with surprise.

“Yes.” I respond.

Kei rallies after a heartbeat, mind obviously working double-time in the face of this new information. “Tell me what’s going on and I’ll have more of an idea of what to say.”

“Doesn’t that count?” I ask.

“No! I need to actually know what I’m talking about to have an opinion and it doesn’t count at all.” Kei argues, distractedly. “You sent Jiraiya-sama off to Ame, which means you’re planning on sending me to Mount Myōboku with one of your toads? If you do, I can’t get back to Konoha on my
own and if something happens here and you can’t summon me back, then it’ll take *months* to get back here if I get a guide.” Kei’s voice picks up speed again, impossibly. “But if Jiraiya-sama recruited Tsunade-sama like he said he would, then maybe there’s a few more options, here… And anyway, how likely is it that even Madara can get to the summon countries with any level of reliability? He doesn’t have a contract except with the Nine-Tails, I think.”

Is this what goes on in her head *all the time*? I feel, suddenly, like I should have made certain that she had her head examined for cracks sometime before promoting her. And then the feeling passes, because Kei is Kei. This girl would have had tremendous potential for evil if she’d been born in the wrong place at the wrong time, or maybe if she’d just decided to go all Orochimaru. She’s mine. And Obito’s and Kakashi’s and her mother’s and her brother’s. It’s worked out.

“Slow down, Kei. You’re veering off into speculation.” I remind her, and she looks back at me with a sort of startled surprise.

“But—” Kei shuts her mouth with a *click* of teeth when I shake my head.

“I can tell you that Jiraiya-sensei and Tsunade-hime are off on a specific mission to Amegakure. I expected them back yesterday, for better or for worse, but I haven’t seen them yet.” I rest my chin on the heel of my hand. “I’ll be honest here, Tsunade-hime’s cooperation is a big part of my plan mostly because of the trouble we could face without powerful summon contracts. Anything—*anyone*—who comes back from Ame will just be helping add layers to my plans.”

Kei gives me a shrewd look. “You’re planning on keeping me out of the village during the critical time, but I’m not the only one, am I? You’re going to scatter us.”

And once again I’m glad Kei is *my* student and not someone else’s. Kei’s brain would be terrifying in other hands.

“It just makes sense.” Kei goes on, quietly. “On top of being a Tailed Beast Host, I have Madara’s seal in me. I can’t be trusted completely.” She smiles grimly. “Isn’t that right, Sensei?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” I admit unhappily. I hold my hands up helplessly. “I can’t know for *certain*, when it comes to you *or* Obito. I’m sorry, Kei.”

“Don’t be.” Kei’s smile is downright crooked. “I’m not sorry for getting caught, not in hindsight. So I guess this is just something I’ll have to live with, you know?”

“Sometimes, I wished I shared your optimism.” I laugh, quietly. “If everything goes according to plan, you’ll only have to spend one night in a place where there’s only bugs for dinner.”

Kei makes a face. “Seriously, Sensei?” she groans.

I laugh outright.

“I bet Obito’s going to get someplace *cushy*, too.” Kei mutters, rubbing her forehead. “Ugh. I mean, I love the toads, but *ugh*.”

“It’ll work out, Kei.” I say, standing up and walking around my desk to her. I put my hand on her shoulder and squeeze reassuringly, and hope she can feel it even through the flak jacket’s thick padding. “We’ll be fine.”

“You have *no idea* how much I hope that’ll be true.” Kei mumbles. She sighs and straightens up, meeting my eyes. “What do you need me to do, Sensei?”
“I’d like you to leave Tsuruya here, in Konoha, on that night.” I tell her seriously. As Kei nods again, confirming that she understands the order even if she doesn’t understand the purpose behind it, I add, “Genma and Raido are going to be in the village, and so is Kakashi. I’m hoping that he can act as your replacement if I need something or someone teleported elsewhere, understood? But if the situation changes, I will need Tsuruya to reverse-summon you back to Konoha for backup.”

“I can scarcely imagine the kind of situation that would call me back if you’re still upright and breathing, Sensei.” Kei replies skeptically. “I’m pretty sure you can take most idiots on with one hand tied behind your back and blindfolded.”

“Maybe.” I allow. “But just in case.”

“All right.” Kei nods firmly, mostly to herself. “All right. So, uh, I think that Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama are back in the village. Even if they haven’t headed over here straight away.”

My eyebrows rise. Hm.

“Can you go get them, Kei? Or get someone else to do it?” I ask, amused again at her sudden return to scatterbrained normalcy.

“Sure, Sensei.”

With that, Kei heads out the office window, because of course she does.

…One more off the list, I guess.

I go back to my paperwork with less enthusiasm than normal. There has to be something more I can do…

It’s about then that I feel a new chakra signature approach and—judging by the sudden raised voices outside of my office—get into a fight with my “secretary.” Fifteen seconds later, said chakra signature stomps up the stairs and approaches my door.

It is kicked open, because of course it is.

“Minato, why didn’t you tell me Jiraiya-sama and Tsunade-sama were back?!” Kushina yells.

Yep. That’s Kushina all right. For all that she complains about not being able to see her own feet nowadays, she can still browbeat any special jōnin in the village into submission.

I put my pen down. “I actually didn’t know they were in the village until just now. Did you see them?”

“In fact, I did—but if they were out drinking and not seeing you and you didn’t know, I guess I can cut you some slack.” Kushina huffs. “But who’s that young man with them?”

…I think?

“I already sent Kei to go get them,” I say instead of letting my confusion show, “but could you describe their friend to me?”

“Hm? Oh, he’s about my height.” Kushina began, successfully distracted from her ire, “He hid his face when I ran by—I guess he’s shy?—but he had… red… hair. Wait a minute.”

Kushina and I exchange looks of startled understanding. There had been a redhead in Kei’s visions.
Kushina's cousin.

…While I don’t think that most people—if there are even enough people involved for there to be a “most” category—who’ve seen or heard about Kei’s visions have been the type to admit weakness, I don’t mind saying that her bizarre ability to dream the future is the single most disturbing skill I’ve ever heard of. Not because of the prophetic part—the Great Toad Sage can pull off something similar—but because of the sheer amount of detail that went into the version I saw. Kei remembers fighting styles, battlefield tactics, major political plots, and interpersonal interactions with the kind of clarity I’d have expected from someone eavesdropping on every relevant conversation, which is impossible. Even the Third Hokage, with his crystal ball, didn’t have nearly the degree of inborn insight into the events he saw—for one, he was just a mortal man with mortal reasoning.

Whatever gave Kei visions? Not human. Probably not bound to this reality either—there were implications, like a vibe or a feeling—because I didn’t get the impression that the visions treated us as people. Point A led to Point B with no consideration for what the people involved actually wanted out of the situation. Or respect for what they could do.

No, whatever was behind the visions thought of us all as puppets. And unless we found a way to break the mold, then I couldn’t even say we were proving it wrong.

If that thing could see the future and mock us all for it as easily as a person could turn to the last page of a book and see the ending written right in front of them, then we’d have to change the middle to change anything at all. And maybe find a way to keep it from influencing Kei any more than it had.

Kushina’s cousin could—might?—be a part of the first full step to changing our “future” entirely.

“Kushina, please don’t run back out there.” I interrupt before she can do just that, catching her arm.

Maybe she remembers those sleepless nights spent thinking about that power as well as I do, because she doesn’t just push me away. “You’re not supposed to be using chakra right now.”

“You never let me have any fun.” Kushina grumbles, before sticking her tongue out at me to show that she doesn’t mean it. We’re okay. “So, how long until they get here?”

“A few minutes at most. Jiraiya-sensei can be timely when he wants to be.” I reassure her.

Now all we have to do is wait.

In the back of my mind, I kind of knew that when Tsunade and Jiraiya came back, things would be kicking up a notch one way or another. Maybe someone (Jiraiya) would get punted through a building (by Tsunade) or there would be a solar eclipse. It was hard to say what would happen when the Sannin—well, two of them—were in town. And not because someone had died.

I tracked the two Sannin—who weren’t even bothering to hide their chakra signatures—to a soba stand somewhere in the market district. I slowed down as I approached, hopping down from a nearby set of rooftops, and made sure my own chakra was about as nonthreatening as I could manage without slipping sideways into full suppression. Jōnin could be paranoid about being approached by people they didn’t know, and I figured the Sannin retained that instinct even if neither of them were really jōnin anymore.

Since they were sitting with their backs to the street, and had even allowed someone else to sit with them, I might have been considered overly paranoid myself. Or just prone to overthinking things.

I still made it a point to identify myself long before I would be considered intruding on their space, though. “Jiraiya-sama?”
Jiraiya turned around on his stool, still holding his bowl of noodles in one hand and chopsticks in the other. He smiled as I approached and said, “Well, if it isn’t little Kei-kun. All grown up and promoted now?”

“Just recently, Jiraiya-sama.” I said, nodding. I snuck a glance at Tsunade and the redhead sitting between them. “Your mission was successful?”

Jiraiya’s grin widened. “If it was a wild goose chase to start, it was the best one I’ve ever been on. Tsunade-hime, don’t you agree?” This last was addressed to the other Sannin at the bench, who was nursing a whole bottle of sake in addition to her bowl of soba for whatever reason.

The red-haired young man sitting between them was starting to get rather nervous.

I approached him first, because apparently my survival instinct was at a ninety-degree angle from everyone else’s. A young man with red hair, dressed in foreign shinobi clothes with a black robe on top? My curiosity wouldn’t let me go forward without confirming my suspicions.

“Cram it, Jiraiya.” Tsunade grumbled. When she lifted her head off the counter, it was only to pour out another measure of sake into a cup and then down it in one shot.

She had a hangover? And was attempting the good old “hair of the dog” trick. Oi.

“You’ve heard of Nagato-kun before, right?” Jiraiya went on, as though the threat of being punched into the stratosphere didn’t faze him anymore. It was certainly a possibility with Tsunade around. “Hey, you can introduce yourself properly.”

I bowed, though it was unnecessary. “Ah, Nagato-san, Tsunade-sama? Keisuke Gekkō, bodyguard to the Fourth Hokage.”

“And his student.” Jiraiya said before anyone else could. He put his noodles back down and waved a hand vaguely. “Kakashi and Obito are around somewhere in Konoha, I think.”

“Well, you already know who I am. Jiraiya-sensei must have talked about me, I suppose?” Nagato sounded a little hopeful, actually. Rather than meeting my eye directly, which would have made sense because he was a fair bit taller than I was, he sort of looked up at me from behind his long bangs and under his slashed Ame hitai-ate. Regardless, I got a good look at those grey-violet eyes, and all of the concentric rings around his pupil that reminded me of Isobu’s single eye. Without the deterioration caused by using the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path, he was actually fairly cute in a boyish sort of way, even though I knew he had to be about Sensei’s age. “It’s nice to meet you, Gekkō-san.”

…I hadn’t really expected the only living person with the Rinnegan to be so, well, shy. I managed a nervous sort of half-smile, myself. “You don’t need to be so formal, Nagato-san. Everyone around here calls me Kei-kun or something. If you used my family name like that, I’d have to stop myself from looking around for my brother every time.”

“Very well, Kei-san.” Nagato nodded slowly, committing it to memory. I probably should have told him that it wasn’t so important, but I didn’t.

“What brings you here anyway, Kei-kun?” Jiraiya asked.

“Well, Sensei wanted to know what was taking you so long.” I scratched my cheek, idly. I was still freaking nervous about everything at the moment. I mean, all three of the people at this soba stand could flatten Konoha if they really wanted to, and that kind of fact wasn’t the kind that was easily dismissed. “He and I could both sense you in the village, so we knew you were okay, but you’re
kind of supposed to report in before you go off and get lunch most of the time.”

Jiraiya laughed. “You just wrapped up what he actually said in diplomacy, didn’t you? I remember the first message he gave me about Tsunade-hime.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I said blankly.

“Jiraiya-sensei, if the Hokage is the one asking…” Nagato trailed off.

“Stop being a bad example for Nagato-kun.” Tsunade growled from her corner, making everyone a little nervous.

Jiraiya muttered something I didn’t catch—but Nagato did, judging by the way his pasty face suddenly flushed—before saying, “Fine, fine. You coming or what, Tsunade-hime?”

“Just let me finish this.” And apparently Naruto’s speed-eating technique with noodles was hereditary or something, because Tsunade downed the bowl of noodles in front of her and the sake in an instant.

By the time I looked back at Jiraiya, turning away from the Uzumaki clan’s inherited appetite, his and Nagato’s bowls were also empty.

Suddenly, I was glad that I wasn’t a clan shinobi. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to see these kinds of bizarre quirks every single day.

(Jiraiya didn’t count. As the “Naruto” of his team, a massive appetite just seemed to be something he had picked up.)

Tsunade and Nagato went on a bit ahead of us, but Jiraiya hung back to talk to me as we walked toward the administration center.

“So, what happened in Konoha while I was gone?” Jiraiya asked, curious.

“Well, you already know that I got promoted.” I said, shrugging. “So did Obito, though he’s in the Military Police now.”

“No kidding? I never thought that boy would be interested in that kind of thing.” Jiraiya mused, “He always struck me as a bit of a glory-hog. Pushing through to full jōnin in the main corps would have made more sense.”

“Just because jōnin are the public faces of the village doesn’t always mean that everyone wants to be one.” I pointed out. “Obito said he wanted to make a lasting impact...but I don’t think there’s anything that says he has to remain a career officer if he doesn’t want to.”

“I can’t see that boy retiring.”

“Well, neither can I. It was just a thought.” I steered the conversation back toward Nagato with a quiet, “Nagato-san... Is he related to Kushina-san somehow?”

Jiraiya shrugged. “It’s hard to say. Not all redheads are Uzumaki clan members, you know.”

I raised one eyebrow.

“But I do know that Tsunade-hime likes him, which is a point in his favor.” Jiraiya sighed. “But it sure didn’t seem like she did, back in the day.”
I didn’t have to ask to know that Jiraiya was thinking about the first time he’d met the trio that canon called the Ame Orphans. I mean, the start of their story had been sad—a tiny gang of children, living in a war-torn country on the losing side of the Second Shinobi World War—but it didn’t have to end the way that the Plot seemed to want them to go. With Nagato here and obviously still capable of walking, things seems to have gone better for them this time around. Maybe Yahiko and Konan had even gotten around to working through their unresolved sexual tension.

“Are Yahiko-san and Konan-san okay?” I asked anyway.

“They were the last time I saw them. Up to their necks in toads and slugs, but they were fine otherwise.” Jiraiya patted my shoulder. “You worry too much, Kei-kun.”

I pursed my lips and said nothing.

Was I a chronic worrywart? Yes. Did it have a purpose? Generally. Were there benefits? Also yes. Since I was going to keep biting my nails over everything until I died of a stress-induced heart attack anyway, then I decided to just deal with it.

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Sometime after Kushina gives gigantic bear-hugs to both of her not-quite-long-lost cousins and two more to Kei and Jiraiya for helping bring them back, and after we all have a chance to settle down a bit, I activate the security seals in my office. While I’m sure everyone from Konoha to Kumogakure could hear the shouts of joy coming from the room, I certainly wasn’t going to let anyone else hear the details. Some things are just for family (and not just the blood kind).

“Two more Uzumaki clan members!” Kushina repeats, beside herself with joy. “Two! Minato, I never thought I’d see Tsunade-sama again, never mind finding another cousin!”

“I think we’re a little more distantly related than that, Kushina-san.” Nagato says, still hesitant to call Kushina family. I can’t be completely sure if it’s because she’s my wife, her exuberant personality, or the fact that she’s the only person in this room who really remembers what it is to be an Uzumaki. And the only one who’s been to Uzushio.

Tsunade is Konoha through and through. Aside from her grandmother, she grew up in the arms of the Senju clan.

“If she says you’re family, you are.” Tsunade replies. “She’s the current head of the clan.”

“Huh?” Kei says, looking blank.

“My grandmother married the First Hokage, but she kept her family name while allowing all of her children to be fully Senju. I’m the head of the Senju clan,” Tsunade explains, with the faintest trace of bitterness in her voice, “because I’m only Uzumaki by blood. Kushina-chan is both.”

Kushina’s smile is a little sad. “But now I’m not just clan head by default. I do have a clan!”

“How does that work when you’re married to Namikaze-sama, Kushina-san?” Nagato asks.

“Same way it did with my grandmother,” Tsunade says. “Or so I assume. You two are going to be married, right?”

“We already are.” Kushina says, annoyed by the perceived threat in Tsunade’s tone. “But there was just never time for a real party! Once Naruto is born, then we’ll have the biggest bash this village has ever seen!”
“Is everyone invited?” Kei asks, sounding amused and yet still glancing sidelong at Nagato. I can just imagine what Danzō would have to say about him, and most of it involves kekkei genkai and the acquisition thereof “for the sake of the village.”

“Everyone we care about.” Kushina says firmly. She tilts her head, scrutinizing Nagato to the point that he starts to shrink in on himself a bit. “You’re too old to be my baby cousin, Nagato-kun, but you’re family and I definitely want to have some way of acknowledging you formally… How about you try being my honorary brother?”

“I would be honored, Kushina-san, but—” Nagato begins, hesitant.

“But nothing! You’re my little brother now and that’s final!” Kushina claps her hands gleefully. “Oh, I can finally update the clan records. And with two names!”

“I didn’t say anything about joining up, Kushina-chan.” Tsunade puts in.

“Well, no, but Naruto-chan is coming along sooner or later and he’s going to be next!” Kushina grins. “Hear that, Nagato? You’re going to be an uncle!”

Nagato, to be perfectly honest, looks like he’s gotten whiplash from Kushina’s boundless energy. I had a chance to acclimate to Kushina’s enthusiasm over the course of our entire childhood, but Nagato’s getting a full broadside all at once.

“I-Isn’t it a little fast? To go from clansman to brother and then uncle all in one day?” Nagato sounds more uncertain about the whole idea of being an Uzumaki by the second.

Kei pats Nagato’s arm sympathetically. “You get used to it, Nagato-san.”

“I… All right. I’ll try.” Nagato stands up a little straighter, blinks twice, and then focuses his attention on me. “Hokage-sama, why did you send Jiraiya-sensei and Tsunade-sama to Amegakure?”

“He didn’t tell you?” I glance at Jiraiya, who shrugs. “I suppose it would be difficult to explain…” I glance at the ceiling, and in particular at the note that says “Your answers aren’t up here.” “The short version? I need someone to help me keep my wife—your new sister—safe from Konoha’s enemies during the remainder of her pregnancy.”

“And you thought of me?” Nagato asks blankly.

“No. Actually, I thought of Jiraiya-sensei and Tsunade-sama.” I explain, keeping Kei in my peripheral vision. She doesn’t seem like she wants to bolt just yet, so I must be doing something right. “But a few months ago, your name came up while we were discussing something else, and it struck me that making certain you and your friends were alive would kill about five birds with a single stone.

“One, Jiraiya-sensei obviously missed you and wanted a chance to reconnect, so I gave him an official reason to go.” I go on, though normally explaining my plots is anathema to me. It seems important to let this man know, though, when he has no other reason to trust Konoha. Particularly me. “It was also on the way to recruit Tsunade-sama, who I needed to see returning to Konoha for different reasons. The two of them, plus you and your friends, would be able to draw Salamander Hanzō into a battle he couldn’t win and force him to call on an ally.” The room is quiet. “That ally, Danzō Shimura, has been a thorn in my side since before I became Hokage, even if I didn’t realize it. Did you kill all of his agents, Jiraiya-sensei?”

“Most.” Jiraiya corrects. “The ones that survived the fight wouldn’t—or couldn’t—give up information during interrogation. The survivors are for Konan-chan to deal with, now.”
Meaning that the agents sent had not been carrying any prominent clan markers. If they had, any burgeoning rebellion like Akatsuki could easily have ransomed them back to their village of origin or used them to implicate said village in any number of illicit activities. No clan markers meant deniability for the village.

“Danzō runs a covert operation that supposedly works for the good of Konoha, but is also known for being ruthless to the point of abject stupidity among certain circles.” I sweep my hand around the room, indicating the number of people “in the know” quite well. “ROOT wanted Akatsuki destroyed for its own reasons, not just Hanzō’s. I sent Jiraiya-sama and Tsunade-sama partially because I hoped we would find more evidence to nail them to the figurative wall, but that hasn’t happened yet.

“For the next reason, I personally hate the idea that Kushina is the only known Uzumaki left in the Elemental Countries.” I say, allowing some of my old anger to leech into my voice. “War tears apart far too many families, in every nation.”

“And then there’s mine.” Kei pipes up, arms crossed over her chest nervously. “Which is kind of petty in comparison to everything Sensei said, I think.”

“Kei-san?” Nagato looks more and more confused by the second.

“You seemed like a good person.” Kei says, shrugging but failing to make it seem casual. “I mean, even after everything that happened to you because of Konoha or because of the constant civil war in Ame, you still agreed to come and see us. And, as more selfish aside, I really didn’t want to get the only Rinnegan user in the entire world mad at us somehow.”

“…What.” Ah, yes, the standard response to Kei’s more off-the-wall thought processes. Good to know it doesn’t just affect her friends.

“Kei has prophetic dreams,” I tell Nagato, who still looks like someone hit him over the head with a club. “Kei was dead-certain that not reinforcing Akatsuki against Hanzō would lead, sooner or later, to a new world war.”

“And, well, a single Rinnegan-user in a snit can flatten a Hidden Village.” Kei mutters, knuckles whitening against her arms. “But I don’t know if you’ve found out how to do that yet.”

“No, I…” Nagato shakes his head. “I’m sorry. Let me see if I have this straight. You’re saying that you sent two of the Sannin to Amegakure, to save my friends and me, because one of your students claims he can see the future?”

“Yes and no. The real reason? Because of all the factors mentioned before, I approved the idea when it came up.” I continue in absolute seriousness, “The only thing Kei gave us was a name to work from. The rest was up to us. And can you really say it hasn’t worked out so far?”

“…No.” Nagato sighs. “So, let me sum up what’s happened in about an hour—the new Amegakure is now allied with Konohagakure, I have a new sister and a brother-in-law and a nephew on the way, Jiraiya-sensei is back in my life and I’ve found out that someone can see the future.”

“Add in a bit about paperwork to make it all official.” I put in, smiling.

Nagato puts his hand over his eyes. “I think I need to lie down…”

“No problem, little brother! Tsunade-sama and I also need to bring you up to speed on what it means to be an Uzumaki clan member…” And Kushina escorts the two out of my office entirely, leaving Jiraiya, Kei and I as its only occupants.
“That went better than I thought it would.” Kei admits as soon as the office door slams shut.

“You probably thought Nagato would kill me or something.” Jiraiya says, “Don’t you have any faith in me?”

“I’m not sure if the most important part is a lack of faith in you, Jiraiya-sama, or an appreciation for how Danzō’s plots tend to go.” Kei replies, sighing and forcing herself to relax. “I half-expected Yahiko-san to already be dead before you ever got to Ame. The best case scenario in that case would be if Nagato-san didn’t kill you and Tsunade-sama. Because if he trains, he’ll definitely be capable of it someday.”

“Someday isn’t now, Kei.” I pick up my pen again and return to reviewing the latest paperwork to cross my desk. “Do you really think he’ll be able to help fight whoever comes after Kushina?”

“I think so.” Kei glances at the ceiling. “Nagato has access to all of the Six Paths abilities without using the corpse puppetry part, but the only one he really needs to use is the jutsu called Almighty Push. Most people, even if they’re Mangekyō Sharingan users, don’t really know how to counter someone who can beat them to death with gravity itself.”

“Is that the jutsu that his future counterpart used on Konoha?” I ask, more curious than concerned. While I don’t doubt that the version of Nagato Kei was actually used to had been a monster in combat, I also don’t think that this version of Nagato is much of a threat. Not because of a lack of potential, but more because of a lack of interest or malice.

“Among others.” Kei frowns thoughtfully. “The Paths of Pain had pretty sharply-delineated powers. The Animal Path was a summoning master, the Human Path could rip souls out of people’s bodies to absorb their knowledge, the Deva Path could manage the Almighty Push every five seconds, the Asura Path was like a Cursed Seal transformation, the Preta Path could absorb chakra, and the Naraka Path could revive any of the others.” She pauses. “Though there’s the possibility that Nagato hasn’t actually figured out how to do any of that yet. The Rinnegan gives him too many other abilities to play with.”

“I have to ask, how do you keep all of this straight in your head?” Jiraiya asks, concerned.

“I’ve had certain information burned into my brain thanks to the dream-vision-things.” Kei huffs. “But somehow I can’t always remember what day of the week it is…”

…I’m actually pretty sure that Kei is drastically overestimating Nagato. While he does have the Rinnegan, the fact that Jiraiya and Tsunade did have to rescue him and his friends from a ROOT/Ame ambush implies that he’s actually still learning what he can do. It’s not uncommon with young-but-talented shinobi to run into that problem if they don’t have proper teachers to help them discover the full extent of their powers. The teachers don’t have to be human—which was how Jiraiya managed to become a Sage—but people with potential need to have some kind of guidance.

“Are you certain that Nagato-san knows all of this?” I ask, half-curious and half just wondering if Kei realizes the implications of her own information.

“…Huh?” Guess not. Kei visibly thinks the question over, chewing on the inside of her cheek. “Well…I guess I’m not. If Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama prevented Yahiko-san from being killed and Nagato-san from being crippled…” A figurative lightbulb goes on, “It mitigates the original trauma that turned Nagato into Pain. And, while I’m not sure that the Rinnegan follows the same rules as the Sharingan, I think that might keep Nagato from realizing how much power he could achieve. Sort of like Obito, right?”
“You tell me,” I prompt rather than answering directly.

“I don’t know.” Kei seems rather worried by this thought. “My best guess is that Nagato-san is still very strong, and has immense potential, but might not be able to use it fast enough. It’s the sixth today, isn’t it?”

Jiraiya shrugs. Of course he wouldn’t know.

I nod.

Kei sighs again, deflating entirely. She brings a hand to her face and pinches the bridge of her nose as though to stave off a headache. “Well, then I have no idea what’s going to happen.”

“Now you know how I feel.” Jiraiya-sensei says. “Minato, does this count as a setback?”

Well, not exactly. There are enough contingencies in place, Nagato or no Nagato, to give most people a run for their money even if a rogue Uchiha is involved. It’s just that Kei doesn’t know about most of them. And, for the same reason that I can’t have her or Obito anywhere near Kushina at the critical moment, I won’t be able to tell her before the plan is in motion.

“No, I think we’ll be able to work through this. I hadn’t planned on Nagato being here, to be honest, so his presence doesn’t affect much one way or another.” I spin my pen in my fingers. “Kei, you can take a break. Jiraiya-sensei and I need to discuss a few things.”

“All right, Sensei.” Kei leaves without any further fanfare, which is more than I could say for the Uzumaki clan’s collective exit.

Well, something has to be quiet today.

“Are you still willing to take over for a day?” I ask Jiraiya, who leans against the office wall with his arms crossed.

“I am. Just don’t get any ideas.” Jiraiya replies. He says with some exasperation, “There was a reason I didn’t want to take the hat years ago, Minato.”


“It’s not just about that, Minato!” Jiraiya blusters. “My spy network, the paperwork…” He pauses. “You’re doing that thing again where you act like your head’s full of sawdust. Stop it.”

“All right, Sensei.” I say dryly. I shake my head again, pushing the sarcasm aside. “Well. Between you and Sarutobi-sama, we should have something like leadership in place while I’m gone.”

“Just make sure to come back. Fukasaku-sama and Shima-sama both want you to introduce Naruto to them properly, even if he can’t get a summon contract until later. They can’t do it if you’re dead.” Jiraiya warns me, half-seriously.

I frown slightly. “If it’s me or the village…”

“You know better than that, Minato.” Jiraiya interrupts. “With the number of safeties you have in place, it’s going to be you and the village. And probably everyone else, too.”

All right, all right. Fine.

“In that case, could you help me look over this seal one last time?” I ask, scooting back from my
desk and reaching into a sealed drawer for a design I’d worked with and tested with Kushina’s expertise. “If this is our last resort…”

Seal in hand, Jiraiya studies it for what feels like a long time. It’s probably not more than a minute in reality. “No, the Dead Demon Consuming Seal is your last resort. This is something better.”

I exhale slowly, feeling relief flood my brain. Thank the merciful higher powers.

We have a chance. Even if I don’t know everything heading our way, we have a chance.
October tenth dawned bright and early, seeming pretty much like any other autumn day we’d had that year. Ergo, sunny and warm if you ignored the vague suggestions of chill in the shade. Living in the Land of Fire meant warm autumns and mild winters, and warm springs, too. It was just the summer that sucked.

I wasn't actually on duty on the tenth, and was instead called up for a meeting at the same time that my mother had just been about to ask me to pick Hayate up from the Academy. Call it a gut instinct or something.

"Kei-san, the Hokage wants to see you now." Raidō said—and why the hell was he the one running messages if he was supposed to be on duty all day?

I looked between Raidō, who was peeking through the front window while upside-down, and my mother, who was washing dishes and looking back over her shoulder with an expression that was mild even while her annoyance bled into the room in the form of killing intent. I did a quick mental inventory check, confirming that all of my relevant scrolls and assorted weaponry was indeed stored safely on my person and not within snatching (and throwing) distance of my mother.

I heard Raidō swallow hard.

"Run?" I suggested out of the corner of my mouth.

He shook his head minutely, because he was apparently profoundly stupid.

"Mom, sorry, I've got to go to work!" I said quickly. "You know how it is."

Mom sighed and the murderous vibes in the room died down. "I understand, Kei-chan. Are you going to be home for dinner?"

"...Eh, probably not. Sorry!"

I threw myself out the window shortly thereafter.

Somehow, things were easier in Sensei's office. Even though there were eight of us crammed into the space and hardly any room for the egos involved, anything was better than being the sole target of my mother's wrath. Even though we were preparing for what could possibly amount to a doomsday scenario for the village, I almost didn't feel the pressure.

Nagato, Sensei, Kushina, Tsunade, and Jiraiya were all in on the plan, and I at least had the bare bones of what would be my role in it. And Kakashi and Obito were about to join us.
That did require us to explain who Nagato was, though.

"Who's the new guy? Is he some kind of secret weapon?" Obito asked me in a rather loud whisper. He even leaned over to speak directly into my ear, which of course meant that everyone within about ten feet could hear him.

"Are you talking about me?" Nagato looked over at us, head tilted curiously.

"He is." I said, pushing Obito away with my elbow.

Nagato bowed a little, though Obito certainly hadn't done anything to deserve that kind of respect. Judging by the way that Obito's visible eyebrow crept toward his hairline, he either agreed or had just noticed how bright Nagato's red hair was. It was a bit of a toss-up.

"Uh…" Obito mumbled, looking at Sensei as though waiting for the blond to toss him a lifeline.

"Who are you?" Kakashi asked blandly. Like he didn't know. "Konoha records don't list anyone other than Sensei as Jiraiya's student, at least in Konoha. Mostly because the rest of them are dead."

Sensei and Jiraiya winced a little.

Kushina reached over and thumped Nagato's shoulder. "Well, then it's a good thing that Nagato is from Amegakure instead, isn't it?"

"Not Amegakure, exactly…" Nagato shrugged, even as Kushina slung her arm over his shoulders. "But close enough. Nagato Uzumaki, of Akatsuki. I…I think we might have taken over Amegakure, after what happened with Hanzō."

"Nagato's only been an Uzumaki for like three days, so go easy on him!" Kushina added, grinning.

Kakashi gave Nagato a very slow once-over. From the top of his Uzumaki-red hair to his Akatsuki cloak to his sandals. I think he stopped to take a second look at Nagato's Rinnegan, just for the sheer WTF-factor involved in seeing one of those ever, but otherwise Kakashi didn't really do or say much for a good thirteen seconds. Then, "Why were we called here?"

Sensei leaned forward on his desk, his hands folded in front of his mouth as though he'd suddenly decided to become a James Bond villain. His bangs drooped over his eyes, so I could see about a third of his face aside from his jawline, which didn't necessarily tell me anything. But his chakra? Sensei was playing for keeps. Whatever he was going to say was deadly serious.

Everyone in the room not named Tsunade immediately straightened up a bit, even if we weren't really thinking about it. And in Tsunade's case, she had to be the cool one. I think. But even her chakra buzzed in agitation.

"Kakashi, you will take Kei's place on the Hokage Guard Platoon and stick by Kushina tonight."

"I do," Kakashi said, nodding.

"Wait, why's he taking Kei's place?" Obito asked blankly.

Sensei ignored the question. "Kei, you're going to Mount Myōboku with Fukasaku-sama as soon as the sun sets. The Great Toad Sage has a viewing crystal that's stronger than the one Sarutobi-sama
used, and he can help you keep an eye on what's going on in the village."

"Right, Sensei. I'll leave Tsuruya here in case I need to be reverse-summoned back." I bowed my head.

"Jiraiya-sensei…" Sensei began, only to be waved off.

"The Third and I will stay here to coordinate the village's efforts. And you, Tsunade-hime?" Jiraiya glanced sidelong at his teammate and crossed his arms.

"I'll be taking Kushina-chan, Minato-kun, and whatever guards he feels like including to Shikkotsu Forest." Tsunade's eyes narrowed. "But I hope you don't expect me to be the midwife."

"No, Biwako-sama agreed to fill in." Sensei replied, sitting up straighter so he could look at all of us. "And what about your apprentice, Shizune?"

"She'll be stationed at Konoha General in case something happens." Tsunade looked pensively out the window. "I don't want her involved in this."

Obito set his jaw. "So what am I gonna do?"

"I'd like you to stay in one of my safe-houses." Sensei told him, glancing at Jiraiya. "If we could leave a toad with him…"

"It'd be better just to have Obito-kun stay with the toads, to be honest." Jiraiya advised. "I know you're worried about Madara's seal, but he'd be safer further away from Konoha."

Sensei seemed to bite the inside of his cheek in thought.

"Wait, all of this is about Madara's seal? I mean, I can't help that unless you can give me a new heart and pull out the old one with the seal on it and I don't think that'll work." Obito babbled, "But Sensei, I want to—I'm on shift tonight and everything! I won't let Madara anywhere near Kushina-san."

"You and what army, kid?" Tsunade demanded. "He might be an old man as you remember him, but he apparently fought my grandfather and lived to harass a new generation. Do you think he'd slow down at all just because a one-eyed Uchiha boy gets in his way?"

"I'm stronger now than I was!" Obito argued.

"But not strong enough." Nagato said very quietly.

Everyone looked at him.

"I'm sorry, Obito-kun. But I don't think we can afford to take any risks at all, here." Nagato continued in his boyish voice. "If there's even a chance that the Nine-Tails—"

"—and his name is Kurama—" Kushina interrupted bluntly.

"—Kurama could escape and be used to kill people…” Nagato shrugged helplessly.

Obito, by that point, was staring a hole in the carpet. Not that I blamed him—despite having provided the information that led to Obito and me being excluded from the proceedings, I had at least known that I wouldn't be allowed within a hundred meters of Kushina while she was in labor. For more than one reason, even!
"I'm in the same boat." I said, clasping Obito's shoulder. "At least you'll be coming with me?"

"Yeah, I guess. You already knew about this, huh?" Obito mumbled, sighing.

I said sheepishly, "Kinda had to, given that this security upgrade was half my idea…"

"It's about the thing with the alternate me." Obito crossed his arms, staring off into the middle distance in thought. Then he nodded, as though coming to a decision of his own. "Right, then. Kakashi?"

"What?" Kakashi glanced over, looking as bored as ever.

Obito walked right up to our teammate and planted his hands on Kakashi's shoulders. Our sole ANBU teammate started feeling a little worried, or at least bewildered.

"Kakashi, I expect you to guard Kushina-san with everything short of your life, because it'd be a pain in the ass to train up another teammate," Obito grinned. "Got it? Come back alive or I'll track you down in the afterlife just to yell at you!"

I wondered if Kakashi knew exactly what conversation that Obito was referencing. Or how significant it had been.

Kakashi scoffed. "I'll be fine, so you can save your breath."

"Well, good." Obito spun Kakashi around and pounded him on the back with an open palm—with his Zetsu arm, which sent Kakashi stumbling. "Make sure to keep that promise!"

"Is your team always so dramatic?" Nagato asked me in a whisper.

"It could be worse." I replied at the same volume. "If we weren't in for some actual trouble, the boys would be punching each other by now."

Nagato gave me a funny look.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing. Jiraiya-sensei, Hokage-sama, when are we going to the summon territories?" Nagato asked instead of answering my question.

"As soon as Biwako-sama gets here, we can go." Sensei replied. "But Kei, Obito? You can leave now, if you want."

"That might be best for me." I suggested, "Mom knows I have some things to take care of. As long as someone tells her I'm on a training mission or something, then it should be fine. Otherwise, she'll be ready to bite my head off when I come back."

"And we can't have that, now can we?" Jiraiya quipped, amused.

"I wouldn't try to get on her bad side on purpose, Jiraiya-sensei." Sensei said dryly. "It's not exactly the safest pastime."

"You're talking to a man who peeped on Tsunade-sama." Kushina said with a grin. "Danger is probably his best friend."

I waved my hands to try and cut some of the extraneous chatter. It helped relieve stress, sure, but the fact remained that we didn't have that much time. Time, as ever, was the chief enemy. (Well, aside
from Madara. And the Plot. And maybe the requisite legion of Zetsu clones.) It would be better to get all of the fun stuff out of the way and get down to the serious things immediately. Then, once we were done with all of the Plot bullshit, we could have a super-late baby shower for Kushina and welcome Naruto into the world. I was sure that my family would love to attend.

I refused to consider the possibility that none of us would see each other alive again. That went for everyone, from Hayate and Mom to Gai and the other classmates I barely got to know in the Academy. We would make this work, dammit!

Jiraiya concentrated his chakra into his left hand, then bit his thumb. With a poof of smoke, one of the Sage toads—the purple-and-yellow Shima—appeared in the palm of his hand.

"Hello, everyone!" Shima said, waving. "So, how many children am I taking home with me?"

"Two, Shima-sama." Sensei told her. "Obito, Kei…"

"It's all right, Sensei. See you in a few hours." I tried to be reassuring, but somehow it seemed to come out flatter and duller than I had intended. I decided that I'd really been putting things off for long enough. "Just let me set Tsuruya up in here."

While I worked on getting a giant crane into a relatively small office, Obito tried to assuage everyone's fears, too. He really did. "We'll be fine, everyone! We'll be back and the village will be safe and sound in like twelve hours or something!"

Tsuruya was very quiet after being summoned, eying everyone carefully before sitting down on the floor to preen her long steel-edged feathers. She could read the atmosphere of a room better than most, it seemed, and was making use of that skill.

Sensei's smile was still strained, even with all the cards falling into place. "Be safe, you two."

Obito and I nodded.

Then we reached out and grasped Shima's offered hands.

And poof: we were gone.

The general rule of thumb, at least when it comes to the topic of teenagers and boredom and bored teenagers, is to avoid said situation and adolescents at all costs. Humans, when deprived of stimulus, tend to go insane if left in such a state for too long. The sheer existential terror of being entirely alone in the world does a number on one's psyche, even if the situation in question is a padded room and not a post-apocalyptic setting. While the exact timing for the onset of trauma would probably vary by individual, I could take a look at my prospects with a critical eye and conclude that face-gnawing madness was imminent if I didn't have something to do in the next five minutes.

But instead of following up on the latest of my inactivity-fueled impulses—which were born of idleness without purpose and not solitary confinement—I rolled over onto my belly, stretched like a cat, and clambered back to my feet to go find something to do.

Basically, I was bored as fuck and not gonna take it anymore.

I know that guarding takes a certain kind of mindset—the kind that can essentially stand still and stare at nothing for hours on end without losing all higher brain function—but I had turned that part of my identity off for a few hours. What, exactly, I would have been able to use said impulses on while at Mount Myōboku, I couldn't tell you. Half of the named residents (because not all tadpoles
got names until later) could literally eat me if they so chose. Therefore, saying that I doubted my skills would be of use was a massive understatement.

Mount Myōboku, with its overgrown plant life and colossal amphibian population and giant goddamn bugs, was nothing like Konoha. I liked the waterfalls that streamed downward from what seemed like every open cliff face, and that the air was cooler and somehow much more humid than Konoha at this time of year, but I couldn't help but look up at the setting sun and wonder what the hell time it was back in the Land of Fire.

I was pretty sure that the ninja world wouldn't know what time zones were and wouldn't bother to assign them if they did know, but it was weird to realize that I had no idea when the party would start back where the Plot happened.

The sky had looked a little too blue for morning, which gave maybe half a clue. Damned if I knew what to do with it, because the toads didn't have timepieces that weren't sundials and I had only an inkling of when shit was going to go down in Konoha. Even after wasting what must have been a few hours napping in the shade of a giant three-leafed clover, I couldn't say for sure how much time was left for certain. Bloody mountains.

Wandering aimlessly, as I rarely got to do at home anymore, I eventually found a small clearing that was unusual not because of the Alice in Wonderland-like size of the flora and fauna, but because it seemed entirely normal.

Well, if you ignored the Uchiha in an MP uniform dangling from one tree's branches.

"Hey! Are you bored yet, Kei?" was Obito's greeting. The Uchiha butt-cape thing was flopping over in response to gravity, meaning that it made him look a bit like he had a tiny and very sad superhero cape dangling off his shoulders. Like, Supergirl-sized. But blue, and with triangle patterns.

As I watched, he walked around the branch until he was upright, sat down on the branch with a faint huff, and crossed his arms over his chest. "'Cause man am I bored."

"You've been bored since we got here." I quipped half-heartedly. I just wasn't feeling it.

Mount Myōboku was great and safe and populated by giant friendly amphibians, but it wasn't home.

Home was probably going to be on fire in a few hours.

Watching the sun set from Mount Myōboku's slopes was some bizarre cross between seeing sand slip down through an hourglass and feeling like steel bands were being tightened around my chest one micrometer at a time.

"We haven't done much lately. I...I don't know, normally I'm on patrol right now and I don't know what to do with myself." Obito admitted after a long, shared silence. The fact that I'd decided to sleep through the afternoon in preparation for a possible midnight battle had left him without too many options to amuse himself. "Want to try sparring?"

"Not especially. What if we get called up?" I asked. And that was the crux of my anxiety, right there. If something happened in Konoha, I needed to be ready to rush to the village's defense. I needed to be rested, stable, and prepared for anything except crippling boredom. Because if there was any word that could be used to describe Naruto's grand entrance, "sedate" was not it.

Obito kicked his legs, restless. "That won't happen until at least, oh, ten or something. Right? Not like the toads keep time, but..."
"I don't know. I just know the sun has to be down and the moon is up. And that was just one version of things." I had to shrug. Not knowing would be the death of me, someday.

"Well, then will you please spar with me?" Obito whined. His voice actually rose by an octave and about ten decibels.

"...Do you do this while on patrol?" I asked blandly.

"No. But I'm not on patrol, am I?" He grinned.

I was unmoved. "Well, no. But I'm still not feeling it."

"Come on, Kei!" Obito implored with absolutely no dignity. It was, on reflection, occasionally difficult to remember that he was supposed to be a member of a law enforcement agency. At all."

"I would probably prefer playing poker, and I don't even know half of the rules." I muttered under my breath.

"What's poker?" Obito asked. He said it like "pokaa," which mostly reminded me that I was supposed to stop using random English words.

"Future stuff." I lied.

"I don't know if I believe you." Obito said flatly.

I stuck my tongue out at him, just a little. "All right, just give me a second—"

"Yay!" Obito celebrated, somewhat prematurely.

"—to get something out of my storage scrolls. I have a game we can try."

Obito groaned theatrically.

"Shut up." I said. I still pulled my largest storage scroll out of its back-mounted holster anyway and unrolled it, searching for the appropriate seal. My scrolls weren't enchanted or anything, so I couldn't just pick any random seal and hope that I would get what I wanted. The first eight seals were all camping gear; not exactly the most relevant of objects.

On the twelfth seal in the scroll, I found what I was looking for. The thirteenth was also good, so I activated both seals simultaneously and, with a pop and a puff of smoke, I had my materials.

The twelfth seal contained a field sewing kit, complete with an array of dully gray steel needles, and the thirteenth seal had disgorged a pair of bento boxes.

"You packed dinner?" Obito asked, surprised. "I thought you left before you got to have breakfast."

"I did. This is actually stuff from yesterday. Luckily, storage scrolls are better than refrigerators as long as you don't set them on fire." I handed him one of the lacquered wooden boxes. "Salmon and rice and umeboshi, if you're wondering."

"Awesome!" Obito produced a pair of chopsticks using Wood Release (which drew a raised eyebrow from me because, well, what). "But what's the sewing kit for?"

"You'll see." I replied, and opened it.

Technically speaking, every member of Konoha's military was supposed to carry their own uniform
repair kit while out in the field. If there was some kind of gear failure in our travels, we were expected to be able to patch what we had and make it home sometime before the legs fell off our pants. It was as much an image thing as anything—kinda hard to be taken seriously as an elite military force when your clothes were falling apart on your body.

That said, most of the teams I knew of tended to just stuff the tiny field kit into a medical supply bundle or something, where they would never see the light of day again. I had sealed mine away almost as soon as Mom had taught me how to pull off a pad stitch. That way, the set stayed sanitary for the times when I wasn't caught up in the middle of a fight and could use an easily-sanitized method for poking myself in the thumb and getting blood for Tsuruya's summoning. Outside of the occasions when someone was trying to make me eat my own elbow, biting myself for the blood sacrifice seemed kind of dumb.

I pulled out a packet of dark blue thread and started trying to eyeball it for length—I needed maybe half a meter.

The noise coming from Obito sounded a lot like "omnomnom." I didn't look over to see what progress he was making. Instead, I took the pair of tiny fabric shears from my sewing set and cut the amount of thread that I needed.

"Cat's cradle? Really, Kei?" Obito eventually said in an incredulous tone, once he caught on to what I was doing. "That's for kids."

"Again, shut up." I said, tying the necessary knots.

"Are you sure you want to spar?"

"Yes." I finished my knots and started tangling my fingers in the loose string. Did I even remember how to do this?

I managed to complete two solo rounds after one failed attempt to rely on muscle memory, mostly while Obito was still eating. Then I set the string aside so I could eat my own dinner, no matter how cold it was.

I didn't get to do much other than just eat my dinner, though. Just as I was about to go back to the game and see if I couldn't outsmart myself (out of a sense of abject boredom colored by I am not wasting chakra before it's showtime) there was a noise like a firecracker. Obito and I both jumped at the sound.

A red toad with blue accents around its face, about the size of a small dog, looked up at us and said, "The Great Toad Sage invites both of you to watch his viewing crystal with him."

Obito and I exchanged a look that spoke volumes. Volumes of what, I didn't know.

"Sure thing," he said for the both of us. "Just let us pack up, please."

Packing up was as simple as sealing everything away again, so it didn't take all that long. Then I re-rolled my scroll into its proper shape, tucked it back into its holster, and stood up to leave.

"What's your name, anyway?" Obito asked the toad, even as it was hopping away from us.

"Kōsuke," the toad replied. "Now, come on!"

…Was it just me, or did something smell like popcorn?
"All operatives are in place, Hokage-sama."

Almost against my will, I feel my spine straighten in response to that voice. Every recruit quickly learns that if an ANBU captain says jump—particularly one of the senior Assassination, Security, or Medical officers—then one had better already be in the air.

"Thank you, Badger," the Hokage replies to the ANBU captain's report. The Hokage is looking out of his office window, pensively watching the sun set.

I'm in the ceiling as usual, waiting to be called upon. If Falcon doesn't get the assignment first. He's older. He might.

"Badger, you and your team should focus on the Uchiha district if possible," the Hokage says mildly, like it's not the ironclad order that everyone knows it is. "We have reason to believe that the Uchiha clan may be targeted directly if the first phase of our plan is successful. Reduce casualties at all costs. Do whatever you feel is necessary."

I feel a chill run down my spine.

*Do whatever you feel is necessary.* No one ever got that order outside of ANBU, not when missions could quickly turn into desperate last stands or complete failures. Even with ANBU, the Hokage almost never gave the direct order to break mission protocol—stealth and security included—to accomplish an objective. It was anathema to ANBU itself.

Konoha shinobi may have appreciated initiative in the field, but there was initiative and then there was *this.*

I watch Badger freeze up at the same time.

"Understood, Hokage-sama." Badger says slowly, her voice steady despite the shock she has to be feeling.

As Badger walks out of the room after a stiff bow, the Hokage looks up and sighs.

"I wish I never had to give that order," he says, mostly to himself. Mumbling now, he continues, "Sarutobi-sama will be here within the hour. Jiraiya-sensei should be finishing preparations now. Kushina's already where she needs to be…" Another sigh. "All right. As soon as Sarutobi-sama gets here, we're leaving."

"Understood, Hokage-sama," says Falcon, who shimmers back into sight from behind his habitual camouflage genjutsu. His black katana bounces against the flowerpot in the corner of the room, making a *tink* sound and chipping the pottery, and I come up with new insults for him in my head. For being my senior in the Assassination specialty, he has his *moments.* "Should I gather the others?"

"Just Shiranui. Pull him off whatever the mission roster runners think he ought to be doing. The others should be positioned around the village already," the Hokage replies, glancing at the clock on the wall.

Falcon nods and vanishes a moment later.

"Kakashi, you've been very quiet since this morning," the Hokage comments after a while.

"I haven't had much to say, Sensei." I reply, slipping down from the hollows in the ceiling. The Hokage looks back at me, nodding. "Are you ready for tonight?"
"I haven't been using much chakra." I say, dodging the question. "I should be combat-ready."

Whatever else the Hokage wants to say ends up being cut off, because he turns to face the door all of a sudden and his mouth shuts with a click of teeth. A moment later, there's a knock at the door, and I smell smoke as it opens.

"Sarutobi-sama," the Hokage says, bowing his head slightly. "Thank you for agreeing to this."

"I can afford to give up one night of retirement for the safety of the village, Minato-kun." The Third Hokage tells his successor candidly. "Jiraiya should be here soon."

The Hokage relaxes somewhat. "Good. Then it's almost time."

"Yes."

It's been "almost time" for about forty-eight hours at this point.

I glance out the window—the sun is finally slipping past the outer wall and leaving Konoha proper in deep shadow—and mentally add another few hours. I have no idea how long it takes for Falcon to find Shiranui when he's supposedly patrolling the walls like usual, but I can't help but feel that it's too long. Regardless of the actual time involved.

"Minato-kun, it may be best that you join Kushina-chan now. I think that Tsunade left one of Katsuyu's clones in the foyer." The Third Hokage says to the Fourth, but gently and without any sign of rebuke.

At about that moment, a black-gloved hand knocks at the window.

The Hokage snaps his fingers and the window flares orange and I can see the chakra in its defensive seals as brightly as the sun even with my normal eye. It's hardly the most subtle security seal in the world, but it doesn't have to be. It just has to violently mutilate anyone who tries to break in through the window.

Then he opens the window, finally, and both the ANBU-uniformed Falcon and Genma Shiranui slip through and into the office.

"Set up, please. We need at least one last trial run," the Hokage says, nodding at Falcon and at Genma. "Aim for the house."

Genma, Falcon, and I get into formation around the Hokage, forming a triangle around him. And then we link hands, synchronize our chakra and—

—and then we're suddenly standing in front of the Hokage's house. All the range of the original Flying Thunder God Jutsu and about half the chakra expenditure with twice the complexity. Solely because he couldn't be bothered rewriting the seals for anyone else to use.

The three-person version, for one, was damn near impossible to aim. At least, without someone in the middle. It could only be used when we were supposed to be transporting someone. Including the one person in the entire world who didn't need it.

There was a dog-sized frog—-toad?—sitting on the Hokage's front step, looking up at us with something that could have been amphibian impatience in its expression. There was a blue-backed white slug, probably about the same size, sitting about halfway up the wall from it. It twisted its… head…to look at us.
"Are you finally leaving, Minato-sama?" it asked.

"Yes." The Hokage turns back to us. "Remember, if Kushina says jump—"

"We should already be in the air, yes." I say bluntly.

Falcon nudges me for backtalk, which I ignore.

"Good. Let's go." With that, the Hokage offers me his hand, which I take. Genma and Falcon put their hands on my shoulders, and the Hokage's other arm lifts the slug from the wall.

And then we're gone again, only this time it feels more like being put in a jam jar and shaken vigorously.

Somewhat predictably, we're greeted by a woman's voice. Less predictably, the person "welcoming" us to the Shikkotsu Forest is not a slug or another ANBU member. Instead, it's the sound of a woman screaming her head off while also…um.

"MINATO IF YOU ARE NOT HERE RIGHT THIS FUCKING SECOND I AM GOING TO KILL YOU! YOU PUT THIS BABY IN ME AND YOU HAD BETTER BE HERE TO HELP ME KEEP THE FURBALL IN WHILE I PUSH OUR KID OUT!"

…Yep, definitely Kushina. I can almost hear the demonic chakra and voice overlaying her own. Everyone cringes at once, myself included, because there is something spine-chilling about both the chakra in the air and the particular tones in Kushina's screaming.

Oh, and the anger. There is plenty of that, too. Enough to make most guys flinch in reflexive sympathy for whoever or whatever had earned Kushina's wrath, because Kushina was the kind of person who could threaten bodily harm (in many different ways) just by being angry in the same five-kilometer radius as her target.

The Hokage—now completely in the role of Minato Namikaze, expectant father—turns white with something between outright panic and nervous excitement writ large over his face. In between one blink and the next, he winks out of existence with another fwish of displaced air and leaves the three of us to stand around in the Shikkotsu Forest like idiots.

I take in the scenery for a moment.

The Shikkotsu Forest is the sort of place with a disturbingly apt name. Sort of like Mount Myōboku, the area was dominated by gigantic versions of ordinary foliage and wildlife. Every single tree in the area was the about the size of the trees in the Forest of Death, but about half again as high as far as I could tell. The land slopes up and off into the distance in a way that implies we are running around on the side of a mountain, but I had never seen a mountain large enough for these trees to look totally normal in comparison. And, further contrasting the Shikkotsu Forest trees from anything in Konoha is their color.

Every single tree trunk is dead, bone white.

I approached one of them, more curious about the new location than intimidated. The thing that worries me is the faint, distant sound of something moving through the trees. And it's a lot bigger than any summon or other monster I've ever heard before—it sounds like a distant landslide.

At that moment, the tree trunk at two o'clock ripples like water and another black-clad ANBU operative materializes out of an otherwise-unseen hollow in the tree, with a blue-striped white slug slung over his shoulders like a slimy shawl.
Genma steps forward, hands at his sides instead of raising one as a greeting. "I'm assuming you saw the Hokage?"

The ANBU operative nodded. He looked at me, though. "'No one travels along this way but I'—"

"—'This autumn evening'." I say without thinking about it.

The other ANBU—Otter—nods his approval before fading back out and into the depths of the hollowed-out tree.

"Pass-phrases?" Genma asks.

I take it as a rhetorical question from his expression and move on without comment. He grumbles something as Falcon and I lead the way through the forest. More accurately, I lead—mostly because I can follow the slime-trails the slugs are using and because I can smell blood, Kushina, and Sensei from a kilometer away regardless of camouflage genjutsu or other tricks.

I don't want to think about some of the crazy enemies we're going to be facing could be capable of, if I can tell that there's something wrong with the security methodology out here.

Genma and Falcon move to shadow me, as I launch into a run and head straight up into the understory of the bone-white trees. As much as the idea of shuffling through the forest in silence appeals, we don't have time for acting like gawping tourists.

We have places to be.

It's around dinner now! After really late dinner, actually, since Mom said it doesn't matter when I go to bed on weekends as long as I eat something before the sun goes down. I mean, I forgot, but everyone does! That's probably okay. I'll still get to bed all right, thought Kei keeps saying that I shouldn't have candy after nine.

Not sure why, really? I mean, I've heard of the thing Kei calls a sugar rush and she doesn't really care but I guess Mom might?

…Anyway!

I'm Hayate. I'm ten years old and live in Konoha with my mom and my sister, Keisuke. Everyone calls her Kei, though. I like playing ninja with my friends, and practicing ninjutsu with my sister, and sparring with my family! I like dango and I think that the best food ever is probably rice candy but no one I know agrees with me.

Enough about me, though!

I had sōmen noodles since Mom decided we didn't need to cook with Kei in mind and there's a lot of the dressing food stuff still on the table. It's too hot to eat the noodles in hot soup so I got to eat as much as I wanted without having to drink all the other stuff! It's weird to think that Kei doesn't like them! Or at least not the shrimp…

"Hayate, have you finished your homework?" Mom asks, looking up from where she's repairing one of Kei's sparring shirts, on the couch. It's white, like most of the training gi we own, and I guess Kei must have snagged it on a branch and then forgot about it since she's not exactly been keeping up with her kenjutsu as far as I've seen. Usually, Mom has her fix her own stuff. Or turn it into the supply depot.
"Uh, yeah! Sure!" I…plan on doing it! Eventually. Just, um, not while I'm still trying to design my super-cool ninjutsu that I'm gonna invent as soon as I can. I hide the colored pencil sketches under my arm.

"Hayate."

"Mom, it's Saturday! Can I please just do it tomorrow?" Kei might be back from her super-secret mission by then and then maybe she'll be able to show me how to walk up trees! I know some genin who can do that but they can't walk on water, so if I can do one then I should be fine.

"If you put it off, you aren't going to do it. Didn't Junko-sensei ask for a page of writing about the difference between ninjutsu and genjutsu?" Mom asks. Ugh. Why do parents talk to teachers about homework anyway?

"Yyes. Yeah, she did." I admit, reluctantly. "But it's boring and I can't see when I'll need it ever!"

"Hayate." Mom sighs and I feel kind of lousy. Mom uses guilt like a club sometimes. "It's one page. I'll even help you as long as you get started on your own." She puts her sewing down. "Besides, it's probably time that I point out our family jutsu a little more."

"…So if I start my homework I get a cool jutsu?" I ask, sitting up.

"I think that would be a fair trade. I always meant to get you started with it…" Mom trails off, but I'm already on my way to the kitchen for paper!

This is going to be so cool!

Mom hasn't moved except to resume sewing again. She lets me sit back down on the floor and put my homework on the table before really paying any attention.

"Mom, I'm ready!" I say, maybe a little louder than I have to.

"I see that." She had better not be laughing at me! Half the kids in my class have family jutsu of some kind, and since I'm not allowed to use kenjutsu on other students during spars, I need something!

"Hm. Can you feel your chakra?"

Well, duh. It's not like Kei hasn't been working with me on ninja tricks, or that I haven't been learning kenjutsu practically since I could walk. I know more about chakra and how it feels than anyone except clan kids, and they're cheating anyway. I can walk on water, you know! (For a little bit, anyway.)

"I definitely can." I say with confidence. "Better than some of the other kids, too!"

Mom nods to herself. "I can see that. Hayate, this technique is called Blade Reading. But it has nothing to do with swords." Mom leans forward. "It is an ability that lets you focus your chakra so you can sense others."

"…Chakra sensing? Right now, I can only feel mine. And even then only when I think about it." I reply, frowning a bit. "Am I supposed to be able to feel anyone else's?"

"No. Sensing chakra is something that people have to be taught to do." Mom goes on, "Try focusing your chakra near your heart. I know your sister has already showed you how to channel chakra
toward your feet—"

"Yeah, and I could walk on water!" While she was with me anyway.

"Hayate."

Oh, right.

Focusing my chakra near my heart is easy, because I've done this before and I know what I'm doing! It's nice to be able to prove that I know how to do something and maybe even more when it's something other kids can't do. I close my eyes because it's easier to do it that way though.

"Now... gently release it from your tenketsu. Starting from the one over your heart. Then let it spread outward, slowly. Like you're watching steam flow from a hot cup."

How do I... oh! I get it. I have my chakra all balled up in my chest like a fist, but it doesn't have to be really tied up and I let go of a little bit, sort of pushing outward? It's really hard to describe. It feels like letting off steam. But not in the way that means I'm mad about something.

And even with my eyes shut, I know mom is there, which I kinda already knew? Of course Mom's there. But I can tell that she just started on her sewing again and she does that too quietly to hear. I can tell how big she is and how she's moving her fingers to work and that is really weird.

"This technique was devised by samurai, who don't use hand seals." Mom explains. "It's easiest to use at close range, which is where most kenjutsu specialists fight, and with practice it helps predict your opponent's movements."

"Okay." I say, still not opening my eyes. I wonder, can I reach out any more with my chakra? It's... it's not really attached to me anymore like it used to be but...

Around Mom's left hand, my chakra suddenly shifts a little. I get a better impression of her right hand.

"Learning to look already?" Mom says, sounding like she's smiling.

"Yeah!"

That might've been it, for a while. Since I totally knew what I was doing and I had a handle on things and all that cool stuff.

But then there was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it!" I say, shooting up from my spot on the floor before Mom could stop me. Hey, maybe I could use my new chakra-thingy on whoever was there!

I swing the door open and... stop.

Because while the face is right, and the clothes and maybe the height and stuff, the person at the door?

That is not my sister.

Chapter End Notes
So, that's part of the setup for this arc. 
There are now two more fanart links on my profile, for anyone who wants to look! 
Many thanks to Mikotsuki and Owls-of-Starlight! 
(Also, there is now a TVTropes page. Anyone can edit it as needed. Have fun!)
Commencement Arc: In the Web

Chapter Summary

Everyone: Panic.

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Minato

What might be an hour in real time, for perhaps anyone outside of that hidden room, feels like eternity to me and everyone in it.

"Room" is the wrong word, really. Proving that Tsunade's sealing genius hadn't just been derived from her own designs, Katsuyu had crafted a sealing chamber through some kind of slime that solidified into rock and many tiny slug-trails that leave acidic pockmarks in the walls and ceilings. The result is a nearly-white cavern that has such powerful anti-space-time security seals that I wouldn't be able to get in and out without her say-so. Nothing gets in and nothing ever gets out.

Maybe once, I would have been impressed by that. I'd had the ANBU move into the room and the perimeter outside it, though there was no way we were getting out unless Tsunade gives the all-clear. As it is, with Tsunade in the corner of the room, meditating to keep herself calm, with Biwako acting as lead midwife and the current, viper-masked lieutenant of the ANBU medical corps assisting… well, the only thing I had to worry about was the Nine-Tails.

I can also say with absolute certainty the impression of eternity isn't just because I'm the one clamping down on Kushina's seal with my chakra, feeling it drain from my reserves like water through a sieve, even though that part is strenuous at best. It isn't even the persistent smell of blood and sweat, or the steady stream of chatter coming from Biwako-sama as she talks Kushina through the worst of it. It isn't the constant burn of the Nine-Tails's chakra under my hands, trying to force its way out and into the world like some kind of monstrous parody of my son's impending birth.

It's really…well, all of these things at once.

And yet time drags, because there's nothing for me to do but hold the seal in place until Kushina successfully pushes our child out.

And the whole time, unless trying to breathe, she's screaming. And crying, and swearing up and
down that all kinds of things had gone wrong in my family tree. Everywhere.

I have to laugh at the one about baby elephants, though. Naruto, it seems, is not going to come quietly.

From what Kei said, nothing about him is going to be quiet.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

"DAMMIT, IT HURTS!" Kushina shrieks.

Though maybe he could hurry it up a little…

"I can see the head now!" Biwako says, from underneath the shroud. "Kushina-san, push!"

Under my hands, the Fox's chakra rears up and nearly forms a facsimile of its own disproportionate head, orange and glowing and trying to take my fingers off. I pour more chakra into Kushina's seal, reinforcing her strength with mine.

Kushina screams again. I want to put my hand in hers, to let her know it's going to be all right and that it's almost over. But I kind of need my hands, so I settle for leaning a little to the side so that my arm brushes hers as best I can manage. "Just a little longer, Kushina-chan. Please. You're almost there."

"I know that, you jerk." Kushina says between pants. Then she screws up her face and I feel her entire chakra system jolt, sending a nasty shock up through my wrists where the Fox's insubstantial fangs are trying to dig in—I'm going to need those later!—and there's a sensation like…like…

It feels like my ears just popped. Only not really. What the hell?

And then I can finally hear something dripping onto the floor, and the ANBU medic's sudden triumphant shout rings loud in the sudden silence. I feel my shoulders sag in sheer relief, just as the Fox finally quiets down and Kushina goes limp like a puppet with cut strings. As it is, I lean on Kushina's shoulder a bit and try to massage feeling back into my hands—too much chakra for too long. Pins and needles everywhere, even as Kushina reaches up to hold my wrist. It's…it's over.

Mostly.

There's a bit of a minor commotion as the medics clean up. Maybe the placenta was taken care of. My brain's too full of fuzz to spare much thought for the practical aspects of childbirth other than the part I'd been dealing with. Which was hardly standard practice.

"Congratulations, Hokage-sama." Biwako says as she swaddles the tiny, bloody form I can barely see past Kushina's raised knees. "It's a boy."

"Gimme." Kushina says, hauling herself halfway upright with a sudden burst of strength, wincing all the way and using me as a handhold.

Can't say I blame her at all. I loop my right arm around her back so she doesn't have to try as hard, and Biwako deposits the squirming newborn in her arms.

He's tiny. Tiny and red, thanks to the recent pressure he's been facing, and maybe a bit of that has to do with blood. On top of his head, nearly invisible, is a dusting of faintly blond hairs. What might be
blond someday, anyway. And along each cheek, as clear as day, are three faint dark lines. Birthmarks, yes, but also the legacy of having a host of the Nine-Tails for a mother.

Kushina and I exchange an exhausted look. I'm...yes, okay, so maybe both of us are crying.

I bring my left hand up and trace the middlemost of our son's birthmarks, toward his mouth. He's so tiny I could hold him in both hands...

He latches on and immediately starts sucking.

"He's actually big for a newborn." Biwako says, to my unasked question. Or maybe I'd said it aloud and not noticed? "He might seem small, but he's...probably around fifty-three centimeters and four kilos."

"...Doesn't seem big." I ask, only half paying attention.

Kushina, though our son is still lying on her chest and supported by her right arm, reaches up and cuffs me with her left fist anyway.

"Ow!"

"You weren't carrying him for most of a year! I'm..." Kushina pauses, thinking of a suitable retort. I preemptively wince. "I can't think of anything right now." Her head drops back to my shoulder. "Too tired."

I kiss her sweat-soaked temple. "There's always later."

She pokes me this time. "Shut up. You have work to do, remember?"

I grimace, just a bit. Right. Giving Kushina and Naruto one kiss each, I step back and let the medics swoop in with intent to patch up Kushina's immense-but-now-flagging stamina. Her chakra levels are lower than anyone would like, and I can just eat a food pill to cover my losses. Kushina, though? Not after childbirth. Any internal bleeding might be amplified, and she hasn't had a proper checkup yet.

Tsunade eases her way out of her corner and makes her way over to me, deliberately casual. If not for the slug and toad she carries on opposite shoulders, I might've bought it.

"You don't need me here, do you?" Tsunade asks stiffly.

"No." I say, "But Kushina does. Can you stay here? I need to check in as soon as possible."

Tsunade gives me a long, narrow look. Then her gaze slowly drifts over to Kushina, who's tiredly chatting to the medics about how amazing her son is. (Not mine, of course—I might've accidentally disqualified myself for father privileges for a bit.Oops.)

She shrugs. "I can do that." She hands the green toad, who is about the size of a housecat, to me without any further comment.

I flash a quick thumbs up before Tsunade also drops the slug onto my shoulder, clearly washing her hands of dealing with me for the immediate future. Oh well. Can't please everyone all the time.

"Any messages?" I ask the toad. I'm pretty sure his name is Keroro, but am not really interested in guessing and turning out to be wrong.

"I'll check, Boss," says the presumed-Keroro. He un-summons himself in a puff of smoke, back to
"Do you have any requests, Minato-sama?" Katsuyu's tiny clone asks from my shoulder. "Tiny" is a relative term—she's still about the size of a large loaf of bread. Just small compared to the original, who I've never seen in the flesh.

"...Get Kakashi in here, then help heal Kushina." I say after a long pause, looking back to where Kushina has cheerfully offered to let Tsunade hold our son.

Tsunade might be afraid of blood, standoffish, and occasionally a hair shy of outright bitchy…but I'm pretty sure Kushina's got her choice for godparent picked out. I hide a tired, relieved smile behind my hand, even as Katsuyu poofs away to follow my suggestion.

We'll be okay, I think.

---

Kei

From a physics standpoint, the giant crystal ball that the Great Toad Sage used to spy on the rest of creation was a marvelous achievement even if it made no goddamned sense. I could vaguely remember something about subatomic particles and how they could be in two places at once, and maybe a little about how radio signals could fly through the air, but personally? I had no ideas how crystal balls worked aside from "it's magic, don't question it." And since I lived in a world of bullshit ninja magic, I probably would.

"What are we even looking at, Kei?" Obito asked in an undertone, leaning over toward me like we were two kids trying to whisper in the middle of class.

Except for the fact that we were in a giant reception hall, our only company was amphibian in nature, and I was pretty sure everyone besides us was somewhat hard of hearing.

Obito was standing next to me, peering up at the crystal ball on its gigantic cushion. On the seat of honor—an even bigger cushion, really—the Great Toad Sage sat looking down at us with eerily blank eyes and frankly he was creeping me out a bit. Shima, however, had her eyes on the ball and was mostly ignoring us, and I guessed that she was mostly interested in seeing whenever her husband popped up. Gerotora, the scroll toad, made a face at all of us because apparently he just didn't want us on this chunk of the planet.

"A crystal ball." I said blandly, after looking around at everyone. Again. Bored. So fucking bored.

...Okay, so that was a lie. I was too anxious to really be concerned with boredom, mostly because I was thinking ahead and tired and wanted to know if/when I would need to fight for the lives of everyone I cared about.

Gotta say, it was still less horrible than exam stress in my old life. I guess my scale of stress had needed to be re-pegged a couple of times since I was born again—while an exam was barely a blip now, it'd been all-consuming then.

And, well, knowing that I wasn't the only one responsible for this whole thing helped a bit.

I crossed my arms and bit the inside of my cheek. Fuck.

At that point, the Great Toad Sage lifted his huge webbed hand and placed it on top of the crystal ball with a sound that, at best, sounded...damp. Eh.
"Hey. Are you all right?" Obito asked, nudging me.

"No." I snapped. "I'm not." I caught myself, biting off a further sarcastic snarl. "Don't...don't talk to me right now. I can barely think."

"Okay."

Good old Obito.

The Great Toad Sage said, in his ponderously slow voice, "Show us...uh...Konohagakure."

After a moment or two, the crystal ball went from semitransparent white-blue and seemed to shudder in place. After a second, the glass turned bright blue, then dark blue, and then resolved itself into about fifty shades of bluish gray. Then pinpricks of light pierced the blue like needles through thread, which might have...yep, those are human-made lights.

If I squinted really hard, I could pick out the Hokage tower and its bizarre windows.

...and the gigantic bulk of Gamabunta sitting next to the aforementioned building, smoking his gigantic pipe.

Oh dear.

"Well, at least everything's quiet." Obito said under his breath.

"As far as you know." Gerotora snapped.

Shima, before the rest of us could respond, said, "Shut up and watch!"

"This is like hearing people blow up the comms with side-chatter." Obito muttered.

Oh for god's sake.

The popcorn hadn't been worth it.

Luckily, when the bickering started getting louder, I had been staring at the screen the whole time like an owl or something, trying to pick out minute details. And apparently, so had the Great Toad Sage. And I saw the thing in the bottommost section of the crystal ball's image, showing up stark white in the darkness.

"What was that?" the Great Toad sage rumbled gently, sitting up a little straighter even with his long legs still crossed.

The blood drained from my face.

"Kei?" Obito asked.

In a very small voice, behind my clasped hands, I said, "Shit."

"What was that thing?" Obito pressed, "Kei. You know what that was?"

Very carefully, one of the large webbed fingers of the Great Toad Sage's hand tapped the crystal ball. The image of Konoha flickered, reversed, and went back far enough that the white thing scooted across the screen backwards.

I saw a vaguely-defined set of chalk-white shoulders, and a head half-topped by mossy green hair
even if the image was otherwise dim to the point of seeming unhelpfully vague. But the look was very distinctive, and I knew it.

"A White Zetsu." I mumbled, shaking. "I fucking knew it. That wasn't the original, but it's definitely a White Zetsu and I called it and oh my god."

"Konoha's prepared for those guys, though. Right?" Obito asked.

"I..." I knew this, right? Sensei talked about barriers and sensors and...and...

"Kei?"

"Shit." Whatever I knew flew right out of my head. Fight or flight had been quite thoroughly triggered and I was not thinking clearly at all. I took a very, very deep breath and clamped down on my brain with my chakra sense, swearing even more internally than I was doing aloud. Shit. Okay. What did I remember? "Sensei ordered Jiraiya-sama and Sarutobi-sama to take over for him as temporary joint Hokages. He and Kushina-san are nowhere near the village, which keeps the likelihood of White Zetsu infiltration low. Barrier teams are supposedly running double shifts today and tomorrow in case something happens to the village..." I bit the inside of my lip again. What else, what else...? "And Sensei made me leave Tsuruya in the village in case we need to be called back. Gamabunta's in the village right now, and I think there was a slug in the Hokage's office earlier..."

"So everyone's within a minute of the village if things go bad." Obito frowned.

"Pretty much." I said, sighing. "Except that I don't know when Sensei will even be available to make the call." In my previous life, I think my mom was in labor for a really long time. Kushina's water might not have even broken before we left.

Obito scratched the side of his face, chewing on the inside of his lip. "Jiraiya should be able to, though. I mean, he taught Sensei. He should know when to call us back in."

I hoped so.

Because while knowing that the village could be in danger was driving me up the walls inside my head, Sensei would kill me if I put everyone at risk when it was so obvious that Madara's cronies were in town. And I don't think I'd forgive myself either if I was somehow coerced or forced into being a part of whatever plan that shithead had planned.

You know. Assuming anyone lived to tell the tale, there.

I chewed on a hangnail on my thumb, trying to clear my head and failing.

Would going to Konoha really be so dangerous? Isobu asked.

It wouldn't be, I replied, if I had the slightest idea how to defend against the time bomb I have sitting in my chest. Sure, it's sealed now, but Madara could probably punch through Sensei's work if I was stupid enough to give him a chance. And I can't afford to.

There would still be me.

And if my mind gets hijacked, I'm not going to be any help in keeping Madara out of your head, either. If I would ever be.

"Kei, you spaced out there for a second." Obito said, looking concerned. "Are you all right?"
"No." I said flatly. I crossed my arms tightly and "But I can't do anything about that right now."


I was not going to freak out. Not until...until I was holding Naruto and being formally introduced to him with Kushina and Sensei still alive to celebrate. Then I'd probably cry out of sheer relief.

I exhaled.

Time to find a new mental gear.

"Honored Sages, is there any way we can see what is happening around Sensei and Kushina-san?" I asked, a little louder than usual so they could easily hear me.

"No. This crystal ball is blocked by the power used by Katsuyu of Shikkotsu Forest." The Great Toad Sage seemed just the slightest bit miffed.

Oi.

Of course, it would be too easy if I could have access to any method of keeping track of the entire situation. That would break the game.

And at that moment, when I was busy freaking the hell out and trying very hard not to do exactly that, another toad popped into existence by my left foot and made me reflexively scoot toward Obito. Not because I was afraid of toads, but more because Obito was the best bet to calm me down when I was about ready to start shooting Isobu's chakra everywhere. Random surprises were likely to get people (and toads, and others) killed.

"Keroro," said Shima, looking at the new arrival with something like alarm.

Keroro was a fairly small toad, all things considered. Green, unlike the toads descended from Gamabunta, with a white belly and skinny limbs...and a tan helmet. The toad saluted, lifting up on his hind legs and exposing a large star marking on his chest. "Reporting for duty, Honored Sages!"

...Uh.

I'd been kind of led to believe that the toads tended more toward yakuza than military...? Then again, what did I know?

Shima clapped her hands, and a red-and-blue toad hopped into the temple complex, heading directly for her. "Kōsuke!"

"I'm here, Honored Sages!" Kōsuke the toad replied, pulling up short when he realized that Keroro was right there. I've never seen two toads glare at each other before, puffing up like pissed-off bullfrogs.

"Hey, hey! Knock it off right now!" Obito snapped, stepping between the two toads before they could play their miniature gang war out.

Kōsuke and Keroro settle back on their hindquarters, chastised. It might have had something to do with the way Obito's Sharingan was active and spinning, just because he was on edge too. He wasn't about to hypnotize anyone, but...well, angry Uchiha can get pretty hard to ignore at a distance of less than ten meters.

"Where did you even come from? Is Sensei trying to send a message?" Obito demanded of Keroro,
since Kōsuke had obviously been on the mountain.

"Boss just wanted me to make sure nothing happened here!" Keroro responded in a high-pitched croak.

"Something has happened." Shima said. "But not here." She pointed at the crystal ball, still and silent with a Zetsu's image frozen in it. "Konoha needs to be warned that they may be facing infiltrators—or that they already are and this is the first we've seen. Kosuke, warn Jiraiya-chan. Keroro, I can send you back to Minato-chan…"

I tuned out of the remainder of that conversation so I could go after Obito instead. He was striding out of the temple with his temper obviously frayed to hell and back—not that I'd noticed while he was trying to keep me from freaking out in turn.

I tried not to be obvious about it, but the Great Toad Sage's, "Be ready to be sent back!" was loud enough to make me want to cover my ears, even when said to my retreating back. In the distance, I could hear some of the other monster-sized toads—Gamaken?—getting ready, too. The rumbling was a hint.

"Obito, wait up!" I called after him.

Obito exhaled loudly, turning back to look at me. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be sorry about getting pissed off when there's a reason for it." I told him, clasping his shoulder like he had for me, not too long ago. "We're both pretty raw right now."

Obito nodded, but his face was still twisted up thanks to some internal conflict. "Kei, are you sure… are you sure that something's going to happen?"

"Well, something, yeah. Zetsu being above ground and in plain sight can't mean much else." I said, trying and failing to keep my tone light. I gave up on that. "Look, Obito? The original vision called for Tobi bringing the Nine-Tails to town and trying to flatten it. I…honestly, I don't see how Madara could do much worse without showing up personally. We've seen his troops and I've heard a bit about what they can do”—and maybe seen some of it, from half-remembered manga panels—"but I get the feeling that this is more a token effort than the real shebang at the moment."

Obito still seemed troubled. "So what might the real thing be? We already know he can't get to Kushina-san, not when Sensei and Tsunade-sama and everyone else keeping guard. She's not even in the same country."

I nodded. "So she's as safe as possible. Which means no fox, and maybe no huge attack." But even as I said it, I was half-listening to faint sounds of argument coming from the temple. Shima and Kōsuke? Or had a new toad joined in?

Something was happening.

"We're probably going to be called back." I admitted, edgy. "But I don't know when. Or for what job."

"Somehow, I don't think it's going to be dog-walking." Obito muttered. He crossed his arms. "I trust you about this kind of thing, Kei, but I'm still…"

Afraid? "I am too." I said. And it didn't even gall me to admit that—I was probably the scariest cat of them all at the moment. But I was also really, really determined to turn this impending clusterfuck of a night into a solid win for the good guys, whatever it would take.
"Think we're going to need to bring, uh, the turtle into it?" Obito asked.

I have a name. Isobu grumbled.

"Maybe." I hedged. "And you might need to be on hand to point me at an actual target and not just something that twitches in the wrong direction."

No, he won't. I can tell who I should smash like a bug just fine.

You really want to test our control, when Madara could have any number of lackeys and the entire village is full of soft targets? The hell we will. I wouldn't trust me on a power high, much less both of us when you have just one eye and we're going to be trying to search for infiltrators like Zetsu at the same time.

That still doesn't mean that we need another Sharingan following us around. Just because Kurama can be controlled by one and pointed at the correct enemy won't mean that we will. This boy—and maybe Isobu meant Kakashi too, in an offhand sort of way—does not fully understand his power. We do. Can we trust him to know what to look for? Where we should go? Madara could point Kurama wherever and still achieve his goals—we have to be more careful than even an extra eye would allow.

He had a point. And I wasn't sure that Obito had the same kind of experience with finding shape-changing opponents as, say, the Animorphs post-David. Or maybe…uh…

Frankly, the existence of the Transformation Jutsu gave us a baseline to work with simply because of how widespread the technique was, as much as I wanted to make it into some kind of joke. Obito was an MP. He was as good as I was, if not better. For one thing, he knew more people.

Sure, Zetsu could mimic chakra signatures. But they couldn't, to my knowledge, strip-mine people's memories.

That would have to work.

"Keisuke-chan, Obito-chan, Jiraiya-chan is waiting for your insight!" Shima's voice rang out, calling us back.

Obito shrugged when I looked at him curiously. "They don't need mine, Kei."

"Says the guy who lived with Uncle Creepy for six months. And my insight's gonna be worth jack in a bit." And I couldn't be happier about that. Or at least I would, once this was over.

It would be different, to have that weight off my shoulders.

"Kei." Obito sighed. "All right, I guess they need both of us. Let's go see what's wrong."

Everything. But hopefully, in time, we'd turn that around.

___

Kakashi

I'm…not really sure how I ended up being the one left holding the infant.

I'm sure there's a reason, but I'm just not seeing it at the moment.

"May I hold him?" Nagato asks, sitting down next to me while the Hokage and Biwako and
Tsunade and Kushina all argue about what to do next.

I nod. I don’t need to tell him to be careful of the baby's head and neck—given how loudly Kushina was talking, I’d be surprised if the main body of Katsuyu had felt her ears burning from the tirade. If slugs had ears, anyway.

I don’t think they do.

Nagato, with the blond Uzumaki child in his hands, looks stunned by the whole sequence of events.

The guy went from penniless orphan to rebel to Rinnegan-wielding joint-ruler of Amegakure, to kinda-heir to the Uzumaki clan and possible godfather of Kushina's son. Maybe not all of that had happened in a short time period, but I knew that the last few had. That would be enough for anyone to deal with. Even if a lot of it wouldn’t be pushed through the Konoha bureaucracy for another few weeks.

And if Kushina still thinks she can trust him, with this, then I probably can.

Kushina's son—Naruto, per one offhand remark by his parents and per Kei's bizarre precognitive dreams—is pretty much as squashed-looking as any other baby. Babies tend to be weird-looking at first, until they have time to turn into three-month-olds. Aside from the whisker birthmarks, though, he seems normal. Big, but normal.

I guess the ten-month pregnancy thing worked out all right. Maybe even in his favor.

"Hello, little cousin." Nagato murmurs softly, balancing Naruto more in his lap than in his arms. Maybe he's afraid of dropping the kid? "Tired, aren't you? You've had a long night."

I shrug, not that Nagato's paying much attention to me. The night's just going to get longer, if the argument's anything to go by. I just know when something is so far over my head—command-wise, not in conceptual complexity—that I should barely bother listening in. Orders would come, and they'd be the right ones.

It was just going to take a while to get any.

"—fine, Minato!" Kushina was saying. "Almost better than fine, actually, since I don't have to worry about not being able to use chakra!"

"The seal is still weak enough that I’d be happier if you stayed on bed rest, Kushina."

"The Hokage doesn't sound happy at all.

"Yeah, and that puts Kurama on the backburner when we need those powers the most!" Kushina argues.

"What powers?" Tsunade demands. "If you use the Fox's power now, all you'll do is leave your son motherless and the Hokage a widower! The seal will not survive any Tailed Beast rampages, no matter how well-intentioned you try to be."

"I'm not going to be using all of his chakra, and you know it!" Kushina countered. "Just enough to get that power Mito-sama had! There's no other way to be sure that Konoha is safe!"

Mito-sama?

…Could this have something to do with her legendary ability to always know when danger was coming, no matter what form it took or disguise it wore?
Nagato looks up, too. His attention is mostly on Naruto, and the baby has his pinkie finger in a death-grip, but he's listening in as much as I am. When he looks back down at Naruto, who is industriously attempting to stuff two of Nagato's fingers into his mouth, he just sighs.

I signal for Genma to get the hell over here.

He does.

"What is it?" Genma asks, wandering over from where he'd been leaning against a nearby wall.

"Be ready to move out." I say carefully, watching the argument devolve.

The Hokage wants Naruto and Kushina to stay safe. Tsunade wants her cousins to be alive at the end of everything. Kushina's pretty sure she can help coordinate the defense forces and enact anti-infiltration protocols in Konoha by commandeering the barrier team and using the Nine-Tails's chakra. Everyone wants to save Konoha but no one's certain how to do it without stomping on each other's toes.

Any idiot can see what's going to happen next.

That's when the frog—which the Hokage must have sent out before calling me in—came back in a burst of white smoke.

"Boss, we've got trouble at home!" the toad says immediately, and everyone's hackles rise in response to the idea that, somewhere, there's a threat to Konoha.

"What kind of trouble?" The Hokage's voice is sharp.

"Keisuke-san says that the problem is a thing called a 'Zetsu,' Boss. He said that there are potentially thousands of them. Does that mean anything to you?" the toad asked.

The Hokage pales, briefly, before his eyes narrow and it becomes clear that the surge of adrenaline wasn't fear alone—he is furious. And he still hasn't given his marching orders yet.

"Yes." The Hokage says, low and deadly. He turns to his wife. "Yes, it does. Kushina—?"

"You won't be able to convince me not to help the barrier team." Kushina says flatly. "Don't even try."

The Hokage blows out a frustrated breath. "I'm not asking as your husband, Kushina, but—!"

"No."

"I'll go with her, if that would help." Nagato suggests, getting to his feet at the same time I do and brushing past Genma with unusual calm. "I…I don't have the power Kei-kun thinks I might, but I could be of some help, right?"

The Hokage gives him a long, considering look. Then he looks at me. "Get Falcon. You're escorting Kushina and Nagato-san to the barrier team building. Guard them. Give them an out no matter what."

"What about Naruto?" Tsunade asks. "You can't run a barrier and bodyguard and babysit. And I'm going into the hospital after this, because damned if I'm going to let that bastard hurt Shizune."

"Naruto…" The Hokage swallows.
"We can stay here with him, Hokage-sama." Biwako offers, still seeming as serene as ever. I can practically feel her chakra moving in agitation at the mere thought of an infant being deliberately endangered.

And Naruto should be far enough out of it, here, that guard duties could be relaxed. A skeleton crew of ANBU could coordinate with the local Katsuyu splits and maintain security…

"Thank you. I'll...I'll leave Keroro here so you can get back, once the coast is clear." The Hokage says. He sighs again. "Not how I wanted to spend Naruto's birthday…"

"Can't be helped, Hokage-sama." Genma says with a shrug.

"I suppose not." Sensei looks at Tsunade. "Can you get us all back there at once?"

"Easily," she says. "As soon as everyone is ready, I can set up a relay in case we need to get back under Katsuyu's eyestalks for protection. But we need to be here."

She and the Hokage are giving me a pair of withering glares. And Falcon's supposed to be senior officer?

"Hop to it," the Hokage snaps at everyone, and we do.

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Hayate

"Hayate." Mom says, her voice awful and cold and totally different from anything I've ever heard. I'm already backing up even before she says anything, with the white monster sliding down off her sword. "Please, stay inside the house."

I nod, shakily.

Between me seeing the fake-Kei and trying not to do anything that'd set her off and maybe run away anyway, Mom had gotten off the couch, torn her katana from the wall, rushed into the hallway, and stabbed the not-Kei in the face hard enough to push the sword all the way through its head. It was all over before the fake-Kai could so much as raise her hand to reach through the doorway.

Mom makes a snapping motion with her right arm, flicking weird white stuff off the blade. Then she turns back to me and steers me away from the door, closing it behind her.

"Mom?" I ask in a whisper.

"I think it's time for you to go to bed, Hayate." Mom says, side-hugging me since she can't use both hands with her katana. After a second or two, she drops the sword on the floor and kneels in front of me, holding my hands in hers. "Please. No matter what, do not open the door for anyone."

"Why?" I ask, but I almost don't want to know.

"The defensive seals should keep out anything that tries to hurt you. Only your sister, the Hokage, or I should be able to get through." Mom says, quickly and seriously. She cups my cheek with her hand. "Please, Hayate. Stay safe for me."

I nod, jerkily, still shaking a bit from the whole...thing. I'm not sure what's going on. "Mom? I'm...I'm going to go to bed, okay?" I don't know what else to do.

"Good." Mom says, and she makes sure to kiss me goodnight before she gets up and picks her katana off the floor.
I go back to my bed and try really, really hard not to think about what's happening. I pull my blanket over my head, hide under my pillow, and try covering my ears.

I can still hear the front door open and close again.
Commencement Arc: Minefields

Chapter Summary

Everyone: Adapt.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Minato

I use the Flying Thunder God jutsu only after I’m sure that everyone else is loaded up and ready to go, or otherwise secure in the Shikkotsu Forest. While Katsuyu won’t keep her own watchful eyes on everything, she had enough smaller, hive-minded clones that there isn’t any real difference. Biwako and Naruto and everyone else who elected to stay behind will stay safe.

Now if only I could make sure that statement worked for everyone else.

Because just as I pop back into my office with the usual fwind of displaced air, it seems like everything gets into a fight for my attention at once.

I’m accompanied by two full squads of ANBU, not counting Kakashi’s micro-team and their Kushina-escorting duty that puts all four of them elsewhere. Since that’s ten shinobi plus myself, I immediately go to my office windows to let most of them out before the group starts to evacuate via the air vents. While having this many people in the office is more troublesome than dangerous, I don’t actually need most of the guards and they can accomplish individualized objectives once they’re out in Konoha.

Once the mass exodus is complete and I know that some people are doing their damned jobs, I turn back to those who haven’t left my office behind. Mainly because there isn’t much else for them to do.

Okay, no, that’s a lie. I just need to figure out where they should be.

Hiruzen Sarutobi. Third Hokage. Immensely powerful even in his relative old age, but I wouldn’t risk his safety before I know where he’d be of the most use.

Jiraiya-sensei. S-ranked shinobi of some note and my teacher in pretty much everything short of how to date.

How do I use that when we’re up against an army of shape-changing chakra-copying monsters?

“Sarutobi-sama, Jiraiya-sensei, what’s been going on here? I received reports of strange activity.” Before Jiraiya can jump in, I add, “I’ve confirmed that our opponents are Zetsu clones, Jiraiya-sensei. But I don’t know where they are or how many of them are active, or what they’ve been doing in Konoha. And I don’t think we will know until Kushina has the Barrier Team under her thumb.”

“She went through labor less than an hour ago, Minato.” Jiraiya says, with a kind of stunned surprise. “What in the world is she going to be doing there?”
This isn’t going to go over well. Calling it now.

I don’t let any uncertainty slip into my tone as I say, “With any luck? Setting the Nine-Tails up to interface with a Sensing Water Sphere so we can pick our targets.”

That gets a reaction.

Sarutobi jerks back in shock as though my idea—Kushina’s idea—had tried to lunge for his throat. “The Nine-Tailed Fox? Are you insane, Minato-kun?”

Jiraiya-sensei gives me a very skeptical look. “You don’t look like you’re concussed or high, so… what the hell, Minato?”

“How can you think of trusting the village’s safety to that?” Sarutobi demands.

“I’m not.” I cross my arms and hold my ground. “I trust Kushina when she says she can keep our village from being beaten into submission by an army of shape-changing monsters. I trust Kei when she says that the Nine-Tails has the ability to find anything hostile in the area and mark it, just like Mito-sama. And I trusted the two of you to keep the village out of danger while I was gone, but it seems like that part didn’t work.” My eyes narrow and I lean on the front of my desk. “So, what’s been happening?”

“There have been reports of mysterious attacks on local homes and the Military Police outposts on the outskirts of the village.” Jiraiya says after giving me a nonverbal version of the “we’ll talk about this later” look. “And the seals around the Gekkō household lit up about ten minutes ago. A squad went out to assess the damage.”

I can feel my eyebrows try to crawl toward my hairline. Kei’s house? “I thought you said the attacks were on the outskirts of the village.”

“Until that one, they were. We’re still waiting on a report.” Sarutobi tells me flatly.

…Could Madara know where Kei lives?

Before I have a chance to dwell on that horrifying thought, something knocks on the office window. I turn around and it takes me a second to understand what I’m seeing.

“Gekkō-san.” I say once I get a proper feel for that chakra again. I deactivate the window seals with a thought and slide the panels open so she can come inside. Somehow, I doubt this is a casual visit.

Miyako Gekkō is a small woman who resembles Kei—black hair, dark eyes, and a complexion best described as “ghostly”—in a superficial way that doesn’t encompass the world of differences between mother and daughter. Kei is my student and, barring some remarkable secrets, I can read her moods and expressions easily. She is her own person, but I’ve seen her grow up and that makes her somewhat predictable.

Her mother…isn’t. I didn’t understand until more than a month into office just why she was so eerie. That was the first time I’d gotten access to the redacted parts of her official file, which had been conspicuously absent from the version I had seen back when I first snapped Kei up for my genin team.

“Or is it Uesugi-san, tonight?” I go on, watching her expression carefully.

I can see the exact moment when the role of Kei’s caring mother slides away to reveal the demon underneath.
It’s like looking at a ROOT agent or a veteran member of ANBU’s more screwed-up squads. Her eyes are already black, but the sudden lack of any kind of emotional depth leaves them looking more like pits directly into hell. Her face is abruptly more angular, thrown into sharp relief by the office lights that gives a ghoulish cast to her features. And that doesn’t quite cover the murderous intent that seeps out into the air, almost unconsciously.

I stare straight back at her.

Once you know what’s hiding under there, it’s a lot less threatening. Especially given what she had needed to confess to Intelligence before she could emigrate here officially.

The Ghoul of the Three Wolves is past her prime.

In a deliberately level voice, I say, “Uesugi-san, I have no intention of outing you to anyone outside of this room.”

Watching Miyako Gekkō slowly reassert herself is a study in nonverbal communication. Under three sets of scrutinizing eyes, I see the pieces click back into place. The personality tics she’s accumulated over the course of nearly twenty years of living in Konoha, the hard-earned respect for the shinobi chain of command…

And then Miyako Gekkō is back. Reserved and stern, yes, but the murderer is back under wraps behind those dead eyes. Tomoe Uesugi goes back to sleep and, to be perfectly honest, I’m not in a hurry to meet her again even if she doesn’t do blistering rants or lectures.

Hah. Ironic that she even earned that title. The three men in this room, myself included, have higher body counts than she could have if her rampage had gone on for a decade.

“So Hayate-kun all right?” Sarutobi asks, now that she doesn’t look like she wants to murder someone. Strictly speaking, it’d be assassination if her target is anyone in this room.

“Yes,” Miyako says, the first thing she’s said since arriving. She crosses her arms. “Barely.”

“What happened?” Sarutobi asks.

“A creature took my daughter’s appearance and attempted to enter the house.” Miyako says in that terribly level voice. “I killed it and it returned to its true form. I’ve been recruiting others who have encountered them and have been trying to kill them back.”

“How many, Gekkō-san?” Sarutobi’s voice is suddenly heavy. Old, even. He’s in his fifties and actually seems to look it for the first time I can remember.

Miyako tilts her head, a sardonic look crossing her face and bleeding into her voice, “Creatures? Seven thus far. Many more bodies.”

Tomoe isn’t too far under the surface.

“Jiraiya-sensei, if you…” Fuck, no, that’s not the best plan. The Third Hokage can’t be used as a member of a mobile suppression unit either. It wouldn’t work.

“Gekkō-san, can you identify Zetsu clones?” I ask sharply, drawing everyone’s attention back to me. Certainly, Miyako is paying attention as soon as I open my mouth, but everyone in this room is used to commanding when necessary. This doesn’t always mean listening to the blond guy who has fewer years of combat experience than any of the others.
(Lived that one. Only once.)

Miyako hesitates. “Only at point-blank range, Hokage-sama. The creatures’ chakra doesn’t quite flow correctly under close examination.”

I don’t even ask how she could do that. I turn back to Jiraiya. “If there’s even a chance that Gekkō-san can identify Zetsu clones ahead of time, please, get people to follow her lead. Kushina won’t have the Barrier Team working like she wants for at least a few minutes, and we can’t spare that time.”

“What do you say, Gekkō-san?” Jiraiya asks with a grin.

Miyako gives me a long look, rather than acknowledging Jiraiya’s comment. “I’ll do it.”

“Great. Now we have half a plan.” I close my eyes briefly, trying to think of something productive for the Third to do. “Sarutobi-sama, if you could mobilize the reserves? I would prefer everyone to be on alert rather than being caught flat-footed. Even if paranoia will be the enemy, complacency will be worse.”

Sarutobi nods. He leaves immediately, probably to go change into full battle gear and summon Enma.

“Gamabunta’s ready to go whenever we find a decent target.” Jiraiya-sensei reminds me.

I nod. “Thank you.”

Jiraiya-sensei grimaces. “Don’t thank me yet. I don’t think the enemy’s gotten serious yet.”

“If they do,” Miyako cuts in, “will you bring my daughter back?”

“Back? Kei’s on a mission.” I try to lie.

Miyako fixes me with a completely unimpressed look. Is it just a mother thing?

Okay, fine. “Kei needs to remain outside of the village for as long as we can manage, Gekkō-san. There may be reason to believe that shinobi of her age are being deliberately targeted.”

“This has to do with the Three-Tails, doesn’t it?” Miyako says flatly.

“…Partially. Regardless. You have your orders, Gekko-san.”

Miyako nods and leaves the office alongside Jiraiya-sensei. I swear I can feel her glaring all the way down the outside stairs.

And that’s when an explosion sounds in the middle of the village and I don’t have time to worry about it.

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Rin

Working in the hospital has really been something I’ve had for… I don’t know, forever? I’m old enough now that the comments about how young I am have stopped being quite so common, at least compared to when I was eight. At thirteen, I think most of the nurses and medic-nin around me have started to realize that I know my stuff perfectly well. It’s hard not to—between Kei-senpai and Akihito-shishō and all the other doctors and nurses and volunteers I’ve worked with, it’d be pretty weird if I didn’t know what I was doing after five straight years.
Still, there’s the occasional new person who doesn’t really understand that.

“Shizune-san, really, I don’t need any help here.” I say without looking up, adjusting the IV drip leading to a thirty-year-old appendicitis patient’s arm. I know what I’m doing.

“Are you sure, Rin-chan?” Shizune asks anyway. Just to be safe. To be sure.

Shizune is fifteen, which makes her older than me by just enough to matter in her eyes. She’s tall and pretty, with dark hair and eyes and maybe a bit of makeup to match her mentor, but let’s be honest here. Shizune, while a medic-nin in her own right and a full chūnin, has not worked in this hospital long enough to tell me how to do my job.

Tsunade-sama is, but she’s not here.

I sigh. “Shizune-san, maybe you should check for anyone coming in with battle injuries? I’m only going to check what else is required on his chart.” Given that my patient will probably be unconscious for another fifteen minutes thanks to surgical anesthesia, there isn’t much that a second pair of hands can help with. I just have to check his response times when he wakes up.

“Oh. Well…meet you in the lobby in five?” Shizune seems nervous…it can’t be that she isn’t comfortable in hospitals, right? I’ve been working here since forever, though, so maybe I just don’t understand other people’s apprehension. Maybe she just hasn’t worked in this environment before?

“Okay, Shizune-senpai.”

True to my word, even if I don’t necessarily understand why Shizune has been shadowing me all evening, I head down to the main lobby after handing my patient—Ayato Kirito—off to the first night shift nurse whose schedule overlapped with mine. “Just for ten minutes!” I said, with every intention of keeping that bargain.

Of course, I make sure to remove my gloves and dump them in the nearest waste bin. I carry whole boxes of latex gloves when I can’t get to a storage closet, and dump them when I’m done because the idea of carrying contagions from patient to patient on my gloves sets my teeth on edge. The hospital can be hazardous enough—negligence should be the least of my patients’ worries.

And as soon as I’m in the lobby, I end up with a front-row seat to…something.

Aside from me, Ayako the receptionist, and Shizune, there are two people in the lobby this late.

One: Akihito-shishō. He’s taller than most people, with a reedy sort of build and graying black hair, cold blue eyes and a scowl to match all of the above. His hands are bony in a way that suggests repeated injury or arthritis, with burn marks between his index and middle fingers of both hands from holding cigarettes for too long. He has his arms crossed over his chest and a cigarette between his teeth, nearly bitten in half.

Two: A tall blonde woman with light brown eyes and muscled shoulders underneath her red haori. She has a large forehead with a purple rhombus in the middle, small eyebrows and a severe look in her eye. Her clothes are of an older style than expected—no mesh or bandages. Aside from the heels and long painted nails, she looks a little like a retired kunoichi, sans injuries. The thing is, everyone in the entire village would know her face—me included.

My teacher is staring down Tsunade of the Legendary Sannin.

“I’m not the one you should talk to about anti-infiltration procedures, Tsunade-sama.” Akihito-shishō says carefully, and yet still managing to sound irritable. “Is there anything we need to know about
these…agents?”

Tsunade huffs and says, “You’re going to have to work on security, the same as the rest of us.”

“Are we expecting some kind of attack?” I blurt out, alarmed.

Tsunade looks down her nose at me, one eyebrow raised. “Yes. And you are…?”

“Rin Nohara, my student.” Akihito-shishō replies, nodding at me. “Rin, Kei-kun seems to be involved somehow. Did you know anything about this?”

“I just know that…Kei-senpai…” Wait. I pale immediately. “The…the infiltrators? Are they those same things that attacked us on *that* mission?” Oriko died that day, and had been replaced by a monster that took Kei away. We got her back and things were confused, and Kei became a Tailed Beast Host, but…I. I thought the Hokage had taken care of things!

“Probably.” Tsunade says, giving me a concerned look. “You’ve encountered them before, then.”

“Yes. It…it was the last, uh, major mission I went on.” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “One of them pretended to be Oriko-san and kidnapped Kei-senpai.”

Shizune covers her mouth with her hands. “And you couldn’t tell?”

“Not until I went back and found Oriko-san dead on the ground.” I tell them. “Kei would know more than I do. So would Obito.”

Tsunade seems to chew on the inside of her cheek. “Damn.” She glances up at the nearest wall clock, which says that it’s 12:07 am. “It’s going to be nearly impossible to completely lock down, but we can certainly try.”

“A hospital lockdown.” Akihito-shishō says flatly. “Do you have any idea how many people have access to this building on a daily basis? We’re down to half our staff for the night shift, but there are still patients in here.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Tsunade snaps back.

“There’s no way to know if they’ve already made it inside.” Shizune says, her voice rising by an octave. “Oh god.”

I’m biting at a hangnail, trying to think.

There are just too many people in the hospital to account for any and all possible identities for a Zetsu to take. Too many access points, too—though the Hokage had sealed most of the windows from any kind of external breach, he couldn’t do the same for internal modifications because otherwise our nurses would lose hands every time someone wanted to open a window. The ground floor entrance has two chūnin posted as guards, but the shift change means they’re not any more familiar with the people in the building than anyone else is.

“I…think the enemy uses chakra samples to change their shape.” I theorize aloud, trying to remember more fragments of that mission gone wrong. Kei talked a lot about the Zetsu thing the morning after, but I can’t recall everything. “I’m sorry I can’t be more help.”

“Don’t apologize unless it gets someone killed.” Tsunade replies. “And if that person is you, you’re excused.”
“Tsunade-sama…” Shizune tries to reprimand, but she doesn’t have the confidence to do it.

Akihito-shishō opens his mouth to say something, which is probably going to be caustic, and that’s when the left-hand wall explodes inward.

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**Kushina**

The Barrier Team, despite the name, doesn’t actually maintain a chakra barrier around Konoha all the live-long day. While they step up security during big events like Minato’s coronation and pretty much the entire Third Shinobi World War, no one can stay on duty all the time. Furthermore, working on a large technique collaboratively means that all members of the team have to be perfectly in sync at all times. While there are medical-nin who are trained for just that, the Barrier Team can’t poach from the hospital while a war’s on and medic-nin don’t have quite the same kind of knack that the Barrier Team looks for.

But of those who can work together on such a grand scale, everyone is present.

I only stumble a bit when Kakashi and his teammates help me land a Flying Thunder God jutsu right outside the Barrier Team’s bunker, with Nagato trailing silently behind us. Must’ve been overloaded, the poor kid. As for me, my hips hurt and my chakra is flagging and I think I would faint if I could, but there are things that need doing.

The Barrier Team has two major functions: detection and interception.

If I have the slightest clue what’s going on, then either the interception team’s not doing their job or the detection team isn’t or one of the teams is dead. Because *something* was going wrong in the street and even if Minato’s bodyguards don’t let me slow down to see it I *know* it has to do with the barrier problems. It has to do with security issues, with the nature of the enemy, or maybe the fact that underground infiltration security may not account for creepy clay men who’ve been under the village since Madara got his ass kicked.

Bit of a coin toss, really.

Kakashi kicks the door down before I have to. Polite of him, even if it gets a bunch of kunai pointed at us before we even get through the door.

It doesn’t last.

Mainly because I’m glaring at everyone. I’m soaked in sweat and I smell like blood and probably look like someone who’s been through hell because I *have*, and the first person to get in my way is getting their head bitten off. I am also not wearing any pants under my hospital gown hybrid of an outfit, which bizarrely makes me *angrier* at this whole situation. Like the universe can’t even spare me a minute to find pants before throwing more shit at me.

With Falcon and Genma helping me stand up straight—barely—I manage to growl, “Get me Kakoi right now.” On second thought… “And water. And a chair or something. I don’t care who you kill to get it.”

Kakashi breaks off to enforce the order because, between him, Shiranui and Falcon, he’s the shortest and thus makes a crappy crutch. I can limp around with assistance, but I guess it’s better to employ all of the prodigies Minato assigned to me in the most efficient way I can. And Nagato wouldn’t be comfortable giving orders to Konoha shinobi at all, so I let him off the hook.

About thirty seconds later, I’m lying down on a pair of mats that were unceremoniously shoved
together to give the recently-pregnant lady a place to relax. There’s a glass of water, too—now empty—and then another.

After more water, another half-minute, and a very careful stretch, I feel almost human again.

“Kushina-sama?” Kakoi is about my age or so, but he doesn’t dress like anyone in town. When on duty, the dark-haired, severe-faced shinobi dresses like someone who walked right out of one of the Fire Temple ceremonies and acts the part. While there’s no real reason to dress up like a shaman or priest while in Konoha—particularly when working for a department that most people never had anything to do with—it does make him easy to pick out of a crowd.

I snarl, pointing accusingly with my right hand. My index finger is going to go up his nose if he leans in any closer. “Why aren’t you maintaining the Sensing Water Sphere right now, you lazy ass?”

“It’s a shift-change, Kushina-sama.” Kakoi assures me as fast as he can. “The sphere will be up and active in just a moment—!”

“It shouldn’t have gone down in the first place!” I snap, and I can practically feel Kakashi tense from across the room. Did Madara know that Konoha’s Barrier Team was cutting corners? How the hell would he?

“Kushina-sama,” says Falcon in a warning tone as I get ready to launch into a tirade. Honestly, this was just negligence!

But I bite back the first eight or so things I want to say and focus instead on what has to be said. “Kakoi, call in whoever you need to make a village-wide surveillance net and get them ready to use my chakra to maintain it. Inoshi Yamanaka, Suzaku Nara— whoever the hell will be useful. I need them yesterday.”

What in hell had the Barrier Team been doing if they weren’t monitoring the entire village? I know Minato called up just about everyone with an office to get them on board. Kei told him what she knew about tonight, via her weird prophetic dreams, and he acted on it. Someone, somewhere, drops the ball anyway, and then I have to deal with it?

I am so done.

“Wolf, make sure it happens.” I say to Kakashi, who nods behind his ANBU mask and immediately disappears. Maybe he’s going to frog-march everyone else into position. Whatever he does, it had better be fast.

I lie there on the floor for a while, trying to recover my strength as the Barrier Team whips itself into shape around me. I’m careful enough not to use too much of Kurama’s chakra, since the seal is still unstable, but if there aren’t any soldier pills available…

I decide to try something a little…unusual. I mean, I think Kei does it a lot, but I never have and maybe this won’t work the way it should.

Still gonna try.

Kurama?

Fuck. If he doesn’t want to listen, then this isn’t going to be easy. I don’t have enough chakra to confront him the way that Mito did.

Kurama. Please.
I wait for a couple of seconds before letting my little mental balloon of hope deflate itself.

**What do you want?**

Oh thank god.

**I need your help.**

I get a sense of Kurama sitting up in his seal—the birdcage is as big as I could make it without mangling the structure—to glare at whatever mental avatar was supposed to represent *me* in the mindscape. I was half-in and half-out and mostly too tired to bring together all the focus I needed to have a big old argument with him.

*Can you feel the emotions of people around you?* I ask, mentally praying that if he *does* then he’s willing to make a deal. *Please say yes. Please say you can find the Zetsu clones no matter where they’re hiding.*

**And if I can, human?** Kurama growls. **Why would I want to help you, of all human pests?**

I think I have an answer. Kei’s answer. *Because the Zetsu clones work for Madara.*

For a long moment, Kurama stays silent.

Then, **I could lie.**

The metaphorical bottom drops out of my stomach. It doesn’t have that far to go—it’s been a shitty night.

**If I marked every single human in this village as the enemy, you would have no choice but to act on my directions.** Kurama laughs, low and hateful. **You would have no way of knowing if your precious village was already gone until they started dying. Or isn’t that what the Three-Tails host told you?**

*NNNnot in so many words.* I hedge.

**You wouldn’t ask me at all if there were other options.** Kurama muses. **So, what did the little rat tell you that made you think this was a good idea?**

I glare up at the ceiling. *Honestly? She was probably betting that you hate Madara Uchiha more than you hate me.*

Kurama hisses and his chakra rumbles through my coils like an earthquake. At least I’m pretty sure I haven’t started glowing yet. *Him.*

The growl goes on for a while longer before Kurama falls silent. Then, while I’m contemplating the ceiling, Kurama says, **And if I did cooperate, what would I get out of it?**

I wonder if he’s thinking that at least I’m willing to let him haggle. *With any luck? Something closer to freedom than you already have.* I listen to shinobi bustle around me, getting ready to set up the Sensing Water Sphere next to me so I don’t have to walk anywhere. *I’ll have to get Minato to help, but we may be able to loosen the seal a little and give you more ways to change what it looks and feels like. You wouldn’t be able to get out any more than normal, but I’ve seen Isobu and Kei interact and he doesn’t seem bored all the time.*
Kurama grumbles. I’ll ask him before I give you an answer, human. I don’t trust you. I will never trust you.

Never’s a long time. Thing is, Kurama is just the type who’d be able to hold to that.

Kurama doesn’t say anything else for a while. It’s long enough that, by that time, I can look around and see Suzaku and Inoshi setting up. Suzaku sits next to me, trying to talk me through the process of linking my mind with the Sensing Water Sphere and with Inoshi so that we can make this all work. I sort of nod along, half-listening.

Then…

I’ll do it. He sounds grudging at best. Just this once.

I reach down through my chakra, as though extending my hand to pull someone up from the ground.

Not like that. Try again.

I frown inwardly.

And this time Kurama reaches first. I can sort of see my chakra-arm reaching out again, my chakra-fingers catching the very tip of one of his long white claws and curling around it.

And then I can see everything. But the “everything” I focus on is a load of chakra specks across the village that seem to be highlighted in Kurama’s bright red chakra. He hadn’t needed to point out literally every problem in the entire area, down to rocks in the village’s foundation, but I appreciated the grudging effort.

One of them was in the room.

Which is why Kurama’s chakra, wrapped around my Adamantine Chakra Chains, shoots out of my stomach and snatches a member of the Barrier Team off his feet and dangles him from the ceiling.

Genma manages to choke out, “Kushina-sama, what—?”

I don’t recognize the shinobi that Kurama’s caught—blue hair, blue eyes, face still with a bit of baby fat and big ears—but that doesn’t mean anything. But as Kurama’s chakra burns into him, destabilizing his fake chakra coils, his appearance destabilizes. His body goes white and monochrome like some kind of person made of putty or clay.

That’s about when Kakashi cuts its head off with the regulation ANBU katana.

As the body seeps into the floorboards, I sit up and take a very close look at the Sensing Water Sphere that’s floating in the air next to me. “Now that that’s over with, Inoshi, we’d better get started.”

I see him hesitate. Inoshi is a sensor, the same as many Yamanaka clan members, and his day job is in therapy and not combat. Hell, neither is mine—at least not for the last year or so—but I still have that edge.

Then Inoshi nods, extending a hand. “When you’re ready, Kushina-sama.”

I let him put his hand on my head and then the transmission begins.
“Do you think that everything’s okay? Like with Sensei getting all those Zetsu clones rounded up?” Obito asked, chin in hand as he sat next to me. He looked pensive, for him, and his jaw set as soon as he finished talking.

I was about to answer that, yes, that was what first responders and sensors and the Barrier Team were for, when I was interrupted by Isobu’s chakra. I blinked, shutting my mouth with a click of teeth and immediately reaching down into my mind to find him. He didn’t try to get my attention deliberately most of the time—there was a difference between providing color commentary and giving me a metaphysical poke in the side of the head. Most of the time, I channeled his chakra when too pissed off to think about not doing it.

**Kurama just sent me a message.** Isobu growled, sounding like a slow-moving chainsaw. Or a really, really big one.

All of my attention immediately zeroed in on him, excluding all other stimuli. *What did he say?*

**He wanted to know if the man behind the attack on Konoha really is Madara Uchiha.**

_Barring yet another successor with a kekkei genkai that gives him access to the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path, and thus an army of goddamn Zetsu clones, I’m gonna have to say that it’s him._ I said coldly. _And if there’s another guy out there with the same powers, we need to put him down before he tries topping his predecessor._

Isobu gave me a brief impression of nodding, then I felt his chakra move again even as he stayed silent. Probably communicating on that other plane of existence, but leaving me out of the loop. Well. As long as the two of them were talking and not brawling…

**Kurama will lend his power to the village.** Isobu’s tails lashed the ice as he clambered out of the bay and into the glacial shelf inside my mind. _And soon, so will we._

And that was when I blinked and the trance ended, which means I came back to reality and got to see Obito waving his hand in front of my face. “Kei? Hello? Seriously, stop zoning out on me!”

I batted his hand away. “Maybe you should pick a different topic, then. I don’t need help freaking out.”

I needed to be sure the Zetsu clones were being taken out in an orderly and efficient manner. With Kurama on the job and cooperating with Kushina, then there was every chance that the response teams would be able to pick the enemy out from a crowd as long as Kushina and Kurama could sustain their working relationship. Naruto had been able to pick out White Zetsu clones like they were the most overt operatives on the planet, for hundreds of kilometers in all directions across the battlefield. Mito had been a key part of the village’s early defensive measures, back when we’d still been on the first two Hokage (supposedly because of a prophetic gift but…eh, semantics).

I didn’t think Kushina and Kurama would be able to be that effective after less than three months of work together, but miracles did happen when the Uzumaki name was invoked.

“Kei? Obito?”

Both of us looked up, startled, and ended up seeing Sensei’s face in the gigantic crystal ball. Okay, to be perfectly honest? He should not have been holding the thing that close to his face. I did not need to have the image of Sensei’s eye, magnified a hundredfold or more because he couldn’t figure out
At least it wasn’t his nose or something. (Though he did need to get some of that sleep-sand out of his eye.)

“Uh,” was Obito’s immediate, rational response. Right. “Hi, Sensei?”

“Kei, Obito, I’m calling you back to the village in four minutes exactly. Kushina’s helped us flag every enemy inside of the village, but there’s trouble with some specific targets and we don’t have enough heavy-hitters to get the big ones. Kei, your mother’s suppression team has made contact with the hospital’s Zetsu clone monster, but we’re getting reports of other creatures in the Uchiha district as well as outside of the walls. Kushina won’t be able to move, but…” Sensei hesitated. “How stable is that suppression seal? Both of you.”

Isobu?

I haven’t felt anything.

Obito wobbled a hand in midair. “It hasn’t been giving me any trouble, I guess? We might just be out of range, though.”

Sensei pulled back from the scrying crystal, giving us a chance to finally see that he was sitting at his desk. I could also see that he was the only one in the office, which explained the extreme close-up. How often had he even used that thing?

“How many Zetsu clones are there?” I asked. It had better not be—

“At least five thousand from what Suzaku Nara’s been telling me and everyone else with clearance.” Sensei’s expression went flat and grim. His fingers laced together in front of his face, reminding me of a somewhat younger and considerably more stab-happy David Xanatos. Or Gendo Ikari, theoretically. “Fewer, if you count the monsters as one big target. I don’t consider that much of a consolation prize.”

“What do you expect us to be able to do?” Obito asked, sounding more concerned than offended. “I mean, I can do Wood Release but so can they, and Kakashi’s not here. We need him for a full formation, but you have Genma and Raidō off doing other stuff too. Unless…”

Well, look at that. Obito and I winced together, but I was the one to voice the thought, “You want him to try keeping an eye out for me while I go for a chakra cloak? Sensei, that’s…”

Ill-advised? Wantonly destructive? Probably going to result in a berserk or unconscious or dead me? …Depending on Isobu’s mood and the combat rating of the first-responder team. There were degrees of badness.

Sensei shook his head. “Not immediately. See what you can do on ground level, working together. Jiraiya-sensei and Miyako-san will be heading north from the hospital with a posse as soon as they finish. Join up with them and then commence street-clearing. ANBU and more experienced teams will be cleaning up whatever and whoever you miss.”

Mostly “what,” I gathered. It was…difficult to consider the Zetsu clones people when I knew that, aside from the original, they didn’t tend toward intelligence that didn’t revolve around murder. And even that one was highly suspicious. In a “Hannibal Lector has a backwater cousin” kind of way.

“And if we run into something really bad?” Obito asked, hesitant. He elaborated with, “Because I don’t know if I can fight over Kei with someone who’s got a Mangekyō Sharingan. At all. And I
really, really don’t want to find out if I can get one.”

“Kushina hasn’t reported seeing Madara in the field. Or anyone with a Sharingan, actually.” Sensei seemed to calculate something, slotting in variables that we couldn’t see into some kind of grand math equation in his head. Maybe his genius was kicking into high gear and we were being left behind?

I was going to regret being born again, wasn’t I?

“You’re going to bait the mastermind into the field.” Fuckin’ called it. Dammit. “I’ll have seals ready for you when you arrive—spot him, and I’ll be there in a flash.”

My eyebrows rose. “Please tell me that was an intentional pun.”


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Hayate

I don’t open the door. I don’t even leave the bed. I stay as far out of trouble as I can, because there’s no way I want to get caught up in whatever is going on outside and making all that awful noise.

The noise gets closer.

Poking my head out from under the covers, I see a shadow move across the window, because of the light hitting the opposite wall.

“Something smells good…” says a voice that seems to come from just by my ear.

I freeze up under the blankets. After maybe half a second, I watch the shadow on the window move away and immediately skitter to the floor, snatching my kodachi from under my bed. I watch the shadows, eyes wide and breathing quiet only by force of will.

A man’s voice laughs and a hand’s shadow appears on the wall. “Let’s get it!”

Oh no, no, no—

The hand clenches, reaching for me, and then there’s a massive burst of light that ends in screams and hurts my eyes so much I can see stars.

“Defensive seals!” says someone, but I’m already out of my room entirely. “Search for a weakness!”

I skid down the hall on bare feet, trying to make as little noise as I can. Need to get away from the windows—

It’s not enough. The house rocks, throwing me off my feet and making me slide painfully across the kitchen floor.

The floorboards start to creak, in the middle of the living room. Something is pounding on the front door. My heart pounds against my ribs like a drum and I can feel my hands shake. The Hokage said we’d be safe—

The floorboards split with a horrible cracking noise, throwing dirt up into the air.

A white hand emerges from the dark space underneath the house, followed by an arm, a shoulder, a head—
It looks human. Kind of. But where the skin should be normal, it’s paste-white and jet-black, splitting the—the thing down the middle. It has green hair and it’s only got one real eye, with the one on the black half of its body being a flat yellowy disk.

It’s looking right at me.

“Found you!” The white half is *singing*, like this is some kind of game. Like he—it—didn’t just rip into the house like the security seals weren’t there and—

I draw my kodachi and slash the fingers off the hand that tries reaching for me.

The monochrome man blinks with his only real eye, pulling his hand back and finding four fingers missing.

“Stay away from me.” I snarl, but it sounds almost like a squeak. Suddenly, stupidly, I almost wish that my voice would crack like Obito’s because it doesn’t sound threatening at all.

The black half says, “**Naughty, naughty brat.**” still in that weirdly amused way. His voice sounds *wrong*, in a way I’ve never heard before.

His chakra feels like that weird white thing from before, the thing that tried to be Kei and failed. But at the same time there’s something *weird*, even weirder than weird, that makes the black thing creepy all on its own. There are two different types of chakra.

“W-what are you?” I hear myself ask, in a whisper. I don’t mean to say it—it just slips out!

The white half of his face grins. “I’m Zetsu, and this is Zetsu!”

The black half doesn’t. “**And you’re coming with me.**”

I scramble to my feet but the Zetsu pair are faster than I am, so I can’t use all my strength to bring the kodachi into a defensive position before he’s on me. He must weigh twice what Mom does, because even a half-meter of steel doesn’t push him back much at all.

The black half’s hand reaches out and wrenches the kodachi out of my hands without pulling it out of his chest first, making the blade groan and bend in the middle. The white half’s hand, even without fingers, takes a swipe at my head.

I duck, pivot on my supporting leg, and smash my foot into his black knee with a chakra-charged kick.

At least, that’s what I aimed for. Mom said to go for the knees, eyes, or crotch in a fight with someone I didn’t know how to beat otherwise. Kei used it back during her Chūnin Exam, so that made it *real*, made it a move that could really work. Even if she hadn’t been really outmatched by that Maito boy.

But the black arm is faster than I am again, grabbing my ankle off the ground and—

**PAIN!**

I’m screaming almost before he drops me and my broken leg to the kitchen floor. It’s broken. It has to be broken. I’ve broken a finger before and it was like this but *this is worse*, so much worse, I can’t breathe.

The black hand reaches down, grabs the collar of my shirt and pins me to the floor.
“I said you’re coming with me.” The white and black halves growl together.

The hand switches positions and the white hand comes down too, and both of them are on my throat and I can’t breathe no no no no—

Then nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title taken from the Matrix OST.
Commencement Arc: Signum Malum

Chapter Summary

Kei: Do a headless chicken impression.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kurama says the enemy will be so easy to spot that only an idiot could get it wrong. Isobu gave the impression of a shrug, which was impressive for a creature without moveable shoulders. He's using the other humans to send information across the village, so no one gets it wrong. Even the idiots. Or if they do, they can't blame him.

That's very kind of him.

I think he honestly wants to see us fail, but refuses to have it be his fault. Isobu said. He's so two-faced about it.

...True. But I'm willing to go with his goodwill for now. We don't exactly have any other way to locate the enemy troops once they've transformed, or at least I don't know of another method.

True. I'll tell you if he changes his mind. Again.

With Obito's wrist in a death-grip, I gave the signal.

There was that sensation again, like with Sensei's Flying Thunder God teleportation hax. It felt like someone stuck a hook in my gut and yanked, just for a second. Like going into free-fall or riding a rollercoaster and feeling my stomach and blood fail to keep up with the descent. I mean, better than being squished by more pounds per square centimeter than a human body could take, but I nonetheless wished that space-time ninjutsu could play nicer with passengers.

And then Obito and I popped back into reality at Tsuruya's feet.

I sat up immediately despite the sudden air-pressure-induced headache—fucking altitude differentials—and looked around.

Aside from Tsuruya's steel-sheened wings, I couldn't actually see that much at that exact moment. But I could hear things—people screaming, fire crackling, structures being wrecked—that made me sick to my stomach at the same time I kind of just wanted to get up and fly into a screaming rage directed at the nearest valid target.

Obito helped me up and I was about to get caught up in searching the burning skyline for something or other, but was interrupted by all of Tsuruya's primary feathers rattling like clashing swords.

"Keisuke-sama!" Tsuruya snapped, forcing me to look up. "You need to avoid running off until I've explained the situation."

Right, right. Tsuruya had terrible night vision, but it didn't take an owl to see what was going on in
Konoha at the moment. With Obito crouched next to me like an indecisive gargoyle, trying to figure out if I needed to be guarded or maybe fled from, I let Tsuruya's report wash over me. She settled down in front of us with her wings folded at her sides so she presented less of a target to anyone who might see us from the ground.

"Konohagakure is currently under attack by copies of the same creature encountered near the Mountain's Graveyard." Tsuruya said in a professional, yet clipped tone. "Hokage-sama has reported that they have merged into five separate plant-monsters that are tearing into neighborhoods across the village. The first of them is there"—and here, Tsuruya punctuated the statement with a jab of her beak that pointed at the hospital's barely-visible rooftop—"and is the first we will attack. None of the defenders have the high-powered jutsu necessary to take it down without losing members of their own team, so we will be reinforcing them together. No one runs away early to chase secondary objectives, Keisuke-sama."

I nodded, feeling pretty stupid. "...So. Where's Mom?"

"Miyako-san is...perhaps taking longer than expected." Tsuruya hedged. She looked at the hospital again. "If we could go and reinforce her division?"

How the fuck had Mom managed to finagle a division out of Sensei? "If she has Jiraiya with her... Actually, yeah, let's just go and start punching stupid faces in."

"I hope you aren't including me in that." Obito half-snarked, backpedaling once I shot a glare at him. "Joking, joking..."

I hurled myself over the edge of the rooftop before anyone could object. I felt Obito follow a moment later, with Tsuruya throwing herself into the night air above us.

"Hospital?" Obito asked, eyeing the distant, slightly-torched street in front of us with the kind of expression that reminded me that he was an Uchiha, and therefore really concerned about fire safety. In a specialized kind of way.

And as much as it pained me to say it, I had to turn that plan down flat. "No. Hokage's tower. Sensei had seals he had to get to us."

"Actually, Keisuke-sama..." Tsuruya trailed off, dropping to street level in front of us. She lowered her wings somewhat and I got a good look at the barely-visible bulge in her flight equipment. Technically, all of the saddle-stuff was mine, but apparently Tsuruya had decided that she needed the storage space even without me. "I have two scrolls in this pouch. Are they what you are looking for?"

Snatching them out of the saddlebag, I examined them quickly in the orange firelight. Two full sealing scrolls, with one painted gold—Sensei's color—next to the cap and the other bound with blue thread. A storage scroll? For water?

I passed the gold scroll to Obito and gave the blue-threaded one a more thorough inspection. While the lighting wasn't great, I could make out the words Dual-use. Stores up to 250,000 liters. Catch me a bad guy, Kei!

Oh what the shit, Sensei.

"I think this one's...yeah, it's all kunai." Obito's expression went flat, nonplussed. "All kunai. I think this says 'velocity' but it's all in Sensei's handwriting..."

...Flying Thunder God kunai launcher scroll. Why didn't he use this thing in the field?
"One of these days, Sensei's tendency to fight old wars will come back to bite him." I muttered under my breath. Surreptitiously, I checked under the collar of my shirt. Did...nope, Sensei's Flying Thunder God seal was still there.

"Little late for that, Kei." Obito tucked the scroll away into one of his flak jacket pockets. "All right. Do you want me in the lead?"

"...No, I probably need to be the ball-buster here. Back me up?" I straightened, putting Sensei's overkill storage scroll into one of my right-hip scroll holsters. Wouldn't need that for a bit. On the other hand, I did need my hands free.

Isobu-san?

Take whatever you need. And I think you can just call me "Isobu" from now on.

Thank you.

Isobu's chakra swirled slowly outward from the seal on my chest, spinning delicate filaments of red chakra inside my coils. Intermingling that energy with my human chakra deliberately—as opposed to in the heat of the moment—let me feel the nanosecond that my eyes changed from plain ultra-dark brown to Isobu's gold-on-red.

I'll keep an eye on things. Go.

I glanced at Obito, who gave me a thumbs up and whose Sharingan remained still, before running right for the towering white monster I could see poking past the rooftops.

Zetsu-stomping time.

I dashed through the streets with Obito trailing behind, drawing my katana with my right hand and forming a chakra scalpel projection around the blade. I found the first target—glowing red in a way I wasn't, trimmed with gold—putting a chūnin in a triangle choke and whipped around him in a quick circle before looking for the next enemy.

I heard the oddly squishy squelch as his head fell off, but didn't spend much time dwelling on it. There wasn't any blood on my sword, so I took that as a win.

"Okay, yep, that's a Zetsu clone." Obito said from behind me. "And they still bleed orange gunk. Good to know."

"Eyes on me, Obito." I reminded him, before tearing off after a fused pair of Zetsu clones and immediately separating them horizontally instead of vertically—which they might have recovered from. But no. They didn't get to have legs or lower internal organs tonight.

Obito laughed, almost hysterical, and then two kunai appeared in the foreheads of two more Zetsu clones off to my left. A second later, and another five Zetsu clones in front of me were consumed in a massive conflagration that I only escaped because Isobu was helping me.

I retreated maybe five meters, ducked under a flying corpse that neither Obito nor I had had a hand in making, and shot through the flames.

I kinda had to stab another Zetsu to death before landing properly, but I made it! Judging by the thump behind me and the lack of a burning need to kill a target on the backswing, so did Obito.

Rin's voice cut through all the noise, somehow. "Kei-senpai, over here!"
I would have gone to her immediately, but...well, shit was going down.

The area in front of the hospital was a wreck that would have made total sense as a set-piece in The Avengers. The ground was torn up and massive Poison Ivy-esque woody vines were writhing skyward through the remains of the hard-packed dirt and gravel that we used as pavement. Somehow, one of them was doing so even while on fire and with a Zetsu impaled on one of the branches. Two nearby buildings had been crushed flat and were piled high with Zetsu corpses, and an Uchiha flame suppression squad was trying frantically to douse the blazing food stands before it spread to other parts of the village.

And there, taking up space right smack in the middle of everything, was a towering monstrosity that could only have been created by Madara's crazed imagination.

It was easily fifteen meters high, shaped approximately like the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man if he had comic-book cancer, sans legs. It was a multi-ton wall of pulsating, vein-free and colorless flesh that had entirely too many eyes holy fuck—at least half of which were focused on me. Fifty beady yellow eyes searched all around the city, occasionally being blocked off by the rivulets of orange gunk spreading from its wounds. Eight vicious, oversized Venus flytrap mouths snapped sporadically at the air, trying to eat something that probably wasn't in range.

Speaking of wounds, Tsuruya flapped her wings overhead and suddenly eight more sword-sized feathers embedded themselves into the top of the creature.

I glanced at my sword. Gonna probably need a bigger blade. And the standard Rasengan wasn't big enough to cause any noticeable damage either...

"Holy shit." Obito muttered, pulling up short beside me. He stared up at the abomination in front of us, which was moving like gelatin in the vague direction of the Hokage Tower, wobbling the whole way. "Kei?"

I sheathed my katana and glared up at the monster. Well, there was more than one way to pull a weed...

Isobu's chakra welled up within my coils, properly, and I watched as my vision was steadily overtaken by a literal red haze.

"Well, if that's what you have to say..." Obito darted forward and then veered left into a leap, shooting off the ground. He ended up on a rooftop with decent lines of sight, and half of the Zetsu monster was engulfed in an orange fireball before I had time to do or say much else.

Before I could head directly into the fray and make up for lost time, though, I heard Rin's voice again. "She's over there, Miyako-san!"

I blinked, immediately looking over to my right. There, beyond the haze of dust and smoke stirred up by the Zetsu monster, were two forms—Rin, waving at me, and Mom, who wasn't.

"Mom?" I said blankly. "You...uh. You look different."

My mother nodded.

I...wasn't quite sure what I was looking at. Oh, she was pretty much the same visually—aside from the fact that her long hair was tied up in a full samurai topknot for the first time I could remember,
and that she was carrying two full-length katana. She looked a little angrier than I would have expected, with her expression pinched and guarded like a soldier going to war. Which I guess both of us were, at that moment. If the flames threw light across her face, I could see angles and a harshness to her features that I'd never noticed before.

But I could read her chakra. And Mom's chakra had always been calm, or even sedate. She didn't do things in a rush or a rage. That just wasn't her.

But in that moment, my mother's chakra blazed from the strength of the Second Gate. If I closed my eyes, I could almost visualize the faint bluish-green glow of her chakra seeping out of her skin and flowing toward both of her swords.

"Kei-chan, we could use your help." Mom said brusquely. "Jiraiya-sama's major summons are occupied, so we will have to stop this creature here and now."

Unbidden, a grin crossed my face. Isobu wanted to fight, sure, and his chakra always pushed me to be more aggressive, but this? This was the first time I'd ever fought alongside my mother in a real battle. "Ready when you are, Mom."

I stepped forward so I was standing even with Mom, once she turned back to face the Thing That Ought Not Be.

Without looking at me, Mom whispered, "Left, Kei-chan. Don't miss."

Given how big our enemy was, I had a hard time imagining that.

I let Isobu's chakra surge, channeling a major portion of it down my arm and into the edge of my katana. I felt Mom do the same, but with her First Gate shenanigans-derived energy instead.

Then Mom went to the right, I shot to the left, and we had the Zetsu creature between us. Isobu's chakra flared bright red, cloaking my entire right arm and my katana in what amounted to an aura of ridiculous cutting power.

(And since I was short one sword compared to Mom, I undid the ties on my sheath with my left hand and tried out the same chakra boost. It worked.)

*Gekko-style Leaf Kenjutsu: Mountain Cutter.*

That particular chakra-enhanced kenjutsu technique...kinda did exactly what it said it did. I mean, not on the same scale as even a *small* Tailed Beast Bomb, but using the cutting power in elemental chakra allowed the users to extend the reach of a blade. How much? Hell if I knew.

I just knew that Mom and I, spamming that technique together, could hack the Zetsu monster to pieces in a way that other attacks on it had utterly failed to achieve beforehand.

It took eight strikes—four from each of us, so two per "blade" of chakra—to hack the Zetsu fusion into manageably-sized chunks that were almost immediately obliterated in two massive bursts of orange flame.

Looking away from the light to keep from being flash-blinded, I was able to spot Obito still on the roof, breathing hard, and another figure to his right.

Asuma?

I waved, as soon as I cut myself off from Isobu's chakra and stopped glowing ominously. I mean,
what the hell else should I have done?

With the Zetsu monster down, it seemed like everyone was coming out of the woodwork. I hadn't realized there were so many chakra signatures in the area, since the Zetsu thing had been blotting them out. Like stars compared to the moon—they were there, but if you looked at the bright spot for too long, you lost track of the smaller stuff.

Besides Mom, Obito, Asuma and Rin, I could easily pick out half a dozen other people I recognized in the crowd. Tsunade, a dark-haired girl who might've been Shizune, Yamaguchi-sensei, one of Katsuyu's smaller clones, Jiraiya, and that mid-sized battle toad Gama were all there. Kurenai appeared a moment later, her red eyes nearly luminescent with reflected firelight.

…Well, at least I only had to worry about S-ranked security clearance for some of them.

"WELCOME TO OUR GLORIOUS ARMY OF RE-CONQUERING KONOHA FROM THE ARMY OF UNYOUTHFUL PUPPET-MEN!" And then I jumped, because how the fishsticks did Gai manage to sneak up on me? I whirled on the spot, but not quite fast enough to avoid the friendly arm over my shoulders and subsequent one-armed hug.

While I was being half-strangled, the crowd of army irregulars finally had a chance to approach. Given that the average age of most of them was around fourteen, I had to wonder what the hell the rest of the standing shinobi forces were doing at a time like this. The whole freaking village was under attack!

"Haven't"—ack, Gai, let go!—"seen most of you in a while!" I managed, elbowing Gai in the ribs. He ignored it. "Class reunion?"

Asuma, having hopped down to street level with Obito, said, "Actually, we're here for the evil pudding-people." He pointed at the remains of the Zetsu fusion, which was slowly losing coherency and morphing into pretty much exactly what he'd said.

"Could've sworn that most of our age group wasn't supposed to be on the streets." Obito said, looking at everyone with a speculative expression. "Asuma, what happened?"

"Before or after these things showed up?" Asuma made a show of seeming unconcerned, but I caught a hint of shakiness in his voice. His jaw clenched.

"Popped by the kiddie corner to find out half the barrier team in that area was dead. The other half was getting eaten." Jiraiya said, coming up behind Asuma and giving him a gentle thump on the shoulder with his loosely curled fist. "You did what you could."

"Tch." Asuma shrugged off the contact and went back to brooding, but at least I knew to sympathize.

"So we have created a small army of volunteers to clear the infestation while the rest of the village defeats the masses of them!" Gai finished explaining, finally letting go of me and spinning me around in place so that he could grasp both of my shoulders and say, quite seriously, "Your mother has explained that she will lead one team, while Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama will lead others. Which one will you join, Keisuke-chan?" He glances up. "Obito-kun?"

"I'm going with Mom." I said, glancing at her to confirm and getting a nod in return. "Obito's coming with me."

Obito shrugged. "I was just gonna say that. How's everyone else split up? Jiraiya-sama?"
"Raise your hands if you're with me." Jiraiya ordered, instead of letting everyone do a full roll-call.

Yamaguchi-sensei, Asuma, Kurenai, Gama and one of Katsuyu's clones (since the first one had split in the last ten seconds to form two smaller slugs) raised various appendages.

"And Tsunade-hime?" Jiraiya prompted.

Rin, Shizune, and a new figure—Aoba? —all raised their hands. Sort of an overconcentration of medics, there, but we could deal with that and Tsunade wasn't much for bleeding wounds at this stage.

"The rest"—Gai, Obito, and a third Katsuyu clone (since the second one split again) all indicated compliance there—"are with Miyako-san. We're splitting into a bunch of smaller teams since now everyone's got a heavy-hitter."

Presumably, he meant Tsunade, himself, and me.

"So, what, we're just gonna hit the nearest Zetsu until it cries?" Obito asked.

"More like until it turns into white paste." Jiraiya corrected. "No quarter."

Not like we needed to be told that.

"Each Katsuyu clone is your portable medical assistant." Tsunade informed us, once we were all quiet. "Don't lose her."

After a second's thought, I picked up the nearest Katsuyu clone, who was about the size of a loaf of bread, and put her on my flak jacket's left shoulder pad. Slugs were slimy in all worlds, but Katsuyu wasn't unpleasantly so. Just sort of cool, and maybe a bit squishy. I could put up with it in exchange for instant healing.

"Might wanna give her to someone else, Kei-kun." Jiraiya suggested. "Preferably someone who does fewer flips."

Oooooor maybe someone whose main contribution to a fight didn't involve the use of corrosive chakra. I could probably regenerate to some extent anyway, right? And since the "flip" comment disqualified Gai… "Okay. Here, Obito."

In short order, the Katsuyu clones were hanging out on Kurenai, Rin, and Obito respectively. Good enough. I had to dismiss Tsuruya, though—her eyesight was shit in the dark, and anyway she'd been using her powers all day.

We didn't do the football thing, like yelling "break!" to signal that we were all ready to go, but we split into three groups to get to business anyway. First stop for my group: the Uchiha District.

Thanks to the fact that most of the Uchiha clan and the nearby families tended to favor Fire Release techniques, the district was slightly smoldering by the time we got there. The buildings were fine, but any White Zetsu that had been found had also been torched, meaning that the streets were covered in burning, melting mayonnaise-men. While there were a few people who had tried cleaning up, melted shovels seemed to turn public opinion against the idea.

I didn't even want to ask what the burn ward was going to have to say about casualties around here.

Mom led the way into the district via rooftops, which meant that the first person we encountered was
a shinobi.

Specifically, her chakra said "Honoka Uchiha" in bright neon letters, so I was a little hesitant to say anything to draw attention to myself. She was in full ANBU uniform, complete with the black cloak that captains tended to wear, and her mask was marked with long vertical strokes of red paint, indicating that her call-sign was "Badger," exactly like her summon.

I wasn't sure if that was something that ANBU did deliberately, or if she'd gone out and found a summoning contract to match her mask.

"ANBU-san, we're here under orders from the Hokage." Mom said in her command voice, which was in a lower register than I could pull off. "Point out the enemy and we'll reinforce your attack on it."

Honoka seemed to give me a long look, ignoring Mom entirely. Then she looked at Mom, whose chakra was steadily creeping upward from "battle-ready" to "killer ready to pounce," which had everyone else looking at her as well.

"We're waiting." Mom said in a flat tone, devoid of patience.

Behind me, I could feel Gai and Obito close ranks with me even if they didn't know what was going on. Gai hadn't been involved in that mission and Obito had been resting in the hospital, so it might've seemed like unexplained hostility to them.

Honoka had a reason to be pissed off at me, but not enough to fly with Mom.

Honoka nodded, turning away from us and leaping to the next rooftop. Without much else to do—though I could sense the Zetsu fusion easily enough, I wasn't supposed to go stepping on anyone's toes—we followed her all the way to the Military Police outpost that was closest to the northern gate into Konoha. There, a twelve-meter Zetsu combination monster was being alternately set on fire by the remaining MPs or having its ankles hacked at by Uchiha clan members of various other affiliations.

I heard Obito inhale sharply—these people were his coworkers. I had no idea how to gauge how many had died, since I didn't know any of them, but Obito clearly had an inkling.

"Can you seal fire?" Honoka asked me in a sharp tone, looking down at the scroll holsters on my belt all of a sudden.

Without specific allowances for Amaterasu's ever-burning flames that consumed normal fire? "Not if you're gonna do what I think you're gonna do."

Down at street level, someone using an unusual weapon—is than an axe?—had hacked one of the Zetsu fusion's legs off and was trying to get at the body's vital organs while the creature hopped around on one leg for a while. Little did he know that the Zetsu clones, as a rule, didn't have any, meaning that big techniques and decapitation were the way to go.

"It looks like you have the situation under control." Mom said, her voice dry as dust. "It must be much easier to find the enemy when they're so obvious."

Mom? Might not want to pick a fight with the ANBU captain, even if she really doesn't like me.

"I think we should leave you two to figure out jurisdiction." Obito piped up, still looking down at the wreck that had once been the MPs' northern outpost. "Kei, Gai? Let's finish that one off. He's not getting anywhere."
The axe-wielding shinobi had progressed to playing whack-a-mole with the Zetsu fusion's heads, though he wasn't making any headway.

I nodded at Obito and dropped down to street level, while Gai darted to and fro to get a better look at the downed Zetsu monster.

While he did that, I took stock of our new set of allies.

In the street behind the axe-wielding lunatic with zero risk-assessing skills and an epic red mustache, there was a small posse of shinobi I hadn't really noticed before. They weren't glowing red, which meant they were probably free of any Zetsu infiltrators.

I drew my katana anyway, but held it loosely at my side. The Zetsu combo-monster wasn't going anywhere, not once Obito opened up and set the entire creature on fire. Honoka hopped off the roof and added her reddish-white flame to the pyre after a moment's pause, and Mom joined us after that.

Was it really that unusual to have someone who could torch the whole monster at once? Apparently so.

I went back to assessing the "crowd." Off the top of my head, I could pick out two Uchiha clan members who looked kind of familiar, but the rest were new to me. Too old to be in my age group, but too young to be in Mom's for the most part. Maybe they were MPs?

Gai wandered over, since it wasn't advisable to kick flaming monstrosities (no matter that he'd probably do so as an adult), and said brightly, "Enomoto-san, Maekawa-san! How glorious to see you again in our time of need!"

The guy whose mustache probably had knives in it turned around and saluted Gai, grinning with the axe slung over his shoulder. "Gai-kun! I was worried you wouldn't be able to join in the fun."

Maekawa was apparently the teal-haired kunoichi near the front of the group, who adjusted her glasses before saying, "I'd have expected that you'd be considered underage, Gai-kun."

"So...who're your friends?" I asked, since it wasn't like I had anything else to do.

"Ah, these two are Natsuki Maekawa and Nori Enomoto!" Gai said cheerfully, indicating each of them in turn.

Natsuki looked vaguely familiar, but I wasn't quite sure where I'd seen her before. I would have probably have remembered the war-hammer she used as a weapon—most weapons, as far as I could tell, didn't tend to have a decal forged into the metal. Hers looked like a sideways colon with a capital D under it—a rather worryingly happy symbol, given that it was also weeping whitish gunk that probably used to be inside a Zetsu clone. She was shorter than I was, and probably shorter than the haft of her weapon, though it didn't seem to bother her.

Nori was equally short—unusual for adult men—and had the aforementioned epic mustache with some serious metal-work woven into it. It was like Cousin It had decided to shave everything but the hair on his head, and as a result I couldn't tell what eye color he had under the ginger mane. The axe he used was about the size of Gai's whole torso, which was another one of those things that seemed kind of impossible until you saw it in real life.

"That doesn't tell me how you know them." I said blankly.

"We are neighbors, Keisuke-chan! We have trained for great strength and endurance on many occasions!" Gai enthused. "It is good to see that many villagers have nonetheless escaped the enemy
and are fighting back!"

I was about to say something, possibly to congratulate the newly-identified fellow fitness enthusiasts who somehow survived Gai’s training regimen, but I lost momentum before I even started. Obito had walked up next to me and, instead of the Gai-like happiness at finding clan members alive and well that I expected from him, just gave an irritated grunt upon spotting the two Uchiha men in the group.

"Obito?" I said blankly, but he shook his head. Katsuyu slid up his shoulder and peered at us with her stalk-eyes, trying to figure out what was going on and failing.

So I gave the Uchiha men a second look.

Where…?

Obito sighed. "It's Yoshi and Matsumaru, Kei."

I did a sharp double-take, while the two of them snickered.

I hadn't actually seen Obito's childhood bullies in years, though the repercussions of their existence had pretty much made up the first year of our acquaintance outside of school. I mean, Matsumaru and Yoshi had stopped being relevant at about the time that Obito and I became Minato’s students for realsies. After the Sorayama C-rank and the Chūnin Exams, but before we actually got promoted.

I never really considered that these two would consider still bothering Obito after his "death."

Yoshi was the shorter of the two, with a large, round nose that was somewhat unusual among Konoha citizens and short-trimmed black hair. He had dark eyes, like pretty much every Uchiha in existence, but I wasn't sure if he had activated his Sharingan. I mean, I could have checked in with Sensei about it—theoretically—but the inability to muster a single damn to give had kind of made me forget.

The taller, lankier one was Matsumaru. In the years since I'd cared if he existed, he'd let his hair grow out and tied a braid off with a white ribbon at the bottom. He had the Sasuke/Izuna-like pale complexion and an unlined face, along with a wide, full mouth that seemed to be built for sneering (like he was doing at that moment). He was also a fair bit prettier than I was, in a way that I generally expected more from the Hyūga clan.

I tilted my head to one side, trying to decide if I wanted to retroactively punch their teeth in or not. Or, more importantly, if Obito wanted me to try it.

Obito shook his head. "It's all right"—more laughter from Yoshi and Birdo here—"really."

Then what was with the continual creepy laughter?

…Waaaaaait a minute. Wait a goddamn minute. This was straight out of the childhood bully playbook. I couldn't really remember why I got that feeling, but I did know that I'd seen it used before and had thought it was petty a long time ago.

No.

**Establish dominance!**

I was about to follow through on that, which probably would have resulted in a suspension because Yoshi and Matsumaru were likely a rank lower than I was and we were in public. It probably would have taken the edge off the bad mood I was in, though.
And then a clear contralto voice cut through it all and snapped, "Yoshi, Matsu, shut the fuck up."

Though I couldn't see her face, Honoka felt annoyed. "Take the juvenile pissing match somewhere else." She jerked her chin. "Chiharu, get over here and be useful. Enomoto, Maekawa, calm down."

"ANBU-san—!" And that was as far as Yoshi got.

Honoka ignored him and gestured to Mom, who was doing the thing where her chakra was nearly strong enough to be visible thanks to the Second Gate. "Chiharu, you're with Gekkō. Enomoto, Maekawa, you too. Track down Kiyotaka on your way to the Inuzuka clan area."

I looked at Mom, who nodded.

That brought our roster up from me, Gai, Obito, Katsuyu, and Mom to all of the above plus Gai's sparring partners and a random Uchiha who looked a little out of his depth at best. I assumed that Honoka could rally enough other members of her clan and random neighbors, in addition to any other ANBU members she might have had waiting in the wings (whom I had not seen), and finally get the Uchiha district extinguished properly and root out all the goddamned Zetsu clones. If not… well, that was what the full counteroffensive was for.

I spared the ANBU captain a backward glance before we were off to fight the next Zetsu monster in the village.

She didn't look back.

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**Something's wrong.** Isobu said, when we were about halfway to the fourth giant marshmallow distraction.

I killed my forward momentum by landing on a water tower for somebody's apartment. It had been maybe an hour since the mission started, and two more Zetsu monsters had been violently disassembled by both my team and by others, with the occasional death roars being audible from across the village as they occurred.

*What is?* I asked him, as my team—new team, whatever—slowed down and then hopped a few rooftops to get back to me.

While Isobu prodded experimentally at his link to Kurama, I sat down on the top of the water tower and peered through the night at the cityscape. We were making progress, occasionally in spite of ourselves, and the glowing Zetsu clones weren't presenting much of a challenge when you could pick them out like a bunch of white whales on a black backdrop. Well, the monster Zetsu was over…yep, over by the Nara clan. It was probably getting dismembered while we were just heading that way.

I let my thoughts drift a bit, more away from Isobu and toward my team.

Gotta say, Chiharu Uchiha didn't really have anything to recommend him. Typical Uchiha build, typical Uchiha skill-set, and no outstanding skills—aside from the Sharingan, which apparently didn't get much use since he was a bureaucrat. Who the hell was this Kiyotaka person that Honoka wanted him to find, anyway?

Isobu rumbled, in something like a warning. **Kurama stopped responding to me.**

Oh, not good.
"Mom, I think we're gonna have a problem”—because something going wrong with the Nine-Tailed Fox was a recipe for disaster—"if we don't already."

"How so?" Mom asked, hopping up onto the water tower with me. But she was facing the wrong way.

I, however, was looking down toward the city. And I saw all the red lights—Kushina highlighting where the White Zetsu clones were positioned—wink out. Even the gold-flecked red of the Zetsu monsters off in the distance.

…*Fuck*. I slid down off the water tower and peered out into the dark. *Isobu, the Zetsu-warning system we had just cut out.*

**The two things are related.** Isobu concluded.

*Well, there's correlation and causation, and this is both. "Katsuyu, get in contact with Tsunade-sama. Something's happened to Kushina-san. Mom?"*

Mom didn't say anything.

"Mom?"

Mom wasn't standing next to me anymore. She had descended to street level while I had been talking to Isobu, leaving me talking to empty air. What would…?

This was *my* neighborhood. I could even…see my house…

"Kei?" Obito's voice sounded like it was coming from above water.

He—he might have gone to the shelters, right? I-it's supposed to work like that. The kids hide behind major defensive seals inside bunkers and wait this kind of thing out. It happened during the Chunin Exam invasion!

The house's front door has been smashed open from the inside. I could see that much, once Mom disappeared inside.

But—but Jiraiya had said the seals were compromised by Zetsu clones. That was the only reason half my damned age group was out on the streets and rounding up the invaders as best we could. There couldn't have—where the hell *was* he?

I didn't really notice when I reached street level, but I found myself stumbling over something in the entranceway and stopping to pick it up.

Hayate hadn't gotten a katana yet. I mean, I'd taken until I was fourteen to get one, and I was probably in the middle of a growth spurt. Hayate wasn't—he wasn't even twelve—but he *did* have a sword.

Which was bent into an L-shape in my hands, right above the guard.

"Do your best to contact the Hokage, Katsuyu-chan." Obito said to the slug on his shoulder. He followed me through the front door a second later. His voice dropped when he surveyed the damage, and he put his hand against my back as though to hold me upright. "Kei, where is he?"

I wordlessly held the kodachi out to him. Or what was left of it. The ten centimeters closest to the tip of the blade were coated in orange-flecked white Zetsu gunk.
"Another team's just arrived—Tsunade-sama—!"

I didn't hear any of whatever else Chiharu was trying to say.

I pushed past Obito and headed back out to the street. There were more people than there should have been, but I didn't care. Mom was in the house, but she wouldn't find Hayate. I couldn't feel him. And if she did find him in there, I didn't want to look. There was no way—and I bit down on the nascent scream of rage before it could start.

I was going to find my brother, and I was going to track down whoever had taken him away. And then I was going to kill the everliving fuck out of everything that tried to get into my way for the rest of the night.

All that escaped my throat was a monstrous growl that owed its depth and resonance to Isobu. The rage, though? That was all me.

"Kei, we can't leave everyone right now." Obito reminded me, with a healthy dose of hesitation.

I couldn't even begin to articulate how little I cared about that in the moment.

"Kei, don't make me do this." Obito's eye was wide and blazing red, his Sharingan spinning.

I didn't give him a second glance after that. It would have cut everything short.

I had already bitten my nails to the quick several hours ago, making them bleed just slightly. Maybe a drop of blood had been lost between then and the moment I decided that Sensei's order could go hang. Obito might've been my handler, or maybe my leash, but he wasn't really the boss of me.

Holding my brother's bent kodachi limply in my left hand, I felt Isobu's chakra spread throughout my body in a flood. In another few seconds, that chakra leaked out from my chest at first before coating me in a foot-thick combat aura that might've started trying to dissolve me. With a thought, I drew on Isobu's chakra and gave it a twist, solidifying the energy into a projected shape.

Obito backed away. I stood up straight and examined my upper arms with a sort of detached curiosity. They were guarded by solid chakra manifestations—fragments of Isobu's spiky shell—that attached to my shoulders like old samurai armor. As I watched, the armor spread downward and covered my forearms as well, without restricting my movements.

Heh. My first partial transformation and no tails were involved at all! I'd honestly expected to go all V2 chakra cloak and immediately murder the nearest thing with a pulse.

"Kei, don't do this." Obito pleaded, his voice cracking in the middle.

I turned to look at him.

Rin was next to him, her brown eyes wide and dark with fear. She refused to cry or panic, but tension was writ large in every line of her body and her jaw was clenched tightly. Her hand was clasped in Obito's normal one, and she didn't back away as I looked at her like she was some kind of bug. I didn't even know when she'd arrived, but there wasn't a single scrap of her that could take me in a fight and I knew it.

Obito seemed somehow older, with a set to his jaw and body that made his own fear obvious. His eye remained its normal plain black instead of the Sharingan's red I expected, and he seemed to be crying in spite of himself. He was afraid, so terribly afraid, and in the grip of Isobu's chakra and my own pain it didn't matter.
Distantly, I noticed that everyone aside from Obito and Rin had elected to keep their distance.

And...and the only reason everyone was acting like this was because of me. Me and my stupid lack of self-control. Me and my anger.

Me and my fear.

I didn't do or say anything for a long moment, frozen by their scrutiny and their bravery in spite of the danger I represented to everyone around me.

"I'm not going on a rampage." I told them, before stopping and blinking in startled surprise at how deep my voice had become with Isobu's influence. I tried to start again, wondering how I could have come so close to losing my shit entirely. Hayate was missing—and I could still feel my blood boil at the thought—but I could still do something. I could still rely on other people to do something.

Then something very odd happened.

Mom emerged from the house. Mom spotted everyone else.

And then Mom cut Rin's head off her shoulders in a single stroke.

I watched the head topple in slow motion. I. I just.

WHAT.

Obito shrieked, "WHAT THE FU—"

The—the head it was—

Zetsu. No, how—

Kushina-san!

"AAAAAAUGH!"

I whipped my head around so quickly I almost got whiplash, and was just in time to catch Gai—who had been thrown off the roof by Enomoto. Maekawa hit the ground hard five meters way, and I got to see the Tsunade-Zetsu tear a chunk out of Chiharu's throat with her—its—teeth. "Her" long blonde hair fell away, revealing the putty-like creature underneath with a vengeance while our teammate choked to death on his own blood.

Shit shit shit.

Obito lashed out, impaling the Tsunade-Zetsu on a massive Wood Release projection that branched off and stabbed through the ones pretending to be Yamaguchi-sensei and Shizune. Enomoto was down—and headless—by the time Mom, Gai and I managed to catch up and put down the remaining Zetsu clones with extreme prejudice.

Six seconds of combat without someone pulling IFF duty and half our team was dead.

Jesus fuck.

Maekawa planted the spiked end of her hammer in the Rin-Zetsu's gut, swearing under her breath.

I had my hand on Gai's shoulder, who was panting not from exertion but from shock. Aside from the thing I heard about his dad, I wasn't sure he'd ever been in a fight that was so much like Sensei's—
wham, bam, corpses everywhere in a flash.

Isobu, what the fuck happened to Kurama?

I don't know. And I can't exactly tell anyone to track him down!

Point. Okay. Deeep breath.

"Gai"—and apparently I was still using enough of Isobu's chakra that my voice sounded like Jennifer Hale's or something—"hang in there. I need to get someone to make a call."

"Already did, Kei." Obito said. "I think."

After a second or two, Gai straightened up and seemed to shake the fear off entirely. His chakra was still jumpy, but he'd pushed most of the fear behind a curtain of bravado that would probably serve him better than my Isobu-influenced rage.

Speaking of. The last thing I needed was to have my brain marinating in the emotional equivalent of anabolic steroids.

You'll get rid of that armor when I say you can.

…Oookay then.

"Mom, what are we going to do?" I asked her, since she'd identified the Zetsu clone off-hand and dealt with the Rin-Zetsu immediately.

Mom looks in the direction of the Hokage tower. "Why did you stop?"

Earlier? "Isobu says that something happened to Kushina-san. She was helping us."

From Mom's expression, I could guess that she could guess the rest of that statement. Being able to spot Zetsu clones while they were disguised was not a common skill. Not in a village as big as ours. But Mom had done it anyway.

Was there some way to apply that to finding Hayate?

Obito was holding the Katsuyu clone in both hands, as though she was a cat or a small dog instead of a slug summon (and component of a creature that made kaijū look tiny). "Katsuyu-chan, how about we talk to the real Tsunade? Or Sensei. Sensei would be better."

"Uzumaki-san must have been compromised." Mom mused aloud, but quietly. "The question is: how?"

"—and half our team just died—" Obito went on in the background.

"Why Uzumaki-san?" Gai asked blankly. "And who is Isobu? Has someone been following us?"

"Why would the Hokage's wife be in danger?" Maekawa asked.

"—so we could really use some help even if it's just to move everyone—"

Did I look like I cared? "Gai, Maekawa-san, not right now. I'll explain later if we're not all dead." I turned my attention back to Mom. "How did you know Rin was a fake?"

"—and the enemy stopped what Kushina-san was doing somehow—"
"Her chakra didn't flow correctly." Mom told me. "But we need to find your brother, now."

I nodded, though I didn't really understand how the hell her sensing ability worked so differently from mine. I couldn't tell the Zetsu clones apart from the real people they disguised themselves as. But there were other, pressing problems. "Obito, can I speak to Katsuyu-san?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure. I'm not totally sure if this is getting through to anyone, since the other teams might be under attack, but...well it's not like you need anyone else. Do you know what's going on?" Obito asked, but he was looking at the armor. That wasn't important. Getting information to Sensei was.

"Distract Gai and Maekawa-san, please." I said to both him and to Mom, rather than answering. Mom's eyebrows went up, but Obito just nodded. I had to have a reason, right?

Whatever. I sat down on the nearest available surface—the bench in the garden—with Katsuyu on my left thigh. Where the hell was I even gonna start?

"Katsuyu-san, does every one of you hear everything each clone hears?" I asked her.

Katsuyu lifted her head and shook it from side to side, which just looked weird considering that her head wasn't really accompanied by a neck, per se. "No. The largest mass will hear the most information. It's very difficult to keep things organized otherwise."

I kind of hoped that the largest mass in Konoha was hanging out with either Sensei or Tsunade. "Where is that one?"

"With Hokage-sama. Tsunade-sama will be informed as well." I assumed that part was because Tsunade was the slugs' contractor, and therefore too important to leave out of the loop. That would work for me.

So I went and blitzed right through in the lowest voice I could. "Sensei, the Zetsu clones must have somehow figured out that someone was making their jobs harder. Kushina-san is the only one who makes sense as a target because while it's not common knowledge that she's Kurama's host, she's related to the late Mito-sama and Kurama's ability to detect evil wasn't exactly a secret." I took a breath. Needed to force the anger back before I did something everyone would regret. "And...I don't know if this part is true. It's speculation at this point. But something tore through the wards at my house. My brother's missing. And I know that Madara and the Zetsu collective have to know that I'm Isobu's host. The two facts might not be connected, but everyone else who's been killed by the Zetsu clones was killed on the spot." And eaten.

And there was more. There was always more, and I hated Madara and his plans so much. "You already know that Madara—or Tobi—was planning on releasing Kurama on Konoha to flatten it. There's some kind of sealing array someplace outside of Konoha that makes it easier, but I don't know how much difference an hour makes when it comes to stabilizing Kushina-san's seal. Alternatively, Madara might be banking on using my brother's life to lure me into the same damned trap because my seal is weaker than Kushina-san's, and thus would take less effort to break." What else, what else? Realizing that Sensei was probably about to get up and go storm the enemy stronghold personally, I went on rapidly, "There's a special Zetsu there with unknown powers, Sensei. The original White Zetsu should be with—with the hostages, if anywhere, but I don't know what the Black Zetsu attached to it can do." More Wood Release? "Advanced Wood Release at a minimum, plus whatever ground-melding abilities it might have used to get into the village."

I paused again, and this time I actually looked around at the rest of the street. Strangely unoccupied, but maybe we just hadn't been spotted? Fuck if knew how anyone could miss us. I was still throwing off Isobu's chakra thanks to the armor he'd given me.
"Did he get all of that, Katsuyu-san?" I asked.

"I think so, Keisuke-san." Katsuyu said. "He's not in the office anymore, and he took the Katsuyu split with him."

"Good." Hm… "Is there a Katsuyu with Kushina-san?"

**Kurama didn't mention it.**

**Would he bother?**

"There was," Ominous much? "Kushina-san seems to be gone, and the Katsuyu is trying to heal everyone else. Tsunade-sama is providing chakra."

Wait. Who would Sensei trust to look after…?

*Did Kurama bitch about someone with a Sharingan? Singular?*

**…Yes. Why?** A pause from Isobu, followed by, *That boy again?*

ARGH. "Obito, I think Kakashi's in trouble."

And as though on cue, an earthquake shook the village in a way that wasn't entirely natural, throwing up massive quantities of dust and flinging housing bits up into the air *from across the village wall what the fuck.*

**…Was Nagato on the security detail?**

**The Rinnegan boy? Yes.**

So, my to-do list was as follows, in order of importance to self. Sort of. Past the first three, it got a bit blurry.

Rescuing Hayate.

Checking up on Kakashi.

Helping Sensei rescue Kushina.

Defeat various Zetsu clones until the original pops up, and then smite him.

Secure the village from external threat.

Maybe talk Nagato out of pancaking Konoha by accident? Didn't quite count as an *external* threat…

I pinched the bridge of my nose. With a list like that, we'd better get started.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's song title is from the Puella Magi Madoka Magica soundtrack.
Commencement Arc: Nunquam Vincar

Chapter Summary

Everyone: Fight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No offense intended to, um, everyone else in existence. But when my brother was in trouble, I remained aware of everything else that was supposed to cross my mind, thanks to Isobu's constant reminders. I just didn't especially care. Nagato could have been violently gravity-smashing enemy summon creatures to death right next to me and I probably still would have ignored him. Mostly.

I needed to find Hayate.

Which would require flaking out on Sensei's orders. On the Hokage's orders, when Konoha was already in crisis mode and, per the slug communication system, the Hokage in question had already skived off the job in pursuit of something else.

"Kei, you're doing that thing where you look like you really want to say something but think you're gonna get in trouble," Obito commented from the street. Somehow, I wasn't surprised that he could read my expressions that well.

I felt Mom's hand on my head. So much for having them run interference with Gai and Maekawa.

After a second or two, Mom knelt in front of me and cupped my face in her hands. "How long have you been holding all of that back?" I couldn't tell if it was amazement or shock in her voice, so I didn't guess. "Tell me. How long have you known all of these things?"

I tried not to make eye contact. "I… I didn't know you were listening." Which wasn't an answer, but I had a predisposition toward evading rather than being direct anyway.

"It was harder not to," Mom told me. "Look at me, please?"

It didn't have the snap of command, but I obeyed anyway. Mom smiled somewhat uncertainly, then wrapped me in a hug that had me crushed against her chest for the most part. I managed to hook my chin over her shoulder, to use my shaking arms to squeeze around her ribs.

"I don't know where you learned everything I heard," Mom said in a whisper, "but you sound like you're doing as much good as you can with it." A soft huff of a laugh. "Is there anything in that steel-trap of a mind to help us find your brother, Kei-chan?"

Yes. Yes, there was.

"I…I think so." Okay, I needed to think it through carefully. Theoretically… "Mom, the thing you do with sensing, can you find Hayate?"

Mom pulled back and shook her head. "No, Kei-chan. My range is only five meters at best." Her eyes were very dark, but I didn't know what was behind them. "Yours is better, isn't it?"
"Yeah. But I… I don't know where the ritual site is." The manga had been unhelpfully vague on that point, and no one ever established what Tobi's maximum teleportation range was. I knew that Sensei had a maximum range, but I'd never figured out what it was (other than being measured in kilometers).

Mom seemed to sag a bit.

"I think I can find out," I hastened to reassure her. "But… I'm not sure if you're gonna be happy with how I do it. Sensei will probably want to kill me, but…"

"We'll deal with the consequences together," Mom said. The corner of her mouth quirked up. "And I've already seen you in the grips of a Tailed Beast's rage. There's nothing you can do that will scare me off now. I'm your mother, after all."

_Oh, Mom. I'm far from the worst thing this night can possibly throw at us._ I tried to laugh, but it turned into a choked-off sob halfway through. No tears, thankfully, but my throat constricted like someone was trying to choke me and I couldn't say anything.

Mom pressed her forehead to mine. "Shhhh, shhhh. We'll get through this, just you wait. We'll get your brother back safe and sound. Just take a few deep breaths. Then we'll hear your plan."

Okay.

Mom let go of me and let me stand up on my own. Isobu's chakra receded somewhat, pulling the armor he'd created back into my coils to conserve my strength. There was a limit to how much of his energy I could use per day, or week or whatever. And since I wasn't getting jumped by anything like a Zetsu, Isobu felt secure enough to back off a bit. Possibly.

"Keisuke-chan, what is our next move?" Gai asked, pushing past Obito to speak to me directly.

"Well, we can't spot the enemy ahead of time like we have been." I made a show of crossing my arms and thinking about it. Doing so just about hid my trembling. "So we need to go straight to the source."

"The source?" Maekawa asked blankly. "Every one of those things is coming from a single point? That seems highly unlikely…"

"But it's true," Obito told her. "But… Kei, I don't know if you're going to be able to find it. I had to give Sensei directions, and it still got away."

"We're not searching for it," I corrected Obito after thinking about it. If Sensei couldn't track it… No. "But we can probably track Hayate."

"How?" Obito asked.

I gave Gai and Maekawa a quick glance, then decided that I didn't care about revealing extra details about the whole Tailed Beast thing. They'd seen the partial transformation, and maybe whatever other crazy things I'd done recently that didn't matter anymore. They'd be fine if they hadn't run for the hills already.

"I can use Isobu's chakra to expand my sensing range. Good enough?" I'd done it before, back when my spiritual energy had been going gleefully insane and destroying my precision chakra control. I could do it again. "The downside is that everything is also going to know where we are."

If they didn't already. Isobu's chakra was many things, but "subtle" wasn't one of them. But if Mom
hadn't whipped out her katana and gone on a limb-chopping spree, we were probably fine. 

"Isobu? You mean the Tailed Beast." Maekawa frowned. "You shouldn't...how do you know you can trust it?"

"I believe that if Keisuke-chan believes that she can do it, she can trust whomever she wishes!" Gai interrupted. "We have been fighting alongside Keisuke-chan and her invisible companion all night, and have suffered no strange disasters. I believe in her!"

Taken aback, it was all I could do to choke out, "...T-Thanks, Gai." I swallowed. "I'll do my best."

"Find us a path, Keisuke-chan! Then we..." Here, Gai paused, just for a second. There was a hesitation in him, which I hadn't seen before. "Then we may lay ghosts to rest!"

I nodded. He was probably talking about everyone who had died here, but it was also an apt description of Madara at this point in the timeline. A shell of a man, holding on through bitterness and a burning desire to see the world ground down under his heel.

He deserved every inch of payback anyone could muster.

Mom gestured for me to get on with it. Maekawa still looked a bit nervous, but eh.

And Obito? Obito gave me a thumbs-up, as Katsuyu crawled back up onto his shoulder.

Right, then.

Isobu?

**Whenever you're ready.**

I closed my eyes.

Gentler than I'd been interacting with that corrosive energy all night, I teased scraps of it free of the seal. Filaments of Isobu's chakra seeped into my chakra coils very slowly, weaving through my lighter, human chakra like a needle through cloth. I teased our energies apart and then together in my mind's eye, maintaining the Snake seal with my actual hands.

What was once blue—my water-aligned chakra—started becoming ever-so-slightly purple in my synesthesia-affected brain. I could feel Isobu reinforcing what I had rather than just flooding my coils like he did if there was a crisis, and I could "see" him lounging around on the glacier shelf in my head.

And now breathe out.

I did.

Where are you, little brother?

A constellation in my mind's eye—deceptively simple, with the brightest points of light standing out in the dark. I could sense most of the chakra signatures in the village, but only as vague blurs. More powerful chakra—the Zetsu monsters when massing together, Jiraiya, Tsunade, some village jōnin—was brighter. Little stars were lit up across the planetarium inside my head, which might have given Isobu an interesting view when he looked up. When it came to Hayate, though, I could tell where he was without any further prompting.
Fifteen kilometers that way.

And there, midway between here and Hayate, were rapidly moving lights that seemed to be heading in that direction. Isobu roused in my mindscape, looking at the one that gleamed red in the dark—Kurama?—and the gaggle of other shooting stars in pursuit.

The big, clunky one with a throbbing bass-line felt like Nagato. Other lights were snuffed out next to him, a lot.

And the little bright light, white in the dark… Kakashi.

…A rescue mission would be more practical with him and the others on board…

I opened my eyes. "I found everyone."

"Well, then what are we waiting for?" Obito asked with a grin. "Lead the way, Kei."

"Leading the way" meant that my team didn’t so much join Kakashi’s fight as hit it like a freight train. This was not, however, to say that someone wasn’t already doing just that by the time we got there. Nagato could probably throw actual freight trains around once he got going, but a jinchūriki tearing into the enemy’s flank did some good in terms of spreading the destruction around.

It was followed shortly by Kakashi’s lightning-streaked kunai cutting through the Zetsu directly in front of Obito, Obito bouncing off its corpse to get at the one trying to sneak up on Gai (who was pinwheeling through the air and kicking Zetsu clones halfway across the battlefield and to their deaths). Mom used another shot of the Mountain Cutter jutsu (though I wasn’t sure if you could call it one, since it wasn’t a ninja technique) to carve through four Zetsu clones at once, while Maekawa brought her hammer down on a clone’s face hard enough to leave a three-meter crater underneath the point of impact.

And me?

I pounced on the Zetsu that was trying to blindside Nagato and tore it to shreds with my bare hands. Well, my Isobu-enhanced hands. It wasn’t like Isobu had claws or, say, legs to help me with any fiddly stuff.

All of our effort was promptly made trivial when Nagato got his breath back, opened his eyes, and threw one hand out to his right like he was trying to direct a symphony.

A thirty-meter-long cone of…of space suddenly opened up in that direction—Nagato’s technique had smashed everything else aside. Where there had once been trees, earth, and possibly hidden Zetsu clones, there was suddenly nothing but a massive furrow in the ground that Isobu probably could have sat in if he wasn’t picky about space.

But beyond that massive trench, in the trees and in the dark, I could see the white blobs in the distance that indicated the enemy was close and didn’t much care who it was spotted by.

How to contain an entire mob of Zetsu clones, simply and easily?

…Ooooh, idea.

I raised my voice a bit to say, "Someone find me a live Zetsu!"

A groaning Zetsu clone was promptly flung in my direction, but by Kakashi instead of Maekawa.
I put both of my hands on its head and concentrated. Seal lines spread from my fingers and wove down its face and neck and shoulders, coalescing into a series of explosive seals. Together, they were some of the strongest instant seals I was capable of creating on this scale. I'd incorporated as much Lightning and Fire as I could manage, though Water's power to dissolve chemical bonds and the like would also make the results more fun.

They were also on a timer.

I shoved the Zetsu away, toward Nagato. "Nagato, aim at the horde."

Nagato looked at the Zetsu, peered at the seals, and automatically winced. Being on a team with Konan had probably giving him a thoroughly practical education in things that went boom, so I wasn't surprised that he didn't try to touch it. Exhaling loudly, he grabbed the Zetsu clone with his gravity-manipulating power and did... something to it. I didn't know what, but there was a lot of chakra involved.

Then that same Zetsu clone was shooting toward the enemy massing in the distance. It was probably like seeing an RPG heading straight for some distant target—the projectile was visible half because it was huge and half because it was moving just slowly enough to be visible but not slow enough to react to. The Zetsu, upon clipping the ground at the end of its shallow arc, knocked a cloud of dust into the air in a huge plume and skidded to a stop somewhere in the middle of everything.

Kakashi brought his hands together and, with Obito working alongside him for the first time in what felt like a month, brought the Earth Release: Earth Wall jutsu to bear.

Hiding behind a wall of compacted earth and stone, none of us saw the explosion go off. I didn't even want to think about looking. We felt the air pressure change, with wild winds whipping up whirlwinds of dust and debris in the wake of the ear-ringing explosion.

And I felt it when a decent chunk of the clone army—all the little lights in my mind's eye—were violently snuffed out.

I felt like Kimblee for about four seconds, then tried not to think about it once the urge to make a nihilistic quip didn't manifest.

As the dust settled, I got a chance to take stock of things.

Nagato stood up, peeking over the edge of the Earth Wall. His hair was about three centimeters shorter on the left side of his head compared to the right; the bright red abruptly terminated in burned fragments right around his earlobe, indicating a near-miss. His Akatsuki cloak collar was similarly scorched, but he didn't look injured. Mostly, he looked pissed off. Even as I watched, he made a hissing noise between his teeth and climbed over the wall, stomping off to finish off whatever stragglers might remain in Konoha's newest artificial clearing.

Kakashi, while he'd decided to stand up at the same time, was somewhat worse for the wear compared to our resident god-ninja. In addition to a generous speckling of blood across the gray vest of his uniform, one of his forearm guards was cracked down the middle and the same arm was sluggishly dripping blood from a cut I couldn't see. His Sharingan was closed when he looked at me, and it wasn't just because I could see sweat dripping down his face. He felt tired.

Gai saved me from having to say anything, because he could break the ice as easily as he broke other people's bones. "My eternal rival, how joyous it is to see you again!"

And, despite what I'd been expecting, I watched as the tension slowly bled out of Kakashi's stance.
When Gai hit him with one of those complimentary friendly shoulder-slaps that could knock the wind out of the unsuspecting, Kakashi just rolled with it.

He even relaxed further when Gai decided that he needed a friendly arm around his shoulders.

Either Gai and Kakashi had a Thing, or he was seriously not on top of his game. Or maybe there was another possibility. Gai is to Kakashi as Obito is to Kei? Shitty analogy, but...

I reached over and pushed Obito's drooping jaw up with one finger. While I could appreciate a good and comedic jaw drop on principle, now was not the time to gawk.

"What happened to you?" I asked, giving the blood spatter a pointed look.

"Most of it isn't mine," Kakashi replied, easing himself out of Gai's grip. "The Zetsu clones hit the Barrier Team building. Genma and Raidō went down fighting, but the enemy escaped with Kushina-sama. Nagato-san and I pursued."

Which I'd kind of figured, but it was a blow to hear it said aloud. And I had to wonder how much Kakashi was hiding behind that careful, level tone. It sounded like an official report to a superior officer, not an account of what would have been a horrifying attack when everyone involved would have felt safe.

Or maybe I was projecting.

Probably the second thing. Kakashi could handle things better than I could.

"Tell us they're alive," Obito nearly begged. I agreed, though for some reason my tongue wouldn't form the words.

Kakashi sighed. "I don't know. I left Katsuyu back there to tend to them. Nagato and I didn't really need her."

Obito held our Katsuyu under Kakashi's nose. "Actually, yeah, you do. You're burning chakra like crazy and that arm can't be comfortable."

I thought I saw Kakashi's masked jaw twitch, but he accepted the slug and she crawled onto his shoulder.

As Katsuyu got to healing (and possibly transferring some of Tsunade's mammoth chakra reserves), I tried to think about what we needed to know. What I needed to do.

So, after powering down a bit from I-Am-Turtle-Hear-Me-Roar mode, I started talking. "Kakashi, you've met Mom." Mom had carefully avoided saying anything while we were sorting out our teenage drama, but she nodded in acknowledgement of the introduction anyway and Kakashi nodded warily back. "And this is Maekawa-san, one of Gai's neighbors. You might know her, too."

"We've met very briefly," Maekawa said, then returned to examining the battlefield. After a second or so, she took off after Nagato with her hammer slung across her back.

"Right." Kakashi shrugged with his uninjured shoulder, since apparently they'd never made any significant impression on each other. He turned his attention back to Mom. "Are you leading this team, Gekkō-san?"

"Nominally." She pushed me forward so I was taking center stage, such that it was. "But I believe that Kei has been supplying much of our information, so I'd like everyone to share what they have
while we have the chance. I only know a little of the enemy we face now."

It turned out that, among the four of us kids and plus Mom, we had something like a handle on what was going on.

The Zetsu clones had hit the Barrier Team building, killing half a dozen shinobi and taking both Genma and Raidō out of the fight with leg injuries of some kind. Kakashi wasn't a medic and didn't actually know the exact nature of their injuries, but given that he and Nagato had been the only ones capable of pursuing, I could fill in the blanks. Everyone else was dead, and we weren't getting any backup aside from those Katsuyu could easily divert to our position. And she wouldn't if Tsunade didn't order it.

"The oddest thing was the split Zetsu." Kakashi crossed his arms, and Katsuyu stretched herself across his shoulders like a fur stole made of squishy stuff. The gash on his arm was already closed.
"All the other creatures are pure white, but this one was split down the middle into black and white halves."

Meaning that, if the original White Zetsu wasn't running amok, the Black Zetsu half was. Could Zetsu clones rip themselves in half and join up with other Zetsu clones? Because it was seeming like the answer was going to be "yes, with extreme variants."

"That's the thing that was originally called 'Zetsu' from my visions," I said. "It has a ton of different jutsu to keep itself from getting killed, but apparently that doesn't keep it from being tracked. How have you been following it?"

Turned out that Kushina had never entirely lost the habit of using her hair like Hansel and Gretel used breadcrumbs. Not often, and very carefully, but Kakashi was able to catch the scent himself with Kushina's occasional reinforcement. It helped mitigate the issue caused by one of Zetsu's particularly bullshit powers, which Obito explicitly identified:

"That's the thing the Zetsu copies do to hide from people!" Obito said, once Kakashi described it. "They melt into the ground and travel that way, using tunnels and other buried Zetsu to navigate. So Kushina-san must have been pulling her hair to give you a trail every time they came up for air."

Because, of course, Kushina had to breathe. As opposed to the adaptive Zetsu clones.

"How is she still conscious?" Mom wanted to know. She had the same body language as Kakashi at the moment, but with more restraint.

"I don't know. But we're still finding hair." Kakashi chuffed, like a tiger. "Or we were. Trap or not, we were still finding hair up until just now." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the battlefield past the Earth Wall.

Until Nagato had to hit everything with the Fist of God. Twice. We'd be lucky to find anything to lead us to her that way—and since my method involved expending Isobu's chakra, there went our stealth rating. We'd still find her, but we'd have to stomp every Zetsu between her and us into the ground first.

"And your dogs?" I asked.

"I left Akino with Biwako-sama." And thus Naruto. Good call. "The rest haven't been summoned. I don't want to put them at risk yet, and I can track just fine on my own." He drummed his fingers against his left bicep. "And I have thumbs, which means jutsu."

Sounded like the reasons I'd dismissed Tsuruya, so I didn't bother questioning him on any of those
"I think that we should be able to defeat the enemy without jutsu!" Gai insisted, to my mild surprise. "We need to conserve chakra, and we will not always have Katsuyu-san to help us regain chakra!"

"Gai, not everyone can kill these guys with a single kick," Obito pointed out.

"This should not dissuade you from trying!" Gai said brightly. "It is important to think positive in desperate situations."

"Gai," Kakashi cut in as Obito's expression went flat with annoyance. "Leave it for now."

Gai gave Kakashi a long look before shrugging. "As you wish, my eternal rival."

Obito looked at Kakashi like he expected our team's mini-jōnin to grow an extra head any moment.

"It would be best to regroup with Nagato-san and inform him of the new information we've acquired." Mom gave me a particularly pointed look. "Kei-chan, I know your sensing technique isn't subtle, but we need to find Uzumaki-san to end this, don't we?"

Well, where Kushina ended up was probably where Sensei would be. Since I didn't really see any plan for confronting Madara that ended well without those two, it made sense. And besides, it wasn't going to be hard to drum up support for the idea of rescuing Kushina or helping Sensei do so. Assassinating the original White Zetsu sans any other details would probably be a harder sell.

I nodded.

"Then we've decided. Kakashi-kun, if you—"

I heard Maekawa scream, and then suddenly all of us were leaping over the Earth Wall after the noise.

The scream was over by the time we got there. It had been replaced by a faint, painful gurgle as blood dripped down from Maekawa's lips. It dripped onto her hands, the haft of her hammer, and the body of the Zetsu whose blade-shaped arm was still thrust through her sternum. Its head had been violently relocated to the depths of its torso via hammer, but not quickly enough.

Gai charged forward with a shout of rage, smashing the half-transformed and half-crushed Zetsu aside with one vicious kick. The blow wrenched the Zetsu's arm out of Maekawa's chest and she sank to the ground into a pool of her own blood.

Gai caught her before she landed face-first on the ground.

I stabbed the Zetsu coming up behind him through the face, then jerked my katana sideways with a nasty flourish that spit its head vertically and horizontally.

Obito leapt onto another Zetsu, impaling it twice with a hastily-assembled Wood Release spear.

Kakashi flung two Lightning kunai down the length of the field and killed two more, bringing a third kunai down on an emerging Zetsu's hand with a quick spin in place.

Mom used the Mountain Cutter again and suddenly there were a lot more half-Zetsus not running around because they didn't have legs.

Then Nagato stormed back into the melee, grabbed a Zetsu, and...did something. I saw a ball of black energy being forced down its throat, and then it was sent skidding across the entire battlefield.
like a runaway train. It might have hit a tree at the other end, but by then I was already running over to Maekawa and Gai with my hands flaring green.

The ground trembled and, with a tremendous roar of earth and stone, Zetsu clones emerged from the ground as though being plucked from it like errant potatoes. They flew through the air toward the original Zetsu that was used as a shot-put, massing into a single white…yes. That was a sphere of compacted Zetsu clones, getting bigger all the time as more and more Zetsu clones were pulled into what seemed to be quickly becoming a giant sphere of mashed-together bodies.

And apparently we'd been sitting on a nest of the damn things.

My chakra completely failed to take hold in Maekawa's system—already dying on the spot—and at the same time, Nagato brought the full force of his massive chakra reserves to bear and crushed the mass of Zetsu clones into a space the size of a truck tire.

There may have been fairly horrible sounds. I don't remember.

Gai and I got Maekawa rolled over, so we could see her face.

She reached up with one blood-slicked hand and grasped Gai's trembling fingers hard enough to turn his fingertips white. "Gai…"

"Maekawa-san…" Gai whispered.

Maekawa's eyes, glazing over with shock and pain, still focused squarely on Gai's face. Her lips parted to form a rictus of a grin, fierce and proud despite the blood. "…G-Go on, Gai-kun…" Don't let this stop you, I half-translated.

Her chakra slipped away.

Her hand, though, didn't droop. Gai was holding on too tightly to let that happen, his head bowed over his neighbor's half-lidded dead stare.

Kakashi seemed to appear from nowhere, crouching next to Gai's other side and whispering something in a low, serious tone into Gai's ear.

Gai's head stayed bowed.

Kakashi bumped Gai's shoulder with his. I caught him saying something including the phrase, "would have wanted." For my part, I sat there like an indecisive deer in headlights for what felt like forever.

Then, after Kakashi convinced Gai to close Maekawa's eyes and stand up, I got to my feet as well and headed straight for Nagato. Given half a moment to wallow in anger, shock or grief, and our team's attempts to fix everything would grind to a halt.

I didn't really want to push. Gai needed time to sort out his feelings, but sooner or later there would be more Zetsu clones and more death until we could find the mastermind and punch his teeth in. We needed to keep going.

It was the same kind of single-minded stubbornness that had let me push my worry about Hayate into Isobu's domain in the back of my mind. It wasn't the same as suppressing my emotions, but I was just giving Isobu more fuel to use to channel his chakra through my body. Avoidance was doubly unhealthy in my case, but I didn't have any other options.
"Nagato-san, I can locate Kushina-san," I told him in a voice gone flat and dead. I felt Mom walk up behind me, while Obito went over to try helping Kakashi with Gai. Hopefully we would still have a team by the end of this.

Nagato blinked, shaking himself out of whatever battle-rage mode he'd been in. "You can?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Host of the Three-Tails, and a sensor. Turns out you can combine the two."

"Then we're going after her," Nagato said firmly.

Yes and no. I channeled Isobu's chakra again, in the specialized way I had before. Kushina and Sensei had moved, with their chakra signals stilling somewhere in the forests to the southwest of the village. Rather than the original fifteen kilometers, we were a mere eleven kilometers away from what I presumed was the ritual site. Hayate's chakra was still there, too, but dimmer compared to the other two.

**I doubt you're going to just leave it like that.** Isobu's tails lashed the icy air in my mindscape. **Especially when your brother is right there.**

"Nagato-san, your cousin isn't the only one there," I said, my eyes still closed. "Sensei and Kushina-san are both there, and…fighting?" I tilted my head up and met his eyes with calm I didn't actually possess. "Maybe. But something took my kid brother from my house, and I'm gonna get him back. So you don't get to just indiscriminately smash the entire area with your shiny new gravity jutsu, even if it'd work on most stuff. You need to be specific."

Nagato looked a bit taken aback that I would give him orders about anything. My role was supposed to revolve around information. Not command.

"You or I could remove your brother from the line of fire, Kei-chan," Mom said from my left. "In theory."

Nagato looked from me to my mother and back again. His expression was an indecisive mix of surprise, anxiousness, and perhaps a trace of hope. Not for my brother, who he didn't know, but it was always nice to have comrades when trying to plan and then enact a complex rescue mission with unknown enemies around every corner.

And when you got down to it, Nagato was the biggest blunt instrument we could use against Madara at this point in history.

"This is a rescue mission first," I said, though reluctantly. I wanted my brother back safe and sound more than I wanted every Zetsu on the planet dead and gone. And yet the idea of killing Madara or one of his major catspaws… "But we should stay aware of any targets of opportunity. I don't know when we're gonna get another chance to decapitate the Zetsu army."

Likely never, if Madara was as intelligent as Kishimoto had been insisting.

"And I shall accompany you on your quest!" Gai announced, stomping over to us. The corners of his eyes were damp and his nose was still running, but his body language screamed determination. "We will work together to bring peace back to Konoha and secure our village's future! This is the promise of a lifetime!" He gave the rest of us a thumbs-up and a slightly wobbly grin.

I shot a look at Kakashi, who nodded. Obito gave a helpless shrug from next to him. Apparently, the mysteries of one Maito Gai were for the universe and Kakashi to comprehend.
"Thank you, Gai-kun," Mom said, bowing slightly. "We will do the best we can to help you fulfill it."

And to do that, we needed...okay. So maybe we didn't really need a plan, as such. None of our plans had survived thirty seconds of contact with *friendlies*, never mind the actual goddamn enemy.

So we ran, and schemed on the way.

The sealing array in the foothills was a work of art.

Four stone pillars were arranged into a half-circle around a raised dais, with all five structures linked by seals. Not seals on the ground, oh no. Someone had decided to use seals *across thin air*, weaving amongst themselves like fine black chains. If I had time to stop and properly examine them, I probably would have practically frothed at the mouth for a chance to study them for the applications alone.

But there were four things getting in the way.

One: Kushina was bound up in those seals, which were crawling down her arms toward the blacked-out seal on her stomach. We could only hear one thing over the sound of her screaming as Kurama's red chakra was painfully dragged out of her.

Two: Kurama had already half-emerged from Kushina's chakra coils and was screaming too, making a high animal noise that was nothing less than pain and anger given voice. I could almost see his chakra clinging to the seal, *refusing* to be removed and enslaved to another master's will.

Three: Sensei was teleport-spamming the hell out of the emergent Zetsu army, keeping Zetsu (black-and-white edition) from getting anywhere near close enough to pour more power into the extraction seal array. Every time the monster tried to get close to Kushina and Kurama, Sensei was stabbing the extra clones he spawned or slamming a Rasengan into any interlopers with extreme prejudice.

Four: *I still couldn't see my brother*.

But you know what? I prioritized. "Everybody, SMASH!"

Nagato swept through the ranks of the generic Zetsu clones and literally rolled them up into a massive white Katamari, just like the group from before. He missed the hybrid Zetsu only because Sensei was too close to avoid if he moved that way, but Nagato still violently squashed the Zetsu clones he caught.

Whitish water flew everywhere as their liquid mass was compressed right out of them.

Obito charged into the remainders of the fray next, with his Sharingan almost glowing in the full moon's silvery light. He snarled even as he skidded in front of Kushina, trying to hold back the half-formed Kurama before he could emerge and possibly fall into Zetsu's sway.

Kakashi appeared alongside him, their paired Sharingan synchronizing their chakra and doubling their effective influence on Kurama—or, rather, against whatever compulsions Zetsu had put into the extraction array.

"Think you can hold on for a minute, Kakashi?" Obito asked, reaching out toward Kurama with his replacement right arm.

Kakashi copied the movement, but with his left. "I think I can."
Mom's chakra flared as she activated the First, Second, and Third Gates all in a row, and used the Mountain Cutter to tear the sealing pillars apart between one blink and the next. Her sword glowed like a blue lightsaber, cleaving through more rock than it could have physically touched and leaving the seal in tatters with its job half-finished.

Gai stuck by me, uncharacteristically silent as we used my chakra sense to locate Hayate all over again. With so much powerful chakra flowing through the area—of which Kurama was simply the most ludicrous example—picking out smaller chakra signatures was quickly proving to be an exercise in futility. I was getting too much feedback from everything else to even know where to start.

Clear your head and let me handle this.

Or it was.

Hayate was to my left, but where?

It was then that Black Zetsu detached from White Zetsu, suddenly turning Sensei's fight into a two-on-one match instead. Mom moved to assist, still using three Gates at once to keep up with the fight, while everyone else stuck to their assigned roles.

Obito tossed the first of two sealing scrolls over his shoulder, seals broken, and doused Black and White Zetsu in two hundred and fifty thousand liters of water all at once.

Nagato picked most of that water up, formed it into the rough shape of a cylinder, and brought it down with an immense bang that shook the ground where Black Zetsu had been standing a fraction of a second before.

With Mom and Nagato both engaging the Zetsu pair, Sensei broke off and popped out of existence once—getting the kunai launcher scroll from Obito—and twice to reach Kushina.

I figured that was taken care of, snatched the now-empty storage scroll out of the middle of the melee with a chakra tail, and immediately started rewriting the seal's physical parameters on the spot. My compression seal, added around the storage seal's properties, would capture and indefinitely contain whatever I managed to snatch with it.

I rolled the scroll, quick as a whip, and handed it off to Gai. All he needed to do was hit the right target, and with a sticky adhesive to make it stick to the nunchaku he preferred, it would be easy enough to succeed.

Then I drew Isobu's chakra up, tapped into the water-hammer thing that Nagato was throwing around, and dropped a Water Dragon Bullet on White Zetsu's face.

What a time to get it right.

And then there was a shriek of sudden pain from Kakashi, making my head whip around so fast I almost got whiplash. Automatically, I said, "Kakashi?" before I even knew what was going on.

Obito was doubled over on the ground, clawing at his chest in soundless agony. And down on one knee next to him, clutching his hands over his left eye socket, was Kakashi. I didn't even have the slightest idea what had happened—they should have been able to suppress Kurama with Kurama's consent even if they didn't have the Mangekyō!

Distantly, I noticed that Hayate's chakra had moved, but I was already charging for my teammates despite the danger.
An invisible hand picked me up by the scruff of my flak jacket and flung me aside like a rag doll, sending me skidding away from my teammates. I rolled instantly to my feet once I got them under me again, and saw grayish-white spines sticking up through the grass where I'd just been.

Giving Nagato a quick thumbs-up, I put my right hand on the handle of my katana and maneuvered around the spikes so I was once again running toward my teammates.

Kurama's half-formed specter loomed over them both until, with a horrific tearing noise, the beast split in half down the center of its body. The now-darker half of it dissolved into red energy and streamed back into Kushina in a flood that would have struck a lesser person dead on the spot. As it was, Kushina collapsed on the dais like a puppet with cut strings, dazed but alive, and landed in Sensei's arms.

The light Kurama, with his/its exposed innards slowly rearranging into a working second half, planted its working forepaw a scant meter away from where my teammates were insensate on the ground. As its jaw regrew a left side and its chakra started to form a second pair of limbs, it screamed raw rage to the heavens.

And then I saw why Obito had collapsed—black energy like chakra but not was streaming from the hidden seal in his chest and sending tendrils out. It spread like ink, with lines projecting out into thin air before whipping around and sinking hooklike projections into Obito's arms and locking him in place from sheer pain.

I tripped on nothing, face-planting on the grass with a gasp of pain as my chest seized. I coughed on reflex and rolled onto my side as I choked on air.

Through glazed eyes, I could see the inky black hooks crawling out from under my clothes and sending waves of pain up toward my brain.

In my mind's eye, Isobu was already screaming, his tails lashing in frustrated fury as Madara's seal once again emerged in my mindscape and tore into him like some kind of beaked, tentacle-laden monster. A tendril lashed around his leftmost tail and his crown of cranial spikes, as another hooked into my throat and choked me instantly.

And then I got a read on the chakra of the creature that emerged from the ground, walking slowly toward me with its eye socket seeming to glow with an alien black light.

It was definitely a Zetsu, and definitely similar to that Guruguru creature Obito had once been semi-friendly with. It was still a monster and still needed to be killed. There was no doubt about that.

But wrapped in the core of it, nearly smothered, was my brother's chakra.

I gasped, forcing my right elbow underneath me to lever myself up. Another pulse from the Puppet Master seal and I was on the grass again, digging my fingers into the damp earth to keep from screaming.

"Looking for someone, Kei-chan?" the nameless Zetsu clone asked.

I managed to growl, "Y-You—"

The Zetsu sat on its heels in front of me, idly resting its arms over the tops of its thighs. "So much for the runaway act, huh?"

As I watched, its head unfurled like Guruguru's had, back when we first reunited with Obito. In between the claylike spikes, my brother's head lolled limply with the whims of gravity.
I snarled in wordless, primal rage, lunging for the creature before another pulse from the seal brought me down again. The Zetsu still danced backward, making a chittering sound that might have been laughter. Its head and shoulders twisted back together, hiding Hayate from view.

"Nice try, Kei-chan! But you're going to have to sit and behave like a good girl! And isn't that the saying?" Its voice dropped, lower and lower until it was a bass growl, "Children shouldn't be seen or heard, right?"

*I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU!*

And then the Zetsu, to its and my surprise, was thrown forward abruptly with stunning force. Nagato, standing halfway across the battlefield and otherwise helping Kakashi to his feet again, had one hand held out toward the spiky Zetsu and was forcing it to float in midair by its hands.

"Get away from her, you bastard." And then Mom was there, cleaving both of the Zetsu's arms from its body.

While the white-gray flesh landed on the ground with an anticlimactic flop, Mom reversed the grip on her katana and placed her thumb, middle, and index fingers of both hands on opposite sides of the stunned Zetsu's head.

There was a nails-on-a-chalkboard sensation, and the Zetsu unraveled into what looked like ten meters of coiled white rope on the spot.

And in the middle, where it had been, Hayate stood on his entangled legs for maybe half a second before toppling backwards into Mom's arms.

"Stop that!" White Zetsu snarled, white teeth snapping at the air with every word. "You're ruining everything even after we got the Fox? You're cheating!"

The aforementioned fox, with the other half of his body regrown from nothing but chakra, ignored Sensei and Kushina and smashed his new left paw down where White Zetsu suddenly wasn't. Black Zetsu flattened where he was, sliding across the ground like a shadow, and made a beeline for—

"Obi—!" And then I was choking on air again.

Mom reached for me, still holding Hayate in her arms.

Kakashi got to his feet and dove for Obito. Gai did, too, while Nagato spun the column of water out into thin tendrils of concentrated water that aimed for the White Zetsu.

"OBITO!" I heard Sensei shout, maybe in warning, but Kurama’s right paw smashed into the ground directly between Sensei and Obito and cut off line of sight. I heard Sensei swear at the fox, but Kushina’s half of Kurama also started flaring up at that moment and Sensei didn’t have time for anything else. Nagato’s chakra shoved Kurama aside with one massive burst of kinetic energy, trying to keep the fox from crushing us all.

Black Zetsu reached Obito and engulfed him in inky darkness.

Obito—no, Obito's body staggered upright even though he was almost entirely covered in Black Zetsu's shapeless body. Even as Kakashi pulled up short, horror writ large across his face, Black Zetsu steered them both toward me and Hayate and Mom.

Kakashi's hand started sparking.
And Mom, realizing what was happening, stood up with her sword in hand and Hayate held to her left side, growling, "Let him go, you son of a bitch!"

The supposedly-disabled Zetsu at Mom's feet twitched. I tried to scream a warning and almost blacked out when the seal tore into my stomach and felt like it tried to pry my ribs open. Anything I wanted to say died in my throat.

Black Zetsu pried Obito's Sharingan open. "**Take a good look, brat. See what happens when you don't toe the line?**"

No, no, no no no no this isn't happening no this can't be happening don't let—

The white spikes struck, catching Mom just under her shoulder blades and through her right leg at the knee.

**MOM!**

Mom crumpled to the ground, one arm still outstretched across Hayate's shoulders.

Obito screamed.

Kakashi's hand stopped sparking as he stumbled, clutching his left eye all over again as Gai held him upright. Gai's eyes were wide with shocked horror, nunchaku clutched tightly in his free hand.

Sensei's Flying Thunder God kunai rained down around us, punching holes through parts of the environment and through White Zetsu. One impaled Obito's kunai holster. Another stuck through Mom's sleeve. Gai caught one out of the air. I narrowly avoided taking one through my head, but only because of luck. It cut into the tie holding my headband in place and got stuck there. Another kunai went high and clung in Kurama's orange fur.

*Fwish.*

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's song title is brought to you by Puella Magi Madoka Magica.
I wasn't on the ground but I was choking on my screams again, thrashing against whatever was holding me. Fishhooks sank into every scrap of skin I still had, twisting in the wound and dragging me through what had to be a living hell. I felt my head bounce off of something as I flailed in agony and none of it made any difference.

Something big wrapped around me, forcing me facedown onto grassy earth. I couldn't move but it almost hurt less than the cocoon of pain Madara's seal had me trapped in. I could have broken both my arms and legs and it wouldn't hurt this bad.

"String-Cutter Seal!"

And it stopped.

My chest heaved from the effort of keeping myself from just bursting into tears from the sheer relief of not hurting, and it took entirely too much effort for me to prop myself up on my elbows. Getting to my feet seemed, for a moment, like a pipe dream.

"Better, Kei-kun?" Jiraiya's hand was splayed out across my back.

I managed to nod, and he looped his arm around my torso like I was an errant pup and hauled me to my feet again. I listed badly to one side, and someone else caught me.

"Kei-senpai, you're going to be all right now," Rin said, kneeling on the ground next to me. She wrapped one arm around me and started pumping healing chakra into my battered ribcage. On one hand, I appreciated her dedication to bedside manner, for all that it approached the definition of the term "tunnel vision." On the other…um. Hello. World falling apart, here?

What happened?

Sensei's Flying Thunder God jutsu had never been used on a group that I remembered, but I could vaguely recall that he'd used it defensively on a Tailed Beast Bomb before. This was an inversion of that process; deliberately moving everyone to a kill-zone.

Because I couldn't think of any other reason to find both Jiraiya and Tsunade in the same spot despite the way all our teams had split up, along with Honoka and a squad of ANBU, the Third Hokage and two of the Elders. Everyone was in battle mode from what I could feel, so we hadn't caught them by surprise. Sensei had set this up somehow, even beyond what our team had planned using Katsuyu relays.

They were doing a lot better than our group was.
Mom was on the ground, Hayate was unconscious, Kushina was dazed, Kakashi was dealing with major sympathetic feedback, Gai straight-up wasn't good enough to be here, Sensei was juggling eight different crises along with a bunch of knives, Nagato didn't know where to aim, and I was trembling from the aftereffects of a local-flavor Cruciatus Curse.

Kurama loomed overhead, standing up on all four legs with nine tails lashing like mad.

And in the middle of it all, Obito was up to his remaining eyeball in what seemed like a full-body sheath made of Black Zetsu’s malleable form. He couldn't open his mouth or scream, but I could see the black lines connecting the evil mass to his eye and could see his Sharingan glow.

And it formed the triple-bladed Mangekyō that I could still remember from some of my worst nightmares.

In the distance, something huge gave a guttural roar and I saw white something, about the size of Kurama, charge toward him with all the grace of a pie falling down stairs (and several million times the mass). Kurama roared back, ears flat against his massive neck and his tails raised high in a threat display.

What the shit?

"Aburame clan, now!" Tsunade's voice roared over the general panic, and then the clearing exploded into thousands upon thousands of silvery wings.

One bug landed on my shoulder, turning around to face me properly. Its little compound eyes couldn't blink, but I nonetheless got the impression that it was giving me a funny look.

I blinked, brushing the little monster off before it could start eating my human chakra. "Seal butterflies?" I asked as it flapped off to join the horde.

"They can easily tell the difference between the enemy and living shinobi," murmured a shinobi next to me. I looked over and recognized, after a brief moment of shock, Shimika Aburame in her long olive-toned overcoat. "Their chakra tastes different."

"Is this you?" I asked. I sort of meant to ask if she had summoned them, or if she was actually a bug clone, but ended up not really asking either.

"No," Shimika said, and evaporated into a cloud of kikai insects that promptly joined the swarm.

The swarm blurred through the clearing, making it impossible to see anything. And because everything flying in the immediate area also happened to be of a chakra-devouring persuasion, my chakra sense told me precisely fuck-all. I couldn't even feel Kurama and the Zetsu abomination squaring off, and I knew they were there.

What the absolute shit?

I managed to steady myself after another second or two, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Rin’s arm around me helped a bit—her energy was just barely there, compared to the way everything else had gone fuzzy—but still.

It was a trial.

Obito was nearly bent double, with his normal arm clutching at his Zetsu-borne and Zetsu-infested arm in attempt to keep himself from doing anything. Black Zetsu, clinging to Obito like a second skin, had shifted so that his yellow dot of an eye settled over Obito's empty eye socket and his rictus
of a mouth was overlapping Obito's in a way that made him look like someone had stitched it over his face.

Kakashi and Gai were in front of him, and I caught the words "don't give up" before the swarm of hell-butterflies thickened into a storm of wingbeats. The tide of bugs was nearly thick enough to force me back, but I just ended up using my free arm to defend my face. Even if they couldn't get at my chakra past Isobu, I didn't need a bug in my eye.

"Rin, can you…?" I trailed off, finally seeing the look on her face. The angle was wrong, but I could also feel her chakra next to mine.

"I…that was Obito." Rin's face was white. "Kei, what happened to him?"

I guessed she must have missed the big freak-out I had a second ago over that exact thing. I sort of felt like I should have apologized for distracting her. My unsteadiness was a minor issue, compared to the whole "Obito is possessed by an abomination from the dawn of time aaaaaaaagh" situation, which took up most of my headspace.

"Madara's messing with him," I informed Rin in a very quiet voice. What I was saying was probably mostly true, but I didn't know the details beyond what I'd experienced. I was still willing to pin everything on Madara, though. I heard her squeak in surprise, and went on with, "There's a seal in his chest that keeps him from moving, so Black Zetsu got him while we were trying to fight other people." I squeezed Rin's arm. "But we're gonna get him back."

"How?"

I didn't know. But I did have a guess. "I think we're gonna have to beat it off him." Beating the madness out of a person seemed like a very *Final Fantasy*-esque solution, but it seemed to work on everything from Tailed Beast hosts to runaway sealing accidents. And on some forms of mental instability, at least on people Naruto fought.

"I don't want to be the one to hurt Obito," Rin said in a small voice.

I gave the battlefield a speculative look. "Well, I don't think you'll have to." I could probably muster up the motivation for a well-intentioned beating, assuming that Black Zetsu didn't just jump to me and steer me into the path of a random Rasengan, or maybe toward the giant pudding monster. At which point I'd probably get eaten, Isobu would be captured, and we'd be even further behind on the whole Ten-Tails bullshit than if Yahiko had just died.

And I was ignoring the big fight between abominations again. I didn't have the ability to fight on the same scale as Kurama did, obviously, but maybe I knew someone who did. And who had enough strength that even Kurama would have some trouble killing us all.

"Nagato-san, can you hear me?" I called out, hoping that he'd be able to respond despite the hail of chakra-eating butterflies.

My answer came in the form of an abrupt hole in the swarm, where Nagato had used that gravity jutsu to push the bugs out of the way. Either that or he was using a Wind jutsu to do the same thing. With the Rinnegan, you could never really tell.

Nagato, carrying Kushina, arrived with no real fanfare. Jiraiya patted his shoulder, sure, but everyone else was too busy to really acknowledge him. Mostly, the Aburame clan members seemed to be focusing on maintaining a defense against the butterfly assault formation, which seemed to be a barrier seal that was also made of seal butterflies.
Honoka wasn't a defensive fighter or an Aburame. So she was busy giving me a funny look while I went to Nagato and Kushina.

"Dammit, why can't I be out there fighting like everyone else?" Kushina demanded as Nagato set her down in front of Tsunade. "I'm not dead enough to be an invalid!"

"Where the hell are my brother and my mom?" I asked, sidetracked.

"The medics have them," Nagato answered, "And what did you need me for, Kei-san?"

"If anyone can roll that Zetsu fusion into a ball and squash it, it's you," I said in a flat tone. "Madara isn't here, so that means the only thing you have to kill is the result of a zillion morons pooling their resources. No one else can launch attacks on that scale aside from Kurama, and he's going to be using the Tailed Beast Bomb if he uses anything. So you're it."

"And the Nine-Tails?" Nagato asked, with his mouth pressed into a grim line.

I bit my lip. "Badger-san over there has the Mangekyō Sharingan. If Kurama looks like he's gonna turn around and stomp on us, get her on board. Black Zetsu may have Obito, but Badger's got two eyes and she's had them for longer. Should be enough."

"You don't sound very sure, Kei-san. I...I've never even seen that thing before." Nagato looked up, to where the giant Zetsu abomination was squaring off against Kurama. As we watched it, it grew about fifty extra limbs in the shape of tree branches and lowered the brand-new crown of its canopy (of arms).

"Well, you have the tools to deal with it. And Kurama, if something goes wrong." Well, technically no one currently alive had the ability to deal with it at the moment, aside from the people trying to kill us. And Nagato. Who was not holding up his end of the whole deal. "Nagato-san, please."

"You really think I can fight all of that?" Nagato asked again.

"Yes."

Nagato nodded. He went over to talk to Honoka, who was standing nearby with skepticism in practically every line of her body language. So what if she didn't trust Nagato or me or my plan? So fucking what?

I didn't care. Nagato would deal with it or he wouldn't. It was out of my control.

I squeezed Rin's shoulder again, then eased myself out of her grip. She still look shell-shocked. At best. "Rin-chan, let's go save Obito."

Rin shook herself. "Right."

Fwish.

"Need a lift?" Sensei asked, popping back into the world right by my left shoulder.

"Only after you get Kushina-san out," I said sharply. "If Black Zetsu gets to her—"

By way of response, Sensei grabbed Kushina's hand, teleported out, and was back in exactly six seconds. Fwish-fwish.

"...Okay, I take it back. Take us to Obito," I backtracked.
“What's happening to him, Hokage-sama?” Rin asked, since I hadn't given her enough of an answer.

Sensei winced. To Jiraiya, he said, "Handle things here for another minute. I'll be right back."

Oh, goodie. He was going to let us handle Black Zetsu on our own. I'd been wondering if Sensei had gotten concussed at some point. He was too young for senility. There were other concerns, like the whole thing where Black Zetsu and White Zetsu together made one S-class missing-nin—ergo, too much for a bunch of teenagers to handle—but I just had to wonder what was going through Sensei's head. There was a plan, right?

In case there wasn't… Isobu, please make sure Kurama's all right. That bullshit with the seal can't have been healthy. My chakra wouldn't extend past the edge of the swarm without getting eaten midway through, so I couldn't tell where anyone was unless I tried using hearing or smell. And the latter was a bust.

I'll try to get him to listen.

Can you tell if the Spiral and White Zetsu variants are dead?

…They're not. The White Zetsu just cloned itself about fifteen million times over, and the clones don't seem to dissipate when hit. I think this is that bio-clone stuff? The big one over there seems to be made of the same thing.

Fuck. That meant that White Zetsu, powered by whatever bullshitium that Madara had stuffed into him, could basically act as a one-man army against what force we could muster. With Nagato unable to pull his Katamari routine without abandoning the fight with the really big one…

They're not retreating underground, or trying for subtle tactics. They're trying to mob our side.

And how's that working out?

We have practically unlimited chakra-eating bugs. Thus, bigger mob.

Sensei grabbed my arm and Rin's and fwish.

The next glimpse I had of the possessed Obito was when Sensei landed square on his back with Rin and I tucked under each arm.

Sensei front-flipped off Obito with a grunt, and another fwish that put all three of us next to Kakashi and Gai. He let go of us then, letting us stand up on our own. I wasn't even wobbly! Go me.

Kakashi looked bone-tired in a way that didn't have anything to do with physical exhaustion. His eyes had flicked to me, briefly, but he'd already refocused on Obito by the time I thought of anything to say. A Katsuyu had, at some point, found him and climbed up on his shoulder like the one we'd found earlier, and was probably pumping extra chakra into him so he could still function. I didn't know if he had enough chakra for another Chidori shot, but I hoped mostly that he didn't do it again.

Gai was equally heartsick, with the tear-tracks from his earlier, interrupted grief still on his face. While his breathing was relatively steady, he looked like he'd used the First Gate while I'd been unable to sense or even see much of anything past the swarm of butterflies. Given that parts of Training Ground Three—which I had somewhat recognized earlier and only then really realized—were still intact and Obito was still possessed, I didn't think it'd been successful. But that wasn't what
the First Gate was for anyway.

Rin, white with horror, still managed to clamp down on her trembling in record time. She swallowed hard, eyes locked on Obito and the thing trying to eat his chakra. Despite the revulsion and her fear for Obito, I couldn’t feel any fear for herself. Under all of that roiling emotion was Rin’s ever-dependable core of steel. There was no way she was leaving the clearing without Obito safe and sound. Either we'd leave together or not at all.

Couldn’t say I disagreed with that notion.

And surrounding all of us in a nigh-impenetrable swarm? More fucking butterflies.

"Well, well, well." Black Zetsu grinned using Obito's mouth, while Obito clenched his teeth against the movement. "The jinchūriki, the damsel, the rival, and the clown. These are all your little friends, boy?"

Obito made a strangled noise, half fear and half fury.

"You have one last chance to let him go," Sensei told the parasite. His voice was completely level despite the tension in the air, and he was idly cleaning under his fingernails with a Flying Thunder God kunai. This, despite the fact that killing intent was flooding the area and I was ninety-nine percent sure that it didn't have anything to do with the Tailed Beast battle going on across town. "Three."

"You think you can destroy me, you arrogant bastard?" Black Zetsu snapped. He raised Obito's arm to point an accusing finger at Sensei, before opening his hand and making a sweeping gesture. "Your future is set in stone. You die here, little Hokage."

"No, I don't think he will," I said in a voice like ice. Set in stone, set in sto—wait. I had half a memory of something… I closed my eyes, both to help myself think and to make sure Black Zetsu couldn't use Obito's Sharingan on me.


"Two," said Sensei.

Isobu, close your eye.

Why?

This is going to get messy, and Black Zetsu's gonna want to spam the Sharingan techniques he can wrestle out of Obito. I don't want to risk him getting you even if we transform.

…Fine. He covered his uninjured eye with one strangely humanlike appendage. Both Kuramas are all right. Yin Kurama is still with his host, while Yang Kurama is allied with the Rinnegan boy and that Sharingan woman. He huffed. So, now we can concentrate on our fight?

Yep. Get ready.

I was born ready. Isobu let out a growl. Let's destroy this parasite.

Parasite, parasite…

"Our future is what we make it, Monster-san!" Gai announced, practically radiating determination.
He was reaching for the Gates, though I didn't really know what he'd be able to do against Black Zetsu that Mom hadn't. He was still so far from his full potential…

"You aren't going anywhere with him." Kakashi's chakra jumped, from spark to blazing bolt of lightning in an instant. If I didn't have Isobu's chakra wrapped around me like a blanket, I would've been cringing from the noise he generated. But I had more important things to worry about.

Sensei—for lack of a better term—uncoiled. Every twitch of his chakra suggested impending horrific violence, to be visited upon exactly one target. "One." All humor was gone from his voice.

"Pointless bravado. You'll die like the rest." Black Zetsu barked a laugh. "Watch closely, boy. This is why you shouldn't run." I felt Obito's body—his chakra being leeched away and into Black Zetsu—slip into a fighting stance. How long would he be able to keep that thing from using Kamui?

Waitafuckingminute—

Fwish. And Sensei was already moving.

Black Zetsu was a chakra leech. How far did that ability extend? How far did any Zetsu variant's integration abilities extend? How far did the corresponding control ability work? If Black Zetsu was an extension of Madara's will…

What in the world are you thinking about? There's a fight going on!

Rin and I threw ourselves in opposite directions, simultaneously dodging a burst of Fire jutsu from Obito. My eyes might have been shut, but I could still see reddish-orange practically through my eyelids and I could certainly feel the scorching heat.

"Rin-chan, Keisuke-chan, are you both all right?" Gai called out from somewhere past the fireball.

"We're good!" I shouted back, getting a feel for Black Zetsu's modifications to Obito's fighting style.

"Jerky" was one way to put it. Though Black Zetsu could force Obito to make hand signs, he couldn't seem to make him aim worth a damn. I knew Obito could hit most targets through sheer AOE bullshit if he wanted, but he wasn't. He had Wood, Fire, and Water release, and he wasn't really using any of it properly.

As if to illustrate the point, Gai launched himself over a Wood Release spike and ended up ricocheting off one of the training posts. Black Zetsu failed to follow through with that jutsu, deciding to chase after Kakashi instead.

Kakashi, for his part, was actually moving a good quarter faster than Black Zetsu was. As a fraction of their total speed, anyway. Maybe it was the constant buzz of Lightning Release saturating Kakashi's whole body, but it honestly seemed like the parasite couldn't keep up even though Obito's Sharingan had to be open.

There were times when Black Zetsu almost seemed capable of landing a finger on one of the boys.

And then Minato would pop in, shove him to the ground, and pop out before the parasite could grab him.

And Rin? Was being totally ignored.

I, on the other hand, felt Obito's dominated hand brush slightly against my elbow.
I reeled, Isobu roared, and Black Zetsu cackled aloud. In my mental world, Isobu's rightmost tail was suddenly missing a cubic half-meter of flesh. I might have screamed, but my brain went all fuzzy for a second there and I couldn't be sure.

"Not so fast, are we?" came out of Black Zetsu's mouth at the same time Obito's voice let out a panicked "KEI!"

"Scuse me, Chucklefuck, but I didn't win the bullshit power lottery!" I snarled back, my eyes still closed. "Obito, I'm fine! Worry about yourself right now!"

Obito's body gave an all-encompassing shudder that evolved into a drunken stagger as Black Zetsu yanked at his chakra. He got his left wrist up and clamped it around his right before Black Zetsu could aim another swipe at me.

I got the hell out of the way.

I've never seen a chakra thief like this one. Isobu curled his injured tail among the other two, as though to defend it. Assuming I didn't get hit again, he'd probably be fine. Killer B had managed to get Gyūki to sacrifice a tentacle as a distraction, so I assumed that some things could grow back.

Then there's no way he's a bog-standard Zetsu. Not that he ever was. I crossed Rin's path briefly as I ran, feeling her duck behind a patch of undergrowth. So, a Zetsu-parasite that uses people's chakra against them and their friends. And yet still human enough to get boxed in by seal butterflies. Something's weird here.

I channeled my chakra sense through Isobu's chakra, getting a detailed map of the area that I oughtn't to have needed—I'd spent enough of my life on this training field to know it like the back of my hand. Possibly better—aside from a few sword-scars, my hand didn't particularly stand out from anyone else's. This training ground had never lacked for landmarks.

I skittered into the tree-line, circling around the fight as Kakashi and Gai tore after the retreating enemy. The butterflies parted like a curtain wherever I went, probably out of fear.

Kakashi wasn't aiming to kill. That jutsu in his hand was more like the Chidori Stream than the Chidori proper—an overpowered taser. But the question was how to get close enough to use it when the other guy wasn't running on effectively half his chakra capacity.

Gai? Gai went straight for the Leaf Whirlwind which, while not necessarily lethal, would still catch most opponents napping. Black Zetsu steered Obito away from the face-cruncher of a kick, spitting curses at the "clown" he'd dismissed.

Rin ducked back, and I could feel her go for chakra scalpels—her old standby. I had no idea if she planned to carve Black Zetsu from Obito's chakra system, but if there was anyone who could do it…

Sensei blinked in and out of existence, always just behind or just to the left of Black Zetsu and Obito. He had more instant-use seals than just the Flying Thunder God, and I didn't know what he was going to use to fight Black Zetsu. It just couldn't be the Rasengan—Obito was durable, sure, but I was also sure that Sensei had no intention of risking anything.

It seemed like Obito's control was strongest on left side. Which was pointedly not the side with both Wood Release and the Mangekyō Sharingan. Hell, Obito was right-handed. So, how were we going to dislodge Black Zetsu enough that he didn't just take Obito's arm and his eye with him when it left?
There was *something* relevant in my memories, somewhere. I knew there had to be. Black Zetsu hadn't been a *complete* unknown. I clawed around in my memory for some kind of hint; *anything* could be the slip that would give us an edge.

It had to come down to willpower, somehow.

*Black Zetsu is a manifestation of Madara's will.*

That was the key.

But how to use it?

**What are you going to do?** Isobu asked. In my mind's eye, he was still moving around with his eyes shut and bobbing gently with the icy current. His tails lashed the air. *You can't even use my power if you're too afraid to hit the boy.*

*I know. But... Hm. You know what? I think that just might work in reverse, too.*

A memory-construct flitted by, side-swiping Isobu's leftmost horn. In its fractal wings, I could see an adult Obito—Tobi—on the ground, with a hole the size of a man's fist in his torso. I knew exactly whose fist, too, once I recalled the context of the image. I could see familiar inky darkness clinging to his arms and pouncing on his shaking body, with the expectation of being *obeyed.*

He should have been using that jutsu that revived the dead. Something like... Samsara of Life? Something kinda gibberish-y. It made corpses into people again, without the infinite chakra and regeneration thing. Nagato had used it to revive Konoha's citizens after pancaking the place.

But no. Tobi wanted to be the Ten-Tails jinchūriki more than Madara must have wanted to be revived, because the former happened. He must have overwhelmed Black Zetsu.

*Idea!* Hopefully I'd survive it.

**Wait, what—?**

I dashed back into the training field.

Sensei had an active seal on the hand that didn't have a Flying Thunder God kunai, but I couldn't easily tell what it was. Hopefully a Chakra Suppression Seal like we'd used on Guruguru. That would be very helpful, since Sensei was the guy who could be relied upon to actually tag the fucking bastard properly.

But...

I aimed two kunai directly at where my chakra sense told me Obito's entrapped legs were, which Black Zetsu caught out of the air with negligent ease. Obito didn't really want to be crippled any more than Black Zetsu did, but with both sides treating the other half of the fight with kid gloves, we weren't getting anywhere.

(Which would only stay at the status quo for as long as Obito could concentrate.)

But I only wanted his attention anyway, and I had it.

"Obito, you don't have to do a single fucking thing he's trying to make you do," I said clearly, my voice deepening again as I called on Isobu's chakra. I didn't need power, but I did need *staying power.* If he punched me, normal-me was going to feel it regardless of any Sharingan bullshit. If I
was channeling Isobu's chakra, I could take what Obito—with *without using his enhancements*—could dish out, with impunity.

Still kept my eyes shut, though.

"You've been pushing back against him already." I ducked a theatrically slow punch from the Zetsu-dominated and derived arm. I could feel his chakra running almost *directly* counter to Black Zetsu's movements, pulling frantically. Still, I didn't dare let it touch me again. "No one's been hurt because of you, do you hear me? *It's all on Black Zetsu.* Anything he tries to get you to do, it's not you. It's a parasite trying to hurt people."

"Kick him out of your system already." Kakashi's voice was strangely scathing. It sounded like the kind of shit you said to teammates under mind control. In superhero comics. "Start taking this seriously!"

"You can defeat this monster, Obito-kun!" Gai called out, and easily dodged a half-assed manifestation of Wood Release that went his way. He even kicked one of the branches apart. "Believe in your will!"

How did that…? Okay, never mind. Clearly this was some kind of *shōnen* thing I didn't understand. I'd even started the trend, so it wasn't like I could complain about spontaneous rousing speeches.

Sensei felt like he'd probably have something to say, but...

Black Zetsu rewarded our consideration by trying to kill us with another burst of ninjutsu. *Status quo ante bellum* and all that.

I ducked under a fireball, swatted a flying ball of mud aside with one of Isobu's chakra tails, and spat a burst of water (*Water Trumpet*, specifically) to douse a fireball. If the rest of us were on the ball, Black Zetsu had been run over by it. His reactions were still slower than when Obito had been a genin, and the spasmodic movements were obvious signs that Obito was throwing himself against the thing that was laboring under the delusion that it owned him.

In passing, Sensei murmured, "Kei, I think we're getting through. But it's not enough, yet."

I jerked my head, preparing a response, but Sensei had already teleported away. He popped up again next to Rin, whispered something, and then was gone again.

*Rin charged straight at Black Zetsu and Obito.*

I scrambled to intercept her, same as Kakashi, as Black Zetsu crooned, "*Little Rin-chan should learn her place. Watch closely, boy.*"

Gai closed in on him from behind. "Obito-kun—!"

"Obi—!" Kakashi's voice.

Black Zetsu urged Obito into a lurching run. I still felt Obito digging his heels in, trying to stall. Black Zetsu overrode that. "*Die, worthless little wretch!*"

Then Rin, in defiance of common sense, threw her arms out to her sides like she was planning on receiving a hug and not a potentially fatal tackle.

I got there first, tried to block the attack with my body, and was promptly swatted aside by a Wood Release mallet that was more surprising than painful. I even hit a tree and went straight through the
I sat up in the ruins of falling branches and instantaneous wood chips, automatically trying to figure out what I'd missed.

It was a tableau.

"HOW COULD YOU—YOU HID YOUR POWER FROM ME? TO USE IT TO SAVE A LITTLE GIRL?" Black Zetsu raged. "You have all the power in the world, and you won't use it to save yourself?"

Obito was kneeling behind Rin, who was already turning to reach for him. Gai had the business end of his nunchaku against Obito's Black Zetsu-encased shoulder, while Kakashi's sparking hand was causing the chakra parasite to spasm against the corresponding arm. Sensei had his right hand around the back of Obito's neck, with a steady pulse of chakra building to a crescendo under his hand.

Apparently while I'd been putting the pieces together outside of the butterfly ambush, everyone else had been working on a plan.

"Zero," Sensei hissed.

The seal under his hand *ripped* through Black Zetsu's chakra system with all the ferocity of a winter storm. The shadowy mass gave a terrible cry of rage and tore itself loose from Obito with a sound like tearing flesh. Obito collapsed, his chakra flickering like a dying lightbulb, and Rin and Kakashi both grabbed him before he hit the ground.

Then Gai's seal—the storage seal from before—was pressed into the parasite's mass and activated.

For a moment, the air in the clearing sounded like a rumbling waterfall and tore just as hard at exposed clothes, hair, and whatever else it could grab. I couldn't hear Black Zetsu's defiant and disbelieving screaming, but I *could* feel it when the bandanna was sucked off my head and into the frenzied air.

There was a *pop* and then blessed silence.

I opened my eyes and took a second to appreciate the fact that I couldn't sense Black Zetsu anymore. Then I shook the excess green from my vision and got up.

I managed to get to the seal—detached from Gai's nunchaku but still on its paper—before anyone else and examine it. My special containment additions had activated, meaning that the subject wasn't going to find it possible to leave the seal unless deliberately released. And even then, storage seals had never been designed with living beings in mind.

Black Zetsu wasn't alive, or at least I didn't really think he was. If he was, he was insanely durable and I wanted this scroll disintegrated by Amaterasu fire as soon as we could manage it.

Sensei's hand descended into my line of sight and picked up the scroll.

I looked up as he re-rolled it and bound it with black string from out of apparently nowhere. His expression—hell, the slump of his shoulders—said he was tired as hell without him actually needing to say anything at all.

"Get to Obito, Kei. This isn't over yet," Sensei said. "You have two minutes, unless something comes up."

"Sensei?"
"I am not letting a Tailed Beast fight at random in the Konoha's territory." Sensei sighed. "You already know. Do what you can, where you can."

And…and he was going to send me to reinforce Nagato? Not that I could argue—I was the only other person who could turn into a giant monster besides Kushina (in theory)—but…well. There were weight classes I really wasn't in.

**We can do it.**

I still filed that away into a mental folder I'd labeled "Things to Deal with Later" and went to join the others.

This turned out to be the right decision.

Even if, once I realized what was happening, I almost immediately felt like I was going to have a heart attack.

Obito was still on the ground, but Kakashi had taken off his ANBU-issue vest and formed a crude pillow underneath Obito's head. Rin had her right hand on Obito's forehead and her left over his heart, channeling chakra into him like there was no tomorrow. Gai had his hands over hers, while sitting on the opposite side of Obito's unresponsive body, and I could almost see the chakra he was pouring into Rin so she could use it to help Obito.

I kneeled next to Gai and added my chakra to hers, shoring up the healing done on those fishing-hook wounds in his legs. Mine had already healed, according to Isobu, but Obito didn't have a Tailed Beast helping him out. I wasn't doing much, given my lack of medical expertise compared to Rin, but it was something.

"Is he going to recover?" Kakashi asked. I wasn't sure who he was talking to, but Rin wasn't going to answer. She was busy.

Obito was alive, but only just. Black Zetsu hadn't come quietly. I didn't have the training to know what his removal could have done.

But what I said was, "Probably."

If Obito wasn't dead yet, then I couldn't see Rin letting him go. I sure as hell wouldn't either—not such a short time after Kakashi and I got him back—but I didn't have enough experience with advanced healing techniques to make good on my promises. Rin did.

Katsuyu, having crawled from Kakashi's shoulder to Obito's stomach, gave one last burst of healing chakra before popping out of reality in a burst of smoke. Guess we'd used up our allotment of free heals.

Then Rin said, in a voice like a sigh, "I…I think we're in the clear now."

No sooner had she finished that sentence, making me almost crack up in sheer relief, than Obito's leg twitched under my hands.

I paused, wondering if I'd just imagined that, but it was quickly confirmed when Gai shouted, "Obito-kun, welcome back!"

Everyone was looking at Obito's face, then, and we got to see him staring up at us with an identical sense of wonder.
It didn’t last.

While Kakashi helped him sit up, and Rin hugged him hard enough that I could practically hear his spine pop, I could also feel Obito’s chakra start to shrink in on itself. It was faint—he hardly had enough chakra to read—but I could feel the shakes almost before they started. This was not going to be a perfect, happy moment.

Gai pulled back, probably feeling awkward and wanting to leave us to our team moment.

I scooted into the vacant spot Gai left behind, resting my hand against Obito’s shoulder. Between Kakashi behind him, Rin currently hugging him from his left side (in a way that meant she was supporting most of his weight), and me on his right, he was pretty much surrounded by friends.

Obito blinked once. Twice.

He was silently trembling before I finished formulating a sufficiently vehement thought at Black Zetsu’s nonexistent corpse. Sledgehammers were involved. So were wood-chippers and battery acid.

Rin pulled him close against her and tucked his head under her chin. Obito was already mostly in her lap, with his tremors taking hold as if had winter rolled in early. It was a short step from there to Rin being the one to physically hold him together.

I could hear him murmur something against Rin's collarbone. It was near-silent and nearly a mantra. Soft like a prayer and twice as desperate. "...I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

Like he needed our forgiveness.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Rin whispered back.

He shook his head, violently. "No, no! I-I almost—"

Obito was afraid. Not of us, not of the Tailed Beasts rampaging in the distance, but of himself. Of what he’d almost done.

"Not your fault," Kakashi said shortly, and I wondered how long it would take him to give himself that kind of absolution. "And you weren't even close to going over the edge."

Obito stared at him, wild-eyed. "But—!"

"'Close' only counts with exploding tags." My voice came out a lot harsher than intended, and Rin winced.

Obito was looking at Kakashi and me like we were aliens. As if the concept of "not guilty by reason of being turned into a meat puppet (or narrowly avoiding such a fate)" didn't exist here.

"You didn't use your Mangekyō Sharingan while you fought me," I tried, going for a softer tone. "If Black Zetsu had used it, we'd pretty much all be dead."

Sans Sensei. And that was cutting it majorly close.

"But I h-hit you!" Obito was still giving me trapped-animal vibes. So not good.

"It was a hit I meant to take, and I wasn't hurt." I managed to smile, despite the situation. Maybe my smile was a little cracked at the edges, whether from nerves or something else, but I still needed him to understand. I was okay. "I was the only one who could've taken it. I asked for it, because I didn't know what else to do."
Speaking of. "What actually happened after that?"

"The Black Zetsu creature tried to make Obito attack Rin," Kakashi said. I could practically feel him trying to inject some reassurance into his tone. "And then Obito phased right through her. Not a scratch."

Obito looked up at Rin.

She squeezed him tighter. "I'm one hundred percent okay, Obito."

He relaxed slightly. Better than nothing.

"Obito..." I began, trying to think. "Obito, if you hadn't been fighting back, Black Zetsu would have killed us all in ten seconds." He opened his mouth to protest, but I cut him off. "No, I'm dead serious. With you fighting him every step of the way, a drunk civilian could have outrun him. No one got hurt, though not because he wasn't trying." Though Rin had been the only one to actually stand still and nearly die.

I was really going to have to tear a strip out of her and Sensei for just standing there in the middle of a fucking fight.

"I knew he wouldn't hurt me," Rin said plainly. As though that was obvious. As though that was the honest, unshakeable truth.

…Okay, yeah, I could believe that.

"Black Zetsu could have torn Isobu right out of me if he got me again during the fight. The Wood Release shots were slow enough for Gai to dodge. You let Kakashi get close with his handheld lightning bolt about twenty times." I took a deep breath. "Face it. You're not the bad guy here. You never were."

I would have loved to be able to just... spend time making sure they'd all be okay.

But no.

"Kei, it's time," Sensei said from behind me.

I winced inwardly, twisting around to face him. "Already?"

"Yes. Sorry." Sensei brushed past me, dropping to one knee so Obito could easily see him and not have to strain his neck. Sensei carefully extracted Obito from Rin's arms so he could squish his student in a bear hug. To Obito, he said, "If I don't come back, just know I don't blame you. Nothing you've done here tonight needs to be forgiven. Remember that, Obito."

"Sensei...?" Even Kakashi was giving him a weird look.

Sensei smiled. I felt the pull of his chakra just for a second—

Fwish.

All of us were... was this the Shikkotsu Forest? White trees, something moving in the darkness, Kushina-san—huh?

Sensei let go of Obito, stepped back, and grabbed my shoulder.

Fwish.
It took me a second to realize where the hell we ended up after the second teleport. After a moment longer, I realized we were looking down on the village from the top of a stone precipice…so the Hokage Mountain was at least intact. Good.

"Kei." Sensei's voice had the clear crack of command, and I turned around to see what he was looking at.

Konoha's village walls extended in a massive circle, kilometers across and partially composed of the long line of the Hokage Monument's mountain. If someone climbed up the rock face and peered over the opposite edge, there'd be thick forest almost as far as the eye could see. There were buildings and small settlements in the distance, but Konohagakure was the epicenter of all trade and commerce in the region. This was a bit of a no-man's land.

Kurama, big and orange and still brimming over with barely-suppressed murderous intent, sat squarely in the middle of the forest. When he sat like that, he didn't put all four limbs on the ground like a canid—instead, he gave the impression of an old guru, with his animalistic hindquarters sitting the way I expected while his humanlike forelegs rested across the tops of his knees. All nine of his tails were up and waving in midair, but I didn't get the impression he was going to rip a bunch of trees out of the ground, fling them at the nearest soft target, and run. He was surrounded by three massive figures, two of which I recognized offhand.

Katsuyu, as big as the entire Konoha administration building and almost luminescent in the moonlight, was to Kurama's left. Her head was raised somewhat, unlike when she was generally preparing to charge into the fray, and I could see her eye-stalks curving inward to observe something on her forehead. If slugs had foreheads.

Gamabunta, somewhat smaller than Katsuyu but also wielding a knife the size of the Forest of Death's central tower, had one webbed hand on the ground as though bracing for an attack while the other was on the hilt of that blade. His legs weren't compressed neatly underneath him—instead, the boss toad gave the impression of waiting for the opportunity, or excuse, to go to town. On his head, barely visible, was a patch of white that was probably Jiraiya's hair.

And the last one, its huge wings flat against the ground and probably upsetting the trees, was a gigantic moth. Or butterfly—much like the abundance of frogs in the Toad summon realm, I imagined that they weren't actually too picky. It had a fuzzy white body with six fuzzy, claw-tipped legs, and huge, iridescent eyes that leaned toward a sort of electric blue tone. Its antenna were vaguely reminiscent of a luna moth, and I could make out large yellow eyespots on the outsides of its primary-colored wings.

"Before we get started, what is that?" I asked Sensei, looking at the Mexican standoff that had Kurama stuck in the middle.

"Mosura, apparently." Sensei prodded the side of my head. "You mean you didn't even read that summon scroll you brought back?"

"...No," I said. "Mothra? Really? And as the boss of all those butterfly summons? "So I'm gonna assume that she's not hostile, and that the Zetsu fusion was smashed by a pissed-off Kurama. What do you want me to do here?"

"Whatever you can. Talk to him? Fight him? Anything to get him on our side."

I felt my thought processes crash to a halt, to be replaced with…What.
"You might be the only person who can convince the Nine-Tails to come quietly back to Konoha," Sensei went on, apparently oblivious to my flabbergasted expression.

"No, wait, let's go back and talk about this all the way through." I started rubbing circles on my temples with my fingertips. "Point one: Somehow the Aburame clan summoned a gigantic butterfly monster and it's our new friend. I can deal with that. It's cool. Point two: Kurama is somehow not trying to murder us all at this exact second. Point three: *How* am I supposed to talk a hundred-meter fox into doing *anything* other than 'whatever the hell he wants'? Because Isobu and I certainly can't *fight* him, no matter what backup we have."

Sensei put his hand on my shoulder. "I believe you can do it, Kei-kun."

I opened my mouth to say something else—probably another protest—but was cut off by the next *fwish* of Sensei's Flying Thunder God jutsu.

"*So we finally meet, little bug.*"

Shit.

Sensei had teleported us both off the mountain. He also just so happened to put us on Gamabunta's head with Jiraiya, right in front of Kurama's huge red eyes. Which was not where *anyone* sane should have wanted to be.

"Yeah, I guess we do." Proud but also surprised that my voice came out that steady, I immediately snapped into a thirty-degree bow on reflex. Mom had trained Hayate and me in the art of respect to the point that it was nearly reflex sometimes.

While Isobu laughed at me from my mindscape, at least Kurama only offered a derisive snort. I would definitely take a blatant dismissal over becoming dinner.

"I know you asked me to call you Kurama-sama, but that's...not gonna happen. Sorry," I went on, probably about to drift over into full ramble mode. "What happened to the Zetsu fusion?"

"*Zetsu? You mean that thing.*" And if a Tailed Beast called something an abomination, then I guess there really was no salvaging it. Zetsu was a semi-mindless humanlike monster with more powers than a Justice League meeting, so of course it would seem like a thing that should not be, even to Kurama. Who was a monster according to just about everyone else. "*It died. These three*"—and here, he waved one disturbingly humanlike hand to indicate the three boss summons —"*are just keeping me from leaving. What a waste of my time.*"

"Kurama-san," I said, even as he glared at me for not using his preferred form of address, "if you'd tried to track down where it came from, Madara would have tried to grab you again."

"*You think that just because I'm not listening to his infernal whining,*" Kurama's voice lowered in anger, "*that I actually think you're the better option? That I wouldn't crush you all where you stand, given half a chance? You're just as selfish and pathetic as he ever was, like all humans. I only decided not to kill you all because I hate him more.*"

Yeah, this wasn't going well.

**Want me to try?**

*It can't hurt, I guess? Give me a second. I had to manifest enough of Isobu's physical form to give*
him a mouth, since otherwise we'd all be stuck communing on the mental plane alone. I guessed that
Sensei and Jiraiya probably would have objected to having me, and therefore Isobu, flop over and
stop responding while we hashed out a deal in the Tailed Beast pocket dimension.

I felt Sensei and Jiraiya both step away from me and Gamabunta shift uncomfortably underfoot as I
pushed through to the V1 chakra cloak. After a second more, I had a mostly-complete but still
miniature manifestation of Isobu projected outward in a cloudlike structure of reddish chakra. All
three tails were visible, along with his humanoid arms and spiky shell and head, but I was also still
quite obviously in the middle of the projection.

"Kurama, you're being an idiot."

Inside of Isobu's chakra aura, I immediately facepalmed with both hands. Goddammit.

"Do you honestly think that these humans are just going to let you run off into whatever
corner of the world you think you can hide in?" Isobu's voice boomed. "Isn't that exactly what
you did until Madara caught you in the first place?"

Kurama's head pulls back and his ears flatten against his head. "How many jailors have you had,
you weakling? You may have had your spine ripped out by these insects, but I don't plan on
following your example!"

"So what are you going to do?" Isobu asked challengingly. "There's nowhere to hide, Kurama!"

"I hate your plan," I stage-whispered at Sensei. "It sucks."

Sensei gave me a thumbs-up anyway.

"It would be simpler just to kill you all," Kurama snapped. "Especially you, Three-Tails! I will
never be trapped by a human again, even if I have to exterminate every living thing on this
continent to make it work!"

"And I'm pretty sure you've tried that!" I shouted at him, separate from Isobu. "And guess what?
Madara happened, you were sealed, and you ended up worse than where you started." I made a
frustrated noise. "Look, I'm supposed to be talking you into not stomping all over creation and killing
squishy humans you find."

"And you're doing so well at that."

Oh, shut up. "Madara is still out there, Kurama-san!" I snapped. It was already hard enough trying to
channel Naruto, but if I had to explain this shit… "Look, as far as I'm concerned, you've got a totally
legitimate beef with humanity. But I am trying really, really hard to make sure that when push comes
to shove we can kill that motherfucker. To that end I am willing to force everyone else to negotiate
what terms you and they have to abide by, if you'll come back to Konoha without killing
everything."

Kurama was giving me what, on a human face, would have been a funny look. "Three-Tails—"

"It's Isobu," My turtle friend growled.

"—whatever. Is this bug telling the truth?"

"I'm still talking, aren't I?" Isobu couldn't shrug, exactly, since his shoulders were pretty much
fused with his shell. I still got that impression, and I shrugged along, too. "It could be worse. She tried talking your jailor into giving you more freedom. Or don't you remember that?"

"I was busy." Yeah, right. He'd been busy fighting Isobu and then getting clubbed over the head by one of Kushina's seal's many fail-safes. None of which she'd designed, from what I remembered.

"That's still more effort than any human's put into interacting with you in more than eighty years," Isobu said dryly. "So put some effort into not being used as a superweapon. Half of you is still stuck in the same host. Do you feel like reassembling yourself or being in two places at once? Because that's what I can see happening."

"I have no interest whatsoever in being stuck in that woman's stomach again," Kurama growled.

Which was convenient because, at this point, I was pretty sure Kushina's seal wouldn't survive having Kurama reassembled in her chakra coils. The strain of a partial extraction coupled with the damage it took during Naruto's birth would probably make putting Yang Kurama back in there a really bad idea.

"Well, what about someone else?" I asked.

"There's no one worth that," Kurama said bluntly.

There were three reasons he hadn't murderized his way out of here yet, and all of them felt a little apprehensive to my chakra sense. The butterfly queen couldn't absorb Tailed Beast chakra if she was anything like her underlings, while Katsuyu and Gamabunta probably didn't have the raw power. Theoretically, Nagato would be able to, but beating Kurama into submission wasn't exactly a sign of progress.

I really, really hoped we weren't going to go the "Pokémon battle" route. "Let's beat this guy up to show him we should be friends!" Fuck that.

You're going to show him?

Nothing else is really working.

Not everyone can be persuaded by bombarding them with genjutsu images of the nonexistent future, either.

...Point. What would you do? He can't leave, since no one from here to the fucking border would let him just waltz off. And we do have the resources to seal him even if he fights. Seriously. Jiraiya, Sensei, and Nagato were all within about two hundred meters. The boss summons were at a disadvantage, but Sensei could call Kushina back in an instant and, to my knowledge, her chakra chains were a lot stronger when she wasn't dying of Tailed Beast extraction syndrome.

"Kurama. Give them a chance," Isobu said, his voice sounding tired. "Humans as a group are useless, panicky ants. But a person can be kind. A person can understand. A person can change," Isobu sighed. "I found a human I could tolerate. I think you can, too."

Kurama blinked. Then he burst out laughing.

"I am serious, you idiot!" Isobu snapped. "They're offering to seal you into someone who isn't a selfish, power hungry human, and maybe you'll finally have a chance to learn something for once!"
"More specifically," I cut in before Isobu could lose his temper, "we're talking about someone who may grow up to change everything."

"Change? Why should I care, little bug?" Kurama snapped his teeth, perilously close to Gamabunta's face. The toad boss, to his credit, didn't flinch.

I, however, found my breaking point.

This goddamned night had been one hit after another. First the Zetsu clones, then Hayate, then Gai's neighbors, then more Zetsu clones, then Black Zetsu and him hurting Obito, and then Mom, and then this thing with Kurama was the straw that broke the camel's back.

"Okay, fuck your superiority complex," I snarled back in his face. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way, and you already know what the hard way is." I threw my arms out to my sides, trying to encompass the whole of Konoha. "I don't know if you've noticed, but we have enough resources to put even you on your back foot, but I got told that we're trying to play nice. For once, the humans are not trying to instantaneously stuff you back into your goddamn genie lamp. We are trying to talk. We aren't any good at it because, guess what, we have your lifespan of history telling us there's only one way to deal with anything big enough to stomp on us. That's to stomp it back.

"You are one of the only beings in the world who's going to live to see the changes we enact. Maybe you've noticed that in all our history, humans live really short lives. Tailed Beasts are effectively immortal, and I'm sure there's a lot we could've learned from you and vice versa if our ancestors hadn't been 'shoot first, question never' types. But we are trying, dammit, so give us a chance to actually follow through!" I panted. "SO ARE WE GOING TO FINALLY CHANGE SHIT OR NOT?"

"There's no way of knowing if working with humans now will change the future," Isobu said while I tried to get my breath back. "But trying anyway is important."

Kurama said nothing for a long moment. Then, "...and if it doesn't work?"

"Then we fight until it does," Sensei said, staring down the creature that had pretty much killed him and his wife the last time around. "I think everyone here heard that. Right?"

Over on Katsuyu, Tsunade signaled that she had. Next to her, finally clambering onto Katsuyu's head after a long disappearance, Nagato gave us all a thumbs-up.

Jiraiya said, "Between all of us—Tailed Beast and human alike—we can make it work."

"Here, we have a Tailed Beast, his host, at least one Hokage, two Sages, three boss summons, two of the Sannin and a young man with the Rinnegan." Sensei met Kurama's eyes squarely. Calmly. "We'll hold up our end of the deal."

"...Hmph. So. I lose, then?" Kurama still didn't feel happy about it. "I have to be sealed away into some random human child."

"I...wouldn't say 'random'," Sensei said carefully.

"You have a plan, then." Isobu twisted to watch Sensei with a cautious air. "Someone who's going to be protected?"

"Yes." Sensei looked at me. "By you and your host, actually."
Thank god.

"Be right back." Sensei _fwished_ away.

I sat down on Gamabunta's head, though Isobu's spectral chakra avatar didn't shift positions at all. "Fucking _finally._"

"Long night, kid?" Jiraiya asked.

"Jiraiya-sama? I...you have _no idea._" I pinched the bridge of my nose. Between the Zetsu alert, Hayate being kidnapped, the Black Zetsu horseshit with Obito, and then all this crap with Kurama? After all of it, I mostly wanted to collapse into a bed and not wake up for a month.

Sensei reappeared, carrying Kushina who was carrying Naruto. "See you in ten, all right?"

"Wait—!" _Fwish._ This one took Kurama with it. From the feel of it, they all ended up somewhere further away from Konoha. After a second, Jiraiya sighed. "That boy..."

"He's gonna keep doing that, isn't he?" Bit of a rhetorical question there, but...

"Yes. He is."

"He's gonna collapse from chakra exhaustion sooner or later," I said.

"Probably."

Maybe I'd dredge up a few more dams to give once I'd had a decent rest myself. I pulled my knees up to my chest and ran my hands over my face. The second Isobu's chakra cut out, I was probably going to faint.

Across the way, Mosura finally poofed into a gigantic burst of smoke that was followed by a series of de-summoning smoke clouds all over the outskirts of the village. The butterflies had _finally_ decided to go home, apparently. I was kind of curious about what their Aburame handlers thought about their performance tonight, but couldn't really think of how to ask the question. Wasn't Jiraiya's part of the operation, either.

"You're pretty calm about Sensei going off to seal Kurama," I said, resting my head against my folded arms. "You know something I don't?"

"I know a _lot_ of things you don't, Kei-kun," Jiraiya said. "But between the speeches you and the Three-Tails gave him, the fact that Kushina's got the other half of the fox, and the seal-work we did in the last three months...nah. Minato can handle this."

"Good," I managed.

"This _is_ fascinating, though," Jiraiya said, looking Isobu's chakra projection over with a keenly interested eye. "This is probably the first time in history that someone's been able to sit down and just talk with a Tailed Beast."

"Aside from our hosts? Yes. But most of them weren't interested in talking much, either," Isobu said. "This one is the _first_ one who didn't just try to steal my chakra first thing."

...Thanks? I think. It's sad that the bar's so low, though.

I know.
A thought occurred to me. "Sensei and Kushina acted like me talking to Isobu was a sign of the end
times. Why are you so calm?"

"You and Isobu-san just spent ten minutes arguing with the Nine-Tails about why we should all
work together for world peace." Jiraiya smiled.

There…was a thing. That he was thinking of. Probably a prophecy, but I was too tired to try to
puzzle out how an old warrior was working his way through that whole thing.

**I don't think your body will take any more of my chakra right now.** Isobu said, seeming to settle
down inside of my mindscape. Even his projected body was just twisting his injured tail around to
inspect the damage. **I'm cutting you off.**

*Not gonna argue.* I thought back.

I felt myself slip sideways, saw the red energy dissipate.

The ground came up to meet me.

---

I woke up in a room with yellow walls, underneath two comforters and somebody's legs. Sunlight
streamed through the open window, with the slightest chill of a mid-autumn morning. Between the
warmth of the blankets and a reluctance to immediately start talking to people, I didn't move for a
while.

The legs shifted sometime in the middle of my attempt at sleeping in—apparently my bedmate had
been asleep, too, but had rectified that.

Someone opened the door.

"Rin-chan, Kei-chan. I know you're both awake." Kushina?

I sat bolt upright in bed, making Rin jolt awake properly. It also meant that I got to confront a
migraine immediately afterward.

"Owww." Rin must have fallen off the bed. Then her head poked up from the side of the bed like a

"…Yep," I said, channeling just a bit of Isobu's chakra to try and combat the headache. But no dice.

**It's a dehydration headache, stupid.** Isobu said flatly.

*Okay, okay, I got that."

"We need to talk," Kushina said firmly.

Huh? "Uh, okay," I said, blinking sleep out of my eyes. "Just give me a second…"

"Now, Kei-chan."

In short order, I was hauled out of bed—noticing somewhat belatedly that I was still in my combat
uniform, minus the flak jacket—dumped at the dining room table. Along the way, I tried to assemble
the facts in my head.

**Fact:** Given who else was at the table, everyone on my team had survived. Sure, Obito was
practically asleep in his (empty) bowl, Kakashi was looking at me with unnerving, silent focus, Gai
was looking for an escape route from Kushina's domestic wrath (probably), and Rin was just getting into her seat, but...well, that was a relief. Sensei was there, too, but zonked out on the couch with Naruto lying on his chest.

Fact: I was in Kushina and Sensei's house rather than my own. This could have meant that my house had been demolished at some point after we killed at the Zetsu clones in the area. It could also have meant that entire districts were cordoned off for another reason. Or maybe whoever had been conscious at that point had decided that I didn't need to be there.

Fact: I was still suffering from that dehydration headache and there was tea in front of me (that I promptly drank). I was also hungry, shaky, and not entirely sure what was going on.

Fact: I still didn't know where my mom and my brother were.

This last conundrum ate the majority of my conscious thought processes.

"Has anyone seen my mom? Or my brother?" I asked.

Dead silence.

Obito sat up with a jerk, still looking terrible and also rather out of it. Kakashi's laser-focused gaze was pointed at me for just a moment, then over toward the kitchen at Kushina. Gai, on the other hand, practically oozed a sense of dread that I didn't understand at first. Rin looked like someone had told her that her dog had died. What did I say?

"You guys are scaring me right now," I said, but the joke fell flat on its face. Crap, crap, crap...

Kushina set a huge basket of fruit in the middle of the table. As she sat down across from me, I felt the tension in the room ratchet up a notch.

"Kushina-san..." I began, but didn't know where to even start.

"I have good news and bad news," Kushina said with forced calm, her fingers laced together in front of her face. I could still feel her agitated chakra moving.

"...Hayate?" I managed.

"He's got a broken leg, but he's going to be okay. He's in the boys' room." She nodded at Kakashi, who had put away his scroll at some point. Not awake, though. Shit. "But your mother... I'm sorry, Kei-chan."

No.

No, no, no—

Shit. I already...I'd seen her fall in the fight against Black Zetsu, but I hadn't...

Fuck.

"That's..." Shit. Okay, no, she's already gone—what has to happen next? What do I need to do? How can I keep my brother safe and healthy now? There had to be a way... And there I went, not dealing with the problem.

My whole body slumped back, as I looked at Kushina with something between denial and raw grief in every line of my frame. Fuck.
No, no. I couldn't let it control me, not now.

But—

I got up from the table, slamming the chair back hard enough to make it tip over with an almighty bang.

Rin tried to follow. "Kei—!"

But I batted her reaching hand aside and stumbled down the hall, feeling tears stream down my face. I found the door I was looking for, wrenched it open, and closed it behind me before bracing my back against it and sliding down until my butt reached the floor. I tried to wipe my face on my sleeves, only to get tears and snot all over them.

No one came knocking.

But there was already someone in here.

A faint voice came from the rough vicinity of the bed. "S-Sis?"

"H-here. Over here," I croaked, getting to my feet and heading over to the bed. I sat down on the edge of it, leaning over so I could see my brother properly.

Hayate looked pale and wan, still dressed in his pajamas and looking up at me with dull eyes. His left leg was in a cast from the knee down, with his pajama leg pushed up so the medics could get at it. He'd thrown the blankets off at some point, leaving a mess of a bedspread and a scattered pillow or two across the room. There was a thick ring of dark purplish-blue bruises around his throat.

"You heard." Hayate's voice was like a sigh. I brushed my fingers against his cheek and felt dried tearstains before I saw them.


He lifted his hand slowly to grip mine, and I saw his lip start to tremble.

I helped him sit up in time for him to smother his tears against my shirt. He was shaking and sobbing and sooner or later we'd both come back to swearing at the world. At that moment, though, I squeezed him just as hard as he was hugging me.

"Wh-What are we going to do?" Hayate demanded, his voice wobbling and hitching halfway through.

I tucked his head under my chin. I couldn't give him a useful answer at that moment. Maybe not for a while. "We'll…figure it out."

It would take time, but we'd be okay.

I wouldn't allow things to be any other way.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Okay, I figured that was long enough on the cliffhanger I left last time. Arc's over,
everybody out.

1. Rin has officially progressed from "-chan/-senpai" for Kei to yobisute, or "null honorific." This will be pointed out later. There is no lingering Zetsu problem. (The Rin-Zetsu didn't get any lines anyway.)

2. Yes, Naruto and Kushina are both Kurama's hosts. Kushina keeps Yin and Naruto gets Yang. As in the manga, the Yin half of Kurama is the generally more congenial side. Yang is…not.

3. The Ten-Tails and therefore the Statue used to be in this chapter, but since it was criminally underutilized even in the role of "big smashy monster," I've elected to keep it off the field for a while longer. Not actually sure why it would be on the battlefield at this stage anyway, given that Madara is still hooked up to it and can't fight in his old age at the moment. So instead, you get the Zetsu equivalent of the S'muz.

4. The boss summon of the butterflies is indeed Mothra. Speaking of summons, I shudder to think of the result when you combine Fourth Shinobi War-strength Naruto with the Slug summon contract.

5. Kei still doesn't know what all happened in this arc. See next chapter for details. You can also ask me on my tumblr (Langwrites), or via review, if something needs to be answered post-haste.

6. This chapter's title is brought to you by the first Pokemon movie's soundtrack.
A while after I finally settled Hayate down, there was a knock at the door.

"Kei?" Kakashi's voice.

Hayate and I were still on the bed. He'd fallen asleep—or at least gone quiet—with his head on my thigh, and I was braced against the headboard with my eyes seemingly glued to the opposite wall. My right hand was still slowly running though his hair, while the rest of me sort of...checked out for a while. The knock brought me back to reality, and I wiped my aching eyes with my left sleeve.

"Yeah?" I croaked, and paused. I sounded horrible. "I...I can be out in a minute." What in hell could they need me for?

The door opened, just a crack, and a familiar brown ball of fur slipped through the gap. He briefly disappeared in the blind spot between the edge of the bed and the floor, but hopped up onto the bedspread. Another dog, this one with a distinct droopy-eyed look and kanji on his forehead, nosed the door open and followed in Pakkun's wake.

Pakkun walked across the mattress until he was able to put a paw on my raised knee. "Kei-chan, things will be okay."

I sighed and scratched behind his ears. He leaned into it, scooted closer, and eventually crawled into my lap. It took a few seconds to rearrange his legs properly, but by the end he was resting with his nose against the back of my brother's head.

Bisuke, on the other hand, cut out the middleman and just walked over to my brother's side of the bed and curled into a ball next to him.

...So I guessed that meant I didn't actually have to do anything, yet.

I cleared my throat and said, "If you're still there, you can come in."

It took a few seconds, but Kakashi finished his mental tug-of-war and gently nudged the door open with one shoulder. On a tray, he was carrying two empty teacups and a black teapot that was leaking steam. He put the tray on the nightstand and kind of just stood there in the middle of the room, practically radiating awkwardness.

"Hey," I said. I patted the empty side of the bed. "There's a spot."

Kakashi gave a wordless grunt of acknowledgement before sitting down next to me. The mattress dipped, but not enough to wake Hayate.
"Small mercies, I guess."

"How is he?" Kakashi asked quietly, not quite meeting my eyes.

I shrugged. I brought my left hand up and rubbed my temples, forcing down whatever half-formed sarcastic remarks I was tempted to say. Something about how our entire team was finally composed of orphans, probably. *Shit.*

"Rin-san is with Obito," Kakashi said, answering a question I hadn't asked. But it was good to know that Obito wasn't being forgotten in the wake of everything. "Gai is, too."

"Good." I started petting Pakkun again. It made it easier to think of what to say and keep from getting distracted by unhelpful impulses. I didn't need to make everyone else feel like shit. "Obito's going to need them. And us."

Kakashi nodded.

I continued staring at the blank spot on the opposite wall that had occupied my attention for so long.

It…It wasn't that I didn't understand that Mom was dead. While a highly paranoid part of me insisted that nobody was dead unless I saw the body, I wasn't really in denial. Being a shinobi for six years meant that there wasn't really any time for that kind of wishful thinking—we tended to skip past "denial" and jump straight to the other stages of grief, only to double back to "anger" as many times as necessary. Denial just wasn't productive in our line of work.

I just…I had things to do. People who depended on me. I'd let myself wallow when Dad died. And when we'd thought that Obito had died (or gone to the dark side). This time, though, I didn't have Mom backing me up.

Now I was the one that Hayate depended on to be strong. He didn't really know Sensei or Kushina, and while Rin and Obito were his friends as well as mine…well, they weren't *Mom.* Neither was I, but I was family. I'd been there the whole time.

I blinked the tears away this time, and none of them fell.

Sooner or later, I'd get up again.

Kakashi handed me one of the napkins on the tray. Instead of wiping my eyes, I blew my nose, folded it up again, and crumpled it in my fist. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve again.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

Kakashi sighed. "Don't apologize. It's fine."

I looked at him, at the visible discomfort in his body language and the hesitance in his voice. And I said, rather than addressing it, "When do they need me out there?"

Kakashi shook his head. "Not yet. Just—" He made a very quiet, frustrated noise. "Kei, you're allowed to just *not* do things."

Like hell I was. "I'm head of household now. There's…there's paperwork and we can't stay here forever…"

"No one's going to ask about that," Kakashi replied, and I could feel this strange combination of frustration, worry, and alarm working through his chakra. "Kei…"
Irrational anger built in my chest like a spark took to tinder. *Fucking hypocrite.* As if I didn't know that the way Kakashi dealt with grief was by pushing himself to exhaustion, whether in this iteration of reality or in the other one, where he'd lost everything over and over again. As if I didn't know that work was one of the best—or worst—ways to take my mind off any impending downward spiral. As if I didn't have other responsibilities that *wouldn't* stay on hold while I got my head sorted out.

Kakashi handed me a teacup.

…Right. I probably wasn't imagining the way that his eye had widened a bit when my temper started flaring unpredictably. Maybe he'd even felt a scrap of Isobu's chakra at this range.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. It took longer than it should have to be able to choke out, "…Thanks."

So we sat, and drank tea, and I tried to think my way through it all.

Sensei and Kushina were alive. Naruto wasn't going to be an orphan if any of us had anything to say about it.

Obito and Rin were alive, too, and if they weren't whole then I guess that was something we were all going to have to struggle through together.

The village was intact. Ish.

Mom was dead, and so were a bunch of other people. What fighting I'd done last night had probably saved others. Other families would be okay.

Knowing that, I had to hold onto the idea that I did everything I could to help. I might've been able to save Mom, if I hadn't had Madara's seal in my chest. Sensei might have if he hadn't had to make sure Kushina made it out alive. Maybe Nagato, too, if they hadn't been dogpiled by Zetsu clones at that exact moment. But if anything else had changed, maybe someone else would have died instead.

If I hadn't had the Puppet Master Seal in me, I probably wouldn't have had Isobu, either. And that could have killed us all six months ago.

I transferred my teacup to my other hand. I reached out, blindly, and grabbed Kakashi's free hand with my left. I squeezed his hand, my fingers shaking.

He squeezed back, hesitant.

"…Thank you." I sighed again. With anger draining out of me, I mostly just felt…empty. Small. Alone.

Kakashi bumped my shoulder with his.

I could get up again.

Cynical as it was, losing Dad and Obito (briefly) had made the patterns of grief somewhat predictable. If my mind was a forest, my mourning mindset was following old game trails through it. I'd done this before.

I just hoped it wouldn't become a habit.

The week after October tenth was…messy.
Not just literally. The village was more than a little worse for wear, thanks to the Zetsu monsters that had been stomping around. Storefronts had been smashed, houses had been punctured or worse, and the hospital had caught fire. Between the number of bodies needing to be removed, the number of injured, and the damage to most structures, central Konoha had become something of an improvised tent city within eight hours of the attack's conclusion.

Somewhere in the forest of tents, the Third Hokage had authorized a missing persons bulletin board. Anyone who stopped by, possibly looking for relatives or friends spirited away by Zetsu clones or among the injured somewhere, would have a chance to add a name to the board. Next to it, labeled by white ink on a black header, was a corresponding list of confirmed dead.

It was just the first day after the attack, so the administrative personnel only had a list of about four hundred names by noon, on both lists. Here and there, a representative of each major clan had apparently trooped up to the board and scribbled down every deceased or missing clan member. You could get halfway down and, after watching the slow procession of people reporting more and more dead names, almost pinpoint the exact time that the Uchiha clan had gotten around to adding names.

*Yoshi Uchiha, Matsumaru Uchiha, Chiharu Uchiha…*

*Inosuke Yamanaka, Chōku Akimichi…*

ANBU had their own lists, somewhere in Sensei's office. I didn't know when he'd get around to checking it and reassigning team captains, and I didn't want to ask. Since Sensei's office received updates on the casualty lists once per fifteen minutes, there was a steady stream of people making their way in and out of the building on a regular basis.

I wasn't stationed in the administration building on the eleventh. I was, however, on the job.

At least, I checked the security seals. Sensei had remoted-linked just about everything he could get his hands on, in a way that reminded me more of Harry Dresden than Nicolas Fury. I could track the movements of people in the office using a game board set up like a model of the office, and the progress of the casualty list via a messaging document on the Hokage's desk. The latter was linked to a scroll slightly to the left of the game board.

The blue piece indicating the Third Hokage hadn't moved out of the room in about four hours.

I checked if Mom's name was on the "Confirmed Dead" list (it was, near the top), then settled in for my shift as a Hokage's bodyguard.

Unless you were walking wounded, nobody had days off in the wake of a major disaster.

The Hokage Guard Platoon's roster had been cut down to half strength in less than twelve hours, so there wasn't enough manpower to go around at the moment. At the same time, I was also one of the two members of Team Minato who could actually walk for more than twenty meters in a straight line. With Kakashi elsewhere regrouping with the rest of ANBU and Obito unable to walk under his own power, and most of the veterans in the Hokage Guard Platoon either injured or dead, I was kinda…it.

It would have been psychologically sound to take a goddamn personal day—or week would have been able to sort out all the paperwork that somebody had retrieved from my house, try to learn how to cook something that my brother would eat, and maybe get some extra sleep. But I'd decided that my coping strategy was to work my demons to death during daylight hours.

I know, I know. Kakashi's coping method wasn't any better when I was the one doing it.
At least we weren't in the office.

For one thing, Sensei wasn't any more mobile than Obito was. Sensei did have an office in the house, with a desk and an in-tray that seemed to be linked somehow to the one in the Hokage's circular office. It was very clearly designed to work in the event that the office was destroyed, the water pipes busted, or some other administrative nightmare.

But with Sensei down for the count due to chakra exhaustion, it meant mostly that paperwork piled up on top of the in-tray's space-time seal. To be honest, I wasn't really sure how he managed to make it home. But according to Gai, he'd made it through the front door before collapsing into a dead faint.

My job, which I managed between trying to get Hayate to eat and staring at a spot on the wall, was to make sure that no one in the house managed to die before he woke up. Rin was managing the actual care part, medically speaking, while the rest of us did whatever.

But Hayate had cried himself to sleep earlier and hadn't woken up. Obito had been moved to the bedroom to keep him company, and he had fallen asleep again almost immediately after breakfast. Kushina was awake and running on fumes to keep herself that way, in case there was some kind of crisis that only she was capable of dealing with. Rin was probably running on entirely too many stimulants and only enough sleep to tide her over.

I was at loose ends.

Gai was gone by about ten in the morning. Genma stopped by, limping and slightly fuzzy-brained but alive, and dragged Gai home with him with the justification that his apartment was still intact, and they were teammates anyway. I didn't ask about what had happened to Raidō—I probably wouldn't have gotten a straight answer, even if Genma did know. Gai still looked miserable at the reminder that he was effectively homeless, but it was mitigated by the knowledge that at least one of his genin teammates was still alive.

"Most buildings in the district got pretty badly hit, but mine's fine," Genma had explained, once Gai was helping him stand up straight. Personally, I would have been leery of letting a guy suffering from post-concussion syndrome walk out of the medical center, but there were probably enough casualties that anyone with all extremities attached was of minimal concern. "Come on, Gai. The power still works at my place, so there's food there."

"Will there be missions in the afternoon?" Gai had asked, as they were leaving.

"You're gonna have to do that bit yourself," Genma had said, wincing as the autumn sunlight hit his eyes.

They'd left, with a stern order from Rin to get Genma to sleep the concussion off. He wasn't dying by any stretch of the imagination, but there was no point in trying to put a wobbly shinobi to work.

As the morning turned to afternoon, the sound of work in the neighborhood around the house got louder and louder. Eventually, the noise woke Naruto—just in time for lunch.

I could tell based on the sudden screaming coming from the master bedroom, which was not accompanied by a corresponding jump in Sensei's chakra. So much for getting him off the couch—it'd taken me two minutes to wrestle his unresponsive ass off to his actual bed, and he hadn't woken up then, either.

Now, Naruto was a very cute baby. For a baby human.

In the spirit of fairness, I will say that newborns are generally not the cutest things on the planet. The
vast majority of newborns are small, red, vaguely hominid creatures that scream a lot and don't generally display any spark of interest in the broader world. Newborns hardly had the eyesight necessary to recognize their parents' faces, but little Naruto definitely had preferences for which brightly colored blobs he wanted to see.

I was not one of them (nor was I brightly colored). Not when he was hungry, and his dad wasn't responding to his loudly articulated argument that he should be fed immediately.

Cute and pushy, at the tender age of about twelve hours. Who would've thought?

"Kei-chan, take over for me," Kushina said as soon as we heard the newborn screaming, handing me a wooden spoon before rushing off toward the bedroom.

I…wasn't exactly sure what in hell she expected me to do with it. I was the kind of cook that, rather than being bad enough to warp the very laws of physics and accidentally create sapient pudding, was merely mediocre. Most the cookery fail came from my lack of attention span, more than anything. I'd forget stuff on the stove while working on creating seals barely two meters away, or wander away while someone tried to show me how to keep myself from starving.

There was an "oof" as Rin dropped into one of the kitchen chairs behind me. I stood at the stove, trapped in the existential terror of trying to figure out what to do.

"Kei, I can help with that," Rin said.

"Really?" I asked.

Rin got up, plucked the spoon out of my hand, set it down on a kitchen towel, and patted my shoulder. With her other hand, she turned the heat on the stove down, probably so the soup wouldn't burn.

Oh. "Thanks, Rin-chan." I paused, looking at her. "When did you start just using my name, anyway?"

She started doing that thing. The thing that Hinata did, when she was nervous? Rin pushed her index fingers together, radiating a quiet anxiousness. "It's…it's not rude, is it?"

"No. You never really had to call me 'Kei-senpai' in the first place, either." I shrugged. "I mean, it felt nice that someone looked up to me like that, but you surpassed me ages ago." I winked. "Eh, Rin-senpai?"

"Please don't, Kei-chan." Ah, crap. She didn't need to slip backwards a step just because she was concerned about my feelings.

"You don't need to worry about me," I told her, affecting unconcern. "My whole genin team is a bunch of rude jerks anyway, compared to you. We don't use '-kun' or '-chan' in any direction, and we pretty much never have."

Mostly because we actually were rude to each other. It was just that none of us had ever cared. For fuck's sake, Obito straight up called Kakashi a bastard the first time they met, and I'd been privately referring to Kakashi as a jackass in my head for about that long. Kakashi had had us both pegged as sentimental idiots.

I just wasn't sure when all those flying insults became endearments.

"Ah." Belatedly, I realized that maybe my description of my team had been more of an indictment
"Still, Rin-chan? You can totally just use 'Kei' for me." Just about everyone else my age did already.

"Only if I can be just 'Rin','" she countered.

Perhaps it was my cultural gap showing again, but it almost felt like a bizarre sort of downgrade to lose the '-chan.' But if that was what she wanted… "Okay, Rin."

"Did you two let my soup burn?" Kushina demanded, reappearing in the kitchen. For a second, I wondered why she didn't seem to have the same bounce in her step as usual. Then I remembered that, duh, she'd given birth about fourteen hours beforehand and… wait.

Yep, she had her shirt pushed up and was still breastfeeding Naruto.

Was my competence in the kitchen so horrifically lacking that she couldn't delay at all? It seemed like Naruto was going to get used to being lugged around like an animate loaf of bread for the foreseeable future—his mother would hardly stay still for anything. We'd have to rig them a sling post-haste, just so Kushina didn't get the urge to just put her baby down someplace in order to use her hands.

"You were gone for like two minutes," I said incredulously. "Even I can't destroy a kitchen that fast."

…Well, I couldn't destroy a kitchen through failing at cooking by accident. I could definitely pull some ridiculous crap on purpose.

Kushina gave Rin and me a thoroughly skeptical look. Then, without another word, she dragged another chair out from its hiding place behind the kitchen table, collapsing into it with a sigh.

"Is Naruto-chan all right?" Rin asked, sitting back down at the table so she could more easily peer at Naruto.

"I don't think anything that eats this much could be unhealthy," Kushina said dryly. Looking at her, I realized belatedly that she didn't really look like she'd slept all that well. Her long red hair was still stiff from sweat or dirt or whatever, and with Sensei still unconscious, me sleeping off chakra exhaustion, and Obito immobile, there hadn't been all that many hands to help keep little Naruto occupied through the night.

"Weren't the Third and Biwako-sama helping you at all?" I asked, crossing my arms.

"Yes, but the village…" Kushina trailed off. She sighed again. "Needs of the many, right?"

"…That's one way to look at it," I said carefully. "But it doesn't really change the fact that you don't look like you've slept since Naruto-chan was born."

Rin and I exchanged glances. Rin said, "Kushina-san, maybe you could take a nap once Naruto-chan is fed? Kei and I can handle most things just fine."

Especially since, thanks to Jiraiya, I didn't have to deal with the local equivalent of the Agony Matrix in my chest.

But as for Rin…

"Rin, you should probably take a nap unless you've got a soldier pill bottle around here somewhere,"
I added, giving the resident medic a concerned look.

"What about you?" Kushina asked, as Naruto made a small sighing noise against her chest.

"I recover a lot faster from chakra exhaustion than most people, I wasn't awake all night, and I wasn't in labor yesterday." I shrugged. "I'll be fine."

"Don't go abusing the Thr—Isobu-sensei's power just because the rest of us are tired," Kushina said, catching herself.

"I'm staying up," Rin said, setting her jaw stubbornly. "There are stimulants in the bathroom cabinet, and I don't feel comfortable going to sleep when Obito and Hokage-sama are still reeling from chakra exhaustion. And besides, I got to nap earlier."

"Explains why you were asleep next to me." But still… "There's nothing we can really do to help with chakra exhaustion of all things. Rin…"

Which was kind of the reason that chakra exhaustion was such a problem, for a condition that was bleeding obvious to any shinobi who wasn't riding an adrenaline high. It was very, very unusual for the condition to strike without warning. I had no doubt whatsoever that Sensei had known that using whatever seal they went with, for Naruto, would have knocked him flat. He just hadn't cared.

Rin shook her head. "You can't make me follow that suggestion, Kei."

…Okay, point. I ranked her in terms of the whole promotion thing, but as a field medic she could basically do whatever she had to in order to ensure her patients' survival. Anything.

**Who exactly do you expect to help if the Uchiha boy crashes on your watch?**

Double point. Dammit.

I gave up. "All right, all right. You're head medic. I'm just head face-breaker. Get the pills you want and we'll get set up."

"You two don't actually have to—" But Kushina's protest was cut off by a jaw-cracking yawn, which neatly punctured her argument. "Oh, fine."

"We'll do a walk-through a couple of times," I said. "Seriously, Kushina-sensei, you need to rest." And at the moment, aside from advanced sealing techniques I hadn't gotten around to, there wasn't much she could do that I couldn't. Pushing her to do so would be…well, stupid. Especially if it was something we could just as easily get Jiraiya to do.

"After Naruto's finished," Kushina acquiesced. Then all of her attention was back on the newborn in her arms.

"Kei, can you send Tsuruya-sensei out?" Rin asked, as we retreated from the kitchen. Rin was probably going to check on Sensei again—I hadn't asked—but I was going to start checking the security seals around the house. We wouldn't be talking much.

"Yeah, I have the chakra for it. Just a second." I headed out the front door, closing it behind me. Then I hopped up onto the roof so I could summon Tsuruya well off the ground. She was large enough to require a leaping start from ground level, which she often didn't appreciate having to do.

I pricked my thumb with a shuriken and, one poof of smoke later, had Tsuruya's huge black-tipped wings shading me from overhead.
She bonked me on the side of my head anyway, with her beak. "Tell me, Keisuke-sama, did everything go well? There were no injuries, no… Oh, dear."

I hugged Tsuruya as she gently wrapped her right wing around me. I wasn't crying but it was a very close thing.

"It's going to be all right, Keisuke-sama," Tsuruya murmured, lowering her head to rest against the top of mine. "When I come back, I'll listen."

"R-Right." I swallowed. "Tsuruya, go find Jiraiya-sama or the Third Hokage. I need to make sure they know how Sensei's doing."

"How is the Fourth Hokage?" Tsuruya asked, her voice still low. With her wing in the way, it was going to be pretty hard for anyone to hear me or read my lips.

"He'll be fine. Rin thinks he could wake up any minute now," I hedged anyway. Okay, so it wasn't a lie… It was more like I was fudging the truth a little. The idea that Sensei wouldn't wake up from a nonfatal bout of chakra exhaustion was frankly terrifying. And unlikely. "I'm going to stay here, all right? I'll take any orders they have, but only if I have someone to hand off guard duty to. And I don't think there's anyone who qualifies right now."

Tsuruya nodded. "I understand, Keisuke-sama. I'll deliver the messages. Do you need me to do anything else?"

"Well, if someone needs help…"

"I will volunteer my services." Tsuruya's flight feathers rattled as she folded her wings back into their resting position. "Goodbye for now, Keisuke-sama."

As Tsuruya threw herself off the roof, I hopped back down to the welcome mat and let myself back into the house.

I could tell when Sensei woke up when he walked into the master bedroom's doorframe with an echoing *thud*, about an hour after Kushina had finally gone to bed, with Naruto asleep on her chest. It probably said something about the situation—about my life—that I could recognize that sound off-hand. I just wasn't sure what.

I didn't get up from the couch to go help or anything—instead, I was creating more explosive seals to replace some of the ones that I kept handing off to other people. It didn't take much concentration compared to the other stuff, so I could guard and practice my explosive calligraphy at the same time. Sensei didn't really need my help to figure out how to operate a door anyway.

"…get that moved…" he muttered as he disappeared into the bathroom, rubbing his forehead. There was the sound of the showerhead's spray hissing and hitting the other wall.

"What happened?" asked Rin, sticking her head out of the guest bedroom. Obito was awake, though he hadn't moved yet and Rin hadn't apparently noticed. Hayate was in the other bathroom, washing his face from what I could hear.

"Sensei misses the door when he's chakra-exhausted," I replied without looking up. "He's two for two on that."

Rin disappeared back into the guest bedroom with a shrug, after a moment's thought. I went back to my sealing work.
Sensei emerged from the depths of the bathroom after a while, and after another *thud* and "ow!" combination. I didn't ask what he'd been having difficulty with. There are some things that just aren't worth asking.

He sat down on the couch next to me, peering curiously at my designs. It took him longer than it should have to make an "ah" of realization.

Sensei scratched his head. "Kei-kun?"

"Yes, Sensei?"

"What day is it?"

I looked up, realizing that he had his head leaning pretty heavily on his upraised palm, which was supported by his elbow and leg. His eyes were also heavy-lidded and somewhat unfocused. I said, "The eleventh. You were either asleep or unconscious for about…fourteen hours? Something like that. I'm on watch."

Sensei had gone as still as a statue.

"Sensei?" I asked.

He jumped off the couch like something had shocked him and ran to the bedroom.

Rin stuck her head out into the hall again. "What was that?"

Whatever I was going to say was cut off by Sensei saying, quite loudly, "I'M A DAD!"

As an aside, I had no idea how he had failed to notice little Naruto in the bed with him and Kushina. I was probably never going to know.

"I KNOW," Kushina snarled back at him," SO BE QUIET!"

That was about when Naruto started crying again.

I facepalmed with both hands.

And this was probably why Sensei didn't work himself to chakra exhaustion all the time. His brain clearly went on walkabout whenever it happened.

Long story short: We eventually managed to get everything sorted out again. Kushina stayed in the bedroom with the newborn, grumbling about her husband's airheaded-ness. Hayate came out of the other bathroom at some point, his hair still wet and eyes still red, and curled into my side as I put the finishing touches on my explosive seals. Sensei eventually ate something, though he struggled to pull his jōnin uniform shirt on without getting stuck—which didn't really say much for his ability to defend himself. Along the way, he made sure to ask what he'd missed by sleeping the morning away.

"Other than reconstruction work, not much," I said, capping my calligraphy brush and eyeballing the drying ink carefully. Once satisfied with my work, I rolled it all up into another premade explosive scroll. I'd probably end up giving it to Genma or someone else again, given my touch explosive talent, but it was always good to have these things on hand. "I can follow you to the office, if you want."

Sensei sighed. "Yeah. That."

"You don't need to sound so excited," I said dryly.
Sensei waved my remark off with a flap of his left hand. His right was occupied by his second melonpan of the day, which he was devouring with gusto.

"You probably don't even need to go in, really," I said, since his mouth was full. "That in-tray in the office is transporting all the paperwork over here, and the Third Hokage is still in the actual office and coordinating things."

Though Tsuruya hadn't gotten back with news from around the village, I really didn't think that it indicated any kind of trouble.

"No, I need to get out of the house and show people I'm not dead," Sensei replied, after downing a cup of hot tea in one swallow. I kind of wanted to know how he did that without scalding himself, but it wasn't super important. "I…I think I'll take you, and Obito, and I'll have to pull someone from the Hokage Guard Platoon to cover the house while we're gone…" Sensei paused, looking at me. And at Hayate.

I was wearing a tear-stained gray tank-top with my uniform bottoms, which were covered in mud and blood spatter. My hitai-ate was in some kind of pocket dimension along with Black Zetsu, and I didn't care enough to try and get it back from him. I had explosives, and my equipment belts, and my flak jacket was still around the house somewhere.

Hayate, who was now wearing shorts and a stained T-shirt that probably belonged to Kakashi (given the bizarrely extended turtleneck look), looked dully back at him.

"Your brother should come, too. I'm going to meet Tsunade there one way or another."

"Is that why you want to bring Obito?" I asked.

"Yes. The sooner everyone's back on their feet, the sooner we can get the village put back together." I saw something shift in his expression, and his eyes darkened. "Then we can start arranging funerals."

Oh.

"Go ahead and get dressed. I'm leaving in two minutes."

"Getting dressed," given that I didn't have any spare clothes stashed in the house, basically consisted of tracking down my uniform shirt and flak jacket. And my sandals, but that part was less of a concern, given that destroying them was harder. As it was, I salvaged a dirty but otherwise serviceable ensemble. I doubted anyone would really care how rumpled I was or wasn't, after last night.

"…And make sure to ask Jiraiya-sama to make completely sure that no one can do that again," Rin was saying to Sensei, as I emerged from the bathroom with a toothbrush in my mouth.

Sensei was carrying Obito on his back, with Obito's arms looped loosely around his neck. He was nodding along seriously with what Rin was saying, his eyes slightly wider than usual. I guessed that while he hadn't actually doubted that she had a spine, given that Rin's actions last night had half been his idea, he'd never really thought that she'd use that same iron core on him.

Obito was stifling a quiet snicker against the side of Sensei's neck.

I dodged the lecture and let Hayate climb onto my back as well. I tried to be careful of his injured leg, but I couldn't really help if it bumped against my hip before I got him settled.
"We're going to get your leg fixed, Haa-chan," I whispered to him, twisting my neck so I could almost see his face.

He nodded, bumping his forehead against the side of my head. "Okay."

"And Kei," and I jumped a little at the sight of Rin's index finger waggling in my face, "make sure you remind Tsunade-sama to check his chakra coils. And keep Hayate-chan off that leg even after Tsunade-sama heals it!"

I nodded automatically. "Right, got it."

Rin stepped back, crossing her arms over her chest. "Well…that's all I had to say. I'll look after Kushina-san and Naruto-chan until someone gets sent here, then."

The living room vanished in a blur of whirling color and a *fwish* before I was able to respond.

When reality reasserted itself, we were all in the Hokage's office in front of the desk, where the Third Hokage had accidentally let some ash from his pipe fall on the desk as he jolted from surprise. The secretary next to him—a chūnin I didn't recognize—dropped a clipboard and hastened to retrieve it.

The Third Hokage recovered first. "Minato-kun, you're already ready to resume work?"

"Close enough," Sensei replied. He had left his signature *Fourth Hokage*-emblazoned coat in the house, along with his flak jacket, but he set Obito down on the office's couch and immediately grabbed the spare formal robes from a nearby…was that a broom closet? Or a cabinet I'd just somehow never noticed before.

Apparently it was more like a robe closet. Regardless, the cabinet vanished from sight as soon as Sensei closed the door and started to tug the robes on over his head.

"Define 'close enough.'" I suggested, setting Hayate down on the couch next to Obito, who still hadn't said anything.

"Don't expect me to give you a lift back to the house."

Dammit.

"Sarutobi-sama, I'm going to need…Jiraiya-sensei, Tsunade-hime, and maybe a few more people."

Sensei made a helpless gesture. "I don't actually know what's been happening since I blacked out."

"Well, how about I get you started, then." The Third Hokage addressed his secretary then, saying, "Please leave us. Ask Tsunade-chan and Jiraiya-kun to come to the tower as soon as possible."

"Yes, Hokage-sama."

The rest of us watched her go.

"I think I need to clarify a few things before anyone else arrives," the Third Hokage said, giving Hayate a significant look. "And this doesn't need to be heard by young ears."

"As soon as Tsunade fixes his leg and Obito's chakra, I'll send them back," Sensei replied, leaning on the edge of the desk. "We'll need Falcon's team at my house as soon as possible."

Sarutobi checked a document at the desk. "…Falcon's team is down three members, but we should be able to get the rest on duty."
I have to admit, I tuned out most of what they said, logistics-wise, after that. Not that it wasn't interesting from a macro-level standpoint about village inter-departmental politics and logistics…but I really didn't care.

My focus was on Obito and Hayate. I figured the two Hokage in the room would be able to handle whatever came their way, at least for a bit.

"Hey. You two are going to be back to walking in just a bit," I said to them, standing in front of them. I wasn't willing to sit down just yet, not after spending the morning getting a crick in my back from leaning over the coffee table for too long.

"I guess," Obito muttered.

Hayate mumbled something I couldn't understand at all.

Oh, dammit again.

Under my breath, I grumbled, "Tsunade-sama had better get here soon…"

"What in the world were you doing?" Tsunade asked Obito, after putting him through a fairly thorough medical examination. Obito and I opened our mouths to respond, but she cut us off, "That was a rhetorical question. I damn well know what you were doing. Just don't make a habit of it. I'm not going to be around to fix your screw-ups whenever you shred your chakra coils."

"I…wasn't really planning on doing it again?" Obito tried, baffled by the woman's backhanded approach to concern.

"Good." Tsunade looked at me, even while still smoothing the… "scabs"…in Obito's chakra coils, which Rin had put in to keep him from dying on the spot last night. She could almost repair the very walls of capillaries with that kind of skill, no matter how shredded they were. To me, she said, "And you."

I squeaked. "Yes, Tsunade-sama?"

"I remember your brother from last night. Why didn't you bring him to one of the medical stations?" Hayate shifted uncomfortably under her gaze as she turned her attention to him. Her expression softened, but only slightly.

"I was unconscious," I offered lamely.

Tsunade paused, as though considering whether that actually was a valid excuse for delayed medical attention. "…Fine. At least you got him to me."

She managed to get Hayate's leg sorted out within ten minutes. Something about a clean break. She did tell me to keep him off it, but since I wasn't heading back to the house until Sensei decided he was done working for the day…

"Obito, can you look after Hayate?" I asked.

Obito flinched nearly imperceptibly. I still caught it, though—all those months of fighting in sync with him had taught me a thing or two about tells. "Uh, yeah. Sure."

"Obito, I meant what I said last night," I said, just as Jiraiya walked into the office.

"What are you talking about?" Jiraiya asked, with a strange lilt to his voice that made me give him a
narrow-eyed glare. I was not in the mood to deal with Jiraiya in goofball mode, regardless of the power difference between us. And yes, I realized that the words I used could have been taken the wrong way.

"Jiraiya-sensei, not now," Sensei snapped from the desk. He was looking at something written in really tiny characters. Apparently, the designer of that particular form had been big on saving paper but not ink.

"All right, all right. Hey, kid. You've still got that weird seal, right?" Jiraiya had turned his attention to Obito instead of saying whatever "that's what she said"-esque remark he'd probably been planning. He could read the mood of a room, but apparently his brain was on a short delay.

…Which, given that most of us hadn't slept in a while, made sense. I sighed and tried not to think about it too much.

"Yeah, I think so?" Obito replied.

Jiraiya nodded to himself. "Right. Let me see your back. Tsunade-hime, if you could…"

The two Sannin and my teammate shifted positions so that Tsunade could continue healing uninterrupted, while Jiraiya applied that strange counter-seal from the night before.

"Kei-kun, take a look at this," Sensei said, still sitting on the desk. He held a thick sheaf of papers out to me, bound with metal rings.

"This is…" Well, it was ten pages long, but it was also an anonymized and abridged medical file from the looks of it, using the Konoha hospital's slightly singed letterhead. I flipped through the stack until I found the coroner's report, which was quite thoroughly abridged. Via someone going over it with a gigantic censorship pen. "This is probably the kind of medical file I'm not supposed to be seeing."

Sensei nodded. "True. Still, what do you notice?"

Well…

"In between all the 'redacted' and 'insufficient clearance' notices, I'm also seeing a distinct lack of mission details. So, ANBU or jōnin mission results. Any details pulled from the file are probably based on that." I flipped to the first page again. "Which means either that the unnamed deceased was involved in something extremely sketchy before his or her death, or that the details of the death are distinctive enough that they would point fingers at someone who doesn't need the advanced notice."

"And?" the Third Hokage asked.

"And I'm going to guess, based on the patient's listed height and weight, that the deceased individual was either a woman or a lightly-built man." I flipped to the coroner's report again. "...And someone who abruptly lost about five kilos of weight upon death. Long-term illness leading to weight loss to that degree would have been noted in the file, or at least pulled the deceased from the active roster. Five kilos indicates a major extremity or major organ being badly damaged or lost, plus associated body mass. Possibly up to or including parts of the head." I looked up. "How am I doing?"

Sensei just gestured for me to go on.

"Well, I'm going to assume that the deceased lost their head somehow, given the abrupt associated change in height that likely explains the sudden weight loss," I said, checking details across the file. "You wouldn't be giving me this file unless it was important or a test, which may or may not be
related to the events last night. I'm leaning toward 'yes' for the latter question, because the hospital was on fire last night, and given the other problems the village has had lately, you wouldn't have had time or inclination to go fishing though the salvaged paperwork for something irrelevant." Flip. Close the file. Sigh. "This is probably someone I know, isn't it?"

Sensei cast a significant look at Hayate, again.

Speaking of, Tsunade had just finished healing them both, and Jiraiya had applied that…String-Cutter Seal…to Obito. I couldn't sense the Puppet-Master Seal, in him or in me, so I took that to mean that the danger was over.

"Obito, you and Hayate are going back to the house," I said, my voice astoundingly level.

"I was planning on it," Obito said, and though I could still hear the hesitation in his voice I decided not to comment on it. It wasn't as pronounced, at least.

Hayate still seemed somewhat listless, but the only way I'd be able to deal with that was by dealing with everything else and then making sure the village was calm enough for everyone. Then I'd be able to help him properly.

…And thinking like that was probably why Asuma had, in the other timeline, run the fuck away to become one of the Twelve Guardian Ninja rather than staying in Konoha to deal with his dad.

Tsunade said briskly, "Your chakra levels should be back to normal by tomorrow. Make sure to go to bed early, and don't even think about stretching the definition of 'light duty' for at least a day after that. Leave the reconstruction to people who can keep their arms raised above their heads." She helped Obito to his feet, and helped him lift Hayate off the couch into a bridal carry. "Now go rest."

They left through Sensei's window. From the feel of things, they made it past the first jump, so I stopped worrying about them for a bit.

"So, Sensei, why did you want us here?" Jiraiya asked, leaning against the office wall.

"Actually, Minato-kun did." The Third Hokage beckoned for his successor to take the floor. "If you would."

Sensei nodded. Then he turned to me. "Kei, that file is about someone you happen to know."

I braced for bad news.

"Honoka Uchiha was discovered dead early this morning, before dawn."

…What? "She was…Sensei, I distinctly remember seeing Honoka-san with Nagato-san during the initial confrontation with the giant Zetsu," I said, surprised. "She was alive, and with Nagato-san providing fire support there was no way anything should have gotten close enough to kill her. And…" Wait a fucking minute. "Sensei, where is her Mangekyō Sharingan?"

"That's what we're trying to find out, Kei-kun." Sensei took the coroner's report back from me before dropping it to the desk. "Now, I know you're not involved in her death, and neither is Nagato-san. I saw enough of his fighting style to know that if he'd attacked her, we probably wouldn't have found a body."

Mainly because he pulped his opponents rather than going for any kind of striking attack. Like oranges.
"I'm not going to assume that her eyes were destroyed. Or that her death was natural." Inasmuch as a death on a battlefield with a *Tailed Beast* on it could possibly be. And anyway, even biting Honoka's head off didn't seem like Kurama's style. He would have mentioned it, right?

*Isobu?*

**Kurama doesn't seem to know anything about an Uchiha during the fight. She didn't use her eyes on him. He would have noticed.**

"Wolf's report"—and here, Sensei produced another sheaf of paperwork, which was filled out with Kakashi's handwriting and not nearly as censored—"shows that there was evidence other humans had been in the area, and a blood trail that disappeared a short distance away."

"They could have waited for Honoka-san's blood to coagulate, though…that wouldn't account for the movement or the additional possible suspects." I bit the inside of my cheek, thinking. "Sensei, Isobu says that Kurama didn't even notice Honoka-san—if he had, he might've killed her. But the destruction seemed too precise for someone that big. There would have been crushed flesh, not a slice. There's no note about tool marks, either, but a single katana strike *could* have produced a mostly-clean separation."

Only if the killer had known *exactly* what they were doing, and if the target wasn't moving. I liked to think I knew a thing or two about shinobi combat, and what I knew made the idea that this could be an accident laughable.

"This is a murder investigation." Sensei sat back on the desk, steepling his fingers in front of his face. In the midafternoon light streaming in through the window, it made him look rather ominous.

"Why involve me?" I asked, more curious than anything. Yes, I'd known Honoka, but…well, I hadn't necessarily liked her. I respected her skill and her attitude, but I didn't necessarily feel any grief at her death. I reserved all of that for…basically for Mom, at this point.

"We have reason to believe that this may not be the first incident of its kind," Sensei responded. His gaze swept across the room, until eventually coming to a stop on the Third Hokage. "We've talked about this, somewhat."

So, Sensei thought it was ROOT, too? Well, that made things simpler. At the same time, the fact that Sarutobi was going to be included in this discussion made things somewhat less so.

"That doesn't answer the question, though…" I said in a somewhat quieter voice, hesitant.

"Kid, the people in this room are those who are absolutely trustworthy in the eyes of the Hokage," Jiraiya said, clapping his hand down on my shoulder. "And who can act on that loyalty."

Aaaaand?

"Keisuke-chan, isn't it?" Tsunade huffed. "Fourteen hours ago, you stood in the way of the strongest of the Tailed Beasts and shouted him into submission. Before that, you fought tooth and nail against a possessed teammate and successfully talked him down to the point that others were able to act and free him from Madara Uchiha's compulsions."

"Face it, kid," Jiraiya said to my dumbstruck expression. "You're in deep now."

Meep.

I tried very hard to push the gravity of that realization aside, because *holy f*ucking *sh*t*. I was mostly
successful, after struggling internally for a few seconds. But my voice still came out strangled when I said, "T-Thank you, Se—Hokage-sama."

"From what I've heard from Minato-kun and Jiraiya-kun," Sarutobi said, into the awkward silence, "there has been a conspiracy brewing within Konoha for some time. It's a serious allegation, and one I'd like to hear justified."

I exchanged a look with Sensei. Most of what I could "prove" depended on future knowledge, because I really had no idea what I could bring to the table without showing too many of our cards. Shisui's death wasn't going to happen for ages, if it did at all, and while I could probably argue that someone should get Danzō to take the bandages off that right arm of his, there was no guarantee that the arm was even there yet.

It would be too much like luck to just randomly stumble onto, say, a refrigerated basement full of stolen Sharingan. Even if I was pretty sure it existed somewhere.

Sensei said, "At this point, we don't have evidence. Just…suspicions." Sensei shrugged. "But to be honest, Sarutobi-sama, we don't actually have to prove anything to you. I just thought it'd be best to make you aware that events in this village have not always been as they seem. At this point, it's my business whether the conspirators get rooted out."

…That had to be deliberate word choice, there.

Sarutobi's eyes narrowed, just a little.

"The ANBU team conspiring with Hanzō the Salamander was a bit of a hint, though," Jiraiya remarked. "I never did report exactly where we got Nagato from, did I?"

"Not to Sarutobi-sensei, anyway," Tsunade put in, equally dry.

"The short version is that, at last count, ROOT is still active despite mandates against just that," Sensei summed up. "And while it's possible that the cell in Amegakure had gone rogue, at least for black ops, a coordinated assault on the Akatsuki stronghold by Konoha and Amegakure forces looks more suspicious than not. We do not, as I recall, have any diplomatic ties to Ame. Further, the government collapsed a month ago and Akatsuki confirmed Hanzō's death, so I doubt we were going to be served well by pursuing an alliance anyway."

Inaudibly, I sighed. This was mostly rehashing things we already knew.

"ROOT may be under new management for all we know," Jiraiya said, probably to mollify Sarutobi. I doubted he believed it. "Shimura-dono may well have ceded control of all ROOT assets to the village, only for a cell or ten to go rogue for one reason or another. There's currently no way to be sure. But I don't like this trend of Konoha not being aware of the moves we make against other villages."

Sarutobi sighed. "Clearly, you've put a lot of thought into this."

"Not enough to convince you, though." Jiraiya shrugged. "Which is fine, if disappointing. Minato is the only one whose opinion really matters. I just thought it'd be polite to inform you what could be going on behind all our backs."

The question was what we were going to do with this information, though. I hadn't been trained to make those decisions, and when I had, my future-knowledge hadn't always been a help.

"Kei-kun?" Sensei said quietly, while the other adults were sizing each other up for a fight. Or
maybe an argument. It was so hard to tell with high-level ninjas.

"Se—Hokage-sama?" I responded, with minor hesitance. I was supposed to be treating him like the Hokage but... well. It was a hard habit to break.

Sensei paced carefully around the Sannin and their teacher and dropped a file—which he had apparently pulled out of nowhere—in my hands. "Here."

"Sensei, what is...?" I trailed off, looking at the name at on the lip of the folder. Miyako Gekkō. "Oh."

"Take this home. We're going to be here for a while." Sensei smiled, but sadly, like he didn't really want to leave me with just this but he had to.

"Well," I said with false cheer, around the knot in my throat, "I can see where I'm not wanted." I didn't want to be around the Sannin or this hell-conspiracy atmosphere when I read this. And I didn't really have anything to contribute that Jiraiya couldn't..."

"I'll tell you everything when I get home." He tapped the file. "We can discuss this then. Actually, we just need to have a family meeting in general..."

Funny, how I'd almost started thinking of "home" the same way I'd heard people talk about. Home is where you can love and be loved in return. "Where the heart is," if I could excuse the cliché.

Sensei gave the rest of the adults a long, dry look. Then he caught the look on my face, or maybe the way my chakra went haywire for a single, alarming moment as my composure started to crack.

Then he gave me a quick hug, which squashed the file to my chest. "I'll be home as soon as I can."

I left the office, my mind whirling.

Bizarrely, being sent home early from work didn't bother me so much. I may have been a special jōnin, but everyone in that room was also anywhere from ten to thirty or more years older than I was. They had the experience to know what to do to uproot a conspiracy. The smart thing to do was to use my information until it stopped being reliable, and then extrapolate to take the problem into their own hands.

They had enough to go on. They didn't need me to convince Sarutobi that Danzō was a fucking creep. Hell, having me there probably didn't help.

I was better off at home.

I got as far as the udon restaurant on Kame Street, with the file still under my arm, before realizing I was going the wrong way.

I was heading toward the house where I'd grown up, not toward Kushina and Sensei's house. Muscle memory had, in a single absentminded moment, ruined everything.

I sat down on the roof, hard, and put my face in my hands.

So much for keeping it together. It wasn't even dinnertime and I was already feeling myself crack again.

"Gekkō-san, please move to the ground. It's not safe to stay up here," said a voice by my ear.

I blinked, hurriedly rubbing the tears away on my sleeve before I turned into a leaky faucet. I stood
up sharply, locating the speaker after just a moment.

An ANBU with a distinctly bird-shaped mask stood in front of me, further up on the roof. If I looked closely, I could see the artistic profile of a peregrine falcon, with blue markings implying a dark mask around a lightly-colored beak. He wasn't wearing a black cloak, but had a rather familiar sword strapped to his back as opposed to the ANBU standard-issue blades.

Almost against my will, I felt my lips curve into a watery smile. "I'll be out of your way in a moment, ANBU-san. Momentary lapse."

The ANBU nodded back, and I saw just the edge of Raidō Namiashi's face-warping scar when he turned his head. Combine that with the black sword and the sandy hair and…well. No one else had all of those. Especially when combined with that chakra signature.

Thank the merciful heavens that he was still okay.

"I think you and I are going to the same place." I said after a moment. "Falcon-san, right?"

The ANBU nodded.

When he turned to leave, I followed.

This time I didn't get lost.

Mom's file was…odd.

Granted, I'd never actually seen someone's unabridged personal file before, but I got the impression that they were supposed to be longer than a couple dozen pages even so. People just accumulated paperwork as they got older, in any society with a working bureaucracy. Ours, as per Sensei's lesser-known title of Paperwork Ninja Par Excellence, did not lack for paperwork.

I decided that subtlety had been expended for the day and, as soon as I got back to Sensei and Kushina's house, dropped it on the kitchen table. I felt Raidō take up his position on the roof, feeling rather bored, and the other chakra signatures in the house were…subdued. Not that I blamed them.

Kushina was asleep and, from the feel of things, Rin had stepped out for a while. That left me in the house with a sleeping mom and baby, and Obito and Hayate.

Hayate limped into the kitchen and sat down at the table with me once I had the file split into loose piles, by topic.

"What's this stuff?" Hayate asked, picking up a detailed schematic of some kind of sword design I didn't recognize. The exact proportions of the blade were off, and it had a reverse-bent edge. There was a word for it, but I didn't really care what it was.

"These are parts of Mom's file," I told him, wondering briefly if I should hide this information from him. It, in theory, wasn't necessarily appropriate for an Academy student to be reading about how his mother used to be…someone else. Thing was, as the current head of the family…"I didn't really think there was much point. "She used to be Tomoe Uesugi, but she changed her name when she married Dad."

And I was starting to get the feeling that "Tomoe Uesugi" had been someone that Mom might have wanted to forget.
"Tomoe…" Hayate leaned over, looking at how Mom's old name had been written. A single kanji.

"Uesugi…Uesugi…" I blew out a sigh of frustration. "I know I've heard that name before, but I can't remember where."

"This says Mom was from the Land of Iron," Hayate said, looking at a page that had the word "immigration" somewhere on it.

Well, theory confirmed.

"I guess she might have been from a clan?" I shrugged.

I didn't know anything about the Land of Iron, really. I knew there were samurai there, and that they turned normal swords into chakra lightsabers or something, but that was about when it all ended. In the snow. Possibly perma-snow. They shared a border with the Land of Frost, didn't they?

Hayate said, "Well, we know she came here…seventeen years ago. Wow."

Sensei would have just been a kid back then. The Second Shinobi World War would have still been raging. Hell, I wasn't quite sure if the Sannin had had their reputation back when Mom was just arriving in Konoha.

It also meant that Mom would have been an active shinobi on our side for only three years. How in the world had she become a special jōnin in that time?

…oh, who was I kidding? I'd gotten that far in five (even if I was sure the last promotion was a formality). It was possible.

"I wonder if she met Dad back when the war was still on." Hayate picked up another sheet. Absently, he rubbed at his eyes with his sleeve, but I could feel a sort of determination in him that I hadn't all day.

At least all this stuff was helping him.

Mostly, it was worrying me. There had to be some reason for Mom to come to Konoha of all places. The Land of Iron wasn't all that close to Konoha, from what I remembered. She could have stopped in any of the countries between the two and just…settled down, I guess? Trained samurai were, in their own ways, nearly as valuable as mercenaries as shinobi were. There just weren't nearly as many of them.

"Kei, Hayate-chan, what are you two looking at?" Obito's voice asked from the hall, and I looked up to find him peeking around the corner like he'd been waiting for a moment that wouldn't feel like intruding.

"Mom's stuff," said Hayate, still distracted by whatever he was reading. "Sis, what's Three Wolves?"

I shrugged. "It's a mountain in the Land of Iron, I think. And Obito, you can sit down here. I doubt any of this is Eyes-Only." If it had been, Sensei wouldn't have let me take it back to the house.

Obito still hesitated, but just for a moment. He sat down across from Hayate and picked up another sheaf of paper.

God damn we did not need another guilt complex on the team. Kakashi was enough for three teams.

"Obito, the thing I said before? Still true," I told him.
"What thing?" Hayate asked.

Dammit.

"It's a team thing, Hayate. I'll tell you later." Or never.

Hayate gave me a critical look. "You're lying."

Double dammit.

Obito was doing that cringing thing, and Hayate focused on him. Softer target. Mom and I had taught him almost too well. Hayate just said, "Obito?"

Obito flinched like Hayate had tried to punch him.

Hayate waited. So did I, but for a different reason.

If I hadn't gotten through to him—if Rin hadn't gotten through to him—then maybe this was necessary.

Obito's voice was no louder than a breath as he spoke. Fear and guilt and shame had torn through him again and again all day, stripping the strength from him. "I…your mom wouldn't be dead if it wasn't for me."

Hayate froze.

…I'd actually forgotten that Hayate had spent most of last night unconscious.

I looked between Hayate (still shocked) and Obito (still cringing) and found myself incapable of making a move. What in hell did you say in situations like this? This had not been a part of my limited psych training, in either lifetime.

"Y-you said it's 'your fault'." Hayate swallowed hard, clearly thinking his way through it. "B-but that's not the s-same as…as killing Mom. It's not."

"But…" Obito trailed off at the look on Hayate's face.

"You're almost like my b-big brother," Hayate's voice hitched. "S-so you're lying. There's no way —"

"I am not—!" Obito reeled back, his Sharingan activating apparently without him noticing. He choked on the knot in his throat, recovered, and tried again, "I'm not—!"

"You are!" Hayate got to his feet, sending the chair skidding back. He looked at me, eyes wide, "Sis, tell him!"

Tell him what?

The truth.

"Obito Uchiha," I said, in an impossibly level voice. I was probably going to break at least one major security regulation, but…well. For a good cause.

Obito’s eye snapped to mine. I was very deliberately not allowing any of Isobu's chakra into my coils. In my mind's eye, I could see Isobu covering his eye again.
"Mom…was like the mother you never had." My voice went terribly gentle. Obito winced again. 
"And you loved her, like we did. Hayate and I both know you'd never hurt her."

"But…"

"You didn't, Obito." I felt Hayate's hand grab mine and squeeze. "That man did, because he knew he wouldn't be able to use your power if you still had her. Had us." Deep breath. "The Sharingan is a terrible power, that cuts its user as much as its enemies. It gets stronger with pain, and he knew it. So he killed her, while she was trying to keep us all safe."

Because Madara would never get Obito unless he broke him first.

To Hayate, I explained quietly, "Last night, a cruel man tried to destroy everyone and everything in Konoha. If he'd succeeded, well, none of us would be here. Obito and I, and others, all went out to stop him." Stripped of all major detail, I could maybe slip this story past a few security regulations…"There was a chakra parasite who used Obito like a puppet to try and get him to work for the enemy. It didn't work, but it was a close fight.

"And…the same man killed Mom." While she was trying to get Hayate to safety, and deliberately challenging Black Zetsu to get Obito out of danger, but fuck mentioning that part. "We got him back—took out the chakra parasite and killed his entire army—but…"

"But he's still out there. He might be able to hurt us." Hayate looked around at us, pale. Then he focused on Obito again, and I felt his chakra act up again in that strange way that meant—"That's…that's why you're afraid. You don't trust yourself anymore."

And just like that, Hayate hit the nail on the head.

Obito mumbled something I didn't quite catch.

Hayate walked around the edge of the table, to Obito's side, and hugged him. I heard Hayate's voice hitch, but he still managed to say, "I do. I still trust you."

And then everyone was crying. But it was the good kind, I think.

It took us a couple of minutes to calm down after that. I got tea started somewhere in the middle of the recovery period, while Hayate and Obito checked the documents on the table for tearstains. Or maybe information. It was hard to tell.

"Kei…what was that jutsu y-your mom used?" Minimal hesitance, there, but at least we were making progress. Obito clarified, "Last night?"

"Which one?" I asked, because Mom had used a lot of jutsu that he wouldn't necessarily have been familiar with. Hell, I'd never seen her bust out the Gates before then.

"The, uh, the thing she did with her chakra," Obito said. "It turned her skin red, and she seemed tired after using it?"

"The Eight Gates." I replied, glancing over my shoulder at them. Obito's Sharingan had finally calmed the fuck down, and Hayate was kneeling on his chair to get a better look at the documents at the far side of the table.

Obito blinked. "That's…Gai does that, doesn't he?"

"Yeah." I turned the heat on the stove's burners down and turned around. "Can I see where the
"What?" Obito asked.

"Well, it says here"—between all the Scrabble words—"that Mom came to the village with chakra coil damage from overuse of the Eight Gates." It would explain a few things… "Mom did serious damage to her own body before Dad met her. He was on the team that managed to bring her in."

"Like a criminal?" Hayate asked, his eyes wide.

"I…don't know. Obito, find the intake form."

A quick search with the Sharingan later…

"Okay, let me see what we have here." I had taken the kettle off the stove and passed it off to Hayate so he could pour us all a cup each. I scanned the documents again. "This says that Mom arrived in Konoha suffering from severe chakra exhaustion and some long-term injuries that hadn't been treated properly." Mainly of the blade-inflicted kind. I flipped a page forward. "And the medic-nin in charge of her care at the time"—Yamaguchi-sensei?—"said that she'd have to quit fighting to keep herself from getting worse."

"I thought only the Fifth Gate on up were fatal," Obito said.

"Well, all of them are going to hurt if you're not careful. They shut down the body's limiters, which means muscles can start breaking bones and things like that." I explained. Flip. Flip. "Mom's old samurai style had a…a jutsu, I guess, that needed the user to open the first four Gates. "Dragon Flight of Heaven…? Where had I heard that before?"

"That still doesn't really explain why she came here instead of staying in the Land of Iron," Hayate pointed out.

"Is there an interview transcript anywhere?" Obito blinked and then his Sharingan was active again. And then, "This is the second time this 'Ghoul of Three Wolves' has come up."

If Mom already had a secret long-lost double life as a samurai from the Land of Iron, who had left her homeland under mysterious circumstances and ended up in Konoha with severe injuries, then…

"Somehow," I said aloud, in a very dry voice that did not prevent me from hearing the fwhish of Sensei arriving, "I think Mom was the Ghoul."

"You'd be right," Sensei said, sweeping over to us while still clad in his heavy Hokage robe.

This confirmation did not, all told, engender any particular feelings of shame, regret, or really anything other than a vaguely hollow sense of being cheated out of getting to ask the question while Mom was still alive.

With a name like that, Mom could hardly have been a notorious murderer. At the same time, I was staying in the house of a man who had a list of confirmed kills that had ticked upward through
triple digits sometime last year, with a boy whose alternate universe counterpart had an even higher body-count, and I trusted them both implicitly.

Both with my life and my brother's.

It was amazing how far standards shifted in a different culture.

"So, you're here to answer questions," I said, though my tone was pretty flat. "We've got a few."

Sensei sat down at the table next to us. "Hit me."

None of us took that literally.

"What do we know about the Ghoul?" Hayate piped up, still holding the paper that listed Mom's country of origin.

Sensei explained. It took a while, and was almost disturbingly clinical.

The Ghoul of Three Wolves first appeared nineteen years ago in the Land of Iron, in the wake of the destruction of one of the most prominent samurai clans in the country. Sensei admitted that he didn't actually know the details, but Konoha informants nonetheless reported the near-total fatalities among the members of the Uesugi clan in the waning days of the Second Shinobi World War. There was no way to say whether the conflicts had been related.

Nonetheless, there were a few recorded survivors. A couple from the clan had been in the Land of Rice Fields at the time and escaped the slaughter, and eventually received another survivor—a three-year-old boy—on their front doorstep weeks after the disaster. Witnesses had also reported seeing an adult escape the burning manor, but no one could confirm if the last survivor was a man or a woman.

Several months later, the murders began.

The Ghoul of Three Wolves hunted down dozens of samurai clan affiliates and rogue shinobi who were later discovered to be involved, whether financially or otherwise, in the destruction of the Uesugi clan. Upon the death of the second son of the Azai clan head, samurai units were mobilized to hunt down the perpetrator. The country was in a state of emergency, having never dealt with a chakra-trained murderer with a clear grudge and the means of acting on it.

The Ghoul murders stopped six months to the day after the first death. The Ghoul had, in those scant months, killed upwards of fifty people directly and tangentially related to the Uesugi clan massacre. Not all bodies were found, and for a year afterward people were contributing most katana-inflicted deaths as the Ghoul's handiwork.

"But what Konoha knows about the Ghoul really started about a year after that," Sensei said, lacing his fingers together in front of him on the table. "It's not in the file, but Wataru Gekkō—your father—was on a sabotage mission in the Land of Rivers during the last few months of the Second Shinobi World War, during our last campaign against Sunagakure."

Wataru and his team—who were down one member by the time they even got there—met the Ghoul in a roadside inn and struck up a conversation about swords of all things. By all accounts, neither party had recognized the other as a threat at the time. While Wataru Gekkō hadn't been listed as a sensor in any known file, it was difficult for grown shinobi to *not* notice when another chakra-trained individual was around. None of the other surviving team members had viewed Dad's actions as unusual, even given the wartime atmosphere, given that the Ghoul had not been carrying any Village-aligned identification.
Then the inn had come under attack by Suna-nin, including a member of the infamous Puppet Corps. Theoretically, it would have been possible for the Ghoul to walk away unscathed by pretending to be a civilian. It wasn't guaranteed—most shinobi villages were a hairsbreadth away from declaring open season on noncombatants who dared harbor enemy troops—but it could have worked for as long as the two teams were embroiled in open combat. Per the Ghoul's record, she had the speed and the skill to avoid death and escape relatively unharmed.

The Ghoul instead chose to ally with the Konoha team and beat back the Suna-nin, using unheard-of samurai techniques in coordination with explosives and jutsu provided by the shinobi half of the alliance. When the Suna-nin were driven into a retreat (and later hunted down and eliminated for information security purposes), the Ghoul chose to maintain the informal alliance.

"She introduced herself as Miyako, at the time," Sensei told us. "We figured out her birth name and family once she followed the team home."

On its face, the situation sounded ridiculous. A fairly well-known murderer, when confronted in an inn by hostile shinobi, would spontaneously forge a battle alliance that she would then use to follow a saboteur team all the way home. It was more characteristic of lost dogs than of humans.

…Though maybe an avenger was psychologically unstable enough…

"Did she ever say why she stopped?" I asked.

"According to her interview? She ran out of targets," Sensei replied, shaking his head.

That was…probably better than anyone really had any right to expect, from someone who probably saw her family murdered in front of her.

I tried, briefly, to imagine what it would feel like to be that…empty. To complete her life's mission, and then have to keep living afterward with so much blood on her hands. And then another fight would show up, giving her something to do for just a little while longer, to avoid facing the emptiness and find new enemies to occupy her time.

There was a reason that Sasuke had been so easily manipulated by Tobi.

The Ghoul became Miyako, over time. She joined Konoha's forces after a thorough vetting by Yamanaka clan elders, the Third Hokage, and almost everyone else who had half a stake in what a half-mad samurai exile would do with free time on her hands. And oddly enough, Wataru Gekkō stayed with her the entire time. Maybe he'd fallen in love at first sight? No one could really say.

Miyako's combat strength deteriorated slowly as time passed, exactly as the medics had warned her. She was removed from active duty after two years of running high-risk saboteur missions, citing health concerns, and slowly acclimated to living in a much slower civilian world.

Miyako became Miyako Gekkō eight months before I was born.

"That's the story as far as Konoha knows it," Sensei concluded.

Hayate recovered first. "Does that mean we have family in the Land of Iron?"

"I don't know," Sensei replied. "Any surviving Uesugi clan members could be anywhere by now."

"Well, even if we do," Hayate paused, looking up at me, then at Obito and then finally Sensei. "I don't want to leave."
"No one can make us," I said flatly. "Not even family." Whom we'd never met anyway.

"Legally, anyone who wanted to reclaim you two would have to go through Kei. As the oldest shinobi you're directly related to, what she says goes." Sensei told Hayate, "And if they tried to claim her as a minor, master-student ties trump civilian legality in most cases." He produced a tri-pronged kunai out of nowhere and started toying with it. "And as her teacher and Hokage, what I say definitely goes."

There went my major worries about ROOT.

Yeah. We'd be okay.

Total casualties: 2,097
Total fatalities: 544

Damage: A lot. (With the caveat that I was neither a paperwork ninja nor an economist, and therefore the number that changed eight times an hour meant nothing to me. Bring on the manual labor any day.)

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from a NateWantsToBattle song. Kingdom Hearts and metal!
Kei

The funeral came.

It went.

Sensei only arranged about four funerals personally, including the ceremony for ANBU agents who died in the line of duty (that only the Hokage and then ANBU were allowed to attend). There was a village-wide memorial service, and we had a minute of silence the day before, but Sensei and Kushina attended everything with Naruto in tow. Everything that the Hokage showed up for, I had to shadow him.

I think it was a way for them to emphasize that while the dead would be remembered, the future was still wide open. The number of babies—particularly the ones born since January, because these were our equivalent of baby boomers—across the village seemed to reinforce that, despite the loss.

Regardless, I left Hayate at home for most of it.

The only service I really attended as a mourner was the private one for Mom, and pretty much everyone in my immediate social circle attended that one. It took place in the late afternoon, in the reddish-orange light of the setting sun. There wasn’t really any other time-slot for a private service, not with over five hundred deaths across the village and someone to mourn every one of them.

Her name had already found its way onto the Memorial Stone, to my mild surprise, and I guess there was something to be said about continuity.

Mom’s name was seven lines over, and five rows down, from Dad’s. I ran my fingers across the names, picking up granite dust from the recent entries. I could see my reflection in the stone, down to the whitened scar across my face and blotchy nose and dark circles under my reddened eyes.

And yes, I cried like a baby.

Nagato

“Thanks for helping us with this, Nagato-san,” Keisuke says, as we step onto the street he’d once lived on. His brother, Hayate, goes on ahead of us, occasionally getting help limping down the street by Obito. Residual rubble is still strewn haphazardly across the village, and the old neighborhood had definitely seen better days. For my part, I’ve been helping out across the village whenever Kushina doesn’t need me, but I haven’t been back here.
From the looks of it, no one has. The street is uncannily silent.

“It’s no problem, Kei-san,” I say, deftly avoiding any upraised nails or similar rubble without much difficulty. I follow along in his wake and we both trail slowly after Obito and Hayate.

He hadn’t asked why I would accompany someone I hardly knew through the village. Honestly, I don’t mind Kushina or her newborn son, or even my supposed brother-in-law. I don’t mind Jiraiya-sensei either, or the Slug Princess I’m somehow related to. The problem is all of them together in small spaces, especially when the Konoha Council of Elders tries to make its opinions known. That’s a lot of suspicion and suspicious retirees in an office I didn’t want to be in anyway.

I don’t think I’ve been that unsettled since Jiraiya-sensei handed those rogue ANBU agents over to Konan, and I saw the look on her face.

“Well, here we are,” Keisuke says, as we catch up with the other two boys.

We’re in front of a modest-looking house with a small garden underneath the front window. It’s off-white with one of those curved, sloped blue roofs common in this village. It’s mashed together between two other homes on either side, leaving little space for much maneuvering. Unless it’s my imagination, the house seems to be slightly slanted on its foundation.

And then there’s the business of the front door being in the middle of the street, broken hinges and all.

No one says anything for a long moment. Keisuke’s younger brother reaches over and clamps onto the nearest person—Obito, in this case—and he’s gone very pale. Keisuke himself takes a very deep, careful breath before heading for the open doorway.

“Kei-san, your brother…” I trail off, as the Konoha shinobi goes very still in a way that suggests something between anger and fear.

Keisuke gestures vaguely, and Obito takes his brother over to the still-intact garden bench and sits down with him. After a brief whispered conversation with the MP, the younger boy curls into a ball and hides his head between his knees. He lets Obito pull him into a one-armed hug, but doesn’t reciprocate.

I stand around, shifting my weight between my feet and feeling completely useless.

So I head inside, with only a last glance at the two boys.

“What happened here?” I ask, once the sounds of objects being moved become audible.

“Sorry, what was that?” Keisuke’s head appears around the corner, from what I assume is the kitchen.

“I asked what…” I let the sentence hang, because I can see what must have been the living area.

The couch is overturned, the rug on the floor is ruined, the kotatsu is on its side…and there’s a trail of dirt and pebbles across the floor, leading back to a hole that seems to have been ripped up from the foundation and through the floorboards.

“Zetsu happened,” Keisuke says in a hateful tone. I look at his scarred face, and the special jōnin looks right past me as though he doesn’t see me at all. He’s too busy trying to glare a hole in the floor to match the one faintly dotted with whitish orange stains.
Whatever I can think of to say in this situation feels inadequate.

Keisuke kicks a bent kettle out of his way, swearing furiously under his breath as he stalks down the hall where the bedrooms must be. I almost expect to see a trace of the Three-Tails’ chakra leak into the air, but nothing happens.

I follow.

“Oh, come on! Those fuckers couldn’t have left the fucking windows in one piece?” Keisuke snarls, even as he’s unloading the dressers in the room and dumping the clothes in them onto the floor. In a moment, the assorted shirts, pants, and other articles disappear into a supply storage scroll on the floor. “Going to be picking glass out of these for ages…”

“Kei-san, can I help somehow?” I offer, “I have some experience with seals.”

Keisuke pauses, brow furrowing as he considers me carefully. For a moment, he almost looks like an adult and not a child trying his best to keep himself together and coherent long enough to get the job done. “Sure, Nagato-san. Here.”

I catch the thrown scroll, noting that the first seal on it contains sealing supplies. “Thank you. I can start on the other room…?”

Keisuke visibly struggles with himself before nodding. “Just...okay.”

I find what looks like a boy’s bedroom, with a faint sprinkling of ash on everything in it. There’s toy kunai and shuriken alongside the real deal, with a poster on the wall proclaiming the heroism of the Third Hokage. The bed is unmade, with the katana-patterned sheets in a pile on the floor. The dresser in this room is open, and I quickly scribble out a storage seal for its contents.

I…I guess I didn’t expect Konoha-nin to be so normal.

After my parents, after Jiraiya-sensei…I suppose I never really stopped to think if ordinary Konoha-nin could just be like any other people. I’d never wondered if it wasn’t that Jiraiya-sensei was special—or that Minato-san was, or Kushina-san—but rather that people were just people. Wherever they came from.

Even in the face of something so horrible.

“Nagato-san, I’m done in this room. I’m gonna get started on Mom’s,” Keisuke calls out, crossing the hall and heading to a different bedroom.

“I understand,” I reply, upending the contents of all three drawers into the floor. One application of chakra later, and they all disappear into the first of the storage seals. Just for good measure, I also bring along the toys and training weapons.

Hayate isn’t in any state to enjoy them, but the idea of just leaving them here…

“I’m finished, Kei-san,” I say as I emerge from the bedroom. I sealed everything easily moveable, including the bedspread. Hopefully, Hayate will get something out of all this pain.

“Same,” Keisuke says, drifting out of the last bedroom with two bound scrolls in hand. He sighs, rubbing his forehead. After a second, Keisuke’s hand drifts down to just covering his face and his shoulders start to shake.

“Maybe you should take care of your brother,” I suggest quietly.
“Y-yeah, I…” Keisuke swallows, then takes a deep breath. He tucks the scrolls away into two empty hip holsters and shoves past me.

Maybe… I snatch an embroidered handkerchief from the kitchen and follow, feeling useless.

I find all three of the younger boys outside in the garden.

Hayate is almost engulfed in his older brother’s embrace, clutching Keisuke’s uniform shirt in a white-knuckled grip. His head is a barely-visible patch of dark hair, and his face is hidden against his brother’s shirt.

Obito has a pained expression, and is rubbing circles on Hayate’s back to minimal effect.

Keisuke tucks his brother’s head under his chin and starts to hum. It’s barely audible, but the thing about being that close to another person is that it doesn’t have to be.

It…almost sounds like a lullaby.

It’s not one I recognize, but Keisuke takes what advantage he can of his higher voice. He can hold a note without his voice cracking noticeably, and while he’s not especially good it seems to be enough. His brother’s breathing starts to slow and even out.

“Obito, fix the floor in there,” Keisuke says, after a long moment looking up through his bangs.

“Kei…” Obito says, surprised that he’s being sent away.

Keisuke’s expression twists into something almost inhuman. “Obito.”

Obito jerks back. “I—okay, I can do that.” Obito quickly disappears into the house, almost as though Keisuke had punched him or hit him with a Lightning jutsu.

I wordlessly offer Keisuke the handkerchief I found.

He takes it, nodding his thanks. He starts trying to coax his brother out from the protection of his hold, but it’s hard going.

I hesitate to make the situation worse somehow, but… “Kei-san, has…has this happened before?”

Keisuke nods, not taking his eyes off his brother’s still-huddled form. “Shhh, Haa-chan. You’re okay.”

Hayate hiccups.

“When?” I ask.

“…Mostly when we’ve talked about coming back here for our stuff,” Keisuke mumbles. He glances up. “Hayate was kidnapped three days ago, from here. We got him back, but…”

“Say no more,” I reply softly. “I’m sorry.”

Keisuke sighs, and then his brother finally unfolds into a child again. Hayate snatches the handkerchief out of Keisuke’s hand and wipes his face with it. He takes deep, desperate breaths, and Keisuke just waits.

He calms down after another few minutes, still not talking to anyone. Keisuke and I…just try to be there, I guess? I’ve never seen a panic attack from the outside before.
“Kei…” says Obito’s voice, from the house.

“Yeah, Obito?” Keisuke asks.

“I’m finished. Do you have everything already?”

“Yeah, we do.” Keisuke glances at me, then sighs. “All right, Haa-chan. We can go.”

Hayate nods shakily, getting to his feet and passing the handkerchief back to his brother. “I’m s-sorry I couldn’t…”

“Hey, shhhhh, none of that now,” Keisuke murmurs back, looping his arm around his brother’s shoulders. “You did nothing wrong.”

“I don’t feel like I did anything right,” Hayate mutters, steadier.

Obito finally comes out and, to my surprise, produces a roll of MP caution tape from some hidden pocket. After a moment, he bars the doorway with two long strips and says, “Well, at least civilians are gonna know not to come in.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Obito,” Keisuke says.

We head back out onto the street without any further delays, dodging rubble as usual and heading back toward the Konoha administration center. The sun is bright and high overhead, and everywhere I look there’s one Konoha civilian or another trying to fix their village up. Shinobi feature heavily in reconstruction work, too, but apparently Keisuke and Hayate lived (or used to live) in a mostly-civilian area.

We reach the administrative center in only a few minutes, though it feels like much longer than that. The big red building is attached to the Hokage’s Tower—somewhat hard to miss—and what Keisuke referred to as the Academy. There are some people outside of the building, ushering their children off to class.

One of the little girls, with long purple hair and a bright yellow blouse, waves enthusiastically at our group. I blink, watching as Keisuke and Hayate break into a jog to go and greet her.

“Hayate-kun!” says the girl, and immediately grabs Keisuke’s brother in a mutual hug.

One of the other children, a boy with a brown ponytail and off-white outfit, slams into the pair and knocks them over into a giggling dogpile.

“They made it,” Obito says, grinning with undisguised relief. He rushes forward, waving. “Hey, Umino-san!”

…I’m not sure if I should follow and intrude on their moment or not…

“Nagato-san, what are you still doing over there?” Obito calls, “Come on!”

In short order, I’m introduced to the Umino family—Kohari, Ikkaku, and their son Iruka. I have to wonder how such a family finds itself in the Land of Fire. The name sounds like something more reminiscent of Uzushio, Tani, Kiri or Yuigakure.

And then I am suddenly surrounded by children.

The little girl with purple hair, Yūgao, looks up at me with wide, dark eyes. Iruka joins her, and I get the impression that they’re mainly curious about my eyes. Like nearly everyone else in the village.
“What’s that symbol for?” Yūgao asks, and I belatedly realize that he’s actually referring to my slashed headband.

“Ah, it’s…it’s the symbol we use in Akatsuki,” I reply, “It’s to symbolize that we’re not part of Hanzō’s old Amegakure.”

“Ame! That was it!” Iruka says. “So does that mean you’re a part of new Amegakure?”

“Uh, yes.” I nod, sending a nervous glance at Keisuke and Hayate.

Keisuke sticks his tongue out at me.

“So, what’s your name again? I missed it,” Iruka asks.

“Nagato…” I correct myself after a moment, “Nagato Uzumaki, actually.”

“Like Kushina-sama!” Yūgao looks star-struck. “That’s so amazing.”

“Hopefully, we’ll get a real announcement about that,” Keisuke says, interrupting the impending interrogation. “But we have places to be right now. Little brother, did you want to go to school today or not?”

Hayate shakes his head.

Yūgao looks disappointed, briefly, but doesn’t say anything. Iruka looks at his parents for an explanation—they were talking to Keisuke a moment ago—but doesn’t get an answer.

“See you around, Hayate,” Iruka says.

“And you too, Big Sis!” Yūgao adds…wait.

What?

“See you around, Iruka-kun, Yūgao-chan.” Keisuke turns to Hayate and says, “To the office, kiddo. Chop-chop.”

“All right, Sis,” Hayate replies.

What?

“Bye, everyone!” Obito says, cheerfully. “See you later!”

We make it to the front door before I fully manage to formulate my thoughts. Or get them in order. Or anything.

“Ah, Kei-san?” Looking at…at her, I guess, I can see the hints of a female build? Most kunoichi wear bright colors or have accessories of some sort. Keisuke wears the unisex Konoha village uniform, complete with high-collared shirt, and doesn’t really seem to care for her appearance. Or what tone she uses on anyone, given that I’ve heard half the number of honorifics I would from, say, Konan.

Keisuke turns, curious. “Yeah?”

“I apologize if I’m being offensive, but…are you a kunoichi?” I ask. I can actually feel myself turning red. Sooner or later I’ll be able to camouflage with my hair. Oh, this is a mess.
Keisuke blinks. “…Yep.” A brief pause, as she thinks and I realize that I’ve been an idiot for over a week. “Oh! Don’t worry about it, Nagato-san. Pretty much everyone makes that mistake at first.”

“I’m so sorry!” I burst out. Konan would kill me for making this mistake in front of her.

“It’s okay!” Keisuke’s hands flutter, frantically trying to stave off…my worries? What a strange girl.

“No, it’s not!”

“I swear it’s fine!”

Obito turns back, grabs my hand, and drags me into the building. I hear him say something about idiots, but it doesn’t really seem to be directed at me…

Hayate backtracks and makes sure to push Keisuke along, muttering all the way.

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Minato

“I think her S-class secret status is officially too little, too late,” I say dryly, rereading the Aburame clan’s mission reports from the tenth of October with an air of faint despair.

*Fifteen* miniature reports of the confrontation with the Nine-Tails, the deployment results of their new summon contract’s boss, and a note asking where the village had gotten a second Tailed Beast along with congratulations for doing so.

Another two reports from eyewitnesses citing an incident in the Gekkō family’s old neighborhood, where Kei partially transformed.

And then, the incident in front of the hospital with over two dozen witnesses of various ages, ranks, and statuses.

And any of them could have spoken to anyone else before the debriefing teams caught up with them.

I’m not nearly naïve enough to believe that the rumors aren’t spreading.

“No, really?” Jiraiya-sensei says, every bit as sarcastic as I imagine Kei would be in the same circumstances. Fortunately, she’s out and about somewhere in the village, leading Nagato around. I’m not quite sure where they went, but…

“I’m worried that if I just confirm it then…” I sigh, glancing at the ceiling and the “Your answers aren’t up here” note.

“She was never going to have a normal life,” he replies, shrugging. Jiraiya-sensei always did have the bluntest possible way to put things… “So you might as well face the situation. Kei-kun needs to have the choice whether or not to re-class her jinchūriki status as an A-ranked secret or to just go public. And if she does, that makes her a target *outside* of the village.” Jiraiya-sensei looks around the office. “But I don’t imagine she’s going to be taking too many outside missions anyway, so the question then becomes whether she can face the scorn *inside* Konoha. How are you going to spin it?”

“The exact details of the Zetsu army’s attack are classified, but…well, the Aburame clan saw the confrontation with the Nine-Tails.” I give the reports a speculative look. “Maybe if we announced that she defeated the Nine-Tails...”

“Wouldn’t work,” Jiraiya says, shaking his head. “Too many people saw you make that thing
vanish.”

I make a noise of frustration. “I’m going to be fending off poaching attempts until I punch him in the face.”

Practically the first thing he did was to ask about the Gekko siblings and how very sad it was that they were suddenly orphans and wow, didn’t he just know a place…

I want to kill him.

It’s amazing how thoroughly one village elder with a bone to pick can slow things down. If I had any solid evidence to link Shimura directly to anything, I’d have ordered the seizure of all of his assets within the village and put him under seal-enforced house arrest until we could have a trial. Preferably one where his arm stays in a sling and his eyes remain covered.

I don’t care how demeaning it is. I do not want to deal with the possibility of Shimura copying Kakashi and getting multiple Sharingan to enforce his will.

“There isn’t any way to know if Danzō has Badger’s eyes, is there?” I ask, contemplating the ceiling. “She never recorded any unique Mangekyō abilities. Not even with ANBU.”

“Unique?” Jiraiya asked.

“Like, I don’t know, that jutsu Kei talked about. Kamui,” I mutter. “We probably could trace her blood if there was any to track, but the Sharingan could be anywhere by now.”

If Shimura is anything like Orochimaru, he could have hidden bases all over the village. Half of ANBU might be seeded with infiltrators for all I know, which cut down on the number of people I could trust to carry out anti-ROOT operations.

I need to ask if there’s any way to tell ROOT from ordinary members of ANBU.

At that moment, there’s a knock at the door. “Keisuke Gekkō has returned, Hokage-sama.”

“Send her in,” I say, while Jiraiya seems to be grinning about something. What? Her sense of timing?

Kei walks through the door sans her brother or Nagato, looking rough but at least alive. She doesn’t seem to be in a good mood, necessarily, and her uniform is somewhat rumpled-looking, but she straightens when she enters the office.

“Kei-kun, go ahead and close the door. The seals will be back up in a moment.”

She nods and does so. “I sent my brother back to the house, with Nagato-san. Was there anything you needed me to do, Sensei?”

She’s never going to break that habit. I shrug it off, saying, “Just a few points for your consideration.”

The seals slam closed, dampening sound outside of the office and neatly frying most forms of surveillance. Keisuke settles into place in front of my desk, both hands in her pockets as usual. Somehow, her body language is more relaxed than this morning.

“So what was it?” she asks.

“First, do you know any way that ROOT forces are different from normal ANBU?” Jiraiya-sensei asks.
Kei blinks. “Yeah, actually. You remember those seals Madara put on Obito and me?”

“Danzō has those?” I say, horrified.

“No, he’s got a…” Kei opens her mouth and sticks her tongue out. She points at the back of her tongue, indicating where someone could, theoretically, place a seal. She straightens and ceases making funny faces a moment later. “Danzō puts silencing seals on most ROOT agents. They can’t talk about him, or even mention his name. Check their tongues.”

“How do you remove it?” I ask. Granted, I’ll have to think about getting my hands on a ROOT agent to rest any theories…

“Kill Danzō,” she says blithely. She pauses, as Jiraiya-sensei and I exchange looks. Not the way we wanted to approach this investigation. “I’ve never seen the seals, personally, but I do know that in the other world, they all automatically faded when Danzō was killed. Or you could try removing the seal from each ROOT agent manually.”

I grimace at the thought of combining the implied number of ROOT agents with seal removal duties, which I could hardly unload on some random ANBU fūinjutsu specialist. Shimura hadn’t necessarily been known for his fūinjutsu but, if what had been implied about Orochimaru had been correct, I would have to worry a lot more about booby traps he stuck in those seals. Too much so to risk agents screwing up.

“But I think we might be able to find ROOT agents to volunteer…” Kei trails off, thinking. “I’m not sure, though. There’s at least one person I want to look up before we can go that route, and I’m half-convinced that he actually isn’t in ROOT yet.” Kei shrugs helplessly. “You were dead in the other timeline, and that could mean anything for what Danzō decides to do next. I get the feeling that he knew he could sneak more things past Sarutobi-sama thanks to their old friendship.” Another pause. “Which was totally one-sided, by the way. Danzō went bitter a long, long time ago.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me,” Jiraiya-sensei says. “So. You’re giving us a lot of speculation at this point. I’m guessing that you think we’ll uncover information to back up all those suppositions in time.”

“If you’re going to investigate Danzō, I’m telling you that you can’t half-ass it,” Kei says darkly. “I can point you in the right direction, but I’m neither old enough nor well-connected enough to do any digging of my own without getting into deep trouble.”

“You might be, now,” I say, flicking a thick manila folder toward Kei. She catches it out of the air.

“Sensei?” Kei says blankly.

“Tell me about this possible informant, then read it,” I say.

“Well, his name’s… I never actually figured that out…” She tucks the folder under her arm so she can gesture with both hands, saying, “The point, though, is that he’s a survivor of Orochimaru’s old experiments into the Wood Release bloodline.”

“I’ve heard of him,” Jiraiya-sensei muses aloud, rubbing his chin. “There have been rumors circulating the village for years about Wood Release, but until Obito-kun came back there wasn’t really anything to go off of. And I do remember the labs.”

Fifty-nine failed experiments. Fifty-nine little trees.

It still makes me sick, years later.
“Well, the kid’s around,” Kei hedges. “I don’t know where, though, or what name he’s operating under. But he might be useful when it comes to puzzling out where ROOT gets its recruits. And… and I think maybe Tsunade-sama could bring him into the Senju clan.”

I practically feel Jiraiya-sensei’s thoughts grind to a halt.

“Tsunade-sama hasn’t left the village yet.” Kei is staring at the floor, still thinking aloud. “I don’t know if that’s because you’re here, because Jiraiya-sama is, or maybe because Kushina-san is still getting her involved in Naruto-chan’s life. But… shinobi need anchors. And that kid? He doesn’t have any. Which is why ROOT would look like a good idea, I think.”

Jiraiya-sensei suddenly breaks into a short laugh. As Kei and I look at him curiously, he explains, “The first thing Academy kids learn is going to have to be the importance of bonds, now. You’re pushing us toward reuniting strong shinobi with their roots, aren’t you?”

Kei looks blank. “Uh, yeah? Most S-class shinobi are members of villages who are, while strong, kinda crazy.”

Well, yes.

“Do you have a name, Kei-kun? Even a bit of one?” I ask, to get the conversation back on track.

“Tenzō, I think? He might pick ‘Yamato’ later, but those are both codenames.” Kei shrugs. “I can’t help you find him. I just know that there’s someone to find.” She holds up the file. “So, what’s this?”

“Files I think you should look over, Operative Crane,” I say casually.

I don’t miss the way that Kei pauses, carefully, and looks up. “Hokage-sama?”

“I suggest you be objective when you look it over.” I rest my chin on my balled-up fist. “Sure, just about everything we talk about in this office is classified, but this is personal to one Keisuke Gekkō.”

“Well.” She flips the folder open and starts reading.

As she does so, I go back to the files on my desk. Jiraiya-sensei can read over her shoulder if he wants to—really, she’d stop him if she cared to.

It’s strange to think that we have three full generations of teacher-student bonds in this room. Jiraiya-sensei taught me when I was younger, then I grew up to teach Kei and her teammates. And with Hiruzen out of the picture for being unhelpful and also for being retired, Kakashi in ANBU, Obito with the Konoha MPs, and Tsunade at the hospital, that left just the three of us to represent a long tradition of shinobi teachings.

Honestly, just knowing that those traditions are being passed down—bell test included—is kind of reassuring. I have no doubt that if Kei gets her own team, she’ll find a way to mess with those kids as well or better than I could.

Kei finishes reading her file and takes a very deep breath. “So, go public or deny everything?”

“Essentially,” I say, nodding. “We could go for a few executions to bring everyone back into line, but there’s no real way to suppress the information entirely anymore.”

“We could scare the village into not actually saying anything, but you outed yourself pretty thoroughly,” Jiraiya-sensei adds.
“I’m still debating which option is best,” Kei says, handing the folder to Jiraiya-sensei and pinching the bridge of her nose. “Because, well, I’ve seen both sides before.”

“Oh?” Jiraiya-sensei asks.

Kei nods. She holds up a hand and counts down with her fingers. “Gaara, over in Sunagakure. Raised with his jinchūriki status out in the open, and then harassed until he pretty much abandoned his humanity. Shukaku didn’t help.” Another finger goes down. “Utakata, in Kirigakure. His sensei tried to remove Saiken, to give Utakata a better life. Only I guess he didn’t realize that he might’ve talked to him about it. Utakata takes it as a threat, everyone dies, and he goes missing-nin.” Middle finger folds. “Killer B, of Kumogakure. Had to strive for most of his adult life to eventually win the respect of the village, since Gyūki rampaged all over Kumo sometime in the past.” Ring finger. “Kushina-san, here. No one knowing has kept her safe so far, but that’s probably going to be over sooner or later.” Pinkie. “And finally, Naruto in the other reality. For being an S-class secret, everyone over the age of about eighteen already knew. Ostracized until his mid-teens, when he beat Evil Nagato into the ground after Nagato squashed Konoha entirely.”

“You’ve thought about this quite a bit, I see,” Jiraiya-sensei comments.

“Yeah, I guess.” Kei sighs. “Here’s the thing, though. I’m also an established kunoichi with a dependent. And I’ve managed to keep my brother from knowing all this for a while now.”

“I thought you said your brother was a sensor. Your mother”—Kei winces as I say it, but I keep going determinedly—“was able to tell the Zetsu clones apart from ordinary shinobi. Your brother…”

“He managed to identify one, too,” Kei says, wincing. “Thing is, I’ve mostly figured out his range. It’s about a meter, and he’s only been able to do it properly for a few days. I’ve been a jinchūriki for months.”

“I wouldn’t assume that any member of your family didn’t know something,” Jiraiya-sensei says dryly. “Maybe he’s just being polite enough to wait for an explanation.”

“Suspecting something is different from having it confirmed, Jiraiya-sama,” Kei replies. She pinches the bridge of her nose. “Look, even if he just rolls with it, being confirmed as the Three-Tails jinchūriki basically makes me a target for Kirigakure. Which means he’s a target as soon as they confirm that I actually have surviving family.”

“…How is that different from what every single jōnin faces?” I ask. As Kei tries to think that over, I add, “Kei-kun, you’ve been at risk since I became the Yellow Flash four years ago. You’re going to have to face the reality that being a powerful shinobi is not safe. For anyone involved in it.” I lean back in my chair. “We do the best we can, but I’m sure you’ve thought that before during the war. Your brother is due to graduate from the Academy within a year, at which point he’ll be assigned a jōnin-sensei and start taking missions like we all did when we were younger.” There’s a reason I’m the only surviving member of my genin team.

Jiraiya-sensei nods, a silent acknowledgment of that old pain.

Before Kei can protest, I go on, “By becoming Isobu-san’s host, you’ve officially become one of the most dangerous people in this village. Jinchūriki are, for more than ninety-five percent of all shinobi, entirely too hazardous to face in combat. You happen to live and interact with some of the only people in this village who can actually do anything about a rampaging jinchūriki. And that’s a close call on bad days.

“So I need you to think very carefully about what recognition will do, in the context that you’ve
already been selected as one of my family’s bodyguards. You’re going to be deployed outside of the
village less than a fraction of the time most special jōnin will, because you have responsibilities here
and the Hokage Guard Platoon suffered fifty percent casualties last week.” I lace my fingers together
in front of my face. “And regardless, your brother is unlikely to be allowed to stay unguarded for
more than ten minutes at a time until he’s deployed. We do know how to take care of our own.”

No one says anything for a while.

Kei has always been my most unpredictable student. I’m finding depths of paranoia in her thought
processes that I never expected to see. Perhaps she just refused to air them in the past. Now that the
team’s position in the village hierarchy is secure, she feels comfortable airing some of it.

Maybe she wants, more than anything, to be reassured.

Then, “Hokage-sama, it’s my recommendation that I be openly acknowledged as a jinchūriki.” Kei
crosses her arms. “I’m already your student and dependent, ish, and it might take some of the heat off
of Kushina-san and Naruto-chan.”

I’m going to have to make sure that Kei doesn’t view this as some kind of sacrificial play. I half-
suspect that she’d throw herself to the wolves to defend those she cares about—or else start a very
localized war.

But not now.

Well, with that out of the way, I expect the meeting’s going to go easier from this point on.

“So what else did you need out of me?” Kei asks, relaxing now that the hard part’s over.

“Ah, just one last thing. You saw Maito Gai in the field the other night, correct?” I ask, being
deliberately obtuse for once.

It’s still funny to see Kei’s face screw up into that skeptical look. “Yeah.”

“Do you think he’s ready for greater responsibilities?”

“I think he’s got the chops for jōnin, easy.” Kei makes a “tch” noise. “Just be careful how you break
it to him. He’s got the skills, but we’re all reeling from last week. And Gai lost people.”

Point taken.

Kei looks puzzled for a moment. “Speaking of that night… Sensei, I’m not actually sure how you
survived using the Dead Demon Consuming Seal. I’m, uh, pretty sure that’s one of those insta-kill
jutsu.”

Ah. That.

“I don’t remember telling you which seal I prepared,” I say, sort of surprised by the question. On one
hand, I haven’t gotten around to teaching Kei the forbidden sealing arts derived from Uzumaki clan
techniques. On the other, well, she’s Kei.

Kei gives me a flat look. “Uh-huh.”

“Well, do you remember the scrolls the Chinatsugumi gave you all those years ago?”

Kei’s eyes widen. “You’re kidding.”
“The Red Strength Blood Seal was the basis for…let’s call it a targeting apparatus. Uzumaki seals, like the Dead Demon Consuming Seal and the Eight Trigrams Seal, are mutually compatible when used with Uzumaki chakra, and you can essentially mix-and-match to get the results you want as long as the basics stay the same,” I explain. “I could have chosen just to seal Kurama-san into Naruto and gotten it over with. The seal would have worked, though Kurama’s chakra would have been dangerously unfiltered if Naruto-chan ever used too many tails. The formerly-mandatory sacrifice was, at the time of design, optional.

“But thanks to that creature that tried to use Obito to attack the village…well, I had a spare soul sitting around. So I used it.” I smile, but it’s a razor-edged thing that, once upon a time, made a Konoha-born defector piss himself in fear. “So, there you have it. The sworn enemy of Konoha, used to fuel its original superweapon.”

“Holy shit.” And yet, somehow, Kei’s grin is nearly as evil as mine.

“Dismissed.”

Kei salutes on her way out of the office, but manages to shoot a comment over her shoulder. “And look up Wind Release: Rasengan sometime, Sensei!”

Oh damn it. There goes one more secret I hadn’t thought she knew. I had a breakthrough just yesterday!

“She got you again, huh?” Jiraiya-sensei snickers.

“I swear she does that on purpose.”

“Probably.”

Kei

So, a month passed.

Sensei and Kushina had announced Naruto’s birth and the thing with the jinchūriki status, and the thing about…

Look, it was a bit of a busy month.

Like, Sensei and Kushina actually got married.

It was a bit of a stumper for everyone else, who kind of assumed that they already were. And legally, the “everyone else” would be completely right. Sensei and Kushina were legally married about three months ago or something, but told exactly nobody out of justified paranoia. Kushina’s clan name had changed on precisely one form in all of Konoha’s mountains of paperwork, and that was just the one that asked who she was married to in case of medical emergency. They’d hidden the whole thing pretty well, actually.

You know, from the five people in the entire village who hadn’t known that Sensei and Kushina were a thing. There wasn’t even anything like a debate about who Naruto’s dad was, even back when Kushina had just been showing.

So basically, they’d been holding off on this shit forever.

And then they finally got to have the friggin’ party.
I got some sidelong glances, I guess, but those who attended the party seemed to be convinced that if anyone could handle the Three-Tails jinchūriki even in such a tight space, it’d be the man who’d beaten the Nine-Tails. Sensei seemed to wince just a bit whenever that little detail came up, but I doubted anyone cared.

Yeah, we’d let that part get out. Let the village think that everything was okay and contained. My part in fighting the Nine-Tails was acknowledged, but as far as anyone not in the know was concerned, it was still Sensei’s achievement. My role as a heroine for the month had been confined to the eyewitness accounts of me—and my team—killing the various Zetsu monsters across the village.

The Aburame clan had been too far away to hear what I was saying anyway.

Anyway, I attended the party in a lavender, flower-patterned furisode Mom had gotten me and had repeatedly altered to fit me as I grew. I didn’t ask how—for all I knew Tsuruya and Mom had conspired together—but since it was a wedding at least I wasn’t the only person who was dressed up and felt a bit awkward. Hayate had to get a rental, but honestly I think he was half-surprised he’d even been invited along.

All in all, the party included…

Fugaku and Mikoto Uchiha in clan regalia, plus their sons and a large Uchiha escort.

The head of the Hyuga clan and his twin brother, with a toddler Neji in tow and his mother carrying him. Himawari was at least seven or eight months pregnant, but had nonetheless shown up with a trail of Hyuga medics just in case something happened.

The Ino-Shika-Cho trio and their wives and their kids, even if they were all babies and I swear Konoha was acquiring a pile of them.

Jiraiya, along with Tsunade and half of the alcohol in the entire village. The Third Hokage, along with his wife and two sons (Ichigo and Asuma). Nagato also turned up, and had to be correspondingly shoved into a formal outfit before being allowed to participate as the brother of the bride.

And our team—meaning not just me, but also Obito plus Rin plus Kakashi plus Gai plus Genma plus Raidō. (And Yamaguchi-sensei.)

Speaking of, half of the entire village. It was a security nightmare.

But I guess as long as everyone was happy with the result, there wasn’t really anything to say against it.

I didn’t want to dance, or anything half as interesting. I was a perpetual wallflower, really, and was perfectly fine with nursing my drink for ages on end if necessary. And despite being a legal adult in terms of shinobi standing, I was still biologically fourteen and thus banned from sampling the alcohol on take.

So really, I sat around and looked dramatic while sitting on a chair in the designated Kids Corner.

I took another long sip of my drink. Some sort of weak punch, probably. Basically, it was there to keep my hands occupied.

“Are you going to just sit here in the corner all day?” Raidō’s voice asked, and I looked up. He had
actually combed his hair for once, but I did note that he wasn’t wearing one of the uber-fancy outfits that, say, had been inflicted on Nagato. He even still had his katana.

Man, and I’d been hard-pressed to fit a tantō in my outfit’s obi.

“Maybe,” I said, still not really feeling the celebratory mood.

Hayate could shake off bits of what I was feeling, mostly when he was with his friends. I could do the same if I kept busy, but I kept getting blindsided by the empty ache of grief whenever I stopped to think for too long.

…Which was probably not the smart thing to be doing at this party.

I frowned.

I was being dumb.

I put my drink down and got to my feet.

“I’m pretty sure I can find a dance for you,” Raidō offered. His expression took on an amused, almost sardonic edge. “I’d do it myself, but I’m pretty sure there’s a couple guys around here who’d kick my ass.”

“I’m pretty sure I can barely walk in this thing anyway,” I muttered. Honestly, who in the world had designated geta as the go-to footwear for this shit? “Dancing’s out of the question.”

“Well, I can drop you off by Obito and Nohara-san. Maybe she’d be able to give you some pointers?” Raidō still helped me to my feet, despite my obvious anger issues with formal kimono. He probably realized that I wasn’t about to take it out on him.

“Good enough,” I replied. Then I muttered something impolite about swinging sleeves, under my breath. Between the trouble with hair clips, makeup, and other formal-wear shenanigans, I was in no mood for tripping over my own clothes. I had not been designed for this dress-up stuff.

Sure, any kunoichi worth the name could fight in any state of dress, but I could still gripe about the inconvenience of it all.

Raidō led me to one of the significantly louder corners of the party, where Rin was talking to Kurenai and Asuma while Obito had his mouth slightly glued shut by daifuku overindulgence.

“Keisuke-chan, hi!” Kurenai said once she spotted me. (And I wondered if she was Asuma’s plus-one.) She smiled. “You look very nice today.”

“It’s a good color on you,” Asuma said with an approving nod, but I didn’t have to be clairvoyant to know that his eyes were pretty much just for Kurenai.

Rin, I noted, was not wearing a furisode. She had an actual, formal blouse and skirt combination that gave her room to move with that slit up the back. She was wearing heeled sandals, but that was still different than the get I was using. She lit up when she saw me, but damned if I knew why.

Obito, it seemed, had managed to get the MP formal uniform, and was not letting any awkwardness keep him from enjoying himself. He waved, standing up when I stumbled on the godawful sandals so he could make sure I didn’t faceplant.

I could already feel myself start to flush red in sheer awkwardness, and that was before anything
especially stupid happened.

“Thanks for the assist, Raidō-san,” I said, and he waved it off before disappearing into the crowd. I turned back to my former classmates and said, “So, everything going okay over here?”

“I was about to ask you that,” Obito said, still letting me use his arm to balance.

I was going to have to run some combat drills to get my balance skills to translate into this weird new form. Preferably in a dress—if I could run a mission in kimono while not shredding the material, then maybe I could consider myself good at bodyguarding in a formal setting…

The only reason I was sucking so much at walking was because I didn’t want to destroy the furisode, as far as I was concerned. I could tear it to shreds and fight naked if I absolutely had to (and wouldn’t that cause a stir…), but I probably would blow my cover if I tried that while Sensei was in a meeting with the daimyo or some shit. And besides, it wasn’t necessary here.

“I hate formal clothes,” I told Obito flatly. “Give me pants any day.”

Obito snickered. “I would never have guessed.”

“Well, at least you can’t be mistaken for a boy this way?” Kurenai tried looking for the silver lining.

Between the flower hairclips and the furisode and the makeup, probably not. My scar couldn’t quite be hidden under whatever visual enhancements the wedding planners had used on me, but it was less obvious. I looked less like a shinobi of any sort than a really awkward teenage girl. But still, I said to Kurenai, “I never minded when I was.”

“You used to get the most evil grins…” Obito mused aloud, sneaking me a smirk.

“I still do, sometimes,” I said. I wasn’t a very nice person.

“Are you going to dance, Kei-san?” Asuma asked, waving a hand to indicate the dance floor where the crowd was concentrated. “I think the Hokage and his wife have finally left the floor.”

“I hope you aren’t going to ask me that,” Rin said, shuddering. “I can dodge every attack coming my way, but I never learned to dance properly. The motions are easy, but to music?”

“I don’t know…yet!” Obito said, and cheerfully activated his Sharingan to copy the dancers that remained on the floor.

Cheating bastard.

“Well, great. Then you can teach the rest of them, Obito-kun. Asuma-kun, do you know?” Kurenai asked.

“Yeah, I kinda had…wait, are you asking me to dance with you?” Asuma asked, blinking. He was also starting to turn a bit red.

“I thought this was a part of the kunoichi curriculum,” I said blankly. “Which, by the way, I completely failed. Rin?”

“It’s been almost five years,” Rin said.

“Well, I can try to remind you,” Obito offered. He deactivated his Sharingan and added, “You too, Kei.”
I thought about it. I said to Asuma, “Have fun, then.”

Then I shoved Asuma out onto the dance floor with Kurenai.

As they disappeared into the crowd, that left me with Obito and Rin. I said, “I warn you, I’m not gonna be able to move much in this thing.” I felt like I was wrapped in a burrito, and could walk just about that well. Half-steps at best, without tearing silk.

“You’ll be fine. Rin and I’ll both keep track of you,” Obito said with ruthless cheer.

And then we were dancing.

For my part, it was pretty limited. I mean, I couldn’t move. Not that I’d known much more than how to shuffle my feet to start with, but Rin got back into the swing of things uncannily quickly and Obito could dance like he’d always known how just by copying other people’s muscle memory.

Before long, the two of them were killing it out there.

And since I couldn’t keep up, I very much felt like a third wheel despite being assisted by both parties.

“No, no, you need to make those sleeves swing,” Rin was saying patiently in the face of my increasingly flustered attempts to hold a beat.

“I’m gonna hit someone,” I warned her.

Sure enough, I did.

“Keisuke-chan, hello!” Fortunately, Gai was unfazed by taking a furisode sleeve to the face. I had not, in fact, brought anything heavy to stick in said sleeves and hurt people with, so he got off lucky.

“Enjoying the party, Gai?” I asked, feeling a smile creep onto my face.

“Yes, I am!” Gai took my hand, to my surprise, and added, “Would you dance with me, Keisuke-chan?”

“As long as you don’t mind getting tripped over,” I replied, though I was sure he’d be able to stand whatever punishment I could dish out. It wasn’t like we were going to be fighting.

Fun fact: Turns out Gai knows something very similar to the tango. He could spin like a top and I didn’t actually have to do much other than remember which way was up and let him lead. It was fun, kind of hilarious, and giggle-inducing to be able to even think about keeping up. But in the end I did not, so accidentally tripping in the middle was pretty much what I expected to happen.

Landing practically on top of Kakashi while Gai continued his one man dance party…was less so.

It was also a lot less pleasant because, despite a pretty good catch on Kakashi’s part, we still ended up head-butting one another by accident.

And anyway, that’s the story about how my first time attending a wedding (and wearing kimono) included me holding an ice pack to my forehead while laughing my ass off.

And I hadn’t been wrong, exactly—the cheerful chaos of the wedding/baby shower did take everyone’s mind off of things. Mine included.

Not a bad way to end autumn that year.
Chapter End Notes

Song title from Owl City.
One of the nice things about being in a shinobi village, particularly Konoha, is that you can basically justify almost anything in terms of military secrecy if you really want to. People live in Konoha not just because we kinda got the pick of lowland locations, but also because we have a pretty thoroughly integrated village all told. Civilians are family are the village, really. They don't have enough clearance to see everything, and the price for protection is control by the military in some ways, but our people are treated well as a whole. It just doesn't change the fact that the Hokage's in charge.

The downside of living in a shinobi village, sometimes, is that the Hokage's in charge.

Sensei leaned back in his chair—which probably will be upgraded to swivel at some point—and stretched. On his desk, forms were neatly piled in one corner and the inbox was empty for once. Legitimately so, and not just because Sensei left a space-time seal active and accidentally teleported all of his work home.

And since it was lunchtime, there wasn't going to be any more paperwork for at least a little bit.

"I think it's time we try something different," Sensei said, idly popping the knuckles in his right hand one at a time. "Did you pack lunch?"

"A bento, nothing special." Kushina had done the actual cooking, after all. And had thankfully avoided cooking too much shrimp. "Why?"

"We're going to the Academy this time."

Since the Academy was all of fifteen meters off the north side of the Tower if roof-hopping was taken into account, I didn't exactly consider this the trip of a lifetime.

"The kids are still in class, Sensei," I said.

I'd gone to visit Hayate during his lunch before, once or twice, but I'd had to be careful about not scaring the civilian-born kids. Or the Academy teachers. Or just people in general. They tended to be leery of random shinobi showing up in the school yard, special jōnin or not.

"Not for much longer. We can visit your brother while we're there," Sensei pressed, still cheerful. Or cheerfully sadistic.

"...You have some kind of appointment down there?" I asked, still skeptical.

Sensei whistled innocently, getting up from his desk and grabbing his bento from that genjutsu-guarded robe closet. Since he was basically vacating the premises of the office regardless of what I
thought, I decided it'd be practical to follow along and watch the chaos anyway. My bento being in a storage scroll, I brought the whole thing along.

I have long since learned not to trust when Sensei breaks routine.

It didn't generally pay to question him, because straight answers weren't his thing, but I'd learned through long experience that Sensei had weird ideas sometimes.

Sensei led me down the stairs instead of just hopping off the side of the Tower. I supposed we were pretending to be civilized people who didn't use chakra literally all the time. Even though hopping around on rooftops was half the point of being shinobi in a populated area, as far as I was concerned.

"Don't make that face, Kei," Sensei said from the bottom of the stairwell. "It'll stick that way."

I scowled on purpose and said, "I haven't believed that since I was five, Hokage-sama." In my last lifetime. If that.

"You don't want to scare them, do you?" he asked, but there was a sliver of what sounded like an order in his tone.

"I don't," I said, giving up. "And besides, I'm sure my brother ruined whatever mystique I'd have as a monster anyway."

"You're not a monster, Kei," Sensei said, and I could see the start of a frown on his brow.

"I know that, and you know that, but not everyone does." I shrugged. "Seriously, though, I can deal with it."

"Like you did the other day?" Sensei stepped aside as I reached the bottom of the stairs, glancing at the Academy's gates.

"He wasn't a threat, Sensei, and you know it." I headed for the gates. "I handled it."

"I'd still prefer if you didn't have to. But that was the price we paid for the tenth." Sensei sighed. "But I never did thank you, did I?"

In exchange for making my status public, Sensei had been able to hide the exact nature of the events on October Tenth—specifically, who the Nine-Tails jinchūriki was. Naruto and Kushina got off essentially scot-free as long as there was a public figure to associate all one's demon-mongering needs with, and I could work with that.

Like fuck I was making Naruto go through all that shit again. I didn't care if he supposedly had his parents' backing this time around. He shouldn't have needed it.

And anyway, as a teenager with an established performance record and all that crap, I had a better chance of keeping civilians too cautious around me to do anything. The shinobi, in general, didn't really give a fuck about whether I was a Host or not. If I was reliable in combat—which seemed to be the case, if Sensei had me as his most visible bodyguard—then they generally didn't have a problem.

I was still somewhat hesitant about visiting the Academy, though. My brother and his friends were one thing. The entire Academy set was quite another.

"You don't need to say anything," I said with a shrug. I reached the gate and pushed it open without any real effort, holding the way for Sensei. "After you."
Sensei grinned. "So polite."

I rolled my eyes as he passed and let the gate shut behind me.

We could have gone through the inside staircase, I suppose, but at least this way we saw the sun and the kids could see us coming if they were in the yard. Yay.

There were, in fact, no kids in the yard. Called it.

Sensei swept across the Academy yard with his Fourth Hokage cloak flaring out behind him, with me plodding along in his wake like a duckling. We met the Academy's office supervisor in the front office not too much later, and Sensei disarmed her prickly exterior with the power of his smile and the fact that he outranked literally everyone in the village.

I didn't pay too much attention to what he actually said. I was busy looking around at the building, particularly the walls, and feeling myself drift a bit amidst the nostalgia.

It didn't last very long. After all, anyone who knew me as an Academy student would have been able to recognize me as the ambiguous-looking kid who slept through all the classes, but passed all of them in turn. I'd only been around for a year, but what a year.

"Kei-kun, they're ready for us now," Sensei said, leaving the front office behind to follow me down the halls.

"You never did tell me what we're here for, Hokage-sama," I replied. There was still an audience, after all.

"Oh, I thought the Academy would like having the Hokage visit during his lunch hour. I believe the students are going to recess in a moment," Sensei replied, innocent as a lamb.

I gave him a very careful sidelong look before saying, "So, we're hosting question and answer hour?"

Fireside chats with the President had been a thing in my old life, right? Not while I was alive, but the principle was the same…

Sensei grinned. "Yes."

Oh, goddamn it. I had thought…

"This has got to be the worst possible way to force ignoramuses to accept me," I told him flatly, "Hokage-sama."

"I'd suggest looking further underneath the underneath than that, Kei-kun," Sensei said cheerfully. "Eat quickly. We've got a working lunch ahead of us."

I was pretty sure that, in my old life, I'd have had to get twenty permission forms per kid from their parents before I'd be able to do what Sensei was planning. I wasn't any more of a danger to the kids than the Hokage was, because both of us were capable of holding back our enemy-killing potential when surrounded by little tykes. Despite all the reassurances in the world, though, I was sure people would still look at me like I was a rabid bear. Even though I had a kid brother and had helped save the village not too long ago, I was still a ticking time bomb in the eyes of some people.

Most of them were hurting or afraid, but that didn't change the pretty fundamental dislike that some villagers would still have toward me.
Sensei had a flair for the dramatic when he wanted to use it. He clapped one hand down on my shoulder and, while I was puzzling over whether or not I was allowed to eat in front of the kids while Sensei talked, teleported us into the presumably-correct classroom.

There were many small faces staring back at us, while Sensei nudged me toward sitting on the chūnin sensei's desk.

With an apologetic grimace to said Academy teacher, I set my bento on the desk and leaned against it. I was gonna have to eat while the kids were distracted. Or sneak out with the Academy teacher while Sensei was putting on his performing hat.

Behind his back, I spotted my brother and his friends hanging out in the back row of desks, toward the right-hand wall from my perspective. I waved at them.

Hayate's chakra pinged back at me.

Well, then.

Sensei said something about everyone going outside—whee, my teacher was a whackjob—and all of us trooped into the yard. Sensei was in the lead, while I hung back with the chūnin Academy teacher and, by not-so-coincidental arrangements, my brother's little gaggle of friends.

I could recognize maybe about four faces aside from theirs, once we had a crowd growing in the Academy yard. I could pick out at least two sets of Byakugan among the students, though I couldn't remember which Hyūga clan kids were the right age to be in this Academy class. There was also at least one Aburame, going by the glasses, and there were two or three kids who looked like they might have been civilian-born going by the awe they showed Sensei.

That wasn't much of an indicator, though. Minato Namikaze was the village's golden boy as far as public opinion went. When you were a war hero, had apparently fought the Nine-Tails and lived, and were the current Hokage, a little star-struck admiration from the crowd just made sense.

Anyway, eventually we got upwards of fifty kids of various ages turned into an audience, with their chūnin sensei at the back to observe everything and Sensei and I at the front to hold their attention.

"—and allow me to introduce my student, Keisuke Gekkō." I felt my train of thought derail and blinked back to the present.

The kids were all looking between me—the obvious outsider—and my brother.

"Yeah, that's my sister," Hayate said loudly from the back of the crowd.

And there Hayate went, ruining my fun.

I held up my right hand in a vague sort of wave. "Call me Kei, everyone. I'm answering questions and stuff too, though I'm pretty sure I'm less interesting than, you know, the Hokage."

Hayate's chakra pinged at me again, and I gave him a pointedly raised eyebrow. He subsided. Still, what a time for a kid to develop his chakra control like this…

Half of the crowd raised their hands.

"In the back there, what's your name?" Sensei asked, indicating a tiny child with dark hair, in the middle of a dense pack of children.
I peered closer. Wait, wasn't that…

"Itachi Uchiha, Hokage-sama."

Yep. He had to be around, what, five or six? If he killed his clan when Sasuke was eight and when he was thirteen, then…yeah. Huh.

Ignoring my back-asswards math, I refocused on what he and Sensei were saying.

"Keisuke-san, when did you graduate the Academy?" Itachi asked, in his rather articulate five-ish-year-old voice.

I glanced a Sensei for a moment—was that public record?—then shrugged. My early life hadn't been classified, just weird. "I graduated at nine, made chūnin at eleven, and got promoted to special jōnin a few months ago. I'm fourteen now."

"She graduated earlier than I did, in a way. I was ten and made chūnin at fourteen myself," Sensei put in, cheerful.

"But you're a—" a white-haired kid, whom I could vaguely recognize, burst out. Two of his classmates clapped their hands over his mouth at the same time, looking wary of my reaction.

"Kei earned her promotion before encountering a Tailed Beast," Sensei said mildly. "Though I suppose that kind of assumption makes sense if you're not well-informed. Wartime graduation ages were lower than they are now, and I had to do a lot of work to get Kei and her teammates ready for the trouble we were facing out there."

White-haired kid, white-haired…wait. That couldn't be Kabuto because he'd still have glasses. Who else…

Oh.

Mizuki.

…He was shorter than I recalled. And a lot less beady-eyed and suspicious-looking. But I was still seeing the green eyes, the bandanna, and the chin-length white hair.

I was honestly not sure if I was supposed to keep an eye on him for signs of megalomania or not.

"Any other questions?" Sensei asked the crowd, once the topic had been taken care of.

"Do you have a favorite jutsu?" asked a kid with a black cloth covering his hair. "The question's for both of you."

Sensei and I glanced at one another before chorusing, "The Rasengan."

"What's that?" asked Iruka.

"Combat ninjutsu," I said. "A lot of fun and very strong, but really hard to learn."

"Can we see it?" That was one of the other kids—a little girl with her hair pulled into two fat pigtails.

Sensei smiled. He held out his right hand and, with a gentle whoosh of chakra, formed a swirling Rasengan in his palm.

I heard practically all of the kids go "oooh" at once.
I did, however, notice that little Itachi's eyes had gone red and Shisui was looking at his cousin with something between curiosity, anticipation, and admiration. Then Itachi's eyes went dark again and he shook his head.

Well, well, well. A bit difficult to copy a jutsu performed without hand seals, wasn't it?

"Most ninjutsu use hand seals, like the Academy basic three," I said, as Sensei let the Rasengan spin itself away into nothingness. "The Hokage invented the Rasengan, which doesn't use hand seals, because he thought all that stuff wasn't fast enough."

"And if you train a lot with your chakra nature, you can reduce the number of hand seals you have to use to make a jutsu work," Sensei added. "Any other questions?"

"What if I want to be the next Hokage?" asked a girl with blue braids.

"Train hard, make good decisions and good friends, and maybe you'll get there," was Sensei's response.

It also generally required becoming the student of the Hokage, or of a future Hokage, or of a Hokage's student. Most of these categories overlapped.

Nepotism was definitely a thing in the ninja world.

And anyway, Sensei wasn't even twenty-five yet. If Hiruzen Sarutobi could keep his title into his mid-fifties, I didn't really see Sensei retiring. Definitely not before Naruto was an established shinobi, at the least. And after Kushina and Sensei raised any more hypothetical Uzumaki-Namikaze kids.

The honest answer would probably have been "finagle your way into having Tsunade, Jiraiya, or Sensei into being your jōnin-sensei."

...And now that I'd thought of Sensei and Kushina having more kids, my train of thought had well and truly derailed.

"Is there anything you don't like about shinobi life, Hokage-sama?" asked Iruka, his eyes wide. His new cheekbone-to-cheekbone scar was still livid against his tanned skin, and didn't quite stretch with his expression just yet.

Well. I didn't like the fact that I had to kill people so often, but I really hadn't been killing "people" in the strictest sense recently. Most of my missions had been fairly straightforward and didn't include much in the way of direct enemy action. In terms of body-count, the things I'd killed the most of were seal butterflies.

"Sometimes spending too much time away from the village is difficult," Sensei replied, looking a little solemn. "But now that I'm Hokage and the war is over, I spend a lot more time here with my friends and family."

"How is your son, Hokage-sama?" asked the chūnin-sensei, apparently unable to stop herself from asking.

"He's doing very well," Sensei said, grinning. "Keeping me up at night, of course. Hopefully, he'll be able to visit sometime soon."

Itachi was nodding along as Sensei talked—apparently Sasuke was a fussy baby, too. Shisui was snickering.
Hayate was nodding, too. Naruto, even at the tender age of less than a month, had certainly figured out what lungs were for. We’d experienced that bit the hard way, and discovered why Kushina owned a breast milk pump. Naruto wasn’t so much a child at the moment as he was a loaf of bread that had intermittent screaming fits (and needed diaper changes).

Hayate had still learned very quickly that he was not to hold Naruto like he was a loaf of bread.

"What was the first jutsu you learned, Hokage-sama?" Yūgao asked, her eyes bright.

"The Clone Jutsu, like most of you." Obviously, clan kids didn't exactly count. "I also learned the Replacement and Transformation Jutsu around the same time. In fact," Sensei waved a hand to indicate me, "Kei here was able to do the Replacement Jutsu without hand seals by the time she was ten."

It was a chakra control trick, Sensei. Still, I shifted uncomfortably with all of those little eyes on me.

"The Replacement Jutsu was really important to me at the time," I explained. "Because otherwise a punch to the face is really a punch to the face. And I don't know about any of you, but being punched hurts."

There was a round of nods.

"So the Academy teaches you how to do the Replacement Jutsu before you graduate, so you can avoid that stuff," I said. "It's just a good idea."

"Have you ever been hurt really bad?" asked one of the boys. I wasn't really keeping track of them aside from the ones I could recognized.

"I broke my shoulder the first time I took the Chūnin Exams," I said, as Sensei winced slightly. "I went up against Himawari Hyūga and didn't run away fast enough."

"Himawari-sama?" said one of the Hyūga students in shock.

Hayate's chakra pinged off mine again—he felt like he was both kind of amused and kind of annoyed.


"But—but the scar?" asked the other Hyūga kid.

Oh, right. The obvious thing. "I was on a mission about a year ago and ducked left when I should've ducked right. I figure I'm lucky I didn't lose an eye."

Which was, while all true, also fudging the truth to a vast extent. Hell, on that mission alone, I'd broken a katana, messed up my face, and gotten a minor concussion, Kakashi had been tortured and lost an eye, Obito had gotten half his body crushed and lost an eye to my rudimentary surgery. And then Kakashi and I had been busy in a weeks-long depressive funk, while Obito was going through horribly painful physical therapy to adapt to his new body parts and being continually mind-fucked by Madara Uchiha.

Kannabi had been the complete opposite of fun.

Just by looking at the crowd, I could tell that there were certain children who would have called bullshit on the Kid-Friendly Edition if they'd known enough details to do so. Among them were my brother, Itachi, and this kid with a Nara-like ponytail.
Question and Answer Time with the Hokage went on a while longer after that, since none of the kids really wanted to let us go and I was getting attached to them too. Eventually, the chūnin-sensei had to herd the kids back toward their classrooms so they could finally get their lunches and eat, and Sensei and I had to scramble to make it back to the Tower in time for finishing our food. Talking to so many kids for over an hour is tiring work.

"Feeling better, Kei?" Sensei asked, halfway through a pile of noodles Kushina had stir-fried sometime in the last few days. Before I could answer, he was already chomping through the rest of it really quickly.

I blinked, holding a slice of fried fish above my bento. I had been about to just eat it, but… "About what?"

Sensei paused to swallow before saying, "About going public as Isobu's host."

I thought about it. Remarkably, I actually was. There was something gratifying about the way little kids didn't run away screaming at the sight of me. I was pretty sure that they had mostly thought of me as a funny-looking fixture around the building until today. The whole Tailed Beast thing had been handled with surprising grace, since kids their age generally didn't have any.

"Kei?"

"Actually, Sensei, I do feel better. Thanks."

There were three birthdays to celebrate in November, which meant a lot of planning and a lot of running around.

First, Hayate's was on the second. Hayate was turning twelve, which meant he was due for a new kodachi and some more shinobi equipment in anticipation of his upcoming graduation. He probably needed a new set of clothes, too, but thankfully I was only expected to get him one gift. Sensei had said something about footing the bill for most of it, too.

Yūgao was the day after, and Hayate was going to be the one attending her celebration as she attended his. My job in that scenario was to get Hayate to and from the party unharmed, and to make sure he could get the gift he wanted to give to her. It'd be easier if he'd just tell me what that was, but no dice thus far.

And last of all, Rin. Her birthday was on the fifteenth and she was finally turning fourteen to match the rest of her age group. I had almost two weeks to come up with something for her, which was better than nothing.

Looooong story short: Hayate got a thick pair of kenjutsu bracers from me, a new kodachi from Sensei and Kushina, a haori-style green shirt from Rin, and Obito ended up getting him a heavily modified weapons' belt like the one I'd made for Kakashi almost a year ago. Only with more emphasis on the katana it was supposed to be holding.

(I never did figure out where the hell Kakashi's jōnin present—from me—went. Must have lost it at Kannabi.)

I got Yūgao a set of shinobi nail enamel, but Hayate wasn't willing to claim it was from him like he used to. He insisted on getting her a sword maintenance kit, which went great with the sword she didn't actually have. Maybe he thought it counted as dropping a hint. I wasn't sure if she had a
bokken yet, but I hadn't been involved in her training.

I also got Rin a shell-embossed box I spotted in the market, though I wasn't sure what she'd store in it. Obito got her a hematite bracelet, which was cute and also tended to randomly magnetize itself to things like doorknobs. I think Kakashi might have gotten her a set of hair ribbons, but only because Rin mentioned it. Hayate made her a card that contained one storage seal, with my help, which spat out a cupcake when the seal was activated.

And Sensei and Kushina made her an actual birthday cake, while Yamaguchi-sensei finally announced that he'd made Rin heir to all his earthly holdings, and every medical technique he could get his hands on. The implication, there, was that all of the adults would make damn sure they were around to make sure she got everything she needed.

All in all, November looked a lot better than October had.

Genjutsu, on its own, wasn't exactly the most difficult of all possible disciplines. It required creativity, ruthlessness, good planning, and a willingness to eventually get right up in someone's face and cut their throat if all other options failed.

There were two major schools of genjutsu.

One was distraction. Making people see things that weren't there and fail to see things that were there, for whatever purpose the user could think of. Camouflage, for non-combat operations, meant that there was a much better chance for the practitioner to get out alive. Or perhaps a skilled genjutsu user could make an opponent think that there were a lot more enemies than there actually were. Either way, the point was to screw with the enemy's perceptions and hopefully reduce the chances your own side would get hurt.

The other one was based on the ability to break an enemy's mind before you ever laid a finger on them.

The Tsukuyomi, for somewhat obvious reasons, was in the latter category. It was an offensive, not defensive, genjutsu. And most targets were apparently reduced to vegetables if they couldn't fight it off. And most of them couldn't.

Isobu, as the Three-Tailed Beast, had access to both types of genjutsu in addition to the kind of watery firepower most people would associate with forces of nature. Which he kinda was.

You could have asked about learning more about my powers a long time ago. Isobu said, when I asked him about it.

We weren't really talking for a lot of that. I gently reminded him.

I still don't understand how you can know how to dispel so many kinds of genjutsu, but can't cast more than the basics.

Call it a lack of motivation. Between learning the Demonic Illusion series and the present, there had been more than enough crap going on to fill my schedule.

…Had that seriously only been six months ago?

"You done meditating now, Keisuke-chan?" Kurenai's voice startled me out of my reverie.

"Yeah, I think so," I said, opening my eyes.
I hadn't really planned on making my genjutsu training into a group event, but hey. What happened, happened.

Which is how I ended up at Training Ground Four, sitting in a circle with Kurenai, Kushina (and Naruto), Rin, and Mikoto Uchiha (and Sasuke).

Kushina was there because she was a Tailed Beast Host and was kind of curious to see how another Tailed Beast operated. Kurama could give her insane strength and stamina, but I hadn't heard anything about his talent for genjutsu. And I was also pretty sure I'd heard Kushina describe herself as complete garbage at ninjutsu.

Naruto was there because Kushina might have wanted to introduce him to the Tailed Beast people could talk to. You know, without him wishing for the instantaneous death of everyone. (I'd heard Kurama was getting better, but Isobu was still the mildest-tempered of the three in Konoha.)

Mikoto Uchiha was there because Kushina was her best friend and her Sharingan would serve as a way to instantly shut me down if I needed any help, though honestly I hoped she was there because Kushina might need her support.

Sasuke was there because Mikoto couldn't find a babysitter, and Itachi wasn't because it was during school hours.

Kurenai wanted to help me with genjutsu, mostly out of curiosity. But she also wanted to know how the hell I'd managed to get promoted twice without learning more than two genjutsu total. If I could dismiss them easily enough, it counted toward a higher ranking in my file, but I wasn't much for casting them on my own.

And Rin? Moral support. Hayate couldn't attend due to school, either.

"You have a funny look on your face," Kushina said, leaning forward. "Did that turtle say something?"

Naruto napped by her side, with Sasuke very slowly wiggling toward the other baby on his belly. They were rather cuter when not screaming incessantly. It was also surprising to learn how bloody big Naruto was for his age—Sasuke was around five months or something, and wasn't really all that much bigger despite the extra time.

"Isobu just called me an idiot for not learning more genjutsu," I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck awkwardly.

I did not.

"Well, I agree with him," Kurenai said. She crossed her arms, looking disapproving. "The Demonic Illusion series is the simplest there is! I know you scored better than that when we were at the Academy, Keisuke-chan."

"Have you met my teacher?" I asked dryly. Sensei came up with great ideas, but the only genjutsu he'd taught us was nonexistent. He didn't use genjutsu in combat—what he did was teleport everywhere he'd planted those Flying Thunder God seals, and Rasengan anyone who was resistant to face-stabbing. I'd never really been a genjutsu-type anyway, but in hindsight the lack was glaring. Even Jiraiya had thought as much.

"Hey, I…actually have nothing to say to that," Kushina said, losing steam.

"Kushina-chan…" Mikoto began, reproving, before pausing. Then she sighed. "Well, what do you
three want to learn? Keep in mind that I can't teach you any Uchiha clan jutsu, and probably wouldn't if I could."

"Is it because they're dependent on the Sharingan, Mikoto-sama?" Rin asked.

Mikoto nodded. "I have more than a few of my own, though. I think they should be enough to get you started—though I imagine that Kurenai-chan will have a lot less trouble."

Kurenai beamed.

I rolled my eyes. Kurenai was already genjutsu-specialized, and I'd experienced—and defeated—that specialty on more than one occasion. Specifically, Kurenai's version. It was a lot harder to shake off the Sharingan, even with Isobu and me working together.

Rin reached over and slapped the back of my head.

"Ow!"

"Don't be rude, Kei," Rin said.

"You don't take genjutsu seriously?" Kurenai asked.

"Being a jinchūriki makes it harder for genjutsu to work," I explained, "But I have been caught in one that the Sharingan didn't break. And Isobu got me out, but that's a side note."

"A genjutsu the Sharingan couldn't pierce?" Mikoto asked, surprised.

Yeah, I wasn't gonna forget the butterflies of doom anytime soon. "Turns out that when you combine genjutsu with fūinjutsu, the result is pretty horrible. Genjutsu mines."

"And you couldn't escape on your own?" Kurenai sounded surprised. "I would have thought you could have disrupted them with your chakra."

Kushina, unnoticed by everyone else except possibly Mikoto, winced. Had Kakashi told her about that mission? It would have made sense…

"I kinda fell headfirst into the basement," I said, wincing. Nope, that had not been my finest moment. "The seal was put down after I landed and knocked myself out. Combine that with the chakra drain…well, it wasn't a fun mission."

Rin blinked, like she'd just understood what I was talking about. "Kei, was that…?"

"It was the mission right before I was promoted," I confirmed. I shrugged. "I mean, aside from getting caught for a few minutes, it wasn't the worst I've gone through."

"But this business about the Sharingan…" Mikoto pressed.

"Kakashi didn't have his Sharingan active." Horseshit, since it was always active. What it had been was covered. "I had to run around breaking the seals manually before we got the region fully disarmed. Honoka-san did better, but I didn't see what was going on with her."

Mikoto frowned. "While I understand that Hatake-kun has a transplant, I still would have expected the Sharingan to perceive the trap."

"Ah! This has to do with the Aburame clan's new summon contract, doesn't it?" Kurenai said, hitting the nail on the head. "I saw some very strange things that night, but the Aburame clan doesn't really
use genjutsu much on their own. I asked Shibi-san, but he said they weren't really kikai insects either."

I glanced at Kushina. Could I confirm this?

Kushina nodded. Not like it was an especially big secret. The rest of the village would have it confirmed sooner or later.

I explained, "That was when we retrieved the contract. Honoka-san suggested that they'd do better with the Aburame clan than with a dead summoner, so…"

That was kinda that.

I shrugged. "Is there any reason I can't just use genjutsu via fūinjutsu and save myself having to learn more hand seals? Rin and Kurenai-chan would get more use out of that."

"While I'm sure using seals is very appealing, Kei-chan, there's a problem with that," Kushina said. "That's a lot of prep work for something you should be able to use on your own."

"Just because I can make things blow up at a touch doesn't mean I don't carry craptons of exploding seals anyway," I pointed out. Before anyone could protest, I picked up a pebble near my knee, coated it in an explosive seal from my fingertips, and flung it across the training field.

It exploded with a noise like a firecracker, making Naruto blink awake in time to find Sasuke pulling on his orange onesie's sleeve. He stuck his little fat baby fingers up Sasuke's nose.

Sasuke stuffed Naruto's whole hand in his mouth.

"You've mostly been giving them to other people, right?" Kurenai asked, ignoring the impending baby fight.

"Only if necessary. The seals I create by hand tend to be timed, so if I want to create a working trap I usually have to rig them up ahead of time." It wasn't a tremendous amount of work, but then, I'd been studying fūinjutsu for years and could easily get away with creating explosives out of otherwise-innocent paper and ink. Genjutsu wouldn't be too much harder, right?

My instant-use seals, on the other hand, were often chakra-intensive. Which, with Isobu, had stopped being quite as much of a danger. Sure, I could only do explosives that way, but it was a technique that had served me well over the last year.

How much bang did I want, versus how much preparation would I otherwise have to use? It didn't really matter. I was capable of killing anything regardless.

…but when you got down to it, it kind of felt like I was just trying to avoid getting into the habit of relying on hand seals again.

Between my katana and use of explosive seals, I didn't generally have or need my hands free to be a monster in close combat. After I'd rediscovered the ability to project a Rasengan without needing to use an open palm, I was even less keen on wasting time in the middle of a fight.

It was a clash of ninja and samurai sensibilities, in short.

"Well, how about you try to create some genjutsu seals with me, first. Then I'll be able to say whether or not you can get out of learning them the normal way," Kushina suggested.
"I would be willing to help test these seals," Mikoto said, smiling as she pried Sasuke away from Naruto, to the babies' obvious frustration. "It will be interesting to see if you can help Itachi learn to recognize genjutsu, girls."

"I can definitely do that," Kurenai said. Then she frowned. "But I still don't think these genjutsu seals will be as good as real genjutsu."

Rin shrugged. "I may have to work next time, so I don't know when I'll be able to meet up. Kei?"

"Ask me about my schedule tomorrow. This is my only day off for a while," I admitted. "I'll work on the seals with Kushina-san and see where we get. Mikoto-sama, will it be all right if my brother comes along, if Itachi can make it? It'd be a valuable experience for him, too. Especially since he's going to be a genin soon."

"I don't see why not."

Up until New Year's, little changes continued to pile up.

Sensei was still Hokage, in blatant defiance of the Plot, and had settled into his work with gusto and Shadow Clone assistance. Sure, he went home with a hell of a headache every day, but he got work done and eventually got to the point where Hiruzen Sarutobi figured it was past time to actually enjoy his retirement. He even finally got around to appointing a new Jōnin Commander—Shikaku Nara.

Kushina continued to be a social butterfly as though making up for lost time. There were so many new mothers among the clans that she had as many choices as she wanted. It was her job, in a way, to maintain connections between the clans and the Hokage by being so friendly that people felt bad turning her away. This was especially true for the wife of the Uchiha clan's head, and I saw almost more of the clan than I had in years in barely a few months.

Naruto grew like a weed, filling Kushina's arms by the time he was two months old. He had figured smiling out uncannily early, but hadn't quite figured out the secret to peekaboo. He had gotten used to seeing more people—mostly Hayate and me, since we were around the most—and lifting his arms to grab fistfuls of hair or whatever was in range. He was a happy baby, loved by his parents and just about everyone else. Naruto even had a new best friend in the form of Sasuke, though I wasn't sure he could recognize him yet.

Obito continued with his probation, helping sort out domestic disputes and other minor grievances that cropped up once the crisis point of village recovery was finally over. He was also tapped to help repair the hospital, but the village's architects took one look at his Wood Release and declined—not enough stability in the wood. I don't think he minded much. He was probably happier helping people directly. Also, Obito was finally able to move back into the Uchiha district around the twentieth of December, since people had finally gotten around to repairing his block.

Kakashi spent a lot of his time on missions outside of the village, but he didn't skip out on visiting just because he had a bunk in the ANBU barracks. He managed to make it to dinner about five times out of ten, if he wasn't on a mission. While I wasn't always sure what to think of his resolution to head into ANBU despite most of his social circle being alive and kicking, I figured that if he'd stop by and remind himself he was human, he'd be okay.

Rin continued working at the hospital for the most part, despite her field medic certification. Without war missions and postings, she really didn't need to be deployed much. And since she spent so much time at the hospital with Yamaguchi-sensei and the legion of medical experts, she continued to just
get better and better. She even got to study with Tsunade and Shizune, since they were sticking around for the foreseeable future.

"You are?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes," Shizune confirmed. Her expression became somewhat dry. "Tsunade-sama says that there's nothing really outside of Konoha anyway."

"...Huh." I wondered if she had come to that conclusion because of Kushina and Naruto, or if something else I couldn't see had changed the Slug Princess's mind. "I'm surprised she decided to stay, still. Everyone said she was gone for good."

"I think Tsunade-sama has finally found a reason to stay in the village," Shizune said, smiling fondly. Her expression went a little wistful, a little sad. "I'm just sorry it took so long."

"Hey, I don't think anyone blames her," I said, but it was probably a lie. There was probably someone who did, considering that she'd ditched when the Third Shinobi World War was still in progress. Like Orochimaru had.

"Shizune-san, please get back to work." Yamaguchi-sensei's voice rang out, making Shizune jump. My old teacher stood off to the side, already lighting up what was probably his fifth cigarette of the day with a spark of lightning. He jerked his head significantly, and Shizune bustled off—from what I could feel, she was probably being asked to reinforce Tsunade on something or other.

And that left the two of us on the hospital roof, among the drying linens.

"Kei-kun."

"Yamaguchi-sensei." I greeted him with a nod, "Still smoking yourself to death, I see."

"And you're as cheerfully belligerent as ever," Yamaguchi-sensei replied, patently unimpressed. "So. You show up to Rin's birthday and hardly say a word to me. And here I thought we were student and teacher."

I shrugged. "We both upgraded."

Yamaguchi-sensei's mouth twisted into half a smirk around the end of his cigarette, but he mirrored my shrug. "I suppose we did. Rin is a talented medic. You...could have been."

"I fell out of practice. Which kinda seems impossible, given Obito and Kakashi. But hey, I can now kill a man in a dozen interesting ways." I made a "what can you do" gesture and just sighed. "Did you need me for something? Otherwise, I can get lost."

"No, you can go and frolic in the woods or whatever you do for a day job now," Yamaguchi-sensei said dismissively. "You've grown beyond me, and you know it."

"What, in stabbing capability? I was always better," I scoffed, grinning. God, it was nice to have someone to make caustic remarks at.

"I don't know. I've seen worse on on Saturday nights." Yamaguchi-sensei snarked right back.

I flapped a hand at him. "Self-inflicted doesn't count."

"And you'd know, wouldn't you?" Yamaguchi-sensei said, taking his cigarette out of his mouth so he wouldn't choke on it if he laughed.
"I have tons of people to make sure all stabbings are directed at the enemy now." Sans one. But I wasn't here to reminisce about ghosts laid to rest.

"I'm sure they run themselves ragged just trying to keep up, now." He was really smiling. "You must be trying to give them gray hairs early, Kei-kun. I hope you appreciate them."

"I do. And you have family now, too," was my rejoinder. As I hurled myself over the roof fencing, I shot over my shoulder, "I think it worked out for the best that I'm not your student anymore!"

"Get off of my building, brat!" Yamaguchi-sensei yelled down after me, but what did I care? Things were going just fine.

I bounced off a building or two before I hit the ground, feeling quite a bit better for having been able to visit much of anyone. Sure, Rin hadn't wanted to talk too much while there was stuff going on, and Yamaguchi-sensei had been on his smoke break, but still. It was nice to catch up with anyone.

…Actually.

As I headed back up the road that led to the Tower—and thus its broad selection of takeout options for the mid-level paperwork ninja—I spotted a somewhat familiar face in the crowd.

A woman with long, dark purple hair, white eyes, and quite a rotund stomach. Flanked by two white-eyed guards as she made her way toward the hospital.

I didn't stop and chat with Himawari-san, but I did pick up the pace toward Sensei's office. I'd just remembered the Kumogakure-caused Hyūga incident, and he needed to know about it as quickly as possible.

Somewhat later, I was eating a late lunch in Sensei's office while Kakashi was in the ceiling somewhere and Sensei was supposedly just filling out paperwork like it was any old winter afternoon. No siree, no ninjas in the air vent…

I could tell Kakashi was up there for two reasons: One, his signature lightning-elemental chakra that always seemed so distinct to me. Two, the fact that there was a pug sleeping in the in-tray on Sensei's desk. And anyway, I was pretty sure he liked miso soup with eggplant, because the contents of the bowl mysteriously vanished by half-centimeter increments whenever I set it down to talk.

Whatever. He was welcome to it.

"So what you're saying is that the clans should be on guard," Sensei concluded, stamping his seal of approval on something or other. One of his Shadow Clones dumped another load of paperwork on his desk—avoiding Pakkun by scant centimeters—before poofing out of existence again.

"Sort of. While it's true that the clan heiress was targeted, there wasn't…technically anything stopping them from targeting any other clan kids." I paused. "Well, other than Kumo's hard-on for the Byakugan in general."

In the ceiling, I heard Kakashi make a "tch" noise.

Boys.

"Actually, there was a guy in Kirigakure who had a Byakugan at the time of the Fourth Shinobi World War," I said, "Though I don't have the slightest clue how he got it."
Sensei frowned. "It sounds like the Hyūga clan's method of avoiding bloodline theft wasn't as secure as they thought."

"...You could say that." The Caged Bird Seal was, in my opinion as a student of Uzumaki-styled fūinjutsu, barely adequate for its intended purpose and all too effective at being used to punish uppity Branch House members.

"Go on."

I tapped my chin with the fat end of my chopsticks. "I'd say the Uchiha clan might want to be careful, given Kakashi's example, but the onus of keeping the Kumo ambassadors out of trouble falls on both the village and the clan. The clans defend their children, and we watch the Kumo-nin?" Sounded kind of fair.

"We have five clan heirs in the theoretically at-risk group," Sensei remarked. "Shikaku's son, Chōza's son, Fugaku's eldest and youngest sons, the yet-unborn Hyūga heiress, and my son." He sighed. "At least Kumo doesn't look like they're going to stand down from their 'resentful ceasefire' tack anytime in the immediate future. I've honestly been half-waiting for someone to try and assassinate me. Keeps a person on their toes."

"Iwa or Kumo?" I asked, half-jokingly.

"Why not both? Both is good. At least that way we know who's done playing at friendship." Sensei shrugged. "Kumo's had a price on my head since I was fourteen or something, and Iwa's got their own problem with me."

"...Huh. Okay."

"Thanks for telling me anyway. Oh! And this came in recently." Sensei dug something out from under Pakkun's belly, leaving the pug undisturbed, and flung it Frisbee-style across the desk at me.

I caught the little black book and blinked. "Kumogakure's bingo book?"

"One of the ANBU teams brought it back earlier today. I thought you'd like to see that a certain someone made it in. Flip to the part about minor villages."

I did so.

And there, staring up at me from the page, was a rather pathetically low-detail sketch of someone who could only be Nagato. It might as well have been a stick figure colored red and black for all the visual information it held.

And underneath the sketch, there was half a page of tiny script detailing how much nobody friggin' knew about the guy. Something, something, violently murderizing people and things that pissed him off. At the moment, the list was sparse, but the more people poked at the hornet's nest that was Amegakure, the more violently they'd be introduced to Nagato's thus-undiscovered capacity for violence.

"Hah!"

"I thought you'd appreciate that. Kushina laughed for a good five minutes. Jiraiya-sensei looked like he was about to cry," Sensei said, dryly amused. "It looks like we're making progress, doesn't it?"

"Kinda does. Isn't Nagato-san kind of your brother-in-law—ah, there it is. Confirmed Uzumaki." I smiled. "Well, isn't that just going to give everyone else fits."
"I think it will." Sensei leaned back in his chair, sighing contentedly. "I think this is going pretty well, don't you?"

"Yep," I said, then glanced at the ceiling. "Kakashi?"

"His mask's name, Kei. He's on the job," Sensei stage-whispered to me.

"Right. ANBU Wolf, do you think we're doing all right?"

"I think the more time we spend on self-congratulating, the less is going to get done," Kakashi's voice said from the vent in the ceiling. "And since I have afternoon shift today, I think you should get enough work done to head home for dinner, Hokage-sama."

"Don't feel like getting takeout?" Sensei teased.

Kakashi snorted. "Would you?" After tasting Kushina Uzumaki's cooking, takeout looked unappealing most of the time. (Though I reserved the right to tease friends and family.)

"Says the guy who ate half my lunch," I said, because I could.

"You asked for it," Kakashi replied, sniffing.

"Kids, please," Sensei chuckled, "Kei, go ahead and waste the afternoon however you choose. We'll be home for dinner."

Mission accomplished! Another resounding success.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter's title is from that Rob Thomas song featured in Meet the Robinsons, "Little Wonders."
Whispers Arc: Bad Blood

Chapter Summary

Kei: Have no fucking idea what's going on.
Kakashi: Actually Do Things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One thing that people learned and learned quickly around Konoha, at least if they wanted to live, was that Uzumaki clan members had volcanic tempers.

There were only two Uzumaki clan members in town on most days, granted, and one of them was all of three months old. It still didn't pay to treat them dismissively. Of the traveling Uzumaki clan members, Akira wasn't dangerous when he stopped by on trade runs, but he was married to a woman who used explosive seals in her personal armament, and Nagato was a walking artillery piece no matter which way you looked at it.

But Kushina? If she got pissed off at you, the only real option was to run and hope that the Hokage caught up with her before she caught up with you. And if he failed, to pray for a quick death.

Sensei, on the other hand, made a point of seeming unflappable and polite in public. He had terrifying killing intent, and had a more threatening reputation, but he seemed nice.

It didn't change the fact that Sensei burned cold.

Most higher-caliber shinobi had a coldblooded side that let them order enemy troops or villages to be violently scattered to the four winds, or to take a man apart in front of his comrades to make them talk, or to do any number of other horrible things for the sake of the village. Sensei was no different. He just hid it better, and could go home without worrying about the blood on his hands if he had to. He'd mostly left that work behind, as Hokage, but as a commander he had the capacity to utilize the cold calculus of war.

When Sensei lost his temper, people learned their lessons in a very terminal way. Just ask Black Zetsu. Oh wait, Sensei fed the guy's soul to the Shinigami because Black Zetsu pissed him off.

...Maybe half of that was hyperbole. But which half?

On January seventh, when the week-long New Year's celebrations for Konoha were finally coming to an end, someone finally tried attacking the Hokage's family.

By which I mean they got violently mangled.

What? I said they tried.

There were a total of five infiltrators.

Apparently one of them tried doing something at the village gates, only to be arrested by an Uchiha MP squad. From what I heard, they were tipped off by Fuse Inuzuka, who happened to be coming
back from cross-country training with all eight of her dogs, and they had to pry the big one's jaws open with a crowbar to get him off.

The second ran into an ANBU patrol inside the village and got a senbon in the eye when he failed to stop and submit to questioning for being a suspicious-looking guy. I imagine the purple-gray arm- and leg-warmers and flat mask had something to do with it.

The third through the fifth got a bit closer to their destination.

The third, unlucky bastard that he was, tripped over Kakashi in a shitty mood and got a Lighting Release kunai to the face.

Contestant number four met Obito, and we found the halves of him on two different rooftops. In related news, we found out that Obito had discovered how Kamui worked.

Number five met me.

By the time Sensei got back to the house, I had a full-grown Kiri-nin in a triangle choke on the front doorstep, using both arms and a smattering of Isobu's chakra.

Kushina and Naruto had been out and about, but my brother had been in the house and I was on my goddamned day off. I had wanted to sleep in, but noooooo, we had foreign assholes running around in our village and there went my morning. I even got beaned in the face by a freaking New Year’s orange earlier, courtesy of Hayate. All in all, I had a bit of frustration to work off, so I didn't just insta-kill him like anyone else would have.

Sensei had to pull me off him before I popped his head off.

As far as assassination attempts went, in hindsight I wasn't all that impressed.

And also in hindsight, the Kiri-nin probably would have gone with death-by-me rather than being handed over to Torture and Interrogation by Sensei's entirely nonexistent sense of mercy whenever his family was being threatened.

I'd like to say that was the story of the first assassination attempt, all told. It would've been nice to just be able to shrug it off and say it was the cost of doing business, really.

But, as with many things to do with shinobi, there was more to it than that.

I was told of the essentials of the case in Sensei's office.

I seemed to be spending a lot more time in there, with the security seals up, than I did nearly anywhere else. If people didn't start to suspect that there was some kind of clandestine something-or-other going on by this point, I'd be shocked. Luckily, Kakashi was in the office and thus I could worry about something else or other as background noise to my thoughts.

Anyway, I summed up my opinion of the attack and its reasoning—per some guy being tortured in a basement somewhere, to my surprising lack of fucks to give—with a very succinct statement.

"Well, shit."

It was appropriate, okay?

I went on to say, "All of that over Isobu? And they didn't even send a guy who could handle a jinchūriki."
"Partially." Sensei glanced up from his files to pin Kakashi to the wall with a look. Not sure what for, but maybe that meant he was going to give Kakashi something to do in a minute. The Hokage was the only one who can really hand ANBU missions over just like that, but I didn't know if Sensei had used that privilege much. "I'm informed that it seems like a provoked attack, though we don't quite have all the pieces yet. The prisoner was very openly hostile toward Konoha, in a way that suggested a personal grudge."

"He could be related to the Kiri-nin we killed on the mission where Obito came back," I suggested. I felt like I was throwing darts at a board the size of the entire wall, composed of conspiracy theories on little post-its. There were too many options to pin down a specific motive. "Though that would imply that Kiri's ANBU system is less secure than ours."

"Or someone is deliberately setting Kirigakure against us," Kakashi put in, ever the cynic. But then, I didn't know enough about the sinister world of ANBU ops to know what was realistic.

Still, for the sake of arguing, "Or they might just want to get Isobu back." Tch. Like they'd be able to. Isobu hadn't sounded too fond of them the last time we talked. "Good luck."

Kakashi didn't look like he wanted to argue the preferences of a Tailed Beast. "By making the Three-Tails—Isobu-san—public knowledge here, you've turned yourself into a target. So someone took you up on it." He shook his head, like he couldn't believe the amount of stupid I exuded. "ANBU is still investigating, but this isn't surprising."

"Thank you, Wolf," Sensei said in a dry voice. "It's nice to know my family was just a target of opportunity." He sighed.

"Sensei, I was still expecting Iwa to send you congrats on having a kid, first," I remarked to Sensei, who sighed again. Yeah, not necessarily the best time for jokes.

"I do think they would have if they'd had the chance," Sensei replied. "But if they didn't get one, I don't have any complaints." He turned his attention back to Kakashi, who hadn't moved. "Wolf, keep me updated on the investigation. I'm sure it'll cross my desk eventually, but I'd appreciate the warning."

"Of course, Hokage-sama." Kakashi said, and for once in his life decided to leave the office through the door as opposed to an air vent or whatever ANBU used to get around. Hell, I'd hid in the ceiling before, but I'd cheated and I probably wouldn't fit in the vents within a few months.

Damned puberty.

Still, I did have something important to tell Kakashi about. "Be right back, Sensei."

Sensei offered a dismissive wave with his left hand, already nose-deep in the paperwork again.

I caught up with Kakashi in the hallway just outside, so at least he hadn't poured on the Body Flicker speed. "Kakashi, wait up for a second."

"What?" His voice was a little harsher than I expected, but whatever. He could judge after I asked.

It was weird to feel his chakra go all agitated even though we were alone out here. I mean, I couldn't corner him or anything and I didn't think he was still afraid of Isobu, but hey. His heart rate was probably up, and I could see suspicion in what little I could see of his face.

I forced myself to relax a bit. Body language stuff like this worked with dogs, so maybe… "Are you going to be at the graduation ceremony?"
Kakashi's chakra stilled. By god that was a weird feeling. Did I catch him off guard? Still, he said, "Probably not. Tell Hayate I'm sorry."

Well, rats. He was looking forward to having everyone there.

"All right. Well, if you do get back early or something, there's going to be a party thing at the Umino family's place. Team announcements are the day after, but I'm not worried about that."

Not like I actually expected him to attend. I was pretty sure Kakashi likes parties like that about as much as I did. I was probably going to spend the afternoon avoiding talking to parents.

Kakashi turned to leave almost before I completed the thought, then paused. He looked back over his shoulder with a piercing stare. "Kei."

I paused, halfway back into the office. "Yeah?" I needed to fill Sensei in on some other futureverse shit while I had it in mind.

"Go check on Obito."

…What.

I could practically feel my face settle into business mode, where my mouth flattens into a whitening line and my eyes narrow.

What's wrong with Obito?

But if Kakashi didn't want to talk, and he did spot something wrong with our team's third member… "I will. Take care out there."

Kakashi vanished in a burst of Body Flicker speed.

Dammit. Like I needed another bombshell in my lap before New Year's was even over.

Speaking of, New Year's celebrations in Konoha lasted about a week. I had almost forgotten, since tradition dictated that a death in the family generally cancelled out most celebrations. I'd have had to send letters to all my relatives and close friends to not send New Year's cards…only Hayate and I were the only members of the family that we knew, and anyway everyone else we cared about already knew about Mom's death.

Being fourteen and twelve, we'd struggled for about two days before just giving up and making sure the Namikaze-Uzumaki joint celebrations were as happy as they could be.

And then the assassination attempt happened.

"Sensei?" I asked, as I wandered back over to the desk.

"Yes, Kei?" Sensei replied distractedly.

"Have you heard much from Obito for the last week?"

"Aside from this morning, no. Is something wrong?" Sensei looked up, concerned.

"I don't know yet. Kakashi seems to think so." Which was fucking weird. Either there was something genuinely up with my only Uchiha friend, or Kakashi just wanted to get me to leave him alone. But there were better ways to distract me that didn't get my anxious thought processes going.
In hindsight, it had been strange to find Obito using Kamui on the offensive in such a brutal way. The Kiri-nin had looked like someone had chopped him in half with a chakra scalpel, as silly as it sounded. No tool marks on the body or anything as obvious as Wood Release. It had looked like Obito had sucked half of the guy into the Kamui dimension and...well, forgotten to get the rest of him. And then thrown the other half right out again.

According to Sensei, the guy had still been twitching when ANBU got to him.

Sensei frowned. "I haven't heard anything. And nothing's crossed my desk yet, either. Kei, would you mind checking on him?"

I wasn't technically on shift—I'd just been called in to talk—so I was technically also free to go do just that. "Yeah, I will."

I left the office after that, heading to the house first. The Academy wasn't in session during New Year's, so I could bring Hayate along to help me figure out what was what with Obito.

Hayate's initial concerns were somewhat less than relevant, but they made sense to him.

"I'm sorry I hit you with an orange this morning," he said quite seriously, when I got back.

"Eh, it's fine." I checked the shoes by the front door—Kushina wasn't back yet—and headed inside to find a decent jacket before I would walk to Obito's. If I was going to walk to the Uchiha district, I'd need something a little thicker than a glorified training tank top.

And I wasn't gonna go over the rooftops if I was taking Hayate along. He was just about good enough to travel like that consistently if he wanted to, but I was worried that he'd injure himself before his graduation ceremony. And that would suck.

"So where are you going now?" Hayate asked, as I put on a dark blue coat and a scarf I hadn't used much in the last few days.

Aside from the incident with the Kiri-nin, I hadn't been doing much this New Year's.

"Gonna see Obito. Coming with?" Did I even have long sandals...? Nope. Once again, Konoha's depressingly consistent footwear came back to bite me. We didn't generally need socks, so the selection in town was appalling.

"Sure!" And he whooshed away to go and get dressed.

It was probably only around 55 degrees Fahrenheit, but Konoha didn't really have consistent thermometers anywhere. It wasn't cold, but it was cool enough to trigger two urges—one, I needed sleeves, and two, Hayate needed to have more than one layer of clothing.

The rest was just complaining.

Hayate whooshed back into view, wearing his new haori-style shirt. I wanted to side-eye it—it wasn't exactly a jacket or similar—but there were sleeves and I hadn't actually said that he had to wear anything in particular.

I shrugged. "All right. Let's go."

I found out that Hayate could, in fact, keep up with me to some degree if I went over the rooftops. Given that Obito and I had managed a respectable pace when we were younger than him, it was
somewhat gratifying to learn.

Sure, he hadn't learned which rooftops let me catch the most air, but hey. He could learn that over time.

Still, when we landed just inside the outer boundaries of the Uchiha district, he had to take a moment to get his breathing under control. Whether due to Isobu or due to years of running the same route to get Obito anywhere on time, I didn't. Hayate would probably be getting a lot of opportunities for physical conditioning once he got a jōnin-sensei. I had. Granted, it felt like most of what I had put myself through had been because of my teammates and not my sensei, but that amounted to semantics.

"Obito's...hah...house? It's there, right?" Hayate panted, looking up at me through his bangs.

Obito's apartment was, yes. In hindsight, I was pretty sure Hayate had never been inside.

Somehow, the building was actually in better shape than it had been the last time I visited. Sure, it was a clan-owned apartment complex, but I'd been expecting the place to still be slightly scorched—at least a bit. I hadn't expected that the place would be a priority.

...Also, for some reason I could sense Obito's chakra only in fits and starts.

What the hell?

I tapped the side of my head as we approached his apartment building, still getting intermittent signals. Obito didn't deliberately flare his chakra to communicate with me or anything, since he didn't really understand how my chakra sense worked, but I still almost always knew where he was once he was in my range. Either my chakra sense was going batty again, or something else was going on.

"Is something wrong, Sis?" Hayate asked, having noticed my behavior.

I had no idea. "Maybe."

We headed up the stairs—Konoha apartments weren't gated, and it wouldn't have mattered if they were—since Obito lived on the third floor and two apartments down the hall. At least, he probably did. He actually could have changed exact addresses when his building was repaired and I'd never know.

I still made sure Obito's chakra popped back into his apartment before I knocked on the door.

There was a loud crash.

Startled, I leaned toward the door and called, "Obito?"

"Kei?" His voice sounded strained. At least he could talk. "What are you doing here?"

"And Hayate's here, too!" my brother added, refusing to be left out.

There was the sound of something plastic and hollow being set down, and a rummaging noise. Then Obito finally reached the door and—

His face appeared first, randomly in the formerly-blank apartment door.

Hayate shrieked in surprise and jerked backward, pulling me with him.

Meanwhile, Obito stepped right through his apartment door like it wasn't actually there. If I hadn't
been looking right at him, and therefore at his Mangekyō Sharingan, I probably would have wondered if he'd gone and died while I hadn't been paying attention. The last thing I needed to deal with was literal ghosts of the past. Knowing my luck, Madara would be next.

My outward reaction was to remain calm. I quirked an eyebrow while I studied him for any injuries, mostly to buy me time.

He was dressed in old gray clothes, with his pant legs and sleeves rolled up, his black spiky hair wrapped up in a handkerchief, and his mouth behind a medical mask. Combined with the eyepatch over his left eye socket, he kind of looked like Kakashi in (theoretical) cleaning mode. He had rubber gloves on both hands and was covered in a fine layer of dust where he wasn't wet from kneeling in something that apparently stained rusty brown. He was holding a scrub brush and, to be perfectly honest, looked a little surprised that Hayate and I had showed up. And perhaps a little embarrassed that we had.

"Spring cleaning?" I asked, with just a trace of teasing in the tone.

"Uh, kinda," Obito said, pulling the mask down so it was hanging off his ears. "…I just walked through the door, didn't I?"

"HOW DID YOU DO THAT?" Hayate shouted, recovering admirably quickly. "You—that's…"

I clapped a hand down on my brother's shoulder. "Let's finish this conversation inside, all right?"

"We haven't even started yet!" my brother protested.

"Yeah, just hang on a sec." Obito flicked his right wrist and a woody vine curled out from under his sleeve and sought out the keyhole. There was a click and he pushed the door open ahead of us, saying, "Um, sorry about the mess."

Honestly, Obito's apartment wasn't as bad as I'd have thought, given how he was acting. Sure, there was That Chair, which had clearly become a repository for everything Obito didn't feel like putting away. There was a suspicious-looking stain on the wall that looked like it was older than Jiraiya, and the sink was full of unwashed dishes. And the futon was unmade. But other than those random points, it was astonishingly well-maintained. Obito had a bookshelf shoved next to a writing desk backed by cork-board, and a lamp on the desk as well as a chair that looked like it could swivel. On the desk was a neat line of framed photographs, and the bulletin board had his daily schedule pinned to it. The main window was half-hidden behind the board, sure, but there was still plenty of light. I could see six or seven posters tacked to the walls, standing out in bright colors against the striped wallpaper. Sure, the place was small, but it was his.

Honestly, I'd done worse when it came to maintaining my room back in the house. Even if Mom had helped.

The only real problem I had was the lingering smell of bleach.

Hayate's nose wrinkled, too. "Obito?"

"Yeah, Hayate?" Obito blinked, like he couldn't see why we were here anyway. Though he let us into his apartment.

"Why's the room smell weird?" Hayate asked.
"Ah, that's…" Obito looked at me, seeming a little frantic.

"Wait, no, never mind that. How did you walk through your door?!" Hayate changed mental train tracks entirely and remembered what he'd been talking about before.

"It's, um." Another stall.

"It's a special Sharingan ability," I told Hayate, since Obito was floundering. "Only Obito can do it."

"Oh." Hayate seemed to realize that he wasn't getting any more of an explanation than that, and let it drop.

"So, what were you doing when we got here, Obito?" I asked, curious.

He got that hunted look on his face again. "How much can I…?"

"The tenth's classified, but otherwise you can tell him whatever you feel like," I said seriously.

Obito spun his desk chair around and sat down in it. Maybe it was just me, but it seemed like Obito was tired. Had he been cleaning since he was interviewed about the would-be assassin he bisected?

Hayate and I sat on the floor. Hayate seemed to be expecting story time.

I wanted more of an explanation.

"I've been cleaning up blood all morning, actually," Obito said warily.

"Blood? Where?" Hayate asked, whipping his head around to stare at the visible parts of the apartment.

I crossed my arms and waited.

"Not here, Hayate," Obito said. "My Sharingan has a special power, called Kamui. It lets me shove stuff into another dimension."

"Like…" Hayate visibly struggled for an example, before saying, "Like the inside of a storage scroll?"

"I guess. I've never thought about it." Obito's handwriting was bad enough that he hadn't wanted to put in the hours to study fūinjutsu. Most of that time would involve just getting his calligraphy up to snuff. "But anyway, I used that special power to stop one of the assassins this morning."

"There were a total of five," I told my brother, "and you saw the last one."

Hayate went quiet. Yes, he had.

Obito looked between us, surprised by the sudden silence. "Um…?"

"The guy got as far as the front step. Then I happened."

"Ah."

"So what does that have to do with having to clean up blood someplace?" I asked, into the awkward moment.

"Not 'someplace,' Kei," Obito corrected me. "I hit the guy with Kamui, remember?"
Oh, ick. He'd sawed the guy in half with the entrance to a pocket dimension, and the blood was still there? While I'd have to remember to check storage scrolls for that capability now that I was aware of it, damn. It'd been a nastier way to die than I'd thought.

"So you can get in and out of that place easily?" I asked, tilting my head to one side. "No eye strain or anything?"

"Rin asked me to keep track. Nothing's changed so far." Obito shrugged. "But I kinda tripped in the blood when I tried to use Kamui after I got the guy to ANBU, so I figured I could clean it up." He picked at the knees of his pants, which reminded me that the rusty stains were still there. "I'm probably gonna have to burn this, but at least it was old."

…Okay. Not exactly the suicide watch caliber thing I'd been expecting since Kakashi had brought Obito up.

Maybe he really had just been trying to get me off his case.

Then Hayate's stomach grumbled.

"Do you have any food, Obito?" I asked, belatedly realizing that I hadn't had breakfast either. I remembered a second after that that the question was kinda rude. We were uninvited guests, after all.

"Not really," Obito mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "I eat a lot of takeout…"

With Hayate flushing red with embarrassment, I seized my chance to get to the bottom of the mystery.

"Hayate, if I give you some pocket money, can you get snacks from the bakery?" I asked. Most of the time Mom or I had gone with him to the store, but there had to have been some times that Mom had let him go places unsupervised…

"No problem," Hayate said, relieved. "Gimme."

I made sure to hit him in the shoulder with my least favorite wallet. It held maybe a hundred ryō or so—enough for a few snack buns if he was choosy.

Hayate dashed out the door, and I felt his cheerful little chakra signature pound down the building's staircase and out into the street.

With half my attention on Hayate as he trotted toward the Uchiha clan's bakery, I turned the rest to Obito. He still felt nervous to me, in a way that wasn't necessarily justified by circumstances.

I glanced around the room again. Getting up, I decided to examine the picture frames arranged on his desk. If that put me within grabbing distance…well, whatever. I knew a couple different ways to put pressure on him, gently.

"Kakashi got me the frames," Obito said, apropos of nothing. He spun the chair around so he was facing the little line of photographs, too. "He said it looked stupid to just have them pinned up."

"Well, I agree. It was nice of him to give you the frames, though." I paused. It had been a rather sweet gesture, but that didn't say much for the state of most of Obito's belongings in past months. "But you can never tell him I said that."

Obito snickered. "All right, I promise I won't tell."
Yeah, right.

The first picture was of our team, actually. Sensei stood in the back, with his hands on Obito and Kakashi’s heads while I—as then-tallest of the genin—was in the middle with my arms around both of their shoulders. I may or may not have been trying not to strangle one or both of them at the time. I couldn't really remember.

"Hard to believe it's been four years," Obito said, "We were so tiny back then."

"Says the guy who's finally taller than me," I replied, smiling. I set that frame gently aside and looked at the next.

A photo of Rin, of course. She was tiny, and still wearing that shuriken-patterned dress, but held up a sealed pack that I knew contained a medic-nin uniform. In careful pen, she'd written, "First day on the job!" in the bottom right corner of the picture. Her other hand formed a V for victory sign, and she was grinning widely.

"I feel like I missed the memo on this one," I said, curious.

"She said Yamaguchi-sensei took it," Obito said. "She gave it to me after we got back from that first C-rank."

Christ, that'd been a long time ago.

"And this one?" The next photograph was of a field, with barely distinguishable blobs running around in the frame.

"Ah, that was the time Kakashi's dogs were learning how to track." He pointed to a dark bluish blur in the background. "That's me. I was laying the trail but, uh…"

"But Kakashi let them loose early." I hadn't known Sensei had a camera out for that moment. "At least they weren't full-grown yet."

"It was almost worth it, seeing Sensei yell at him," Obito said fondly.

He picked up the last picture frame in line, skipping two half-sized frames that depicted events I almost recognized. The photograph he held was old, gone slightly yellowish with age, and it looked a little wrinkled. Like someone had crumpled it at least once.

There were three people in the photo. A man with a brown crew cut and low-necked Uchiha shirt, alongside a woman in a yellow kimono with a side-swept part to her brown hair. In the woman's arms, barely visible, was a tiny fuzzy-headed baby.

"Your parents?" I asked, gently taking the frame from him.

"Yeah." Obito didn't look like he was going to cry. He looked solemn, sure, but this was an old pain. "I never knew them, you know? Mom and Dad died in the Second War, so…so I kind of didn't know enough to miss them."

Held long enough, against the sharp points, sometimes old pain could be gently worn down. The edges smoothed, until eventually there was a simple leaden weight there, in your chest like an old friend. Neither pain nor comfort. Just a reminder, on cold days.

Sometimes, I felt that way about my old life. Whether it was gone or I was the one who had fallen down the rabbit hole unwittingly, I didn't know.
And yet this one was the one I had.

I'd picked up a lovely little collection of losses to weigh me down in this life, all the same. Dad, Mom, even Obito for a while there. And yet, I could accept those. I had to. There was no going back.

"I think I'd miss them more if I did know them," Obito said, sighing. He smiled, though, and I blinked. "But I have Sensei, and Rin-chan and you and Kakashi and Hayate and Kushina-san…and it's not that lonely, you know?"

I did. Oh, did I ever. "More than you know." I abruptly remembered why I'd shown up here unannounced in the first place. "Obito, Kakashi is actually the one who sent me here. He sounded worried about you."

Obito's face fell. "Oh."

"Obito, is something bothering you?" I asked anyway. So there was something. It must have been bad if Kakashi had called me out here, right?

"Just…" Obito fidgeted, twisting the hem of his shirt between his fingers.

"Obito?"

Obito gave me one last, searching look before reaching down to open one of his desk's side drawers. He pulled out a manila folder, with his name on it. "Here."

"What is this?" I didn't open the folder just yet. I was a little busy watching Obito's body language—it was the equivalent of a whole-body flinch.

"Just open it," Obito said quietly, not looking at me. Instead, he was tracing the edge of the team photo with the fingers of his transplanted arm.

I opened the file, sitting back against the desk by Obito's other elbow.

The first thing I noticed was that the first page belonged to a personnel file—specifically, Obito's Military Police performance review. The page had been highlighted, twice, to emphasize one segment of the profile.

_Potential security hazard._

"The hell is this?"

"It's part of an MP file. I, uh, probably shouldn't have taken it, but…" Obito mumbled something inaudible. "I wanted to know why the patrols were getting weird…"

"How so?" I asked, turning my attention to the next page.

*Unusual Mangekyō Sharingan technique…*

"Turn to page seven," Obito said softly, instead of answering.

Page seven, as it turned out, was a genealogical chart.

Aside from his parents—Megumi and Naoya Uchiha—there was a name that stood out in his family tree.
Tracing the ink lines with my finger, I followed the lines of descent from Madara on down—and diagonally, past the names of people I half-recognized from either old KIA reports or the Memorial Stone monument. My finger swerved to the left and kept on going, it was just on Obito's immediate family again.

Obito Uchiha was Madara's only remaining great-grandson.

Looking at the next few pages, I could see more of the picture behind that revelation. Madara hadn't married while in Konoha's good graces, but apparently there had been an illegitimate daughter who claimed relation upon reaching the village. While the Uchiha clan weren't quite certain if this was the case, there was enough of a physical resemblance to make the survivors of Madara's attempted purge very cautious. But she'd been clan-less and lost, and the clan head at the time had let her in.

That woman—Kaede Uchiha née Takagi—had married into the clan to make the name official, and in time there were several children. One, Megumi Uchiha, married Naoya Uchiha and their marriage eventually produced Obito. All of her siblings died childless.

It wasn't a guaranteed blood connection, but it didn't really matter. As long as the clan—as long as Obito—believed he was Madara's last remaining direct relative, then the downward spiral was in place.

"Have you talked to anyone about this?" I asked quietly, closing the file.

Almost absently, his left hand reached out and wrapped around mine. His right swept over his face, covering his eye. He was shaking. "N-No."

I dropped the file on the desk and slid off it, pulling Obito to the floor with me.

He'd gotten taller than me a while ago, but I let him nearly burrow into my side like Hayate used to—still did—with my arm over his shoulders. He had to hunch up more to do it, but he managed.

"Were you worried I was going to hate you for being related to that guy?" I wanted to know, at once in awe of terror-fueled thought processes and frustrated by them.

Obito nodded, though he still wasn't looking up at me.

"I'm not going to deny hating Madara Uchiha with every fiber of my being." Mainly because it'd be a lie and he'd spot that in a second. "But I don't hate you. I honestly don't think I could."

I'd thoroughly compartmentalized Tobi and Obito in my head for more or less that exact reason. I could pity Tobi as much as I thought he was a rampaging asshole, but Obito? Nope. Not capable of it. I wasn't even capable of killing him.

"I think that this is something that needs to be talked about, though." I squeezed Obito's shoulder. "Can you do that for me? Can you help me understand what's going on in here?" I swept my thumb across his face, slowly, and caught a teardrop on its way down. "Tell me what's going on, please."

"I…" He cleared his throat, "I didn't know…about this. Before."

When Madara had been keeping him in the basement? "Huh?"

"I mean," Obito shifted so he didn't have his arms around my waist anymore. His head ended up on my lap, facing away from me, and I instinctively pulled the kerchief off his head and ran my fingers
through his hair. I'd apologize if it was unwelcome, but... "I mean when—when we were growing up."

"Does this have something to do with"—the fact that you were an orphan within a major clan and somehow left to grow up alone?—"being an orphan?"

"Kinda?" Obito gave a one-shouldered shrug. "I mean, I guess...if they knew I was related to Madara, no one would want to take me in."

Wow, I could practically feel my opinion of the Uchiha clan plummet. It was Naruto all over again.

Still, it was my job to see the bright side here, wasn't it? I didn't know if Obito would appreciate me playing devil's advocate here, but...well, I had to try. I'd gotten pretty far by forcing myself to assume that people were basically good and could be reasoned with. Even the ones that were the size of buildings and could spit city-destroying energy bombs.

(And yet Danzō, Orochimaru, and Madara had earned full "worthless dickbag" ratings from me despite that. Hey, I wasn't perfect. Or Naruto.)

"Well, that was stupid of them." Natural 1 on my diplomacy roll. Big whoop. "If they thought you were going to follow in his footsteps, then they should have done their best to make you really a part of the family. Not just provide money on odd weeks."

Obito sighed. "Yeah."

"What else?" I asked, as he rolled over so he could look up at the ceiling. I could finally see his face, too. "I thought you went back to the clan because things were better."

"They weren't. I mean, I hoped..." Obito shook his head. When he stopped, he was looking up at the ceiling. I could see his face twisting up along his whorl scars, and his chakra flickered in agitation. "I really felt like I could go back to the old me. But I wasn't the same and...and it felt like they hadn't changed. So I had to change again, to fit them."

I tried to imagine it.

Obito, upon returning from that hole in the ground, had been a skinny kid with half his face scarred and half his body replaced by a Zetsu's, only one eye, and a truckload of issues. He'd been stuck underground with only a hateful old man and his retinue of Zetsu servants for company, hearing a constant stream of nihilistic bullshit from the master himself. The master who was, in all likelihood, his maternal great-grandfather and had absolutely no qualms about trying to pull Obito apart and mold his mind into something else entirely. And if he could pull it off without Obito realizing that what he was doing was manipulation of the highest order, so much the better.

I didn't know if Obito had ever trusted Madara, but the revelation about the seals, Zetsu, Isobu, and Rin would have destroyed it. And while he trusted us—people who, several months before, had left him to die—he couldn't trust the only human being he'd interacted with for half a year. In fact, the creepy old man had turned out to be an even bigger creep than previously imagined.

And then, once he'd come back to Konoha, he almost immediately tried to reintegrate with a clan that had, for reasons unknown to him, never really accepted him in the first place. They'd likely never believed the official line of bullshit Sensei fed them—not when Fugaku knew most of the story.

So Obito, still reeling from social isolation and psychological conditioning, had gone back to a clan that wasn't prepared to offer any kind of help. He'd thrown himself into it, trying to become a model Uchiha by joining the MPs. He had the combat skill required—oh, did he ever—but not the mindset.
Little things marked him as "outsider," long before he'd known they'd been there.

I continued to card my fingers through his hair.

"I tried. But...but I couldn't understand why nothing seemed to be getting better," Obito murmured. "After you let everyone know you were Isobu's host, they started doubling up my patrols. It used to be just me and one officer, but then there were three of them. And I always felt like I was being watched..."

Which, in a clan that had so many kekkei genkai active, was probably very close to hellish.

"I didn't know what I was doing wrong," he said, his voice twisted in despair. "So...so I used Kamui to break into the office, this morning. I shouldn't have, I know, but..." He'd needed to know, but hadn't even known what questions to ask. "I didn't know what to do."

Well, if he'd trusted Fugaku worth a damn, he could have asked.

But that was the trouble, wasn't it? Trust was a two-way street, and it was one we'd both walked many times. Obito didn't trust his clan because they didn't trust him. Rin had. I had. Sensei and Kakashi had, too, and as a result he'd thrown everything about himself into our bonds. The clan had been an afterthought at best.

"I think I need help," Obito mumbled, finally looking at me. "Please?"

"Of course I'll help," I said, and put my hand on his forehead. "All you ever had to do was ask."

Obito put his hand on top of mine. "Thanks, Kei."

And that was when Hayate came back in through the apartment's door. He'd actually been sitting outside of it for at least five minutes, but took the sudden calm silence as a cue. He took one look at the two of us sitting on the floor—well, I was sitting—and said, "Should I come back later?"

I rolled my eyes. "No, Hayate. Did you get food?"

"I got some melonpan," Hayate said, holding up a bag, before inverting it. Only crumbs fell out, at which point he added, "But you were taking so long talking that I ate them."

Well, I suppose that was par for the course. I should have made sure he had breakfast before we left the house.

Hayate walked over to us and, without so much as a how-you-do, flopped down on the floor on my other side, also resting his head on my lap. Just on the opposite side Obito was.

He was asking for a noogie.

"Are you two dating now?" he asked.

Obito sputtered.

"Pretty sure I'm just more comfortable than furniture. But hey, maybe it's a family trait." I leaned forward and put my elbow on my brother's forehead, putting my weight on it and making him thrash. He got out from the "hold" in a scant second, but he scrambled across the room to get out of my range anyway.

Obito sat up and started laughing.
Hayate glared reproachfully at me. "That hurt."

"And you asked for it." I looked at Obito again, who'd finally calmed down. "So, feeling better?"

"Me? Yeah, I think?" Obito scratched his head. "Though I still don't really know what we should do. Or what I should do, I guess."

"I'd say talk to Sensei first." At Obito's surprised look, I said, "Hey, if Kakashi thought someone needed to check on you, it means you weren't talking to Sensei. Which he confirmed, by the way. But seriously, he's like your legal guardian, too."

"I'm still not calling him 'Dad,' though," Hayate said. He wrinkled his nose. "That'd be weird. The Hokage's not my dad."

"Especially since the clan doesn't seem to be doing its job," I concluded, as though Hayate hadn't said anything.

"…Okay. I can do that." Obito winced. "I think."

"Do you have a patrol shift today?" I asked.

"No, I…" He sighed. "Fugaku-sama put me on leave after the thing this morning. I've just been cleaning up after it, since."

"Well, then we can get you lunch and we can talk to Sensei and Fugaku-sama? Maybe getting all of this out in the air will help," I suggested.

Obito still didn't look too happy with the idea, but I was a little mollified at the thought that Fugaku had pulled him off the roster for however long. I would have liked to hear his reasoning for it, or at least heard that Obito had heard the reason behind it. Sure, Obito probably needed help and Fugaku may or may not have known that ahead of time, but what Obito needed was to be assured that his treatment wasn't entirely arbitrary. You couldn't trust that.

We needed to sort everything out as quickly as possible to keep bad blood from settling in.

"I'll meet you over at the Hokage's office in fifteen minutes, all right?" Obito got to his feet, looking a little embarrassed. "I need to get dressed."

"If you're not there by then, I'm going to drag you there," I warned him as I got up, crossing my arms and setting my jaw into a stubborn jut.

"I know. Thanks."

Hayate looked between us like we were speaking a foreign language. "I have no idea why you need to go see the Hokage, but…can we get lunch first?"

"You ate our lunches, Hayate," I said.

"You were busy and I was hungry! And I still am!"

I sighed and gave up. "All right, all right. See, this is why I didn't give you my real wallet."

"What?!"

Obito ended up having to throw us out. Otherwise, we'd have argued on the threshold of his apartment all day and never gotten anywhere.
Obito's talk with Sensei ended up taking the better part of an hour, even with my attempts to help the
explanations. Eventually, I had to leave with Hayate—some stuff was too heavy and too personal for
us to be involved—but I was later told that it had worked out. I wasn't actually sure what that meant
at the time, but Obito was later able to clarify it for me.

We were on the roof of the Academy, looking down over the edge of the building and waiting for
the fun to start. Obito wasn't wearing his MP uniform variant, and I pretended that my Konoha
uniform included a katana strapped to my back even though we weren't heading out on a mission.

Still waiting on that explanation. I gave Obito a long look.

"It…It turns out that Fugaku-sama didn't realize what was happening," Obito said, sheepish. "I
mean, he knew I wasn't doing my best, but he didn't realize how bad I was doing"— he tapped the
side of his head—"up here. The extra guys on patrol were for a psych evaluation, but nobody told
me."

That would defeat the point of an evaluation. People didn't behave the same way when they knew
they were being observed, or so the stories went. I didn't say as much, but Obito got the vibe from
me anyway.

"So I…kind of panicked," Obito went on, quieter. "Fugaku-sama was pissed that I grabbed the
records, but he was also kinda surprised I could pull it off. Once he realized it was a Mangekyō
Sharingan power, though, he was pissed off all over again."

"Why?" I asked.

"He was worried it meant I was…what was the word he used…uh, reeling? From October. And I
was, because I was avoiding everything and just playing around with my new power once it
stopped…well, once it felt less awful." Obito shrugged self-consciously, "And he didn't notice, so he
was mad at himself for not noticing and at everyone else for just letting me go back onto the roster
without double-checking his orders."

"I think a lot of people are finding out about that kind of stuff now," I said, wincing. New Year's had
not really been the best time this year. "I mean, I didn't…"

"I was trying really hard to make sure you didn't find out," Obito replied, looking at the ground. "I
mean, you had a lot to worry about and so did Sensei and everyone…"

"But not Kakashi, apparently." Even as I said it, I knew it was a self-reprimand more than anything.
How had I not noticed? That was easy. I was too wrapped up in my own problems to give anyone
else the time of day if they weren't bleeding on the carpet in front of me.

Kakashi was in ANBU, for fuck's sake. If he could make time to pick up on things like that…

"So what happens now?" I asked him, shaking myself out of my funk.

Obito sighed. "Well, I'm not on the patrol roster anymore. Psychiatric leave, like yesterday. And I
guess Fugaku-sama wanted me to see a Yamanaka. But I don't know if I'm going to be able to
continue as an MP."

"I didn't realize it was that bad."

"It's…Fugaku-sama said that the clan hadn't deserved my trust." Obito shook his head. "So they
didn't deserve my strength. Fugaku-sama says I can come back to the MP thing if I want, but that he
"That's…that's pretty big of him." Which was likely not the right term. Fugaku shouldn't have been turning the clan over for Obito's sake, at least from what I knew about both Obito and the head of the Uchiha clan, but maybe I was reading into things the wrong way. "So what are you going to do now?"

Obito's stomach rumbled. "Right now I'm thinking about lunch, and how I can't get it until Hayate officially graduates."

I kicked him in the ankle. Sure, we might have been fifteen meters above the courtyard where every other extended family member of every other student was gathering, but still. It was the principle of the thing.

"Ow!"

I paused. "That actually hurt?"

"Fugaku-sama made me promise not to use my Mangekyō so much," Obito muttered, rubbing his ankle. "He said I might lose my eyesight. And I've only got one eye, so…"

"Point." I looked down at the crowd again. Luckily, the crowd was focused on the Academy doors and not the two special jōnin goofing off on the roof.

I felt a flash of lightning chakra almost before the—

"Yo," said Kakashi's voice from behind us.

Obito jumped. I didn't.

"Thanks for showing up," I said, turning to greet him.

He wasn't in his ANBU uniform. Instead, he was wearing jōnin blues like Obito and I were, though he'd opted for bandages to cover his calves where I used mesh. He was also wearing the metal-backed ANBU gloves. If I could forget the fact that he wasn't quite at his full adult height and that the visible parts of his face had no stress lines, I could have mistaken him for his older counterpart.

He shrugged. "I have a few minutes to spare."

"Do you know if Rin-chan is going to make it here?" Obito asked him.

Kakashi shrugged again.

I was looking over the edge of the building, to where I could feel Sensei standing just inside the Academy doors. "She's got fifteen seconds."

Rin ended up missing the parade of kids that streamed out of the Academy as soon as Sensei threw the doors open. She'd make it up to Hayate somehow, so I didn't worry.

For my part, I hopped off the edge of the roof, pinging my brother's chakra signature.

He pinged back, his chakra riding high with joy that only increased as I wove through the crowd and snatched him up into a bear hug. Obito zoomed along in my wake, followed by Kakashi (at a more sedate pace).

"I did it, Sis!" he cheered, even as I lifted him into the air.
"I knew you could!" I told him, finally setting him down again and bringing my hand down on his head to ruffle his hair—only to find a bandanna-style headband in my way. "Copycat!"

"You lost like three of these, so it doesn't count!" Hayate replied, still grinning. He twisted around in my grip so he could see Obito. "Hey, I did it!"

"You did!" Obito said with a matching grin. "I said you were gonna be a great ninja!"

"I am going to be the greatest ninja!" Hayate bickered cheerfully with him.

I still felt a pang. If only Mom had lived to see this moment…

While my brother and my best friend embarking on their epic scuffle, Kakashi sidled through the crowd until he was next to me and said, "Kanjutsu, too?"

"Yep." Damned if I was going to be able to train him on it, though. Hayate may have figured out a weird sensing technique and he did have potential as a possible kenjutsu master, but I didn't know if his jōnin-sensei would be able to make sure he kept making progress.

"Any idea who's going to be on his team?" Kakashi asked.

Yūgao and Iruka, possibly? "I have half an idea, but I didn't get a look at Sensei's notes or anything."

Despite my best efforts. "As long as it's not as bad as when Rin was a genin, it should be fine."

"Rin?" Kakashi blinked.

"Rin's genin team failed and got sent to the Genin Corps," I told him. "Yamaguchi-sensei pulled her out again and made her his apprentice."

"Ah," was what Kakashi said, as though trying to put that information into context with what he knew about the only real medic-nin we knew. Then, "You're going to train him."

That did not sound like a question. "When he's home? Yes. But there are these things called missions that kinda get in the way."

"Then if you can't handle it, I can," Kakashi said flatly.

…Eh?

I pointed at him, then poked him in the shoulder. "You. Kakashi Hatake. You are offering to help train my brother."

Kakashi rolled his visible eye. "As if that's such a difficult concept to grasp."

"I'll let you train with him right after I throttle you," I said in a tone that matched his.

"I hope my students aren't about to murder each other in public," Sensei's voice said from apparently nowhere, neatly puncturing our argument. His tone was cheerful, but the hand that landed on my head said, "Behave" entirely nonverbally.

"No, Hokage-sama," Kakashi said.

"Good. Kei?" Sensei prodded.

"I wasn't going to do anything," I said. I didn't know if I was lying, so he wouldn't be able to tell.
"Good." And then Sensei drifted away, his cloak flapping out behind him. I guess he was still on kid-congratulating duty?

Kakashi sighed.

"Look, I'll ask if he can take up that offer once he has a team, all right?" I suggested.

"Fine," Kakashi said, and took off.

I stared at where he'd been for a little longer before shaking my head and going back to my brother and Obito. They'd headed in the direction of Iruka's parents as my conversation with Kakashi had gone on, so I raced to catch up.

Team assignments in the morning, huh?

Well, then I'd panic then.

By noon two days later, I had good news: My brother was on a team with Iruka Umino and Yūgao Uzuki. Their sensei was Inoichi Yamanaka, which struck me as suspiciously apropos given that Hayate probably needed a therapist. Regardless, he was a solid shinobi, and I didn't have any doubts that he'd get them through hell or high water just fine.

By the tenth, Hayate and his team were on their first of what would turn out to be a seemingly endless parade of D-ranks.

By the fourteenth, Hayate was thoroughly sick of D-ranks and Obito was finally talking to a Yamanaka mediator to help him reconcile with his clan.

By the twentieth, one more assassination attempt had been stopped dead, this time solely by Raidō. At least that one had been Iwa, since we'd honestly been waiting for their salutations for a while.

By the twenty-eighth, Konoha was officially back to what amounted to full strength. Missions were being run, I was getting more time off as the old members of the Hokage Guard entered the rotation properly, and Tsunade was officially named secondary godmother to Naruto (after Mikoto). Jiraiya got to be the godfather regardless.

By early February, I also had bad news: Sensei had absolutely no fucking idea where Kakashi had gone for about three full days. He hadn't reported in to ANBU, or even stopped by Sensei's house to crash. His account in the village coffers was untapped, and no one could apparently remember seeing him anywhere.

It was like he was just gone.

"Kei?" Sensei had asked, cautious in the face of my uncharacteristic silence at the news.

I was pretty sure he could feel the steady tendrils of Isobu's chakra leaking into my coils. A muscle in my jaw started to twitch. To keep my teeth from grinding, I spat a word. A name. Someone who could pluck my teammate out of the villages without somebody noticing. Someone who had been harassing us all for months. "Danzō."

Sensei's eyes narrowed. He'd probably suspected as much. "I can have that investigation on my desk in two minutes."

I needed to find Kakashi. But I forced Isobu's chakra back. I needed to find him without letting...
everyone know I was looking. That meant going through Sensei's political ties and through ANBU and hoping that someone knew an answer somewhere. Kakashi hadn't disappeared without a trace. That wasn't something he did.

But where in hell was he?

Other than the terrifying possibility that the answer was exactly that.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title courtesy of Taylor Swift. Funny how the phrase is so appropriate here. :) Obito's parents are named after two of his voice actors.
Whispers Arc: Looking Glass

Chapter Summary

Kakashi and Kei: Share the spotlight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kakashi

8:46 am, February 5th

“Wolf…I’m sorry.”

The thing about attempting murder is this: It’s going to stay an attempt if you’re stupid enough to give your target any warning whatsoever.

Between Kinoe’s voice, the faint smell of his Wood Release growing from the walls, and the strange play of shadows on the cavern walls, everything gives him away.

I whirl on the spot and duck under the blockiest Wood Release jutsu I’ve seen from him yet.

Wood is Water and Earth combined, so that means as long as we’re underground he has the advantage if he tries to box me in. If I use any lightning, he has the combined form of his kekkei genkai to play with, and I won’t be able to leverage all my advantages fast enough.

I spare him a glare with both eyes—Obito’s Sharingan is pretty effective that way—before planting my spiked sandals in the dirt and using Body Flicker to get the hell out of there.

From observing Kinoe, I know enough to read the differences between Obito’s and his styles of using Wood Release.

Kinoe’s use of the kekkei genkai is thoughtful, steady, and square. His primary attacking forms try to catch and constrict rather than to just rip holes straight through the nearest target like Obito’s version. The wood itself is tougher, but correspondingly that much harder to use in a fight. It’s slow and cautious in a way that combat jutsu don’t need to be, and I’m almost irritated by the contrast.

Well, if you want to catch me, Kinoe, you’re going to have to be better than that.

A mud ball shoots out of the tunnel in my wake, splatting on the ground. It’s followed by a blur of greenery as Kinoe catches up to the impact site and uses his bloodline to draw fully-formed planks of wood from the mud he just used against me.

One lightning kunai rips through them like pruning shears.

My eyes narrow. That was a little too easy.

Well, if he keeps this up, maybe Kinoe will find out what it’s like to be backstabbed first.

A tree branch shoots through the air as though shot from a bow, impaling a rock that had been
behind me. I’m just a little faster than that, though, and I don’t plan to share its fate.

“Hold still, Wolf!” Kinoe says, his voice rising. “Please! I don’t want to hurt you.”

I can almost believe that. He may not want to, but that doesn’t mean he won’t. Whether of his own free will, or on orders I can believe the Councilman might have given, Kinoe doesn’t like causing unnecessary pain.

He’s still ANBU. Still ROOT.

We know a thing or two about necessary evils.

Another twang and a narrow strip of wood shoots past my face like an arrow, again.

Well, great. Now he’s discovered something he thinks might work.

I duck and dodge through the rock-strewn landscape, heading away from the forest that borders one side of this bare expanse. I hate it when my enemies have too many weapons available. Reaching a forest—or worse, a river—is going to give him far too many ways to fulfill his mission objectives.

“Kinoe, your mission is a failure,” I tell him flatly, as another twisting column of wood tries to engulf my left leg. A quick blast of lightning shuts that attempt down cold.

“I still have my orders,” Kinoe responds, apparently unaware that no matter how much genjutsu he knows, I can still see him shuffling around in it.

For a massive chakra sink, Obito’s Sharingan is paying dividends now.

I sidestep another burst of the oddly slow Wood Release whatever-this-is, to Kinoe’s almost tangible surprise. Yes, I can see you. No, I don’t care one bit about whether you’ve realized that or not.

“Kinoe, I don’t actually want to hurt you either,” I say quietly, as though it’s an apology and not just a statement of intent. Kinoe has potential, assuming I can pry him out of his current mindset. He might be a decent ANBU agent someday. Perhaps a great one.

But he can still do it without killing me.

“Then please stop fighting!” Kinoe shouts, as though stealth goes out the window just because the fight is getting loud anyway.

…I maybe he really doesn’t want kill me.

Well, then this is getting exactly nowhere. The only reason we’re doing this pointless song and dance is because Kinoe is eleven, is an escaped Orochimaru test subject, and he doesn’t know any better. This is a job for Sensei or someone who actually knows how to rehabilitate kids pushed into situations like this. Maybe a Yamanaka. I’m pretty sure Obito’s finally seeing one.

As Kinoe launches yet another Wood Release arm at me, I deliberately fail to dodge it in time and let it wrap around me like a wooden cage growing out of thin air.

I put my hand on the hilt of my ANBU regulation katana and draw it. Kinoe’s is still sheathed.

Too bad for him. Now, how did Kei do this…ah! There we go.

Lightning races up the blade as I channel chakra into it in a way that I’ve only copied once, and even that had been a partial match. Kei’s habit of not using hand seals is irritating that way. Hopefully,
she’ll be willing to put herself through more experiments so I can figure out how to do this without preparation. In the meantime, this will do.

Kinoe’s eyes widen. The Wood Release projection splits, trying to weave around my arm and cut off the chakra to the blade. What does he think I’m going to do with this, cut my way loose?

…I could, but it would be a waste of a good setup.

“Sorry about this, Kinoe.” I slam my chakra into the blade. Lightning flashes, crackles, and burns too brightly to stare at even with the Sharingan filtering out some of the chakra to read the “jutsu” I’d barely practiced.

Kinoe realizes what I am about to do several seconds after the lightning jumps from my katana, races down the Wood Release cage in pursuit of something special, and arcs into the blade on his back. By that time he’s already on the ground and too stunned to move.

Thousands of volts to the spine tend to do that. It might have been kinder to just knock him out cold instead, but since he’s not unconscious I’m just going to have to correct that.

“Lightning Release: Stunning Flash,” I say, stepping out of the would-be cage of thorns and splinters. I sheathe my sparking katana, drawing the lightning off and grounding it back in myself. “Or Arcing Bolt. Haven’t thought of a name for this version yet.”

Kinoe is still shaking. “T-Th—”

“Don’t let future victims handle your equipment, Kinoe.” I roll him over and remove his ANBU mask. I don’t want him to close his eyes before I can push the command through. I look down at him and concentrate with Obito’s eye. “Night.”

Kinoe falls asleep between one blink and the next. I pick him up and sling him over my left shoulder. Even if he did try to kill me on orders, I’d still prefer to drag him home. Maybe the Hokage would be able to figure out what to do to deprogram the village’s only non-transplant Wood Release user.

And maybe he could learn not to hate me.

I almost hope he learns his lesson from this. Though I’m not quite sure what that lesson will be.

The wind shifts.

The funny thing about being in a canyon is that visibility is fairly close to “abysmal” if there’s no Hyūga on the team, and that other senses can be baffled by the wind if it’s not feeling cooperative. Rocks further reduce the amount of viable space, and it’s all too easy to be cornered. That was half the point—Kinoe led us here because he wanted it to be difficult for me to get out alive.

There are twenty men heading in my direction.

…Fuck my life.

Run, or fight? Probably both, given the rate the wind’s moving and calculating out how strong their scents are. They don’t smell like they’re from Konoha. North? The diet’s different…

“You,” I tell the unconscious Kinoe, “are a jinx.”

I draw my katana.
Kei

12:37 pm, February 5th

I did a pretty good impression of an improperly beheaded chicken for about a minute after the news came in.

I mean, I wasn’t running around in obvious disarray, gushing blood everywhere from my neck stump. That’d be too literal.

But my thoughts definitely went in circles.

Kakashi wasn’t supposed to be on a mission, ANBU or otherwise, as far as Sensei knew. ANBU operatives could get assigned missions in their “civilian” guises, but Kakashi hadn’t gotten one of those or any special assignments from Sensei.

And I didn’t know the first thing about how to help.

Sensei let me pace around in agitated silence while he fussed around the office, trying to figure out what he’d missed for some bureaucracy-related reason or another. He put a lot of effort into seeming omniscient, but the fact remained that it was impossible for him to know everything that was happening in Konoha at all times.

An ANBU agent appeared halfway through one of my circuits of the office, appearing from the ceiling somehow. I didn’t really know how they did it—this guy was too big to fit in the vents—but hey, what did I know? I wasn’t black ops.

“Hokage-sama, your report,” said the owl-masked agent, dropping the manila folder on his desk.

“Thank you, Owl. Send Falcon in,” Sensei replied, and I blinked when I heard Raidō’s ANBU name.

“That will not be possible, Hokage-sama,” Owl reported. “Falcon left the village earlier this week.”

Sensei muttered something under his breath. “I’ll assume the details are in this file?”

“Yes,” Owl said.

“Very well. Dismissed,” Sensei barked, and Owl vanished out the window.

I felt the electric hum as Sensei activated the security seals again. If I looked closely enough, I could almost see the faint glow of active anti-eavesdropping measures in the walls. And ceiling and floor.

Sensei flipped the file open and started reading.

I didn’t volunteer to help. It was an ANBU file. If Sensei wanted or needed my input, he’d ask.

After a while, Sensei glanced up and said, “You don’t have to wear a hole in the floor, Kei. You can go home. Nothing’s going to change in the next hour.”

That was the part that was driving me crazy.

I made a muffled noise inside my throat and sat down on the office’s couch, trying not to lose patience.

Or hope.
What are you worrying over now? Isobu’s voice asked from the depths of my mindscape.

He’d gotten more comfortable in time, over the past few months. We’d knocked the glacier and the psychiatrist’s office over and put in a white-sand beach, since why the hell not. He could lounge in or around it without any fear of unexpected callers, except maybe the two Kuramas.

It mostly meant that he caught up on his beauty sleep or something. Apparently, having me for a host was not the most relaxing gig.

I could kinda see his point, now. Distantly, because I was in the middle of a quiet freak-out.

The boy is fine. Isobu said in a flat tone. And if he isn’t, then there isn’t anything you can do about it.

We could— I was about to suggest something stupid, then stopped. I sighed. Never mind.

If we could find him, then locate him without being stopped by the man in front of us or someone else, it still wouldn’t mean he has to be alive for us to find. Isobu told me.

And he was right. Ugh.

I sat with my legs crisscrossed on the couch and tried to meditate instead.

I’d never been too good at traditional meditation. Even with the worry beads I’d gotten for my last birthday. I just tended to play with them. I liked running through katas for the same reason I paced like a woman on a mission—I needed to keep my body occupied or my mind would go off on epic tangents.

If I could just relax—if I had something productive to do—I could just go do that instead. But one thing required another, and I needed a distraction I didn’t have.

Sensei threw something at my head.

I caught it without looking, then glanced up at him with a disbelieving expression once I realized what it was.

“Edit that,” Sensei said, not looking up from the file. “It’ll keep your mind occupied, if nothing else.”

Sure, it didn’t have an orange cover, but I definitely recognized the signature on the roughly-bound book. It looked like a first printing—or a hand-bound manuscript—but there was no mistaking Jiraiya’s handiwork. Or the little “18+” on the corner of the cover.

Briefly, I wondered if Kushina had told him that I’d been an adult in my other life.

If not…well, I was pretty sure Kakashi had gotten his hands on these things somehow before he was of age. It probably couldn’t be that bad.

“Where did you even get this?” I wondered aloud, as I read the first page.

“Jiraiya-sensei wanted me to help him polish it for editors, but I don’t have the time,” Sensei replied distractedly.

The book was already dog-eared thanks to what I assumed was Sensei’s first read, with the makeshift spine cracked in a dozen places. He’d also taken to writing very compact notes in the margins, telling Jiraiya what things he’d liked or disliked. If this was just a manuscript, then I
supposed he had every right. That was why Jiraiya had given it to him, right?

Though after page four it turned into Kushina’s handwriting.

Kushina had even gone as far as to cross one character’s introduction out entirely, saying that if Jiraiya could waste five lines talking about breasts then he could damn well describe the whole person for just as long.

I didn’t think I’d be able to finish the text if it was that creative…

Well, regardless of my impressions of the text, its writer, or its editors, it kept my mind occupied. As long as I was trying to figure out exactly what euphemism Jiraiya had accidentally botched on page forty, I didn’t worry about Kakashi.

Funny as it was, the existence of this book, here and now, made me think that of course Kakashi would come back. He hadn’t read it yet, after all.

I’d made a couple of minor additions myself—just in the corners, mentioning that the dialogue felt stilted in one place or another—by the time I realized that my heartbeat had slowed to normal and that I was actually calm again.

I was still worried, but it wasn’t an all-encompassing anxious state. Not the kind that annoyed Isobu and made me hell to be around. I was just…I don’t know, waiting.

I felt the flash of a familiar chakra signature—actually, two, accompanied by a third—before there was a knock on the door.

“Yes?” Sensei asked automatically, still not looking up from the file. The line between his eyebrows was becoming more annoyed the longer I watched him. Cautiously, mind, but…

“Open up, Minato. You’ve got a visitor,” said Jiraiya’s voice.

Sensei snapped his fingers and the security seals deactivated.

The door opened.

Jiraiya came in first, giving me a long look once he spotted me on the couch. Then he looked at Minato, who had finally decided to give his back a rest and sit up straight. Then Jiraiya did a double-take when he saw what I had in my hands, before shaking his head.

Behind Jiraiya, to my mild surprise, was Shikaku Nara. I hadn’t expected to see the new Jōnin Commander this morning, but I supposed that it made sense. Even if I didn’t remember Sensei specifically asking for him, it was a good idea to get him involved in any investigation with ROOT.

And the third person was a small woman with a white headress and glasses with angular frames, dressed in a modest black kimono. She had blonde hair, of a significantly more subtle shade than Sensei’s violently electric yellow, and gray-green eyes without visible pupils. I probably wouldn’t have recognized her if not for headdress—which I recognized belatedly as something like a nun’s. Or because of the barely-detectable seal in her mouth.

Nonō Yakushi, the only known ROOT retiree, had just walked into Sensei’s office.

I could immediately feel my figurative hackles come up.

“Here to take me up on that offer, Yakushi-san?” Sensei asked in a mild tone.
Nonō bowed deeply. “Yes, Hokage-sama. I would like”—she dug the fingers of her right hands under her jaw, shaking—“this removed. As soon as possible.”

“Did something change?” Sensei asked, his eyes narrowing.

She nodded.

Sensei stood up, crossing the room to meet her. “Very well then. Jiraiya-sensei?”

“The room’s ready.”

Sensei turned back to Shikaku, saying, “You’re in charge, Shikaku. At least until I get back.”

When I got up to leave—whether to follow or not, I wasn’t sure—Sensei ordered, “Keisuke, stay here.”

I blinked, freezing in place at his tone. “Hokage-sama?”

“I take back what I said about dismissing you for the day. Stay with Shikaku and come up with groundwork. Use the file on my desk.” Sensei didn’t smile. His focus was a million miles away, or perhaps with his wayward student.

I knew mine was.

I inclined my head. “…And Obito?” His and Kakashi’s halves of the Sharingan pair had some strange properties, didn’t they? There was something about sensory feedback, both ways…

Sensei paused. “If he comes here, tell him what’s going on. I’ll be back shortly.”

“By your command, Hokage-sama,” I said, bowing.

Sensei may or may not have given me a funny look before leaving. I didn't check.

I sat back down on the couch as the door closed, focusing on the book again. Hopefully, we’d get news one way or another on a lot of issues. In the meantime, I could slowly, carefully suppress the urge I’d had since I got the news, which was to go out and mangle whoever was keeping my teammate from coming home.

It’d be a pity to unleash screaming hell without knowing where to aim it. (1)

Kakashi

9:56 am, February 5th

Well, I think, as Falcon hits the ground behind me before rolling back up again, this is not what I thought I’d be doing this morning.

“Wolf, are you all right?” Falcon asks, drawing his black katana as he looks around at the bodies littering canyon.

It’s a bit of a mess.

The team at his back—Crow, Horse, and Rat—spreads out to secure the area, while I turn to face him properly and take a careful look at the damage.
Earth Release spikes have spread everywhere, barely missing the various former combatants. The walls themselves are probably only being held up by the Wood Release misfires, scorched as they are, and I eye them dubiously. There’s blood all over the place, but none of it is mine even if I do have a disturbing splatter on me from multiple close-combat opponents who underestimated either my endurance, or skill, or both.

I think the scene of the fight, such that it is, looks a little more time-compressed than it should. There were at least two fights, after all.

“I’m fine,” I tell Falcon, pulling a cracked porcelain shard from my belt. “But my mask didn’t make it.” It’s in about fifteen pieces, actually, but it kept me from getting my head cracked open. I want to keep a bit of it to commemorate the only sacrifice it could make.

“Was that”—Falcon indicates the mask—“because of him?”

The tiniest ANBU on record—at least according to the mission file I got—in the entire organization is hog-tied on the ground, out cold. I suppose I’m not being subtle.

“No, that was the mission,” I say, heading over to where the ANBU agent Kinoe is still sawing logs. I sit back on my heels next to him, check to make sure he’s still unconscious, and then pry his mouth open. While Falcon seems confused, he doesn’t stop me as I figure out whether Kinoe’s got a…yep. That’s a ROOT tattoo.

“Falcon, look at this,” says Horse, from across the cavern.

Falcon goes to see what Horse found out, while I pick Kinoe up and follow.

“…Okay, that’s a new one on me,” says Crow, scratching the base of his long black ponytail.

“Musical notes. Really?”

“Keep the commentary to a minimum, Crow.” Rat pulls the foreign hitai-ate loose from its mount and pockets it. “Wolf?”

“They claimed be representatives of Otogakure,” I tell them, shaking my head. Reflexively, I close the Sharingan and cover it with my free hand. “They were after the lab, but decided to come after us. Got it out of that one.” I wave a hand vaguely, indicating an Oto-nin corpse that was covered in bite marks.

Akino didn’t like how he smelled. Neither did I, which is why the guy’s throat is halfway across the cavern.

“…I want to ask if you’re kidding, but of course you’re not,” Falcon says, shaking his head. “Why?”

“Kinoe can use Wood Release. And my eye is a bit obvious,” I tell Falcon, who winces. Rat, Horse, and Crow go very still. “It makes sense.”

I don’t actually know for sure if Kinoe is involved in any of Otogakure’s bloodline theft ambitions. It really doesn’t matter if he does—I’ve heard the rumors surrounding Kinoe’s Wood Release, which are the reason that there are any expectations about Obito’s use of the bloodline. Obito’s is obviously a transplant, and he couldn’t keep a secret to save his life, so the Hokage had let his powers go unremarked-upon, officially.

Unofficially, the councilman is probably very concerned that the Uchiha clan has a powerful bloodline out of nowhere, and may be reaching beyond his borders to see if he can’t get a similar upgrade.
But this is all speculation.

All I know for certain is that Kinoe tried to kill me and (probably) take my Sharingan an hour ago. After that, I spent fifty-five minutes dodging, ducking, and killing Oto-nin while lugging an unconscious, possibly-traitorous teammate around.

And then Falcon’s team showed up.

“And this is why they pay him more, and why I don’t want a raise,” Crow says to Horse, as an aside. “Too many bizarre secrets.”

I sigh internally. Without witnesses, ANBU can be shockingly unprofessional.

“Crow, rig up a corpse scroll while you’re talking,” Falcon snaps, finally losing patience. He turns his attention back to me. “Any injuries?”

“No,” I reply. “Just mild chakra exhaustion.”

Honestly, fighting Kinoe took the bulk of my energy. Not because I was using particularly powerful jutsu, for once. Obito’s Sharingan did most of the damage. After that, the Oto-nin were relatively easy to cut down to size. Even if I was carrying Kinoe at the time and fighting with just one hand and a barrage of kicks.

I guess there was something to Kei’s sword-dependent style after all. Now I just have to figure out how to use the full Chidori with only one hand…

Falcon nods. “Then we’ll be heading back immediately.” Falcon tilts his head to one side, thinks about something else but declines to share, and shrugs. “Horse, carry the kid. He’s going straight to the holding cells.”

I hand Kinoe over to the only female agent of this team, who slings him over her shoulders. He’s going to have one hell of a bruise on his stomach by the time he wakes up. I almost feel guilty about that, but then I remember that he tried to kill me an hour ago and the conflicted feeling comes back.

Kinoe is tiny. He’s a wide-eyed brat, with confidence in his abilities but not the conviction to use them to their fullest extent against someone who showed him one iota of kindness. There’s a bit about him that reminds me of Obito from last month—fragile and desperate underneath the armor of “I can kill a man with my pinky” levels of skill.

I’m sure Kei would have something caustic to say right now, but I’m too tired to bother.

“And here,” says Rat, handing over a spare mask.

It’s a generic, unpainted thing—probably some kind of rodent, given that it’s Rat, but I accept and put it over my face.

Crow stuffs three Oto-nin corpses into his storage scroll before wrapping the whole thing up. He slips it into his kunai holster. “Ready.”

“One of my dogs should be halfway to the village by now,” I tell Falcon, as Rat starts planting explosive seals all over the canyon to trigger a rockslide.

“How many did you send?” Falcon asks. Falcon, of all people on this team, should know exactly how many dogs I have and which ones I’d use for a message, so I give him a look that says volumes about the stupidity of his statement. I’d only run missions with him fifteen times. In and outside of the
village.

Falcon says nothing.

“One to your post, one to the village,” I say, after a while. Chakra exhaustion hasn’t caught up with me yet, but I can feel myself getting there and reflexively close Obito’s eye.

Falcon nods. “…Well, good enough. Team?”

“Ready,” Horse and Rat report.

Crow shrugs.

And we’re off.

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Kei

2:22 pm, February 5th

The silence in the office was stifling.

I finished reading the rough draft of what would be Jiraiya’s bestselling series, then read it again with a narrower mind and more severe editing pen. Maybe he’d appreciate it, maybe he wouldn’t. It was all right, I guess, but first drafts always sucked by definition. He was already ahead of the curve. He’d improve and then I assumed he’d put the books out with some regularity.

The thing was that once I was done reading, there wasn’t anything else to do other than talk to Shikaku. And I didn’t want to.

Shikaku was trustworthy almost by definition. Two different Hokage hat-owners had declared him the Jōnin Commander in two different realities. If both the Third and Sensei agreed that Shikaku deserved the post, I sure wasn’t going to argue.

Shikaku didn’t say or do anything too unusual, actually. He poked around the file on Sensei’s desk, like he was asked to, but he didn’t really do much in the way of asking me questions.

Simple stuff, really. Name, rank, hobbies, etc.

I wasn’t stupid enough to think that Shikaku wasn’t gathering intel on me as easily as I breathed, but…well, I think anyone would have been able to see my agitation and comment on it if they wanted to. Shikaku didn’t.

I almost picked up Jiraiya’s book for a third reading, wondering if I’d missed anything important, when Sensei teleported back into the room with yet another fwish.

I stood up immediately, and so did Shikaku.

“Hokage-sama,” Shikaku said, his expression cautious. In hindsight, I was a little surprised at how stark those twisted scars on his face were, even when he wasn’t really trying to pull a face. I generally didn’t make faces in the bathroom mirror, but I probably looked a bit like that, didn’t I?

“Shikaku, Kei,” Sensei nodded at both of us. He crossed the room, heading back for his desk as soon as Shikaku vacated it. He sat down in his chair, stretching his arms carefully over his desk, and then said, “Our ROOT retiree was remarkably helpful.”
“I’m surprised you didn’t have to leave her in Interrogation, Hokage-sama,” Shikaku said, glancing at the clock on the wall. “That was almost too easy.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Sensei replied. “We had to remove her tongue.”

“…I’m gonna assume the angle was too awkward?” I guessed.

“Right. We had medics reattach it after Jiraiya-sensei and I removed the seal. She may have a slight lisp after this, but she could still write the answers to our questions. Yakushi-san should recover fully in a week.” Sensei’s eyes narrowed somewhat. “Though we have to keep her in a secure recovery ward in case ROOT tries to silence her.”

Shikaku frowned. “Any names?”

“We’ve confirmed that Danzō Shimura is still the head of ROOT,” Sensei replied, interlacing his fingers in front of his face. “He stopped by the orphanage Yakushi-san runs, escorted by two bodyguards. He was…disappointed that she’d accepted alternative funding.” Sensei glanced at me. “Thank you for that tip, by the way.”

“Of course, Hokage-sama,” I said, and I saw Shikaku raise his eyebrows at me.

“As I was saying,” Sensei went on before Shikaku could ask anything, “the councilman implied he would out Yakushi-san as former ROOT if she did not continue to bow to his demands—new recruits this time.”

My mouth twisted in disgust. “Bastard.”

Sensei nodded. “Yakushi-san decided she would give herself up first, unaware that you’d previously informed us about her. She was pleasantly surprised at the lack of judgment, I think. And my refusal to pull her funding. Even if she somehow died under the knife, her work will continue. Just without the councilman poking his nose into things.”

“You had your students investigate the councilman?” Shikaku looked like he wasn’t quite sure if he wanted to be appalled at Sensei’s lack of sense or just surprised that he’d been that underhanded.

“I don’t know if that’s the right term for what we were doing,” I said, “And anyway, I didn’t know Kakashi was tapped for that. I thought he was supposed to be looking into the Kiri-nin thing from January.”

“So did I,” Sensei muttered, frowning more severely than I’d seen in months.

…Crap. “Sensei, I did not want to hear that.” I managed to keep my voice level through sheer luck.

“Define ‘investigation’ for me,” Shikaku suggested. “Was he asked to infiltrate at any point?”

“That’s the problem. I can’t find any record that says as much, and I know I didn’t order him to go dark.”

The absence of evidence is not proof of absence. Just because Sensei couldn’t find a paper trail didn’t mean that Kakashi hadn’t gotten in over his head with Danzō. It just made it a hell of a lot harder to prove if Kakashi didn’t come back.

I was about to say something, though in hindsight I didn’t know what. Regardless, I was interrupted by familiar barking from outside the window. I jerked back to attention, wondering why I could hear anything from outside when the window was shut and the office was packed with security seals, and
was almost immediately faced with the answer to that question.

Liver-toned Ūhei, the skinniest of Kakashi’s eight dogs, was balancing carefully on the window and pawing at the glass.

Sensei was up and out of his chair and letting that dog come inside the office so quickly that he might have used his signature jutsu.

Ūhei hopped inside the office and trotted over to my side, where he sat as though nothing at all had gone wrong. “Afternoon, Kei-chan!”

*I’m not going to yell at the dog. I’m not gonna yell at the dog. I’m not—* “Ūhei, where’s Kakashi?”

Ūhei lifted a leg and started scratching behind his ears. “The boss says… Kakashi says… ‘I’m sorry I’m late. I had some gardening to do.’ He said you’d understand what he meant, Kei-chan.”

…No fucking way.

Immediately, my brain launched into an association game.

Kakashi didn’t own any houseplants that I knew of, but I could immediately connect ‘gardening’ with ROOT because Konoha was also a plant metaphor if you squinted at it hard enough. ROOT got its name because they were the ones that ran in the dark to support the leaf-sigil-wearing remainder of the population.

But it had a double meaning, because of the Great Toad Sage prediction Kakashi had received months before. I didn’t remember the *exact* wording in my panic, but I remembered thinking that Yamato was the answer to Kakashi’s unconventional prophecy. He wasn’t the only person in Konoha who could use Wood Release, since Obito was still running around, but Kakashi had *already* been friends with Obito. It wouldn’t make much of a prophecy if he could make it work by *breathing*.

“Youma-to,” I said, blinking. “Sensei, either Kakashi fought someone from ROOT, or he fought Yamato. Or *both*—I was never clear on when Yamato left the organization.”

“You mean Kinoe?” Ūhei yawned. “He was unconscious by the time we got there. Didn’t look like much of a fight.”

Oh thank god.

“Kakashi’s on his way back now,” Ūhei added, one ear flicking. “I can hear Akino already.”

Sensei looked carefully at Ūhei, who butted his head against my thigh. Then Sensei spread his fingers out flat against the top of his desk and closed his eyes.

Shikaku didn’t move. I scratched behind Ūhei’s ears, but otherwise I stayed still.

I didn’t want to see what happened when a Sage forgot what he was supposed to be doing and got distracted. There were entirely too many statues on Mount Myōboku for me to forget.

After about thirty seconds, Sensei opened his eyes again and said, “Kakashi split from his team. He’s heading this way alone. I’m going to assume that ‘Kinoe’ is on his way to ANBU’s holding cells.”

Shikaku sighed, saying, “If he did what the dog implied, then that’s the least of his worries. Failing a ROOT mission…” Shikaku shook his head. “Protective custody’s the least we can do.” Then he
looked at me. “But your student… Keisuke-san, how did you know about this ‘Kinoe’ character, or whatever his name is?”

I looked at Sensei for permission.

Sensei looked directly at Shikaku, before the man could add anything, and said, “Meet Operative Crane.”

Shikaku blinked first. “…You’re serious. The one who looked at the data and predicted the October tenth disaster. Your student.”

“Yes.” Sensei was half a step short of preening.

“I didn’t predict the invasion,” I corrected. “I expected the Nine-Tails to run around loose. I wasn’t sure how, but going by records about Mito-sama, the vulnerabilities in the seal were already known factors.”

Ūhei licked my hand. “Kakashi is almost home. What now?”

It turned out to be another two minutes before my teammate snaked in through the ventilation system, apparently because he was contractually obliged to do so. I didn’t really care how he got inside—all that mattered to me was that he was back in the village after three days missing.

Kakashi dropped from the vent in the ceiling, landing in a crouch before straightening up again with a brief bow to Sensei.

He looked pretty rough after whatever mission he’d been on. There was a hitch to his movements that spoke of fatigue, but not nearly as much as I would have otherwise expected from him. ANBU gear was beat to hell and covered in blood, but he didn’t move like any of it was his. The mask he wore wasn’t one I was used to, being a rodent rather than a vaguely-canine shape and dangling from his neck by a string. Obito’s eye was shut, so he was returning my once-over with a mild, one-eyed glare of reproach.

“Kakashi,” Sensei said, getting up from his desk and crossing the room, “let me see your tongue.”

Kakashi tilted his head to the side as he paused to consider the strange question, but that was probably fatigue talking. His gloved fingers hooked in either side of the black material and tugged down.

…It was probably weird that I’d never seen Kakashi’s face before. Neither had Obito, but we’d sort of given up on that curiosity after a certain point in Team Minato’s history. Neither of us could remember when we stopped caring, but it was a while ago.

Kakashi’s face was…well, I’d have to go with “cute.” He had a narrow jawline and straight noise, which I’d expected, and a mole to the left of his mouth that really suited the term “beauty mark.” It was kind of strange—even though I’d expected him to be attractive, it was a little surprising to have that suspicion confirmed. With his face framed by his fluffy white hair, I’d have to admit that he was… I supposed the technical term would be “aesthetically pleasing,” but that made it sound like I was talking about a chair.

And yet it was just weird to see him without the mask. I’d gotten used to not actually wondering what was under the mask and just focusing on what came out of it. Which was mostly smartassery.

While I pondered this, Kakashi opened his mouth all the way and stuck his tongue out so Sensei could check him for the usual ROOT tattoo. And I noticed the teeth. It wasn’t anywhere as near as
obvious as it was with the Inuzuka clan, but Kakashi’s canine teeth were all slightly more pointed than the human norm.

He could probably open cans with those.

“Clean.” Sensei gave a sigh of relief, both of his hands on Kakashi’s shoulders. “Thank goodness.”

“Kinoe had one,” Kakashi told Sensei, pulling the mask back up over his face. “It’ll be in the mission report.”

Sensei stepped back and nodded. “Good. But would you first get to explaining where you’ve been for the last few days?”

“A ROOT agent approached me on the first,” Kakashi said, after giving Shikaku and I careful looks. “Kinoe, actually. He said he’d been sent to ask for assistance on an off-the-books mission that was vital to village security. After seeing information about a potential lead on an abandoned laboratory, likely used by Orochimaru, I agreed. I was already checking into potential security leaks due to ROOT or other sources, but I decided to see if the assignment was offered in good faith.

“We did find the base after scouring the region for three days. It turned out to be inside Arashi Keikoku.” Who the hell put their base in a location named “storm canyon”? “The entrance had been smashed by a recent flood, but the experiment containment tubes were intact.”

I had the image of the lab in my head—gigantic upright glass tubes, as large as support columns, containing glowing fluid and little dark shapes inside. Shapes that may have been human, once, before being twisted into something else.

“Intact?” I echoed faintly.

“But empty,” Kakashi said, “I think it triggered Kinoe. He didn’t speak to me for at least fifteen minutes after we found the first ones, even while I tried to help him out of it.”

I winced. Yamato—Kinoe—had one of the more traumatic childhoods I could recall offhand. But I wasn’t sure of the exact timeline, or when he’d entered ROOT service. I just knew he’d attended the Academy, and then both graduated and got promoted to chūnin in the same year. At age six.

Every time I thought I was okay with the ninja system, it reminded me why I wasn’t.

“Is the site marked?” Sensei asked.

“Yes. I also had pre-packed preservation seals, but they aren’t going to last forever. We probably have a month or two before they degrade.” Kakashi looked off into what I’d call the “middle distance,” thinking. “Kinoe attacked as we were leaving the facility, after I expressed disinterest in joining ROOT. I subdued him and was preparing to return to Konoha, but… Kei, have you heard of Otogakure?”

Had I ever. “Otogakure—a new shinobi village located in the soon-to-be-former Land of Rice Fields,” I recited, feeling a growl trying to build in my chest. “Sometime in the next ten years, it becomes the Land of Sound. I don’t know when. But I do know who rules it.”

Sensei was frowning.

“Orochimaru,” I confirmed.

“What?” That was Shikaku.
“Kei knows things,” Sensei reminded him.

“I’m going to need an explanation for that at some point,” Shikaku said sourly.

“Of course.”

“An enemy team, numbering approximately twenty shinobi of roughly genin to chūnin skill level, attempted to prevent me from leaving,” Kakashi went on, as soon as it became apparent that neither man was going to say anything further. Neither was I, but he could ignore me more easily. “The team leader admitted to being sent to destroy the laboratory, but also expressed interest in my Sharingan and in Kinoe’s Wood Release abilities. There was some evidence of our fight, but I got the impression that the Oto-nin were more opportunistic than planned.”

“And was Kinoe after your eye?” I asked, just to confirm my suspicions. This was Yamato, and yet…

“Target of opportunity,” Kakashi said, “The offer to work with a ROOT liaison was probably in good faith at the time, but circumstances changed. I didn’t take his commander’s offer to join. But I knew too much, so the obvious answer was to kill me.” He opened his left eye. “The Sharingan would have been a consolation prize.”

I scratched Ūhei’s ears again, frowning. “So Kinoe’s in interrogation now.”

I wasn’t sure whether to be disappointed or not. Yamato would grow to be the most successful ANBU captain in the organization’s history, and a pretty decent guy. The Plot would put him through a lot of shit to get there, though. One of those things being me—he’d tried to kill my teammate, after all. Even if he’d been hilariously unsuccessful, I was waiting on Kakashi’s judgment. If he forgave Kinoe, then I could probably accept that even over my territoriality when it came to teammates. Not that I’d ever actually met the kid…

“Until the situation changes, yes,” Sensei replied to my unasked question. Which had been, “What now?” “ROOT may send a disposal agent for him, or mount a rescue effort. He could submit to having his seal removed, or any number of other possibilities.”

“I can try talking to him,” Kakashi offered, to my surprise. As I stared, he went on, “I’ve met Kinoe before, though he wasn’t representing ROOT openly at the time. He didn’t want to kill me, but he’s conditioned to obey orders above all else. If I can get through to him…”

“I’ll help where I can, then,” Sensei nodded his assent. “Maybe Tsunade-sama as well…”

I sighed. “So, all in all, we have a lot of dirt on ROOT and at least one fairly open attempted murder. What do we do now that we know for certain Shimura’s the active head of the organization, knowing that he pushes for off-the-books missions with low chances of survival or success? Because I don’t know how public any takedown could possibly be.”

Especially when the man still had access to a private army.

Danzō Shimura was a respected elder, even if he was a social recluse. That happened. He’d never had a family, instead devoting his entire life to the village and therefore was allowed to retire with most of his limbs still working. He didn’t seem dangerous. He looked like a wounded old warrior made bitter by endless conflict, but not evil.

“Answering that requires deciding between a hard takedown and a long imprisonment,” Shikaku put in, breaking his silence. Apparently he’d decided that we were serious, despite our group-wide
idiosyncrasies. “Public execution isn’t a workable solution—we’d have to air too many village secrets to drag this into the open. Life imprisonment could work if he’s a proven traitor, but the investigations won’t reveal everything he was involved in. He’d be useful for drawing out any rescue attempts by his subordinates. On the other hand, it may be too much of a security risk to have him alive in any capacity, Hokage-sama.”

“…We’ll keep it under wraps for just a little longer,” Sensei said in a cool voice, his eyes narrowed almost to slits.

*Let’s see how deep the rabbit hole goes.*

“Kei, tell the front desk to cancel all of my appointments for the rest of the day, then head to the house for the remainder of your shift. I’m going to be busy.” Sensei ordered. “Kakashi, with me. Shikaku, you have the run of the office. Shiranui-kun should be here in five minutes.”

“By your command,” Shikaku and I said together.

Sensei led the way out of the office, though I wasn’t sure where he was going. Kakashi and I lagged behind somewhat, though never by more than a few paces. Uhei poofed away to wherever the rest of the pack was, leaving me sadly devoid of canine ears to scratch.

Still, I caught Kakashi in a sidelong hug before he could get away. As his chakra jumped in surprise and I could start to feel my hair try to stand on end, I told him fiercely, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Kakashi relaxed. “I wasn’t going to miss training on Saturday.” Saturdays were the days my brother usually had free for “family” training. Which was basically me, plus whoever I could finagle into helping.

“Well, thanks for that, then.” I let go of him, leaving him rubbing his arm to get feeling back into it, and added, “Oh, and by the way, we match.”

I tapped my left cheekbone, indicating the mole just under the corner of my eye.

“Heh. Maybe,” was his reply.

Then Kakashi and Sensei went left and out of the building, while I went to see the front desk. Things were finally moving.

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**Kakashi**

3:55 pm, February 5th

“I failed,” Kinoe says in a quiet voice.

Given the body of evidence—mine—I have to agree. “You failed.”

“Then why am I still alive?” Kinoe asks, looking up.

The kid has catlike eyes—Kei would probably call them almond-shaped—and looks at me with nothing short of despair in his expression, his body language, and his voice. He’s small, smaller than Hayate is, and his long brown hair used to be a sort of a flag—really, it’s more of a shroud now. Ball ed up in the corner of the interrogation cell, unbound but still not struggling, he paints a pathetic picture.
Kinoe has been alone for a very long time.

With the Hokage and Jiraiya and Tsunade in the wings, it’s not really surprising that he thinks I’m a threat. I even personally kicked the fight out of him maybe six hours ago.

“I didn’t want to kill you,” I tell him, carefully. “And the Hokage’s going with my decision for now.” I sit down outside the cell and its powerful chakra-baffling seals, but keep my hands in sight so Kinoe can still see what I am doing.

“Why?” Kinoe asks, even as his chin drops into the bowl of his folded arms. “I was trying to kill you.”

“You weren’t trying very hard if I’m still here,” I say. “Kinoe, did you want to kill me or was it just your orders?”

Kinoe doesn’t respond for a while. He seems to shrink in on himself, further, before mumbling, “I’m sorry. I didn’t…”

“…It’s scary, isn’t it?” I ask, and Kinoe looks up. “When you’re alone, all you think about—”

“—is dying,” Kinoe echoes. He blinks. “But when there are two of you…”

“…All you think about is surviving,” I conclude quietly. “Kinoe, I don’t want to kill you. I don’t want to see you hurt. I’d prefer if you could come out of the cell and I could trust you not to attack me anyway. Or ever.”

I take a deep breath. “Don’t you ever want to come out of the shadows?”

Kinoe’s shaking.

“I’ll be waiting for you,” I try. “There’s a whole world out here that could be, Kinoe.” He just needs the ROOT seal to come off.

I don’t know how to help him past this, but I can at least try. I have enough people in my life determined to do the same for me that it feels strange and selfish not to.

The Hokage—Sensei—was the first person to make sure I was still functional after Dad. Kushina did her best to keep me alive and fed and tried mothering me, I think, but maybe I wasn’t in the best headspace to take that. Then Obito and Kei wouldn’t get lost, until it stopped feeling like a burden when they were around. I almost can’t imagine what life would be like without everyone now.

“W—would you really?” Kinoe whispers, his eyes even wider than normal.

I nod. It’s the least I can do.

The funny thing about having friends—or at least people that try very hard to make sure I don’t die in a ditch somewhere—is that you get better at it over time. What I know about ROOT, from what the Hokage and Kei have said, is that it’s a lonely existence where your bonds are all either broken or become that way by the time you’re finished training.

Kinoe doesn’t know the first thing about being a friend. Or having one.

“For now, we’ll need to make sure that you’re not too badly hurt,” the Hokage’s voice says from behind me.

Kinoe blinks at him, surprised and thoroughly intimidated. “Ah…”
“Will you allow our medic to take a look at you?” the Hokage asks.

Kinoe hesitates a very long time before he nods, carefully.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen a person’s eyes go quite as wide as when Kinoe first lays eyes on the Senju Princess, Tsunade. It might be admiration, or complete disbelief. Kinoe is, in a way, the heir to the First Hokage’s Wood Release legacy, unlike all of his blood descendants, so maybe Kinoe’s been wondering if there’s a kinship there. He might admire Tsunade for being what he isn’t—accepted, respected, widely loved, and afraid of nothing. And a proud Senju.

Or maybe the reaction’s because of her huge rack. I’ve been informed by a highly credible source (otherwise known as Jiraiya) that its powers are not to be underestimated.

I stay outside of the cell, ready to spring, in case something happens as Tsunade draws Kinoe out. She can’t work in that cell any better than Kinoe can, and it’s once he’s out that there might be trouble.

Kinoe probably knows better than to make hand seals around the Hokage, though.

Tsunade grumbles, turning Kinoe’s head this way and that. She checks his pupils, does something with her left hand that elicits another grumble from her and a green glow, and then pushes Kinoe’s chest experimentally. “Kakashi, what’d you hit him with?”

“B-ranked Lightning jutsu,” I say, calculating the power I put into it. Less than a Chidori, but more than the lightning kunai… “Though not one I’ve used before.”

“I’m feeling lightning burns down his spine,” Tsunade mutters distractedly. “Kinoe-kun, demonstrate a jutsu for me. I don’t care which. Just don’t attack me or there’ll be hell to pay.”

Kinoe nods. But even after making the Snake hand seal, nothing happens. His eyes widen.

“Thought so. Lightning damage,” Tsunade says, for the benefit of her audience. “Means no jutsu for a week, because the chakra coils need to recover. I could cut that down, but I won’t.”

“Oh,” Kinoe says, sitting back down again.

“I don’t trust you, kid. You may be carrying my grandfather’s kekkei genkai, but so far you’ve used it against my family,” Tsunade says, tilting Kinoe’s chin back up so he meets her eyes. “You didn’t turn your back on ROOT at all. You just got caught. Neither I nor the Hokage can trust that.”

Kinoe nods.

“So you’re doing back in that cell for a while. You won’t be tortured, or starved, or taunted or anything like that. But until we’ve determined what to do with you, you aren’t going anywhere.” Tsunade tells him.

“I understand,” Kinoe says quietly.

He goes back into his cell without any further fuss, still looking like he feels about as big as a speck of dust. I wince internally, but…well. Nothing for it now.

“Go ahead and head back to the house.” The Hokage looks like he has a lot to think about, and it’s the kind of topic that people without foreknowledge or the ability to bench-press small towns don’t need to know. At least, that’s my impression.
“Understood, Hokage-sama.”

Kei

3:55 pm, February 5th

Sensei’s house was kind of crowded by the time I got there. Aside from Kushina and Naruto, per usual, Obito was helping with dinner while Hayate was apparently taking a shower after his team’s afternoon training session. Rin was also in attendance, and learning to knit from Kushina as Naruto stuck a wooden mushroom in his mouth.

“I was wondering where Kakashi was,” Obito said, when I told him about what had happened in the office. “But I didn’t know he was missing. Or that someone was trying to kill him. Who the hell does that?”

I wasn’t quite sure if he was talking about the people trying to kill Kakashi or talking about how Kakashi had vanished. “Well…”

“And that he let you see his face,” Obito continued, as though I hadn’t said anything. And to be fair, I had hesitated for slightly too long. “So…”?

“He’s a cute kid,” Kushina piped up from the couch.

“That’s implied.” Well, I was officially getting nowhere in this conversation.

Rin put her knitting aside and looked up. “Kei, you saw his face?”

“Yeah. He had to open his mouth so Sensei could check if he had a ROOT seal. Though now that I think of it, they’re probably going to change where they put those seals once they realize we’re onto them…” I frowned. “Crap.”

“Kei, you’re getting off-topic,” Obito reminded me. “Kakashi has a face?”

I facepalmed. “Yes. Yes, he does. He doesn’t have any huge deformities or anything that would normally require a mask to hide. What do you want me to say here?”

“Details?” Rin suggested.

I gave up. “He has a mole right here…”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title courtesy of The Birthday Massacre. Yes, that’s a band.

(1): refers to this fic.
Chapter Summary

Kei: Get caught up in the present.
Story: Skip months.

Chapter Notes

I needed to write a happy chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After about a month spent cycling around R&D, wherein a team of actual researchers and I (and whoever else was available) tested them for safety and reliability, I was finally ready to bring out my brand-new set-and-forget genjutsu seals.

Based heavily on the designs for the genjutsu traps I’d seen some six months ago, I’d drawn and redrawn what seemed like dozens of designs that were more compatible with human chakra. While the butterflies had been devastating, their dependence on actually being the seal in question meant that I wouldn’t be able to make a mass-produced seal design based on how they did it. I’d had to confirm that with the Aburame clan, who were happy with their new chakra-eating insects but were understandably not interested in sharing secrets. Shimika had at least told me that much.

My basic design wasn’t exactly a comprehensive genjutsu mind-fuck like the butterfly ones tended to be. It was a basic visual genjutsu, which screwed with the visual cortex in the brain to make the target believe that everything they saw was about fifty centimeters further to the right.

I was pretty sure that Mikoto Uchiha would think they were children’s playthings, and they really were more suited for pranks at this stage than they were for combat.

Field-testing them was still fun.

Inoichi Yamanaka, as expected from his clan, was a shrewd and intelligent man with the kind of perceptiveness ordinarily expected from psychics, conmen, and prosecuting attorneys. That made him a good jōnin-sensei, because between his daughter and the clan kids that were running around, he had a lot of experience dealing with children. Even if they occasionally made him want to pull his ponytail out by the roots.

The last bit was probably why, when I’d posted a D-rank for genin to help with the final stage of my tags’ testing, Team Inoichi showed up to claim it.

Which was why Hayate and Yūgao were running into trees all morning at Training Ground Four.

The kids weren’t allowed to take the tags off, per orders from Inoichi. They had to figure out a way around the restrictions placed on them. It was a bit like blindfold training, but sillier. My brother and Yūgao had a bit of trouble with that concept.
Iruka, on the other hand, had figured out the trick to the genjutsu—that it was solely visual—and was making a clicking noise with his tongue and easily navigating the forest. He was quite a bit further through the “obstacle course” than the other kids were, even if the obstacles themselves were just a little further to one side than they normally would be.

“Your brother can’t detect non-human obstacles,” Inoichi said, as the two of us sat under a tree and watched the kids try and navigate toward their lunches.

We had bento lunches for everyone, assuming they didn’t knock themselves unconscious first. They could also take the seal tags off their jackets and just stop the exercise there, but that would have been too much like giving up.

And the kids were nothing if not competitive.

I took a long sip of green tea and nodded.

“I’m seeing very little of the Academy tajutsu style from him,” Inoichi commented, as another crash of a kid going through a bush sounded from the woods.

“Mom and I taught him kenjutsu at home,” I told him, balancing the thermos of tea on my upraised knee because I could. “I tried some stuff with the tajutsu my teammates use—we kind of blended our styles after a while—but Hayate’s not quite strong enough for it.”

Mom had never been a tajutsu user the way that people expected. She was kenjutsu all the way, while my fighting methodology had incorporated both. Her tajutsu had not been exceptional without the sword. It probably had a lot to do with her background, but I’d never gotten a chance to ask.

But going to Kakashi and Obito for help with Hayate had resulted in a wealth of resources for my brother, who still hadn’t decide who to emulate the most. He’d been trying some of Kakashi’s loose-limbed method of using the environment to every possible advantage, but wasn’t fast or strong enough to make full use of it.

Maybe when he hit puberty.

At about that point, Iruka stumbled out of the woods with his eyes still shut, falling over onto a sunny patch of grass next to the picnic blanket. “Ow…”

“I’m guessing that the echolocation trick didn’t work on the bushes?” I teased, as he got to his feet again.

“It worked, it just…worked less,” Iruka corrected me. He picked himself up carefully, and I realized that, yes, he’d probably fallen straight through a barberry patch. Ouch. “Can I take the tag off now?”

“Yeah, you can,” I said, and he removed the sticky paper from his arm with a sigh of relief. “So, how do you feel?”

Iruka groaned. “Hungry?”

“No nausea, dizziness, or urge to throw up?” I pressed.

“Nooo. Inoichi-sensei, can I please eat?” Iruka wheedled.

Inoichi sniggered, but he still passed Iruka a bento box to devour.

It commenced a disappearing act in his mouth.
“Well, at least there weren’t any unintended side effects,” I muttered, putting my thermos down and checking my notebook of seal designs. It was about the same size as a Bingo Book, but with blank pages so I could write as much as I wanted. “It’s good for a proof-of-concept, but if I want to be able to use these in a fight, I’m going to have to tweak the Yang chakra anchor…”

“Why did you want to work on a fūinjutsu workaround to genjutsu in the first place?” Inoichi asked. “I didn’t realize you had any problems with it.”

“I actually don’t,” I said. “What I’m really trying to do is to make a point. Kushina-sama wants me to study genjutsu to shore up my full education, but I would rather work on this. It’s still genjutsu, and I’m still learning about them…but I don’t screw up my combat style by having to make hand seals.”

“You could just learn to make hand seals faster, Keisuke-san,” Inoichi said dryly. “Most people do.”

“Most people don’t specialize in fūinjutsu and kenjutsu at the same time. I do.” I scribbled a few more notes before snapping the book closed. “The only reason I drop my sword is if I’m handing it to someone else. And Kakashi comes with his own.”

“Can Obito use kenjutsu?” Iruka asked, with a mouth still full of rice.

“…You know, I think he can, but he pretty much never does.” I tapped the end of my pencil against my lower lip. Obito had used his Sharingan alongside me in combat before, but I’d never seen him pick up a sword and go to town. “I’ll see if I can’t test that.”

*Wham* went another pair of kids—this time, my brother and Yūgao had managed to make it almost to the edge of the forest before smacking into one last tree. The tree itself gave a shudder and some leaves drifted down from the branches.

Hayate staggered out of the woods at last, closely followed by Yūgao, and both of them looked like they’d be developing bruises from the high-speed impacts with bits of the landscape. Hayate had as many scratches as Iruka, if not more, and Yūgao had picked up a collection of twigs in her hair that reminded me of some of my own training accidents. Long past, mostly.

“All right, all right, you kids can have lunch now,” Inoichi said to his other two students.

My brother immediately stripped off the genjutsu seal and, once he realized where he was and who he was lying next to, yanked Yūgao’s seal as well.

“That was awful,” Hayate complained, even as he wriggled over to the picnic blanket and snatched a bento from the pile.

“That wasn’t the most devastating genjutsu in the world,” I told Hayate seriously. “I mean, I can cast worse ones normally.” Well. I could cast one.

Yūgao grabbed another bento and opened it, grumbling unhappily.

Over the course of lunch, I managed to get more data from the kids about my…whatever-it-was-called seal. I hadn’t thought of a name yet, so I was just calling it the Experiment. It made it sound cooler than it really was.

“I think we’re going to need to work on our genjutsu dispelling, too,” Inoichi murmured thoughtfully. “Even if these were tags, I was surprised by how unprepared you were to deal with them…”

“It’s not much of a realistic scenario,” I admitted. “Maybe you can lay one on them while they’re
training on something else?"

“I could, but I wonder how much that would help.” Inoichi caught my interrogative look and added, “At this stage, I have to monitor my students’ training more than I would need to later. I’d rather get them started on elemental ninjutsu first…”

“Well, as long as you didn’t do what Sensei did, that’ll work,” I said.

“What did the Hokage do?” Yūgao asked, surprised that I could complain about such a famous teacher.

“I was his student for four years before I learned how to cast my own genjutsu,” I said flatly. “And I didn’t even learn that from him.”

Inoichi choked on his tea.

Hayate gave his sensei a careful look, then furrowed his brows and said, “You’re never gonna forget this, are you?”

“Nope,” I replied, while Inoichi was still trying not to laugh.

“So, when can we expect Kakashi-san to show up?” Iruka asked, having finally finished his lunch.

Kakashi had made a habit of showing up around Training Grounds Three and Four over the past months, though mostly because Hayate and I trained out here. He helped Hayate with kenjutsu—or at least his version thereof—while I helped him help my brother. It’d worked out like that for a while, actually, until Yūgao had gotten wind of the not-so-secret training sessions. Somehow, this led to Team Inoichi occasionally getting joint lessons between me, Inoichi, and the youngest jōnin in Konoha. They weren’t even pure kenjutsu anymore.

“I think he said he might be coming here around…an hour ago, actually.” I frowned.

“He’s late,” Yūgao said, then stuffed a last slice of salmon into her mouth.

A little flash of lightning, and—

“I always show up exactly when I want to,” Kakashi said flatly, showing up in the branches of that last tree. The one that probably had Hayate’s and Yūgao’s faces imprinted on it, specifically. He huffed. “Inoichi-san?”

Inoichi glanced at me, smiling. “Make sure to mark the mission as successful, will you?”

“Sure. Your pay’s going to be from R&D, and maybe once I have a battle-ready seal I’ll credit you four.” I shrugged, grinning back. “Lemme just have everyone pack up…"

While Inoichi’s team cleared the training field, I beckoned Kakashi down from the tree.

“Shimura?” I asked in a whisper as he landed next to me.

“Not yet. But something tripped my apartment’s traps.” Kakashi replied, similarly quiet. “He’s testing us.”

Every once in a while, people with workable stealth ratings would tell me how the secret campaign against ROOT was going. I couldn’t investigate much of anything myself—mostly because Isobu’s chakra made it impossible for me to fully suppress my chakra even if I wanted to—but I could still stay informed. Then Sensei would be able to bounce ideas off of me without having to also get me
up to speed on things.

And besides, if everyone knew I was the Three-Tails jinchūriki, then they knew where I was at all times. It was a basic precaution for the village’s sake, so I’d gotten used to always having eyes on me in one form or another. They weren’t always hostile, of course, but being observed was pretty much my lot in life. I wasn’t going to be able to ditch all of the watching eyes to go digging around in abandoned laboratories or anything like that, so I just…well, I played it normal.

I went on grocery runs, I talked to everyone I knew, I attended weekly sessions with the Kunoichi Quartet (and associated children) to learn about what they’d been doing, and I occasionally pulled in a couple of C-ranked message-running missions. I’d picked up the fūinjutsu research on a whim, but was kind of getting into it. Between that, training my brother, and the million other distractions I had, I ought to have been too busy to be a nuisance for anyone.

Rin would say that it still wasn’t enough.

And still, Sensei hadn’t officially made a move on Danzō. That I knew of, anyway. Was he waiting for the old man to have a stress-induced heart attack? Who knew?

“What are you going to show us today, Kakashi-sensei?” Yūgao asked, bouncing to her feet.


Aside from thinking that the jutsu sounded like the name to a theme park, I didn’t have any objections. It was a C-ranked jutsu with many applications, and we were next to a riverbank anyway. The kids would have fun with it. “I learned that one last year. Inoichi-san?”

“One would hope that a jōnin would know how to use his own chakra nature,” Inoichi said in a dry voice.

“Then let’s get started,” Kakashi said, and headed to the riverbank with three genin trailing him.

The riverbank was really just a resource. The various Water Bullet-styled techniques were supposed to rely on environmental water, which was then displaced to the mouth and shot out like a fire hose. I didn’t really understand the technical explanation, but I did know that Water was one of the more annoying chakra natures like that. Water Release attacks generally required a water reservoir of some sort, while Earth was everywhere anyway, and so was Wind. On the other hand, Fire and Lightning had higher personal costs—I could use Water Release all day while Kakashi would burn out after maybe two Chidori shots per day.

Sure, my control was relative garbage at higher levels, but I had a lot more to chakra play with. Even without tapping Isobu.

Come to think of it, maybe I ought to have gotten reassessed on that count…

“The hand seals are Dragon, Tiger, and Hare,” I said, demonstrating. I didn’t push any chakra into them, though.

The genin watched all three of us raptly.

“Can anyone just…use that?” Hayate asked, mimicking my movements.

“It helps to have a Water nature, but almost anyone can learn it,” Inoichi replied, “So, Keisuke-san…”
Well, if Kakashi would otherwise have to mess with his mask and Inoichi wanted to keep talking, sure. I made the required hand seals, and Water Release: Wild Water Wave!

I had to turn my head so I didn’t douse the kids with the sudden burst of water coming out of my mouth. As it was, the tree ten meters to the left got a thorough soaking.

“As soon as it’s not March anymore, I think it might be a good idea to organize a water fight or something,” Inoichi mused, as the kids got started.

Within a minute, Hayate was standing out on the surface of the water, making faces at his teammates as they tried to hit him with their jutsu. If I had to guess, I’d bet that Iruka would succeed first. At least Mom and I had made sure Hayate knew how to swim…

“Try concentrating on the Water chakra first,” Kakashi was saying to Yūgao. “Then go for shaping.”

“Okay, Kakashi-sensei,” Yūgao replied, and tried the hand signs again.

This time, Hayate had to do a cartwheel to get out of the way.

“Follow-up, Iruka,” Inoichi encouraged him.

“Dodge like the wind, Hayate!” I, of course, had to root for the home team.

Both attacks missed, because Hayate wasn’t stupid and had learned to dodge as well. He ended up running to the other side of the river, encouraging his teammates to hit him with everything they had. Most of the time, everyone missed—even when Hayate failed to fire back, due possibly to a chakra nature mismatch—but all three of the kids were a little damp by the time we finished that part of the training session.

“Can we please have a water fight?” Iruka asked. And he was employing the puppy eyes. “Please, Inoichi-sensei?”

“Let’s have teams!” Hayate called out from across the river. “Me and Sis versus, uh, Yugao-chan and Kakashi-sensei. And then Iruka can have Inoichi-sensei!”

“Is that really fair?” Yūgao asked. “Kakashi-sensei doesn’t have a Water nature…or do you?”

“I can fake it,” Kakashi said, shrugging. And yet, he was giving me a sidelong, challenging look.

“Oh, you’re on.”

“What did I just say about it being…oh, never mind. We’ll just all have colds together.” Inoichi was grinning, though. “The ground rules are simple—no ninjutsu other than Water Release. No genjutsu, but taijutsu and weapons are free.”

Hayate bounced back across the water toward me.

I added, while reading out and giving my brother a one-armed noogie, “And I’m not gonna be using the Three-Tails, so don’t even go there.”

You ruin all my fun.

Shut up.

To make a very long story short, a D-ranked mission showed up in the office the next day. It asked for one genin team to please, please drain Training Ground Three and Four and get them back up to
snuff for the next team.

And Hayate had sniffles for three days afterward.

“You can do it, Naruto! Say ‘Mama’!” Kushina enthused, lying on her stomach and cooing to her baby.

“Ba-ba-ba-baaaaa,” said Naruto.

Next to him, Sasuke looked at his mother with a toy kunai’s ring end in his mouth. He pulled it out with a *pop* and said, “Ma-ma!”

Kushina pouted.

“He’s eight months old, Kushina-san,” I reminded her, even as I balanced a box of sewing equipment between my shoulder and head. “Give him time.”

“You sound like a baby development book,” Kushina groaned, dropping her head to the tops of her hands. Her legs kept kicking, though. “Narutooooo, play along with Mama…”

“Ba!” said Naruto, and wiggled on his stomach across the rug. His tiny hands fistedit in Kushina’s loose red hair.

Sasuke shuffled over toward him on his butt, babbling happily, while his mother tucked her hands back into her lap and smiled contentedly at the sight.

Maybe having them over to help with the move had been a bad idea. They certainly weren’t helping things along…

After Sensei re-re-updated the fūjinjutsu wards around my family’s house (and showed me how to make more), and after Hayate was going on multiple D-ranked missions per day, I wondered if maybe it was time to move back into the old house. It…didn’t quite work out like that.

Sensei had gone back after Nagato and I had cleared out my family’s belongings, then put preservation seals on the house itself to compliment the Uchiha MP tape Obito had left. Hayate had been back twice, but he hadn’t broken the seal on the house. I had been back four times, including this one, trying to figure out what to do with it.

On one hand, this house was where we’d grown up. It held a lot of memories for us. I could walk into it and remember childhood moments just by smelling old scents left in the halls. If I closed my eyes, I could almost image that nothing had happened at all. It also seemed kind of a waste to just leave it sitting there abandoned, since we’d moved into Sensei and Kushina’s house and colonized their spare spaces with reckless abandon.

On the other hand, this house was also where bad memories waited if we weren’t careful. Hayate had had a breakdown in the front garden just from *seeing* it while reeling from October Tenth, and I’d been pissed off just walking inside to gather our stuff. The living room floor hadn’t been replaced perfectly, since the original wood had been bamboo or something and Obito’s repair work didn’t match. Putting a rug over it didn’t change the fact that this place was *marked*.

Basically, the practical side of me said to sell it. What good memories *I* had couldn’t overpower Hayate’s bad ones. So I had to get it ready to sell. Once I stripped off all the security seals and cleaned the house up, it was likely going to go to a civilian family, given what district we’d lived in. I just needed to get it to that point sometime before I died of old age.
Somehow, the people I’d recruited for this purpose seemed less than interested.

Aside from Kushina and Mikoto and their respective sons, I also had Inoichi’s genin team (including my brother) running errands for things like paint, and Obito had volunteered to help me get replacement slats for the roof. Kakashi had been by, up until lunch and Gai’s challenge to some kind of game involving rocking horses.

(I didn’t ask.)

So while Obito had gone to get more pitch to seal things up, and Inoichi’s team was off at the store, I moved things around to sealing scrolls and poofed them away into pocket dimensions. And Mikoto and Kushina and their kids filled the house with noise so I didn’t have to think in silence for too long.

I’d figure out what to do with all this stuff later. Maybe an estate sale? Well, if Hayate and I were alive it was probably too gauche, right?

“How’s Itachi doing?” I asked, once the sewing stuff had disappeared into a seal.

“He is now the top of his class, Keisuke-chan,” Mikoto replied, picking Sasuke up before he could try to stuff Naruto’s foot into his mouth. The littlest Uchiha squirmed on her lap, pouting, before leaning back into his mother’s arms. “He was very fond of the daifuku you sent him.”

“I hoped he would be,” I said, “Obito loves that stuff, so I was banking on it being an Uchiha thing.”

“You don’t like to glue your teeth together?” Kushina teased.

“Apples, strawberries and other fruit are better,” I agreed. “Kushina-san, Mikoto-sama…do you know anything about selling houses? Or getting an apartment…?”

“I know more than Minato does,” Kushina said.

Mikoto shook her head. “I just moved into Fugaku’s house. Sorry I can’t be of more help.”

“Okay. I’m probably going to ask you for advice, then…” I sighed, “Lemme finish packing this place up.” Then I’d be able to start really cleaning.

“Ha-wa-mah-na,” said Naruto.

“Uh-da-wa-la?” asked Sasuke.

“Ubah,” Naruto said.

“Oh my gosh, they have their own language,” Kushina squeaked.

Mikoto almost busted a gut laughing.

I sighed and, between the genin and Obito, managed to get the house set up.

By the end of the month, everything was finally in order.

We sold our house to a young family of metalworkers, who had a shop elsewhere in the district. I’d only known who Temujin was—he was the one who’d made my first katana and sold it to Mom—but I could almost recognize their silly little toddler. Tenten was a cute kid at the ripe old age of a year and spare change, but I didn’t stick around to bother them.

No, instead Hayate and I moved into a two-bedroom apartment in a totally different part of town. We
actually moved closer to the Hokage office and Academy, but were on the other side of the village relative to where we’d started. The new place was in a shinobi-dominated part of the village, where apartment managers were a little more understanding of the security seals I was obligated to slap all over the place. It was also the kind of place with neighbors I could trust.

Moving into that apartment was really just a matter of applying all those seals, then unpacking all the stuff that’d been preserved in sealing scrolls to make it more like home.

The apartment was actually a lot bigger than Konoha standard—two adjacent bedrooms with one bathroom across the hall, and then a kitchen that opened into the living/dining room. Though it was probably around…what, ten by ten meters all told? It still made most apartments in town seem like bolt holes.

I was pretty sure Kakashi’s consisted of just one actual room. I knew Obito’s had two—the main room, and the bathroom. He didn’t actually own the hallway.

“I have my own room again.” Hayate marveled at that thought alone, once we’d gotten all of his stuff squared away properly.

His room didn’t look much like it had before—it wasn’t green anymore, for starters—but he’d managed to get all of his things inside. We’d even come up with a wall mount for his various weapons—shinai, bokken, a hanger for his kunai holster, a mount for his kodachi, and then a final pair of wooden hooks for his future katana. He’d re-tacked all of his posters to the wall, and added in one that was an advertisement for Temujin’s weapons’ shop. His old dresser had also survived the transition, so we’d put it in his new room, too. On top of it, there was a framed photo of my brother’s genin team.

I ruffled his hair and went to my room.

My room at the family house had been a bit of a pit, to be honest. I left sealing scrolls and supplies everywhere, and I’d stained my bedroom pretty thoroughly with various inks whenever I was occupied with new designs. I’d had to paint over all of that so it’d seem like a kid could actually live in there. Aside from the mattress on the floor—not a futon, because I was a degree of cultural bias there—my new room was pretty bare. Everything of value (and my clothes) ended up in the closet. I had a low craft table with a cushion to one side so I could create seals without marking up the rest of the apartment, and there were books and scrolls strewn haphazardly across my workspace. I had a few photos here and there—one of Team Minato, one of Hayate and me goofing off in the summer years ago, one of Mom sitting underneath the trees during the Hanami festival…

As for the rest of the stuff, well, Mom’s katana and wakizashi set was gonna stay on the living room wall until Hayate was old enough to handle them.

We’d salvaged some of the pots and pans from the house, and I’d set the kitchen up for two kids who were still learning this whole “cooking” thing. And I’d bought rice, noodles, spices, and a bunch of other stuff I knew could hold us until either of us figured out the arcane secrets behind cuisine. And we could always visit Sensei’s house if we exploded the kitchen and had to beg for scraps.

I dug some weapon cases out of the closet—one containing senbon, while the other had kunai—and set them on my desk for later. I’d finally figured out when Genma’s birthday was (in about three days) and, given how much he tended to make things explode, I decided to create a few nonstandard senbon for him to puzzle out.

Maybe he’d have fun if I could incorporate my genjutsu seals into these things…
Which was around when someone rang the doorbell. I heard a *thud* from the other room, followed by a loud pattering of feet. I felt Hayate rush for the front door and, given what chakra signature I could feel past it, I let him. I’d catch up in a second.

“Hey, kid,” Genma’s voice said, once Hayate opened the door. “Can you give this to your sister? I… kinda forgot her birthday.”

Fun fact: Genma’s birthday was on the seventeenth of July. Mine was the tenth.

I’d spent my fifteenth birthday fixing this apartment up to livable conditions, but hey. There was eventually some cake involved. Kushina was good like that.

“Not having a party for her?” Hayate asked him, while I emerged from my bedroom and headed over to say hi.

“Eh, not so much.” Genma’s senbon made another circuit of his mouth. He spotted me and added, “Sorry I’m late. Got stuck on the capital rotation for two weeks. You know how it is.”

I didn’t, actually, since I’d never been called on to make sure the daimyo’s manor was secure. Sure, Konoha lent ninja out to the daimyo so we could maintain political ties, but I’d never been available for that. I wasn’t sure if it was because I had a dependent listed right there in my file, or if it was because Sensei was making a special exception for me. As a political tool and a big stick with which to threaten other nations, I was probably too potentially useful to be sent out to the capital. If Sensei needed me to smash heads on the home front, he wanted to have me at hand.

Not that he would, without some serious incentive to do so, but the thought was there.

“It’s fine,” I said, instead of mentioning all that. I glanced at the present that Hayate still had in hand. “What’s that?”

“It’s your present. Go ahead and open it.” Genma leaned against the doorframe, waiting.

Well, I was already fifteen, so…yeah. Sure. Why not? I carefully unwrapped the bright package and was rewarded with a small lacquered box. Sliding my fingernail along the seam, I opened it.

Inside was a small, bright red omamori. I’d seen them before, in passing—the little silk bags tended to end up everywhere after New Year’s—but I’d never actually had one myself. The one in my hand proclaimed that it would help protect the owner’s family from harm.

“Figured you could use the luck,” Genma explained, though there was a solemn cast to his teasing. “You can keep the cloth and the box, too.”

“Thanks, Genma-san.” I handed it to my brother, who turned it over in his hands. “Was this a souvenir?”

“Yeah, there’s a big temple at the capital. It seemed like everyone was getting ready for an early Tanabata at the time, but I didn’t think I’d make it back here in time to keep it relevant if I bought something from that.” Genma shrugged. “And anyway, I like the touristy part of traveling around. I’d do it more if I wasn’t stuck in one spot for half the month.”

“And if you were deployed to nice places,” I prodded.

“That too,” Genma quirked an eyebrow at Hayate, “So, kid, you gonna be in the Chūnin Exams?”

“Maybe the next one,” Hayate said. “Inoichi-sensei says we’re not ready yet.”
“Been there.” Genma glanced at me, pointedly. "Or your sister has."

“Shut up.” I said.

“So what are you doing for your birthday, Genma-san?” Hayate asked, before I could start a verbal sparring match.

“Well, Gai promised me we’d head out someplace, but I think he got Ebisu to pay.” Genma shrugged. “So we’re gonna have a team dinner at an Akimichi place with Chōza-sensei, since Ebisu’s cheap like that.” He looked toward the ceiling. “I’d say we could hang out, but only like two of us can legally drink…”

“Genma-san,” I said dryly, “you’re turning eighteen, not twenty.”

“I’m dragging Raidō along to see if he tries to drink Chōza-sensei under the table,” he replied blithely. He rolled his eyes. “Honestly, Kei-san, it’s like you don’t even know me.”

“Seriously, get the hell out before you corrupt my brother or something. Thanks for the gift, and I’ll get yours to you sometime”—here, I paused for a quick calculation—“this week. You’re still going to take my shift on Saturday?”

“Yeah, sure.” Genma left with a dismissive wave and another round of clicking his senbon between his teeth.

“Your friends are weird, Sis,” Hayate told me as I closed the door behind Genma.

“Don’t I know it,” was my response. But I did need to figure out if I’d done the responsible sibling thing and introduced Hayate to Gai in full Youth Mode. It was something like inoculating him, but with less responsibility and no needles.

Hm… Maybe I’d have to wear the omamori like a bracelet to get the full benefits… I mean, if it kept me from getting mauled in my next sparring match with Gai, it would have paid for itself twice over.

Tanabata, in Konoha anyway, still ran on the local lunar calendar and not the one that said January was New Year’s. It was about the only thing that did. I’m not exactly sure where we even got it, since there were random smatterings of other cultures in Konoha and I was eventually forced to just write them off as quirks.

This did not mean that I disliked festivals. Actually, I really liked them.

Hayate and I dressed up in yukata (navy stripes for him and purple-backed shuriken for me, plus shuriken-shaped hairclip), but only on the last day of Tanabata. I wasn’t actually around for the first two days, so he got to do whatever while hanging out at Iruka’s house for a multi-day sleepover.

What I did hate were last-minute missions. Even if they were as simple as “Go here, blow the entire secret laboratory to kingdom come as soon as the salvage team’s done.” It still took me out of Konoha for a while, and Orochimaru’s secret labs had a way of turning my stomach even years after everything and everyone in the place had long since either left or died trying.

Between the genjutsu seal senbon I’d given to Genma, the base-clearing explosions I was capable of, and various other stupid little things, I was getting something like a reputation among Konoha’s shinobi forces. “Danger” was a double-edged assessment in some ways. I was dangerous, sure, but so was every person I hung out with.
But anyway, I tried to enjoy myself even after that kind of mission. I’d missed the first night’s fireworks show, to my brother’s great disappointment, but the festival itself was still there.

So that was how I got where I was on the eighth of August.

Konoha may not have been the richest village, but we could damn well throw a party. There were tons of paper decorations, in every imaginable color, with the smell of fried food and sticky sweets permeating the air. Orange paper lanterns were strung on cable over our heads, instead of string, in case someone needed to make a quick exit from being trapped on a date or something.

I was in one of the larger non-clan groups, actually. While Iruka, Yūgao, and Hayate forged ahead of our group and occasionally disappeared into the crowd, I maintained a steady walking pace for Gai, Genma, and Raidō to follow. Sure, Ebisu had vanished earlier in the direction of Asuma, Kurenai, and Shizune, but the rest of us kept together. Obito and Rin had been with us, but they’d said they’d come back once Obito managed to win Rin a stuffed panda without being caught cheating.

“Genma, we must try this prize booth next!” Gai enthused from behind me, and I turned around to see him pointing at a goldfish-catching booth with the words “NO JUTSU” in large characters to one side. Not that Gai ever…

Shopkeepers got worked up over the silliest things.

Like shinobi being excellent cheaters when it came to these games. Which were rigged anyway.

Even when we didn’t cheat, shinobi had faster reflexes and surer movements than any civilian. Some booths had put up signs banning anyone over the age of twelve, as though that would save their profits once the clan kids got going.

Speaking of, Raidō was stuck carrying all the things Gai had won over the course of the night. At last count, this included one live turtle, a Gamabunta toy, three Uchiha-style paper fans, and a poster for something I didn’t recognize. Probably a movie.

“Seriously, Gai? We’ve already got a turtle,” Genma complained.

Theoretically, the turtle game was harder to win. Practically speaking, we had Gai.

Raidō muttered something from behind the pile of prizes.

“I can take the turtle, Raidō-san!” Yūgao said, holding up her hand.

Raidō immediately handed its travel container over. “Here.”

Yūgao made a squealing noise of pure joy and ran off with it. “Iruka-kun, Hayate-kun, I have a turtle now!”

I tilted my head to one side. Was it really right of Raidō to give it away? “Uh…”

“Ningame is the best shelled friend a shinobi can have!” Gai assured me. “Kame-chan will find a good home with Yūgao-chan!”

Oh, so he did have his summon contract. I’d wondered.

“Is it too late to join?” drawled Kakashi’s voice, and Gai immediately whirled on the spot to greet him. Kakashi’s yukata was blue with black paw-prints, because he was predictable like that.

I froze for a second once I recognized the kid standing next to him in a bamboo-patterned green
yukata. Smaller than Hayate, but with spiky brown hair and dark, catlike eyes. Without the gladiator-styled hitai-ate, I probably wouldn’t have recognized him if not for his chakra.

It felt like the stuff that made up Obito’s right arm.

Yamato?

“No, my rival!” Gai put both of his hands on Kakashi’s shoulders. “You have arrived at the perfect time to participate in a challenge of great importance!”

“Which is…?” Kakashi prompted.

“This game!” Gai said, sweeping his arm toward the goldfish-catching booth. The proprietor was looking a little nervous.

“Hm.” Kakashi looked at me with his one visible eye and said, “Kei, this is Tenzō. Keep track of him.” Then Kakashi rolled up his sleeves and stepped toward the booth in perfect sync with Gai.

The owner of the goldfish booth winced preemptively.

Genma looped one arm around Raidō’s shoulders and leaned on him, in possibly the best position to watch the show. Raidō sighed.

I gestured for Tenzō to stand closer. He hesitated, but did as I asked.

“You’re the Three-Tails jinchūriki,” Tenzō said quietly from my side, staring up at me with wide eyes.

“And you apparently need some help with social skills,” was my muttered response. In a more conversational tone, I added, “Seriously, though, don’t kill the mood around here. Everyone already knows, but it freaks people out sometimes.”

“But…” Tenzō shook himself. “I barely know what I’m supposed to do here.”

“You could do what they’re doing,” I suggested, waving a hand in Gai and Kakashi’s direction. Between the two of them, they’d clear out the stall in minutes without using any jutsu at all. Even if the paper nets were flimsy, the two of them took competitive cheating to a whole new level.

I was pretty sure I could hear the proprietor crying. Maybe next year he’d make it a “no chakra” rule instead.

“Or what they’re doing over there.” I meant my brother and his friends, who were off in the crowd and probably pooling their mission money to buy something fried. I could just barely see Iruka’s wave-patterned yukata through the throng.

“…I don’t like fried things,” Tenzō said. “Nothing greasy.”

“Then you and Kakashi have something in common,” I said. I held out my hand. “So, Tenzō-kun, what do you like to eat?”

“Simpler stuff. Walnuts?” It sounded like a guess, but he let me pat his shoulder anyway. Maybe he’d gain confidence as the evening went on.

And maybe I’d figure out what the fuck he was doing here, as opposed to wherever Kakashi and Sensei had been keeping him.
(Could Tenzō grow walnut trees?)

“You can call me Kei-san, by the way. Everyone calls me that.” Except people who were overly formal, like Gai.

“Ah-HAH!” Gai crowed in triumph. “I have defeated you, my rival. I now have seven wins to your eight!”

Kakashi was eyeing the paper net he’d been using, which was nearly snapped in two. “So you did. Congratulations, Gai.”

I peered at the booth.

Between the two of them, they’d managed to capture and bag every goldfish in the tank. Sure, Gai’s pile of water-filled plastic bags was higher than Kakashi’s was, but man did these two go overboard on these stupid challenges.

“So, are you two gonna take those home or give ‘em back?” Raidō asked.

“I don’t have the space,” Kakashi said, “Gai?”

“No, I believe we have done what we came here to do!” Gai gave us all a thousand-watt smile.

“Thank you for spectating this event, but we must return the fish to their rightful owner, so they may be won by deserving children across the village!”

The stall’s owner sobbed in relief.

Raidō muttered something that might’ve been a prayer thanking the local spirits for mercy. He’d been the group pack mule since the start and that wasn’t going to change.

Genma patted his back sympathetically.

“So, where have you been?” I asked Kakashi, as we all settled back into our “roving band of bored adolescents” mode. It mostly meant wandering around until Gai got excited or someone got hungry.

“Busy,” was his reply, and Tenzō walked closer to his side than mine even as we finally reached my brother’s mini-gang of genin.

“Sis, take one!” Hayate offered me three choices—sugared strawberry, Mikan orange, or apple. The last choice, or what I supposed had been the last one, was a taiyaki fish that Yūgao and Iruka had already split between them.

“What, are the other two for you?” I asked, snatching the strawberry.

“Yeah, but… Huh?” Hayate blinked. “Kakashi-san, who’s this?”

“What, you think I wouldn’t just show up late on my own?”

Hayate gave him a flat look.

Kakashi gave in. “This is Tenzō. He’s about your age, so for all I know you’ll get along.”

“Who are you?” Tenzō asked Hayate, who was giving him a curious look that edged into suspicion by millimeters.

“Hayate Gekkō! I’m Kei’s brother,” Hayate said. His eyes narrowed somewhat. “Your chakra feels
weird. Like…like Obito? Just a bit.”

“Tenzō-kun has Wood Release, Hayate,” I told him. It probably wasn’t classified—it was really more like Tenzō himself was kind of a state secret. Only if he was out and about, something had changed.

“Oh! Okay, then.” Hayate looked down at his remaining two festival snacks contemplatively, then held them up in front of Tenzō’s face. “Want one?”

Tenzō grabbed the candied apple apparently on pure reflex. Idly, I focused my chakra sense on him and, to my mild surprise, I couldn’t sense a ROOT seal on him.

Weird, I thought. And then I ate the strawberry with a loud crunch.

“Were you in any of our classes?” Yūgao asked, even as she wiped chocolate off her cheeks. So much for the taiyaki. “You were in the Academy, right?”

Kakashi tapped my shoulder, while the kids whisked Tenzō away. I turned to frown at him.

“Don’t look at me like that. This was Sensei’s idea,” Kakashi said in a low voice.

“I’m not angry, Kakashi,” I replied, equally quiet. “I’m just…confused. He tried to kill you, didn’t he?”

“We’re rehabilitating him,” Kakashi said.

“That…okay. Does that mean we should expect to see random assholes offering him candy?”

Kakashi looked blank.

Well, apparently that metaphor didn’t work across cultures. Even if I knew that kid-snatching was definitely still a thing, maybe it didn’t take the exact same form as the stereotypical white van route…

“Are they re-recruiting this kid or not?”

“Sensei doesn’t think so,” Kakashi said, as Gai dragged Genma on ahead with the kids. Raidō followed with a grumble. “He’s been out of their hands for too long, either in therapy or with me. The conditioning breaks down over time.”

Why did I get the feeling that that last bit was something that they’d tried and tested? How many other ROOT kids were being carefully deprogrammed even now? I’d given Sensei a start, but I didn’t know what he’d done with that lead. Maybe Shimura had mysteriously broken a hip while at home alone? Fuck if I knew. He could have dismantled ROOT entirely and I would only be informed after the fact if he didn’t need to bounce an idea or two off me.

I felt like I’d set the figurative barn on fire by setting Sensei on Danzō. I not only couldn’t close the barn doors after all the horses had fled, but I also didn’t want to. Sticking around would only mean getting burned.

I sighed. “Okay. Not totally on board with this plan, but I’ll work with that. He deserves better, anyway.”

Kakashi nodded seriously. “I thought you’d say that.”

Well, there was something to be said for being predictable in a non-insulting way. “By the way, did you see Rin or Obito anywhere?”
“Back by the okonomiyaki, I think. Obito was playing a game.”

“Still?” It could not possibly take that long for Obito to either cheat successfully or get banned from a stall.

Kakashi shrugged. “I have to keep an eye on Tenzō. You can go find them if you want.”

I debated it for about ten seconds.

“I’ll make sure the others don’t stray,” Kakashi offered, reluctantly.

“Thanks, Kakashi!” And I was off, using my chakra sense to pinpoint my other friends.

But as soon as I approached, Obito’s chakra headed off into the crowd someplace, leaving Rin alone and hunched over on a bench in her butterfly-patterned summer yukata. I slowed down, practically feeling the grade-A awkward in the air. If I’d had a knife sharp enough, I probably could have carved it out of the air and sold it as cheap building material.

“Rin?” I called, heading closer.

Rin looked up, sighed, and patted the bench next to her.

I sat down. “You all right?”

“No really,” Rin mumbled, and leaned on my shoulder. “Sorry, everything’s just…complicated.”

I patted Rin’s hand. “Talk it out with me? It might help.”

Rin sighed again, deeper this time. “It’s hard to…”

“…Then, uh, can I kinda poke at things?” How did well-adjusted human beings do this kind of thing? Because I was also thinking of getting a carton of ice cream or something and having an old-fashioned bitching session, but wasn’t sure what about. “You can tell me to shut up.”

Rin made a noncommittal noise. “Remember how, um, you told me about Obito. After Kannabi?”

…So that hadn’t been the best way to handle it. I fucking admit it already. “Yeah. I’m sorry, that was a lot of stuff—”

“Obito and I talked,” Rin interrupted, “and he told me his feelings, and we talked more, but…”

“No spark?” I’d been there before. But not in this life.

“No! It’s…it’s just…” Rin sighed. “Complicated.”

“…Okay?” Yeah, I was out of my depth.

“You don’t understand, Kei.” Rin paused, trying to decide what to say next. “I…I do like Obito a lot. I’m okay with knowing that, with that part of me. I might not like him as much as he does me, but…”

I let her squeeze my hand as she took a deep breath. She said, “But I also like Kakashi. And that…that hurts him, and it hurts me sometimes, too. I’ve been in love—or something like it—with Kakashi for a long time, and it doesn’t feel like it’s going anywhere.” Another sigh. “He even told me that.”

“Wait, Kakashi told you he didn’t care about your feelings?” I felt a surge of defensive anger. I knew
he didn’t like Rin that way, but there were ways to put things gently! “Fucking hell, I knew I was gonna have to…” To what? Yell at him over something he couldn’t change anyway?

“Kei! Don’t.”

I grumbled.

“I wasn’t finished.” Rin blew out an angry breath. “Do I have to spell it out for you? Kakashi can’t love me, because he just doesn’t. That’s okay. I’ve… I’ve thought for a long time that he’s been in love with someone else. But my feelings don’t change and that drives me crazy.”

Oh. Damn, this was a mess. “…Did he let you down gently?”

“He tried.” Rin’s voice turned wry. “But I don’t think there’s any way to really do that. He respects me as a medic-nin and a woman, but he doesn’t look at me that way.”

“I’m sorry, Rin.”

Rin waved a hand dismissively, as if warding off the apology. “Don’t worry about it. You didn’t know.”

“No, I was being an insensitive bitch.” I sighed, pulling on the hairclips I’d put in just because they fit my yukata. Now they were something to do with my idle hands. “I’m sorry. You’re still working things out up here,” I tapped the side of her head, gently. “And I shouldn’t have pushed.”

“Yeah.” Rin sighed. Sighs were apparently quite contagious. “I’m…it hurts, to be told you’re not that special. He probably didn’t mean it that way, but… Well. I’m just going to have to take my broken heart somewhere else, right?”

“I’m hoping Obito isn’t the rebound guy in this scenario.”

“He’s not.” Rin pinched my wrist, and once she got an “ow!” out of me, she went on, “I’m taking things way slower this time. I need to know I can love him the way he does me before I say anything.” She looked down at the tops of her sandals. “There’s a chance. But I didn’t want to say anything tonight, and I don’t know how he took it…”

“…I’m sorry you got hurt, Rin,” I said, after a long pause. “I’m sorry everything’s such a mess.”

“It’s not anyone’s fault but mine,” Rin said. “I’ll fall out of love sooner or later. Then maybe I’ll be able to give Obito a fair shot.”

“Are you going to be okay?” I asked.

“I know I will be,” Rin said, determined. “Don’t worry about me, Kei.”

Fat chance of that. I worried regardless of whether I wanted to. Everyone else didn’t really come into it.

I said, “Well, are you feeling okay enough to go join our group? I…I probably need to find Obito.”

Rin gave me a clueless look. “Look for him? Obito went to get—”

And then Obito’s chakra was back again, bounding back from the food stalls and over to us. Once he was actually in view, I could see that he had won one of those stuffed pandas, and was carrying two taiyaki in paper packets along with a selection of foods on sticks.
“Kei?” Obito dropped the panda on the bench next to Rin, then juggled the various food items for a moment before catching them again. I spotted two skewers of yakitori to start with. There were six more of various things. “When did you get here?”

“Just a minute ago,” I said, deciding to pretend nothing had been said or happened over the last few minutes. “Gai won a turtle.”

“That jerk! I told him I was gonna be there in a minute!” Obito pouted. “Rin-chan, here.”

Rin took the offered taiyaki and bit into it immediately, probably so she wouldn’t have to talk. Well, if that was the tactic she wanted to use, I could help.

“He gave the turtle to Yūgao-chan, though.” What else could I distract him with? “Also, is that a chocolate banana? Gimme!”

Obito dutifully surrendered his remaining sweets to Rin and me. “Rin-chan, Kei, do you mind if I, um, go catch up to everyone else?” He paused awkwardly, as though carefully assessing our body language for any kind of indication that we wanted to get up and move. He didn’t find it.

“Go ahead, Obito,” I said, since Rin was still eating the taiyaki.

“I can be back in a minute?” Obito hesitated.

Rin swallowed and said, “I’m just going to rest here for a little while. We’ll catch up.”

He still looked torn.

“Seriously, I’m not gonna let her get lost,” I said. I straightened my legs and flexed my toes. “I just need a breather.”

“Get going, Obito,” Rin said, chuckling. “You’re not missing anything here.”

Obito nodded, then dashed off through the stalls. I wasn’t quite sure how he was going to locate the rest of the group, but maybe he could sense his connection to Kakashi’s Sharingan? Hell if I knew. Maybe he’d get lost and the rest would find him.

“Have you ever tried to talk about this stuff before?” I asked Rin, once Obito was well out of earshot.

Rin made a muffled negative noise, having started on the second taiyaki.

“I admit to being…not really the best person to talk to about this…” Mainly due to having zero romantic experience. “But I’m willing to listen if you want or need me to. I’ll try not to push as much.”

Rin wiped her mouth with her sleeve and mumbled, “Thanks, Kei.”

I hugged her. “No problem, Rin.”

“Kei.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever been in love?” Rin asked.

Counting both lifetimes? “Nope.”
Rin blinked. “Really?”

“Really. Crushes, yes, but love? I love people, sure, but I’ve never been ‘in love’ before.” Or at the very least, I was very good at squashing those urges before they did anything. "Like, right now, I could say that I love Hayate, Obito, and Kakashi, and you, and like half a dozen other people. That means I’ll kill or be killed trying to make sure you can all be safe and happy, but…” I shrugged. "It’s not what you’re talking about."

“It’s not,” Rin agreed with another sigh.

“Crushing on someone doesn’t make you stupid, Rin.” I said. “And neither does falling in love, but I guess…take it slow? I’ve never been burned because I never let things get anywhere anyway, but…”

“But…” Rin sighed. “But what if I keep just…I’m being pulled in too many directions.”

I waited for her to say something else.

“I…I love Kakashi, I think,” Rin mumbled, resting her head in her hands. “But sometimes it feels like I love Obito, more like he does me, and…”

What exactly was I supposed to say here?

“And sometimes I love you, but it can’t all be true, right?” Rin mumbled something else, then dropped her head against my shoulder in what would have been a head-to-desk moment of sheer frustration if I’d been a desk.

“I don’t know, Rin.” I rested my cheek against the top of her head. “But I’m sorry I can’t really help you there. My brain doesn’t think that way, not really.” Oh, I jealously guarded what social bonds I had and could be terrifyingly protective, but that wasn’t the same as what Rin was talking about. Not even close.

And even if it was, I couldn’t give her anything like what she was asking. That kind of hollowness wasn’t my thing—I had to really believe in what I was doing, or it’d fall apart on the spot.

“I’ll be fine, Kei,” Rin said, shaking me off. She hopped off the bench and to her feet. “I think we can go back to the festival now. I need to do something fun.”

“Like?” I asked, even as I got up to follow her.

“I don’t know. Just…something silly and fun so we can get back to business tomorrow and not worry too much?” Rin smiled, though it was wobbly.

“Tanabata wishes, maybe?” I suggested, heading in the general direction of where our group had run off. From the feel of things, everyone was having fun.

“Maybe. Maybe I’ll get a mask and scare Obito. Or get a strawberry daifuku.” She brightened at that last prospect.

“Rin?”

“Hm?” She turned to look at me.

“I’m sorry, again.” If Rin had a flaw, it was her heart. She loved too much, and it sounded like a horrible thing to think about anyone, much less her. “That I can’t…I can’t love anyone like that. Not yet.”
Not on demand. Not when confessed to. My heart was a slow thing, and clueless as all get out. It didn’t change in the face of new information. It, and I, were strangely stubborn like that. Inflexible.

Rin took my hand. “It’s okay, Kei. Let’s get back to the others.”

We did.

And by the time we got there, my teammates and Gai were embroiled in another challenge—competitive ring tossing, this time.

It lasted until Rin snuck up behind Obito, wearing a cartoonish cat mask, and shrieked loud enough to startle him and accidentally send him into the booth itself in a brief panic. She made it up to him (and the rest of us) later by getting strawberry daifuku for everyone, grinning all the while.

“How do you feel, Tenzō-kun?” I asked some time later, when our group had finally retired to a nearby park for the night. Not to sleep, unless we wore ourselves out entirely, but there was a huge picnic blanket and my brother was using my leg as a pillow anyway.

Raidō was drinking something, though he was disinclined to share in a catlike sort of way. Genma sat next to him and was examining some of the prizes from the evening’s games, including the turtle that Yūgao had claimed. Obito and Gai were playing hanafuda to my left with Rin and Kakashi spectating, while Yūgao was puzzling out one of those weird get-the-ball-into-the-wooden-cup things. Iruka hummed, admiring a silk fan he’d won someplace in the orange lantern light. All of us had made Tanabata wishes, though Tenzo and Kakashi had needed a bit of persuading.

I had a good wish, but I sure wasn’t gonna tell anyone.

Tenzō sat placidly next to me, slowly eating a chocolate-covered banana. We were all going to have to work our asses off in training to burn these junk calories, but hey, festivals were for fun’s sake. I could live with that. “I’m…I’m happy. This was fun, Kei-san.”

I patted his shoulder. It was.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated in loving memory of Zeus, who had to be put down earlier this week. Gonna miss you, buddy.

Song-derived chapter title is courtesy of the Goo Goo Dolls.
“The Chūnin Exams?” I blinked, setting my bowl of ramen down on the countertop again. I stared at my brother, who sat next to me and was pointedly, almost shamefully averting his eyes from mine and concentrating on his shrimp ramen.

I looked at his teammates, who occupied the third and fourth seats at Ichiraku’s front counter, and who were looking between Hayate and me with expectant expressions.

“We can only enter with a full team,” Iruka said, leaning over to try to get a look at Hayate’s expression.

I said, puzzled, “I know. I’m just not sure why you’re asking me about it.”

True, the Exams weren’t going to happen for almost two months, and were in Suna this time around. And they were also a bit mystifying for the uninitiated. But while all of these facts were, in fact, facts and not just speculation, I didn’t really see why they were taking it this soon.

“Inoichi-sensei thinks you’re ready?” I looked at all three of the genin, propping my head up on my curled fingers.

“He gave us the option of taking it, anyway,” Yūgao mumbled.

I sighed. Time to explain my thinking. “Okay, I don’t deny being worried about this kinda thing, since you’re going to be spending a month in a foreign village and that freaks me out. Yūgao, Iruka, you’ve both had this conversation with your parents?”

Two nods.

Okay, then. So the problem was my brother.

“Hayate, you’re probably more ready to take on the Exams than I was the first time.” I paused. Then I told him, “But I’d still been a genin for two full years before I passed. Do you think you’re ready?”

Hayate finally met my eyes, looking more determined (or perhaps stubborn) than he’d seemed since the day he’d come back from his team’s first C-ranked mission. “I do.”

“Then, while I’ll probably want to wring Inoichi-san’s neck if you get hurt, I’m not going to ban you from going.” I stirred my ramen idly. “But I’m gonna make sure all three of you get some more training, as quick as we can pull it off.”

“You are?” Iruka looked surprised.
“If you think the goal is just to go there and pass, you’re wrong.” Maybe my blunt tone and slightly evil grin were a bit too much? Regardless, all three kids flinched. “The Chūnin Exams are where the best and the brightest of each village show off their skills to clients and show just what we can do. By the time Sensei heads there—and he’d better, because Kage get-togethers only happen if the villages have got competitors in the finals—all three of you should be impressive.”

“…We’re dead,” Iruka said faintly. “So, so dead.”

“Can you maybe not kill us?” Yūgao asked. “Pretty please?”

“Who said anything about killing you? No, you’re just going to be training.” At their looks of relief, I added with a level of cheerful sadism, “Gai-kun needs a few sparring partners before his next mission. Maybe he’ll help you train. I’ll be joining, of course…”

Three groans.

“Now, technically I can’t force you to attend,” I said. “But I’d really recommend it, even if you feel like you have to beg permission from Inoichi-san.”

I was going to be hanging with Gai as a congratulations for being field-promoted to full jōnin, but the kids didn’t have to be there. But it didn’t change the fact that Gai was one of the best people in the village to power-level with. He was always up for it, for one, and that made him pretty damn awesome.

Being one of the few people in the village with a healing factor strong enough to keep up with him, I could say that without any degree of irony.

“What are we going to be facing in the Suna Chūnin Exams that’s so scary?” Hayate asked. “It’s…it’s just like ours, right?”

“Not so much.” At their surprised looks, I said, “I’ve never been to a foreign exam. I can tell you a bit about what you could run into, just because you’ll facing Suna genin, but the main scare factor is that it’s basically going to be your team plus whoever else the village can put together. In a foreign country. Backup’s a week away at best, and I’m not gonna be there until the Third Exam. Foreign Kage aren’t allowed in other villages before then.” I paused, thinking. “I’ll ask Sensei for more info, but you should also ask Inoichi-san.”

Yūgao frowned. “Doesn’t Suna have…puppets?”

“Right. The Puppet Brigade is one of Sunagakure’s oldest organizations, and a lot of their shinobi have at least the basics of puppet-based combat in mind when fighting.” Hm. What else? “You’re also going to see a lot of Wind chakra natures, to say the least. Maybe you should ask Inoichi-san to give you the paper test so you know what you’re getting into on that front.”

Hayate looked at Iruka.

“What?”

“Did you get the paper test thing?” Hayate asked.

“Yeah. I got a Fire-Water split thing, I think. Mom and Dad made sure I knew before I graduated,” Iruka explained. Well, I supposed there were some benefits to having two jōnin for parents. They were quite sensible people.

“Yūgao-chan?” I prompted.
“I…don’t know.” She frowned. “I should talk to Inoichi-sensei, too, then?”

I nodded. “It’d help.”

“I don’t think I’m Water.” Hayate stuck out his lower lip and pouted. “That would’ve been cool.”

“We don’t actually know what Mom’s chakra nature was, either,” I remarked. “For all I know, she might not have known either. It’s not like samurai train for ninjutsu.”

“Then I’ll get it tested and come back and tell you.” Hayate paused, contemplating life, the universe, or possibly just his bowl of ramen. “Sis, what about Tenzō-san?”

“What about him?”

“Is he going to be in the Exams, too?” Iruka asked, leaning over so he could see me. “Tenzō-san was strong that one time he showed up for training, and he has Wood Release.”

“Tenzō-kun is already a chūnin,” I informed Team Inoichi. “I think he made chūnin…uh, seven years ago? Before I did, anyway.”

“No way,” breathed Hayate. “But he’s our age!”

I shrugged helplessly. “Sorry, I just heard from Kakashi. If it hadn’t been him, I wouldn’t have believed it either.”

“Well, then I’m gonna make chūnin this time.” Hayate said.

“So will I.” Yūgao said. “Then maybe we’ll all become jōnin together!”

Iruka looked a little dubious, but shrugged and smiled along with his team anyway. Then he got around to finishing his ramen.

I supposed I could follow his example. In short order, Ichiraku’s was silent except for the sounds of slurping soup.

Honestly, it would be interesting to find out what, exactly, I could do to help these kids grow stronger. I just hoped that I would be able to see him grow.

About a week and another C-ranked mission for Team Inoichi later, Hayate got back to me on the whole chakra nature question. Not that I’d been waiting for him to tell me or anything.

Over the previous week, I’d also found out that Sensei had been the one pushing for a foreign exam—something about how showing Suna up on their home turf would confirm our military superiority. Or at least that was how he’d framed his argument to the Elders (still sans Danzō) when they questioned him about it. It would also put him in range of another Kage for the first time since his inauguration, and I thought he kinda wanted to see how he stacked up.

Personally, I wanted to see what the Fourth Kazekage had done to fuck up his kids this early in the timeline. I didn’t know if Sensei’s tentative alliance thing with Suna would amount to anything as far as Gaara was concerned, but…maybe taking the economic pressures off would help, somewhat? I didn’t know. I didn’t even know enough about Sunagakure and its harebrained tendencies to make a guess.
Anyway, back to the day my brother came home. It was late afternoon and I had just gotten back from the training fields, feeling a little like I’d been hit with a meat tenderizer a couple hundred times. Gai’s celebratory spar had lasted almost fifteen minutes, but only as a warmup for the three-hour training session. Gai was fun and funny like that.

“Lightning!” Hayate reported, bouncing into the apartment and getting road dust on everything. “Yūgao-chan got Wind, but Inoichi-sensei says we can learn other types if we train really hard.” He made a face. “But that’s not gonna help me in the next Exam. Didn’t you have to train for months to do all that stuff?”

“Yes.” I shoved a plate of onigiri toward him without looking, since I was still trying to figure out how to make okonomiyaki on a skillet. My journey toward mastering cookery was slow going, but there was some progress. “Dinner, Hayate.”

When Hayate fell on the plate with all the hunger of a growing teenage boy. Rice flew.

But while he ate, I thought.

I thought of a clear evening in the Konoha summer, when an Oto genin was crushed into paste for the crime of pissing Gaara off. When Suna and Oto forces met to conspire toward Konoha’s destruction. I thought of my brother being ripped apart by a Wind jutsu at the hands of someone barely older than I was. About Yūgao, fully grown, finding his corpse on a rooftop and never being able to find her fiancé’s killer.

I very carefully thought about something else until my hands stopped shaking.

“Adamantine Chakra CHAINS!”

“…So I guess she’s reentering active service?” I asked Sensei, as Kushina tore Training Ground Thirty-Eight apart.

Sensei, who was lying on his stomach with Naruto sitting in the bowl of his arms (and pulling on his hair), grinned and said, “Maybe!”

We were well out of danger, hanging out near a slightly-misplaced Hashirama tree and otherwise not really participating. Sure, Sensei would later—but only once Kushina wore out her current opponent. Or trapped him in her chakra chains, which was a distinct possibility. If she could hold Kurama of all people…

“Grand Fireball Jutsu!” was Obito’s retort, audible from across the field and accompanied by a gigantic fireball of death.

For almost anyone else. But Kushina? Hah. She didn’t even need Kurama’s chakra to shred it.

“You’re not worried that Kushina is going to hurt Obito, are you?” Sensei asked, while Naruto progressed from merely pulling on his father’s hair to trying to eat it.

I reassessed my body language. While I was leaning forward a bit, I was still sitting crisscrossed on the ground and had a sealing scroll out in front of me, complete with all of my sealing supplies. Theoretically, I could have been a little anxious, but, “Obito’s slippery, and Kushina-san doesn’t really want to hurt him. I think they’ll have fun.”
There was another explosion, deep in the midst of the training fields. Given the lack of immediate follow-up, I had to assume that someone had been momentarily scared off.

“I think that one’s Kushina’s.” Sensei tapped the corner of my testing paper. “Her point.”

I dutifully gave Kushina’s side of the paper another tally. The score was, at that moment, four to Obito and seven to Kushina, but I held out hope for a turnaround.

Task completed, I asked, “So how’s Naruto doing? No trouble sleeping, or any of that other stuff?”

“Well,” Sensei began, before carefully extracting his long side-locks from his son’s mouth, “I think he’s doing well. He doesn’t sleep through the night, but he’s stopped screaming when he needs a diaper change or if he’s hungry. At night, anyway.”

“That might be the best you can hope for,” I replied.

“Paaaaah,” was Naruto’s articulate contribution to the conversation. “Papa!”

Sensei’s attention was immediately back on his son. “What is it, Naruto? Hungry?”

He pointed at me and wiggled into a sitting position in his frog-green onesie, still entrapped in Sensei’s arms. As he laboriously climbed up Sensei’s bicep, he whined, “Kiii…”

“Kei, Naruto-chan.” I wiggled my ink-stained fingers at him. “No touchie.”

Naruto pouted, climbing up onto Sensei’s back and then grasping fistfuls of his hair. “Papapa!”

“I’m not really sure what he wants me to do, here. He’s not really pulling.” Sensei gave me a helpless look. “Kei?”

“Naruto-chan might want a ride.” I shrugged. “But hey, it’s around noon. I guess he might want lunch if Kushina didn’t feed him before getting us. Or maybe he just wants Kushina-san.”

“Naruto-chan, is your daddy not enough for you?” Sensei asked, craning his neck so he could peer at his son over his shoulder.

“Mama!” was Naruto’s response.

“That kid is going to be spoiled if you’re not careful,” I told him, as another distant explosion rocked the training field.

“I like to think we’re better parents than that.” Sensei’s head jerked as Naruto tugged experimentally on his hair. “Ow!”

“…Uh-huh.” I finished my latest genjutsu seal with a flourish, then capped the sealing brush and pushed the scroll into the sun to dry. While I loved fūinjutsu, sometimes the actual work of creating seals was tedious. “Anyway, I made a bet with Rin that I lost, so…are you two going to have any more kids?”

Sensei choked.

“Seriously?” I said, while Naruto burst into likely-unrelated giggles. “I’m fifteen. I’ve heard this whole thing before. But I do want to know if you’ve come up with any precautions that are better than what happened when this little guy was born. Seeing as I’d probably be tapped for guard duty again.”
“I…uh, yes?” Sensei coughed. “Kushina and I haven’t…um. Well, it’ll be her choice.”

“…Okay.” I shrugged. Ultimately, it wasn’t really my business.

“Kei, is there a reason you’re worried Naruto will grow up spoiled?” Sensei asked, as Naruto industriously turned himself around on his father’s back and pushed himself up. Naruto’s own personal Hokage Mountain gave him a better vantage point to see things than he would have been able to manage on his own.

“Kinda, yeah,” I said, as another explosion sounded from the wooded part of the training area. At the rate Kushina and Obito were going, I wondered if they were going to have to replant the area themselves.

Almost as an afterthought, I picked up a security seal I’d made during my musings and activated it. Its radius was about five meters and included a genjutsu component, which was enough to baffle eavesdroppers. “In the…other world, Naruto grew up pretty much alone. Sort of like Obito, but,” I wobbled a hand, “worse.”

Sensei nodded, looking a little confused.

“I mean, Kakashi wasn’t fit to be a parent at all, as a traumatized fourteen-year-old ANBU operative, and Jiraiya was off doing stuff for the sake of the village, so the only consistent adult presence he had in his life was the Third Hokage. Who was, as you might imagine, really busy.” At Sensei’s second nod, I went on, “Which effectively meant Naruto had no consistent adult support until age twelve.”

Sensei’s eyes narrowed. Naruto made a noise that sounded like “Mama!” again, but didn’t move. He sat contentedly on his father’s back, watching clouds overhead.

“Looking at his history in that world, and how he used it to empathize with others—up to and including Kurama—well.” I sighed. “But it doesn’t really make up for the fact that his early life was frankly terrible. I can understand the argument that the upbringing of a child has a massive influence on who they’ll be as adults, but…there were a lot of chances for Naruto to fail. And I don’t feel like the core of what Naruto was—will be—is only tied up in his crappy childhood.”

Naruto made a happy burbling sound and twisted around again, deciding that his father’s hair was still the most interesting thing within reach.

“I’m not sure I follow your reasoning, Kei.” Sensei paused, reached up, and gently deposited his son on the ground.

Naruto immediately put one hand on Sensei’s back and wobbled to his feet, using Sensei like a guiderail.

“I don’t know. Maybe Naruto won’t be vital to the mental health and morale of the entire world,” I mumbled, half to myself. “But I guess…I guess I just want him to grow up into a good person. A happy kid, but one who can also see the other side of people’s stories and listen, since that’s what a lot of people seem to need.”

“Who says we have to wait until he grows up?” Sensei mused aloud. “I don’t know about you, but I think there’s a chance that, if all of us work together, maybe we can build that kinder world you’re dreaming of. Maybe then, Naruto won’t have to carry that burden—that dream-alone.”

My answering smile was a little sardonic. Maybe a little sad. “We’ve already gotten started, in some ways.”
“I think you have, yes.” At my surprised look, Sensei added, “I do notice things, Kei. You make a point to look out for your teammates and whoever else crosses your path. It doesn’t really matter if you’re doing it out of pragmatism or because you genuinely care about everyone—the results seem to be the same. After all, that genjutsu of yours showed us that Kushina and I are only alive because of the changes you made with Obito. That’s just one example.”

“I tried,” I mumbled. “But right before we went to Mount Myōboku—I’d hit my limit.” I drummed my fingers on my knee. “That’s why, um, it’s why I decided to tell you everything that time. In hindsight, anyway. Once we’d gotten Obito back, there wasn’t much else I could do to secure the future without the Hokage’s explicit or implicit blessing. And everyone knew you were going to be Hokage, so…”

“And with Kurama?” Sensei prompted.

“I really didn’t think that was going to work,” I admitted. “I’d been working with Isobu for months, but he’s a lot less angry than Kurama is. Or was.” Pausing to reorganize my thoughts, I went on, “But one thing about the resurrected Madara—or even Tobi, during the late parts of the Fourth Shinobi World War—was that to them, the Tailed Beasts were just weapons. And they hated that. I mean, the old guard like to pretend that a shinobi is just a weapon, but we’re more than that and we know it. But no one ever gave the Tailed Beasts a second thought on that count.”

“True.” Sensei gently steered Naruto back toward me, since he’d been carefully making his way toward Sensei’s feet. “I admit…I didn’t either. But that’s in the past. Kurama’s been calmer, at least according to Kushina, and he isn’t as restricted as he was. I guess he’s so old that his subjective view of time is different than ours, since Kushina said he doesn’t seem to mind waiting until Naruto can talk back to him.”

“He might regret that.” Naruto chose that moment to crawl into my lap like a puppy, flopped across my legs. “Hey, Naruto-chan. Can you say ‘why’?”

Sensei winced. “Please, don’t teach him that one on purpose.”

“Woo?” said Naruto.

I smiled. “Close enough.”

There was one last explosion, and then Kushina shouted in triumph.

“Guess it’s over, then.” Sensei pushed himself back into a sitting position. Then he leaned over to brush his knuckles across Naruto’s marked cheek. “Your mother’s done very well today. I’m sure she’ll be able to run mission if she wants.”

The air next to my elbow wavered, twisting like a midair drain, and Obito appeared out of the portal. And then he hit the ground in what looked like a fairly painful belly-flop, groaning, “Kushina-san is evil…”

“It’s not her fault your chakra capacity’s lower than hers, Obito.” I poked him in the shoulder. “Are you hurt?”

“My pride, mostly.” Obito struggled for a moment, then rolled over onto his back. “Ow.”

“Oboo?” said Naruto. He wriggled off my lap and toward Obito, grabbing Obito’s shirt sleeve between his tiny fingers. “Itoo.”

Sensei grinned. “He almost got it that time.”
Naruto got bored with Obito’s dusty sleeve after a moment and then climbed up onto his chest. It gave him a better angle to touch his face, which was what our resident toddler immediately did. “Itoo?”

While Naruto ran his tiny hands over the whorls over the right side of Obito’s face, I looked up when I felt Kushina approach.

She was honestly hard to miss. In her special jōnin uniform—tight pants, short sleeves, and her long red hair done up in a ponytail—Kushina looked more professional and ready for a fight than I could easily remember. She also had her fair share of dirt and splinters everywhere, but she was still grinning madly as she jogged up to us.

She immediately tackled Sensei back to the ground, riding a victory high for all it was worth. “That was awesome!”

“Mama!” Naruto said, and bounced off Obito’s chest—drawing an “oof!” from him—to stumble toward his parents.

I would have said “his mother,” but since Sensei was still flat on his back thanks to Kushina’s exuberance and Kushina was still on top of him, he was really heading for both of them.

Kushina rolled off Sensei and held out her arms to her little blond bundle of joy. “Come to mommy, Naruto!”

“Mama!” Naruto giggled, and was swept up into a hug.

Sensei sat up again, smiling in a wry sort of way. Of course Naruto was going to favor his mother—both in terms of the strength of their bond, and in terms of taking after her in personality—at this age. Sensei was at the office most of the time that Naruto was awake, making these moments relatively rare and doubly precious.

(Though maybe he should have put a small playpen in his office anyway.)

Sensei got to his feet and brushed the dirt and grass from his pants. “I think it’s about time I head back to work. Obito, Kushina, are you heading back to the house?”

“I am, but only to change.” Kushina plucked a piece of grass from Naruto’s hair and shifted him so he was lying against her flak jacket’s shoulder pad. “Naruto and I are going to visit Mikoto-chan later. Obito?”

“I think I’m going home.” Obito sat up, though with difficulty. “I’m beat.”

“Kei?” Sensei prompted.

“I promised Genma I’d give him some more genjutsu senbon in exchange for a barrier seal design,” I said. “I can be at the office in a few minutes, if I’m needed.”

Sensei shook his head. “No, Shimika will be with me. It’s fine.”

Not that I had anything against the Aburame woman, but… Okay, so maybe I was a little paranoid. I needed to stop being quite that bad.

I picked up my security seal and deactivated it, then tucked it into a pocket. Unlike explosives, I could get these things to work more than once. Also unlike explosives, they didn’t take people’s fingers off if I got mad. Truly, a terrible price to pay.
“Sensei, for the Chūnin Exams, are you going to bring all of us, or just a few?” By “us,” I meant the Hokage Guard Platoon. I mean, there weren’t that many of us—though Obito could actually show up for the job now that he wasn’t splitting his time—but I imagined that at least a couple of us would be a part of the Konoha entourage when it headed to Suna.

Assuming that any of our genin made the finals, anyway.

Sensei shrugged. “I’ll decide once I’ve talked it over with the veterans. It’ll be my first foreign Exam as Hokage, and a first for you two, period. So I’d like to make sure I know what I’ll be doing. I’ll let you know once I’ve figured it out.”

“Ohay. In that case, see you tomorrow.”

And I took off to Genma’s place a little after that, leaving everyone else to sort themselves out.

Maybe it wasn’t fair of me in hindsight, but in the month leading up to the final confirmation of competitors for Suna’s Chūnin Exam, I pretty much drilled my brother into the ground.

Hayate wasn’t weak, but he wasn’t a powerhouse like the members of my team. None of the members of his team were capable of just powering through threats. So they needed skill and guile. Aside from the benefits of being relatively small and therefore easily overlooked, I really couldn’t do much for them. I could teach them how to make better traps, or even give them some of my seals, but it didn’t affect their thinking.

Most of my ability to deceive people hadn’t been learned for combat purposes. Since Isobu, I didn’t hide my advantages in combat so much as…I just didn’t use them as much as I could. While I had his chakra, I preferred to use my own and my skill in kenjutsu rather than just going for the nuclear option.

I taught Hayate kenjutsu and maybe a bit of fūinjutsu—the kind that exploded on purpose—and tried to see what I could do for Yūgao and Iruka. More kenjutsu, traps—whatever they needed in order to round out the education Inoichi had already given them. I went with the assumption that having Inoichi for a sensei had made them clever in a way that being genin alone could not. That was half the point of having jōnin-led teams in the first place.

In late January, a little after Sensei turned twenty-six, I finally got more information about the Exams.

In addition to Team Inoichi (whose official designation was apparently “Konoha Team Four”), there was another team made of competitors I recognized immediately.

Konoha’s Team Makoto was composed of Anko Mitarashi, Kotetsu Hagane, and Izumo Kamizuki. They were being led by a red-haired woman named Makoto Kiyotaka, who I vaguely recognized as a one-time member of one of Sensei’s various combat teams. I was pretty sure she was in Intelligence somewhere, like Inoichi.

I had no doubt that the team had been reshuffled. Anko’s old sensei, who was very nearly Voldemort, had turned out to be a traitor years ago, meaning that there wasn’t much chance of her being able to take the Exam with her team’s old roster. There was even a possibility that he’d left earlier than he would have otherwise, since I couldn’t remember the time he’d been outed as a monster in the other timeline anyway. That would have shot her promotion chances straight to hell.

There were four other teams, but I didn’t recognize any of them and therefore didn’t really make note
of them.

After the meeting where the jōnin nominated their teams, we retired to the Hokage’s office and its legion of security seals.

“And I’m taking you along for the Finals, if our teams get that far.” Sensei leaned back in his chair and looked contemplatively up at the ceiling. “Along with…hm. Obito, Kakashi, and Rin.”

“Why Rin?” I asked, looking up from examining one of the barrier seal kunai I’d made with Genma’s design. It was fascinating to see what an independent seal-user could make, though I personally wasn’t as interested in straight-up barriers as he was. Then again, I also wasn’t interested in genjutsu seals as much more than a proof of concept, so maybe I wasn’t the best judge.

“I think we need a medic, just in case.” Sensei sighed. “I would like to have Tsunade along, because she’s already proven against Sunagakure’s poisons, but I need her here to act as interim Hokage.”

“…I bet she was happy about that,” I said in a dry voice.

“She may have threatened…things.” Sensei still managed to smile, though. “I’m sure she wasn’t serious. And anyway, I can’t really trust Sarutobi-sama to keep the councilman under wraps, as it were. Tsunade doesn’t like that snake any more than I do.”

“And Jiraiya-sama?” I asked, turning the barrier kunai over in my fingers. I needed to test it…

“Not even in the village anymore.” Sensei shrugged. “I could order him back, but I’m fairly certain I know where he is. He’s not subtle if he doesn’t want to be.”

“Doesn’t that defeat the point of having a roaming spymaster?” I asked.

“Just because our enemies know where he goes doesn’t mean they know what he finds out. And Jiraiya-sensei can basically do what he needs to, where he is now.” Sensei sat up properly. “So, back to Rin. She’s been learning under some of the best medic-nin on the continent for years, Tsunade included. While I doubt that she’s learned how to kick a mountain in half, I think she was last certified in advanced poison treatment.”

Rin was definitely progressing faster than I’d thought. “She didn’t mention that the last time I saw her,” I remarked, but I was smiling despite my word choice. I was happy for Rin. Anything else was secondary.

“I think she took her prophecy very seriously,” Sensei said.

“…Hm.”

Kakashi had already met Tenzō and befriended him faster than I would have thought possible. We might have already killed the man in black—or rather, the thing that had been a shadowy chakra parasite, which had been controlling Obito. I wasn't sure if that counted. I didn’t know anything about dead gods for certain, though the Ten-Tails certainly seemed like one candidate…

I was still stumped for definite “dragonling” candidates. And it wasn’t like I planned on getting a genin team for at least a few years, regardless of this destiny stuff.

Because on one hand, Team Seven (or Team Kakashi) would eventually grow to be as destructive as any dragon. But I didn’t want to be their primary teacher, now or ever. Sure, I was a jinchūriki already—and some would argue that there wasn’t much worse out there—but I was fairly certain that I’d die of a stress-induced heart attack based solely on their shenanigans. I already had enough to
worry about with Hayate, and he didn’t practically have “Main Characters” stamped on him.

As for other candidates…Uchiha clan kids? I wasn’t sure. Breathing fire would be good, I supposed, but I wasn’t sure what I’d be able to teach them without knowing for certain that the Uchiha massacre wasn’t going to happen. I’d cut some of the events leading up to it short—like Sensei’s death—but I didn’t know for sure. And if it turned out that Shimura was somehow responsible for my (hypothetical future) students’ deaths…

That would be bad. For everyone.

And then, finally…the Chinatsugumi would be another resource. Much as I hated to think about them in that context.

The Chinatsugumi, though they hadn’t apparently realized it, were all either reincarnations or at least creepily similar to some figures I’d thought I’d made up in my last life. I didn’t have proof of it either way, much like how there was no physical evidence of my reincarnation except for the scars in my head. But the old me had loved dragons. Probably about as much as Daenerys Targaryen.

Who knew? Maybe the dragon motif had carried over. I didn’t think the Great Toad Sage would pick up this kind of absurd detail, but maybe I was underestimating his abilities.

Or maybe all of this was just speculation. I didn’t know. I’d never really been clairvoyant, after all.

“Kei, can I see that kunai?” Sensei asked, startling me out of my reverie.

“Sure.” I tossed it at him without activating the seal, so he easily caught it between two fingers.

“Hm. This isn’t a standard design.” Sensei whipped a Flying Thunder God kunai out of nowhere and examined the seals closely. “Then again, neither is mine. Did Shiranui-kun happen to name this?”

“Nope. Why?”

“I feel like it needs one.” Sensei was eyeing the seal on the metal speculatively. “Do you think he’d —?”

“Let Genma do it, Sensei.” Like I’d forgotten his tendency toward naming things in a really weird way. “It’s still his even if he gave me the design to mess with.”

Sensei pouted.

My eyes narrowed. “And I’m gonna tell him not to use the words ‘flash,’ ‘howl,’ ‘dance,’ or ‘storm’ at all.”

“You’re no fun,” Sensei said.

“I don’t even know if that seal does what Genma said it would,” I told him. “My calligraphy isn’t the same as his no matter how neat it is. And you’re the one who taught me about errant brushstrokes.”

“I’m joking, Kei.” Sensei sighed. “How about you head down to the market for a break? I think some of the Chinatsugumi are finally in town again. I imagine they’d want to see you.”

The Chinatsugumi had, fairly early in the war, declined to send full caravans to Konoha because the
roads between our village and Sorayama were so thoroughly watched. There were enough deserters and foreigners among their ranks to make Chinatsu wary of pushing their luck, so they’d been cautious and gone no further than Tanzaku-Gai for most of the war.

Not the best business strategy, perhaps, but it was one I could sort of understand why she’d done it.

“All right. Do you want me to buy you anything?” I asked, only half-joking. The Chinatsugumi themselves couldn’t range wherever they pleased, but their associates could. I’d never seen reindeer meat (transported via seal-embossed containers) before I met them, in either lifetime.

“If you can find one of those little Daruma dolls, sure.” Sensei had already gone back to his paperwork by then, and gave me a dismissive wave. “Bye, Kei.”

I left through the actual office door, unlike some people I could name.

When I reached the Chinatsugumi—and their rented chunk of the market district, where all of their merchandise was laid out to be sold—I was somewhat surprised to only see a few faces I recognized. There were more guards than I remembered, and I could see a team of what looked like genin being led away from the caravan, but of the Chinatsugumi…not so much.

Chinatsu was there, though. She was sitting down on the back of one of the caravan carts, sharpening a long knife, when I finally worked my way through the crowd.

She looked up and said, “Keisuke-san. You’ve grown since we last met.”

“It’s only been a year and spare change.” I sat down next to her, looking out across the marketplace and the wares slowly being unloaded. “So, no Rikuto this time?”

“Rikuto decided that it would be best if he remained in the compound,” was Chinatsu’s measured response. “Given his heritage, and the village’s recent history.”

I made a vaguely agreeable noise. “So, how’s everyone been?”

Chinatsu’s golden eyes went distant. “…Worried. Preparing. Misaki insisted that we give my niece the seals as soon as she could handle them.”

I wasn’t sure exactly what said seals looked like, but I could guess which ones she was talking about. Rather than the strength-enhancing fūinjutsu that Chinatsu and her sister used, she was talking about the anti-eruption seals on Mount Soragami. I didn’t understand the mechanism by which they worked, but I could imagine that giving a… “How old is Aiko-chan, anyway?”

“Six, now,” Chinatsu said.

Giving a six-year-old access to continent-destroying seals didn’t seem wise, all told.

“She won’t be able to use them, Keisuke-san. It’s just a bloodline seal.” In other words, something more akin to magic than true fūinjutsu. Keeping a curse alive by keeping the blood alive, or—in this case—keeping the protective seals on a volcano tied to a single family.

I kind of wondered why the Uzumaki clan didn’t seem to have had any.

“Did you come here to buy something?” Chinatsu asked, putting her knife away. “I don’t imagine you just wanted to stop and chat.”

“Sensei wants a Daruma doll, if you have one.” I kicked my legs idly, watching them swing in
midair. I was physically a teenager, so I was allowed to occasionally act the part.

“I’m surprised the Hokage would want one.” Chinatsu scooted off the edge of the wagon and flagged down one of the caravan workers. “A Daruma doll, please.”

“Right away, Chinatsu-sama,” said the woman, scuttling off.

“Why is it surprising that the Hokage would want one?” I asked her.

“I’ve always thought of the various Hokage as…well, those who make their own luck, rather than wishing.” Chinatsu shrugged.

Well, given the omamori pendant around the hilt of my katana, I could honestly say that the shinobi contingent of the population wasn’t really any less superstitious than any other group of people. And besides, Daruma dolls didn’t need to be made special for every possible blessing they were supposed to confer. Omamori…well, it was polite if they were. And I’d need to remember to return this one to the Fire capital, whether personally or through making Genma run that errand for me.

“A little late to get one,” Chinatsu commented, once she’d gotten the Daruma. The little red caricature was actually kind of cute, if in a bizarre way. As expected, its eyes were blank, waiting to be filled with a dot and a corresponding wish. “But it’s still early enough that the blessing should work for the next year.”

I made a neutral noise. “So, how much is it?”

“This one? The Hokage can have it for free,” Chinatsu said. “I trust that his ambitions are good for the Land of Fire as a whole.”

Sensei’s ambitions…

Trapping Danzō in a web of his own lies. Offing Orochimaru. Making sure his son would grow up safe and happy (without dying). Rehabilitating ROOT members. Strengthening ties between Konoha and Suna. There was probably other stuff I was forgetting, but that list seemed like a representative sample.

“They are,” I said firmly.

“Good.” Chinatsu signaled for another worker, and told the man, “Please wrap this neatly. It’s a gift for the Fourth Hokage.”

“Of course, Chinatsu-sama.” And he bustled away.

“Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?” Chinatsu asked.

“How are the kids?” was my response.

Chinatsu blinked. “…Fine?”

“Weak answer. And you call yourself a mother?” I teased. Or I gave it my best shot, anyway.

And yet I could see Chinatsu’s expression shift as she caught the subtle undercurrent of pain in my voice. Her eyes seemed to soften.

“Roku is starting to show some sort of strange powers we think, but we don’t know what it is.” Chinatsu mimed a circle around each of her eyes. “He has dark marks around his eyes when he draws on his chakra, but none of us have seen that before. I’m very proud of him.”
“Sounds like Magnet Release,” I said quietly.

Her eyebrows rose. “Well, perhaps. Tayuya, meanwhile, has picked up playing the biwa from Rikuto. She’s more talented than he is, though I don’t think the instrument is small enough for her.”

“...I think she’d be good with the flute,” I muttered.

Chinatsu gave me a long stare. “...I see.”

It was somewhat difficult to carry on a conversation with Chinatsu. Rikuto was friendlier, less stiff, and often...more honest, in a way. Or at least better at pretending that he was just another random cheerful civilian. In hindsight, it was actually weird to think that Chinatsu’s outward personality seemed so close to the “shinobi shall never show his tears” mantra in its entirety. Rikuto had been a jonin for Iwa, and seemed to have picked up precisely none of it. Chinatsu’s records, meanwhile, pegged her as a former Konoha genin. The contrast was just incongruous enough to be weird.

“There are those of us who wish to join a shinobi village, rather than stay at Sorayama.” Chinatsu’s eyes unfocused somewhat as she stared into the middle distance, somewhere across the marketplace. “Misaki and I cannot, and Rikuto will not...”

“It’s not a bad idea.” If they wanted to avoid the potential hazard called one of the goddamn Sannin, anyway.

But I could also see why Rikuto, Iwa missing-nin extraordinaire despite the fact that Konoha’s upper echelons knew about him, would not really want to move into a village he’d probably fought in the past. He hadn’t seemed overly enamored of the ninja system in general, either.

“True. But without the Kasai clan, Soragami will...not remain as it is.” Chinatsu sighed. “And as for relocation, the core members of my group refused to consider it. Nanami was never a kunoichi, but she was from a Kiri clan. Shirozora? Chūnin, formerly of Kirigakure. And Zakuro will not leave the father of her children behind.”

“Of course not.” Shit.

“I don’t expect you to understand, not at your age.” Chinatsu sighed again. “But adults can sometimes be quite stupid.”

And again we returned to the whole issue of the snake-summoning member of the Sannin.

“...I could...try to talk to Sensei?” I suggested, hesitant.

Chinatsu paused. “...Would you?”

“It might help a bit if you started a dialogue about this stuff first, but, uh, immigration laws aren’t...” Well, they’d let Mom in, hadn’t they? The Ghoul of Three Wolves had apparently been considered the scariest bogeyman in the Land of Iron because she was real. And yet, our Intelligence department had still let her in. “It’s an idea? I mean, the Hokage is going to probably devote his energies toward the upcoming Chūnin Exam, but the idea has some merit. And if not here...maybe Ame?”

Chinatsu made a neutral noise of acknowledgement, nodding. Whatever she was going to say after that, though, was cut off by a different caravan worker coming up to us with a neatly wrapped package.

“Your Daruma doll.” Chinatsu handed it to me a moment later. “Goodbye, Keisuke-san.”
Well, that was a dismissal if I’d ever heard one. I skedaddled.

“No, no, no.” Obito blinked as Tenzō shook his head at him. Tenzō went on, “I don’t even know how you’re doing that, but you—I have to use the Snake seal just to get that much wood to move!”

“Transplant.” Obito shrugged.

“Why do I get the feeling there’s something he’s not telling us?” Raidō stage-whispered to Kakashi.

“Because he isn’t.” Kakashi’s voice was, as usual, rather snappish.

I continued snacking on dango and let the boys argue.

Somehow, the “everyone in the new Hokage Guard Platoon except for Genma who was on shift at Sensei’s house” meeting had gone a little sideways. Kakashi had showed up late with Tenzō, meaning that it wasn’t really an exclusive gathering anymore, and we didn’t get to discuss who would be doing what once three of us were in Suna. No, instead our meeting was derailed by Obito demonstrating his Zetsu-derived version of Wood Release and confusing the crap out of Tenzō, who had the non-Zetsu version with a correspondingly higher chakra cost. It was still being derailed.

I presumed that we would figure out the details of our work once we got to Suna, in the best traditions of procrastinators everywhere. The only reason I was even there was because Hayate’s team had left three weeks previous, which gave me my first real taste of empty nest syndrome. I didn’t like it much.

“This isn’t…this isn’t even the same kind of wood.” Tenzō looked confused and frustrated.

Confrustrated? Confuzzled? Thwarted?

Obito was dangling by his feet from the tree above us, while Tenzō sat next to Kakashi, so the argument was inescapable. As was a moderate degree of food thievery.

Swiping another dango stick from my stockpile, using a scrap of a branch, Obito went on, “I don’t even know how this works, okay? So don’t ask me why it doesn’t make sense, because I don’t know.”

“There’s not exactly anyone to ask about how Wood Release works for multiple users,” I said, around a dango stick clamped between my teeth. “Hashirama-sama was the only one of his kind and…well, he’s a bit dead to ask about it.” If you discounted the uberzombie form.

“But I…but the invaders…” Tenzō trailed off.

Raidō said, “I’m not sure they count if they’re not human.”

“Anyway, I’m pretty good at this stuff now.” Obito grinned. “Right, Sapling?” And of course Obito remembered that prophecy.

Kakashi rolled his visible eye.

Tenzō frowned up at Obito. “I’ve had this power longer than you have.”

“So?”

“So I know what to do with it.” Tenzō pointed up at Obito, saying, “Do you even know how to
“Make a shield?”

“… kinda?”

Tenzō huffed. “So you’re not better than me.”

“I’m stronger,” Obito corrected. “I can make more than five tiny trees before I get tired.”

“Prove it!” was the response.

As the two of them charged off toward the training field proper, Kakashi sighed. “Well, at least he’s adjusting to normalcy.”

“This is normal?” Raidō asked.

I responded, “Yes, it is.” Then I handed him a stick of dango.

“Sometimes I forget that you’re still kids,” Raidō said, around one of the dumplings. “And then that stuff happens.”

“Watch who you’re calling a kid, old man,” I teased.

“Obito isn’t the best example of maturity,” Kakashi muttered.

“Well, no, but that’s why Hayate likes him so much. He’s fun to hang out with,” I said, and handed Kakashi the last dango stick.

Kakashi made a mumbled noise that sounded like thanks, even if he didn’t like sweets that much.

Out on the training field, there was a sudden shout and then a new tree sprang into being more abruptly than Athena from the head of Zeus. Just wham, bam, tree.

And then it just kept going. The training field rocked, smaller trees swaying as though in the wind, while Obito and Tenzō’s chakra drove the roots of this new monster of a tree deep and wide across the area. Dirt flew everywhere and there was a series of gigantic cracks as those roots broke their smaller cousins into splinters. And meanwhile, the new Hashirama-styled tree kept shooting up toward the sky.

All three of us—Raidō, Kakashi, and I—sprang up and got the hell out of the way while we still could.

In the middle of that chakra maelstrom, though? Obito and Tenzō.

“I would love to know what the hell they’re doing!” Raidō shouted, as all three of us ran—a severed tree trunk smashed into the ground where we’d been a moment afterward.

As it happened, Raidō landed next to me as Kakashi swung his ANBU katana overhead and slashed a falling limb apart before it could hit us. As such, he was able to hear my explanation.

I could see the main body of the tree pretty well, and that said a lot.

Actually, there were two trees, tightly intertwined. Tenzō’s interpretation of the First’s bloodline resulted in darker wood that quickly grew a bark layer to protect itself from attack, while Obito’s version was lighter, grew faster, and was twisting around in a rough spiral.

“Thumb war with trees?” I suggested, only half-joking.
Kakashi made a noise in the back of his throat that sounded like it’d come out of Bull instead.

“I’d say you didn’t have to worry about the kid killing himself like this, but you kinda do.” Raidō smacked another dislodged branch aside as the too-thin-to-be-practical Hashirama tree thing finally reached what looked like its final height.

The tree swayed as the Obito-derived Wood Release constricted suddenly, sending another barrage of fallen leaves and branches down on us.

“Kakashi, Raidō-kun, you get Tenzō-kun. I’m shutting Obito down.” And I reached for Isobu’s power and spun it around and around my coils like a thread. I also felt my eyes itch, so at least something was happening.

Kakashi took off at a run, flanked by Raidō. Both of them headed for where Tenzō’s chakra was the strongest.

I did the same, but around the other side of the tree and toward Obito instead. The tree—or trees—was shaped like one of those fuzzy-topped pens if there was a lot of clay wound around in. The resulting weird structure would probably collapse in the next windstorm, but I still needed both boys to stop dicking around before one of them fell over from chakra exhaustion.

I found Obito not long afterward, his hands clasped together in the Snake seal like Tenzō would have done, and yelled, “Obito, stop doing that!”

Obito jolted like I’d hit him, and I belatedly realized that Isobu was also losing patience with him.

I forced Isobu’s chakra back down a bit. “Obito, I know you’re into competition. That’s admirable. But Tenzō-kun gets caught up in things and if you aren’t careful, he’ll be the one in the hospital and you’ll have to explain to Tsunade-sama how he got there!”

Obito immediately stopped channeling chakra into the tree. “Sorry?”

“Apologize to Tenzō-kun, if—Kakashi, how is he?” I had to reorient on Kakashi and Raidō when they emerged from the wrecked underbrush, carrying Tenzō between them. It was actually surprising how quickly they had gotten Tenzō out of trouble.

“Tired, but not dead.” Kakashi let me put my hand to Tenzō’s forehead to check his chakra levels.

Tenzō giggled, sounding almost drunk.

“Maybe a little loopy,” Kakashi amended.

Obito sheepishly, “Sorry, Tenzō-kun. Kakashi, I can take him to the hospital if…”

“Tenzō-kun needs bedrest, not the hospital,” I corrected, having made a couple quick calculations about his chakra levels compared to his maximum capacity. “So you get to take him to the Hokage Residence, where Tsunade-sama is”—I checked my chakra sense, “—right now, actually.”

Obito paled. “But—!”

Whatever Obito was about to say was bitten off and forgotten under the weight of three glares. Tenzō couldn’t participate, but I like to think I made up for that.

“All right, all right. But if I die because I got punched through a wall, I’m going to haunt all of you,” Obito declared, though he did scoop Tenzō into a bridal carry. “C’mon, kid, let’s get you fixed
Obito, rather than using Kamui, decided just to go with the normal shinobi rooftop-run.

“…I feel like I should have told him that Tenzō gets motion-sick when being carried,” Kakashi said, his tone mild.

I pulled my dango skewer out of my hair, where I’d made the probably-poor decision to stow it, and threw it at his head.

He ducked in time.

“Kids, kids, maybe we should try to figure out what we’re going to do to explain this?” Raidō gestured at the tree.

“…Training accident,” was Kakashi and my mutual response. Kakashi continued with, “I’m going to go make sure they make it there. Kei, Raidō, see you two later.”

A burst of Body Flicker speed later, and that left just Raidō and me looking up at the monstrosity of a tree in the middle of the training grounds.

Way at the top, a crow was looking down at us and cawing.

“…Okay, so, do you want to cut this thing down?” I asked. “I know a jutsu.”

“Show me what you’re thinking of, and then I’ll give an answer,” said Raidō.

We ended up not cutting the tree down, since it was really a job that genin could have fun with, but I did teach Raidō how to use the (workaround) Samurai Sword jutsu. So, all in all, the afternoon worked out all right.

A week later, Sensei finally got the list of finalists from the Kazekage’s office. He showed it to me and to Rin while we happened to be in the office for a schedule briefing (with regards to why we didn’t have one).

I read over Rin’s shoulder and, beneath the flowery diplomatic words, I focused on the important parts.

There were a total of eight finalists.

From Konoha: Hayate Gekkō, Yūgao Uzuki, and Anko Mitarashi.

From Suna: Maki, Takumi, Osamu, and Katsuo.

And, surprisingly, from Ame: Ren.

“I don’t know half these names, so they kinda mean nothing to me.” I grinned despite that. “But Hayate made it! Hell yeah!”

Rin cheered, too.

And not long after that, it was time to pack our bags—or scrolls, in my case—for a trip to Sunagakure.
Chapter End Notes

If you can't recognize where this chapter's title comes from, please go watch The Lion King. :) The title is...somewhat ironic, given hints in past chapters.
Whispers Arc: Ghost

Chapter Summary

Kei and friends: Arrive in Suna.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

While it was true that Kakashi, Obito, and I were the only members of the actual Hokage Guard to be traveling with Sensei to Sunagakure, we were nowhere near the only shinobi to make up his entourage for the event. We had a couple of other people to fill out the ranks. Rin was coming along, of course, and so was one of Sensei's squad-mates from the Third Shinobi World War. And Kohari Umino, who had volunteered because her son was in Suna and she didn't have any other standing assignments.

Given who our Hokage was, I couldn't say that we were all there for his protection. I couldn't even say that most of us were there for his protection.

We were basically there to look impressive.

…Sort of.

Actually, among our team, we had multiple forms of long-range detection that otherwise made a mockery of people who dared think they could take us by surprise. Because of Gaku Inuzuka and Aomaru, we effectively had three forms of scent-based detection if you counted Kakashi, too. Kohari Umino didn't have her son's bizarre hearing, but she did have something that mimicked tremor-sense common in animals. Then we had Obito, who could see chakra being molded from almost two hundred yards off and lacked Kakashi's stamina weakness (as the tree war had proved). I had a multi-kilometer sensing range when working alongside Isobu, and then Sensei had his own version—using Sage chakra instead.

I would not have wanted to be on the team that was tasked with sneaking past us.

I ended up sticking all of my stuff into a pair of scrolls on a back-mounted holder, as usual. I had two smaller scrolls on my right hip for the various set-and-forget seals I'd made up over the years. It was the only thing, really, that made me stand out from the other people in Konoha uniforms. Even Kohari had a katana and a bandanna-style headband, so that didn't make me unique.

My presence changes the game, Isobu said as we stood at the main gates, waiting for all the ceremony to be over with.

Yes, but I have to wonder how much. I looked across the assembled shinobi, frowning slightly in thought. You're not exactly adapted for desert combat…

Because of course I was thinking about possible Tailed Beast fights. I'd been required to call on Isobu's chakra a lot more than I'd expected back when he'd first been sealed in me, so I was conditioned to expect bad things.

And probably dehydration, depending on the weather out in the desert.
Sensei was still talking to Tsunade, who still looked unhappy with being handed the Hokage's office (literally and figuratively) for a week. Hey, if she already lived in her grandfather's old house, she could take a bit of the responsibility.

Next to Tsunade, Kushina stood in her jōnin uniform and grinned at Sensei's predicament. Naruto sat in her arms, peering at his dad in a vaguely interested way. I wasn't sure he understood what was going on.

"How hot is it going to be over there, Umino-san?" Obito asked Kohari, who was one of the oldest members of the team.

"It should actually be colder than it is here, at least at night," Kohari told him, "There's very little water in Sunagakure, which means the land controls the temperature. So sometimes, they wake up and there's frost on the ground."

Obito stared, trying to process the concept. "Frost? In a desert?"

"Technically, the only thing that makes the Land of Wind a desert is the lack of rain," I remarked. Finally, that geographical trivia I'd learned was becoming useful. Even for a five-minute conversation. "They get most of their harvests from a strip of land on the border with Rivers, I think."

"So then there can be really cold deserts if there's no rain." Obito's brow furrowed. "Or snow, I guess."

Like Antarctica.

"Right," Kohari confirmed. "Parts of the Land of Snow seem to be like that, from what I've heard."

Even more like Antarctica.

"Actually, the First gave them that land." That was Gaku, who sounded less than happy with that little bit of trivia. He added dryly, "For some reason."

It had to do with Shukaku, actually. The First Hokage had been using the Tailed Beasts as bribes for peace, because he was naïve in some ways, only to find that the First Kazekage had already swiped the One-Tailed Beast beforehand. So the First Kazekage had demanded arable land instead, and we'd been kind of fighting over it ever since.

At least until the Land of Rivers had popped up.

"...Should I have packed a sweater?" Obito wondered aloud.

"I don't think we're going to be wandering around after dark very much," Rin put in.

"Chūnin Exam finals generally take only a day," Kohari said. More cheerfully, she added, "But I'm looking forward to seeing Iruka there."

"Same for me and Hayate," I said.

Sure, Hayate was a finalist while Iruka wasn't, but watching the Chūnin Exams with family was a pretty good way to learn new things. Competitors always had fun tricks.

Sensei walked back over to us at that point, smiling broadly. I supposed the lipstick mark faintly visible on his cheek had something to do with that. "All right, everyone! Sunagakure awaits!"
And then we started to run. It'd take a week to get to Sunagakure on foot, but that was no reason to slack off.

Other than waking up on the third day with Obito, Rin and I in a defensive ring made of Kakashi's dogs, nothing of interest really happened on the trip.

We caught lunch on three of the days we spent on the road, rather than eating rations, because Kohari Umino turned out to be the best fisherwoman I'd ever seen. And not the sort with nets—or at least, not only with nets. She had a strange chakra trick involving senbon, fishing hooks, and theme-thin shinobi wire. The result of her skill was a very tasty lunch wherever we found a river, because Rin had packed some spices to go with my apparently-endless supply of camping equipment.

If all else failed, we could use it to hurt people. There was a second frying pan in there somewhere.

Anyway, after that point Gaku Inuzuka talked something over with Sensei and the next thing we knew, we were all being offered soldier pills because Sensei was impatient with the whole "stopping to sleep" thing.

I had to decline, for medical reasons. Namely because if I did take one, I had absolutely no idea what would happen. Inuzuka soldier pills had never been rated for jinchūriki consumption, so for all I knew I'd probably explode. Instead, leaning on Isobu a bit seemed to lead to roughly the same results, so I went without medicinal stamina boosters.

Anyway, we got there a little after sundown on day five. We were, of course, immediately stopped by Sunagakure guards and Sensei had to talk to them for a while.

Aomaru, Gaku's immense fawn-colored partner, carefully leaned back into a long doggy stretch, flexing all of his toes and yawning. Honestly, Aomaru was more of a giant bear-hybrid with ratty ears than a dog, but he'd kept up with the rest of us without any complaints.

Gaku reached down and scratched behind his ears. Aomaru obligingly did not eat his hand.

Seriously, I'd seen the typical Inuzuka dogs while in the village, and Aomaru's ancestors had apparently been hybridized with a lion somewhere. But he got along with Bull—the only bigger dog I'd ever met—and thus I wasn't complaining about his presence.

Shiba obligingly poked his nose against my leg to get my attention span back on track. I snapped off a quick, joking salute to Kakashi in thanks. He just shrugged.

Obito was talking to Kohari again, with Rin dropping in some comment or another, but I decided to hurry up a bit and flank Sensei.

By the time I really refocused, Sensei had talked his way through the guards, and we were being led to what I assumed was the foreigner's district. While Konoha didn't exactly have a designated neighborhood where we could set foreign shinobi up for the night, we did have a number of publicly-accessible inns that were intensely monitored for security's sake. They just weren't all in one place, for some reason.

Sunagakure, however, had apparently planned ahead several decades ahead of time and did have a special location within its walls for visitors.

The inn had a name that I didn't catch before getting distracted again.

This time, it was because Kohari had shot past both Sensei and me and scooped up the figure back-lit in the doorway, hugging him fiercely.
"Mom! Mom, I'm okay, really!" Iruka's voice was muffled by both his mother's flak jacket and his own laughter.

"I was worried about you, young man!" Kohari tried and failed to pull off a stern parent mode, collapsing into relieved giggling. "Come on, come on, show us around!"

"Okay—Hokage-sama, you have a special room and everything." Iruka waved the rest of us over.

I sent out a subtle, entirely-human chakra ping, and got an answer from Hayate. He was on the second floor, with Yūgao and Inoichi.

"I think some people are going to have to share, but that's okay because my team just has two rooms anyway," Iruka was explaining as we entered and walked into the yellow-orange indoor lights.

"I don't think that will be a problem, Iruka-kun," Sensei replied with a laugh. He turned to the rest of us and added, "Kakashi, Gaku, could you please come with me to meet the Kazekage? I'm sure everyone else can set up our rooms properly."

"By your command, Hokage-sama," the two dog-ninjas said together, and followed Sensei back out.

That left Obito to turn to the inn's front desk receptionist and say, "So, how many rooms do we have?"

"Six," said the receptionist, looking bored. "We only have futons here, so you should have plenty of space."

I had to wonder how much traffic this place saw at any other time of year. And anyway, I'd brought my futon from home.

Obito grinned. "Thank you, then."

And with that, Iruka led the way up the stairs and let the lot of us set about claiming our spaces.

I poked around some of the rooms before going to visit my brother's. As advertised, the inn was small and slightly sandy thanks to foot traffic, and only had actual beds in about half the room. And those were bunks that weren't quite long enough for Gaku and his dog.

I think most of the team gave up and just asked for futons within five minutes of bustling around sorting out who wanted what room. The beds were just not worth it.

Then I finally poked my head into the room where Hayate, Inoichi and Yūgao turned out to have been eating dinner.

"Hi, Sis," said Hayate, waving with his chopsticks in hand.

I shot across the room, snatched him off the ground, and squished him in a hug.

"Sis"—swing—"I'm"—my brother was officially tackled and pinned—"fine"—and then I started tickling him. "Ahahaha no, no, stop, hahaha!"

"You think you're gonna be a chūnin when you can't even get out of a tickle-fest?" I cackled.

Hayate nearly kicked me in the face trying to get away, but I ducked left and he missed entirely. "I can—hahaha—I can do this!"

"Prove it!" I challenged, grinning widely.
"I will!" Hayate was grinning back.

"While I'm glad you're both excited," Inoichi's voice broke in, cutting across the brewing friendly brawl like a whip-crack, "I don't think the inn can take much shinobi tussling."

Both of us paused.

Yūgao was (unsuccessfully) stifling her giggles, while Iruka and his mother peered into the room cautiously, as though expecting a fight to have happened anyway. Obito stood next to them with a hand over his mouth and his shoulders shaking from suppressed laughter.

"Fine." I let go of Hayate's ankle before he could kick loose. Then I let myself flop to the floor, yawning. That whole "not taking a soldier pill" thing seemed to have finally caught up with me.

"Tired?" Obito asked, crouching next to me as Hayate grabbed his dinner from the table.

"Unlike everyone else, I didn't go for chemical enhancers," I grumped. I pulled out my sleeve scroll, which had carefully perforated paper for the seals I'd written. I tossed it up to Obito's waiting hand. "So here, take my security seals and do something with them. Should take care of most stuff."

"Oh! Right." Obito snatched the seal scroll out of the air. Then he opened it to check that I hadn't made a mistake in my fatigue-addled state.

As if. I could write seals even if I'd spent thirty-six hours awake, and the results would only explode prematurely some of the time!

"Gotcha. Umino-san, please take care of her? I'm gonna go spread these around." And then Obito was off, bothering everyone else.

Kohari was kind enough to help me back up.

My energy crash ended up making it so I went to bed in the women's rooms with my road clothes still on, but at least I'd remembered to get my futon out before just passing out on the floor. I was one of six kunoichi on the trip—in addition to the Hokage's posse, Makoto, Anko, and Yūgao also had to be accounted for. All the men got to fight over sleeping arrangements in the rest of the rooms.

Except Sensei. Being Hokage, he got his own. And probably loaded it down with more security seals than I'd ever written, but hey. His prerogative.

All in all, that five-day stretch—from morning in Konoha to night in Suna—passed pretty peacefully.

The next morning was a bit of a scramble in the improvised barracks. It turned out that soldier pills had one major side effect that no one had bothered mentioning.

Namely, they made everyone who imbibed them massively hungry once they wore off. Soldier pills didn't really just generate three extra days' worth of chakra out of nowhere—they burned stored carbs, fats and sugars and also made the user crave them like crazy afterward. They weren't nearly as extreme as the infamous Akimichi Food Pills, which burned through even more insane amounts of body fat for more extreme results, but only one member of our team was an Inuzuka. Nobody else had ever gotten used to the strain.

I sat back with Teams Inoichi and Makoto and watched the carnage in the dining hall unfold from a safe distance.
And that was only about half our team. I had never seen Rin eat that much, ever.

"Can I just say that that's kinda terrifying?" Kotetsu asked, openly staring at the behavior of his fellow Konoha-nin.

At the ripe old age of thirteen, Kotetsu somehow still managed to have the spikiest hair I'd ever seen outside of Jiraiya himself. He had the signature strip of cloth across his nose, even at this age, and a navy blue mark on his chin that could easily be mistaken for a goatee if he was older. He was taller than his interim sensei when standing up, but hunched defensively over his breakfast as though he expected his superiors to try and snatch it.

Given that Sensei, Kakashi, and Kohari Umino had taken off early to go talk to the Kazekage again, I didn't really think his food was in danger.

"If you're not saying it, we're still all thinking it," said Izumo, to his right.

Izumo's dark brown hair covered his right eye, per usual, and he had a dark green sweater that went up and over his chin. His hair wasn't as untamable as Kotetsu's, or maybe he'd crammed most of it under his bandanna headband and just called it quits.

"Oo to 'er 'iners." I was pretty sure Anko meant to say "You two are whiners," but it was difficult to be eloquent with a mouthful of rice to talk around. Anko swallowed and went on, "This is why you're not in the finals! You're too busy worrying about things."

"What are the tournament brackets, anyway?" I asked, spotting an opening to change the topic. "I didn't get to ask last night, so…"

"Yūgao-chan is going up against a Suna-nin, but I'm fighting that Ame girl." Anko poked the side of her face with the thick end of her chopsticks as she thought. "Uh, I think her name was Rin or Ren or something like that."

"I'm going to be fighting Maki-san," Hayate said. "She uses some kind of cloth jutsu, and Inoichi-sensei said her sensei's famous."

"Maki-san's sensei is Pakura." Inoichi retrieved a Bingo Book out of nowhere and tossed it to me. "Also known as the only jōnin-level user of Scorch Release in Sunagakure."

I flipped to Pakura's page, which was about in the middle of the black book. There was a low-resolution photograph of a Suna kunoichi with green hair and orange bangs, wearing a dark purple outfit with arm-warmers. She had apparently been throwing a glowing fireball at the photographer. "Scorch Release? Shit."

"I'm not fighting her, Sis." Hayate downed his cup of tea before continuing with, "And anyway, Maki-san doesn't have the bloodline. I checked."

"You should still be careful, though," Iruka piped up. At my raised eyebrow, he added innocently, "Maki-san was the one who defeated Kotetsu."

"And I told you, if I'd had a chance to use my summons I would have had her!" Kotetsu protested.

"So, Izumo-kun…?" I prompted.

"Anko."

That answered that, then.
"Iruka scratched the base of his ponytail. "I think the qualifiers might've been a bit rigged."

"It honestly wouldn't surprise me if they were." I shrugged. "But hey, at least we're going to see something cool tomorrow, right?"

"You will," was Makoto's contribution. The red-haired kunoichi had rolled up her Intelligence coat's sleeves and was looking contemplatively across the room. I'd never actually talked to her before, and her chakra was telling me it probably wasn't a good time to start. She felt like a grouch, and not just because I was pretty sure she was mildly hungover.

…Actually, her family name was "Kiyotaka," wasn't it? I vaguely remembered hearing that name during the night Naruto was born, but nothing had really come of it. Chiharu had been too dead to complete the mission. I didn't know what should have happened there, and wasn't sure how to ask.

"Have all of you prepared for poisons?" I asked.

"Yep!" Anko said. "But I bet they haven't planned for snakes, Kei-san!"

Oh, ouch.

Anyway, breakfast broke up altogether sometime before nine in the morning, when the rest of the gang finally cleaned the kitchen out. The Finals were tomorrow, so we had a bit of time to wander Sunagakure if we didn't mind being stalked by Suna-nin and Suna civilians. The exceptions were Kakashi and Kohari, who had been chosen as Sensei's guards for a bit. We'd probably swap whenever Sensei wanted, though.

"We could probably go out and buy a souvenir or something," Obito told the genin.

"We've never been to Suna's arena," I pointed out, crossing my arms over my chest. "We have to case that area at some point, too."

Obito opened his mouth to argue, but Gaku hooked his arm around my Uchiha teammate's neck and dragged him out of the inn before we could get caught up in debating the merits of strategic thinking.

Kohari caught me a little off the main street, pulling me aside for a quick chat.

It amounted to, "You're on shift now, Keisuke-chan."

So that was that.

I was pointed in the direction of the Kazekage's office, which was in a building shaped like an egg or a gourd. There were dozens of other sandstone-brown, roughly cylindrical buildings, linked by power lines. The kanji for wind was plastered across the side of the building in reddish brown.

Despite the lack of bright red paint and trees, I actually rather liked the Kazekage's idea of architecture. Wind could rip right through the streets and whip sand everywhere, but the buildings would retain their strength despite not really retaining their polish.

I entered the building without any fanfare, tracking Sensei and Kakashi and the other chakra signatures in the building with half my attention. They were in the office and not moving all that much, but they didn't feel particularly stressed or agitated. Neither did the Kazekage, which alleviated some of my worries. The rest of my thought processes, however, was devoted to observation.
This led me to notice the faint glitter of gold across all the surfaces in the building.

Rasa, despite his later actions as Fourth Kazekage, apparently wasn't an idiot. At the moment.

I actually had to use the stairs in this building. While some of the probably-Suna-ANBU front office workers gave me sidelong looks, I proceeded up through the building until reaching the Kazekage's office. I didn't know my way around, but I didn't feel like asking for directions from people who probably would have killed me without a second thought (and wouldn't have given me directions anyway).

So hooray for my chakra sense, which made all of that moot.

Outside of the door to the Kazekage's office, there was only one guard. He was probably about four years older than I was (as well as significantly taller) and wore Sunagakure's official uniform. Going by the color of his eyebrows, I assumed he had dark hair—given that the rest of his head was wrapped in a Suna sun-repelling turban, it was my best guess. He had a slightly darker skin-tone than I did, with a broad nose and prominent lips twisted into a mild grimace as soon as he realized I was heading his way.

He looked vaguely familiar in a way that put my figurative hackles up, but he let me past him and into the office unobstructed.

The office was meticulously neat in a way that Sensei's tried and frequently failed to be. There were no loose papers, whether in piles or not, but the Kazekage had left a number of thick binders on the corner of his desk, as though he had just been interrupted in the middle of studying something. Such as trade law, going by what I could read upside-down on the covers of said binders. Small, circular windows let filtered sunlight enter the office, but I imagined that they were hardly any larger than portholes on ships for security purposes.

The Kazekage himself, in his formal blue-trimmed robe but not wearing his official hat, sat behind his desk and leveled a cool, dark stare at me as I entered. I got the impression that he viewed me as a particularly uppity bug.

He wasn't a particularly tall or well-built man, but I could sense his chakra easily enough and I had no doubt that he could pump out as much killing intent as Sensei on a bad day. His hair was a sort of reddish brown that was squarely between what I remembered of Kakurō's and Gaara's tones, and I could see him in both of his sons. Or maybe the reverse. I could also feel his chakra all across the building, scattered among the particles of gold dust he controlled.

All that glitters was definitely gold in this case. But that didn't mean it wasn't potentially lethal.

And yet, while I remembered the Fourth Kazekage's combat abilities and their potential, I found myself distracted by my foreknowledge of what this man would do, if he thought it was for the good of his village. I'd used Gaara's story as a cautionary tale for a very good reason.

I still turned my attention to Sensei, who stood in front of the desk, and to Kakashi, who stood off toward the wall.

"You called, Hokage-sama?" I asked him in a completely level tone.

"I did." Sensei smiled, and I could feel his chakra exerting a sort of opposing pressure to the Kazekage's strength. It wasn't killing intent, or even undirected hostility. It was just a gentle push back—a refusal to be intimidated.

Kakashi's chakra was also maintaining strength, but with the crackling energy of lightning instead of
Sensei’s wind. I drew Isobu's chakra up, just a little, and ignored the pressure as best I could.

_Isobu, can you sense Shukaku around here?_

**Yes. But he's not listening at the moment.** Isobu gave me the impression that he tilted his head to one side. *I know he's ranting like a lunatic, but I can't quite hear what he's saying.*

Rats.

The Kazekage's door guard entered the room after me, crossing it to stand opposite Kakashi at the other wall. "Wall" was a bit of a misnomer, since the office was circular, but whatever. I headed over to stand next to Kakashi instead of just staying stock-still in the office like a dork.

Kakashi rolled his eye at me, and I shot him an annoyed look in return.

Sensei's chakra snapped out as clearly as if he had slapped both of us upside our heads. So we stopped after that.

…Why the hell were we even here?

"Kazekage-dono, allow me to formally introduce my student, Keisuke Gekkō." Sensei's diplomatic smile was honestly kind of creepy at this angle.

Well, that explained the bad feeling. I sighed inwardly as the Kazekage and his guard immediately stared at me.

I managed a crooked smile, though I found myself channeling Sensei and winking as well. "It's an honor to meet you, Kazekage-sama."

The Kazekage leaned forward, lacing his dingers together contemplatively in front of his face. "So, you've brought an Uchiha, a Hatake, an Inuzuka, and several extra shinobi, Hokage-dono. You must be very interested in personal security."

"Only as much as I'm interested in the results of the Exam," Sensei replied mildly. "Several members of my entourage wished to see the genin compete."

I had no doubt whatsoever that Sensei had fifteen reasons for nearly everything he did. It was not _nearly_ that simple. This discussion had several goals I didn't quite see yet. He'd get around to explaining things eventually.

Thinking that didn't stop me from being vaguely irritated by it.

"But not everyone has arrived for this meeting just yet." The Kazekage glanced at his bodyguard. "Baki-kun, see that the Ame delegation hasn't gotten lost."

_Baki?_

My mind went momentarily blank. And then there was a surging cacophony of questions.

Baki? The man who killed Hayate? The one who would go _entirely unpunished_, despite Yūgao seeking revenge? The man who would stay on as one of Gaara's advisors in his term as Kazekage?

Why wasn't I already _killing him stone dead?_

I was reaching for Isobu's chakra almost before I'd completed any of those thoughts.
Isobu stirred, baffled. **Who is—oh, no. This human? Here?**

Trust the monster in my head to know what was going on in it.

Isobu's chakra didn't surge. Instead, it sank into mine like fishhooks and **yanked** on the chakra in my brain hard enough to cause momentary disorientation—and to make his genjutsu powers known. His power tore through my rapidly mounting anger as fiercely as a crop thresher in a field of wheat, cutting it off.

**NOT. NOW.**

Vaguely, I was aware that my eyes had narrowed to slits and that the memory swarm in my mindscape had gone eerily silent. And yet, Isobu had snapped me away from unthinking, reflex-level anger and instead I just felt…cold.

Not fear-cold, but the kind of cold anger that didn't rouse Isobu unnecessarily. It probably wasn't because of something *I'd* done—instead, I later realized that Isobu had pulled the hot anger back and buried it in his own chakra like a flood dousing a flame.

It was the exact opposite of what should have happened.

Still, I didn't get more than a curious glance from the young Baki, who snapped to his Kazekage's orders and trooped dutifully out of the room without another look at me. I supposed that the burst of killing intent hadn't actually made it any further than the inside of my chakra coils, as bizarre as that sounded. Isobu had been on top of his game, apparently.

Kakashi, who was behind me, gently prodded my back. A static charge leapt from his hand to me, but no one else seemed to have noticed.

I nodded almost imperceptibly. *I'm okay. I'll explain later.* And I really wasn't looking forward to that, to say the least.

Sensei and the Kazekage made veiled remarks for another ten minutes or so while I tried to sort through what had been a "vision" and what had been the scars of my reincarnation trauma from years ago. I still went cold all over when I thought of Hayate's death in that other world, and it wasn't just because of the memories I'd sequestered away in the depths of my mindscape. No amount of meditation really seemed to make a dent in the fact that I'd spent six solid years with recurring nightmares.

Not all of those nightmares had been kind enough to just be memories. No, my brain had come up with original content with depressing frequency.

Kakashi zapped me out of my reverie just before I felt Baki reenter the building.

Bracing myself, I took a deep breath and focused on the chakra signature accompanying him. I felt a Water nature, like my own but without a Tailed Beast component. The second signature, oddly, came from something tiny located on our new guest's shoulder.

The hell?

A minute later, the mystery was solved.

Baki entered the room first, followed by a young man in a red-rimmed black cloak.

I blinked.
Orange hair in spikes as sharp as Sensei's, over brown eyes and a moderate tan from outdoor living. He wore an Ame headband with four vertical lines bisected by a single slash. And as though it was a lapel pin, a white paper flower sat innocently on his chest.

If the flower didn't practically bleed another person's chakra, maybe I'd have let it go unremarked. But I was pretty sure that it meant Konan had her eye on the proceedings.

He saw Sensei and grinned. And that grin was incredibly similar to what I remembered of Naruto's. Yahiko was Naruto's doppelgänger. Or brother from another mother. Or something like that. "Ah, Minato-senpai!" I could practically feel Sensei blink. "Yahiko of Akatsuki and Amegakure, honored to finally meet you."

"Ah, I remember Jiraiya-sensei speaking about you at some point." Sensei smiled suddenly. "So does that mean Jiraiya-sensei is around?"

Why was Jiraiya acting as a bodyguard for Yahiko? His allegiance to Konoha wasn't remotely a secret, so it'd look like we were trying to sneak extra people into the Exam. Sure, he had a double allegiance of sorts to Mount Myōboku, and he'd taught all three leaders of Akatsuki, but…

"Yeah, he's off checking in with your team. It's fine." Yahiko shrugged. "But anyway, let's get this meeting over with!"

On second thought, maybe Yahiko just hadn't thought about the implications. I'd gotten the impression from the manga that he was not exactly the brains of the operation, though he was its heart. Akatsuki would function as intended as long as he was alive.

The Kazekage looked between his two guests and looked like he wanted to facepalm. Still, he rallied his dignity and said, "So, let's discuss arrangements for tomorrow, now that we're all present."

In the end, the three village leaders managed to sort things out to their satisfaction. From what I actually understood, Yahiko wanted to have his shinobi—mainly a few Amegakure shinobi who had been Akatsuki members at some point—as close to him in the stands as possible. Sensei didn't mind that, because he had pretty much the same sentiment, but justified it with the Kazekage's box supposedly having the best vantage point in the stadium. The Kazekage, of course, had a home field advantage in that his shinobi outnumbered us about a hundred to one, and ended up acquiescing with a condescending sort of grace that belied his frustration.

I didn't blame him, exactly. It wasn't every day that you found out that the foreigners in one's village were actually all allied with each other and not necessarily with you.

Amegakure—or at least Akatsuki's founders—was bonded to Konoha via marriage (what with Nagato becoming Kushina's brother legally and then her marrying Sensei) and the fact that Jiraiya had taught and partially raised all four of the two villages' leaders. Sunagakure had no such bonds to either other village, and that was a bit…worrying. Especially when Ame was apparently a bit of a rising star.

At least nobody came to blows. (Though I did eye the gold dust stuck to our clothes with extreme suspicion.)

But even as we left the building a little over two hours later, I knew I wasn't getting out of things that easy.

"Yahiko-dono," Sensei began, once we'd reached the street again.

"Oh, no, you don't call me that." Yahiko waved it off. "Seriously, just Yahiko. You're my senpai as
far as being taught by Jiraiya-sensei goes, so that's the way it'll stay."

"...Yahiko, then." Sensei nodded. "Well, what I was going to say is that I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be available for a while. If you want to talk, please leave a message at the Desert Rose, and I'll see what I can do to arrange another meeting."

"What, really?" Yahiko frowned. "Why?"

"I...need to speak to Keisuke-kun, here." Sensei eyed me pointedly, and I winced. He continued, "But I really would like to talk to you. I'd like to share stories, too."

"Well, if you insist." Yahiko stopped. "Wait. Keisuke?"

I raised my hand meekly.

"Jiraiya-sensei mentioned you!" Yahiko went on with, "He said you were the kind of student he'd wished Minato-senpai would get. When he was mad at him. Like, 'May you have a student just like you.'"

"...Thanks?" I said blankly.

"Not really," Yahiko said, and shrugged. "Well, see you later."

As Yahiko left, Sensei muttered, "That is a very interesting young man."

"That's one word for him." Kakashi poked me again, though this time without any lightning. "So what was that?"

"What was what?" I asked, playing dumb.

Kakashi was having none of it. "Don't play dumb."

I had a vague impression of déjà vu and knew immediately that I wasn't going to get away from explaining my issues.

"Okay, okay, you win." I held up my hands in surrender before Kakashi could harmlessly zap me again to prove his point. Between him and Isobu's quick thinking, I'd avoided causing a scene, but it had been a close call that couldn't go unpunished.

Sensei said, "Good. Then let's get back to the inn right now. I think we need to have a full team meeting."

"Plus Rin?" I asked, kind of hoping for a mercy kill. Rin could guilt trip people.

"Yes."

Dammit.

"I can go find Obito," Kakashi volunteered.

Sensei nodded. "Please do."

Crap.

I sighed deeply, and Sensei flicked the back of my head.
"Ow!"

"Don't relax yet, Kei. We need to talk."

We need to talk. In social terms, I was in for a whuppin'.

Sensei took a bit of mercy on me and didn't immediately go in for the kill when everyone was assembled in his hotel room. No, instead he had tea brought to the room (and tested for poisons), and we assembled around the folding table in his room on some of the spare futons. Obito sat next to me while Kakashi was at Rin's left elbow, looking across the table at me between sips of tea. Sensei presided over our meeting without remarking on the tension in the room, apparently content to wait us out.

Well, to wait me out.

For about five minutes. Sensei eventually broke the awkward silence with, "So...what was that about? I thought you'd be happy to spend time outside of the village for once."

I couldn't tell if he was deliberately playing dumb or not. I'd thought it had been pretty obvious that I'd been triggered by hearing Baki's name, and realizing he was within striking distance. Or at least I, knowing the source and reasoning behind my anger, could call it obvious. Maybe Sensei suspected that I had lost control of Isobu?

Silly Sensei. I didn't control Isobu. It was a relationship. It was based on mutual respect. Or possibly on driving Isobu out of his mind with worry. Otherwise he would never have saved me from my long-stoked hatred.

After taking one last sip of tea, I turned to Obito and said, "So, Obito. Remember the nightmares I had as a kid?"

Obito blinked, looking rather confused. "...Um." His face screwed up in thought. I probably hadn't said anything directly to him about my worries over my brother for years, though the worry had grown and abated over that timeframe. "About Hayate? I remember you didn't sleep much when we were in the Academy, and you...I think you said, once, that you had nightmares about your brother. In the hospital?"

Probably after a freak-out of some sort. It'd been...what, back when we'd first met the Chinatsugumi? That had been a long time ago.

Kakashi nodded, and I vaguely remembered that he'd been there at the time. He'd listened, hadn't he?

Sensei and Rin just looked confused. Sensei did remember when my brother had been kidnapped and had seen the trauma recovery process, but probably didn't make the connection between Hayate and Baki. Meanwhile, Rin had probably seen Hayate's medical records at some point, but she hadn't gotten the low-down about my myriad issues.

In response to Obito's guess, I murmured, "Yeah, I did. Only I kinda lied. Just a bit."

Or I'd been lying like a rug. There were white lies and then there were the epic lies of omission I'd been practicing practically since the day I was born.

Then Sensei snapped his fingers, as though an idea had just popped up. "You mentioned once that that young ROOT agent, Kabuto, could be involved in your brother's death. It was when we were discussing Yakushi-san." Sensei frowned thoughtfully, taking another sip of his tea. Then, "Now
that Yakushi-san is on our side, I can't dispute the results, but still…"

I winced. "Yeah. So…I may have lied a bit when I talked about…um. The future world thing. By omission." I made a vague gesture with my right hand that could have been interpreted as either a wobble indicating "so-so" or maybe just an attempt to ward off criticism. "The whole story was a little longer than I made it out to be."

Rin reached across the table and grasped my left hand in a supportive, firm grip. She said earnestly, "We're listening."

"Yeah, I can tell," I grumbled. "Anyway, skip forward ten years from now. Hayate makes chūnin and then special jōnin at some point, though I don't know when, and gets engaged to Yūgao along the way. Keep in mind that I'm a complete nobody in that world. Ergo, non-factor."

Kakashi frowned. "…So you're not related to Hayate in that world."

All too accurate for my tastes.

I made a face at him before continuing with, "Probably not. Assume I don't exist there. It's easier that way." I took a deep breath. "So for some reason or other, a whole bunch of stuff happens and Sunagakure ends up allied with Otogakure during a Chūnin Exam in Konoha. Kabuto—that ROOT kid Yakushi-san raised and the kid we still haven't found—is on Oto's side. Baki—the future jōnin we just met—is on Suna's side. And both of them are not on Konoha's side."

Obito mumbled, "I'm following so far, but…"

I talked right over him, saying in a strained voice, "So my brother, who is much older than he is now, stumbles into this midnight conspiracy while investigating something else." Like Gaara murdering that Oto genin for being too stupid to live. Who the hell willingly challenged Gaara because they thought he was in the way? "And he finds out that they're planning on staging a joint Suna-Oto invasion of Konoha, with the intention of wiping us off the map."

Sensei and Kakashi both went very quiet and dangerously serious.

"Suna and Oto? They're a super-small village, though, aren't they?" Rin said, confused.

"Orochimaru's their leader. Enough said," I almost snapped. I shook my head and proceeded with the air of someone trying to get everything over as quickly as possible. Because I was. "So anyway, Hayate finds out and thinks maybe it's a good idea to go warn people. But he's not as sneaky as a trained ROOT agent and a Suna jōnin, or else Baki figured out Wind-based sensing somehow. Hell if I know."

And here, my voice went almost hollow, "Short version: Hayate gets spotted, fights, and gets killed inside of five minutes."

"But Kei," Rin begins, "Baki-san hasn't—"

"I know." I glared into the depths of my teacup. "I know about a million things have changed between the then and the now and I'm half-convinced I'm going to die of stress before Hayate dies fighting the same guy. Too many things have changed already."

"But it doesn't change the fact that, until I was eight, I was beaten over the head with trauma nightmares for years." I ran a hand over my face. "My rational mind says nothing's going to happen. The remainders of those visions say 'Who cares? Have more nightmares!' Isobu had to tell me I was being stupid. Isobu. Because whenever my brother's in trouble or if I think he is, any Tailed Beast freakouts are most definitely my fault."
"You can't kill someone over something they haven't done yet." Rin was sweet, really, but that wasn't how our world worked.

"Actually, we kinda already do." That was Obito. His chakra said he was looking around the table with a guileless air. "I mean, that's why ANBU takes Hokage-sanctioned assassination missions."

I looked up to see Rin giving Obito a "you're not helping" look.

"Are you going to be able to handle seeing Baki-san again?" Sensei asked, watching my reactions carefully.

"I…might? The initial shock's over." It was like ripping a bandage off, in theory. I could probably desensitize myself to triggers like Baki, but it wouldn't be comfortable at all. I'd be edgy as hell.

I was almost seeing why people had decided to seal the Tailed Beasts into children. That way, at least you had a chance of noticing preexisting issues before your human weapon developed a hair trigger. Adult or teenaged shinobi had already learned to hide those kinds of things from prying eyes.

Then again, in my case, beggars couldn't be choosers.

"I don't actually know for certain how I'll react if someone doesn't distract me when I see him again." I propped my elbow on the table and leaned my chin on the heel of my upraised hand. "But I think I need to meditate to get my brain back in order. Maybe talk to Isobu. Maybe nap through the afternoon. I don't know."

"It sounds like you're going to need an intervention team if it comes down to that." Sensei poured himself another cup of tea. "I could act, since I know the seal on you is still active, but leaving the box myself would cause the Kazekage to react however he feels is necessary."

"Kakashi and I could do it," Obito suggested. "Couldn't we?"

"Not if one of you is supposed to be 'guarding' me." Sensei gave me a level look. "I wasn't expecting your visions to be a liability, Kei. Or your emotions."

"I'd argue that in this case, me not having a level head is worse than Isobu—at least he doesn't really care about people enough to get angry over them." I sighed. "And from what I know, Baki isn't a bad person. In that scenario he was following orders, and Hayate was on the wrong end of them. So…"

I could probably rationalize my way past that semi-irrational fear if I had enough time to turn it over in my head. I had a little less trouble viewing the Kazekage as a practical man who made bad decisions, but then, he hadn't actually given any orders here against Konoha, and he probably hadn't ordered Gaara's uncle to kill him yet. Maybe the dissonance was because I knew the Kazekage would recant his attitude post-mortem, and Gaara would be a greater Kazekage than his father had ever been once he got his head back in order. Baki, though, had just killed my brother and moved on. Nothing personal.

"Are you going to meditate?" Kakashi asked pointedly.

I nodded. "Yeah. Otherwise I'm a menace to society, I guess."
"Right. Summoning Jutsu." Kakashi slammed his hand down on the table, which was promptly engulfed in smoke.

When the chakra smoke cleared, Pakkun was sitting in front of Kakashi and inspecting the tea cake next to his master's cup. Offhandedly, Pakkun asked, "What'd you need me for?"

Kakashi gave his dog a pointed look, and Pakkun blithely ate the tea cake anyway. "Stay here with Kei."

Pakkun nodded. "Right." Then the pug hopped off the table and walked around until he could lie down next to me and lean against my leg.

I started petting him immediately.

"While you're meditating," Sensei mused aloud, "can you see if Isobu-san can pass a message to Kurama-san?"

I said, "Probably. Why?"

**Why in the world is he asking me?**

"I think I might've forgotten to take care of something back home. I know I left Kushina to deal with it, but I'm a little anxious to hear the results." Sensei smiled innocently, but his phrasing sent up a few alarm klaxons in my head anyway.

"...I'll see what I can do." I couldn't promise more than that, with Sensei being deliberately, ominously vague.

"Please do," Sensei said mildly. "And by this time tomorrow, have yourself under control."

I inclined my head, formally. I could hear the Hokage-ness in his voice and whether uncomfortable or not, I didn't want to disappoint him. Or miss the Finals. While I was sure watching my brother fight would get my blood pressure up, I was sure it would bug Hayate if I didn't show.

I could almost imagine his thirteen-year-old voice, cracking a bit in despair, "Where were you, Sis? Why weren't you there?"

Yeah, I didn't want to have to live with that. So I had to get myself under control.

In time, my team rotated out of the inn. Rin was going to check out the Sunagakure hospital, accompanied by Kakashi, while Obito was just going to go exploring. I didn't ask what else they wanted to do, since I was effectively under self-imposed seclusion to sort myself out. Hopefully they'd remember to get cute souvenirs or something.

I went back to the room I'd been sleeping in beforehand, rolled my futon back out, and decided to lie down. On my stomach, with my arms stretched out under my pillow.

Pakkun ate the other tea cakes before following me, so I made sure to pay attention to him. I didn't know how a summoned dog's metabolism differed from that of a normal dog, but I didn't imagine that so much extra sugar would be good for his stomach.

Pakkun didn't actually show any signs of distress, though. So, eventually, I had to meditate for real.

With my fingers running through Pakkun's fur, I took the metaphorical plunge.
I more or less bypassed my mindscape this time, heading down to the Tailed Beast collective subconscious whatever the heck. For the most part, I was actually comforted by its familiarity. The space itself was seemingly infinite, covered in water that was barely two centimeters deep and barely enough to create perfect mirrored reflections. Down here, I didn't have any particular powers like I did in my mindscape, but I was able to sit and chat with Isobu without any worry of being scoped out by a mind-reader. Even of the Sharingan sort.

But the yellow-skied salt flats were occupied. Mainly because there was a big blood-red fox lying in the middle of it like a sunbather, with his nine colossal tails idly waving behind him like a long cloak.

"What are you doing here, human?" Yin Kurama asked, rolling over so his feet were back under him. I was sitting on Isobu's head by then, with my legs dangling down between two of his forehead spikes. Underneath me, Isobu lifted himself up on his forelimbs and stomped toward Kurama. It made for a rocky ride, but probably not as much as, say, riding a horse. Isobu was big enough compared to me that I could have easily wondered if I was caught in an earthquake.

"We're here to get some answers." Isobu dropped back onto his belly, sending waves across the flats. He folded his arms in front of him like a person, and rested his head on top of them. Yin Kurama's tails lashed. "Is it about the fight? That's old news."

"Fight?" I asked. Panic seized me again. "Wait, did something happen in Konoha after we left?"

"A minor matter that angered the humans, I suppose." Yin Kurama shrugged. "It wasn't important enough for my host to require my help, so it's not enough for me to bother with at all."

"Do you have any idea who was involved? Or what happened? Is Kushina-san safe, Kurama-san?" "Fight?" I asked. Panic seized me again. "Wait, did something happen in Konoha after we left?"

"A minor matter that angered the humans, I suppose." Yin Kurama shrugged. "It wasn't important enough for my host to require my help, so it's not enough for me to bother with at all."

"Do you have any idea who was involved? Or what happened? Is Kushina-san safe, Kurama-san?" "Do you have any idea who was involved? Or what happened? Is Kushina-san safe, Kurama-san?"

"I don't know. I'm not her secretary, so don't expect me to write down all your questions for her." Yin Kurama turned away.

Isobu grumbled, "That's just because your handwriting's terrible."

Yin Kurama growled, "You take that back!"

…What.

Just…what?

"The Seven-, Six-, Five-, and Two-Tails are worse than I am," Yin Kurama snarled, all of his tails seeming to puff up.

And when nine tails on a fox that size all decided to go for the "I wanna be bigger than I am" animal reflex, it was a little like Yin Kurama had suddenly doubled in mass. Despite its usual tendency to lie flat, he had more hair, proportionately speaking, than Cousin It.
"That's because they don't even have hands!" Isobu snapped back.

Wait a minute.

I leaned over and thumped Isobu's horns a few times to get his attention before saying, "That's still half of the Tailed Beasts. And besides, there's nothing really stopping Kurama-san from learning calligraphy."

"There isn't?" Yin Kurama's tails stilled, his ears lifted, and his head tilted to his left. His body language was a weird mishmash of humanlike and canid, and the result was generally mixed messages.

"Kushina-san was one of my three teachers when it comes to fūinjutsu. If you asked nicely, I'm sure she could help you. You have hands that are built pretty close to hers, so it's not like she'd have to learn new techniques to help you." I swung my legs as I thought, then added, "I mean, it might keep you from getting as bored if you had something to work on, right? It's productive that way."

"...It's an idea." Yin Kurama settled down again. Maybe it was just me, but he seemed more relaxed when Isobu wasn't hammering on one of his few insecurities. "What were you asking about?"

"What did that fight involve?" I asked, leaning forward intently.

"My host lost her temper with some other human. Her prey tried to escape without her permission." Yin Kurama's fangs were bared in a vicious grin. "You know, sometimes you humans aren't so bad."

That did not bode well for whoever had tried to cross Kushina. "Kushina isn't violent without a reason. What did her prey look like?"

"All you humans look alike to me. You're small." Yin Kurama appeared to think about it, and one of his long ears flicked. "Bandages? Black hair, maybe."

"That could describe half of the humans in the village." Isobu shifted uncomfortably. Maybe he was wondering where this conversation could end up.

"I could just get her here to talk to you." Yin Kurama's tails stretched skyward, or at least upward into what ought to have been just the sky. Instead, they vanished about halfway along their length, into apparently thin air.

And then there was the sound of barely-audible screaming.

A tiny red-streaked blur streaked out of the sky like a comet, plummeting toward Yin Kurama's back as his tails reappeared and curled around his body. Then the blur hit the top of his tails, ending up engulfed in his long red fur.

Kushina's voice rang out from the mass of the giant fox monster's tails, "What the hell was that for, Kurama?"

Yin Kurama's middle tail lashed, caught something, and pulled loose from the mass. "You have visitors, host."

Kushina was clinging to the fur of that tail, looking disgruntled. She was also wearing her jōnin uniform, and I wondered if that meant she was also wearing it in real life.
"Visit—oh!" She flung herself loose from Yin Kurama's fur and landed squarely on his head, waving. "Kei-chan, Isobu-san! I didn't know we could talk from so far away!"

"Why does he rate a '-san'?" Yin Kurama demanded, his ears coming up again.

"Because," Kushina said, then paused. "Well, I don't know. He just looks like one. So, what's going on over there in Sunagakure?"

"I met the man who killed my brother in the other world." As soon as I said it, I saw Kushina blink. I went on, "He seems nice, but it was…not fun."

"Is this another thing like with Obito?" Kushina asked.

Tobi had been another source of nightmares over the years, but Obito being around, alive, and cheery had mitigated most of that trauma in the same way that vaccines inoculated against disease. Obito hadn't genuinely scared me in quite a while, with Tobi as a factor or not.

"Kind of. But Baki-san was following orders." I shoved that topic aside as hard as I could, and said, "But Sensei wanted me to check in with you, since this communication method is faster than birds and it's undetectable. So what happened in the village? Kurama-san said there was a fight."

"Oh? Well, there was. Sort of." Kushina shrugged. "Minato asked me to help Tsunade-sama keep the village safe from ROOT, because they've been lying low since he organized the ANBU manhunts for the various members."

So that was why I hadn't been hearing much on that front. I wasn't involved in the investigation, of course, but I'd still been a little antsy about how quiet ROOT had been. Kakashi hadn't had any news to tell me, so I'd wondered if the trail had gone cold.

And the last anyone had said, Danzō had been confined to bedrest after breaking his hip or something,

"…I take it that Sensei deciding to leave the village for a while was well-timed." I frowned.

"And ROOT made their move," Kushina agreed. "Right into the trap I set up for them."

"Which was…?"

Tsunade was the genius medical ninja who had quite literally changed the face of Konoha's war machine by making us invest in medics. Having her and Kushina in the village would have made the village too dangerous for any foreign foe to confront directly. Not that most of them knew that, but I imagined than an insider like Danzō would have known better than to underestimate the two women. Kushina's jinchūriki status was well-known to Konoha's elders, and Tsunade had been a "speaks for herself" kind of threat. Politically and otherwise.

Looked like both of us had been wrong.

I'd assumed that Danzō's forces weren't idiots.

He'd assumed he could recover from that mistake.

"Around their leader, of course. It was a rescue mission." Kushina sat down on Yin Kurama's head and smiled unpleasantly as her eyes went red and her pupils turned into vertical slits. "Shimura's dead."
"...And we're sure about that." Holy crap. If it was true, then maybe the Uchiha massacre wasn't going to happen! "We're absolutely sure that he's dead. We have a body?"

"We do, sort of." Kushina wobbled a hand in midair. "He had some kind of space-time seal that was supposed to kill everything within a twenty-meter radius around him the second he died, and then cram it into a storage seal. Sort of like what Minato used on that black blob thing from the Tenth."

"No one got caught in it?" I demanded, sitting up. "Please tell me no one got caught in it."

And hadn't he had some kind of...right! He'd been able to use Izanami in the other timeline. Between the ten stolen Sharingan and the Sharingarm he'd mounted them into, he'd been spamming the shit out of the reality-modifying technique. But here, he must not have had time to complete whatever research had gotten that arm for him. Nor had he been able to take Shisui's eye, which was the most dangerous of the lot.

Hard to steal someone's Mangekyō Sharingan when the person in question didn't actually have one yet. And, with luck, Shisui would never be in a position to get it again.

"It didn't even go off." Kushina grinned. "Come on, Kei-chan. What do you take me for? I've forgotten more about seals than Shimura ever knew. And I checked the captive ROOT agents for seals after his death, too. He's gone."

"How'd you stop that seal, though?" Hadn't Tobi needed to intervene to save Sasuke, when the kid finally offed Shimura? Kamui was like a half-step of bullshit down from Izanami, and Tobi had had that at his disposal too.

"My chakra chains aren't just for binding things." Kushina smiled. "They can shut down all the chakra moving in anyone who gets caught by them. Just leaves brute strength. And while Shimura was a tough old man, no one can hit harder than Tsunade-sama."

So, like Nagato's chakra receivers, but using the chakra chains as anchors instead...

I guess that solved one mystery about the Uzumaki clan. They'd been blessed with more than ridiculous vitality. Impossible-for-anyone-else fūinjutsu seemed right up their alley.

"So I'm going to assume that Shimura got his ribs caved in," I said thoughtfully. "And that, what, his troops just rolled over and gave up?"

"No." Kushina went solemn for a moment. "But the fight was underground, so it was at least contained. The ROOT extraction team couldn't get out of the fortified bunker thanks to Shiranui-kun's portable barrier kunai. I didn't even have to reinforce that. Then Falcon's team was forced to take the ROOT agents down hard. Only one survivor, and he barely lasted long enough to cough up the location of their training facility."

Which I was going to assume had not been possible before Danzō's death. Even for a Yamanaka. Otherwise ROOT would have been found out the instant that ANBU did infiltration checks.

But hadn't one of Danzō's bodyguards been a Yamanaka? That was like putting the mole in charge of mole-hunting if that guy had anything to do with the investigations.

"We're going to hit them next." Kushina looked contemplatively up at the sky. "Or at least, ANBU are. Hopefully."

"And you're saying that the Hokage planned all of this?" Isobu asked. "He isn't clairvoyant."
Kushina said, "No, but he was forewarned, and had more options than just sitting on the issue. That part was driving him crazy. Drove me crazy, too. Remind me to give you the first draft of the speech Minato wanted to make when he finally got Danzō by the short hairs. We weren't charitable."

I stared. "...I'm going to guess that it's not appropriate for all audiences."

"No. But I think you'd appreciate it." Kushina shook her head. "Tell Minato that his plan worked out. No one got hurt on our side, not even Falcon's team. We're just cleaning up."

"I will." And maybe I'd try my very best to never get on either of their bad sides ever again. And then I remembered what Yin Kurama had said earlier in the conversation. "Uh...by the way, is Tenzō-kun all right?"

Kushina tilted her head to one side.

"Kurama-san mentioned him," I added.

Kushina rapped her knuckles on the top of Yin Kurama's head, muttering something, before saying, "He's fine, Kei-chan. He got a little roughed up, but Tsunade-sama has him now."

That just raised more questions. I could guess and say that her tone implied that Tenzō was home free from all things ROOT, but the words she used suggested a darker meaning. The phrasing was just ambiguous enough to be worrying in my agitated mental state.

"Did he defect back to ROOT?" I asked sharply.

A little taken aback by my tone, Kushina said carefully, "No. Tenzō-kun was hurt when he joined in the initial brawl against the ROOT extraction team. Broke his wrist." Kushina frowned. "Where did that come from?"

"I had a run-in with someone who accidentally gave me nightmares for six years," I said tersely. "I may not be thinking rationally."

Or be officially paranoid.

Isobu added, "She isn't. While in this village, we've already had a near-miss."

"What kind of near-miss?" Kushina hopped off Yin Kurama's head and easily floated over to Isobu's. She sat down next to me and took my right hand in hers. "Kei-chan?"

I told her, this time without leaving anything out. So did Isobu.

"Oh, Kei-chan," Kushina murmured, giving me a hug. "Your brother will be all right. You have Rin-chan and Obito and Minato to help make sure he does, you know. Not just the power of a single person and her inner demon."

"I would argue that the inner demon factor changes things." Isobu said flatly.

"Reluctantly, I'm forced to agree with you." Yin Kurama yawned, then. "Smash them all like the pests they are and there won't be a threat."

Oh, what a time for these two to start getting along.

"Thank you both for thinking positive," Kushina sniped at them both.
"I'm sorry," I mumbled, when both Tailed Beasts settled back down. "I didn't mean to make it sound like Tenzō-kun was on Shimura's side. Or even to get that close to losing my temper over something that's just in my head. I'm supposed to be trying to meditate, but then I decided I should talk to you first and…well."

"There's nothing really wrong with having the occasional doubt or bad thought, as long as you don't act on it." Kushina patted my hand. "Or, if you do, you think on it before its make or break time. That way at least you can say that you were trying to come up with a better solution."

"Yeah." I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I'll give Sensei the all-clear from Konoha after I actually meditate. Is that all right?"

Kushina nodded. "The situation isn't urgent here anymore. We're fine. And I'll give Tenzō-kun an extra melonpan and say it was from you, okay?"

"Good idea." Even if he'd probably wonder why I was apologizing through a proxy. I hadn't done anything to him recently other than besmirch his name while emotionally compromised.

With a final wave from Kushina and a nod from Yin Kurama, both of them vanished.

"…Isobu, they're scary when they're working together," I admitted, once they were gone. Sure, I felt better, but Kushina and Tsunade had apparently dismantled ROOT without Yin Kurama's help. Uzumaki women might have just been born more terrifying than average. "I'm not sure which one's scarier."

Isobu nodded sagely. "I'm not sure if she's a bad influence on Kurama or if Kurama's a bad influence on her."

We couldn't exactly do anything about it now. "Either way, it probably averages out a little south of 'friendly.' Let's head back and see if any time's passed since we got here."

And a little after that, I "woke up" exactly where I remembered lying down. Isobu and I both checked for genjutsu, intruders, or any other interesting surprises, but found none. Pakkun was the only person in the Konoha section of the inn besides me, which suited me just fine.

Pakkun had migrated onto my back, but he just gave an audible doggy sigh and said, "Are you planning on getting up already? I just got comfortable."

I reached awkwardly back to scratch under his chin. "How long was I out?"

"About five minutes." Pakkun leaned into my hand, closing his eyes. "Now can you hold still so I can take a nap?"

"…Sure." I could meditate lying down. And he'd asked. I got comfortable again and Pakkun got up, turned in a circle, and settled back down again.

We had an actual quiet hour in there, total.
"You need to learn how to use my powers more than you have already."

That was the first thing Isobu told me, upon being asked for suggestions during my meditation period. I had asked for "ways to control myself more effectively," so I wasn't exactly sure why he suggested that.

We were back in the mindscape, and he was bobbing in the shallows of the bay like a giant greenish iceberg, while I was lying on the sand. Sure, we weren't actually on a beach, but I liked to think that the sensation of sun on my face was a pretty good substitute for sunburn. And while we were in here, we could easily be heard from any place in it, without having to shout, unless Isobu and I were mumbling to ourselves.

"Why's that?" I asked, though it was a stupid question. In order to be an effective shinobi, I needed to know all of the tools in my arsenal. While I had no problem with using Isobu's chakra as a way to enhance my strength, speed, and sensing ability, those things didn't modify my fighting style much. I had to put less time into retraining myself as long as I didn't change how I fought.

"It's fine to use my chakra alone," Isobu said, "but you're not going to reach your full potential that way."

Yeah, I wasn't.

But at the same time, what powers did Isobu have? Powerful genjutsu? Great, but not what I specialized in. I had devised workarounds that let me use them with the speed I was used to, but I didn't have much interest in things other than just blowing the enemy to into bone chunks. What else could he do?

"What do you know about coral?" Isobu asked me, sounding like he was trying not to growl.

"Microscopic living creatures that live together in superstructures generally called reefs by humans," I rattled off, digging my toes into the sand on Isobu's beach.

"…Yes. But pretend you don't have to think about all that." Isobu grumbled a bit, then said, "A host using my chakra can use our combined control over water to cause coral to grow anywhere you touch. It's called the Coral Palm jutsu."

"And?" I asked. I remembered a few scraps from my old ecology lessons, and coral was always described as "fragile" whenever the topic came up. But that might've had something to do with water temperature…
"It's organic rock that fights chakra directly. I've only ever seen one person escape, and he did it by hacking his arm off," Isobu told me flatly.

"Did he die?" Morbid curiosity. I swear it was going to get me in trouble one day.

"Yes." Isobu seemed to purr with satisfaction, which…honestly? It just sounded weird coming from a non-feline form. And from a rib cage that big.

Then again, he could talk. What did I know about what sounds Tailed Beasts could make?

"Isobu…I don't know how to say this," I admitted, scratching the back of my neck, "but I've kind of always thought of using that much of your chakra as a weapon of last resort. I mean, I can deal with the little enhancements and the other little bonuses, but my fighting style would have to be completely useless before I'd be willing to go full Version Two Chakra Cloak. Or to try a full transformation."

"Are you afraid that your seal won't survive it?" Isobu asked, as his middle tail slammed down into the water and something fishlike in it proceeded to die of hydrostatic shock.

(Either the fish-creature's death had just been that obvious, or else Isobu was feeding my brain bizarre phantom sensations.)

"A little, but not as much as I would have before Sensei and Kushina modified it." I sighed. "Not to mention that there are only about three people in the whole village I can practice against if we do go all the way. And Jiraiya would do the sensible thing and just drop Gamabunta on us."

"What about this?" Isobu flicked another of his tails, and a memory fragment went careening straight for my hand. I managed to snatch my hand out of the way in time, but Isobu just continued with, "Look at that one."

I picked up the memory fragment with my nearly-impaled hand and…Oh. This one had a looping clip of Naruto in full Sage Mode, as he was going to confront Pain with four summoned toads at his back.

"Okay, you have a point there. Though I don't know if Sensei is as comfortable with this as I'd need him to be." I frowned thoughtfully as the image-Naruto proceeded to pick up a summoned rhinoceros as big as a tanker truck and hurl it the approximate length of a football stadium. "But if he is, yeah, I'd be okay trying to find our limits."

Mainly because Sage Mode could let people tank attacks they otherwise wouldn't survive.

"Then it's a plan. We simply have to make it through tomorrow." Isobu settled back down in the bay, apparently content for now. "It will be interesting to go all-out on the man who sealed Kurama."

…Okay, I was just gonna have to ignore that. Or else I wasn't going to get any sleep later.

I caught up to Sensei a while after that, since I still needed to finish my actual meditation and people kept interrupting. Checking my chakra sense once I was done, I pinpointed him as he was coming back to our inn from the Ame delegation's place. There were probably about seven Ame-nin in town, even with Konan's flower throwing a false positive, and he hadn't needed anyone to chaperone him there.

Especially since Jiraiya was accompanying him back.
I managed to get their attention inside the inn. Not a major feat, given how small the lobby was, but...well, whatever. Mission accomplished.

"Sensei, Kushina-san is all right," I told Sensei, with Pakkun still on my shoulder. I imagined that my padded flak jacket was more comfortable than the sandy ground, so I didn't mind the extra weight either. I'd trained with weirder handicaps. "Everything’s been taken care of.

Sensei blinked, momentarily nonplussed, before a light lit up behind his eyes. "Oh! That was actually faster than I expected."

"For what?" I asked him.

"For you to get back to me, actually." Sensei grinned, the picture of innocence. "I knew I left the village in good hands."

This Hokage of yours is a little too confident.

*It might be partly an act, but he's masking his chakra too well for me to tell for sure.*

Sensei patted my shoulder. "If you hurry, you should still be able to catch your teammates wandering around town. This is our rest day, so you should enjoy it."

"Sensei…during the exams, am I allowed to cheer even though I might be in the box with you?" I asked. The idea had been bothering me off-and-on, ever since I heard my brother was in the finals. If I was supposed to be a guard, wouldn't that mean I needed to maintain a dignified front for my Kage's sake? "Since Hayate's a finalist and all."

Sensei brought his hand to his chin and made a show of thinking about it. "Well…"

"Oh, like you're going to be quiet, Minato." Jiraiya slapped Sensei's shoulder, nearly sending him careening into me. "Let Kei-kun have some fun with this."

"It's an important event, Jiraiya-sensei." My blond teacher, despite his words, seemed to be fighting the urge to smile. He cleared his throat and told me, "Kei, for the duration of the Chūnin Exams, consider yourself relieved of duty. I can get Kakashi to take care of it."

"Thanks, Sensei." Oh, and one more thing… "By the way, have you mastered Sage Mode? Either of you?"

Sensei groaned, exasperated. "I know we've talked about this, but Kei, can you please not bring up everything I'm working on? I like to pretend I have some secrets."

Jiraiya gave me a shrewd look. "No. But why do you need to know?"

"I need to get more training in. So, I'm willing to spar with someone who can take me on at full tilt." I crossed my arms and shifted my weight, so I had my hips cocked to one side.

"Um… Well, I'm only up to three minutes, so we'll have to see how this goes." Sensei shook his head. "Kushina's been telling me I need to train seriously anyway."

"It could be interesting." Jiraiya rubbed his chin, contemplating.

And maybe it'd help him prepare for possibly facing down his godson in fifteen years.

"Well, Kei, you're free to do whatever you want at this point." Sensei waved a hand dismissively. "Go on now."
I explored Sunagakure after that.

Maybe it was just my jinchūriki status talking, but I didn't feel any particular need to immediately find someone to hang out with. Instead, I walked around town and tried to take in the sights out of a much-belated sense of wonder.

Between a late arrival to the village last night, and an early meeting with the Kazekage, I hadn't gotten a chance to check out the village itself. It wasn't my first time in another shinobi village—I'd been to Tanigakure and to Jōmae too—but it was my first time exploring another of the Big Five. And it was amazing how different things were once you got into another village's territory.

The Land of Wind wasn't all desert, but Sunagakure had been one since the village's founding. Someone or something, back in the day, had smashed a gigantic hole into the sandstone and left a valley behind. The valley, because it had exactly one inlet, had become a fortified town and, eventually, a shinobi village. Looking at the walls, I wondered if a meteorite impact had something to do with it. If I tried to edit the buildings out with my mind, it did kind of look like a huge crater…

But anyway, that was a mere idle thought.

The buildings themselves weren't made of wood, but rather a sort of clay composite that could shed daytime heat. It reminded me of the way that native Arizonans had once made entire cities out of the same material, though obviously the folks who lived there hadn't decided to include power cables running from building to building. The awnings, too, were something undeniably Suna instead of having easy equivalents in other cultures.

As a foreign shinobi, I obviously wasn't allowed to head into certain areas. The village walls, for example, were not open to tourists. I wasn't supposed to be anywhere near the administrative center, either, so I didn't go there. The Academy was also out, for obvious reasons.

Instead, I visited the marketplace.

Which was underground.

Actually, that's not quite accurate. Suna's market for nonperishable items, like cloth and dried spices, was on the ground level. So were their hot food stands, since steam and smoke were more of a hazard where airflow was a problem. On the other hand, anything that could rot or end up getting mummified by the hot desert air tended to be stored below ground.

It still smelled a lot like old fish.

I was in search of something a little different than fish, though. I wanted to see if Suna had some very particular things.

"Is there anything to eat down here?" Pakkun asked, from around ankle height. He got tired of pretending to be my parrot at some point.

"Kakashi-kun, this will be perfect!"

And by "particular things," I did not mean my teammates. I was actually craving pomegranates. I hadn't seen the darn things for over fifteen years and was rather looking forward to being able to juice a few. Sure, I'd probably ruin a shirt or two, but it'd be worth it.

But hey, you take what you can get. I waved in their direction, though I was probably not too visible in the crappy underground lightning. It turned everything red. So, I waved again and shouted, "Rin!"
"Kei!" was Rin's quick reply. She shoved something into Kakashi's arms before pushing her way through the crowd toward me.

Some Suna civilians gave her dirty looks. That stopped once Pakkun bit one of them in the ankle, then disappeared into the throng.

"Kei, what are you doing here? I thought you'd be meditating all afternoon." Rin was wearing one of those Suna headdress things, which blocked out excess sunlight to help prevent heatstroke and sunburn. I wasn't sure why—it certainly wasn't that hot out.

When in Rome, I guess.

"I got finished early. So, what have you two been doing?" I asked, as Rin grabbed my arm and dragged me back to where Kakashi was paying for…whatever they'd bought.

"I wanted to try some of these things. Look, candied dates!" Rin enthused. "They also have special breads you never see anywhere in Konoha."

Well, if rice needed tons of water to grow—and it did—then obviously different regions would have to explore different culinary options. Konoha tended to prefer a combination of rice and various grains, including buckwheat, while I was pretty sure that Sunagakure couldn't get away with that without importing a majority of their food. So if they had a bit of a Middle Eastern flair, more power to them.

"Not exactly surprising." Kakashi was holding a pinkish fruit that looked rather familiar. Pakkun had already clambered up onto his shoulder and was sitting there patiently. "I've never eaten one of these before."

"I think that was what I was looking for." I sidled over to the stall with Kakashi in front of it, looking at the wares as the shopkeeper looked askance at all three of us. "How much for these?"

The merchant named his price—kind of expensive for a fruit so difficult to eat—and I walked out of the market with two of them a few minutes later. Granted, they were in Rin's grocery bag, but it was the thought that counted, right? And I'd be able to test my new knife skills on an unnecessarily complex fruit.

"What did you get?" I asked Rin, as we headed out into the sunlight again.

"This flatbread, more candied dates…" Rin dug around in her bag for a moment before pulling out a clear glass jar of something salmon-colored. I had to look closer to be sure of what it was, and remained nonplussed even after I realized what it was.

"…Pickled ginger? I thought we had that stuff at home." Granted, I didn't use it much, even when eating out, but I was still certain the Land of Fire had ginger farms somewhere.

"But the Land of Wind has a different kind," Rin insisted, placing the jar back in her bag. "And it's not any more expensive here, so why not? We can just seal up all of our stuff in one of those sealing scrolls for the trip home."

"Point taken." I shrugged. "Kakashi, did you get anything?"

Kakashi nodded, but said, "Earlier, I did. A cactus."

"…For you, or for Tenzō-kun?" I asked, genuinely curious. Kakashi wasn't around the village as much as he probably would be once he left ANBU, so he probably wouldn't be able to take care of a
plant like the one Naruto had given him.

Pakkun made an aggravated noise from Kakashi's shoulder, because clearly getting a plant with thorns was going to screw with his doggy mojo.

…Wow, brain.

"Both. I'll let him pick which one he wants." Kakashi glanced around at the outdoor market. "Actually, I think Gai said something about curry…"

"How hot?" I asked, because I got the feeling that Suna had a very different type than Konoha preferred. Hot regions tended to produce hot food, for a variety of reasons.

"Gai's would take the roof off your mouth if Genma let him cook for the group," Kakashi replied, heading off toward the spices. "Granted, Gai isn't much of a cook anyway."

"You eat takeout or Kushina-san's cooking all the time, though." Rin had to pick up the pace to catch up to the two of us.

"Gai's worse. Tip: Never let him watch the stove." Which, upon consideration, sounded pretty much the same as Kushina's concerns about me a year ago. Only I was pretty sure I wasn't the kind of person to add extra stuff to a dish, like that guy from Ratatouille.

Rin piped up with, "I think we're not going to find instant curry here…"

Sometime after that, we finished shopping and had picked up a carrot pastry of some sort (which both of my teammates automatically hated) in addition to real curry, noodles, and a bunch of other stuff that Rin wanted to experiment with. I only knew how to make like four dishes, with Kakashi not much better and Rin lacking resources to cook, so I imagined that we'd probably need to plan some kind of group cookout to pool our ignorance once we got back to Konoha.

I did not have high hopes for it. But that was just my cynicism talking.

Oh, and Pakkun had left. Guess he wanted to fill the rest of the dogs in on his successful babysitting mission.

"Oh, Kei, did you see Obito anywhere? He took off this morning, and we haven't seen him since," Rin commented, frowning suddenly. "I hope he hasn't gotten lost…"

Actually, I was thinking "I hope he hasn't gotten caught snooping someplace that'll get the rest of us in trouble." Obito had a more liberal idea of exploration than I did, and Kamui allowed him to get in and out of places that otherwise had the most stringent anti-intruder security measures on the planet. It was what had made Tobi such a pain in the ass.

Kakashi gave me a significant look, which I took to mean that he was thinking roughly the same way I was.

So I reached out with my chakra sense and— "He's by the…stadium, I think. Like, a kilometer that way. Otherwise, there's nothing out there to hold his attention out in the middle of the desert."

"Are you sure about that?" Kakashi asked.

"…Well, unless he's discovered scorpions." I checked with my chakra sense again. Obito didn't feel jumpy. "Though I don't think so."
"What is your range, now?" Rin asked, curious.

"...You know, I'm not sure." I'd never exactly tested that, and when I needed extreme long range scanning, most relevant persons could traverse it in seconds, whether through teleportation or other means. Still, I had a lot more chakra than I had once had as a child, and Isobu's chakra integrating with mine and expanding even my normal chakra capacity had changed a few more variables.

"Probably five hundred to a thousand meters if I'm concentrating really hard, though I know Obito's chakra really well. More under special circumstances." Meaning basically when partnering up with Isobu for the explicit purpose of finding things. "Well, that's another thing for when we get back home."

Kakashi said, "Are you testing something?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna see what 'going all-out' looks like. Sensei might invite you and Obito to it."

Rin looked alarmed. "Really?"

"...I want to look forward to that, but I feel like it's mostly going to result in property damage," Kakashi said dryly.

I was about to say something, likely sarcastic, when Obito's chakra vanished from the spot a kilometer away and reappeared about two meters away.

I had to give him mental points for the entrance, too. Obito managed to disguise the Kamui reemergence, which was quite unique, by dropping a smoke pellet through the portal first. By the time the smoke—which was the same color and smell as chakra smoke from both the Body Flicker jutsu and Summoning jutsu—vanished, Obito was standing in front of us with only minor fanfare.

"Hi! Where've you guys been?" He was holding a scorpion. It had a light gray body and yellowish limbs, with narrow pincers and a very long tail with a red-tipped stinger. If Kakashi had made a bet with me, I would have owed him money.

"Um, the market? Obito, why do you have a scorpion?" Rin asked, recovering first.

"I kinda wondered what kinds of venomous animals they had around here." The scorpion crawled up his right arm, which had enough weirdness going on that Obito was probably safe. "Rin-chan, do we have any stuff about scorpion venom? I know most shinobi use mixed poisons, but I don't know if we've ever gotten samples from these guys before."

Quick as a whip, Kakashi pulled a book—and not porn or manga—out of his shuriken pouch. From the cover, it was a field guide to local wildlife. And it was not the sort of book that got published just because the writer wanted to satisfy his curiosity.

If he had, he wouldn't have titled it *Hostile Flora and Fauna of the Land of Wind*.

Kakashi flipped through the pages rapidly, while Obito's scorpion friend turned around on his sleeve and marched back down toward Obito's gloved hand.

"Hey, Obito? Might not want to let that sting you," I said, pulling a kunai out of a hip holster I'd put on for today. Kakashi's reaction had set me a bit on edge.

"I wasn't planning on it." Obito picked the scorpion up with a quick burst of Wood Release, trapping the creature in a tiny wooden cage.

"Sunagakure red scorpion," Kakashi announced. He snapped the book shut. "Congratulations,
Obito. Your new friend can kill you in five minutes."

Rin, peering at the scorpion, said, "I think the hospital will want to see this one. If he hasn't stung anything yet, he probably could be useful for making antivenom."

"Or making poisons. Can I see that?" I asked Kakashi, who obligingly tossed me his field guide.

Obito twisted the Wood Release projection until it formed a wicker-like cage with a long vine as a string to hold it. He held it out. "Do you want it, Rin-chan? I could take it to the Suna hospital if you think that'd be the best choice instead."

"Um, maybe?" Rin handed her bags to Kakashi, taking the little wicker cage. Inside, the scorpion snapped its pincers at her.

"This thing says there's no antivenom," I said, perusing the five pages of warnings on the Sunagakure red scorpion. Jesus. Hundreds of years of chakra bullshit and nobody had figured out how to counter it? "But I guess that's no reason we can't try."

"Well, that settles it. We're taking this back to the inn." Rin smiled broadly, to my surprise.

"So, you like him?" Obito still seemed hesitant.

"Yep! If Kei can make a containment seal for him," Rin paused, and I nodded. She continued with a renewed smile, "Then we can keep him and take him home for medical research. Thank you, Obito!"

"No problem." Obito peered into the bag Kakashi was carrying. "So, is this dinner?"

"We're having dinner back at the inn. These are mostly gifts," Kakashi corrected him.

"Did you want to get anything from the market before we head back?" I asked Obito.

"Eh, right now I can't think of anything. Maybe tomorrow, before we leave." Obito shrugged. "Well, let's go!"

Much later that day, after dinner, I was lying on my futon with Shiba across my feet. It'd been a long day, and I needed to calm my brain down a bit, so I was inking yet more explosive seals in a strange sort of meditation. I was pretty sure that the methods that sane people used would not have resulted in accumulating a pile of explosive notes, but I was going with what worked for me.

Kakashi was reading what looked like a romance novel, over by the room's only window. He had picked up the book from the inn's lobby, but he looked like he was about to fall asleep from boredom halfway through the first chapter. Maybe I could get him to trade once I was done.

Then the door opened, and my brother poked his head into the room.

"Sis, can I use your explosive tags tomorrow?" Hayate asked.

I looked up, drawing a line through the last seal to cancel it out. "Um, why? I thought genin were supposed to just use their own talents."

"It's not my fault you haven't taught me how to make them." Hayate crossed the room to my futon, then flopped over on top of me like a felled tree. Oof! "Come ooooon, Sis. I swear I know how to use them!"
"Ask your sensei," I said. "If he says you can use them, sure."

"I already did," Hayate told me smugly, still lying across my back. He shifted his weight and, though his elbows were digging into me, I didn't toss him off. "He says I can do whatever to win."

"I'm more worried about you blowing yourself up, Hayate." I held up one of my seals, dropping it to my left so he could reach it. "Because these? These are not standard seals. I haven't made those in ages."

"I don't think standard seals will work on Maki-san anyway." Hayate picked up the seal and rolled over on my back, so he was lying with the back of his head between my shoulder blades. "Iruka said he heard her training and he thinks she might know fūinjutsu, too. Just, uh, with the cloth stuff instead of paper."

"Just let him," was Kakashi's unasked-for contribution to the conversation.

The Chūnin Exams were supposed to test foresight, command ability, and also the ability to know when you were outgunned. To make a good showing, entrants had to do all of the above, and maybe have the nearest Kage smile down on them.

Having a sister who specialized in kenjutsu and fūinjutsu (specifically of the things that went boom) and just asking for help probably counted as resourcefulness.

Hayate's chakra pinged mine again. "Please, Sis. I can do this!"

"Well, all right." I reached out, grabbed my explosives scroll, and handed it to him over my shoulder. "So, kenjutsu?"

"I think so." Hayate stuffed my entire scroll into one of his jacket pockets. "I think I've almost figured out that thing you and Mom could do. The Mountain Cutter."

"Almost?" I asked.

I felt Kakashi's chakra show a spark of interest.

"Well, I don't have enough chakra for more than a couple shots," Hayate admitted. "And Inoichi-sensei won't let me train with the Gates. So, I guess it's more of a last resort thing."

"The audience loves a show," Kakashi put in.

"Yeah, we're not competing just for the promotions. I know that." Hayate shrugged. "But I want to win! So, I'm willing to do whatever to give myself a better shot. Without sabotaging my opponents."

"Hm." I contemplated my ink-stained calligraphy brushes.

"So can I take your flight goggles, too?" Hayate asked, poking my shoulder.

"Is this because of the sand?" I asked.

"Yeah. I mean, I know I can sense, but a lot of Suna-nin use Wind and I can't sense as well if there's some kind of fake sandstorm." I guessed that being here for a month, just training, would tell him that much. "And it would help with contact poisons and blinding powders."

"Point." I didn't have my flight gear on me, but I could get Tsuruya's flight bags easily enough. "You can use them."
"I kinda wish I'd trained more with a full katana." Hayate finally got off of my back and sat up. He scooted over until I could see him without straining my neck, then crouched down next to me.

…I was not going to fall for puppy-dog eyes.

"No." And I wasn't going to budge on that. Hayate could not learn to use a full katana in twelve hours. It just wasn't going to happen.

Hayate grinned. *Cheeky brat.* "Hey, it was worth a try."

I reached out and poked him in the forehead.

"Hey!"

"Go and bug your sensei, Hayate."

Hayate left, and from the sounds of his laughter bouncing off the walls after that, I had to imagine that he'd gotten exactly what he wanted.

"He'll be fine," Kakashi said, not looking up from his book.

I put my brushes on the pile of explosives I'd made, thought about it, and then dropped my face onto my pillow. With my voice muffled by cotton, I said, "I know that, and you know that, but my heart rate doesn't want to believe it."

"Try being more convincing." He sighed, snapping his book shut. "I give up. Do you want to read this?"

I looked up. "Is it horrible?"

"The pacing's bland, I hate the main character, and I've gotten through the first chapter and I'm pretty sure the main couple hasn't met. Your call." Kakashi held the book out to me, then tossed it so it landed next to my hand.

"What a glowing endorsement." I picked up the book and flipped it open to the first page.

Kakashi sat down across from me, picking through my pile of drying seals and sorting them by power.

"The branch Roku had added to the fire burst asunder with a muted pop as the coals underneath heated the gnarled length of wood to the point where a small cache of water or sap that had somehow evaded the rays of the sun for untold decades exploded into steam…" I recited, then paused. "How did this make it past the editing stage? Because this is…" The first sentence of what promised to be a horrible experience?

"Yeah." Kakashi had sorted my seals into piles that translated to "small," "big" and "run," at a glance. "And that's just a campfire."

"It's an abomination," I said, and flipped to another page to start scanning for more problems. Depressingly, I found them. "…Did the author just use five synonyms for 'green'? He's talking about a tree. Oh, and this one has something about 'brown silk,' but I think human hair doesn't quite work that way. Unless you're showering them with compliments. But, um, this character's describing herself."

"It's one of those books that makes a great projectile," Kakashi commented absently. "Because I
know I want to throw it."

"I'd rather scribble on it." Even if I didn't like Jiraiya's work at its current stage, he had a bunch of editors—including me—to stop this sort of crap before it happened. "And not as an autograph. But it's not my book. So I guess we can give it back to the innkeepers."

"...Later," Kakashi said, picking the book back up. "I almost wonder how bad it can get."

Should I have mentioned the fact that Jiraiya was working on his romance series already? Would that be conforming to the Plot too hard, or would that mean I was being a bad influence somehow?

Or maybe Kakashi had an overdeveloped tendency toward morbid curiosity, and he'd find his way to *Icha-Icha* eventually.

"Well, have fun with that." I went back to my seals, and he went back to reading a book he didn't seem to like.

About fifteen minutes later, he ended up hurling it across the room and out the room's door just as it opened. It sailed over Kohari's head and into the hallway, much to her surprise, and I never did figure out exactly which part of the book pissed him off.

Traditionally, regional Chūnin Exams feature some sort of celebratory procession—a parade, of sorts. Something to make the guests feel like they've walked into something amazing, and to pay damn close attention to the skills of the village's finest up-and-comers. In Konoha, we sometimes had a parade, but I'd avoided most of the Exams since I got promoted to chūnin, and hadn't attended any since being promoted to special jōnin either. The war had made such displays...tacky, I supposed.

In Suna, which had never been the richest village to start with, the display was actually handled mainly by the Kazekage himself. Sure, he had attendants, but who the hell cared? It wasn't like anyone else in the village could use Magnet Release on the scale that he did.

We were dealing with a guy who could control gold dust on a scale normally only seen with Tailed Beasts. Specifically, Shukaku.

And by my reckoning, Gaara was already around, complete with a furious Shukaku sealed into him. So Suna's economy had already taken a nosedive, and the Kazekage needed to pull something spectacular to make up for it. Sensei had mentioned something about reports of the guy selling off gold dust for raw cash, but we'd never authenticated those reports and I still wasn't sure where they'd come from. But the idea that he'd do so—to reduce his combat effectiveness to keep his village afloat for a little while longer, in addition to sealing Shukaku—contributed to my mental image of the man's character.

I was thinking Lawful Neutral.

And anyway, a giant hand made of gold dust made an impression. So did creating the Chūnin Exam ring in front of us.

The Sunagakure stadium wasn't like the Konoha one, which was kind of a theater shape. Suna's was open-air, like a track field, with stands only on one side of a huge dirt field. The Kazekage had changed that as soon as Sensei had arrived in the Kage box with Yahiko. The newly-created ring was raised about a meter off the rocky desert ground, and had been carved into a fifty-meter-by-forty-meter stone square by the Kazekage himself, right in front of us.

Then the gold dust hand lifted up again, while the Kazekage stood in the center of the ring with his
arms crossed over his chest, and delicately swept the remaining detritus off the field. The dust cloud didn't get anywhere, thanks to his attendants' Wind jutsu, and the crowd was strangely silent. Respect, I supposed.

All it really did was force those of us in the Konoha section to whisper to each other.

"...So not what I was expecting." Obito happened to be next to me, so I heard his whisper without any trouble. "Can Sensei do that?"

"Don't think so," I whispered back. "But he's great if you want someone's throat cut or if you wanna bury them in paperwork."

"Shh!" Rin hissed from Obito's other side.

Rin, Obito and I made up the front ranks. Then Kohari, Iruka, Inoichi, Gaku and Aomaru one row up from us. Past them, Makoto, Kotetsu, and Izumo made up the rest of the group. Kakashi was off being a bodyguard to one of the very few people in the village who probably didn't need one.

Though now that I thought of it, Sensei was probably the lowest-powered Hokage of the current batch. Which was not the same as being weaker, exactly, but I was pretty sure he had relatively little in the way of chakra reserves compared to, say, Jiraiya. Or me. Or Kushina. Or, hell, even the Kazekage? Sensei's thing wasn't stamina, it was speed. Well, speed and rigging the battlefield in his favor within a nanosecond. Maybe that was why he said he wasn't all that great at maintaining Sage Mode? Naruto could just make a bunch of Shadow Clones and have them gather natural energy for him whenever he planned in advance, but Sensei didn't. It wasn't his specialty, and he barely ever needed the extra punch.

Maybe I needed to suggest that to him. Even if Sensei could teleport and thus make most people look like total chumps before they got their necks sliced open, it couldn't hurt to ask. He already had the skill to take down opponents roughly as dangerous as he was (ex. Black Zetsu, circa a little over a year ago), so maybe a power boost of some kind would let him hop over that threshold and become really deadly.

"Kei-san, you're missing the best part!" said Gaku, from behind me. His dog, Aomaru, had never been particularly chatty, but the big beasty nonetheless leaned forward and put his head on my shoulder.

I looked out onto the field again, while reaching up and scratching behind Aomaru's long ears. He squished his nose against the side of my neck, making a contented "whuff" noise.

Out on the field, all of the genin had finally trooped out at the behest of the Kazekage. While the man himself promptly exploded into a Gold Dust clone and left things to the attendant on the field—presumably the referee—that still let me get a good look at the kids.

If I had to guess, the oldest of them was the Ame genin, Ren. She was wearing one of those Akatsuki all-encompassing black robes, so I figured she had to be a core member of the original recruits, and seemed to have the same modified Ame headband as Yahiko and Nagato did. She carried what looked like a scuba tank strapped across her back, with bands extending over her chest, and I guessed that it stored water for jutsu purposes instead of air. Her hair was long, black, and had a pair of pink streaks near her temples, and I was almost certain that her eyes were pink, too.

"First one's Ren." Thanks, Obito, but I kinda noticed.

Going down the line from there was one of the Suna genin. Taller than Ren, but with dusty blond
hair and a mostly-brown outfit, loose enough that I couldn't really tell if he was overweight, skinny as a rake, or neither. He carried a pair of huge storage scrolls, stacked atop one another on a back-mounted carry rack, and wore a cloth mask over the lower half of his face as well as a pair of fingerless gloves. His Sunagakure headband wasn't on his forehead, but instead wrapped around his neck like a choker.

"Second one's Osamu. No clan name listed, but Suna doesn't really do clans anyway," Obito said, holding up his program. Ah.

Past Osamu, there was a girl with light brown hair and purple facial tattoos, like Rin's. But instead of plain rectangles, they reminded me of scorpion mandibles. She wore a black choker, a boat-necked yellow shirt, and gray shorts with long mesh leggings and only one kunai holster along her right leg. However, she had a back-mounted rack that carried what seemed to be a bolt of cloth about as tall and wide as her entire torso. If I had to guess, that was Maki.

Obito obligingly confirmed the guess, saying, "Third one's Maki, Hayate's first opponent."

"And the next two?"

I saw one boy holding what looked like a wooden war fan—sort of like the kind that Madara and Tobi had both used in the other world. It was painted blue, to match the Kazekage's robes or something. He wore a pale blue long-sleeved shirt, cargo shorts, and had covered all the rest of his exposed skin with shinobi mesh armor. It was actually interesting to look at, if kind of baffling.

The other boy, who was probably around ten years old, was wearing a black-lined white turban. He wore a cut-down version of the Sunagakure flak jacket, which had had both huge shoulder-guards removed at some point. He had a pair of seals tattooed to each forearm, which looked like storage seals to me. Obviously, I wasn't about to get much of a look.

"A fan specialist, Takumi, and the other one's Katsuo. Second puppeteer in the group, and he does poisons." Obito handed the program to me. "Though I think this thing's for betting purposes. You always get rich jerks living it up during events like this."

And then, all in a row, were Yūgao, Anko, and my brother.

Yūgao was wearing a lot of shinobi mesh along with her high-necked pink top and dark blue pants, but not as much as Anko was. She carried a small steel-ribbed war fan, which was dark pink if I remembered correctly, and a collapsible metal staff rather than a sword. It was going to be interesting watching how she did with those weapons, since I'd never seen her train with either.

Anko wore a mesh top, along with mesh guarding her arms and a tantō strapped to her back. She was wearing shorts, along with yet more mesh and a pair of long boots to cover her legs. She'd doubled up on shuriken pouches and kunai holsters, and probably had a scroll on her person somewhere. Though I had no respect for Orochimaru as a person, I was still fairly certain that Anko had been a skilled student. She wasn't bad at seals for a genin.

Hayate had taken off his bandanna, and was wearing it around his neck like a scarf. He also had my flight goggles on his head, sort of the way that Obito tended to wear his. Then he had the long, dull red overcoat he favored for missions, complete with hood, modified sword belt, and more. Very desert chic, I thought.

Now, if only we could get this show on the road.

I peered over my shoulder at the Kage Box, where the Kazekage, Yahiko, Sensei, and their
respective guards had all managed to crowd into some kind of order. It looked very official, with a bid banner and a garland of desert flowers across the front guardrails. I wasn't sure what the guardrails were for, other than to look pretty.

Unlike the Konoha observation area, there was no sheer drop. In Suna, they had apparently decided to build their Kage Box directly into the stands, which meant the hosting Kage had legions of reinforcements. Sure, assassins could theoretically get close, but the various Kazekage had always been kings of murdering people via overwhelming home field advantage.

Sensei could just teleport out, so the risk to him was negligible. Kakashi couldn't, but he and Kohari were probably much less interesting targets.

As for Yahiko…well, even with only one Ame-native guard who looked old enough to be his father (and Jiraiya, who was actually leaning back on the wall between Yahiko and Sensei and looking kinda bored), he still had Konan's paper flower. I didn't even want to know what traps she'd stuck in that.

As I watched, the Kazekage stood up.

"How well do you think our side's going to do?" Obito asked, leaning over to pry the program open. "We only have three entrants, but they're not facing each other in the first round."

"I don't know, but I'm hoping Hayate beats Maki." Going by the program, Anko and Ren were up first. Then Hayate and Maki. The winner of the first match would face the winner of the second, unless there was a tie. In that case, the only actual winner would get a bye.

"Oh, and here's Yūgao-chan stuck in a bracket with all the Suna-nin." Obito frowned. "She'll have to beat Katsuo and either Osamu or Takumi just to get back to fighting Konoha-nin. And that's if they win."

"How old is everyone?" Rin asked, prodding Obito's shoulder.

Obito's Sharingan activated for a second—seriously?—before he said, "Well, we already know Hayate's thirteen and his teammates are twelve. Ren's sixteen, though her mission history doesn't really match, and then Maki's fourteen. Osamu and Takumi are each fifteen. And Katsuo's nine."

"…That wasn't in the pamphlet, was it?" Rin snatched it from my hands, drawing a dry look from me.

"Nope," I said, watching Obito carefully.

"Don't ask me anything and I won't have to lie," Obito whispered back, shrugging.

So he had broken in someplace.

…I'd yell at him later if I had to. Not now.

"How's the scorpion, Rin-chan?" Obito asked, changing the topic.

Rin smiles. "I think Sasa-chan is doing well."

"I didn't realize you already named…her?" I hedged.

"Female Sunagakure red scorpions have smaller pincers. I had to find another one to check, but Sasa-chan seems to be female. Or an adolescent male." Rin shrugged. "Whichever it is, I'm sure
Tsunade-sama will want to see what we can learn from her. I fed her last night, so she's probably not going to need to eat until we get back to Konoha."

"Just make sure to keep her in the box." I thought about what the Aburame clan would say about a Suna scorpion randomly getting loose in Konoha territory. They were *avid* adherents of combatting invasive species of all sorts, mainly because their kikai insects would be called on to deal with infestations of *anything* that got to be a pest species.

There was such a thing as putting the bugs through too much work.

Scorponok could darn well *stay* in that box.

"Oh, wait, I think the Kazekage's done." Obito tilted his head and his Sharingan went active again as he looked down at the arena. Obviously, it was no Byakugan, but Obito could see detail from what would be impractical for normal human vision.

As we watched, all of the kids but two trooped back off the field.

Anko and Ren squared off in the middle of the empty ring, adopting ready stances. Anko seemed to be planning to go for a kunai first, while Ren reached up for the valve on her water tank.

*Let the games begin.*

Chapter End Notes

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Sorry, no song title is intended here. There are a couple of indie songs titled "Complacency," but I'm not really referring to them.

Oh, let's see.

* Ren's physical description is based partially on Lie Ren from RWBY, who was voiced by the late and much-mourned Monty Oum.
* The Sunagakure red scorpion is based on the Indian red scorpion. The venom of the species very dangerous to humans.
* The quoted passage up there is from Brisingr by Christopher Paolini. Kiiinda hated that book.
As soon as the referee's hand sliced down through the air, Anko and Ren both dove toward each other.

Anko's whipped a kunai out of nowhere and ripped through Ren, who exploded into a shower of water. Then Anko was darting back and across the field, looking for her opponent while something white drifted in the puddle—aha!

The puddle promptly exploded as an exploding tag, left unattended in the clone, went off like a firecracker.

"What just happened?" Rin asked, leaning forward as the crowd oohed.

"Unless you use your chakra or set them on fire, exploding tags don't have to go off." I wasn't familiar with whatever sealing style Ame ninjas used, but I imagined that Konan's explosive notes were even more stable and predictable than mine were. She only had her entire life and all the paper jutsu in the world to practice with it.

Down on the battlefield, Ren emerged from the ground like a Diglett from hell, grasping at but failing to catch Anko's ankles. As the smaller kunoichi leapt back and flung her kunai at her opponent, Ren snatched the weapon out of the air and tossed it aside with one hand.

Her other hand rested on the valve of her water tank.

"I wonder how much water's in that thing." Obito craned his neck to see what was happening, though his Sharingan wasn't active. "It's not like a storage seal."

"Sometimes, Ame has very different versions of what other villages use." I was certain that Amegakure was the only village with honest-to-god skyscrapers, though I didn't know if they had them yet. Maybe it had been a side effect of having Nagato there? One of the Paths of Pain was kind of a cyborg, wasn't it? "I guess going the non-chakra route for water storage makes sense, but I'm still sure seals could be more effective in this case.

"What about releasing only a little of the water?" Rin suggested.

"…We did kinda get doused the last time we used one of Sensei's water storage seals, didn't we?"

No, I'm pretty sure Nagato took care of that. Obito shook his head and said, "Well, let's see what this Ame-nin can do."

I added, "And here's to hoping that Anko-chan pulls through!" Because why not rhyme?

Down on the battlefield, Anko and Ren clashed again, but this time Ren used the water tank like a
bludgeon. Even on a miss, the metal clanked dangerously and knocked a divot into the sandstone arena floor.

*I kind of wonder if that's going to explode into a hail of metal shards if she keeps abusing it.* I'd never been a physicist, but I had watched Mythbusters and Jaws once upon a time. Stuff under high pressure did not react well to being punctured.

…Ike a deep-water fish at the surface?

*Maybe?* Like I knew.

And *finally* the Ame-nin unscrewed the valve on her water storage tank and started making hand signs. Water rushed out along the sandstone and Anko darted away again, watching her opponent warily.

Of course, Obito's Sharingan was already active before the Ame kunoichi made her move. Friggin' Uchihas.

And yet, I wasn't worried about Anko. She'd only showed off her kunai skills thus far, which was barely a taste of what she was capable of. She had to have a few more tricks up her sleeve to stomp on Izumo, even if she had trained with him before.

Thinking of that, actually… "Hey, Kotetsu-kun, you said something about a summon contract?"

"Anko has snakes." Kotetsu said over Aomaru's head. As he scratched the dog's head, he added, "But I can summon weapons, so it *should* have worked on Maki-san."

"…Weapons?" Obito turned his head, looking at Kotetsu incredulously. "Seriously? I thought summon contracts only worked on animals."

"And people," I added, thinking of the Chūnin Exams back home.

"Yeah, but it's kinda more like just a…I don't know," Kotetsu mumbled. He said, after a pause, "I have this weapon—a mace—and it's just too big to carry and it's chakra-active, so it doesn't really work with storage scrolls. So I left it at home and I can summon it here, as long as no one pulled it out of the circle in the meantime."

…Okay, so maybe people who couldn't create custom storage scrolls had to make bizarre workarounds, but that honestly just sounded kind of dumb. Massively impractical? And then if Kotetsu *had* managed to summon his weapon, he'd have to lug the thing back to Konoha unless he found someone willing to help him store it the right way.

"Makoto-sensei helped me set it up," Kotetsu admitted, shooting a glance at his red-haired interim sensei.

She shrugged.

"I think it'd be easier to just, uh, get a custom storage scroll made for you. Because that sounds too complicated." Obito glanced at Makoto, who had turned her attention back to the arena. "Kei could do it."

Did I just get volunteered?

"Anko-chan, get her back!" Rin shouted, either ignoring our conversation or too caught up in the fight to pay attention.
Down below, Anko bounced off Ren's shoulders and ducked under another Water jutsu. The water formed a dragon's head and chased after her, only to be blown apart by an explosive tag attached to a rock.

The explosion was only standard size, so I didn't worry about Hayate sharing too much with his comrades just yet. It was one thing to supply explosives to my younger brother, but I imagined that Makoto and Inoichi would side-eye me for being the elicit supplier of powerful ordnance to an entire cadre of genin.

That was their job.

I mean, sure, by the time I'd been Hayate's age I'd pretty much already taken over that position for my team, but there was something to be said for not following in one's older sibling's footsteps. Especially in this universe.

"Summoning Jutsu!" came Anko's voice from the arena floor.

I watched as there was a colossal plume of smoke and then—oh, cool!

Anko had her hand on one of the puddles Ren had made, while trying to make her dragon-headed jutsu go after Anko, and she'd made the seal lines of a heavy-duty summon.

"Nurehebi, get her!" Anko shouted, as a red-lined white snake surged out of the water as though the puddle was a lot deeper than it first appeared. The snake was probably about three meters long and covered in pearlescent white scales, curling its body around Anko's legs before rearing up to look at their enemy.

Ren backed up.

The snake itself, shrouded in water, bared its tiny fangs and spat a globe of high-pressure water after the Ame-nin's running retreat.

"I think that's the cutest snake I've ever seen." It had little feathery things—a headdress?—around the corners of its jaws and it had little red outlines around its eyes and oh goodness it was cute for a giant constrictor. And was that another brush-thingy on its tail? Gosh, that snake was dressed to impress.

"That's a new one," said Izumo, with a frown audible in his voice. "See, Kotetsu, this is why you set up with an animal summon contract. Your mace doesn't give you any more maces."

"Shut up," was Kotetsu's reply.

Anko, down on the battlefield, spun away from another of Ren's attacks as the Ame-nin flung a kunai at her. The kunai was stopped by Nurehebi, who shot it out of the air with a thin stream of water that nonetheless must have hit with the force of a bullet. The kunai went spinning off toward the desert floor some ten meters away.

"Kick her ass, Anko-chan!" Iruka cheered, over Obito's shoulder.

"Iruka!" Kohari said sharply.

"Sorry, Mom," was his chastised response.

Kotetsu and Izumo sniggered.

"Iruka, you're supposed to put your heart into a cheer," Kohari went on, "so it should have been
Okay, so apparently Iruka's penchant for shouting in the classroom—and thus his maximum volume—had been inherited from someone. Good to know. Or it would be once my ears stopped ringing.

"Oh, okay!" Iruka took a deep breath, and I reflexively covered my ears. "YOU CAN DO IT, ANKO-CHAN!"

Obito mouthed something like "My poor ears!"

Rin, well into the spirit of things, stood up in her seat as Anko landed a kick on Ren's water tank with Nurehebi constricting the older kunoichi's ankles to slow her down. Rin's hands were formed into fists in front of her mouth. "Come on, Anko-chan…"

It was at about that point, with all of us looking down on the grappling match, that Ren the Ame-nin finally managed to say something that all of us could hear.

"WATER RELEASE: GREAT CLONE EXPLOSION!"

And the water—the water around Nurehebi, the water in the tank, and the water in the puddles across the arena floor—all exploded like someone had dropped a grenade in it. A big ol’ plume of water, out of nowhere, that obscured all of the combatants and threw the crowd into a strange silence.

The silence gave way to panicky speculation, probably because of gambling.

I ignored that and probed cautiously at the mist obscuring the field with my chakra sense.

Beside me, I could feel Obito feeding more chakra into his Sharingan, as though it would spontaneously gain a few Byakugan-like aspects. Such as the ability to see beyond what would normally be considered human range.

It was all kind of pointless, since the mist cleared a moment later.

Anko was shielded by Nurehebi, but it became very apparent that the Ame-nin's water storage tank had exploded in the chaos. Metal shards dotted the sandstone arena, and one of them had managed to draw a thin line of blood across the pearlescent scales along Nurehebi's neck. The snake's water supply was gone, and it was lying on the sandstone, twitching feebly.

Hydrostatic shock?

Ren, for her part, was lying some six meters away and clutching her leg. Her chakra was going haywire with pain and with…something else? I couldn't tell precisely what had gone wrong from so far away.

"What the hell just happened?" Kotetsu asked Obito.

"From what I can tell, The snake bit Ren-san before the jutsu went off," Obito said, peering closer at the damage. "Are all of the snake summons poisonous?"

"Venomous, and I'm pretty sure they must be," said Rin, having calmed down somewhat now that the match seemed to be one for the judges. Ren, for her part, still hadn't gotten to her feet. "I thought Nurehebi had to be a constrictor, but guess I was wrong."

"Snake summons must pull double duty." I paused, thinking. "Somehow, I don't think Suna has
"Probably not." Rin glanced up toward the Kage box, where Sensei was leaning forward to observe the proceedings. "If the Hokage wants, I could try to come up with something."

"He hasn't said anything yet," Obito pointed out. "Oh, look—Anko's up!"

Anko had, indeed, gotten to her feet. She put her hand down on Nurehebi's head, and the huge snake poofed away into a cloud of smoke. Then Anko straightened up and drew yet another kunai from a pocket, heading toward her opponent.

Our section of the crowd, which wasn't that large, began a slow chant of sorts. "An-ko, An-ko, An-ko!"

Thus, we were promptly disappointed when Anko sank to her knees, and Ren fainted.

The judge declared a double KO at that point.

"Damn, she's going to be disappointed," Kotetsu muttered.

"It's an anticlimax to have both competitors out of the running, but she did fairly well. I've never seen her summon that snake before, and I don't think she could have predicted her opponent blowing herself up," Makoto said, speaking up for the first time in quite a while.

Aomaru barked his agreement.

"Maybe she needs a bit more polish on her Replacement jutsu?" I suggested.

Makoto shrugged. "Probably. But I did like her teamwork with her summon."

"Is that enough to get her a promotion, though?" Rin asked.

"It might. It might not. It's the Hokage's decision," said Gaku. He looked down at the arena floor, to where medics were carting both Anko and Ren off to the infirmary. "But I'll go check on Anko-chan and see what happened. We didn't get the best view from here."

"Okay. Tell us if something happens?" Obito had turned off his Sharingan, so it was only a request.

…Maybe there was something wrong with me, given how I kept jumping to so many conclusions. Or assuming possible ill-intent where there wasn't any.

"Sure. Root for Hayate-kun for me, will ya?"

We all nodded, and Gaku took off. Aomaru stayed, though.

"So, what's the difference between poisonous and venomous again?" Obito asked Rin.

"Sasa-chan is venomous," Rin said, "because of her stinger. But…I think maybe the Hokage has some poisonous toads. There are no stingers or fangs. But snakes that try to eat them are going to be very upset."

"I think that the Land of Rainforests has a bunch of poison rainbow frogs. Pretty, but local hunters use their poison to kill huge animals." I scratched the back of my neck. "But I don't think our medics run into poisonings like that all that often."

"Because they're too far away?" Obito guessed.
Um, no. "More like because the victims die inside of a minute."

Kohari turned to her son and said, "You have some very strange friends." So yes, maybe we were kind of strange. I was certain that Anko would get by just fine, and she had—even if she'd probably gotten slightly exploded. Gaku hadn't sent up the Medic-Signal or anything, so I assumed that she was going to be all right until confirmed otherwise.

Or maybe I was egging on a pointless conversation because I was nervous. Hayate was going to fight next.

Hayate was going to fight next. Oh man.

**Why are you only panicking now?**

*Because I am very good at avoiding anxious thoughts until they hit me in the face?*

**That has nothing to do with anything.**

What did he know?

"Kei, do you need to take a moment to breathe?" Rin asked.

"No, no, I'm going to be fine." I took a very deep breath. In, out. Okay. Hayate was going to be fine. "He'll be fine. Hayate isn't some pushover."

"You don't sound too sure," Obito teased.

I shot him a glare, and he winced.

He obligingly backtracked. "All right, shutting up now."

"Will the competitors in the second match please come down to the battlefield?" the judge shouted, loud enough to cut through the babble of the crowd. Some of us quieted in response. Some did not.

For my part, I watched my brother and Maki troop out of the competitor's waiting area.

Hayate had loosened his hitai-ate around his neck, and was in the process of retying it as he walked out beside Maki. Maki, for her part, seemed to give my brother a skeptical look for his apparent lack of preparation. Thus, my brother ignored her.

I extended my chakra sense outward, testing.

I felt Hayate's chakra, bouncing excitedly inside his body as he assessed his opponent. He also pinged back at me, just for a moment, to acknowledge that he knew I was there and watching. He didn't feel like he had any problem with fighting his opponent, confidence or otherwise—he knew what he was going to do. His chakra faintly buzzed with playful lightning, and I felt better for feeling it.

Maki, as I poked at her cautiously, felt like a breeze through drying laundry lines. Probably insensitive or judgmental of me, in a way, since I knew she used large bolts of cloth to fight and she was from the Land of Wind. But she didn't feel unstable or needlessly aggressive, and I was fairly certain that it would be a friendly match.

Inasmuch as fights against foreigners ever were.

"Begin!" barked the judge, and I leaned forward in my seat to watch the opening shots.
Maki dashed backwards, unfurling her weapon as seal-lines spread across the linen like black lightning. The cloth interposed itself between her and Hayate, who aborted his charge with a sharp turn of his heel and instead drew one of my explosive scrolls from his long jacket sleeves.

The cloth swirled through the air after him, with designs I didn't quite recognize, and were promptly met by four exploding kunai going the other way.

When the smoke cleared, I didn't see any scorch marks on the cloth, but that was because it had formed a giant swirling white mass around where I could feel Maki's chakra, presumably to protect her.

Hayate stood on the opposite end of the arena floor than expected, peering at the shield with interest. He said something, then started unrolling the tear-away explosive scroll.

I didn't like the look of that. "Ah, hell. He'd better not be trying to do what I think he is."

"Which is…?" Obito prompted.

"He's going to try brute-forcing that shield if it doesn't come down." And I didn't remember which seals Hayate had taken with him. I didn't think I'd created anything recently that would pulverize rock, but…

Hayate shouted something to Maki's shield. A taunt? A warning?

"I hope Maki has a backup plan, then." Obito glanced at the Kage box, presumably searching for a reaction from the elites up there. I didn't think he got one.

I felt Maki's chakra shift then, as she Replaced herself with something else. Her cloth shield wall was empty, guarding nothing, and I had to wonder how she planned to take advantage of my brother's apparent tunnel-vision.

Hayate tossed the scroll down at his feet. Then he started charging a lightning kunai—not as strong or as well-formed as Kakashi's favorite mid-combat distraction—before unceremoniously dropping it, and he burst into a run toward the unoccupied corner of the arena.

The lightning kunai turned over once, twice in midair, before hitting the unrolled scroll dead center. By that point, Hayate was well away from the impending fireball.

I felt Maki's panic as the area above her underground hiding place was promptly immolated.

When that fireball cleared, the sandstone had been violently pulverized—which meant I'd somewhat underestimated the ordnance my brother had access to—and Maki's chakra had fled again, back to the cloth shield.

Which Hayate was currently standing next to, with yet another technique prepared.

"Now, I think I recognize that stance…" Obito began, his Sharingan active again. "Yeah, Kei, that's your kenjutsu!"

"Our family's kenjutsu," I corrected absently. *Come on, Hayate! Show us what you can really do!*

Actually, why wasn't I up and shouting?

I rectified my mistake by getting to my feet as the two competitors were about to clash directly. "COME ON, HAYATE, KNOCK HER FLAT!"
"Whoa, okay." Rin seemed surprised by my sudden enthusiasm, given my lackluster showing during Anko's fight, but recovered quickly. She joined in with, "YOU CAN DO IT, HAYATE-KUN!"

Down on the arena floor, Maki's cloth unfurled from its cocoon shape around her and slashed out like a whip for Hayate's face. My cheering, however briefly, faltered in the face of sudden action.

As the cloth moved, I could hear Obito give a quiet running commentary along the lines of, "Gonna have to see what that seal means when I get home…" and I could feel Iruka stand up behind me, trying to see. Our section of the stands was perhaps a bit rowdy.

Hayate shot left, then right, but the chakra-infused linen followed him wherever he went. He rolled in midair on another evasive leap, and I saw his hands come together briefly in a few seals. I couldn't tell what because the angle wasn't great, but I could feel his chakra swell—and then…

The cloth trapped his ankle. But not Hayate's, not exactly.

"Rapid-fire Clone-stuff and then something with the Replacement jutsu," was Obito's muttered comment. "But I can't tell if it's a—oh!"

The clone popped, disappearing, and the cloth knotted closed on empty air as Hayate landed safely out of reach.

He might have given Maki, with her full bolt of cloth unrolled and her chakra somewhat flagging, a cheeky grin. We were too far away to tell.

I still whooped in triumph anyway. Then I settled back down in my seat so Iruka and Izumo wouldn't have to crane their necks so much.

"Was that the Clone Jutsu?" I asked Obito, who had probably been able to see the flow of Hayate's chakra even from this far off.

"Yep. You know, I never even tried to use that in a fight." Obito grinned. "But good on Hayate for making it work."

Hayate drew his kodachi for the first time in the entire fight—and that wasn't just a simple draw. Iaijutsu was our family's not-so-secret signature, straight out of the Land of Iron, and Hayate's chakra-infused kodachi cut right through the cloth and the seal on it.

"I'm also seeing a lot of lightning manipulation from him. Has he been training with Kakashi?" Obito asked.

"Yeah, actually. He's not that strong yet, but I'm surprised by how fast he seems to be picking up on that part." I thought about it, then shrugged. "I'm not sure if that means Kakashi's a good teacher, or Hayate's a genius."

Obito made a show of gagging. "Ugh, no. How about just no? Like, you're a genius and so is Kakashi and then Sensei and so is Rin! Where does that leave me?"

"…Says the guy who still holds the course records for the Military Police," I retorted.

"Can they not argue so we can all focus on the match?" Kotetsu stage-whispered to Aomaru.

Aomaru gave a doggy huff, so I reached back and scratched his ears. When he laid his head down on my shoulder and smooshed the side of his muzzle against my neck, I knew I'd been forgiven.
Down below, Hayate was industriously hacking Maki's cloth jutsu to pieces with a lightning-charged kodachi and making it look easier than it probably was. If I concentrated, I could feel both lightning and carefully manipulated cutting chakra moving in sync.

He'd fused my technique and Kakashi's and come up with something…different. Something good.

He needed to name it.

"It almost feels like a workaround to the Mountain Cutter," I said, watching Hayate dart to and fro across the arena floor, fending off more cloth attacks and retaliating with vicious slashes. "Less chakra overall, but he's not really using the kodachi for its edge down there. He's using it for its shape."

"Huh?" Obito looked blank.

"When creating chakra projections," Rin said, "the size of the blade or weapon depends partly on chakra control and partly on the amount of chakra you can push into it. Maintaining chakra scalpels more than a centimeter or two beyond your skin is really difficult, at least for surgical purposes, but using a weapon…"

"If I use my katana as a focus, I can extend my reach proportionately." And if I was using Isobu's chakra or deliberately cramming as much chakra as I could into the shape, I could double the effective length of the blade or create an improvised lightsaber. Or a sword the size and breadth of the Kubikiribōchō without the weight issues. Or both. "And a katana isn't as sharp as a scalpel, but it's plenty sharp for this."

Granted, people who actually knew the Samurai Sword-and-or-Saber thing would be better at it than I was, having never actually been taught properly. Mom had never really expected me to rearrange my concept of chakra to fully master her version of the technique. But I could make do with what I did know, and did.

Down in the arena, Hayate finally sliced apart the last major section of the cloth jutsu, leaving Maki's weapon in so many shreds of linen.

…Which was not to say that she was helpless. Far from it.

The separate scraps of cloth, to my chakra sense, hadn't really been destroyed or even neutralized. They'd simply been split, like normal cloth. My brother could cut it, but he hadn't managed to obliterate it.

That wasn't how the katana worked.

To neutralize Maki's jutsu, he'd have to irreparably ruin her weaponry, and it was going to take more lightning than he could make.

"You can't stop me now, Hayate-kun!" Maki shouted, as the linen rose up and loomed over my brother.

Luckily, my brother had thought of that. And had thought of a way around it.

In the words of someone probably in the throes of TNT-induced euphoria, "As the size of the explosion increases, the number of situations it cannot solve approaches zero."

All around Maki's feet, desert sand blew around and revealed a carpet of explosive tags across the arena floor, stretching from the edge of the arena behind her to within four feet of Hayate.
"…He took a few more than I thought," I said, staring. Wait…

"You can try your luck, Maki-san, but I don't think you're going to like what happens if you do!" Hayate replied in a cheerful shout.

Wait a fucking minute here. I checked my scroll pocket, flipping the most dangerous of them into my hand. Sure, Kakashi had sorted my seals the other night, but…

Maki hesitated. "I…"

"You can't make chūnin if you're dead, and I have way more where these came from!" Hayate shouted.

Almost to myself, I murmured, "He didn't…"

"Kei?" Obito asked.

The judge then said, loud enough for the rest of us to hear. "Maki of Sunagakure has surrendered. The winner is Hayate Gekkō of Konohagakure. Please clear the arena!"

Maki ended up walking out first, gathering her shredded cloth back into something resembling the long bolt it had come from. She stomped off the sandstone, clearly upset with her loss.

Hayate hopped off the edge of the sandstone platform a moment later, turned, and threw a lightning kunai at the mass of seals.

I put my face in my hands as the seals screamed, popped, and made noise as they whizzed through the air and dust like overactive fireworks. Which was, in the end, exactly all they'd been.

Maki's voice became a shriek of rage. "You little jerk!"

"If it works, it works!" Hayate yelled back.

"Kindly get off the field!" the judge yelled over both of their voices, and over the continual whizz-pop-bang of the firework seals.

"…What just happened?" Rin said.

"Got me. Where'd he get all those tags?" Kotetsu asked.

Aomaru barked.

I raised my hand. "But, uh, with the qualifier that I didn't know he was taking all of the first two tiers of the things."

"Two tiers?" Rin looked shocked at my carelessness. "Kei, how many explosive seals did you make?"

I had to shrug. "…I dunno. It's a hobby of mine to make enough that I'm kinda swimming in 'em all the time." I managed a cheeky grin, though. "But at least he didn't take the really big ones."

Rin and Obito both groaned.

"Seriously?" Izumo demanded. "He just asked you for explosives?"

"I don't remember anyone saying it was against the rules. I've been making these things since I was
nine," I said.

"I remember that time." Obito's voice was a little muffled, since he had his face in his hands. "And how they didn't use to work."

"So he can just use all of those without a problem? Like, he doesn't have to pay for them or anything?" Kotetsu asked.

"No, I pay for my supplies and I don't ask for money, I'll charge him once he actually earns more than pocket money." I shrugged again, then got up. "I'm going to go for a short walk, okay? Hayate won, so the crowd's gonna be changing money around and that's a perfect time to get snacks. You want anything?"

"...Well, Yūgao's match is the one after next, so...can you find me a bag of chips?" Izumo asked. "I can pay you back later."

Kohari glanced from her son—still watching the arena as the Kazekage flattened it back out—to me. "A water bottle would be nice. If you can get a cold one, even better!"

In short order, I was given a good half-dozen requests.

Well, it...it felt nice to be useful.

I came back with all the requested items in a storage scroll. Because of course I could.

I could also pack hot lunches that way, so excuse me for showing off a bit.

Anyway, I passed out all the food, unsealing items one at a time, before making my way back to my seat. Though of course I'd missed the Suna-only match before, Yūgao's was still there. I'd never seen her fight all out, so it'd be interesting to see what she could do.

Or at least that was the plan.

Isobu interrupted with, A little help here?

Are you serious right now? The match just started! Sure, time tended to move faster when everything went at the speed of thought, but I wanted to watch these matches! I'd barely seen Yūgao fight in the entire time I'd known her, and I wanted to know how strong she was. And besides, five or ten minutes of being stuck down there could mean I'd also miss parts of Hayate's next match, depending on how fast things moved.

But since when did Isobu ask me for help with anything? I stopped short at that thought, my eyes going unfocused as I reached for Isobu's consciousness again. What happened?

Shukaku—oof!—is in the Tailed Beast subconscious dimension with his host. And he refuses to let the boy go. Isobu sent me an impression, of creeping sand and a child's high-pitched shrieks of terror. I don't even understand how he got down here without his host's consent. The red woman didn't have to accept Kurama's demands—

Gaara's a toddler, Isobu! Fuck, fuck, fuck—

"Obito?" I nudged him. I needed his attention. What I didn't need was the possibility of Shukaku overpowering Gaara's mind and kicking off a rampage that had never happened in the old timeline.
Below, Yūgao ricocheted off her opponent and sent a barrage of senbon needles in Osamu's direction. Osamu replied with a burst of Wind jutsu that blew the senbon out of the arena but missed Yūgao herself.

"Yeah, Kei?" Obito was distracted, but he wouldn't be for long.

"I'm gonna be unresponsive for a few minutes." That sent Obito's thoughts screeching to a halt, for some reason. Probably phrasing. I was already turning to Rin, saying, "So, Rin, I'm gonna be out. Please don't send me to the medical wing."

"Why are you going to be out?" Rin asked cautiously.

"Tailed Beast fight. See you in a few." And then I let my mind dive after Isobu.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title's from Green Day this time. (And now I feel old.)

Also, how did you happen across CYB? Answer via comments, please, if you haven't already answered on Tumblr or FF.Net.
**Depths: Headlock**

**Chapter Summary**

Kei: Suffer emotional whiplash.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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I still hadn't decided on a name for the shared subconscious of the various jinchūriki on the planet. There wasn't one to start with, that Isobu knew of, so I clearly needed to come up with something snappy. Since my mindscape was already named, in use, and modified to fit my turtle friend, there had to be something else to call it.

The particular naming ceremony would just have to wait until there weren't two giant monsters duking it out right in front of me.

Finally, my legs fully formed inside the strange sub-dimension and I could drop to the ground and see what was happening. I landed on top of ankle-deep water and could see the distorted reflections of the Tailed Beasts wrestling as I straightened up.

The two of them had foregone the tendency shinobi had to square off dramatically, waiting for a convenient wind to mark the start of the fight. The two massive monsters had jumped straight into the mutual mauling, with Isobu's three tails wrapping around Shukaku's one and trying to pull his nonexistent spine out of him.

So, fun fact: Neither Isobu nor Shukaku had teeth.

Not real teeth, anyway, since that seemed to be the purview of the upper-level Tailed Beasts, and both of them really just had huge spikes soldered onto their respective jaws. Isobu complimented that array with the spines on his head, his shell, and his tails. Shukaku made up for his lack of true teeth by being made of actual sand, which made it a huge hassle to try and hurt him meaningfully without just hitting him with Tailed Beast Bombs until he stopped trying to get up.

Isobu didn't need me to tell him about that, though.

He'd forgotten more about Shukaku than I would ever know.

No, if he needed me down here, it was because there was something he couldn't handle on his own.

I had not met the Tailed Beast who could easily remove a toddler from Shukaku's hold. Mainly because they didn't have the manual dexterity necessary. I didn't think I'd met a person who could easily do it, at least not down here. So I was simply going to have to rescue Gaara the hard away, with Isobu acting as a big, crabby distraction.

Theoretically, I could just cut Gaara out of the overgrown sand-squirrel's head as soon as Isobu could hold him down for more than a few seconds. It was just one of those things that was easier said than done.

"STAY DOWN, YOU MISERABLE REPTILE!" Shukaku howled, flowing back and away
from Isobu's grip like a waterfall of sand. His body twisted, curving into a serpentine form for just a moment, and his head turn all the way around to launch a compressed ball of air directly at Isobu's face.

Isobu met the blast squarely with a similar-sized blast of compressed water. When the two attacks met, a cascade of cold water poured down across the battlefield like a sudden winter rainstorm.

I darted up onto Isobu's lower shell and sprinted for his head, ducking around spikes and sand hiding in the cracks of it. As he bucked, spitting more water bullets at Shukaku, I had to cling to him with chakra channeled into my hands and feet to avoid being thrown off.

"I can hold him here," Isobu told me with a grunt, as I skidded to a stop on his left shoulder and gripped one of his spikes.

"Forever?" I asked distractedly, peering at Shukaku's head. Where was the flash of red? I knew that Gaara had been protruding from Shukaku's head when he transformed in the old timeline, but I had to admit that I didn't really understand his unique forms.

Isobu grunted, "Long enough. Where is the human now?"

"I don't," I began.

Then Shukaku laughed. "YOU WANT TO CALL ON THE SQUALLING BRAT? HE CAN'T HELP YOU!"

I ignored the big tanuki's rant for the most part after that. Instead, I focused on tracking the non-Shukaku chakra in his mass. "...Well, I can sense Gaara in there. But he's a kid, and Shukaku's pretty damned big. I can only tell that he's in his head somewhere."

"Then we'll have to pound Shukaku into sand until he coughs him up." Isobu's forelimbs squared and he seemed to settle down in place. "Get ready to move."

Why was it that every confrontation between Tailed Beasts seemed to devolve into all of us beating the stuffing out of each other? Sans the bit with Kurama yesterday, but there had been the thing with the seal-cage before that...

...If we called Kurama down here, somehow, I imagined that Isobu would be absolutely mortified. And then Shukaku would be so much dust in the wind. And then there would be other problems relating to Shukaku and Kurama's epic sibling rivalry, and I'd have to explain all of that to a two-year-old.

So we were on our own.

I glanced down at myself. Despite the weapons and supplies I'd been carrying in reality, I was down to just whatever I could use on the fly down here. I'd carried my mental avatar body down here instead of my real one, meaning I was wearing an oversized T-shirt with sweatpants and a pair of glasses. So, no weapons or scrolls.

No seals but those I could make spontaneously.

"Well, this'll be fun." I made sure to cram as much sarcasm into the words as possible.

"Unhelpful sarcasm is the last thing I need from you." With that, Isobu shifted his massive bulk forward and launched another ball of water directly for Shukaku's face.
Once again, it was countered with an air blast.

Isobu’s outermost tails dug into the ground—or what passed for it—and heaved him to the left as Shukaku’s long sandy tail lashed down where we’d just been. Despite the fact that both Tailed Beasts were somewhat lacking in the mobility department, since Isobu didn’t have back legs and Shukaku’s barely counted, they both managed a decent turn of speed.

Even if their movements were limited, it didn’t change the fact that they were a hundred meters tall and even stubby limbs at that size moved a hundred paces to my one.

I clambered down Isobu’s shoulder to reach his ear and, quietly enough that Shukaku couldn’t hear, I said, "Can’t you glue him to the ground with coral?"

"Not if he rips his legs off and starts over elsewhere." Isobu’s outward tails flattened against the water below us all, and I felt his chakra reaching out. There wasn’t airborne water vapor down here, not really, and the water pooling below us was also just a product of a collective imagination.

We could still use it to attack. Shukaku only had as much sand as he was made of, since Kurama had been the one to create this particular variant of the dimension. Isobu wasn’t interested in overturning that ruling, and Shukaku wasn’t strong enough.

"If you can coat him in enough that he has to deform to squeeze free, I might be able to get Gaara out of there." I glared across the field at the giant tanuki. "Do you have any idea how to calm him down?"

"Half an idea, but not that one. Too slow." Isobu’s central tail touched the water. "Hang on."

I did so.

Isobu’s huge shell seemed to deform as his head and the front of his shell tipped forward over his hands. When I looked back, I saw the rearmost parts of his shell—where the huge plates overlapped—start to curve over toward his tails—

And then Isobu and I were upside-down. Isobu’s three tails curled under his belly to form something like tractor treads, and his arms folded up with the spikes facing outward and oh god of course he had a rolling attack.

I probably screamed. After the fact, I distinctly remembered trying not to curse, for the sake of toddlers that might or might not have been listening.

And anyway, the screaming was somewhat muffled once Isobu finally hit Shukaku with the full weight of his greenish-gray spinning body and smashed his weaker sibling into…well, basically into a beach. We were already surrounded by water, after all. I was, for my part, thrown clean off my turtle friend and into the pile of sand that had once been a Tailed Beast, and immediately set about looking for any sign of red.

Shukaku’s head was already reforming, so I had to work fast. Already, I could hear the dulcet tones of Shukaku saying, "I’LL KILL YOU FOR THAT, THREE-TAILS!" with enough volume to make the sand quake.

I’d better hurry up. Okay, so, where would a tiny toddler be in all of this? I could easily skim across the top of the sand—it was sort of the opposite of the water-walking trick—without getting snagged by any of the sand as long as Shukaku was distracted. And with Isobu in his face and blasting him over and over with compressed water, I imagined he couldn’t be anything else.
"Gaara-chan? Gaara-chan?" I slipped among the dunes of somewhat-damp sand, ducking away from surges of Shukaku's sand under my feet and also from the sand-laden torrents of water raining down from above. "Come on, kiddo, you have to be in here somewhere…"

My patience, such as it was, was rewarded just as Shukaku figured out how to put enough sand together to reform his arms and lunge at Isobu. Somewhere in the midst of the sound of rushing sand and crashing waves, I heard a tiny voice cry out, "Mama!"

Where—there he was! Just behind another mound of sand, I saw a pale arm wiggling. Crossing the shifting surface of Shukaku's body at a dead run, I quickly found a tiny red-headed toddler squirming in the sand. He was encased in sand up to about the middle of his thighs, and stared up at me upon my sudden appearance like I was some kind of bogeyman.

"Can I help you get outta there, kid?" I asked, hesitating to approach for just a moment.

"Want Mama!" Gaara shrieked, falling backwards onto his butt and flailing his arms. "Mama help!"

Fuck.

"Whatever you're doing is—auh!" Isobu was roughly shoved away from Shukaku's flattened mass, bringing his armored hand up to cover his only eye. Must have gotten sand in it.

I was focusing more on Shukaku, whose head had reassembled itself. I stared down into his gaping maw as he snarled, "GET AWAY FROM THE HUMAN, PEST! HE'S MINE!"

"No." I glared up at those golden eyes and snapped, "What do you want with Gaara?"

"He is my jailor, human." Shukaku's voice was like gravel when he spoke instead of shouting. It'd be funny in retrospect, given that he was made of sand, but at the time I was surprised by the fact that he could just talk. Not shout. "I will have my freedom back."

"And what, get sealed again?" Isobu argued, having recovered. Shukaku failed to rise to meet him, so Isobu glowered down at his weakest sibling. "Aside from me and my host, the humans brought four more humans who can take you and yours to pieces on top of the one that was already here. You will lose, Shukaku. You could even die."

Shukaku growled again, his sand shifting.

I took that opportunity to haul the silently crying Gaara out of the sand and reposition him against my hip. While I had certainly missed out on certain aspects of puberty, I'd gotten enough in the way of hips that I could manage one toddler. Even if I had to sneak out of a demon's range while my inner demon argued with him.

"Death would be better than permanent imprisonment!" Shukaku roared in Isobu's face. "What do you know about prison, Three-Tails?"

"The two hosts I had before this one seemed to be a hint." Isobu shook his head. "You are not the only one who's been through it."

I had, at this point, gotten out of Shukaku's giant sand-trap and snuck back toward the gaps in Isobu's huge gray-green shell. Gaara remained silent the entire time. His face was buried against my T-shirt.

"YOU KNOW NOTHING!" Shukaku snarled, with all of his sand surging upward in a wave. But even as I watched from the curve of Isobu's crab shell front, Shukaku's sand was sluggish in a way
that even inevitable doom never was.

The water was weighing him down.

I clamped my hands over Gaara's ears as Isobu reared back, his tails flaring out.

"YOU ARE AN IGNORANT CHILD!" Isobu roared back, "KNOW YOUR PLACE!"

The argument was...circular. At best.

"You're all the same age!" I shouted up at Isobu.

But there was this thing, with twins and other multiple-count siblings. The younger one will say that age doesn't matter when asked which is oldest. The elder, though?

"No, we're not!" snapped Isobu.

Exemplars of proper conduct. Really.

Somehow, despite how Isobu had smashed Shukaku into being a chunk of scenery not five minutes beforehand, the tanuki still had fight in him. Quite a lot, in fact.

"I'LL KILL YOU ALL!" Shukaku had managed to reincorporate all of his sand, but with a considerable liquid component. His face looked like a candle shaped like a carved pumpkin, which had started to melt. "I'LL GRIND YOUR SHELL INTO FERTILIZER AND SMASH THE REST OF YOU INTO PASTE, THREE-TAILS!"

"Isobu, if you have any kinda trump card for dealing with him..." I whispered, as the sand tanuki loomed. Despite being weaker, his upright stance did mean he was taller than Isobu. Then again, pretty much all of the Tailed Beasts were.

"In a way, I do. But I don't want to resort to that." Isobu's bulk shuddered, and then he launched another compressed blast of water for Shukaku's head.

"Mama?" Gaara asked belatedly, looking around when the water from Isobu's attack blew back on us. "Where Mama?"

Did Gaara even know what his mother looked like at this age? Did he already think that Shukaku embodied his mother's will? Hell if I knew. I was starting to get used to the idea of having no fucking idea what was going on, and that was annoying just on its own.

Questions for later.

"Hey, kiddo, what's your name?" I asked, as though I hadn't been shouting at Shukaku earlier. I tried my best to inject some cheer into my tone, but I wasn't feeling it and Gaara wasn't dumb.

His lip wobbled. "G...Gaara?"

"You sure, Gaara-chan?" I asked, somewhat briskly, as Isobu blasted Shukaku's arm off and it blew apart into a miniature cyclone.

"Um," was as far as he got, before he hid his face against my shirt again.

I raised my arm to block some of the water and sand from hitting him in the face, but we were both getting doused anyway. "Well, Gaara-chan," I continued with false cheer, "I'm Kei. Just hang on
"tight, okay? We'll get you back to your family soon!"

"We?" Gaara mumbled.

"Isobu, mainly. That's him up there, with the water blasts. I just help," I corrected myself. "Again, hang on!"

Right on cue, Isobu's shell bucked, and I was glad that the tree-walking skill had easily adapted to other surfaces. Gaara ended up squished against my chest and shoulder, but I managed to keep his head from jerking dangerously.

"You okay, Gaara-chan?" I asked, once Isobu shot one of Shukaku's feet and blasted it back into the shape of mere damp sand.

"Mm-hm!" Gaara replied, still clinging.

"Good, now..." How the hell were we going to get out of this, really? Shukaku and Isobu were both immortal and ultimately indestructible. They ran out of energy eventually, like anyone, but down here they could essentially blast away at one another until the sun burned out. There wasn't much purpose to it, but since when had that stopped angry siblings from fighting?

"I'll blast you as many times as it takes for you to learn," Isobu growled under his breath as Shukaku worked on reassembling his head out of the driest sand that remained.

"Can we do anything else?" I asked him. One of my hands was flat against his shell. "Because this is getting us nowhere. We rescued Gaara-chan, but now what do we do?"

"The host must call their spirit back to their body." Isobu blasted Shukaku again, making his half-formed head explode again in a burst of sandy water.

"I pretty much never do that with you!" I argued, almost instinctively.

"Then figure out what will work!" Isobu snapped, turning his attention back to his fight.

The next vicious twist of his shell flung both Gaara and I more than fifty meters across the empty salt flats. We flew, however briefly, and I had to tuck and roll around Gaara to protect him from the inevitable skidding impact, however dampened by the strange physics of this place.

Still ended up on my back in ten centimeters of water with the wind knocked out of me, but hey, Gaara was fine.

I rolled upright into a cross-legged meditation pose, and then I set Gaara down on my right leg.

"Okay. Gaara-chan, can you talk to me for a little bit?"

"Why?" Ah, Naruto's soon-to-be-favorite word made its appearance. I hoped that Gaara actually wanted to know the answer, since I was going to give it to him.

"Because...you see that big brown monster?" I pointed, but Gaara was already nodding fearfully.

"Well, he's really mad right now. Me and my big green monster are trying to get him to stop, but we can't. He's too big and angry."

Gaara nodded, his green eyes darting to where our respective Tailed Beasts were still wailing on each other with reckless abandon.

"So..." How did I put this? "...you're gonna have to tell him to go to his room."
"Room?" Gaara didn't appear capable of comprehending just how big of a room Shukaku would need. That was okay. He didn't need to.

"Well, it's that or we call the biggest monster and have to make him do it." Kushina would be pissed at being pulled away from mopping up the rest of ROOT and Danzō's machinations if this ended up requiring her attention in the end, but this was important. If she ended up being mad, I could take that.

And anyway, in all likelihood it'd just take Kurama in a hissy fit to make everyone else simmer down out of sheer self-preservation.

"So, Gaara-chan, you wanna try being the boss?" I asked him.

"…Daddy?" Gaara seemed to think about it. "Daddy boss."

Yeah, but the Kazekage wasn't exactly around. "Try it anyway, please? For me?"

Gaara nodded. He turned to the Tailed Beasts—at which point I realized Shukaku had been smashed into something resembling pancake batter again—and said in his best bossy voice, "Room."

Shukaku stirred. "WHAT?"

"Bad!" Gaara shouted. "Go room now!"

"You heard the human. Go to your room." Isobu was snickering, or as near as he could manage.

"SILENCE! I WILL NOT BE ORDERED AROUND BY A LITTLE PINK RAT!" Shukaku roared, but it was somewhat less intimidating than he might have hoped. It was difficult to be intimidating from underneath the massive bulk of his stronger sibling when said sibling had literally flattened him more than once.

"Shukaku-san, you're not getting out of this." I picked the little conquering hero up from my knee and lifted him so he could sit on my shoulders. That way, Gaara could have the best podium in the whole place. "This isn't even the worst we can do."

Shukaku growled.

"I mean, Kurama hasn't even joined the party." With Gaara's fist in my hair so he could keep his balance, I strode forward as Isobu's left tail smashed down and bashed Shukaku's single one back into inanimate sand.

"Go room!" Gaara shouted again.

"You think this is over, human?" Shukaku bit out.

Isobu brought one of his armored hands down on Shukaku's barely-formed head to keep him from getting too nasty. "It never is, with you. You'd think being trapped in that old human would have taught you some patience."

"Being trapped only teaches rage." Shukaku tried and failed to get back up again. Which, again, was probably pointless with Isobu sitting on him. "It hasn't been long since I was sealed here! I can still break it!"

"…Um, Shukaku-san, Gaara's two." I looked up, and Gaara nodded down at me. "Yeah. So it's been, uh, two years. If you haven't cracked it yet, I'm not sure you're going to. Even if it is a bad
Shukaku visibly and literally deflated, shocked. "…But I haven't even finished cursing his family to the twentieth generation."

"I told you your sense of time was off," I called up to Isobu. "You and all your siblings!"

Isobu rolled his visible eye.

"WHATEVER! I'M STILL NOT GOING BACK IN THERE!"

Isobu snorted. "Yes, you are. Whether I have to smash you flat again or not."

"Third time's the charm, Gaara-chan. Give him all you've got!" Unseen by Gaara, I gave Isobu a thumbs-up.

Gaara took a deep breath. Then he did it again. He was gonna huff and puff and knock Shukaku's metaphorical socks off.

"GO," Gaara shouted, "TO YOUR ROOM!"

And at the exact same time that Gaara's chakra called Shukaku back, Isobu blasted straight down with a Tailed Beast Bomb. Gaara's call was a bit like going to meet someone when they rang the doorbell, while Isobu's post-script was perhaps more of a boot to the ass.

All's well that ends well, anyway. The funny thing about physics in the mindscape, on top of the various other silly little quirks, was that the Tailed Beast Bomb had been thoroughly concentrated just on Shukaku. No blowback to deal with, and no waves either.

I looked up at Gaara, who was leaning over and peering down at my face. "Good job, Gaara-chan!"

"Did it!" He tugged on my hair, steering me back toward looking at Isobu. "What that?"

"My monster. You can call him Isobu-san," I replied, resting my hands on his tiny ankles to keep him from falling. "Wanna say hello?"

"It's Isobu-sama, humans." Isobu seemed to puff himself up.

"Iso-tama!" Gaara said.

"…Close enough, I guess." Isobu dropped back down onto his lined belly and eyed Gaara and me with some curiosity. His mouth seemed to twist, though he didn't have lips. "…Thank you."

"Why?" Gaara asked.

"Not you." Isobu blinked slowly, like a contented cat. "Kei. For…helping."

I grinned. "No problem, Isobu." I turned my attention back to the toddler. "So, Gaara-chan, do you like piggyback rides?"

"What that?" Gaara asked. Was he chewing on my hair? Yes, he was.

Oh well.

"See, it goes like this…"
I opened my eyes to a sideways view of the back of someone's head sticking up over the row of seats in front of ours, and the feeling of slender hands shaking my shoulder. Upon further thought, I was lying with my head in Rin's lap, and she was the one doing the shaking.

"Kei, wake up! Hayate's match is about to start!" Rin said, as I looked up.

"I'm up, I'm up!" I hauled myself back into a sitting position, then rubbed at my eyes. "How long was I out?"

"Long enough to miss the rest of the first and the whole second round!" Kotetsu complained from behind me. "You're lucky Hayate had a bye, I guess, but you missed Yūgao's match, too!"

Aomaru chuffed and pushed his face against the side of my flak jacket's neck guard.

"How in the world do you sleep through a Chūnin Exam? Are you part Nara, kid?" Gaku asked, leaning on his dog.

What a joker.

"Ha. Ha. Ha." Ignoring Gaku's further contributions to the conversation, I looked around, but saw neither hide nor hair of Obito or…wait, Kakashi was gone, too. Where'd they go? I could see Makoto over in the Kage Box with Sensei and the other elites, but my teammates were nowhere to be found. Kohari Umino was also missing.

I shook my head and dismissed the question before I could ask it. There were some questions I couldn't ask in front of genin, not when I suspected that Shukaku had to do with some of the answers. "Okay, summarize what I missed. Anyone?"

"Well, the two Suna guys fought." Izumo shrugged. "Then Yūgao did. The Katsuo guy won, and he beat Yūgao in the only match of the second round. He used a really freaky puppet."

"That totally fails to capture how awesome the match was!" Iruka protested, looking insulted on Yūgao's behalf. "She was kicking his butt!"

"Until she got poisoned unconscious," said Izumo.

"You're not even in the finals, and you're saying she's weak?" Iruka demanded.

"No, I'm saying she lost and she's in the infirmary now or something. Which is where Umino-san went, in case you were wondering." The last sentence was apparently for my benefit, since I rather expected that Iruka would know where his mother was. Izumo just shrugged again.

"So, Kei, how was your nap?" Rin asked, prodding at me with a diagnostic technique. "No drowsiness? No aches?"

"I'm fine, Rin." And I did note that she was deliberately not asking me about the whole "Tailed Beast fight" business. Did the others just assume it was a non-sequitur of some kind? Did people say really silly things before slumping over in a narcoleptic mini-coma?

"If you say so," Rin said doubtfully.

I set my jaw.

"The final match of the Sunagakure Chūnin Exams is about to begin!" the judge called from the center of the arena. "The competitors are Hayate Gekkō of Konohagakure and Katsuo of
Sunagakure! Will the chūnin hopefuls please come to the center of the arena?"

Right on cue, the two genin trooped out onto the sandstone.

Just from a casual observation of the two, I noticed that Hayate had pulled his hitai-ate's cloth up from his neck and over his nose and mouth, and had pulled my flight goggles down over his eyes again. Katsuo, on the other hand, had already crossed his arms so that his hands were touching his forearm seals.

"So, Katsuo's a puppeteer?" I heard myself ask aloud. I'd heard it from Obito, but I needed to confirm that my memory wasn't faulty. "And a poison user."

"Right," Rin confirmed.

"That explains why Hayate wanted my stuff," I muttered. "Rin, did Hayate get anything from you last night?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

I didn't really know for certain. "Like, I don't know, did he ask for some kind of antitoxin? Antivenom? Antihistamine?"

"No," Rin replied.

Shit.

"You don't go into a fight with a known poisoner without taking every precaution in the book," I muttered under my breath. "Hayate, play it safe…"

"BEGIN!" the judge shouted, before Body Flickering away from ground zero.

Katsuo immediately deployed a pair of puppets from the storage seals on his tattooed arms. Once the smoke cleared, I got a good look at a large wooden puppet shaped like a spider the size of a large dog, and a smaller one shaped more-or-less like a monkey. The big one was deployed in front, as a guard and a moving shield, while the smaller one had more seals on it that, I would assume, involved launching things.

Hayate's chakra had already flickered away from his starting point—currently occupied by a plain old Clone Jutsu—and was circling unseen around to Katsuo's blind side. I could feel something like a genjutsu keeping him out of immediate view—maybe Yūgao had taught him something—but there was so much dust in the air that it hardly mattered much.

Hayate hit Katsuo like a speeding car, kicking the smaller genin with both feet at once and launching him across the field.

A poof of smoke revealed that Hayate had kicked one of the puppets instead, which disassembled in flight and hit the ground with a clatter.

Hayate planted the point of his kodachi in the sandstone, as though pole-vaulting, and launched himself out of the way of the retaliatory strike. Said strike came in the form of the monkey puppet coming back together, screeching, and diving through the space where my brother had last been.

Katsuo himself reappeared, slightly disoriented, from the belly of his huge spider puppet.

Hayate landed, located Katsuo immediately, and charged after him.
"He's playing this a lot more aggressively than last time," I said, as Hayate bounced off Katsuo's spider puppet in a failed attempt to force Katsuo to flinch.

"Ah, right, you didn't hear." At my curious look, Rin explained, "Your brother gave his spare tags to Yūgao-chan, and she used them in her match. He's only using his own chakra and his own skills now."

Okay, that was chivalry and team spirit writ large, but it didn't help Hayate now.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Dammit, Hayate."

"Don't worry too much about him. Hayate's strong," said Iruka. "He's really strong!"

A muffled groan was all the noise I made in reply.

Katsuo's huge spider puppet reared up and spat a hail of senbon needles after my brother.

Hayate was gone in another burst of his lightning-aligned chakra.

"I need to ask Kakashi what he's teaching Hayate when I'm not there," I muttered. Another thought struck me, just as Katsuo's puppet sent a senbon needle through the sleeve of Hayate's coat on a near-miss. "Rin, where'd Obito go, exactly? I didn't think he was supposed to be working now."

"I don't know," Rin said, "but I do know that there was a spike of weird chakra a little while ago. Maybe it had something to do with your nap?"

Oh, not good. Shukaku had been acting up in the underbelly of the universe or whatever, yes, but to have his influence reach into the real world? Very worrying.

I was about to get up, but Rin caught my sleeve. "Kei, the Hokage called Obito over. He didn't ask for you, not yet."

"I probably slept through it," I protested.

"You didn't. Kei, the Hokage doesn't need your help right now," Rin said, pulling me back down into my seat. "Hayate needs to see you here, watching him succeed."

She had a point. If Sensei had needed me, he would have just had someone haul me over there and wait until I got up. Until something happened, I didn't need to be anywhere but here.

Hopefully.

Hayate shattered the monkey puppet again, but this time his sword was blazing blue in my mind's eye. I could almost see the instant when the chakra strings snapped and the puppet went dead in the air. I couldn't hear the sound of wood clattering to the ground over the noise of the crowd, but I imagined it anyway.

Hayate kicked the puppet out of the arena to deny his opponent any additional sneak-attack options.

That left Katsuo with his spider and not a lot of options if he didn't want to get smashed.

Hayate slid his kodachi back into its sheath, changing his stance.

"Is he building chakra for an attack?" Rin asked.

"Yeah. Feels like…" I paused, watching his chakra move in my mind's eye. "Something like the
Mountain Cutter. Smaller. Sharper?" Hayate and I had trained in the same tradition, but experience had forced my style to diverge from his over my career. I'd picked up more taijutsu from Obito and Kakashi than I often admitted, and Hayate had been incorporating jutsu instead.

If his version of the technique didn't feel the same, that wasn't unexpected. In hindsight anyway.

"He's going to use up a lot of his chakra this way," I concluded. I rested my chin in the palm of my hand. "Come on, Hayate…"

Down on the battlefield, Hayate was forced to juke left and then right, ducking repeated bursts of senbon. The Mountain Cutter, as my mother and I had conceived of it, didn't need any actual windup time.

Yet, Hayate didn't seem to be capable of using all that energy immediately. Or at range.

Hm. Something to work on.

"Does your brother ever use two swords?" Kotetsu asked. "Because right now, he looks like he could use another one."

"Mn, no, that's something he's going to have to learn." I hadn't really learned how to dual-wield blades until I spent some time watching Sensei, and even then the skills hadn't been easy to transfer. In the end, I had never really carried two blades. The first was my katana, and was necessary. The second would be made mostly of chakra and mostly when I needed it.

Unbidden, the feeling of using my old kodachi's sheath like a blade came back to mind. Driving the improvised blade through Kakkō's back and into the ground. Not something I was eager to remember. Particularly since that particular fight had accomplished exactly fuck-all.

"What's this Mountain Cutter thing anyway? Isn't that hyperbole?" Gaku asked.

"It's just the name Mom made up for our style's ultimate attack." I shrugged. It might've had another name, but Mom had never used a different one. "It's a little overblown, but, you know, if you do it right then it'll cut through just about anything."

"But you need to use half your chakra per attack," Rin added. "So it's not really efficient."

At Gaku's blank expression and Aomaru's nonplussed face, I explained, "Mom used the Eight Gates to do it. I never learned that, and neither has Hayate. So I don't really know exactly what changes he's made."

"I guess we'll find out," said Izumo.

"Hayate can do this! He will succeed!" Iruka insisted.

While my brother's teammate's faith in him was comforting, I didn't think it'd affect the match one way or another at this point.

Katsuo crouched behind his puppet, then sent it careening after Hayate like a runaway freight train on chakra strings.

I watched as the puppet deployed axes and sickles from the joints of its limbs, spitting senbon needles everywhere and generally behaving like a wooden hell-creature. It was a little like a crop thresher in terms of function, and I knew it would be unpleasant to be caught by any of those blades.
Poisoned weapons were a puppeteer's best friends.

Hayate didn't hesitate. His chakra flowed down his arm and into his sword, shifting fast enough that I almost couldn't track it.

The next thing anyone saw was Katsuo's puppet splitting down the middle of its chassis as though sliced apart by thin air, sending wooden shards and other fun things careening past my brother and toward the other side of the arena.

Some kind of canister, hidden inside the puppet until that moment, exploded in his face.

Across the battlefield, Katsuo was finally hit by the vacuum wave component of the technique, and he was hurled out of the arena and into a cactus.

That wasn't something I'd emphasized in my own training, though it was looking like I should have. Mom must have known, and trained Hayate in some of the advanced chakra usages I didn't get a chance to learn before being deployed. I was almost sure of that.

And then Hayate's distress hit me in a cold flood. I turned my attention back to him—why had it ever left?—and spotted him doubled up on the ground. I couldn't see what was going on, but I could feel pain and panic from him even these far away, even if I couldn't figure out where. His chakra flared erratically, reaching for anything—anyone—to help.

"What's going on?" Iruka asked, leaning forward over Aomaru's head. "I didn't see what happened!"

That was the last thing I remember hearing from the stands.

Rin was already on her feet and had hopped back over to the aisle before I got my legs working properly. I was too stunned, frozen by an old fear I thought I'd forgotten. I could remember a dark room, and feeling my brother's tiny chakra signature shriek in terrified, silent distress.

I ran after Rin without checking to see where we were going, or hearing anything but a roaring in my ears that drowned out everything else. It had nothing to do with Isobu.

Rin caught up with the medics carting the two competitors to the infirmary.

Katsuo was probably going to have to stay off that leg of his for a while, and looked furious with himself for the ring-out and the destruction of his puppets. He went on ahead.

Rin bustled up to the Suna medics and might have argued credentials with them. I wasn't sure. I didn't care.

My brother's chest was rising and falling only in errant bursts. Someone had taken the goggles and the headband off. I could see his face, which had gone slack and was covered in both a fine sheen of sweat and raised, reddened, blistered patches.

Dark and too hot, the sound of harsh breathing from across the room...

I took his hand and felt for his pulse along his wrist. I also channeled chakra for something like a diagnostic jutsu, but I wasn't concentrating well enough to read much detail from it.

My brother's lungs were failing. His heart was pounding, erratic and using far too much oxygen.

Not again. Not again, not again, not again, not again—I couldn't—wouldn't—

I can't do this again! I can't lose him!
My vision went red, then black, for just a moment.

Blood.

Screaming darkness.

Dawn, and crows.

I was never fast enough. *And I never would be.*

Then I blinked. And...everyone had backed away. Except Rin, and the stretcher-bearers.

My hand was on my brother's limp wrist, still, and Rin's hand came down on mine with almost absurd gentleness. "Kei. Please. I can handle it from here."

My eyes itched.

Isobu was being curiously quiet.

I swallowed hard. I didn't know enough to help, did I? If I tried advanced healing with Rin, I wasn't going to be able to help on her level. No, I was better as a glorified battery. And she didn't need that yet.

But...but Hayate...

Her other hand cupped my cheek. "Trust me."

I nodded.

She turned to the medics, the medical assistants, and even the Suna-nin who'd started to form a crowd to see what the fuss was about. "Get him to the infirmary right now, and let's see what was in that mix that hit him. Move, people!"

I didn't go with them.

I stood in the hall for a moment, looking down at my hand and the faintest shimmer of reddish chakra swirling around my fingertips. Exhaling, I let go of my grip on Isobu's chakra and focused mainly on calming myself down.

I'd never been good at self-soothing techniques.

"Keisuke-san?"

I turned at the sound of my name, and found myself face-to-face with Baki.

His face didn't trigger a secondary surge of helpless anger, but only because Isobu had his tails wrapped around the core of his chakra and refused to let me have any. The sensation was distracting enough to throw me off.

But there was an undercurrent there, out of Isobu's control, which was cold and harsh and somehow still me. That part of me took a vicious joy in seeing the blood drain from Baki's face as he met my eyes.

I probably looked and felt like a serial killer. I didn't have a convenient mirror to see if there was something extra going on with my face, but it probably didn't matter.
"Baki-san. Did you have something to say?" I asked, surprised at the level tone in my voice. Sure, the question came out a little chilly, but it was clearly non-hostile.

"Ah, yes." Baki coughed. "The Kazekage...he asked me if Konoha would be willing to accept assistance from Sunagakure in this matter."

"I don't know about Konoha, but I would be personally interested." On second thought, didn't I have a reflective edge on my katana? A thought for later, perhaps. "Depends on what you mean, though. Are you offering to help with medical matters?"

"I can't help personally," Baki clarified, "but the Kazekage is offering to provide Sunagakure's expertise in poisons and medicine."

I hadn't asked anyone what, exactly, had happened while I was out. I had some idea, but if Obito and Kakashi were gone because they were dealing with a Shukaku flare-up...well, this sudden amiability from Suna forces would make sense. The Kazekage didn't do anything without a greater goal in mind, but perhaps gratitude for two Sharingan assistants would tip the scale. Or not gratitude. Perhaps resentment of owing anyone anything.

My brother was a bargaining chip, then, to get the Kazekage out of an immediate debt to Sensei. Assuming I was correct, anyway.

"Baki-san, I would be grateful for any help Sunagakure can offer," I said carefully. I couldn't speak for Sensei or for the village. But I could speak for myself. "Hayate is my younger brother, and he's all the family I have left."

Another calculated risk. If people wanted to hurt me, Hayate was the obvious target. But anyone who looked at our respective surnames would know that. I still hated Baki, in the depths of my soul, but not this Baki. Not yet. Not this young jōnin who hadn't done a damn thing to me or mine and might never do it.

Acceptable risk.

"I understand, Keisuke-san. Or Gekkō-san," he corrected himself. Then he vanished in a burst of Body Flicker speed and left me to my thoughts.

I eyed the space where he'd been, then drew my katana and looked into my reflection's face. I'd expected a scowl. I expected something like the physical manifestation of my killing intent. I didn't expect what I did see.

My irises were bright gold.

"Kei! Kei, what happened?" Obito's voice startled me out of my dazed sulk, making me look up from the magazine I'd been staring at for about half an hour. Staring at, rather than reading. I could barely string three words together when I could feel my brother's chakra wink in and out in the depths of the hospital.

Waiting rooms were probably a feature of at least one layer of Hell.

"Hi, Obito—" And that was as far as I got.

When Obito swept me up in a crushing hug, I didn't protest. I just rested my chin on his shoulder and sighed.
"We missed the match, Kei." Kakashi stood off to the side of the waiting room as though he'd always been there. "How's Hayate?"

I made a noncommittal noise as Obito set me down and dusted me off. "He's alive. No one's been out to give a progress report or anything."

"Seriously?" Obito frowned. "That's…that's not normal, is it? I'm not normally the one out here waiting…"

"It's only been half an hour," I said dully. I took a deep breath and added, "But Rin's in there. I trust her."

Obito nodded seriously. "Rin can take care of him. But, uh…Kei, why are your eyes that color?"

Kakashi's headband was sitting straight on his head, though his Sharingan was closed. He clearly expected something out of me.

"I'm agitated, but not murderous," I muttered. "Apparently, this is what happens when I'm broadcasting my mood, now."

"Did something change while we were gone?" Obito asked.

"Several things changed," I informed him. "My brother's in respiratory arrest, I talked to a Tailed Beast, and I think I've discovered new levels of impulse control."

Obito looked blank.

"The Tailed Beast situation has been dealt with," Kakashi said, while Obito struggled to find something to say. "The One-Tail is contained. When did you fight him?"

I tapped the side of my head.

"Ah." Kakashi's Sharingan opened. "So. Any trouble?"

I waved off his concern. "Nothing I couldn't handle. I'm sorry it ended up causing trouble for you."

"I'm not sure you could call a weird ball of sand 'trouble,'" Obito said. "I mean, even with the face on it. It didn't…attack, exactly. Not much."

"What he means is that he tried to start a staring contest with it, and got sand in his sandals as revenge," Kakashi added, giving Obito a sidelong look.

"You can't prove that was deliberate." Obito crossed his arms.

Maybe it was the tension in the air, but I…I just started giggling. Nothing they'd said was really funny, as such, but I was so wound up that it didn't really matter what set me off. It could have been a misplaced picture frame or something, and I probably would have still cracked like an egg.

In short order, I was giggling so hard that I needed to sit down, unable to breathe from laughing. But the sound that came out of my mouth didn't sound like laughter at all.

"Uh, Kei?" Obito had his hands up, as though preparing to catch me or fend off a punch to the face. He didn't look sure which one he really expected.

My vision went wobbly, distorted by tears.
I felt a hand on my shoulder and looked up, trying to force a grin automatically.

Kakashi stared placidly back, his Sharingan closed, and offered me water in a paper cup.

I stopped smiling. I took the paper cup, looked down at it, and felt my breathing hitch. "I-I can't do this again."

"Do what?" Kakashi asked, kneeling in front of me.

I had to take a sip of water before I could continue. Then I rubbed at my eyes with my other hand, embarrassed. "I just… I-I remember what happened on the Tenth. With Hayate. This—this helplessness drives me insane."

There was only one "Tenth" for Konoha. Especially for those who had fought in it.

"Hayate will be fine," Kakashi insisted. "The Hokage was able to call in a favor."

"A favor we got for him, and on his orders," Obito added. I gave him a blank look. "So do us a favor and believe in us."

"In you?"

"In the power of people's selfishness, and the Kazekage's hatred of debts," Kakashi corrected.

Pfft. "I think I can do that."

"Good enough," Kakashi stood up, looking around at the waiting room with the air of someone with nothing better to do.

"So, did Baki-san tell you about the extra medical staff?" Obito asked, sitting down next to me.

"Yeah. But he didn't say who he was bringing in. Maybe another puppeteer?" I shrugged, not really feeling up to guessing.

That was about as far as the conversation got.

The doors to the waiting room were kicked in from the outside, startling all of us.

Cue a seventy-year-old woman barreling in, pausing, reorienting, and lunging right at Kakashi with chakra strings trailing from her arms. "WHITE FANG, PREPARE TO DIE!"

Several things happened at once.

Obito's eye went red and he whirled to face the incoming jōnin with his right arm building chakra for a Wood Release barrage.

Kakashi's chakra exploded outward with a sensation like a lightning strike, scorching the hospital linoleum.

I dragged on Isobu's chakra hard enough that I felt it surround me in a Tailed Beast chakra cloak almost before I knew it.

Two seconds later, the haze of battle was put on hold by a massive flare of chakra that made all of us pause, just to look in the direction it had come from.

( Didn't hold a candle to Isobu in a tizzy, but then, it wasn't Isobu who was acting. I was.)
The Kazekage, flanked by Baki, strode into the waiting room with an expression that bordered on murderous.

Behind him, with his eyes gleaming gold and his eyelids marked in dark orange, was Sensei. His chakra felt strange. Detached, maybe? Either way, I knew Sage Mode when I saw it, and didn't want to get in his way.

I didn't really want to think about the picture we presented.

Kakashi had left a scorched trail across the floor, and was somehow across the room and behind Sensei without using the Body Flicker jutsu or the Replacement.

All three of my chakra tails had curled defensively around Kakashi's previous position, cutting the old woman off from reaching it by dissolving her chakra strings as soon as they got too close. The tails were almost solid, bubbling with chakra, and I had to make a concerted effort to pull them back.

Obito had stopped short of actually attacking, and had needed to direct his Wood Release attack straight up to avoid accidentally firing in the direction of the two Kage, since the old woman had ducked. That left a wooden spike protruding from one of the fluorescent light fixtures, raining sparks down on us.

I straightened up from my battle-ready stance. No need for this to get violent.

Er. More violent.

"Elder Chiyo," Sensei said in a deliberately even tone. "Meet my students."

Chapter End Notes

Title's from an Imogen Heap song.
Depths: Eye to Eye

Chapter Summary

Obito: Be Naruto, but in beta.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Of the six people in that waiting room who were ready to rumble, not one of us moved. We were at an impasse, standing still like statues, for long enough that the moment made the transition from ominous to uncomfortable and then to downright awkward. The Kazekage's gold sand drifted around the room, and so did quite a lot of agitated chakra from all of us, but no one looked like they wanted to turn the level of violence from "imminent" to "immediate." Killing intent, used like a cracking whip and then held up as a threat, kept all of us from acting on our impulses for just long enough to remember what we were doing.

Funny, how that put Sensei and the Kazekage on the spot as lion-tamers.

Sensei exhaled first, closing his eyes, and the Sage markings faded out before he decided to say anything. I had to wonder how he could still find words to say, since I'd run out of them.

In the end, the Kazekage spoke first. He said in a tone that said "death before dishonor" and other fun things, "Elder Chiyo. Your patient is through those doors."

Chiyo hesitated for just a fraction too long. Her hooded gaze remained on Kakashi, who stared levelly back with his Sharingan closed. I couldn't imagine what was going through her head, at that moment.

Then her body language shifted entirely, as she changed her demeanor from "deadly shinobi" to "doddering old woman who occasionally played dead to fake out her brother." "Whoops! I think I got the wrong ninja. Sorry about the mistake!"

And then she flounced off through the swinging doors like a shinobi a third her age.

Obito was definitely making a face—he felt like he was making a face—but I didn't look at him. Not even when he reached up and removed the Wood Release javelin from the ceiling and it turned to dust in his hand.

I kept my eyes locked on the two village leaders in the room, who in turn had not let their guard down regarding each other. I did put Isobu's chakra back where I'd found it, though. It felt politer that way.

Similarly, I felt Kakashi cautiously power down once Chiyo had gone off to do her job. I'd have to ask him exactly what new Chidori variant he'd come up with this time. It hadn't felt like the usual nails on a chalkboard across my chakra sense, so maybe he'd been training like a maniac to come up with a new technique. If so, I had somehow missed that.

"...I trust this incident hasn't affected our agreement, Hokage-dono," said the Kazekage.
Sensei shook his head. "No harm was done, Kazekage-dono."

"Then I will take my leave and confer with my advisors for promotion prospects." The Kazekage swept an assessing gaze across the room, his eyes searching for points of weakness, before walking off and out of the hospital.

Sensei stared after him for a moment, then focused on Baki. Baki bowed, but he didn't leave.

"You might wanna, um, call a maintenance guy," Obito said, looking up at the still-sparking light fixture. Then at the floor, where Kakashi had somehow reduced the surface of eight linoleum tiles to so much char. "Please?"

Baki nodded and slipped out of the waiting room, but it didn't feel like his chakra was moving that far away.

"…Could someone explain what the hell just happened?" Obito asked as soon as Baki had left.

"From context, my father killed Chiyo's son and daughter-in-law in the Second Shinobi World War." Kakashi's expression, from what I could see of it, was somber. He shook his head.

"Ah." Obito's face fell. "But he died years ago…"

Kakashi didn't bristle at the thought, but it seemed like a close thing.

"Elder Chiyo probably realized that," Sensei said. His chakra was very tightly controlled, allowing nothing about his thoughts or emotions to slip through one way or another. "Discuss it later with her if you want, but we don't have time for that now. It's not an issue unless she attacks again.

"But before you stay here…" Sensei sighed, "could someone please get Kei up to date on what's been happening? This Shadow Clone isn't going to last much longer."

"I didn't look at a clock," Obito admitted, sheepish. "So I don't really remember what happened when. But…oh! Kei, you passed out around an hour ago, right? So we can start there."

I made a face. "Sure."

"If you two have things handled…?" Sensei prompted. When the two boys gave him simultaneous nods, he—

Okay, I'd never seen Sensei stab himself in the hand with a kunai, but that was certainly one way to dismiss a Shadow Clone. Points for style. Combining Shadow Clone hax with the Flying Thunder God, all while probably investigating further on all counts by himself? It wasn't surprising that Sensei had wrangled an S-class rating.

"So, do you have any idea where the real Sensei is?" I asked, watching my teammates' reactions.

"He's working on the One-Tail's seal. Something came up," Obito said with a shrug. "I don't get it, personally, but…"

Kakashi interrupted with, "Back on topic. Let's sit down for a moment."

All three of us sat down around the waiting room's sole magazine-laden table, and I slapped an anti-eavesdropping tag down on it. The hospital staff didn't need to hear anything we were talking about. Honestly, I should have done it sooner. Maybe even when I'd first walked in.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Kakashi asked.
"Isobu asked me to help him with Shukaku," I explained, while Obito had his Sharingan trained on me. "After that, I guess… I facilitated a kind of wrestling match thing between the two of them. Isobu smashed Shukaku into sand dunes twice, and I got Gaara a bit of control…" I trailed off upon seeing Kakashi's body language. "What?"

"The One-Tail's seal was constructed from an advanced storage seal," Kakashi explained. "I think you already know what that means."

"Yeah. No mind-filtering components." Mine didn't have much in the way of a cognitive filter between Beast and host, but mine was also a complete slapdash job that had been designed to fail inside of four hours. It was something of a miracle that Sensei had managed to stabilize me. "But it's modular, inside of its own context, and the design as a concept is actually more flexible than more abstract seals. I still wouldn't have gone with it."

"Sensei said that, uh, the seal was at least workable." Obito scratched the side of his face, along the whorled scars. "But…"

"The One-Tailed Beast's seal shouldn't be deteriorating…" I muttered. Not this soon.

"It wasn't," Kakashi said flatly. "It had been modified."

There was something foreboding about the way he said it. "How?"

"From the inside."

What? "What?"

WHAT?

How could the seals be modified from the inside? How could anyone even tell? The modification of a jinchūriki seal usually required multiple specialists—or one sealing equivalent of Tony Stark—and was chakra-intensive enough that anyone with decent sensing ability should have been able to feel it happening long before it was successful. Furthermore, Tailed Beast chakra was often completely incompatible with the process primarily because their energy was far too reactive.

The knowledge necessary to modify a jinchūriki seal was even harder to come by than the raw ability to do so. There was a minimum chakra requirement for the task, as well as control threshold, and then there was training involved to refine both points until nothing about the modifications would be constructed incorrectly.

Otherwise, like many faulty seals, it would explode.

What the hell had happened?

When I finally spoke, my voice had turned rough and harsh. Not because of Isobu, but because I was realizing that there was a good chance we were in deep shit. Implications were there, but I hadn't managed to even put them to thought, yet. "Obito, I think we need to take this to the Kamui dimension."

And I needed space to think, even if I was wrestling with all too many ideas. They threatened to crush me.

Somehow, somewhere, I had fucked up big time.

Obito was looking between Kakashi and me, having apparently missed the subtext. "Kei?"
"A privacy seal isn't gonna cut it," I bit out. "We need to discuss this in private."

"Well, okay. I just, uh," Obito gave the swinging doors a second glance, probably about to say something about my brother, but… "Okay. Since you asked."

Obito took my hand, then held the other out for Kakashi's.

Obito's jutsu, in a way, was the strangest sensations I'd experienced in my second run at life. It didn't hurt, and it wasn't unpleasant except in a "this should not be working this way" sense. I couldn't feel myself being pulled into a miniature wormhole, being stretched out until I could fit into a hole in space-time the size of a quarter, but I knew I was. I could see it happening.

I decided right then and there to keep my eyes shut if I ever had to do it again.

I landed in a handstand once my body figured out what proper proportions were again, so my first glimpse of Obito's version of Hueco Mundo was upside-down. I righted myself and stood up, looking around.

Hm. Black background or a featureless void of some kind, while the ground was made of something that was probably stone. It was arranged into perfect, grayish blocks the approximate size of skyscrapers. I couldn't see far enough to say whether the field of gray extended past an outer ring of raised pillars, and I wasn't really interested.

I also had no idea where the light was coming from. Above, certainly, but there was no sun and there weren't any stars.

Eerie.

Kakashi landed next to me a moment later, in the wake of a gentle swish of displaced air. He looked at me and said, "First time?"

"…Yeah." I shrugged, staring upward into the infinite dark. "I mean, I knew it looked like this, but seeing it in person…"

Kakashi made a neutral-sounding noise, and then Obito finally twisted out of the air in front of us. In hindsight, it was like watching water flow down a drain, but backwards.

Obito looked at both of us and said, "So, what's the big secret here?" Defensively, he added, "I'm not an idiot! I just… don't get seal thingies."

"If the seal is modified from the inside, then the only one who can change things is Shukaku," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "And if he can modify his seal freely, then the Kazekage has a lot more to worry about than just his kid's sanity. Thing is, I don't actually know how his seal was changed. Kakashi?"

"Where would he even learn to do that? And how is it possible?" Kakashi asked, audibly frowning.

"I think…" Ah, hell. I swallowed, and my fingers tightened involuntarily in the fabric of my uniform. "I think it has something to do with me. Somehow. I know that sounds arrogant, but…"

"I take it Shukaku never got that far in the other world?" Kakashi asked.

"No, not even close." Which may have had something to do with how differently the Beasts I had met were behaving differently. I'd butterflyed something, but no one had been able to point out exactly what. And I didn't have proof just yet. "One of you, can you draw the seal modification?"
"Sensei probably would have had to write the thing out longhand to tell it'd been changed."

"It looked like this, Kei." Quickly, Obito activated his Sharingan again and carved the sequence of kanji into the stone with a kunai.

All three of us crouched over the seal Obito copied between our feet, which made for a bit of a crowd. But we were used to that.

I barely had to look at it to realize what had happened, tracing the lines with my finger. "That's… that's not something Shukaku could have just learned. It's an Uzumaki sealing variant."

"So that's not just Sensei's lousy handwriting?" Obito asked. "I mean, there was a bunch of other stuff but this was where he turned pale—"

"Sensei's handwriting and his seal-work are totally different," I reminded Obito. "Because bad seals explode when you don't want them to. This seal's definitely doing what it was intended for."

"Then where he'd pick this one up?" Obito still looked blank.

I shook my head. "No, Obito, Shukaku has never been recorded anywhere near Uzumaki clan holdings. Before being sealed in the Kazekage's son, he spent more than eighty years sealed inside an old priest, and Sunagakure has records that go back even further than that. He couldn't have just picked up those seal patterns anywhere, and they have to be deliberately taught."

Kakashi caught on first. "Kei, what did you do?"

I gulped, watching Obito's gaze swing to me and his expression shift to something crestfallen. "Kei…?"

"Shukaku's seal doesn't have a cognitive filter between him and Gaara. And…neither does mine." I rushed on with, "Though theoretically he could have learned some of those sealing patterns from Kurama, who might be learning calligraphy from Kushina…I don't think he did. But he hates Kurama." Oh god, what did I do? "It's a lot more likely that he learned from Isobu—and copied what I know about seals."

Oh god.

Ohhhhh god.

Oh fuck.

I finally had to sit down when the weight of my mistakes finally hit me.

I had only had a cognitive filter—or something approximating one, anyway—during the earliest days after Isobu had been sealed in me. The Five Elements Seal had ruined my chakra control and my ability to fight, but it had kept Isobu from talking to me at all. And after that, when trapped in the butterfly genjutsu, I…

I let him see the memory cloud. And I'd never thought about what he might be picking up while riding shotgun in my head. I'd been using some of his chakra in my seals for months—almost years—and never once thought about what feedback he'd get out of it.

**Did you think I was going to wait forever?** Isobu asked, in a voice that reverberated enough that I almost wondered why Obito and Kakashi didn't look like they'd heard him.
Obito looked at Kakashi, though, and both of them then looked at me with their Sharingan active. I had to imagine that the expression on my face wasn't reassuring.

What did you do? I demanded of Isobu, barely remembering to keep it in my head at the last second.

I did what you would not, Isobu replied, and made sure my brother will be safe.

"What I wouldn't?" I repeated, jarred out of silence. "What are you—?"

I am talking about your repeatedly-stated desire to assist the Tailed Beasts. Isobu growled, But what have I seen from you? Platitudes, and threats. Meanwhile, I can hear my brother's screams from across the continent, while his seal keeps him in total isolation from any of our brothers and sisters!

I was sealed in a warded jar for three months. Compared to what I've seen of Kurama's seal, mine was a nightmare. Isobu's tails lashed. Months, of not being able to move, or see, or hear, or make any noise even for the echo. I could not feel anything. I could only wait for it to be over. Shukaku, unlike me, was sealed for years. And now that he has a human, why would he not tear them to ribbons at the first chance? It would make him real!

I remembered a quote, just out of nowhere. "Love breeds sacrifice... which in turn breeds hatred. Then you can know pain." Pain—Nagato—said that once.

Isobu loved his siblings, despite their stormy relationships and the long distances between them.

If you can—and are encouraged to—protect your brother, then I do not see why I should be any different. Isobu glared down at my mental avatar, his eye glowing ominously.

Your brother can flatten the entirety of Sunagakure in a tantrum. Does he need to be protected? And yet, I knew it was an ignorant question as soon as I asked it.

If your brother could reshape the world at his whim, would you stop worrying? Isobu scoffed. Hardly.

...He had a point.

"Kei?" Obito asked. "Are you talking to Isobu?"

I nodded, though I didn’t say anything. My eyes were a little unfocused, looking off into the middle distance, as I tried to think through Isobu’s reasoning and hold an internal conversation.

You are...tolerable, for a human, Isobu said after a while. Why do you think I never cut you off from my chakra? I could. I could abandon you in the middle of a fight. I would come back.

I was curious. You asked for my name, when no other human had. Not since him. Isobu seemed to sigh. So I was disappointed when you avoided taking a stance to help my siblings in a concrete way. Oh, you talk a big game, and to some of the right people, but only I can hear them. He paused. Not all of them, and not all the time. But enough.

"Why did Shukaku act up as soon as we got to Sunagakure, Isobu?" I asked aloud, for my teammates' benefit. "You said you couldn't tell what he was saying."

I was the only one of us to reach out to Shukaku on purpose. He was...excited.
"Excited? I…okay, I can see that." I paused, while Kakashi and Obito's respective Sharingan started spinning slowly. They weren't trying to get my attention, though, so I imagined that they were all right with passively observing my chakra and Isobu's as we spoke. "Isobu…what exactly did you teach him to do?"

Isobu growled. **I taught him how to disrupt any seal that dares put him inside something without chakra of its own.**

I'd probably have to tell Sunagakure that the teapot strategy was literally never going to work again. Not that it was a good idea in the first place. And it had clearly never been the humane solution. Now that I thought about it, there had to have been a reason Gaara had thought that he *was* Shukaku, and perhaps memory bleed-over had been the answer. And with what Isobu was saying about Shukaku's experiences…

It was, in a word, horrifying.

**Shukaku can talk to me now. He may not be happy, but he can see and act and be heard. Even if his pride is hurt by the idea of needing any help at all.** Isobu's eye seemed to glow. **It is a start.**

"So, you're working for Tailed Beast rights, in a way. No, not rights. Powers? Welfare? There's a term I'm missing here, but you know what I mean." I watched my teammate's movements, but only vaguely. They hadn't decided to act or not, yet. "So all this…"

**I am acting in my brother's best interest.** Isobu said shortly. **As I expect of you.**

Heh. The past ten minutes had been nothing but that, hadn't they? I freaked over Hayate's safety, while Chiyo tried to maul Kakashi out of revenge because she'd lost her family to his father, while Isobu did something a human would call ill-advised to ensure his brother's sanity.

It seemed like we were all doomed to working at cross-purposes, no matter how well-intentioned we all were.

"Is Shukaku all right?" I asked aloud, although I was certain that I was confusing the hell out of Obito and Kakashi by now.

**He is angry. As usual. But he can rant at me now, instead of just hearing his own screams into the void.**

…Well, then. What's done was done.

I couldn't exactly go back in time and tell Shukaku to get back in his cozy little box, and didn't want to. Not now that I understood, somewhat, where he and Isobu were coming from. Hell, the fight from before might have been an *act*, and I was still going to be looking back on some of the things I'd said and cringing months later, if this was anything to go by.

"Um, maybe next time tell me what you're doing ahead of time, so I have an actual explanation for when people start asking questions?" *And maybe let me know before you do it if you're going to act out a fight like that?* While, yes, I understood why he'd do it, I would prefer to have at least some kind of explanation on hand for when people inevitably started asking me difficult questions. I hadn't even been able to come up with a reasonable lie to cover my ignorance this time.

**I make no promises.**
I sighed aloud. Clearly, this discussion wasn't over.

"Kei, we're only getting like half a conversation and a chakra read," Obito reminded me. He tapped his eyebrow over his empty eye socket. "And I get two, only the second's fuzzy. What did the Three-Tails—Isobu—say?"

I thought about it. "Isobu is taking a stand as the first Tailed Beast Tailed Beast Rights activist."

"...Huh?" While Obito had been the one to actually verbalize his confusion, Kakashi was looking pretty bemused, too. Obito guessed, "Like...exercise?"

Maybe I should have known that the ideas didn't quite transfer. Stupid language differences. I spoke like a native, but every once in a while I'd say something that didn't quite work and then I'd get funny looks. And then people would generally ignore my oddities once they remembered what Dad had been like. Or what I was like.

Isobu, who had more understanding of my thought processes as a result of the lack of a mental filter between us, caught on faster. He said,  *That is not what I said.*

*Vive la révolution!* Which was about the only French I remembered, other than  *moi* and  *merci.*

"No, I mean that Isobu did a thing that makes Shukaku's life easier, and Shukaku acted up because he was just so darn excited about being able to avoid ever being sealed into a teapot again." I shrugged. "Though...hm. Pretty sure Isobu can't actually make seals himself..."

**Shukaku lacks a solid shape, like Matatabi. He can form whatever seals he wants out of his body by stretching carefully.** Isobu paused, then added,  *Though I suppose it helps that he is covered in Curse Seals. Something of a legacy from the Sage.*

And there was another thing I'd simply have to chalk up to "things I never got to learn before reincarnating," then. If Shukaku's weird little spots were Curse Seals, there was a pretty good chance that they'd  *always* been Curse Seals. What a weird world.

"Isobu showed Shukaku some of my seal designs," I concluded. "Which allowed him to modify his seal and make it less like a sensory deprivation cell. He can talk to Isobu now. At range."

Obito did not look like my further comments had illuminated much of anything. "Okay, but...uh. That doesn't really explain the freak-out."

Kakashi was being very quiet.

"...I don't really know how to break this to you, but Tailed Beasts are sapient beings with agendas of their own. And Isobu worked on his agenda, which caused a lot of panic but, uh, otherwise seems handled." I tilted my head to one side. "So, how  *was* it handled?"

Kakashi said, with his fingers drumming under his left eye and his Sharingan locked on me, "How do you  *think?* We came, we saw, we had to shut him down."

"Kakashi, that was—" Obito began, but I felt Isobu's chakra shift the same way as an impending landslide.

Kakashi, intentionally or not, had found one of Isobu's personal hot-buttons and  *hammered* it.

"You expect me to believe that the Three-Tails teaches  *other* Tailed Beasts how to modify their seals, and to just be okay with that?" Kakashi snapped. "Obito's apparently letting the entire thought
process fly right over his head, but I distinctly remember you telling me how to shut them down, Kei. You can't take risks with monsters that can flatten villages, no matter how friendly they act."

Isobu's chakra exploded out of my coils and coalesced around me in a red shroud, while I remained seated and tried very hard to get a grip on the surge of alien anger. I could rationalize my way past nearly anything that happened in this stupid lifetime if I tried, apparently, but not everyone had developed the ability to just ignore things that they couldn't change. Or knew how to drop an argument when both sides were stubborn as fuck.

Hoo, boy.

The red mist twisted, forming a segmented shell and multiple long tails. Isobu's shell flared out in front, like a crab's, and I could see his head form last a little above mine. I hadn't really used the Isobu avatar mode for years, but apparently he'd figured out the trick without my help.

I stood up, probing cautiously at the edges of the projection. I didn't feel anything out of the ordinary—such as my flesh boiling off—but the idea alone helped me tamp down on Isobu's anger somewhat. Isobu wasn't angry enough that he was forgetting himself. Or forgetting the squishy human he was attached to.

Obito and Kakashi had both gotten to their feet and retreated a few steps, though Obito seemed more hesitant. Kakashi's body language, meanwhile, was raring for a fight.

For fuck's sake.

"So I should just let humans do whatever they wish to my brothers and sisters? Not while I still live," Isobu snarled, making the ground shake with the power in his voice. "And I am not going to let you, of all worthless humans, dictate what I can or cannot do to ensure the safety of my family!"

"It's our concern when you start threatening innocent lives while you do it," Kakashi growled back. "The One-Tail acting up may not have hurt me, or hurt Obito, but there were people around who can't defend against mobile sand. Not to mention that if he had kept it up, Kei would have probably been called in and ordered to neutralize a toddler over something you did!"

"I'm pretty sure the Kazekage or Sensei could have—" was as far as Obito got.

"Shukaku's sand dome is harmless until you humans start to attack it! If you had just let him be until he calmed down, his host would have been able to walk free without your interference," Isobu snapped, seeming to rear up on his tails a bit.

"Then what about the sand eye, or when it tried to crush Obito anyway?" Kakashi demanded.

"Uh, that didn't really—" Obito tried again. He reached out to Kakashi, who shook him off.

"Obviously, it failed." Yikes. No remorse from Isobu there.

"Isobu, did you actually ask me to help you out with Shukaku because you cared what he did to Gaara, or was it just a smokescreen?" I asked, and since I was inside what ought to have been his ribcage, I had a somewhat easier time cutting through the argument than Obito did.

"I do not care about the poor judgments humans make. But I did know that you would likely be eager to help another human," Isobu said, and I winced. "I do not hate the hosts we are sealed into. But asking me to care is futile." To me, he added, I do not want to die—again—and
so our fates are temporarily intertwined. Reassembling myself would be troublesome.

*Bit harsh, aren't you?*

*It is the truth.*

"So, you did it because...it'd make Kei happy?" Obito guessed.

Isobu growled. *Your human happiness is irrelevant. I protected my brother. That is all.*

"So can I ask...?" Obito started again, only for Kakashi to override him.

"The Hokage is still going to have to clean up after you for this stunt." Okay, reasonable objection there. Ish. "And we have no idea what this has done to our relations with Sunagakure, between the Tailed Beast activity and whatever other things have been happening. I doubt you told us everything."

"If I told you everything I knew and did, we would be here for longer than your natural lifespan. I am not interested in inflicting your company on myself for that long," Isobu replied nastily. *Especially yours.*

"Excuse me," Kakashi responded, and it didn't even change inflection enough to form a proper question. "What."

Shit.

"Did you think I forgave you," Isobu began in a low snarl, *for using that eye on me?*

"I apologized for that a long time ago," was Kakashi's sharp reply.

"And I had to spend several hours having my seal inspected, as soon as you could find a stronger human to run to," Isobu growled.

I remembered this. Back when I'd first come back from the hell butterfly mission, I'd been called up in case of mental deterioration. I'd understood Kakashi's reasons despite the inconvenience, but as far as I was concerned there'd been no harm done.

Isobu clearly did not agree.

"But Kei said it was—" Obito tried again.

"But Kakashi went back on his apology, by not letting Isobu and I handle things ourselves," I interrupted. I glanced at Obito, "Sorry, Obito, but this is really between him and Isobu."

Kakashi didn't say anything.

"Perhaps, even when you made it, you planned on seeing how you could irritate me most effectively." Isobu's tails lashed. *If so, it worked.*

"I was trying to make sure Kei was going to be safe," Kakashi replied, his eyes narrowed.

"And you couldn't trust either of us to do it?" I asked, confused. While it made sense from his viewpoint, Isobu had helped during October Tenth, even after that. It'd been months since any kind of untoward activity, even on a mission when I lost my temper.
How long had this conflict been festering?

Finally, Obito had his chance, and seized it. "I know you have the best intentions, man, but"—and here, Obito grabbed Kakashi's raised hand to keep from being interrupting again, "but seriously, you're scaring me here."

"I'm scaring you," Kakashi said flatly. "And the Tailed Beast right in front of us?"

Obito nodded. He looked at the chakra projection and said, "See, I know Kei and Isobu-san don't always get along, since that'd be unrealistic. But, uh, I don't let it drive me nuts. Kei knows those seals, and sure maybe Isobu-san knows them too, but I figure I can trust Kei to know what to do. I mean, she knew back then, didn't she?"

**What?**

"I hadn't had any concrete experience of being a host back then, Obito," I reminded him. The entire Three-Tails possession event had *not* been a fun scenario to prep for. I hadn't known then if I could keep Rin safe long enough to get Obito's attention and *then* pry him out of Madara's influence. It had just so happened that he'd done a lot of the work himself.

He said, " Didn't stop you from having backup plans. And I know you said you knew it was coming, but it was still important that you prepared for the whole thing with Isobu-san and Guruguru and Madara instead of just, y'know, not."

While I didn't share Obito's confidence, I didn't say anything. He had way too much faith in my ability to act on my foreknowledge.

Obito managed to sling an arm over Kakashi's shoulder. "Are you sure you're all right, Kakashi? Because I'm getting mixed signals. Like you're mainly afraid for Kei, but, uh, I don't think you're really as cool as you act."

"What," was Kakashi's response.

"Okay, so here's the thing. You're angry because you're worried," Obito held up his other hand and started counting down on his fingers. "Which means you don't really trust that Kei can take care of herself." One finger folded into his palm. "Which means you try to do it for her." Another. "Only you know she doesn't really want you—or anyone else—to do stuff 'for her own good,' so then you go behind her back." Another. "Which pisses off Isobu-san, and maybe Kei, and here we are." Just his thumb remained free.

"I think we're a little off the topic of sealing accidents and Tailed Beast stuff, Obito," I said.

"I'm getting there." Having apparently decided that fingers were useless for mnemonic purposes, Obito went on without using them and said, "All that stuff wrecked Isobu-san's trust in you, and you didn't trust him anyway, so when we get to the point where everyone's doing stuff for the people they care about and it blows up, everyone fights. Instead of, you know, sitting down and just talking about stuff until we have some kind of agreement to not scare each other again."

…Uh. Obito had apparently been taking communication classes from somewhere between missions.

If Isobu and Kakashi were both listening to him—and a quick check confirmed that they *were*—then he'd clearly rolled a natural twenty on his diplomacy check.

"You expect me to trust him?"
"Not really. It's just, uh, maybe we can all try to give each other a bit more slack? Like, Isobu-san, you do stuff so you can protect your siblings. And Kei." Obito looked sheepish. "Kakashi does stuff to protect the people he cares about, too. And I'm sure you know about Kei trying to keep her brother safe all the time.

"Like, uh, I heard about the speech Isobu-san kinda gave to Kurama-san, though no one remembered the whole thing." Obito paused, "And I don't really know if there was stuff I missed, but…well, I think you're a good person, Isobu-san. We're just all working against each other because we're not talking, you know?"

"I don't think I know the whole thing, Obito, and I was there." I said. Isobu…you didn't actually say everything you told Kurama aloud back then, did you? Were there parts that even I missed?

Yes. I am an effective multitasker. Then Isobu said aloud, "I still intend to work for the best interests of my siblings, human."

"I think all of us get that," Obito said, with a significant glance at Kakashi, who had turned away. "Even if we don't think we do yet. I just want to know first. I mean, I…guess I could stop you? But really, I just want to know what's going on."

"Kakashi, what about you?" I asked him. It felt like we were somehow coming to an agreement. What the agreement was, I couldn't quite say.

"I'd prefer if the Thr—if Isobu would just stop doing things that send you into an hour-long coma or scare the village into nearly declaring a state of emergency," Kakashi said, with Obito's transplanted arm still over his shoulders. His eyes narrowed as he looked up at Isobu, but his Sharingan didn't shift to Mangekyō mode. "Are you going to stop?"

"…I suppose I could stop needlessly antagonizing you humans." Isobu shifted his weight and settled back onto his belly. "But I make no promises if I need to act in defense of my siblings. Which is what I expect of all of you."

"That we'd defend our precious people," I asked, "or that we'd try to look after the Tailed Beasts too?"

Isobu grumbled. "The former. I doubt you can stretch your selfishness far enough for the latter."

While Isobu was probably talking about "you" in the plural form, meaning all of us, my train of thought took a detour. Once again, I recalled what I'd said about my heart. Not just to Rin all those months ago, but also the self-berating tendencies I'd had since being reborn. I was too selfish to care about everyone.

I wasn't Naruto. I couldn't expect anyone else to take up his role, though, given how much the timeline had changed. This Naruto could grow up very differently compared to the Naruto who grew up alone and hated.

But…

Maybe, as a team, we could cobble something together.

"I will wait until another sibling can contact me. For now, Shukaku and Kurama will occupy my time," Isobu rumbled. "But when they call, I will answer. Your reaction is up to you."
"What if they can't?" Obito asked.

"Then I will do what I have to do."

Oi.

Obito let go of Kakashi, instead deciding to gesture grandly as he said, "But seriously, talk to us about this!" He waved at Kakashi, "I mean, Kakashi's got more lightning than anybody I've ever met, and I can do some pretty cool things, too. Even if we can't really understand everything you want to do, in here"—and here, Obito touched his chest over his heart—"we can at least get you both out of trouble most of the time. All right?"

"...Your concern is unnecessary," Isobu muttered.

"Then let us worry about Kei, at least." Obito shot me a grin. "You all right with that?"

"I probably don't have much of a choice," I said, crossing my arms. But I was smiling a bit, too. "Right?"

"Right." Kakashi agreed, shaking himself out of his funk. He looked at Isobu. "Can we agree on that, Isobu-san? You tell us a few things, and maybe we can combine forces?"

Isobu snorted. "There will have to be a terrible threat, but... provisionally, I will trust you again, human. Despite how you have betrayed that trust in the past." He lowered his head. "Do not expect a third chance."

"I won't need one," Kakashi said. He looked at Obito and me, and added. "At that point, I doubt these two would let me get away with it."

Obito made a huffing noise and said, "Damn straight."

Isobu gave one last deep-throated affirmative rumble before his chakra lost its shape with a pffsh noise. The red mist then dispersed back into my chakra coils, fleeing back behind the seals. Maybe it was too embarrassing to stay out here and deal with the beacon of idealism and hope that Obito seemed to carry with him everywhere. It made things awkward.

Idly, I rubbed my arms and looked up at my teammates.

I had the absurd urge to start laughing, and squashed it. "Thanks, both of you. I, uh, I don't think I need that debrief anymore. We covered it."

"I'll say," Obito agreed. He thumped Kakashi's shoulder. "What did I tell you about all those bad feelings, Kakashi? You have to get rid of them somehow!"

Kakashi muttered something unintelligible. Then, "So, what are we going to tell the Kazekage when we head back?"

"The situation's been dealt with." I glanced around the empty void again, now that it wasn't filtered through a reddish haze. "And I still need to make sure my brother's all right."

"Are you okay dealing with that on your own?" Obito asked.

"Well, no, but we took so long that I think you two are needed elsewhere." I shrugged. "I didn't really expect everyone to take so long to see eye-to-eye on things."
Obito snorted with barely-suppressed laughter.

"What?" I asked him, while Kakashi gave him a sidelong look.

"You said 'eye-to-eye,' like, you know how all of us—uh, never mind." Obito's eye went from normal Sharingan to Mangekyō. "Wanna head back?"

"Yeah." I paused. Then I took one big step forward, snatching both of my teammates in the biggest hug I could manage. I held on just long enough for it to get awkward, then let go.

Obito was grinning.

Kakashi was face-palming, right over the unmasked part of his face.

"Now we can go!" I said.

And we did.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a daze. The adrenaline high from working through things with Isobu and Kakashi and Obito hadn't lasted that long, so I was left tired and shaky by the time I finally shooed them off to report in. Technically, only one of them needed to report in. Between their shared Sharingan, either of them would be able to recall enough to be useful to Sensei.

I just wanted to be alone for a while.

So, between waking up this morning and flopping out of Obito's Kamui dimension, a lot had happened. My brother had been hurt in a fight, Isobu had turned out to be conspiring with his fellow Tailed Beasts for the greater good, Kakashi had revealed some serious issues with Isobu at the same time Isobu had made his clear, and we'd hashed out something like a vague agreement not to pull each other's hair anymore.

It felt like the kind of day when it didn't really pay to get out of bed.

After a while, something pinged off a thought in Isobu's brain and prompted him to say, You were going to ask me something before we left that world.

I was?

Yes.

I hemmed and hawed for a moment, then asked him, What did you tell Kurama back then?

I said I would do what I could to help him find happiness again. No matter how long it took. And while none of you were listening, he did. Isobu gave me the impression of a shrug. I didn't expect it to work. But maybe I'm also selfish. I didn't want to lose a chance at the future your memories were pointing toward.

If we'd died there... If Isobu hadn't roused himself to help...

If staying here—in you—prevents the Ten-Tails from being born again, I can stand it. We'll work together to keep that thing from ever coming back. Isobu paused. You're not horrible for a human. I thought you would understand why I would still work to protect my family. From that thing, and from humans.
And you were right about that. Oh, was he ever.

Isobu went silent for a long time.

But this wasn't over. So I told him, But you're not going to get access to my memories anymore, Isobu.

...Fair enough.

In my mind's eye, I swept up the entire cloud of memories and stuffed every last scrap of them—and of my thoughts, too—into my mental avatar. No open-access crap for Isobu. Not anymore. He'd done some good with it, but he'd done that without my permission and I wasn't going to let him off for that.

...Oh. And I thought of something interesting.

As I crammed the last memory away from Isobu's glowing eye, I said distractedly, Oh?

You said you called this place the mindscape. Isobu swept his tails outward to indicate the mentally constructed beach and other amenities. And I think you were frustrated with the lack of a name for the second layer, where Tailed Beasts congregate.

Yeah.

So, what about calling it... the mind-skype.

I let out a noise that sounded like "pfft" as I bit down on a laugh. Oh, what the hell? Why didn't I think of that?

Now and forever, that place is the mind-skype, Isobu announced imperiously. Then, At least, for the two of us. I doubt the others would appreciate the joke.

Probably not. Thanks, anyway.

I looked around the empty waiting room. I could still feel Hayate's chakra, so I settled back down for yet more waiting.

They had named this place quite aptly.

I stared at the clock on the wall for a full minute at one point, watching the seconds tick by. Three-fifty already, huh? Time flew when I was in the middle of arguing with my team and my literal inner demon, but apparently it couldn't spare the effort when I was actually looking at a timepiece.

Typical, really.

At about that point, several bright chakra signatures made their way down the hallway toward me. Recognizing them offhand, I just put down the magazine I hadn't been reading and waited for them to arrive.

Iruka made it through the door first, barreling into the waiting room. He skidded to a stop, sighted on me, and ran over. He landed on the waiting room chair next to mine with a thump, saying, "Is Hayate all right?"

"Not sure, yet," I answered, as Yūgao and Inoichi finally arrived in the room.
Yūgao was limping a bit and using her sensei's arm as support, but she was moving under her own power. She had a big scrape along one cheek that had been covered in a strong-smelling salve, reminiscent of road burn, but I expected that she would be fine.

"Hello, Yūgao-chan, Inoichi-sensei. Like I told Iruka-kun, I haven't heard anything from the medics in there," I told them, as the pair of them found other seats in the waiting room. "I don't even really know what he got hit with, to be honest."

My voice was surprisingly steady, even to me. Maybe the situation with Isobu had taken the figurative wind out of my sails.

Inoichi frowned. "It's been longer than I'd expected from Suna medics. Rin-chan is in there too, isn't she?"

"Along with Elder Chiyo of Suna, yeah," I said. To the kids, I added, "Chiyo is one of the oldest medic-nin on the continent, besides being an expert puppeteer and poisoner. If anyone knows how to deal with poison, it's those two."

That said, Chiyo had never been able to make a poison that Tsunade couldn't counter. I was banking on Rin having studied with Tsunade and Shizune, and thus learning from them, to save the day.

Then the doors for the surgery—or whatever they called the section for operating rooms around here—swung open.

A Suna medic-nin, dressed head to toe in the local equivalent of medical scrubs, poked his head out and looked around the waiting room until he laid eyes on me. I saw his pupils widen and felt his chakra jump, but didn't make any untoward moves. The kids were also looking at him, waiting for news.

"Uh, K-Keisuke Gekkō, yes?" When I nodded, the medic-nin continued with, "Nohara-san is asking for you."

…I was not a good sign. Still, I got up and, as I walked over to the door with my hands in my pockets, asked, "Did she say why?"

"Uh, no. Sorry." He ducked through the doors and damn near ran away.

The medic skittered on ahead through the halls as I strolled after him, keeping my chakra under tight control. I'd probably spooked this guy earlier, during the whole confrontation with Chiyo, but I couldn't muster up the goodwill to apologize just yet.

If Rin was calling on me now, it was because she needed some kind of backup.

I ended up hearing angry voices before I even got close. The medic who'd been guiding me through the hospital's depths took one look at me at that point and took off running somewhere. Presumably, he figured that I could follow the sound of Rin actually shouting, and he'd be free to escape my presence in the meantime. Fair enough.

I tracked Rin's chakra to a ward with a placard to one side of the doors, which said Respiratory Distress, and nudged the swing doors open with one foot. I sidled inside and was greeted by, in a word, a fight.

Under a thickly woven net of wires, tubes, and various other devices, I could just about see my brother lying in the bed that ought to have been the center of all this attention. His chakra was still there, and certainly stable enough for all that he had a tube down his throat, he wasn't awake. Here
and there, medics bustled and adjusted one thing or another, but no one's focus was really on him like it should have been.

Instead, Chiyo and Rin had their respective chakra signatures flaring up like a fire plus gasoline, which ratcheted the tension in the room up to unworkable levels. The two kunoichi were glaring at each other, arguing in medical terms I couldn't quite parse as they stood across Hayate's bed from each other. They were both angry enough that none of the other medics around seemed to want to distract them from their fight and incur their wrath, but the net result was that medical things were not happening.

"Rin, what's going on?"

I got a long string of medic-babble in reply.

I coughed. "Ah, no, hang on." Rather than snapping my fingers or something, I gathered chakra into my hand and summoned a spinning Rasengan the size of a baseball. The noise from the jutsu, while certainly a distraction, did not quite make a dent. But the way that a Rasengan ripped at the air around it, like a miniature tornado, did.

That stopped everyone cold.


"Short version?" Rin looked frazzled, even with her hand hovering over my brother's chest. "A capsaicin spray mixed with a paralytic."

"Define 'paralytic,'" I suggested, eyeing Chiyo.

"Kumogashira poison is more than a mere paralytic," Chiyo informed me haughtily. "Which is why we are still here."

Okay, rather unhelpful. "Rin?"

"We have no idea what dosage was inhaled, but it could last anywhere from half an hour to eight hours," Rin said, pushing her hair out of her eyes. Sweat stuck to her tattooed cheeks, and I realized belatedly that Chiyo hardly looked much better.

"...And you just let me sit out there in the waiting room, totally unaware of a toxin metabolizing in my brother's blood?" I asked incredulously.

Rin narrowed her eyes at me.

I dropped the overacting, which didn't hide stress worth a damn anyway. Not from Rin. "All right. What do you need me to do, Rin?"

"I need you to transfer chakra to both of us. Chiyo-sama and I are not strong enough to force the poison to process any faster, but with your chakra we should be able to help Hayate's body break it down faster," Rin said, and waved me over. "Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to keep him breathing that long."

"And the respirator?" I asked, watching the machines warily. Did Tailed Beast chakra disrupt electricity?

"It's doing its job, but I need to work on his diaphragm specifically and Chiyo-sama needs to take a break," Rin said. She may or may not have shot a dirty look at the old medic-nin, who stuck her
tongue out in reply.

"I can last long enough to tweak his and clear the reaction to the pepper solution." To me, Chiyo added, "Once the poison is purged, expect him to be tired and hungry, but alive. And don't expect me to use your chakra, jinchūriki."

"I expect you to!" Rin snapped. "For the sake of the patient!"

Chiyo glared.

"Is this why you two didn't call me earlier?" I put my hand against Rin's shoulder and started shifting my chakra into her, slowly enough that she could grasp it. I felt her sag with relief at the boost, but I kept my eyes on Chiyo. "This isn't the first time we've done this, Elder Chiyo."

Chiyo sniffed. "And you kept your inhuman chakra away?"

Given that I'd been half terrified that Obito would die under my hands—or more specifically Rin's hands—at the time, it had been a lot easier than expected. I could, in fact, shove chakra toward someone else so they could use it. I hadn't known what else to do.

And after that, Rin had called on me once or twice for an endurance boost while working. So that was something, too.

What I actually said to Chiyo was, "Without a problem."

It took a little longer to convince her—time Hayate only just had, thanks to Rin—but eventually she came around.

And we brought my brother back from what would have been the brink, anywhere else.

It took about an hour for my brother to get back on his feet after he woke up.

And it turned out that "woke" was in fact a fairly useless and inaccurate word.

Kumogashira poison didn't let its victims lose consciousness. No, instead, it acted simply as a full-body paralytic. In cases where the concoction had been used to hunt game, the prey died of asphyxiation as their diaphragm failed, and got to be conscious for every minute of it.

Hayate, fortunately, had avoided that part of the program. But he still clearly remembered the intubation process and all the medics arguing over his supposedly comatose body, which had not been pleasant.

"It was really annoying. Everyone kept using medical words I didn't understand, and I couldn't ask them to explain," Hayate croaked. His throat was still sore.

I squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. "Sorry about that. Maybe next time you can try not to catch poison grenades with your face?"

"I'll remember that," he muttered, and finally accepted the ice chips I'd been trying to get him to eat for twenty minutes.

"Speaking of freaky things, I didn't scare you too badly, did I?" I raised my fist and tapped it over my heart. It was, unfortunately, also the location of Isobu's seal.

Hayate shook his head. "No. You wouldn't hurt anyone unless they deserved it."
What a glowing commendation.

I sighed. "Well, okay. Do you want me to ask the medics to let you loose early so you can head back
to the inn?"

Hayate shook his head. "I've only got a bit longer in here. Just, um, please stay?"

I squeezed his hand. "Okay."

And an hour later, just before Hayate was going to be released into my care, Obito bounced into the
Suna hospital to give my brother a congratulatory tackle—probably for the finals match that he'd
missed—and that led to its own problems and a lot of yelling. Hayate and I both appreciated the
thought, though perhaps my brother didn't need the wind knocked out of him twice in one day.

So, there was yelling. Most of it was Rin, at Obito.

Hayate and I fled in the confusion.

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**Kakashi**

The next morning, Sensei decides to let everyone but me run off to find breakfast. We're only going
to be in town until the promotion ceremony at noon, after which point we are *finally* heading home.

I've been on missions where I've missed Kushina's cooking less than this.

So, while the others spend the early morning eating, goofing off, and packing, I have breakfast with
the Hokage and we debrief the last few days.

There's a lot to go over. Breakfast doesn't last nearly that long.

Eventually, there's only thirty minutes left until we can finally leave. I've already picked out who will
be promoted, but haven't told anyone. It'd ruin the betting pool since I trained two of the competitors.

"All in all, we gained more than we lost," the Hokage says, idly twirling a Flying Thunder God
kunai around his index finger. For some reason, I'm pretty sure that the gesture would have been far
more fitting if he was sitting behind his desk and staring me down from behind a pile of paperwork.
As it is, he looks more like he's amused than actively scheming.

There's really only so much anyone can do with gravitas when lounging on the floor next to a coffee
table.

"Suna may know that Kei is a jinchūriki, but they've overlooked Operative Crane's full scope," the
Hokage goes on. "It'll be months before they realize that there was ever a break-in. Obito did well."

I nod.

"And while I didn't expect the Tailed Beast problem, it seems to be handled." The Hokage shrugs as
he sits up. He puts down his kunai, picks up his teacup, and takes a long sip. Then, "So for now, I'll
commit some additional time to researching cognitive filters in case Kei or the Kazekage ask. I doubt
they will, but it's best to be prepared."

"The Kazekage seemed to believe he got the better end of the deal," I comment mildly, glancing at
my tea. On second thought, not yet. Too hot. "An Uchiha with Wood Release? Me? Kei was the
*obvious* one, but we're all exceptional."
"It's only a loss if he can capitalize on the information," the Hokage reminds me. "Which, given how your abilities function, is unlikely. But I'll see for myself how Kei fights when we get home. As far as I'm concerned, though, Rasa believing he has something over our heads is no problem for us."

"Rin expressed some concerns that Chiyo was holding back." I reach out and idly set a spark running across the surface of my tea. The porcelain doesn't crack. Good. "Deliberately. Not just because I set her off."

"Not terribly surprising," the Hokage mutters. "We already knew she wasn't going to be a friend to Konoha even if the Kazekage ordered her to pretend. Still, combining that report with Obito's information and the report Kei gave on the future Akatsuki..."

"Sasori will be a difficult fight if he challenges us, but it's not an impossible one." I pick up my teacup and take a long sip, glancing at the clock on the wall.

"The promotions are in five minutes," the Hokage says. He raises an eyebrow challengingly. "Can you get there in time?"

I drain my cup and set it down. I nod at him.

The Hokage—Sensei—grins widely and disappears in a fwhish of displaced air.

I'm out of the inn by the time the dust settles.

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Kei

Long story short: Hayate got promoted! So did Anko, and Yūgao, and Ren and I guess all four Suna-nin. Not quite sure why, since I missed a bunch of fights, but I supposed that everyone wanted to look strong for the next year.

I...had mixed feelings about seeing the last of Suna for a while. About not being able to see Gaara in person, but unable to finagle a reason the Kazekage would swallow. About Hayate nearly dying again. But I didn't have mixed feelings about going home at all.

The road goes ever on and on...

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Chapter End Notes

Song's from A Goofy Movie, and sung by Tevin Campbell. It's honestly one of my favorite Disney songs ever.

*If we listen to each others' hearts*
*We'll find we're never too far apart*
*And maybe love is the reason why*
*For the first time ever, we're seeing it eye-to-eye*
Chapter Summary

Kei: Do the Awkward Turtle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aside from the Konoha genin teams—some of which didn't actually have just genin anymore—Jiraiya had also decided to follow us back. Yahiko and his Ame delegation had left Suna on the back of a gigantic paper crane, so his bodyguard services hadn't been required anymore. So, he joined the center of our traveling circus group and stuck close to Sensei while the rest of us fanned out into what would have been lazy formation design for any other sort of group.

Actually, with Sensei and Jiraiya in the middle and Kakashi, Obito and me on point and each flank, all we did was increase the range that we could defend. The genin were in the middle, too, but they were protected by both their chūnin teammates and their respective sensei at rear guard, while Gaku, Aomaru, and Kohari fanned out behind our group.

Basically, everyone would be protected for the whole trip if they needed it. It was probably unnecessary, but it made everyone feel all warm and fuzzy to get used to their new roles.

It took a week to get to our destination, and we made it there with maybe two hours of sunlight to spare.

Konoha.

The first Hidden Village among the Elemental Nations, where shinobi from many clans and hundreds of thousands of civilians could congregate in relative peace, banded together for the common defense in a way that had never happened before. The childhood dream of Hashirama Senju (and, at one point, Madara Uchiha) that had grown and prospered.

Honestly, though? All of that fancy, poetic crap was true, but for the twenty-odd shinobi coming back from Suna…

Well. "Home" was good enough.

Those gates were definitely a sight for sore eyes.

Sensei let us all run off in different directions, after reminding me to stop by the office sometime for a pile of paperwork. He didn't have enough consideration to tell me what I was supposed to be doing with said files, other than something about analysis and troubleshooting (which I took as a likely candidate for "not hyperbole" if there ever was one).

"Tell me what you think about it, once you get it!" Sensei said, as he waved my questions off. "No questions until then!"

Well, if that was how things were going to be.
Somewhat later and still feeling a little like I'd been banished to the little kids' table, I found myself in the produce marketplace with a debate on my hands.

What, exactly, was I supposed to make for dinner?

While admittedly I was a novice cook, I had figured out how to make some of the foods that Hayate and I preferred. This was facilitated by the amount of time I spent in the village, relative to pretty much everyone I knew. I didn't take normal missions, mainly because I had a full-time position exactly where I wanted to be, and that meant I could keep track of everything in the refrigerator with more leeway than anyone I knew except for the housewives. I also had the help of the recipe cards my parents had left behind, as vague as they sometimes were.

…Except for this month.

Since Hayate and I had both been gone for nearly two weeks, I was going to have to throw just about everything out and start over from scratch. Aside from the probably-spoiled food, I'd also have to clean the house just on general principles, because two weeks' worth of dust was probably waiting for me once I got home.

But for at least a little while, I could forget about old noodles and just concentrate on what I wanted to make.

"What do you think would be good, Granny Umeko?" I asked the elderly woman who stood next to me among the seemingly endless tiers of squash.

"I think one of these should do, for you and your brother," was my old neighbor's response. She picked up a green, striped squash from somewhere and handed it to me. "Turn it over, Keisuke-chan."

Granny Umeko wasn't really a grandmother, but she insisted on the title and had since I could remember. For a tiny old woman who managed a vegetable stand, she was a living example of how big things could come in small packages. She'd never been a shinobi, from what I could tell, but I'd seen full-grown shinobi of all ranks treat her with absolute respect and more than a little affection for as long as I'd known her.

Guess it didn't pay to piss off the lady who knew what you ate. Or maybe there was power in being a fixture in the neighborhood for so long that it was slowly becoming a literal description.

I turned the vegetable—or was it technically a fruit?—upside-down and took a look at the big patch that indicated what side it had been growing on. Marring the neat dark-green skin was a bright patch of orange rimmed with yellowish white. If it was anything like a watermelon, this thing was probably ripe. "Why this one?"

"You look like you could do with something warm." Granny Umeko reached over and thumped the pumpkin fondly. "It's also difficult to fail at cooking one. Cut it in half, take the seeds out, roast the rest." She smiled. "And there you have it."

Any vegetable would have to be resilient to survive my fumbling attempts at cooking. Eyeing the pumpkin dubiously, I was still deciding to buy it or not when someone else sidled up next to me.

Granny Umeko turned to the new customer with a smile and said, "Oh, hello, Raidō-kun."

I turned to my right and saw Raidō rubbing the scar across his nose, looking flustered. "Uh, hi." He glanced at me, then looked at the vegetables like a man trying to find any point of familiarity in a foreign land.
I let him focus on his apparent existential crisis for a bit longer, then put the pumpkin down. "Raidō?"

Granny Umeko sat back among her wares with one last conspiratorial look at the two of us, then bustled off. I didn't ask why and never planned on doing so.

Raidō shook his head. "Sorry, what?"

"...I was just gonna ask what you were looking for." I gave him a long, assessing look. While Raidō didn't look like he'd taken a hit to the head recently, I did know that he was the falcon-masked ANBU agent. If he'd been involved in the mission to wipe out ROOT's leadership, he was probably exhausted.

"Oh," Raidō said, and fumbled for a moment for something to say. Then, "I, uh, I'm looking for a way to make pumpkin into something."

"Do you cook?" I asked.

"No," Raidō admitted, and I watched his face heat up with something akin to morbid fascination. He added, by way of explanation, "I'm a takeout guy. I, uh, I'm just trying to make something for once. As an experiment."

If the awkward atmosphere got any thicker, I'd probably be able to cut it with a knife.

"Been there," I told him. Only in my case, Mom's death had been the main reason for me to learn. And it was still very much a work in progress. "So, here."

Raidō jolted a bit when I picked up the pumpkin I had been looking at and shoved it into his hands. "I, uh..."

"I'll admit I don't know anything about pumpkins other than what Granny Umeko told me, but this is the one she was trying to get me to buy," I said. Hm, there wasn't a clock nearby... "Maybe I could help? Though maybe it's not so much 'helping' as 'pooling our collective ignorance'..."

"Do you know what goes well with this?" Raidō asked, while hefting the pumpkin.

"...If I had to guess? Soy sauce and something sweet."

"That's more than I knew." Raidō shrugged, scratching at his scar with his free hand. "Okay. You're hired."

"Hired?" I repeated.

"Or whatever. I'm maybe a bit desperate here." Which did not jive with his earlier airs of nonchalance, but I'd let it slide. Raidō said, "So, uh... get what you need? I'm still deciding, I guess..."

I'd call it taking pity on Raidō, if I wasn't every bit as aware of the tension in the air and almost as affected by it. I gathered up all the vegetables I needed for the next week, and a second pumpkin for experimentation purposes, and paid for everything I was going to work with. I even managed to swing by the spice merchant on our way out of the marketplace, picking up a few items I was sure had spoiled in the last two weeks. Woo, replacements.

Then I sealed everything into what I called my "grocery scroll," because I had absolutely no reason not to use my fūinjutsu skills for everything ever.
Raidō bought his pumpkin separately, still looking lost.

"Do you have a kitchen?" I asked him, once we were ready to go.

"...Not really." Raidō wobbled his free hand in the air. "I have a mobile stove thing."

Hm. "Well, if you want, we can go to my apartment and blow up an actual kitchen. I'm supposed to be making dinner tonight anyway."

Raidō blinked. "That's...okay. Thank you."

I strode on ahead a bit, then paused. "You know, thanking me might be a bit premature."

"Why?" he asked.

I said, "I don't actually know what my brother's been doing since we got back. For all I know, he's got all his friends at our place and we're gonna have to feed a bunch of ravenous teenagers."

Raidō gave me a long look, his expression slightly pinched, before he sighed and said, "I'm pretty sure you are a teenager, Kei-san."

I made a grumbling noise and led the way home.

And when we got there, hopping rooftops because of course we would, it turned out that a certain bandana-wearing someone was already there.

I closed the security seals as soon as we were in, and was in the middle of kicking my sandals off at the threshold when my brother's voice called out, "Sis, are you home?"

"Who else do you think it could be?" I responded, ducking out of the entryway so Raidō could avoid having to stand on one foot or chakra-stick himself to the wall and get his shoes off. I chucked my grocery scroll onto the kitchen counter as I went, and pinged Hayate's chakra with mine just to reassure him.

It had been a rather insensitive question.

Hayate poked his head out of his bedroom and spotted Raidō immediately, so he said, "What's Namiashi-san doing here?"

"Just Raidō, kid," was Raidō's reply. He put the pumpkin he'd been carrying in the kitchen sink, then turned on the water to rinse the dirt off its skin.

"I offered to help him cook something, since I have to cook anyway and we have an actual kitchen." I unrolled my grocery scroll until I found the seal I'd used for my pumpkin, and activated it. One poof of chakra smoke later, and a nearly-identical squash was on the counter.

Hayate padded out on bare feet to join us in the kitchen, tilting his head to one side like a dog hearing a new sound. As soon as he saw the pumpkin, his eyes lit up. "Oh, can I cut it? Can I?"

"You can cut this one." I thumped the side of the one I'd bought. "But we aren't going to be using these things for target practice, little brother. We actually want to eat it."

Hayate still gave an evil laugh. "Yes! Be right back!" And Hayate ran to his room.

Raidō's mouth twisted a bit. "Should I be worried, or...?"
"Only if you're afraid of a kid with a kodachi." I turned my back to the impending chaos and took out a dishrag to scrub some of the clingier dirt off of Raidō's pumpkin. Hm, this thing was heavier than it looked.

I put it on the counter and then rapidly scrubbed the second pumpkin free of dirt. And then I swapped them, just as fast. I felt Raidō's eyes on me, but he had to turn his attention back to my brother's rapid approach after a split second.

A second later, there was a war cry and, immediately, Hayate's kodachi was embedded well into the rind of the pumpkin I'd bought.

"I let him get away with more than Mom ever did," I muttered. Then I reached over and flicked my brother's ear.

"Ow!"

"Four out of ten. You need to get through the whole squash," I reminded him.

"I didn't want to mark the counter," Hayate protested.

"Then don't. Cut exactly enough to get through the squash, and we're good. But since you didn't, you need more training." I levered his kodachi out of the pumpkin and, gathering chakra into my fingertip, carved through the rest of it with a chakra scalpel. Much saner. "And we're going to have to bake this one, now."

Raidō, who had carefully stayed out of the way, was biting down on his lip. I didn't have to look closely to know he was suppressing laughter. He coughed instead. "So, uh, is this normal around here?"

Hayate grinned back, waving his sword in the direction of the two new halves of pumpkin. "Only with squash. Hey, Sis, do you need me to find the recipe cards?"

"Go clean that," I ordered him. "Then get the cards."

"Okay, okay." And Hayate bounced off back toward his room to get his sword-cleaning kit, too.

Raidō shook his head, still holding back laughter. Once he got himself under control, he said, "It's reminding me of the time I watched Team Chōza try to cook. Keyword being 'try,' because I don't think the result still qualified as food."

"Why?" I asked, as I dragged a baking sheet out of some nether-region of the kitchen and washed it off.

"Curry. Gai-kun is a...a fan." Raidō turned his attention back to the pumpkins. "So, what are you doing now?"

"Getting ready to bake this thing." I picked up my grocery scroll and looked through it, then popped a different storage seal open. Once the smoke dispersed, I had a small bottle of cooking oil sitting on the paper. I ended up talking half to myself as I puzzled out what to do with the mélange of ingredients around the house.

Hayate popped back in, dropped off the recipe cards—which had been a box in my room, like a lot of our parents' things, and disappeared again.

I picked up the first one. Simmered pumpkin, and roasted pumpkin. Those would work. "Okay, uh, I
think you put oil on the cut halves…and I think we'll need dashi… Raidō? I think we're gonna cut yours up, then…stew it, maybe? What do you think?"

"Hey, I don't have any more idea what I'm doing than you do. I don't have a problem with it." Raidō shrugged, rolled up his sleeves, and got to work.

So with him briefly occupied, I ran around and cleared the rest of the cooking area. Trash went into trash bins, the fridge was cleared out, and basically I did the chores I probably should have before we started cooking. Luckily, we were actually cooking things, so food poisoning probably wasn't on the menu.

And if it was a concern, well, as shinobi we'd all eaten worse things.

Hayate wandered back in at that point, and I said, "Hayate, help me put these things away."

Thanks to the grocery run, we were stocked up on vegetables again, at least. I hadn't gone anywhere for meat, so we were going to have to deal with eating pseudo-vegetarian for one meal.

"Okay, Sis." And somehow, having three people in the kitchen wasn't crowded despite how much we were all moving.

As Hayate finally closed the fridge after finally reorganizing its contents, he piped up with, "So, can I have friends over?"

"I don't ever remember telling you that you couldn't," I said distractedly as I put the split pumpkin in the oven, with a little pile of its seeds and guts to one side of the pan. "How many?"

"…Well, since you have one of your friends over, I was thinking Yūgao and Iruka, mostly."

"Aren't they eating dinner right now?"

Hayate raised a finger to protest, then said, "Point."

"Go ahead and sit down, Hayate." I waved him over toward the table in the living room. "We're almost done."

Though Raidō and I were not experienced cooks, we were both good with knives and blades of all kinds. Compared to actually figuring out what ingredients combined into something tasty, chopping vegetables was easy mode. Sure, chopping the onion darn near made my eyes feel like they were bleeding, but we got it done.

Eventually, the pumpkin chunks ended up stewing on the stove and the pumpkin halves were put in the oven to bake.

While Raidō joined my brother at the table, I started making tea to go with our dinner. Then I got some rice going, since no meal was complete without some kind of grain component.

"So, you were gone for a couple of weeks there," Raidō said, "which was new. How were the Exams?"

"I think there was more excitement outside of the arena than in it," I said. I paused, then dragged the teapot over to the low table and set it down on a mat. Teacups.

"I made it to the final match, but I got poisoned and I guess you can't be declared the winner when they have to drag you off the field." Hayate wrinkled his nose. "Don't get poisoned. It's not worth it."
"There was a bit of drama with the whole Kage meeting," I put in. "The Kazekage didn't know that Sensei and Yahiko-san knew each other."

"Who?" Hayate just looked confused.

"Yahiko-san is one of the three leaders of the new Amegakure government," I explained. "Alongside Nagato-san."

"Ah," said Raidō. "I remember him. Absolutely terrifying in a fight, if I remember right. He volunteered to help clean up the village a few years ago. I didn't realize that he was part of a triumvirate thing."

"Right. And Jiraiya-sama came with him from Ame, as a bodyguard. The Kazekage basically walked into the meeting and then realized he was outnumbered in his own village by S-ranked shinobi." I took a sip of my tea, and said, "So he wasn't happy."

"I bet." Raidō gave the stove a suspicious look, then turned back to his tea. "Sounds like we had the boring end of things."

Bullshit. Raidō's team had been involved in wrecking Danzō's entire organization. The only reason Kakashi, Obito, and I had gone with Sensei to Suna, aside from personal interest, was to get us out of the way. ROOT wouldn't make a move with the entirety of Team Minato in town, or so it seemed.

"Can you tell us anything? We missed a few weeks there," Hayate said. "Konoha isn't that boring."

Raidō scratched his scar, averted his eyes for a second, and then said, "Well, um, I hadn't worked with Shimika-san in a while. So without Kei-san, we had to reshuffle the Hokage Guard for the first time in a while."

Hayate made a face that said, quiet distinctly, that he did not consider this a worthwhile conversation topic.

Raidō was not impressed by that look. "Kid, I can't exactly share mission details with a genin." Particularly since Raidō was, according to his friggin' ANBU file, a designated assassin with a list of kills nearly as long as Kakashi's.

"I got promoted!" my brother replied, finally running the oil cloth down the length of his kodachi. With that, he placed the sword back in its sheath and added, "So I'm a chūnin now. I have a vest to prove it!"

"Huh. And you're what, ten?" Raidō asked.

"I'm thirteen," Hayate replied. He put his kodachi down on the floor next to his leg and asked, "How old were you when you were promoted?"

"I was your age, I think." Raidō nodded toward me. To my brother, he said, "Thing is, I'm twenty-one. I was already a chūnin by the time your sister graduated."

"Pff, old man." I rolled my eyes. I changed the subject with, "So, Raidō, why'd you focus on pumpkins?"

Was it just me, or did Raidō start to blush? "Uh..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "That's..."

He could have just said he liked them, but it was quickly becoming apparent that Raidō was perhaps not the best liar. It didn't really make sense—special jōnin ANBU assassin and all—but there was
something about this innocent winter squash that threw him off his game hard enough to bounce. And not bounce back.

After a long pause, Raidō said, "I want to learn how to do this."

Hayate and I exchanged looks.

"What?" was the defensive rejoinder.

Yeah, that'd been a bit overwrought for a "just because" reason. If that was really the answer, he probably wouldn't have been nearly as evasive about it, unless he was somehow afraid of admitting that he had some cooking ability. And that bordered on stupid.

"Are you dating someone?" Hayate asked.

And then we got to watch as Raidō's froze in place and, after a brief delay, his ears and cheekbones turned red. Given the scar, which didn't seem to have the best circulation, the effect would have been interesting even if Hayate's question hadn't revealed something rather important. I didn't hang out with Raidō much, and this universe lacked Facebook and social media, so the idea that he was actually in a relationship—and not an obvious one—was novel.

Raidō covered his face with both hands and mumbled something unintelligible. Still, he nodded.

Hayate looked as though no one had actually said "yes" when he asked that question before, and was at a loss for words.

I just felt the awkwardness in the room dial itself back up to eleven.

"Well, you don't have to talk to us about it," I said, apropos of nothing, once the atmosphere in the room had finally evolved from "awkward" to "secondhand mortification." I took a long sip of my tea and, with my brother, kinda tried to look anywhere but at Raidō until he recovered.

It took a moment, but eventually Raidō mumbled, "I just want to make up for all the dinners I keep missing."

I made a noise of understanding, but didn't press. Hayate was looking up at the ceiling like he was supposed to be inspecting it, but I could guess at what he was thinking. I'd missed a lot of Hayate's childhood thanks to missions, or so it seemed to me.

"Civilian or shinobi?" my brother asked, rather than what I'd expected.

So maybe I was the only one of us who thought of the past so much.

"Shinobi. There's some schedule overlap, but..." Raidō sighed. "Not much."

"Well, maybe—" And whatever I was about to say was cut off by a knock at the door.

Hayate immediately dashed over to answer it.

"Hayate," I growled, "that had better not be who I think it is." But of course, I already knew. Hooray for my chakra sense.

"Sorry, Sis!" Hayate tossed over his shoulder. Then he opened the door. "Come in, guys!"

I heard a rising cacophony of voices—Team Inoichi and Team Makoto—and winced preemptively. Okay, so tonight was definitely an order-in sort of night. Crap.
By the time I looked back to Raidō, preparing to apologize for the ruckus, he'd disappeared. And the kitchen window was open.

I had not thought it was wide enough to let an adult through, but it clearly was. I'd have to re-seal the windows later, then.

I walked over to the window and shut it, then checked on the pumpkins.

Seemed like I was going to have to make a delivery later. I...didn't know where Raidō lived, but I would probably be able to ask around.

Something for tomorrow, then.

I turned back to my brother's gaggle of friends and decided to just concentrate on being a good host, for now.

The next morning, I packed up the entire pot of simmered pumpkin and sealed it into my grocery scroll. While I'd successfully finished the recipe according to Dad's handwritten notes, I couldn't have said if the result had been what Raidō wanted. The kids had liked what little they got to eat—since I was guarding the pumpkin bits for their unknown recipient—and had also said the roasted version was all right.

Still. Going AWOL kind of screwed with the cooking lesson.

So, since I didn't know where Raidō was and didn't feel like waking up the village with my chakra to check for a specific location, I went to Genma's apartment first. I figured that, even if Genma didn't actually know where Raidō was, he'd be able to get the delivery where it needed to go.

And my next shot after that was Gai, who generally knew where Genma was (and would run around until he found him), and so on. Last possible resort was Kakashi, because of the ANBU connection.

But first, Genma's.

Genma lived in an apartment building that bordered the Aburame district. It wasn't upscale, exactly, but the area was well-maintained and had an air of settled-ness that some parts of the village were severely lacking. This neighborhood had never taken the kind of devastating damage that had hit parts of the Uchiha district, or the area around the hospital. In spite of my aversion to kikai insects, it was clear that having Aburame neighbors and their butterfly summon contract here had saved the immediate area from quite a lot of pain.

His actual building had four stories, with spacious studio-type apartments—at least by Konoha standards. While I couldn't see inside the apartment from street level, I could still make out the faintest buzz of security seals.

Like any fūinjutsu specialist, Genma had not skimped on the anti-burglary measures.

I unsealed the pot of pumpkin and carried it up the stairs the old-fashioned way. As I went, I dragged my left index fingertip along the wall, poking at the chakra signatures in the building out of curiosity. At nine in the morning on a Saturday, plenty of the residents were still around. I couldn't sense anything in Genma's apartment past the door, which meant that his seals were about as good as mine.

I'd been kind of waiting for him to take up my suggestions for that particular seal, so it was nice to get some indirect validation.
Okay, apartment three-oh-three. It even had his name on the little mail-slot, which was probably sharpened or otherwise messed with. I'd never been particularly interested in testing his home's defenses on the occasions that I'd been here before.

So, rather than poke too hard at anything, I knocked on the door.

The funny thing about sound-muffling seals, which I could feel in the walls of the apartment, was that they couldn't quite muffle vibrations that traveled through solid objects. So, if someone had punched a wall, I'd still be able to feel it through the frame of the building. There were plenty of places where a sufficiently prepared seal-user would be able to compensate for that and seal off the nearest sections of the building, but an apartment was not one of them.

As it was, I felt a series of thumps that suggested either two people, or one very fast person, rushing around inside the apartment. Since I knew for a fact that Sensei was at home this morning, I kind of doubted that the apartment only had one occupant today.

Too bad Genma's door didn't have a peephole. Deadbolts? Yes. But no peephole. I'd bet that Genma used his hearing to compensate for that.

I knocked again, and this time I said, "Hey, Genma? It's Kei! I'm just dropping something off!"

Another muffled thud. Maybe he needed to invest in carpeting the place? I didn't think my apartment manager would let me get away with that, but maybe the Aburame were more lax about that kind of thing.

There was a resounding thud as something hit the door at speed. I backed off instinctively, startled, and clutched the pot of stew/soup/whatever the heck a little tighter.

And then, finally, Genma opened the door maybe ten centimeters or so. The chain-lock on his door kept it from going any further.

"Didn't expect to see you today," Genma said, looking like he'd not only gotten up on the wrong side of the bed, but that the damn thing had attacked him. His hair was messy and stuck to his head in places thanks to sweat, he was wearing a tank top that looked like it had been through a firefight, and his chakra seemed to be moving sluggishly somehow. It was also the first time I'd ever seen him without a senbon in his mouth.

There was something about his forehead…

"Sorry, was it your day off?" I asked, rather than dwelling on it.

"More like I just got back from a mission," Genma replied. He yawned, rubbing at his eyes. "Was there a reason for this…visit?"

"Yeah, actually." I lifted the pot of pumpkin so he could see its contents through the glass lid. "I was gonna drop this off, so can I come in?"

Genma's eyes lit up. "Simmered pumpkin? You bet!" Before he went to unlock the chain-lock, though, he winced and said, "Just, uh, mind the mess. Sorry."

Using my place as a reference, Genma's really wasn't that bad. Sure, there was a large futon recklessly stuffed into a corner of the room, with the comforter hanging off what I assumed was a coat rack. There was also a noticeable layer of dust coating a bunch of surfaces, but it was consistent with being gone for a while. Combining the wreck the gaggle of genin and chūnin had made of my living room last night with the fact that I hadn't really been able to clean up after my long absence,
and Genma's apartment almost seemed homey.

"So, how was Suna?" Genma asked, leaning back against his kitchen unit's counter.

I put the pot on the stove, then shrugged. "Not a lot that I can actually say without getting a warning from the Hokage."

Genma raised an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

I winked.

Genma rolled his eyes. "Quit joking around. I actually do wanna hear what happened. Did that pipsqueak brother of yours pass or not?"

Haha, made him ask. "Well, my brother and a couple of his friends are now chūnin, so you're gonna be seeing more of them. And there was some stuff with the One-Tailed Beast, but that's my problem."

Genma shook his head. "Honestly? I have no idea how you and your team survive some of the crap you get into." Then his eyes slid over to the pumpkin again. "So, what's the occasion?"

"Huh?"

"It's not my birthday, I don't know of anything you did to piss me off recently, and yet it's still pretty close to my favorite food," Genma rattled off, indicating the pumpkin. He crossed his arms and said expectantly, "So, what gives?"

Click went my brain.

Raidō's weird stammer whenever the topic of why he was so interested in pumpkin recipes.

Raidō's admission that he was in a relationship. My brother hadn't asked who the other person was, since we'd been busy being cowed by his spectacular embarrassment over the topic.

The thing about missing dinners, and the issue of overlapping mission schedules.

And I'd finally realized that Genma was wearing a plain headband, instead of the reversed bandanna he generally preferred. Which Raidō did wear. They didn't even look alike!

And, now that I was actually paying attention, I could feel one extra chakra signature even through the generalized dampening effect of the privacy seals.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

With my face heating up—I was so dumb—I mumbled, "Your boyfriend forgot this at my place."

"...What was he..." Genma trailed off for a moment. Then I saw the realization hit him like a hammer. Sighing, he turned toward the bathroom, which held the chakra signature and had remained studiously closed, and said, "Raidō, she knows. You can stop hiding now."

There was a quiet, muffled curse.

"Yeah, I know, but there's pumpkin involved," Genma told him. He rubbed the back of his neck. "My bad."

Another brief curse, and I was pretty sure I heard the word "pants."
"…Yeah, sorry." Genma turned his attention back to me and said, "Sorry, but he's not coming out of there. Wardrobe malfunction."

My brain was connecting another set of dots at that point. I hadn't seen any loose clothing around here, but that didn't mean that there wasn't any. And I was cutting that thought off there. Stars and stones, I didn't need to think about my friends' private lives.

"You know what?" I was still red to the tips of my ears, but at least I hadn't lost control of my voice. While Raidō continued to hide behind the bathroom door, I said, "I'm sorry I made this morning so awkward for you two."

Genma blinked. "…What, that's it?"

"Yep, enjoy your breakfast." But before I had fully exited the premises, I turned on my heel and rattled off, "I'm happy for you both, drop the cookware off whenever, and I'll see you later!"

And then I was out of their hair for a while.

I was at least ten blocks away before I could stop, take a deep breath, and officially mark this morning as the most intensely uncomfortable situation I had ever been in, socially speaking. It was like walking in on Sensei and Kushina, but worse, because I had never suspected the possibility. It was one thing with a couple whose relationship kinda had to happen for Naruto to exist. It was quite another to walk in on two people without even having an inkling that they were a thing.

I facepalmed. What a start to the day.

I headed home after that to clean up.

While my brother had gone someplace in the intervening time—probably the Mission Office—I still had to maintain a pretense of being a responsible human being. That meant actually having organized spaces in the apartment, or at least spaces that did not have significant dust and food layers mixed in on top of what ought to have been clean surfaces.

I emptied trash bins. I dusted everything I could get my hands on. I walked on the ceiling to wipe down the lights. I opened all the windows and cleaned the bathroom with bleach, though it stank horribly. I scrubbed every pot and pan in the house and set them on racks to dry. I went on a cleaning spree fueled as much by hatred of icky sensations as it was by embarrassment-derived adrenaline.

Regardless of my motivations, the apartment was spotless by the end.

Which was why, at the end of it all, I was surprised to find a thick manila folder on the kotatsu in the center of the living room.

The Paperwork Fairy—otherwise known as the Hokage—had clearly stopped by. I didn't sense any seal-work other than the usual, so it kinda had to be him.

On top of the file, in scratchy handwriting, was a little note on pink paper. It read, *Eyes only, Kei! Burn the entire thing after reading it. Or perform a controlled explosion. I don't care which.*

Sensei had such a way with words.

I crumpled the note and tossed it into the kitchen wastebasket, then sat down on the floor. I stuck my legs under the kotatsu's blanket and opened the file, slowly.
The apparent title for the entire file was, **ROOT FACTION: DESTRUCTION COMPLETE.**

And right below that, in Kushina's handwriting, was another note. It said, *Now what?*

Given the seventy pages of reading I was going to have to do, based on the file's thickness, I imagined the answer was something along the lines of "Let me get back to you on this."

*Well, no time like the present.* I activated the apartment's security seals—sans the one that Hayate could bypass via the front door—and started reading.

Chapter End Notes

Song title courtesy of Elvis Presley.

This chapter takes place in February, in-universe. Happy Turkey Day, for those who care out-of-universe.
It turned out that Sensei had not been merciful. Whether because of the screw-up with Baki, or just by mistake, the file on the table contained multiple storage seals. The first seal, which just said “box” in the middle, coughed up a cardboard box full of manila folders that dated as far back as the Second Shinobi World War. After seeing the first one, I didn’t even want to look at the rest of the files.

What the fuck, Sensei.

The horrifying part, once I got started reading headings instead of just sitting there and screaming internally, was that there were hundreds of individual files. Each one was thin—barely four pages in some cases—but I’d see code names and clan jutsu and all sorts of little details that set off enough red flags to decorate Tiananmen Square.

I was seeing names. I was seeing codenames like “Sai” and “Shin” used for half a dozen different kids each. I saw a record of Tenzō’s recovery from a busted lab someplace, talking about his height and weight at age five—below average, below average, insufficient—and a file talking about how Nonō Yakushi’s orphanage could be useful to the cause.

And the more I read, the sicker I felt.

Nonō, in her active role as Nanigashi, must have dissected dozens of people. Former ROOT operatives, lost ANBU units, enemy corpses—there was no way to be sure, between all the medic-babble, who any of these people had been. Once they went under the knife, they weren’t people. They weren’t even corpses. They were assets.

She’d been allowed to retire, as a special exception for her years of work. Danzō had planned on rescinding on that deal, through Kabuto. Kabuto, the agent named out of hand by some random orphan kid, trained to kill on command and to infiltrate every village on the continent. Whatever had been there before, it had been hollowed out until Kabuto’s identity was just a mask he could slip on or off, making it easy for him to end up anywhere.

And then Sensei had derailed that. Shimura’s assets had been frozen, his agents detained or killed, and eventually it had all led to his death to complete the picture.

It was…a pretty depressing way to spend the rest of the morning, actually. I felt my mood drop steadily the longer I read, wondering how to help anyone affected by the old spider’s web.

At around noon, someone knocked at my front door.

Without opening the door, I could already tell that it was Genma. My apartment didn’t have the same kind of chakra-sense dampening effect that his did.
Getting up, I stretched and glanced at the nearest clock before going anywhere.

_Noon already?_ Well, the morning was officially done.

I packed up all the paperwork and crammed things back into their seals before I went to go get the door. Senior shinobi or not, Genma hadn’t been the one asked to look over those files for Sensei. I stuck the remaining monster of a manila folder under the kotatsu for good measure.

Then I answered the door.

Apparently, three hours had given Genma time to get dressed, figure out which headband was actually his, and get the formerly-filled pot back to me.

“Can I talk to you, Kei-san?” Genma asked, even as he offered the giant soup-pot-thing back to me.

“You already are, but sure.” Stepping back from the door, I waved him inside. “Come in. The seals won’t fry you if I opened the door from the inside.”

“That’s reassuring,” Genma muttered, but he followed me in. Without any further prompt from me, he sat down at the kotatsu and slid his legs underneath the blanket, then folded his arms on the tabletop.

I got the tea kettle going, then started sorting through tea varieties. We had matcha, but it seemed pompous anywhere but in a tea ceremony (which I couldn’t remember how to perform), and then there were a couple of varieties of black tea…

“So…” Genma began.

“What kind of tea do you want?” I asked over my shoulder.

Genma groaned, letting his head fall into his folded arms. “Please forget about the tea. This conversation can happen without you having to act like a hostess.”

I nudged the kettle off the burner, then joined him at the table. I propped my head up on the heel of my hand, with my elbow on the table, and said, “I already apologized for this morning, Genma.”

“You did.” He lifted his head. “But here we are, having this conversation.”

I raised one eyebrow. “…Okay.”

“That reaction, right there, is what’s throwing me off.” Genma sat up and said, “I honestly can’t tell what you’re thinking right now.”

“The main thing I’m thinking is ‘why are we talking right now?’” I told him. “I apologized about ruining your morning. Was the pumpkin horrible or something?”

Genma was developing a tic under his left eye.

I stopped, reading his chakra and his expression carefully. Well, that hadn’t been the right thing to say. “Genma, is this about the fact that you’re with Raidō?”

“Yes.” And that was about the most frustrated I’d ever heard him.

“Are you happy?” I asked him. “Like, are both of you happy with things and talking about important stuff, and no one’s getting hurt?”
Genma blinked. “…Yes?”

“Then it’s okay.”

“That’s it?” Genma’s senbon twitched. “After what happened this morning?”

“Walking in on you two was probably the most embarrassing thing I’ve ever done, but… yeah.” I tilted my head to one side. Given how worked up Genma was—for him, anyway—I could guess where this was going. “I guess you were expecting something more extreme.”

“I might have talked Raidō down from the idea that you’d shout the whole thing from the rooftops and make his neighbors hate him,” Genma said dryly. “I kind of expected more, given the running away thing.”

“Why would his neighbors hate him?” And as soon as I said it, I realized it was a stupid question. I immediately smacked myself in the forehead and said, “No, no, just hang on. I clearly forgot to turn my brain on this morning.”

“That makes two of us,” Genma remarked. Apparently for lack of anything better to say, he went with, “The pumpkin thing was good, though.”

“Thanks. It was Dad’s recipe.” I stared at the tabletop for a moment, then said, “Genma, what did you need to talk to me about, really?” I looked up. “If it’s really about Raidō and you, I don’t really have anything important to say. If you’re happy, then what I say doesn’t matter at all.”

To my surprise, Genma gave a short, low laugh. “Honestly? Just that.”

“…Then wasn’t this whole thing pretty overblown?” I asked him.

“Maybe a little.” Genma slumped over again. His chakra was still agitated, but he was slowly calming down. “You have no idea what a relief this is.”

No, I didn’t. I wasn’t sure I could. But since this was messing with Raidō and Genma, I sympathized anyway. “Are you gonna be all right?”

“Yeah,” Genma mumbled. He drew his arms up, so his head was resting on his forearms. I could see his expression shift into a half-smile after a moment, and he said, “Did this morning strike you as actually pretty funny, in hindsight? If you ignored the terror part.”

“It was like something out of a romance novel,” I agreed. “The silly ones.”

“…Wait, you read romance novels with…” and here, he made a hand gesture that left very little to the imagination.

“Jiraiya is my sensei’s sensei,” I said, feeling myself start to blush again. “It’s an… uh, it’s an occupational hazard.”

“I’ll bet.” But he was smiling! Yay, the awkwardness of the morning was officially over!

“So…” I began, “Can I ask you how long you two have been together?”

“You just did. But I’ll let you,” Genma said. He looked up at the ceiling as he thought, then said, “Eight months, now. We got together after my birthday.”

“So you were already together during Tanabata?” Damn, I’d certainly missed a hell of a lot of cues. Granted, I didn’t generally hang out with Genma at the same time as Raidō, and… actually, I almost
never spent time with Raidō outside of work hours. Whoops.

At least I knew both of them. It was somehow less weird than, oh, meeting a new cousin’s significant other? And then discovering that I hated them. Not that I knew any of my cousins in this lifetime.

“Yeah,” Genma said.

“I can’t believe you managed to keep things secret for that long.” Not like they lacked for motivation to hide things, I supposed, but wow. Didn’t people generally figure this kind of thing out quickly? Not including me, at any rate.

“I think that a couple people already know,” Genma corrected me. “But no one’s said anything, so Raidō can keep his illusions.”

“Who would already know?” I asked.

“Your teammate Kakashi, for starters,” Genma told me.

Kakashi? Well, now that I thought of it, he had a sense of smell better than an Inuzuka’s and he was one of Raidō’s ANBU teammates. Add in his functional brain and the opportunity to actually interact with Raidō… Yeah, I could see that. Points to him for not letting anything slip, though I didn’t know what he actually thought about all this. And it almost seemed too personal to ask him.

As for Genma, well, he had showed up at my house. This conversation wasn’t going to reach anyone else’s ears before I got an affirmative from Genma and Raidō. But as long as he was here… Curiosity burned, so of course I gave in. “Can…can I ask how you two got together?”

“That is…kind of a funny story.” Genma glanced at the clock on the wall. “Which is too long. Short version: I asked him out.”

“…Yes, that’s how many relationships start,” I said dryly.

“Marginally longer version, then: He complimented my ass by accident, and then I complimented his on purpose.” Genma waved his hands as though to say, “Ta-dah.”

I wasn’t sure why I was still asking him anything. Curiosity met sarcasm and smashed itself to pieces like a car against a tree.

Genma happened to turn his head, then, and I caught a glimpse of something I hadn’t noticed before. Right behind his ear…

“Is that a hickey?” I asked, before I could think better of it.

“Huh?” Almost instinctively, he raised his hand to the side of his neck and covered it. “Oh, yep.” A fond smile crept onto his face. “Raidō was covered in ‘em, too. That’s why he didn’t…” And then he trailed off.

I was blushing to the tips of my ears.

“…Fuck. Please don’t tell anyone I told you that.” Genma finally actually blushed. Just a little. “I keep forgetting you’re fifteen. You don’t ever act like it.”

Maybe that’s because I’m not a kid at all? “I’m not even sure what it’d mean to act my age in this context.”
“…I don’t really know, either. I guess I expected more screaming.” Genma shrugged.

I wasn’t sure if he meant a poor reaction derived from a conservative society, or something closer to Sakura’s nosebleed-spree reaction to the guy-on-guy edition of the Sexy Jutsu. I was pretty sure that it’d been intended as a gag showing that Sakura had a functional sex drive, same as the guys who fell for the Sexy Jutsu, but the entire idea was just designed for cheap laughs or something.

And wow, I was never going to ask about who was on top. Or think about asking. Ever again.

If the thought had had a physical form, I needed to drag it out behind the figurative shed and shoot it.

“I think you may be making a bigger deal out of this than it actually is. At least, with me. I can’t speak for other people in this town.” I sat back and tried to see Genma’s point of view on this, since I’d been all too blind recently.

Different groups in Konoha tended to react differently to things outside the norm. While shinobi often preferred the most practical approach to issues like love, because we never really knew which mission was gonna kill us, it wasn’t always so clear-cut to civilians. And while shinobi were revered as the honorable protectors of Konoha as a whole, it didn’t really change the fact that we were actually just a really prominent minority. Unlike in some villages, Konoha’s civilian population dwarfed its fighting population.

I tended to use the village’s treatment of the old timeline’s Naruto as a baseline for how they reacted to things they couldn’t understand. More often than not, I was proven right. There were parts of the village where a sort of mob collective ruled, and those were the kinds of places where people wouldn’t meet my eye after I went public as a jinchūriki. I tended to look at it as a matter of fear, but hate was a significant component for some specific individuals.

Shinobi wouldn’t say anything, because a lot of us had pretty miserable times in our lives where having someone to love was our lifeline. Most of us knew better than to lash out at someone else for who they happened to find happiness with. There were exceptions—exceptions to everything—but that was the general attitude.

Civilians didn’t know better. They didn’t know a lot of things related to a lifestyle that demanded life-risking and life-losing in equal measure, sometimes. And some of them chose to express that ignorance in a way that was blatantly, incredibly unhelpful. There would be unfriendly eyes everywhere.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked Genma. Frankly, none of my musings meant anything in the face of reality. If he wanted me to do anything with regards to avoiding trouble, I’d help.

“For Raidō’s sake, please don’t say anything.” Genma was frowning again, and crossed his arms over his chest. “It was a bit of an assumption on my part, about the whole freak-out thing. Guess I thought…well, I don’t know what I thought. But all of my friends are shinobi and I pay rent to the Aburame clan. I don’t have to give a shit about other people’s opinions if I don’t want to.” Genma’s senbon twitched as he set his jaw. “But Raidō is…well, you know. He lives in a civilian building. And given what he does for a living, he can’t really afford anyone to pay too much attention to him.”

Meaning, basically, that if any infiltrators ever had suspicions about Raidō randomly disappearing in order to fulfill his ANBU duties, they’d get a bunch of free witnesses thanks to the power of gossipy neighbors. The whole point of ANBU was that its members were anonymous enough that no one would ever be able to pin their actions on a single member. ANBU was, for Konoha, the ultimate knife in the dark. If you saw an agent, it was one we wanted you to see.
Insert even more self-congratulatory hype as needed, basically.

So I said, “I won’t tell anyone, Genma.”

“Thank you.” Genma shifted in his seat, looking away from me. “You know. For being understanding, and for helping Raidō yesterday.”

“No problem.” With that, I got up and headed to the kitchen again.

At the same time, Genma got to his feet and started for the door.

“Genma, hang on a second.” After a bit of scrambling around, I found what I was looking for and sent it spinning across the apartment at Genma’s head. “Here, take the card.”

He caught it out of the air, then peered at it. “Uh—the simmered pumpkin recipe?”

“Yeah. I think you’re gonna get more use out of it than I will.” I grinned. “Right?”

“Heh. I think I will.” Genma left with one last wave and a, “Thanks again, Kei-san.”

For a couple of minutes after he left, I basked in the warm glow of having actually done a good deed for the day. Or week. Hopefully, once Genma got back to Raidō about things, the guy would have a chance to calm down from his near-heart attack. Then they could go back to being happy.

I made myself some tea, then…well.

Then it was back to reading ROOT reports.

There went the good feeling.

I sighed and got back to work.

By two in the afternoon, I had something like an idea for a possible suggestion. Kushina’s note had asked for a potential course of action.

I didn’t really have that.

What I had were suppositions, based on both personal experience and what I knew about ROOT in both realities through manga and through hearsay. I hadn’t been involved in the investigation proper, except as a catalyst, and thus I couldn’t accurately gauge how many dominos were going to be toppled. I could draw from knowledge of old political scandals that had never touched me, and I could do my best to advise Sensei on what he should do next.

The decision wasn’t going to be in my hands.

Nonetheless, I boxed up all of the files and the seals, got dressed in my special jōnin blues, and then headed to the Hokage’s office anyway.

I caught Sensei in his office with two of his shadow clones, while he was busy making a dent into the mountains of paperwork that Tsunade had left behind for him.

“Did anything get finished while we were out of town?” I asked as I walked in, carrying the file I’d been given earlier. I hadn’t sealed it into a more convenient shape—ergo, flat as a tattoo—because stacking storage seals tended to lead to spontaneously-generated wormholes.

I closed the door behind me to prevent any loose paper from escaping. None of the Hokage Guard
seemed to be on duty today, which was odd, but it was just as likely that Sensei had shooed away whoever was on the clock. He didn’t often need protection, so we were more likely to allow it than the Third Hokage’s guards were.

“I don’t think so!” said one of Sensei’s clones. At least, I assumed the one on the left was a clone. Technically, the real Sensei didn’t have to be the one behind the desk. It was just what generally happened.

I had learned, sort of through happenstance, how Sensei managed to keep insane hours in the Hokage office while also being a dad and whatever else he got up to in the time he had left.

I didn’t know what exact thing had prompted the incident, but about a month and a half ago, Tsunade had stormed into Sensei’s office a little past midnight and thrown a file folder at him. I’d caught the bulk of it, what with ninja reflexes being a thing, but two sheets of paper had smacked Sensei in the face. Lightly—it was still paper, even when thrown by Tsunade of the friggin’ Sannin—but there was definite contact.

And then he’d exploded into smoke.

There had a brief moment of confusion before Sensei had teleported into the office, still wearing his pajamas. Explanations had ensued, and Tsunade had left the office with a new appreciation for the Shadow Clone technique.

Effectively, Sensei had a thirty-six hour workday. Any time he had to take care of duties outside of his Hokage capacity, he left a clone in the office and went to do whatever he had to. Often, that meant there was a clone doing paperwork while Sensei went home and caught up on sleep. Given that he could teleport to any of his Flying Thunder God seals, it was easier than one would think to maintain this kind of bizarre double life.

Chakra-intensive as hell, and not great in terms of mental strain, but it was doable. I supposed it was a bit like being a firefighter or something—always on-call, but not always on-site.

Sensei apparently had some very weird dreams when the clone ended up dispersing before he woke up.

But in the middle of the day, Sensei wasn’t shy about employing his Shadow Clones out in the open. Particularly when there was so much work to do.

“I skimmed the files you gave me, Sensei,” I said, hefting the file for emphasis. “And I’m here to give a preliminary…opinion, I think? Unless that isn’t what you wanted.”

“No, no,” said the Sensei at the desk. “I want to hear your report. Just give me a second to…” Sensei brought his hand down next to the stamp pad and the whole room glowed orange with active security seals.

The Shadow Clones both dismissed themselves.

“All right, so…” I had rehearsed a spiel of sorts, and yet when confronted by the idea of actually saying it, any polish wore right off. I found myself going back to basics, going over what Sensei already knew, and felt like a high schooler giving a verbal book report. “I wasn’t able to read everything, but it’s clear enough that Shimura had a tendency of grabbing kids from across the Land of Fire. Few were ever reported missing, so I guess they were orphans like Tenzō.” Say what you would about the data-rich world I’d come from—at least there’d be a record of most people’s existence, somewhere. “I don’t know if he picked up the habit from Orochimaru, or if…if
Orochimaru’s experiments always featured kids given to him by ROOT. There’s no way to tell anymore. But we know that Danzō was working with that reptilian bastard, which would be enough to condemn him if he was alive to stand trial.”

Sensei made a “go on” gesture.

“Right. So, about what we should actually do with the data and the ROOT agents… I guess Homura and Koharu are telling you to bury it?” I paused, then hedged, “If they know about the bust.”

“Mitosado and Utatane are no longer a part of the equation,” Sensei said flatly. Meaning that they had been, but got punted out of the ROOT business after Sensei lost patience with them.

“In the future universe,” I began carefully, “Danzō’s manipulations eventually came out. I’d rather explain the details in writing, later, but the backlash from ROOT’s outing seemed to be effectively ignored, given what happened after that. Between the attack on the Five Kage summit, and the stuff with Akatsuki…Well. Uh, Tobi declared war on the entire world under the name ‘Madara Uchiha,’ so I get why people didn’t seem to care much after that.”

“But thanks to you, we don’t have a Tobi to worry about,” Sensei reminded me, with a nod. “However, the issue of ROOT and Danzō Shimura remain, even after neutralizing both.”

“Yeah. I…” I found myself twisting a lock of hair between my fingers, then stopped. “I think you need to meet with the heads of the clans.”

“Oh?” Sensei’s tone was mild.

“Shimura and the other two members of the Council seem to want to crush the clans into line with the village. No matter what it does to them,” I said, thinking of the Uchiha clan. I was ninety percent sure that their planned coup had been inspired by more than random dickery and arrogance. “I…I guess that’s a good reason to bring the clans in closer. The right way.”

“The right way?” Sensei prompted.

“Every clan in Konoha’s lost a kid or two to ROOT. I can’t say if they were forced to give them up, on pain of some kind of political sanction…” I frowned. I thought back to what I’d read—barely—and said, “Everyone except the Uchiha clan. Which might explain their shrinking influence somewhat… Sensei, I think we need to get these grievances out in the open, otherwise it’s like we’ve all been poisoned and we’re just…waiting for it to get better. That’s stupid. It lets a dead man set the terms the village has to live by.”

It explained why there was only a record of one pair of Sharingan, total, among ROOT’s files. They had to have been Honoka’s. The clan wouldn’t have given up any of their kids, but that didn’t mean that Shimura hadn’t had ways around that. Given that Honoka’s death, while in full ANBU uniform, would never be fully explained to the clan due to village policy…

It felt like I tripped over more bullshit from that old bastard every time I turned around. I wasn’t even the one directly involved in the investigation, though I knew I had eyes on me as much as any other member of my team. If not more, given the whole jinchūriki thing.

I said, “It’s important to control the flow of information, now. Covering things up works, but when it comes out there’s going to be an explosion and we can’t know what form it’ll take or how devastating it will be. If we get the testimony of clan heads, if we can get them on-side…maybe there won’t be a reason for a cover-up, at least on our end. We can push the angle that Danzō was solely responsible for everything, and that our faction—whatever we’re calling ourselves—were the ones to
nail him to the wall for it.” I shrugged one shoulder. “I can’t tell you if it’d be harder or easier if he was alive to scream at, but we’ve got a corpse to work with. And a corpse can’t defend itself.”

Sensei made a vague noise of acknowledgement. He had his hands clasped in front of his face and was staring off into the middle distance as he thought.

I didn’t know who else he’d talked to before I wandered into his office. I didn’t know what variables he was considering.

All he said was, “Thank you for your report, Kei.”

Just this once, I crossed my arms and waited.

Sensei’s eyes refocused on me after another moment or two, and he straightened in his chair. “Yes?”

“Do I get any hints about what you’re actually going to do with that information?” I asked. I’d gotten used to being kept out of the loop whenever Sensei put his figurative politician hat on, but it was still annoying sometimes.

“Not until I actually decide, Kei,” Sensei replied, smiling innocently.

I gave up. “Did you need me for anything else, Sensei?”

“Hm… Actually, yes.” Sensei’s smile expanded into a grin that wouldn’t have looked out of place on his son in the alternate future. Oh, crap. “Please go home and prepare for our spar at noon tomorrow. I’ll be disappointed if you hold anything back.”

Double crap. I’d actually forgotten about that for a while, given the stuff that had happened this morning.

“Understood, Sensei,” I said, bowing.

Sensei was still grinning. “It’ll be interesting to see how strong you’ve become, won’t it?”

It would be. It would also probably be a painful experience.

*Isobu? I think we’re gonna have to strategize.*

**Yes, I think we will.**

Sensei’s voice stopped me, right before I was going to turn to leave. “Oh, and Kei?”

“Yeah, Sensei?” I asked, surprised. What did he want now?

“Why do you always refer to the contents of your visions in past tense?” he asked.

He’d actually noticed that? “Mainly? As far as I’m concerned, that story’s over and done with. We’re making a better one, here and now.” Careful, careful. Still shading the truth, there.


I dumped the file I’d been holding on the corner of Sensei’s desk. Then I headed out of the office and went for the external stairs.

I left the Administration Center and started heading to the market. I needed to buy sealing supplies, meat, and probably get something for a late lunch. It was becoming very rapidly clear that I was not
necessarily going to be able to do any of that, though.

“Kei, you’re late!” Rin ran up to me, looking like I’d done something stupid recently. “Where have you been?”

“…At home, then in there.” I said, jerking my thumb back over my shoulder to point to the Hokage’s office window. Rin really didn’t need to know precisely what I’d done today. “Did I miss something important?”

Rin huffed. “Honestly, Kei! I can’t believe you right now. We were supposed to meet up today with Kurenai and the other kunoichi.”

Ohhh, right. The support group thing that Kushina was running. The one with the Uchiha matriarch. That one.

“Is it already over?” I asked weakly. Dammit, I’d entirely forgotten. Between the pumpkin incident and Sensei dumping a load of top secret files on my table, I hadn’t had any time to think about it. I had forgotten to ask when the next meeting was supposed to be, but I knew it was supposed to be a Saturday so Itachi could attend. I just hadn’t realized that it was this Saturday.

“No, but Kushina-san sent me to find you.” Rin put her hands on her hips. “So are you coming along or not?”

On one hand, I was pretty much guaranteed to get the ever-living shit kicked out of me tomorrow if I didn’t prepare to fight Sensei with everything I had.

On the other…well, I was probably gonna get wailed on regardless of what I did.

When Rin turned to leave, I jogged to catch up. I asked, “Is everyone already there?”

“Pretty much. Except you and me.” Rin held out her hand. “Come on, Kei! Kurenai-chan said she had something for you.”

“Well, okay.” I was just gonna have to leave early. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t show up at all. “Lead the way, Rin.”

Rin led me to the Hokage residence, which was ordinarily Tsunade’s place. Hiruzen Sarutobi had never lived here, preferring the Sarutobi clan holdings, but Tsunade had knocked down a wall and built a room and made her grandfather and granduncle’s former place into her own. When she wasn’t in the hospital or out drinking, she lived here.

Tenzō had moved in at some point during the ROOT investigation, but I hadn’t asked for further details than that. Just like that, though, there were more people living in the Hokage residence than there had been since the Second Hokage.

On this particular Saturday, there were a lot of kids. They were mostly concentrated in the yard and the room that opened into it, along with all the food, but I was still immediately concerned about tripping over any of them.

Mikoto Uchiha had brought both of her sons, and Tsume Inuzuka had brought both Hana and the toddler Kiba. Then there was Himawari Hyūga, with her little daughter Hinata. Then Kushina and Naruto. And then all three of the Ino-Shika-Chō kids, plus Rin and Kurenai. Almost everyone was snacking on something, though Mikoto and Kushina were also manning an open-air grill.

“Well,” I said, since I couldn’t come up with anything better. “I guess I’m late?”
Rin smacked my shoulder. “Yes, you are!”

“Hey, hey, I was busy!” I protested, even as Rin herded me over toward Kurenai. I ended up sitting down next to the resident non-clan genjutsu expert, had a plate full of grilled meat shoved into my hands by the Akimichi mother, and got to be rather nonplussed about the whole thing.

“What have you been, Keisuke-chan?” Kurenai asked, even as she handed me a spare set of chopsticks.

“I was at the Administration building. Sen—the Hokage wanted me to review a bunch of stuff.” I glanced over toward Kushina, who hadn’t looked up when I arrived. Then something on the grill caught fire and I understood why.

“Huh. Did you finish?” Kurenai asked, as Sasuke wandered over.

The toddler then proceeded to steal a bit of sliced pork from her plate and stuff it in his mouth.

“Hey, Mikoto-sama, are you feeding him enough?” I asked loudly, as Sasuke gnawed industriously on his prize.

Kurenai was too busy giggling to offer any resistance to little Sasuke’s next great heist. Another slice of meat disappeared.

“Itachi, your brother…” Mikoto said, offhandedly.

Itachi appeared from somewhere in the throng of younger kids and picked up his younger brother, chiding him in a high-pitched voice. “Sasuke, no!”

Sasuke ignored him, inasmuch as he could, and started chewing on Itachi’s arm.

The result was loud enough that it took me a moment to realize that Naruto had stolen my food.

I let him.

“So, what are you doing tomorrow?” Kurenai asked, as Itachi struggled to control two toddlers.

I opted for honesty. “I’m going to get the crap beaten out of me.”

“…Why?” Rin asked, since Kurenai reacted to my dramatic revelation with nonplussed silence. She hadn’t hung out with me enough to know that the best response was sarcasm, or to keep asking to cut through the inevitable layer of bullshit.

“Sen—the Hokage and I talked about going all-out in a spar while we were still in Suna,” I explained, setting my plate down and picking up Naruto with my now-free hands. Once I had him settled him on my lap, I went on, “So, he brings everything he has, and I try to do the same. And I’m pretty sure I’m gonna lose.”

Sensei’s standby might’ve been the old teleport-stab combo, but that was far from the only tactic he could use, or the only jutsu. Aside from variations on the Rasengan, Sensei knew how to manipulate Shadow Clones and related techniques like a master. Which he was. And aside from that, Sensei had Lightning and Fire Release jutsu—a survival skill, with Obito and Kakashi on the team—and Sage training with enough experience and power to compete with Jiraiya despite the age difference. He wasn’t Hashirama Senju, sure—no true macro-scale jutsu were just gonna pop out of nowhere—but he was a better thinker and had more tactical flexibility at (insane) speed.
By contrast, I had Isobu. And while I got strength, speed, and stamina from our partnership, I still didn’t know how Isobu’s unique Tailed Beast abilities worked or how to use them. I preferred the Rasengan to the Tailed Beast Bomb, since I didn’t know how to transform that far without killing myself, and I had a plan for option one. I could pull water right out of the air to use as ammunition for Water jutsu if I needed to, while Sensei specialized in non-physical jutsu that had higher chakra costs than mine if there were any water sources to draw from.

But there was very little, in terms of mere speed boosts, which would compare to outright teleportation. I knew that Sensei wasn’t outright immune to genjutsu or, say, getting stabbed, but nothing I could do would matter if I couldn’t hit him.

If I was going to win—or lose with some dignity intact—then I needed to find a way to make him take a hit like the tank Sage Mode made him rather than just dodging. And I wasn’t sure how to do that, yet.

Kurenai squeezed my shoulder sympathetically. “I’m sorry. Um, well, I can put ten ryō down on you, if it makes you feel better?”

“Wait, wait, what?” Tsume Inuzuka interrupted, carrying Kiba under her arm like an errant pup, with Kuromaru trailing behind her. “Who’s betting? Who’s fighting?”

“Kurenai-chan is betting that Kei will win her fight with Hokage-sama,” Rin responded dutifully, but she winked at me.

Oh, damn.

“The Hokage won’t lose to his student, no matter how strong she is,” Tsume scoffed. “Fifty ryō on Minato.”

“Are we betting on my husband?” Kushina called out loudly. “If so, for what?”

Double damn.

“We’re not betting on anything,” I responded, but by then Tsunade had poked her head into the room. She must have been drinking in the other room or something, because I hadn’t seen her when I’d come in.

The thing with Tsunade and gambling was kinda self-explanatory at this point. She had a reputation for taking every sucker’s bet on the face of the continent and blowing through her inheritance money the same way. Given that she was the only living Senju, or at least she had been, this had mainly been a problem for Shizune to sort out. The Senju clan had been rolling in cash by the end of the Clan Wars, thanks to the god-shinobi they had leading from the front.

Between coming back to Konoha (and having her outstanding debts paid off) and kinda-adopting Tenzō, Tsunade had been cutting back. Shizune hadn’t had to go retrieve her sorta-aunt from a real dive in ages.

Just from looking at her face, I was somehow getting the impression that when Tsunade fell off of that wagon, the results would be of the kind best viewed through a telescope.

“You’re betting…without me.” Tsunade’s voice promised bad things.

I didn’t say anything. It didn’t pay to say something dumb to someone with super strength and an apparent hangover. At least she did her drinking at home nowadays.
Himawari Hyūga chose that moment to drift into the conversation, every bit as serene as the Uchiha matriarch. The two of them flanked Tsunade, who glared blearily at them.

“I think we need to get a proper pool started, don’t you, Himawari-san?” Mikoto Uchiha said in a mild voice.

Himawari nodded, smiling placidly. “Hm, yes. Kurenai-chan, could you please fetch some paper and a brush? This needs to be recorded.”

It was a fucking conspiracy and I was pretty sure that Tsunade and I were the only ones not in on it somehow. The astounding thing was that the conspiracy in question was barely a minute old and suddenly had ten participants.

In short order, a scroll was produced and I had a calligraphy brush in my hand somehow. Before I knew it, I was recording bets for basically every clan mother in Konoha, watching in a sort of detached horror as the numbers crept steadily upward. While hundreds of ryō ended up in Kushina’s hands—it was her husband and her husband’s student—I felt like I’d been shoved into the passenger seat in my own life for a few moments.

Maybe…I shouldn’t have mentioned this? Like, at all?

“Aaaaaand…done!” Kushina grinned as she looked over the list of names. “Oh, I bet we can get more people in on this, but I’m not sure we should! This is more fun than the Chūnin Exams.”

Himawari patted my shoulder while I sat frozen in the wake of it all. “I’m rooting for you, Keisuke-chan. Do your best!”

I could feel my face heating up as I read the list of names and bet amounts. It…it was about even, weirdly. These women had more faith in me than I did.

(Itachi had refrained from betting. He liked his allowance where it was.)

Rin’s name was on Sensei’s side of things, though, so I mustered what theatrical offense I could and said, “Really, Rin?”

“Sorry, Kei, but it is the Hokage.” Rin shrugged, unabashed.

“Well, I’m on your side,” said Kurenai. “You can do this!”

“…I’m not sure whether to be honored by your faith in me or run away to live in the hills or something,” I admitted, looking at the floor.

“Hah! With an attitude like that, there’s no way she’s gonna win,” Tsume said, sitting back and exchanging high-fives with Yoshino Nara. “Minato’s got this in the bag.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that, Tsume-san,” Mikoto said sweetly. “It doesn’t pay to underestimate someone with her power, you know.”

Oh, boy. I read the names again.

Tsunade had refrained from betting openly, citing privacy concerns—meaning that nobody would bet on the same side as her—but that still left a lot of money on the board.

“At least get her teammates on board with this,” Himawari said to Kushina. “I’m sure they would be interested in seeing who would win.”
I got to my feet, nudging Naruto toward his Auntie Mikoto. “I’m sorry, everyone, but I need to go home and prepare for the match if I’m gonna win. I… I guess I can’t control who you decide to share this with, but you’ll have to ask Sensei if this is gonna be a public spectacle.”

And then I ran away. To prepare, of course.

Not because I’d been embarrassed all too many times today.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is from the Undertale OST.

Also, who do you think will win?
Kei

It rained overnight.

As I walked out onto the flat, brownish plateau of Training Ground Four, I curled my fingers around the katana at my left hip. Rain was a good sign—it meant that I’d have something to work with for my Water jutsu—but I could still feel my body shake thanks to nervousness.

Training Ground Four was about as far out of Konoha as was possible, while still counting as our territory. Nobody lived in the area, because the landscape was dull and barren, which meant it was one of the few places where S-class shinobi could train safely. A long time ago, Hashirama Senju had deliberately left this place bare when constructing Konoha, claiming that there had to be someplace to use all of the really destructive clan techniques.

It probably spoke more about the shinobi in his generation than anything. If I’d been in Konoha at the same time as Tobirama Senju and Madara Uchiha, I probably would have felt safer if I knew there was someplace where they could murderize each other without involving bystanders, too.

But today, Training Ground Four was going to be occupied.

There was already a bit of a crowd—mostly various clan representatives, some jōnin and special jōnin from across the village. Hayate, Anko, and Yūgao were with their teams, but stood out because of their flak jackets. I could also see both of Iruka’s parents, Kushina, Rin, Yamaguchi-sensei, and both Raidō and Genma hanging out in different parts of the crowd. Even as I watched, the crowd just kept getting bigger.

I spotted my main headaches right in the middle of the only rock-free zone in immediate view. Sensei and Jiraiya, waiting.

"Kei-kun, nice of you to join us!" Jiraiya called out, waving.

I headed over to them at a trot, despite how silly I felt. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Genma scribbling something on the ground, with Gai standing over his shoulder to offer encouragement.

"I'm pretty sure I'm early, even if the rest of you were here earlier," I said, waving an arm to indicate the crowd. "Also, when did we get an audience?"

"A little bird told someone about the match, and then people wanted to make money off of it," Sensei said, shrugging. "Now, who could have done that?"
"I get your point already," I grumbled. I squared my stance and pressed my lips together in a thin line. "How long until noon?"

Jiraiya produced an alarm clock out of a sleeve, then shook it. "Five minutes. Any last words, kid?"

"Are there any rules to this…?" I waved my left hand vaguely. "Thing."

Sensei said "Oh!" and pulled something out of his flak jacket pocket. It was a strip of paper—a seal—that he handed to Jiraiya. To me, he said, "Kei, I won't be using the Chakra Suppressing Seal in this match. Instead, I'll be leaving its use to Jiraiya-sensei, who is going to be our referee."

He was about the only person around who could survive that job, so I approved.

"It'd be too easy to win that way," Sensei added, with a sort of innocence that I didn't trust.

My eyes narrowed. "I'd have thought you were above trash-talking."

"Is it still just banter if it's true?" Sensei teased, as though he wasn't standing two meters away.

…I was officially out of reservations about punching him. Previously, this attitude was due to my belief that nothing I could do would hurt Sensei, so it didn't matter how extreme I got. Now, I didn't care.

My eyes itched.

"Ah, there we go." Sensei smiled and added, with some anticipation, "Mind if I show off my eye color trick, too?"

"You're gonna have to, Sensei." And there went the Tailed Beast voice. Awesome.

The traditional pre-fight posturing was interrupted by a distinct twist of air, and Obito warped into existence next to my left elbow. There was a second bizarre spiraling effect in midair, and Kakashi was suddenly right next to him. On a rock.

"Yo," said Kakashi, once he found his footing again.

"Are we late?" asked Obito.

"No, no, you're fine." Still, Sensei jerked out a hand and pointed at the crowd. "But you should still be over there, boys. We're about to start."

The crowd had somehow gotten bigger still in the previous three minutes.

Hell.

Kakashi squeezed my shoulder—a vote of confidence?—and Obito followed that up with a hug that engulfed me quite effectively. Kakashi was already some distance away by the time Obito get around to letting go.

Obito said, "Good luck, Kei!" before running off after Kakashi toward the "sideline," inasmuch as there really was such a thing when Sensei and I were gonna be throwing overkill jutsu around. Having two Sharingan users around probably helped the situation, actually.

"Well, time's up," Jiraiya-sensei said. He put the alarm clock away and then folded his arms over his chest. "Ready?"
Sensei and I both tensed.

Jiraiya Body Flickered his way out of the battle, over to where Genma had finally set up his shimmery bluish barrier to shield the crowd from any backlash from our more powerful jutsu. Without taking my eyes off Sensei, I could feel the moment when Jiraiya's hand dropped.

Sensei disappeared between one heartbeat and the next with the faintest *fwish*.

I didn't even have to think about what to do next, as the air *snapped* like someone twanged a gigantic rubber band, and then Sensei reappeared next to Obito—standing on the *outside* of the barrier because of course he was—with his chakra radiating confusion.

The very first thing I needed to do in the fight involved neutralizing Sensei's two instant-win options.

I'd drawn a complex seal on my left arm to control the Flying Thunder God Seal permanently emblazoned across my left collarbone, which would render it inert for twenty-four hours. It would reduce the amount of lead-time Sensei had on detecting me if I ever needed to disengage (not bloody likely), at least until Sage Mode got involved. It would also prevent him from instantly teleporting to me and stabbing me in the face until he could establish a different seal and a new anchor point.

And it'd worked, much to Sensei's bafflement.

I waved at him with my left hand.

Then, before Sensei could launch into the Body Flicker to reestablish contact, I pulled on Isobu's chakra with a vengeance. Red energy flowed out of my body, surrounding me like a bubbling red flame, twisting itself into a shape reminiscent but not identical to Isobu's three-tailed form.

For one thing, I was only going for the first tail, and for another I was only in V1 Cloak mode rather than V2. While V2 would have the effect of making it impossible to touch me without Sage Mode, it would also alter my movements into something more bestial. I couldn't use my sword like that, and V1 was still good enough that Sensei wouldn't be able to reach my real body unless I let him.

Speaking of, I rose from my hunched-over position and put my hand on the handle of my katana. The chakra aura resolved itself into a shelled shape, flaring out along my shoulders and down my back to establish that I had no intention of being attacked from the rear.

And anyone who tried was gonna get burned.

Sensei didn't use hand seals. One second he was next to Obito, and then the next—Christ, how did he move that fast even *with*—

I caught his tri-pronged kunai on a chakra-assisted swing of my katana and broke it, sending Sensei spinning from his abruptly excessive momentum. His left hand hit the ground, palm flat and planting a seal *there*—

I dropped a seal, too, and made sure to smother his in it. Channeling chakra through my legs was easy once I got the hang of it. Explosive footprints, go!

Then I brought the chakra tail *down*, anchoring in the bare rock and sent myself on a catapult trajectory away from the explosive I'd just armed. I felt Sensei use the Flying Thunder God jutsu to dodge, reverting to the anchor point some fifty meters past his starting position, just as a thirty-meter fireball engulfed the space where we'd just been.

I landed on my left foot first and spun, bringing my sword to bear on Sensei's new position right in
front of me. My sword bit into his side and met no resistance whatsoever, particularly when he exploded into smoke a fraction of a second after contact. Another flicker of speed and I knew I'd not only missed, but ended up somehow furthering his plans, because his chakra tore across the battlefield in the other direction.

Sensei fought best up close. Why was he running?

I drew on Isobu's chakra differently as I took off in pursuit, Body Flicker speed giving me a boost even past the usual jinchūriki shenanigans. Drawing the water from the surrounding environment—\textit{thank} you, weather—I sent two Water Dragons after Sensei's distant chakra.

As though summoned from hell or something, the two chakra constructs appeared out of what seemed like thin air and swam through the air after him, roaring a challenge. I followed in their wake, waiting for any sign I was on the right track.

Sensei reappeared just briefly, skirting between the nearly intertwined dragons and toward me as easily as if it had been some kind of synchronized dance. He was still ten met—

\textit{Fwish} and then I was on the back foot again, with a Rasengan in my face. I brought my katana up to block, Mountain Cutter turning my blade into something more akin to the friggin' Buster Sword, and the two techniques made contact.

Blinding light, followed up with a detonation that ripped my katana out of my hands and sent me rolling back toward the flat plain we'd started on. Isobu's forearms ripped themselves out of the chakra cloak and dug into the earth, slowing me, and the chakra tail behind me slammed into the ground to stop me altogether. Maybe it was something about the chakra, but I wasn't dizzy when I got back to my feet.

No, I wasn't dizzy at all. Blood pounded in my ears, but all I felt was the need to punch Sensei's lights out.

\textit{Fuck it. You drive your limbs, and I'll handle mine.}

\textbf{I can do that.}

Sensei Body Flickered up to us again, Rasengan at the ready, and Isobu's tail whipped down between us. I caught the briefest look of surprise on his face before the tail split apart and slammed back together onto Sensei's wrist.

I gave him a cheeky wave as Isobu's tail hauled him up and over my head again, only to slam him into the ground behind me.

\textit{Puny god.}

\textit{Oh my god, you don't get to make that reference. You basically \textbf{are} the god here, Isobu!}

\textbf{I will be once I beat him.}

Isobu reeled him back in, probably for a second crushing, but I felt it when Sensei Replaced himself with a log and nudged Isobu's consciousness. Better leave it than waste energy.

The tail dissolved briefly into unshaped chakra, dropping the log, then reassembled itself into two separate tails. \textit{Okay} then.

I had no idea where my sword had gone. Sensei had already forced Isobu and me to use part of our
hidden hand in an attempt to keep up. While two tails in the V1 Cloak wasn't a game breaker just yet, neutralizing Sensei's ungodly speed advantage was going to have to remain our priority.

*Ready?*

**Always.**

Isobu's shell solidified on my back, the chakra darkening and becoming denser, less human in my mind's eye. His tails grew translucent spikes, curling out into the air like they would have if he truly walked in the real world. His armored forearms and upper arms seemed to form over mine, leaving me with armor that weighed nothing while providing enough resilience to...well. We'd have to find out what we could take.

The second way Sensei could shut me down would have involved using the Chakra Suppressing Seal. I could find a way around that—I had made the damn seal myself, and could keep Sensei from getting close enough to touch me. Only Sensei had removed that particular option from his arsenal, so perhaps my techniques were less necessary.

I still wasn't gonna cut him any slack, because he sure as hell didn't need it.

*Fwish.*

"You know you're not going to win this way." Sensei's voice came from about...yes, twenty meters off. I didn't have the reach to immediately attack that space, but I just about had the speed to do it.

Isobu's tails shifted, as though he was preparing another attack.

"I don't know about *that*, Sensei!" I called out, though I was still wary of any new attacks from him. Sensei didn't often stop and chat during a fight. If he did, it was because you were already where he wanted you and he wanted you to stay there just a bit—

I drove forward, just as Sensei teleported to the spot I'd just been standing on and slammed a Rasengan down into the dirt.

What would it be like to take a direct hit from one of those?

Best not to find out.

Sensei grinned, then teleported out of range.

**Let me try something.** Isobu's head shifted above mine, forming a black globe of chakra in his spectral jaws.

*Are we talking mini-Tailed Beast Bomb here?* I asked him.

**No. You're too small for this, and we have not practiced a full transformation.** Isobu's jaws widened further as he drew yet more chakra into the impending blast. As I watched, thin tendrils of water streamed up from the damp ground and wove themselves around the Tailed Beast chakra core. Isobu's armor faded around me, leaving the V1 cloak. **This is something he won't expect.**

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**Minato**

Kei's doing better than I would have expected before this! I've only managed to take her sword out of her hands, but none of the attacks I've used have been working the way I'd have expected. If Kei
had been a stranger—and one who wasn't a student of mine—then maybe I would have been able to end the fight in a fraction of a second despite her Tailed Beast powers.

But no, my bright little pupil managed to work her way around that, too!

Despite the situation—and how I was bounced to Obito's instead of Kei's Flying Thunder God seal—I have to fight down a grin. Even as one of the big chakra tails lashes out and tries to take my legs out from under me, and I use the Flying Thunder God to warp to a different part of the training ground to avoid it.

She's come such a long way. How far can she still go?

Can you keep up, though? I wonder, feeling Kei and the Three-Tails' chakra crash through the section of the training grounds closest to the stands. She almost certainly knows where I am, though she can't quite seem to move fast enough to capitalize on it. It's one thing to neutralize air resistance through the Body Flicker or outright teleportation. But perhaps Kei has enough power to simply force it? Hm.

There's a noise like an explosion, and I can see a fat globe of water shoot up into the air from Kei's position. It's not a water dragon, but…

The water orb explodes a hundred meters in the air, then Kei disappears in a blur of speed as the spray falls like rain.

The first drop hits my extended arm like a rock. What—?

Kei lands in a crouch to my left, briefly, before surging after me. Her eyes focus on me, inhuman in their intensity. She glows like a red star, with the Three-Tails' aura forming something like his real shape around her, and their tails slap down onto the damp ground. Rain rises, freezes in the air, and then—

Mist?

"Hidden Mist Jutsu!" And then there's a lot of mist, blotting out anything more than two meters from me and dampening sound.

Immediately, I know it's a lie. I've been under a real Hidden Mist effect before—and fought blind through it until finding the user—but this doesn't feel anything like that. It's thicker, heavier, and I can actually feel myself slow down. It is mist, but it's not the kind I've seen before.

Why can't I sense anything in here? Not even my seals! Normally there would be some kind of…of natural energy…

A translucent red tail whirls out of the mist at waist height and forces me to fling myself backward as though snaking my way under a horizontal bar. My feet stick to the ground, giving me leverage to stand a second later.

And then I leap over a second tail, then hit the ground and duck on all fours under the third. That third tail clips the edge of my cloak and shears a flame-patterned corner right off as the second tail comes back for another pass.

Kei snarls in wordless frustration at the repeated misses, down on one knee in the middle of this whirling storm of Tailed Beast chakra as her tails do the attacking for her. She's fast enough with that reddish energy that the mist can't fill in a tail's wake fast enough, but seeing her twenty meters away isn't enough to guarantee success.
Even if I felt confident enough to attack her head-on—a losing prospect when I can't tell where the seals I need are—the blazing chakra cloak screams "danger" to the part of me that clings to common sense. My favorite jutsu are all close-range, but melee combat with a jinchūriki without an easy escape? Not where I want to be. Not when she can attack with all three tails independent of her actual movements.

I can tell she and the Beast are tracking me easily through the haze of energy and the mist, even though I feel like I've fallen into a fog.

Still on my hands and the balls of my feet, I hurl myself out of Kei's melee range (which seems to have grown to some twenty-odd meters of tail-enforced perimeter) and reach again for any sense of where my seals might be.

Nothing.

And the range of her mist seems to be expanding.

Well. Well, well, well.

My student is craftier than I expected, and now I'm paying for it.

As Kei braces her hands against the ground, as the Three-Tails's spectral jaws open wide to launch another attack directly at me—call it a hunch—I start laying new seals experimentally. Just a quick seal, hardly a half-meter from my current position, but this new seal blazes in my mind's eye.

How Kei managed to cut me off from all of my seals that are older than this mist, I don't know. But I've clearly underestimated the power she and the Three-Tails wield together, and I need to stop playing around.

I reach through my connection to natural energy instead, pulling on the clones I placed in the Hokage Tower—

The ground for fifty meters in all directions lights up with a purplish glow harsh enough to illuminate the mist, exactly like a net of explosive seals primed to blow. Or, I think as the purple seems to get even more expansive, maybe she's created a minefield. And I was stupid enough to step right into it.

Clever girl.

---

Kei

While Isobu charged a miniature Tailed Beast Bomb—really more water than "bomb," but who's complaining?—I sent my chakra through the ground to prime the biggest explosive seal I've ever used in combat. With the Three-Tails Mist cutting off Sensei's ability to use his Flying Thunder God seals, thanks to a triple-layered genjutsu concealed in Isobu's oppressive chakra, he couldn't move more than the range of a Body Flicker with any confidence.

Granted, he was fast enough for his namesake even without literally cheating the laws of physics and didn't actually have to stay inside the mist if he didn't want to, but I had enough power to flood Sensei's effective maximum range with things that went boom. And Isobu's chakra covered the whole training field anyway, so it wasn't like there was anywhere he'd be able to go without breaking at least one rule of the spar.

Isobu's jaws snapped shut on the energy he'd been building, sending it swirling around me into a kind of preliminary V2 cloak instead, and I set off the first set of chakra mines.
In movies, people caught in the middle of an airstrike would see nothing but huge plumes of dirt, all thrown high into the air by the power of high explosives. The sound system would mimic the sensation of ringing eardrums rather than going for bass and trying to deafen the audience. There might be a streak of gray as death rained down from the sky, marking the passage of an air-to-ground explosive of some kind, but ultimately the poor characters would generally be helpless in the face of death from above. The only way to avoid dying was to get lucky, because bombs didn't respond to pleas of mercy.

Being caught in a minefield, laid by yours truly, was somewhat similar. Obviously, there weren't any problems with an overhead plane screaming into view with worrying dramatic timing, but the plumes of dirt went just as high, and the noise was every bit as deafening.

Isobu and I, cradled in his chakra, bounced out of the kill-zone as though shot out of a cannon. We hit the ground some hundred meters later, rolling to a stop with all three of Isobu's chakra tails flared out behind us in an S-shape each, waiting for any sign that Sensei was going on the offensive. We'd left the mist behind, but it'd be easy to create a second one after the first inevitably dispersed.

I had felt a very suspicious flare of chakra from him right before the blast, though, and felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

It couldn't possibly be that easy. A few Tailed Beast tricks and the biggest explosion I'd ever made were certainly awesome, but Sensei was the Yellow Flash.

It was a matter of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

_Fwish_. Oh sh— "Sage Art: Rasengan!"

**Oh, no you don't.** Isobu's tails whirled on the spot and lashed out, two of them catching Sensei's cloak before I had time to turn.

As they yanked backward on his cloak, tearing it due to the combination of Isobu's strength and Sensei's momentum, the third tail met the Sage-boosted Rasengan head-on while trying to swat Sensei like an errant fly.

The tail and the Rasengan both detonated at close range—throwing me forward and into a brief, helpless somersault along the bare dirt. The tail was a loss for the moment, so I got my feet under me as quickly as I could and juked left before ducking right into a dive, and barely avoided another Rasengan to the back.

My right hand hit the ground first, so I stuck to it with chakra and pivoted on the single point of contact and swung both of Isobu's remaining tails back toward Sensei's chakra signature.

There was a bone-jarring _thud_ as both tails made contact, hitting Sensei spiked side first in the upper arm and forearm as he _blocked_.

I got another good look at him then, and had to pause for a heartbeat as I realized what was going on.

His grin was a little strained, a little worn. His outfit was a mess, too—scorched and a little shredded, going by the cloak. I could that his chakra had shifted—he was supposed to be playing a bit more conservatively, to be thinking carefully about his next move. He _wasn't_ supposed to be trying to fight me in hand to hand when I had organized a way to literally blow his socks off—if he wore socks, anyway. His shoes were pretty shredded.

But he'd tanked the best explosives I had, and now he was holding off an Isobu-powered hit without moving from the force of it. There weren't even any noticeable skid-marks along the ground.
Sensei's eyelids were a reddish orange like they had been in Suna, and his eyes had gone gold with rectangular pupils.

*Oh, hell.*

Sensei had gone right for Sage Mode.

"Let's see how your taijutsu has progressed, Kei!" Sensei said brightly, and immediately shoved the tails away and went for my throat.

*Iso* — And by that point, I had already taken a kick square to the face.

Then Isobu's chakra flared, fashionably late, and my vision went red.

---

**Minato**

Kei doesn't *quite* recover from the strike as gracefully as I half-hope she can. I guess I must have taken her by surprise, because she goes skidding backwards and into a tumble, eventually skidding to a stop near the barrier shielding the crowd from debris.

When she gets back to her feet, yet *more* Tailed Beast chakra surges from her seal, and Kei vanishes underneath a bubbling mass of dark red chakra. Her eyes become ominous, glowing holes in her face, her mouth becomes nothing more than a jagged outline that mirrors the spikes on her head, and three solid-looking tails extend outward, spikes curved and deadly. There are even beginnings of a shell, there across her shoulders, but it's half-formed and I'm not sure how she's going to use it.

She's found out how to access the second stage. And it's not a partial transformation, not like before. No half-solid shell. No armor. It's well and truly the second stage of Tailed Beast chakra usage. If I didn't know it was her under there, there would be no way to tell.

Kei's blank white eyes lock on me, and she *roars*, sending a wave of pressurized air whirling in my direction. It's every bit as strong as one of my Wind jutsu, but undirected. Not focused enough.

I lift my hand and crook my fingers, offering nothing but a challenge. "Let's go."

Kei raises her tails, dropping onto all fours to accommodate her new center of balance. Then she blurs into motion.

I teleport fifteen meters back, closer to the edge of the mist, as soon as I feel Kei's chakra shift in my direction. The spot where I was standing a minute ago, and some five meters around that, is shattered like porcelain and the ground collapses inward toward the point of impact.

It's like seeing Tsunade giving the ground a light tap.

*Not bad at all.*

The next strike she makes, after blurring again from sheer speed on her approach, is a textbook perfect leg sweep. It's launched with full Tailed Beast-derived speed and strength, and I don't dare try to block. Not yet.

I don't have a full picture of what she can do. On the other hand…

Gently as I can, I brush my hand against Kei's left tail as it passes at inhuman speed, using natural energy to take the glancing hit without flinching.
On one hand, well, I have a seal on her, now. Even after the third tail grew out again.

On the other, I have to teleport away to figure out what the hell is happening to my hand. Where I touched Kei's chakra tail, pinkish, rocky growth is clinging to my skin and, if I'm not mistaken, it's growing. Already, my index and middle fingers on my right hand are too covered in the stuff to move.

"Like the Coral Palm, Sensei?" Kei asks, in a horribly distorted voice.

From the look of her face, I'm actually surprised that she can even form words. Those craggy jaws aren't suited for the job.

Well, a fistfight is clearly out of the question.

With my other hand, I form a spinning Rasengan with every intent of throwing down a new gauntlet. *Fwish.*

Kei

Okay, that's Sensei's hand seals taken care of. Sure, he never depended much on seals in the first place, but the coral would engulf his arm if given enough time. That would make his mobility—or at least some of it—less of an immediate problem.

…Or, looking across the battlefield at him, maybe it'd give me a chance if I could outlast him long enough.

Sensei had a Rasengan, yes, but it was about the size of an exercise ball and I could feel the powerful twisting winds that indicated that it was another Sage technique. I hadn't seen Sensei use the Rasengan left-handed before, but he clearly had the concept down pat. He had Wind Release already—or if he didn't, he would *soon*—and I knew what had come after Sage Mode for Naruto in the original timeline.

Ergo, the *complete* Rasenshuriken.

*Not* something I wanted to deal with. If Kakuzu, who was just about as old as dirt, had gotten completely wrecked by that jutsu, I was going to avoid having anything to do with it at all costs.

And then Sensei teleports again and I know—

*He's behind me!*

**That won't save him.**

-that if Isobu wasn't watching my back, I'd be halfway across the training field already. Instead, Sensei's Rasengan smashed into a *second* Rasengan, formed between two of Isobu's tails and tinged faintly purple from his chakra.

The two attacks struggled against each other for a painfully long moment with a noise like a complex machine straining against an obstruction, during which I got a good look at the expression of shocked disbelief on Sensei's face…and then the two Rasengan detonated.

With Isobu's strength, we managed to stay in place even with the bone-shattering explosion at our collective back. However, I had to reach out to find Sensei's chakra again since he'd friggin'
teleported out of range again.

*Mist, again.*

**Right.**

There was still enough residual water to create more of the chakra-sense-baffling mist, but we weren't going to be able to just press the attack. Not when Sensei had seen us do that already. We needed to come up with something else.

The mist shrouded the battlefield, blotting out the sunlight as it linked up with the already-existing fog. If I had to guess, Isobu and I had limited the effective range of Sensei's teleportation bullshit to only a third of the total area of the training field. There wasn't enough water to do more than that, not without screwing something up for the audience. Air with a humidity of zero wasn't something I wanted to force them to experience.

I could feel Sensei flitting to and fro in the mist, placing new seals.

Dammit. And he still had Sage Mode for at least another minute.

*What about a clone?* I asked Isobu, as we approached Sensei's general area, relying on the mist's chakra-baffling effects rather than suppressing our energy. And on my ability to move silently in the field, which Sensei had trained me to do through many long practice sessions over the years.

...**Hm.**

It wasn't a "no," at least.

How was this supposed to go, again? *Snake, Ram, Horse—*

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**Minato**

*Again* with the anti-me Tailed Beast mist. I'll have to ask Kei how she gets Isobu to play along and grant her access to all of his powers, because this is far more than I expected this morning. Even with Sage Mode, there's enough interference that I don't feel comfortable jumping to any of my older seals. And I don't have visual or auditory confirmation of Kei's exact location, but my seals are all closer to where I remember she was last standing. That's an unacceptable risk.

*Rats.*

Of course, I think as I feel my internal timer for Sage Mode start to tick down, *there's no real guarantee she's even in that direction anymore.* Damn this mist!

*There! "Hello, Sen—!"* One quick backhanded punch later, and the clone explodes into a fine spray of water.

*And again.* Popping the second clone is as easy as the first. Why is all of this water—?

The water leaps up at me, cutting off my senses with the same Tailed Beast inhuman haze as before—and then it closes overhead.

Kei materializes out of the mist, with her eyes still glowing like emergency lights, and her extended, upward-turned hand gathers the mist with a deafening *bang.* The air pressure doesn't make *sense—*
My ears pop, and I hear her guttural voice say clearly, "**Water Prison Jutsu,**" before the orb closes around me. Instead of her hand, Kei has two tail-tips in the body of the bubble, maintaining the flow of chakra without needing her actual input. So, the Three-Tails can do this on his own?

…I am never getting stuck in this mist ever again. I'd rather teleport blindly and risk ending up all the way across Konoha than have to repeat this experience.

Kushina is never going to let me live this down. *Kakashi* is never going to let me live this down. They will tell Naruto stories for our **entire lives.**

Still, I can't move while in this bubble, and the coral is still creeping up my arm. Even as I acknowledge that growing problem, Sage Mode cuts out entirely, and I realize that this is **not** the Water Prison variant that lets its victim breathe freely.

*Well done, Kei.*

Kei doesn't shift back to the thinner, wispier of the two Tailed Beast chakra modes I've seen. Instead, she remains in the more volatile form, clearly expecting me to try something. Which I **am,** because I can hardly do any less, but I still half-expect her to tell a joke or something.

Come to think of it, Kei was caught in a Water Prison during our first C-rank mission as a team. Maybe she used that experience as inspiration?

"**You're going to get out of this, Sensei,**" Kei says in a conversational tone, completely at odds with her current vocal range. Those glowing eyes narrow suspiciously. "**The question is, how?**"

*Well…*

Disregarding the coral growth and the lack of air, this isn't the worst possible position to be in. Kei's somehow managed not to actually **hurt** me, despite the higher-ranked jutsu we've been throwing around. Even with Sage Mode fading out of my chakra coils, I still have an ace or two up my sleeve.

Speaking of which, I choose that moment to send in **my** clones. She used up the mist to create the Water Prison, which means they can find me easily enough—and I can find my way out of her range with no issues once I get out of here.

"**Time's up.**" Kei opens her caricature of a mouth wide and begins charging a black orb of energy. The Tailed Beast Bomb? At this range?

My eyes narrow. The Sage Mode boost is gone, and I can't hold my breath forever, but I have a way out of this.

The first clone warps in, slamming a Rasengan into what turns out not to be just Kei's back. Instead, the clone is met by two purplish Rasengan going the other way, as one of Kei's tails detaches from the Water Prison and decides to go on the offensive. It spawns two Rasengan along its length and curls around the clone, dispersing it easily by overpowering the attack.

Kei's eyes never leave my face.

So she sees it when the rush of natural energy brings the orange and gold back to my eyes. I smile as she recoils just a bit, though I'm still not getting out just yet. I need more of a distraction.

Two more clones warp in, each bristling with Sage Mode power and a Rasengan each. Kei is thoroughly distracted, even if she hasn't moved far enough to break the Water Prison, and I can make my move.
Using the Flying Thunder God Jutsu would be too easy, with my clones running around and planting new seals as they go. Kei hasn't overridden them with explosives yet, so I could get out if I wanted to without much trouble.

But with Kei's back to me, it's too good of a position to give up.

Gathering chakra slowly, I press my will outward into the body of the Water Prison. While Kei might be able to feel it if she pays attention, she's too busy dealing with Sage Mode clones to actually act on whatever sensation is coming from the bubble. The Water Prison is moving clockwise, so if I just—

I feel the Three-Tails's eyes on me and its chakra lashes out across my senses, snapping my chakra back into my body before I can subvert Kei's Water Prison.

Never mind, then.

Fworp. One Flying Thunder God Jutsu later, and I'm out of there.

I take a deep, almost gasping breath, wringing the water from my hair. After a second's thought, I discard my shredded cloak. Despite being forced to give up something like an advantage, I'm fine. Granted, I'm soaked to the skin and out of position, but Kei hasn't dealt with my clones yet.

Bomph.

Never mind that, then. This clone sends its last memory—of getting a Tailed Beast-powered kick directly to the gut that would have killed any normal human—along with an extension to my Sage Mode internal timer. Well, its sacrifice wasn't in vain.

The next clone is stabbed to death—a coral sword?—and by that point I have to get moving. Kei knows exactly where I am, but not where I'm going to be.

Fwish.

Kei

Fighting Sensei was like fighting air. Not like fighting Tobi would be, granted, but he still wasn't there when I was trying to hit him. Quite aside from Sensei's literal Wind affinity, he never stuck around long enough to take a hit if he could see a way out of it.

Of course, if I had the speed advantage that he did, I'd probably do the same. Didn't make it any less annoying.

Given the brief lull in the battle, I look down at my new weapon. Clenched in a hand covered entirely by Isobu's chakra, the coral sword is a thing of...well, I didn't want to call it beautiful. As katana went, it was an ugly, malformed thing that happened to also be bright pink and settled in my hand like a porous volcanic rock. But it had killed Sensei's second clone just fine.

Will this spread the effects of the Coral Palm? I asked Isobu.

It is the Coral Palm, he corrected me. It can do no less.

Well, that was reassuring in a weird way. Sensei had already effectively lost the use of his right hand, given that it was encased in coral, and that distinction made it easy to tell him from the clones. He'd still gotten away, but I hadn't really expected to be able to do more than slow him down in a Water
Prison. But catching him at all was a triumph.

Hopefully, he'd take me more seriously now.

**Here we go.**

I felt the burst of chakra almost before Sensei was on me, aiming a Sage-powered kick directly at my head. I caught the strike on the back of my right forearm, engulfing the offending limb in coral as soon as I felt contact and killed his momentum dead.

Hadn't he learned?

That Sensei exploded into smoke.

*That sure answered my question.*

But what was Sensei *actually* doing, if he'd sacrifice clones to try and mess with me?

*Fwish. Fwish. Fwish.* Three Sensei-clones all at once, then—

"**Summoning: Toad Mouth Bind!**"

For a moment, I had no actual idea what the hell that meant. It was probably a side effect of Sensei's rather random naming scheme for jutsu, which tended toward being non-indicative at best. I didn't immediately understand the problem.

And then the pinkish flesh started growing around me, burning out two clones in turn. My chakra-coated feet barely avoided sticking to the brand-new "ground," even as I watched the mass grow up and around me like I was...I don't know, maybe trapped in the throat of some massive creature.

An experimental Rasengan at the "wall" confirmed a niggling thought I had, unfortunately. The pink, moist walls absorbed the hit with minimal stretching, and tried to eat my hand even as I pulled back.

This was that thing that had required Itachi's Amaterasu to get out of. The bit where Jiraiya, a universe over and some ten years into the future, had tried and failed to trap two of the more bullshit-prone Akatsuki members.

God *damnit.*

"I wouldn't waste too much time being frustrated, Kei." The last clone had yet to implode, so I glared at it even as it went on in Sensei's mild voice, "After all, everyone eventually hits their limit. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

*It is when this isn't my limit,* I hissed at him silently, all three tails lashing as Isobu reacted to my frustration.

**Now?** Isobu asked me, as I looked up at the flesh of the giant toad's esophagus overhead. I did *not* want to stay in here for any longer than necessary.

...*Just a second.* Channeling Isobu's chakra down my arm and into my coral sword, I looked at the wall with my expression firmly controlled underneath the blood-red aura of the V2 cloak. If I could just—

I unleashed the Hunting Tiger Strike against the side of the fleshy wall, using both Isobu's chakra
and my control and the parasitic nature of the coral, ripping it wide open. Without a second thought, I dove through the sudden opening and left that trap behind to eventually be dismissed.

And anyway, the trap in front of me was a lot more concerning.

The trap in question was a toad. Specifically, a rust-red toad with red markings around his mouth, eyes, and along his forearms, who wore a blue haori with the sleeves tucked short. He'd wrapped bandages around his middle like a true yakuza member, and I didn't have to look behind him to know that he still had a big ol' tantō stuck in that makeshift belt. There was a pipe sticking out of his mouth as his big yellow eyes glared down at me, rectangular pupils seeming to constrict.

Somehow, Gamabunta had seemed smaller the last time I had seen him—but then, I'd been on his head at the time.

Sensei waved down at me from the tip of Gamabunta's nose.

For fuck's sake, Sensei. Internally, I groaned before bowing to the inevitable. Isobu, we're gonna have to do the thing.

Excellent.

BA-BMP.

There was a sound like cracking glass, breaking slowly in stages as its strength gave out. Or maybe it was the snap of bone, grinding painfully into place. Maybe it was something stranger, like the tide rushing in. But what I could really hear, what I could really feel…?

Dizziness. Loss of any awareness of the outer world, as Isobu's chakra wrapped all around me, layering itself like rings in a tree with me at the core.

I didn't know where I was. My sense of up and down was distorted, though I was sure Isobu was moving both of us away from Gamabunta. To do otherwise didn't make sense.

I didn't know what I was going to do once the transformation finished. I'd lost any sense of time—what was Sensei doing? What could happen, before I remembered myself?

It felt like…something. Some amount of time had passed. I couldn't have said how much.

But when Isobu said, Look, I did.

One vast red eye snapped open.

Minato

"...Wasn't expecting her to do that," I admit, as the bulk of the Three-Tails rises from where Kei was standing just a minute ago. Gamabunta had to leap back to get clear as the overwhelming chakra resolved itself into a solid shape.

For a creature generally referred to as a "turtle," I'm seeing many different types of shelled creature crammed into the Three-Tails's form. There's the sweep of a spiky crab's shell, then the segmented back common to shrimp or lobsters, and then the long, spiky tails that borrow from entirely too many animals. Its hands and arms are human-like, with four sturdy fingers and a thumb each, but every scrap of those limbs is covered in gray-green armor. Its head isn't so much a head as it is a mobile durian that happens to have teeth and eyes.
Perhaps that's unfair of me.

I can feel Kei's chakra in that monster, calm as can be, so at least I know that the two of them aren't planning on going berserk. But still, I think as I glance down at the barrier-shielded audience not too far away, I need to keep this fight far away from everyone else.

"Minato, this is what your student can do?" Gamabunta rumbles underneath me. "It's the Nine-Tails all over again."

The Three-Tails's voice, resonant despite its relatively higher pitch, says clearly from across the battlefield, "I take offense to that."

"Tch," Gamabunta grumbles.

"What now, Kei?" I shout over Gamabunta's complaints. "Stalemate?"

"No. That would be cliché," the Three-Tails says, and I can almost hear Kei's tone in that voice. "We're going to fight you and your summoned partners like this. Together." The three scaled tails lashed and the Tailed Beast lowers its head. "Come and get us."

"I think you stole my line," I muse, but I'm smiling anyway. "Gamabunta, what do you say to a little company?"

"Bring whoever you want." Gamabunta's weight shifts underneath my feet as he leans forward, preparing to draw his weapon and leap into the fray. Riding a boss summon as it moves into battle is a bit like trying to ride a mountain. At a hundred meters tall, Gamabunta dwarfs most of the other toads at Mount Myōboku and has the strength to back up his mulish attitude.

Most. He's not bigger than this toad.

I pour chakra into a pronged kunai, enough to call the one I'm looking for. Then I hurl the kunai over the Three-Tails's back in the distance, with Sage-derived strength, and let the chakra do what I need it to go.

Kei might even get a kick out of seeing him fight.

In a massive burst of smoke, behind the three spiked tails, a giant aquamarine toad lands squarely on the ground with enough force to make it shake. With dark markings under his eyes, a brighter back, and two massive swords strapped across his back, Gamahiro cuts an imposing figure for most people.

The Three-Tails and Kei just give the toad dismissive swat with their tails, forcing him to block with both unsheathed blades. The force of the blow knocks Gamahiro to one knee, much to the toad's shock, and the Three-Tails and Kei move together—their chakra is synchronized—to heave the Beast's bulk onto its forearms. With a monumental effort, they manage to begin...a somersault? The movement puts the Three-Tails's head in line with Gamahiro, who immediately takes a massive blast of water squarely in the face.

Water from literally nowhere, apparently. I'm never going to understand how people with Water affinities manage without these kinds of huge chakra reserves.

As Gamahiro staggers, the Three-Tails is up and moving toward Gamabunta and me, launching itself into a forward roll that ought to look silly, but really puts all those spikes on its back to good use for traction. The tails curl around it, forming a complete tread, and then Gamabunta has to leap out of the
way to avoid being ground into meat hash under the Three-Tails's bulk.

Watching the Three-Tails and Kei pass below us from Gamabunta's bulk, I'm the first to see the spiky hell-monster launch itself off the ground in a jump I usually see from Akimichi clan members. Extending one tail as it spins, the Three-Tails brings that tail down on Gamabunta's trailing left leg, eliciting a grunt of pain from the massive toad.

Gamabunta and I crash to the ground a moment later, shattering it.

"How is she doing that?" Gamabunta demands, as the Three-Tails bounces back to earth and uncurls from its spinning form.

It's immediately set upon by Gamahiro, who finds himself trying to block a pair of gargantuan coral swords formed instantly from the Tailed Beast's hands. Definitely Kei's influence there, for all that the Three-Tails can barely move through Kei's usual katas without actual legs.

"Gamabunta, can you still fight?" I ask, placing my hand against his brow. While Gamabunta has never been a pushover, and I'm no medic, I can still feel his chakra curling defensively around the leg that the Three-Tails struck.

"Pft. You're a hundred years too early to be asking me that, Minato," the toad says disgustedly. "I don't need your pity."

"My mistake, Gamabunta." And yet I'm smiling.

Though this battle is a real clash of titanic forces, it's...it's almost fun, to have someone to fight who knows how to pull her punches so well. Even with such tremendous power at her fingertips. I'm under no illusions about the Three-Tails's feelings toward us, so what mercy we've seen thus far must be Kei. Maybe this won't help her in a real all-out battle, but I'm honestly feeling just fine about how she can do in a spar, even one as far past that definition as this one is.

She's grown so much.

I rap my knuckles against Gamabunta's head, sending a gentle pulse of my chakra into him. We can do this. "Let's go join Gamahiro and show her a real fight, huh?"

Gamabunta leaps into the fray without a word.

Kei

Choking the big sword-wielding toad was easier than it probably had any right to be. With my two-handed kenjutsu adjusted for Isobu's strength and leverage, and two of his tails squashing the toad in their coils, it seemed like this fight was going to be over before it really even started.

This toad might have used swords, but he wasn't me. And I was damn good at what I did, even by proxy through Isobu's arms.

The third tail, left to stabilize us so we didn't roll over somehow, was the only saving grace that let Isobu and I heave ourselves out of the way of Gamabunta's attack, aimed at our "unprotected" back.

We let the turquoise toad go and, as he disappeared into smoke, brought both coral swords up against Gamabunta's.

Only a few more seconds, Isobu reminded me, and I grimaced internally.
As powerful as a Tailed Beast transformation was, and as much power as I could feel throbbing in my coils, it had a cost. And that cost was, bluntly, expressed in time. Like, oh, picking up a star in one of those Mario games?

Tailed Beast hosts burned bright. But as inexperienced as I was—as inexperienced as my body was—I'd burn fast. I had barely half a minute at full power. Sensei had ten minutes of Sage Mode, thanks to all the clones. I couldn't push the energy burden off on anyone or anything else like that.

If I did too much too soon, I'd die.

*Just a little longer.* I took a deep breath I couldn't really feel, as it was more habit than anything. *Mountain Cutter!*

And Gamabunta, for all that he was the size of a mountain all his own, hurled himself far enough away to dodge.

*Welp.* That was it, then.

*I'm cutting you off, now,* Isobu said, and the power—except for the barest scrap required to keep me conscious—vanished. So did the Tailed Beast body I'd been safely sequestered inside. Which put me quite a ways in the air, with no parachute.

I fell.

I had enough presence of mind to summon Tsuruya, so at least I didn't face-plant on the ground a hundred meters straight down.

She swooped under me and let me droop across her shoulders as she adjusted to our sudden predicament. She and I coasted to the ground in a gentle glide. She didn't even ask what kind of stupid situation I'd gotten myself into.

*Then* I face-planted in the broken dirt, since getting off Tsuruya's back properly seemed suddenly like it was too much effort.

"Keisuke-sama, what happened?" Tsuruya asked, leaning over me with the point of her beak prodding the back of my head.

*Ow.*

"I'm fine," I mumbled, still unwilling (or maybe unable) to get to my feet.

"Well, I see no reason for you to spend the afternoon on the ground," Tsuruya said, and hauled me to my feet again with some difficulty.

I listed badly to one side, mainly because my legs were trembling so badly that it was difficult to figure what a straight line was, but Tsuruya nonetheless steered me onward.

I wasn't quite sure when she'd stopped, but it had to have been a minute or two. The next thing I knew, I flopped forward into what should have been a dizziness-inspired faint, but strong arms caught me before I could topple.

"You did very well, Kei," said Sensei's voice.

"Oh, cool," was as much as I managed. Then I passed out.

Somewhat later, I woke to the sensation of someone poking me in the cheek. Irritably, I swatted their
hand away, mumbling, "Five more minutes, dammit."

"She's awake!" said a strikingly familiar voice.

*Wait a minute.* Hadn't I just been fighting Sensei…?

With some effort, I managed to open my eyes and try to figure out what the hell I'd missed. Rin was sitting by my right side, with her hand hovering over my chest and gently applying some kind of healing jutsu. Hayate was to my left, and managed to wear a look of affront when I focused on him.

"You didn't have to smack me, Sis," Hayate said reproachfully. He was rubbing his fingertips with his left hand, pouting.

"Don't go poking jōnin when they're unconscious, Hayate-kun," Rin admonished without looking at him.

I sat up, though Rin put her hand on my shoulder to make sure I was steady. After a second, I brushed her hand off and rubbed my eyes. "So, how long was I out?"

"About a minute," Rin said. She took her other hand off my chest and sat back, tilting her head at me as though not quite sure what she'd expected. "That…was a much faster recovery time than I thought you'd have."

"Isobu was going easy on me," I replied, shrugging. I focused on my brother then, saying. "So, I lost?"

"Yeah, you did." Hayate huffed, crossing his arms. "But it was *so close*. You almost had him!"

"Close only counts with exploding tags." I looked around, realizing that Hayate and Rin were the only humans within about five meters. The rest of the group that had come to observe was keeping their distance thanks to a set of barrier seals that had Genma carefully pacing the perimeter like a caged tiger.

Genma was actually inside the barrier, running his hand over its glittery blue surface in a way that reminded me of, well, me whenever I was refreshing the seals in my house. Raidō, Kakashi, and Obito were also sitting around the inside of the seal, evenly spaced out like points on a compass, but they were still keeping back. Maybe they wanted to avoid distracting Rin?

Huh. *Guess I scared everyone pretty badly.*

"We're good, everyone," Rin told them.

The tension drained out of the bubble, and Genma snapped his fingers. Then the shield bubble collapsed as easily as if it were made of soap.

"Except for the bit where I don't think I can really walk right now," I admitted, while the boys stretched and got to their feet. "My legs feel like jelly." And ached like hell, but that was fading. Oh, the wonders of medical ninjutsu and a Tailed Beast-inspired regeneration rate. I'd be fine.

"Let me help!" And without any further input from me, my brother hauled one of my arms over his shoulders and levered me to my feet again. Hayate made a pretty good makeshift crutch, but the experience was still a little embarrassing.

At about that point, the rest of the crowd swooped in.
Or they might have, but Kushina appeared as though by magic and said brightly, "Payouts right here, everyone!"

It was a little like watching someone throw food into a koi pond. Though my head pounded from the noise—and probably from the chakra strain—I still felt my spirits lift just a little. No one seemed terribly angry at me for losing. In fact, the crowd was mostly jostling and laughing with one another, recounting one part or another of the fight to people who might have missed a bit. Fragments of conversation bubbled to the surface, seemingly at random.

"Did you see the toads?"

"—the Water Prison was textbook!"

"I've never seen a Tailed Beast strain like that!"

"Did you see the Hokage's arm? Tsunade-sama had it cleared up like that!"

"Everyone seems happy," I commented, as Hayate led me away from the crush.

"That match did confirm what I already thought," Genma said with a shrug, sidling through the crowd as though they weren't there. "You're definitely the scariest fifteen-year-old girl I know."

"How many do you know, Genma-san?" Rin asked from behind me.


Tiniest pool of candidates ever, but I could live with that.

"It does help that we won about five thousand ryō apiece by betting on the Hokage," Raidō added, equally nonchalant.

"Well, I don't feel bad about losing a bet like that!" Obito piped up. He patted my shoulder, grinning. "You did great, Kei! Losing to Sensei is nothing to feel bad about!"

I gave him a wry half-smile. "Thanks, Obito. I kinda figured he'd win, but as long as I gave it my all…" I trailed off, shaking my head. "Good enough, right?"

"Yep! Oh, Kakashi, who'd you bet on?" Obito spun around and continued walking, though backwards.

From behind me, Kakashi said, "Sensei, of course." He made a noise that might have been a laugh, and I craned my neck to see if he actually was laughing, only to find that he'd stopped already. "Though I'm going to remember that Water Prison trick."

I sure hope so. Kakashi falling for that one a universe over had been…well, disappointing.

"How much did you win, Kakashi?" Raidō asked.

"About fifty thousand ryō."

Raidō made a choking noise. Fifty thousand ryō was more than any of the bets I'd heard before leaving the big kunoichi meeting yesterday, but it was only equivalent to a C-ranked mission. Granted, it was a lot for just one person when those missions usually went to teams, and I didn't think Kakashi was going to lose anything in taxes. Maybe everyone else had only been betting pocket money?
"Confident, huh?" Genma said, unfazed.

"It's Sensei," Kakashi replied in the same tone.

Okay, he had a point. Didn't mean I wouldn't rib him for it. "Ouch, Kakashi. Gets me right here," I said with a bark of a laugh, tapping my chest over my heart. "But I guess it was for a good cause, right?"

But Kakashi was magnanimous in victory. "If you want an apology, I can buy you lunch."

"How can anyone eat fifty thousand ryō in food for lunch?" Obito demanded, when Genma made his very own special choking noise. It had a senbon in it.

"Have you ever seen Tsunade-sama eat after she uses a lot of chakra?" Rin asked, though it was clearly a rhetorical question. "I bet jinchūriki have to do the same thing."

On cue, my stomach rumbled. *What the hell, metabolism?* "Honestly," I admitted, as I put my hand against my stomach in mild embarrassment, "I was kind of hoping Kushina-san would cook this time. I'm too tired to do much other than sit and eat…"

"Offer's open," Kakashi said, with the verbal equivalent to a thoughtless shrug, though I felt his chakra shift strangely. *Eh?*

"Maybe another time," I mumbled, and yawned. "Okay, okay, I really need to rest. Give me a second to sort out this stupid body…"

Eventually, my group found a place to put my effectively-immobile ass down for a bit. We did some crowd-watching, and I might've fallen asleep on Rin or something, but that wasn't important. I'd fought well, no one was really hurt, and I'd pushed my limits harder than ever.

It was a good day, when all was said and done.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is courtesy of Matchbox Twenty.
"I believe we could make an apartment building around this, Keisuke-chan!" Gai shouted down at me. Honestly, given how high up he was, Gai was pretty much the only person who could effectively communicate from up there.

"Up there" was the top of one of the big coral swords Isobu and I had made in our fight against Sensei. If I had to guess, the blade was actually longer than Gamabunta's favored weapon, and it looked like a rather bizarre, pink piece of modern art from where I was standing. Huge, yes, and also rather impressive for what it was made of, but also just kind of "what the fuck was the artist thinking?" at the same time.

"While that's great, I don't think anyone wants to live in an active training ground, Gai!" I yelled back up at him.

After I'd fainted for the second time in about ten minutes, my friends had decided that maybe it wasn't a good idea to keep dragging me around. So, with Rin's specific orders in mind, my brother had dragged me to the Namikaze-Uzumaki household to sleep off the effects of pushing myself to my limits. While this did mean that I was exempt from cooking duties, and that I woke up in the late afternoon to Kushina's homemade ramen, it also meant that I did so with spiral squiggles on my face courtesy of Naruto.

I'd been too hungry to do much more than just eat and bear the giggling.

It also meant that no one had made certain to pick up my sword from the training fields. So, after much deliberation, I had made the decision not to retrieve it until morning. Five hours hadn't given Isobu's chakra enough time to fix me up, but Rin thought that a good night's sleep might.

Cue the next day, bright and early. While most of my friends had prior engagements—mainly of the mission kind—Gai had been running around during his morning training. He'd seemed amenable to a distraction, so I'd asked if he could help.

"It sounds like an excellent opportunity to train my tracking skills!" Gai had said, beaming even while sweat ran down his face.

I was not going to find my sword if I scoured Training Ground Four on my own, so it was a win-win.

Which was how we had discovered what everyone else in the village already knew—namely, that the coral swords had not disappeared when Isobu had let the transformation go. One of them had snapped in half at some point, leaving two pieces the size of airplane wings lying some ten meters apart on the ground. The other had not, staying upright where it had been imbedded in the ground.
The broken one had chips taken out of it, with little hand-sized gouges cut free with shinobi tools. Gai had said something about souvenirs, but I wouldn't have believed it if I wasn't seeing the evidence firsthand.

People were weird.

"Gai, where were you yesterday?" I asked him, while still kicking over random chunks of wood. Isobu had flattened a lot of trees in thirty seconds. "I could have sworn you were there at the beginning of the match."

"Oh! Well, Keisuke-chan"—and here, Gai leapt off the top of the coral tower so he could speak to me directly—"I was asked by Kushina-sama to convey the results of all the bets to all those who did bet. I am, after all, a very fast and hard-working ninja."

Also completely guileless, or at least people assumed that. They trusted Gai's word because they often assumed he wasn't capable of lying. But Gai was a jōnin, so people who knew him knew better in short order. He could tell someone that the sky was green with absolute conviction and, for just a second, they'd believe it. That was really all it took.

So he'd been put to work as a sort of Green Beast Express: Faster and more reliable than the Pony Express over short distances.

"I remember that the line for payouts went around the block…" I said distractedly, though in truth I could only remember a barrage of knocks on Sensei's door.

"Quite so, Keisuke-chan! Everyone was very excited, especially if they decided to bet on the Hokage!" Gai grinned. "It was quite fun!"

I made a face. "It was a lot less fun when I was fighting."

Gai paused. "You… You didn't find fighting Hokage-sama fun?"

"I kinda did, but I kinda didn't at the same time," I admitted, crossing my arms over my chest and looking away. "The Three-Tails loved the challenge, and I guess I really did want to push myself to see how strong I was, but I don't like fighting friends and family."

"You really don't have any ambition, do you?" Sensei had asked last night. I'd been too tired to really formulate an answer, but I knew what it was.

I didn't. I really didn't.

Gai looked like he didn't have a concept for people who didn't like the idea of throwing themselves toward greater and greater heights. He was practically the patron saint of hard work—despite not being dead—and there wasn't much that fell harder into the category of "not Gai" than being entirely uninterested in power and effort.

I'd fallen backwards into superweapon status and was still playing catch-up in some significant ways.

"Well, Keisuke-chan, I think you should train with your comrades rather than just worrying!" Gai suggested brightly. "It is true that great power can be disconcerting at first, but you cannot become comfortable with your new strength if you never use it!" Gai bounced in place on the balls of his feet, thoughtful. "Really, while I was impressed by your fight with the Hokage, you do not have much staying power."

"Yeah, the end there was a bit of a make-it-or-break-it moment. Either I'd lose once my strength ran
"You want to train with me?" Gai looked like he was about to explode from joy.

"Okay, Gai. What time works for you?"

I managed to keep my expression blank, though I had a sudden urge to start running. "We've trained together befo—?"

At that point, I was already being hugged to death and there was nothing for it. I made a noise like a squeaky toy being stepped on as Gai spun me around in joy.

Gai, meanwhile, continued with his gleeful rant. "WE WILL RUN TWO HUNDRED LAPS AROUND THE VILLAGE TOMORROW MORNING, THEN SPAR UNTIL WE CANNOT FIGHT ANY MORE!"

"I'm—glad—you're—happy—" I managed, in fits and starts, "but—can—you—please—!"

Gai set me down with a flourish, brushing a tear from beneath his eye as he struggled with his emotions, "Keisuke-chan, I would be honored to be your sparring partner until you can set a worthy goal for yourself!"

"Who"—here, I croaked and had to clear my throat—"said anything about setting goals? I'm okay where I am!"

"No, Keisuke-chan, you already know you are not happy where you are. You are afraid of your own strength." Gai adopted a pose reminiscent of a superhero, maybe Superman, giving a lecture of great importance. "Which is not to say that caution isn't important! But it is making you unhappy."

"...Can't argue with that." I looked down, sighing again. "And I'm not really keeping up with training with Obito or Kakashi, either..."

Gai patted my shoulder. "Then catch up with your teammates first? Even Ebisu makes an effort to meet Genma and me in combat, though our specialties are very different." He gave me a thumbs-up. "After you spar with them, we can train to our hearts' content! And Ningame would love to meet the Three-Tails and discuss turtle life with him!"

I nodded. Still, this wasn't exactly what we'd been talking about before. Shifting my weight from foot to foot in the face of his enthusiasm, I finally said, "So, uh, can we keep looking for my sword now?"

"Of course, Keisuke-chan! We will retrieve it from the rubble of your battle, or I will climb the Hokage Mountain fifty times on my hands alone!" Gai flashed me one last brilliant grin and takes off.

Riiight back up the coral...spire. I was going to call it a spire in my head and no one could stop me. Anyway, Gai stood up there, peering around the rather flattened battlefield, while I did the literal groundwork. Hopefully, he'd spot something to point me in the right direction as long as we both kept looking.

I had just kicked a shattered log aside, searching underneath it, when I heard a sudden storm of barking coming from the approximate direction of the village.

Granted, it turned out to just be one dog. If any dog deserved to be able to make a storm all by himself, though, Kuromaru was definitely worthy. He bounded onto the scene with his partner Tsune at his side, looking admirably fierce today.
"You!" Tsume said sharply, pointing one clawed index finger at me.

I mouthed "me?" as Gai landed beside me, via an epic leap from the top of the coral spire that I sadly missed.

"Yes, you. Keisuke Gekkō, host of the Three-Tailed seafood buffet." Tsume stood up straight and nodded to herself as Isobu sputtered inside my head. Then, "Good fight yesterday, kid."

"...Thanks?" I never knew exactly how to interact with Kiba's mother, though I'd known her first as an examiner way back when. She was every bit as overbearing as Gai when she wanted to be, but more fierce about it. Gai was just...overenthusiastic.

Tsume was a Kushina-like bulldozer.

"But right now the Hokage wants to see you, so finish up whatever you're doing here." Tsume made a shooing motion. "Go on."

"But we are searching for Keisuke-chan's sword!" Gai protested. "We cannot leave without recovering it. It is very important to her!"

While Gai was correct, I still put my head in my hands. Mom had given me that katana personally, which made it special, but it wasn't a uniquely valuable weapon otherwise. I was sure Tsume didn't care.

One of Tsume's eyebrows rose. "A sword?"

"Yeah." My voice came out much quieter and more hesitant than expected. So maybe it really was a special sword. Or maybe my spine turned to jelly around domineering women? It was hard to tell sometimes.

"Don't worry about it, kid." Tsume looked at her partner and dropped her hand onto his head. "Kuromaru, go ahead."

And that was the story of how two special jōnin couldn't find what a dog found in about four seconds. We probably should have just dragged Kakashi into our search in the first place. Luckily, Tsume had been the one to respond.

With my katana strapped across my back once again, I made my way to Sensei's office under Inuzuka escort and wondered why it was necessary.

Of course, once I got there I realized the problem.

"A promotion to full jōnin? B-but Sensei..." With Tsume and Kuromaru at my back, her arms crossed and her back against the closed office door, there was nowhere to run. And I didn't want to have this conversation at all.

Not when I didn't really deserve it.

"Yes, Kei?" Sensei sat serenely behind his desk, his chin resting on one hand as he waited for me to respond to his suggestion.

There were no extra copies of Sensei running around, so I was at least mostly certain it was the real him, for now. The office was clear of paperwork, thanks to the hard work of said clones, but that mostly just made me feel like I'd well and truly been put on the spot. There wasn't any place to hide.
"Speak up, please," Sensei said, and it was an order in the form of a request at best.

I steeled myself. "Hokage-sama, I respectfully ask that you keep the promotion slot for someone who deserves it more than I do. There are—there are other candidates." Though in the pressure of the moment, I couldn't think of any. Maybe Tsume, since she was standing right there? Obito?

Sensei's eyebrows rose. He glanced over my shoulder and said to Tsume, "I believe I need to talk to my student alone, Tsume-san."

Tsume's chakra suggested she had to bite down on a comment or two, but she and Kuromaru turned and left the office in silence. That left me alone in the office with Sensei, which was more uncomfortable than it had been since getting back from the hell butterfly mission. Funnily enough, I'd been offered a chance at promotion then, too.

"Opportunities for promotion don't come around that often, Kei," Sensei commented. "What's on your mind?"

I found myself staring at the floor, trying to think. If not for the fact that I had my hands in my pockets, they'd be shaking. I hadn't felt like this before fighting Sensei. What the hell was wrong with me?

"Kei?"

"…A jōnin is supposed to be the elite of the elite," I said after a long moment, my voice still quieter than I would have liked. "I…I guess I have the power for it. I fought you, and most jōnin can't do that. But I'm still not really ready for it."

Sensei made a neutral noise.

I took that as a cue to continue. "Being a jōnin would require me to reach not just competence, but, uh, something pretty close to excellence in several different disciplines. I…I can only use one type of elemental ninjutsu. Kakashi could use three by the time he was thirteen." I could feel Sensei's gaze drilling into the top of my bowed head, but that was my fault. I didn't want to meet his eyes. "But I can use what I have really well, so that counts for something. I have fūinjutsu expertise beyond most people my age, even if it's not perfect."

I could feel Sensei's chakra suffuse the room, gently supporting me and mine. It was like he was trying to smooth down the agitated energy I was giving off, though he didn't know why it was necessary. "Go on, please."

"I, uh—I'm good enough in taijutsu. I think. You and Obito made sure of that, and I fought without my katana for most of the match yesterday." It was something I wouldn't have been able to say just a few years ago. "And I can do kenjutsu, though I'm still working on Isobu's part in that. We'd never done the coral swords before…"

"You'd never used the coral swords?" Sensei interrupted, and I looked up on reflex.

He'd stepped out from behind his desk at some point, and stood in front of it and a lot closer to me, an expression like shock on his features. Then he pinched the bridge of his nose and said, "Oh, Kei. I knew it would be difficult for you to practice with Tailed Beast powers with any subtlety, but I didn't think you wouldn't practice at all."

I said nothing.

"I'm glad the Three-Tails trusted you with his powers, but that was…ill-advised," Sensei sighed,
shaking his head. "Remind me later to set up a specifically warded training room or something. The
seals on your home…?"

"I checked those; they'd break down during the second stage of the transformation. It's too much," I
said, "So it'll, uh, take a whole lot more practice for me to be able to really do it…and I wasn't gonna
try with my brother around."

"And I did spring that match on you, didn't I?" Sensei mused.

"I had a week to think about it," I replied. "I could have trained on the road. I knew it was going to
happen, but I didn't ask when."

Sensei patted my shoulder. "Still, enough about that for now. Kei, can you continue?"

"Right," I said, and Sensei retreated a bit so he could lean back against his desk. After a second or
two, I said thoughtfully, "Anyway, the coral swords mean I can keep using kenjutsu even as my
strength and speed increase, so that's useful. Then I…don't have the best grasp of genjutsu, not
really. But Isobu does, and his genjutsu worked on you, so that's a pretty good assessment right
there."

"The mist was a genjutsu?" Sensei asked, eyebrows raised.

"Well, the mist was real, but it carried a contact genjutsu." I shrugged. "You'd have to ask Isobu how
it works. He tried explaining, but he had to dumb down explaining the explanation and gave up after
a while." Advanced genjutsu theory was not my thing. And Isobu didn't even use the same notation
system as Kurenai did, so the kunoichi meetups hadn't helped.

"Still, interesting. I haven't been taken in by a genjutsu for years." Sensei smiled then, saying, "But
I'm interrupting again."

I nodded. "And, uh, I guess as soon as I start really putting my back into things…I can keep up with
you. If you're not using anything to boost your speed. And I hit pretty hard when I want to." Not that
we had electronic punching machines or anything here to actually quantify strength. If we did, I'd
still say with confidence that I wasn't in Tsunade's tier or anything. No one was, except maybe
Kushina if she ever really decided to tap into Kurama's chakra. But no one had seen that happen yet.
"And as for chakra reserves, I knew I started around the middle of the pack for a kunoichi. Not great,
and big chakra reserves didn't run in my family. But since getting Isobu stuck in me, the only times I
passed out from chakra overexertion were when I was overusing his. I don't actually remember my
last totally mundane run at chakra exhaustion."

"You may be moving past that kind of concern, Kei." Sensei's smile became a little wry. "Though I
haven't."

I paused. "Did you run into the doorframe again this morning?"

"I did, actually." Sensei rolled his eyes. "Anyway, back to the assessment. Kei, is there anything you
really think you can't do as a jōnin?"

"Yeah." I bit the inside of my cheek, then decided it'd be better to just bite the bullet. "I can't lead."

Sensei made a "go on" gesture as his eyes narrowed a bit.

"The only time I was even a little in charge of things was during my Chūnin Exams." I shrugged,
uncomfortable. "I mean, that's squad leadership and that's great, but I'm, uh, a born follower
otherwise. I don't like leading. Even at Kannabi—and I know you put Kakashi in charge—I only did
a little. And we lost Obito when…” Well, no one had really been in charge by then. And I'd lost my head. I had Obito to thank for the fact that it hadn't been literal, and that sacrifice had nearly been fatal.

I was really better off being an easily-deployed superweapon.

My eyes were focused on the office's rug again. I swallowed hard. "I'm okay where I am."

"I disagree," Sensei replied, and I looked up again. He had his arms crossed pointedly over his chest and was looking down at me with faint disappointment in his expression and his chakra. It wasn't…it felt somehow muted, like there was something holding him back from just delivering a lecture about self-confidence and pride.

I couldn't meet his eyes for very long.

"When we consider a shinobi for promotion to jōnin, a senior jōnin of appropriate strength or specialization is selected for assessing the new prospect," Sensei informed me, his voice completely level. When my gaze snapped up toward his face again, his expression was serious as well. "That spar yesterday was your assessment."

"It…what?"

"In terms of sheer combat capability, you are more than qualified for jōnin rank." Sensei reached behind his back and pulled something out of his hip pocket. After a second, it was flying through the air at me.

I caught it. An Iwagakure Bingo Book.

"And as of yesterday, they'll have to update your rank in that." Sensei gestured for me to open it.

"I didn't realize I had a…oh." Right there, in the Konoha-nin section, a page after Sensei's. There wasn't a photograph or anything, but there was a basic description of me. My eyes skipped around as I read, resulting in disjointed sentences like this: One hundred and sixty-seven centimeters, unknown weight, black hair, unknown sex... And right there, in big blockish characters, Kill on sight. After that, there was a lot of speculation about my power and my skills, but there was an element of fear of the unknown—Iwa had no idea why Konoha had kept me in reserve for so long when it was public knowledge that I was a jinchūriki.

So they speculated. And yesterday, as far as fears about a full Tailed Beast transformation went, I had gone and proved their worst fears correct.

Well, then.

"And sooner or later, they'll probably update that to 'flee on sight' once you get in the field again." Sensei crooked his fingers, and I tossed the book into his waiting hand. "I'm also facing some pressure from the Council, since our two other jinchūriki aren't going to be stomping all over enemy villages anytime soon."

"But I thought Kushina-san…” And then I trailed off, as Sensei shook his head.

"Kushina hasn't said anything to me about restoring her field status for two months," Sensei replied with a sigh. "If she wants to, the offer's open. But that's not what we're here to talk about."

"But I still don't have any real experience leading a team," I protested. "I just…do things. I haven't even really been on a mission in more than a year."
Sensei raised one eyebrow. "I seem to recall you taking charge of a team including your mother, Nagato-san, Gai-kun, Kakashi, Obito, and assorted other shinobi during the October Tenth crisis."

I…I had, hadn't I? "That was still more than a year ago."

"From Obito's report after the fact, you had information and wrangled everyone involved under your command without hesitation. What was so different about that mission?"

It was self-appointed, for one. And Mom and Maekawa-san had still gotten killed on that rescuing rampage of a mission, and Obito had been badly hurt. It'd been a miracle that we hadn't all died once Black Zetsu turned the whole thing around on us.

But what I said was, "Hayate was in trouble. So I…I argued for the village's benefit—we were gonna go try and rescue Kushina-san, too, and I made sure we all knew how important she was to our defenses—but I really had a selfish motive. It just…worked out." And it only cost me my mother and Gai's friends.

If Hayate hadn't been held in the same location as Kushina had, would I have still tried to rescue her? Christ, what was wrong with me? Every time Sensei tried to make a point with something positive I had done or could do, I kept tearing it up in front of him. I knew I was selfish and short-sighted, but all Sensei could see was the results of my actions. A net good. There was just so much fear behind every "success."

So much doubt. "I don't deserve to be a jōnin when I don't know how to be a leader."

Sensei didn't say anything for a while. Then, "If you hadn't taken the initiative to tell us about what was going to happen then, I wouldn't be here to argue this with you."

"That's…that's just intel, Sensei. And anyway, I couldn't—the village needed you." Saving Sensei had been good. It had been such a correct choice that it almost felt like I was riding on the waves created by that choice even now. I loved him, sure, but… If there had been a choice not to tell him—not to save him and Kushina—then I didn't know of any version of me that would have gone with that. I didn't want to.

Not after Kannabi.

Sensei and Kushina—the future they promised just by being alive was more important than my fucking mental issues.

"Intel needs to be acted on to be worth a damn," Sensei said sharply, and I flinched. Then he sighed and said, "While the information was invaluable, what I'm worried about now is the fact that one of the most promising young shinobi in her generation is consistently tearing herself down in front of me."

Sensei stepped forward and pulled me into a hug without hesitation. I pulled my hands out of my pockets and hugged back on pure reflex, but I could already feel my face burning. If Sensei was just a little taller, I might've been able to hide my face in his flak jacket without a problem. As it was, though, I just made a muffled noise against his shoulder pad and let him squeeze.

"This has been going on for such a long time, I almost forget you're so hard on yourself, Kei." Sensei let me pull back, but he kept his hands on my shoulders and gave me an assessing look. "What is this really about, Kei? You don't have to take the promotion…"

"N-no, I…" Fucking hell, I am not going to cry like a baby right now! I'm a special jōnin! And yet,
it took me a moment to get my voice under control. "I can't take the promotion now. I don't have enough experience."

"That can be fixed." Sensei poked me in the forehead. "But are you okay up here?"

No. But then, I'd always known I had issues. They just…flared whenever I was asked to reach outside my comfort zone.

Or asked to take on such a dangerous responsibility.

Jōnin were generals. They commanded every rank of shinobi below them in wartime, with allowances made for special jōnin skills that outstripped those of the commanding officer. Sensei had been commanding battalions since he was seventeen, and Kakashi would eventually be named a general in the Fourth Shinobi World War in one universe, where two other division commanders were Kage. Then there were jōnin-sensei, entrusted with the care and instruction of genin until promotion, retirement, or death. Or all three.

I wasn't a commander. I was a wrecking ball. And thanks to my homemaker tendencies for the past year, I was barely even that.

"Doesn't feel like it," Sensei commented, and I belatedly realized he was reading my chakra even as I read his. "Kei, what do you say to a bit of field work?"

"Like what?" I asked, as he let go of my shoulder and stood back.

"Something to get you back into the swing of things," was his vague response. My expression must not have been very accommodating, because he added, "Take outside missions again, Kei. Not A-ranked on up or anything. C-ranks. Ease yourself back into the procedures, the pressure. You've been at home so long that I'm not sure even you remember how you used to behave out there."

I probably didn't. Still, a boring old escort mission or something…honestly sounded kind of relaxing. I'd have to have a team, probably, but I'd always been told in my old life that I needed to get out and meet new people. Mom might have mentioned something along those lines back before my first Chūnin Exam, but I wasn't sure if she actually had or if it was just something motherly to say and I was misremembering.

Sensei patted my head this time, smiling sadly. "Heh. It feels like only yesterday you were scaring yourself silly about your personnel file. And now you're an S-class threat to Iwa." He pretended to brush away a tear with his free hand. "Kids grow up so fast."

"Really, Sensei? You're going with that cliché?" I complained.

"Hey, I have to have fun with this parent thing somehow. And Naruto isn't old enough to appreciate the classic lines Jiraiya-sensei used on me." Sensei winked. "Even if you're really old enough to be my little sister."

"Heh, true." I'd never really viewed Sensei as a surrogate dad. Obito could have been thinking along those lines, and I was pretty sure Kakashi did, but me? Nope. I'd had Dad, and a dad before that. And the Dad-shaped hole in my life was not Sensei-shaped and never had been.

"So, will you try this out?" Sensei asked me.

"Yeah. I mean, it's a bunch of C-ranks. It shouldn't be any problem." Somewhat later, I would realize that handing the universe a line like that was just asking for trouble.
But Sensei distracted me by saying, "By the way, can you go and check on Kakashi for me? He seemed put-out yesterday, but I didn't have a chance to talk to him." Sensei looked over at the clock and sighed, "And I have a meeting with Shibi Aburame in ten minutes. I can't leave to go look."

"No Shadow Clones?" I asked him.

"I…don't have the chakra to spare, after yesterday," Sensei said with a wince. "But don't tell anyone."

I mimed zipping my mouth shut.

"Good girl. Now, go see what's going on with Kakashi."

I was gone in moments.

Finding Kakashi in Konoha, with my range as large as it was, turned out to be pretty simple. I could track his lightning signature for kilometers in any direction if I concentrated my expanded chakra on the task, and he wasn't nearly that far away. It was a bit weird, in hindsight—he certainly wasn't the only person with a Lightning affinity in the village. He wasn't even the only person with sparky chakra that I knew. But I could always find him easier than the rest.

In fact, I found Obito and Kakashi's chakra signatures together, around the middle of the business district. So I headed that way, hopping idly from rooftop to rooftop because I could.

I hadn't been taking particular notice how people reacted toward me after my spar with Sensei. I generally didn't try to—while only one person in about a thousand had ever been willing to give me shit over being a jinchūriki, there were a lot of people in Konoha. And a lot more than just one in a thousand had been wary of me. Unable to do much about their feelings, from my perspective, I just let the whole thing sit until the situation changed. I got used to it.

There was an undercurrent of respect in the chakra of the people who saw me, now.

Fear, too, but the fact that the respect was there at all was novel. The business district contained relatively few shinobi households, so civilian presences were thick on the ground. And I still didn't feel excessive fear from them.

Given what Naruto had needed to go through to get that much consideration out of his fellow Konoha citizens, I took that lack of collective fear and scorn as a victory.

I dropped to street level, landing next to a calligraphy supply shop, and focused on my teammates. They were…standing in front of a bookstore about four shops down, so I sauntered over to go and say hi. Though I didn't have high hopes that I'd find out what was up with Kakashi while we were in public, at least I could find out what he and Obito did when they hung out together.

I'd never actually been to this bookstore before. It had a big painting of a smiling green turtle, with a legend proclaiming that the Kame Bookstore had deals anyone would come out of their shell for. I wasn't sure it was true, but I could give them points for the pun and the mob of sales flyers taking up the rest of the window.

I could feel my fingers itch a bit as I thought about how long it had been since I'd gotten my hands on a decent novel. But this wasn't shopping day, so I focused on my friends instead.

Obito stood to one side of the shop's other window, facing my direction while still focused on Kakashi. Kakashi had his back to me, but apparently wasn't paying attention to his surroundings or
trusted Obito to watch his back for him. Either-or.

And funnily enough, Obito's expression was becoming more and more irritated the longer I watched. And his chakra matched.

So I sidled up to Kakashi's left shoulder and said, "Hi."

Kakashi glanced at me, seeming slightly interested that I'd showed up, but it was Obito's reaction that surprised me.

"Make him stop!" Obito wailed, throwing himself at me and hugging me around the waist in a death-grip. The impact knocked me back a few steps, since Obito outweighed me by a fair bit, and Obito kept clinging even as he was dragged along the street.

"Stop what?" I asked, bewildered. Why in the world was Obito acting like this?

By that point, Kakashi had turned around as well. He carried a shopping bag with what looked like a few books, and he had one open in his right hand, held so I couldn't read the cover. He gave Obito a nonplussed look, but reserved the completely blank expression for me.

Obito craned his neck so he could glare back at Kakashi. "Don't you start."

Was that a mischievous glint in Kakashi's eye, or was I just imagining it?

"Kei, why did the skeleton want friends?" Kakashi asked.

…What?

Obito glared with his Sharingan active. "Do not—!"

Kakashi talked right over him, saying, "Because he was feeling bonely."

"Pfft." I tried and failed to successfully bite down on the startled laugh. Kakashi didn't joke. It wasn't something he did. It was like seeing Batman trying to read off a bunch of knock-knock jokes, which was probably why I was laughing.

Well, that…and I genuinely liked stupid puns. I mainly liked making them, but had no talent for it. It was why I preferred making references instead, but the people around here wouldn't have understood most of them.

"Kei," Obito whined from around waist height. "Not you, too!"

"He made me get this book instead of one about fūinjutsu," Kakashi said, and held the book up so I could see the cover. One Thousand and One Jokes and Puns. "But by now I'm sure he's drawing a blank on why."

"Oh my god," I managed, though still trying not to giggle.

"You both suck!" Obito snapped.

Yep, there was definitely just a bit of teasing in Kakashi's tone. He held the book up in front of his face and said, "There was another one on lock-picking, but I couldn't get into it."

Nope, couldn't stop the next giggle. Though I couldn't see his face when it was hidden behind the book, his chakra seemed cheery enough.
"That's it!" Obito let go of me and whirled around to face Kakashi, shouting, "You, me, Training Ground Fifteen tomorrow!"

Kakashi shrugged.

Obito grabbed his bags—which had been on the ground behind Kakashi—hopped up to roof height, and then disappeared into thin air via Kamui.

I looked up at where the wormhole thing had been and said, "Okay, I didn't know he hated puns that much."

"It's probably more that I've read the first six pages out loud at this point." Kakashi dropped the book back into his bag and tied the bag shut. He said, "But it got him off my case."

"Does that mean you're out of puns?" I asked, closing the distance between us to see what else he'd bought. Unfortunately, the bag was neither transparent nor translucent, so I couldn't tell what other kinds of books Kakashi was interested in. Rats.

"No, there are about a hundred pages left." Kakashi gave me a curious look. "You really like those kinds of jokes?"

"There's a bit of timing involved, but yeah." Kakashi was actually more upbeat than I expected, if he could annoy the shit out of Obito with something so innocuous. Maybe I didn't need to check on him at all? "Need any help with the books?"

I was curious. So sue me.

Kakashi raised his visible eyebrow and started walking in the general direction of his apartment. Welp.

"I'll take that as a no," I said, following him.

"You'd be right."

And yet I still followed. Sort of like a lost puppy or something.

Kakashi slowed down a bit so I could catch up without picking up my pace, so he said, in response to the expression on my face. "Why are you smiling?"

"Thought of another pun," I said, and smothered the smile.

"Is it bad?" he asked.

I paused. "…Kinda lame, maybe."

Kakashi made a circling motion with his free hand, fingers extended. Well, if he insisted.

"I was just thinking, I was following you around like a lost puppy." I held up my hands, saying, "First thing that came to mind."

"There was an entire section on dog puns in that book," Kakashi mused aloud. He nodded to himself, then said, "That was terrible, Kei. It would have made more sense if you said I was following you like a puppy."

"But you're not." I shook my head, sticking my hands back in my pockets. Great, defensive again. "Hey, I never said I was any good."
"Apparently." Kakashi took a right turn at the end of the street and I followed him, curious still but for a different reason.

I knew Kakashi's apartment was friggin' tiny, and that he didn't really spend much time in it since Sensei and Kushina would always clear a space for him. I knew that Kakashi nonetheless stopped in his apartment first, after any mission that didn't go to hell. While it wasn't much, it was still his space, and people didn't visit it enough for him to feel pressured when he was there.

And there I was, following him anyway. After a while, Kakashi sighed. Then, "Kei, are you going to follow me all the way home?"

Point of order: I was still almost certain that Kakashi considered the Namikaze-Uzumaki household his real home. But I wasn't going to argue about that, and we had better things to talk about.

"Actually, yeah," I said, with a level of casualness that surprised me as much as it did Kakashi. "I was going to talk to you about something, but I guess we could take out two birds in one stone and stuff."

"What birds?" Kakashi asked.

"Well, I want to see what you got from the bookstore, Sensei wanted me to check in on you"—and there was a minute scowl there, under his mask—"and I think you can squeeze me into your schedule for lunch, right?"

Kakashi stopped walking. I could see the whites of his visible eye quite clearly as I turned to see what the problem was, only for him to abruptly jerk his head away so I was looking at the half of his face that was covered by the headband. "You…probably shouldn't visit my apartment right now. It's a mess."

"It can't be worse than my room," I said, skeptical. "And anyway, we don't have to hang out at your house. But I'm hungry and I want to hang out with you, so lunch seems like the best option here."

"…True." Kakashi hefted the shopping back over his shoulder and took to the rooftops without a word, but his chakra seemed to say follow me.

So I did.

At some point in the previous ten years, it might have made sense for traveling via parkour on steroids to lose a bit of its luster. Shinobi traversed the village like that all the time, even if they didn't have to. It should have seemed mundane or boring after long enough.

Nope. I still got a little thrill every time I did it. It was, after all, about the closest thing to flight that most of us could manage.

We reached Kakashi's apartment in about a minute, and he held up a hand to stop me before I could follow him into his building.

"It can't possibly be that bad," I said, still disbelieving.

"Just wait here, Kei," Kakashi said with a sigh, and slipped in through his apartment's sole window. His place was on the second floor, but apparently lacked all but the ground-level entrance for some stupid reason.

I sat on the roof and waited with badly-disguised impatience, kicking my feet idly out over the edge
of the roof. There was some shuffling going on in the apartment itself, but I pretended I was deaf for about two minutes to be polite.

During that time, I observed.

Kakashi lived in a shinobi-majority district, sort of like the one I lived in with Hayate. However, while I knew Genna's place was owned and maintained by the Aburame clan, and that my house was sort of in this neutral zone where the Hokage actually had more influence than any one clan, I couldn't have said which clan controlled rent around Kakashi's place. The Inuzuka clan was that way, and the Akimichi, Yamanaka, and Nara clans owned property around here…

Then someone called up to me, "Keisuke-kun? What are you doing up there?"

I looked down and spotted Fuse Inuzuka, along with her husband Yatsu and the biggest dog they had.

It had been about a year since I'd interacted with Fuse outside of Hokage Guard duties, since she was one of the few retirees who had survived the Tenth and we'd been pretty short-handed. Her hair was still done up like a pair of upright canine ears, and she was wearing a casual kimono instead of her shinobi gear.

Yatsu had his hair pulled into this strange, loose ponytail that allowed two long sections to fall over his ears like, well, floppy dog ears. He didn't look at me—still blind—but managed to wave in my direction anyway. Was it echolocation, or was he taking cues from the big hound this time? Or was he also a sensor?

"I'm waiting on a friend," I replied, waving back to them though Yatsu couldn't see it. "It's nice to see you."

"Are you referring to Kakashi-kun?" Fuse asked.

"Yep," I said. Hm. "Say, who owns this district? Or at least this building?"

"The Inuzuka clan does," Fuse replied. "But specifically, my brother is the manager here."

"I didn't know shinobi could do that," I said, surprised. "Doesn't he have to run missions, too?"

Yatsu shrugged. "No. Not every clan throws all of its members into combat roles." There was the slightest bit of an edge in his voice, which made me wonder just which clan he was talking about. Sure, the Inuzuka were a bit infamous for their combat mission record, but…

…Did he really hate the Hyūga clan that much?

Kakashi drew back the blinds on his window and opened it, peering out. Since I was basically sitting where a window box might have gone if he had one, he didn't have to ask where I'd run off to. "Kei, who are you talking to?"

"Down here, Kakashi-kun!" Fuse said, with her hands cupped around her mouth. "How are you today?"

"Fine," Kakashi replied, and slipped out the window with the speed and grace of someone who had done it a million times before. He tapped my shoulder with two fingers as he passed and dropped to ground level.

"See you later, Fuse-san, Yatsu-san!" And once again, I followed.
"Do you have any idea what their deal is?" I asked Kakashi a while later, over a couple of bowls of egg-topped udon.

We'd decided not to go to Ichiraku's, just because we had memorized the place's menu and anyway Kakashi wanted to splurge a tiny bit. So somehow, that got us a place in an udon restaurant instead.

The restaurant wasn't particularly upscale, but it had booths. That meant I could slap a privacy seal down on the table while we ate, so we could talk about whatever. I'd take the seal off when it was time to pay for our food.

"Whose deal?" Kakashi asked. Secure in the knowledge that I had seen his unmasked face before and not cared, and that the security seals were pretty near impossible to pierce, he stirred his noodles once and then scooped some into his mouth. Unlike, say, Obito, he could listen and eat at the same time.

"Yatsu-san and Fuse-san," I said, picking up one of the slices of egg with my chopsticks. "I've never really talked to them outside of work, so…"

Kakashi nodded mostly to himself, then swallowed. Then he said, "I know that Yatsu-san left his clan before I was born. My neighbors say he's been blind for at least as long, and Fuse-san acts like one fact has a lot to do with the other."

"Really?" I couldn't quite imagine what it would have been like. A Hyūga, completely blind—and then chucked out of his clan like last week's trash. Christ. "That's…that's pretty horrible."

"There's a lot of bad blood there," was all Kakashi said after that. "You'd have to ask them for more detail."

I frowned, shaking my head. "No, it was rude of me to pry at all."

Kakashi continued eating, making slurping sounds as he went. I didn't have a solid grasp on how much he could eat, but it looked like one bowl of udon wasn't going to be enough.

I ate the egg slice and chewed slowly as I thought. Well, that was one avenue of conversation exhausted.

"Kei, what did you need to talk to me about?" Kakashi asked, once every noodle in his udon was gone, leaving a small amount of broth at the bottom.

"I…hm. Sensei just told me to." Which was not, perhaps, the most flattering way to put it. Being ordered to hang out with someone sounded pretty harsh. "Or maybe he just wanted to make sure I wasn't in the office. I don't know. But are you okay?"

While I slurped down my noodles in turn, Kakashi drained his broth and thought. After a while, he said, "Obito was being annoying, but I'm fine. You?"

I set my bowl down once it was empty, exhaling with a satisfied air. That hit the spot. Thinking about Kakashi's question, though, I didn't really want to just brush him off the way he'd just done to me. Or the way he had responded to Fuse's casual concern earlier. "…Sort of."

Kakashi's visible eyebrow rose, and his mouth quirked to one side. While I'd gotten used to reading his expressions when only one-quarter of his face was showing, it was a new and baffling development to be able to read his jaw and mouth without the mask in the way. "What does that mean?"
"Sensei asked me if I wanted to be promoted to full jōnin, but I'm not sure if I'm ready." I poked around at the side dishes available—grilled saury was there for both of us, though I'd pushed my portion over to Kakashi without a word. Hm, that left rice, miso, pickled daikon…

Kakashi gave me a flat look. "So you're turning it down."

"No, I…" I trailed off, meeting his eye briefly. Then my gaze was down at the tabletop again. "I don't know."

"You've never led a formal mission above C-rank before, but October Tenth and Kannabi were both at least A-ranked missions. And then there was the incident in the Land of Rivers," Kakashi said, a frown in his voice. He only stumbled a little, though. "So I don't see why it's a 'don't know' and not 'not yet'."

"I don't think I can do it," I admitted to my bowl of rice, rather than looking at Kakashi. "But I don't want to disappoint anyone."

"The only person you're really worried about disappointing is yourself," Kakashi replied, planting his elbow on the table and resting his chin in his upraised palm. "The fact that Sensei even offered you the chance for a promotion shows that he thinks you can do it. Everyone who saw you fight would agree, which is why Sensei decided to make it public."

"So it wasn't just because I blabbed about it at the wrong venue?" I tried for a joking tone, but it fell a bit flat.

"No. Or at least not totally." Kakashi took his bowl of rice and looked speculatively between the two saury on offer, as though deciding which one to eat first. "Obito's probably going to be due for his jōnin spar soon enough, so it's not just you. The three of us are some of the most dangerous jōnin—or special jōnin—Konoha can deploy, so there was always going to be some kind of…push."

Well, at least it wasn't personal.

"So you think I should go for it?" I asked, as Kakashi bit the fish's head off.

He nodded. After swallowing, he added, "Or at least think long and hard before giving a flat 'no' to Sensei."

Hm. It had been less than an hour…

Kakashi finished the saury in a moment, then said, "Well, we can talk about something else."

I reached for the security seal very slowly, giving time for Kakashi to pull his mask back up if he wanted. "Round two?"

Kakashi nodded.

Round two—kitsune udon for me and tsumiki udon for him—arrived shortly. I was a little leery of the raw egg in Kakashi's bowl, which was being poached from the heat of the soup, but had no such problems with the fried tofu topping my order. Om nom nom.

Still put the privacy seal down again, to deter prying eyes or eavesdropping ears.

"What books did you get?" I asked, after chomping one of the aburaage pieces in half for easier manipulation.
"The joke book, as you saw," Kakashi said, "And then one I just wanted to get. But the last one is a surprise."

"It is?" Given that he hadn't even told me what the second one was, what was the third supposed to be? I smiled uncertainly. What had I walked into?

"If you are promoted, it will be your present," Kakashi said, meeting my eyes just for a moment before his gaze skittered off to the side somewhere. Right as his cheekbones started to color a bit, he dove into his bowl. Not literally, but I couldn't really expect to get anything more out of him for a bit.

It was just weird to be able to see Kakashi's whole face. Was the soup too hot for him? It certainly cooked that egg…

I scratched my scar before shrugging to myself and copying the one-time Copy Ninja. Well, even if the book was a bribe of sorts for making jōnin, I was still curious enough to want to ask about it later.

For a few minutes, the only sound involved was either slurping or chewing, and the clicking of chopsticks and spoons.

Then I broke the silence, once I had eaten all of the tofu and was just toying with the noodles. I said, "So… That second book. It isn't anything like that book we read in Suna, is it?"

Kakashi paused, with his bowl still held up to his mouth. He slurped down the rest of the soup and set the bowl on the table again, then dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. Stalling.

I drummed my fingers on the table, staring at Kakashi.

He stared back.

For a moment, it was like something passed between us. If we'd been dogs, I would have been something like a dominance display. Who'd give up first?

Kakashi looked away and mumbled, "It's the, um. It's the first of Jiraiya-sama's new series."

"I didn't know he'd managed to get a publisher," I said, though I should have. It'd been a year since I'd put my two cents in on his first draft, along with Kushina and Sensei and whoever else Jiraiya had conned into reading it. "What's the title? Is it any good?"

"It's from the *Icha-Icha* series, though there's only one book so far." Kakashi still wasn't looking at me, and was steadily getting redder. "It's called *Icha-Icha Paradise*."

"Make-Out Paradise. I wondered if it still had its infamous orange cover and the R-18 warning, but that wouldn't have explained how Kakashi could get his hands on it if that was the case. Had something changed significantly in the editing process?"

"Any decent reviews?"

Kakashi shrugged, still avoiding my gaze. "I don't think it was really the critic-first kind of book."

I made a neutral noise. "Well, whenever you're done, can I borrow it?"

"You're already getting one book from me," Kakashi said defensively, with a sidelong glare in my direction. "Wait until you get that one before you ask."

"Which I'm only going to get if I get promoted." At this, Kakashi nodded. So I said, with my face heating up a bit, "So I'm being bribed with books, one porn and one not."
"It's a romantic comedy," Kakashi corrected me, huffy to the last. In a mutter, he added, "Jiraiyasama had to cut some scenes for the first printing."

I thought of some of the stuff that Kushina had commented on and nodded to myself. That made sense, though I imagined that Jiraiya wouldn't have been happy about it. Then again, he'd get to release an ultra-special collector's edition later with all the sex scenes put back in for more money on the same manuscript. Probably.

Was that even how book publishing worked?

It worked for video games, anyway. In a "hey, look at all the stuff we would have added in if we had more time and/or any reservations about talking all your money."

Still, I let the topic drop after nothing else seemed to come to mind. And I couldn't exactly complain to Kakashi about DLC dependency in an industry from a dead universe. Or a universe I was dead to. Whatever.

"Are you training with anyone now?" Kakashi asked, "I saw a lot of Water Release jutsu from you, in each stage of the transformation, but it seemed like you were relying heavily on the Three-Tails's power instead of yours."

"I know. Sensei's just too tricky to take on otherwise," I replied, toying with my remaining udon. "But as for more elemental ninjutsu, I'm all ears. It's just that I didn't have any time to train in, say, Fire." Which, as a nature transformation that was close to Water on the wheel, was an absolute pain to learn. Or it probably would have been, if I put any effort into it…

"You should probably think about learning the Shadow Clone jutsu," Kakashi suggested, to my surprise. "What? You have more chakra than Sensei and Obito combined. As long as Sensei signs off on it, you can learn it."

"Is that how you learned it?" I asked, having never really thought about the idea before. Clearly, Kakashi had needed to learn that technique somewhere, and the nature of the technique help him polish any number of other skills solely because they were a physical and mental force multiplier. Having one person who could use the Shadow Clone jutsu in a team meant that they could effectively be in two places at once.

Sensei preferred to stack the deck even more by adding the Flying Thunder God teleportation into the mix, but there was potential there. Even for the non-teleporters on our team.

"Yes," Kakashi said shortly.

Well, well, well. No wonder no one had ever called Naruto out for learning the technique, even though it was forbidden. As soon as someone with enough clearance signed off on it, he was in the clear. Given that the kid had beaten up a traitor with it and had an in with the Third Hokage, there wasn't any real question.

Speaking of traitors, I probably needed to keep an eye on some of the kids running around with their genin teams now.

It turned out that I zoned out a bit, wondering about off-topic things like that. It must have been at least a minute of silence from me, which probably turned the atmosphere rather awkward.

So Kakashi tried to break it. He cleared his throat and said, "Kei, I—" And that was as far as Kakashi got, because both he and I jerked to attention as a new chakra signature made itself known right next to us.
Kakashi pulled his mask up, and I ripped the seal off the tabletop.

"Sensei wants us in the office right now," Obito said, with no preamble. The expression on his face was a match for any of Kakashi's game faces, with his normally-cheery face still and his eye narrowed.

Kakashi stood up first, counting out ryō notes by feel even as I slid out of the booth and snatched my sword off the floor. "What's the situation?" Kakashi asked sharply.

Obito shook his head. "Can't tell you here."

Fair enough. Once Kakashi finished paying for both of our meals (which I would need to remember to pay back), I gave the restaurant at large an assessing look. While Obito was a nervous mass of chakra, no one else seemed to have taken any particular notice.

"Done," Kakashi said. "Let's go."

And all three of us zipped out of there, at Body Flicker speed.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title comes from that one song featuring Ed Sheeran.

On to news:
1. There are two new side-stories up on the cyb-by-lang tumblr account, under the tag "fan works," for more reading material. (I didn't write either, so they're not on The B-Plot.) And there is also new art for the story, on the same blog's "art" tag!
2. Check the "word of god" or "this shit is canon" tags for out-of-story information, confirmation, and other fun things!
3. I'm starting a new job sometime this week (or next week), so writing time is gonna be at a premium for a while. Sorry, folks!

The only experience I'd had with the big clan council chambers was not a pleasant one. Two years ago, Kakashi and I had been hauled up in front of Fugaku Uchiha and whoever else felt like reaming us up one side and down the other about the clusterfuck that had been Kannabi. And both of us had been in the perfect psychological pitfall that it felt like we'd deserved every bit of side-eyeing, lecturing, ranting, and suspicion that people could drag out. Those memories, for me, seemed burned into the wood and plaster in the building like old ghosts, and I gave an instinctive shudder as the three of us strode through the empty halls.

There was a mass of agitated chakra up ahead—while the component signatures weren't the same, this situation felt unpleasantly familiar.

Obito hadn't been there, so he didn't hesitate for the half-step that Kakashi and I did when we entered the building. And he didn't lead us toward the crowded chamber—instead, we were heading onward and upward to Sensei's office.

"Why does Sensei need us?" I asked in a whisper as we went, finally losing patience.

"He needs Operative Crane," was Obito's reply, and I could feel his chakra humming underneath his skin in a way that reminded me of Kakashi. It felt like a banked flame, contained for the moment but certainly capable of breaking its chains.

Speaking of, Kakashi's earlier awkwardness had melted away. His jaw tensed underneath his mask, and he flexed his hands methodically as though expecting that he'd have to use them to kill someone. His chakra buzzed like a live wire.

I frowned and didn't ask anything else.

Operative Crane, from the start, had been a cover for whatever Sensei needed. For the most part, I'd been the one who supplied the information that Sensei couldn't find anywhere else solely because we didn't live in the universe that my information was from. I'd also been the one to stitch new facts and figures together, but my role had never been that of a field agent.

I was...overt. Quite aside from the issues with fielding a jinchūriki without every sensor sitting up and taking notice, I'd never been trained to be much other than either the support or backbone of a team. I had basic shinobi stealth figured out, but I'd lost the ability to totally suppress my chakra since
Isobu had come along. People would know someone was there. And if they knew that, they could act on it.

But Obito was a different story.

I hadn't asked what Obito was doing to enforce the power of the Operative Crane mantle, but it was fairly obvious now that he'd had more to do with the operations side of things than I had. While I sat at home and read through file cabinets, Obito was doing things.

Like using Kamui. While Sensei was no slouch, having a second person in Konoha's forces with access to exclusive space-time ninjutsu was invaluable for strategic purposes. His power gave us an edge that literally no other shinobi could replicate.

Except Kakashi. But he wasn't really there yet. Older-him had gone thirteen years without even knowing the Mangekyō Sharingan existed. Even when he was nearly thirty, two uses would put him in the hospital for a month. Kakashi was playing it very safe to avoid killing himself through chakra exhaustion.

"Pre-meeting briefing?" Kakashi asked, barely louder than a breath, jarring me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah," said Obito, not much louder.

It was the quietest and most awkward walk to Sensei's office since the time…since… Hm. Since sometime before this, probably. I just couldn't think of anything that stood out. Maybe that time when Obito and Kakashi had both passed out from chakra exhaustion and Genma and Raidō came with me to the office instead?

Before I knew it, we had arrived.

Obito held the door open for Kakashi and me, and we slipped inside without a sound.

Good thing, too, given that there were already some people there, and there was already a meeting of sorts in progress as a result.

Sensei stood up from his desk when we entered, but with the faintest of winces. He didn't hesitate for more than a half-second, but I felt his chakra emphasize the moment of sudden weakness. Still, he said, "Good, you're here."

To Sensei's left, arrayed among the filing cabinets that might have been pulled out of storage, were the Third Hokage, Jiraiya, and Tsunade. To his right, Kushina and Shikaku Nara stood waiting patiently for the three of us to file on in.

I hate not knowing what I'm walking into, and this situation was no exception.

Obito closed the door behind us and the office's seals flared to life in my mind's eye, locking our secrets in with us.

Sensei sat back down again, perhaps with the faintest hint of relief. "I suppose you're wondering why I called you here."

"I'm not," Jiraiya muttered.

"Thank you, Jiraiya-sensei, for that input," Sensei said dryly.

Tsunade elbowed Jiraiya, who yelped.
"Thank you, Tsunade-chan," the Third Hokage said without apparently giving a shit if anyone heard him. The perks of being retired, I supposed.

Obito sighed from next to me, shaking his head. He said, "Okay, Sensei, we're all here. But why?"

"Two floors below us, we're going to be dragging all of Danzō Shimura's dark deeds into the light," Sensei went on, as though the various S-class shinobi in the room weren't acting like Academy Students while the teacher was being boring. "We have thirty minutes before we have to be down there, but the clans have assembled before the deadline." Sensei briefly drummed his fingers against his desk. "And we're going to get our secrets out of the way right now, so there are no surprises down there."

I blinked. Wait, he couldn't mean my "visions," could he?

"Sarutobi-sama, Kushina. Operative Crane is two individuals. You're looking at them." Sensei nodded toward Obito and me. "Keisuke supplies information analysis. Obito's Kamui ability makes him impossible to keep out of secure facilities."

"Not impossible…" Obito said, at the same time that I said, "Well, a little."

Shikaku nodded slowly, though I had no doubt he'd worked out some of this on his own. I could see him slot us into new categories in his head, accept the shape his thoughts formed, and move on to the next stage of his strategy without missing a beat.

"Don't downplay your contributions," Sensei rebuked us mildly, but he didn't dwell on it. Instead he prompted, "Sarutobi-sama…?"

I might have imagined the room's temperature falling, but I shivered anyway. This was getting into really heavy territory, and with people I didn't honestly know all that well. What was Sensei going to expect us to do in the meeting?

"Danzō," the Third Hokage said heavily. "was my friend. But it has become clear to me that while I considered him a trusted advisor, he did not believe the same of me. Not for some time."

Jiraiya sighed. "He made a point of acting like a harmless old war hawk whenever you were around. But he wasn't as careful around me, or around Minato. Guess he thought we were too young to read him."

"I'm not sure that 'harmless' and 'war hawk' go together," Kakashi frowned. "Are we just airing grievances?"

"Yes, and no. In truth, this meeting is so we can all establish a…baseline. What Danzō did to us, or around us, that puts us on the clans' side," Sensei said. "The clans are going to be furious when I explain what happened with ROOT. But I'd rather they rant and rave at a time I choose rather than watching helplessly as the information explodes in ten or twenty years."

Kakashi's visible eye narrowed. "You want me to bring up that Danzō tried to recruit me? Twice?"

"Forcibly," Minato added.

"But don't bring up Tenzō's name," Tsunade interrupted, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I wasn't going to. I can barely bring up what I was doing at the time," Kakashi replied. Ah, right. He'd been on an ANBU mission of sorts. Not really official, but he'd been out of the village without anyone knowing…
Obito tilted his head to one side. He frowned thoughtfully and, after a while, said, "I don't know if he ever tried to do anything to me. I mean, I was legally dead and stuff for a while there. I had another creepy old guy to worry about."

"Then you need to catch up on your reading, kid," Jiraiya said, shaking his head. He turned to the nearest file cabinet and dug through it, then pulled out a pair of files. Just at a glance, one of them had my name and the other had Obito's written on it.

"What—that's my name." Obito caught the file as Jiraiya tossed it at him, then snatched the second out of the air and absently handed it off to me. "Sensei?"

I was already flipping through a…what the shit? "This is a transfer request. Off of Team Minato." I swallowed. "O-Obito, what…?"

"Mine's a medical exam order," Obito said, his voice carefully controlled. "Full physical for me, which I distinctly remember not getting. Emphasis on the—why the hell would anyone need to focus on the eye that didn't get removed?"

The adults in the room didn't seem surprised at all. Sensei must have spoken to them before we arrived. But Kakashi was staring at us both, his visible eye wide in surprise.

I flipped to the next page. And I saw red. "This—he thought—"

I felt Shikaku and Sensei nod.

"That fucking bastard thought he could take my brother!" I demanded, feeling my eyes itch in a way that meant Isobu's chakra was leaking into mine again. "To take us both into ROOT and, what, celebrate his new pets? And he tried to do it officially!"

"He was also interested in Kakashi's transplanted eye," Obito says, flipping through his file. "What was he going to do with all of this?"

While I seethed, I thought quickly. Danzō's involvement in these files meant nothing good. If I somehow got hold of a chart outlining the essential features of a "good person" in moral and ethical meanings of the word, then compared a chart of Danzō's essential personality features in a Venn diagram, I would have only been able to put one item in the overlapping middle. And that phrase was "well-intentioned." With question marks.

"Currently unknown," Sensei said, and I jerked my head toward him in surprise. He didn't want to talk about my "visions," even though they were a good chunk of the reasons we'd gone after the old man at all? Only Tsunade and Shikaku hadn't been personally informed. I knew why Danzō had been after Obito's eye and arm, and most of it involved self-improvement through surgery.

It wasn't like I'd ever seen a ROOT agent benefit from Danzō's bullshit. Including Tenzō.

"I wanted to give you all a chance to avoid being surprised by what information pertains to you personally." Sensei glanced at Jiraiya, who frowned. "The clans are going to accuse us of being complicit in the councilman's actions. It's not an unreasonable conclusion to make. But we all know perfectly well that we were the ones who finally stopped him."

"Konan-chan never did say if she was going to ship those ROOT agents back to us," Jiraiya said, seemingly out of nowhere. "We got everyone who reported in when the old man had a chance to start screaming. That does leave any number of them in the wild, but they may rot on the vine. They may not. We need the clans' weapons pointed at our enemies, not at each other."
"Given," Shikaku said. The scarred Jōnin Commander's eyes narrowed. "You're expecting something beyond the usual screaming matches."

Entering the council room still felt like walking to a hanging. I wasn't on trial, and neither were Obito and Kakashi. But if the clans came to blows in that room, blood was going to coat the ceiling. And knowing how worked up I was about Hayate and what Danzō had tried to do, I'd probably be a contributing factor.

"Your eyes are still gold, Kei," Obito whispered to me just before we entered.

I gave a helpless shrug and just walked in after Kakashi, who was holding the doors open for our group. There were enough stupid eye techniques around that I didn't care how much I stood out. I was just going to sit in Sensei's corner like a good weapon and avoid starting anything with anybody else. Couldn't be that hard, right?

Sensei made his way to what was about the middle of a massive ring of stands. As the Hokage, he got his own section instead of having to take the floor or anything like that. The room was shaped in such a way that his section could hear the faintest whispers in the room if the seals were active, and any sound produced in his immediate vicinity was not transferred at all. Just in case secrets needed to avoid being spilled.

It was something to do with architecture that I didn't get, and seal work, which I did. Something like ovals? Elliptical…? Whatever.

But none of that was terribly important.

No, instead the important factors in this...what, open forum? Not really open—I could only spot one member of each clan representing their interests. No council of clan elders. No children or nominally unbiased individuals. At least there were some familiar faces, despite my mixed feelings about some of the people said faces belonged to.

In the Hyūga corner, Hiashi was glaring around the chamber at basically everyone. As a small mercy, his Byakugan wasn't active. No one needed anyone else getting a look at their insides at a meeting like this. There was also probably a rule against it, even if the Byakugan wasn't terribly subtle.

The current head of the Akimichi clan, Chōza, sat between Shikaku and Inoichi. While not oblivious, the man didn't seem nearly as keyed up as Hiashi was. Actually, he was talking to the Yamanaka representative without sparing any particular concern for the rest of the room. It was as though he didn't believe the outcome of the meeting would have much impact on his clan.

Off to his right and forming a third corner, Fugaku Uchiha examined the battlefield. While he didn't have the same degree of frostiness as Hiashi, I noticed that only became the case once he spotted Obito sitting off to Sensei's right. He gave my teammate a minute nod once he caught his eye, and Obito blinked rapidly before cautiously nodding back.

Oookay, apparently there had been more than just one kind of therapy going on.

And then, sitting in the last corner of the room like a fourth pillar, Shibi Aburame sat with his hands hidden and his collar pulled up to his nose. He had carried a large, buzzing satchel into the meeting, which I assumed meant that there were other kikai-related concerns that he couldn't just drop. I didn't blame him for prioritizing other things.

Everyone else was, after all.
And between each noble clan, there were others.

As the only living, adult Senju, Tsunade was sitting with her head propped up on her closed fist and her expression as bored as she could make it. Speaking as someone who was familiar with Kakashi, and as someone who owned a mirror, Tsunade had the best resting bitchface I'd ever seen. As I watched, she held up her other hand and started examining her painted nails as though the meeting was a complete and utter waste of her time.

(Which it was.)

Tsume Inuzuka sat near Tsunade with her arms crossed over her flak jacket with Kuromaru by her side. She eyed the assembled clan representatives with interest, but didn't really comment. She looked amused when she spotted my team and me, but also faintly disappointed when all three of us ended up in Sensei's corner.

The Third Hokage, representing the Sarutobi clan, had already started smoking. He hadn't gotten around to blowing smoke rings, but Tsunade was providing a perfect example of exactly how much impact this meeting had for most of the S-class ninjas here. So I wouldn't have been surprised if he started. In someone's face. For being an uncooperative jerk.

I had a few candidates in mind. It was a pity that only one of them was in this room.

Speaking of people holding the title of Hokage, Sensei's corner was a bit crowded. Kushina was sitting directly to Sensei's right and Jiraiya was on his left side. Then Sensei's three most adorable students (meaning us) were spread out from there.

I hunkered down in my seat and looked at Sensei out of the corner of my eye. When was he going to…?

"I see that everyone has arrived promptly," Sensei said, as though we hadn't been the last ones to get there. By like an hour. "You may be wondering why I called for a representative from each major clan to meet here today."

Tsunade rolled her eyes. "Get on with it, brat."

Sensei went on, apparently oblivious, "Some of you may already have noticed that the number of mission-kills has fallen in the last year."

Tsume said, "The war's been over for three." Which was not the same as pointing out the obvious, exactly. Tsume's eyes were narrowed to slits. "So what makes the last year so special?"

...A lot. The thing with Sunagakure and the adjustments made to Gaara's seal, the attacks led by Kirigakure that went literally nowhere thanks to our strength and the Mizukage apparently going bonkers, and so on and so forth. And then there was that big fight yesterday, which I imagined made a lot of people a lot of different amounts of money. We'd had a pretty busy year, actually.

"Aside from our burgeoning alliance with Sunagakure?" Sensei smiled unpleasantly. "The ANBU faction known as ROOT has been disassembled over the course of the last year, with the process reaching completion just last week with its leader."

There was a long, long pause.

"What the fuck is ROOT?" Tsume asked.

Not the first time someone was going to be thinking that today, in my opinion. Tsume was just the
only one to say that out loud. If Tsunade and Kushina hadn't already known, though I imagined that they would have had something to say, too. The way Sensei described ROOT, it could have easily been some kind of weapon or factory of some kind, and not an army of human beings raised from childhood to be perfect weapons.

There was something screwy about how much time and effort the people on this continent seemed to devote to that ideal.

"A faction within ANBU," Sensei repeated, still smiling away. "Until recently, it functioned as Danzō Shimura's private army."

Fugaku abruptly went paler than normal, with his eyes giving off a brief red glow before flickering out. I didn't turn my head fast enough to see if Obito had done the same in response.

Shibi Aburame adjusted his glasses, seeming to frown behind his collar.

Huh? Had these two in particular had a bad history with Danzō? No one else had a reaction really worth noting.

"Shimura was a respected member of the community," Hiashi said, but I could feel the gears turning in his head thanks to my chakra sense. Sensei probably could, too. His frown became more severe. "Though it does not preclude his involvement, I believe I recall meeting him on more than one occasion. He did not have the physical ability to command unwilling shinobi."

There were a couple of nods.

Like that matters, I thought.

"Like it takes that much," Tsunade muttered, but her expression was slowly working its way up to something murderous. "You didn't see the medical records I dug up. Or the corpses."

"Bodies, Tsunade-sama?" Chōza asked, appalled. "Elder Torifu would have said something!"

I was pretty sure I saw the Third Hokage blow a smoke ring as he waited for the brief protest to die down, but I wasn't sure if he was aiming it at anyone. While he wasn't exactly in his peak fighting condition, he was hardly any older than Jiraiya had been during the second half of Naruto's story. And that guy had never been a pushover.

Did Danzō train? Ever? I was fairly certain I remembered how he had walked with a cane at some point, but I wasn't certain whether he'd started investing in surgical upgrades for compensating for an arm injury or if he'd actually cut off his original, functional arm for a Zetsu one loaded up with Sharingan. And since Tsunade had gotten him, it was probably one of those questions I would never be able to answer.

"Hence the comment about this issue being within ANBU, I believe. Why? Because no covert operation within a covert organization would dare reveal itself," Shibi put in, turning his head to face Sensei. "Because then the village could claim to have no knowledge if the ruse were discovered. Therefore, Shimura acted in the best interests of the village. Theoretically."

Devil's advocates were everywhere.

Still, Sensei didn't tell Shibi to be quiet. Instead, he waited for additional input.

He knew something I didn't. While a perfectly accurate statement for the other three hundred and sixty-four days in a year, too, it pertained very particularly to this situation and this person. Maybe
Mainly because a bunch of them died. I remembered something about the Second Shinobi World War, and about the death of the Second Hokage, but further detail was a bit spotty.

"And in turn, I ordered ROOT disbanded at the end of the Third Shinobi World War," the Third Hokage said heavily. "ANBU used to depend on ROOT for training purposes. Obviously, this was an old and disregarded practice more than ten years ago, but Danzō wished to maintain his troop numbers even after ANBU became more adept at fielding entirely non-ROOT agents. His forces lost relevance entirely, but I might have let him maintain an honor guard of his own if not for information uncovered just before young Minato-kun took office."

This was news to me. I had always figured that ANBU had been created first, with ROOT as a kind of insidious infection spreading throughout it like a cancer. If ROOT had been ANBU's training program gone bad, the Third Hokage's tolerance for its existence made more sense. He had probably assumed that there was no way his old friend could have been such a bastard.

Funny. He'd made the same assumption about Orochimaru.

I wasn't really inclined to be charitable, to say the least. Even if he had been the Hokage I'd technically grown up with. As far as I was concerned, Sensei was the only Hokage I'd ever really be able to think of as absolutely trustworthy. It wasn't really that he was on my side. I was on his.

We just had to get everyone else over here, too.

"Speaking of that," Sensei said, "Jiraiya-sensei?"

Jiraiya shrugged and got to his feet so he could make use of his height and lung capacity to carry the crowd. "About a year ago, ROOT agents were deployed to Amegakure to secure an alliance with Hanzō the Salamander. Supposedly, he would owe ROOT a debt if they could corner and wipe out a rebel force called Akatsuki and secure his hold on Ame."

Muttering broke out. Akatsuki might not have been quite a household name, but it was hard not to notice the only group on the continent with a known Rinnegan user. Nagato had a bingo book bounty with eight zeros in it, mostly because of his eyes. The remaining millions came from adding the bounties of people he or his friends recruited into Akatsuki...or the hostile forces that the three of them killed. Horribly.

"Tsunade and I intervened, thanks to a timely tip," Jiraiya said with a shrug. "And one of the ROOT agents coughed up their mission. I backtracked the rest of the information and the sealing work I saw. Shimura was more ambitious than smart that time." Jiraiya looked around the room. "You might remember one of those rebels as Nagato Uzumaki, who single-handedly held off the invasion force on the northern side of the village by squashing it into slurry. Or who later assisted in reconstruction efforts here in the wake of the October Tenth attack."

More muttering. Tsume turned to Tsunade and commented at a volume too low to hear, but Tsunade just rolled her eyes.

"One of my other students, Yahiko, helped secure our alliance with Sunagakure," Jiraiya said, "which Minato set in stone. Amegakure and Konohagakure are the most tightly aligned villages in
the Elemental Countries, and in adding Sunagakure to the group we have secured some of the most powerful shinobi on the continent." Jiraiya added, as though to rub salt in the wound, "None of which would have happened if Shimura had gotten his way. Instead of getting three S-class shinobi, their village, and their organization in our corner, Danzō would have gotten backing for whatever he, and he alone, wanted to accomplish in that region. We already know from experience that he wasn't sharing his toys with anyone else."

And Hanzō, while unlikely to have gotten a backdoor into Konoha out of the deal, would have probably continued to oppress Amegakure or keep it in the Second Shinobi World War or whatever. I hadn't studied the guy much, ever, but it had seemed especially pointless once Akatsuki and two Sannin had killed him and all of his diehard troops.

"That's just one example of Shimura running operations behind the village's collective back." Sensei nodded at Jiraiya, who sat down and looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling. Sensei cleared his throat and said, "However the next example is more serious, which is why I asked for a clan registry from each of you."

"All right," Inoichi said, "I'll bite. Why do you need clan registries? Is it the names?"

"Yes and no," Sensei said. "What I really need is the list of birth dates."

"...ROOT was the training division," Fugaku said, and this time his Sharingan was up and spinning in agitation. "Are you telling me that he was recruiting from our clans?"

"Occasionally," Sensei replied, his gaze drifting across the room to alight on a particular face. "And that would be your cue, Shibi-san."

The Aburame man stood, adjusting his glasses again to more fully cover his eyes. And then he began to speak. "This story may not be familiar to some of you in this room. Why? Because you are the heads of your respective clans, and Shimura did not often deal with those who could challenge him in a court of public influence." Shibi's voice was deceptively even, given what I thought he was building up to. "I am not so well-connected."

I was willing to bet that he would be, after this.

"Torune is the name of a child of one of my clansmen, who died in the field years ago. Shikuro, as I would later discover, was a ROOT agent of some renown within his organization." Shibi's hidden eyes seemed to drill into Hiashi, of all people. "Torune's kikai are too dangerous to be controlled until he is older. Why do I know this? Because Shikuro was known for his intensely destructive, unique hive composition. While I cannot allow him to attend the Academy until he has more experience, I chose to raise Torune as a son. As Shino's brother."

"When did you become aware that Shikuro Aburame was a ROOT agent?" Sensei asked.

"When Danzō Shimura approached me, one year ago, with the intent of taking my son away," was Shibi's reply.

My fists clenched in sudden, shocked anger. What?!

Obito's Zetsu arm clapped down onto my shoulder to keep me from getting to my feet.

There was more muttering among the clan representatives. In particular, Tsume and Chōza looked (and sounded, via growling and Kuromaru) furious. With both clans being highly group-oriented, it was no surprise. Shikaku's eyes had narrowed dangerously, and Inoichi looked appalled.
Hiashi was stoic, but had fallen suspiciously silent over the course of the meeting. Did...did he know something we didn't, or was he even more suspicious of the village because of these revelations? Was he feeling more or less willing to come to Sensei about problems like this? His chakra control was good enough to be annoying.

And Fugaku's Sharingan drilled figurative holes into the opposite wall as he fumed. I wasn't sure he even noticed it was active. "He just walked up to you and demanded that you give up a child?"

"Yes. Does this sound familiar, Uchiha-dono?" Shibi asked, raising one dark eyebrow.

Took the words right out of my mouth, Shibi. I did know that Danzō had a kind of hate-boner for the Uchiha clan that went further back than the Uchiha Massacre, but it sounded like we were about to find out some of the details.

"What did Shimura threaten if you didn't turn Torune-kun over to him?" Fugaku asked instead.

"Shimura wished to take either of my children," Shibi corrected, his tone calm in the face of Fugaku's anger. "Shikuro's death left him without an Aburame agent. I concluded that while Shikuro was an adult and could make his decisions, I would not allow Shimura to make mine for me. I would not give up Torune or Shino. And in reply, he asked if I wished my clan's lands...repossessed." Shibi met Fugaku's Sharingan from behind his shades and said firmly, "It was not a compelling offer. He then insinuated that my clan could suffer further consequences for my refusal. I reaffirmed my decision, and he left without incident."

Oh. That...that explained a lot. In a bad way. Why the Uchiha clan had felt pressured by the village. Why it seemed like the majority of the clan lived solely in the District, as though there was no place for them outside of it. Why their petitions to the Council had been rejected over and over again.

Fugaku said, in a flat tone, "That does sound familiar, Aburame-dono. My apologies for interrupting your narrative."

"I believe the difference between our similar circumstances," Shibi said without any particular heat, "is that I reported my grievances to both my clan council and the Hokage. Who, surprisingly, took my concerns as perfect truth." Shibi looked at Sensei. "I now see why. You were building a case against Shimura's influence in Konoha politics before the incident occurred."

I tried not to draw any attention to myself, looking down toward the floor. I'd been the one to first pit Sensei against Danzō. And before that, I'd warned the Chinatsugumi against any of his overtures with the same degree of seriousness as the warning about Orochimaru. And then Jiraiya and Tsunade had saved the fledgling Akatsuki, and added more weight to our suspicions.

Without all that, I didn't know if Sensei would have taken such a strong stance against him.

"Actually," Kushina said brightly, "we were building a case for his house arrest. Much more straightforward!"

Well, we hadn't needed a trial that way. Just the mountain of evidence and Sensei's decision to bait Danzō to his death.

"I see," said Shibi. With a last nod at Sensei, Shibi sat back down.

"We're still sorting through a mountain of paperwork about former ROOT agents," Sensei said apologetically, "but I'll tell you what I've discovered.

"First, there are no Uchiha in ROOT. There was one agent, or at least we think so, but we
discovered their corpse on October Tenth with their eyes removed," Sensei explained. That'd be Nonō, then. But I guess Sensei decided she didn't need to make her big public debut here. "We found the eyes in question in ROOT storage, so there is some speculation that the Uchiha was a ROOT agent who was betrayed by their employer. We don't know for certain."

"Why haven't they been returned to the clan?" Fugaku asked.

"Frankly? Until we had enough evidence to drag ROOT into the light, it would look more like the village was collecting kekkei genkai," Sensei said, grimacing. "They've been preserved, Fugakudono. After this meeting, Tsunade can take you to retrieve them. Given the lack of close family in the agent's file, you would be the best person to take them."

Fugaku nodded and sat back. His Sharingan finally deactivated, leaving his eyes plain black again. "The clan will have to live with that. Given...what happened."

Sensei glanced at the floor for a moment in thought. "I deliberately acted to counteract Danzō, playing on the resentment of the only ROOT agent we could find who was peacefully retired. Once I intervened in Danzō's attempt to influence them as they had done to you, Aburame-dono, ROOT made an apparent point to anger me personally. Why Shimura thought he could possibly get away with it is beyond me, but they do say an old dog never learns new tricks."

With that, Sensei prodded me.

With a brief glare for his smiling face, I got to my feet.

And I was not going to even pretend to be calm.

"I'm sure you already know me," I said, my voice flat. "Keisuke Gekkō. Orphaned on the Tenth of October, like a lot of other people were. Like my brother." My eyes were already gold, so I was sure that everyone in that room knew I was angry. "And our favorite Konoha Council member decided that my brother and I would be better off in his care than as sad little orphans."

I was sure I didn't imagine Obito wincing. I'd have to apologize for that later.

"He put in a formal transfer request for me, during the period before Sensei reestablished his presence in the office on the eleventh," I explained, having done my homework and hated things as a result. "Sensei stopped it. And he stopped it again when Shimura brought up the topic later on, when my brother and I were still living in Sensei's house."

I clasped my hands behind my back. "So I'm not at all sorry that Shimura's dead."

That got a bunch of raised eyebrows across the room.

Hiashi said, "I didn't realize that Shimura had died. Under house arrest, I assume?"

"In one sense!" Kushina said, cheerful still. "But it was really more like we had him under house arrest for a year—which accounts for the dip in mission deaths, since ROOT would kill ANBU agents that discovered them and then they suddenly didn't have any missions at all. Or at least they'd try." Kushina smiled exactly as unpleasantly as Sensei had before and added, "But that ended a little less than two weeks ago. Shimura attacked me when I went to go feed him. So Tsunade-sama killed him."

Which was not what Kurama had said. I didn't have actual details about the situation leading up to Danzō's death, I did know that Kurama had praised her performance. Which implied Adamantine Chakra Chains, premeditated murder, and Tsunade squashing someone quite thoroughly. I didn't
even want to think about the results of Tsunade's punches hitting something without Orochimaru's durability.

Sensei prodded Obito next.

Obito, I hope you nail this. I didn't even really know what he was going to say, but I sat down anyway.

"Oh!" Obito jolted to his feet, looking out at the ten other faces and looking abruptly nervous. "Uh. I...I got back to the village about a year and a half ago or something, but I was listed as KIA for a while too. And, um, I got this arm along the way. Most people know about it now."

I winced internally. I hadn't noticed any underlying tension between Obito and the rest of the village aside from his clan, but I had to wonder how many people in this room—or in their clans—had spent the time since Obito's return wondering when he was going to snap and murder everyone. Which was, of course, the best possible thing for someone recovering from trauma.

Fucking ninjas.

"I didn't get a physical when I got back," Obito went on, his gaze sort of just sliding off of people instead of finding a single point to focus on. "Which I didn't realize was weird—I mean, there was a medic where I was, so maybe I didn't need to go to the hospital? And I wasn't going to since Sensei said I shouldn't just go wherever."

Obito took a deep breath. "But I, I found out that the order went in before I was really even considered alive by the village. Like, someone wanted me to get this"—and here, Obito reached up and touched the top of his cheekbone, under his right eye—"looked at before anyone was supposed to know I wasn't a corpse. How does that even work?"

Never leave a debate opponent with a rhetorical question. They might just answer it.

So Kakashi grabbed it with both hands. "It doesn't," he said, for the benefit of any particularly slow members of the audience. "Which, in addition to the details of Shimura's recruitment attempt for me—which I am not allowed to disclose—indicates only that we were all targets."

"Kei is a jinchūriki. I have Obito's eye in my left socket. Obito...Obito has one of the strangest, most unique powers anyone's ever seen," Kakashi said plainly. "Team Minato has...uncanny luck. Some would call us cursed. But Shimura threw all of this—this effort into taking what he could from the clans. From us."

Then Kakashi and Obito both sat down, allowing Sensei to take the stage one more time.

"For all that he talked about putting Konoha first, he spent a suspicious amount of time ruining the lives of people in it," Sensei commented, with the faintest sardonic tinge to his tone. "It was almost like he didn't comprehend a world where his goals and Konoha's didn't align perfectly. Like he thought the clans and the rest of the people here were just pawns on a shogi board."

Sensei leaned forward in his seat. He took a deep breath, then said in a voice that resonated across the room, "As Hokage, I chose to make the results of this investigation known so the clans can take grievances to Konoha as a whole and not be censured for it. No more back-dealing and underhanded threats. We cannot change the past, but we can make certain that Shimura's machinations don't destroy what our predecessors worked to create." His gaze swept across the room. "Currently, we are in a time of relative peace and security, in defiance of the world Shimura was going to make for our children and grandchildren to live in. We have moved beyond reflexive, thoughtless hostility
toward each other."

For a long moment, no one in the room said anything. We all just looked at each other, thinking.

Sensei wasn't...well, he was pragmatic. If a single speech could change the shinobi world for the better, Hashirama Senju would have gotten his way in about fifteen minutes. So Sensei had started here, with an explicit outlining of past wrongs done by the village against the clans, and asked forgiveness and for everyone to look toward the future. It would be a struggle to make a brighter future after what so many people had done to wreck it out of selfishness or shortsightedness or genre blindness, but as long as work happened, we were going to make progress.

All of us knew this wasn't going to be the end of the fight. There was always more shit heading downstream toward us. But no one could change the future without the strength to pick up a figurative hammer and get to work.

"Thank you for coming to this meeting today. Uchiha-dono, Aburame-dono, I'll be happy to meet in my office with you both in about half an hour. There is someone there I want you two to meet. As for everyone else, I will be providing each of you with a list of known losses to ROOT forces for each of your clans. If you wish to discuss solutions or preventative measures for these kinds of abuses of power, please bring your ideas to my attention as soon as possible." With that, Sensei turned and walked right out of the meeting room. Half a step behind, Kushina followed.

Obito, Kakashi, and I waited until everyone was gone before we finally decided to leave. It wasn't something we planned, but it just seemed like the right decision for all of us.

"Ten ryō says this isn't over," Obito said, leaning back in his chair and resting his feet on the back of the low wall separating the stands from the low center of the room.

"Sucker's bet," Kakashi muttered, glancing at me. "He'll probably call us back within an hour. What should we do now?"

I shrugged. We'd already had lunch, so that was out of the question. "Well, I owe you for lunch."

"Oh, right! "Hey, what did you want say before? Obito kinda cut you off there."

"I did?" Obito asked. He jerked upright. "Was it interesting?"

"It wasn't important," Kakashi said dismissively. "And you don't have to pay me back."

"Maybe if it was a date I wouldn't," I said, though I had a niggling thought that it was much fairer to just split the bill all the time. And did Kakashi just wince there? "But seriously, I can pay for my own food."

Kakashi's chakra crackled.

To my surprise, Obito flashed us both a quick grin. "If you two are gonna just argue about this, I'm gonna go see if I can't get my lunch. See you in a while, probably!"

And then he did something that I remembered Tobi doing, once. He raised his arm and moved it in a slow circle, and his body progressively disappeared around it until his arm vanished into a hole in space-time bit by bit, too.

"...That was weird," I said after a moment, to the space where Obito had been. "I hope he's seeing Rin about eye strain nowadays."

"He is. That may even be where he's heading now," Kakashi murmured, with his chakra already
back to normal. "Did you get the same feeling from the clans as I did?" he asked, changing the topic.

"Depends. I think there are going to be some trouble spots," I admitted, while wondering what Kakashi meant by Obito going to visit Rin. Had I heard a bit of wistfulness there? Were Obito and Rin...a thing? I wasn't going to ask about that yet, though. "And I already know that Kumogakure's going to be gunning for us again, but that's not news. I don't know if they're going to try and target Kushina or Naruto, though, or if they're going to try for one of the dōjutsu clans. We already know that they can be transplanted."

"Depressingly enough, yes," Kakashi agreed, frowning under his mask. "You've already discussed your suspicions with Sensei, haven't you?"

"A while ago, yeah. I just hope Hiashi's support doesn't come from that potential shitstorm. Fugaku and Shibi are on board, though, and I think the rest are pretty much on our side," I said, picking dirt under my nails as I thought. "Well, I think we're done for now. Can we like...I don't know. Let's go someplace and talk about jutsu or something."

After a brief moment of consideration, Kakashi nodded. "We have some catching up to do. Let's go."

By the time Sensei did call us back, Kakashi and I had gone to the Academy roof and gotten to talk about most of the obvious changes in our respective repertoires.

Kakashi's new mobility-enhancing Lightning jutsu was called Lightning Release: Arc Jump, which actually worked in a straight line. But as long as he could mark his place with a faint tinge of Lightning chakra, he could fire himself like a bolt of lightning at that point. Sure, he couldn't attack while moving that fast, and he couldn't phase through solid objects, and he needed line of sight to use it successfully, but he was working on those parts. Already, he had practiced it enough to use it as a reflexive dodging technique. Maybe, in time, he'd manage a reverse-engineered version of what the various Raikage kept playing with. He'd also progressed with his Lightning manipulation to the point that he could send a bog-standard human—and most shinobi—into cardiac arrest with a touch. That technique didn't have a name just yet.

And I described some of the things I'd been working on with Isobu, which the various jinchūriki transformations played into. The coral projections were most definitely a work in progress, given that I could barely get the blades to hold a consistent edge, but creating solid objects out of pure chakra was something too energy-intensive for me to accomplish on my own. That meant I'd always have to use the V2 cloak to pull it off, which curtailed my training opportunities rather severely. As for the full transformation...well, even with properly formed coral swords, I'd need to adjust my kenjutsu to compensate for a lack of sheaths for iaijutsu, using two blades, and for not having any actual legs. Again, a work in progress.

And then Sensei's secretary came to come get us off the roof and into the office. Obito showed up a minute later, having clearly run from the Hospital to the office instead of just ripping a hole in space-time for the same purpose. I had to wonder if Rin had told him to lay off the use of a technique that might screw with his eyesight. He kind of only had one eye left to use for it.

"Ordinarily, I wouldn't call all three of you to the office at once over a mission, and not so soon," Sensei said, once the three of us were safely ensconced inside of the Hokage's office. Security seals up, possibility of eavesdroppers down, and so on and so forth. "But a message arrived right after Fugaku and Shibi left, and I think all three of you need to hear it."

Kakashi straightened from his usual sulky slouch, watching Sensei carefully. Obito's earlier agitation had thrown him off—or maybe on, if that meant his mission-ready state. He wasn't in uniform, but I
could definitely sense the ANBU training in him. And he'd gone totally quiet, which was a sharp change from just twenty minutes ago.

Obito crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and waited with less poise. It was an accomplishment. Instead of devoting any particular effort to that, I concentrated on my chakra sense and noticed an extra signature in the room. It wasn't much—more like the chakra levels in a small animal of some kind—but it was still unusual.

Sensei nodded to himself, mostly. Then he waved his hand at something on his desk and said, "Well, go on."

From behind the inkwell on his desk, something made a rustling noise. Then, with the sound of crinkling paper, a little white shape bounced into view.

I'd never really been a fan of origami or paper art in general, but someone must have thought that Sensei was. They'd left a little white paper crane on Sensei's desk.

And the little crane was moving like a real one would have, though with an awkward lack of feet. Now, who did we know with a tendency to use origami to create minions?

The crane hopped off the desk and landed on the floor between us. As we watched, it unfolded itself into an unmarred paper square, then re-folded into a little origami person. It looked like a child wearing a white paper dress, actually.

I could practically feel everyone in the room biting down on the urge to say anything.

The origami creature stepped forward until it stood equidistant from each of us. Then, without any further sound, raised its little arms and all three of us jumped back as a full-sized, flickering image of a woman in Akatsuki uniform dominated the room.

…Okay, so she was only about my height, but Konan's hologram-like projection stood an additional five centimeters off the floor and could look Kakashi square in the eye. She had light blue hair with a distinct lavender undertone, and wore a white origami rose in her hair. Her eyes were cool gray with eyeshadow the same color as her hair, and there was a silver piercing under her lower lip. While she wore the usual Akatsuki robe and had the new Ame headband style, it would be a mistake to think this woman was any common foot-soldier.

She was, after all, the last original Akatsuki member left standing. In one timeline, at least.

Here and now, though, she wasn't nearly as worn by time and pain. Instead, her image smiled faintly as she saw the three of us, and she said, "Hello, everyone. I am Konan, the third of Jiraiya's Amegakure students. Am I looking at Minato-senpai's students?"

"That's us," Obito said. "I'm Obito Uchiha!"

"Kakashi Hatake," said Kakashi, still eyeing Konan's image carefully.

And as Konan turned to me, I managed, "I'm Keisuke Gekkō, Konan-san. Er, Konan-sama?"

"Konan-senpai at most, Keisuke-san," Konan corrected me gently. "That goes for all of you, except for Minato-senpai."

"Okay, Konan-senpai!" Obito said, "So, you have a mission request?"
"Yes." Konan lifted her arm and her image briefly dissolved. However, her voice still came through loud and clear as we were treated to the somewhat garbled transmission of a cave's mouth. "To be brief, this is a cavern within Amegakure territory, recently uncovered due to limestone erosion in the area," she explained, and the cave's mouth seemed to grow jagged fangs of limestone for a moment. "We came across it during the last severe winter storm, and Yahiko sent a Water Clone in to investigate it for weak points."

The image shifted again, showing the inside of the cave's depths. The faint sound of water constantly dripping down formed a sort of background white noise as Konan continued, "And inside the caves, we found…this."

The cave effectively disappeared. While Konan's image did appear again, carrying a sheaf of burning paper, it was dwarfed by the massive thing lit by the firelight.

"Holy shit," Obito breathed.

Sitting primly in a meditative position, the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path seemed to loom over everyone and everything, despite the projection only reaching the office's sealing. It was exactly as ugly as I remembered it being—all emaciated limbs, ten closed eyes set in a mummified face, one mouth with a full set of completely flat teeth. It looked like someone had forced a tree to grow into a horrific depiction of an elder god, complete with ten little stumps to represent the Ten-Tails it had once been.

Yahiko's image climbed up its side, illuminating its limbs—chained, though damned if I knew where the links were.

"That's…I remember that thing!" Obito burst out, his eye wide with shock. "That's the statue thing that was keeping Madara alive the last I saw him!"

Konan's image flickered back into view, her gray eyes narrowed. "Madara Uchiha?"

"So that's what that thing looks like," Sensei murmured. "I was wondering about that…"

"Yeah, he—look, there's a whole ton of history behind that," Obito said, cutting himself off. "But I met the guy a while back and that was definitely working with him."

"That's not all it is," I said, stepping forward. "You're looking at the empty shell that used to be the Ten-Tailed Beast."

That's not all it is, Isobu said, in a sort of mocking echo. He was staring up at the statue's grim heights even from the inside of my mindscape. Not even close.

What?

I need to talk this over with the others, Isobu said. Give me a moment.

Wait, which others? How many of your siblings are you even talking to?

Not now, was all he said in response.

"The Ten-Tails?" Konan asked, openly staring. "I thought that was a fairy tale."

"It's really, really not," I told her, eyes still on the Statue's motionless form. "The Tailed Beasts don't remember being the Ten-Tails, but the Three-Tails confirmed that the story was true. I don't know as much about it as he seems to, but that thing is really bad news."
Konan frowned. "I see. Well, I was going to request your team to investigate this statue's origins, but I see that you already know. I would like more detail, however."

"So, we don't actually have a mission?" Obito asked, disappointed despite the earlier spike of fear.

"No, I would still like to hire Team Minato," Konan said. "There are a number of aspects of this situation that I believe we, as students in the tradition of Jiraiya-sensei, need to work together to resolve."

None of us said anything for a moment.

And then, when I was just starting to wonder if Sensei had deliberately let us wander into this minefield of a conversation because he could, we were saved from endless silence.

"When do you need us there?" Kakashi asked, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"As soon as you can travel here," Konan said. She bowed. "I look forward to meeting all of you in person."

Then the little paper person on the floor folded itself into a crane again and flapped its way back onto Sensei's desk.

I sighed internally. And to think I'd been wondering if this chunk of the timeline was going to be boring. Mondays were officially the worst days. What was the phrase, again? When it rains, it pours?

Well, since we were apparently suiting up for Amegakure, all of those bits seemed accurate. We'd just have to head over there and find out for sure.
"…And that's why your daddy's always running into walls," I concluded, bouncing Naruto on my knee as I waited for my teammates to show up at Sensei's house.

"Daddy fall down!" Naruto concluded, still pulling on his stuffed toad toy's long pink tongue.

"Yep! You're one smart cookie, Naruto-chan." While the toddler continued to babble happily to himself, I propped my chin up on his head and took a moment to reflect.

While obviously putting a jinchūriki right in range of the withered Ten-Tails was a bad idea, I didn't exactly plan on being the one to poke around its insides. Konan's paper messenger had confirmed, on further interrogation, that the cavern for the statue was some ways outside of Amegakure proper. I'd be around in case someone needed to bounce theories off me, but my job was mainly to see if we couldn't establish firmer ties between Ame and Konoha.

That left Kakashi and Obito, who both had quick ways out of trouble, to investigate along with any of the Ame trio who wanted to go with them. If I had to pick one of them, though, I would have chosen Nagato. While Nagato was one of the strongest people on the continent, his main value there would be the link between his Rinnegan and the statue. I didn't know if he'd actually tried that already, and it would take us almost a week to get there. If he had, we'd probably find out how that experiment went around the time the continent flipped over on us.

"Are you slandering me?" Sensei asked, once he'd appeared at the front door with the usual _fwish_ noise. I didn't doubt that he'd been listening beforehand, though.

"It's not slander if it's true," I told him. "It's more like telling stories to your son so he can make fun of you when I'm not around."

"Is this revenge for not giving you the C-rank I talked about earlier?" he asked, amused.

"No, I figured this was a crisis and that's fine," I said, as Naruto made his little frog toy lick my face. "But I claim the next C-rank that fits my abilities and temperament."

"Temperament?" Sensei gave a sudden back of a laugh. "Like what? Because I _did_ see what happened yesterday. Your temper isn't great, Kei."

I shrugged. "Well, then you shouldn't have told me that Hayate could have been hurt." If my brain
was the control panel of a doomsday device, I could honestly say that there was a switch with the label "Hayate's in trouble" that could get blistering anger out of me no matter what day it was.

Probably not a good weakness to have. But it was there anyway.

I sighed aloud. Hayate could stay at our apartment, but I'd also talked with Sensei about possibly letting him stay over in the Namikaze household's guest room. And I was pretty sure the Umino family would let him sleep there, if he wanted. But really, I expected that he'd be running missions for most of the time that I was gone in any case.

"Are you worried about your first S-ranked mission?" Sensei asked in a whisper, leaning in so only Naruto and I could hear.

I glared at him over the top of his son's head. "First planned one, maybe."

"Well?" Sensei insisted.

"I don't know. There are a ton of ways that this could go wrong, as usual," I said.

I bounced Naruto on my knee again, but it seemed like the toddler was tired of the game. As he turned around and reached up with both hands for his father with an imperious cry of "Up!"

Sensei obliged, scooping Naruto off my lap and into his arms. "There we go, Naruto." With Naruto having established a grip in his father's hair, Sensei turned his attention back to me and said, "I still expect you to keep your team informed of any updated information you get as the mission progresses. I didn't get the impression you knew as much about this assignment."

"That's because we're veering off into speculation, and it'll change depending on the situation on the ground." Like information always did. I stared down at my hands for a moment, thinking. "We'll see once we get there."

"True," Sensei said, and patted my shoulder. "Also, maybe you should take your gear and head to the West Gate. I'm pretty sure Obito and Kakashi are getting into it over there."

"What?" I grabbed my pack and immediately stood up, staring at Sensei even as I got my stuff secured. "How can you tell?"

"I have a seal on each of them, remember? Might be something you want to consider," Sensei suggested, and headed into his house.

Well, now that I concentrated, I could definitely feel the two of them over in that part of the village. Kakashi's chakra in particular got easier to locate the angrier he got. What the hell?

"I told them to meet here," I grumbled as I took off.

After a bit of verbal sparring—in which puns featured prominently—the three of us set off from the West Gate. Given our average endurance, which was admittedly half chakra and half physical conditioning, I was pretty sure we managed to go farther than most teams in the same timeframe.

So, on the eve of the first day away from Konoha, we could afford to slow a bit and chat. A little.

"So, Obito," I began, as we dashed through the forests outside of Konoha. A lot fewer trees out here, but they were sufficient for traveling quickly above ground. "How's Rin?"

Kakashi dashed ahead of us, shooting me a quick, skeptical look.

I winked back.

"So, when were you gonna tell us that you two are a thing?" I asked.

Obito tripped on a branch and fell out of the canopy.

Maybe I should have saved that for when we made camp.

Obito caught up to us a minute later, red in the face and shouting, "We're not like that, Kei! Rin-chan's just been making sure my eyesight's okay even with how much work I've been doing!"

"How much work?" I repeated. "Obito, you're overusing that jutsu after everything that happened, aren't you?"

"Not as much," Obito insisted, though petulant. "But it's what I've got, Kei."

"You say that like you don't have four or five other techniques no one can imitate," Kakashi called over his shoulder, irritated. "But you only have one eye."

"But it's mine," Obito said to Kakashi's back. "Rin-chan already looked at it yesterday and the fixed problems that came up. I'm fine."

"I'm not gonna turn a blind eye to your situation, Obito," Kakashi replied.

"Shut up."

"Rin will actually kill you if you go blind after all the work she put in," I said. "Like, she'll watch as you bounce off walls eighty times in a row and won't lift a finger to help, because it'll be your fault for overusing a jutsu like that."

"Ugh, that's almost exactly what she said." Obito concentrated on his landings for a moment, then said, "Only she threatened to strap me to a hospital bed for incurable stupidity, too."

"Sounds more extreme than usual," I remarked, dodging the trunk of a tree as we went. "Aside from the eye thing, did you do anything to make her mad?"

"Not that I know of." Obito rubbed the back of his neck. "I'll talk to her as soon as we…well, actually, when you guys set camp I'll just go see her. It's not that hard to find places I've already visited."

Which was why we weren't just teleporting to Amegakure, by the by. None of us had ever visited, so a Flying Thunder God Formation wouldn't have helped at all. Even Sensei hadn't been there, and Jiraiya didn't generally leave Sensei's kunai just lying around. Obito needed some idea of where he was going to end up in order to go someplace—or at least, Kakashi needed to be in the area. I was pretty sure that Obito could always locate the other eye in the pair.

"Don't let it fester," I agreed. "Sounds all right to me."

Obito nodded to himself. Then, "I hope she doesn't get mad again because I'm using Kamui to get back…"

Spoiler: It turned out later that yes, Rin did get mad. But it was a bit more than that.

While Kakashi set up the camp perimeter with his dogs and my security seals, Obito and I got our
actual campsite ready for bedtime. Despite the existence of soldier pills, no one really wanted to suffer an energy crash at the end of the trip. Assuming that nothing horrible happened while we were working our way toward Amegakure, we'd be okay.

"Rin yelled at me pretty much immediately," Obito admitted when I asked. "But I asked her to tell me what I did—if I did anything—to make her madder than what usually happens."

"And what did she say?" I asked.

"She said, um…” Obito looked down at the bedroll he was trying to unwrap and sighed. "She said I wasn't allowed to do anything that dumb and preventable. Because chakra exhaustion isn't something that just hits out of the blue, and I'm supposed to be limiting how much I use Kamui anyway."

I kicked my bedroll out flat, then gestured for him to continue. "Well?"

"She said I'm not allowed to do stuff that has such a high chance of making sure I never come home," Obito said quietly. "That she'd cried enough for me the first time, and so did everyone else."

Wordlessly, I reached out and grasped his left shoulder.

He sighed. "Yeah, I know." He paused awkwardly, then cheered up a bit and said, "Though something good did come out of it!"

"Like what?" I asked.

"Well, uh," Obito mumbled, slowly turning red. But in a pleased sort of way.

"Spit it out," Kakashi said.

"Rin and I, um, we…” Sooner or later, Obito was going to turn redder than Raidō…had… Wait. "I have a date with Rin when we get back!"

"Congrats!" I said reflexively, pleasantly surprised.

"Yeah, it's really…” Obito trailed off. "It's kind of embarrassing, actually. I said, 'Can I be your boyfriend?' at the same time Rin said, 'I want to be your girlfriend.' It took us a bit to, uh, actually hear what we were saying. But we're going to take it slow. I don't think either of us really know what we're doing, so… So we're going to try."

Even compared to the story I got from Genma about how he and Raidō hooked up, it was actually pretty cute.

"Then we'd better make sure this S-ranked mission goes better than our last A-rank together," Kakashi said, drifting out of the dark with his dogs at his heels. He stopped at Obito's side and thumped the back of his right shoulder blade with his fist. "Won't we?"

Obito brushed him off, but said, "Yeah, we will." He sat down with his back to the fire. "And we're all a lot stronger now than we were back then. So I think we're going to be okay as long as we do this together."

Speaking of that… "Actually, it might be best for me to stay as far away from the Statue as possible," I said, while Kakashi dug through our packs for our dinner. I'd sealed a hot bowl of miso soup with eggplant into one of the scrolls in his pack, but I didn't remember quite where. It would take him a while to find it.
"Is it because of Isobu-san?" Obito asked.

"Yes." I sat down on my bedroll and started picking through one of my storage scrolls, looking for whichever seal held my pillow. Absently, I said, "In the other world, that thing was used as a…a storage container."

"For what?" Obito wanted to know, startled. "It didn't look hollow or anything…?"

"…This might take a while to explain," I said, even as my pillow poofed back into existence in my hands. I set it aside and said, "But the short version? Over there, Akatsuki was a band of missing-nin with the explicit purpose of capturing all the Tailed Beasts and sealing them into that statue to create a superweapon. I'm not sure if they knew that meant reviving the Ten-Tails."

"And Akatsuki here is…not going to do that, I hope." Obito looked a little green around the gills.

"No, I don't think so." I picked up another scroll and worked on getting my dinner—leftover baked pumpkin and assorted other stuff—out of whatever scroll I'd sealed it into. "From what I know about Konan-san, Nagato-san, and Yahiko-san, they're really just idealistic revolutionaries here. Danzō didn't ruin their lives because Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama rescued them, so they're not dead or insane." What in the world had that timeline looked like? "And without Tobi to give them that last push, they'll make better choices on their own, too."

"What happens, exactly, if the Ten-Tails comes back?" Kakashi asked. He had found his dinner and snapped the chopsticks apart as I watched. As he stirred the steaming bowl of noodles, he said, "If Akatsuki sealed all of the Tailed Beasts into the statue, all of the jinchūriki died when they were taken. That would leave the villages without any jinchūriki to use on offense or defense, and they'd be facing off against something that sounds like it'd give the Nine-Tailed Fox nightmares. Why would anyone even try to bring that thing back?"

Stupidity? Isobu suggested. The Sage sometimes talked about what the world was like before the Ten-Tails was sealed away. Imagine the Clan Wars era your people view with so much fear, and then drop in a massive monster that devours other beings whole—body and spirit alike. Isobu's eye closed. None of us remember what that was like. But we know enough that we don't want to go back.

Would any of your siblings know more about it? I asked him.

Gyūki might. Kurama, too. But neither of them really want to talk about the old days.

"Isobu says anyone who tries is an idiot," I said, staring down into the fire for a moment. "The Infinite or Eternal Tsukuyomi—I forget which— involves using the Ten-Tails's power to create a massive, world-spanning genjutsu, but there was never any mention of what's supposed to happen while everyone's stuck like that. I guess the Ten-Tails eats them?" For fuel, maybe. Like in The Matrix? "But I do remember that the Rinnegan can control the statue—up to a point."

"Here's to hoping that Nagato-san can hold it off if something does happen, then," Obito said.

"I don't understand how Tobi expected to control it, since, well…" Kakashi gestured at his left eye. Which was the one with the Sharingan, true, but Obito's was just an empty socket.

"Tobi went grave-robbing after Nagato-san died," I said flatly. "And he killed Konan-san in the process."

(Fūinjutsu was the best thing ever.)
"It sounds like there's seriously nothing this guy wouldn't do to make things worse, Kei," Obito said bleakly.

"Yeah," I muttered. I sighed, running a hand through my hair and sliding my headband off in the process. As it dropped onto my bedroll, I said, "Seriously, Obito, I don't think I thank you for existing nearly enough."

"Existing like I am with friends like you two isn't really that hard," Obito pointed out with a faint smile on his face. He added somewhat sadly, after a moment of thought, "I guess that's one reason I kinda feel sorry for Tobi. Everything came tumbling down on him before he knew how good things could be. It's easy to go bad when there's no one left to tell you any better."

Ehhh, I wouldn't go that far. But then, I wasn't exactly a bubbling wellspring of empathy. Obito was. Pakkun trotted over to me and sniffed at my dinner, which was in a bowl in front of me. "Vegetables?" he said, frowning.

"Yep," I replied, picking up a cold cube of pumpkin in my chopsticks. "Sorry, Pakkun."

"Not a problem. Hey, Kakashi, when are you going to feed us?" Pakkun demanded, wandering over to him instead. He was quickly joined by Kakashi's other seven dogs, who all sat around him in a ring of fur for more effective begging.

"You can feed yourselves too, you know," Kakashi told them.

"You're a bunch of mooches," Obito said to the dogs, though I noted that he had unsealed and commenced devouring his dinner much faster once Pakkun had approached me. So he didn't really have anything left to steal.

I smiled anyway at their antics. "They're cute mooches, though."

"Cute or not, I don't have enough food with me to last this trip if there are eight more mouths to feed," Kakashi said. "And I didn't pack dog food anyway."

"You're such a lazy master!" Shiba barked unhappily.

Kakashi rolled his visible eye. "I'll feed you what you like once we aren't on the road."

All eight dogs whined in unison.

"This place freaks me out a little," Obito said, apropos of nothing, as we gazed across the lake to Amegakure proper. "It just looks...weird."

Amegakure wasn't a Hidden Village the way that Konoha was. Perched on the edge of a massive lake and amidst near-constant curtains of rain, Amegakure loomed over the landscape like a city skyline straight out of my world. I couldn't judge building heights from where I was, but it looked like there were many more spires than would have been practical in a world with helicopters. It didn't gleam, though—the rain was in the process of turning the city gray.

Kakashi shook himself under his thick rain-cloak, peering out from under his flattened and soaked bangs. "Konan-san said she was going to send someone out here to meet us."

I pulled my hood back a bit and looked up. As rain dripped down my face, saturated with chakra I was pretty sure I recognized, I said, "I think she already knows we're here. We just have to wait."
"Really?" Obito asked. He flipped his hood back and stuck his tongue out to catch a raindrop on it.

"How can she tell?" Kakashi asked. "I can smell anything in this rain."

"I think Nagato laces his chakra into the storm," I said. "It's actually centered on Amegakure from what I can tell."

"...That's kind of scary," Obito said after a moment. "Oh man, does that mean I just swallowed some of his chakra?"

"Probably," Kakashi said.

Off in the distance, I could see a tiny black shape in the sky above the city. It turned and seemed to get closer to us, flapping gigantic white wings as it went. "Uh, Kakashi, Obito, is that who I think it might be?"

Obito's eye turned Sharingan red while Kakashi lifted his headband, too. After a second or so of peering at the flying figure, Obito said, "Oh, it's Konan-san!"

"She can fly?" Kakashi stared out across the lake as Konan flew steadily closer. "Her wings...that's paper. I'm amazed she can keep going in the rain."

"If she couldn't use her paper ninjutsu in the rain, I don't think she would have lasted that long," I pointed out. "I bet Jiraiya-sama could have told us specifics, but we didn't ask." Though I already knew that toad oil could weigh her down to the point of uselessness. We just didn't have any, and neither would anyone with hostile intent toward Amegakure in this universe.

After a couple more minutes of careful flapping, Konan landed on our little spur of rock as lightly as a bird, blowing all of our hoods back as she settled into place. Her paper wings flew apart as she secured her footing, almost like confetti framing her arrival, before they reformed into a gigantic paper umbrella over all of our heads.

I clapped.

Konan gave a playful little bow and said, "Hello again, Team Minato. Welcome to Amegakure."

Damn, she was beautiful. And there went my train of thought for a good three seconds.

Obito raised his hand while I was in the process of rationalizing the thought to death. He said, "So does that mean we can actually go into the village now? Kei said we should probably wait outside of it."

Konan raised one blue eyebrow at me. I could only shrug helplessly in response.

"While there are some security concerns in any new village," Konan said, "you are invited guests. You didn't have to wait two kilometers outside of the village."

Obito reached over and punched me in the shoulder. "Told you!"

"Yeah, yeah," I grouched. So I'd been thinking a little too much of the circumstances leading to Jiraiya's death. It wasn't like the old story had focused on Amegakure for any other reason! "I'm sorry already!"

"I still found you. It's fine," Konan said.

"Konan-san, when would it be best to take care of our clothing concerns?" Kakashi asked, while
Obito and I shoved each other for a couple of seconds. He'd already lowered his hitai-ate, knowing that we weren't going to cause any real trouble.

All three of us had decided to wear our jōnin blues on the trip to Ame solely because they were the outfits we cared the least about. People got their uniforms wrecked all the time and sent them in for repairs, and I didn't even want to think about the number of shredded flak jackets Konoha went through. I had at least two spare sets at home in case one got shredded beyond all repair.

But since Amegakure was home to an awful of people who had grievances with the Five Elemental Nations—primarily because border powers like Ame got steamrolled whenever we fought each other—Konan had suggested that each of us take some less-distinctive clothes for the times when we wanted to walk around in the streets. There were diplomatic passes of a sort, like the metal tags Konan and the other two rebel leaders sometimes handed out, but it was better to avoid unnecessary hostility.

"Fortunately, I can take all three of you directly to where you will be staying while you are here," Konan said. Which didn't necessarily mean we were going to be at an inn. "From there, you may either rest or begin work immediately."

Obito's stomach growled right on cue. He gave Konan a sheepish look and said, "Maybe we can decide once we eat?"

Konan's smile was something I had never really expected to see on her face in person. A fond smile, sort of like how Rin looked whenever Obito and I did something silly in front of her. Fond exasperation, perhaps? "Of course, Obito-san."

With a nod to us and a quick gesture indicating that we should probably back up a bit, Konan raised both of her arms over her head.

While we got out of the way, all of the pieces of paper that had formed our little umbrella flew together until they nearly formed a single, coherent sheet. As we watched, that sheet—easily the size of a sail—folded itself rapidly into…yep. That was what I'd thought.

A gigantic paper crane flapped its wings and blew our cloaks aside from the sheer down-draft it produced. It was easily twice Tsuruya's size, and if Konan was planning on providing transport just like that, I didn't need to call on my flesh-and-blood crane to check.

Konan leapt up onto one of the crane's huge wings, then hopped into position in the crook between its neck and back. "Step up here, please."

Obito bounded up and onto the paper crane's back without any hesitation whatsoever. Kakashi, on the other hand, put a cautious foot on the joint where the nearest wing met the body and put his weight on it experimentally before apparently just getting on with things.

Then I bounced on up. I landed in the divot on the left side of the crane's central hump, while Obito was on the right one and Kakashi was in the back. Once I was onboard, Konan clapped her hands and the crane flapped its huge wings once, twice.

And then we were in the air and surging toward Amegakure's spiky skyline. In a paper bird.

I needed to learn to stop questioning some things and just go with the flow, like Obito. Who, on our flight, raised his arms within the first ten seconds in the air and was shouting "Wheeeeee!" most of the way to Amegakure's most complicated-looking tower.

We alighted on a small landing pad next to a demonic-looking caricature of a face built into the side
of the tower. More specifically, the crane dissolved into three smaller cranes to fit through the opening into the side of the tower, with one crane carrying each member of Team Minato. Konan just danced across the leftover paper sheets as though she didn't weigh anything, landing as perfectly as a trained gymnast on the far edge of the landing pad.

The rest of us had to hang on for dear life, since our crane steeds seemed to prefer skidding stops rather than perfect landings. And once we were on our feet again, they split apart into their component sheets of paper and flew back into Konan's sleeves.

"Are you sixteen or six?" Kakashi asked Obito once we were all settled again. "What was with all the cheering?"

"Flying is the coolest thing ever." Obito crossed his arms stubbornly and huffed, "You just don't have a sense of fun."

"Konan-san," I suggested, before the boys could start squabbling like they had before we left Konoha, "where are we going to be staying?"

"This way," Konan said, hiding a smile behind her long black sleeves. "You're probably not used to the weather here, are you?"

I shivered a little. "No." I used to live in a region that rained buckets, but Konoha was fairly temperate. Summers made me wish for Amegakure's rainfall, but maybe not the version in early March.

"Well, come along then," Konan said, and all of us fell into line with her as she walked backwards toward what turned out to be a staircase. "Yahiko and Nagato want to see all of you, and it would be better if you don't have to shiver all through dinner."

"How have they been?" Obito asked. "I mean, we saw Yahiko-san like a month ago, but still…"

"We've been doing well. All of the damage from our takeover has finally been repaired, so we can sleep soundly for once," Konan said as we descended. Little sheets of paper floated on after her as we went, with pieces in the shape of people or small origami animals hopping at her heels.

I was going to take a wild guess and say that Konan was probably the information hub of Amegakure, just because she had a downright ridiculous number of ways to get information. Every village needed a spymaster. What made Konan special was that she was also every agent in the field.

"So, do we call you Konan-senpai in public, or is Konan-san okay?" Obito asked, curious. "I mean, to the people here, we're just Konoha-nin. We probably shouldn't be too informal, right?"

"I think 'Konan-senpai' will do for any public appearances you might make," Konan replied, sending another paper construct shooting off in a different direction with a flick of her wrist. "But we need to get started on the reason we called you three here in the first place."

After passing another few floors, Konan ushered us into a hallway that was decorated in a more traditional manner. The doors were actual rice-paper shoji, which made me wonder if they'd been stockpiling since Hanzō's death. The rainy climate ought to have eaten right through them otherwise, right? Or mold would have.

"You each have a room here, if you want," Konan said, "or you can take two of them apart and just sleep in one room. I do recommend that you trap them, though—even now, things aren't necessarily what I would call stable."
And coming from someone who'd grown up smack in the middle of a warzone, Konan's words had weight.

"One room is easier to trap," Obito said, eyeing the walls and doors speculatively. He nodded to himself. "Kakashi, pick one."

"That one," Kakashi said, pointing at a seemingly random sliding door and heading toward it immediately.

"Ah, Keisuke-san," Konan said, before I could go and join my teammates. When I stopped, looking back, she continued, "Do you have any concerns about how the rooms are arranged? I just remembered that Konoha is a little stricter than we are here in Amegakure, and I don't want you to feel awkward."

"Honestly, Konan-san, the only thing awkward about this is that you're asking that," I replied, watching a sheepish expression spread across the older kunoichi's face. "I'm fine. Thanks for your concern, and thanks for being one of the few people who doesn't need to be told I'm female. You're pretty observant."

"It has nothing to do with observation," Konan admitted. "Nagato came back from Konoha once and told us all about the 'terrible mistake' he'd made. Yahiko and I didn't stop laughing at him for a week."

"Harsh," I said, but smiled anyway. "Well, Konan-san, we're gonna unpack now. Do you need us anywhere immediately?"

"No. Just join us downstairs when you're hungry," she said, handing me a paper star, spun practically out of thin air by a strip of paper and a wisp of her chakra in an instant. "Here, this token will get you through to our quarters on the fifth floor. Don't try getting in without it. Imoriko isn't very friendly."

"Imoriko?" I repeated.

"You'll meet her in a little while," was all Konan said, and then she vanished down the stairs in a flurry of paper.

Huh. That sounded like a summon animal security measure. I tucked the paper star carefully into my hip holster and went to see what my boys had done with the room.

Aside from the security tags on the walls and the requisite flinging of personal belongings across the room, they hadn't done all that much. Obito was actually in the next room over, dragging a futon back, and Kakashi was sitting cross-legged on one of the lily pad-patterned ones on the floor.

After a moment, he held up his hands and a dangerous-looking length of ninja wire seemed to glow in the faint light, coiled between his fingers. "Eighth trap's ready to go."

"Cool, gimme," was Obito's reply. He caught it in his gloved right hand when Kakashi tossed it his way, and commenced trapping the window.

"Do either of you want to get changed?" I asked, distractedly sorting through the arsenal of seals in my head to decide what I wanted to add. By the time we were done here, an enemy would need to take out the building to get in here. And with the people who lived here, I rather doubted they'd survive in any case. "We have a bit of time."

Kakashi got to his feet and picked up his mission pack. Slipping into the room that Obito had stripped for more supplies, he slid the shoji shut behind him and said, "Mine."
"You know, you're supposed to say 'dibs' instead of just running in," Obito said. Anything else he wanted to say was muffled by the kunai between his teeth a moment later.

"You're busy," Kakashi replied through the shoji. Then apparently he decided to concentrate on not looking like a Konoha-nin for a bit, which was really the point.

After a couple more minutes, Obito and I had trapped the room to a point that even Kakashi probably would have had trouble getting into the room unscathed. We didn't need him to test it, though, because that would have ruined his clothes and he was already inside anyway.

Kakashi pushed the shoji open a moment after Obito flopped onto his futon to dig through his pack.

He wasn't wearing his mask or his headband, leaving his fluffy white hair untamed by gravity or accessories. Aside from that bizarre detail, though, Kakashi had simply found a short-sleeved version of his Konoha uniform. But without the flak jacket or headband, it just looked like he was showing allegiance to the Uzumaki clan, given the ubiquitous shoulder patches that all of our uniforms had.

Obito stared at the lower half of Kakashi's face for long enough that Kakashi actually started to fidget.

"You don't look like you," Obito said finally.

"And?" Kakashi prompted, sounding irritable already.

"Go put the mask back on," Obito said. "This is one too many freaky things in a single day."

Kakashi rolled his normal eye, though the Sharingan remained shut. "Fine, fine." He drifted back into the other room and grumbled to himself for a bit.

Obito shook himself and said, "Kei, you didn't do that weirdness justice."

"It's just his face," I said, my eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

"You didn't say he was pretty," Obito argued. "That should have come up!"

In fact, I had deliberately talked my way around that little point. So, oops?

"What, does that make it awkward somehow?" I asked.

Obito grouched, "No, I'm just jealous." He sighed. "There are guys in my clan who aren't that pretty. There are people in the Hyūga clan who aren't that attractive."

"You know, if this bugs you, you could always do what Mom said I should do when I find someone attractive enough to get a little envious," I suggested, since I didn't know what else to do.

"What's that?"

"Mom said that you should always remember that you can't be hot the same way someone else is," I explained. "So the best thing is to be hot in a you way." Granted, I didn't specify which of my mothers had said it, but I didn't really remember. I'd been a lot more self-conscious about my appearance before the whole reincarnation thing.

Obito thought about it. "Sounds kind of cheap."

"Says the guy with a date," I reminded him.
Kakashi piped up, "You two do realize I can still hear you, right?"

"Don't you have dogs to feed?" Obito shot back.

"Actually, yes, but it's your turn to get changed now," Kakashi said, turning back to us with his mask firmly in place. But he'd picked up a strip of cloth to remind himself not to open his Sharingan, so we were back to seeing about a quarter of his face.

After some hemming and hawing, Obito left his vest in the room, but that was all he did. He kept all of his weaponry with him, like Kakashi and I did.

In the end, I swapped out my Konoha flak jacket and uniform top for a sleeveless, cowl-necked black shirt with mesh arm covers. I kept my hip and thigh scroll/weapon holsters, but I left my katana in the room when it was time to head down. I could get access to some kind of blade if I needed one, and not just because I had a dedicated weapon scroll, too.

Then it was time to meet our, um, our seniors? If Jiraiya taught them and taught Sensei, then did that make us kinda like step-students or something? And how was that affected if Jiraiya had taught me, even if it was just about genjutsu?

"Kei, stop goofing off and come on!" Obito yelled back up the stairs, since I was dawdling as I thought. Kakashi had already gone on ahead.

"All right, all right!" I hurried to catch up.

"Dinner," as it turned out, meant all of us ate yakitori on a balcony on the fifth floor of the Akatsuki triumvirate's steel tower.

"We don't cook as much as we should," Yahiko had admitted, once he spotted how nonplussed we all were by what was essentially takeout. "So since we didn't really know when you were going to arrive, I just bought stuff."

And aside from meeting Yahiko's salamander summon ("She's just cranky, I swear!") and finding places to sit, that was that.

"How did you get all these towers built?" Kakashi asked, leaning back against the chunk of wall closest to the sheer five-story drop. He looked out into the rain pensively, his Sharingan open and drinking in the scenery.

I wasn't sure why. Cities weren't exactly pretty, and most of Amegakure's architecture had a "mad artist" vibe, with an optional note of "junkyard living."

Then again, art was subjective.

"They were already there. But we blew up at least a few, and Nagato...did something to fix those," Yahiko said, looking over at the third member of their team.

Nagato was sitting on the floor with Akino in his lap, and was scratching behind the dog's ears with an expression of intense concentration on his face. He didn't seem to have heard his name.

All of Kakashi's dogs were out and about, and they were the reason that Yahiko ended up needing to make a second trip to that yakitori stand. Now happy with their lot in life, they lounged around the balcony while the rest of us talked. Akino was simply the only one who decided to sit on someone.
Though Pakkun was on my foot, I could still move and had decided that it didn't count.

"I don't really know what kind of jutsu it was," Yahiko went on, "but since it's pretty hard to get large amounts of metal here without paying through the nose, it worked out for the best."

While he wasn't actually using any descriptive terms, I was willing to guess that it had something to do with Nagato's Paths of Pain (or whatever he was calling it now), and particularly the one that had been a missile-launching cyborg. Really, sometimes it seemed like this continent didn't have any level of internal technological consistency…

"So, about that statue," I said, since no one else seemed ready to say anything about what we were supposedly being hired to do.

"Are you sure it's the Ten-Tails?" Yahiko asked. "Because I don't see why something like that is in our country."

"It used to be the Ten-Tails," I corrected. "But the Sage did…something. And now there are nine Tailed Beasts and one husk that should probably be launched into the sun."

Yahiko blinked. "Isn't that a little extreme? I mean, it's not doing anything."

"We actually don't know all of what it can do," Obito broke in, "I mean, when I last saw it, there were these big tube things and I guess it was keeping Madara on life support or something." Obito glanced at me for a moment and then added, "But he seemed like he was reaching the end of that lifeline last time, so…"

"Could you try starting over from the beginning?" Yahiko asked. "Where did all this stuff about meeting Madara even come from?"

Obito, Kakashi and I exchanged glances.

Yeah, that was what could be called "a long story."

"The whole story would be best," Nagato piped up. On his lap, Akino had rolled over and was grasping Nagato's pale hand in his mouth.

"…Then I suggest you get comfortable," Kakashi said, sliding down the wall until he was sitting against the floor.

"It really is a long story," Obito agreed. "Kei, can we get some seals?"

I nodded, but Konan held up her hand. "Please, allow me."

When I sat down in place, Konan drew paper seals from her sleeves and sent them skittering off to the walls and floor. I could feel the security protocols snap into place like steel bands to my senses, which really just told me that I needed to copy Konan's designs. Maybe she'd be willing to swap ideas once this was over?

Our story had more detail than just "Obito was held captive for six months in a megalomaniac's basement," but far less detail than what we'd reported to Sensei. The majority of the dramatic bits in the story were still under the blanket of S-ranked secrecy, but we could bend things a bit to accommodate our new mission. And if we went in to explore that statue's secrets blind, there was every chance that we'd all get killed somehow, so there was a certain level of pragmatism at work.

But explaining all that meant explaining other things, like the original story of the Tailed Beasts and
the monster they used to be. And why it'd be a bad idea for me to get near the thing.

My argument mainly rested upon the preexisting connection between Isobu and the Ten-Tails, and how Yahiko had said that the creature was like a gaping chakra void with a great big mass of weird shit in the middle. Kind of like a big, demonic coconut. None of us wanted to see what would happen if I got sucked in.

"...So I'm not getting anywhere near that thing," I said, toward the end of the info dump about Tailed Beasts. "Because I want to live."

"That's fine, Keisuke-san," Konan said. "Because neither Yahiko nor I are going to be interacting with it again."

"I mean, I could," Yahiko said, before anyone could open their mouth to ask why he was holding off. "But it seems like it's more of a Nagato thing. And you did say that the Statue is linked to the Rinnegan, didn't you?"

"Yes. Oh, and Nagato-san? If it tries to impale you with chakra receiving rods, do us all a favor and don't get stabbed." I couldn't remember if that had been a result of the way Nagato had summoned the Statue in the previous timeline or if it had just been a function of the Statue's interaction with its handlers. Nagato had not been in a good place to make sound decisions when his best friend was dead on the ground, his legs were useless, and Konan had still been in trouble.

I probably would have done something stupid in those circumstances, too. And...I kind of had, though Kannabi was not quite on the same scale.

"I'll...try?" Nagato said blankly. Er, whoops? Maybe I needed to explain about the future-past Nagato?

"Don't worry, she says stuff like that a lot," Obito said sympathetically. "But it's usually best to follow her advice anyway."

"The idea is that Nagato-san will be able to keep the creature contained if it decides to wake up," Kakashi said. "And if he can, we may be able to seal it underground or in Obito's Kamui dimension. Someplace no one will be able to access."

I still wanted it to be launched into the sun. But given some of the stories about the Ten-Tails and the Sage of Six Paths, and what Pain had just failed to do with a berserking Naruto, maybe the moon would be far enough.

It won't be, Isobu said, interrupting my thoughts. The Sage did seal that creature into the moon, but the fact that it is here now means that it is a part of a summon contract of some kind. His tails lashed in the water, stirring up the bay and sending waves crashing toward the shore. It was on this world before this Rinnegan boy ever discovered it, but you already know that only he and others with the Rinnegan make it do anything. So, Madara must have brought it here.

"The only question is why?" I murmured aloud, looking up at the dripping ceiling.

"Why what?" Obito asked.

"Why would Madara bring the Ten-Tails's husk here?" I repeated, for the benefit of the audience I had briefly forgotten about. I stood up and started to pace. "Madara managed to escape us at the Mountain's Graveyard because he could make it move before Sensei could get there and kill him. But why would he move it here? Nagato's the only person on the continent with a working
Rinnegan, so he'd be able to take it away from him. Why would Madara risk something like that?"

"It could be a trap," Yahiko reminded me, as though we hadn't been treating the situation like one since we first heard of it. "But I don't like the idea of something that big and that dangerous in Amegakure territory. We can try examining it again with Konan's paper jutsu, but it still seems like Nagato's going to be the only one to get anything out of it."

"I know I'm going with him," Obito put in, "because I'm the one with the best escape strategy. If something goes wrong, I can get us both out of there quickly." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I mean, I don't have the Puppet-Master Seal anymore. Jiraiya-sama made sure of that much, so it means I'm probably safe."

"There might be a way to destroy it," Konan remarked, holding up an explosive tag between her fingers. "Has anyone ever tried?"

"We can anyway," Yahiko said, shrugging. "Okay, here's a plan for now. Obito-san and Nagato will check it out tomorrow morning with a couple of Konan's spy birds so the rest of us can see what they're seeing. Kakashi-san, did you want to join them?"

"I'm the only one trained in forensic investigation," Kakashi pointed out. "Since when? It would make sense, as long as I knew Nagato-san could control it."

"So then Nagato and Obito go first, and you go in once we feel like it's safe so we can try to figure out how it got here," Yahiko concluded. "That might work."

"Did you discover anything unusual about the Statue, other than the fact that it's there?" Kakashi asked.

"When we tapped it," Konan said, "it sounded...strange. It may not be made of the same material all the way through."

Well, that was ominous. What could be hiding in there?

Madara was still at large as far as we knew, but what about his followers? I knew for a fact that couldn't have killed every Zetsu available to him, because the body count in Konoha didn't even come close to matching up. Sure, we'd killed more than ten thousand Zetsu clones, but Tobi had somehow gotten his hands on ninety thousand more of the putty soldiers when they'd come up in the future-past timeline. There could easily have been more of them, but I also didn't think Nagato would have just left them lying around once he realized that they hid underground.

"Nagato-san, did you get rid of all the Zetsu clones in Amegakure?" I asked him.

"You mean the strange soldiers?" Nagato asked, but it seemed to be a rhetorical question because he nodded and said, "Last year, we exterminated as many as we could locate within ten kilometers of Amegakure."

"But what if the Statue has more around it?" Obito asked. "I know it might not have seemed like it, but I only saw two active Zetsu clones the whole time I was with Madara. And somehow, when Sensei and Jiraiya-sama went after him, they got about a hundred to deal with. Something weird happened there, and it might be happening here."

"This just keeps getting better and better," Yahiko muttered.

On that upbeat note, we tabled our plans for tomorrow. Because, of course, we needed to get dessert.
Konan and Kakashi ended up heading back to the Akatsuki tower early, while Obito, Yahiko and I headed down to the market near the docks of Amegakure. Nagato hadn't left at all, preferring to stay with Kakashi's eight dogs and simply pet everything that wanted to be petted. That left those of us with actual sweet teeth to sort out who was going to get what.

Somehow, I ended up walking around the market and observing the merchants at work. I had the idle thought of buying a novelty umbrella, or something else that wouldn't generally be found outside Ame. I didn't travel much compared to most shinobi, but the idea of a souvenir appealed somewhat.

As I poked through the stock of a merchant selling oiled paper umbrellas with some rather beautiful flower designs, the merchant gave my Konoha symbol a sidelong look. I ignored the hostility with the ease of long practice, since it wasn't like I hadn't dealt with worse from people who actually knew how unstable "my kind" could be.

"Buy something or get out!" And there was the moment when the hostility became overt. Yay.

"I want to see that one," I said, as though the merchant hadn't said anything about window-shoppers like me. I was pointing at an umbrella that had—surprise!—a raindrop pattern. Maybe Naruto would find that funny.

"Oh, and that was the one I wanted to see," said a voice behind me.

I turned, and found myself looking at a woman who I definitely didn't recall sensing. She was a little taller than I was, and while I couldn't see her eyes past a pair of dark sunglasses, I did note the almost white-gold tone to her thick, feathered hair. She had unmarked skin, but her chakra said "kunoichi," which implied some talent. And the extreme plunging neckline said "boobs." In one sense, she was beautiful.

But in another, the hair on the back of my neck was trying to stand up more the longer I looked at her.

"A fellow tourist?" I asked reflexively, masking my doubts behind a smile.

"Oh, yes," she said, and the creeping feeling got stronger. She looked back toward the umbrellas and sighed, "The children just love these."

The merchant bustled between us, then jabbed the umbrella at me. "This one?" he demanded.

I took it from him and examined the pattern, but I kept one eye on the woman.

A genjutsu. Isobu seemed to rumble inside of the mindscape. An infiltrator?

...I don't know. If I knew what village she was from...

"Yahiko-senpai," I called out, though I still tracked the woman's chakra without looking. "Do you think Naruto-chan would like this?"

"He might?" Yahiko said, drifting over. "It's kind of a tragedy that I've never actually met the kid, you know."

"Remind me to tell Sensei about that, then."

And then Yahiko turned to the woman, who had been retreating from the shop, and said, "Passport, please."
She dug through her purse for a moment before producing an official-looking slip of paper. As I watched, Yahiko took the paper between his fingers and his chakra flared.

A musical note appeared on it, next to Konan's seal.

Sweet galloping Gertrude.

"Another new village, huh?" Yahiko said, as though he had—oh no. He genuinely had no idea what that meant? "Take it back to your lodgings and register properly, will you? There's no photograph on it."

"Of course, Yahiko-sama," the woman said, bobbing into a brief curtsey. Then she bustled away as though nothing had happened.

"You feel kinda tense to me, Keisuke-san," Yahiko commented, when the woman had finally vanished. "What was that about?"

"…Might want Konan-senpai to add a new village to her personal watch-list," I said after a while. "Because the person who runs it should not have agents here."

"Hm," was all Yahiko said in response. Then, "Well, did you want to get this umbrella or not?"

I looked contemplatively at it for a little longer. Then I said to the merchant, "Do you have one with toads?"

The merchant in question looked at Yahiko, then looked at me. And then, with an impressive grasp of his changing circumstances, said in a much friendlier voice, "Of course!"

Obito showed up a little after that, carrying a whole bag of slightly overripe kinkan but no candy. I knew that March was a little out of season for most fruits, but hey, he'd tried. We ended up heading back to the tower with a security update and dessert in hand.

And in the morning, we'd confront the Statue.

(Konan never did find that mysterious kunoichi. And I never let my guard down.)
Bloodlines: Anti-Gravity

Chapter Summary

Kei: Have a heart attack influenced by long-distance events.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title's from that one song by Runaground.

That night, Isobu and I talked a few things over.

“What the hell aren’t you telling me about the Ten-Tails?!”

Well, he talked. I suffered a sudden failure of volume regulation skills.

Isobu, who sat placidly in the middle of the Tailed Beast mindscape dimension, was remarkably tolerant of the screaming monkey in front of his face. Ergo, me.

Actually, besides Isobu, there were three Tailed Beasts in residence. Shukaku sat on his haunches across from Isobu, with Gaara sitting on top of his giant sandy paws. And, turning the Tailed Beast meeting into a square, both halves of Kurama sat opposite each other, though without either of their human hosts. Yin Kurama was lounging on the ground, his head propped up on the knuckles of his right hand, and his nine tails flared out behind him like a skirt. Yang Kurama sat back on his haunches and had his elbows across his knees.

The two Kuramas mostly seemed interested in watching the show.

“You let your human talk to you like that?” Shukaku cackled, while Gaara played with a tiny amount of sand that was lying dormant at his feet. He was making a sand castle.

“Yours can’t make complete sentences, so I don’t understand why you think you can talk,” Isobu told him. His three tails lashed, briefly, as he turned his eye back to me. “The truth is, we don’t remember anything before being separated into nine Tailed Beasts. But the old man—the man you know as the Sage of Six Paths—did tell us some. We were with him for months.”

Given that most jinchūriki lasted a grand total of two seconds after their Tailed Beast was extracted, I was duly impressed. Being the first jinchuriki ever—and of the Ten-Tails—had apparently given the Sage a bit of a break on the usual instantaneous death thing.

“The Ten-Tails wasn’t a normal creature.” Shukaku glanced down at Gaara, and his sand danced between the toddler’s fingers. “Not even by our standards.”

“What made it so different than everyone else?” I asked, already dreading the answer.

“The Sage didn’t talk about it much,” Isobu cautioned. “But you already know that the Sage
was the jinchūriki of the Ten-Tails, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Because Ten-Tailed Tobi hadn’t exactly been one of the things I could just ignore. “There was something about…Truth-Seeking Orbs? I do know that being the Ten-Tails’s host results in basically unlimited power and indestructibility. I mean, all of you are immortal anyway, but your hosts do die.”

“And so did the Sage.” As one, the Tailed Beasts closed their eyes as Isobu spoke. Just for a moment. “But there is a secret about the Ten-Tails that not even you could know.”

“What’s that?”

“The Ten-Tails’s rampage was not just a punishment for human sins,” Yin Kurama said. “It was fueled directly by them. Very personally.”

“The Sage’s name was Hagoromo Ōtsutsuki.” Yang Kurama dropped lower to the ground, so he could meet my eyes with his—which were about the size of my entire body. “And the Ten-Tails was the result of his mother, Kaguya, gaining all the power of the Shinju by devouring its chakra fruit. And she went mad with power. All of it.”

“The what?” I asked.

“The giant god-tree you might have forgotten about,” Isobu put in. “Remember?”

The name “Kaguya” was familiar, but not in that context. There was the story of Princess Kaguya, the bamboo-cutter’s daughter, who was originally a space alien who dropped into pre-industrial Japan or something. That story had little to no bearing on this world’s version of the story, where the mythical Kaguya had been just the mother to the Sage. There were fragmented stories about how she stole the fruit of the Divine Tree (against the will of the gods) and then triggered a multi-decade rampage by the Ten-Tails. In hindsight, I’d never closely examined how Kaguya had disappeared from the story right before the Sage showed up and put the Ten-Tails in its place. She was only ever mentioned as the Sage’s mother, who ate the chakra fruit and then gave birth to the Sage. Full stop. Who cared about the woman who gave birth to Heracles? Obviously, someone had, but parents were supposed to drop right out of the stories to let their divine children take hold of the narrative.

I brought my hand to my chin in thought. Then I asked, “How crazy?”

As the first chakra user on the planet, I imagined that when Yang Kurama said “all of it,” he meant it literally.

“Imagine a jinchūriki without a seal. Worse than this human and I were going to be.” Shukaku waved a paw vaguely, and Gaara clung to the other thumb-claw. “The Sage’s mother became the Ten-Tails by fusing with the Tree, though no one knows why. Before that, no one really knows what it was like. But we do know that once she had all that chakra, only the Sage and Uncle Hamura could stop her.”

But I could guess a few more things, based on what I saw. “The Ten-Tails didn’t show any intelligence in the Fourth Shinobi World War. Even when it came to the—to this”—I waved my hand to indicate the Tailed Beast mindscape—“the Ten-Tails didn’t show up. All of the Tailed Beasts it held did, though. From what I remember, Tobi and Madara’s Rinnegan could only keep it in line so far, but neither of them mentioned anything about a mental struggle in terms of pitting two thinking minds against each other. Just that it was too aggressive to contain.”
And then the bloody thing had just ended up sealed away regardless.

“Uncle Hamura?” I repeated, buying time to think.

“Hamama?” Gaara asked.

“It was Hamura, brat,” Shukaku said, but with subtle fondness.

Gaara ignored the correction and held his arms up at the gigantic tanuki. “Up!”

Shukaku sighed and created a floating platform of sand to carry Gaara up to eye his eye level.

“The Sage’s twin brother, who fought alongside him against Kaguya,” Yin Kurama clarified. “We never met him, but he led most of the Ōtsutsuki clan away after he had children. The Sage stayed with us on this world.”

“Define ‘away’” I suggested.

Yang Kurama shrugged his massive shoulders. “The moon? All we know is that we haven’t seen them since.”

Well, if the Sage’s brother had been as strong as the man himself, I imagined that surviving in a hard vacuum wasn’t impossible. This ninja-ridden reality had more ways to thumb one’s nose at physics than most comic books I’d ever read.

“The nine of us,” Isobu said, “were born from the Ten-Tails’s chakra alone. The Sage wasn’t able to contain all of his mother’s Tailed Beast form, so he had to seal the body separately. He created the moon to contain the husk that was left. And we’ve already discussed how the body might have come back here.” Isobu growled. “The idea that Madara of all people could call it back to this world…”

“However it got here, the empty husk is what you are going to be dealing with,” said Yin Kurama. “Along with anything it might contain.”

Okay. Oooooookay.

I needed to take a minute. I sat down abruptly, trying to figure out what to do with any of this information.

So if Princess Kaguya was really more like, uh, Hera from Greek myth, then where did that leave us? The Ten-Tails I’d seen had been more like Godzilla than a woman who sounded like the inspiration for the phrase “hell hath no fury,” but the Tailed Beasts were being clear. Or as clear as they could be. Kaguya had been the mother of all monsters, and the Ten-Tails might have a mind inside all of that rage. It…it kind of explained a bit about why the Ten-Tails was so human-shaped to start with. While on one hand, “humans are the real monsters” was a bit of a theme in this universe, I had to wonder if something that had started as a fucking tree would otherwise have any interest in opposable thumbs.

So, I was going to assume that the Tailed Beasts had the most accurate information available. They’d been born from the chakra of the Ten-Tails, and the Sage had been as honest with his nine new kids as he could have at the time. A tree wouldn’t have had the initiative necessary to blow a gasket over a fruit being stolen.

At least, I didn’t think so.
Abruptly, the Great Toad Sage’s words came back, hauntingly apt. “Beware the man in black. Dead gods still dream.”

If I assumed that the Ten-Tails—that Kaguya—counted as enough of a god for the prophecy, then her revival would be absolutely disastrous. Even aside from what the Tailed Beasts knew about her personality and the power she would be able to throw around once she got back on her feet, I remembered what I had thought immediately when I had first heard the second half of that prophecy. 

*Reaper.*

Kaguya’s revival would be an extinction-level event. And if the “dream” part was accurate, then she could either influence people from beyond the grave somehow like a dead Reaper, or she wasn’t as dead as anyone assumed.

Then again, Tailed Beasts couldn’t be permanently killed. Why would anyone assume that a woman who became a Tailed Beast would be any different?

*No pressure, right?*

But who was the man in black? Assuming the prophecies were linked, it had to be someone who was working for Kaguya’s revival, or else the heir to her legacy. Someone who carried a dead goddess’s dream…

I bit my lip, unwilling to voice the thought. But I was already thinking of Tobi and Madara. They were the only two villains who had lasted long enough in the manga to be relevant by the time I’d dropped into this reality instead. If all of that stuff was foreshadowing for Kaguya’s return, then there wasn’t much time to bring anyone else in to be her cat’s paw. So wouldn’t it have to be one of them?

Maybe that had been the real purpose of the all of that bullshit about the worldwide genjutsu.

“**There is one other factor,**” Shukaku said, interrupting my thoughts. “**The Sage had two sons.**”

“And did one of them do something stupid?” I asked offhandedly, because it felt like there was a bit of a universal theme about siblings in this universe. Aside from the Inuzuka siblings, there was always some kind of tension in the manga. Knowing that the Sage was about as mythological as a real-life person could get, I had to assume that his family drama was every bit as epic.

“The older one—Indra—was very similar to the person you know as Madara Uchiha,” Shukaku said bluntly. “I never liked him much. Imagine him as the stupid one.”

While I imagined that when Madara was made, they broke the fucking mold, it was becoming clear that I was wrong. There were always epic rivals in every generation, weren’t there? Hashirama and Madara, Jiraiya and Orochimaru, Naruto and Sasuke...

“But the younger one was not nearly as aggravating.” Yin Kurama yawned, then went on with, “He gave the Sage the idea to make us.”

What.

Shukaku said, without acknowledging my confusion, “**Asura was friendlier. Harder-working. He actually stopped and talked to us sometimes after we were born and off on our own. At least, before he and his brother killed each other.**”

I covered my eyes with my hand, as though trying to ward off a headache. *Of course they did. Yeah,*
“...While this is probably the most gossip anyone’s heard about the Sage of Six Paths in over a thousand years,” I said, “I don’t know what this has to do with the Statue my friends are going to be facing off against tomorrow.”

“It doesn’t. Kaguya’s rampage was old news by then,” Shukaku said. “But we figured you might want to hear the entire story.”

Well, if I’d come this far already…

Sighing to myself, I ninja-hopped my way up to where Gaara was still building sandcastles out of Shukaku’s sand and sat down next to him on the Beast’s head. With a toddler crawling into my lap, I told Shukaku, “Go ahead.”

By the end of the explanation, I decided that I’d pitch it to Jiraiya as the plot of his next heavy novel once I got back to Konoha. While the story was no *Make-Out Paradise*, the subject matter was a lot more relevant to our sense of our world’s history. If HBO existed, they could make a *Spartacus*-level drama out of it.

With that cheery thought, I woke up. I had no way of knowing if I had spent only a few minutes in the Tailed Beast mindscape and just slept the rest of the night away, or if it had taken far longer than it felt like to hear the Tailed Beasts’ side of the story.

But I did know that when I woke up, I was bracketed by both of my teammates’ backs. Somehow, our three futons had merged into one. Obito was sleeping with my arm pinned under his pillow, while Kakashi had his mask off and had stolen about half of my blanket.

I chuckled very quietly to myself and decided to sleep in. The Ame trio could hear my story when it was actually light out.

Amegakure didn’t really have a particular office space the way that Konoha did. While Hanzō *had* lived in a spacious mansion that was loaded to the gills with traps, the Akatsuki triumvirate had apparently repurposed it into a homeless shelter after stripping out anything dangerous. *Their* Amegakure’s nerve center was actually made up of the first four floors of their favorite tower, while they used floors five through ten for their living quarters. I’d heard from Yahiko that it was a temporary arrangement until they could build a real administration center, but they were still fighting over the design.

So in the meantime, while Konan basically ran everything from one spot via her paper messengers, thirty or so Ame-nin made up the office’s actual staff. And, once Yahiko had finally been tracked down by the Ame-nin who made up his guard detail, all of those bodies meant that the triumvirate could get on with the business of running a village.

This included sorting out all of the foreigners that somehow showed up in Amegakure, too. The result was a series of queues to the front desk that reminded me of a DMV.

Since I didn’t have anything else to do other than wait for the three to report in, I found myself hanging around the Ame-nin for lack of any diversions.

“You could always go back to your rooms if you’re bored, Gekkō-san,” said the nearest Ame-nin. Ren, the pink-eyed young woman who had fought Anko at the Chūnin Exams, had been properly
introduced to me this morning, so she was the person who had been assigned to keeping me out of trouble.

This basically meant making certain I never left Konan’s sight.

“I don’t think I’ll get anything out of staying up there,” I told Ren. “But thanks for the suggestion.”

Ren nodded and got back to work, signing off on something or other.

The three shinobi generally known as the leaders of Amegakure, the original three Akatsuki members, were simply the most prominent members of their organization. They were the most powerful, too, but in this timeline the other rebels against Hanzō’s rule had also survived, which meant that Amegakure had a core leadership made of dozens of former insurgents.

It also meant that Yahiko, Konan, and Nagato had needed to crush two other minor rebellions that were the result of their hostile takeover. Ame’s history recorded them as Hanzō’s relatives and former political allies, but I wasn’t sure about that. Regardless of how involved the other rebels were in Hanzō’s regime, they were still dead. And given that Nagato was involved in the suppression, I assumed the crushing had been literal as well as total.

As for the rest of Akatsuki, it turned out that they were made up mostly of war orphans and malcontents of various types. Yahiko was older than most of the core members of Akatsuki. Other people had flocked to his cause once it became obvious that the rebels were gonna win the civil war, but the new administration was still short of adults.

“Can you get us lunch, then?” asked Tohru, an Ame-nin with a topknot. I’d had to be introduced to him twice, since I’d forgotten his name about five seconds after learning it the first time.

I glanced at Yahiko for permission. He nodded back.

“Yep. What does everyone want?”

And that’s the story of how I became an office gofer.

Sometime later, I was delivering lunch in various forms. I even had a Water Clone helping me, which was easier than it would have been in Konoha thanks to the tremendous amounts of environmental water in Amegakure. Though my memory for names was still lousy, I was somewhat better with faces, and everyone got what they ordered eventually.

And then, during the last few moments of this self-appointed delivery mission, I heard a shout.

“You!”

At this exclamation, I automatically glanced around the room for anyone else the speaker could have addressed. Since neither Konan nor Yahiko turned to talk to the person yelling in my face, I assumed that meant I was, in fact, the “you” in question.

Aside from my team and me, the umbrella category of “foreigner” also included the greenish-gray-hAIed, magenta-eyed young man who was glaring at me like I’d killed his grandmother. He had a rough-stitched scar running from the lower lid of his left eye toward his jawline, and he was shorter than me by at least four centimeters. Aside from wearing a green robe-like top that was accented by a Kirigakure hitai-ate, I could also recognize the flower-topped crook-ended staff he had strapped across his back.

“Me,” I said, to the young man who might have been the Fourth Mizukage. Sensei would despair of
my self-preservation skills in the face of important people yelling at me.

What was he even doing here? Obviously, he wasn’t a jinchūriki in this timeline—my status made that kind of obvious—but I also hadn’t heard much of anything about Kirigakure in…in quite some time. I’d killed a few of their ANBU on the mission where Obito came back, and when a squad had failed miserably to infiltrate Konoha, but I’d never been the one to throw the first kunai.

Yagura, looking around at the crowd of other foreigners and the way that both Konan and Yahiko were looking right at him, seemed to reconsider his tone. Briefly. In a low voice, he said, “Kirigakure has a few bones to pick with you, thief.”

**Big talk, coming from this human,** Isobu grumbled from inside my mind. After a second of thought, my favorite turtle added, **So this is the human I could have been sealed into, if not for your interference. He’s smaller than expected.**

Thank you for your completely useless commentary, I told him.

I try.

“Kirigakure has its own problems,” I reminded Yagura. “But you’re a Mizukage candidate, Yagurasan. Why would Kirigakure send you to this newly-established village?” Even without Isobu, my chakra sense told me that Yagura was no pushover. Isobu had given him a crapload of chakra to play around with, but Yagura felt skilled. His chakra was water-aligned like mine, but somehow more precise, and I didn’t dare assume that the staff was just for show.

And there was that Bingo Book entry for notorious Kirigakure shinobi, which removed some of the mystery about both of us. I was in there because I was Isobu’s jinchūriki, but Yagura was in **our** Bingo Book as a potential S-class shinobi, if we gave him long enough to get that strong. From the feeling of it, we had.

Ren’s eyes darted between Yagura, whose glare had kicked up a notch, and me, the known jinchūriki, and she signaled for help before anything else could happen. Which probably made her smarter than I was, to be perfectly blunt.

“If you start the Fourth Shinobi World War in Amegakure,” Yahiko’s voice cut in sharply, “it’s also going to end here.” As though the crowd was no obstacle, Yahiko was suddenly between Yagura and me like a referee, with tension in every line of his frame.

As a sensor, Yahiko probably knew better than most people exactly how much power was crammed into the building, even with my boys and Nagato off on their spelunking adventure.

“Go hang out with Konan for a day,” they said. “It’ll be calming,” they said. “Maybe investigate the creeper from yesterday!” And then no one accounts for the sheer number of possible problems that might require me to **not** stay calm.

Sure, I’d made the decision to stay away from the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path long before ever reaching Ame, but I was in the mood to gripe about self-inflicted misfortunes anyway.

“This is a Kirigakure internal matter, Yahiko-dono,” Yagura said, glaring at the taller shinobi. “It’s not your concern.”

“Actually,” Yahiko countered, “it’s my business when you threaten my employees. Keisuke-san was loaned to Amegakure by the Fourth Hokage as a personal favor. If Kirigakure wants to open diplomatic ties to Amegakure, it might be a good idea to avoid trampling all over what’s already
And just like that, I had Akatsuki’s protection for as long as Team Minato was working for them. Yahiko might not have thought of it that way, since he was also looking out for his teacher’s student’s students, but the message was clear.

Kirigakure wasn’t going to be able to do much about me.

But Yagura was here anyway. Why Ame, and why now?

Kirigakure was off the eastern coast of the Land of Fire, well into the Land of Water’s archipelago. Amegakure, on the other hand, was between the Land of Rivers, Fire, and Wind, and was hundreds of kilometers inland. Who would have the authority to send a Mizukage candidate so far away from home? And why the fuck would anyone important like that go to Ame unless they had a hell of a reason?

“So, as a favor I’ll let you skip the line,” Yahiko said in a much more casual tone, eyeing Yagura carefully. “What does Kirigakure want with Amegakure?”

I was going to stay and listen, but one of Konan’s paper cranes flitted across my field of vision and drew my attention to her. Granted, I was nearly certain that the Konan at the desk was actually a paper clone she’d made so she didn’t have to be there in person, but that was a minor quibble.

I left Yahiko to deal with Yagura, then followed the paper crane onto the next floor. The Konan at the desk must have been a paper clone, then.

Four floors up, where the Akatsuki triumvirate all had their own workspaces—though I didn’t know what was in all of them—the crane led me to a shoji with blue chrysanthemums on the paper. Figuring that it was Konan’s office—and sensing her inside—I rapped my knuckles against the wooden frame of the shoji.

“Come in,” Konan’s voice said, and I obeyed.

Konan was sitting at a writing table, which was covered in neat rows of seal tags. Konan’s hand was on the tabletop, practically merged with the seals slowly forming all at once on the surface, and I had to tear my eyes away from the sight.

I sat down across from her. “You needed me here, Konan-san?”

“Yes. Nagato and your friends have finally reached the Ten-Tails, and you need a quick way to relay information directly to them,” Konan said, and held up a carefully folded origami person. It looked a lot like the one that she had sent to Sensei’s office, which had projected the initial image of the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path.

(Also known, variously, as the Statue, the Ten-Tails, the One-Eyed Giant, “that creepy mummy,” and “trouble.”)

“A live connection, huh?” I muttered, and took the origami figure. Better than a live helmet feed.

A what?

It came alive in my hand, wrapping its little paper limbs around my hand and wrist like a particularly clingy monkey, and lifted its square-shaped head. Just like the see-through hologram thing that Konan had used last time, the image flickered and waivered in place before clearing up.
And then I was looking down at a…well, it looked like someone had strapped a camera to someone’s head, given how the image was swaying and jerking with somebody’s movements. Given that I could see Obito up ahead, climbing on what looked like the curve of a massive heel, I assumed that Nagato was the one carrying Konan’s paper camera-thingy.

“Konan, are you seeing this?” Nagato’s voice asked, and his pale hand waved in front of the paper scout’s field of view.

“We can see, Nagato,” Konan said. “Keisuke-san is here, too.”

“Oh, she is? Well, we haven’t found anything serious yet,” Obito called out, with his image turning to face Nagato. “And the statue hasn’t moved.”

“I haven’t tried to make it move,” Nagato clarified, “but…I can definitely feel something down here that’s not us, or the statue. But it’s not really human, either…”

“Don’t poke it unless you’re prepared to smash it,” I suggested, watching as the image wavered when Nagato nodded.

“We’ll continue exploring for a while. Once we’re sure we’re clear, Kakashi-san can come in,” Nagato said, and moved on.

For a while, the only sounds I could hear were of Nagato and Obito exploring a dripping limestone cave, poring over the various nooks and crannies created by someone plunking a hundred-meter mummy monster into it. I’d have thought that shoving something with that much mass into such a small space would result in tons of rubble, but apparently either the Akatsuki trio had taken care of it or the Statue had pulverized the rubble.

“Do you mind telling me what happened with the Kiri-nin, Keisuke-san?” Konan asked.

How was I supposed to put it? “Yagura is a potential candidate for Mizukage.” I tapped the spot on my chest where Isobu’s seal sat. “There’s a conflict of interest.”

“I see.” Konan turned her head and flicked her left wrist. A sheet of paper shot out of her sleeve and flew out of the office in the form of an origami butterfly. “Daibutsu and Kyūsuke should be able to keep an eye on him.”

“Who?” I asked.

“You’ll meet them soon enough,” Konan said, “but for reference, Daibutsu is the oldest Akatsuki member here. Kyūsuke is…hm, closer to my age than yours, I think. You’d notice his purple tattoos first.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Hey, Nagato? I think there’s something down there!” Obito’s voice called out from the projection, and I jolted back to attention.

“Like what?” I asked, and was ignored.

“I think you need to make this thing move its stupid elbow first,” Obito yelled. “It looks a bit like cloth, maybe?”

“Obito-san, please stand back!” Nagato suggested loudly.
I watched Obito’s image leap back from the Statue and land on one of the water-slick walls of the cavern, sticking to it with chakra.

And the husk of the Ten-Tails moved.

I bit down on a startled, reflexive shriek, jerking away from the image of that thing flexing its massive hands. Its withered arms shifted, dislodging layers of dust that shouldn’t have accumulated in this kind of environment. I would have expected mold or moss so thick even Nagato would be choking on it, not...not whatever this was.

Obito gave a sudden scream, and then Nagato’s head jerked and the image spasmed horribly. There was a noise like two massive objects colliding, and then something white flew across Nagato’s field of view and hit a wall hard enough to splat.

Then the little projection sorted itself out. Konan was on her feet by then, peering into the image alongside me, as Nagato adjusted his headband.

“I thought those were all dead,” Obito’s voice said as he rematerialized to Nagato’s left. “That was one of those Zetsu things!”

“I...I don’t think we ever established where they came from.” Nagato’s breath came a little faster than normal, probably out of sheer surprise. “I didn’t—Konan, did you see where it might have come from? It’s all limestone around here.”

“No, Nagato,” Konan replied. “We can only see what you do.”

“Oh, right. Obito-san?” Nagato prompted.

“It looked like it came from under the Statue somewhere,” Obito replied. Already, he was picking his way through the cave and back toward the mostly-dead monster.

Chills went down my back. Zetsu clones almost never appeared alone. “Obito, get away from there.”

“It missed, Kei!” Obito protested.

I couldn’t keep myself from snapping, “Then why the fuck are you giving it a second shot?”

Konan blinked at my language—not sure why, given that she’d been hanging out with teenagers since forever—while Nagato’s hand came into view and he did something. The result of that something was the Statue being lifted off the ground and starting to float toward the cavern’s ceiling through the use of Nagato’s gravity-manipulation powers.

“Oh, hell.” I wasn’t sure if Obito or I said that first, but it was definitely our shared reaction toward the things we saw next.

Even if I hadn’t just heard the story about a tree growing some kind of godhood-inducing fruit, I would have recoiled from what was poking out of a tunnel that had been hidden behind the Statue’s back. Or, more specifically, the thing that was growing out of the Statue’s back and curling down through the tunnel like a nightmarish extra tail.

Nagato pulled the Statue forward as he strode around it, but his paper scout-thingy was pointed down the tunnel. And we could see that the tree that grew into it was covered in thick branches and long white stems. Each stem had a fruit growing at the end, like a cherry tree or something.

And each “cherry” was a half-formed Zetsu clone.
“Fuck,” I heard Obito whisper, as Nagato continued to pull on the Statue and expose more and more of the dormant ranks of Zetsu clones.

Konan’s gray eyes seemed to flash. “Nagato, burn them all.”

“Nagato, can you see this?” Obito yelped. His arms flailed, and he shouted from the opposite end of the cavern, “There’s—there’s human faces in the bark!”

“Oh god.” I swallowed hard. “Obito, does it look kind of familiar?”

“It… They—they look like,” Obito began, and paused. “Like the faces on the Hokage monument. E- Especially the First.”

Well, that definitely explained why Obito could use Wood Release. I’d forgotten that Madara had a stock of Hashirama’s cells—which, by the way, was disgusting—that he used to give the Statue some more fuel for its troops. But holy fuck was that ever creepy in person. So many faces...

“I can feel it trying to absorb my chakra, even now,” Nagato reported, looking up at the statue itself. “Obito-san, please stand back. I’m going to break the tree down.”

“Y-You got it,” Obito said, and vanished in a swirl of air.

And then things got loud.

After carefully lowering the Statue to the ground, still in its half-rising position, Nagato turned his attention to the tree growing from its back and lifted both hands. He didn’t really have to, from what I remembered of the Deva Path’s powers, but perhaps it helped him concentrate.

Then a section of the tree, as thick around as one of the Statue’s arms, crunched in on itself as though it was no stronger than a pencil. A second groan of wood started immediately, and a colossal cracking noise heralded the collapse of the second section into so many splinters. After that, the cracks and crunches got closer together as Nagato hit his stride, punctuated occasionally by the squish of a Zetsu being caught between the various chunks of flying wood. As he went, Nagato dragged more and more of the tree out of the tunnel to be crushed methodically into firewood.

None of the spear-sized got anywhere near Nagato thanks to a bit more Deva Path magic. But I would not have wanted to put anyone else in there with him. It would be like standing in front a giant wood chipper.

It took a total of four minutes for the noises to stop. By that point, the cavern was littered in enough wood chips to cover the Statue’s ankles. Some of that debris was held together by glue made of squished Zetsu clones, and none of it had tried retaliating. All that was left of the tree was a large purple bud, about the size of a minivan, with the rest of the stem ending in the world’s biggest pile of potential splinters.

As first-person views of utter destruction went, I’d give it a ten out of ten.

“Is it safe to come back in?” Obito’s voice rang out, in the wake of that commotion.

“Possibly,” Nagato called over his shoulder. “But stand back. I think we’ve found the last part of the tree.”

“Gotta say,” Obito’s voice said, getting closer anyway, “that was the most straightforward way to fight that I’ve ever seen. Find target? Target goes squish.”
“I try,” Nagato replied. He looked down at Obito, who was grinning at him. “I thought I said it wasn’t quite safe.”

“Yeah, but I got out the last two times all right.” He shrugged. “So, what’s...oh! I know what that is.”

“You do?” I said, though Obito had made a point of ignoring whatever I tried to say through Konan’s messaging system over the last few minutes.

“It was the top of the tree,” Obito said, and grinned guilelessly.

“...That’s very helpful, thank you,” said Nagato, with the faintest trace of sarcasm.

“Seriously, though. I think if we crack that open, we might find what we’re looking for.” Obito turned his face toward the bud and said, “I can see a bit of chakra moving in there.” He had his Sharingan on, then.

“Famous last words, Obito,” I said dryly.

Obito shushed me, and Nagato held his hands out again.

The drastically overgrown bud tore open some fifteen meters away from them, splitting from tip to end as neatly as if a knife had done it.

Bones spilled out.

Everyone froze for a moment. I could hear Nagato’s breathing in the sudden silence. I could hear my breathing. I could have sworn that I could hear Kakashi gasping, except that I knew he wasn’t there.

“That...that isn’t what I thought it would be,” Obito said. And, because he was apparently incorrigible, he crept closer to the resulting pile.

Then Nagato did something with gravity and Obito was suddenly floating half a meter in the air and back toward him, with a startled squawk. He flailed in midair for a moment, trying to figure out why gravity wasn’t doing its job, before realizing what was going on and groaning aloud.

When he finally dragged Obito back to face him, Nagato said, “Please don’t do something that might make your friends upset, Obito-san.”

Thoroughly chastised, Obito didn’t go after the skeleton again.

“Keisuke-san,” Nagato began, “do you have any idea what might be happening here?”

...Maybe I did? “I don’t know for sure. But maybe you could float the bones over to you instead of going over there?” I suggested.

“Kakashi-san may be able to tell us more about them,” Konan said, eyeing the skeleton with distaste. “Obito-san, if you could?”

“Oh! Sure, I can get them to him.” And as soon as Nagato used more Deva Path power to do exactly what I had said, Obito followed Konan’s suggestion with a minimum of squeamishness. I didn’t want to imagine the entire idea of having a portal built into one’s head and then thinking about the stuff you’d have to let get close to your eye to use it.

Better Obito than me.
...Shit, he was the one who let me perform eye surgery on him without anesthetic. He could do whatever the fuck he wanted at this point.

Once Obito had vanished again, Nagato looked around the cavern again. “Konan, I don’t think the Statue will burn even if I give it my best shot. There must be a reason the Sage of Six Paths didn’t destroy it.”

“...Perhaps he was thinking in a different way,” Konan allowed. She propped her elbow up on her desk and rested her head against her upraised palm. After a moment’s thought. “I can be there in half an hour. Be ready to contain the blast.”

Holy shit.

Nagato nodded, making the projected image shake. “Of course.”

Konan sighed to herself and stood up. “Keisuke-san, I will be busy helping Nagato deal with the problem. I can’t know if I will be back soon, so please head downstairs to wait with Yahiko. I will send your teammates along when I can.”

“Okay, Konan-san,” I replied, bowing my head respectfully.

Konan smiled. “I’ll be back.”

And Konan left in a flurry of paper, leaving me to trudge downstairs again.

I wasn’t really allowed to help Yahiko with any administrative duties. While I was used to doing things like running for supplies, delivering papers, and forging signatures (if Sensei didn’t feel like signing something), no one wanted a Konoha-nin to be involved in Amegakure’s bureaucracy any more than I already had been. And that was as a gofer.

“Hey, Gekko-san, are you going to be around much longer?” asked another member of Akatsuki. Brown-haired and resembling a Neji (sans Byakugan) to some extent, Kie was one of the original Akatsuki members who’d fought against Hanzo and believed fervently in their cause.

I shrugged, leaning back against a desk. “Classified, Kie-san.”

He frowned severely. “Don’t think you can just do whatever you want because you’re Konoha-nin,” he warned.

Since I was barely allowed to fetch lunches for people, I didn’t really see his point. “I know, Kie-san.” I decided to relax a bit and said, “As soon as Yahiko-senpai is satisfied with our mission, we’ll be out of your hair.”

Kie still didn’t look particularly mollified. “Well, why do you call Yahiko ‘-senpai?’ It doesn’t seem like something most Konoha-nin would do.”

“Our teacher, the Fourth Hokage, was taught by Jiraiya-sama at around the same time as Yahiko-senpai,” I told him. “So he’s our senpai.”

“Oh,” Kie said. He huffed. “Well, don’t think everyone is going to be able to address them so familiarly! And there are gonna be more of you, aren’t there?”

“...Maybe?” I kind of doubted that Yahiko would want any help from Konoha when Amegakure still
needed more income to stand on its own figurative feet. And if the Akatsuki trio needed money, I imagined that as soon as they got their house in order, they’d hit the continental economy with a bang. The only question I still had was if this Akatsuki would be in the business of recruiting missing-nin.

But it probably wasn’t the right time to ask that question.

Just then, I felt the signature pop of Kakashi’s chakra reentering the Akatsuki’s central tower, about two floors below me. Right after presumably kicking Kakashi out of the Kamui dimension, Obito’s chakra followed suit. I could feel their familiar bright flame and bolt of lightning chakra signatures and exhaled an immediate sigh of relief.

To Kie, I said, “I’m sorry, but I have to go right now. Can we talk later?”

Kie nodded and let me leave.

I chose to scramble down the stairs in the approved ninja fashion, which was to avoid the actual steps and just ricochet off walls to get to my destination faster. *Gotta love breaking physics.*

I spotted Kakashi staggering out from one of the basement doors, illuminated by a stark white light coming from the room. Cold seemed to drift out like a fog, trailing after Obito’s ankles.

“Obito!” I called out, catching his attention.

He snatched me up in an immediate hug, making me squeak in surprise. I patted his back until he set me down again, and I noted how shaken he seemed.

“Hey, what happened?” I asked him, trying to scoot past him and to the open door.

“It’s…” Obito shook his head, his voice failing him.

*That* wasn’t good. I pushed past him and toward the room I assumed had to be a morgue. Konan’s chakra was almost burned into the room, setting up a dozen or more interlaced refrigeration seals. Inside, there were six steel drainage tables. Kakashi stood by one of them, unloading a hundred bones onto its surface from a wicker basket.

“Kakashi, what’s your first thought?” I asked, but my eyes were completely trained on the partially assembled skeleton.

Obito ghosted in after me, still quieter than he should have been.

“Going by the lack of teeth, without any evidence of jaw trauma or disease,” Kakashi commented absently, “I’d say that this skeleton was gumming his food before he died.”

If he hadn’t been holding a fragile-looking femur, I would have smacked him. Instead, I looked down at the other bones that Kakashi had started to rearrange into a coherent whole. Ribs, ribs, ribs, various vertebra…

“Do we have any idea who this might be?” I asked, looking at the bone spurs on the cap of each femur. That must have hurt like hell.

“I won’t be able to say for certain unless we get a DNA test,” Kakashi pointed out. “And even then… Wait, you think this is someone specific, don’t you?”

“Madara was the only old man associated with the Statue, according to Obito and from what I
remember. If this was the Sage, the bones would be way too deteriorated to be able to even guess. So I have a guess, yes.” I admitted. “And I’m hoping it is him, so we can lay this entire problem to rest.”

“I’m not going to say it can’t be him,” Kakashi said, putting the femur into its correct place. “But, again, I can only tell you so much before testing. And I don’t think either of our villages has a convenient stock of Madara’s DNA for this kind of thing.”

“You…” Obito began, hesitant. “You could test it against mine.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that we don’t have any of the right equipment here,” Kakashi said flatly. He held up the skeleton’s right forefinger, barely held together by scraps of what might have been cartilage? “We can assume, for now, that we have the bones of someone associated with the Ten-Tails. Willingly or not. We don’t know who. We do know that the subject was an arthritic old man who lost pretty much all of his teeth before he died. No bone trauma aside from fully-healed breaks, so I’ll go out on a limb”—and here, he held up the rest of the arm and made Obito swear quietly at him for the pun—“and say that he died of old age.”

“It wasn’t like he’d be getting into fights in his nineties,” I muttered.

“No, but the bones have enough old breaks for me to say that he lived like a combat shinobi for a long time,” Kakashi pointed out. He put the arm down and traced a slightly misaligned section of the skeleton’s fourth rib. “And this probably should have been fatal. This rib got nicked twice before the break.”

“That…must have hurt.” I shuddered for effect.

“It probably did. But then, most people would just bleed to death after this point. It wasn’t something they’d be in a position to worry about.” Kakashi braced his hands on the edge of the table and said to Obito, “Is there anything you want to ask before I have to really get to work?”

“Oh, n-no.” Obito looked away, hugging himself. “Just let me know if you find out who it is? Uh, was?”

Kakashi gave Obito a long, level stare—probably because he’d already said he couldn’t do that, twice—and sighed to himself. Then he said, “I’ll make sure you’re the first to know if I find anything.”

Obito nodded stiffly and walked out.

I watched him go. Turning back to Kakashi for a moment, I found him staring squarely into my eyes. Maybe it was some half-forgotten impulse from the days where we’d trained together after Kannabi, or maybe some other shared pain. But I felt like I knew his intentions even without thinking of forming a question.

I said, “I’ll look after him, Kakashi.”

“Thank you,” Kakashi said, and I left to follow Obito up the stairs.

I didn’t get that far. Obito was waiting on the first turn in the staircase, looking back down at me. His mouth twisted into a grimace, and he said, “Kei, I heard Kakashi. But please, I’m gonna need a bit of space. Just for a while.” His active Sharingan seemed to gaze off into the middle distance for a moment before focusing on my face for just a moment. “Please?”

I nodded. But I had another idea, which didn’t require me to leave Obito entirely alone.
Once Obito Kamui’d away—and I made a mental note to complain to Rin about how he kept forgetting her orders—I headed back down to Kakashi and his macabre puzzle.

He raised an eyebrow at me anyway, even as he finally found a loose patella.

“I’m gonna need you to send Bisuke up there,” I told Kakashi without letting him get a word in. “I don’t think Obito wants to deal with people for a bit.”

Kakashi nodded, and then immediately summoned Bisuke by tapping his foot against the chilly floor. I had to assume that was bleeding somewhere, but I didn’t ask how or why.

The newly-summoned Bisuke barked, “What do you need, Kakashi?”

“Go look after Obito for a while,” Kakashi told him. “We need to finish working on whoever this used to be.”

Bisuke sniffed at the bones and said, “But this guy’s been dead for a year or something, hasn’t he? He doesn’t really need any help!”

Kakashi’s eye widened just a bit, and I felt myself start to stare. Over a year? Was there any way to be more specific?

“What?” Bisuke said, blinking up at us. “I’m a dog. You think I don’t know bones, Kei-chan?”

“Maybe not in this specific sense?” I mumbled, unsure of what to say.

“I’ve smelled all kinds of things that even Kakashi hasn’t,” Bisuke pointed out. He shook himself, making his fawn coat fluff up. “But I can go see to Obito.” Bisuke’s tail wagged. “Is he upstairs?”

I glanced up, though I didn’t have the ability to see through solid objects. With my chakra sense and familiarity with Obito, though, I didn’t need to. “He’s on the seventh floor.”

“Right!” Bisuke barked, and dashed away.

“...So. I’m leaning more toward ‘Madara’ than not,” Kakashi said after a moment, looking down at the bones. “Bisuke just confirmed a couple of my suspicions.”

“Aside from that part, what else makes you think it’s him?” I asked.

“It has to do with the degree of decomposition, and a bit of evidence from the site,” Kakashi said. He leaned over the table and pointed out...something. “I’m not sure if you noticed over Konan’s live report, but the inside of the bud was badly stained by decomposition, which makes me think this man died there. Maybe after life support failed? But at the same time, some of the tendons and things are still here even if most of the flesh is gone.” Kakashi shrugged. “If the environment had been drier, he might’ve mummified, but as it is, the body more or less dissolved in place. And since the flesh is gone, it wouldn’t have taken all that much to just rip a limb off by jarring it.” And that didn’t even get into how the Statue or the tree growing out of it could have fucked with any of the natural processes involved after death. God dammit.

“Still, the lack of rotten material clinging to the bones makes me think that Bisuke was right. Whoever this guy was, he’s been dead for over a year,” Kakashi said, sighing. “Which is a bit short of the October Tenth attack. But it’s possible he’s been dead for longer than that—I don’t have enough information to be able to tell, and I don’t want to crack a bone open to check the marrow when we’re not back in Konoha.”
“So while we think this might be Madara—or possibly some other old man associated with the Statue—we don’t really know much else other than maybe that the guy died there, and that he was probably involved in the Zetsu thing?” I rubbed my forehead, trying to think. “I don’t remember the Zetsu clones aging, and I was never sure if they had bones…”

“They don’t,” Kakashi said.

“Thank you. So I guess...we have a dead megalomaniac in the basement.” I looked up at the ceiling and said, “So, now what?”

Kakashi nodded. “More or less. Can you seal these up? I want to take these back to Konoha to make sure.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I can do that.”

Between the two of us, we managed to pile the entire skeleton into a jumble of bones and seal it into a single empty slot on the scroll I had on hand. Kakashi made sure not to miss anything, including random carpals or tarsals, and then went to the sink to wash his gloves off.

Maybe it was me just being paranoid, but I did notice Kakashi wincing a bit as he stood there, and again I wondered how he’d so easily summoned Bisuke…

“Kakashi,” I said as I strode over to him and came to a stop behind his back, “did you get hurt during the investigation?”

“A splinter caught me in the leg,” Kakashi said, and I automatically glanced down at the bandages on his calves for any sign of blood. It wasn’t like his clothes were exactly designed to show bloodstains. Stupid black pants!

“And?” I asked. I didn’t have much of a nose for blood—didn’t have much of a scent tracking ability at all, actually—but I still had to stifle my first urge to pick Kakashi up and plunk him down on a table so I could more effectively demand to know where he was hurt.

“And I got grazed.” Kakashi turned to face me, even while wringing out his ANBU gloves, and said, “It’s already bandaged.”

“But did you clean it out?” I demanded.

The silence was admission enough for me. And why was he blushing?

“As soon as we’re done here, we’re going back to our rooms,” I informed him. “And you’re going to sit through the worst antiseptic I have.”

Kakashi rolled his visible eye, but he didn’t meet mine afterward. “Fine, fine. You’re the captain, apparently.”

...Right. I was supposed to be the team leader this time, wasn’t I?

I drew myself up and said, “And as your captain, I say we’re gonna take care of you and Obito first, and whatever else is going on here can wait. Got it?”

It took a bit more arguing than that, but we did leave the Akatsuki basement/morgue with maybe-Madara’s corpse and both of us walking under our own power. Kakashi limped, sure, but it wasn’t life-threatening if he’d field-dressed it himself. We’d be fine.
“What the hell, Kakashi?” I demanded, as Obito sat nearby with Bisuke in his lap, looking on in curiosity. I had ordered Kakashi to sit down on one of the spare futons and let me take a look at the injury, which had meant he needed to take his pants off. And I was thoroughly disappointed in his idea of what constituted a serious injury. “This isn’t a graze, you idiot.”

As it turned out, Kakashi had a ten-centimeter gash along the outside of his left thigh, right below the hem of his boxers. There were actually two matching holes on opposite sides, and apparently he’d almost lost the lower strap on his secondary kunai holster. It was still bleeding like a motherfucker, because of course it did, and it had dripped down to his knee without any problem, going by the bloodstains. The gauze pad over it had been getting close to saturated by the time I got a look at the “graze.”

“It’ll scar, but it’s not a fatal hit,” Kakashi pointed out, sitting essentially in the middle of a miniature medical suite. Rin didn’t believe in taking chances, and I had the knack for storage seals, soooo...

“That’s still no reason to go standing around on it like you never got stabbed,” I griped, even as I put my hand against the gash and started applying the Mystic Palm Jutsu. Both of us had taken worse injuries before, so unfortunately the technique had become a standby for our team.

“I wasn’t stabbed,” Kakashi pointed out.

“You can take your stupid technicalities and...and...” And do something anatomically impossible. But I wasn’t actually going to tell him that. I settled for, “Shut up.”

“Uh,” said Obito, “am I in trouble? Because I kinda knew about it…”

“I’ll decide in a minute,” I snapped. “You need to feel better, and then I’ll yell at you for real about certain other things.”

“...Like what?” Obito asked cautiously.

“Like ignoring Rin’s orders to avoid using Kamui too much,” I told him flatly. “Or maybe I should just tell her and have her deal with you.”

Obito made a “meep” noise and stopped talking.

After another minute or two, I’d sealed the wound enough that I figured it would hold under stress. While I certainly didn’t want Kakashi to go and take on an entire complement of Kiri-nin, it at least wouldn’t be painful.

“Oh, go get a different pair of pants. I’ll stitch these up,” I said, as I packed up my medical supplies. The main downside to having a ton of supplies in storage seals was that they inevitably had to be put away again.

“...Kei, you do know I can do that myself,” Kakashi said, even as he skittered out of range of any other possible medical procedures. It meant he was closer to his pack, too.

I side-eyed him. “Fine. But if I get bored and start designing more explosives, I blame you.”

“Needlework is boring,” Obito mumbled.

Bisuke reached up and bumped Obito’s chin with his forehead. “But it’s how Kakashi made our clothes!”

“...Huh?” Obito said blankly.
Kakashi, who was in the other room and apparently had found pants, said loudly, “I had a few free weekends.”

...If I was being completely honest with myself, I would have done the same thing, given time and cute animals. “Was this while Obito and I were training for our second Chunin Exam?” Because that was about the only time I could remember without Kakashi in some kind of contact with Obito and me.

“Again. Free weekends.” Kakashi sighed and said, “And I haven’t had one since.”

“But now we have team uniforms! It’s great.” Bisuke’s tail was wagging faster than some small pistons. “Maybe you should make some for Obito and Kei-chan!”

“I don’t want to look like one of Kakashi’s dogs,” Obito said, scratching behind Bisuke’s ears. “How about you dogs come up with something a little more human-friendly? We already have vests...”

If I could see Kakashi’s face, I imagined that I’d see a level of eye-rolling previously achieved only by Mad-Eye Moody. Because we were goofballs and unrepentantly annoying sometimes.

“Armbands?” I suggested.

“Get me a pattern and maybe I’ll think about it,” Kakashi replied.

And on that bright note, the Akatsuki tower started shaking.
Instantly, all three of us were on our feet and moving again. Obito disappeared down the stairwell quick as a wink, while Kakashi and I left through the two rooms' windows and Bisuke disappeared into smoke. If the tower was going to collapse, a guy who could suck himself into a tiny wormhole was probably going to have more luck than people like Kakashi and me, who could get squished.

Outside, Kakashi skidded down the sloped Amegakure awning with just a scrap of chakra on each foot keeping him from slipping. It was like he'd somehow come up with an invisible snowboard and decided to grind down a rail.

Me? Just fell. It wasn't like I had to worry about sticking the landing.

I landed in a crouch on all fours, absorbing the impact with as much ease as a cat. The effect was somewhat ruined by the inevitable splash—Amegakure wasn't quite efficient enough that puddles weren't a problem—but chakra saved my pride once again. I didn't ruin my clothes thanks to landing on top of the puddle rather than in it.

"What the hell was that?" Yagura's voice demanded, and I glanced back to see him standing behind me with a small crowd of shinobi. Three of them were his—Kirigakure shinobi that I hadn't seen earlier and currently didn't care about—and the other two wore the black Akatsuki robes.

One of the Akatsuki members was tall enough to look down at Jiraiya, with a perfectly smooth head and a face that reminded me a lot of a Buddha statue. He had a bo staff strapped across his back, so I wondered for just a moment if Konan had gotten him from a temple somewhere.

The second Akatsuki member was a young man with long brown hair mostly tucked under a bandana-style Amegakure headband. He had Inuzuka-like narrow eyes with dark markings around them, and blue tattoos across each cheek that looked kind of like a circuit board.

Daibutsu and Kyūsuke, I assumed.

"If I had to guess," Kakashi said in a quiet voice that still managed to carry, "I'd say Amegakure's leadership is having fun."

There was a strange undertone to his voice that nonetheless made me think that, despite his innocent words, Kakashi was still invoking the once-and-possibly-future God of Amegakure to get Yagura to
shut his trap. Which didn't even get into what the "Angel" was capable of, without calling on any gods at all.

Trusting Kakashi to keep Yagura from doing anything his Ame escorts would have disapproved of, I closed my eyes and reached out with my chakra sense.

Since attaining full Tailed Beast Mode—though only for a moment—I'd found that the range of my chakra sense had expanded by at least another five kilometers. While previously my limit had been around fifteen while using Isobu's chakra to bolster mine, I kept finding my range growing little by little, over the previous forty-eight hours. But a slow, steady increase in chakra, over two full days, added up to something significant.

At just a little more than twelve kilometers from Amegakure, Nagato and Konan glowed like beacons in the dark. While chakra residue didn't carry easily, I could still feel traces of it in the air as a distant dust cloud loomed. There was some Nagato in that, but the bulk of the energy that had been expended there was Konan's. There was no evidence that anyone else had joined the battle. Even Zetsus.

Relief flooded my veins. As long as those two were all right, Amegakure would be fine.

The Statue hadn't gone after either of them, going by its chakra. Actually, it probably hadn't moved. Despite the haze of Konan's explosives, the dead spot occupied by the Statue was still.

"It's not serious," I said, opening my eyes again.

Kakashi nodded. He eased back into a slouch instead of the posture that, for people who knew him, would have indicated an eagerness to spring on someone and snap their neck. Probably Yagura's, and wouldn't that have been a mess.

Not that I didn't think Kakashi could. Possibly even bloodlessly, given the rain. But it would have been politically tricky.

"Kei, everyone's all right in here," said Obito's voice, and I felt him jogging up behind me. Turning, I spotted Yahiko behind him.

"Good," I said to Obito, and glanced past him at Yahiko. "Yahiko-senpai, did Konan-senpai give you any kind of status update?"

Yahiko nodded, and a tiny paper person poked its head out from Yahiko's high collar. Sheltered from the rain by his chin, it waved at me.

Well, I could see that Konan still had a sense of humor about things. Or else she had designed an army of autonomous, sentient paper constructs and let them loose on Ame.

Yahiko turned to the gathering crowd and bellowed, "False alarm, everyone! Back to work!"

And in short order, nearly everyone dispersed.

"False alarm?" Yagura repeated. His bodyguards—a two-guy, one-girl team—seemed to brace for impact. "Everyone felt that, Yahiko-dono. That wasn't just some firework going off at the wrong time."

Speaking of the Kiri team, I saw a blonde woman with long dangly earrings and a heart-shaped face. She had a slight build, compared to her two teammates, and wore the standard Kiri uniform with jade bracelets around each bandage-covered wrist.
The biggest member of the team was a man with long, wavy brown hair tied off behind his back. He was frankly built like a Mack truck, complete with huge bare biceps and the same jade bangles as his tiny teammate.

And then there was the guy who didn't stand out much. Aside from his sharply slanted eyes, the last guy reminded me of a skinnier version of Asuma, without the indecisive stubble. He was also paler by a fair margin, like he didn't do things in daylight much.

...They were familiar somehow, but not in the same way that Yagura was. Had I seen their pictures somewhere before?

**If they attack you now, Isobu commented, you may be able to remember their faces long enough to say something pithy to their corpses.**

*Can we never talk about CSI ever again? Especially after this morning.*

**But this is the best time for it.** Isobu griped, then subsided.

"As far as I'm concerned," Yahiko said sharply, "I have enough to deal with without Kirigakure shinobi brandishing weapons in a neutral village." He crossed his arms over his chest and said, "Daibutsu, Kyūsuke, back to the Kiri zone. Take our guests with you."

Yagura glared up at Yahiko, who didn't appear to spare him a second thought—instead, he turned his attention back to Obito and said, "So, is something wrong?"

"...I guess not," Obito said, his eye darting between Kakashi and me as the atmosphere settled down somewhat. As Yagura's party left the area, taking their buzzing chakra with them, Obito said, "They sent him to be a diplomat?"

"Villages have to send powerhouses to get anything done nowadays, Obito," I said. "Like we did in Sunagakure, remember?"

Granted, Suna had been a bit of a fluke. Sensei had to go, as Hokage, but he'd brought nearly every S-class shinobi he could get his hands on. And then Yahiko and Jiraiya had shown up, with the rest of the Ame contingent and Konan's flower.

"Let's head back inside," Yahiko said. He jabbed a finger at the sky and said, "Nagato hasn't figured out how to make that stop yet, and it would suck if you all caught colds now."

Old wives' tale or not, Yahiko bustled all three of us back into the tower to dry off. He didn't have any apparent concerns about his friends, which I took to mean that he was certain they were all right. While I had no idea what Yahiko's range was, I assumed that Nagato was pretty hard to miss no matter what degree of skill was involved. At least, he was to me.

"So," Yahiko said as we weaved through the crowd of desks. Most of them were ill-matched, but all of them were occupied by at least one Ame-nin busy Getting Shit Done. "I haven't had as much time to hang out with you three as Nagato and Konan have. How about you tell me what's been going on, from your point of view? We all know Nagato's gonna roll up whatever thinks about threatening us and smash it into okonomiyaki, so there's no point in worrying too much."

"...Is that how he dealt with Hanzō?" I asked, rather than deal with the fact that Nagato wasn't going to be able to kill the Statue. Because it was literally impossible.

"No," Yahiko said, as we climbed the same freaking staircase after him again. He said distantly, "I handled him."
"How?" asked Obito.

"Kenjutsu," Yahiko said, tapping the grip of the katana at his waist. It looked like an ANBU-regulation katana, but that was probably an assumption based on the lack of a guard. While Yahiko could have gotten it off the ROOT unit that was sent to wipe out Akatsuki, he could easily lie, and I didn't really want to know the answer. "It was easier once Jiraiya-sensei and Tsunade-sama took out Ibuse. He’s still pissed that Hanzō's dead, so Imoriko has to negotiate with the salamanders on my behalf now."

"That's still nicer than most summon contracts would be," Kakashi remarked. "So, Yahiko-san, the quake from before…?"

"What about it?" Yahiko asked, as we finally reached the Akatsuki living quarters.

"Does Konan-san do that often?" Kakashi asked.

I kind of ignored the thread of the conversation for a moment, looking around first and foremost.

The Akatsuki triumvirate personal floor was...a mess, to be blunt. Konan's office was organized in a way that reflected her sealing specialty, and I hadn't seen Yahiko or Nagato's versions. But the floor they actually lived on had been kicked over by a renovation demon or something, going by all the sawdust and other fun residue of a home remodeling job.

Aside from having knocked out at least three walls, the aforementioned demon had gotten started on several projects that were abandoned in the middle. One of them included installing a kitchen sink. Aside from that, clothes carpeted two sections of the floor—where there had once been designated rooms—in a way that reminded me of a college dorm room when both roommates had an allergy to laundry baskets. Sensei probably would have said that a tornado had hit the place, but I would have argued that tornadoes were more discriminatory.

"Dammit, Nagato," Yahiko muttered, looking around at his living space with an air of despair. "This is why you don't use ninjutsu to clean."

I mostly ignored that, too, and continued poking around. While Kakashi and Yahiko talked about the logistical difficulties of having teammates who could rearrange maps and then occasionally forgot not to, Obito sort of drifted around and watched me explore.

The Ame trio had a few wall scrolls haphazardly lying across countertops here and there, and someone had left their door open. I wasn't going to snoop, exactly, but...

You're snooping.

Shut up.

Something screeched and I jumped back, toward Obito's chakra signature, and knocked both of us over.

"Did you know that the contract includes screaming salamanders?" Yahiko asked in a tone that made it obvious that the question was rhetorical.

"We do now," Obito said from under me.

"Why do salamanders even have the ability to scream?" I demanded, getting up and then helping Obito to his feet again.
The salamander in question was a big, brown, flat-headed creature that peered at us from the ceiling of the open room. It made another "paaaaarp" noise before waddling around on the ceiling for a moment. Then the door slid closed.

"Curiosity did kill the cat, Kei-san. Just be glad that was only my alarm." Yahiko turned away then and dug around in the cabinets above the sink for something. When he turned around, he had cans of various kinds of drinks in each hand. "I don't have the slightest idea how to make something traditional, so here you go."

Then he dragged all of us over to the low kotatsu table, because we were sheep and had already been embarrassed about six times today.

"Cold tea?" Kakashi said blankly, even as he accepted his can.

"Ame special." Yahiko cracked his can open without any hesitation and said, "Cheers." And downed the lot.

"This is the lowest-budget tea break I've ever had," Obito said, reading the label. "This isn't tea. This is some kind of health drink disguised as tea."

"Mine says honey on the label," I said, a little baffled. I hadn't seen honey with green tea in...years? Mom would have called this stuff sacrilege, or nearly so.

Obito watched Yahiko drain his can, shrugged to himself, and opened the can. He sipped cautiously.

I, on the other hand, suffered a sudden attack of bravery and decided to take a big swallow immediately. Go me.

Kakashi looked at all of us like we'd grown two heads.

"It's just sweet, Kakashi," I said. Kind of...boring, actually. More honey than tea, in my case, made the drink taste a bit syrupy.

Kakashi was making a face under his mask. I just knew it. "I...don't think so." And on top of not liking sweets, he probably didn't care for the idea of taking his mask off in front of Yahiko.

Yahiko looked around at us and kinda just shrugged it off. It took a second for me to realize that his brown eyes stayed focused on Kakashi's face, then drifted to each of us before darting back. In a pattern. Then Yahiko said, "So, kiddos, what's Konoha like?"

"Not rainy," Obito said.

"I figured as much, given that it's in the Land of Fire."

"Well, we have summer festivals and stuff," Obito said. "But those are kind of regional and it'd be hard to have Tanabata in this much rain."

Yahiko nodded, but looked disappointed. "Damn, I was hoping to come up with some kind of special occasion..."

"It'd be better to celebrate Amegakure than anything else," I said. "...Do you ever have some kind of anniversary thing? For defeating Hanzō?"

"Not really," Yahiko replied. "We've been reconstructing Ame for a year, but maybe in a few more. Once people get used to us."
Would it be like celebrating the French Revolution while the Terror was still going on?

"Where did you learn Water ninjutsu?" I asked Yahiko, apropos of nothing.

"Jiraiya-sensei taught me a bit," Yahiko replied. "Though I think the better ones are the ones I've learned from the salamanders since getting the contract. And in Akatsuki, most of us teach each other. You?"

"I learned most of mine from a chunin I met," I replied. "He lives with this merchant group in the Land of Fire, but I did see a few of their wagons out in the market." If Kirigakure was in too much of a mess to do much about Shirozora and Nanami, did that still make them missing-nin? "I actually almost expected to see someone I knew down there."

While at least half of the core Chinatsugumi were shinobi, they were also missing-nin—or at least Rikuto and Shirozora were. Even if they were mostly just merchants now, the caravans couldn't deal with Iwagakure and Kirigakure in case somebody got suspicious. Instead, they focused on villages and cities that their members hadn't pissed off and built relations there. They built little sanctums, becoming part of new communities.

Sure, those new outposts doubled as places to run if shit got serious, but their primary motivation always came down to money. New markets equaled new business partners. And for the villages that took in tons of trade cargo, it was a mutually beneficial setup.

Any further conversation was stalled by the sound of someone in private room opening a window. Aside from the screaming salamander alarm clock, which didn't go off, I hadn't expected anyone else to show up at all. And then there was a loud thump, as a very heavy someone—or two somebodies—hit a mattress.

(I used to jump on a bed with my brother. I know these things.)

"Konan, make sure Nagato doesn't soak through the mattress!" Yahiko yelled. He dashed into the other room, with all of the messy clothes. I had to assume they were Nagato's, then? God dammit these people were confusing.

"I am—oof—trying!" Konan replied. "Nagato, you went swimming."

"It wasn't on purpose." Nagato wandered out of the room a moment later, with Konan keeping him upright with some difficulty. When he made it to the table, he slumped over the surface with a sigh of relief, dripping water onto the wood.

"What's going on?" Obito asked, looking like he was fighting the urge to poke Nagato and see if he would jump. Then he gave into temptation anyway, after about four seconds.

"Ow…" groaned Nagato, not lifting his head from the tabletop. Not even as Konan undid his headband and tied it to a drying line above the sink.

"Nagato," Yahiko growled, "if you ruined my pillows, I'm going to roll your clothes into a ball and set them on fire."

"I was on my pillow," Nagato replied, still not looking up.

"And mine," said Konan, but much less annoyed about it.

Um… Was this gonna be another Raidō and Genma thing or…?
"Uh..." said Obito. "Do you all share a bed?"

"Yes," Konan replied without looking up, as Yahiko dropped a towel on Nagato's head and commenced drying him off with all the gentle loving care of an older sibling administering a noogie. While Nagato immediately tried to punch Yahiko, blindly, Konan said, "I think the particular use of his Rinnegan abilities has exhausted him."

Obito, Kakashi, and I all looked at each other. So, we weren't going to talk about...that. Saved me a headache for the moment, but I wasn't totally sure of what we were going to think in an hour. There was a bit too much going on to really have a discussion.

I sighed. "Judge not, lest you be judged in turn," right?

**Exactly what are you talking about?**

*Ask me again in a minute.*

Obito patted my shoulder, though I wasn't sure he knew why I was sighing in the first place.

Kakashi finally elected to crack open his canned drink, whatever it actually was, and sniff at the contents suspiciously. He had apparently decided that Konan and Yahiko could handle whatever was going on with Nagato. Any other concerns were not his problem.

"I'm fine!" Nagato insisted, but Yahiko had batted away his hand without any effort. "Ow!"

"You're an idiot," Yahiko said to Nagato, giving up on the toweling for a second. He dropped to one knee next to Nagato, grabbing the redhead and hugging him fiercely. "What did you do? Konan hasn't had to carry you since we were kids!"

"I did the same thing as usual," Nagato said, grumbling a little even as he relaxed into the hold. "Just...more of it."

"...How much more?" Yahiko wanted to know, and everyone heard the warning tone in his voice.

"I, um." Nagato ducked his head. "I might've launched the Statue as far as I could."

Which was probably somewhere around *low-earth orbit*. If the Tailed Beasts were right and the Sage had *created the moon*, Nagato probably could have managed escape velocity on an object with far less mass. I asked, "As in, so far it might not come back down? Or far enough that it's not our problem anymore?"

"Everything that goes up has to come down, Kei-san," said Konan, distracted. Yahiko was hauling Nagato to his feet—or nearly so—and starting to move him, and it took most of her attention.

I wobbled a hand in the air and said "Kinda," but mostly to myself.

Kakashi stared at me. So did Obito, but he was a little less skeptical about it. But the Akatsuki trio was too busy wrangling Nagato out of the room and toward a bathroom (and hot water) to bother with what I was saying.

"I'm not getting into a discussion about how I know that," I told them, and went back to my can of green tea. The second sip was as syrupy as the first.

Obito exchanged looks with Kakashi and said, "I know we say that Kei just kinda 'knows things' a lot, but this is weird."
Kakashi nodded, giving me a long look even as he pulled his mask down and knocked back his completely nonalcoholic drink. And then, since the drink was apparently inoffensive enough for him to stand, he drank the rest of it.

The comment about gravity was probably another tick mark in Kakashi's "Kei is a weird kid and this is really weird" tally. I was mentally counting down to the moment that he called me out, and probably had been for years.

While I certainly was a strange child, I'd just lived in a world where people had been to the moon. Without magic powers, and with significant technological advancements. I was not looking forward to the day that shinobi figured out how to really utilize what technology we had. Given our society's patterns, it was just a matter of time before we started using all of that tech to kill each other even more thoroughly than usual.

I sighed again. It was a problem for another day. "So, if Nagato took care of the Statue and we have the skeleton, I guess that means the mission's over."

Elsewhere in the apartment, the hot water finally turned on, and we could hear Yahiko, Konan, and Nagato speaking quietly to each other through the thin walls.

"Yeah, I guess so," said Obito. He was staring down at the table, looking distant, with his head resting on the knuckles of his left hand.

"Obito, were you feeling okay earlier?" I asked, now that we had a quiet moment to talk.

"Mn...no," Obito mumbled. "Just... I don't know how to describe it."

"Try," Kakashi suggested. "We can help."

And Kakashi could bring Bisuke back to facilitate that. Given Bisuke's absence, I reached for Obito's right hand and placed my hand on top of his. Just for a moment.

"...I can do that." Obito blinked slowly, like a cat, and took his hand back. He stretched out against the surface of the table, then folded his arms to pillow his head. "It's...kinda weird. I mean. If the body is Madara's."

Kakashi frowned, visibly. Seeing him without his mask added a level of sincerity to his expressions that I hadn't noticed was missing before. "We haven't established that yet."

"Yeah, but I think we will," Obito said, closing his eye. "And that...that's the hard part."

"...I don't understand," said Kakashi, but he said it as though he wasn't even certain that that was the right response.

"How so?" I asked Obito, and my voice came out softer than I had thought it would.

Obito blew out a frustrated breath. "I don't know how to say it!" After a moment, he went on, in a harsh tone that seemed to twist around on him. "I just—when I saw the bones, I was upset that he was gone. It was like—I'd lost someone I cared about, but I know he was a monster and he was just using me. And it was his fault I couldn't come home sooner, and then there was the kidnapping!" By that point, he was glaring down at the table as though he expected to be able to spontaneously develop heat vision.

Oh, Obito. And here was Stockholm Syndrome, rearing its ugly head.
"He wasn't a good person. He was probably the gold standard for evil," Obito said, though his voice was getting wobbly. "He hurt you both, through me and through all those Zetsu copies. He's why Miyako-san died." Obito buried his face in his arms. "But…"

My voice was hidden and buried behind the lump in my throat. I didn't know if it had formed from anger or empathy for Obito's pain, but it was there nonetheless. I dug my nails of my right hand into my palm, but I reached out again for Obito with my left.

"B-But he still…he looked after me. Whenever I felt like giving up, like it was too hard…” Obito made a choked noise and trailed off for a moment, letting me hold onto his left hand. Then, "I didn't have anyone besides Z-Zetsu, and Guruguru, and h-him. No one to talk to. And you were both—you didn't know. You couldn't have—there was no way there was any kind of rescue coming."

Neither Kakashi nor I said anything.

Obito sighed. "It was like…like the more time went on, the more I liked them. I didn't—I knew they were standing b-between me and getting out. But you didn't see what it was like, when I woke up." Obito held up his right arm, turning his wrist slowly. He watched it move, almost hypnotized. "I was—it—I couldn't walk. My arm was g-gone, my eye was gone. I really—I should have died down there. They didn't—they could have l-left." His fist closed on empty air. "They didn't have to save me."

And they had, and we hadn't.

Fuck.

"Th-they didn't have to h-help me at all," Obito continued, in a voice that hitched but didn't have any real inflection. "B-but they gave me this arm. Th-they helped me learn to use it. To get stronger." He let his arm drop to the table again. "I could almost… There were t-times I thought they cared. They c-could have. Maybe they just…decided I wasn't worth it, after you brought me home."

Then, when Kakashi eyes met mine, we both decided to abandon subtlety and just scooted over, so we bracketed Obito on each side. I still had Obito's hand in mine, and Kakashi placed his arm over Obito's shaking shoulders to reassure him.

"Y-you must think I'm pretty m-messed up," Obito managed past the hitch in his voice. "I—it's stupid."

Actually, it was the long-delayed exploration of a problem I suspected had been festering in Obito for well over a year. Just because I didn't experience any regrets about Madara's lonely demise—or what I hoped was his demise—didn't mean I could say what Obito could or couldn't feel. And given that Madara had kept him for over six months, while none of us had ever mounted so much as a half-assed a rescue attempt…well.

I could at least offer hugs.

"I thought I was o-over this," Obito mumbled, still hiding his face. "It never—with Inoichi…"

Just talking about a problem didn't always bring up all of the emotions associated with it. But to be confronted with the reality, even a year after the fact…

Or was it the jumble of emotions that was the worst part? Madara had been a bogeyman for most of modern shinobi history, and even after the Tenth we hadn't been sure he was dead. And now, with evidence that pointed toward "yes" after over a year, maybe the finality of it all was what was throwing Obito off. Madara actually being dead changed things.
"This is—it's just really confusing," Obito said, though his voice was muffled by his sleeves.

"Let's go back to our floor," Kakashi suggested, gripping Obito's shoulder. "Come on."

After that, Obito let us guide him back up the staircase. We spent a while just sitting around the low table in our room, not really talking. I made tea and everyone had a bit, but we all decided that this was a time to just...be. Though Kakashi did put his mask back on at some point.

Eventually, the shower two floors down stopped running.

I didn't really care. Instead, I spent my time lying on my side, listening to my teammates' breathing. Kakashi sat near me, reading his copy of *Icha-Icha* and listening to the rain. Obito was lying next to me, his back against mine. I waited until I could feel Obito fall asleep to really let my thoughts loose.

The Statue was gone. Madara was...probably gone. We'd survived this mission with only minimal harm, even if Obito would need to talk to Inoichi again when we went home. We'd get through all of it just fine.

But if that was true, why did I still have a bad feeling about the future?

On the day we were going to leave, there was a Zetsu invasion a little before lunch.

It ended the moment Nagato got his hands on one of them and ripped its soul out of its body and absorbed it. Sure, the Zetsus trying to attack people might have scared some people into minor heart attacks, and every shinobi ended up killing more than their fair share of the drone army, but the overall effectiveness of the attack was frankly laughable.

Because, once Nagato shook off his chakra exhaustion symptoms—similar to a hangover—he demonstrated why the Rinnegan was known as the most powerful bloodline limit on the planet.

Even now, several hours after the fact, there was a crowd oohing and aahing over the tremendous mounds of Zetsu-based mulch that were left of every Zetsu within twenty-six kilometers of Amegakure.

"Are you all going to make Zetsu extermination a thing now?" I asked Nagato, while Ame shinobi started burying all the shredded corpses.

"We can't know when they'll activate otherwise," Nagato said distantly. He was looking down at his hands. "I've never torn someone's soul out before."

"I wouldn't have guessed that Zetsu clones had souls," I mumbled, right on the lower edge of what would be audible.

"They do," Nagato murmured. "He couldn't remember his name, or who he'd been. Only that he'd been human once. But he could remember the others, so... I chose to deal with the problem in front of me." Nagato shook himself. "Ultimately, the Zetsu creatures are still hostile. They will always be hostile. But it's...sad, how far they've fallen."

Nagato and I stood there, looking across the lake toward Amegakure, where the last few Zetsu stragglers were being put down. We were quiet for a while.

"Are you certain you don't want any kind of bonus for your mission?" Nagato asked. "I understand this was something arranged between Konan and Minato-senpai, but it did deal with the kind of trouble that is more normal for S-ranked missions. Tailed Beasts and everything."
"All we really did was make it easier for you to hurl it into space," I said. I punched him in the shoulder, in a friendly way. And at the same time, I slipped him a Flying Thunder God kunai for Konan's future reference. And so we'd have a waypoint if we ever wanted to make this trip again.

"I don't know about this...'space' thing," Nagato said cautiously. He was still a little skeptical about my more unproven ramblings, even once I'd explained the idea. (And then I found out that he had taken my hypothetical plan to "launch it into the sun" as literally as he could.) "I just know that it won't come back down for a while. No one can reach it except me."

Unless they had a rocket. I didn't know enough math to be sure when the thing would come down, or if it would. But Nagato was the only one who could really change its trajectory once it was caught in the planet's orbit, at least for quite some time.

I nodded. "Thanks for putting us up for a bit. We can find our own way home from here."

At that, Nagato looked back over his shoulder, to where Obito was carrying a crate full of some kind of grain and loading it into a wagon. Kakashi was elsewhere, avoiding the smell of Amegakure fish being put into crates lined with refrigeration seals.

Spotting me, a merchant waved back.

There were some perks to the Chinatsugumi's expansion efforts after all. The most important of them were the outposts of Konoha-friendly faces everywhere.

"Don't be a stranger, Nagato-san," I said, as I headed down the crest of the tiny hill and toward my team. "Talk to Kushina-san often, all right?"

"Of course," Nagato said.

And then Kakashi came back from wherever he'd been, Obito grabbed both of our hands, and we used the Flying Thunder God Formation. It was one thing to be worried about conserving chakra. It was quite another to spend too much time in an area we knew had potentially-hostile Kiri-nin.

The next thing we all knew, we were at the gates.

"Hey," said Genma's voice. He waved at us from the checkpoint, looking bored. There wasn't anyone in line in front of us, so it must have been a slow day. Wasn't mid-afternoon usually busier? "You kids are late."

"We're a week ahead of schedule," I argued. And it had only taken a chunk of Isobu's chakra to cut out a trip that would have taken even Sensei two days' worth of chakra to pull off.

"You're welcome.

And you're the only reason we're not all dead of chakra exhaustion, so thank you.

"Is Raidō around?" Kakashi asked, as we headed in through the gates. Genma didn't make any move to stop any of us, so I assumed it was okay that he wasn't really checking IDs.


Kakashi nodded and said, "Kei, we need to report in."

I sighed. "Duty calls. Say hi to Raidō for me if you see him first!"

Genma waved us on and said, "Sure, sure. Hey, Obito, can you beat your teammates to the Hokage's
Obito set his jaw and said, "No problem."

"Prove it," Genma sing-songed, and then suddenly Team Minato was racing across the village with basically no further prompting.

We were terrible.

But we were home. And why not celebrate that?

For the record, Obito lost. But only because Rin was in the Academy and grabbed him first. And I was pretty sure Kakashi let me win, given the existence of his speed-enhancing jutsu. Which would have been cheating.

"What do you mean you have another mission?" Hayate demanded, his voice cracking as he spoke. Sometimes, I was reminded that he was a teenager now. Like me.

What a horrifying thought.

The debriefing with Sensei had been...boring. I hadn't been involved in the bulk of the mission, but I could report everything the Tailed Beasts had told me and what I had deduced from listening to everything that happened. Obito and Kakashi had the fun parts, and got dragged to the hospital by Rin for a checkup after that point.

Me? I stayed long enough to confirm that Obito was getting eye treatments from Rin and that Kakashi's leg gash was going to scar despite my best efforts. I got a clean bill of health from her, and then I headed home.

Hayate got home while I was trying to figure out where the hell all of the takeout had come from. I certainly hadn't left a bunch of empty paper containers in the fridge, and I hadn't thought that Hayate liked them…

"I mean exactly that," I told him, pulling one of the containers out and checking it over. Seriously, had no one ever told my brother not to keep these things in the fridge once they were empty? "Sorry, Hayate, but Sensei wants me to build up as much leadership experience as I can, and the last mission was a bit too easy."

It was easier than explaining the fact that we'd been trying to figure out how to get the Ten-Tails out of the area without it waking up and killing everything that moved. And since Nagato was who he was, and Obito had Kamui, the rest of us had more or less been window dressing until it came time to crunch the numbers and figure out what had happened before we got there.

And then there had been the short-lived Zetsu incursion.

"But you were gone for two weeks!" Hayate complained. He flopped over on the floor and clung to my leg, making pathetic noises.

I reached down to pat him on the head and somehow ended up on the floor anyway. As my brother put his head on my knees and made sad puppy eyes at me, I said, "So, how are the infiltration missions going?"

"Is it that obvious?" Hayate asked, in a much more normal tone. "Dammit! I'm supposed to be a body double for a merchant's daughter in a week and Inoichi-sensei says I have to act the part to
“Make the Transformation jutsu count!”

“It’s more that you’re not in costume,” I said. “And anyway, wasn’t Inoichi-san going to take that role?”

“He’s gonna be the merchant,” said Hayate. “But the guy’s got like a million Academy-aged kids, and I still can’t get this right. How is acting like a kid this hard?”

I couldn’t exactly give him any real advice on that. My childishness had been a paper-thin ruse for longer than Hayate had been alive. If I hadn’t been reincarnated—if my mother hadn’t carried me for nine months—literally no one would have bought it. “I don’t know. Would it help to go visit the Academy students?”

“Probably not,” Hayate said. “I don’t really think any of the Academy kids are that spoiled.”

“Maybe go visit with some of your clan friends?” I suggested. “Obito may know someone who needs a babysitter for a bit…”

Hayate’s eyes widened in horror. “No.”

...What kinds of missions had my brother been on with his genin team? “Then I don’t know what to tell you. Stick it out. Ask Yūgao and Iruka what they’re doing. Pretend to be asleep the whole time?”

Hayate thunked his head against the sink cabinet out of pure frustration. “Ugh.”

I ruffled his hair. “Cheer up. I’ll get dinner ready for us and tell you a story about Ame.” And hopefully by the time I was done cooking, I’d have figured out which parts of said story I could tell him. With Madara Uchiha’s bones in ANBU’s basement somewhere, and the Ten-Tails in orbit, and the Zetsu attack, there were gonna be some serious holes.

But I did think about it. And over a dinner of instant ramen—because I wasn’t feeling that interested in cooking—I told my brother about some of the funnier things I’d seen and thought while in a foreign land. Like how Kakashi made clothes for all eight of his dogs all by himself, how Obito had made fun of me for thinking we were supposed to stand way out in the rain for a couple of hours, and more.

“Oh, and Obito and Rin have a date tomorrow,” I said, once I’d exhausted the other Hayate-safe conversation options.

Hayate looked blank, then disappointed, and said, “I thought he had a crush on you, though. You do a bunch of stuff that only couples do, right?”

I stared at my brother from across the table and said, “Uh, no. I remember the first time you called Obito ‘brother,’ and I can tell you right now that my feelings are pretty much exactly the same.”

Hayate blinked. “Oh. Really?”

“Yes, really,” I said.

“Huh.” Hayate scratched his head. “Well, that’s boring.”

“If there’s anything my life could use for the next six months,” I said, “it’s ‘boring.’”

Sensei had looked at the mission report Konan had sent with us—in the form of an origami cow hiding behind Obito’s goggles—and decided that I could run missions of comparatively less danger.
As long as I didn't run into any Kiri-nin, he'd thought, I could handle solo or team assignments with relatively little trouble.

I was scheduled for a two-shinobi mission with Gai, starting in two days and running until whenever it was finished. I was supposedly going to be in the lead, though Gai outranked me and had for at least a year or two. Something, something, go knock over a bandit castle for some villagers near the border with the Land of Grass. It was a setup for an easy C-rank, though the threat level could have been bumped to B-rank depending on how much resistance we ran into once we got there.

After the Ten-Tails and Amegakure's drama, I was really hoping it would be a cakewalk of a mission.

"You're gonna be on missions forever, aren't you?" Hayate complained, placing his chopsticks over the mouth of his ramen container. "That sucks."

"It's money," I said. "And well, with the Three-Tailed Beast…"

"Right," Hayate said, and sighed. "Are jonin always gone a lot? I've only had two-day missions so far."

"You've been a chunin for about two weeks, Hayate." I looked speculatively down into my cup of ramen and decided on the spot that I would never buy this brand again. Distantly, I added, "You're gonna get the long ones soon enough. Actually, your next mission sounds pretty long."

"Yeah. But you've been on longer ones," Hayate said. He rested his head against his hand and added, "Thanks for getting all that stuff set up."

"What stuff?"

"I mean, Aunt Kushina came by here and made sure I had food on Tuesday," Hayate said. "Even though Naruto's really hyper and she's already pregnant. And Rin—"

"Kushina's pregnant?" I interrupted, staring at my brother in shock. "Yeah. She said she's going to have the baby in, uh...November?" he said. "You didn't know?"

"No, I didn't." I got up and took both of our ramen cups to the kitchen trash can. "I'll stop in and see if they need anything done before I leave."

*That certainly explains why she isn't interested in being on active duty at the moment,* I thought.

Allowing for a moderate margin of error, I could guess that Kushina must have gotten pregnant in January sometime. Hayate hadn't mentioned a specific due date, but I had a sneaking suspicion about that. Specifically, about how Sensei's birthday was in January, and that Kushina and Sensei had not decided to throw a party.

Well, then. After the experience with Kushina and Sensei's first kid, I imagined that Sensei was going to go insane on security measures.

And I would probably...not be there for it, depending on my mission rotation. I frowned at the thought and started rinsing chopsticks. Naruto would have a baby sibling. *Naruto.* I was sure he'd be the best big brother he could, though perhaps not immediately.

"What kind of mission are you going to have?"
"Gai and I are gonna see if we can kick a bandit dude off his throne. Preferably hard enough to bounce." I shrugged. "And probably infuse the world with Youth."

Hayate peered suspiciously at me. "You're not...gonna copy him, are you?"

"Gai and I already train together," I pointed out. "I'm just missing out on the green."

"Gai could fix that."

"Yeah, but it's the wrong kind of green for the mission," I said, and tilted my head to one side as I considered the option. "Well, it's not like I'm exactly spoiled for outfits…"

"That is going to look weird," Hayate said, instantly reversing his position on jumpsuits of any kind. I could see it in his expression. "Don't do it."

Well, now I had to. I wouldn't take one of Gai's spares, but hadn't I gotten one of those things for a birthday present last year?

I winked at Hayate, and he groaned aloud.

Gai burst into tears the second he saw me on Wednesday morning.

I had cheated just a bit, since orange legwarmers hadn't come with the outfit I found in my closet. And the green outfit itself had been just a bit short around the ankles and wrists, since I'd grown over the previous six months. As a result, I had bandages around my wrists and up to my elbows, and another set for each of my calves to keep any components from shifting too much. And since my bandana wouldn't tie all the way around my waist like Gai's more traditional hitai-ate, I had to improvise a bit with my sword straps and three scroll holsters.

If I had to sum up the effect, I'd say that I looked a little like a much stabbier version of Gai. Almost as though the Green Spandex brigade had enough members to specialize. Add in my backpack, and I probably looked like a particularly heavily-armed turtle all dressed in form-fitting green.

Leonardo would be fucking proud.

"Sorry I couldn't find enough to make it genuine," I told him, while patting his back sympathetically.

"No, Keisuke-chan, this is wonderful!" Gai said, grabbing me up in a hug that would have probably broken the back of a lesser woman. Even with my pack keeping some of the pressure off, I still made a squeaky noise like a toy being stepped on. "You look beautiful today! So strong! So sure of yourself!"

That was a bit of an exaggeration…

Gai set me down and gave me a thumbs-up. "We must get a picture."

I glanced at the gate guard—a chunin I didn't know—and shrugged just out of sheer fellow-feeling. We didn't exactly have a glut of cameras in Konoha, but I had no problem with immortalizing this outfit in the annals of People Who Actually Willingly Wore It. "I don't think we can right now, Gai. Unless you have a camera?"

Gai would be overjoyed when Lee finally graduated. I could just see it now.

"In fact, I do!" Gai said brightly.
I waved the guard over, and he took a picture for us with Gai's goofy little Polaroid-thing. Low-tech and kind of ancient-looking, but since the flash still worked I'd have to assume that the camera did too. Both Gai and I had gigantic grins—his was bigger—and our arms slung over each other's shoulders just because we could. The only problem was that the film would probably take a week to get back to us, but hey, we'd be busy. It'd be fine.

"Make sure to send someone to deliver it to my apartment, please!" Gai called after the guard, who was apparently going on break and whose replacement immediately gave us a funny look. Gai ignored that and said to me, "Keisuke-chan, are you in charge of this mission?"

"Yes," I said. I scratched the underside of my wrist. Had the bandages been a bad idea?

"Then I will follow your lead, Keisuke-chan!" Gai said brightly. "Please, lead the way!"

Which I did.

When we got to the village a few days later, we immediately got into a fight with bandits on the road. And then with the ones in the village. And then the ones on the hill behind the village. And then, once they had raised the alarm, the rapid-fire fistfight went up the hill and into the fortress on said hill. And then through the fortress.

By the time we got to the bandit king, we'd been fighting his men for about an hour without stopping, moving slowly uphill like a two-shinobi reversed avalanche of death or something. We didn't even really stop in the village itself. We just kept finding more faces to kick in.

Actually, the fights themselves took longer than they might have otherwise, since Gai had asked me to honor the uniform I'd adopted for the mission. So I did.

Then we found the guy in question, sitting on a tatami mat in the middle of his fortress and eating his breakfast—stolen from the village just that morning, of course—he had barely gotten halfway to his feet before two simultaneous chakra-charged kicks to the chest launched him backward and out of the room.

With sweat dripping down our faces and a sort of fierce joy from a good workout, Gai and I fist-bumped. Then we started the real work, which was dragging all of the downed bandits to the nearest lockup. On my own, I might have killed them all just because I wouldn't have been focusing solely on taijutsu and instead just done what worked fastest, but it would have ruined Gai's experience.

We got home inside of a week, having been paid and fed well by the thankful villagers.

And then, when Gai caught up with Genma and Ebisu and picked up a mission with them, I got another one too. Since Hayate had departed on his mission while we were gone, I didn't even feel guilty about it.

Missions kind of blurred together after that.

The highlights pretty much went like this: I went on one pair-mission with Kakashi, where he managed to distract the missing-nin target with a well-timed pun ("We're going to cut you some slack...or not.") right before I decapitated her. I went on a border rotation with Ebisu, which put us down on the coastline and let us explore the wonderful world of half-rotted seafood when a boat from Kiri washed up on the shore. Obito's mission involved chasing down an Iwa patrol that had thought they could get away with stealing samples of Sensei's fuinjutsu. I reinforced Konoha's barrier with Genma.
There was even a mission where Obito and Kakashi were with me again, and we unraveled a conspiracy to rig the casinos in Tanzaku-Gai, which was about the weirdest mystery we’d encountered. If the head of the scheme had said something about meddling kids, it would have seemed a perfect fit. We'd even brought Kakashi's dogs out to help sniff out the culprit, and uncovered a completely unrelated drug smuggling ring that ended with a bunch of dead thugs.

And just like that, months slipped by.

The newest Namikaze-Uzumaki kid was born on the twentieth of November that year, in the middle of what felt like an early winter gale.

At least, Konoha was like that. Like for Naruto, Tsunade had made Katsuyu's realm available to the Namikaze family, and had decided to be midwife personally. Rin went with them, and so did Sensei (for obvious reasons).

But some of us demurred. I'd been on back-to-back missions for two solid months, so I stayed in Sensei's house to recover and watch both the toddler Naruto and Tenzō, who was pacing nervously around the living room. Kakashi was on a mission—again—and Obito had left to go and support Rin.

Naruto was fussier than normal, very aware that neither of his parents were around, and I had thus far failed to distract him in any meaningful way. He wouldn't even hug his favorite stuffed frog, though he did drag it around the house twice.

"Mommy!" Naruto called out, his little face scrunching up in a definite warning about impending tears. "Daddy?"

"Naruto-chan, come here." I patted the couch next to where I was sitting, and Naruto climbed up onto it with only a little grumble. After he tucked himself firmly into my side, he put Gama-chan on my lap and held it up, pointing its orange face toward me.

"Gama-tan is scared," Naruto told me, pushing the top of his head into...basically into what bosom I had. Which wasn't much. "Mommy and Daddy gone."

I squished him against my side, rubbing circles on his back. "They'll be back soon, Naruto-chan. Don't worry."

After a second, I noticed Tenzō standing awkwardly behind the couch, so I waved him over. Climbing over the back and sliding down the cushions, he slotted himself into place on Naruto's other side, sandwiching the toddler between us.

"Worried?" I asked Tenzō, as he looped both of his arms around Naruto. I ran my fingers through the no-longer-so-tiny chunin's hair, mostly because Hayate was on a mission and I needed to reassure someone. As the surrogate brother figure Kakashi had picked up, it sort of made him family to me too.

Tenzō nodded into Naruto's blond spikes, his expression distant. As Naruto nuzzled his way into Tenzō's flak jacket, which he hadn't taken off since arriving, he said, "I'm a bit worried. Naruto was born on the Tenth, but there's no way this can possibly be that bad of an emergency..."

"That was a unique problem." Not technically irreproducible, but I wasn't worried about it despite that.

Black Zetsu was dead. Madara was dead. The Ten-Tailed Beast was in space. Anything else that
came after us now was going to die.

**Yin Kurama's seal is loosening,** Isobu reported. **But he's not putting any effort into it.**

Yet another reason I was glad that *my* seal was over my chest instead. It was less secure for it, but I probably wouldn't have to worry about Isobu falling out of me in childbirth at the same time the kid did.

I think he's trying to fall asleep. He's complaining about the noise, Isobu said. And I can't get him to stop.

*What about Yang Kurama?* I wondered, and stroked Naruto's hair.

He's laughing at his better half. Literally.

*But is Kushina all right?* I asked.

She seems to be. Screaming, of course, because human births are disgusting, but the slug woman is not panicking from what Yin Kurama can hear. Isobu seemed to roll his only eye. I refuse to be more excited about this. It's not as though the child is going to be one of us.

True. But the baby will be the child of a jinchūriki, the brother of another, and my...baby sister or niece. Not sure. I ran the pad of my thumb over Naruto's marked cheeks. There's plenty for you to be excited about as the baby grows.

...I reserve judgment for later. *I do* remember what this one used to be like. And how Shukaku's host behaves.

"Kei-san," Tenzō said, "are you all right?"

Whoops. "Yeah. I was just thinking." I rubbed my eyes with my left hand, yawning. "Just tired. I can't remember if Naruto-chan here is getting a new baby brother or sister yet. Did Sensei or Kushina-san happen to tell you?"

"A girl," Tenzō said. "They're gonna name her 'Tatsumaki.'"

*Tornado, huh?* Given the family she was being born into, that was a very fitting name.

"Hear that, Naruto-chan?" I murmured, feeling my eyes start to slide shut over and over. It was a sure sign that I was tired. And that I'd fall asleep at the slightest provocation. I wanted to fight that urge on instinct, but then I thought about where I was.

If I couldn't afford to catch a nap in Sensei's house, with Naruto and Tenzō right there, where could I sleep? It was about the safest place in the village.

With that thought in mind, I leaned back on the couch and pushed the top half with my back to force it to recline. Tenzō did the same, with Naruto and his frog still in his arms, and ended up leaning his head against my chest once I rolled onto my side. Naruto fell into the gap between us, chewing on his frog, but seemed happier than before.

The three of us fell asleep on the couch like that, and slept until I felt Kushina's chakra reenter the village and jolted awake with enough force to end up on the floor. That, of course, woke Naruto up, and Tenzō had to calm him down again.
"You're getting pretty good at that," I told him, once he'd gotten the toddler settled again.

"I've had a lot of practice, Kei-san." Tenzō handed Naruto to me, though. He needed two hands to get his flak jacket's zipper on, and then he went into the hallway closet to get a coat.

With a brief consideration of how I was just wearing my uniform pants and a T-shirt, which had been drooled on, I went to follow suit. Flak jacket, coat, random other shit…

I tucked Naruto into a toddler sling and, once that was all sorted out, went with Tenzō toward Kushina's chakra.

That ended up putting us at the hospital, but since Rin and Obito met us in the lobby, I assumed everything had gone well.

"How's everyone?" Tenzō asked, once he got out of the mandatory Team Minato hugs that seemed to be handed out like candy at times like this.

"No complications," said Rin, leaning back into Obito's chest. She still had a fine sheen of sweat on her face, from either stress or from pouring her chakra into Kushina earlier. "Everything went as expected."

Obito looped his arms around Rin's neck and leaned over, with his chin ending up on top of her head. "Aside from the part where Kushina was screaming the whole time," Obito said with a wince. "I mean, I know childbirth is like eighteen kinds of suck, but is it supposed to be that bad?"

"How long was she in labor?" I asked Rin.

"Two hours or so," Rin said with a shrug. "We left when Kushina's water broke, but the contractions didn't start until ten hours later. Most of the time we were gone was spent preparing the area for the Nine-Tails's chakra, and waiting. No one wanted to be out of place when it started, but the delivery itself was short."

"See, that's nothing compared to Naruto-chan and his fourteen hours." I hefted the dozing toddler up in his sling a bit, and he made a face at the world without opening his eyes. "I did hear that the second kid was supposed to be easier, but that's even better than I was expecting."

Tenzō's round eyes were even rounder than normal. "That's…that's kind of terrifying."

"Welcome to the life of an obstetrician, Tenzō-kun," Rin said, but not unkindly. Above her head, Obito was looking slightly ill. "Be glad you never have to go through any of that."

Tenzō nodded rapidly.

"So, Obito," I said, "when do we get to see the baby?"

"As soon as we do?" Obito guessed. "Though we already did. Tatsumaki's bald right now, but she's kinda cute."

"Are you saying my daughter isn't the cutest girl in the whole world?" Kushina yelled down the hall, making all of us jump. "Come in here so you can see for yourself!"

"No, don't—there are already six people in here!" Jiraiya yelled right after.

"Then get out!" Kushina argued. "Where's Naruto? Where's my other baby?"

"Here, Kushina-san," I said as I strode toward her chakra, since Naruto was already waking up in
response to the dulcet tones of his mother's voice. I did not want to be the one left holding the screaming toddler, because I had no doubt that Kushina's little blond angel would undergo exactly that transformation if I kept him from his mother.

Obito, Tenzō, and Rin followed in my wake, since I had a reason to be going somewhat faster than they were.

Naruto, once awake, immediately struggled out of my grip and ran toward his parents' voices. I followed, right on his tiny heels, as he peeled around a sharp turn and barged into a room full of adults.

And it was full—between Jiraiya in the corner, Kushina in the bed with the little bundle of joy, Sensei getting his hand healed by Tsunade, three nurses, and the various machines, there wasn't much room for four extra teenagers. But right between Kushina and Sensei, there was just enough space for a tiny blond toddler wielding a plush frog like a flail.

Sensei caught him and let the world's most determined child use him as a high chair.

"Naruto, this is your baby sister," Kushina said, lifting the tiny bundle so the two-year-old could see it properly. After a second, a tiny reddish hand poked out from the blankets.

Naruto, enthralled, crawled up from Sensei's lap and stuck out a finger, letting the baby wrap her tiny fingers around his.

"Her name's Tatsumaki." Kushina leaned over and kissed the top of Naruto's head. "What do you think?"

At that moment, little Tatsumaki apparently decided that all of this was entirely too much excitement for the few hours of life, because she immediately started screaming.

I watched a jolt run through all of the shinobi present—or at least the ones who didn't have kids of their own. Which was...all of us except Sensei and Kushina. While we'd been around Naruto throughout his first two years, to varying degrees, there was a special pitch in an infant's voice that hit our brains like nails on a chalkboard. Parents built up an immunity over time, based on their love for their children. Which, again, most of us were not.

Somehow, the room was deserted inside of four seconds. Tenzō and Tsunade made the most graceful retreat, given that she had work and he'd spent the most time around Naruto during the kid's tantrums.

Obito and Rin? Gone.

Jiraiya and me? Headed down the hall and away from the noise.

But we did manage to hear Naruto's second reaction to having a new sibling: "Make it stop!"

"Thoughts on your new godchild?" I asked Jiraiya, once we were away from the worst of it.

"Tsunade's, actually." Jiraiya looked up at the ceiling tiles, where I was sure nothing of interest could be found, and said quietly, "I never really expected to be a grandfather, kid. Much less twice over."

I nodded to show I was listening, but he wasn't looking at me. He turned away and covered his eyes with his hand, but I could still see a tiny tear that escaped and ran down his face.

Then his other hand came down on my shoulder, knocking me off-balance, and I saw that he'd
mastered his expression. He grinned down at me. "Kei, you do your best to protect what you can see, alright? I'm going to be out of the village more and more often as you kids get closer to growing all the way up, so I won't always be there to pull Minato out of the fire. Look after each other."

I put my hand on top of his and said, "You got it, Jiraiya-sama."

Chapter End Notes

Tatsumaki gets her name from the Tornado of Terror, S-rank Hero #2 in One Punch Man.
Chapter Summary

Every light burns out.

Hey Sis!

I just had to write to tell you that Tenzō and I are rivals now! Like, agh, I know he's been a chūnin longer than I've been a ninja at all, but he's my age! The only thing he has going for him is his bloodline, and he hasn't been out of the village in months!

I refuse to lose to him!

...Though I don't know if he's noticed yet. I need to challenge him to a sparring match like Gai-san does with Kakashi!

Sincerely,

Hayate

Sis,

I lost.

This sucks.

Gonna get stronger for next time by training with Gai-san!

Hayate

Sis,

That was a bad idea. It's been a week and my bones still hurt.

Hayate

Sis,

I think he let me win. That sucks worse! Probably not as much as it sucks to be away from home, though. Are you okay?

Hayate

Sis,

Since you asked in your last letter, I've been staying with Iruka sometimes, and Aunt Kushina and
the Hokage more often. I think they like having a live-in babysitter, but when I can't stand it I just leave Tenzō there with them. And I think he said something about changing his name? "Yamato" sounds weird but I guess he needs a new one for some reason.

Since you've been gone, Tatsumaki-chan's finally grown hair! She's a redhead, like Aunt Kushina said she would be. I know you said her "whisker-marks" were cute, but they just look like normal birthmarks to me. I guess she looks like her brother? I don't know.

Obito and Rin are still dating. Iruka said they went on a mission together in Tanzaku-Gai, but I think they just visited the casino and the hot springs there. They came back with souvenirs for Naruto and Tatsumaki, but not for me! Jerks.

Oh, and Iruka took the Exams (again). He didn't pass. I think he's gonna spend some time thinking things over before he tries again. Inoichi-sensei says he doesn't really seem like wants to hurt people much. Which is alright, since Yūgao and I already kinda do it for him.

Things have been alright, but what I said before... The apartment is a bit too lonely to stay in alone. I've been keeping up on the rent and stuff, though.

But seriously, how are you doing out there?

Hayate

Sis,

Genma just gave me a pumpkin cake. And I guess I have some kind of standing sparring offer? I don't even know him that well.

What did you tell him?

Hayate

Sis,

Do you have any idea when you're coming home? The last time you were here, all you did was sleep a lot. I know the higher ranks are getting deployed a lot more as bigger missions come up, but do you think you can be home soon? I hope we can at least spend New Years' together. We already missed both of our birthdays.

I don't need everyone else checking in on me all the time. I need you to come home.

I miss you.

Hayate

I kept that letter tucked into the front pocket of my flak jacket for what felt like ages. It sat beside its fellows, each one more crumpled and messy than the last, but I refused to throw any of them out.

After all, it was all I heard from my brother for months at a time.

Writing back, for a fūinjutsu specialist, would have been trivial. I always had paper and ink. It wasn't like I lacked opportunity or the time to do it.
But when I sat down to write, the words wouldn't come.

What was I supposed to say? I had back-to-back-to-back missions all the time because it was impossible for anyone to deny that I was an S-class shinobi of some kind. Half of the contents of those missions were classified.

Over the course of a year, I went on a slew of missions that became more challenging the longer I went. Whether that meant escorting a caravan through the Land of Stone with the Anko and Team Chōza, or kicking over another bandit group with delusions of grandeur, or hunting down a band of missing-nin and turning in bounties, I was slowly escalating from C-rank to B-rank and then to A-ranked missions.

Twelve months of living outdoors to varying degrees. Twelve months of barely being in Konoha for more than a month total, counting the few times I had to come home to report anything to Sensei. I worked with dozens of shinobi over those months, all over the Land of Fire and sometimes even the Lands of Rain, Stone, Grass, and Hot Water. I formed the backbones of several teams, fighting longer and with fewer lasting injuries than would have been possible for most people. I provided healing where needed, or a figurative lance to those who tried to cause Konoha forces any kind of trouble.

I made a name for myself out there. By the time it was over, my Bingo Book entry had been updated twice—once to recognize that I was truly an S-class jinchūriki threat, and once to attribute a string of kills, broken enemy bunkers, and overturned plots to me.

It was enough to make a girl blush. But really, I just felt tired.

Afterward, I couldn't remember how many people died because of me. Most of them would have been elated to kill me, because it would have removed an obstacle for their villages. Instead, I'd gotten them first, and got to live to feel conflicted about my impact on the world.

In the following November, I was posted at a station somewhere near the weird little strip of land that separated the Land of Fire, Hot Water, and Frost. While my performance in battle hadn't suffered during my time in the field, I still found myself waking up in the middle of the night with homesickness dragging me down like an anchor around my neck.

Even if I could still fight and plan, and had gotten better at both over the time I spent outside of the village, I was emotionally…not all there. When there was nothing to do, I felt muted, vague, and weary in a way that had nothing to do with physical weakness.

A week before December, I was sitting on my bunk and reading the now dog-eared copy of *Icha-Icha Paradise* that I'd bought on my last trip back home. The book had gotten to the top of national bestseller lists in the year since Jiraiya had gotten enough copies sold for a second printing, and at some point the more imaginative X-rated scenes had been added back in. Given the chronic shortage of decent reading material at tiny border outposts like this one, I'd take what I could get.

To be honest, some of the situations in the novel were a bit too close to what I remembered of Jiraiya's misadventures around the Konoha hot springs. I skipped those.

"Hey, Gekkō-san," said Makoto Kiyotaka, the outpost's Intelligence officer and an off-again, on-again jōnin-sensei. She had a messenger hawk on her right forearm, and held out a green-marked message to me. "This one's for you."

"Thanks," I said, and caught the tiny slip of paper when it was inevitably thrown right at my head. While I unrolled it and started mentally replacing numbers for words, Makoto left to feed the hawk.
On the occasions when we hunted out here, we rarely wasted anything. Since Subaru had caught a rabbit, I figured that most of its entrails would make a nice snack for a loyal raptor.

The strip of paper was only about as wide as my thumb, and maybe twice as long. And yet, the writer of the message had managed to include something very important.

Orders for Keisuke Gekkō: Return to Konohagakure. Effective immediately. And instead of a signature, which wouldn't have fit, Sensei signed the slip with his shinobi ID number. It was one of those things that, as a member of Team Minato, I'd had to memorize just in case. Most people wouldn't have bothered.

I packed up all of my stuff—sealing supplies, clothes, and so on—inside of two hours after presenting the slip to the commander in charge of the outpost. Commander Akiko Emigahara barely looked at it, because it was one of four she had seen, but she did say, "Watch for Kumogakure's diplomatic team as you go."

"What?" I asked, blankly.

"You've been hiding in your bunk," Commander Emigahara pointed out with some disapproval, pinching the message between her fingers for a moment. "But Kumogakure has finally opened negotiations with us."

…Well, if that wasn't a reason to get home as soon as possible, nothing was. "Understood, Commander. I will be careful."

"See that you are."

And as soon as everyone else in my rotation was packed—and the next group of Konoha-nin had arrived and been updated on the situation they were heading into—I headed home.

It took a week and a half, even at shinobi speed, because there were certain parts of the Land of Fire that had weird terrain and I was posted in one of them. But the return trip always seemed to go a little faster than the journey away from home.

Konoha's main gates were a bit crowded when I arrived, to my surprise. While I was just as dusty and road-weary as most of the people, there were a number of merchant caravans undergoing inspection by a team of Konoha-nin. Some of them had decorations that were a bit more in line with Kumogakure than with Konoha—lightning bolts, clouds, and so on.

I surveyed the cheery crowd with a somewhat unimpressed stare. If this attempt at diplomacy went off anything like what had happened with Kushina, or in the future-past with Hinata, then I anticipated a speedy exit for most of these people. Or at least a rapid rebranding.

The Chinatsugumi caravans weren't among them, but then, they did have a sort of outpost thing in town. They didn't really need to bring everything with them when they wanted Konoha to buy their stuff.

"Oh, hey!" said a voice, and I craned my neck to spot Kotetsu waving at me from off to my left. Close behind him, Izumo followed.

"Kotetsu-kun, Izumo-kun," I acknowledged them both, smiling somewhat self-consciously. I felt like I hadn't had a proper shower in forever, my hair was even worse than it had been before I left (thanks to months without mirror-assisted trims), and my gear was scuffed to hell and back. I'd done enough to keep myself recognizable, but not much more than that. "Sup?"
"Not a whole lot since the last time you stopped in," Izumo said.

"Except that it was months ago," said Kotetsu, with perfect timing. "Your brother's been bugging us every time he hits the gates, asking if we've seen you yet."

"Keep it a secret for a bit longer," I suggested. "I'm hoping to surprise him." 

"All right, we can do that," Izumo said, and then elbowed his partner. "Can't we?"

"Fiiiine," Kotetsu said. "Let's get you checked back in."

The check-in process was painless, despite how long I'd been gone, and I was soon on my way to the Hokage's office, as usual.

*Heh.* It was almost like I'd never left, in some ways. While I did notice a few new buildings in Konoha's skyline as I went, I didn't view them as important. The sooner I reported back to Sensei, the sooner I could go home and sleep for a week. Hayate's letter made it plain that he wouldn't be impressed by that kind of plan, but there was really nothing like coming home to my own friggin' bed and not a cot in some backwater I didn't care to name.

I headed straight into the office from the rooftop stairwell, not even pausing to drop my mission pack anywhere until I was inside Sensei's office.

Sensei's chair was facing the window, but I felt his chakra and also felt the moment the security seals slammed down on anyone else's access to the room.

"You needed me back home, Sensei?" I asked, unable to keep the fatigue entirely out of my voice.

"Yes," Sensei said. He stood up and absentmindedly spun his chair back into place, but walked around the desk to stand directly in front of me. "But I think you needed to come home first."

Eh? "So there's isn't a mission?" I blinked. "That's..." What word was I looking for? "Thank you?"

Probably for the best, Isobu said quietly in my mindscape, and I had the strangest feeling that he was looking over my shoulder. But not in a bad way—he just wanted to make sure that I didn't faceplant. *...He's talking to you.*

*Right.*

Sensei was careful about it, but I did see what he wanted about a second before he hugged me. "Welcome home, Kei."

I let my head roll to the side, resting against the neck padding of his flak jacket. My eyes started to water a little as I hugged him back, but I didn't cry. "Thank you, Sensei."

"Now, go home. We'll have plenty of time to catch up as soon as you've had some sleep." Sensei let go of me and stood back a bit, tilting his head to one side. He looked from my head to my toes and winced, saying, "You look like you could use some time at home. Your brother didn't stop talking about you the entire time you were gone."

"I know. I got his letters." In what time I had left, during the usual "hurry up and wait" of any military force. And boy did I ever feel that. Blargh. Still, he was right. I missed my brother. "See you later then, Sensei."

I was most of the way out of the office before Sensei called, "And Kei?"
"What, Sensei?" I tossed over my shoulder.

"I'm sorry." Sensei looked grim once I finally managed to convince myself to turn and face him, however briefly. "You were out in the field for too long."

Who cared? I wondered, through a mental fog. But what I said was, "You're forgiven. Later."

The trip home was a blur after that point. But I did end up getting home in one piece, without falling off a roof or tripping on a power line.

I disarmed the seals, dropped my mission pack on the floor inside the front hall, and just about managed to clamber into an old t-shirt and sweatpants after taking a short shower. I didn't get as far as my bed, but I turned the kotatsu on and fell asleep under the coverlet there instead. It wasn't like anyone would use the apartment's central heating if they weren't there, and December was cold.

I slept like the dead, with my head pillowed on my folded arms.

I did wake up for a minute, but I just felt a familiar chakra signature settle down next to me. Half-asleep and probably not really up to thinking, I reached out blindly and drew whoever it was into a one-armed hug. Marginally thinner arms clutched at mine, drawing it over whoever it was, and a weight settled against my side, softly and without fanfare.

I moved my free arm so my forehead rested in the crook of that elbow, mumbled something vague, and went back to sleep.

A couple of hours later, I woke up with the usual sensation of pins-and-needles that came with sleeping on the floor like an idiot, but I was in a different position than normal. I had the usual sensation of some kind of rug imprint on my face, plus some dried drool, but when I tried to move my right arm, there was resistance.

I looked at the source of my predicament and spotted a familiar tousled mop of brown hair.

While I'd been in too much of a daze to notice, Hayate had found me lying on the floor like a drunk and had apparently decided to join in on my nap. He had my right arm wrapped in both of his, with my wrist by his face.

He snored.

I bit back a laugh and lowered my head to the floor again, resting my chin on the back of my hand. Goofy little brother. I'd missed two of his birthdays by my count, and he was nearly as big as I was, but I supposed that some things never changed. I was still a beloved older sister.

I blew on his ear, throwing hair over his face.

Blindly, he hit me in the face with his left hand.

"Ow!" Rubbing my nose ruefully—guess I deserved that—I braced my bare foot against his hip and pushed, sending my brother rolling out from under the kotatsu cover. "I'm home," I told him, and then I stuck my tongue out at him.

He woke up and flailed, ending up on his butt with his back against the wall. And then he saw me, awake and moving. That knowledge quickly overcame any annoyance about being kicked across the room, and the resulting grin was blinding. "I didn't get to say this before, but welcome back."
"It's good to be back," I told him. I sat back down on the floor and eyed him, and he did the same.

I...hadn't expected to miss out on seeing him grow. While I'd been back in the village intermittently over the last year, I was struck again by how different my brother was from that little boy who used to follow me everywhere, repeating what snips of my name he could pronounce. At age fifteen, he was easily my height and probably around my weight, with deep-set eyes and prominent cheekbones that reminded me of Dad. He'd let his hair get a bit out of control, and was anxiously twisting it between his fingers as I looked at him. He'd even started growing a bit of facial hair, though it was more like the barest hint of whiskers instead of Dad's five o'clock shadow. He was still all gangly limbs and hadn't filled out yet.

"Is something wrong, Sis?" Hayate asked, and his voice didn't crack at all.

I was tearing up again. "Nothing," I told him, rubbing at my eyes. "I just...I wish I'd been able to be around more."

The next thing I knew, Hayate was hugging me. He said, "Same here, Sis. But you're here now, right?"

I choked on a sudden sob, my fingers digging into the fabric of his shirt. "Y-yeah."

I'd been homesick for so long that I hardly knew what to do with myself anymore.

"Are you gonna be around for longer this time?" Hayate asked, once I finally let go of him and was busy rubbing my aching eyes.

"I don't know," I admitted, sighing to myself. Sensei had said that I spent too long out in the world, and I agreed with him, but there was still the possibility that I'd be sent someplace. Konoha didn't exactly lack for jōnin, but I was a bit more useful than usual.

Hayate muttered something impolite, but I didn't call him on it. He shook himself and said, "Well, you can still catch up with everyone while you're here. Iruka and Yūgao want to see you, and there's a whole lot to talk about. I couldn't send all of it through the mail."

"Oh?" I asked, rolling my shoulder to get the ache out of it. "Are you gonna keep me in suspense?"

"For a bit. I mean, it's a big thing," Hayate said, and looked away. Huh?

"Well, we can go get ramen with everyone we can find," I suggested.

"Ichiraku's doesn't have that much bench space," Hayate pointed out, having recovered from his brief bout of embarrassment. "And anyway, Aunt Kushina said she wanted to have a big dinner. Before I got here, they said they could start any time after you woke up."

"That's nice of them," I said, glancing out the window. It was already dark, but... "What time is it now?"

"Around five," Hayate guessed. "So, what do you say?"

I scratched my head, wincing as my fingernails caught in a knot in my hair. "...Okay. Give me a chance to get dressed for real and get ready. You should, too."

"It's not really a formal event, Sis."

"Still," I insisted. "I'll be out in five."
Hayate raised an eyebrow at me, but let me get on with it.

I poked around in my closet for a bit. While I hadn't had much time to organize anything before having to leave again, Rin had made certain that my wardrobe was less hilariously drab (or horrifically green) during the only free Saturday I'd had in August. It meant that I did have a small assortment of clothes that actually complimented my build rather than smothering it. Given that my shoulders were wide enough compared to my hips that I almost had a swimmer's build, that meant fewer sleeveless tops than I'd once gotten used to.

I'd put my foot down regarding crop tops, though. The rest of the knowledge Rin had painstakingly instilled into me was still there, but...

Looking at what I had, I felt the urge to put effort into things leave me with my next breath. Screw it, December was cold and we'd bought most of my stuff in the summertime.

I grabbed a cream-colored sweater, a spare pair of shinobi pants, and a non-weapon belt from my closet. My mission sandals were beat to shit, but they'd work for just a bit. Once dressed, I pulled my overlong bangs back with a butterfly hairclip Rin had given me, then looked in the mirror in the hallway.

...Eh, good enough. I still needed a haircut.

Hayate, who had apparently decided that a haori-styled shirt was good enough for anyone, was already waiting by the door.

"You don't really look quite up to the party," Hayate commented, eyeing me carefully. He could feel the way my chakra wavered when I was tired, perhaps more clearly than ever.

I shrugged. "It's just a few hours. And I want to see everyone as soon as I can."

Hayate nodded. "Your call, Sis. You still remember where the Hokage Residence is?"

I playfully punched him in the arm. "I was just gone for a while, stupid. My brain didn't fall out of my head while I was out of the village."

"You sure about that?" Hayate teased, though he rubbed his arm for effect. Whiner. If he'd been training with Gai like he said he had, that barely counted as a love tap.

Taking shots at each other the entire way, Hayate and I headed for the Hokage residence—and the great glowing beacon of chakra there. Kushina wasn't subtle.

"Welcome back!" Everyone seemed to shout at once, creating a wall of sound that hit Hayate and me like a hammer.

I did a quick head-count, right before Kushina hit me in the middle of my ribcage and started compressing me like a beloved stuffed animal. Over her head, I spotted Yūgao and Iruka at a long table laden with ten different kinds of food, just getting up from their chairs. Tenzō and Tsunade were in the kitchen, with the former eyeing the latter's drinking with entirely reasonable caution. Sensei was on the couch, being climbed on by both of his kids, and Obito and Rin were just behind Kushina and helped her squash me. Genma was sneaking food from the table, since everyone's attention was occupied.

No Kakashi or Raidō, though. Huh.
And then I remembered that I was supposed to be breathing, and squirmed in the grasp of three different shinobi.

"Give her a bit of space, Kushina," Sensei suggested, as Tatsumaki climbed up onto his shoulder.

Kushina let me go a moment later, then yanked my head down to her height and kissed my forehead. "Thank goodness you're back safe and sound, Kei-chan!"

Sensei winced.

"Did Hayate tell you some of what happened?" Obito asked, as Kushina pulled away. I had to look up to meet his eye—not a novel experience, but if I had to guess I'd have said that he had finally finished growing. He was taller than Sensei, and his voice was a bit deeper than it had been. He'd also swapped out his medical eyepatch for a more pirate-y look, which I approved of on general principles. "Seriously, it's hilarious."

"Hey!" protested Hayate, shoving at Obito's shoulder.

"What? It is," Obito said, unphased.

Rin took my hands in hers and said, "Come on, there's plenty of food and we're dying to know what you've been up to!" Rin, who had apparently decided on finally growing her hair out, seemed to have topped out about ten centimeters shorter than I was, looked less like a cute little girl than she had the last time we'd done much together. At seventeen, she was mostly filled out thanks to training and looked about the happiest that I'd ever seen her.

I smiled crookedly and said, "It wasn't really that interesting…"

Sensei's chakra did something weird as Rin and I spoke, and I resisted the urge to ask what was wrong.

Rin dragged me to my place at the table, which was between her and Obito and across from Genma, but I still found myself craning my neck to look at everyone as they crowded toward the table.

Sensei, with Naruto clinging to his leg and Tatsumaki on his shoulders (with her hands in his hair like he was some kind of horse), made his way to the table somewhat more cautiously than normal.

Tatsumaki was a tiny thing even at a year old, with three whisker marks per cheek like Naruto, and dark purple eyes that more closely resembled Sensei's in terms of shape. Her short red hair was tied into a pair of pigtails, and she was dressed in a pale yellow onesie.

Naruto was three, so he had mostly-complete control of his limbs and was staring over at me with a clear spark of curiosity in his eyes. In a white T-shirt that was already stained by some kind of mysterious sauce, from the look of it, he looked up at me like he might demand to be picked up at any second.

"Welcome back," Genma said once I sat down, as casual as if I had never left.

I blinked at everyone, still either a bit sleepy or a bit slow. Probably both. "I'm glad to be back," I said, since it seemed like a safe option.

"If you're wondering," Genma said, "Kakashi, Gai, and Raidō are sorry they couldn't make it, but they're out. Jiraiya-sama, too."

"On the same mission?" I asked.
"Hopefully not," said Tsunade.

For a while after that, all any of us had time or attention span to talk about. While Sensei tried to get Tatsumaki to eat her considerably-less-appetizing mush, Kushina pointed out what foods she'd made and cheerfully recommended everything to everyone. Everyone loaded up their plates in short order, and for a while the only sound anyone heard was the sound of people eating. Breathlessly, in some cases, because Kushina's cooking was just that good.

"Hayate, you need to tell Kei about the thing," Obito said, pointing his chopsticks at my brother. The fact that he had tempura shrimp clutched in said chopsticks didn't seem to bother him.

Hayate exchanged looks with Yūgao.

*This soon?* I wondered.

**What?** Isobu asked, but his voice sounded as though he'd been woken up from a nap. Oops.

I shushed him.

Grumbling, Isobu closed his eye again and went back to sleep.

Tenzō was also looking at Hayate with interest, his catlike eyes wide and his expression eager.

"Come on, tell her!"

"Shut up," Hayate told him.

"Kid, either speak up or one of these two," Tsunade said, indicating Obito and Tenzō, "are gonna do it for you."

Hayate groaned. "Fine! Sis, Yūgao and I are dating now!"

Silence reigned, aside from the sound of Tatsumaki trying to eat her father's hair.

"Congratulations, then," I said. "Obito, can you pass the...no, I'll take literally anything over there except the tempura shrimp."

"...That's it?" Hayate asked blankly. "But you've been gone for a year. I didn't even know I liked Yūgao until a few months ago."

I turned my attention back to him, with a huge serving bowl of steamed pumpkin now at my elbow, and said in a perfectly serious voice, "Your older sister can see the future."

Hayate grumbled, though my teammates had to choke back laughs.

"Seriously, though. I saw that one coming." To Yūgao, I said, "If you are both kind to each other, we won't have any problems."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about, Sister," Yūgao said brightly.

Iruka rolled his eyes and said, "You two are going to be *insufferable."

"Of course they are," Rin said. "More mackerel?"

"Yes, please," Iruka said, and took the bowl.

"We aren't that bad, are we?" Obito asked. I assumed he was referring to himself and Rin.
Minato, Tsunade, Kushina, Tenzō, Yūgao, Hayate, and Iruka all said, "Yes," at the same time. Well then.

"Traitors," said Obito.

"I missed the lovey-dovey stuff, then," I said.

"You did," Kushina agreed. "But it was cute while it lasted."

"It looked like a comedy to me," said Genma. "Given how much Rin-san was yelling at the beginning." To me, Genma added, "Pass the pumpkin, please."

I did so.

"In my defense," Rin said, "Obito kept using his eye jutsu without apparently listening to anything I had to say. Ever."

"I needed to at the time, though," Obito pointed out.

"Which is why I forgave you."

"What have you been doing, Kei-san?" Tenzō asked.

"Missions, mainly," I said. I shrugged. "It wouldn't have been all that bad if I had enough time between them, but there was always some kind of scheduling problem. Next thing I know, I've been out for almost a full year."

Kushina reached over and whacked Sensei's shoulder. "Minato, tell her!"

"Tell me what?" I asked, when Sensei gave Kushina a look that suggested he'd be facepalming if he had free hands. Naruto and Tatsumaki had somehow both ended up in his arms, and I wasn't sure how it had happened.

"How do I put this?" Sensei wondered aloud. "Actually, Kei, there was...um. There were repercussions, to the incident with the clans."

I stared at him. "Sensei?" This was not heading in a pleasant direction. When Sensei opened his mouth to explain, I shook my head and said, "Wait, no, don't tell me now. Maybe you assumed I knew something I didn't, but I seriously don't want to ruin the mood right now. This—it's supposed to be a party, right?"

Too late, mood ruined. Everyone had gone very quiet.

Suddenly claustrophobic, I got up from the table, appetite gone, and headed outside. I tried not to slam the door as I left, but might've failed at that.

Blowing out a deep breath, I scaled the side of the building and sat on the roof. The panels were cold, but I'd felt suffocated in there.

If I'd read the situation correctly, spending a year outside of the village had been a punishment detail. And Sensei hadn't even told me before sending me away. After the first mission happened to stack with the one afterward, I'd just assumed that it was bad luck. I'd had enough time to come back for a little while after the third, but the fourth, fifth, and sixth extended missions had all run right into each other.

I pulled my barrette out and let my bangs fall forward over my face.
I must have… I didn't know. So maybe addressing the clans had been a bad move during the meeting. Obito and I should have just stayed quiet and not gotten uppity. Was the reason I'd been sent away because I'd spoken out of turn? Or was it because I’d been too happy that Danzō was dead? Maybe it came down to just forcing Sensei to show more of his hand than he wanted to?

I sighed aloud, with my breath coming out in a translucent cloud.

There was shouting from below my feet. It sounded like Hayate was yelling, but Tsunade's voice was also raised. Obito and Rin also sounded upset, but I didn't hear Sensei’s voice in any of it.

So much for a plain, happy homecoming. It felt more like I was out on parole all of a sudden, with someone looking over my shoulder to keep me out of trouble. I was home, but not home free.

This isn't going how I planned, I said to Isobu, drawing my knees up to my chest and resting my chin on top of them. I thought it was just about getting more leadership experience. Not...being kicked out.

Given the amount of screaming Kurama's host is doing, Isobu said, I doubt it's that simple.

Which one?

Both.

And right on cue, I heard Naruto start to cry.

Dammit.

I got to my feet, hopping down and landing on top of a brick-and-mortar fence that separated the Hokage Residence from the rest of the neighborhood. From there, I bounced up and off the next roof. I didn't really care where I was going, as long as it was away from everyone.

I don't see how running away will help. Isobu blinked slowly, as though he needed a moment to contemplate my stupidity. Didn't you just spend months complaining about how you missed all of these humans?

It's complicated.

It was, in fact, a result of two different problems coming to a head: a massive sleep debt, and the realization that Sensei had kept the reason for my long deployment a mystery to me. So instead of having months to come to terms with the latter point and let my hurt feelings (justified or not) boil off, all of it was hitting me at once instead. If I could just wait, an explanation would probably come up sooner or later. Maybe it would be sufficient.

But I didn't want to hear it.

Eventually, I came to a stop in Training Ground Three, near the three training posts and the Memorial Stone. I looked at it as I passed, seeing my reflection just for a moment in the black granite as the glare of the lamps caught me, but didn't stay.

I wasn't planning on running my feelings off, not like Gai would have probably encouraged me to do. But I didn't want to be around anyone else.

I just wanted… I didn't know what I wanted.

Running away always felt like a better idea before I actually did it.
Kicking my scuffed sandals against the cold earth, I turned on my heel and went back to look at the Stone.

About halfway up one side, Obito's name had been painstakingly removed from the monument three years ago. The stoneworkers had been so careful that it was difficult to tell that the name had ever been there, but I knew exactly where it used to be. I didn't recognize the name over his spot, now.

I traced my parents' names in silence.

Though I had the memories of an adult, it didn't seem as though I was as resilient as I would have liked to be.

Sensei had screwed up before. He was human. Making mistakes was just something we did. My first Chūnin Exam, Kannabi, the mission where we got Obito back…

Then why did this feel so personal? Just because he hadn't told me? Just because, if he had, I might've known what I had to do better?

My fingers curled into a fist next to Dad's name.

It didn't matter. I was a shinobi. It shouldn't matter. All I needed to do...was learn to accept—

_fwish._ "Somehow, I didn't think you would come here."

"I usually don't," I agreed, surprising myself by how controlled I sounded.

"Kei, I'm sorry I didn't explain before," Sensei said, and I felt his chakra approach me slowly. Cautiously.

"What was there to explain?" I asked, and my voice took a turn for the sullen. With a soundless laugh that barely amounted to a puff of air, I muttered, "I screw up, I get to spend months chasing missing-nin in the middle of nowhere. That's how it's supposed to work."

I turned around to face him.

"No," Sensei said quietly. "That isn't the way this works."

"It isn't?" There was a laugh in my voice, but what came out was more of a choked hiccupping noise. "I-I didn't—I was trying to think of reasons why I"—no, no, that's not what I wanted to say! "How did I mess up, Sensei? What did I do wrong?"

"You didn't—"

"Don't tell me that!" I snapped, cutting right across him. "I must have—there must be some reason…"

Years ago, when I'd been new to this world and still reeling from being reborn, I'd been too busy to deal with the consequences of being torn from everything I ever knew and being reborn into a place where all the variables were different. Relearning all of my basic skills had been all I had time to think about. The only part of me that had still mattered was what I could recall of this storybook world. Everything else was Keisuke. Mom and Dad's baby girl. Hayate's sister. Oh, I still had the helm, but what I had been before was irrelevant detail.

The only person who cared who I had been before this—before this ninja bullshit—was me. The knowledge I had was useful, but no one examined the source of it. No one asked how I knew
anything—not in a way that I couldn't wriggle out of.

And my usefulness had run out. I had maybe a few months—Kumogakure's treaty was coming up—and then the rest of it was pointless.

"I'm not... I'm sorry I don't matter anymore," I whispered, just noticing the tears dripping down my nose. I hooked my thumb on the inside of my sweater and started to wipe them away. "After Kumo comes, n-nothing I predict will be true anymore. I'll just be me again."

Just Keisuke. Isobu would know who I used to be, but the rest of it I could take to the grave for all it mattered. I'd just be...me. Out of step with the rest of the world, for no reason anyone could see. Forever.

"Did you think I sent you out of the village because...we didn't need you anymore?" Sensei asked, and his voice was a lot closer than I remembered. I dashed my tears away on my sleeves and nodded, even as he hugged me and I just ended up bonking my head against my shoulder. "Kei..."

"W-What did I do, Sensei?" What had changed everything? What made sending me so far away from home, long enough that Sensei wanted to apologize, a good idea?

Sensei's chakra yanked on us both, and I blinked as I felt the ambient temperature shift abruptly. Lifting my head, I blinked and recognized the inside of Sensei and Kushina's apartment. Specifically, on the couch.

Sensei let go of me and reached back over the couch, pulling a blanket out and tucked it around my shoulders. "I'll be back in just a second, all right?"

I nodded, pulling my knees back up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. After a second, I rested my cheek against the top of them and decided to just...stop. Stop doing things that made people upset.

Maybe stop everything.

Sensei sat down next to me a while later, putting two cups of tea down in front of us on the coffee table. He paused for a moment, as though trying to decide if it would be okay to touch me.

I solved his dilemma by just leaning into his side. I made no move to touch the tea.

"Kei, you didn't do anything wrong," Sensei said to the top of my head.

I made a doubtful noise.

"If anyone should be apologizing," Sensei murmured, "it's me. I never told you why you had to be out of the village for so long."

Whatever. It didn't matter.

"After the meeting with the clan representatives," Sensei explained in a slow, even tone, "there were...heightened feelings. Some people didn't like the fact that I asked you and Obito to speak up where and when you did. I felt Sensei shift beside me. "It took a while for them to build up momentum. Months. But when they did...I didn't—I should have told you about it."

I stayed quiet.

"The Shimura clan felt that you were disregarding their contributions to the village," Sensei went on,
and he started rubbing my arm as though to make sure I stayed awake. "And the Hyūga clan, well, they reacted badly, in private, to the revelation that Danzō was dead on my orders. They still move cautiously around me."

The Hyūga thing would sort itself out. As long as someone caught the Kumo team in the act, we'd get away with whatever we had to. They'd come to our side.

I blinked slowly, my eyes half-lidded and feeling annoyingly puffy. I wasn't crying anymore, but still felt soppy and miserable. I curled tighter around myself, as though protecting some invisible core that had already been hurt once.

Not just once.

"I sent you out of the village because I was afraid," Sensei told me. "For your sake."

"I can take care of myself," I said in a hollow voice, but I didn't have to look up to know that Sensei didn't really believe me. I wouldn't have believed me. There was a reason I was on this goddamned couch instead of enjoying my homecoming.

"Kei, you didn't hear them," Sensei said. "You didn't hear what I—what my ANBU—heard them say about you. Obito is an Uchiha, and his clan name gives him some protection, but…"

So I was a clanless jinchūriki. Sensei still should have… I didn't know. Done something.

"I'm sorry. I thought it would only be a month, but there was still too much happening. I just...let your leadership learning go on longer, because it was easier for me than explaining the truth. That there were some people who don't appreciate you." Sensei leaned over and rested the side of his head against the top of mine. "I'm sorry. I should have called you home sooner."

"Mnuh," I mumbled, peering out from underneath my bangs. I wasn't truly focusing on anything, but maybe that was because I was exhausted. A two-hour nap in the middle of the day hadn't done much for me.

Sensei was about to say something else, but a thud sounded from somewhere down the hall.

"Kakashi's home," Sensei said, for my benefit. As though he'd forgotten that I could sense as well as he could.

I made another noncommittal noise, and Sensei didn't get up. Instead, he twisted in place and said loudly, "Kakashi, Kei's here. Can you—?"

Kakashi appeared before Sensei was finished speaking.

Wearing his ANBU armor, Kakashi looked older than I remembered. While on my year-long unofficial exile, I had only ever sensed him from an extreme distance. We hadn't talked or seen each other in the field, and our breaks in Konoha never seemed to overlap.

I could see that he'd more or less reached adulthood intact. While tired, going by the lines around his eyes and the way his chakra buzzed only a little, he still reached out to me with his black-gloved fingers and put his hand on top of my knee.

"Kei?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

I didn't know how to answer the question.
But I knew how to answer a different one. One that, over time, Kakashi and Obito and Sensei might have eventually known to ask.

"I th-think I need to say something," I mumbled. I shrugged off Kakashi’s touch and slowly unfolded from my bunched-up position, letting my feet touch the floor. I braced my hands on the couch, elbows locked straight, and felt my gaze slip to the floor almost before I actually understood what I was seeing.

Kakashi’s hand reappeared, his right hand going to my left. "Kei?" Then, "Sensei, what happened to her?"

"I—" And that was as far as Sensei got.

"I lied to you," I interrupted, as my hands gripped the couch cushions and my nails started to dig into the fabric.

"About what?" Sensei asked, sounding more puzzled than worried.

That would change.

**You're going to tell them?**

*And you. Properly.*

"S-Seventeen years ago," I began softly, "I started lying to everyone around me. And it just...it was easier to keep going. Like you said, Sensei. Why stop?"

"What are you talking about?" Kakashi asked, twining his fingers with mine. But he couldn't get me to relax.

I refused to look at him. I just pressed on, with the quiet inevitability of a tide or maybe impending winter. "The truth… The truth is, I haven't always been Keisuke Gekkō."

Silence.

Then, "What do you mean?" Sensei asked. His voice was quiet and sleek, like a knife, and I swayed in place, a prisoner to my own momentum.

Kakashi tried to tilt my head up, so I’d look him in the eye, but I shook him off.

"I used to be someone else," I murmured, as though drifting. "There was...a story. A world. A world like this one, I guess. I lived there. I died there. And I was reborn here." I looked down at my left hand, and realized distantly that my nails that had started bleeding. "In that world, I was an adult. I could do whatever I wanted. I just...wanted to see worlds that weren't mine. And one of those worlds, and the story in it, was this one."

"I don’t—Kei, are you saying that you saw the world as some kind of storybook?" Kakashi asked. Then, with a small noise of realization, "That's why your 'visions' never accounted for you. You weren't supposed to be here."

"I passed off what I knew from that story as a prophetic gift," I mumbled, my head bowed still. "It was the only way I could think of to change the plot."

"So that's why you said you'd seen it before," Minato said quietly. "And why you were so dead certain that certain events were going to happen."
I nodded, closing my eyes. "It was...easier. I'd seen it all play out once. I could be detached enough to see the causes." I sighed. "And then I got attached."

"Attached?"

"Hayate first." And oh, how that hurt now. What would he think of me once this got out? "I didn't—before he was just a minor character. His death didn't matter." Sensei and Kakashi both flinched. "And then he was born. And he—and I couldn't not love him.

"I met Obito and Rin later. And I couldn't—knowing that the story would waste them, I couldn't stay out of it." Kakashi's hands were cold behind the gloves. I couldn't feel his chakra strongly, there. "I thought, oh, I've seen this before. But I'm older. I'm stronger. I can do something."

"We know about this part, Kei," Sensei reminded me, and I remembered that.

"I kept just...everyone started out as paper, and then I got to know you, and I had to stand up. I had to do something." I managed a soft laugh, bitter and harsh. "And as long as I knew the game, I could still protect someone. But now I can't see anything. And I've changed too much, and nothing I do will—"

"Kei, stop," Kakashi said. "Please, you're hurting yourself."

"And you," I murmured, stopping him cold. "Kakashi. You were...you were different, in the story. It just kept hurting you over and over because it made things 'dramatic.' Pah." I almost smiled; a twisted thing, laughing more at myself than anything. "If Obito and Rin made it, I thought, you'd be okay. What did it matter if some twenty-year-old phony died in their place, as long as it filled the quota?"

I didn't belong here. I loved them all, but I wasn't really one of them. All that mattered were the changes I'd made. And each one pushed me further and further away from mattering at all.

Just a little bit left, until I couldn't predict anything anymore.

Then I could just...stop.

"I'm sorry I didn't say this before," I said tonelessly, though my eyes were still focused on the rug. "Or if I've hurt you by saying it. Maybe I just didn't want to believe I c-could lie so much."

I'm sorry I'm not real.

As though thinking those words had opened a wound inside me, I started crying again. And it was ugly crying, with shaking and sobbing and—and a hollowed-out feeling like someone had scraped out my insides and done it slowly.

I just cried my fucking eyes out, like I was the one hurt. Like it was important.

I didn't blame Kakashi for leaving once I started, or Sensei for not knowing what to say.

Distantly, I heard a pop.

Then there was a little furry body trying to work its way into my lap, and I wiped some of the tears and snot away on my sleeve.

Pakkun bumped his nose against my chin, lapping at the tears and pushing his way up my chest so he could stick his wrinkly face into my collarbone. And then, all at once, seven more dogs surrounded me. Bull at my back, Shiba over my knees, and Urushi and Guruko trying to reach my
face even if Pakkun was taking up all the space. Úhei and Akino hung back, but not far, and nosed their way in.

I hiccupped.

Sensei pulled my head against his side and said, in a very quiet voice, "I'll sort this out for you, Kei. Give me some time to do it, but by the time I'm done, no clan will stand between you and your home again. Can you hear me?"

I nodded, too choked up to talk, and kept my head bowed.

Sensei got up after that, off to take care of a few things, and for a moment I just rocked in place, with Pakkun clutched tight to my chest.

I must have been there for a while, because I felt completely numb by the time I felt Kakashi's chakra next to me again. I didn't lift my head to acknowledge him, but Pakkun did.

Kakashi gently bumped his forehead against the top of my head. Almost too quiet to hear, he whispered, "No matter what you think, I'm glad you exist. Not your prophecies. Not your power. Just you."

He left after that, to go do mysterious ANBU things. But he left me with all eight of his dogs, which was enough.

The next day, there was some kind of big to-do about Kumogakure's treaty. I stayed inside that day, hiding out in Sensei and Kushina's guest bedroom, and ignored all of it. I turned away any visitors except Hayate, who would have broken in, and mostly just slept the day away.

And then the Kumo head ninja tried to kidnap the Hyūga heiress.

Almost like he'd been tipped off, Kakashi caught the Kumo head ninja two steps outside of the compound with the unconscious Hinata, and didn't kill him. Though from what I heard later, he made the guy wish he was dead.

Good.

"Can you handle one more mission?" Sensei asked me, a few days after the Hyūga incident.

I nodded, though I was staring off into the middle distance somewhere past Sensei's ear and out the office's window. Given the rampant feelings of betrayal in the village, even if they were aimed at Kumogakure instead of me, it made sense for me to get out while I could.

"Not as a team leader," Sensei added, once he had my assent. "Ebisu has been asking—politely—if he can take on a few missions for his promotion to special jōnin. He'd like to be a tutor, but he needs to be a half-step higher for the promotion."

"Okay," I said quietly. "That sounds nice."

"Hey," Sensei interrupted my thoughts, drawing my eyes back to him. "I'm sending all of Team Chōza this time. Shiranui and Gai should be able to follow his lead, and I have faith in you. Just...give him a chance to prove himself, okay?"

"Where are we going?" I asked, which was about as much initiative as I'd shown for three days.

"Mount Soragami. The Chinatsugumi would like an escort to Konoha again," Sensei told me, trying
to smile. It stopped around his mouth.

"By your command, Hokage-sama," I said with a nod. "I'll go get ready."

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Minato

As the door closes behind Kei—or what's left of her—I drop my head into my hands.

What have I done?
Isobu’s large eye narrows as he watches his human’s listless mental avatar. It hasn’t moved or tried to talk to him in long enough that he is actually impatient. The truth is, while he does care about the mind behind his gilded cage, he doesn’t know what to do about it.

This wreck of a human isn’t a mere shell of the Kei who has actually worked with him over the last three years. That would be an insult to shells everywhere. An empty shell can still be an opportunity and be useful to new creatures on the bottom of the ocean.

This is a burnt husk. Ashes and dust, from human fires. The explosion has already happened, and what is left is the mere outline of what had once been there.

But while he is cut off from his host’s mind, he is not out of options.

He dives. Down, into the dark and deep places where only Tailed Beasts can communicate. The mind-skype, as he calls it, is still open.

“Kurama, I need to speak with you and your host.”

Isobu waits, curling his three tails back on themselves as he tries to put his thoughts in order. Kurama will arrive when he wanted, and never a second before. That gives Isobu some time to decide what he will and will not say to his strongest sibling.

That thought still rankles.

Yin Kurama appears in utter silence out of the dark, his blood-red fur standing up along his spine and all nine tails raised high like the struts of a fan.

“So, just you, today?” Isobu asks, folding his armored arms in front of his chest.

Yin Kurama shrugs one disturbingly human shoulder. “I was the one most interested in hearing from you. My other half seems amused by juvenile humans. As for my host? Later.”

Isobu gives the massive, lanky fox a long stare, then decides to let that comment go. “My human has not recovered from her reaction earlier. Have the other humans found more information? I don’t understand what led to the situation in the first place.”
“Human gossip,” Yin Kurama says with a dismissive huff. “When humans can’t harm each other with rocks and sticks, they use words as weapons.”

“Sounds familiar,” Isobu replies, recalling Kei’s memories. Yang Kurama’s host had borne the brunt of maliciously-intended apathy in the strange story. And now he does not, due to blatant interference from Isobu’s host. “What kind of gossip? And where did it come from?”

“My host is driving herself and those near her into madness in her attempts to determine just that,” Yin Kurama replies, bringing one humanlike paw to the back of his head and scratching behind his long ears. “I wasn’t interested in listening to the details.”

Maybe Isobu needs to speak to Yang Kurama instead. “That’s not a useful attitude.”

“Hah. Even without detail, I can deduce more than some short-lived specks,” Yin Kurama’s nine tails lash and he brings his feet back to the ground. “Someone among the human clans has been spreading interesting stories, but our humans are failing miserably to investigate them. There are those who believe that we control the government of this wretched little village, through some unknown power.” Yin Kurama’s grin is full of fangs. “Humans look at us and see us as the ultimate evil, and yet can barely see that their misery is all self-inflicted. As though one of us would care. Pathetic.”

“...I don’t understand.”

Yin Kurama snorts. “You are the strongest genjutsu-user out of us. Not long ago, you and your host fooled even the Hokage with your powers when you fought him, no matter how briefly.” Yin Kurama’s grin shifts into a snarl. “And the humans are afraid of that power.”

“Connect that with the fact that you and your host killed that bandaged human...” Isobu goes on, carefully slotting pieces of the puzzle together to complete the thought. “Does the village believe that, somehow, my host and I manipulated the Hokage into twisting events in her favor?”

Yin Kurama rolls his eyes. “Of course they do. Humans are so easily ruled by fear, they clamored for her exile to remove our influence. And yet they never realized that my other half and I remained! They view you as tamed, but quake in fear anyway!” Yin Kurama’s long tails lash in irritation and human stupidity.

“And no one knows where the stories came from?” Isobu asks, for clarity’s sake.

“They believe the rumors originated with the bandage man’s clan, but I am simply seeing the same pattern in earlier forms,” Yin Kurama says in a dry tone. “The further out you go, the wilder they become.”

So Yin Kurama doesn’t have an answer. Wonderful.

“I don’t think my host even heard what the rumors were,” Isobu complains. “She couldn’t last long enough to hear them.”

“Does it matter?” Yin Kurama asks. “Weaknesses are capitalized on, no matter how fair or unfair the world might be. It is kill or be killed.”

It’s Isobu’s turn to snort at Kurama’s idiocy. “If you believe that, why is your host still teaching
you how to write?”

Yin Kurama falls silent.

“Keep listening, and keep me informed.” Isobu heaves himself off the ground and makes to leave. “I want a name by the end of this.”

“There may not be a name. And your host may not care to pursue this,” Yin Kurama warns.

“I would still know.”

Yin Kurama makes a noise that sounds like a sigh, perhaps at Isobu’s stubbornness. “As a favor to you, then. From one sibling to another.”

Isobu nods, then leaves. He has a few things to mull over before he speaks to either Kurama again.

Kei

When training to be a soldier of any kind, the first thing that a decent drill sergeant will do is break down the green recruits. A good drill sergeant then builds them back up again into a useful shape. A bad one just breaks people into jagged shards and hopes to point them at the enemy.

I came pre-broken. I just refused to admit it for so long that I almost fooled myself. But those cracks were there to stay.

I was well-trained. Even while otherwise listless, I had packed my usual mission supplies on automatic. I even remembered to bring two extra sets of weapons in storage seals. I hadn’t remembered to cut my hair, but that wasn’t important.

As soon as the rest of the team arrived, we could leave.

I’d been told to meet the team at the village gates. Sensei had taken Team Chōza aside into his office, so I just moved on ahead. They needed time to get ready that I didn’t.

Fifteen minutes after I arrived, I felt the other members of the team fade in.

Which put us in the present.

“Genma,” Ebisu was saying to his teammate. “I’ll be in charge of this mission as soon as we’re out of the gates.”

“You got it.” I heard Genma sigh to himself and say, “Kei-san, you alright with that?”

I nodded. Then I went back to staring off into the middle distance for a while.

“And I, too, will follow your lead for the sake of completing our mission, Ebisu!” Gai enthused as he tuned in to the conversation. He bounced up beside me and put an arm around my shoulders, shaking me a bit to make sure I was awake.

“I’m fine, Gai,” I said in a dull voice.

“You are not being very convincing!” Gai insisted.

I shrugged with my free shoulder and said, “I know.”
“Ahem,” said Ebisu.

Gai let go of me.

I looked up at Ebisu through my bangs.

“We can move on from here.” Ebisu adjusted his shades. Whatever he saw in my face made him grimace. “We should be in Sorayama in half a week at most.”

Genma shouldered his pack. Then, without asking, he picked up my pack and took it along as well.

“I can carry my own bag, Genma,” I muttered.

“But burdens are lighter when they are shared, Keisuke-san!” Gai argued.

I looked between Genma and Gai. Between two friends who only meant the best. Between someone who would carry my pack and someone who would probably carry me.

I gave up. “Fine.”

It wasn’t worth arguing about. If I could still carry my sword and my personal gear, my teammates could do whatever they wanted. I wouldn’t be a burden.

Later that night, I stared out into the dark woods because I couldn’t sleep. While the stars dragged themselves across the sky, I listened to my teammates as they talked in hushed voices.

“...about the rumors?” Ebisu was asking.

“Absolutely not true!” Gai blurted, and was shushed by Genma and Ebisu at once.

They went quiet. Then Genma’s voice, saying, “...where they started…”

“...but I heard…” Ebisu, again.

“...know her…” Genma.

I rolled onto my stomach. Then I picked up my pillow and put it over my head to block my ears. I didn’t want to hear anything they said.

You hardly resemble the human I met four years ago, said the one voice I couldn’t block out with a pillow.

Sorry.

Isobu rumbled like a distant volcano. Do you even know what happens to jinchūriki who fall into despair?

Gaara came to mind immediately. So did Dark Naruto.

So did Dark Kei. I’d fought that bizarre mental construct off before, when facing down Isobu for the first time, but there was always a possibility of sinking into something worse than that. Something hopeless.

I squeezed the edges of my pillow harder against my ears. I’m sorry. But I can’t do this right now.
“Right now?” I may be your friend, Isobu told me, but if you use my chakra while this unfocused, I can’t say if you will be safe.

*It won’t be necessary.* I just needed to get home intact. Maybe I could finally get everyone to leave me alone.

I was so tired.

**And if it is?**

*I trust you*, I said. I trusted Isobu more than I trusted my stability at the moment. If something happened, he had enough kindness or self-preservation to stick to fighting the enemy instead of hurting my teammates.

*I don’t want to hear that from you right now*, Isobu told me. *In your state, it doesn’t mean anything.* Where is the human that cursed right in my face and refused to let me kill anyone besides Madara’s pawns? Where is the human who told me she would befriend me? Where is the human who asked for my name?

**Where is my partner?**

I reached for my chakra and tore at the additions to my jinchūriki seal.

Isobu fell silent as the mental barriers snapped into place.

**What is a “honey trap?”** Isobu asked a day later, while we were climbing the slopes of one of Soragami’s daughter peaks.

I’d loosened the mental barriers once the silence in my head started bothering me. Of course, Isobu had to take advantage of that.

*Mostly it’s a role in a seduction mission,* I replied without thinking. *ANBU agent seduces a target, and either kills them or pumps them for information. Or stays in place to maintain control.*

*Humans,* Isobu groaned in frustration. _Every time I learn something new, my opinion falls._

I shrugged one shoulder. *Sorry.*

**Don’t apologize.**

I stayed silent. I almost wanted know why Isobu needed to know, but the urge to ask didn’t fully materialize. He’d tell me if he had to.

He didn’t bother me again for the rest of the journey.

“Ah, Sorayama is as beautiful as ever!” Gai announced, once we could see the Chinatsugumi’s stronghold.

“Hey, Ebisu, are we staying overnight?” Genma asked, eyeing the setting sun. Our travel time toward Sorayama was good, but we wouldn’t be able to do it again. Watching over wagons would slow us down.

“Yes, I think we should,” Ebisu said. I felt him turn, and he said to me, “Kei-san, do you agree?”

I shrugged again. “It sounds nice.”
Gai and Genma’s chakra twisted, but I didn’t read into it.

Ebisu frowned. “Well, I hope you feel better once we have a chance to rest in the inn.”

By that point, I was looking off into the distance again. Sorayama was getting bigger as we walked.

It took a few more hours to get to the gates of Sorayama. We ducked through the security checkpoint, with Ebisu leading onward.

In the big hall, Misaki greeted our team. She looked older than I remembered. Around the eyes, she had picked up crow’s feet and her hair was coming out of its bun, but she didn’t talk like she cared.

She mostly talked numbers.

I waited for it to be over.

It must have taken less time than I thought, because the next thing I knew, I was being steered away from the desk. Genma and Gai had each walked up beside me and, without touching me, guided me away.

I was in a room at the inn after that.

I ate with them, though I didn’t remember what anything tasted like afterwards. I just knew I was supposed to eat something to make my stomach stop growling.

And then I sat up for a while, unable to sleep but too tired to do anything else.

Gai sat with me until he wasn’t anymore, and then Genma gave me a chance to play shogi with him. When I didn’t do anything, Ebisu took the spot and they played for a while.

I fell asleep sitting up at the table.

I dreamed.

I dreamed of running in the dark, calling out for someone to help me. For someone to find me. To tell me I could stop running and come home.

But nobody came.

Rikuto

“Do you remember what Shirozora was like when we met him for the first time?” Misaki asks me, as she continues slowly chewing her way through a pile of paperwork taller than her head.

“What, back when he had the social skills of a concussed sloth?” I ask, but I do know what she means. Misaki isn’t my favorite person in the entire world, but she always has a point to make if she talks. I just need to wait around until she finally goes in for the kill.

“Witty,” Misaki says, in a tone that disagrees with her words. “But did you happen to see young Keisuke-kun as she came in today?”

“No, I was triple-checking all of the account books.” Which had given me a headache I haven’t gotten over yet. I rub my goatee, thinking, “I’m going to assume that isn’t an idle comment. Did something happen to our little half-pint?”
“Adulthood seems to be part of it,” Misaki allows. So Keisuke’s not hilariously short for her vocabulary anymore? Drat. “But it doesn’t take a social expert to realize that she is not as she should be.”

Now, I feel like I should point out that I do like the weird little Konoha kid, despite the whole Hidden Village thing and my aptitude for nicknames. But if Misaki of all people can tell that something’s gone to hell, when her ability to tell when her own kid is upset is somewhat...shitty, then I should probably be worried.

“Well, what do you want me to do about it?” I ask, throwing an arm out to indicate the empty hall and lack of Konoha-nin. “I’m sure they’ve already decided it’s too late for visitors by now, and I’m still in their Bingo Book somewhere. And I like my face where it is.”

If I’m going to approach Konoha’s only (open) jinchūriki, when she’s in a snit, and expect to get away with it, I need actual assurance that the other three won’t get in my face. Sure I recognized the senbon guy when I spotted him in the inn’s lobby, but I don’t know the other two. I don’t plan on walking to my death before I’m old enough to have forgotten how to use toilets.

“I doubt it will be nearly that terrifying,” Misaki replies, unamused or unimpressed by my turns of phrase. “Keisuke-kun seems to have lost all motivation other than what’s necessary for life. Were I on her team, I would be willing to accept any help offered.”

Except for the part where Misaki has never been on a shinobi team that she hadn’t immediately alienated, I can almost see how that statement looks rational. It’s perfectly possible for the worst possible person available to have a valid point, if I stare at it long enough for my eyes to cross. If the little prophet is in that kind of condition, things must be pretty bad.

I can’t remember if our (limited, by shinobi standards) intelligence reports have coughed up anything about that. “Give me a second to go through what info we have from Konoha?”

Misaki waves me off and I leave, darting through the darkened halls.

Technically, I’m in charge of what information network we have. Not because I particularly want to be, but because I’m the only one who’s gotten far enough in a Hidden Village’s hierarchy to have the experience for the job. Sure, my information is sparse and filtered through merchant eyes across the continent, but it exists. And the outpost in Konoha is one of the oldest we have, if you don’t care about permanent fixtures.

My office is off to one side of the compound, behind five partitions and one case where roof access is the only way in. I get most of my deliveries of information from pigeons rather than the hawks that shinobi villages use, because hawks are expensive and I get pigeons for free.

My desk is a mess when I finally get to it, and I wince preemptively at the thought of having to go through it all to find what I want. Scraps of paper and pigeon crap are everywhere. There is a box with “Konoha” on it, somewhere, but I have to find it first.

“One of these days,” I gripe to myself, “I’ll actually figure out how to organize.”

It takes me a few minutes of digging, but I find a mess of little paper slips under a pile of old cup ramen containers. They’re pretty greasy as a result of being shoved off the desk and into the trash bin, but about half of them are still readable.

Some of these things are over a year old. No wonder I threw them out.

I turn my desk light on and start reading.
Most of them are irrelevant on top of being old and a little disgusting to touch, dealing with things like the price of shrimp in some port city I can just barely remember visiting. Maybe that was relevant to our interests once, but the price of seafood is hardly riveting reading now.

It takes me a while to find what I’m looking for, which ends up not being in the trash pile at all. After another twenty minutes of poking through the sheer amount of dead tree material in my office, I find a little subsection where my agents—pigeon summons are the best and I will hear no slights against them—have stored information pertaining to Tailed Beasts.

And their hosts, of course. No one’s let them run loose for ages.

As soon as I start understanding what I’m reading, I wonder why I didn’t consign this pile to the trash immediately.

While it’s true that rumors are unreliable sources of information, someone good at information analysis can usually parse out what’s bullshit and what’s truth running around behind a mask. I happen to be good at that, because it’s a survival skill in Iwagakure during wartime, and those who were bad at it didn’t tend to last long. At nearly forty (...or thirty-seven), I’m probably old enough to be able to say what’s what.

And what’s coming out of Konoha’s rumor mill is finely-honed shit.

Take a spark of fear or hate. It doesn’t take much—everyone in a Hidden Village lives in a fucking tinderbox anyway. It’s child’s play to turn a shinobi village into an undirected mob if someone can figure out what the correct spark will be. It’s the main reason why villages tend to control the flow of information as tightly as they do. They know they’re vulnerable.

The Fourth Hokage might not see that.

I rest my knuckles against the edge of my goatee and think as I read the scraps and assemble a picture in my head.

The timeline starts when Keisuke goes public as a jinchūriki.

Never a good move, given that most of them start with their identities in the open and don’t do well. I’ve seen Rōshi and Han get all sorts of shit for existing in Iwa. While no one ever fought the two of them, because it’s a fucking stupid idea to fight people who can flash-boil enemies in their own juices, I don’t remember either of them being happy with their lot in life. Sure, Han’s a kid and Rōshi is Ōnoki’s own blood, but that’s nothing in the face of fear.

But she did it anyway. There must be some angle I can’t see. I know that Madara Uchiha’s big meltdown involved the Nine-Tailed Fox, but so does anyone with half a brain and a history book. The Fox does appear a couple more times over the historical record, and I know that it showed up again in Konoha a few years back without flattening the place. So there must be another jinchūriki?

Hm. I’ll ask her and see if it’s not an S-rank secret.

After that, Keisuke stays in the village for a year. Tracking her movements is easy. My pigeons don’t even have to work for their lunches in Konoha, and they get good information from that period.

And then, a little after a Chūnin Exam in Sunagakure—no real info there, since the bastards can recognize my birds out there—Keisuke comes back to Konoha and...fights the Fourth Hokage.

Holy shit, why would anyone do that?
I can respect a guy who can kill two hundred of my countrymen in a single day, but holy *fuck* do I never want to piss him off. My Lava Release isn’t unique—there are plenty of guys with that bloodline in Iwagakure, and the Yellow Flash didn’t slow down when chopping *them* into bite-sized pieces.

I shudder. Keisuke is more reckless than I thought.

Um. Okay. After that…

A mission to Amegakure, of all places. We do have an outpost over there, but it’s barely a year old and any information from it would have to be filtered through too many months of human memory. I do know that the Amegakure government is run by three S-class shinobi of some kind, but I’m not sure I can believe what I hear about them. The fucking *Rinnegan*? In Ame, of all the tiny backwater villages? But the people who report to me were clear on that.

I shake my head. Back to the tiny prophet.

After the Ame mission…oh? The timeline gets weird. Six months of more missions outside of the village. The Fourth Hokage has a second kid. The world spins on.

And then Keisuke spends a solid—or nearly solid—year outside of Konohagakure.

But in her absence, things get interesting. And disturbing.

The pigeons don’t have date and times on any of their reports because they’re idiots about human concerns like precise timestamps. But there’s a clear lapse in information regarding Keisuke *from the village itself*.

Except for a series of whispers.

Pigeons and merchants have good ears when they want to use them, and I am looking down at a series of reports that track gossip as it changes in the market. For over six months.

It starts with an idea.

Tailed Beasts have special power that humans can’t match. The specifics vary, but the Three-Tails is the only one with genjutsu specialization from what I can remember. The others don’t bother.

But here, someone listed only as *Person 1* insists to *Person 2* and *3* that the Three-Tails jinchūriki is controlling the Fourth Hokage. I know I’m missing part of the story—hell, the pigeons probably didn’t even notice the conversation’s beginning or end if there were too many people around—but I can extrapolate.

Someone started a street-level smear campaign against, and based on fear of, a jinchūriki.

More pigeon (and merchant) reports reveal more of the progression. From fear of control by a Tailed Beast, the story changes to focus on fear of Keisuke, and then a sort of glittering-edged malice that happens whenever gossips have too much spare time.

By the end of it, the story is that Keisuke seduced the Fourth Hokage into purging her enemies from the village. Literally so, and complete with steamy detail that makes me just scratch my head. Gossips are so much more imaginative than ordinary people, who have better things to do. Jiraiya would make a killing off the content if he could manage to scrub his brain out and remove all memory of the context.
Well, at least I know when the civilian rumor mill started working. Mind control was a security concern. Seduction was just another trick in the shinobi toolkit.

I lean back in my chair and think.

Is all of this supposed to just be another case of a village of ungrateful bastards with memory issues? ‘Cause I know that tune well enough. Sure, the jinchūriki angle’s not one I’ve thought too hard about before, but it’s more of a continuation of a general theme. Hidden Villages are, after all, pretty fucked up. The idea of a student sleeping with their teacher for perks isn’t exactly a novel idea. It’s kind of what the weirder samurai stories amount to. As for the mind control...okay, yes, that was an actual concern. But not one I expected to see in Konoha of all places.

It just doesn’t seem like enough to trigger the problems Keisuke seems to be having.

What the hell happened? Is that kind of rumor enough to build momentum for a mob? Not on its own, but combined with the general lack of information about jinchūriki, and the death of some politically important fuckstick...maybe.

...Wait a minute.

I poke through the little pigeon reports again, searching for a name. Who had set this off?

“Danzō Shimura...?” Where had I heard that name before? The name conjures a quiet sense of dread, weaker than any of my bouts of deja vu, but I can’t place it for a moment.

Then it hits me like a brick to the face.

Back when Keisuke really was a half-pint prophet in name and form, I'd bothered her for a bit of a read on the future before her first Chūnin Exam. Zakuro wanted to come with me, and together we’d gotten a few names out of her.

One of them was Orochimaru’s, and the guy still brings a chill to my withered Iwa-born heart even if no one’s seen hide or hair of him for ages.

The other? Danzō Shimura. A Konoha Council member. An elder. And a guy who “collected” tragic little orphans like summer stag beetles.

_Fuck_. If Keisuke had done something to get the guy killed—like the rumors implied—then I owe her a drink.

_Or maybe a gift certificate? How old is she now, anyway?_

I’ll decide when I go over and bother her tomorrow.

First, I’m gonna pop in and tell the kids that their favorite babysitter is back in town. It’s baffling, but for some reason they seem to ask about the goofy little special jōnin a lot for kids who go without seeing her for year-long stretches. Especially Kazuki, and I know for a fact that my kid is the type who can’t fixate on most _thoughts_ for more than five seconds.

I’m not sure if it’s like the link that binds Misaki and the others to me. We _know_ each other, like old friends or old rivals who’ve finally put down their swords. We’ve all been like that since we first met.

But the kids... Is Keisuke supposed to be one of us? I’ve never answered that question to my satisfaction, and I’m sure I’ll end up just turning it over and over forever.
Ain’t like it’s gonna happen. She won’t join us if we ask, though it’s a nice thought anyway.

Kei

The next day, I wouldn’t necessarily say that I was “better” in a way that would have made much of a difference to an outside observer. But I was a little less dead inside.

Ebisu left me alone for the morning. We weren’t leaving until tomorrow, but he wanted Gai and Genma to try and help unload the caravan that had just come in. The three of them did their best to avoid waking me up on their way out, but I still wasn’t sleeping well enough for that to work.

I got up an hour later, when several pairs of children’s footsteps came pounding down the hall.

A slightly raspy child’s voice said, “Is she here?”

“I think she’s here,” another child replied.

“Roku, didn’t Auntie say?” A little girl’s voice, high and excited.

“Yes.” Definitely Roku.

A fifth child said, “Then she has to be here.”

“Then we should make sure she’s awake!” said a sixth.

“We’re being loud,” said the second voice, sounding like the youngest of the group.

Apparently, the entire kindergarten crew had arrived.

I kicked my covers off and got to my feet. As I stumbled around, looked down at myself. Being dressed in pajama pants and an overlarge white t-shirt didn’t quite make me presentable to adults, but kids would probably be fine with “depressed couch potato” chic.

I ran my hands through my hair twice, to get some of the knots out.

I decide to answer the door. I looked down into six expectant faces.

“BIG SIS KEI!” screamed all of the Chinatsugumi kids at once.

Answering the door may have been a mistake.

The two smallest girls did their level best to knock me over at waist height, but were unable to overcome my ability to stick my feet to the floor or my grip on the doorframe. As a result, dusty pink-haired Tayuya and blonde Aiko were acting like misplaced training weights.

Aiko and Tayuya’s gray and jet-black eyes looked up at me like they wanted to be picked up. I wasn’t going to until they let me go, for starters.

“You look sad!” shouted Kazuki, who was the owner of the scratchy voice. His big blue eyes almost seemed to glow in the crappy hallway light, and I automatically mussed his brown spikes before he could pursue the line of inquiry. Nope. Didn’t want to talk about it. And yet, I still heard him say, “Is something wrong?”

I didn’t feel like I was sad.
I didn’t feel much of anything.

“She’s not sad unless she says she is,” Kaito argued immediately. I looked down at him and thought, when I saw his almost catlike green eyes focusing on me from down around waist height with the rest of them. If I remembered right, this green-haired kid was actually a little older than Aiko, but was still smaller.

Miyu and Roku hung back. While Kazuki’s twin sister didn’t really like touching people and assumed that other people didn’t like it either, Roku looked like he was about to fall asleep on his feet.

“How old are all of you now?” I asked, putting on a more kid-friendly expression. The smile at least tried to reach my eyes.

“Eight,” said Kazuki and Miyu together.

“Maybe nine,” Roku said quietly. “We just celebrate my birthday at New Year’s.”

“Six and eight months,” said Kaito.

“Six and a half!” Aiko said.

“Five,” Tayuya said at the end.

“Can we go back to hide and seek now?” Miyu asked, her blue eyes narrowed in annoyance.

“Nooooo, Big Sis Kei needs to teach us how to play real ninja!” Kazuki barked, shouting his twin down.

“Shut up!” Miyu snapped back.

Roku started dragging both of the twins away by the backs of their yukata collars. Over their protests, the tallest of the six children pulled them out of view.

“Sorry, loud,” Tayuya said.

“They’re dumb,” said Kaito.

“They’re not dumb!” argued Aiko.

“Kids,” I said, “what do you actually want to do here?”

“Play!” the three remaining kids replied.

I wasn’t really feeling it. But the kids were.

Dilemma.

But as three kindergartners dragged me out of the inn, I caught Gai’s eye just before I was tugged into the Chnatsugumi compound. I’d probably get Genma and Ebisu just from sheer team magnetism once they realized their loudest friend wasn’t there anymore.

Even if I wasn’t up to playing, Gai always was. And if he could shout louder than both of Rikuto’s kids, then more power to him.
I woke up in the middle of the night.

Genma and Ebisu and Gai were all asleep. Gai was almost sleeping against my back, while Genma was on his other side, and Ebisu was dozing near the door. They must have decided that he would be the guard. Or maybe he had decided himself.

I kicked off my futon’s coverlet and got up, cracking all of my joints in my arms because they were stiff. A quick look at the clock confirmed that it was about four in the morning, and the thought was irritating. I didn’t want to be awake, but I was anyway. If I went back to sleep, I could have had more nightmares.

Then I shrugged to myself and went to find a bathroom. I knew there was one outside in the hallway, so I headed in that direction.

When I left after finishing my business and washing my hands, I immediately tripped over a sleeping body that did not belong to Ebisu and had not been there before. Shinobi reflexes saved the little roadblock from being crushed under me, because I grabbed the door handle in time.

And then I stopped to figure out who I had almost just kicked.

The light was bad, but my chakra sense worked.

The sleeping form shifted and revealed Roku, one of Chinatsu’s children. His long black hair stuck to his face from drool. I reached down and shook his shoulder.

Nothing happened.

I patted his cheek.

Nothing, except for his narrow brown hands grabbing hold of my pant leg.

It seemed that Roku was a sleepwalker.

I was...probably supposed to do something.

Without really thinking of what I was doing, I scooped the nine-year-old into my arms and carried him down the hall. At the next left, I walked down the stairs and into the inn’s lobby, which was empty and dim. And then I walked outside.

The Chinatsugumi compound was big, but I knew my way around. Shirozora had trained me here. My memory still worked.

The front hall was empty and dark, but I just moved on.

Roku made a noise and buried his face against my neck. I adjusted my grip on him and continued carrying him toward his actual home.

“Hello?” someone called, and I stopped.

In the light of an open doorway, a robe-wearing Chinatsu was looking out into the hall right at me. She looked exactly like her twin, Misaki, but would do such undignified things as actually rubbing her eyes in front of people. Or yawning.

Like she was doing now.

“Chinatsu-san,” I said, and walked over to her. I shifted Roku so most of his weight was on my hip.
“Roku-kun was in the inn.”

Chinatsu frowned. “That’s further than he usually goes.” She met my eyes for a moment, but I looked down and away. Still, I offered Roku to her. “Thank you for your help, Keisuke-san.”

“It was nothing,” I said. It didn’t matter. “I should get back to the inn.”

“Wait,” Chinatsu said, and something tugged on my shirt. When I looked, Roku’s hand was still clinging to my sleeve.

I moved my hand to pry his fingers off, but Chinatsu stopped me.

“Can I speak to you?” she asked.

I looked at her hand, then at Roku’s. Then I shrugged. “Okay.”

Chinatsu led me to a sitting room of some kind. There was a couch near the door, so we sat down on it. Roku didn’t let go of me, so Chinatsu let him sleep with his head on my lap.

I rested my hand on his head.

“When we first met,” Chinatsu said, “do you remember what I told you?”

I blinked, unable to quite remember. It had been eight years. How did she still know?

“All of us are connected.” Chinatsu lifted one arm and swept it outward. “All of this. And you.”

Oh.

Right.

“I still don’t know how this is the case,” Chinatsu admitted. She pushed my bangs back from my face. “But you are one of us, Keisuke-san. We want to help you.”

I looked at her out of the corner of my eye.

“Please, let us do that,” Chinatsu said, and her knuckles brushed the side of my face.

I looked down at Roku. His fingers were still caught in my shirt.

“Why do you care?” I asked my knees, instead of looking up. My voice shook.

“It’s something people do when they see someone in pain,” Chinatsu replied. “It’s easy to forget when you need others more than ever, and they don’t come.”

All too easy.

I wanted to go home.

“Our children miss you,” she said in a soft voice as she watched me. “They see someone who will care for them as much as we do.”

“I’m never here,” I said. Home was somewhere else. Why did I need to stay away? But instead of saying that, I asked, “Why should they?”

“Children,” Chinatsu said, “love easily and fully. And you are kind to them when you are here.” She held up her hand and crossed her first two fingers. “And I did mention the connection, didn’t I? Just
because you don’t see someone every day doesn’t mean you don’t care about each other.”

“Oh.” I brushed Roku’s long bangs away from his face. To Chinatsu, in a whisper, I said, “It doesn’t feel like this—like I’m—”

_I try and I try and I just want to know if—if maybe I’m just playing at this. If I really matter._

I was hollow. There was a yawning chasm inside my chest where my heart should have been.


And they were almost finished. It was almost over.

Why did I need to try anymore?

“I—I’ve been fighting for everyone for so long, I d-don’t know what to do when I’m _not._” Hayate didn’t need me to look after him. I just...I could trust others to do that. To make sure he survived. Maybe? “I’m almost—m-my friends don’t _need_ me. My brother d-doesn’t need me. A-anything I do now is j-just…”

Just an insurance policy, really.

“I don’t recall meeting your brother recently,” Chinatsu said, reaching out and tucking some of my hair behind my ear. “I imagine he is kind, and brave, if he’s anything like you.”

I nodded, unable to trust my voice.

“And I’m sure he loves you very much.” Chinatsu leaned closer to me, and said, “I can tell you a secret, as a sister.”

I wiped my nose on my sleeve and looked at her through eyes swimming with tears.

“While I don’t always need her, Misaki is _always_ going to be my sister,” Chinatsu told me. “And even if I don’t always agree with her, I can tell you that I love her, and that I worry about her when she’s hurting. She always looks after me, though I don’t always need it. And I return the favor.”

I mumbled something.

She drew back and said, “That is how being a good sibling works. Even knowing you briefly, over years, I think I can say that you are a good older sister.”

I was good with kids, or at least kids I was related to or connected to through some kind of reincarnation-induced bullshit.

I made a loud sniffling noise.

Chinatsu eyed me carefully and said, “You might want to get some more sleep before the sun comes up, Keisuke-san. Also, I believe someone has been waiting for you to come back.”

Oh. I wiped my eyes and used my chakra to try and force myself under control, before I felt Genma’s chakra approach the doorway and heard him knock on the frame. “Kei-san?”

“In h-here.” So much for getting my voice back to normal.

Genma stepped into the room and spent a moment just looking at all three of us. Then he crossed the
room and held his hand out to me. “I heard you get up, earlier. I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

With his hearing, I didn’t doubt that he knew exactly what he was interrupting. I couldn’t quite muster the anger to glare at him.

“You’re fine, Shiranui-kun,” Chinatsu said. “Keisuke-san probably needs to catch up on sleep.”

Genma nodded. “Sounds about right.”

I sighed and took Genma’s offered hand. I moved Roku to Chinatsu’s lap with my free hand. “I get it. I’ll go back.”

“Good. I think I’m the only one who noticed you left, but we’ll all know the second Gai does. And no one wants to hear that,” Genma said, and escorted me out of the compound.

We arrived at the inn in just a minute or two, even when walking like normal people. But when we got there, Genma took a detour and ushered me into the empty dining hall instead.

“Do you mind telling me what happened?” he asked.

...I could.

It was a strange thought. Most of the wake of—of my homecoming had been focused on just hiding away from everyone. Building poison inside me like some kind of tropical frog, waiting for someone to step wrong and give me a moment to explode and hurt them back. Or hollowing myself out, because I was too tired to deal with concern or love when I had been gone so long that I barely remembered what they felt like.

Being sent away again had done the opposite of helping. At least, at first.

I looked up at Genma, who had forgotten his senbon somewhere and was looking at me with furrowed brows, and said, “Okay.”

“Okay?” Genma repeated.

I shrugged. The conversation had helped remind me that I was alive and that I still hurt, but I still didn’t feel that strongly at the moment. I was back to neutral.

It was easier not to feel.

But maybe it wasn’t the best plan anymore.

I sat down at one of the tables, crossing my arms and drooping over the placemat like I was planning on falling asleep again. But I didn’t. “I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“I’m a light sleeper,” Genma pointed out. “Kind of a requirement for the job.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“So about the discussion with Chinatsu-san...”

I shrugged again. “What do you want to know?”

“...I mostly wanted to know if you’re all right,” Genma said, though the hesitance there told me that it wasn’t what he’d first planned on saying. “But I guess that’s a stupid question. You haven’t been okay since coming back to Konoha.”
I made a noise of agreement.

“Guess the year out took a lot out of you,” Genma said. He drummed his fingertips against the tabletop. “It’d make anyone into a strung-out mess.”

I nodded. Maybe I’d been uniquely vulnerable, but he was right.

“I can’t say much about what we’re gonna do about that, but we do have an extra day since Ebisu pushed us to go faster than normal,” Genma said. “Maybe take a day to just...decompress? Gai and I will be around, but if you would rather just stay out of our mission crap, I’ll talk Ebisu into just bossing the two of us around. He needs the practice anyway.”

“Thanks, Genma,” I mumbled into my folded arms.

“And once we are back in Konoha, Raidō and I have your back.” Genma ruffled my hair. “I’m not sure if you know this, but you were the second person in the village to say ‘congrats’ about us. We won’t forget that.”

I hadn’t known that, but I supposed it made sense.

“It’s okay to slow down and take a break sometimes,” Genma said. I heard him get to his feet. “So, do you want to try sleeping again? Because the table can’t be comfortable.”

“Okay.”

The next day, the kids found us again. And Ebisu gave his permission for another play day.

“That was fun,” Genma said, sitting on the side of the roof with Tayuya hanging off of his neck. He wouldn’t let the kid fall, even if she was probably going to steal his senbon sooner or later.

The rest of us were below the two of them, on the porch that led out to the compound’s garden.

Roku and Kaito were lying on my lap, and not sharing especially well. Roku was the largest child, and his dark hair kept getting into Kaito’s face when the latter tried to claim more space for himself. If Roku wasn’t closer to my hip, Kaito might have tried to push him off.

Gai was sitting next to where Aiko, Miyu, and Kazuki were all sprawled out on the porch, each one drenched in sweat from playing ninja with the most hilariously enthusiastic ninja out there. He could keep all three kids occupied with no effort at all, and their attempts to wear him down had only made him run around faster.

Ebisu had gotten something out of our play session, too. While he wasn’t really interested in being climbed on, he had a lot of useful things to say with regard to strategies for overcoming Gai’s tremendous advantages. And the kids had listened.

Which was why Gai had broken a sweat at all.

“Are you feeling any better, Keisuke-san?” Gai asked.

I thought about it.

While I wasn’t home, there weren’t really any expectations out here. Ebisu and Genma were concentrating on Ebisu’s qualification for special jōnin. Gai was just having fun. I was only there to round out the numbers, but my presence didn’t really come with any expectations.
It was nice to be able to veg out.

“I’m okay,” I said, though the word felt suddenly inadequate. I just couldn’t quite put what I was feeling into words. But it didn’t feel like I had to try, either.

“Good,” said Ebisu.

Genma jerked his head abruptly, and the next thing we knew there was another shinobi next to him.

Rikuto leaned over the edge of the roof and waved down at us, sticking his feet to the roof slats with chakra. “Hey. Are my kids being good?”

“They have been angels!” Gai said brightly, as Genma scooted away from the new arrival.


Miyu said, “We’re *always* good.”

“Uh-huh,” Rikuto said. He glanced at Genma, asking, “And the others?”

“They’ve been fine,” Genma replied.

“Good. Then I guess they’ve all earned an extra snack.”

“Snack?” Tayuya repeated, climbing up onto Genma’s shoulder. “Anmitsu!”

As though it was some kind of signal, Kaito and Aiko immediately snapped to attention. “Anmitsu?” they asked.

“Yep.” And as soon as he said that, Rikuto’s kids, along with Aiko, Kaito, and Tayuya immediately scrambled for the dining hall. Gai and Genma went with them—though in Genma’s case it was partly because Tayuya was trying to jump off the roof with him as her springboard.

Roku stayed exactly where he was, still dozing. So did Ebisu.

“Ebisu-san, can you take Roku-kun to dinner so he doesn’t miss out?” Rikuto asked.

Ebisu hesitated, looking back at us curiously.

“It’s all right,” I told Ebisu.

With a terse nod at me, he picked Roku up and carried him in the wake of the other children. The kid didn’t even shift in his sleep.

Rikuto hopped down from the roof and landed near me. “What, you don’t like anmitsu?”

I wasn’t really hungry. But sweets sounded nice.

Rikuto, who could read my face, said, “Come on, there’s going to be tons left over.”

I followed him to the dining hall, maybe a little more cheerful than before.

After lunch, the children scattered to find their tutors among the various townspeople. I didn’t ask where they were studying, or what.

I decided to take a bath.
Sorayama had a bathhouse, and there was no one there so soon after lunchtime. If there had been, I would have found a shower at the inn.

Instead, I took my bath things there and decided to soak for a while.

There wasn’t a bath attendant, so I tried remembering the rules from Konoha. There were no posted rules, either, so I guessed.

Step one: Take off shoes.

Step two: Strip naked and dump clothes in a complimentary basket. No one would steal my stuff.

Step three: Take a shower and rinse thoroughly.

Step four: Actually go in the hot spring, which was outdoors. And it was December.

After washing off and pulling a water bottle out of a storage seal I brought with me, I got into the hot spring to just...well, to sit there.

The bench built below water level was just high enough that I could lean by head back against the rocks, with my shoulders exposed. From chest-down, I was submerged. The sharp cold was a good contrast to the hot water. I probably wouldn’t overheat.

I dozed.

I felt someone approach, but the chakra faded and I didn’t worry about it.

I just needed time to be left alone and stop thinking.

“Ah, Keisuke-chan,” said a voice.

I opened my eyes. So much for being alone for a while.

“You don’t look as bad as I expected,” Nanami said. Her green eyes narrowed as she stared at me.

I stared at her for better reasons.

Right beneath her collarbones, her entire body melted away into the water. Even the ends of her white hair went invisible in the hot spring and the cloud of steam flowing up from it.

“...Okay,” I said. Then I went back to trying to nap in the water.

Two fingers poked me in the forehead. “Rude. Wake up.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I’m talking to you,” Nanami replied. Her voice was suddenly much closer.

I didn’t want to move, but... “If you’re touching me right now, stop.”

“I’m fused with the spring,” Nanami said, brows scrunching up. “I am touching you right now.”

I gave her a long, blank stare. She had moved closer, but her head and shoulders were still the only parts that looked human.

I climbed out of the bath. Nope.
“I still want to talk to you,” I heard Nanami say.

“Not now,” I said. I would be happier if we did not have conversations while naked. I could just about tolerate most of the people I knew in Konoha, but Nanami was pushier. And melded with the water.

I was not going to take a bath in someone. Just no.

After a bit of searching, I found the bathhouse’s stock of towels and yukata. I dried off and put one of the yukata on, then decided to go and get my clothes.

Nanami kept trying to get me to talk to her.

“You don’t want to talk to me?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Are you still learning Water ninjutsu from Shiro this time?”

“Are you leaving tomorrow?”

I ignored all of it and finally found all of my things. Shampoo, check. Soap, check. Water bottle… Not check.

I must have left it somewhere. I turned back to Nanami to ask.

And I saw her playing with my slightly deformed water bottle.

It was deformed because it was frozen.

Great. Shirozora was probably on the other side of the bath partition.

“You know, I didn’t thank you for playing with Kaito today,” Nanami said, out of nowhere.

“No problem,” I said, deciding that the water bottle wasn’t worth it.

Kaito, at least, was cute. He was a kid. Nanami was at least thirty, and her quirks were a lot less charming.

Speaking of, Nanami decided that it was time to try something different. She was smiling, which made me pause. Did she think I just...needed to lighten up?

The next thing I knew, she tried splashing at me, with her arm still in water form.

Hot water flew out of the spring like a whip, with the half-melted water bottle coming with it.

Nope.

I still had enough reflexes to skitter out of the way, sticking to my landing point three meters away as the water rained down. Chakra stuck me firmly to the floor until I didn’t want to be.

I did catch my water bottle, though.

Then I turned on my heel and with all of my stuff, walked out of the women’s section of the baths.

I didn’t want anything to do with Nanami’s misplaced sense of “fun.”
And then I dodged the patch of ice that had formed outside the door, and sidestepped the bucket of snow that nearly fell on my head.

What was hilarious in training was simply annoying now.

They meant well. I knew they meant well. It was why I wasn’t angry.

Why I wasn’t letting myself get angry.

I swallowed hard and just left. I didn’t need to deal with this.

Sometime around dinnertime, I decided I wasn’t hungry.

I sat in the hotel room for a while in my pajamas, picking through the copy of *Icha-Icha Paradise* again.

It wasn’t funny.

I was too busy being upset with myself for being too angry to concentrate.

Sounded odd. Was still true.

I shouldn’t have been upset, or angry, or annoyed. I shouldn’t have even been numb.

But I just stared at the same page for too long and seethed.

It was so stupid. Shirozora and Nanami were weird and inconsiderate, but in any other mood I would have at least played along. Or fought back.

As it was, I just kept going back to beating myself up for feeling things that weren’t sunshine and unicorns.

Until I didn’t feel anything.

At that point, someone knocked on the door.

Because I never learned, I answered the door.

It was Rikuto.

Looking at him, I had to note the differences since the last time we’d met. Rikuto was actually shorter than I was, by four centimeters. His goatee was shot through with little specks of gray, though I was almost certain that he wasn’t forty yet. And for once, he wasn’t smiling, teasing, or otherwise playing around.

Rikuto in serious mode had only happened once before that I remembered. It wasn’t a happy memory.

I let him in.

I sat down at the table at with my elbows propped up on the surface.

“So, we haven’t talked for a while, Keisuke-san.” Rikuto settled down on one of the cushions at the room’s low table, but a careful distance away. It was like he wanted to avoid being in mangling range.
I tilted my head to one side and let him talk.

Rikuto didn’t speak immediately. His eyes were trained on my face, where I was certain the emotions had fallen right off.

“You’re feeling...upset?” Rikuto prompted.

I muttered, “You think?”

“What was that?” So much for being a former Iwa jōnin.

I sighed.

“Kid, I see you once in a blue moon. If you need to get something off your chest, I’m not exactly gonna be around to yell at you for it.”

I sighed again. Well, if he really wanted to know… “I spent a goddamned year away from home, with minimal contact, because Sensei wanted to ’protect’ me.”

Where did that come from?

...I don’t know?

Isobu made a noise, but didn’t say anything else.

“From what?” Rikuto asked, leaning forward.

“Some clan bullshit.” I shrugged one shoulder, drawing one knee up toward my chest. I hugged it closer and put my chin on top of it. “Someone whining that Shimura got killed and I wasn’t appropriately quiet when we were breaking the news to the clans, maybe.”

If I focused on it for too long I could feel a nasty rush of anger bubbling up inside me, so I made an annoyed noise and tried to put it out of my mind.

“Just that? And a year and a half deployed? Sheesh, who’d you piss off?” Rikuto asked.

“Everyone, I guess.” I glanced at him. “I didn’t tell anyone about that.”

“Kid, this may be news to you, but merchants *chatter,*” Rikuto said bluntly. “And my summon contract? Carrier pigeons. I know damn near everything I can get access to.”

“People were talking about me this far away from Konoha?” I asked, blinking.

“Eh, no. I just get news out here thanks to loose lips in the village,” Rikuto replied with a shrug of his own. “So, I take it you don’t know the whole story.”

“Between coming home and getting my ass kicked out again, no,” I growled. So *what* if I’d been too much of a wreck to string thoughts together? I knew enough to know that Sensei had lied to me, kept me away from people I cared about for so long I almost forgot what they were *like,* and couldn’t even *justify* it.

And then he kicked me out again to sort through the wreckage.

Screw his reasons. I didn’t care anymore.

“It’s like—look, everyone in the village thinks he’s a hero. And yet every time something bad
happens, it’s on me, or on Obito, and it just keeps happening,” I said in a growl. “Even this fucking promotion is his idea, and he just—I thought he wanted me to get experience. And it was just a lie to keep me out longer.” I raked my hands through my hair in sheer frustration. “And I never even wanted to be a jōnin! Special jōnin’s good enough!”

Rikuto sat back and let me rant, but I noticed his hesitation after that last complaint. “What did you want to say?” I asked.

“Oh, I was just wondering if you heard the rumor mill’s quarterly reports.” Rikuto shrugged. “I mean, you’d know if you were mind-controlling the Fourth Hokage into killing off political rivals, right?”

The fuck?

**This sounds familiar,** Isobu added after a moment. **Kurama and I discussed this not long ago.**

“What the actual fuck?” I demanded. I wasn’t sure if I was talking to Isobu or Rikuto more, in that moment.

Rikuto grinned in the face of my anger, because he was an asshole. “Oh, it’s not even the best part. The latest version—or maybe the newest addition?—is that you’re actually sleeping your way to the top!”

“H—How does that even—?” I sputtered. “That’s disgusting!”

Rikuto laughed outright. “And apparently the Fourth Hokage is a bit of an idiot. Why didn’t he just tell you and point you at the rumor mill? It’d be hilarious.”

Probably because I wouldn’t have done anything. I’d heard other attempts to ruin what reputation I had, but most of those had cut short after my fight with Sensei, hadn’t they?

And besides, we were shinobi. Seduction missions might have been ANBU’s purview under normal circumstances, but we would do damn near anything to ensure mission success. Sex was just another tool if we wanted it to be.

But with Sensei? Uuuuuuuuugh.

“Or maybe that’s not the whole story, either,” Rikuto mused. “But it’s certainly the part that my eyes and ears in the world bothered to remember. What else could be going on behind closed doors?” And he waggled his eyebrows.

If I’d had a kunai, I would have probably thrown it at him. “If you’re trying to piss me off, it’s working.”

“Good!” Rikuto replied, getting right in my face and smirking in a way that made me want to punch it off his face. “Be honest with yourself! Go back home and tell the Yellow Flash to either be straight with you or go fuck himself.” Rikuto backed off slightly. “Fight for what you have, and keep it at all costs. Or die.”

That viewpoint probably explained why Rikuto was a missing-nin, actually. Pissing off one’s superiors was not a way to avoid suicide missions.

“Go away,” I said in a tone that was barely civil.

“Fine, fine,” Rikuto said. He got to his feet and stuck his hands in his pockets, like he didn’t expect
any retaliation from me.

Well, he was right. I didn’t make a habit of shooting the messenger, even if the message was delivered with entirely too much sass and the messenger was an asshole.

It was still a better idea than moping.

Once Rikuto was gone, I hauled myself to my feet and muttered a few choice words to myself.

**I take it that you’re alive again?** Isobu asked with the slightest touch of sarcasm.

*Yeah,* I told him. *You could say that.*

**Good. I prefer when you have your backbone,** Isobu said. **Denying your anger and hurt got us nowhere.**

*I guess.* I stared down at my hands. I wasn’t *better,* not really. Rikuto had just made me angry enough to crack the seal of apathy. And maybe that anger would carry me home like a fucking hot air balloon.

Or maybe I’d wake up feeling just as gutted when it faded.

I was going to elaborate more on that thought. I might have even countered what Isobu wanted to pull out of this weird-as-shit situation. Shituation.

Hah.

I needed to go on a walk to clear my head.

So I did.

I was somewhere near a vegetable stand when I started hearing a song in my head.

*The secret side of me*

*I never let you see*

*I keep it caged*

*But I can’t control it*

*So stay away from me*

*The beast is ugly*

*I feel the rage*

*And I just can’t hold it*

**What is that garbage supposed to be?** Isobu demanded, as the world started to go a bit fuzzy around the edges.

*English music,* I told him, surprised that I was still thinking clearly. Okay, this was probably one of the worst genjutsu I’d been caught in—by which I meant that it *sucked.* The butterflies had been several times more deadly.
I could perceive all of the chakra in it, which wasn’t supposed to happen. That chakra was Zakuro’s, but the woman wasn’t anywhere nearby. In fact, I hadn’t seen her once on this entire mission. What the hell?

I’m getting rid of it. It’s just noise, Isobu said, and his chakra twanged across my senses like a rubber band.

And when the genjutsu came down, it was loud.

Not the genjutsu, but there were dozens—hundreds—of chakra signatures all crowding into my mental map of Mount Soragami’s slopes and lighting it up like a fucking pinball machine.

We’re under attack. I brought my hands together in an automatic seal. Isobu—

On it, he said, and our chakra flared together to rip the genjutsu loose from everyone in Sorayama.

Screaming started.

Chapter End Notes

A million miles away
Your signal in the distance
To whom it may concern
I think I lost my way
Getting good at starting over
Every time that I return

I'm learning to walk again
I believe I've waited long enough
Where do I begin?
I'm learning to talk again
Can't you see I've waited long enough?
Where do I begin?
Memory: Cascade

Chapter Summary

Plot: Cascade failure.

Chapter Notes

This chapter's song is "Cascade," from Homestuck.

We were under attack and I was unarmed.

Cursing myself and my blithering idiocy, I automatically leapt back to dodge a series of thrown kunai, and each impact traile me like the thrower was counting my steps. Or range-marking.

I caught a flash of gray cloth, and blocked a kunai stab attempt by slapping the point aside with one chakra-coated hand. Then I snatched at the sleeve of the arm holding it, got a grip, and severed every nerve I could get my chakra scalpels to touch.

The hand went limp.

And then I kicked the owner of that hand in the face, hard enough to cave his balaclava-wearing skull in.

Gray fabric uniform, ski-masked look, black bodysuit… I’d ruined the guy’s shinobi headband, but I could recognize an Oto uniform damn near anywhere. This wasn’t just some random band of enemy shinobi—they were trained killers all pointed right at Sorayama, and every last one of them was going to be trying to kill everyone they could get their hands on. Or worse: capture us, in the name of Lord Voldemort.

Augh!

I ducked under an Oto-nin who threw himself at me, but I made sure to drag my fingers along his leg as he passed overhead.

When he landed, his left leg exploded into red mist.

I didn’t have time to think about it. I was dodging incoming attacks by a hair in every direction—catching and returning kunai, batting shuriken aside with whatever I could find, and just staying ahead of the game.

Then, an opening—and with Isobu’s chakra reinforcing me, I launched into the hand seals for the Water Release: Great Waterfall technique.

It wouldn’t have been possible in any other circumstances—but Sorayama had rivers nearby, there were multiple hot springs, and Isobu’s chakra hauled on those water sources as well as the water in the air, and the result was nothing less than a localized waterspout going horizontally and up—and
catching almost forty Oto-nin where they were trying to cross the village's defensive walls.

The vortex ripped the roofs off of half a dozen buildings, mixing rubble into the deadly cascade of force, and added other sources of water to its mad crusade.

The results were fairly similar to putting that part of the village through a gigantic washing machine.

For a moment, the area was clear.

"Keisuke-san, I would appreciate a minimum of property damage," said Misaki's voice, set over a cacophony of falling wood and bricks.

I turned.

Both of the Kasai sisters were coming up behind me.

Misaki was dressed in her usual formal kimono, but carried a naginata that had a man's severed arm impaled on the blade. Her exposed hand was covered in glowing red seal-lines, and the spiraling patterns ran up from the hemline of her kimono to cover the entire right half of her face in thorn-like designs. Her gold eyes glowed like candles.

Chinatsu, carrying a straight-edged tsurugi rather than a katana, had matching markings along the right side of her body.

And their chakra, together, felt like the sun itself had dropped in for a visit.

"Your mission was to defend the merchant caravan," Misaki went on, though her eyes were looking past me. "Gather your equipment, and do your job."

"But you're—"

"Aiko has the seals," Chinatsu interrupted firmly. "Get her out of danger, and some of us might live long enough to put this place back together."

Misaki nodded, her expression grim. "Neither of us matter any longer."

*The volcano-controlling seals were passed on? Irrevocably? With no safeties? Neither of them still have control of the mountain?*

God *dammit!* I'd known that Chinatsu and Misaki had passed seals to Aiko, but *those specific seals?*

I gave the Kasai sisters one quick nod, then ran.

The inn wasn't far away, but I heard a high-pitched whistling noise coming from behind me just as I reached the front door. I immediately juked right, then I skidded into the entryway, just a hair ahead of—

Oh my fucking god.

*REALLY?!!*

The thing that cut into the pavement, a bit behind me, was a fucking *camellia-topped staff*. A second later, its owner landed on the ground next to it.

*Yagura?*
He turned his head—but in the wrong direction? *Wait, what's going—*

And Yagura leapt back out of view, his chakra screaming *panic*, as a torrent of lava flooded the street after him.

*Rikuto.*

Though I couldn't see him, I could hear his war cry. "*Where is my wife, you bastards?!*"

He could handle it for a bit. I ran up the stairs and kicked the door to my team's suite hard enough that it flew into the opposite wall.

Inside the room, I cursed my team's lack of organization. I cursed myself, mainly, because I'd been the one spending the most time in there, but that wasn't productive. I located my mission gear after a second, and put my flak jacket on as soon as I got my hands on it. Then I clipped my scroll belts and sword belt over my pajama bottoms, as fast as I could manage.

I was wearing a T-shirt, the knee-length remnants of what used to be uniform bottoms, and whatever gear I could pile onto myself.

Good enough.

I slid the suite's window open and threw myself out of it, landing on a conveniently passing Oto-nin and driving him into the top of a fence. The boards and our combined weight resulted in a satisfying crunch of bone under my feet, and I left him hanging across it like a used towel.

Then I was in the air, leaping from roof to roof as I tracked my team's chakra signatures across Sorayama and through a cloud of interference.

I could feel *everyone.*

Chinatsu and Misaki occupied the square as a tightly-controlled storm of destruction, making the little lights representing the enemy wink out one after the other. Rikuto joined them, harassing four Kiri-nin—of which Yagura was one—and driving them toward the Kasai twins. Across the village, Nanami had merged with the hot springs and was boiling the enemy in their own clothes, while Shirozora occupied and held the Chinatsugumi gardens using just the water in the fish-ponds. The chakra signatures of all six children were clustered tightly behind the two former Kiri-nin, and the enemy struck at them again and again.

And midway between the outer wall and the Chinatsugumi compound, Team Chōza was effectively pinned by around fifty fighters. The Oto-nin were dying *en masse,* mainly because of Gai, but the sheer number of corpses-to-be were slowing Team Chōza down.

*V1 cloak?* I asked Isobu.

*Of course.* Isobu seemed to sit up a bit in the water, lifting his horned head. It was impossible for a creature without lips to smile, but he somehow managed anyway. *It's good to have you back.*

*We'll see. This is going to get a lot worse before it gets better.*

*As long as our enemies die, I won't complain.* His eye narrowed. *In fact, I think I'll enjoy this.*

As Isobu's chakra swept through my system like a storm surge, I could see the moment that my vision was covered in a red haze of his chakra.
And I was tearing across the rooftops to relieve my beleaguered teammates.

I arrived in time to see Genma stick a senbon needle in someone's eye. As the victim—yet another faceless Oto-nin—reeled back and remembered to start screaming, his head exploded. It sounded like the time I'd put an explosive seal on a watermelon.

**Interesting.**

I landed, luckily, on an Oto-nin who was trying to escape the battlefield, and the chakra-boosted impact crushed him to the ground hard enough that I felt his lungs give out.

Good.

Ebisu twisted and threw from his hip, sending another Oto-nin careening right for me, and I leapt over the flying man's trajectory with the timing borne of long practice. As I spun, I slashed outward by drawing my katana in midair and launching into the Curve of the Moon iaijutsu technique—and the Oto-nin hit the ground in pieces.

I touched the ground again in a three-point landing for just a moment, and then Isobu's chakra yanked me to one side like a yo-yo. A translucent tail was wrapped around a street lamp and he pulled me neatly out of the way of what turned out to be a—

Oh, more dead people.

Not literally so. But between Team Chōza and *me*, we made short work of the remaining Oto-nin brigade. It took maybe a minute. Two, tops.

"Keisuke-chan, I am glad you seem to be back to your normal self!" Gai greeted me, but he notably hesitated to hug me.

Yeah, the burning aura of death probably put a damper on that. And I really wasn't back to normal. I was just...doing my job.

Violently.

Wait. With a bit of help from Isobu, I dialed down the V1 cloak back to nothing, and all four of us darted into a nearby intact building. It was probably a shop, but given how many things had been smashed it would have been difficult to tell what was sold. Still, we needed a bit of space to talk and it was going to have to do.

"Did you see the Chinatsugumi?" Ebisu asked, and he froze in the act of adjusting his glasses when he realized that his fingertips were covered in blood. He wiped his hands on his pants first.

"I did," I told him. "Misaki-san says that our job is to help with the evacuation and to defend everyone. She and Chinatsu-san are taking the bulk of the enemy off us, but they won't last forever."

Already, I could feel their chakra starting to die down.

"Is there any kind of escape tunnel?" Genma asked, pulling another senbon out of his thigh holster to replace the one he'd just used to make a man's head explode. Had he been carrying the explosive version in his mouth the entire time?

...I wouldn't have noticed, would I? I'd missed a lot.

"I..." Was there one? The Chinatsugumi had never mentioned anything like that to me, but this place...
wasn't exactly Helm's Deep. There had to be another way out that didn't go entirely overland, right? That would just make sense.

If anyone knew about where a tunnel or other escape route would be, then clearly someone would be either guarding it or hiding in it, in a situation like this one. Konoha's version of an escape plan was really more of a counterattack strategy, but we nonetheless had shelters build around the village. The biggest of them was in the Hokage Monument.

Sorayama wasn't a Hidden Village, but it did host people with powerful abilities—some of whom were missing-nin who would be expecting pursuers sooner or later. It would just be smart thinking.

Reaching out with my chakra sense, I tried to clear out some of the interference. Like with the Tenth, there were a lot of chakra signatures out there that I was unfamiliar with.

"There's..." How was I supposed to explain this? "I can sense civilian chakra signatures leaving the area, but I don't know how they're doing it." My chakra sense didn't account for obstacles, such as thousands of metric tons of dirt. I just knew where people were. It didn't tell me how to get there without having to find someone to excavate.

"I'll be able to figure that out," Genma said. He gave me a long, assessing look, and said, "Kei-san, the three of us should be able to help coordinate the retreat—or at least defend the people who are. But I think you're going to be more useful somewhere else."

Hadn't I been calling myself a weapon of mass destruction for years? Well, it was finally time to earn those stripes.

Except for one thing.

"The priority is Misaki's daughter Aiko," I told them. "I'll break off once you have her secured, because otherwise we're all going to die anyway."

Ebisu's eyebrows rose, and I could almost see his eyes around the edges of his shades. "The fabled Kasai clan bloodline?"

I nodded. "And that's where the enemy's attention is focused." Mostly. If you didn't count Yagura. Hopefully, Rikuto would be able to keep him occupied.

"I see... Genma, Gai, protect the civilians. I'll be making sure we can achieve all of our objectives by following Kei-san. She will hold the enemy's attention while I bring the child to safety." Ebisu straightened and added, somewhat uncertainly, "Is that right?"

"You're doing fine, Ebisu." Genma punched his shoulder playfully. "We'll be back together before you know it."

Which was all very well and good, but we still needed to make sure it happened before we could go celebrating.

"Genma and I will let no enemy past us!" Gai gave us a thumbs-up. "That's a promise!"

"You got it," I said, and offered a fist bump.

I got three responses, forming a circle of fists for just a moment.

"All right, kids. Let's get to work," Genma said, and we split our team up. The Oto-nin were mostly fodder to shinobi of our skill levels, and I trusted my teammates to know when to cut and run.
Like when their boss showed up.

Ebisu and I left first, with our chakra somewhat suppressed so I could continue getting a decent read of the situation in the village.

So I felt it when Chinatsu and Misaki's chakra disappeared.

I stumbled for a moment, almost falling off a roof in shock, and checked my chakra sense again. I found myself looking back toward where I'd left them, without really realizing I was doing it until I saw the column of smoke.

Rikuto's chakra had long since disappeared.

For a moment, with Ebisu hovering over my left shoulder and probably wondering what was slowing us down, I felt a stab of pain in my chest. Chinatsu and Misaki could hide their chakra better than any shinobi I'd met, so they could be fine—right?

But Rikuto…

I shook myself. That wasn't—it wasn't *going* to be what we were dealing with. Misaki had made it clear that they were not a part of our mission. Aiko was.

I couldn't afford to slow down. To be distracted. If we failed to get Aiko out of danger, there was no *point* to any of this because Soragami would be overjoyed to just bury us all in pumice and ash. We'd all die regardless of anything else we tried to accomplish or how hard we fought.

Rikuto's chakra disappearing meant Yagura was free to harass all of us for whatever boneheaded reason he wanted. I could still feel *him* running around, and had no doubt that he'd be back to attack me. It'd make our mission harder to accomplish, but Rikuto's death didn't mean all of the rest of us would die. Losing Aiko *would*.

Fuck it. I crammed my feelings into a mental box and resolved to deal with them later, if Soragami didn't kill us all first. "Ebisu, let's go."

Ebisu didn't hesitate.

The two of us ran for the Chinatsugumi compound.

I'd have said we did it stealthily, but there were so many running and screaming people that the only thing that would have cut through the crowd would have been a new disaster of some kind. As it was, the low, deep rumbling of a *fucking earthquake* was enough of a distraction for everyone, even if Ebisu and I could get past most of the shaking by leaping from place to place.

Low to the ground, though. While we were fish swimming against a current of people, it'd have been suicide to deliberately travel too far above the crowd.

**Do you sense that?** Isobu asked as we went.

*Sense what?* I asked him, as Ebisu and I skittered over the roof of the Chinatsugumi's compound. The kids were in here, somewhere, but there was also a second storm of chakra that felt like…

Zakuro's chakra? Not just Zakuro's—Rikuto's and Akira's were there, too, melded together into some horrible mess that hit Shirozora's icy chakra like a hammer.

And then his chakra, whirling into the amalgamation of Akira, Rikuto, and Zakuro, vanished as a separate signature.
All that was left was the hybrid.

Nanami’s chakra flared, then guttered and died, just as Ebisu and I reached the inner garden.

The garden looked like a massive jutsu had sanded the entire place down to the volcanic bedrock. All of the red-leafed maples were torn apart and strewn everywhere, with gigantic iceberg-like frozen monuments replacing each one of the fish ponds. The ornamental stone and bridges had been shattered by ice or melted by magma, and the ground continued to shake what was left of the place down around our ears.

Nanami’s body was half-in, half out of one of the icebergs. Her human torso, arms, neck, and head were entirely covered in hoarfrost, and her lower half vanished into the remnants of the nearest koi pond. The lower half of her left arm had been snapped off, leaving frozen bone and flesh exposed to open air. Half of her face had been broken off.

What remained of her expression was frozen in something that looked like horrified betrayal.

"Kei," Ebisu said, and I turned to see what he was looking at.

Shirozora was lying on the edge of the steps into the compound, surrounded by a shell of glittering ice, but that wasn't all. His lower half was engulfed in lava that radiated raw heat and had ripped through his icy shield like nothing. He was still twitching, but his jaw worked futilely just above the gaping, bloody ruin of his throat.

He was dying. His chakra was already gone. What was still breathing was just meat.

My hands twitched—an aborted attempt to reach for him, cut short by Ebisu's blocking hand and a significant look at the pool of still-glowing lava that had effectively cut Shirozora in half. Not even into two pieces—that would have implied that there was more than one left.

"W-whoever did this is still here," Ebisu said, but it was like I was hearing his voice from underwater.

My eyes itched from Isobu's chakra crawling further into mine and from burning, angry tears. To Ebisu, I managed a strangled, "I know."

"Kei-san," Ebisu prompted, though his chakra retreated from mine and into his coils from fear. "Focus."

I stepped around Shirozora's corpse and headed into the building at a run, making a beeline toward the horrific hybrid of chakra that had come for the children. It almost drowned them out, but I could still feel at least three of them in the same area as that all-consuming mass, which threatened to swallow them whole.

Ebisu, perhaps realizing that I was going to kill whoever I ran into first, stayed behind me the whole way. The halls were silent and filled with lava-borne flame and smoke, left in little trails like blood down the wooden floors.

We reached the nursery—the shielded sanctum—in about four seconds.

All three of Misaki’s assistants were dead on the floor, throats or bellies cut and blood all over the room. And standing in their blood, trying to muffle the children’s screaming, were four Oto-nin. Roku's skinny arm was bent behind his back at an impossible angle and he was screaming, while Aiko clawed and bit at her attacker's hands. A third Oto-nin kicked Roku hard enough to silence him, then seemed to notice that Ebisu and I were standing there and alerted the last.
While three of the Oto-nin were nondescript, including the two whose uniforms glittered with frost and who were pinning Roku and Aiko to the floor, the fourth was not.

Holding a motionless Kaito off the ground by his throat, the fourth Oto-nin turned to face us.

Her hip-length ash-blond hair was familiar even when tied back by the Oto-nin headband, as were the curves and muscle I recognized behind the Otogakure uniform and distinct snake-print collar. Her smile was familiar, too, as was the patient gleam of blood-reddened teeth. She was pretty, but it was the kind of beauty that belonged to anglerfish in the dark. And under her skin, writhing like serpents trapped in a sack, were four stolen chakra signatures that clashed horribly to my senses.

She wasn't wearing shades this time. I had a full view of her silver eyes, which gleamed like steel.

I knew those eyes.

"Hello again," she said in a silky voice, her eyes flashing. Zakuro's chakra bore down on Ebisu and me, and I smashed the incoming genjutsu away from both of us before it could twist its way into our skulls. "How long has it been since Amegakure, sweetie? You know, I never forget a cute face."

Ebisu gasped, but he was alive and still had his senses.

"What's with that ugly face you're making?" the Oto-nin asked, her dark eyebrows knitting together in perfectly sculpted confusion. "Aren't you glad to see me again?"

"You." My voice was a hideous Tailed Beast growl, lower than Isobu had ever given me.

I knew that face. Those eyes.

Every story needs a villain.

Isobu connected the dots almost instantaneously, putting together what I'd told him once about the Chinatsugumi and my reaction to this—this scum of the earth inside of a second. You wrote this woman?

I didn't answer him. I focused on her, letting the burst of guilt carry me over a threshold and into a brand new frontier of defensive, protective anger. "Let him go."

"Oh, no, I couldn't." She smiled in a slow, self-satisfied way. "I think I'll keep him. He'll make a decent light snack, don't you think? Like his parents did."

I threw myself at her, Isobu's chakra cloak—three tails and all—springing to life all around me and surging, simultaneously, for the other three Oto-nin.

All three tails struck home, severing limbs and tearing chunks out of enemy flesh and spraying their blood across the walls. But the female Oto-nin slung Kaito over her shoulder and spat lava in my face. It caught on the V1 cloak and hardened instantly as Isobu's watery chakra nullified it through sheer force.

But she got away.

Ebisu managed to skid under my attack, snatching both Roku and Aiko out of the carnage.

I whirled on the spot, all three tails coiled up and behind me in the midst of the now-neutralized enemy, barely avoiding burning Ebisu and the other two kids.
"Kei-san," Ebisu shouted, and I paused.

"What?" I demanded, feeling Isobu's chakra wrap more snugly around me.

"I'll take Aiko and Roku from here. Get Kaito back," Ebisu ordered.

I looked briefly at him, both through normal sight and with my chakra sense. He was terrified and out of his depth, but he knew what the mission was and could stick to it. He knew he couldn't accomplish any rescue on his own—but he didn't have to.

Between one breath and the next, I summoned Tsuruya.

My huge crane summon took one look at the situation, and at me, and didn't even need to ask what I wanted of her. She curled her long wings over Ebisu's shoulders, in an instant shield.

There was a reason I had come with Ebisu for this part of the program. Now, he could get out.

I nodded one last time to him as Ebisu carried the kids out under Tsuruya's protection, then decided that the door would be too slow. I could feel the Oto kunoichi heading for the main gates, so why bother with turns? I was already going to be taking on S-class ninja, and if she was heading in that direction, then so be it. Maybe I'd be able to retrieve the other three children along the way.

I blasted the roof out of my way with a high-pressure burst of Isobu's chakra, mingled with water, and tore after them.

It took a few minutes for me to lock onto the disgusting swirl of the Oto kunoichi's chakra with any accuracy, but it wasn't for lack of trying or for lack of opportunity. Even after combining so many people's chakra into a single body, she was slow by my standards, and her chakra was so outrageously bloated that the task should have been like shooting a white whale on a black background.

No, the problem was all of the other ninja.

With a V1 cloak active, I was quite literally the brightest target on the entire battlefield, both to people with sensing specialties and to those who couldn't sense worth a shit but had functional eyes.

And since I was the only shinobi still openly active on my side of the conflict, in between all the Oto-nin and screaming merchants, I was suddenly the most popular target in town.

It might have slowed me down more than it did, giving the Oto kunoichi more of a lead, if not for how flexible Isobu and I had gotten about chakra usage. Whenever it felt like I was being swarmed, Isobu's chakra tails spun around me like three deadly orbiting bludgeons, independent of minor concerns like anatomical consistency, and smashed my opponents aside like nothing. He didn't do it constantly—it made him a bit dizzy—but it was enough to clear the chaff.

The Oto kunoichi hit a rooftop and slid down the opposite side.

I hit the roof with another pressurized burst of water, from the near side of the building, and punched the top third of it off. I was aiming a bit above where I expected the Oto kunoichi to be and hoping to hit her with wooden shrapnel, and followed in a straight line.

Immediately upon reaching the other side of the former storehouse, two different dragon-shaped blasts of water smashed me to the ground.

I wasn't hurt, but my momentum was stalled out until I could get my feet back under me. And then
the dragons swirled around for another pass, so I needed to figure that out \textit{immediately}.

And yet, I could still perceive my enemies perfectly well. Inside Isobu's chakra cloak, I prepared to take the hit from the Water Dragon Bullets—but also to take all of that water and murder everything I could get my hands on.

"I see your mission was a success, Akuro-san?" asked the first of my attackers, who was a pretty blonde woman that I recognized. It was that Kiri-nin from Amegakure.

And seriously, Akuro? \textit{Evil wolf}. Who the hell named their kid \textit{that}? What was this, Ame's greatest hits and misses? Because wow, if any of the Kiri-nin wanted to survive this, they had lost the chance by assisting this pedophilic hell-bitch.

"Oh, it was less of a success than I might have wanted," said the Oto kunoichi, who looked toward me and smirked. "But I suppose not every experience can be delicious."

The Kiri-nin had the decency to be slightly creeped out. The dark-haired teammate of hers stayed silent, but I had my eyes on the group's two kunoichi.

"Keep her pinned, Suiren-san," Akuro said sweetly, adjusting her grip on Kaito. "Orochimaru-sama will want to deal with this one personally."

"Yagura-sama has the right to the first attack," said the other Kiri-nin whose jutsu was trying to encircle me. It was the bodybuilder-looking ninja from Ame. Nice to know they were all on the same team, still.

There would be no loose ends.

"Do I look like I \textit{care}, Junsai-san?" Akuro mocked him. "Just keep her here."

Then she left, shooting along the roofs without being hindered by any Oto-nin. Unobstructed, \textit{defended} by these idiot Kiri-nin—

Yeah, no. Fuck that.

\textit{Isobu? I want to kill them all.}

\textit{Let's.}

We would have. I swear to the stars we would have just started killing and not stopped until the sky rained limbs and blood. Until Kaito was safe.

But I didn't get to act on that impulse, because a green blur shot out of nowhere and smashed into the dark-haired lead Kiri-nin with all the force of a raging bull. Given the war cry of "\textit{DYNAMIC ENTRY!}" there was no questioning who it was.

A second later, two of Genma's exploding senbon nicked Suiren's arms and a third impaled her shoulder, making her yelp as her arm went limp and numb.

The last Kiri-nin standing looked like he was going to turn his Water Dragon Bullet on Genma, so Gai whirled in and smashed \textit{him} into a building for good measure.

"Where is Ebisu?" I demanded of Genma, even as I used one of Isobu's tails to hit the remaining Water Dragon Bullet so hard that the attack imploded.
"He reached us with the kids and told us to back you up. Ningame's helping him hold things together. Same thing with your crane," Genma replied, nailing Suiren twice more with senbon and taking out her legs. "Kaito?"

"Not safe," I said, immediately turning my attention back to pursuing Akuro.

"We'll deal with these idiots. Catch up to them," Genma suggested, never taking his eyes off the Kiri-nin. "Now, Kei!"

I didn't need telling twice.

As soon as I got a clear shot at Akuro, which took another fifty meters of running so I could catch up to her, I turned up the dial on Isobu's power.

Each of his tails became ten-meter banners streaming out behind me—except for the fact that they only obeyed the laws of physics insomuch as I wanted them to, and that I didn't.

The tails wrapped together, compressing into a single tail with triple the length, and I slammed Isobu's chakra and mine into my legs for a quick burst of speed that gave me just enough reach.

Akuro turned around in time to see the triple-length tail whipping down toward her, as thick around as a pencil and with all the force Isobu and I could muster.

The massive chakra blade whipped straight through her as though she was made of paper, swinging onward to embed itself in the street with enough force to rock the ground as hard as any earthquake.

By the time it hit the rock, it was back to being a nasty bludgeon.

Akuro hit the ground, rolling with Kaito still over her shoulder.

Her left arm hit the ground several meters away.

I landed near it, scattering Isobu's chakra back into three defensive tails, and brought my foot down hard enough on Akuro's arm to make it squelch under my sandal.

Akuro stared at me, her silver eyes suddenly wide and not nearly so confident. Not without lackeys to slow me down. Her arm had already stopped bleeding, and I felt a bit of Akira's chakra boil off as she burned it to close the injury. Kaito rolled off her shoulder and to the ground, still out cold, but she made no move to pick him up again.

I wanted to kill her. And not in a kind way, like Genma and those head-splodey senbon of his. Not like Kakashi and his instantaneous heart attacks.

I wanted to rip her in two and leave her to bleed to death like she had done to Shiro. I wanted to smash her face off like she'd done to Nanami.

I wanted her to suffer.

"S-So, this is the power of a jinchūriki?" she asked, and her voice only shook a little. Point to her—though it wasn't going to matter.

I bared my teeth.

And then she smirked.

What?
"Well, well, well. Isn't that your cue?" Akuro said, and a torrent of water surged apparently out of nowhere to flood the—central square? We'd already come that far?

I had a sudden bad feeling about this.

**Ambush!** Isobu roared, just as a watery wheel seemed to spring into existence in front of us. After a fraction of a second, it resolved itself into a mirror, showing me—glowing, chakra-cloak-wearing me.

*Oh fuck.*

"Eat this," Yagura's voice barked, and suddenly my reflection was lunging out of the mirror right at me.

The reflection—an instant Water Clone—hit me with all the force I probably would have otherwise used on Yagura, bowling me over and sending me rolling into a storefront hard enough to bring it down around me.

My Water Clone tried to capitalize on knocking me over, but there was something to be said for adaptability under pressure. Instead of drawing my sword—which I had seen on the clone's belt, too—I decided to cut out the middleman.

As I leapt to my feet, I brought concentrated Tailed Beast chakra into my hands just as the clone lunged for me.

"Rasengan!" I snarled, and drove the swirling drill-ball of death right into my doppelganger's gut.

The clone exploded into a shower of cold water droplets. Once she was gone, I could see my opponents clearly again.

Yagura stood across the square, holding his camellia staff in both hands, with water pooling at his feet and a second water mirror already formed in front of him. His eyes told me he planned to stop me here, despite his harsh breathing. His stance and chakra spoke of grim determination to get what he thought his village deserved. What Konoha had "stolen" from them.

The fact that he was standing beside Akuro told me that I was going to rip him to shreds regardless of any tricks he thought he had.

"I'll be taking the Three-Tails back now," Yagura said in a low, fierce tone.

"No, you won't," I said, and Isobu's voice had never resonated quite so much with mine.

But I wasn't really watching Yagura, though I was sure Isobu was. My attention whipped to Kaito as soon as I felt his chakra shift.

Behind Yagura's water mirror, Akuro had reached Kaito again, pinning his unconscious body under her weight. She'd pulled the collar of his shirt away, and her head was bent over his neck. It took me a second to realize what was happening—until the moment Kaito's chakra started flowing into Akuro's body.

Yagura had to flip his mirror over and launch the Water Clone at me immediately, because otherwise I would have gotten past him and ripped Akuro's head off with my teeth.

As it was, the V1 clone of me was smashed apart under my hands inside of a second, because I had hit V2 and its blood-red, burning aura in between the clone being released and me crossing the
distance between us.

And then I bore down on Yagura, screaming with rage and hate and wanting nothing more than to kill everything I could get my hands on.

Yagura exploded into water under my weight, and I leapt at Akuro just in time to get a last burst of lava to the face before Rikuto’s chakra faded entirely from the horrible hybrid chakra she was using.

I shook it off, breaking obsidian apart in my hands and crushing it into so many glass shards.

Yagura shouted in alarm and encased me in a Water Prison before I could smash Akuro’s head off her shoulders. Snarling at the sudden stop, I began charging a miniature Tailed Beast Bomb to aim directly for Akuro’s smug face.

She smiled, and the water around me suddenly froze solid as Akuro yanked on Shirozora and Kaito’s combined chakra.

I drew Isobu’s chakra back into my body, tearing the tails free of their supposed icy prison, and reassembled them in an instant. The tails smashed part of my prison apart, and I brought the Tailed Beast Bomb right in front of me to take care of the rest.

I missed both enemies with the resulting barrage of ice chunks, but I was the only one who wasn’t blown back by the shockwave I created. Landing instead in a perfect animalistic crouch, I surveyed the battlefield for a split second.

The central square was in a hundred million pieces, with the force of the powerful techniques ripping mere buildings apart as though they were made of nothing but matchsticks. Yagura had been thrown to one side, with blood dripping down his face and blinding him. Akuro still had her remaining arm wrapped around Kaito’s neck, preventing a clean shot even at her head.

Then Yagura got up, wincing. "Not bad, kid."

I growled with Isobu’s help, sounding like an engine twice our size.

Yagura spun his staff in his hands, and I was momentarily torn. He couldn’t possibly threaten me more than he had—I was the one with Isobu. I had enough power to kill him four times over, even if he did his best not to take a decisive hit.

But at the same time, turning my back on a Mizukage candidate, even to kill Akuro, seemed like a deadly mistake if I’d ever heard one.

The indecision lasted only a moment. It was just long enough for Akuro to launch a barrage of ice needles at my back, which I idly batted aside with one of Isobu’s chakra tails.

Guess she wanted to be the first on the chopping block.

Akuro was on her knees, her hand still raised to form a single half-seal, and I saw Kaito still lying helpless behind her.

I Body Flickered into motion and reappeared right between her and Kaito.

And then Isobu made a noise I’d never heard from him before. It sounded a bit like whale song, and it hit my ears and rang across my nerves with enough force to momentarily stun me.

Akuro took the opportunity and blew me across the square with a burst of wind—half of the Ice
Release bloodline—and Yagura followed it up with a clone of me in V2 mode, wielding a Rasengan in her clawed hands.

I could see my hands as I drew my katana and whipped out the Mountain Cutter and carved my clone in two. The fact that I could see my hands at all—and not Isobu's chakra—was something that was not supposed to happen.

I'd dropped into V1 cloak again.

Isobu?

It's—he's in my head.

He's what?

Isobu just roared incoherently after that, and I managed to focus past the screeching to see Yagura across the square, holding his staff behind his back and holding his empty palm out toward me as though trying to stop traffic. His eyes were closed, and I could feel his chakra in the air like mist, touching Isobu's.

Akuro was hiding behind him, still dragging Kaito along behind her. Blood was running down onto his shirt.

Shit.

And yet there wasn't anything to do but keep fighting. I was not going to let Kaito die because of this—this monster, any more than I would let my kid brother take on Madara fucking Uchiha. It wasn't going to happen.

I gathered what remained of Isobu's chakra to restructure and reinforce the V1 cloak, since he was occupied, and threw myself into the fight.

Two Water Clones headed toward me at once, courtesy of Yagura, and another two uses of the Mountain Cutter got me past even their V1 cloaks inside of a second. A third clone blasted me back once I decided to block instead, but heaving her over my head meant that I didn't lose any more ground than I would have by just stopping to use iaijutsu.

But when I got close enough to finally hit Yagura directly, he hooked the end of his staff around my foot and yanked my feet out from under me before I could focus hard enough for a Water Dragon Bullet right to his face. And when he did it, my katana flew out of my hand.

And Akuro froze my legs to the ground.

It only lasted for a moment. It only needed to.

Akuro threw herself at me, teeth first, and I caught her on a forearm that suddenly didn't have Isobu's chakra protecting it anymore.

The pain from the bite wasn't something I'd faced before, but I could handle it. And the blood, and the knowledge that another human being had just bit me.

But Akuro's bite ripped right into my chakra coils and started sucking the life out of me.

This is how Rikuto died. This is how Zakuro, and Akira—this is how they all died! And with Isobu still screaming in my head, I only had a few seconds to get out of this situation or die just like them.
Yagura stood over us, even as I gathered what chakra I could and formed a half-Rasengan in my free hand. It wobbled in a way that the jutsu hadn't done since the day I learned it, because between the pain and the way my chakra was being drained away, I could barely concentrate.

Yagura raised his staff, preparing to bring it down on my skull.

NO.

YOU.

DON'T.

Isobu's chakra flooded my body and threw Yagura and Akuro away from me from the sheer force of the surge, bolstering my chakra back to something that almost, in bad lighting, looked like homeostasis. Sure, my chakra was gutted, but Isobu's was there and apparently cutting through mine had given him an opening to drown me in his power to regain control of himself, too.

Or something. I was too relieved to care.

I got to my feet.

"This is becoming annoying," Akuro said to Yagura, with her eyes narrowed. Like losing her left arm had just been an inconvenience.

I suddenly didn't want to know anything about Orochimaru's transplant research. At all.

Akuro picked Kaito up again, without wiping our blood from her mouth. Maybe because of the blisters forming there. "Yagura-san, you've wasted enough of my time. I have a job to do."

And she made to leave, while Yagura took up a blocking position.

No!

And then, out of the glorious (not) blue, "DYNAMIC ENTRY!" split the air for the second time in ten minutes.

And Yagura was smashed squarely into the remaining pavement.

Which left me free to do what I'd been waiting to do for entirely too long.

I made a single Dragon seal, and the Water Dragon Bullet shot out ahead of me to encircle Akuro just as the Kiri-nin had done to me not long before.

She tried to freeze it, but Isobu's chakra and mine countered what remained of Shirozora and Kaito's stolen chakra with contemptuous ease. The dragon kept going, its jaws wide in a terrible shrieking roar and its yellow eyes glowing in the late afternoon light.

Water, drawn by the jutsu, yanked on Akuro's ankles and hurled her into the air. Kaito tumbled out of her grip, only to be caught by Isobu's waiting tails and gently eased to the ground behind me.

But Akuro? Oh, no.

No. She wasn't getting off with mere motion sickness.

She was smashed face-first into the ground in front of me by the Water Dragon Bullet, and I walked up to her fallen form with Isobu's chakra buoying me and my anger forward. If I was just on my
own, I would have collapsed long ago.

But I wasn't.

So I was free to bring one chakra-enhanced foot down on Akuro's elbow hard enough to shatter the joint into bone shards.

Akuro screamed in helpless rage and pain, twisting in an effort to get a grip on me. At the same time, she burned with Akira's chakra, trying to heal herself rapidly enough to matter. Or maybe to recover enough to spit in my face.

But she couldn't. Even with all the healing power she'd stolen, it didn't make a difference. Her neck wouldn't turn far enough. Her arm was shattered. She couldn't get the leverage to even look up at me and face down death.

She didn't deserve that much.

Without waiting for her to recover, I brought Isobu's outer two tails down as hard as I could, and I didn't stop bashing away at her until she was a red stain on the ground.

With my grisly task finished, I turned back to Gai, who had started to painstakingly bandage Kaito's bite wound.

Yagura was still where Gai had left him, so I imagined that he was either unconscious or dead. Given the blood and the crater he was still lying in, I leaned more toward "dead," and didn't feel the slightest bit of guilt at the thought.

He'd brought the fight here. He couldn't blame us for finishing it.

"The Kiri-nin?" I asked Gai, as Isobu started pulling back on his chakra. I dropped out of V2, then out of V1 and back to the stage where only my eyes showed signs of jinchūriki power.

Fucking hell, I was exhausted. I could practically see the incoming adrenaline crash, and I would have welcomed it on almost any other day. But not today.

That was a theme for this entire fight, wasn't it?

On any other day, I wouldn't have brutally murdered someone who made me angry.

...On any other day, I wouldn't have done a lot of things.

"We killed them," Gai said, as he wound a bandage around Kaito's neck and shoulder, tying a gauze pad in place. "Genma and Ebisu have spread out a bit to look for survivors, but the fighting is mostly dying down. Did you find any of the other children?"

"...Not yet," I replied. My shoulders slumped. I'd been so focused on Kaito's immediate safety that I hadn't even thought about Kazuki, Miyu, or Tayuya. "Get Kaito to safety, and I'll be able to."

"Are you certain you don't need help, Keisuke-chan?" Gai asked.

It was a fair question. I was covered in blood, soaked to the skin otherwise, and was damn near shaking as I came down from both Isobu's chakra and an adrenaline rush.

Instead of actually answering, I asked, "Do you have any soldier pills?"

"I do not," Gai replied. He finally finished bandaging Kaito up, and put his hand against the side of
the boy's face. "His chakra levels are very low, Keisuke-chan."

I can fix that.

I knelt next to them and put my right hand over Kaito's clammy forehead and my left over his heart. Dragging up what remained of my chakra—or at least what was still entirely human and not blended with Isobu's—I sent just a trickle of it into Kaito's chakra coils. While I was doing that, I used the Mystic Palm to try and fix up a few of his injuries. Reduce the swelling on the sprained ankle, on the concussion, on his bite wound...

It wouldn't be enough to get him conscious again. But I'd feel somewhat better letting him go with Gai.

I was going to stay and, with everything I had left, I was going to clear out the Oto-nin if it was the last thing I did.

With all the civilians gone, it wouldn't be like I would have any reason to hold back.

I pulled my hands back before I could give Kaito too much of my chakra. "It should be safe to carry him now, Gai. Get him out of here."

Gai gave me a long, cautious look. "I will bring Kaito-kun to Tsuruya-san and Ningame, but I will be back for you, Keisuke-chan. That's a promise!"

I nodded wearily, as my eyelids started to droop. As long as he got Kaito out.

Gai picked Kaito up properly and gave me one last, reassuring look. Then he ran, taking Kaito away from the battlefield.

I looked around what remained of Sorayama. In the shadow of Soragami, the former merchant stronghold burned as bright as a bonfire. The merchants were all either gone or dead, Chinatsugumi included. Half the buildings were gone. The streets were torn up from multiple massive jutsu, and I was hardly the only one left who could cause immense destruction.

I glanced at Yagura's mangled body, still unmoving on the pavement. Gai had broken his back, to say the least of his injuries. Human spines weren't supposed to bend that way.

Isobu, do you think we can handle the rest of them?

We can, Isobu said, surveying the world through my chakra sense. Together, we could sense about a hundred or so remaining chakra signatures.

I looked out and across the village. There were still pockets of Oto-nin signatures here and there, looting or scavenging. Given Gai's speed, he and Kaito were already well out of danger.

Let's kill them all.

And we would have. There were only so many ways a weaker, unprepared opponent could fight a jinchūriki—even an exhausted one. And if it meant that no Oto-nin would ever threaten my friends again, I was more than willing to kill everyone I could get my hands on, no matter what it would cost me.

Or so I thought.

At that exact moment, I heard soft laughter.
There was something inherently, viscerally disturbing about hearing human voices where there shouldn't have been any. Knowing that there was no one around, and yet the sound continued, sent a chill down my spine that Isobu couldn't do anything to help me with.

There were no chakra signatures in the immediate area—not even an AOE genjutsu—and nothing nearby could have just coincidentally produced that noise.

"I'm beginning to like this village," murmured a sibilant voice. There was a quiet overemphasis on the "s" consonant, barely detectable. Like an accent the speaker had mostly been trained out of, or maybe made out of habit.

I still couldn't determine which direction it was coming from. I couldn't feel the chakra signature that should have told me where he was.

With the hairs on the back of my neck standing up straight, I backed up a step.

Shit.

"As soon as its pest problem is taken care of," the voice went on, "I think I'll make it mine."

Why did I get the impression that I had hundreds of eyes on me at once? It didn't seem possible...

"Oh, Yagura," the voice went on in an amused tone. "All of that effort, wasted by your weakness."

I Body Flickered away from Yagura's downed body, dashing across the ruined town square and sliding to a stop in front of what used to be a sweets shop.

Where I had just been, looking down at Yagura's broken body, stood a tall, dark-haired person.

The hairs on my arms started to stand up, too.

I'd last seen this person in person six years ago. Long, dark hair so straight it was almost limp, over a chalk-white face. He had deep-set serpentine eyes, and prominent purple markings around them as though to emphasize his alien, unknowable nature, and his deep detachment from humanity.

Cheekbones sharp enough to cut.

And a chakra that seeped out into the air with the steady, icy pervasiveness of his chakra—no, his use of killing intent.

I backed off another step, and another.

Orochimaru was someone I had hoped never to run into. Part of my brain had realized that of course he would be backing up his men if he was devoting this many of them to a single offensive, but the rest of me had refused to think about it.

I could face Yagura. I had. I'd fought Akuro, too, and I hadn't started shaking like this except from anger.

But Orochimaru?

No.

I'd decided years ago that I would run.

Being a jinchuriki barely mattered in the face of someone who had been in Akatsuki. Otherwise known as the organization that hunted Tailed Beasts. And when he'd backstabbed a few idiots, he
hadn't been immediately splattered across the vicinity—he'd gotten away.

It wasn't a question of power. Orochimaru was plainly outclassed by half-a-dozen other powerful shinobi, some of whom I had even befriended. But aside from Nagato, who hadn't figured out how many different powers he could use, Orochimaru was the single least predictable opponent on the planet. Sensei preferred variations on the same five tricks, and although all of them were lethal, it didn't touch how many different ways Orochimaru could ruin someone's life.

I could fight him and lose.

And worse yet, there was a chance he wouldn't kill me.

"Going somewhere, Keisuke-kun?" Orochimaru asked. "I must say, I'm disappointed."

And he knew my name.

Shit.

Orochimaru smiled, his earrings swaying as he stepped forward and over the wreck that used to be Yagura. "After all, Konoha-nin put so much importance on teamwork, don't they?"

My confusion must have shown on my face, past my rattled nerves. My team had already cleared out. They were safe.

"Oh, I suppose you can't sense him at all." Orochimaru raised two fingers in a signal. "Let's try this again."

The ground rumbled again. Over the remaining roofs of the nearby buildings, I could see something—shit.

Those were scales. Six massive brown coils became visible over the roofs, and the scales I could see were as big as my head. And their chakra, no longer hidden by the serpents' suppression skills, was massive. At the same time, the shape didn't make sense for me for a long moment.

What kind of snake had a forked spine?

I quickly got an answer.

The brown serpent's heads—plural—rose over the buildings, and as it slithered over to Orochimaru's side, its bulk flattened a strip four shops wide along the way.

One of its necks was bent in the middle, curling around something…

I stopped breathing as the second head dropped its burden to the ground.

Genma's body was entirely still on the ground, with blood pooling underneath him. His left arm had an extra two bends in it, and I could hear his faint, wheezing breath even from fifteen meters away. His chakra flickered weakly, unresponsive even to what would have been overwhelming pain.

"Dear Keisuke-kun." Orochimaru tilted his head to one side, smiling faintly. "Are you still going to run?"

No.

I encouraged Isobu's chakra as it flooded my body, reinforcing my tired muscles and filling me with energy that burned. It surged through me, making my injuries hiss with something like steam as they
filled in—patchily, and unevenly, but regrew tissue nonetheless. My skin started to itch as the red chakra seeped outward from my coils and across me, engulfing me in the second stage of a Tailed Beast transformation.

No, I wouldn't leave Genma.

I lifted my head, opened my glowing, jagged mouth, and bellowed out a roar of challenge. If Orochimaru and his snake focused on me, they wouldn't have time to hit Genma—I'd shred them both if they did.

I would never leave anyone behind again.

"Excellent," Orochimaru said, nearly inaudible in the windstorm Isobu's energy and mine had combined to make. Orochimaru slid into a combat stance, but it was loose and unconcerned. He was grinning. "Let's see what you can do, Keisuke-kun."

"Do not forget about us, Keisuke-chan!" Gai's voice cut across the battlefield almost as clearly as my roar.

I stopped short, looking to either side of me.

Ebisu and Gai landed from their long run, just off to my left and right. I felt both of them tense up upon seeing their teammate lying prone on the ground, but neither of them balked.

"We're with you," Ebisu said, his voice trembling just slightly. His eyes were trained on his teammate, but it would be idiocy to take his eyes entirely off of Orochimaru for too long. "We'll get Genma out of here."

"All of us will come home, Keisuke-chan," Gai said, and he got into the starting stance of the Strong Fist style. He was close enough to touch me if he wanted to, but showed good judgment and didn't so much as offer me a fist-bump.

I would remember this. And I would protect them, too. "**Thank you.**"

Orochimaru gave the three of us a long look, then reached up for his snake. It lowered its second head, baring its long curved fangs.

"Tsuchihebi, split," Orochimaru commanded.

Above Yagura and Genma's prone bodies, the snake's two heads heaved themselves in different directions. With a hideous tearing noise, the snake split into two snakes in a way that would have just been impossible for any ordinary serpent, and both resulting snakes bore down on us as though they hadn't just ripped themselves in half lengthwise.

**We're going to need more help.** In my mindscape, Isobu lifted his spiked head and tails, his single eye glowing like a beacon. **If you want to get out of here without anyone else dying.**

I didn't have time to ask him what he meant.

I drew Isobu's chakra up and solidified three blades along his tails in addition to my katana.

And I threw myself into the fray.
Memory: Battle of Orochi

Chapter Summary

Plot: Split-screen mode!

Chapter Notes

This chapter is literally named after the battle theme for Orochi in the game Okami.

There were few people more terrifying than Orochimaru.

Sensei might have had the “flee-on-sight” order from Iwagakure, but that was due to sheer kill-count. In terms of the actual number of ways he could destroy you, Orochimaru had Sensei beat.

And we—Ebisu, Gai, Isobu, and I—were going to fight him anyway, because it wasn’t in our nature to turn and run when our friend was dying at his feet. Sure, all of us could feel Orochimaru’s killing intent pressing down on us, and we were all quaking in our figurative boots.

...But it would be a cold day in hell the day that we ran from this fight.

**We just need to hold on until help arrives, Isobu said. Kurama heard me.**

I didn’t breathe a sigh of relief. A lot of horrible things could happen before any backup arrived.

But it took a bit of pressure off, and I could focus on the attack.

I reached Orochimaru first, pivoting on my lead foot as soon as it touched the ground and launching three near-simultaneous slashes at him with Isobu’s blade-tipped chakra tails.

And the first snake’s head got in my way, taking the brunt of the blows with its thick scales. It tried to knock me backward, away from Orochimaru to give him a bit of space for a jutsu, but I dug my heels and my blades in and hung on. The sudden halt to its momentum made the entire serpent jerk to a stop, sending ripples along its body and flattening everything underneath it for the second time.

The second snake tried to get around me, to Ebisu and Gai.

*No!*

**Let me try.**

Isobu’s chakra surged out of my back, just like we’d practiced. As the second snake tried to bear down on Ebisu and Gai, the chakra hit the air so hard that there was a thunderclap, and my knees almost buckled under the sudden, unaccustomed weight of this technique.

But I kept standing, even as Isobu’s full-sized, gray-green shell took the entire weight of the brown snake summon and impaled it four times in return. It floated in midair over my entire team, slightly
translucent and dome-like in structure, and all of us could see snake blood dripping down the side.

Just like that, I had both summons occupied. One, because its ribs would be exposed to the open air if it made any stupid decisions, and the other because I had three forty-centimeter blades embedded in its face and the edge of the shell prevented it from lifting its head.

Gai and Ebisu took the opportunity to maneuver out of danger.

Good plan, because I wasn’t going to be able to manage the projection for long.

With the few seconds I had left, I crumpled the edges of Isobu’s shell for their chakra and shoved the resulting excess into the top surface.

The spikes on top of the shell quadrupled in size, and coincidentally quadrupled the size of the wounds in the impaled snake.

The snake exploded into smoke at the exact moment that Isobu’s shell dissolved away in midair.

“I see you’ve learned a few new tricks since your fight with Minato-kun,” Orochimaru said, while his second snake summon continued to try and pull its head away from me to strike. As it was, it couldn’t even open its mouth.

“Where are the children?” I asked him, Isobu’s voice overlaying mine.

“Oh, the children…” Orochimaru smiled. “I could ask you the same thing, Keisuke-kun. You ran off with my prizes.”

“Humans aren’t toys,” I snapped. Behind the featureless, glowing pits that the V2 cloak gave me instead of eyes, my gaze flickered to Genma for just a moment. I needed to get him away from there.

“Ironic, coming from you,” Orochimaru countered. He held his hands out mockingly. “A jinchūriki defending the rights of humans to exist, after what they did to make you? Amusing. But that soft heart will be the end of you today.”

I bared my chakra-formed fangs. “Come at me and put that theory to the test.”

Orochimaru did so.

With all three of Isobu’s tails, I threw the snake summon back over the row of buildings to meet Orochimaru’s charge cleanly. Hopefully, I would buy Gai and Ebisu enough time to get Genma out.

Orochimaru actually stopped short, whipping one arm out and across his body as though he was making a knife strike of some kind—and then it was raining snakes, because of course he summoned the fucking things from up his sleeves.

Each snake opened its little jaws and coughed up a partial replica of the Sword of Kusanagi, amounting to a storm of dragon-slaying blades I didn’t have any time for.

Water Release: Water Trumpet.

A sudden blast of water, badly overclocked by the strength of the chakra behind it, ripped free from my mouth and blasted all of the snakes aside or back toward their master. A second dose of Tailed Beast chakra, as a follow-up that looked more like a downsized Hyper Beam than anything, atomized the stunned serpents immediately.
Orochimaru looked at the results of my attack and, grabbing Genma off the ground by his flak jacket, immediately fled the village.

I bellowed in rage and followed.

Outside of the village walls, I could see Oto forces arrayed in loose formations, but all but two shinobi scattered for the hills as soon as I touched the ground again.

Those two, in full Oto uniform, caught Genma when Orochimaru threw him at them. I heard the faintest rasp of pain from Genma when he was dropped unceremoniously to the ground, and all thoughts flew out of my head.

I didn’t need hand seals for the Body Flicker, and what speed was granted by the V2 form should have given me the edge over Orochimaru, no matter how many jutsu he could use. I dug my claw-tipped feet into the ground, about to start removing faces.

And then the ground exploded underneath my feet.

I wasn’t thrown back, because the explosion was mostly just heat and flash, but the dust that was dislodged by the explosion blocked my sight for just a moment.

I felt Orochimaru’s chakra split in two.

One half went for me, and the air burned as an Uchiha-caliber fireball bore down on me with all of the force of a natural disaster.

I was a walking natural disaster. And I wasn’t afraid of fire.

Pulled out of the ground and the river and the now far-off hot springs, water swirled up around me like the jaws of a mythical monster. The vortex swirled, reached up—and then whipped into a waterspout that engulfed the fireball with a vengeance that also contained the cloud of steam.

The resulting explosion of steam knocked nearly everyone flat to the ground.

And in that cover, two snakes sprang from the ground and coiled around my legs. I lashed out, instantly, but a third snake—easily twice the size of either of the snakes that had done a reverse-hydra in the village—surged up from the ground underneath me and its sheer momentum shunted me through the air and into a nearby hillside.

I hit the ground under the snake’s weight, swearing under my breath because even jinchūriki bullshit couldn’t entirely ignore physics.

But once I had leverage, I cheated outright and brought a Tailed Beast Rasengan into existence right in front of my glowing mouth, and popped it like a water balloon.

The resulting explosion smashed everything within ten meters straight up. While the snake reeled like it had been sucker-punched by a giant, I shot out from under it and into open ground.

It let me see where the snake had come from, so I could target it.

Orochimaru was on the ground with his hands still on a summoning seal, while a second Orochimaru…

Somehow, one of the Oto-nin had dragged Yagura’s broken body over to the Otogakure line. One of the Oto-nin from before had apparently stomped on Yagura’s neck, killing him instantly, but the
other one was holding onto a massive, complex-looking scroll. I caught the moment when the first one smeared Yagura’s blood across the scroll.

Orochimaru stood next to them, next to Genma, and my heart almost stopped when I realized what was about to happen. When he looked directly at me and smiled.

No.

I hadn’t seen Konoha’s forbidden jutsu scroll in a very long time, mostly because I wasn’t supposed to have access to it in the first place. But Sensei had let me see it anyway, because there were some things than the Hokage’s unofficial sounding board needed to know. Even if I hadn’t seen that scroll, I could still recognize this technique.

There was no mistaking the Impure World Reincarnation technique for anything else.

Orochimaru was going to burn Genma’s life for Yagura’s. And I was too far out of position to stop him.

I immediately spat a hastily-assembled Water Dragon Bullet at the Orochimaru closer to me, trying to get him away and to get enough space to avoid the snake, which had recovered from the shockwave and slithered between me and Genma.

Mountain Cutter!

Isobu’s three blades didn’t do the job as well as my katana would have, but the tails made for easy reach and I needed to cut my way past a lot of snake.

And Orochimaru met me going the other way with Wind Release: Overpressure.

It took me too long to get out of it. Too long to get back to the ground—ducking flying snake pieces all the way down—and mount a real charge.

I tried anyway.

Smashing everything aside with the sheer force of the Isobu-given chakra, I hit the ground more than ten seconds later. I dug into the dirt, sliding onto all fours, and even with the Body Flicker I would have been too late.

“LEAF WHIRLWIND!” And Gai—wonderful, green Gai—popped out of abso-fucking-lutely nowhere and kicked three men in the head at once. One of them was Orochimaru, and he immediately puffed away into a bit of smoke and a lot of snakes. The other two were his men, who went down with compound skull fractures.

On occasion, people forgot that Gai had become a jōnin at fourteen entirely on his own merits. I’d forgotten.

I’d forgotten that when the occasion called for it, Gai could effectively turn invisible. It wasn’t something he did often, and a casual observer would never know that the Green Beast of Konoha had a solid three in genjutsu skills. In a crowded and over-loud battlefield like this one, that was more than enough to get where he was going and wreck people’s faces.

Gai, glowing with a greenish aura that was probably half sweat and his skin nearly beet-red, grabbed Genma and almost immediately vanished through sheer speed.

As soon as Gai got Genma clear, I obliterated the entire burgeoning ritual—and scoured a two-
hundred-meter wide strip of land of anything resembling topsoil—with the Great Waterfall technique.

Maybe I killed a few Oto-nin in the deal, too. Wasn’t sure.

Distantly, I could feel Gai rejoin Ebisu with Genma along for the ride, and I had to assume that he could get taken care of as long as he was out of the fight.

As for me…well.

Orochimaru didn’t look happy.

I bared my monstrous, Isobu-derived teeth. Sure, he couldn’t tell where my teeth even were behind the V2 cloak, but it was the thought that counted.

“This is no longer entertaining,” Orochimaru said, and his voice was perfectly audible despite the distance between us. He rolled up his sleeve, displaying the massive bar tattoos that held his edition of a summon contract.

Shit.

“Let’s see how you deal with Manda.”

There was a noise like a volcanic rumble, low and deep, and the cloud of smoke was something I would have expected from a wildfire. The ground buckled when the creature behind the smoke finally touched down, and I was bounced hard enough to fly some fifteen meters backward—and I leapt another fifty once I saw the smoke start to shift.

Manda’s massive, purple, horned head hit the ground like a giant’s fist, where I’d just been.

“You dare summon me now, Orochimaru?” Manda hissed as his head pulled back like a cobra’s. He didn’t have the hood, but I could easily see it as a threat display. “After you didn’t give me my human sacrifices last time?”

While Manda and Orochimaru argued—and Orochimaru seemed to be losing—I weighed my options with Isobu.

My best idea here is just to get eaten and then explode him from inside with a full transformation, I admitted.

Not a bad plan, Isobu commented, seeming to frown. After all of this, you’re back down to thirty seconds at full strength. And I wouldn’t bet on that right now.

I grimaced under the Tailed Beast cloak. Do we have any idea it will take for help to finally show up?

…We just have to hold out for as long as he can.

I started charging a variant on the Tailed Beast Bomb. Because, bluntly, they were giving me an opening.

Now, I fully expected to have to take on Manda alone. He had the approximate mass of a skyscraper, which put him well out of the literal and figurative weight class of any ordinary opponent. I was exhausted, but I was still the S-class shinobi. I’d faced Gamabunta—and lost—but this wasn’t a sparring match.
It was me or the snakes, and I just wanted to buy time.

That was when Gai reappeared.

And Gai, using what felt like the First through Sixth Gates, smashed into Manda with exactly as much force as his future self would have someday done against a Kisame clone. A furious flurry of punches, each powered by the Gates, hit Manda square on the nose hard enough to make the massive snake’s head jerk straight downward from the momentum alone.

I’d never seen the Morning Peacock in person before.

_The problem_, I thought as I surged into motion, _is that Manda’s so damned big that Gai isn’t ever going to get to do that again_. I automatically “swallowed” the Tailed Beast Bomb’s densest form, feeling fire build in my throat and belly as the urge to let loose got stronger and stronger. But I didn’t have time to charge it anymore.

_Must go faster._

Manda had flinched, but only because an Eight Gates user could hit with tremendous force. But Manda wasn’t down, and the Gates’ drawbacks didn’t leave much room for the user to get away from opponents who survived mostly intact.

I thought of Gaara’s fight against Lee and went even faster.

I hit Manda square in the nose, where Gai had just fallen away, and it took me a moment to realize that Orochimaru wasn’t up there anymore. While Manda’s head whipped backward and the snake screamed in fury, I clung to his scales for a second with my V2-given claws and looked down.

Gai was on the ground, shaking a bit from fatigue, and Orochimaru was right behind him.

The air felt like a storm.

There was lightning in the air.

“**Gai**!” I shouted, trying to get his attention. Manda was coming back to life underneath my feet, and he bucked hard enough to send me flying straight up.

The last thing I saw, before Manda swallowed me whole, was a massive thunderbolt flash on the ground.

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**Kakashi**

If there’s anything that proves that the Hokage isn’t really listening to me, it’s the fact that I was sent across the country to assassinate one merchant on another merchant’s payroll, while a third merchant sat back and waited for his rivals to be implicated in the death. _I hate_ being told to set someone up to take a fall, no matter where it is, because it inevitably means that the mission involves sending someone a “message.”

Heart attacks are easier to manage. The horse’s head and three-day terror campaign was just excessive.

But the mission is over, and I’m finally on my way home.

Things were a mess when I left. The timing for this assassination request couldn’t have been worse,
and yet the timeframe had been narrow enough that only my team could have possibly handled it. If
the original messenger had been any faster, I might have been able to dump the assignment on a
different assassination team.

But it hadn’t, and that puts me way out in the middle of the countryside when I know I’m needed
most at home.

Kei isn’t at her best. At all.

I don’t have the slightest clue how to fix it. I don’t even think it can be fixed. But whatever state
she’s in, she needs as many people around her as possible. A year out of the village did nothing but
wear her down to the bone, and I don’t think she was even slightly better by the time I left. I don’t
think she noticed me leaving.

But now my team and I are on our way home, and hopefully Kei’s road to recovery is in front of us,
too.

I stop short just as we crest a tree-lined hilltop, landing on a branch and holding up my hand for the
rest of the team to slow to a stop if possible.

Crow doesn’t crash into Rat this time, at least.

Falcon, a little ahead of me, hears the rest of us slow down and stops on a branch about five meters
above and to the left, looking back at me. His black captain’s cloak and pack stand out against the
sunset, telling me that he’s dropped his low-level camouflage genjutsu as well.

Horse lands on the ground, a little below me, and I lift my head to try and pick up the same scent as
before.

The wind is carrying the smell of thick, acrid smoke toward us.

“What is it?” Horse asks, looking up at me.

I inhale again, deeper.

Smoke, yes, but there’s also blood and the smell of cooking meat. If I concentrate, I can pick up a
few foreign scents, but it’s hard to be certain of anything else from so far off. The scent still smells
like it’s dissipated a fair bit.

I shake my head rapidly, trying to clear it.

“Someone attacked one of our villages,” I tell Falcon, and pause for a moment. “The only place
around here is Sorayama.”

All of us take a moment to contemplate that. Falcon’s probably thinking of some kind of adaptive
attack strategy we can use once we get close enough to see any of the combatants. Horse is already
deciding on triage, though we won’t be able to get everything sorted out until we get there. I don’t
have any idea what Crow and Rat are thinking.

Mostly, I want to know why I can almost smell something familiar in all that smoke. I can’t put my
finger on it yet, though.

“Move out,” Falcon says, automatically taking point.

At full speed, kilometers disappear under our feet easily. Our mission wasn’t difficult, just tedious, so
we all have most of our chakra. We should be ready for anything.

We’re within ten kilometers when we feel it.

Horse jerks to a stop, catching herself on a branch when the wave of Tailed Beast chakra hits us. Rat actually does crash, because Crow smacked into him and threw him off the branch, and Falcon notably hesitates to cross the distance between his tree and the next.

Falcon signals for me to join him on point, and I do. My mind’s already whirling.

“What’s she doing out here?” Falcon asks me.

I have no idea. “I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense.” Why would Sensei put Kei on a mission to Sorayama? She was barely moving the last time I saw her. There’s no way she could be mission-ready now.

I’ve seen other breakdowns at other times, sometimes even in the field. Kei’s had less than a week to recover. ANBU agents don’t come back into the fold for a month at a minimum after an incident like Kei’s, if not longer. And even then, a lot of us didn’t come back after psychological leave.

And now she’s using the Three-Tails’s chakra out in the field again.

I have a very bad feeling about this.

“Wolf, don’t do anything stupid,” Falcon warns me.

I turn my head so I can glare at him with Obito’s eye. I am this close to snapping at him, to saying that I don’t point out obvious things like that whenever Genma goes off on risky missions. And besides that, I’m within a month of getting my own captain’s cloak. I don’t need to be reminded to maintain objectivity.

But I don’t put any of it into words.

Falcon looks away first.

“Permission to scout ahead?” I ask him instead. My Arc Jump is a lot more reliable than it used to be, and I can use it almost fifteen times in a row without feeling too much strain—or using Obito’s eye for anything except sighting my destination.

Falcon struggles for a moment.

I’m not really a part of his team. I’ve been on solo and mixed team assignments, but ultimately this is an internship of sorts. And effectively, I’m his equal. He doesn’t need to look after me the same way he does the rest of his team—particularly Crow.

“Permission granted,” Falcon says finally. He gestures to the rest of his team, who form up closer to him. “We’ll arrive in a few minutes.”

“I’ll be a few minutes ahead of you, then,” I respond, and open Obito’s eye again.

That tree looks promising, even if it is a kilometer away. Target sighted.

I complete the hand seals for the Arc Jump and fly.

Boom.
I’m in the tree. Next one…

*Boom.*

I can see Sorayama on top of the hill. It’s…it’s definitely on fire. I swallow hard and then direct my attention toward the shattered roof of the Chinatsugumi compound. I need to aim somewhere intact…

*Boom.*

And I can see the damage that’s been done to this place.

Looking down from the roof, I can see eight corpses immediately. Three of them are in Otogakure uniforms, which explains who was attacking. Three more are the Chinatsugumi’s near-interchangeable aides, and the last two…died horribly.

Shirozora’s been burned to death by lava, and Nanami’s in a hundred shattered pieces on the ground. In the second case, the only reason I can even tell who she is…it’s just the scent of her blood that’s left as she thaws.

And Kei’s definitely been here. Her scent is thick on the ground—I must have missed her by less than ten minutes.

Sniffing around a bit more, I also identify a fourth Oto-nin and Gai’s other genin teammate, Ebisu. *What’s he doing here?* I can’t think of any reason a team would require both Ebisu and Kei—their specializations are too different. Not to mention that he’s a bit too old for escort missions around here.

…but then, if he wasn’t here, there might have been a chance that Kei wouldn’t have walked out of here.

The Tailed Beast chakra reeks of a last stand. I can’t say for sure what Kei’s mindset is like now, but I’m also not looking forward to finding out.

I need to get to her.

I don’t use the Arc Jump again while in the village, not when I need to devote so much time to just investigating my surroundings as fast as I can.

This entire place looks like a battlefield. I can smell snake, thick on the ground and absolutely putrid. I also find the corpses of some Kirigakure shinobi, their scents nearly masked by the snakes—and while there, I pick up Gai and Genma’s scents, too. Not their blood, granted, but I can definitely smell them and their scents aren’t old.

*Shit.*

Falcon is going to have a heart attack.

And that’s when I start to hear the real problem, making massive amounts of noise outside the village. I head to a roof to get a better vantage point, and see *Manda*’s big purple head rising over the edges of the village walls.

I’ve never seen that thing in person before, but it’s enough for me to confirm that not only *was* Orochimaru in the area, he *still is*. I recognize the Snake boss summon from Jiraiya-sama’s descriptions of him, and he’s every bit as big and ugly as I remember.
And Kei’s chakra is right. There.

I watch the battle for a moment, as Manda gets into some kind of argument with a cream-colored speck I can hardly see, and I see a green speck hit him in the nose. Gai?

Then a red one. Kei.

I Arc Jump straight to the village walls, suppressing my chakra for this approach until I can determine where would be best to jump in.

Only I can’t, because I can see Orochimaru charging a Lightning jutsu and aiming at Gai’s back and Kei’s in the air and—and fuck everything.

I push myself through the Arc Jump again, and immediately take the excess energy from the jutsu and channel it into the Chidori—right as the Lightning jutsu closes the distance toward Gai, and Kei vanishes into Manda’s gullet.

Orochimaru’s Lightning jutsu, whatever it is, hits me squarely in my left arm and arcs into me like a real bolt of lightning.

For a second, it’s like I’m on fire. Every nerve in my left arm burns—it’s not the one that’s supposed to be channeling the force of the Chidori, but now it is. I have two of them, and I’m not—it’s not supposed to be nearly this—

Screw this.

I drag Orochimaru’s chakra up my left shoulder, coaxing it because Lightning calls to Lightning entirely differently than Water or Wind do. The bolt surges up my arm, is diverted down through my stomach instead of over my heart, and up and out toward my right hand.

Where the Chidori, already charged, is abruptly overcharged and I need to do something with it before my hand is burned off.

I aim at Orochimaru’s face. “Raikiri”

The resulting bolt looks almost like a wolf’s head, ripping its way out of my grip like it’s alive, and it strikes Orochimaru dead-center as he’s staring at me in abrupt shock. He’s blown off his feet and possibly mangled by the strike, which carries the Chidori’s charge as well as whatever he put into his attempt to kill Gai.

For a frozen second or two, no one says or does anything.

Then, from behind me, I hear Gai say, “Kakashi?” in a tone of total shock.

I lower my smoking hand, which is already showing signs that it’s going to scar, and turn my head to nod at him. We have that much time.

And just then, Manda starts making choking noises. I knew it.

The side of the titanic snake’s neck starts looking like he swallowed a power pole. And then, as though by some miracle, a pair of blades—curved and jagged, looking like stone—rip their way out of the side of his throat at two different angles. After a moment more, the blades work like scissors to pry his flesh apart.

Manda looks like he’d scream if he could make his voice work.
Then, with a loud *snip*, the blades close together and retract.

And a V2 cloak jinchūriki Kei pries herself out of the opening like some kind of oversized maggot. Her horned head and spiky shoulders appear first, followed by the tails and her legs, and then she’s out and dropping to the ground next to the fifteen-meter scorch mark Orochimaru left on his way out.

“**Kakashi?**” Kei’s voice is horribly distorted, but I can still hear her surprise and exhaustion through the filter of the Three-Tails’s chakra. “**How did you get here?**”

“I was in the area,” I tell her. I can’t read her mood under the chakra cloak. “What do you need me to do?”

Kei blinks. Or at least the flashlight-like eyes visible in the V2 cloak narrow and widen again. “**Is Sensei here?**”

What? “No. Your chakra though—I wouldn’t have known you were here if not for that,” I try to explain, and start looking around.

“**Shit.**” Kei shakes her spiky head and doesn’t elaborate. Instead, she says, “**Genma’s been badly hurt. Ebisu’s looking after him now, but he needs a hospital. And so does Gai.**”

Falcon is *really* going to have a heart attack. Two heart attacks. At once.

“I am fine, Keisuke-chan!” Gai protests.

“**Can you even use any jutsu?**” Kei asks him harshly, and he falls silent. “**Thought so. Gai, none of Team Chōza has to die here. Including you. We just need to be patient.**”

“Patient for what?” I ask, as Kei turns to regard Orochimaru and Manda.

As we watch, Orochimaru’s husk opens its jaws and spits out a brand new copy of him. At the same time, Manda starts to shed his massive purple skin.

“**Isobu sent a warning to Kurama. Hopefully, we should have backup incoming.**” Kei sighs and drops into a kenjutsu ready stance. As I watch, her hands start to extrude more of the pink coral that has accumulated on her tails, and what I’ve seen stuck on the Hokage’s arms before. “**But in the meantime, we keep fighting.**”

“Gai,” I say, “please get to your teammates.”

“Kakashi…”

“Don’t waste your life after I just saved it!” I snap, without turning to face him. I can’t concentrate on this battle if Gai is still in danger. And unlike Kei and me, he’d last four seconds.

I’d give us, together, about ten minutes.

But with Manda already back to fighting strength and Orochimaru flicking bits of his old body off of his fingernails, I can’t help but think that holding out is all we’re going to be able to do.

“**Kakashi,**” Kei says, in a much quieter voice than before. Her breathing is heavier, louder than I expect. “**If this goes bad, do your best to get them out of here.**”

I pause. “Kei?”
“Gai’s your friend. Genma has someone waiting for him. Ebisu has ambition,” Kei says with a soft sigh that sounds strange with the Tailed Beast overtones. “I can do this alone.”

*Idiot,* I think with a mix of fondness and absolute exasperation. This is not remotely the time for that. *I’d never leave you behind.* “What’s that phrase again…two heads are better than one? I think we have that covered.”

“In more than one sense,” Kei mutters.

And then Orochimaru and Manda are ready to go, and there’s no more time to talk.

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**Raidō**

Clearing out hostiles around Sorayama’s northern edge takes time that I’m not sure anyone still has, but it has to be done.

After killing every Oto-nin around the refugee column and dropping Crow off to help support the efforts of two summon animals, the only option we have is to strike at the source of the attack on Sorayama and cut its head off.

The problem, when Manda’s giant head rises over the village, is that I know my team is horribly outmatched.

But we’re ANBU. And Orochimaru is a missing-nin attacking the citizens of the Land of Fire. And from the looks of things, he’s also attacking Konoha-nin in the process. I can’t see Kei being sent on a solo mission at this point, so her team is in danger.

There’s never going to be any question of what our duty is.

The three of us—Horse, Rat, and I—dash around the outside of Sorayama’s walls to reach the battlefield that the main causeway has become.

We don’t make it that far.

Horse immediately splits off from our formation as soon as she spots a Konoha shinobi—Ebisu?—trying to bind someone’s injuries. This new, temporary medic-station only has one medic and one patient, but it’s cut off from the fight by a section of Sorayama’s wall.

I can see Gai limping his way up the hill, while behind him, Kakashi and Kei—in her second jinchūriki form—are trying to fend off Manda and Orochimaru together. They’re not being beaten back, but Kei’s chakra is nowhere near as overwhelming as it was initially.

They’re losing chakra too fast to be able to keep this up.

Rat rushes down the hill to help Gai make it to Horse and Ebisu faster, and I have a sudden sinking feeling as I remember that these two…well. They’re Genma’s baby chicks.

I know Gai is in all likelihood going to be capable of killing me in a single punch someday, but Ebisu doesn’t normally take that many missions outside of the village. Genma complained to me about that once, saying that Ebisu was never gonna get the promotion he wanted if he didn’t get out and do things like Kei. Just…little things I suddenly remember, and it becomes something like a warning in my head.

Who is Ebisu looking after?
Horse gives a little gasp, just as Rat finally drags Gai over to his teammate.

Both of his teammates.

My hands are suddenly shaking, worse than they have in years. My mouth is dry behind my mask, and I kneel down next to Horse and Ebisu’s patient.

It’s Genma.

I reach out with one trembling, gloved hand, and press my fingers to the uninjured side of Genma’s neck to feel for a pulse.

It’s there. But just barely.

I kneel down next to him and try to think past the litany of no no no no that is tearing through my head.

Distantly, I hear Horse muttering under her breath about fractures and contusions, with Ebisu replying just as quietly. None of that matters.

The only person who matters is lying on the ground and slowly slipping away from me.

His entire left side struggles to get any air. Only half his chest manages to expand when he draws in a shallow breath, making a faint rattling noise that sends chills right through me.

There’s blood trickling from his nose and bubbling at his lips before it drips down his broken jaw. The rest of the side of his face is swollen and purple, and barely recognizable—even if the pain is something I can make out clearly.

His left arm has been broken at least twice, with the compound fracture snapping both of his lower arm bones, and I don’t even want to know what the shoulder looks like.

The flak jacket didn’t help. Nothing helped. Nothing protected him from this.

Horse gently nudges me to one side, and I look back to see her using a medical ninjutsu on a gash Ebisu might have stitched before we got here. Going by the amount of blood on the grass around them, Genma’s femoral artery could easily have been punctured.

It doesn’t even matter how much chakra Horse pours into him. There’s no amount of her field healing that will replace surgery, at a hospital that none of us can reach in time to matter.

He’s going to die.

I don’t know what to do. I clasp Genma’s intact right hand between both of mine, biting back on the urge to scream, or swear, or cry.

“What happened?” I ask Ebisu, unable to keep the pain out of my voice.

Ebisu obviously struggles to find the words, then manages, “Our team—we split up to secure all of the civilians. And Orochimaru found Genma first.”

I’m kneeling in a pool of his blood. I have a very good idea of what that means.

“Kei-san helped us get him back,” Ebisu goes on, “but we can’t keep fighting Orochimaru forever. We can’t… None of us are strong enough for this.”
If I stay right here, I’ll be with him until the end. Part of me wants that—to stay behind and just buckle under the terrifying weight of the knowledge that Genma is going to die.

There’s no rescue coming.

There’s no chance of reinforcements.

We’re out on our own with an S-class missing-nin breathing down our necks, and our heavy hitters are almost worn down to nothing.

But if I fight alongside Kei and Kakashi, I might give them half a chance more. Kei’s an S-class shinobi on her own, and Kakashi’s not far off. If I fight, maybe I can give them just enough of an edge.

Just enough that not all of us will die today.

And I don’t really have the strength to watch Genma’s life slip through my fingers.

“ANBU-san?” Ebisu asks.

I draw a deep, shuddering breath. I know what I have to do.

Genma… It’ll probably be easier on him if he doesn’t wake up from this. It’ll be easier if he just…slips away. Waking up in pain is something I can’t ask of him, not now.

My mask seems to be suffocating, now.

I’m going to die facing Orochimaru anyway. What’s one stupid regulation at this point?

I reach up with my right hand and, with my hood still pulled low over my face, I remove my ANBU mask and set it aside on the grass next to me.

Horse makes a shocked noise, but it quickly fades. She knows what I’m going to do, for better or for worse. She gently pulls Ebisu back, just for a moment.

I lean down over Genma’s face and press my lips to his forehead. If I concentrate, I can just barely feel his breath, weak though it is, brush against my right ear. He’s alive, still. But that’s all. I just wish my thoughts could get through to him like this, but they can’t. I’m sorry, Genma. Even if you wake up I…don’t see how this will work out.

Goodbye.

“Ra—” Gai is about to say my name, but my mask is back on before he can finish it. He bites down on the rest of it. “ANBU-san, are you going to fight?”

I glance at Rat, who is by Gai’s other side. The smaller ANBU agent seems just to be…waiting.

I turn my attention back to Gai. “Horse is in charge here now.” I’m not answering Gai’s question. Of course I’m going to fight.

If Kokutō can taste the blood of the man who did this to Genma, I can die happy.

“Rat, move out.”

Rat inclines his head and starts off down the hill. I follow, drawing Kokutō from its sheath as we go.
We reach Kei and Kakashi in just a moment.

Kakashi’s cracked his mask in half again, somehow, and is fighting openly now. His ANBU katana is snapped in the middle, but he’s continuing to hang onto the sparking bottom half of the blade. I’m not sure if he’s using it as a focus for his techniques, but if he wants to keep it, I can’t exactly tell him not to.

Kei is on her knees, still clinging to the jinchūriki cloak. Her sides are heaving like she’s run all day and night, and reddish foam drips from the chakra construct’s caricature of a mouth. All three of the Beast’s tails are tipped with pinkish blades, but the tails themselves are drooping toward the ground.

I don’t see how we’re going to get out of this.

The best we can hope for is to go down fighting, buying the civilians some time to escape.

“More Konoha-nin?” Orochimaru sneers. His gold eye flit to each of us in turn. “You have a remarkable cockroach-like tendency to keep appearing out of the woodwork after I’ve exterminated your compatriots, don’t you?”

I bite down on the urge to attack him. He’s baiting us, and the first one who charges in without a plan is going to get eaten—either by him, or by the giant purple worm he calls a summon.

“Big words...coming from someone who’s had to cheat death...four times today,” Kei manages, though she’s clearly not in any shape to be making smart remarks. There’s a slowly-forming pool of blood underneath her feet, and her arms are nearly limp at her sides.

“Oh, I intend to cheat death far more times than that,” Orochimaru replies. “After all, Keisuke-kun, you only have one life to throw away. And I can see you burning it moment by moment.”

“As long as it screws you over,” Kei growls, “I don’t care.”

“You? You’re nothing more than an attempted roadblock.” Orochimaru looks at each of us, arrayed out in front of him like we actually have a chance. “Nothing you four can do will matter.”

It probably won’t. Not from where I’m standing. Kakashi and Kei are on their last legs, and Rat and I just aren’t capable of fighting on this level.

It’s hopeless.

Kushina

I’m trying to get Tatsumaki to eat her okayu without fussing when the call comes in.

My little red-haired baby isn’t the worst eater I’ve ever met—that honor belongs firmly to Kakashi when he’s in a snit—but there’s something about rice that seems to offend her today. She narrows her purple eyes at the spoon in clear dislike, and I take a moment to wonder what I have to do to get her to eat.

“Mommy, I want some!” Naruto says, and he’s already climbing up the back of Tatsumaki’s chair as he says it. As soon as his hands appear behind his sister’s shoulders, he tries to haul himself up far enough to reach the spoon.

Tatsumaki seems to take offense to this, too, and bites the spoon out of my hand, porridge and all, before her brother can get it. She starts to suck on it, denying her brother any food at all.
Typical siblings, from what Biwako-sama tells me.

“I’ll get you a bowl right now, Naruto,” I tell him, since there’s always enough food in this house. Just, um, not necessarily in Tatsumaki’s tiny bowl.

Naruto makes a face, but he climbs down from his sister’s high chair anyway.

**Human,** Yin Kurama interrupts. My thoughts screech to a halt, and I freeze in the middle of getting Naruto’s serving for him.

**Names, please,** I remind him, even as I resume getting Naruto’s dinner ready for him.

**Kushina, then,** Yin Kurama corrects himself. But then, more urgently, he says, **My sibling just called me for help.**

If Naruto notices that I’m suddenly quiet, he doesn’t let it distract him from eating.

**The Three-Tails—I mean, Isobu-san? What happened?**

Kei isn’t in the village, and part of the reason Minato isn’t at home at the moment is because he knows I’m still upset about that. How could he send Kei away from everyone who loves her when she’s in *that* state? Whatever he likes to think, Kei is still a child in some ways. She needs people she trusts looking out for her as she recovers. Or to be on hand in case she tries something desperate.

She *doesn’t* need to be halfway across the country with a bunch of crazy merchants, even if my cousin Akira *is* out there. They’re still not us. They’re not her family, and Sorayama isn’t her home.

**The human village is under attack,** Kurama reports, and I freeze again in shock. *No. That’s not—*

And Isobu says that one of the attackers is the missing-nin Orochimaru. Does that mean anything to you?

**It does.** I immediately head into Minato’s study, peering at the seals on the wall. No alerts were set off… Hm.

“Mommy?” Naruto asks, at the same time that Tatsumaki says, “Mama?”

“Just wait a moment, kids,” I tell them. They can sense the tension in the air now.

I pick up a spare sheet of paper. Scribbling “COME HOME NOW,” across the top, complete with a minor flashbang seal underneath, I drop the paper onto the in-tray Minato keyed to his office—and vice-versa.

The paper disappears as soon as it touches the inscribed metal tray.

Fifteen seconds later, I hear the *fwish* of displaced air from the kitchen that signals Minato’s arrival.

“Kushina? What’s wrong?”

I head back out into the living room in time to see Tatsumaki climbing up the front of Minato’s shirt, and squash the urge to smile at the sight. If Isobu thinks that the situation is so dangerous that he needs to call on Kurama, then Kei’s in serious trouble. Any other month, I would have said that Kei could handle Orochimaru, or nearly so.

Not this time. “Orochimaru attacked Sorayama,” I tell Minato, “and Kei’s still fighting him, right now.”
The blood drains out of Minato’s face. “Is she all right?”

“What kind of question is that?” I demand. “She’s not all right, or else Isobu wouldn’t have told Kurama he needed help!”

I never actually said that.

*I’ve gotten better at reading between the lines, Kurama,* I tell him. *You learn a lot about someone by teaching them, and you hide things for the sake of pride when you shouldn’t.*

Yin Kurama huffs, but doesn’t comment further.

“Tatsumaki, Naruto, you’re going to be staying with your big brother Tenzō, okay?” I say, turning to speak to the children as Minato vanishes again.

“What’s a ‘Chimaru?’” Naruto asks.

“Mama?” Tatsumaki repeats. “Mama go ‘way?”

“Orochimaru is a really bad man,” I tell Naruto. “So Daddy and I have to go out and scare him away.” *At the least.* If he’s hurt a single hair on Kei’s head, I’ll kill him. “While we’re gone, be good for Tenzō-kun, okay?”

And then Minato pops back in, dragging Tenzō and Hayate.

“Tatsumaki, Naruto, you’re going to be training together,” Minato says, as he drops both boys on the couch. “Tenzō-kun, Hayate-kun, we need you to look after Tatsumaki and Naruto.”

“No problem, Hokage-sama,” Tenzō says immediately.

Hayate looks sullen and asks, “Why?”

Minato and I exchange glances for just a moment. If I’m upset with Minato, Hayate is a dangerous mixture of confused and furious at his sister’s treatment over the last year. He doesn’t even know the entire story, but he does know that it’s definitely Minato’s fault that she’s outside of the village right now.

Minato takes a deep breath. Then, “Because your sister is in danger, and we need to go get her.”

Hayate blinks, startled out of his resentment. “But Kei is—she’s one of the strongest people in the village!”

“And she’s facing someone worse,” Minato says, his tone leaving no room for argument. “And no, you can’t come with us. We’re going to gather everyone we can spare and hit him like a thunderbolt, but I need to know Tatsumaki and Naruto can be safe here with you before we can leave. Do you understand, Hayate-kun?”

Hayate still looks alarmed, but he nods anyway.

“Thank you,” I tell Hayate sincerely, since Minato is already off in his own world and making big plans for smacking Orochimaru around. “We’ll bring her back safe, Hayate-kun.”

Hayate replies, “Thanks, Auntie Kushina.”

And then Minato takes my hand, and we’re off to get Obito.
The next thing I see is the hospital roof. Obito and Rin are both there, sitting together and out of view of the rooftop door, but they startle apart as soon as they realize that Minato and I are both there and watching them.

I doubt they got to anything especially worth being embarrassed about, but I don’t have any time for that. None of us do.

“Obito, I need you to head to Sorayama immediately,” Minato says, with no preamble whatsoever.

“Sensei?” Obito says, blankly.

“Just go, Obito,” Minato commands, “I don’t have the range, and Kei’s life depends on how fast we can all get there. I’m giving you a minute to figure out the situation on the ground and point us at Orochimaru.”

Obito’s eye widens, and his Sharingan immediately shifts into the triple-bladed Mangekyō mode. And then he’s gone.

“Hokage-sama—?” Rin begins, but I interrupt her.

“Rin, please alert the hospital to the possibility of incoming casualties,” I tell her. “We don’t know how many are going to be injured, but tell Tsunade-sama that it’s an Orochimaru-related incident. She’ll know what antivenoms to use.”

Rin’s spine is ramrod straight as she settles into crisis mode. “On it, Kushina-sama!” And Rin runs down the stairs.

I start to hear the hospital coming to life underneath our feet as Rin triggers some kind of code. Code black, possibly, but I don’t remember the procedure for a massive influx of casualties.

And then Obito reappears, scything out of the air as though he’s made of ribbons.

“How bad is it?” Minato asks him as soon as he’s solid again.

“Everything’s on fire, Sensei,” Obito replies. He looks shaken. “But Kei’s not the only one there, Sensei. Kakashi’s there too.”

Minato’s hand tightens on mine, and I feel my heart try to leap into my throat to match. “What?” I demand.

“I wouldn’t have been able to find the place so fast otherwise.” Obito looks like he wants to panic, but can’t. There’s too much at stake. “We have to help them!”

“I’ll go first,” I say, before Minato can give any orders. To Minato, I say, “You need to get the Third to take over for the day. We can’t afford to have too many of us outside of the village, and you know I can take the first hit if I have to. Even from Orochimaru.”

Minato still doesn’t look convinced. “But Kushina…”

“I am a kunoichi of Konohagakure,” I remind him. “And I go where I’m needed most.”

“…If you’re sure…” Minato noticeably hesitates.

“I’m sure.” I turn back to Obito and hold out my hand. “Kurama and I will be the first ones out. Make sure to come back for Minato as soon as I’m clear.”
Obito looks at Minato for confirmation.

“She’s the one going,” Minato reminds him. He looks and sounds fond, but also resigned. “I’ll be back in a flash.”

Obito hesitates, for just a second. Then he grabs my hand, and we vanish through a hole in the world.

The place we arrive in is...weird. I’ve never been inside Obito’s Kamui dimension, but I didn’t expect to see plain, slightly creepy columns of stone that reached off into an ever-expanding black void. It’s almost cold here, with no wind or sun, and I shiver for just a moment.

“I can open up the second portal now,” Obito says as I stop acting like a tourist. He still looks pained at the idea of just dropping me off in the middle of a warzone. He’s the only one who’s seen in, so he might be right to worry.

He’s also the one who’s sparred with me most often since I had Naruto, so I think his worry might be a bit much.

Kurama and I are much more in sync than we were the last time we tried this. Ready?

**You say that like there’s a chance I’m not.** Yin Kurama yawns widely, then starts channeling a torrent of his chakra out from the seal. He doesn’t need to reinforce me right now, but if he does...well, I’m hardly going to complain. The second stage of a chakra cloak is a lot easier to take hits with than it is with the first.

My eyes itch a little bit as Kurama’s eyes overlay mine, turning them red and fox-pupiled rather than a plain dark purple.

Obito starts to back up.

And then the red aura surrounds me like a bubble, letting me see this monochrome world through a hazy red filter. After a few seconds’ pause, the red aura intensifies until my normal body disappears from view under a Tailed Beast cloak exoskeleton.

“Looking good, Kushina,” Obito says. “You’re up to five tails now. And your hair is acting up a bit, but...”

“I’m going for six, minimum,” I tell him, through a voice half-garbled by Kurama’s chakra. The world isn’t red now—it’s just more intense, like I can see everything.

**If you want six, I can give you six,** Yin Kurama comments. He folds his arms over his chest. **But give it a moment. Let’s see what you can do with this and your human strength.**

“Okay, Kushina...I’m going out first, and then you pop out,” Obito says. He’s bouncing anxiously on the balls of his feet. “They won’t be ready for you.”

“Sounds good to me.” I drop into an animalistic crouch.

Obito disappears into midair as he uses Kamui again, and I wait for the moment to strike.
I wouldn’t admit it to him, but seeing Raidō in his Falcon uniform felt like getting a sword to the gut and feeling it twist. After what had happened to Genma while we were supposed to be teammates—when I was the only S-class ninja out here—seeing Raidō at all brought a wave of guilt that I couldn’t afford to feel.

Not when I could practically feel the V2 cloak falling apart around me.

Isobu was being as helpful as possible, but Orochimaru wasn’t a pushover even if I was channeling a fragment of a god. And killing him four times in a single fight had been something I didn’t think we were going to get a chance to try again.

I coughed up another mouthful of bloody foam. Every breath was a knife sliding through my ribs. Even if the fucking Sword of Kusanagi couldn’t actually pierce a Tailed Beast chakra cloak, blunt force alone was enough to break a rib. Isobu was doing what he could to stave off the pain, but the actual bone refused to just be healed.

Beside me, Kakashi’s chakra was down to practically nothing. Though he’d stopped using the Chidori or any variations on it, Obito’s eye ate through his chakra like a particularly vicious piranha, and he was probably about five minutes from dropping into a coma.

And the last ANBU agent, Rat, wasn’t even worth mentioning. What chakra signature I could sense pointed more toward genjutsu than surviving a gigantic punching match between kaiju.

To make a long story short: We were completely screwed.

Then things started going to hell.

Isobu actually had to stop me and say, Your body can’t handle the strain anymore.

You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me!

If I let you use any more of my chakra, Isobu growled, all you’ll do is die in horrific agony faster.

I was going to tell him that I’d accept that kind of price, just to keep Orochimaru at bay a little while longer. But Isobu didn’t give me a choice, and I felt the V2 cloak dissolve around me.

In a way, I was lucky I was already on my knees. I wouldn’t have been able to keep my balance if I wasn’t. It also let me see that the bloody pinkish foam had changed, somehow, to a trickle of nothing but blood. Without Isobu’s chakra preventing me from seeing or feeling the worst of my injuries, I also abruptly realized that I had a gash in my side that had failed to close properly and was bleeding sluggishly down my hip and thigh on that side.

I couldn’t even remember how I’d gotten it.

I pressed my hands to my side in an attempt to stem the flow of blood either through chakra or just by sheer force, and the pain alone made me wobble on my knees.

“Kei?!” Kakashi was instantly there next to me, trying to keep me from just falling over sideways. It worked, but I couldn’t stop the bleeding and the edges of my vision were going black. “Stay with me, now.”
“Not...sure I...can,” I wheezed, trying not to dribble blood down onto his armor. What power I had, I tried to push toward the wound. Even a crappy patch job would keep me up at least a little longer, right?

My chakra fizzled halfway to the wound. Between the pain disrupting my concentration and the sheer lack of chakra, I couldn’t even stop the bleeding.

“Isn’t that interesting?” Orochimaru’s voice range out. I heard his signature, low laugh a moment later.

Rat and Raidō—whose chakra screamed anger and fear in nearly equal proportions—immediately tried to block Orochimaru’s line of sight, but it was pointless. Predators could sense weakness.

“Out of my way,” Orochimaru said, and then Raidō and Rat just weren’t there. I caught a glimpse of Raidō’s black cloak landing down the hill with a bone-jarring thud, and Kakashi’s arms were ripped away from me just a moment later.

I didn’t hit the ground. I didn’t have that much time.

One moment I was swaying on the spot, and the next Orochimaru’s neck was longer than it should have been. I was in the air, legs dangling down, and Orochimaru’s teeth were holding me up by the muscle of my left shoulder.

Compared to everything else, it didn’t hurt that much at first. I already had a hole in my side, a broken rib, and the bones in my arms felt cracked on top of everything else.

And then he dropped me.

Hitting the ground jarred every injury I had, making my mind blank out in pain for a few precious seconds.

And then the burning started.

I must have passed out, because the next thing I saw was Isobu’s four-story face.

“What the heck?” I asked, looking around in shock as I reassessed my control over the local gravity. I didn’t need to be upright to function, but still. What was I doing here? “Isobu?”

“There’s something in here.” Isobu’s huge eye narrowed.

The bite—!

“Well, well, well. What have we here?” Orochimaru’s voice seemed to murmur from everywhere at once. It replaced the sound of the wind and waves that should have been dominant. “What an interesting little girl you are, Keisuke-kun.”

Shit.

I retreated to Isobu’s head-spikes, looking for the source of the sound. With Orochimaru’s laughter as background music, every move I made felt like it could be my last. While Isobu shifted underneath me and attempted to locate whatever was laughing so damn much, I took a moment to panic.

I’d known that Orochimaru’s bite could spread the Curse Seal. I’d known that the Curse Seal of Heaven had enough of Orochimaru’s soul in it to essentially function as a fucking Horcrux.

“I always did want to see what a jinchūriki’s power would feel like,” Orochimaru said with a faint
“I just never thought it would be so easy! Your soul is hardly even attached. There’s plenty of room for a new...tenant.”

Fuck fuck fuck.

**This has to do with your reincarnation experience, doesn’t it?** Isobu asked, even as his huge tails churned the water. **Your soul has too much weighing it down from its past life.**

*Up until now, that wasn’t a problem!* I hissed back at him. I wasn’t normal, no, but I’d made it work. With a few...speed bumps, like Id and the Dreamer. I’d at least managed to survive everything up until now.

I felt Isobu radiating skepticism.

*Or at least it was a problem I could handle!* I resisted the urge to beat my head against the nearest giant turtle spike. *And now we have an extra roommate, and I—can you even get rid of him?*

**Not easily,** Isobu said, shifting uncomfortably.

God dammit. **What do I have to do to get him out of here?**

I didn’t get to hear his answer. At that moment, *something* appeared out of thin air and landed on Isobu’s back next to me.

For a moment, I didn’t understand what I was seeing. It looked like a huge white carpet for a moment, draped across Isobu’s shell. And then I realized that it was moving.

It was a carpet of hundreds of thousands of white snakes.

As I reeled back in horror, the serpents seemed to flow together, surging up and into a strange, eerie shape that...oh hell.

Orochimaru’s “true,” post experimentation form. A snake nearly the size of a summoned creature, but made of a swarm of other snakes. As Isobu’s shell pitched and rolled beneath my feet, the monster fully assembled itself. It even had a patch of long, lank black hair that framed its face exactly like Orochimaru’s hair did his.

“Well, what do you think of it, Keisuke-kun? My true form?” The giant serpent tilted its head to one side and showed off all of its fangs.

Isobu, burn the seal off! I watched, paralyzed in terror, as Orochimaru drew his head back for a strike.

**But you’ll die if you use any more of my chakra!**

*Do it anyway!* I’d rather die than be a new Orochimaru clone!

Isobu considered my proposal for maybe half a second. *This will hurt.*

And then I burned.

**Kakashi**

I hit the ground and roll, avoiding the worst of the impact. But it takes me a moment to get air back
into my lungs after being backhanded by Orochimaru’s right arm. I don’t think anything’s broken, but I still can’t get to my feet immediately. My vision goes black when I try.

But I can look up. And the bottom drops out of my stomach.

He has Kei.

His neck is too long, stretched out until it reaches Kei.

And Kei—

His head is—his jaws are holding her in the air. And she’s still not reacting.

I have to get over there, but I can’t—I don’t have any chakra left. I can’t even use Obito’s eye anymore. If I do, I won’t be—

Orochimaru lets go of her.

Kei drops to the ground, unmoving.

Orochimaru’s head retracts toward his body. He turns to me, grinning with all of his fangs.

My eye darts back to Kei. I keep Obito’s eye closed. I need to conserve my chakra for when he gets close enough for me to kill him.

“Are you...angry at me?” Orochimaru asks me. He wipes blood—Kei’s blood—from his mouth. “Do you hate me?”

I manage a growl, but I can’t—I can’t get up. My limbs feel like lead, weighing me down with exhaustion and pain. I only have enough chakra for a single, desperate attack, and I still can’t get to my feet. I have to wait for him to get closer…

“A Sharingan like yours is useless to me, Kakashi-kun,” Orochimaru said thoughtfully. “I wonder. Can I make it worth something...if I kill the one you love?”

Then Kei starts screaming.

“Or perhaps not.” Orochimaru glances back at Kei as soon as the swell of Tailed Beast chakra starts again. “What—?”

Kei’s thrashing on the ground and she’s still screaming, clutching at her left shoulder. At the bite. At what Orochimaru did to her.

“This shouldn’t be—” Orochimaru cuts himself off, frowning.

If I could just—

A burst of Tailed Beast chakra bowls us both over, as energy the same color as blood fountains out of Kei’s shoulder. But it’s not blood, because it forms the shape of one of the Three-Tails’s massive hands and wraps back around her, forming a new V2 cloak.

But all I can hear is the Three-Tails’s roar start to harmonize with Kei’s.

Orochimaru’s back is still turned away from me, looking at the actual threat, when the air distorts in front of me.
I jolt in surprise, but Obito’s hand reaches for mine. His eye is trained on Orochimaru, not Kei, and I want to ask him what the fuck took him so long—and then the air rips open again, in front of Obito’s face.

And another jinchūriki appears, swathed in a second V2 cloak with six tails and a series of bone structures overlapping her body.

Kushina explodes into motion, going after Orochimaru like an angry mother bear. If angry mother bears had godlike power and could fire waves of reddish-orange, concentrated devastation from their mouths.

I blink and half of the hillside—along with the entirety of Manda disappears in one blast.

“Kakashi, what’s happening to Kei?” Obito asks, shaking me to get my attention back. His entire body screams fear, in a way that almost doesn’t make sense to me for a moment. He wasn’t here.

“Orochimaru bit her and now she’s—” Wait, no. “Where the hell have you been?”

Obito shoves a bottle of pills into my hand. “Take one. Two would cause a chakra overdose.”

Soldier pills, then. I’m definitely going to feel this in the morning, but with luck I’ll actually live long enough for the crash.

“Seriously, don’t even think about it,” Obito says. “Rin changed the recipe for these ones.”

Fine. I take one pill and swallow it whole.

I don’t get an instant surge of energy, but I do gain the ability to stand on my own. It’s an improvement. Anything’s an improvement over lying helpless on the ground while Kei screams in agony ten meters away.

The instinct to go to her is nearly overwhelming, even in the face of the Three-Tails’s raging chakra. I don’t even know any medical ninjutsu, and I don’t have a way to calm her down without the Sharingan. Using it would probably convince the Three-Tails to kill me.

But she’s in pain. She’s in so much pain, and it’s killing me to see her like this.

My hands clench, nails trying to bite through the material of my gloves.

Kei’s surrounded by a whirling storm of Tailed Beast chakra that I don’t think we’re going to be able to get through. Maybe Kushina might, but going by the Adamantine Chakra Chain barrier she put up around us while she goes after Orochimaru, I can’t be certain that she’ll do anything to help.

She’s done enough to keep Orochimaru away from us. Obito and I need to do the rest.

“Kakashi, Sensei’s gonna be waiting on me to get back to Konoha and pick him up.” Obito is still unable to tear his eyes away from Kei, but can’t risk getting close and wasting chakra avoiding her attacks. His voice quavers. “I’m… I’ll have to leave you here, to get him.”

I consider that. Then, “Get the injured first.”

“Injured—who got hurt?” Obito blurts, looking around the battlefield as though he hasn’t seen it before.

I resist the urge to punch him. Kei’s still screaming, but Obito needs the facts as fast I can manage. With luck, we might be able to get everyone out right now. “ANBU agents Rat and Falcon are both
down. Ebisu and Horse set up a medical station behind that bend in the hill, and their patients need immediate transfer to Konoha. Get everyone out.”

“What about you?” Obito asks.

“I’m fine.” I’m at least functioning, which is better than most people can say now. Genma’s probably dying, Gai needs to avoid permanent damage from the Gates, Falcon and Rat still haven’t gotten up after Orochimaru backhanded them… “Get the others out.”

“Can you handle…this?” Obito asks, his eye still trained on Kei.

She’s gone quiet, but in the V2 cloak she’s just bashing her shoulder against the ground again and again. She’s still making an animalistic panting noise, like a paw’s been caught in a trap but the initial shock is over. Her glowing eyes are shut tight, and there’s no way I’m going to be able to make contact with the Sharingan without getting mauled. Kei probably barely remembers who I am.

Still, I have to do something.

“I’ll have to. Go,” I tell him.

Obito casts one last look at me, hesitating for just a moment, and runs in the direction where I last saw Falcon and Rat.

And that leaves me alone with Kei.

She’s brought one of those chakra-coated paws up and is digging the claw-tips into her left shoulder. She’s doubled over on the ground, three tails writhing in the air and her forehead against the dirt of the new crater she’s dug into the earth.

There’s something precise about her actions now. Controlled. Through the pain, she still has a goal in mind.

I make it to the edge of the crater and slide down the side. If all of this has a purpose, I need to help her see it through.

Obito

I make it to the downed ANBU agents first, following the skid-marks in the torn-up grass and mud. It looks like someone sanded the entire hillside down, or maybe the aftermath of a flood, and for a second I can’t see the Rat or Falcon-masked agents—until I concentrate with my Sharingan and can see their chakra faintly moving in all the debris.

I touch Rat first, since he’s closer, and yank him into my Kamui dimension as soon as I’ve got a grip on his uniform. As he streams away into thin air, the second ANBU agent—the captain with the black cloak and the black sword—sits up against a shattered boulder.

“...Obito?” asks a familiar voice, and I stare at the bleary-eyed ANBU captain, who’s lost half his mask. What’s left of it is dangling down off one ear by the string, and it gives me a full view of Raidō Namiashi’s unfocused eyes.

“Just hang on a minute. I’ll get you out of here,” I tell him urgently. With Rat in my Kamui dimension, I can get Raidō out of trouble right now. “Take my hand, okay?”

Raidō blinks slowly, but then focus comes back into his expression. “What…about Genma?”
“I’ll go get him next. Just take my hand first.” I grasp Raidō’s bloodied right arm. “It’ll just be a second.”

“Don’t... care. Get Genma out.” Raidō touches the back of his head and winces, his fingertips coming away bright red. Hell. “Ow.”

“Nope. Getting both of you.” And I yank him out of this dimension entirely, watching as he vanishes into a hole in the air.

Okay, Genma now.

I’m pretty fast when I want to be. And I have all the motivation in the world right now.

I make it to the makeshift medical station with a quick Body Flicker, instead of using Kamui. I might step on someone if I do, and I really can’t afford to make mistakes here.

The ANBU agent with the Horse-patterned mask is using some kind of healing jutsu on Genma when I get there, with Ebisu and Gai sitting anxiously nearby. And Genma’s looking like a couple steps short of being dead—almost like someone picked him up and swung him at a tree or something?—so I need to get him out of here right now.

“Obito?” Ebisu asks, when I skid to a stop next to him. “I don’t understand. How are you here?”

“Cheating.” I don’t elaborate on it, instead turning to the ANBU agent on site. To her, I say, “I already got Falcon and Rat out. I’ll pull anyone else you need me to, but I only have a few seconds before I go back for the Hokage.”

Horse’s eyes flick to Gai and Ebisu in turn. Genma’s a given.

“And you?”

“I’ll stay.” Horse jerks her head in the direction of the battle, where Kushina is still chasing Orochimaru around like a particularly tricky mouse.

If I look closely, I can see the remnants of three huge structures almost as big as the Konoha main gates, and a good dozen craters dotting the landscape. I have no idea where they came from, but going by the impact craters and the way they just stop at the edge of Kushina’s Adamantine Chakra Chain barrier… Well. Any attack they were meant to block probably would have killed us all, too.

And between them and us, but still inside the barrier, are Kakashi and Kei.

They’ve somehow made their own crater now, expanding slowly from where the two of them are still...talking? Whatever is going on down there, it’s going to have another few seconds to keep happening before I get Sensei and stop everything.

“Okay, Gai first. Be careful where you step, okay?” I say sharply, and grab Gai’s shoulder. As he disappears into the Kamui world, I hold out my other hand to Ebisu and say, “Watch the landing. Genma’s probably going to end up where you do.”

“Only probably?” Ebisu asks, frowning.

“It’s not exactly as easy as marking a target,” I tell him. “Just be ready to catch him.” And I open Kamui again, and then Ebisu’s gone.

And finally, I put my hand on Genma’s uninjured shoulder and shift him over to the other side of the
portal as gently as I can. He’s still breathing, but if I’m not careful it might not be for much longer.

“I’m out now,” I tell Horse. “Good luck.”

Horse nods and stands. The next thing I know, she vanishes—and reappears somewhere else, probably. This stage of the battle is over.

And then I use Kamui, and land on all fours as soon as I reappear in what amounts to my own private world.

My private world is crowded as all hell now.

Between Team Chōza and half of the ANBU team, it’s actually more crowded than I can ever remember it being. Even back when Kei, Kakashi, and I all talked with the Thr—with Isobu-san, it hadn’t been full of people. Even when I’d killed people with Kamui, it hadn’t had this many people.

And now everyone’s in pain.

Genma’s still unconscious, but Gai and Ebisu are both hovering as well as they can and making sure he doesn’t crash while nobody’s healing him. Rat’s out cold still, but Raidō—he’s lying next to Genma and holding onto his good hand, though he doesn’t look all that much better.

I open a new Kamui portal to the Konoha hospital’s roof. Time to get people moving.

I have to head out first, and I drop out of Kamui right in front of Sensei and Tsunade. And about fifteen medics, nurses, and doctors, all waiting for the first casualties.

Sensei’s arms are crossed and he feels keyed up in a way I haven’t felt in years, but otherwise he seems to be under control. “Ready?” he asks me.

Tsunade gives him a flat look from behind his back.

“Not...quite yet,” I tell him. “Transporting wounded now.”

Tsunade nods and I take a moment to steady myself before I try and pull Genma out. The last thing I want is to accidentally cut his foot off or something because I can’t gather enough chakra to manage the holes in reality.

I have to strain, though, when I realize that Raidō refuses to let go of Genma’s hand, and I’m sure not going to cut their fingers off. I feel a stinging sensation in my eye as something gives out, and Sensei yelps in sudden shock as I feel something warm start to run down my face.

By the time I get both Raidō and Genma through, spiraling out of the air like twisted bolts of cloth, my eye is definitely bleeding. I’m wobbling dangerously on my feet for a second, and then everything seems to happen really quickly.

Some of the medics grab Raidō and Genma away from where they’ve landed, transporting them away on stretchers. Tsunade puts her hand over my eye, while Sensei tries to steady my shoulders.

“Sorry, Sensei,” I manage when the two of them force me to sit down on the rooftop, though I can’t see anything and I feel a bit fuzzy around the edges. Chakra exhaustion cannot have worse timing, since it’s always bad, but this is probably not the best time for this shit. How many times did I use Kamui there?

“He’s too low on chakra to use this...jutsu for much longer.” Tsunade’s voice is harsh. “You—
Higurashi, get a protein supplement and at least one mixed meal. We’re going to be relying partly on soldier pills. And get Nohara here for dosages and for a second opinion on this eye.”

“I have a few of those,” I tell her, even as her healing chakra worms its way into my eye and starts fixing up the damage I’ve done to myself. “Rin-chan gave them to me.”

“Nohara will be able to do more with this eye than I can, though,” Tsunade mutters. “She’s been the one looking after you, hasn’t she?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Obito, how many more people do you have in the Kamui dimension?” Sensei asks.

“Just ANBU agent Rat and Ebisu and Gai, but Gai used the Gates, I think.” If I concentrate, I can sort of tell where they are. As soon as I have a bit more chakra, I’ll be able to get them all out.

“Ebisu’s…I don’t think he’s hurt. But Rat didn’t wake up when I pulled him in, so I need to get him out next.”

“You heard him,” Tsunade says, probably to her medics. “ANBU procedures for the agent. And if you forgot about it for Falcon, I will find you.”

A couple different voices say “Yes, Tsunade-sama!” before running off. The door to the roof opens and closes a few times.

Sensei’s still hovering. “Do you think you’ll be able to manage a few return trips?”

“Maybe,” I tell him. “But using Kamui like this eats up chakra really fast. It’s not gonna be easy.”

The door to the roof slams open, and I’m sure it takes a chunk out of the wall it’s attached to.

“Obito!”

But that’s definitely Rin’s voice, so who cares about the door? Tsunade’s hand pulls back, and I catch a quick glimpse of Rin before she makes me close my eye again.

“How much have you been using your eye?” Rin asks.

“A...lot. I kind of need it to see, so—ow!” I yelp, as Rin flicks my ear. “Okay, okay, uh...fourteen times?”

“If it was any time but now, I’d make you stop,” Rin says, and her voice is shaking. Oh no. “But I can still fix the damage—and you can go out again. Bring everyone home.”

“And the dosages, Nohara?” Tsunade asks.

“One pill should be sufficient,” Rin tells her. “But two is dangerous together. He’d need some kind of supplement…”

“Already taken care of,” Tsunade says, as the roof door opens again. Someone shoves a cold glass into my hand. “Drink the entire thing, then eat the pill. Then you can start using that jutsu again.”

The glass turns out to contain a thick, moderately disgusting nutrient shake. It tries to taste like strawberry, but the results are pretty much just vaguely sweet, cold mush. Either way, the cold means I can’t really taste the bitter aftertaste I know is supposed to be there, so I just slurp the whole thing down and hope for the best.

And then the soldier pill, which I don’t bite because biting it means I’d just overdose on it all at once
instead of getting a steady supply of chakra on top of mine.

“How do you feel now?” Rin asks.

I pause, to assess my chakra levels. I nod to myself, and Rin pulls her hand back so I can open my eye. Which isn’t bleeding anymore. “I’m gonna be bringing Rat out next. Don’t let him drop, okay?”

“You won’t need to worry about that,” Tsunade says.

In short order, Rat is bundled up in a stretcher and carried off by medical ninja. Gai and Ebisu emerge from the Kamui dimension after that, shaken but mostly intact. Ebisu follows the medics that drag Gai off for a medical assessment, and I’m still feeling decent enough.

Not sure how much time I have left before the crash, but I can get Sensei out to Kushina, Kei, and Kakashi with no problem.

I hold out my hand to him. “We can go now.” Overall, I think all of that might’ve taken a few minutes. Not the best time, but it’s workable.

“Take this with you, then,” Tsunade says, and she bites down on her thumb. Even as the injury is already closing, the blood vanishes in a puff of smoke—which also drops a Katsuyu into Tsunade’s hands.

This chunk of Katsuyu is about the size of a cat, and Tsunade immediately drops it onto Sensei’s shoulder.

“Good idea,” Sensei replies, nodding. “So, Ino-Shika-Chō can be deployed in roughly ten minutes. I think once Kushina and I meet up, we might be able to handle some of the transportation problems, but just in case… Obito, do you know where Shimika and Shikane are at this time of day?”

“No, but I can find out,” I tell Sensei.

“Get them and be ready to use the Flying Thunder God Formation. I don’t want to tax you any more than I have to, and it’s just as reliable. As soon as I’m at Sorayama, come back here and find them. They should help you get Inoichi and his team out here.”

Maybe more reliable, actually. It uses three people’s chakra instead of just me, and it doesn’t need to open multiple portals to get anywhere. It’s just that the area has to be marked ahead of time…and I didn’t have any of the permanent seals on me at the time.

Dammit, I’m going to have to start carrying Sensei’s kunai around everywhere, aren’t I?

This is probably part of the reason why Sensei doesn’t want me to rely so much on Kamui. Using Kamui means I’m the gatekeeper whether I like it or not, and it’s not always the best option. Like right now.

I grab Sensei’s hand and activate Kamui again. As soon as he’s vanished in midair, I yank myself into the Kamui dimension as well.

Time to deploy the next S-class ninja.

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**Kakashi**

As soon as Obito leaves, I slide down into the crater and head closer to Kei.
She’s not screaming anymore, not in the same sense. Instead, the Three-Tails’s voice has overridden hers, and all I can hear is roaring that sounds like a gigantic beast in agony. She’s still entirely enveloped in the V2 chakra cloak, and chakra bubbles off her form in a horrible boiling froth. Kei and the Three-Tails bash themselves into the dirt, tearing at their “skin” as though infested by fleas.

They are officially out of control. And I’m still getting closer to them.

This is probably a bad plan.

“Wolf!” calls a voice, once I’m at the bottom.

Kei’s on the ground and on her knees, and she is making horrible noises under her breath that sound like labored breathing. But in a creature a lot bigger than she actually is.

I’m not sure I can call back to Horse and not trigger something.

“Haaaaah…” Kei lifts her head, and her glowing eyes stare sightlessly up at the edge of the crater. Up, up, toward the sky.

Her jaw hinges open, jerking as the angle expands to something impossible for human mouths. I can almost hear bone cracking.

As I watch, the bubbles of chakra consolidate into one bite-sized purple-ball. Kei and the Three-Tails lunge upward and chomp down on it, pulling the dense ball into the body of the V2 cloak. And as soon as she does so, the area immediately around her is flattened as though by one of Nagato’s ninjutsu.

Oh no.

“Kei!” I shout, just as Horse reaches the edge of the crater. To my fellow ANBU agent, I order, “Horse, don’t you dare get any closer.”

“And you?” Horse asks, but I’m not sure if her attention is even on me. It’s very, very hard to ignore Kei at this point.

She’s turning in our direction. Her eyes are like searchlights in the dark red of her face.

I have to get her to stop. I don’t know if I can calm her down without using Obito’s eye, but I can’t just leave her here to suffer.

Something changes.

Kei jerks her horned head. Her right arm comes up and her claws hit her right shoulder hard enough to make the entire chakra cloak ripple, and something wriggles at the strike. Differently than the cloak. Separately.

And with a spurt of blood and chakra, a white snake rips itself free of Kei’s body. It’s at least half a meter long, and it’s covered in blood and chakra burns in nearly equal measure. And its chakra, to Obito’s eye, moves exactly like Orochimaru’s.

What the actual fuck.

The snake flips itself onto its belly, drawing its black-marked head up in a sudden hiss as Kei stares down at it.
Kei blasts it with the Tailed Beast Bomb.

The snake—and half of the crater, and a third of the hill we’re on—vanishes into a massive red, concussive blast of energy. The blowback sends me slamming backward into the exposed dirt walls of the crater, knocking air right out of me, and I slide down the side while coughing and gasping from the hit.

Horse is gone.

But Kei’s still there, and she turns back to me after obliterating the hillside.

“Kei,” I try, and she doesn’t respond.

Except to drop onto all fours and start growling.

*Shit.*

I have enough chakra for an Arc Jump. I aim for a point behind Kei. If I tag the area, I have someplace to run if this gets more dangerous than it is already.

But as soon as I turn Obito’s eye in Kei’s direction, I realize the main problem.

Though my view isn’t as accurate as that of a Byakugan, I can see chakra flowing outward from the seal on Kei’s chest in an unending flood. Some of it is directed toward the shoulder wound where Orochimaru bit her—and where the snake popped out—to repair the damage. But the vast majority is just covering Kei up and smothering her underneath its power, and I can’t actually see any way to stop it.

Kei’s never really lost control of the Three-Tails’s chakra before. What the hell is going on? The Tailed Beast chakra hasn’t stopped flowing for a moment, even though the Orochimaru problem is being dealt with. And even if Kei isn’t in any shape to deal with the seal, the Three-Tails should have cut her off to keep her safe from that overwhelming strength.

A theory creeps up on me, and for a moment I can’t even breathe from the sheer horror of the idea.

Kei’s seal is cracking. She can’t control it. The Three-Tails can’t control it.

They’re dying.

This is just their last gasp before the end, and they’re going to die *screaming*. Slavering and insane, and unable to even comprehend what’s happening.

Kei and the Three-Tails hack up another mouthful of bloodied foam. They aren’t growling anymore. They’re just on their knees, coughing and shaking in place.

I need to *do something*. And I’ve been so useless at that all day that anything starts to look like a good idea.

“Kei!” I shout, trying to get her attention. To gauge her reaction. Can she even still hear me?

Those lamp-like eyes turn toward me, but there’s no recognition or understanding there. The growl starts up again, but weaker and stuttering as the coughing continues.

I take a step closer. “Are you still in there?”

Her tails lash the air, and her eyes haven’t left my face. For an insane moment, I’m almost glad that
my ANBU mask is destroyed. She can tell that it’s me if she tries, not just a faceless assassin. Not just an enemy needing to be cut down.

No matter what’s going on in that head of hers, she hasn’t attacked me. Maybe she won’t.

“You can hear me, can’t you?” I try, raising my voice to be heard over the constant buzz of chakra. She’s not emitting any kind of concentrated chakra wave, but the second she does and if the hit connects, I’m dead. “Easy, now…”

Kei lifts her arm, and the growl intensifies into a sharp snarl of anger—or maybe pain. Either way, I can see the Tailed Beast chakra concentrating, and reach for the Arc Jump to get out of the way before she reflexively murders me—

And then Obito pops out of the air in front of me, followed immediately by the Hokage. By Sensei. A Sensei with a slug on his shoulder, but it’s him.

Sensei takes one look at the situation and immediately Body Flickers to me—with Obito in hand and somehow Horse is right there—and uses the Flying Thunder God jutsu to get us out of Kei’s range.

From a distance, we hear Kei’s Tailed Beast voice rise from a snarl into a scream of pain, and I might kick Sensei in the shin to get him to let go of me. Even if, in the barrier, a shockwave throws a huge cloud of dirt into the air.

He winces and drops me. “What in the world are you thinking right now?” Sensei demands anyway.

“What even just happened?” Obito asks, staring back in the direction we came from.

Which is inside the barrier. Inside of the shining golden dome, a black blast of energy hits the apex of the structure and explodes harmlessly inside of it. Kushina’s barriers are something else, but the question after that is “where is Kushina?”

Kushina, as it turns out, is about a kilometer away—with the golden chains still trailing from her back—and still chasing Orochimaru.

“Kei’s seal is breaking,” I tell Sensei. I never use the “don’t argue with me” tone on him, but this seems like an appropriate time to start. “I need a way to either strengthen it or shut it down.”

“The Sharingan works, doesn’t it?” Sensei asks.

“But we told—we promised Isobu-san that we wouldn’t do that to him,” Obito says. His eye is wide, and it’s almost like he’s almost unable to understand why it might be necessary to save human life.

I wince. I do understand. Both sides of this. Dammit. I would do nearly anything to save Kei...but I won’t do that. Ripping out the Three-Tailed Beast’s mind and supplanting it with my will? Never again.

“I have this. But you’ll have to get close enough to use it,” Sensei tells me, even as he produces a Chakra Suppressing Seal for me out of his kunai holster. Katsuyu also slides across his arm and onto my shoulder. As I adjust to the slug’s presence on my shoulder blades and take the seal, Sensei says, “And I won’t be helping.”

“Orochimaru?” Obito asks.

Sensei nods. As I watch, his eyelids turn orange and his irises are replaced by square pupils on a
He won’t have a chance to hurt any of you again.”

Considering that Sensei doesn’t even really know what Orochimaru did, I still manage to feel oddly comforted by that thought. But it’s not time for chitchat.

“Obito, get me back in there,” I tell him, as Sensei turns away to chase Orochimaru with Kushina and the Nine-Tails.

Obito holds out his hand and away we go.

Obito drops me just inside the barrier, then teleports out. I don’t ask why, just like I didn’t ask why Sensei only gave me the one Chakra Suppressing Seal in the first place. Obito’s abilities are too useful somewhere else.

I guess I should have some pride in Sensei’s trusting that I can avoid getting killed long enough to use this seal on Kei, but I’m too worried to think about it much.

“Kakashi-san, should you really be attempting this on your own?” Katsuyu asks, from my back. She at least remembers me from last time, then.

“Probably not,” I admit, but I make my way back toward Kei anyway. Obito’s eye is open, but I only need it to mark my range for the Arc Jump. I don’t plan on using the Mangekyō Sharingan form on the Three-Tails.

Kei’s V2 cloak is rippling and heaving, and the Sharingan helpfully informs me that the seal has destabilized even more, over the course of a minute at most. What is left of Kei’s chakra only surfaces briefly in the roiling storm that belongs to the Three-Tails, and every second I waste just looking at them means that they get closer and closer to dying.

She looks up at me as I approach her, by sliding down the new crater wall. At the same time, Katsuyu snakes up from my shoulder blades so she’s wrapped around the back of my neck like some kind of bizarre, squishy scarf.

“As soon as the chakra dies down, please heal her,” I tell Katsuyu under my breath.

“Of course, Kakashi-san,” says the slug, and I can almost hear a bit of affront in her tone.

I turn my attention away from Katsuyu and back toward Kei. She’s making that low animalistic rumble, but there’s a new tone to it now. Somewhere in the back of the cacophony, there’s a few tones that sound like...notes? A bit like whale song. Something...sad like that.

They had better not be saying goodbye.

“Kei, do you remember what I told you a few days ago?” I ask, raising my voice a little.

Kei’s growling pauses for a moment, and she tilts her spiky head to listen in. The whale song noise doesn’t stop, and her V2 chakra cloak continues to writhe against her form...but it’s progress. She can hear me.

“The last time you were in the village,” I begin, concentrating on keeping my body language relaxed and nonthreatening, “You said you...kept a secret.”

Kei’s still listening. Good. I might be able to pull this off. As long as she’s not attacking, I might be able to get close enough to stick the Chakra Suppressing Seal on her before she kills me.
“Do you remember what I told you then?” I ask her. Moving with all the haste of a glacier, I edge closer to Kei.

Kei lowers her head. Though light is sucked in by the chakra cloak, I can almost picture those horns lowering in preparation for a nasty tackle.

“That no matter what you thought,” I go on, after a brief pause to make sure she’s not going to just charge and impale me, “I still care about you. Even after we haven’t talked for a year. Even after how much pain you’re in. Think back, please…”

Kei’s empty gaze focuses on me, and her maw hangs open—but she’s not snarling. Blood drips down from those jagged chakra-teeth, but aside from her breathing, she doesn’t move.

This close, the Three-Tails’s power is overwhelming. My throat is dry, and when I swallow hard, it’s almost painful. Gooseflesh ripples up and down my arms, and every instinct I have is demanding that I run. I shouldn’t be here. I should be with Sensei and trying to fight Orochimaru, because I know from experience that I can. Not well, but I can.

Here? Kei could rip my face off before she even realizes what she’s done.

Deep breaths. I still don’t dare move too quickly, or else she might react to the movement and the results will be...messy. “If you can just hold still a little longer, I’ll be able to stop s-some of the pain. Can you do that for me?”

“Haaaaaaaaaaah…” is what I hear, and the exhalation comes with a cloud of steam.

I’m almost close enough to touch her. Just another few meters...

The V2 cloak spasms, rocked by another wave of pain, and Kei lets out a sudden shriek before throwing herself at me.

Shit! I use the Arc Jump and hurt myself to the other side of the crater. Lightning touches down and I land halfway up the dirt-and-mud slant in the earth, clinging to the slippery material with chakra for just a moment—

And that’s apparently not far enough, because Kei’s on me by the time I manage to open Obito’s eye for a second jolt. The Chakra-Suppressing Seal is somewhere in all of the debris, but it’s out of reach.

The V2 cloak gives Kei bestial jaws large enough to eat my entire head. I can’t help thinking about it, given that I’m almost staring down her throat as she roars in my face. A mouthful of blood flies out of her mouth alongside the roar and splatters across the front of my uniform.

It’s not that I’m pinned under her weight. I’m not. She’s not even touching me. But if she does, she’s going to give me chakra burns to feel for the next lifetime.

She lowers her head so her eyes are even with mine. I freeze under her fathomless gaze, as blood-scented steam continues to hiss through the jagged V2 cloak mouth.

If I don’t move, I’m dead. If I do move, I’m still dead. I can’t get nearly far enough away when I can’t pick out a landing zone.

“Kei…” What do I do what do I do what do I—

Kei’s mouth opens again. “Graaaaah…”
Then I do something stupid.

I reach up and wrap my arms around her. My hands instantly start to ache when they come into contact with the bubbling Tailed Beast chakra, and the pain spreads into a kind of magnified stinging as it lances up my arms and toward my chest as soon as I touch her. Katsuyu’s influence dulls it a bit once she realizes what’s wrong, but it doesn’t stop me from pulling myself up so I can hug her fully.

Kei isn’t moving. Her head twists so her V2-cloaked face is nearly up against my neck, but that’s it. She doesn’t bite down, doesn’t try to kill me.

“I’m here. I’m here,” I tell Kei, though I have no idea if she can hear me. “Come on, listen to me. I know you’re in there.”

It hurts just to touch her. But just the idea that she hasn’t horribly mangled me yet—I can be here. I can hold on.

And then I burn.

The Tailed Beast chakra pours into me like I’ve somehow ended up inside the chakra cloak, feeling it sink into my chakra coils like some kind of venom. The sheer overload is going to kill me without Kei having to lift a finger, unless—

Unless—

I make fifteen hand signs behind Kei’s back, quick as I can, and both of my hands start to spark with a Lightning Release jutsu. I don’t have a lot of time, but I at least know how to translate chakra into a charge. And I know how to carry a charge, and how to get rid of it.

Avoiding Katsuyu and my heart, I channel as much chakra as I can handle out through my feet and legs, sending a thunderbolt straight down into the dirt beneath me. It’s all I can do to keep converting the Tailed Beast chakra as it accumulates in my coils, before it can settle and start to incinerate me from the inside out.

It takes me a while to realize I’m screaming.

And so is Kei.

And this time I can actually hear her, under the Tailed Beast cloak, and forcing my eyes open again lets me see that she’s downgraded—from V2 to V1, so I can actually see her under the reddish chakra.

I don’t know what is working here. Maybe everything. Maybe just one piece, and I don’t know what. Either way, I have no choice but to hang on.

And then Katsuyu—who isn’t on my neck anymore, and has been proactive while I’ve been pinned—slides up Kei’s back despite the remaining Tailed Beast chakra and places the Chakra Suppressing Seal in my hand. I snatch it up and activate the seal, and Kei’s overwhelming chakra finally, finally dies off.

Kei collapses on top of me.

I’m shaking even as I lever her off of me, rolling her off to my left while my chakra coils buzz like a beehive is inside me. I still can’t get rid of enough chakra—I’m still overloaded—but I don’t have
time to focus on anything less than an immediate chance of death. Chakra overload isn’t going to kill me so fast that I can’t make sure Kei is okay first.

“Kakashi-san, Keisuke-san is in bad condition,” Katsuyu says from her place on Kei’s chest.

She can say that again.

Kei is bleeding from her mouth and nose, and even from her eyes. Her flak jacket’s zipper is a mess of metal teeth, exposing a T-shirt that is nearly brown-red with blood. Almost every patch of exposed skin has been scoured raw, and her breathing is abnormally shallow thanks to the same damned broken rib from earlier. And if I look with Obito’s eye, her seal for the Three-Tails’s containment is almost glowing, red-hot and weakened significantly by this struggle for survival.

I have no idea how much damage she’s suffered, but it’s horrific.

This never should have happened.

“Kakashi!” It’s Sensei, trailed by a non-V2 Kushina. Way to be late. “Kakashi, what were you thinking?”

I put my hand on the top of Kei’s head as Katsuyu pumps healing chakra into her. She doesn’t open her eyes, but she shifts a bit when I touch her hair. Just a little. Just her eyes.

I don’t want to talk to Sensei. I don’t even want to look at him.

“Kakashi?” Sensei asks. He lands next to me as Kushina goes to Kei.

Kushina leans over Kei, and her long red hair seems to fall across Kei like a shroud. I hope Kushina is looking over the seal. There’s no other way Kei’s going to live through this.

I manage to keep my temper in check until Sensei touches me. Just a gentle hand on my shoulder, but with the Three-Tails’s chakra in my blood and the string of recent events in my head, I can’t take it anymore. Sensei might think I’m in shock, and I might be.

But what I feel is raw, blistering anger.

“How could you send her out here, Sensei?” I demand, lifting my head and glaring at him with both eyes wide open. “When you knew there was a chance that something—anything—could go wrong after you hurt her?! If it wasn’t Orochimaru out of nowhere, would you have even come out here?”

Sensei reels back like I’ve punched him.

“And all this, over what? Rumors? Hearsay? For fuck’s sake, Sensei,” I snarl in his face, “Kei needed to be with us, in the village, more than she needed to be sent away because it was politically convenient.”

Kushina is ignoring us. Maybe she agrees with me.

Katsuyu is crawling up my leg.

“And now, she might die,” I tell Sensei in a low, vicious tone. “And after what she told us? After everything she’s been through, you just. Didn’t. Listen.”

And Sensei doesn’t argue. He draws a deep, shuddering breath, but he can’t meet my eyes and he doesn’t try after the first attempt. His gaze is over to the right, fixed on Kushina and Kei.
I wish he wouldn’t. It’s so much easier to be pissed off at him when I can’t see how much guilt is weighing him down.

“Kei-chan,” Kushina says quietly, as Kei shifts. “Come on, wake up. You’re okay now.”

Kei groans.

“Where’s Orochimaru?” I ask Sensei.

Sensei shakes his head, still looking at Kei. “We had to break off the chase.”

What? “Why?”

“Because we needed to come back for you both.” I stare at him when he says it. Kei and I were fine.

...Not fine. But that means if Orochimaru didn’t run, he’s still around here. He’s still a threat. I’m not ungrateful that Kushina is fixing Kei’s seal and I know I couldn’t have done it myself, but to leave Orochimaru to do whatever he wants? Now?

“Kurama heard Isobu scream,” Sensei tells me, almost desperately. “We all had a stake in coming back, Kakashi. I couldn’t just let both of you die, either.”

I want to argue with that. But I can’t. Not when Kurama’s just saved Kei’s life. Sensei wouldn’t have had a choice—there was no time for vengeance. If he has to choose between killing a man and saving his students, I like to think that there isn’t really a choice at all.

Maybe I’m just angry that I couldn’t make a single kill count against that bastard.

Kushina helps Kei sit up, and her head droops toward Kushina’s shoulder in total exhaustion.

“How are you feeling?” Sensei asks her.

I think that’s...yes, Kushina is glaring at him over the top of Kei’s head.

“...Tired,” Kei mumbles. “...hurts...” After a moment, she pushes Kushina back. “Wanna...try...”

Let’s see if she can stand. Or at least try to.

Kei does make it to her feet, shakily. Sensei stands to help her when she stumbles.

One moment, everything’s fine. Kei’s wobbly and sickly-looking, but she’s up. She’s using Sensei’s arm for support, and I can see the relief in everyone’s faces. It’s real. She’s okay.

And then Kei shoves Sensei to the ground.

Something silver streaks over his head, and then it’s in Kei’s chest.

It’s—that is a sword. There’s a sword in Kei’s chest, embedded up to the hilt.

No no no no this isn’t happening this is just a dream, it’s not real, please don’t let it be real—

Her eyes are wide, but not surprised. She coughs a spray of blood across Sensei and me and—

My head jerks around until I’m looking in the direction the blade came from, just as it jerks out of Kei’s chest and flies back—

It’s Orochimaru.
It’s Orochimaru, and he’s here, and I want to—I have to—

Obito’s eye starts to bleed, and I reach for the man in a way I don’t even really understand, but anger’s burning through me like a live wire, and this chakra—

DIE!

Almost a hundred meters off, the air twists and Orochimaru’s head vanishes right off his shoulders. And the Sword of Kusanagi drops soundlessly to the valley floor, splashing Kei’s blood over the grass.

Kei sinks to her knees, even as Kushina rushes forward to catch her and Sensei teleports out again. Katsuyu throws herself off my shoulder and toward Kei and—

It doesn’t matter if Orochimaru’s dead.

I’m too late.

People appear after that, Obito among them. I hear voices I should recognize, but I can’t work up the energy to care. My chakra is back down to within normal limits, and I’m alive after using Kamui…

Something thumps to the ground next to me, even as Obito pulls me to my feet.

Orochimaru’s head, with his tongue sticking out of his mouth and his eyes still wide in bewilderment, stares up at me. Mocking me. His last laugh worked.

I kick the head down the hill. Laugh at that, you bastard.

“...one of the most unusually wounded minds I’ve ever seen…”

“...And that’s just a surface scan?”

“...sorry, Hokage-sama, but that’s the way it is…”

“...any way to help her?”

“...probably done enough.”

Someone was holding my hand.

It was warm.

And I slept on.
December 10th

Raidō

I don’t remember what happened after confronting Orochimaru.

I remember waking up in a darkened hospital room, all my gear gone, and being treated by an animal-masked medic. Being told that I need to be ready to be woken up every few hours, until the experts feel safe letting me go home.

It takes me hours to recover meaningfully, drifting in and out of consciousness and post-concussion nausea. Lizard visits, and so does Horse and even Tsunade, and between all three of them I shake off the worst of the effects about fifteen hours after being dropped off by...someone?

I can’t remember how I got here.

I know I have to be in the hospital—in our hospital—because everything smells the same, and I hear familiar voices. I have a pounding headache, and I still can’t make it all the way down a hallway without having to stop and lean against a wall to wait out the intermittent waves of nausea and light sensitivity. But the most worrying thing is that there’s a chunk of my memory that’s just gone.

I hate concussions.

But I do remember Orochimaru rushing me. I remember fighting him before that, Kokutō out and unable to land a solid hit, and Kakashi and Kei making sure the man didn’t kill Rat or me. I remember realizing, instantly and with a quiet sort of horror, that there was no way to win. That I’d never get my revenge, not even as a petty last strike against the man who killed Genma. That the best I’d be able to do is spit in Orochimaru’s face before he killed me.
I can’t get Genma’s face out of my head. All I can think of is the strangled wheeze as he tries to breathe, about the sunken look to his ribs and the way his arm bent the wrong way with the bones exposed…

I don’t know if he’s even alive.

I can’t—I don’t know if I want to survive if I—

Fuck.

Around eight in the morning, I finally get enough thoughts in order to ask. They’ve been jumbled by panic and the throbbing in my head, but concern for Genma is at least consistent. It forces me to pull myself halfway together.

“Genma Shiranui?” The receptionist checks his patient intake records, going through a list of names that goes through the four pages in tiny script. “Oh. He’s in surgery right now. Who are you again?”

The sense of relief—he’s not dead he’s not dead—lasts long enough for the word “surgery” to sink in. I know Genma’s injuries were serious, but…

I don’t know. I can’t think.

“Raidō Namiashi. His, um, next of kin or something. I…can’t remember the term.” I hold up my hospital bracelet, which sort of disappears under my uniform sleeves. Pretty sure it means I’m concussed and not at my best, but I generally don’t pay attention to color-coded paper in this context.

“I know what you mean,” the receptionist says. “You can wait in that room over there. It has snacks and tea, though your stomach may not want to handle it.”

“Thanks,” I say reflexively, and wander over to a waiting room.

The waiting room in question is beige and features both a painting of a fruit bowl and a bowl of actual fruit on the low table. I sink into a chair and pick up a winter apple, turning it over and over in my hands. I’m not hungry—the entire idea of eating makes me feel sick—but I need something to keep my hands occupied.

I’m still not allowed to leave the hospital, so what else can I do? Sit here and wait.

“Hey, here,” says a voice, and I look up. It’s Ebisu.

He looks…better. He’s replaced his beat-to-shit uniform with another one, so I guess he’s gone home since arriving in Konoha and me wandering out of my daze. The glasses he’s wearing aren’t cracked, either, and he looks like he’s scrubbed himself raw to get his teammates’ blood off of his skin.

I take the offered cup of water, but mostly I just stare at it. The thought of eating or drinking anything, even though I know I have to, makes my stomach turn over.

“How’ve you been?” I ask him. My eyes are sort of squinted against the hospital fluorescent lights, so I can’t really look directly at him for long periods.

“…Not great,” Ebisu admits. “I’m the only one on Team Chōza who’s still standing.”

Yeah. I knew that feeling, though I hadn’t stopped in on Rat before stumbling my way out of the ANBU wing. A pitched battle with an S-class shinobi wasn’t good for anyone’s health.
“Gai is recovering well, from what I heard,” Ebisu goes on, staring down into the depths of the paper cup he’s holding. From the looks of it, it’s the strongest green tea he could find in this place. “Just overstretched himself. He should be back to his old self in a few days, as long as he doesn’t try training in the recovery ward.”

I give Ebisu a sidelong look.

“I know. I’m here to keep him occupied when the medics don’t,” Ebisu admits. “But Genma…”

“I don’t even want to hear how bad it is,” I tell him, but it’s a lie. I desperately want to know what’s wrong, but at the same time there’s no way to fix anything from where I’m sitting. I can’t use medical ninjutsu. I can barely keep track of what I’m doing in between the thud-thud-thud of my heartbeat in my head.

It’s agonizing.

Ebisu must read my expressions better than I think he can, because the next thing he says is, “He’ll be okay, Raidō.”

I place the cup of water down on the low table and, while pressing my fingers to my temples to try and deal with some of this impossible headache, I ask him, “How do you know?”

“Tsunade-sama is the best medic-nin on the continent,” Ebisu says, with perfect faith.

“Medical ninjutsu can’t save everyone,” I tell him flatly, but my spirits struggle to lift up anyway. Maybe…

Ebisu rests a hand on my forearm, and I stare at his scabbed knuckles rather than looking up at his face. He should get those seen to, shouldn’t he?

Why do I even care about Ebisu busting his knuckles open? It’s not something I’d do, it’s just…something that Genma…

“You missed part of what happened, Raidō,” Ebisu tells me, cutting off my thoughts. “You didn’t see Kei-san when she came in.”

I could…sort of remember Kei at the end of that fight. Out of chakra, out of Tailed Beast chakra, and on her last legs. And then I got hit hard enough that I don’t remember much about the fight after that. Or some of the pieces before it.

“How bad was it?” I ask him. There’s a bit more emotional distance between Kei and me. I can ask what happened to her. I can’t ask about Genma yet. The words just don’t form.

“As I understand it, she took what would have been a fatal attack, for the Hokage’s sake,” Ebisu tells me, adjusting his glasses. “Kushina-sama managed to save her life.”

Kushina-sama can heal? Since when?

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“I don’t understand how it works,” Ebisu goes on, once he spots my puzzled expression. “But whatever she did, she did it for Genma, too. Otherwise…”

“They’d be dead already,” I say in a hollow voice, completing the thought. In a way, it brings home how close I am—and was—to losing a friend and…and Genma.

“But they’re not,” Ebisu says, and his hand tightens on my arm. “Don’t give up yet, Raidō. Genma
will—he’ll make it home. *All* the way home.*

I drop my head into my hands. Muffled, I manage to say, “I hope so,” and Ebisu falls silent.

I go home that night. Not because I want to, but because my hospital bed is occupied by a new patient—a civilian with a crushed leg that might turn gangrenous—and the ANBU medics and hospital staff alike decide that I can do better than crowded rooms and crying people everywhere. No one can give me an update on Genma’s condition, and it seems like the best option.

I have to bite my thumb and smear blood on the door to get past Genma’s seal-locks on the place, and then I step into an apartment that’s been abandoned for what feels like ages. I only got a day of downtime before the merchant assassination mission, and it doesn’t look or smell like Genma got anything cleaned before the Sorayama mission, either.

I moved into Genma’s Aburame-owned apartment almost six months ago. Landlord issues, I told everyone, and didn’t really say where I was going once I left my old complex behind. But I didn’t talk about Genma there.

I didn’t say that I missed him so much that I could hardly imagine spending one more day in an apartment that I didn’t care about anyway. I just packed up my stuff and left instead of renewing my lease. It was an easy decision.

Six blissful months later, and I’m alone again.

Now, in the still and silent darkness, the walls seem to close in on me.

It’s not like I haven’t moved in properly and made this space mine, too. There’s a second toothbrush on the bathroom counter, I have my very own weapon rack on the wall, and there are some takeout containers on the countertop that we both forgot to throw out. I keep my own house plants—bamboo—and Genma has his sealing corner where everything goes from normal to explosive.

But without him, shivers run up and down my spine.

I try to ignore it. I unfold the futon that we normally share, whacking the dust out of it as I go. If I go to sleep, headache or not, I can kill eight hours in one shot. And by the time I wake up, maybe there will be news about Genma. Good news.

It doesn’t work out like that.

I don’t generally get nightmares, even about my work in ANBU. I don’t dream much in the first place, which Genma tells me means I don’t have much of an imagination. Given what I’ve seen from Kakashi and some of my other teammates over the course of my career, I’ll take it. It’s by far the better option when compared to the strings of recurring nightmares that other ANBU operatives seem to get.

When I try to sleep this time though, I wake up within two hours. Even before that, I tossed and turned constantly.

I stare up at the darkened ceiling, unable to quiet my thoughts. Ordinarily, I sleep on my back and Genma spends the night curled against my side. Every errant noise in the village keeps him awake on nights when I’m not home, he says. But when I am, he drowns all of it out by pushing his head close to my heart and losing himself in that white noise instead.

My hearing isn’t nearly as strong as his. But I miss his weight and warmth and the sound of his even breathing once he calms down at night.
I sling my arm over my face and resolve to stick this out as best I can. It’s going to just have to be a rough night. As long as Genma’s in surgery, I know people are still trying to save him. I don’t know when I’ll actually be told if he’s out, but hopefully making it through tonight will just get me that much closer to finding out.

And lo and behold, I sleep badly if at all. I own an alarm clock (that Genma hates and “forgets” to wind) and it’s unhelpfully dead for the entire night, never letting me move past 4:03.

Then the sun finally comes up.

I dig through the fridge for something approximating breakfast. We forgot to throw anything out before our last missions, so the first task ends up being just to clean the kitchen out. Dump the old takeout containers, the old vegetables…

In the end, I have four eggs, a package of instant ramen, and a bottle of chilled sake. Not exactly what I was hoping for. Still, I make a breakfast out of them that at least isn’t going to immediately put me back in the hospital, unlike everything else.

Then I shower, and shave, and get ready for the day. I get my flak jacket—well, maybe Genma’s, but who cares?—out of our only closet. With some preparation, I almost look like I didn’t face off against a Sannin and lose. Sure, I have a bandage around my head, but Tonbo Tobitake has his entire head wrapped up all the time and no one ever seems to care about that.

I walk to the hospital instead of trying to go by rooftop run. It’d be the worst timing in the world if I managed to hurt myself literally the day after being discharged from the hospital with nothing more than bandages and a bottle of painkillers.

And while on my way there, I happen to take a detour through one of the few neighborhoods in Konoha where not every house is occupied. Some kind of water pipe problem scared the people who used to live on this road out to other parts of the village, so the area is provisionally abandoned until the pipes are figured out. Days turned into weeks turned into at least a month, so the result is that a lot of feral cats move in.

Sure, the district most known for feral cats is really owned by the Uchiha clan, but I’ve always suspected that the clan has a soft spot for the homicidal felines who owe them rent. Literally. They’re probably uncontracted summon animals.

And then I hear mewling, coming from a house near my side of the road.

Curiosity piqued, I fight a brand new headache as I walk over to the overgrown garden near a particularly pathetic-looking house.

I find a box in the garden, turned on its side. I sit back on my heels and peer inside.

In the box are a pair of mud-balls that have tiny little mouths. Looking closely at them, I recognized four spindly little limbs each, straight tails, and little round heads that might have ears involved somewhere. One of them lifts its head and mews again.

I’m pretty sure they are supposed to be cats. Or baby cats.

...Well, I can drop them off at a veterinary clinic before I go to the hospital. I pick up the box and the kittens in it, then continue on my way.

Good deed for the day, I guess.
December 11th

Rin

Obito appears as though out of nowhere, just as I leave the recovery ward. He smiles, but I can’t see most of his face. With both eyes bandaged, he’s been waiting patiently in the hospital for me when he shouldn’t be. I tried to send him home, but he refused.

Obito doesn’t quite have the hang of walking around blind, but he seems cheerful enough despite the handicap. Using Kamui as many times as he had, he got everyone home safe—at the cost of straining his eye so badly that Akihito-shishō and I both had to step in to help him recover. He’s a hero, yes, but sometimes I wonder if he has any sense of self-preservation.

Then again, given where I’ve been working, I can’t say that about any of my friends.

“How are they doing now?” Obito asks, as I loop my arm around his, interlacing our fingers.

“They’re...stable,” I tell him, and lean into him as we walk. Obito eases his arm out of my grip and wraps it around my shoulders, probably as much to make sure that I can lead him around as it is just for my sake.

Kei’s being kept in a sealed room until Kushina and the Hokage have had a chance to compare her damaged seal with what Jiraiya might know. There are so many toads involved that I had to give up counting. That doesn’t even get into the fact that they had to call in Hyūga clan experts just to see the damage that’s been done to the tenketsu in her left shoulder, where Kakashi said she burned a powerful seal right out of her body with Tailed Beast chakra.

Genma still hasn’t woken up. His breathing is better than when they first brought him in, thanks to some secret jutsu Kushina used, but I hadn’t been able to do much for him around all of the other medics. Lungs and skeletal damage like that aren’t my specialties, but...I would have liked to have been able to at least help.

All I can do is check on my other friends.

Obito sighs suddenly, shaking his head. “I can barely believe it. Who would have thought that going to Sorayama would turn out like this?”

Kei nearly died. And even in surviving, she’s not out of the woods yet, with all of those injuries and the Three-Tails to deal with. Kakashi’s being treated for chakra burns of at least two entirely different kinds, while Genma barely avoided losing his arm at the shoulder. Gai is suffering from muscle tears and severe chakra overstrain, thanks to his overuse of the Gates. And Obito? He’s overused his eye so much lately that he’ll be blind by twenty if he can’t get to regular treatments whenever he starts feeling the strain.

I’ve helped where I can, but in the end I’m as scared as anyone that it won’t be enough. Katsuyu and Tsunade’s power is the only reason that what we’ve done has amounted to success. Kushina’s miracle cure is still with her, and won’t be available until she says so. The rest is down to time and luck.

I hope Team Minato’s insane luck works both ways.

“Let’s go say goodnight to Kakashi and Gai-san, okay?” I suggest to Obito as we walk.

“Visiting hours are over already?” Obito asks with some surprise. With his free hand, he rubbed the side of his neck. “How long was I out there?”
“In the hall? About two hours. Then my shift in there was over,” I admit to him. “I didn’t mean to make you wait that long, but your eye…” I didn’t want to send him home, where there’d be no one to wait for him. Pointing him toward the Hokage’s house would mean that he would be asked to babysit with Tenzō.

“Hey, it’s fine. I didn’t even notice.” That doesn’t make me feel any better about it.

“I’m sorry anyway, Obito.”

“Rin-chan, if you can give our friends that much more of a chance, it’s okay if you forget about me for a bit.” The way he says it makes me feel slightly guilty simply because it’s so genuine. Obito doesn’t mind being left out in a hall like a blind old dog for hours on end.

I shift my arm so it reaches back and around his waist. “Thank you, Obito.”

We come to the recovery room where Gai and Kakashi are staying, and are greeted with a cheerful, “Hello again, Rin-chan, Obito-san! We have just been told that it’s almost time to go to sleep and focus on our healing!”

“Otherwise,” Kakashi says in a long-suffering tone, “Gai wouldn’t ever go to sleep.”

Obito and I enter the room properly.

Obito detaches himself from my arm to wander in the direction of Gai’s bright voice, his hands outstretched. After a bit of blind groping at the air, Gai manages to catch Obito’s flailing arms and guide him to sit on the hospital bed next to Gai’s foot.

I tried helping him with that before, but Obito didn’t like being led around if I was too obvious about it. What independence he has, like this, he treasures more than most. I’m just glad Gai is there to catch him.

For my part, I sit down opposite Obito, on Kakashi’s bed.

Then I take stock.

Checking the clipboard hanging off the edge of his bed, I read what looks like a laundry list of potential problems and dangerous unknown factors. Aside from chakra burns along his arms and chest, because of overexposure to Kei’s Tailed Beast chakra, he has internal damage from what looks like being hit by a literal bolt of lightning. While the palms of his hands are badly burned enough that Tsunade had clicked her tongue when she saw them, it’s the way his capillaries have been damaged that sets the other medics to worrying. Worse, the damage continues through his chakra coils and makes ninjutsu usage an extremely bad idea.

Gai, from what I remember, has an overwhelming number of micro-tears in his muscle from what amounts to overdoing everything at once. While the Eight Gates are a powerful technique, they also release all of the body’s natural limitations—like the ones that keep muscles from snapping bones as they contract. Gai was lucky, all told, and escaped with only a few compression fractures in his knuckles. He’ll be up and about within a day, if tremendously sore.

Add in Obito, and it becomes clear that these three have done the most damage to themselves out of anyone in the hospital.

I can’t say the same for anyone else here.

“How are you two feeling?” I ask them, while Obito bounces experimentally on the bed.
“We will make full recoveries, Rin-chan!” Gai replies, though the cast means he can’t make a proper thumbs-up. “Unless Kakashi is unable to conquer his distaste for hospital antiseptic and food!”

“I swear they’re the same thing,” Kakashi mutters, then trails off into a sigh. “Obito, can you use your eye?”


“I think I would forgive you if you broke into my apartment now and brought a book back.” Kakashi sighs again. “But I guess you don’t have that covered.”

“Shut up,” Obito says reflexively. I think Obito would be smacking his own forehead if he wasn’t worried he’d miss. Instead, he slowly drops his face into both hands and moans, “Why am I even friends with you?”

“Because Kakashi is a beautiful flower of Konoha and the glow of friendship brings you back!” Gai replies, and nudes Obito with his foot.

“I’d say ‘stop being negative,’ but I’d be shocked if I could channel enough chakra to make it work,” Kakashi says, letting his head drop back into the pillow. “You all right, Obito?”

“Yeah, just wore myself out. Twice,” Obito admits with a wince. “But everyone’s home now, and we’re getting better.”

I’m not sure of that. At least, not for Kei and Genma. The Hokage and Kushina are still working on her, and Tsunade has Genma in intensive care. Not surgery—not anymore—but he hasn’t woken up and there’s always a nurse on call in there. He’s hooked up to so many machines that it almost looks like we’re running his entire body for him.

“You look worried, Rin-chan,” Gai says.

I look at his earnest, concerned face, and absently tuck a strand of hair back behind my ear. “I am. I mean, I’m sure that everyone will be fine, but… I don’t know. I wish I could do more for you.”

“More?” Obito repeats. He reaches out for me and I take his hand, sliding my fingers between his after a brief hesitation. “You already do so much for us, Rin-chan. You’re kind, and you listen, and you’ve healed all of us here.”

“I just wish I could stop you from being hurt in the first place,” I tell him, curling my other hand into a fist. I don’t train to hit people. I don’t train to fight people, really. My job as a field-certified medic is to keep my teammates alive long enough to come home, and I cannot afford to be anything other than the last shinobi on my team left standing.

But am I doing enough to…to stop all of this?

“You can’t stop us from getting hurt, Rin,” Kakashi tells me, though his voice is a bit distant from fatigue. “Combat shinobi take risks.”

“You are very good at what you do, Rin-chan!” Gai said encouragingly, but it fell a little flat to me.

I squeeze Obito’s hand and say, “I just wish I could do more. Tsunade-sama’s summon is more useful than I am.”

Katsuyu can at least go out into the field wherever and whenever she has to, spreading Tsunade’s power to unheard-of distances for medical ninjutsu. I also heard about what she did to save Kei, even
though she was in so much danger and Kakashi had lost the seal by that point. In retrieving the seal when she did, Katsuyu saved both of their lives.

“Rin-chan, you can always get your own summon contract,” Gai says. “I have Ningame, and Kakashi has his dogs, and Keisuke-chan has Tsuruya-san.”

“I know Kei had a contract,” I admit, “but I don’t know much about them. I mean, it’s a physical scroll, isn’t it?”

Gai looked thoughtful for a moment. “You should ask around for more help finding a summon contract, but I met Ningame by using the Summoning Jutsu without a contract and ending up in the tortoises’ domain. I negotiated for a contract, and got the chance to sign it!”

I wait for objections, about the risk of running into hostile clans of summon creatures. About, maybe, the fact that I’m not really all that good at fighting.

The Summoning Jutsu is a B-ranked technique, with moderate-to-incredible chakra costs. But for its cost and complexity, it is the most versatile jutsu around. I’d thought about getting a contract somewhere before, but there are no suitable spare contracts in Konoha for a clanless medic-nin. And sometimes the animal clans involved are picky about their summoners, like the Toads are. They only need one summoner per generation, and are famous now for the power of the only two living signers of said contract.

But Obito and Kakashi consider the idea without laughing or protesting.

“The Summoning Jutsu,” Gai explains, “will put you into contact with the clan that suits you best. Knowing you, Rin-chan, I think that you will not have any difficulty in finding your destined partners!”

“Really?” I ask them.

“Yeah,” Obito nods. “I mean, I don’t know much about summon contracts, but I’m sure any clan you run into would be as nice as you are, Rin-chan.”

“Just be sure to be polite,” Kakashi suggests. “It never hurts.”

“...Can anyone go with me?” I ask, hesitant.

The boys all look at each other, as though trying to figure out if any of them have the answer.

“I don’t know,” Gai says. “I made the decision to obtain a summoning contract without informing my teammates or my sensei. But I think with a few precautions, you will succeed!”

Kakashi nods in agreement. But he’s already nodding off, so he doesn’t bother to say anything about it.

“Thank you,” I say quietly.

“Hey, if you need someone to go with,” Obito says, squeezing my hand, “I’ll be there.”

I need to speak to Akihito-shishō and tell him I need to have someone cover my shifts for the next few days, don’t I?

I’m about to get up and lead Obito out, so I can take him back to his apartment, but Kakashi makes an abrupt noise. All of us look at him as he forces himself to sit up, or at least get up on his elbows.
I let go of Obito’s hand and offer Kakashi mine to help him (while Obito leans back against Gai’s raised knee to keep his balance), but he waves me off.

“What’s wrong, Kakashi?” Gai asks.

“I just…” Kakashi trailed off, staring out the door with his normal eye. “Did anyone else notice someone walking past the door?”

I blink. Since when is Kakashi a pure chakra sensor?

“Well, I did hear a few footsteps. I’ve just been assuming anyone I hear is a medic,” Obito allows. “Rin-chan?”

“I’ll take a look,” I say, and then wince.

“Well, it’s not like any of us can really do that part,” Obito says cheerfully, ignoring my unintentional reminder of his current blindness. “But I’ll come with you, anyway. I can at least walk.”

And combat shinobi—even Uchiha—are always taught how to fight without using their eyes. It’s harder on him in particular, given the existence of the Kamui technique, but the idea of Obito coming with me makes me feel a bit better. I have no idea what’s going on.

“Good night, both of you,” Obito says as we leave. “Unless we get in a fight. Then Gai’s in charge if you get attacked.”

Kakashi gives Obito a dry look and says, “Just go figure out if we need to smash that fly on the wall.”

Obito and I head back into the hallway. With Obito’s hearing leading the way, and my shoulder to keep him away from walls, we make our way toward what turns out to be the hallway to the recovery ward.

Raidō Namiashi is sitting outside of the room, with a blanket bundle in his lap and his back against the wall near the door. He can’t get into the room to visit anyone inside, and I’m pretty sure he was discharged yesterday. He still has the bandage around his head, though it’s been cleaned and changed.

“Raidō-san?” I call out, but softly. Sound carries through the walls around this part of the building, and while most people in the recovery ward at this point are either drugged to the gills or unconscious otherwise, it’s still not polite.

Raidō’s head jerks up on reflex, and he immediately winces as his post-concussion headache makes itself known. “Ow…”

Obito immediately makes his way over to Raidō, sitting on the floor next to him. “So, what are you doing here past visiting hours?”

“Could ask you the same question,” Raidō says, and rubs his temples with his hand over his eyes to block out the light. His eyes are squeezed shut against the pain.

I lean down and say, “Do you want me to take a look at you for a moment? I can help.”

“Yeah, that’d be—ow—great.” Raidō takes his hand away from his face.

I apply a numbing ninjutsu to the sides of Raidō’s head, and then search for the cause of all of the
pain in the first place. Reduce swelling, reinforce bone, seal the skin…

“Thanks, Rin-san,” Raidō says, when he can finally look up at me without pain.

“No problem.” I sit back on my heels and give him an assessing look. “Obito’s going to walk me home. But why are you here?”

Raidō leans his head back against the wall and sighs aloud. “I’m waiting.”

“For somebody?” Obito asks from Raidō’s other side.

“Yeah,” Raidō says, and bows his head. Actually, no, he’s looking down at something in the blanket on his lap. And it’s moving.

It mewls.

“Is that a cat?” Obito asks, cocking his head curiously.

“Mm-hm,” Raidō mumbles, and he unwraps the blankets. Squished up against each other like peas in a pod, their fur colors intermingling, are a pair of kittens.

One of them is awake and active, with orange tabby fur and big green eyes. The kitten stares up at Obito and me with its mouth open and mewls again, then yawns widely. Its fellow kitten is mostly white with large black patches on its ears and its tail, and snoozes on undisturbed.

“I picked these two up yesterday,” Raidō explains quietly, rolling his shoulder as though to get some stiffness out. “And I guess I, uh, didn’t really let them go. I figured Genma might like to see them. Or maybe hear them.”

I frown slightly. “Genma-san isn’t awake right now, Raidō-san.”

“I know, but I can’t sleep,” Raidō says with a one-shouldered shrug. He isn’t looking at Obito or me, just staring off into the middle distance. “Might as well wait here so I know when he wakes up.”

“Visiting hours are over, though,” I remind him gently.

Raidō shifts uncomfortably. “I know.”

“Wait, you can’t sleep?” Obito asks, confused. “I mean, all of us are nervous about Kei and Genma, but…”

Most of us have no choice but to force ourselves to relax. Kakashi barely has the energy necessary to stand, and any worrying about Kei has to happen between circulating chakra in his coils to test his limits. I’m a medic, but what I can do is limited by my medical expertise and my precision, as well as what my superiors want me to do.

But this feels different.

Very, very different.

Raidō explains, “I moved in with him a while back. I forgot how to sleep there on my own, I guess.” He glances back down at the kittens on his lap, and one of them is chewing on his sword-callused fingers. “Genma and I have been together for two years.”

I can almost feel the moment where Obito’s thoughts stutter to a stop. He shuts his mouth immediately with a click of his teeth, biting his lip to keep from talking.
After a second, I ask, “Do you love him?”

Raidō raises an eyebrow.

“There, stupid question. Well, um, don’t tell anyone I said this…but I can let family in,” I tell him in a conspiratorial whisper. “But you’re probably going to have to sneak out on your own.”

Raidō pauses for a second. “I already snuck in, though you caught up to me. And I snuck these little guys in, too. I guess I just want to know if they’re a risk to Genma. I can bring them back to the apartment and have the neighbors—or Ebisu—look after them, but…” Raidō shakes his head. “I just want to show him something more interesting than the room’s walls.”

“Well, his immune system is fine, and his file doesn’t say anything about allergies. And animals are good for healing,” I tell him. “I’ll let you in.”

And once Raidō has been squared away, I take Obito home. If he stays on the couch, I can keep track of his recovery more closely than anyone else.

What day is it?

Kei

Everything hurt.

I woke up as a sort of solid ache, running deep into my bones and centered on a sharp pain in my chest. It hurt to move. It hurt to think about moving enough to figure out if everything was still attached.

But someone was holding my hand.

So I opened my eyes with difficulty, feeling that sleepy crust built up in the corners.

Huh. I’d almost forgotten what a Konoha hospital room looked like. It’d been so long since I’d spent any time here, the teal-colored walls had stopped feeling familiar. The scratchy white bedsheets were still the same, but I didn’t really have to open my eyes to be able to tell that much. But I opened my eyes anyway, and tried to take stock of what was happening.

Hospital room, check. Medical ventilator and attachment? Check. Throbbing pain thanks to meds wearing off like the traitors they were? Also check. All sorts of crap stuck to me, in the forms of IVs and monitor wires? Definitely check.

A familiar brown mop of hair by my hand, pillowed by the crook of an elbow?

I moved my fingers experimentally. While they were stiff and bandaged besides that, I got them to obey me. With aggravating slowness, I wrapped my fingers more firmly around Hayate’s limp hand and gently squeezed.

Check.

Hayate mumbled in his sleep.

How long had I been asleep? I remembered snatches of conversation that I must have heard while other people thought I was out, but not enough to say that I’d been awake. And if Hayate had been here long enough to fall asleep and not wake up and hit me as soon as I poked him…
I tried to think back. What was the last thing I remembered?

I was on my feet and saw a gleam of silver, just visible off the sunset, and Orochimaru’s chakra was there—

Oh. Right.

I tried to move my left arm and, for a moment, my vision went black from pain. I didn’t make a sound, but my hands clenched reflexively. The next thing I knew, Hayate was up and standing over me, but froze in place as soon as I got my eyes to focus on him again.

He looked down at the wires trailing from me toward the machines, then at the tube down my throat and the mask attached to it. It was like he was a deer caught in headlights, unable to decide what to do next.

His face crumpled. “I-I…”

I gripped his right hand tighter, unable to smile or do much else with all of the medical equipment in the way, but trying anyway. I’d missed Hayate, though I hadn’t been in much of a state to show it the last time I’d seen him. But I was here now. Sort of.

Hayate sat back down in his borrowed hospital chair with a thud, still holding my hand in both of his. He pulled my hand over, resting his forehead against the back of it, and I could see his shoulders shake with the effort he put into keeping his voice steady as he said, “I didn’t know if you were going to w-wake up.”

Unable to talk, I flexed my fingers as best I could and ran my thumb over the back of his hand. It was like trying to say I love you, I love you without words, but there was a thought weighing me down.

During the fight against Orochimaru, I had told Kakashi to leave me behind. So I could get Team Chōza out alive, I was prepared to give up my life and stall Orochimaru to death. And I would have died. The rest of the fight had been enough to prove that.

Kakashi had said no. He’d said no, and stayed, and kept me alive long enough for this.

"I was worried you weren't going to come back when the Hokage left to go after you.” I felt Hayate shake. His hands tightened enough on mine to hurt, but I refused to react. “The last time he had to fight, with you, M-Mom died.”

For a moment, I felt a burst of hatred that almost immediately morphed into the emotional equivalent of a frag grenade.

I hated myself first and foremost. As noble as it sounded to give up my life for my comrades, all it amounted to was stupidity if it hurt Hayate like this. He’d been at ground zero of my descent into a depressed haze, and he’d tried his best to be there for me. And I went and spat on that—on him—by not acknowledging it, by throwing my life away.

And I raged silently at Sensei, for putting me in a position where that seemed like the greatest idea ever. It was small, compared to how much I wanted to go back in time and change my actions, to reach out and cling to my remaining family like some kind of limpet with separation anxiety—

But I couldn’t. I couldn’t take any of it back.

If I could just fucking move my left hand, I could at least sign an apology. But no. My idiocy hadn’t
even left me with that much.

“Kakashi told me what you almost did,” Hayate said, though his voice was muffled by our hands. “And I’m proud of you, a little, but you scared the shit out of me.” He finally looked up, “I know it’s...it’s like a-a-an ideal thing, to die f-f for the Hokage. I know it’s y-your job. But I st-still...”

Shit. I want to be able I say that I love you, but I can’t—and I want to hug you but I can’t and I hate that. Please, don’t hate me.

I hadn’t even been thinking at the time. Like, I’d known that my duty was to protect Sensei on paper as well as just, like, in my heart somewhere. But the only thought in my head at the time had been that the sword was coming and that I was the only one who saw it in time to matter.

Telling Kakashi to take everyone and run had been a calculated decision. I’d still had enough chakra left to make that call. But to protect Sensei?

Just reflex.

I couldn’t move anything besides my right arm and I couldn’t talk, but I could move my chakra. So, with more difficulty than I remembered, I reached out with my chakra and pinged my brother’s.

He gave a loud sob, and pinged me back. He managed to avoid all of my wires and hugged me, and I brought my mobile arm up to rub ineffectual circles on his back. He didn’t cry into my hospital gown, but he held on like he never wanted to let me go.

“I’m just glad you’re home,” Hayate managed, into my shoulder.

Against his back, stiffly, I drew a character against his back. Just a quick I’m sorry, traced by hand.

“Stupid, stupid sister.” Hayate hiccuped. “D-Don’t scare me like that again.”

I’ll do my best, I thought.

It turned out that I’d woken up sometime around seven in the morning, because Hayate sat with me through the barrage of nurses after that. There were too many people around, and anyway the sun had finally come up.

I was still barely awake and in a fair approximation of agony, so no one asked me to stand up for tests. They did dial up the dosages on the painkillers once they checked my injuries for some level of healing, so I faded in and out through most of the morning after that.

Given the pain, I didn’t mind spending the morning pretty damned loopy. It just...trailed into the next day, and through at least one room transfer.

On what turned out to be the fourteenth of December, from the chart I noticed on a wall, I woke up again in the early hours of the morning. Probably around five.

And I finally realized that I was flat on my back.

Isobu hated that. I’d never been able to get a straight answer out of him about it, and had ended up chalking it up to his turtle components. Even now, after the shit we’d been through, I expected fragments of his thoughts and fears to be trickling down the line to me.

Where was Isobu? He couldn’t dead. Tailed Beasts were basically unkillable, with resurrection-based immortality because they dispersed into ambient chakra when killed until they pulled
themselves together. But I couldn’t hear him, and I couldn’t reach for his presence in my mind at all. It was like someone had put in a wall, keeping me from contacting him at all.

There was a reason for it. There was always a reason for whatever the medics did.

But I heard my heartbeat monitor start to wail anyway.

_Dammit._

To my surprise, Yamaguchi-sensei walked in a moment later. His chakra seemed to buzz with tension, but he relaxed fractionally when he realized that I was staring at him.

“Kei-kun,” Yamaguchi-sensei said when he walked over to my bedside. “What’s the problem?”

And he offered me his hand. Clearly, my brother had told someone that I could still draw characters with my right hand, even if my left had graduated from being painful to move to merely godawful levels of sore.

I finger-spelled the characters I needed and felt like a complete invalid the entire time. And I very much _was_, so I didn’t really get to complain about it.

“The Three-Tails? No, Kushina-sama and Hokage-sama banned its chakra from entering your system until you recovered,” Yamaguchi-sensei answers. “The problem with burning yourself with chakra, Kei-kun, is that it also nullifies your otherwise-impressive recovery rate. So stop doing that.”

I drew something else on his hand.

“Rude,” Yamaguchi-sensei commented. He checked my health via a quick chakra read through my hand, and he blinked. Then he threw his hands in the air and said in an exasperated tone, “Did anyone ever _check_ to see if you even need a damned ventilator anymore?”

I stared at him. It wasn’t like I could do much else, and I certainly hadn’t been awake enough to argue the point. Zonked out of my mind on painkillers and all that.

Yamaguchi-sensei flapped a hand irritably and said, “Never mind, I’ll get the staff started on removing some of these things. This is ridiculous.”

In relatively short order, I was divested of all extraneous medical equipment and shuffled to _another_ room, and this one didn’t look like the inside of the ICU. Instead of the place where casualties went to die (after all due care), I was wheeled into one of many recovery wards in the building. This one had two beds, the other of which had its curtains drawn. The lights were still low there, so it hadn’t taken anyone that long to get me out of there.

“Now, stay here and stop scaring everyone for a few minutes. I’ll have the receptionist send your brother up here as soon as he comes back,” Yamaguchi-sensei says in a deadly whisper that nonetheless eased right over into pure ham.

My voice sounded like gravel in a blender when I talked, but at least I _could_ talk. “Go away.”

He made a dismissive noise and barged out the doors, probably off to go terrorize someone’s broken leg into making a miraculous recovery.

For a moment, I enjoyed the silence. Sure, Isobu was locked up in my seal like it was Fort Knox, and I was still bedridden, and I still felt enough pain to remind me that I wasn’t dead, but...well. It’d been a long few days.
And then I had to stop ignoring the pair of chakra signatures in the bed next to mine. I hadn’t noticed the hospital chair on the other side of the bed at first, but now that I could move my neck freely and do things other than just blink energetically, I decided to shift a little.

Leaning over toward the other bed, I whispered, “You awake?”

“I am now,” grumbled Gennma’s voice from the other side of the curtain. “And I’ll just say it sucks. They won’t let me have any senbon.”

I snorted with laughter, even if it pulled on a wound I didn’t know I had and sent pain shooting through me. After a gasp and a moment to recover, I managed, “Did Yamaguchi-sensei offer you a cigarette?”

“Ice chips.” Genma sighed. “So, you?”

“Not yet,” I told him. “Just got the tube taken out.”

“Well, you’re pretty lucid for it,” Genma said. He shifted and, after a moment, asked, “So, I heard you got stabbed in the chest.”

“Just a flesh wound,” I said immediately, and Genma made a noise that could have been a laugh. It turned into a wheeze after a second, and I felt his chakra struggle to suppress a cough.

“Oh, ow, don’t do that to me right now,” Genma replied, though a bit shakily. “No jokes.”

“I can do that,” I agreed. “So. Raidō’s there, huh?”

Genma gave a long sigh of contentment. “Sleeping like a rock. Didn’t exactly seem like he did much of that while I was here.”

“Probably not.”

“You know, we had quite a crowd in here yesterday.” If he wanted to go with such an abrupt change of topic, I could let it go. No more war injuries. “Had to tell Gai not to do flowers. So he gave me a card. It’s on the nightstand.”

I craned my neck to look, and managed to just make out the words “You’re a beautiful flower of Konoha, and I wish you a speedy recovery through the power of Youth,” complete with flower drawing, on an upright greeting card. From the look of it, Gai had made it himself. I had to wonder if he’d immediately gone to create it once his Plan A was shot down.

He probably had. Gai was just like that.

“Oh, he brought a cat bed. It has cartoon fish on it. Did I mention that before?” Genma wondered aloud.

“...Why a cat bed?” I asked, though I was pretty sure I knew the answer.

I was sure Genma was grinning. “For the cats.”

“And here I thought you didn’t have enough time for pets,” I said.

“Well, given that my arm got broken in three places and my shoulder joint damn near healed into a fused knot made of broken bones, I’m not gonna be going on many missions now,” he replied.

The only reason I didn’t wince out of guilt was because of his tone. It was Genma’s way to make
light of anything he could find humor in, and as a result his jokes could sometimes be downright
cutting. Usually at himself.

“Anyway,” he went on, “I had Gai take it to his place. He’s cat-sitting the two of them now.”

I couldn’t quite think of what to say.

“Kid, I’m going to make a full recovery sooner or later. But two surgeries makes a guy a bit antsy.”
Genma sighed again. “I’m just glad I’m not going in for my ribs.”

And here I was, after getting basically everything except the heartbeat monitor removed. I wouldn’t
go into surgery again for mere pain, and being a jinchūriki—with or without direct access to Isobu’s
chakra—would still give me an edge over a normal shinobi.

“So what are the cats’ names?” I asked him.

Genma gave another embarrassed little laugh, which thankfully didn’t turn into a cough. “Sushi and
Kabocha.”

Pumpkin, huh? I’d never been the type to name my pets after my favorite food, but it sounded cute.
“Is Kabocha orange?”

Genma chuckled again. “And Sushi is black and white.”

And for some reason, the word “white” reminded me of something important. Genma would have
said something if Kakashi hadn’t made it but—

A thought occurred to me, sending a feeling like icy fingers down my spine. “Genma. Did—do you
know if the children are all right?”

Genma’s chakra stilled, losing all sense of humor. I felt Raidō shift, his sleep disturbed, and almost
wanted to retract the statement. But I needed to know. How long had it taken me to remember?

The others…” He exhaled slowly, then went on, “No luck. Trackers did their best, but they’re
just…gone. Hell, we couldn’t find half of adults who lived in that fortress, much less the kids.”

I hissed under my breath. Fuck.

“I think Rin-san said the three of them were in the hospital somewhere, but I haven’t seen them since
I woke up.” Genma’s voice sort of rolled right over me, as I sank back into my hospital bed and
started swearing in a steady stream, almost on automatic.

There was—there hadn’t been a way for me to ensure the others would be safe. I had to recognize
that, acknowledge it, and move the fuck on. I just—I’d tried, but with Orochimaru and Yagura and
Akuro, it’d been all I could do just to keep people I could see alive long enough to come home.

Genma had been a premier example of that.

“It’s not worth much to hear it from me, now, but Kei-san? You did the best you could with what
you had,” Genma said.

It probably shouldn’t have helped. The thought of what Kazuki and Tayuya and Miyu could be
going through at that exact moment was the kind of thought I didn’t want to have. But I really didn’t
have any choice. If there was ever going to be some chance of rescue, or reconciliation, or a bunch
of other R-words, I needed to be able to stand up to act on any of them.

And I couldn’t.

So I needed to cram those feelings of failure into a mental filing cabinet until I had the means to deal with them.

“I’m going to go back to sleep.” Genma said quietly, while I tried to corral my whirling thoughts and put them away for a while. “Please, don’t disturb Raidō. I mean, I know it’s hard, but neither of us can even move. It doesn’t do any good to focus on things we can’t change right now.”

He had a point.

I knew he had a point.

I still wasn’t going to be able to sleep with that thought in mind.

But, on Genma’s advice, I tried anyway.

I drifted in and out, waking every twenty or thirty minutes, until dawn finally broke.

If I’d been able to sleep, I might have just let my fatigued brain finally drop off to sleep, but anxiety and guilt kept me awake when ordinarily nothing should have been able to do it. I stared at the ceiling until the low lights started to turn on, slowly signaling that the day would begin soon.

“Raidō, wake up,” Genma’s voice said quietly, once his chakra finally signaled to me that he was awake and thinking. “If you want to hide, you’re gonna have to do it now.”

Raidō’s chakra signature roused after a moment, and I heard him yawn. Then the other hospital bed shifted, and Genma actually squeaked before starting to laugh helplessly under his breath. And while I wasn’t exactly known for having a dirty mind as much as one that went for doomsday scenarios, well, they were a couple. There were any number of things that could have been happening.

“I don’t actually want to know what you two are doing in there,” I told them as I tracked the chakra of people within the hospital. Visiting hours would be starting soon, and we had a non-Rin nurse heading our way. “But figure things out fast.”

Genma murmured something, and then Raidō’s chakra became muffled under a powerful genjutsu. It was probably the camouflage thing I’d seen from him before. And once Raidō was cloaked, the curtains around Genma’s bed rippled. Raidō slipped out of the room just as the floor’s head nurse walked in.

Guess he wasn’t an ANBU captain for nothing.

“Oh, you’re awake again, Gekkō-kun?” said the nurse, whom I didn’t recognize. She was of the same general mold as Yamaguchi-sensei, complete with the domineering personality and string bean build. The main difference was that her voice was higher, and I didn’t know her name.

“I’m awake,” I agreed.

The nurse glanced at my various monitors. “It looks like you should be able to stand having visitors, after breakfast.”

I made a face at the thought of hospital food.

“I know, I know,” said the nurse. “Nevertheless.” After a moment, she turned to the curtain around
Genma’s bed and asked, “Shiranui-kun, are you awake?”

“Yep,” Genma replied.

I bit back at least two sarcastic comments.

“Same thing I said to her, then,” the nurse said. “Be ready for a barrage of visitors.”

“Make sure to remind Gai not to bring flowers,” Genma called out to her as she left.

“A barrage?” I asked Genma, when the room was quiet again.

Genma replied, “Mostly for your sake. Me? I’m gonna be anesthetized or asleep for the rest of the day. Whenever they wheel me out of here.” He muttered something under his breath.

“Well, good luck,” I told him.

Genma ended up getting taken out of the room around an hour later, but most of our conversation sort of just died off after that last comment. I ate a tasteless breakfast while Genma dozed through the medic-nin prepping the area to wheel him out.

And by eight, I’d caught a glimpse of the immobilization rig they’d trapped his entire upper left side in. And then he was off to have that mess dealt with.

Five minutes after eight, I felt three bright little chakra signatures trooping down the hall. I put my empty breakfast tray on the nearest table and futzed with the bed until I could finally lean back against the raised back half of it. I needed to seem awake, for—

“Big sis Kei!” shrieked Aiko, as she led two more kids around the corner and through the doorway. She pulled her hand free from the nurse who had been escorting them around, ran, and leapt up onto my hospital bed.

“Whoa, hey, hang on,” I said, holding out my right hand to catch her. My left was still fucked (in that trying to lift it hurt like the blazes), so I didn’t trust it worth a damn. I was still waiting on some kind of soft cast.

Once she calmed down, I let her clamber onto my legs and pin them to the bed. She was followed by both Roku and Kaito, though I noticed that the latter had a yellow “Fall Risk” medical bracelet. Roku had one arm in a cast, but otherwise seemed lucid.

Roku helped Aiko make sure I wasn’t going to be walking anywhere, while Kaito needed a bit of help to get past the bed’s railing. Once on the bed, I saw a bandage wound around his head, and he curled up into my side like an exhausted puppy, leaning his head against my chest.

The nurse took one look at the pack of puppies I was dealing with and left, apparently convinced that no one would die in the next few moments.

I wasn’t that optimistic.

Aiko was twisting her fingers in the ends of her hair, which was four inches shorter than I remembered and without its usual cheery braids. She had a stitched gash under her eye, which was a rainbow of old bruising. She was wearing a hospital gown, like all of us, and suddenly seemed shy and nervous in a way she’d never really been before.

Roku was wide awake, unlike usual, and stared at me like he didn’t quite believe I was real and he’d
never see me again. He looked at me like he was trying to memorize every detail. And like Aiko, he’d clearly been punched in the face at some point during the Sorayama incident, but wasn’t letting that stop him from wandering around.

And Kaito? He’d never clung like this. His skinny limbs trembled against my hospital gown, and I wrapped my arm around his back. When I did, I could feel the heavy gauze pad that the medics had put over the remainder of the bite wound he’d gotten days ago, and the bandages they’d used to secure it.

I didn’t even have to ask whether I was their rock in a shifting sea. They’d already made it clear.

“What happened here?” I asked, as I lifted my hand to touch the bandages woven through his near-black green hair. “Kaito?”

“Kaito hurt his head,” Roku answered, when Kaito responded by burying his face in my chest. His tone was strange, almost like he was spitting out a reply on autopilot. But if Aiko and Kaito wouldn’t talk, Roku took initiative, “They said it might grow back white instead of normal.”

A little chill crept up my spine. When I had written the character who so resembled Kaito, his hair had been white. Entirely. There had been legitimate plot reasons for that, but now it felt like a middle finger straight from the Plot I’d been fighting for most of this lifetime.

“And the nurse said Kaito was a girl,” he went on, puzzled. Then he frowned. “Why would she say that?”

Kaito shifted, burrowing further into my right side.

“That, I don’t know,” I admitted. I’d have to ask. And maybe get someone yelled at. Instead of concentrating on that, I asked, “Have the other people here been kind to you?”

I got two nods. Kaito didn’t bother responding.

“It’s weird,” Roku said in a soft voice. “We don’t know any of them.”

“Konoha is—generally—one of the nicer Hidden Villages,” I said, but without any particular conviction. I’d pulled the short straw more than once in my second life, and mostly thanks to the people who lived here. And recently enough that the new scars were still raw.

I still didn’t know what to do about that. What to say.

I hadn’t...been in the best state the last time I saw most of them. Ebisu had probably let the others know that I had gotten better—or at least less dead, before replacing my feelings with overwhelming hate for a while.

I didn’t really know what to call how I felt, now.

And I had never addressed the elephant in the room before leaving, freaking out, and then getting run through. Namely, the details of my reincarnation.

And like a lot of decisions made while emotionally compromised, telling Sensei and Kakashi was one of those things I was sure I was going to regret.

“Big sis?” Roku asked.

“Yeah?”
“Can you, um, can you tell us a story or something?” Roku suggested, as he settled in next to me.

If I could use every story I’d ever heard of...yes.

“Give me a moment to think about it,” I said. I frowned in thought, leaning back against the bed. I had an idea, as long as I skipped a bit to avoid the name “Orochi.” Or I could just leave that villain out.

Well. I had something, and at least it ended better than most of the shinobi parables we were taught in the Academy. Most of those were depressing.

“Once upon a time, in a land far away from here, there was a god in the form of a white wolf,” I began, as the children settled in. “But the gods in this land had lost strength because the faith of the people had wavered, and the god returned to a world overrun with monsters, and had very little strength to fight them with. And so the wolf embarked on a journey to cleanse the land and restore human belief in the gods…”

I was probably telling the story badly, by removing the eight-headed Orochi with a lot of spotty editing. But for now, the kids could stand to hear the Orochi-free version for as long as they stayed awake.

The lot of them fell asleep a little after the Spider Queen was defeated, where the wolf saved the little dog Ume from being eaten and his owner Kokari from being left horribly depressed. Kaito remained stuck to me as though with glue, while the other two treated me like a breathing pillow.

With the kids asleep, I decided to doze.
Kaito, Roku, and Aiko had to leave for more tests around nine in the morning. “Do we have to?” Roku asked me, as Kaito quietly refused to leave my side. In fact, he dug his fingers into my hospital gown and hung on for dear life.

Aiko was already standing, her tiny feet in those uncomfortable hospital slippers, and she looked between Roku and me with wide gray eyes. “That nurse was mean.”

“Then ask for Yamaguchi-sensei instead,” I suggested. At their blanks looks, I explained, “He was my teacher when I was learning medical ninjutsu years ago, and he’s nice to kids even if he looks scary.”

“Really?” Roku asked.

“Really,” I told them. “And if he looks too scary anyway, or if he’s yelling at someone, ask for Rin Nohara. She’s not scary, and she listens. Yamaguchi-sensei is good for scaring other people, though.”

Roku’s eyes unfocused for a moment. “Rin...san? I heard that name before…”

“She’s visited you once, but it was a long time ago,” I replied.

Roku nodded. “We’ll find Rin-san.”

And with that, Roku gently pried Kaito away from me and, with only a bit of hesitation, led them after the nurse that had come to escort them to their checkups.

That left me with nothing to do except sit and stew in my thoughts.

Did the kids even know what had happened? I hadn’t asked if they understood what had happened at Sorayama. I could certainly remember having a concept of death at the tender age of six, but I was a reincarnation and therefore a complete cheater. Kaito’s parents hadn’t quite been killed in front of him, but all three kids had seen Chinatsu’s aides all die defending them. They’d been in mortal peril. That left scars, even if the children didn’t understand the magnitude of what had occurred. How thorough the Oto-Kiri forces had been.
And I didn’t know if the Chinatsugumi—the pure merchants, the ones who hadn’t gone down fighting—had mostly made it out okay. At civilian speeds, it would take them days to arrive in Konoha, if they were even headed in our direction. Until then, these three kids were at the mercy of Konoha’s charity, without any familiar faces besides me and Team Chōza. And Rin, but the last time she’d visited Sorayama had been years ago. They were in a sea of strangers, and would be for days.

And among all of the other unknowns, there was no way to know what had happened to the other children. Gemma had heard rumors, but that didn’t mean much given that no one on the relief team could have possibly known about the kids. I’d been the last one standing, and I didn’t remember telling anyone that we should have been looking for kidnapped civilian children.

Hell, I didn’t know what had really happened there, because there was a missing bit in the middle and the ending basically came down to me getting perforated. And even that part—the mystery of how I’d come down from a Tailed Beast breakdown, or what I’d done in it—was a total blank.

I clung to the fact that Genma hadn’t mentioned my teammates. If he and I were the worst off...well, it sucked to be stuck in a hospital bed, but I could live with that. I knew what had happened there, and that I’d recover in time. If my friends had suffered, just because I was stupid enough to get bitten by Lord Voldemort...

This was not a productive line of thought.

Luckily, it was almost immediately interrupted by a blue Konoha sandal hitting the swing doors and knocking both of them wide open.

The sandal was attached to a foot, which was immediately followed by bright orange legwarmers. And then the whole ninja stumbled in, bearing a pair of wrapped packages in his arms and a tortoise’s huge red shell on his back. Tied to his arms, he had also helpfully brought along a selection of paper chains and good luck charms, at least two homemade cards, and a takeout container. Unable to get up and help him with any of it, I watched as Gai brought everything he apparently thought was necessary for a well-wishing and grinned at me.

It took me a bit longer than it should have to realize that the tortoise was alive, since it didn’t react to Gai’s exuberance.

“Hello, Keisuke-chan,” Gai said, grinning from ear to ear. “I’m so glad to see you awake and lively!”

And I was just glad to see him alive. Probably wouldn’t be a good idea to say as much, though.

“I’m glad to be awake,” I said, and eyed his burdens with mild worry. “Are, uh, are you supposed to be doing crazy stuff right now?”

“My hand is in a cast, Keisuke-chan, but I am still mobile!” Gai replied. He paused for a moment, thinking, and said, “Actually, all told, I do not feel much worse than if I overworked myself during training. I must credit this to Rin-chan’s wonderful hard work.”

“Just be sure you don’t re-injure yourself,” I suggested.

“He won’t,” said Ningame, from just below the edge of the mattress. He craned his neck so he could see me, and added, “I won’t let him.”

“Ningame, I am not so irresponsible that I will hurt myself again,” Gai protested.

Maybe I needed to get them off of that topic. “Gai, what is all this stuff?”
“Oh! I have brought gifts to ensure your quick recovery, Keisuke-chan!” Gai said, and presented me with two signed cards.

I blinked and had to put them down on my blankets, since I could only use one hand to read them. My left still wasn’t doing much for me. As soon as Rin or Yamaguchi-sensei came to see me, I’d have to complain about that little fact, and figure out what the fuck I’d done to myself.

“Thank you, I…” And I trailed off once I got the card open.

The card itself had been designed with Gai’s usual flair, complete with little sketched shuriken and katana for a border design along the inside. The card itself was a light spring green, and left plenty of room for people to write their well-wishes and put their signatures all over it.

And they had.

“Get well soon!” proclaimed the card, and a cluster of signatures had sprung up around the message. I read the names with a feeling of floaty, but not unpleasant, numbness that came with surprises like this one. And yet, my throat started to close up and my eyes started to burn as I read.

Kurenai Yūhi, Asuma Sarutobi, Aoba Yamashiro, Kotetsu Hagane, Izumo Kamizuki, Anko Mitarashi…

Then my eyesight blurred too much to read the rest. I put the card down and dragged the collar of my hospital gown up to dab at my eyes. I didn’t exactly have enough sleeve to do it with.

When I looked up, Gai was holding a box of tissues for me. “There is another card too, Keisuke-chan.”

After I wiped my eyes again, I checked that one out. The second card was robin’s-egg blue, and contained another twenty or thirty signatures. A few stood out, just because I was surprised the people involved had bothered.

Himawari Hyūga, Mikoto Uchiha, Fugaku Uchiha, Shibi Aburame, Biwako Sarutobi, Hiruzen Sarutobi…

I hadn’t even seen half of these people since the clan meeting over a year and a half ago.

“I only got signatures from those who would not be able to visit you in the hospital immediately,” Gai admitted. “I’m certain that Kakashi and Obito wish to see you directly, and they are not going to be available for missions that take them outside of the village.”

“Outs—oh. Sorayama cleanup?” I asked, as the warm fuzzy feeling started to wear off.

“Yes. The Hokage wanted us to do as much as we can for those who lived in the village,” Gai explained.

“Gai isn’t going, though,” Ningame said firmly. “The refugee columns were Tsuruya-san’s responsibility initially, and mine. But we will not deploy walking wounded to this task. I put my foot down.”

“You did?” Gai asked his summon.

“Well. Sort of,” Ningame turned his head toward Gai. “I can tell you right now that you’re not going anywhere until you are healed, Gai!”
Gai gives me a helpless look for just a moment, but then he waggles his eyebrows to show that he’s not being at all serious. “Keisuke-chan, we do not know what happened during the incident, not in the detail that others do. But rest assured that Konoha is doing its best for everyone who was hurt in the attack.”

I wasn’t quite sure if I could trust that if it had come from anyone else. But from Gai? I could believe that he believed it. And if he believed it, then it’d become reality sooner or later.

It was just the kind of person he was.

“Thank you, Gai,” I said, and put as much sincerity into it as I could manage. He didn’t have to do all of this for me. It must have taken him hours to go around and talk to all of these people...and quite a while to get any information about Sorayama, if enough high-level personnel were involved.

“You have not even seen my other gift.” With that Gai picks up the long-forgotten package and, after a moment where he apparently makes certain that it’s the one he means, he hands it to me. “Feel free to open it, Keisuke-chan. I did not get you anything for your birthday, but I think this gift will be suitable!”

“I, uh, may need your help,” I admitted. I gestured helplessly at my stupid left arm and added, “I can’t really, um, use that much chakra.”

“No need to worry!” Gai said. At my nod, which he accurately assessed as permission, he picked up the package and shredded the wrapping paper in about half a second. Scraps blew everywhere from the sudden shockwave of air, because of course Gai still did stuff at immense speed when he wasn’t supposed to.

Ningame bit the outside of Gai’s legwarmer to get him to stop.

While Gai argued with his summon, I picked up the tangle of cloth to get a better look at it.

The first component was a pale gray T-shirt which had an image of Isobu’s big, spiky head slapped right onto the front of it. It looked like a traditional ink painting, but I didn’t know of any artist in town who would have drawn it. Pulling on the fabric experimentally, I realized that it would stretch a bit—just not over the image. Weird, but artistically a good choice.

And the pajama pants were equally interesting. Instead of just using normal, worn-out shinobi pants that I either dismantled or modified into pajama bottoms, I could now be fashionable and thematically appropriate while lounging around and not going on missions. Mainly because the pants were dark blue, with dozens upon dozens of bubbles on the fabric.

As soon as I could tell Isobu about this, I was sure he would get a kick out of it.

“I am glad you like it,” Gai said. With his good hand, he grasped mine and said, “I cannot stay for long, Keisuke-chan, but I hope that you will be able to wear these instead of hospital gowns soon enough.”

I smiled back, and pumped his hand once. It was a lot less violent than his usual handshakes. “Baby steps toward progress, right? Thank you so much, Gai.”

“You’re welcome, Keisuke-chan!” Gai said, and he picked up Ningame and zoomed out of the room.

Off to make the world a better place.
Heh.

I needed to get back on my feet to do that.

-

I got really bored within twenty minutes of Gai taking off.

If I concentrated, I could feel Genma’s chakra again, outside of the isolation room that Konoha’s medic-nin preferred for surgeries, but they didn’t bring him back to my room to sleep off whatever they’d done to save his left shoulder. As a result, I had no roommate and no one to talk to.

I’d read Gai’s cards four times each, and folded and refolded the pajamas he’d given me with some difficulty. I buzzed for a nurse twice, to no avail, and thus my useless arm remained useless.

I had to assume that there were more casualties. Sure, my chakra sense couldn’t easily pick out civilians compared to shinobi, but there were a lot of people in the hospital.

“Obito, I already said Kei’s just through—”

That was Rin’s voice. And shortly thereafter—

Obito hit the door face-first and knocked the swing doors open wide enough that Rin could slip through in his wake. It took me a second to realize why, and then I spotted Obito’s headband pulled over both of his eyes like he was trying to make fun of Kakashi and had missed the mark.

Well, eye and eye socket.

“Kei, are you awake?” Obito asked, looking around even though he certainly didn’t have the Byakugan to play with.

“If you didn’t think I was awake, why’d you barge in?” I asked, sitting up thanks to the power of adjustable bed settings. I mean, I could probably do it on my own, but why push?

Obito paused. “Uh.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Oops?”

“Gai told me you were awake,” Rin chastised me. “I told Obito we could come and visit. You shouldn’t tease him like that.”

I stuck my tongue out at them. I hadn’t had nearly enough time to joke with them both.

Funny how almost dying could change a person’s perspective.

“Obito, why do you have your headband that low?” I asked him, rather than pausing for too long and giving myself a chance to wallow.

Obito, after a bit of blind groping at the air, managed to find his way to the edge of my bed and sit down on it. He had to feel around to locate my knee, and then he turned pretty much in my direction.

“It’s kind of a reminder not to use my Sharingan until Rin-chan says it’s okay.”

“What’d you do?” I asked him. I didn’t...remember seeing him at Sorayama. But I couldn’t think of any other mission that could possibly make Obito overwork himself like that.

“I used Kamui...a lot,” Obito says sheepishly. He couldn’t see my reaction, but he hurriedly added, “I had a really good reason and we got a lot of people out of there all right, compared to what could have happened. I mean, uh...”
I sighed. “Obito, I’m not in any position to lecture you about reckless use of dangerous jutsu. At all.”

Rin sat down on my left side, mirroring Obito. After a second, she scooted so she faced me and crossed her legs to form a bowl with her lap. “I can’t really yell at anyone either...I mean, I did something dangerous yesterday, and I’m lucky it turned out well.”

*Rin* did something risky? “Like what?”

“It’d be easier to just show you.” With that, Rin bit the side of her thumb, gathered chakra, and then —oh, no way.

There was a puff of smoke, and a glossy black scorpion sat on Rin’s thigh. It had glowing green markings, huge pincers, and it was about the size of a cat. On its tail, someone had tied a cute, lacy ribbon just after the base of the stinger.

“This is Kyūri-chan,” Rin explained, even as the gigantic thing crawled over the hospital linens.

*Cucumber*? What was it with people I knew and naming their pets after food? Even as I thought that, it curled its stinger around itself and pressed its pincers closed and toward its head, then embarked on an epic journey across the bed.

It looked...*kind of* like a cucumber when it did that. With legs.

Actually, wait, this wasn’t a pet. “Congratulations on your summon contract, Rin,” I told her. “Is Kyūri-chan the only one?”

“No, she’s just the one who’s going to be observing me for a bit,” Rin corrected. “Once Kyūri-chan approves of me, I’ll be able to actually sign the scorpion contract.”

Eh?

“I got to speak to the mother of all the scorpion summons on the contract. She’s their boss, and she’s called Dokuyu-sama,” Rin explained. She held out her hand to pick up Kyūri, like some kind of favored pet, and cradled the big arachnid against her shoulder. “And all of the scorpion clan are her daughters and granddaughters.”

...How many babies did scorpions have at one time, again? I had a sudden vision of a picture I’d seen once, somewhere, of a mother scorpion carrying about thirty babies on her back, to protect them from predators. While originally the entire idea had given me chills, I liked to think that I’d grown a bit stronger over the course of this second lifetime.

Bugs just didn’t bug me as much. Eating them did, but I wasn’t called on to do that. Ever.

“Oh, and we brought you some gifts,” Obito said into the silence. “I have the scroll here—”

And Obito, after fumbling with the pockets in his jacket, managed to produce a storage scroll.

“Since when have you been able to use fūinjutsu?” I asked him, while he unraveled it.

“I can’t,” Obito replied. “Kushina-san helped me with this.”

“Oh, and speaking of help,” Rin said, like she’d just realized something important, “is your left arm all right?”

“In fact, no,” I told her, glaring down at the offending limb. “I can’t get it to move without hurting like hell. What happened to me?”
Rin paused for a moment, while Obito traced his fingertips across the inside of the scroll in an attempt to figure out which seal he was looking for.

“I don’t know how to say this…” Rin mumbled. Louder, she said, “But something destroyed three of your tenketsu points in that arm.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Is that all you have to say? ‘Oh?’” Rin repeated, and I knew I was in trouble. She sat up and almost snapped at me, saying, “Kei, the human body has three hundred and sixty-one tenketsu total, and I know you’ve done horrible damage to your chakra system before! Outright destroying your tenketsu could render you completely incapable of molding chakra, and you could have easily died if the Gates had been affected!”

I didn’t say anything. Instead, I sunk into my hospital bed and tried not to make any sudden movements.

Obito pretended to be busy.

“...But you’re not surprised at all,” Rin said, bringing her hand to her mouth as her eyes went wide. “Kei...did you know what would happen?”

I nodded.

Sounding hurt, Rin asked, “Then why did you do it?”

Hoo boy. Question of the hour, that one.

My fingers twisted in the bedsheets as I fidgeted. How was I supposed to...actually, Rin had told me the damage without too much hesitation. I could probably return the favor.

“When I was fighting Orochimaru,” I began carefully, “Isobu and I hit the limit. You know, of what chakra I can use from him before I burn up or something.”

Obito went still.

Rin gestured for me to go on.

“So Orochimaru jumped on that opening, and he bit me.” I gingerly touched my left shoulder, and the limb felt like particularly achey lead. I still couldn’t move it. “It’s probably somewhere in Anko’s file, or something, but Orochimaru can place a Curse Seal using his teeth. And the seal went right here.”

I didn’t remember what happened between that and the mental world, and then waking up to Kushina’s purple-eyed gaze boring into mine. But I could guess.

“I told Isobu I didn’t care what happened to the rest of me,” I went on, staring down at my lap. “So he flooded my system with his chakra until the...until the fragment of Orochimaru got burned out. But I can’t remember what happened in the middle, so I’ve just been assuming that the fuckup with my shoulder is on me.”

“Kakashi talked about a white snake…” Rin murmured, thinking rapidly.

“Sounds like a soul fragment to me,” I said with a half-shrug. “Orochimaru got a bit literal about his title.”
“Which one?” Obito asked. From what I could see of his face, he looked like he was trying to decide between being horrified at what had happened and concerned for my sake.

“He’s sometimes called the ‘White Snake,’” I told Obito. “And it’s something that sort of came up in the intelligence reports about him. His real form isn’t really human anymore. It’s more like a hundred thousand white snakes all crammed into one shape.” I shuddered. “That was what Isobu and I saw inside my head.”

“That must have—wait, you told Isobu to flood you with his chakra.” Obito reached over and grasped my left hand in both of his. “Kei, you were okay with dying? If Orochimaru hadn’t been defeated first—”

“I probably would have died,” I agreed. “Actually, I almost did. Kushina had to repair the seal before it just...broke, under all the stress.” Another one-shouldered shrug. “But if I let the Cursed Seal stay on me, I would have been…”

What in hell was this world’s term for a Horcrux?

“Each Curse Seal contains part of Orochimaru’s soul,” I improvised. Okay, okay, how to make this less alarming...? “But I guess that doesn’t really explain how important they are. Each seal essentially contains an, uh, a dormant form of Orochimaru. I think if you perform a specific unsealing ritual, the seals themselves can turn into another, whole Orochimaru.”

...Welp, so much for not making Rin look at me like I was about to explode. I only did that to other people, thank you so much.

It was a small mercy that I couldn’t see Obito’s full expression.

“And I wasn’t going to let myself become one of his spies, or an extra life, so I just...got rid of it.” I had officially made the entire business sound even more dire. Go me. “At the time, the most important thing to me was to keep him from getting any more footholds in this world. I...didn’t really think about what it would do to me to burn the seal off. It didn’t really seem to matter.”

And the next thing I knew, Obito and Rin were both hugging me. While the scorpion escaped onto Rin’s back in time, the scroll ended up crumpled between all of us, and my left arm continued sending out unhelpful pain signals. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from swearing, to remind myself that this was okay, I wasn’t in any danger—

Obito eased off a bit, giving my left arm a chance to calm the fuck down, but his arms were still around my shoulder and around Rin, and his face was against my neck. Rin had both of her arms around my waist and was careful not to squeeze too hard, and her face was squished between my shoulder and Obito’s.

It was like being constricted by a very warm python. They probably didn’t mean it that way, but I didn’t exactly have the world’s most intact rib cage, and I wasn’t at my best.

I still held on as long as I could without breathing.

But after a while, with the deep ache in my chest reminding me that it existed, I had to pinch Obito’s side to get him to let me up.

“Never, ever, ever say you don’t matter,” Rin said firmly, even as she numbed my useless shoulder with one hand. “I don’t—I wouldn’t…” She swallowed hard. “You introduced me to Akihito-shishō. I—he wouldn’t be looking after me if it wasn’t for that. And I don’t know if I would have tried to be a medic-nin at all without him, and you, and…”
“And I would never have even gotten this far. Neither of us would have,” Obito said, nodding as he picked up the train of thought Rin had briefly dropped. While Rin sniffled for a moment, Obito managed a quick, wobbly grin and said, “You can feel good about saving both of us from what happened in that other world. So don’t be so hard on yourself!”

“You did the work yourselves, mostly,” I mumbled. While it was true that interfering at the right moment had given them both a chance to work out their futures, there had not technically been anything stopping either of them from caving under the pressure of ninja life in a different way.

“Kei, I don’t think you understand how...abstract some of the things you talk about really are,” Rin said. “I mean, you mentioned once that the story you remembered didn’t really have you in it, right?”

I nodded. “Right.”

“Neither of us really know what it was like,” Rin said, holding up a hand to stop me when I wanted to protest. Her eyes were still a little red. “As far as we’re concerned, this is the only timeline, or world, or story, and you’re in it for us. You’re real. It’s the world without you that’s vague and unreal and...impossible.”

I froze. That—it wasn’t—

It wasn’t supposed to work like that.

This was supposed to be just an offshoot, a branch timeline, a world where things went right enough and I could just...bow out once my role was finished. Where I could ensure something resembling a happy ending would happen.

I wasn’t supposed to be someone.

Obito hugged me again, while I reeled from Rin’s choice of words. “So don’t ever think we don’t care about you. The world you keep talking about—it sucks, and we need you here so ours doesn’t. Don’t...do that thing where you go away in your head.”

“We love you too much for that, okay?” Rin asked, and started sniffling again.

I could barely hear her over the noise from my breath hitching, and big, ugly sobs started to tear their way out of me. It was like seeing Hayate again, and knowing I’d almost hurt him so badly, but Rin and Obito knew. They knew something resembling the entire story.

Rin and Obito stayed long enough for all of us to calm down. It took...some time. Longer than it had with Hayate, because we all kept setting each other off.

“Poof.”

And in my hands was a rectangular glass vase, with pebbles piled into the bottom half. Out of the top, three little bamboo plants poked out, with their long leaves flaring across the top of the vase. When I shook it, very briefly, water sloshed around the top levels of the rocks.

“I know you didn’t spend a lot of time at home,” Obito said, “but this plant doesn’t require a lot of work, and I think, um, having something to focus on will be good. And there’s no pollen, so Kakashi can’t complain.”
“Isn’t bamboo a grass?” I asked, rubbing my eyes. Stupid tears. “It does do flowers, eventually.”

“Sort of, but this thing grows so slow that it shouldn’t be bad. You can just snip them off, too,” Obito said, letting me go. Then he turned to Rin. “Your turn, Rin-chan.”

Rin dug around in her medic-nin uniform pockets, and produced a silver-wired pendant on a matching chain. The pendant was made of mother of pearl that had been carved into a teardrop shape, and reflected a rainbow of colors as it turned in the light. When Rin handed it to me, I turned it over and over in my hands, letting the chain tangle in my fingers.

“Did you make this?” I asked Rin. I had given Rin a box for seashells before, but I couldn’t quite remember when.

“I did,” Rin said. “Do you like it?”

“I do.” I didn’t own any jewelry, and I kept Mom’s wedding band in a box somewhere. This was...this was really nice. I didn’t really know what to say, but perhaps I had an idea of what to do. Fumbling for a moment, I put it on with one hand and hoped that it made up for my inability to string words together.

After a while, I managed to say, “Thank you,” which felt inadequate.

Rin and Obito each gave me another hug before they left.

The world seemed a little duller once they were out of the room. There was color, in the form of the bamboo plant and the pendant, but my thoughts were melancholy at best.

I slept again, for lack of anything better to do.

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Kakashi

The Konoha hospital clings to its patients, generally unwilling to let them wander off to parts unknown to recover in peace and quiet. Unless a patient can be released to someone, the staff’s general levels of possessiveness and paranoia regarding patient health mean that getting out is more difficult than it has to be. It’s generally more like trying to break out of prison than any other experience I can think of.

Luckily, I know Ten—Yamato. It’s still a pain trying to get used to his name change.

Anyway, Yamato isn’t a medic, but he is Tsunade’s ward. He has enough know-how to keep me out of trouble, or so the hospital thinks. One possible case of voluntary kidnapping later, and I was able to go home, get a new change of clothes, and feel a little more human.

Yamato does his best to keep track of me during that time, and is successful only because my injuries make it impossible for me to mold chakra worth a damn. And maybe because I’m feeling cooperative.

Now I’m back in the hospital, with T—Yamato at my side, feeling awkward at best.

“I can leave you here,” Yamato says, since we’ve been standing at the T-junction leading to Kei’s room for entirely too long. “You know the way there, right?”

Yamato focuses his cat-eyed stare on me, and for a moment I feel a lot older than seventeen. Bright-
eyed and clean-shaven and not remotely scorched or bruised, he’s been well out of the epicenter of the literal and figurative explosions. I’m not even sure if he wants to join ANBU as a teenager. He’s grown his spiky hair out long enough that it’s settled down and can be tied off, in a style that almost mimics Tsunade’s. Without the Senju-styled headband, he looks less...focused. More relaxed.

I wish I could say the same for me.

I still feel like a live wire. Between my injuries and the realization that Kei is awake, I can’t stay still.

But I can’t just leave Yamato staring at me. I sigh and say, “Yeah, I can find my way there. Thanks, T—Yamato.”

“If you have that much trouble with it,” Yamato says, “you can keep calling me Tenzō.”

No, I need to get used to this. “It’s fine, Yamato.”

“Well, shout if you need me,” he says, and leaves in short order. He helps so much during the day in the hospital that I’m not sure if the staff know he has more violent skills than setting up IVs.

I head down the hall, hands in my pockets, and hope that Kei is going to want to talk to me.

The last time we really talked was probably before her year-long deployment. But between the disaster of her return to Konoha, and then the mission, and then fucking Orochimaru, I can’t say that we’ve really spoken outside of the minimum required to get vital information across. That’s all.

And then there was the problem of Kei’s biggest secret.

I’ve never really thought about what happens after I die, to be honest. About what would kill me, yes, but not that part. There are powerful, dangerous techniques based on manipulating souls, so the afterlife—the Pure World—probably exists. I know there are fūinjutsu that call on a literal reaper of souls, and Kei mentioned something called Impure World Reincarnation, which drags shinobi back from the afterlife to serve as the summoner’s shock troops. It was one of the Second Hokage’s most notorious techniques, according to the Forbidden Scroll.

But Kei didn’t follow the call of a jutsu that perverted the spirits of the dead. She reincarnated normally, but from some place that doesn’t make any sense to me. A totally different world, where our lives are mere stories and misery is just entertainment.

I wonder if that’s what it’s like to be a god.

There are stories of spirits falling from the sky, being trapped in this violent world and unable to go home to the heavens. But I can’t remember many details on them. I just know that the spirits were miserable in the mortal world.

I can practically feel myself dragging my feet, and shake myself to get it back under control. I killed an S-class missing-nin not three days ago, and now I get the shakes when even thinking about trying to talk to one of my teammates? *Pull it together, Hatake*...

As the numbered rooms pass by faster, I continue to turn the puzzle over in my head.

Kei doesn’t...no, before her string of missions, Kei hadn’t seemed like a spirit dragged out of its rightful afterlife, or a heavenly being that crashed into this world. She’d just been, well, Kei. A little silly, willing to play along with jokes, highly protective of her friends....

Well, that last part hasn’t changed. Hokage Guard or not, Kei always puts everyone else first.
And then there was the crash.

I don’t know if the situation is recoverable. I don’t know if Kei will go back to being hollowed-out and silent now that she’s back in Konoha.

But I have to see her. I’m at the door, so I just need to…

“Kakashi?”

Sweat breaks out on my forehead. Anything I want to say just flies right out of my head.

I push the door open anyway.

Kei is sitting up in her hospital bed with her left arm in a sling. She looks like she was crying relatively recently, and her hair looks like she’s been spending too much time asleep, but she’s aware and active and nearly normal. Her skin’s entirely grown back, and aside from her arm she doesn’t seem to be in any particular pain.

It’s better than I hoped for.

“Morning,” I greet her, as I cross the room to grab one of the visitor chairs.

“Just sit on the bed, Kakashi. Everyone else has,” Kei suggests.

A quick sniff confirms that. Under the pervasive, lingering odor of iodine-based disinfectants and whatever lemon-scented cleaner the hospital staff uses, I can smell seven other people. Obito and Rin are obvious, and recent, but I can also smell Genma and Raidō, even if they were over there and not on Kei’s bed. And then there are three strange, foreign scents, which remind me of Sorayama’s volcano.

So the children Obito brought back here did make it. I’d wondered about that.

I sit down on the edge of the bed, debating briefly if I should scoot closer before deciding against it. I need a bit of distance.

Kei doesn’t say anything for a long moment. She twists the blanket up between her fingers and doesn’t meet my eye. I don’t quite know what to say either, so I dig around in my pockets for the thing I meant to give her and hope it breaks the ice.

I look around the room. On top of the usual Gai-made cards that pepper the hospital, there is a bamboo plant in a vase, and a mother-of-pearl necklace around Kei’s neck. Obito and Rin are the only two people I can think of who would bring such specific gifts.

“Do you want to talk?” Kei asks, finally drawing my attention back to her. She bites the inside of her cheek as soon as the question’s out in the air.

“Yes, but I owe you this first.” I dig into my pockets and hand her the gift I’d intended to give to her almost a week ago.

Kei takes the gift, then unfolds it a bit with a surprised, “Oh!”

It took me a while to figure out what design to use for the armband. But once I decided, it was easy enough to sew the Konoha leaf symbol into the red fabric. This is the first in a series of five I’ve made so far. I just haven’t felt like giving them out until Kei gets hers.

“Hm, Kakashi, can you hand me that vase?” Kei asks, and I can see the spark of an idea in her eye.
It’s more than I’ve seen from her in entirely too long, so I snatch the vase up and hand it to her carefully.

Kei takes the bamboo plant and lowers it into her lap, preventing the water from spilling out with her knees. And with a flourish, she wraps the armband around the stalk of the bamboo, grinning and trying not to giggle. “I dub thee Mr. Ukki.”

Kei bursts out laughing.

I can almost feel the joke go flying over my head.

Kei stops giggling after a while, but she picks at the armband around the plant. She’s still smiling, though, so maybe I shouldn’t question it?

“I don’t understand what’s so funny,” I tell her.

Kei pauses, as though just remembering that I’m there. I see her hand spasm for just a moment, tightening on the armband. “It’s a bit hard to explain…”

I can’t stand to see Kei close herself off again, so I offer her my hand. *Come on, stay with me…*

Kei takes it. “It, uh, has to do with that story I told you about.”

“Do you want a privacy seal for this?” I ask. I have a few of those, just because I’m good at my job and I never know when I might need them.

Kei nods, so I take a privacy seal out of one of my pockets and place it on the bed between us. I have just enough control over my chakra to activate it, and Kei relaxes a bit once she sees that it’s one of her designs. Maybe this will help her feel a bit better?

“So I guess it’s not really a joke, exactly,” Kei says in a small voice, still toying with the armband. “Just…something I find apt, I guess.”

“I’m listening,” I tell her, squeezing her fingers between mine.

Kei takes a deep breath. Then, in a rush, she explains, “It was something from the story, you know? N—One of your future genin students gives you a plant, a little like this one. Maybe it was another weird kind of plant. Whatever it was, uh, the other *you* named it Mr. Ukki.”

“…So you can say you’ve gone back to your…roots?” I ask, raising one eyebrow. If I was wearing my headband, I’d probably look like an idiot.

Kei starts giggling again, and it’s far more honest than the last round. That session leaned toward hysteria.

Still, she settles back down eventually. “Thank you for that.”

“Well, it’s no apple, but there’s always a pun,” I say with a shrug.

Kei pauses, tilting her head to one side for a moment. “Well, I’ll forgive you for that, if you talk to me?”

“About what?” I sit back, tucking my hands back into my sweatshirt’s central pocket. She probably doesn’t need to hold onto me for the moment.

“If…could you tell me what happened?” Her right hand reaches up, clutching at her hospital gown
over her heart. In my mind’s eye, I can almost see that moment again, with Kei’s slack face and the
blood dripping down the Sword of Kusanagi. From the way her knuckles whiten, she can remember
that moment, too. “After...this?”

Where do I even start?

“Please, Kakashi.” Kei lowers her head. Her hand tightens still further on her hospital gown. “I don’t
—I don’t know how I’m still alive, when so many people aren’t. I mean, I should have...”

Kei trails off, because I put my hand on her knee and draw her attention away from her self-hatred
for just a moment. We don’t need to face this particular inner demon again, not right now.

So I tell her.

I tell her about Kushina’s panic, about Sensei disappearing and about Obito’s arrival. I tell her about
transporting the worst-wounded to Konoha, including those children Gai only told me about
afterward, and I spend some time discussing Kushina’s unique healing ability.

I tell her about activating Kamui and killing Orochimaru. While I knew I had the ability more than
three years ago, no amount of training could have made up for the chakra cost of Obito’s technique. I
knew that much just by seeing it in action the first time.

And now, it seems, I’ve tackled that problem.

“...I didn’t realize you were—I mean, of course you’d be worried, but...” Kei shakes her head. “I’m
sorry. I knew I was going to do something dumb and I didn’t warn you.”

“You were doing your job,” I tell her. *Shit,* I didn’t mean to cause her more pain. “Kei, you know all
of us are—no, wait, you didn’t hear what I did.”

“What you did?” Kei asks. “But—”

“You were—you and the Three-Tails went insane, just from the pain,” I say quickly, trying to stave
off the inevitable. I have a pretty good idea of what her reaction is going to be once I run out of ways
to describe the events leading up to the dumbest moment of my life. Maybe putting it off will lessen
the impact? “I lost the Chakra-Suppressing Seal Sensei gave me, but I still wanted to try talking.
It...didn’t work.”

“Kakashi, what did you do?” Kei asks, sharper than I expect.

*Maybe* I shouldn’t try to bluster my way through a lie in front of someone who’s known me since I
was nine.

Might as well get it over with. It’s not as though I haven’t already said everything she could possibly
say about *that* particular flash of brilliance. “After talking didn’t pan out, I ended up pinned. I was
already low on chakra, and...emotionally compromised”—which is a great way of downplaying
sheer desperation—“so I hugged you.”

Kei stares at me.

Yeah, that is about what I thought her reaction would be.

And yet I still wince inwardly as Kei says, “You idiot.”

“Way ahead of you there,” I tell her, masking my discomfort with a shrug. I realized my choice was
a stupid one basically as soon as the idea popped into my head. “I called myself every name in the book when I did it.”

“But why did you think that hugging a berserk jinchūriki would—” Kei cuts herself off, shaking her head. “You could’ve died.”

Like that would have stopped me. I didn’t—there was no way I would have left Kei to suffer like that. I love her too much to walk away. Ever. “That was a risk I was willing to take.”

Kei falls silent.

When Kei doesn’t look like she has anything else to add, I go on, “I don’t—the Three-Tails did something, there, and used me like a lightning rod.” After a moment, I started picking at the bandages on my hands, and I can almost feel Kei’s eyes focusing on them. “The medics said that the burns here are from redirecting Orochimaru’s lightning, but my chakra coils… I guess the Three-Tails needed to get rid of all of the chakra before the seal broke down. I got overloaded, badly, and the medics say I won’t be able to take missions for a month.”

Kei shrinks in on herself the more I talk, and I reach out to her. She stares at the bandages on my hands for a long while, and then grasps it anyway. After a moment, I put my other hand over hers, and she doesn’t pull back.

“I don’t regret doing it,” I tell her, even as her head droops forward and her hair covers her face. I can’t see her expression. “It was stupid, and reckless, but I couldn’t think of anything else to do.”

“...Well, as long as we’re on the same page,” Kei mumbles, drawing her knees up toward her chest.

I don’t know how to help. I can probably change the subject to something lighter, but I can’t think of anything in the moment that won’t sound completely stupid. And there are things I do need to talk to Kei about, if only because they hurt her so badly the last time we spoke. People keep telling me that it feels better to talk about feelings, but I’m in unknown waters.

So I take a stab in the dark. “Kei, can...can we talk about your story again?”

“Y-Yeah,” Kei mumbles. “We can.”

Okay, now I’ve dug myself into a hole.

I don’t have any idea how to talk about reincarnation, Kei’s situation, or Kei’s reincarnation experiences. She never talked about it before, and that means I don’t have any way to approach this. How would I even start?

“Did you hear me before?” I ask, since I can’t think of anything else.

Kei shakes her head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“A week ago,” I begin, and Kei freezes in place.

I feel the bottom drop out of my stomach. I don’t want to keep upsetting her, but this conversation just doesn’t want to improve.

“I told you that whatever you feel about being born into this world,” I whisper, “we’re all glad you’re here.”

Kei takes a deep, hiccupping breath.
I don’t know what to do other than keep going. She needs to hear this, fully, and not when she’s already been hurt or when she’s in too much pain to comprehend human speech. The third time has to be the charm, right?

I hope so.

“I know you feel like an outsider, or maybe...like someone playing god, but you’re human.” Okay, I know I’m grasping for a word that fits, and I missed. But Kei doesn’t pull away from me. “We’re all human. You were born here, and you belong here with all of us.”

Tears drip down onto the blanket, and Kei starts to shake.

I hope I’m doing the right thing. Please, please let me do the right thing here, for her. She’s been hurt too much, too often, and I can’t stand to see her like this.

“Even if you don’t realize it.” And then I fall silent because I can’t think of anything more to add that would be useful.

For a while, neither of us says anything. Kei sits and trembles in place, trying to keep a lid on her emotions, while I hold her hand and wait for them to pass.

But eventually, she calms down again. I don’t know for certain if my words have helped her, and perhaps I won’t until we talk about this again. But I can sense that this part of the conversation is closed, even before Kei lifts her head and her reddened eyes meet mine.

After a moment, Kei pulls her hand back and rubs at her eyes with her wrist. I settle back and wait for her to say something.

“Do you remember your prophecy, from the Great Toad Sage?”

I nod. Couldn’t exactly forget about it, simply because I noticed T—Yamato’s similarity to the figurative sapling. Small kid who makes trees. Sounds like a good candidate right there. The fact that Yamato’s connection to me meant ROOT’s downfall, over time, also seemed to point toward my prophecy being over and done with. I just had to keep moving forward.

Kei finally meets my eyes and says, “I think I found mine.”

The Great Toad Sage’s voice comes to mind immediately. “You will teach three dragon hatchlings to fly.”

Frowning slightly, I ask, “Are you talking about the three children who were in here earlier?”

They’re the only candidates I can think of at the moment. Though I’d wondered if Kei would teach Uchiha clan members, I suppose it makes sense that her baby dragons would appear in a group of three.

“Yeah, them. I-I never really put it together, until now,” Kei admits. She doesn’t even ask me how I knew that. “But the Chinatsugumi—they weren’t just merchants. You remember when we first met them, right?”

Uh. “I remember you being on the wrong end of Zakuro-san’s genjutsu bloodline.”

Kei shakes her head. “No, I mean about them being weird.”

“They are weird, yes,” I allow.
“They—they weren’t a part of your story, any more than I was,” Kei manages after a moment. She takes a breath and says, steadier, “None of them. But the important thing is that they’ve always been connected to dragons. It just seems to be less literal this time.”

“I don’t get it,” I admit. “Do you have some kind of...connection to them?”

“Yes.” Kei looks down at her lap again. “You remember how I said your world—it was a story to me? It wasn’t the only story out there. This one—it was mine. Not my life, but a story I made.”

How do I even respond to that? Kei—I love her, I know it as clearly as I know anything, but sometimes the things she says take time to even comprehend. Her mindset, in some ways, is truly alien.

But I know that the word “teach,” in conjunction with a skill, means that Kei is going to have students in the future. And I can grasp that easily enough. I may not know much about the children, or their purpose in Kei’s life beyond that. But if they’re Kei’s students, she’ll love them like her brother. They’ll be instant family.

If I don’t know these children now, I soon will.

As if to prove me right, three tiny sets of feet quickly become audible, past the buzz of the privacy seal. I pick the seal up off the bed and deactivate it.

“Big Sis Kei, are you here?” asks a child’s voice, and the door is quickly pushed open.

Three children in hospital gowns troop in. The tallest and oldest one immediately doubles back to lead the smallest child into the room. The little blonde girl ends up being the first one to reach the bed, but she stares up at me with wide, gray eyes as soon as she realizes I’m there.

“Who is he?” the child asks Kei, shrinking back.

The other two children skitter forward, huddling together with the blonde.

“This is my teammate, Kakashi Hatake,” Kei tells her. To me, she says, “Kakashi, in order: Aiko Kasai, Roku Chigami, and Kaito Yuki.”

Given Chinatsu’s clan name, I’m willing to assume that the blonde girl is the Kasai. The boys, though? My best guess is that the smaller one is Kaito, because the skin tone of the taller one doesn’t generally appear in Kiri clans.

Having been introduced, the smallest child apparently decides I’m not a threat. Kaito climbs up onto my lap, then crawls over to Kei. To my surprise, he buries himself into Kei’s right side, and Kei wraps her arm around him.

Then the other two follow suit, though neither one uses me as a ladder because I get off the bed to give them room first. One by one, each child slots into place around Kei.

Though they’re not dogs, I keep thinking of puppies rather than dragon children when I see them with Kei. I see the same desire for warmth and comfort. And I could smell the sharp tang of fear as soon as they walked into the room and met me, a stranger.

I stand a little out of the way, falling back to observe.

This group’s energy is all focused inward, and it doesn’t take a genius to see the pain reinforcing that bond. These children have lost everything, but they’ve latched onto Kei harder than I expected.
These kids need so much therapy.

But with Kei, they seem to be...all right. Cracked, like all of us are, and entirely too early, but they’re here. And Kei is going to be with them every step of the way, even through her recovery from this last year.

I glance out the recovery suite’s window, lost in thought.

I’m not going to do it. I can’t do it.

Kei has enough to think about without adding my feelings to this situation. If I tell her I love her, she’s going to devote her energy to my feelings as well. I’ve held onto my feelings for a long time already, and right now Kei needs to focus on herself and her new students.

Sure, nothing’s official, but I still don’t want to add to her burdens. She has enough to worry about. So, for now, I can bow out. I still love her, but what’s important here is Kei and the children. Anything else is secondary.

I reach out and take the armband I made off of Mr. Ukki. I adjust it so it sits more snugly around the three stalks. “I’ll leaf you four here to rest. Kei, take care of yourself.”

Kei nods and refocuses on the children. Her baby dragons.

Come to think of it, I need to check on my sapling again. Just to make sure he hasn’t fallen down a well or something.

With an excuse in hand, I leave.

Raidō catches me in the hallway before the bone and joint center, where I think Yamato has been growing splints for people.

“Did your visit go okay?” Raidō asks, as he scans me for any sign of...what, exactly? Something he doesn’t find. “Did you tell her?”

“Tell her what?” I ask, too quickly.

“You’re supposed to confess your love before the betting pool breaks down.” Raidō gives me a thoroughly unimpressed look.

How many people are in on this?! For fuck’s sake. Irritated, I hiss, “No, I didn’t tell her anything. And you shouldn’t either.”

Raidō gestures for me to elaborate.

“Kei has too much going on, and I’m not going to add to it,” I tell him sharply. “So stay out of this.”

Raidō looks completely blank for a few seconds. Then, as he slings his arm over my shoulder, “Shit, is it that bad?”

I nod, unwilling to say more.

“Do you want to talk about it?” It’s a bit late for sympathy, now.

“Not if you’re in on the betting pool.” I shake Raidō off and stalk away, off to find Yamato and make sure he’s all right.
It takes me a couple of minutes after that to start sneezing, and another ten seconds to realize that apparently, Raidō now has a cat.

Kei

The baby dragons went back to the children’s ward for lunch. They probably wouldn’t have left at all, if not for Yamaguchi-sensei showing up with candied ginger for good little piranhas, which they accepted as a bribe for good behavior.

Though he didn’t offer me any, because he was still a jerk at heart. And maybe dietary concerns.

Either way, it left me with nothing to do except get fusssed over by nurses. Between the sponge bath and the trip to the bathroom and the severe boredom, I didn’t end up with much to do.

I did find out that the Sword of Kusanagi had left a perfectly straight, reddened scar through my left breast, though. It even had a matching one that went right under my shoulder blade. So I guess the discovery there would at least keep me occupied for a bit from the sheer “how the fuck did I survive that” factor. There was enough important stuff inside my ribcage to have worried about that in the abstract, but the scar brought it home.

As it happened, the reason I survived my impromptu ventilation walked through the door during lunch, complete with her entire family.

Naruto made a beeline for me and held out his hands, demanding to be picked up immediately from the side of the bed. Unfortunately, I didn’t have enough arms or enough chakra to do as he asked without losing to physics somewhere, so I gave Kushina a helpless look.

Kushina smiled back, clearly hiding a giggle behind her daughter’s back.

Tatsumaki, with her red hair in a single ponytail today, struggled in Kushina’s arms in an attempt to kick off and toward the floor. With her message understood, however, Tatsumaki was conveyed over to my bed by Kushina.

“I made a card!” Naruto said in a bright voice, holding up a sheet of what used to be someone’s request for a...land ownership audit? Why would someone give that to Sensei in the first place?

Speaking of Sensei, he stayed near the door. His chakra was closed-off, cautious, and gave a strong impression that he didn’t want to be here.

My heart sank a little. Sensei didn’t even want to look at me?

But my spirits lifted a bit when Kushina picked up both Naruto and Tatsumaki and deposited them on my hospital bed, complete with the card made of ignored legal documents.

Naruto opened his mouth.

Inwardly, I braced for impact.

It came out as something like this: “Maki draws on the walls and eats cookies and doesn’t save any for me and hogs the ramen and always wants kisses and I love her so much!” And it went on for longer than I expected, fast enough that I wasn’t able to remember the bulk of it.

Tatsumaki started to giggle. “Ruto big noise!”

Well, she wasn’t wrong.
“Swimming is fun, and playing is fun and puppies are fun and I wanna puppy,” Naruto went on. “Mommy says no puppy. But ‘Maki and me wanna puppy.”

“Puppy!” said Tatsumaki. Then a thought seemed to occur to her. “No puppy?”

“You can always ask to play with Kakashi’s puppies,” I told him, since I did. When I was around.

“Tatsumaki, Naruto, I don’t think we’ve had lunch yet. This was just going to be a short visit, remember?” Kushina interrupted gently, but both of her kids turned to her with anguished looks on their faces.

I wasn’t sure why. I barely spent any time around them, as a rule. Hell, Tatsumaki hadn’t even had a personality the last time I was in town.

But I watched Kushina cast a significant look at Sensei, who was still being a wallflower. He winced when he met her eyes, at least as far as his chakra went. Someone was still in the figurative doghouse…

In short order, all of the Uzumaki-blooded members of the family were out the door and in search of something more appetizing than the crap left over from my lunch. I didn’t blame them, and in fact would have followed if I had any confidence that I would make it that far. As it was, the “Fall Risk” bracelet around my left wrist was an inconvenient reminder of reality.

Sensei leaned back against the wall and didn’t say anything. He didn’t look at me at all, with his gaze pointed firmly out the window instead.

I felt like I should apologize, more than anything. While Rikuto’s—the last conversation we really had was about encouraging me to be angry at injustice, and at people who hurt me. But I couldn’t find much of that anger, or at least none left over for other people.

It wasn’t exactly turning the other cheek. It was… I didn’t know what it was. But I was tired of being in pain, and of being exhausted, and of being unable to face my problems head-on. I just wanted to let it go and be done with it, but my stupid brain wouldn’t let me.

“I’m sorry, Kei.”

I jerked back to attention, tearing my eyes away from the middle distance and focusing on Sensei again. And, to my horror, a “For what?” slipped out, more aggressive than I expected.

Sensei’s eyes were on me, and his body language shifted. Where before, he was just leaning against the wall and trying to be invisible (and failing), there was a distinct slump to his shoulders that I couldn’t remember seeing before. His arms were crossed over his chest, and the second I tried to make eye contact, he averted his eyes.

I didn’t even have the capacity to joke at that point. While a small part of me was viciously satisfied that Sensei was finally, finally showing that he felt guilty about what had happened to me, the rest of me was more of a full-body flinch.

When the chips were down, I didn’t really want Sensei to be hurt. Whether physically—as proven by the incident that got me my first through-and-through wound—or not, I hated to see the people I loved in pain.

“I’m sorry, Sensei,” I heard myself say, as though in a daze. “I was out of line.”

“Don’t apologize,” Sensei said, but his tone was too soft to make it an order. “You had a point.”
I risked sneaking a peek at him.

He was still on the other side of the room, not moving. His chakra was still twisted in on itself, not flaring in anger.

Was I in the clear? Was everything okay?

“S—Sensei,” I said, around the lump in my throat. I tried again, and managed, “You can use the chair. You d—don’t need to stand over there.”

After a brief hesitation I almost never saw from him, Sensei nodded and crossed the room to sit down in the chair by my bedside. I sank further into the mattress, unsure of what to say. I should have been bowing, right?

Sensei sighed. “I haven’t been the best teacher, have I?”

What could I say to that? The fastest man alive was always a little bit too late. That was irony, or so I thought. Either way, it just hurt in a way that being near Sensei shouldn’t have. Sensei was supposed to mean I was safe, but the years had slowly chipped away at that sense of loyalty and dependence. The straw that broke the camel’s back—the sense of emotional abandonment that had gotten stronger and stronger over the course of my year out in the world—had been a long time coming.

It was probably a sign that I was irrevocably fucked up.

“I’ve made a lot of mistakes, Kei,” Sensei said, leaning forward a little so he could prop his elbows up on the bed. In the afternoon light streaming through the window, I could see the way the light hit his hair differently—and the occasional brighter spot where he’d picked up gray hairs.

He wasn’t even thirty.

“And how I’ve treated you has been one of the biggest ones.” Sensei looked away and said, “If I had just told you what I was trying to do, you probably would have understood. It wouldn’t have been a full year of field work, and you would have had the emotional strength to handle it.”

I looked away, too. Maybe I would have.

Or maybe I would have cracked in a new and interesting way instead.

“But I didn’t understand your situation at all, did I?” Sensei asked, and I looked at him again. There was a security seal by his elbow, preventing eavesdroppers, so I could assume that he was going to say something that didn’t need to be overheard at all.

So of course he did.

“Youreincarnation situation must have caused immense stress on its own, and I kept assuming that you got your information from some...conditionally helpful spirit,” Sensei shook his head again, and there was an undirected pulse of anger in his chakra, which promptly turned on him. He berated himself, “Someone or something that wanted to keep us alive for unknown reasons, and I couldn’t fully trust it.”

To be fair, I probably wouldn’t have trusted my information if I wasn’t me, either. Even if it kept being proved right, the source was dubious. Reincarnation-induced prophetic dreams sounded like complete horseshit, and they didn’t come with convenient automatic updates as the situation changed.
Just another reason that role was more and more useless with each passing day.

“It’s okay, Sensei.”

“No, it’s really not,” Sensei argued, but without raising his voice. “Kei, please look at me.”

Why, when we were making such a game out of avoiding eye contact? But still, my gaze finally snapped to Sensei’s face and stayed there.

“You are not expendable,” Sensei told me, reaching out and cupping my cheek. “You are my student, a baby sister, and someone who has a huge number of people who care about her.”

I immediately thought of the day’s barrage of hugs, and my throat started to close up.

Sensei continued quietly, “By letting politics get in the way—by letting small-mindedness and hatred dictate how I treated you—you were nearly killed by my cowardice.”

“I chose to protect you,” I protested. The decision had been about as thought-out as a spinal reflex, but it was still something I’d done. He couldn’t take that away from me.

“And I’m not sure I deserved that much,” Sensei replied heavily.

No.

No, he didn’t get to say that. Not after everything—

Sensei pushed his chair back, standing up.

“And I apologize for every time I’ve hurt you.”

What, was he going to run away from me because I got hurt? Getting hurt in his place was my literal job description, and, even if the year before the Orochimaru fight had done a lot to wreak havoc on my mental stability, I didn’t hate him.

Did he hate me now, for making him feel this guilty? He was supposed to be impartial, untouchable as Hokage—

Sensei knelt down in the middle of the floor, his feet tucked underneath him in a proper seiza, and slowly lowered himself into a full bow. His hands formed a triangle in front of him, and his forehead didn’t touch the ground, but it was the fucking Hokage, bowing to me.

“No, no, Sensei, no no no that’s not necessary,” I babbled, struggling to swing my legs over the edge of the bed. Sensei shouldn’t have been bowing to anyone, least of all me.

Sensei didn’t move. Maybe if he didn’t do the full ten seconds, it wouldn’t count—

“No, just get up! I’m not—!”

I fell off the right edge of the bed and hit the floor in a tangle of bedsheets. At least one monitor started screaming as a wire got detached, but I didn’t care. My limbs trembled with horrible weakness as I struggled to get some mobility back, but I had to get him to stop.

“Kei!”

By the time I sorted myself out, I was furious enough at my own weakness that time slipped away from me entirely.
Sensei’s arms encircled me, scooping me and my blankets off the floor and back onto the bed. In fact, he sat down first and let me lean into his side so I could sit there and steam silently against my stupid, disobedient limbs.

I picked at his white wrist-tie with my right hand.

Sensei still shouldn’t have bowed to me like that, but I could...appreciate the sentiment, and accept his guilt.

“I can’t ask you to forgive me without promising to do better,” Sensei said quietly to the top of my bowed head. “What do you want me to focus on first?”

What did I want? More than anything?

What had I wanted before all of this shit had started, more than anything? What had I kept coming back to, when I spent that year outside of the village?

“I want to be around my family,” I whispered, my hand clutching at his sleeve. “Hayate, and you, and Obito and Rin and Kushina and… I’m so tired of being alone.”

I felt Sensei nod. “If you want, I can keep you in the village for as long as necessary.” Then he drew me into a hug, which I could only partly return.

“And keep me filled in, please,” I mumbled into Sensei’s shoulder. “At least about stuff about me?”

“Done,” Sensei responds instantly. After a moment, he rested his cheek against the top of my head. “I’m sorry for everything, Kei.”

“I forgive you,” I said, and it was finally over.

I could finally start to heal.

Chapter End Notes

Beta: Sorry, but I’m stealing Lang’s attention for some other projects, so expect the next chapter to be delayed for a fair bit while she gets a well-deserved break from CYB.

Lang: And in the meantime, please visit the CYB-by-Lang Tumblr page (and the TV Tropes page, but this site seems to hate outside links) and check out the new artwork and writing that has popped up.
Camaraderie: Guiding Me Home

Chapter Summary

Kei: Begin recovering for real.

Chapter Notes

Beta: And now you can have your author back.

Lang: This chapter is very much a transitional chapter. We're running through a lot of groundwork for the next arc and dropping hints all over the place. And characters are gonna be dealing with the repercussions of their choices for a very long time. (Also possibly setting up for another timeskip, but we've got one in this chapter already.) The song for this chapter's title is "Guiding Me Home" by Kutless.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Compared to the speed I was used to on the occasions when I wasn’t barred from using Isobu’s chakra, I recovered slowly. I got to watch my injuries remain livid, day after day, and hear medics tutting about the damage I’d done to my poor tenketsu. I got more visits from just about everyone who’d signed my cards, and more besides, but it didn’t really change the fact that I was incredibly bored on the occasions when people didn’t take up my time.

On the fifteenth, Kakashi smuggled me a copy of Icha Icha, but it wasn’t a particularly thick book and there were only so many times I could stand to read anything. Later hospital misdemeanors on my behalf included at least one “borrowed” medical textbook, but there wasn’t much I could do with it if my chakra control had suffered as much as I suspected it had. The other major contraband item, an apple, was more useful.

But then, I still wasn’t supposed to be channeling or molding chakra at all, so I didn’t exactly get a lot of opportunities to test that idea. I knew enough about tenketsu as chakra regulators to tell that my left arm was going to be pretty useless in the near future, but as a jinchūriki I might have had some long-term options. No one had ever studied the effects of tenketsu destruction on someone like me.

On the sixteenth, Hayate brought me a basket of sweet rolls, courtesy of the Akimichi—apparently, a road-weary Chōza had recognized him on the street and dragged him to the Akimichi clan’s best bakery.

“I’m not sure if he wants to visit, given all the stuff going on, but he’s probably going to try,” Hayate said, after swallowing a mouthful of some of the finest bread in Konoha. “I mean, you did kinda save his kids.”

I frowned, failing to connect the dots. “Chōji didn’t leave the village, though.”

Hayate gave me a flat look. “Did you forget that Genma, Gai, and Ebisu are all on Team Chōza?”
…Yes, yes I had. “Please pretend I never said that,” I muttered, through the hand over my face. “I’m being stupid.”

Granted, Genma had gone home to recover yesterday, and Chōza hadn’t stopped in because he’d been outside of the village, but it was still a brain-fart.

“It’s not like I can forget,” Hayate said. Gesturing with the remainder of the roll, he added, “After you told Genma I needed some help training, he kept dragging me to the group spars even without Gai. I guess since I was already kind of training with Gai sometimes, he figured I needed to be looked after by the whole team.”

“You kind of already have a team,” I said, puzzled. “I only asked Genma to check in on you occasionally…”

“He’s a busybody,” said Hayate. “I was doing okay with Inoichi-sensei and…okay, so I was mad at the Hokage, but that’s different and it wasn’t all the time. Aunt Kushina was all right. Did he talk to you?”

And once again, I was reminded that my brother was old enough to have opinions. Occasionally, they were even informed opinions. Yay, incoming adulthood.

“Yes, Sensei and I talked,” I told Hayate. At my brother’s scowl, I sighed and said, “Hayate, he’s going to do better now.”

Hayate bit another hunk off the roll and started to chew on it, to avoid having to respond immediately.

Well, that topic seemed closed. I’d still have to get my brother to open up about the accumulated resentment he had for Sensei at this point, but it’d be easier to do that once I could put him in a headlock.

Or maybe not…

“Hayate, I’m not going to be heading out on missions much like this,” I said, waving my right hand over my still-stuck-in-a-sling left arm. “So I’m going to be here if you need to talk.”

Hayate progressed to glaring up at the ceiling.

Oh, for the love of swords. “What is this really about?”

“I just don’t understand how you can just forgive someone who hurt you like that!” Hayate blurted, throwing his hands in the air in frustration. “He kept you out of the village for almost a whole year!”

Oh, no.

“Hayate,” I said, as my brother turned away. “No, look at me right now. Get over here.”

Hayate slid off the window ledge and grabbed the nearest chair, then slid the screechy thing over to the right side of my bed. Then he threw himself into it, crossed his arms over his chest, and looked sulky.

I reached over and ran my right hand through his hair. “I was angry at Sensei, too.”

“But you’re not now,” Hayate mumbled, leaning into my touch.

“No, I…” How was I supposed to explain this? “What Sensei did was stupid and short-sighted. And
he’s already been yelled at by Kushina, and by Kakashi”—which I had only heard about through Kushina—“and I think your anger came through loud and clear.”

“But what about you?” Hayate asked, giving me a narrow-eyed look.

“…I can’t stay angry at the people I care about,” I told Hayate, bowing my head. “I know it’s kind of…weak, maybe, given that there were plenty of reasons to hold a grudge. But I already had a lot of negative feelings and didn’t need another set over something that was just a series of stupid mistakes.”

Hayate made a skeptical noise.

“I know, I know,” I said, and carded my hand through his hair again. “It sounds like I’m making excuses for him. And it doesn’t cover how those decisions hurt you, either.”

“I’m fine,” Hayate insisted.

Yeah, right.

My little brother might have already been fifteen years old, but it didn’t change the fact that I was his only remaining family and Sensei had sent me off on a series of meat-grinder missions anyway. And since becoming primary breadwinner for the two of us three years ago, that year-long stretch was by far the longest I’d been away from home since…ever, actually.

Even my wartime deployments had been better about downtime in the village.

“When you get down to it, forgiveness is a choice that everyone has to make for themselves,” I admitted, somewhat unhappily. “I can’t ask you to put everything aside.”

Hayate stared at me for a long moment, then sighed. “I won’t try to avenge you or anything. The Hokage is still the Hokage, but…” He shrugged. “I just don’t know how to feel and it pisses me off.”

“Been there, Little Brother,” I said, sighing to match him. “Definitely been there.”

He scratched his nose. “I heard something on a mission a few months ago.”

“Oh?” I hadn’t heard much of anything about Hayate’s missions, other than what he elected to tell me. This was a rare treat.

“Yeah, from one of the monks in the Fire Temple.” Hayate lifted his head and said, “He was just reading precepts, but I guess it stuck in my head…”

“What one was it?” I asked.

“Oh, I think it went something like… ‘Holding grudges is like swallowing poison and waiting for the other person to drop dead,’” Hayate said, after a moment’s thought. “I can kind of see how it fits this, but I’m already doing that. I don’t know how to not be angry every time I see the Hokage’s face and remember what he did by throwing you out of the village.”

“I think he feels the same way when he looks in a mirror, Hayate,” I said.

Hayate made another disbelieving noise, but didn’t argue the point. “I’m just glad you’re home.”

“Well, I’m technically not home yet,” I said, and as Hayate grumbled again at the thought, I added in a cheerier tone, “But the medics said I could start some physical therapy tomorrow, so I should be able to get out of here.”
Hayate hugged me, which was a little like being caught in a mutual industrial press accident. We Gekkō siblings could never be accused of lacking familial affection, even if we sometimes didn’t see each other for weeks.

We let go of each other just as three bright chakra signatures trooped into the room.

“Big Sis Kei?” asked the lead child.

Roku, Kaito, and Aiko were in better shape than they had been the first time I saw them in the hospital. While Roku’s arm was still broken, he seemed more used to the cast at this point and the bruise on his face had faded to a sort of greenish yellow. His split lip was also healed up, and his visible eye was alert and clear instead of half-hidden under a black eye. Kaito, while he still had bandages around his neck and peeking out of his hospital gown, was looking around the room with interest instead of a fixation on the nearest supportive figure (me). Aiko was still clinging to the end of Roku’s hospital gown’s ties, but she peeked out from behind him this time.

My brother leaned over the back of his chair to look at all three kids upside-down, because of course he did.

Kaito made a beeline for me again, but froze up in indecision once he realized that there was a person who looked like me in the room. I mean, sure, Hayate and I weren’t that similar—

“Aiko-chan, this is my brother Hayate,” I said. Reaching down to beckon Kaito over, I added, “Hayate’s two years younger than I am, and he’s a chūnin.”

“What’s a chūnin?” Roku asked. Since I had tacitly given my approval of this mysterious doppelganger’s presence, he was apparently comfortable asking questions.

“Mid-ranked ninja,” Hayate explained, righting himself. “Journeyman, sort of. Hey, you need a hand up?”

Kaito, who stared up at my brother with a still-frozen expression, nodded slowly.

Hayate scooped the tiny kid off the ground and easily deposited him on my hospital bed. Immediately, Kaito crawled over to me and wedged himself into the space between my right arm and my torso, but he didn’t flinch away from Hayate.

This seemed to be the cue for Roku and Aiko to follow suit immediately, with only Aiko needing the assist.

“So, Hayate, these three are Kaito, Aiko, and Roku,” I said, and nudged Aiko with my knee to get her off my left shin. “Kids, again, this is my younger brother.”

Hayate looked more curious than anything, tilting his head to one side. “So why do they call you their sister? I figured I’d know if we had any more siblings, if you know what I mean.” And he raised one eyebrow, clearly teasing.

At some point, I would need to figure out how long it took for children to understand figurative language and sarcasm. Overexposure accounted for, say, Kakashi’s early adoption of both techniques, but some of what Hayate would say would probably fly right over their heads.

“We’re not really sisters,” Aiko explained to Hayate, sounding rather patient for being six years old.
“I’m not dumb.”

Roku added, “And besides, I was adopted. You don’t have to come from the same Momma to be family.” But, as though the thought had brought up another, less pleasant association, Roku bit his lip and said, “I haven’t seen Tayuya since we got here.”

Ah, hell.

“I didn’t see her in the kid room,” Aiko put in, scrunching her nose in sudden distress. “Sis, where is she? And Kazu, and Miyu?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I haven’t seen them since before Sorayama was attacked. You remember when we played ninja, right?”

Aiko nodded, though her eyes were welling up with tears.

“No one’s told me anything,” I told them. Helplessly, I looked to my brother for a quick save. “Hayate?”

But my brother was slowly shaking his head, and he said, “There are a few refugee kids, but they’re either infants or teenagers. I only heard about three Academy-aged kids, and that’s these three.”

Roku pulled his knees up to his chest, dragging his fingers through his bangs so they fell over his face and covered both eyes. “No, no…”

“I want Mommy! I don’t wanna be stuck here!” Aiko started to cry. After just a moment, her voice rose to a heart-rending wail. “Mommy!”

Hayate acted decisively, getting up from his chair and onto the bed and scooping Aiko up and into his lap. She latched onto his neck and screamed in his ear, but Hayate hadn’t been Naruto’s go-to babysitter for nothing. He even added Roku after a moment, pulling the boy into a one-armed hug that he reciprocated by burying his face against Hayate’s ribs.

And Kaito, silent against my side until that moment, started to hiccup.

My brother and I hugged those kids until they cried themselves out, unsure of what else to do. Neither of us were child therapists, or therapists, or even really qualified for this kind of shit in the slightest.

But we were there, and solid, and that was what the kids needed.

Two weeks passed.

I was out of the hospital within twenty-four hours of when Sensei and Kushina visited a second time. It wasn’t that I was in great shape, but more because the hospital needed as many beds and free hands as they could manage. With my regeneration rate back up to snuff and Isobu’s chakra flowing again, I was better served by staying the hell home.

I didn’t see much of the refugee kids. After the three of them started crying loudly enough to wake up patients in the recovery ward, the hospital staff tracked down the non-shinobi Chinatsugumi refugee adults in order to provide some stability for them. Since none of them were seriously injured enough to overwhelm the outpatient facilities, they were shipped off to recover elsewhere.

Honestly, for a while there? I had to focus on myself.
The first week I spent outside of the hospital was...not what I expected.

Besides being dragged home by Hayate and setting both of Iruka’s parents on me for the sake of providing me with soup, Kushina and Tatsumaki made the kitchen their new experiment zone. The house was full of delicious smells and comforting food, both of which lasted for days. I participated where I could, but I mostly let the atmosphere and the joy of being alive wash over me as it wished.

And I went outside a few times, always accompanied by either my brother or one of our friends, but the most memorable occasion happened on the twentieth of December—mainly because I happened to go out to the market at the same time as three Akimichi shoppers.

Specifically, Chōza, his wife Momo, and their son Chōji.

My only warning was Hayate, walking backwards in front of me and grinning at someone over my shoulder. The lack of hostility—and the time spent in the hospital—meant that I was slower on the uptake than I would have been otherwise, and thus I failed to react to the incoming bear hug of joy before my feet were already dangling off the ground.

More confused than frightened, I craned my neck a bit and, to a peal of my brother’s laughter, realized that Chōza was hugging me about as well as Gai ever had. Better, actually, since Chōza was built like a bear with arms to match. Since there was no escape, I didn’t bother trying.

“Thank you, Keisuke-chan,” Chōza said as he finally set me down, clapping his hands down on both of my shoulders. “Thank you for bringing my genin home.”

Point of order: Genma was a special jōnin, Ebisu wanted to be one, and Gai had made it to full jōnin at fourteen. But it was clear that Chōza didn’t ever plan on stop thinking of them as his students.

“They’re my friends,” I told Chōza with a somewhat wobbly smile on my face. “I couldn’t do anything else.”

“Then I am glad that they have you for a friend,” Chōza replied. He patted my shoulder again, and then seemed to remember that other people were around. “Here, let me introduce you to my family...”

In relatively short order, I got additional hugs from Momo and Chōji, and a promise that if I stopped in on an Akimichi restaurant, I’d be treated like family. When the family bustled off, Chōji waved at me over his mother’s shoulder.

“...Okay, did you know that was going to happen?” I asked Hayate, since he was still chuckling just a bit.

“Only about two seconds before you did,” Hayate replied. He walked a little further along the rows upon rows of seafood stalls, leading me through the crowd. “People have been getting nicer.”

I gave him a blank look. “I...what? Are you talking about the rumors?”

“I mean...” Hayate paused, thinking. “What you did, with helping kill Orochimaru, it made the world safer and people are happier for it.” He flashed a quick, sardonic grin. “Though yeah, the assholes mostly shut up when we walk by, now.”

It probably said something about my state of mind that I honestly hadn’t noticed. I was so focused on simply being back in town that I was ignoring anything about it that could otherwise dampen my mood. Though staying in the house and focusing on recovery probably helped with that.
Also, I hadn’t killed Orochimaru. Forcing him to use his regeneration techniques over and over again still only counted as a TKO, and I had no way of knowing if he had any Curse Seal backups lying in wait.

Hayate waited for me to catch up, then slung his arm around my shoulders and said, “Come on, let’s go get udon. I’ll pay.”

Since the backlogged payouts for my string of B- and A-ranks hadn’t yet made all the way through Konoha’s bureaucracy, I let him.

There were other incidents—a random clap on the back from two different chūnin on two different days, a free winter cabbage, and Teuchi refusing to let me pay for ramen—but I was a bit too overwhelmed by finally being home to think about it much. Between the biweekly visits to the hospital to check my recovery rates, being stopped in the street, and what could best be called emotional exhaustion, well…

The entire two-week period was something of a blur. But a pleasant one.

And after it was over, and I could get my arm back to basic functionality, I went to the hospital to officially upgrade from having to use my left arm’s sling. I probably could have gone without it for some time here and there, but Rin had managed to instill a long-belated fear of medic-nin into me. I didn’t disobey doctors’ orders anymore.

But after I got the all-clear to change my physical therapy routine from “outpatient care” to “okay, maybe some light sparring if you’re really careful,” I found Sensei waiting for me outside the hospital’s front doors as I left.

Of course, this was cause for comment. Mine. “Sensei?”

“Kei, could I talk to you for a moment?”

It didn’t really sound like a request, but I still hesitated. “Can we talk” is never a good sign.

We could always make him go away, Isobu said, in a voice that still had a slight edge of threat woven into it.

My brother wasn’t the only person still pissed off at Sensei. The difference was that Isobu was the one with a direct line to my brain if need be.

It’s not necessary, Isobu, I reminded him, not now that we’re home.

You’re too quick to forgive.

…Look, I don’t need to have a breakdown about whether Sensei still cares about me, I said, feeling the thoughts try to rise up and choke me in broad daylight. I swallowed hard and said to Isobu, Please, it’s over. I don’t want to try to take everything back, after all it took for me to get this far.

I didn’t need any emotional setbacks. Not now.

“Hey, are you all right?” Sensei’s voice was closer, and I blinked. The commanding officer aspects had bled out of his frame, and he stood in front of me with one hand on my shoulder, as though trying to make me come back to myself. “Kei?”

I blinked rapidly, then nodded. With a voice that only came out a little strangled, I said, “Yes, I’m
fine. What did you need to talk about?”

Sensei continued looking at me with a worried expression. But he withdrew his hand and said carefully, “I was just going to ask you how you’ve been.”

_No, you weren’t_. And I wasn’t sure I would have given him an honest answer even if he had asked that. _Something about my reaction made you decide against asking whatever you were going to say._ But what I said was, “I’m doing okay. You?”

“I’m not sure I believe you,” Sensei replied, and I felt my eyes being drawn back toward the ground. “Kei, is your brother at home?”

I checked my chakra sense. “Feels like it.”

Sensei nodded to himself, then said, “In that case, I can take you home and we can all talk.”

“Okay,” I said, though I still didn’t know what he wanted. I held out my hand.

Sensei took it, and one _fwish_ later put us on my apartment’s front doorstep.

We headed inside.

Hayate was cleaning all of the swords we owned, using the kotatsu and making the entire house smell like warm oil. It stung my nose for just a moment until I got used to it again, and Hayate looked up as we walked in. I definitely felt his chakra shift once he realized that Sensei was right behind me.

Maybe we shouldn’t have arrived while my kid brother was cleaning all of those sharp implements…

“May we sit?” Sensei asked Hayate.

Sensei got a carefully blank expression in return, but Hayate _did_ nod.

So the three of us were at the table, and Hayate put the swords away. Too bad, because the atmosphere was certainly thick enough to cut with one of them.

“What did you want to talk about, Sensei?” I asked, since it didn’t seem like anyone else was about to.

Sensei said nothing for a long moment, even as Hayate and I both stared at him and waited for _some_ kind of response. Then, finally, he said, “Have you ever thought about attending therapy, Kei?”

My mind blanked out for a second or two. On automatic, I heard myself say, “Dad brought me to Inoshi Yamanaka when I was a kid. I…only saw him once, though.”

And he was three years dead by this point, having been one of the many people who hadn’t survived Black Zetsu’s attack on the Sensing Barrier building. I hadn’t known that until later, but he’d been the only person who had had enough clues to put together my strange situation. If he’d tried.

I still didn’t know what he’d written down about me, and hadn’t really wanted to look.

“But no, I guess…my situation was a bit too unique. I didn’t think anyone would be able to understand, so I didn’t try.” I started picking at my nailbeds, not looking at Sensei or Hayate.

“Though I’ll admit that I probably need help.”

“Didn’t Inoichi-sensei ever try to help? Even a little?” Hayate asked. “He’s—well, he talked to me a lot while you were gone, trying to get me to talk to more people and worry a bit less. And it did help,
even if I still missed you a lot.”

“Inoichi-sensei isn’t my teacher, though, so I don’t have to listen to him even if he does offer any help,” I told Hayate, looking up. “And I’ve always heard that you have to be able to be completely honest with a therapist, but I…well, my security clearance is all over the place, and I didn’t want to try to make something out of a situation that wasn’t going to let me be honest anyway.”

“And despite being your teacher,” Sensei said, “it’s become clear that even if I want to help you, I’m useless at it.”

Hayate snorted.

“Not helping, Hayate,” I scolded him, but my heart wasn’t in it.

“He has a right to his opinion, Kei.”

“I know that.” Hayate huffed, crossing his arms on the tabletop and dropping his chin down onto the tops of his folded forearms. He glared across the table at Sensei, from below his overgrown bangs.

...Well, Sensei tried. That counted for something.

But hugs didn’t fix everything, and there was still quite a ways to go before I could completely trust him again. Forgiveness and trust were intertwined, but not the same. I could forgive Sensei’s bad judgments and still flinch away from the next one, out of sheer self-preservation.

“If you do decide to pursue therapy,” Sensei said, “you do know that medic-patient confidentiality applies. Unless they think you’ll hurt yourself or others.”

“I don’t think that’s really a concern,” I said. I wasn’t suicidal, and I wasn’t really the type to self-destruct like a frag grenade. “But… Wouldn’t being in therapy mean I’d have to stay off the mission roster?”

“You know someone who does run missions at the same time, Kei,” Sensei reminded me.

Right. Obito.

I hadn’t asked him how that was going. I’d been so caught up in my catastrophic breakdown that it hadn’t even come up. But knowing that Obito was in therapy, and was still reaping the benefits of having a pressure release who wasn’t a friend or loved one, made my decision a little easier.

I just hoped I was doing the right thing. And that being a former psych major didn’t interfere at all—I didn’t have the slightest scrap of optimism regarding my reincarnation problem, when I hadn’t even told Hayate, Obito, or Rin about it yet.

Still never planned on it.

But all the same, I’d made my decision. Maybe it was inevitable. “Does…um, can Obito’s therapist take on another patient?”

“I wouldn’t have suggested this route if I didn’t have someone in mind,” Sensei replied, smiling just faintly.

It was kind of funny, actually. After so many years of disdaining Konoha’s mental health services—or how well people utilized them—I was finally going to see what it was like for myself. And hopefully, I’d come away with a better impression than what biased sources had given me
beforehand.

Well. I still had to contact the expert first.

I rubbed my arms anxiously. That had…never been my strong suit. I was much better at rolling with introductions than trying to do things myself, especially about something this important. I wasn’t going to be strolling in as Keisuke Gekkō, host to Isobu and defeater of S-rank opponents.

I’d just be me. Vulnerable, and tired, and in need of help.

“So why am I here?” Hayate asked. He paused, then mumbled, “Aside from the fact that we’re in our apartment, anyway…”

“Kei needs you to be there for her.” Which was quite a lot of weight to put on a fifteen-year-old’s shoulders.

“Of course I’m gonna be here for my sister,” said Hayate, sounding affronted that Sensei had even seemed like he was going to question our bond.

I shrank in on myself, trying not to focus on the feeling of creeping shame that was making its way up my spine. I needed this, but it hurt to admit it. It hurt to admit that I couldn’t stand on my own, and all of it was because my brain turned against me at every opportunity.

And maybe it had latched onto Sensei’s statement as a way of telling the rest of me that Sensei wasn’t really family. Because of course it did.

“If not Obito’s therapist, who did you have in mind?” I asked Sensei, once I had shouted down the rest of my brain so I could think again.

Sensei paused. Then, with both Hayate and I staring him down once again, he asked, “How do you feel about scorpions?”

“I think the ones Rin has are cute,” I said, briefly puzzled. Why would…?

Oh.

“Rin’s summon contract is finally official. I...admit I was running out of options, so I asked her if her contract included any mental health specialists, and she said yes,” Sensei told me. “And Gama recommended Suika-sensei.”

Watermelon? Well, it was clear that the food naming scheme was officially a thing among the scorpion clan.

“She was about the size of an ox cart, but she seemed kind and understanding once I explained the situation.” Sensei smiled sheepishly. “Suika-sensei is willing to take on another patient, but she did say she isn’t willing to stay in Konoha. If the first meeting goes well, you’ll have to work out your schedules together.”

“Who are her other patients?” I asked. I was curious enough that it probably meant I was going to just jump in with both feet.

Sensei raised an eyebrow at me. Right, that whole doctor-patient confidentiality thing...

“Sorry, let me rephrase: Does she have human or animal patients?” I tried again.

“Probably mostly animals,” Hayate guessed, before Sensei could answer. “But you don’t have to see
her if things don’t fit well, right?”

I nodded.

“Then you’ll try?” Sensei asked.

I had to. There was no getting better if I didn’t try.

Suika-sensei crouched in the center of a large, though security-sealed clearing, her watermelon-sized claws tucked in close against her body. All eight of her eyes were focused on me, with the exception of the two or three that kept wandering off to look at something in her peripheral vision.

Speaking of watermelons, she did sort of look like one—with pinkish-red markings along her legs and sides, and dark green striping along a bright green body, I could see where she had gotten her name.

Rin looked between her summon and me, cautiously hopeful.

“Uh, if it’s all right…” I trailed off, unsure of where to begin. “Could we get to know each other a bit?”

“Of course,” said Suika-sensei. She tucked her eight legs in and curled her tail, focusing on me again.

A bit eerie, but I could deal with that. I sat down on the grass and said, “I’m Keisuke Gekkō. I’m seventeen years old.”

Without a neck, Suika-sensei couldn’t nod, but her stinger bobbed in acknowledgement.

“I like my friends, and apples, and I have a real soft spot for dogs. My dislikes… I don’t like people who judge me before they get to know me,” I said, a little distantly. I made a ton of early snap judgments based on my foreknowledge, so it was a bit hypocritical of me to say that. “My hobbies are practicing kenjutsu and fūinjutsu.”

Suika-sensei’s tail bobbed again, and she turned toward Rin.

“Rin Nohara, also seventeen,” Rin said, smiling. “I like my friends, too, and my boyfriend, and strawberries. I don’t like it when people get hurt around me, and I don’t like natto either. I practice medical ninjutsu and signed a summon contract to help people, and I like collecting seashells.”

“I see,” said Suika-sensei. “Rin-chan, will you be attending our sessions? While the fact that you and Keisuke-san are friends can be helpful, I don’t wish to see my patient uncomfortable…”

“If Kei doesn’t want me here, I’ll just be here to summon you. I can leave,” Rin said, getting to her feet.


Rin patted my right shoulder and said, in a whisper, “I hope this goes well, Kei.”

And she walked out of the privacy-sealed zone without a backwards glance.

“Keisuke-san,” Suika-sensei began, “would you like me to introduce myself?”

“Please,” I replied.
“Very well. I am Suika, daughter of Dokuyu-sama.” Her pincers clicked, as though in a strange mimicry of human clapping. “I enjoy gardening in my spare time, and my favorite food is a type of noodle dish that you probably don’t eat in human lands, though I’m sure the Toad clan has some. Hm…I dislike seeing people suffer, almost as much as Dokuyu-sama does.”

“How big is Dokuyu-sama?” I asked her. Because if summon clans tended to be ruled by the biggest and strongest.

“Oh, I imagine she is the size of the largest of toads, though perhaps shorter,” Suika-sensei replied.

…Which meant she was probably in the same size category as Manda and Gamabunta. Not Katsuyu, though—from what I could tell, there was only one Katsuyu, and all of the others amounted to “what we could actually manage to summon.” She could have been the size of a mountain and no one would know unless they visited her at home.

“And now I am going to ask some difficult questions,” Suika-sensei said, settling down in place. “Is there anything I might do that would upset you in an unproductive way? Therapy is often difficult, emotionally, but I understand that there are simply some things people will not discuss. Particularly if it’s not important to your goals.”

I took a deep breath and tried to think.

What did I want out of this? What would make me rage-quit instead?

“I…I need you to believe me, when I say things that sound impossible,” I told her, even as I rubbed my left arm uncomfortably. “It’s not the same as believing me when I’m lying about how I feel, which I might do, but…”

Did Orochimaru count as an expert on the nature of souls? I had no interest in thinking of him as anything other than a monster in human shape, but he had been brilliant. He was probably the foremost expert on ninja-made Horcruxes the world over.

I shook my head and tried again. “I’m not normal, Suika-sensei. And I really mean that. The weirdness is tied directly into who I am, and I’ve…gotten it looked at. And if you don’t at least pretend to believe me, I can’t really trust you.”

“I understand, Keisuke-san,” replied Suika-sensei. “I will keep an open mind, though I hope you don’t mind if I ask a few clarifying questions sometimes.”

“That would be fine,” I told her. I sat back, looking up at the bright blue sky above us. “What about you? Do I need to do anything special so you’re okay?”

“Just show up on time, and be as honest as you can be,” Suika-sensei told me. “That should be enough.” She shifted her weight and curled her tail tighter over itself, trying to look smaller. “May I ask why you sought counseling?”

Oh, boy. Wasn’t that a laundry list to work through.

Well, I had a mental breakdown about two weeks ago, and there were enough warnings signs for it that it would have been like setting off a flashbang grenade if anyone had been around to see it. Instead, I spent a full year away from home, on top of never seeing any of my friends in the field, and only got to come back for long enough to crash and recover physically before being sent out again. I killed more people than I can even remember, and when I finally got back, I discovered that it was all a fucking stupid idea that Sensei came up with, and then I watched and felt my friends die while I
was unable to protect them from *fucking Orochimaru*. And in the aftermath, I’m afraid of being hurt again by the Fourth friggin’ Hokage, and my left arm isn’t circulating chakra like it should, and for all I know I might have to retire before I’m twenty.

How’s that?

I paused. *Probably* a bit overboard and rant-laden for a question that worked better with a quick answer. And anyway, all of this would come out over the course of my appointments, which made the explanation a bit superfluous.

What I actually ended up saying, though a slightly blocked throat, was, “I had a meltdown almost a month ago, and my teacher suggested I get some kind of help.”

Suika-sensei paused. “And this teacher—we’re talking about the Fourth Hokage, yes?”

If she’d had a notebook, she’d probably have been taking notes. I assumed that she had a good memory and let it slide.

“Yeah, him,” I said flippantly. “In Konoha, your jōnin-sensei is supposed to be your second line of defense if you don’t have family, but he’s overworked and doesn’t have the time. So that wasn’t working out.”

“I see,” said Suika-sensei. Her pincers clicked again, almost absently, as she thought. “Keisuke-san, I cannot tell any other humans about what you tell me in these sessions. Unless you are a danger to yourself, or others, I will not violate that agreement. Do you trust me to keep your secrets?”

…If she had been human, I wasn’t sure.

But given that Suika-sensei was a scorpion larger than most civilian vehicles, I could.

Long story short: I had a scorpion therapist who could crush trash cans like cola cans, and I liked her. Our first session didn’t really end up doing much, because we had to make good first impressions before anything else, but I remained hopeful. The road to recovery was a long one, but I was pretty sure I’d taken the first step.

Some months later, I was back to “work.”

The payouts from all of those damned B- and A-ranked missions amounted to well over a million ryō, which meant I could afford to not do anything strenuous for months if I chose to.

According to Sensei, and Hayate, and just about everyone else I asked, I wasn’t supposed to be on the mission roster, and would continue not to be for as long as necessary. Because I still dealt with bouts of trembling weakness in my left arm and the resulting physical therapy sessions, on top of going to visit my therapist, no one really wanted to be the one to tell me it was time to get back in the field.

Even Gai had told me it would be better not to spar with him, so we—meaning Gai, Obito, Kakashi, Rin, and Ebisu—spent his birthday celebration at the best curry restaurant in town. Genma and Raidō didn’t attend, but they sent a card and a few taijutsu scrolls that might have been stolen from a foreign country once upon a time.

And then there was Sensei’s birthday, and Obito’s, and eventually March rolled in with nary an uptick in danger or drama.
Quite a change, really.

The twenty-second of March found me in Sensei’s office, for the first time since I was still sixteen. I sat with my back to a wall, with my portable writing desk across my knees, and wrote dozens upon dozens of steady, neatly-inked characters on specialized sealing paper. While I wasn’t using my blood-laced ink this time, it didn’t hurt to be careful.

While the Dead Demon Consuming Seal wasn’t the sort to spontaneously explode at the first errant brush-stroke, I still didn’t want to deal with the possibility that it could activate. Anything left to chance would be like dangling a steak in front of the Plot’s huge, serrated teeth.

In truth, I wasn’t really doing much in the way of guarding Sensei. He was really the one who was making sure I didn’t have some kind of crisis in the office, by half-supervising my sealing work and mostly filling out the piles upon piles of paperwork that seemed to appear out of thin air. But nevertheless, it gave us a chance to just sit and do what we had to. I’d missed the companionable silence in the year I’d been gone and, while it wasn’t the same, what was there was comforting to my rattled nerves.

Three stacks of paper poofed into Sensei’s inbox, and his chakra jumped for a moment until he saw who had sent them. I didn’t know what that was about, but was too busy concentrating on my calligraphy to ask.

Sensei picked up the papers and gave them a quick once-over, then said, “I think these were sent to the wrong place.”

“How so?” I asked absently, finishing the kanji for “person” on one arm of the seal. Almost there…

“These are requests for medical records, from the Academy, along with…things. Tsunade would have a better idea what a…” Sensei replied. Reading further, he let out a surprised “Oh.”

“What is it?” I asked, actually looking up.

“Kaito Yuki, Aiko Kasai, and Roku Chigami are all joining the Academy’s newest class,” Sensei replied, and held up one of the packets he’d received. Networking all of those teleportation seals for paperwork purposes had sped up intra-village communication, but errors like this one were still commonplace. The whole system was still in the testing phase.

“All three of them?” I blinked. “So, is Roku planning on testing out of the first two years, or what?”

Sensei gave a helpless shrug. “You’ll have to ask Shikane about that. But it seems like the answer is a provisional ‘no.’ He simply plans on joining the first-year students.”

“Then I guess you can just send it along to Tsunade-sama,” I suggested. As he scribbled a note on a separate sheet of paper and clipped it to the packets, I looked down at my replica of the Dead Demon Consuming Seal and asked, “Also, can you check my work here?”

Sensei slid the super-packet off the side of his desk and into a bin marked “hospital,” where it vanished into thin air. Then he stood up, stretched, and said, “Sure, Kei.”

Sensei, looking over my shoulder, started tracing the outside edge of my replica seal with the blunt end of his pen. “Structure looks good here, though this edge may be a bit too wide at the end…”

And on it went, as Sensei went over the replication challenge patiently and pointed out where I’d strayed from the design. It wasn’t generally a matter of handwriting—my calligraphy had to be good, or else I wouldn’t have survived as a fūinjutsu specialist. But sometimes I just forgot which kanji
went where and guessed, which would have still resulted in a fatal explosion if the seal had been real.

“Given that this is a first try, I’m impressed,” Sensei told me, once he’d scanned the entire seal for errors. There were only three, though that was three too many for field work.

“Thank you, Sensei,” I said, as I set my work aside to dry completely. “What seal did you want me to try next?”

“Actually, I think you should try asking Kushina for her more unusual Uzumaki clan designs,” Sensei replied. Eyeing my work, he added, “And have you given any more thought to pursuing a fūinjutsu mastery?”

“...Not really,” I admitted. I started to pack up my sealing supplies as I talked, ashamed of my cowardice. “I’m just...not ready for it.”

It would be an interesting long-term goal, possibly, but my chakra control was still crap. I hadn’t been brave enough to try more than my mainstays, even after Suika-sensei tried encouraging me to pursue my old hobbies. I’d just been making these toothless replicas for weeks, practicing for something I hadn’t conjured up enough courage to try for real.

Maybe I could try it once I was sure I could relearn my other jutsu.

“One day at a time,” Sensei said reassuringly, which had sort of been Suika-sensei’s motto once she got more of my story out of me. She was encouraging, but told me to be patient with myself. And she also suggested that I should write in a journal, but I was putting that firmly on the backburner.

“Yep.” I wouldn’t be so bold as to say I was getting better, because I was still afraid of jinxing it, but I didn’t feel quite as tired as I remembered. Emotionally.

Sensei let me get back to my sealing practice, rather than telling me to get to Kushina post-haste.

Do you really think that talking to the scorpion is helping? Isobu asked, as I settled back down.

*It’s more than I’ve managed so far,* I told him. *Then I thought about how that remark could sound and added, I mean, you help me a lot, too. But there’s some things that I don’t think I can really explain to you, and anyway I’m sure you don’t want to hear most of it.*

And the scorpion is more invested in your well-being than I am? Isobu demanded.

*...More like she’s far enough away to be unbiased. Mostly. I sighed. Seriously, Isobu, the fact that I’m seeing Suika-sensei doesn’t mean I don’t rely on you.*

Hmph.

It didn’t take a genius to notice when someone like Isobu was getting jealous. *Suika-sensei isn’t a combat summon. If you’re worried she’ll take your place, it’s not going to happen and you can relax.*

Isobu just grumbled again.

“Oh, Kei, the ANBU teams brought this back a little while ago. Want to take a look?” Sensei asked, interrupting my thoughts. When I looked up, I spotted the little black Iwagakure bingo book dangling from his fingers.
“Sure,” I said, and caught the book when it was tossed to me.

Then, as I always did, I scanned for familiar faces.

I didn’t have to look for long.

Though the image was blurry, and heights and weights and even general description were all a bit vague, I could recognize Obito’s description. *Mostly* because the image showed someone emerging from a featureless concrete wall, and the black-cloaked figure clearly hadn’t bothered to smash said wall in the process.

“Konoha’s Phantom?” I said, with a brief laugh. “Obito called it.”

“Oh?” Sensei asked, curious.

“Way back, when he came home, he said...he said he wanted to be Phantom Obito, because Tobi wasn’t using the title.” In hindsight, it wasn’t even really funny in a way that provoked laughter. It was more of a bizarre coincidence. But nonetheless, Obito had guessed well.

“Ah. Well, that was certainly accurate,” Sensei remarked. To my surprise, he waved a hand and said, “Go on.”

I did so.

The entries weren’t alphabetical or anything, but more of a mélange of threat assessments and speculation. But if I flipped through the pages, looking for a familiar profile, I could eventually get where I was going.

Gai also had an entry, which called him the Green Beast of Konoha—cute, and what he was already calling himself to start with. There was also a note about possibly upgrading him to the Green Death, but apparently the nickname was still disputed.

And then there was Sensei’s still snug in its “flee on sight” categorization. But next to the vague description of his abilities, along with his official Hokage coronation photograph, was a brand-new entry.

*Associates with the Lightning Fang, the Red Habanero, Konoha’s Phantom, and the Tidal Blade. DO NOT APPROACH.*

That...hadn’t been what the entries during the war had said...

Quickly, I flipped through to find *my* entry, and found it right next to a sketch of Kushina, and her associated profile.

My entry was still about as full of holes as it had been the last time I’d read it, but Iwa had courteously updated the list of confirmed and speculated kills, as well as their assessment of my powers. The number of deaths and mission failures that were directly attributable to me had doubled in the last year. My profile insisted that I had completed two dozen B-ranked missions, and a baker’s dozen of A-ranks. They had even given me credit for violently ruining an S-rank mission for Iwa-nin.

And they’d given me a partial credit on Yagura’s death, along with full credit for killing Akuro. *Not* sure how that had gotten out. The ones who had really killed Yagura had been Orochimaru’s men, but I supposed that just landing the finishing blow didn’t really “count.” Gai had gotten a functional kill on him long before that.
Akuro, as I had learned through bits and pieces and old bingo book entries, had been a ghastly figure in local lore around the borders of the Land of Fire. And now she was dead, because she’d fucked with the wrong people.

Well, person. I would have given Gai the assist points for that one.

And then there was my nickname: *Tidal Blade*. Given that I used kenjutsu and had only really picked up a Water ninjutsu affinity, it made sense. It was even a bit of a pun if one bothered to substitute “wave” for “blade.”

Not bad, Iwagakure.

“I kinda like the nickname,” I told Sensei, as I turned pages until I found Kakashi’s entry. Ayup, Lightning Fang for when he was out of ANBU uniform. He at least pretended to be covert when he was on the clock.

“I always did think that Iwagakure had a good naming scheme going,” Sensei said cheerily. Then again, he was the one who could kill two or three hundred shinobi in a single routine battle.

…Actually, hadn’t I done that, too? I checked my entry again, and noted that all of the Sorayama kills aside from Akuro and Yagura had been left to sheer speculation. It wasn’t like Oto-gakure generally *cared* if they lost a fuckton of men.

But maybe losing Orochimaru was a bit more important.

“Do the records even say Orochimaru is dead?” I asked, now that I’d thought of it. “And if they do, who supposedly killed him?”

Sensei paused, then his eyes focused on the ceiling for a moment as his thoughts came together. “Officially, his death is being attributed to ANBU. Kakashi didn’t want it to get out that he’d done it…and anyway, knowing what we do about Orochimaru? We’re not actually certain he’s dead enough to call it.”

Well, at least *someone* had been able to read all of my info on the guy. Until the Curse Seals were all eliminated, all too much of Orochimaru was still in this world. I wouldn’t be up for the Horcrux hunt for ages, if I ever was, and the second he was revived at least once, we’d be back to square one.

And when it came down to it, I dreaded fighting the kids Orochimaru had recruited. I’d still *do* it, and kill every one of them if I had to, but the thought was already twisting my stomach into knots. The thought of a necessary evil, against people too dangerous to send normal shinobi or even ANBU to deal with…

I shuddered.

But since I was thinking of it… “There haven’t been *any* reports on more refugees, have there?”

In the months since Sorayama, stories trickled in with mission reports. Few of the Chinatsugumi had decided to permanently relocate to Konoha, particularly if they hadn’t experienced the brunt of the attack themselves. Many of them had gone back to their civilian lives, scattering among the dozens of towns in the Land of Fire, and moved on physically if not emotionally.

But while the three children I mentally referred to as “young dragons” were definitely staying in Konoha for the foreseeable future, my mind turned toward uncertainties.

And no one had ever reporting finding a single trace of the others.
Rikuto’s body had never been found, even if Kakashi’s dogs identified a probably-lethal amount of blood near the square. Misaki and Chinatsu had been, and riddled with kunai, but I didn’t know why the retreating Oto-nin would take Rikuto and not the other two. The Kasai clan fūinjutsu was at least theoretically replicable, but apparently Orochimaru’s men had been on the lookout for destructive kekkei genkai instead.

I would take every opportunity I had to call Orochimaru a tunnel-vision-afflicted idiot. Even if he was dead for the moment, and even if hatred was like a self-inflicted poison, I couldn’t stand thinking of him without feeling the rising tide of mingled fear and loathing threaten to pull me under.

“I’m sorry, Kei.” Sensei could still see my expression, and I didn’t have to ask why he was apologizing. “But at this point, all we can do is declare them all dead. We’ll continue searching for Orochimaru’s hideouts, but the chances that we find anyone alive…”

Were astronomical, yes.

I dropped my head into my hands and took a deep breath. So that was a door closed, a hope destroyed. I’d known that would be the answer, deep in my bones, but hearing it said aloud was still a blow.

And I still didn’t know if anyone had broken the news to the kids. Obviously, someone should have, but.

But.

Shit. I had to be sure. The kids didn’t need bad news right before they started in the Academy, but I —

I wasn’t a grief counselor, or a medic, or much of anything else at the moment. I…I’d stopped knowing what to do years ago.

And even then, I hadn’t been great at it.

“Did someone break the news to them?” Sure, the last thing we needed was another round of Murderous Orphan Syndrome in the population, but they needed to know. The last time I’d spoken with them, Aiko had still been convinced that there was a chance her mother could come and find her. She’d been broken up by the implication that her mother hadn’t, but the seed of hope had been there anyway.

“I believe that their guardians did, yes,” Sensei replied, frowning faintly. “But I can’t be certain.”

Dammit.

After that, the conversation just kind of…died.

I left once I remembered that I was supposed to be checking in with Rin during my lunch break, just to make certain that my shoulder continued healing properly.

So, about those health checkups I needed during my recovery. Turned out that there was some bad news to accompany the more positive developments—like mobility. More than a week after I first started “work” again, Rin finally gave me her verdict.

We were on the hospital’s roof, where Yamaguchi-sensei had helpfully left a pile of cigarette butts in the corner. Sitting against the rooftop fence, hidden from most people’s view by a forest of drying
sheets, Rin and I spent our lunch break together. She’d decided to wear a lab coat rather than the usual standard medic-nin garb today, which probably meant she was only on clinic duty for the day.

“I’m sorry, Kei, but your chakra control is never going to be good enough for medical ninjutsu again,” Rin said, as she finished scanning my left shoulder. “Your shoulder tenketsu…think of them like, um, surge protectors. If your chakra flow increases for any reason, like if you’re using powerful ninjutsu, you could easily hurt yourself. If you aren’t careful, you could be facing that overload problem every time, and just make the damage worse.”

…Shit. There went my lunch break.

“You’re sure there’s no way to fix it?” I asked her. “Not even Isobu?”

But Rin was already shaking her head. “I don’t have a lot of experience with Isobu-san’s skill at manipulating your recovery rate, but I don’t think he can fix these kinds of things unless he uses your chakra network, right?”

“Right.” In fact, I’d been wondering exactly how extensive Isobu’s healing powers were. While it made a kind of sense that Kurama could repair Naruto’s arm from the Rasenshuriken’s hideous backlash, I didn’t remember Shukaku showing off the same expertise when Gaara had gotten stabbed (for realsies) in the Chūnin Exam invasion.

**I can repair almost everything except death,** Isobu insisted.

*Then why is my shoulder still a mess?* I countered.

Isobu subsided with an angry grumble.

“Kurama’s better than Isobu is,” I told Rin, thinking of another incident—specifically, when Sasuke had ventilated Naruto’s chest cavity with the Chidori. I…probably couldn’t expect to come out of a similar incident unscathed. “I don’t have any idea if this is just going to be something that heals with time, or what. Isobu’s still dependent on my chakra coils, mostly, so…”

“And I can’t help you with this anymore,” Rin said, her eyes downcast. She brought her hands to her face and let out a frustrated groan. “Why am I so useless at this?”

“Rin?” I squawked, taken aback. But no, Rin had really said that, and she looked like her white lab coat was weighing her down toward the floor.

“I just—every time you get hurt, all I can do is patch things.” Rin swore under her breath, then ran a hand through her hair as she sat up again. “I’m sorry, Kei. I’m sorry I can’t help.”

No. No, I wasn’t going to let her beat herself up over the results of the consequences of my decision. Not after she’d spent so much time on protecting all of us from just that. It wasn’t Rin’s fault that my mistakes had finally tipped over the edge of what Rin could fix.

I snatched up the collar of her coat and yanked her into a tight hug. “Don’t say things like that, Rin. You’re doing your best.”

Into my shoulder, Rin hissed, “But that isn’t good enough!”

“Then we work until it is.” I let Rin pull out of the hug and sit back, rubbing at her eyes with the heel of her hand. I said, “We’ll figure this out, Rin. You’re a medic, and I know fūinjutsu. We’ll get there.”
Rin sniffed loudly, then sighed. As I waited for her to reply, she took her headband off and rubbed at her forehead, thinking hard. Tucking the metal plate into her lab coat pocket, she looked up at me again.

This time, her expression had firmed, and her eyes were a touch narrower than I expected. She set her jaw. “Yes, we will.” She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Kei, I just—it was a moment of weakness.”

I smiled, relieved, and clapped my hand down on her shoulder. My left, which was painless whenever Rin could take a look at it. Sure, the fundamental problem hadn’t been addressed yet, but we’d get there.

“What we need is someone who knows a lot about tenketsu, and not just the Hyūga method of blowing them up,” I mused aloud. Sure, that one Hyūga medic had just about turned green once he saw my arm, but I assumed that wasn’t the usual reaction.

“Well, if you discount the part where she can’t see tenketsu,” Rin said, with her brow furrowing, “Tsunade-sama is the best medic-nin we have.”

Yes, that was obv—

Wait a tick.

I slapped myself in the forehead. With my hand sliding down to cover my eyes, I grumbled, “Tsunade-sama’s entire combat style is based on controlled release of chakra, starting with that mark on her forehead. I’m an idiot.”

“...Wait, are you referring to the Strength of a Hundred Seal?” Rin asked, and I nodded. “But neither of us have nearly that much chakra control—or just chakra, in my case…”

I settled back down, resting my hands against the tops of my thighs, and said to Rin, “But I think the same principle could work for me, if we could find out if fūinjutsu and medical ninjutsu could be combined into a form I can still use.”

“Then we need to get Kushina-san,” Rin said. “She knows more about fūinjutsu than anyone.”

And since Kushina was a jinchūriki, she would be able to work on that angle, since Rin and I had both hit a wall. “So, do we maybe have a plan?”

“We have a plan,” Rin said firmly. Abruptly, she let out a giggle.

Eh?

“I’m sorry, it’s just—I forget, sometimes, that we have all of these wonderful people to help us,” Rin explained, once she got the relieved laughter under control. “It’s not just us against the world, you know?”

...I did.

I did know. It’d just...taken a while to sink in.

Chapter End Notes
Lang: As always, ask any questions you have, check out tumblr for new art, and I hope you enjoyed reading. I'm gonna be applying for a new job in a bit, so hopefully I'll have actual money for next year.
Camaraderie: The Choice

Chapter Summary

Everyone: Make decisions, big and small.

Chapter Notes

This chapter's title is from the Undertale OST, specifically the track titled "The Choice." It's basically the main theme, slowed down five times over. Very dramatic.

Having gone to Kushina and Tsunade for help, Rin and I were left with a couple of different answers.

Kushina said that while she knew how to seal Tailed Beasts and other sources of volatile chakra, she wasn’t quite sure how to approach creating an artificial tenketsu. She didn’t have the medical expertise to know how to create a seal to mimic their function on someone like me, but there was always something she could learn.

Tsunade, on the other hand, frowned severely and informed us that our understanding of the Strength of a Hundred Seal was flawed. Yes, the seal needed a crapton of chakra in precise dosages and at certain times, in certain configurations, but it wasn’t truly a chakra regulator. Once established, the seal just...continued to work unless deliberately overclocked at some point. Kind of explained why she could just smash things when Sakura had to actually concentrate to turn into a human bulldozer.

But both women decided that the idea of creating some kind of seal to function as replacement tenketsu was a good one, and said that they’d help.

It was really all Rin and I could ask for, since any work we did could help someone else in the future—and as such, we needed to make sure it was a solid concept before moving on.

Rome wasn’t built in a day and all that rot. Regardless, I had plenty of things to occupy my time.

Like running around and bugging all of my friends.

Because Obito had the first shift of Sensei-sitting of the day, and Kakashi was on a mission to the Land of Snow—not that I was supposed to know that—I had the late morning free while my brother and his team had their group spars. Knowing that Rin also had a morning shift at the hospital and wasn’t due out until two, I had a lot of time on my hands and no one to spend it with.

I’d...gotten clingy over the previous year, so I immediately decided to go find someone.

This, somehow, resulted in a trip out to the training grounds with a full supply of training gear.

I was probably not in the best mindset for sparring with actual people, but I had an urge to wallop something and a bunch of wooden posts would probably suffice.
Still brought my actual katana, though. I needed to get used to using it again, properly, and I’d never relied too much on my left arm for kenjutsu anyway.

In short order, I found myself at Training Ground Seven, which had the usual stock of straw training dummies hanging from every tree in sight. Out of the sixteen of them that were in plain view and not strung up in other trees I couldn’t see, fifteen had at least five senbon in each of the targets on their torsos. Some of them completed the set with multiple senbon to the forehead-mounted bullseye.

And in the middle of the clearing, taking aim at the last trepanning victim with a senbon in his left hand, was Genma.

Raidō roamed off to one side, collecting senbon off the ground. From the looks of it, Genma had generally missed more than he hit at the beginning. Of course, I had no idea how long these two had been here, and it was only a guess.

“Hi, Kei-san,” Genma called over his shoulder as I arrived, but he didn’t take his eyes off his target.

Raidō turned around and waved at me, though.

I waved back. “So, is this just a target practice session, or can anyone join?”

Somewhat distracted, Genma replied, “Just gimme a chance to nail this last one.”

A moment later, Genma impaled the last straw target through a hole in its button eyeball. For a moment I wasn’t sure if he threw hard enough to make a brand new hole in the wood, or if he’d thrown accurately enough to thread a needle. With a needle.

For a target ten meters off and no weird eyeball shenanigans to assist, that kind of accuracy was just downright freaky. It also explained how the hell Genma could eschew any other weapon and somehow still not die.

But as soon as the throw was complete, Genma let out a loud sigh and let his arm drop. Wincing, he was still rubbing his shoulder when he turned back to me and said, “Field’s free, now.”

“I didn’t mean to make you feel like you had to finish early,” I backtracked, holding up my hands. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, Kei. PT’s over for today,” Genma replied, and caught the water bottle Raidō tossed at him with his right hand. At least that side was in working order. “I’ve just been doing accuracy drills all morning.”

Yes, the hundred or so senbon probably indicated as much.

“‘Bout time I stopped, anyway. This arm’s still giving me trouble,” Genma said, and sat down on a fallen log.

Well, I could certainly empathize there. I joined him on the improvised bench a moment later, as Raidō continued cleaning up the training ground by cutting the various straw targets down.

“Come to think of it, how’s your arm doing?” Genma asked, and I noticed that he had already started chewing on the last stray senbon he had on hand.

“The tenketsu are still shot, so that’s not new,” I said with false cheer. I kicked my legs idly as I went on, “I’m probably not gonna be running any missions until we figure that out.”
Genma blinked. “I didn’t exactly think you’d be jumping at a chance to get back out there.”

“Not like you, you mean?” I teased him, then sighed. I dropped my head into my right hand and said, “I really don’t care about like, thrills or challenges like that. But not being able to use chakra with my left arm is kind of just a problem in general.”

“Huh.” Genma exhaled slowly, leaning back and looking up at the sky. “And Tsunade-sama can’t do anything about it?”

I told him, “It’s about as bad as a Hyūga could do, so it’s...not really something she’s practiced. Rin and I are looking into fūinjutsu options instead.”

“And there aren’t any Hyūga medics to take a look at it?”

I shook my head. “The whole point of the Gentle Fist is to break tenketsu and organs so bad that nothing can fix them. They’re not really in the repair business if they hit someone for real.”

Genma, with only a bit of a wince, patted my right shoulder with his left arm. “Well, just shout if you want my help with the fūinjutsu thing. I’m not a medic, but new eyes might be helpful once in a while.”

“And it has nothing to do with how bored you are, since you’re benched too?” I tried teasing him again.

“Absolutely not,” Genma informed me in a faux-serious tone. “I’m offering out of the goodness of my heart. ...Though yes, I’m bored and I need a new project or else I’m going to go insane.”

“I think your only project should be getting your arm healed,” Raidō called from the last dummy, which he was disassembling in order to retrieve all the senbon stuck in it.

Genma scowled, but the expression slid off his face in just a moment. He grumbled, “Like I need the reminder.”

I didn’t either. But then, I hadn’t really needed the same kind of treatment. Isobu could take care of most physical damage that time would otherwise give up on, with the glaring exception of the tenketsu problem. Anything else got sped up enough that Genma’s concerns were of a different tack than mine.

“So I guess that means you’re not up for a spar?” I had assumed that was the case, actually, but it wasn’t like Genma and I usually practiced together anyway. We were...not exactly in the same weight class, and our skills only had one area of overlap. Fūinjutsu like mine was great for fighting, but Genma’s wasn’t.

“Not remotely,” Genma admitted. “On the other hand, I’m pretty sure Raidō is.”

And as it so happened, Raidō was heading back over to us at the time, and heard every word. With pockets full of senbon and a pained expression, Raidō told Genma, “Stop volunteering me for things you don’t want to do.”

Genma stuck his tongue out at Raidō anyway. “What, you were gonna make her ask?”

Raidō gave me a long-suffering look. “Sorry about him.”

“No, I actually do want to train a bit, but...” I gestured helplessly at my left arm. “Well, you know.”
Raidō tilted his head to one side, giving Genma and me assessing looks. Then he said, “Jinchūriki or not, I wouldn’t really recommend it. Not until your arm’s healed.”

Bleh. “It’s not really a matter of healing at this point.”

“Still,” Genma said, as Raidō sat down to his right. But Genma paused for a second, closing for his eyes and holding still.

Raidō and I waited.

Then, Genma said, “Well, if neither of us end up sparring, I can hear Gai and his crew coming back right now. That’ll be enough for anyone.”

With barely any forewarning other than that (and the obligatory heads-up from my chakra sense), Gai Body Flickered onto the scene with a shout of triumph. In his wake, I could sense three somewhat less-enthused chakra signatures following along.

Running everyone else ragged was Gai’s specialty, and the members of Team Inoichi were no exception.

That was probably why Iruka stumbled over to the log like a drunk and collapsed across it, his face red and his hair everywhere thanks to Gai’s idea of light exercise. Between panting breaths, he managed, “The Academy was n-never this tough.”

Hayate staggered to a stop, but didn’t collapse. Instead, he sat down with his back to mine, trembling from exertion, and informed me in the most dramatic tone he could pull off, “I’m dead.”

I gingerly patted Iruka’s back. “You’ll live.” To my brother, I said, “And so will you.”

Yūgao, meanwhile, sat down next to Iruka and upended her water bottle over her head.

Gai grinned. “That was an invigorating run! Now, we spar!”

“I think the kids are exhausted.” Genma thumped Raidō’s shoulder and added with cheerful malice, “Tell you what, Raidō can—”

Raidō clapped a hand over Genma’s mouth—barely avoiding the senbon—and hissed, “Not a chance.”

“Not a chance what?” Gai asked, bouncing over to us.

Raidō’s expression froze up for a moment, in a sort of nervous grin. Then, “You know what, I have a shift change to take care of. Bye!”

As soon as Raidō disappeared into a cloud of smoke, Genma stage-whispered to me, “That’s his go-to excuse for everything now.”

I searched for something positive to say and came up with, “Well, he gets more work done that way.”

Genma snorted, but let the topic drop.

“Gai, if Raidō really is going to take over a shift, that means Obito is free now,” I said, blatantly throwing Obito under the bus. Well, if I couldn’t spar with Gai—which I would, under normal circumstances—then I could at least find someone in town who would be up for a challenge. “Just mention that you’d like to test his strength, and he’ll jump at the chance.”
“Do you think so?” Gai asked, buzzing with undirected energy.

After watching Sensei all morning, I had no doubt that Obito would want nothing more than a bit of excitement. “Yep. Go get him.”

Gai looked like he was about to bound off and do exactly that, but he paused thoughtfully. “Would you like to stay and watch our spar as we go, Keisuke-chan? Actually, all of you are invited to spectate!”

“Do we have to move?” Yūgao asked, as she tied her sopping-wet hair out of her face.

“No, I believe this location will be suitable! We will put on a Youthful display here for you all!” Gai gave us all a thumbs-up. “That is a promise.”

And then Gai was gone again.

Hayate groaned, bumping the back of my head with his. “I don’t know how you can keep up with him, Sis.”

“Is this a jinchūriki superpower?” Iruka asked, eyeing me skeptically.

“Practice makes perfect,” I told him, thinking back to the time I had first started training with Gai. It basically boiled down to “I’ve been doing this for six years, you lazy sods.”

“That doesn’t really work that way,” Genma countered. “I’ve been on his team for more than ten years, and I still can’t work on that level.”

“He was like that the entire time?” Yūgao asked, horrified.

“Nope,” said Genma. “And now he can kill jōnin with his little finger, and I’m on medical leave.” Genma shrugged, looking up at the sky again. “There’s a reason he talks about hard work so much.”

“...I don’t think I’ve ever seen you work hard at anything,” Hayate told Genma. The other teens were also giving the oldest shinobi in our midst skeptical looks.

“And now you know why Gai is stronger than Genma,” I summarized, as though reading the life lesson at the end of a fairy tale.

Genma rolled his eyes. “Thanks, Kei-san.” After a moment more, he took the senbon out of his mouth and asked, “So does anyone know what time it is?”

Everyone thought about it. Konoha did not have easily accessible clocks, and there was only so much timekeeping anyone could do while running in a Gai-inspired workout. Everything felt much slower while doing that.

“...Noon-ish?” Iruka guessed.

Genma got up, brushing splinters and dust from his pants. “I’ve got to get going.”

“Why?” Yūgao asked.

“I was supposed to take Sushi and Kabocha to the vet today, and I might be late.” He pointed up at the sky, where the sun had gone to hide behind the clouds like the unhelpful jerk it was. “Maybe.”

Oh. Oops. I said, “We can explain to Gai. I’m sure he’ll understand.”
“I hope so,” Genma said dryly. “It’s not like he’s not the best cat-sitter in the village or anything. Or the bit where he gave me a lecture on responsible pet ownership I really didn’t need.”

The rest of us waved Genma off, so he could do whatever he had to, and exchanged more silly stories for a while.

In the cool spring air, it seemed like our lives were carefree for at least a little while. It was all I could ask for.

Rin showed up on my front doorstep on a Tuesday, which would have been weird except for the bit where Rin’s schedule was weird anyway. Mine was pretty much “when I felt like working,” so it wasn’t exactly surprising that I wasn’t out and about.

Mornings, as far as I was concerned, were for sleeping in.

So I answered the door in a T-shirt and sweatpants, because of course I did. I had a comment on the tip of my tongue, about not waking me up for the end of the world, and had to swallow it when I looked down and realized that Rin was standing there.

She gave me an expectant look and said, “So, are you free today?”

I took stock.

Me: Pajamas, no breakfast, generally planning on snoozing the whole day away unless roused like a starving grizzly bear.

Her: Perfect hair, bright-eyed expression, cute outfit, and more energy than I’d had since I was sixteen.

“Sure,” I said. Except for the bit where I wasn’t exactly ready to go anywhere. I still needed to eat, shower, get dressed...hell. “Uh, you can wait in the kitchen? I need to...kind of get ready. In general.”

Luckily, there was fruit on the counter, so it wasn’t like I was being a bad host. It was just that Hayate had gotten up first, eaten all the takeout, and left in short order before I had even thought about swearing at the sun. There was something about being fifteen that turned people into ambulatory stomachs. Probably puberty.

Rin picked up one of the apples off the counter and bit into it, so I took that as my cue to retreat to the bathroom and get ready for the day.

After taking a shower and brushing my teeth—I’d eat while we were out—I got dressed.

Given that Rin was wearing something other than her hospital scrubs, I assumed she wanted to actually go out and do something. As opposed to training, or dragging me to the hospital to get my arm looked at again. That kind of thing demanded at least a modicum of “not looking like a hobo” out of me.

So I tried.

Black T-shirt under a...when the hell had I gotten a new hoodie? And one that for some reason was best described as eye-searing blue. Anyway, that plus the tighter style of shinobi pants that Rin favored, and then my less-ugly sandals.
I almost felt fashionable. Then I remembered that my hair was still wet, and just clipped it out of my face with whatever I had on hand. It would turn into a cowlick-ridden mess no matter what I did, so I just gave up on it preemptively.

“You look cute, Kei!” Rin said, once I stumbled my way back into the kitchen.

...Yeah, I wasn’t buying that. Instead of actually acknowledging the compliment, I asked, “What did you want to do today, anyway?”

“Oh, I thought we could hang out,” Rin said, smiling. “Aside from when things get serious, we haven’t done a lot of that lately.”

She had a point. If I was visiting Rin, for the most part it meant either I was going to have another appointment with Suika-sensei, or that I was noticing some kind of new and awful development in my left arm’s situation.

So no, we hadn’t had much time just to relax like actual non-dramatic friends.

“But still, what did you want to do?” I asked her again.

“Well, I was thinking we could do a little shopping”—and here, my expression became the slightest bit strained—“for some supplies”—phew—”and then maybe we could find some different clothes for special occasions, or maybe for everyday wear.”

Dammit.

You are a weakling. You can’t even stand something boring when one of your human friends is suffering alongside you?

...Okay, point of order? She thinks it’s fun, I argued silently.

“Kei?” Rin’s voice broke me out of my stupor, and I finally realized that she was giving me an expression similar to a pout. “You don’t really want to go, do you?”

I winced. “Sorry, Rin. I just—I’m really bad at this ‘shopping’ thing.” In fact, I was bad at most things that required me to wander around with no idea of what I was looking for, just to snap up any targets my partners could locate.

In other news, I was also bad at hunting.

Rin paused. “Well, how about we just focus on food, then? I need to get more for Sasa-chan, too.”

That, I could do. “Okay then.”

“Great!” Rin said, getting to her feet. “Let’s go.”

Our first stop was not, in fact, either a market or a pet supply store. It was a bank.

I stayed outside while Rin did whatever she had to. I didn’t have much interest in big financing things and the banking system had never made any sense to me, so I spent the time letting my mind wander a bit.

A few minutes later, Rin reappeared.

“So what was that about?” I asked.
“Akihito-shishō had a couple of errands for me to take care of,” Rin said, and didn’t elaborate.

After that, we were off.

Between Rin’s head for markets and mine for having absolutely nothing at all to do with the topic, we managed to buy all of the things we needed in record time. Bringing my grocery scroll along had been a good idea, since I had enough control over the chakra in my right arm to create more storage seals as we went. In the end, all of what we bought was tucked into various pocket dimensions.

And I learned way more about scorpion care than I had ever cared to know.

We spent at least a few minutes poking around the pet supply store. Rin knew what she was looking for, and while she went for the terrarium with feeder crickets, I explored a little.

I picked up a large packet of dog treats from a shelf near the back. While I didn’t always see Kakashi’s dogs, I could think of a few different people with canine companions who would tolerate someone spoiling their partners. Like Fuse Inuzuka.

And while I was at it, I picked up two different dog toys—one rope toy that looked like it could survive the loving attention of a chainsaw, and a rubber squeaky cat. Once I introduced the two toys to Bull, I fully expected them to be destroyed within a few minutes—especially the rope. Those also went in the shopping basket.

Then I joined Rin again at the terrarium, where the store’s employee was fishing the recalcitrant crickets out and sticking them into a disposable plastic bag.

While he did so, I noticed that he was channeling chakra, forcing the crickets to stick to whatever he touched—no escape for them. The rest of the process consisted of picking up the random junk in the tank and shaking them into their new, temporary home—which would be their last.

He was still a showoff.

“How’s little Sasa doing now, Rin-chan?” asked the employee, as he rang up our purchases.

“She’s fine, Satoshi-kun,” Rin responded, as she counted out her money.

The employee nodded. But as he was packing the crickets away (and I abruptly remembered that no, I couldn’t just stick them into the grocery scroll if I wanted them to live), he happened to say, “So, who’s your...friend?”

I gave him a flat look.

There weren’t exactly a ton of people around who would fail to recognize me. Sure, I wasn’t as distinctive as Kakashi and his floofy white hair and the hitai-ate eyepatch, but the scar wasn’t exactly subtle. And what was with that pause?

Sure, I was being over-defensive when faced with half an iota of possible judgment from a guy who felt like a genin, but my nerves had been keyed up for entirely too long.

Or maybe I was missing something.

Under the mess of spiky black hair and the one-step-down-from-Gai eyebrows, the guy had a pleasant smile and a friendly demeanor. He looked like the kind of person I could easily meet on the street and have a friendly chat, but my stupid brain insisted on overthinking everything.
“Oh, this is Kei,” Rin said cheerfully to the clerk’s question. “Kei, this is Satoshi-kun. You do remember him, right?”

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t remember you.” Not in the slightest.

Rin punched me playfully in the arm. “Come on, Kei, he was in our class!”

“I was in your class for maybe a year, and I slept through most of it,” I protested. But now that I thought of it, his face...kind of looked familiar... “Wait, Satoshi Inabi? You were placed on Rin’s genin team when we graduated!”

“And you’re Keisuke Gekkō.” Satoshi’s eyebrows rose, and he stepped back from the counter a bit for effect. “Damn, you got tall fast. If you were a guy…”

I sputtered, for just a moment.

“I know, I know, too fast.” Satoshi cackled, while Rin started giggling. Leaning forward, he put both elbows on the countertop and said cheerily, “But seriously, Keisuke-san, it’s nice to finally see you again.”

“Likewise,” I said, still reeling. “I, uh, I hope Rin’s been saying good things about me?” And my boys, come to think of it. We were sort of infamous.

“Mostly that she wished you’d get hurt less,” Satoshi replied, shrugging. “But hey, at least she’s got the skills to help. All I can do is listen.”

“But you listen really well, Satoshi-kun,” Rin assured him as she took the bag of crickets. To me, she added, “He helped me a lot when Obito and I got together, and we were still a little...uncertain, I think.”

“.‘Uncertain?’” I repeated. I’d been doing that enough that I probably could have been substituted with a parrot to no discernable effect.

“I didn’t—I mean…” Rin sighed, all of the wind coming out of her sails. “First relationships are a lot harder than books make it seem.”

I patted Rin’s shoulder sympathetically, though I had absolutely no idea. “Very true.”

“And everyone needs someone to talk to,” Satoshi added. “Or to get advice. And Rin’s made it pretty clear that her old man’s kinda...not great.”

Or he *sucked* at it.

No one said anything for a long moment. Welp, there went the conversation…

So, after saying our goodbyes to Satoshi, we left.

Rin and I, after dropping the crickets off at Rin and Yamaguchi-sensei’s apartment, went to a restaurant for lunch.

“Restaurant” was probably overstating it a bit, actually—it was a bit of a hole in the wall near the Konoha Administration Building, but there was soba. The place also had enough booths that I could slap down a privacy seal and feel completely sure that I wasn’t inconveniencing the wait-staff.

“Back then,” Rin began carefully, as she stirred her noodles around and around, “I wasn’t—I was afraid that Obito and I weren’t going to work out.”
I nodded to show I was listening, but couldn’t exactly reply with food in my mouth.

“I felt, at the time, it was a bit like I was forced to pick Obito over you,” Rin admitted, shaking her head. “But that’s stupid. It was a choice, and it mattered, and I would choose him again. But at the beginning it was hard to do.”

I swallowed hard. “Rin, I—”

“No, Kei, it’s all right. I’m over it.” Rin spoke over me, quietly but insisting on being heard. “Don’t beat yourself up over turning me down.”

...Er.

In some ways I’d kind of avoided thinking about it. Sure, I was aware of Rin’s feelings, and I loved her—but just not in the way she would have appreciated. That part hadn’t changed at all.

“So I went to Satoshi to figure out if I was doing the right thing,” Rin said. She smiled, distracted and fond. While twirling her noodles again, she went on, “And he said that as long as I spent more time happy than I did worrying about what might’ve been, then things would work out.”

“I’m surprised you went to him, but I guess that’s a bit silly to say,” I said.

“Satoshi and I didn’t know each other that well,” Rin told me. “I mean, we were only a team for one day, and Satoshi retired right after, but he’s a good friend now.”

And it wasn’t like she could talk to me of all people. I’d been out of the village so much that I wasn’t physically available, and the second she brought this up if I was, I’d probably have checked out mentally. But that wasn’t important now. “So, now that you’ve been dating Obito for almost two years, are you happy?”

“Oh, yes,” Rin said, brightening. She leaned forward and her expression became something I could best describe as “squee!”

Oh dear.

“Obito is so cute!” Rin chirped, with almost as much enthusiasm as Gai but in a much higher octave. “He helps me look after Sasa-chan, and feed her, and he never runs away from her even if she tries to sting him. I mean, Kei, he doesn’t live with us and he doesn’t have to, and he’s always so sweet about it. And he makes me laugh, even if things are hard, and he always remembers my birthday and —” Rin trailed off with a heartfelt sigh. “He’s almost too good, you know?”

I said nothing. I had no idea how to even approach this.

“Obito—he’s kind, and if he forgets things I can’t stay mad at him even if he thinks I should,” Rin murmured. “I even went out to find that cat he keep rescuing, and we got it out of that tree together. I don’t think I’d ever seen Shisui-kun laugh so hard.”

Pffft. I bit my lip and pressed the heel of my hand against my mouth, forcing the laugh back before it could burst free.

“Oh, laugh if you want,” Rin giggled. While both of us cackled together for a moment, Rin recovered first and dashed tears from her eyes as she wound down.

It took me a little longer, but I calmed myself back down after a while. A little breathless, I managed to say, “Sounds like you’re happy.”
“I am,” Rin said, and leaned in.

Blinking, I copied her and heard her whisper, “And it helps that he’s a good kisser.”

Given Rin’s excitement, I had to conclude that they’d figured that one out with plenty of practice.

I was about to ask about something. I couldn’t remember afterward, because a part of my brain started to scream at the rest of me. My head jerked as though someone had blasted the dulcet tones of microphone feedback into my ear.

“Kei?” Rin’s voice demanded in concern, as I came back to myself and shoved the pain aside.

I swore again under my breath, wondering why I was apparently the only person to hear that scream. And yet, my ears didn’t hurt… “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Rin asked, and her hand was on my wrist and her chakra fed into mine. But there wasn’t really any pain to numb, was there?

“Chakra sense problems,” I said, distracted. Underneath the electronic scream, there had been an undercurrent of what I realized wasn’t my pain, but someone else’s. And it was still there, but fainter, in the distance.

Keito.

“Rin, I’m sorry, I have to go sort something out,” I rattled off, getting to my feet. “I’ll pay you back later, okay? For lunch and for the dog toys.”

“Of course, Kei,” Rin replied on reflex, but she was getting to her feet, too. “Kei, I may be able to help—”

But I was already out the door, and didn’t hear anything she said after that point.

What was that supposed to be? Isobu asked, stirring in the depths of my mind.

Someone in trouble, I told him, as I vaulted up to the rooftops and started calculating strength, direction, and distance to the intermittent chakra flares. It felt like—yes, that was definitely the Academy. And it was lunchtime for the kids, which could mean nothing good.

As I sped across the roofs toward the administration center, a dozen—no, two dozen other shinobi chakra signatures were already springing into action. If I hadn’t cared about smacking into a building, I could have closed my eyes to get a more accurate read on the situation, but I still needed to get there to be much use.

Fwish.

Sensei appeared just to my right, and I ducked left to avoid accidentally running into him. This, instead, forced me to drop down, having lost enough momentum that I would have missed the next rooftop jump.

Sensei caught the edge of my sleeve and yanked me back to solid ground. His chakra hummed against mine, showing worry and agitation and also a businesslike, brusque edge that would have had me cowering from him if Kaito hadn’t been in trouble.

His tone, as I skittered along ahead, was no less sharp. “Kei, you’ve already noticed the problem.”

Over my shoulder, I told Sensei, “I’ve noticed that there’s a problem.” The flippant tone was a flop
—there was enough stress in my voice that I almost immediately had to give it up. This just wasn’t the kind of situation that warranted it. I shook myself, then I asked, “Do you have a better idea what’s going on?”

“No,” Sensei replied.

Well, shit.

I was about to voice that thought, but Sensei didn’t give me any time to do it before grabbing my shoulder and just teleporting both of us to the site. I was fast, but there was simply nothing that compared to folding space-time like that.

And I hit the ground feet-first, eyes itching, as a crowd of children started to stream out of the Academy’s side gates past me. Sensei stuck to the walls, then dropped down to ground level ahead of me to clear the crowd.

“What happened?” Sensei barked at the Academy’s head teacher—Shikane Nara, actually. I hadn’t really thought about her being transferred from whatever she did other than being in the Hokage Guard, but it was nice to see a familiar face.

“One of the students is having difficulty,” Shikane said, perfectly serene despite the fact that her students were, uh, kind of evacuating to the schoolyard.

Well, it wasn’t like we were actually under attack as such…

Sensei and I drew her off to one side. It was mostly a formality, but the rest of the kids didn’t need to hear this.

“Is Kaito all right?” I asked her in a whisper. I already knew the answer.

“Kaito-kun recently froze every pipe in this part of the building,” Shikane informed us, as her voice took on more of a pleading tone. “Keisuke-kun, please try to talk him down.”

What the actual fuck is going on here? Why are you so calm? But what actually came out of my mouth was a startled, “But what’s happening?”

“Kaito-kun has encased one of our classrooms in ice,” Shikane replied, and Sensei closed his eyes briefly as though to force himself to slow down and think. Ignoring him, she went on, “From what the other students have said, he screamed while they were roughhousing, and used the ice to chase everyone else away.”

“No one’s been hurt, right?”

Shikane shook her head. “No, not even Kaito-kun. I think his power may be beyond him at this point, but the initial panic is over. It’s just that everyone who’s tried to reach him has been chased away from the room. But now you’re here, Keisuke-kun.”

I had no problem whatsoever with going in there—though I’d never been trained on something like this—but I did want to hear a bit of Shikane’s reasoning. “Shikane-san…”

“As a jinchūriki, you can shrug off any damage he might unintentionally cause,” Shikane said, reaching out and clasping my shoulder. “And I know you were one of the first responders to the Sorayama incident. I have no doubt you are suited for this.”

Yes, great, but what the hell does that have to do with me being able to feel Kaito screaming? What
I needed to find him. That nasty little voice in my head, which screamed about doom and death whenever something went even slightly off a plan, was doing its best foghorn impression.

Sensei frowned, crossing his arms over his chest as he thought. “Are there any children trapped in there with him?”

Sure, he could probably tell that just by closing his eyes and concentrating, but it was still good to make sure things were verbally confirmed.

“No,” Shikane said, shaking her head firmly. She let go of me and sighed heavily. “We escorted all of the other children away from the building to give Kaito-kun some breathing space. At this point, Kaito is only a danger to himself, but that alone...” Shikane shook her head. “I’m sorry, Hokage-sama, Keisuke-kun. This is difficult for everyone here.”

Kaito’s chakra was a storm’s eyewall, tucked into the building and rampaging against its bonds. And there was a definite edge there, like a caged tiger, and the lightning sang when it oughtn’t.

It was too much. I had an image in my head, of a tiny house that had been blasted down to nothing by the force of a child’s terror and an untrained bloodline.

But Kaito wasn’t Haku. And the people around him weren’t homicidal villagers. No one was coming to hurt him, but I didn’t know if he knew that.

How are we going to help him? Because I knew perfectly well that we were going to do it. I stood there for a moment and quietly stamped down on the urge to panic from the pressure.

“Kei, can you do this?” Sensei asked me.

Kaito—he was one of my students. Not that Sensei could know that, unless Kakashi had told him. Kaito was mine. My responsibility, my little lost lamb with the ability to coat large areas in frost.

I needed to be there for him.

“Yes, Sensei,” I said, and headed toward Kaito’s bright sparks without further comment.

It wasn’t hard to locate Kaito. Even if I hadn’t been a chakra sensor, the air temperature steadily dropped as I walked through the silent halls. Out of curiosity, I dragged a hand along the nearest wall, and felt a chill from frozen pipes inside the walls.

Shit.

You’re going to need my help for this, Isobu said as we went, maintaining a steady silent stride along the wooden floors.

Probably. But can we not do the glowy eye thing first?

...If you insist.

Thanks.

The classroom was...perhaps a bit obvious. Icicles the size of spears drooped down from the top of the classroom’s doorframe, guarding the entryway like dragon’s teeth. An unearthly chill seeped from the room, spreading spidery lines of frost outward from the open door.
At least I knew there was going to only be one person inside. A scared someone, but someone I knew and someone I wanted to help. I was definitely going in.

I touched the first icicle and leaned closer, nudging the door open past it with one foot. The ice splashed back into harmless, if cold, water as soon as I sent a feather-light touch of Isobu’s chakra into it. Making my way carefully into the room, I called, “Kaito?”

I heard a sob, somewhere in the frigid air. His chakra shifted, and the classroom’s door sealed shut with ice behind me. The air seemed to get somehow colder, and my chakra sense narrowed to focus on the single point that mattered in here—the little, sparking presence that I knew nearly as well as the other Lightning-user in my life.

But Kakashi was stronger, and had been a shinobi since he was Kaito’s age. And Kaito was a scared little boy who needed someone to come looking for him.

I could be that person. I was that person. I couldn’t be anything less.

“Kaito, I’m here,” I said softly, as my breath made a white cloud in front of me.

The solid rows of desks extended upwards from where I stood, blocking any line of sight. But based on the cold and the chakra, I could tell that Kaito was in the second row’s furthest corner, under the desk and behind the four or five chairs that had been arranged normally, once.

On silent feet, I made my way up until I was even with him. On top of the desk, I could see the remnants of children’s lunches, school supplies, and other miscellaneous items, which gave me a few more clues to puzzle over as I dropped down into a crouching position.

Once down, I could see his tiny huddled form in the shadows—harder than normal, given that the ice had covered the overhead lights and probably destroyed them in short order. His knees were pulled up to his chest, and his arms and face disappeared behind them as he wedged himself into the corner.

...I was probably going to have to get all of those damned chairs out of the way before I could even get close to him. While, sure, I could approach him any of a dozen different ways thanks to ninja training, the chairs would also present an obstacle for him—if he wanted to leave, being unable to find a clear line of sight to escape would be incredibly unhelpful.

“Kaito?” I called again, taking care to pitch my voice so there was no chance it could be a shout.

It might have been my imagination, but I thought I saw his tremors stop for a second. *Come on, please look at me. I’m not going to hurt you. I can’t imagine hurting you. And I’ll punch anyone who tries. Please, look up…*

And as my internal mantra got steadily more pleading, I drew a few symbols under the nearest chair with my fingertip. One flare of chakra later, and there was a quiet *bomph*. First chair was sealed into the floorboards, but it was out of the way nonetheless.

Just four more to go to clear Kaito’s path.

“Kaito, it’s me,” I tried again, carefully slinking up to the next chair to remove it. “It’s Kei. Remember me?”

And to my relief, I saw his head bob once. The white streak in his hair shifted as he started to lift his head, but the only noise he made was a hiccupping sob. Then it was right back to the corner, with his breath fogging the air as his quiet panting sped up again.
Okay, nope, not approaching for a moment. New plan.

_Fuck._ I was so out of my depth.

“You’re safe here,” I told him in a soft tone, even as I carefully reached out and, with another _bomph_, sent the nearest chair into a pocket dimension. With that, I was able to tuck my legs under me and settle into place. “Please, look up. You’re in Konoha.”

Kaito whispered something.

I stopped what I was doing—plotting, mostly—and held myself perfectly still so I could listen.

“...K-Kei...?” As I stayed frozen in place, I watched him shift again—saw his eyes seem to gleam in the shadows. And for the first time since this thing started, I could see his hands shift upward and toward his mouth, where they were probably a bit warmer. But still, he shook.

I let out a silent breath. Then, “Yeah, Kaito. It’s me. It’s just me.”

“I c-can’t—it’s—” Kaito tried, but kept getting cut off by his traitorous lungs. I was _almost_ sure that this was mostly normal crying. Not panic-crying. “Sc—ared.”

For a brief, hysterical moment, I wished that Akuro was alive solely so I could kill her again. If I could have gone back in time and ripped her still-beating heart from her chest back when we first met in Amegakure, I would have.

“Can you come here?” I asked, sealing the third chair as I crept closer, still on my knees.

Kaito shook his head rapidly.

Nnnnnnope. Not going that route either. _Shit._

What could I say? While “anything” was a bad answer and liable to make the situation worse, I wasn’t exactly spoiled for choices. So I kept trying. “Kaito, can—I come over there? Is that okay?”

No answer.

For a while, all I could hear was his rapid breathing getting quieter and slower, despite the occasional sob that shook his whole body. Unsure of what to do, I got rid of the last two chairs standing between Kaito and me—and subsequently him and an escape route if he needed one.

“...K-Kei?” Kaito asked in a small, but somewhat steadier voice. He peeked out from behind his arms and his knees again, his face reddened and his eyes puffy from crying. But his shaking had petered out again, and I was _almost_ close enough to touch him if he let me.

“Hey, Kaito,” I said, and while I tried to smile it almost certainly came out flat and strained. “I know you’re scared. That’s okay. I’m here now.”

Though hesitant, Kaito gave me a long stare before nodding once. He still sniffled, but the worst seemed over.

I hadn’t seen the worst of the panic attack, just the aftermath. I could only try to piece together how bad it had been, or what had caused it. There could have been a flashback, triggered by details of the incident Shikane hadn’t really described. I didn’t know yet.

But first things first, here and now. “Is it okay if I sit next to you?”
Kaito blinked slowly, as though unable to process the question for a moment, before nodding. Okay, permission acquired, but I wasn’t quite sure where I was supposed to go. Obviously, being larger than Kaito, I couldn’t crowd him, but I also couldn’t comfortably fit under the desks like him...

I scooted down the chair-free aisle and put my back against the wall, so I was sitting close to—but not touching—him, and also giving him a straight shot toward the main aisle if he wanted to get away. That would probably work for now.

What now?

And it turned out that I didn’t have to find my own answer to that question, because Kaito crawled into my lap and wrapped his skinny arms around my neck. His face buried against the side of my neck, and his legs managed to get a grip on my waist like he was some kind of koala.

I hesitated to hug him back, wary of possibly triggering him again. But eventually, I did.

And as the world came back—the ice melted, his heartbeat slowed, and my nerves finally settled—Sensei entered the room alone. He listened for a long moment as I hummed a lullaby I hadn’t had to use in years, and didn’t try to get me to move until Kaito had long since fallen asleep.

As ever, the hard part was bound to come afterward. But for a while, there was peace.

In an act of benign neglect that bordered on stupidity, I had never bothered to interact with any of the Chinatsugumi merchants who were permanent Konoha residents. Sure, they owed their allegiance to a merchant group that no longer existed and thus were stuck where they were, but my primary contact with them had always been Chinatsu herself. The rest of them sort of blended into the background.

Except this guy.

Raiden Koizumi was about as tall as Sensei, with white-blond hair tucked into a samurai-esque topknot at the back of his head. He had the same placid expression as a cow in a field, complete with wider-set gray eyes that were the same shade as Aiko’s. While Shikane confirmed that Raiden is a successful merchant in his own right, despite working under Chinatsu’s banner, I just got a weird feeling when I look at him.

It was the same crawling déjà vu I’d felt every time I recognized another reincarnation, like the Chinatsugumi members, for who they were.

Raiden was...well, it shouldn’t have surprised me to learn that he’d fathered Aiko in this timeline, too. What was surprising was that he’d taken his illegitimate daughter under his wing immediately. His original self had been entirely too self-absorbed to even think about anything beyond the moment.

And I was somehow sitting across the table from a man who was not only happily married to a woman named Chihiro with twins on the way, but one who had adopted three other children without a second thought. He should have felt safe.

But Kaito hadn’t gone running to him when he showed up. For that reason alone, I kept my guard up.

Shikane’s office in the Academy was a study in contrasts: part administration hub, part workspace, part playpen for unruly children who somehow ended up banished here. And somehow, she still had enough room to fit all of the adults and children and supervise this...very awkward meeting.
Sensei, Shikane, and I formed the “shinobi” camp of the group. Kaito was sort of his own little neutral zone, while Raiden acted as the “parent.”

He probably didn’t deserve the air-quotes, but I wasn’t sure how to slot him into my mental map of this battlefield otherwise. And Chihiro only stopped in long enough to grab Aiko and Roku from the group in the courtyard and take them home, so she wasn’t really a part of this conversation.

“Can you tell us what happened, Kaito?” I asked him, as he shifted so his face was no longer buried in the side of my neck.

His grip tightened on my jacket. “No.”

“You don’t want to, or you don’t know?” Raiden asked, leaning forward across the table. He wasn’t shinobi-trained, but I felt his chakra pull back into his core and his body language had shifted so he appeared as nonthreatening as possible.

I rested my cheek against the top of Kaito’s head and murmured, “It’s okay. No one’s gonna hurt you. You’re not in trouble. We just need to know what happened so we can protect you.”

The more I spoke, the more I felt Kaito’s heart rate slow. He was still half-burrowed into me, but it was progress nonetheless.

Shikane and Sensei were being uncannily quiet. Just waiting, and listening. Maybe if they stayed that way for long enough, Kaito would forget they were there and open up to us. And to do so, their chakra was...dispersed, I suppose. I could still feel them both, but only because I knew exactly what I was looking for.

“I’m s-sorry,” Kaito mumbled miserably, letting me pick him up a little and shift his weight so it was more on my right leg. My left arm didn’t have enough strength to hold him there indefinitely.

Over the top of his head, I could see Sensei and Shikane making shinobi hand signals at each other. I caught the word “asset” and “protect” along with a smattering of other phrases, but they stopped once they realized I was watching.

Sensei signed, “Go,” to signal me to continue since I’d stopped. Field sign was limited, but few teams had enough Yamanaka members to make telepathy a thing.

“Sorry for what?” I asked the top of Kaito’s head.

“I didn’t want to hurt anyone,” Kaito managed, through a lump in his throat. “I was just sc-scared.”

“What were you scared of?” Raiden asked, a little closer than before. He was acting like someone trying to approach a frightened animal, keeping his voice soft and only moving closer in tiny increments.

Kaito twisted so his face was buried against my chest again. But one of his hands let go of my jacket and twitched its way up to the blotchy, uneven scar above his right collarbone. His fingernails dug into it. “I-I was…”

I took his hand in mine and eased his fingers away from the scar. “Easy, easy…”

“S-someone pulled my shirt,” Kaito mumbled. “I th-thought the sc-scary lady w-was back…”

Sensei’s chakra jumped, but subtly enough that no one but me could feel it.
Akuro’s death had been too good for her.

I pressed my lips together and kissed the top of Kaito’s head, as he shook in my arms.

Raiden had somehow managed to scoot all the way over to me, so he could reach out and touch Kaito if he wanted. “Kaito…”

Kaito made an inquisitive noise, lifting his head free of my collar so he could see Raiden’s face. Guileless, Raiden opened his mouth and asked, “Who is this ‘scary lady?’”

Kaito stared at him, his green eyes wide. He trembled, and the temperature of the room started to drop. “B—but we t-told you—”

Before Kaito could start to cry again, or shout, I shucked off my jacket and bundled him up into it as though it was a trauma blanket. To Raiden, I said in a less-than-accommodating tone, “That was a very insensitive question, Koizumi-san.”

Raiden looked as though I’d just slapped him, but his eyes were on Kaito, not me. His chakra was harder to read, but I could feel the man’s anger threading through him. His jaw worked, teeth grinding for just a moment. Then, Raiden said in a carefully level tone, “She—that woman exists?”

“We t-told you she did,” Kaito insisted, still staring at Raiden with wide, accusing eyes. “You d-didn’t believe us?”

“Kaito, look at me,” I interrupted, drawing his attention back to my face. “She will never hurt you again. She’s dead.”

Kaito sniffled.

“Koizumi-san,” Shikane spoke up for the first time in a while, “I believe we’ve isolated your child’s problem.”

“Yes, I—I see that.” Raiden shook himself, trying to regain his composure. “I, er, I think that perhaps the Academy isn’t the best place for him. Or for my daughter or nephew.”

Unintentionally, my grip tightened on Kaito, and he squeaked in surprise before his guardian’s words sank in.

“No, I’m staying!” Kaito argued, squirming so he could face Raiden. He took a moment to gather steam, shaking. “Please. I have to stay.”

“But Kaito, that woman—she hurt you, and the village doesn’t take ninja who might get hurt again,” Raiden said, shooting helpless looks at Sensei and Shikane.

Shikane sighed. “Koizumi-san, Kaito-kun has the Ice Release bloodline. He needs to be taught how to use it safely.” She tapped a pencil on her desk. “While this incident is concerning, it’s not insurmountable with time, careful training, and therapy.”

...Now that I thought about it, when had therapy become so prominent in Konoha? While my therapist was definitely new to treating humans, Obito’s had already been in business. And I still
couldn’t recall the exact moment when there had been a paradigm shift away from “there are no therapists” to “we have them; use them.”

When had something changed? And why?

“But it’s not safe,” Raiden protested.

“If I get strong like Big Sis Kei,” Kaito argued back, his face reddening, “then no one will ever hurt me again.”

“But what if you’re not strong enough?” Raiden didn’t get to his feet, but it was a close thing. “I’m only trying to do what your parents would have wanted—to keep you safe.”

Which had served them so well.

I had a sudden urge to slap myself for the thought.

Kaito shook his head. “I still want to stay. You can’t—I need to protect me. I need to be strong!”

“Kaito, what if something like this happens again?” Raiden demanded.

Kaito’s mental state wasn’t a good sign for his prospects in the field. While we knew at least one of his triggers—or thought we did—I didn’t know how he’d react if he was in a real fight. If he did have PTSD, then I didn’t even know how the rest of the shinobi forces would react.

Sensei spoke up, “Would it help if we assigned someone specifically to Kaito-kun?”

“What?” Raiden asked, concentration broken.

“It seems to me that you’re worried about no one being able to calm him down and keep him safe.” Sensei stood back, steepling his fingers in front of him as he thought. It was probably better than playing with his kunai like he preferred, but I still thought it made him look pretentious.

“Yes, yes. Of course,” Raiden said, and Kaito settled back down into my arms.

Kaito reached up and touched the sides of my face, drawing my gaze down to him. “Can you do it? I promise I’ll be good. I won’t do bad things. Please?”

But Sensei was already shaking his head. “Keisuke isn’t a jōnin, Kaito-kun.”

“I could be.”

For a second, I almost didn’t recognize my own voice. But everyone was looking at me, so it had to be me, didn’t it?

I looked down into Kaito’s wide green eyes, feeling his weight in my lap. He trusted me, more than I could trust myself with anything.

But hadn’t I spent that hellish year outside of the village to grow stronger, smarter, and more capable for just that role?

I’d run away from responsibility for as long as I could, out of fear of letting someone down. I hadn’t thought I could do anything that wasn’t just protecting what I had. From stepping up to become a Hokage Guard member, to taking care of Hayate, to running missions that left me scrubbing blood out of my clothes—somehow, none of those had felt like choices. They were my decisions, yes, but I’d just fallen into those roles.
I would protect this child’s future. This was my choice.

“Sensei, I want to take you up on that promotion offer now,” I said, facing Sensei over the top of Kaito’s head.

“But what about Aiko and Roku?” Raiden asked, flabbergasted by the way the conversation had gotten away from him. “I mean, I don’t meant to question your methods, Hokage-sama, but isn’t this unusual? Kaito wants to stay, yes, but--”

“Shinobi teams start out as four-member cells, with three students and one teacher,” Sensei pointed out. He glanced at Shikane, who nodded back. “Granted, we generally don’t form the teams this early, but we can easily change that.”

“Their graduation is years away, Koizumi-san. What we are talking about now is how to make Kaito-kun’s Academy experience a successful one,” Shikane added, since Sensei had clearly forgotten.

Raiden sighed with relief. “Oh, thank goodness. I thought...well, I don’t know what I thought.”

Did no one hand out helpful pamphlets for this shit? I’d certainly be there for the kids, but it would be so much easier if civilians weren’t apparently misinformed about how the Academy operated. I’d need to talk to Raiden after this, to figure out what assumptions he had and get them out of the way properly. For the kids’ sake as well as his.

Most of the kids with shinobi parents got specialized training at home that put them ahead of the curve, particularly if they were born into major clans. Even though Raiden and his wife were the main people responsible for Kaito, Aiko, and Roku, it was clear that this family was out of its depth.

If I wanted to give these children the best chances possible, I needed to be involved long before the question of team assignments even came up.

Raiden turned to me again. After visibly struggling with himself, he burst out, “Promise me you’ll look after him. After all of them, if they’re yours.”

Kaito was the first, but they were all mine.

They were always mine. I just hadn’t been able to see it.
Camaraderie: Blue-Sky Days

Chapter Summary

Kei: Pick up a plot thread. All of the plot threads.

Chapter Notes

This chapter's title is the opening theme to Toppa Tengan Gurren Lagann~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the whole, starting my day sitting in the hospital’s basement was one of those situations that could have been worse.

While the particular chamber was kind of cold, there were climate-control seals in place that prevented the moisture buildup that made underground rooms feel like morgues. And while there were more seals on the walls that forcibly ejected natural energy and environmental chakra to provide a clean, stable space for dangerous procedures, it wasn’t a hostile sort of emptiness. Not feeling chakra against my skin just let me focus more on what was inside of me.

Actually, that was the entire reason I was sitting in my underwear in this magical clean room, with Tsunade, Rin, Kushina, and an assortment of medic-nin from various clans all arrayed around me. While each person in the room carried their own chakra signature, they had too much control to allow it to leak into the air and ruin anyone else’s readings.

“Channel chakra toward your left arm again,” Tsunade ordered, and the skin on my shoulder blade pricked as she channeled her chakra to monitor mine. “Hikaru, watch.”

The Hyūga medic activated his Byakugan with three quick hand signs, nodding as the veins around his eyes bulged.

“Monitoring,” murmured the Aburame medic, who had three kikai insects on the curve of my shoulder. “Tsunade-sama, the tenketsu are still inactive.”

“Same here. The chakra flow just stops after the joint,” the Hyūga observed, frowning.

“I can feel that,” I muttered.

It wasn’t that I had a block stuck in my chakra coils—which Hikaru had pointed out immediately after being called in—but more that whatever chakra I had simply couldn’t move past the wrecked tenketsu. What I used ended up being frittered away uselessly, like a broken fire hydrant or something. I just wasted chakra.

Tsunade, with her hand still on my back, said, “Rin, take over here. Hikaru, focus on the arm past the joint.”

As people shuffled around and I sat with one arm pulled out and being poked by medics, there
wasn’t really much for me to do other than obey orders and talk to Isobu.

**Should I have apologized for the damage?** Isobu asked, since there was only so much else that came to mind.

No, I think the blame for that is on me, and on Orochimaru, and maybe partly on Yagura. Sure, we knew something bad was going to happen, but it wasn’t your fault that we got chased into a corner. I sighed internally.

**Speaking of that human,** Isobu murmured after a moment, **what do you think happened to the forces behind him?**

What, like political force or whichever shinobi supported Yagura? Or do you mean Orochimaru? I asked.

**Both.**

I guess we could ask Sensei for any reports on other villages, I offered, as Rin moved my arm back and forth so Hikaru could get a better view.

**That may work.** Then Isobu sighed. **Though it was in a good cause, I am sorry for hurting you.**

Given that it was my idea, it felt a bit overdone. But since we’d gone round and round on this exact topic several different times whenever it came up, I was probably better-served spending my energies elsewhere.

Like on seeing if the damage to my arm was completely hopeless.

Rin pinched the underside of my wrist. “Kei, pay attention.”

Ow. “Okay.” I blinked rapidly, trying to concentrate again. “What am I supposed to be paying attention to?”

“What does it feel like if I do this?” Hikaru asked, as his fingertips seemed to glow with chakra in my mind’s eye.

Under my suspicious gaze, he drew his fingers slowly down the length of my arm. While goosebumps sprang up wherever they hadn’t already, I couldn’t be sure what sort of effect he was going for.

“Well, I didn’t lose feeling in my arm, if that’s what you’re asking,” I said, shrugging with my right shoulder. *When in doubt, sarcasm.*

Rin flicked my ear. “That’s not being helpful, Kei.”

“But it’s true,” I protested. To Hikaru, I explained, “Really, though, I’m not feeling anything unusual. What should have happened?”

“I would have expected a tingling sensation,” Hikaru said, as his Byakugan went inactive again. “Tsunade-sama, direct stimulation of the chakra coils was unsuccessful. I’m not certain what other therapies are available.”

Tsunade muttered something under her breath. A crease appeared on her forehead, just below the Strength of a Hundred Seal, and she rubbed at it in annoyance. “Somehow, it’s not surprising that this case is full of complications. There must be some kind of curse on everyone associated with the
Hokage’s hat…”

The Aburame called her kikai insects back, and they flew up toward her raised hand.

Tsunade went on, “So, do you want the good news or the bad news first?”

I studied her face carefully, keeping an eye out for any sign of a developing tic. Whatever happened, I was probably going to make it worse. “Good news?”

“Your arm is functional despite the lack of chakra, which honestly would have killed most people’s limbs dead,” Tsunade said, her eyes drilling into mine. When I didn’t react, she went on, “If you’re careful, you could continue to function as a field shinobi as long as you kept your left arm bound. It’s always going to be weaker than your right, and not just in the ‘I’m right-handed’ way.”

I nodded along, since that sounded more or less exactly like what I’d experienced. I could still, say, do a back handspring on my left arm, but I had neither the strike force nor the endurance I’d taken for granted before. Using both arms left me dangerously unbalanced in most of the demanding physical tasks of a shinobi lifestyle, which was a liability. If my right hand could use the Rasengan, Isobu’s chakra, and my explosive seals, my left was effectively dead weight in the kinds of fights I kept getting into. If I retired from being a ninja, I’d probably never experience any real problems, unlike someone with nerve damage.

Which would have been acceptable if I had any intention whatsoever of retiring. As far as I was concerned, it was not an option. Not being a shinobi meant not being a Hokage Guard, or being a jōnin-sensei, or being able to help my friends in the field. It also made me a pretty lousy superweapon.

“It’s not an optimal solution,” Tsunade admitted, “but I won’t order you to retire. If you play it safe, you could have a long and successful career ahead of you.”

But still, Tsunade didn’t smile. In fact, the crease between her brows got more pronounced. “At the same time, I think we both know you’re going to run into half-a-dozen disasters the first time you so much as sneeze outside of the village.”

...Well, she wasn’t wrong. At first, missions would be cakewalks. And then, just when I was feeling complacent, Orochimaru.

Or something. He was just the most recent example.

“And the bad news?” I prompted, once Tsunade’s words had percolated in my brain for a while.

The medics all looked at each other, but Tsunade just poked me in the forehead and said bluntly, “Your tenketsu are completely destroyed. Irrecoverable. Nonexistent. And because of that, all of the chakra coils centered in your left arm, and the tenketsu linked to them, are badly atrophied. Also irrecoverable. Furthermore, using Tailed Beast chakra to overcome this kind of injury is likely to destroy your arm entirely. It doesn’t have any chakra to channel and take the brunt of exposure.”

And lo, did the other shoe drop with a vengeance.

A lump of lead formed in my gut, but not as heavy as I would have expected. I’d already figured, between the weakness and the lack of chakra response from my left arm, that something had gone clunk and there wasn’t any coming back from it. I’d had a few months to get used to that fact, even if no one had put it into words.

It wasn’t so much as a revelation as a confirmation of what I already suspected.
“There’s still some hope for Kushina’s suggestion, but medically speaking, you’re beyond conventional means.” Tsunade shook her head. “So, no, there’s no special therapy we can use to ease tenketsu back into existence. I’m sorry.”

Well, if I was beyond conventional means… “What about a replacement or transplant?”

Tsunade’s eyes narrowed. By now, she’d had all too much experience with the weirdness that followed Team Minato around like a bad smell, and knew that I was the one who actually voiced the nonstandard ideas. “What…kind of replacement?”

I’d hate to disappoint her. “Oh, we could amputate my left arm and track down a Zetsu to replace it with. Obito has one, so it’s like we’d be twins! After surgery, anyway.”

For a long moment, no one said anything. Rin, with exaggerated slowness, covered her face with both hands and let out a long-suffering sigh, while the Aburame’s expression was indecipherable, and Hikaru just looked confused.

Then Tsunade rubbed her forehead, grumbling, “That is a stupid idea, and I’d hit you for it if you weren’t my patient. I don’t think I have to tell you all the reasons that shouldn’t have worked in the first place, or even answer that seriously.”

I shrugged, fighting down a nervous grin. “I have to laugh somehow.”

“Very funny,” said Tsunade, and got to her feet. “Well, all that’s left is to map the empty chakra coils.”

Wait. “What?”

Tsunade raised one slender eyebrow at me. “You didn’t think I’d work with Kushina on a tenketsu replacement system without gathering all the data I can, did you?”

“That will take hours, Tsunade-sama,” Hikaru said, but carefully kept the whine out of his voice.

“Then we’d better get started, shouldn’t we?”

Long story short: I was stuck in there for two hours while the medics traced out every dead tenketsu point they could find, and copied everything onto some kind of ultra-complex chart that made my eyes cross when I tried to understand it.

I had no doubt the process would be helpful for future reference, but aside from the tickling brushes they used, I spent the rest of mid-morning thoroughly bored.

After a morning wherein I got enough ink on my arm to look like I’d tripped into a tar pit, and had to painstakingly scrub all of it off afterward, I was also tasked with taking the medics’ report to Sensei when I reported in for my afternoon shift. There were ways to send things ahead, but apparently the fact that I was heading there anyway meant that I was automatically a courier.

The walk from the hospital to the administration center was pretty short to start with, and only got shorter once rooftop shinobi-only paths were taken into account. Since my left arm was the problematic limb, I didn’t have any trouble making it to Sensei’s office window within about two minutes.

I knocked on the glass, to be polite.
Sensei snapped his fingers, without looking up, and the glass stopped giving off the kind of chakra that indicated that trespassers would not just be shown the door, but arrive at said door in the form of ground hamburger.

When Sensei decided to stop playing around, his seal-work could be amazingly vindictive. It was really the little things that counted—and made my job pretty superfluous.

I slid the window open and hopped inside, still carrying the medical folder under my left arm. “Hi, Sensei.”

“Morning, Kei.” He paused. “Or is it afternoon?”

“You’re the one with a clock in the office,” I said automatically, shrugging. Walking around the desk to the front, I dropped the folder next to his inkpad. “Report from Tsunade.”

“What is it about?” Sensei asked, finally looking up after signing one last document of some sort.

I shrugged. “The usual. My arm’s a wreck, I can’t use Isobu’s chakra with it, and we’re working on a workaround that might not work.”

“...Did you use ‘work’ enough times in that sentence?” Sensei asked, quirking one eyebrow up as he looked at me over the top of the medical paperwork.

“Okay, so it doesn’t work, and work is going to be hell if I work in the field.”

Sensei gave me a flat stare.

I know someone else I can annoy with wordplay! I’d probably lay off of Obito, though.

Oh, this will be entertaining.

“And just after you’ve confirmed that you want to be a jōnin...” Sensei sighed as he read the rest of the report. “Rotten timing.”

“I still want the rank, but if I can’t be deployed... Well, maybe this won’t work.” At Sensei’s suspicious look, I said guilelessly, “It’ll be a problem.”

“Does Tsunade say anywhere that you can’t go on missions, or is this just your impression?” Sensei asked, dismissing whatever thought had come to mind. Probably about me being deliberately annoying. “Because her recommendation is that you just keep your arm out of the way.”

“Yeah, but how many A- or S-rank missions really allow that kind of handicap?”

Sensei closed the folder and met my eyes. “The short answer”—is that I couldn’t—“is that you won’t be taking any. I believe I owe you a string of C-ranks and D-ranks from before this incident, don’t I?”

Oh.

“Well, yeah, but—” A jōnin who couldn’t take jōnin missions was a bit of a waste of a promotion slot. I tried again, “Are you sure this is the right decision?”

Technically, I didn’t need to take missions for financial reasons. The main reason I took missions came down to defeating boredom, challenging myself, or maybe escorting a genin team with a sensei on medical leave. But I wanted my own genin team, too, and that did require a higher rank...
Oh, this waffling was all pointless. I was going to be a jōnin. Second-guessing myself over and over again was an exercise in frustration.

And while I wrestled my brain into some kind of order, Sensei continued watching me. Then, “I think you already know the answer to that question, Kei. You made the decision two days ago.”

I nodded. To be honest, as soon as I’d realized how badly Kaito needed me, I’d known there was no turning back. Not with Kaito, not with Aiko, and not with Roku.

“Speaking of big decisions,” Sensei said, while I stood there and stewed, “I had something to tell you.”

“Oh?”

“The new Fourth Mizukage is a woman named Mei Terumi,” Sensei told me, and shuffled a few papers on his overcrowded desk until a letter fell out.

Well, that name was sure familiar. I had to wonder how having a double-kekkei genkai user like that woman would change the course of Kirigakure’s history. Any persecution of people with special bloodlines would seem massively hypocritical if it came from the top, and she’d probably crack down on anything similar among her civilian population.

But wasn’t she my age? Hell, most of the S-class Kirigakure ninja were…

“She’s declared Yagura a missing-nin, retroactively, along with all of his co-conspirators.” Catching the look on my face, which could best be described as “skeptical” with a whole load of grudging approval on top, Sensei explained, “She also extends her personal thanks to you for putting down a madman who fell so far. While the new Mizukage and Yagura were allies in the Kiri Rebellion, it seems that they had a falling-out.”

I rolled my eyes. “And if Yagura’s plan had worked, I’d bet she’d be singing a different tune.”

“But as a politician, she takes the cards dealt to her,” Sensei said, eyeing me again for the ‘work’ I had worked into my response. “And she’s generously promised to give up claims to the Three-Tailed Beast, and stop operations aimed at recovering him from you.”

Which mostly meant that she’d stop openly attempting to murder me to get Isobu back, with shinobi she couldn’t afford to lose. I had no doubt whatsoever that Kirigakure’s ANBU were still going to be deadly foes from now on.

“I hope you don’t take offense but...I mostly trust politicians about as far as I can throw them,” I said. “With my left arm.”

“Then you’re ahead of the game,” Sensei admitted, tilting his head to one side.

“You, I could probably throw with my right arm.” Which still didn’t amount to that much—I’d never really been the type to go all Tsunade and punch people into the lower stratosphere.

...Or the lithosphere.

Sensei smiled ruefully. “That’s more charitable than I have any right to expect.”

“You’ve still got some work to do,” I said, looking away and toward a perfectly boring part of the office’s wall.
“...Did you just stick the word ‘work’ in that sentence just because?”

“Maybe! What I said is true, though,” I said, directing a quick smile back to Sensei so I could show him I was teasing him a bit.

By the time I did so, Sensei had already started on paperwork again. Because of course he would do that. While reading something or other, Sensei looked up for a moment and said, “By the way, Kushina wants to know what kind of cake you want.”

Eh? “Why?”

“She wants to make sure you have fun with your jōnin promotion party,” Sensei said with a bright grin, clapping his hands together. “As soon as Kakashi gets back to the village, we’re moving forward on that!”

_Oh, no._

Kakashi coming home would be a great thing, since he’d be safe at home with us, and I’d get to hear how the Land of Snow stuff had went. Team Minato would be back together, in full, for the first time in a long time.

But I really didn’t want people to blow this promotion business out of proportion. “Um, how many people are we inviting?”

Sensei grinned. “Everyone.”

_Meep._

“But in the meantime, I need to ask you to do something that’s a lot less fun.” Sensei’s expression was a bit solemn, so I snapped back to attention. “Downstairs, there’s still some lingering damage from the incident the other day. Can you help the Academy sort out its water damage problem?”

I knew less than nothing about how to deal with flood damage that wasn’t actually flood damage to a building like the Academy. But I could sort of tell when Sensei just wanted me to keep busy, or tackle a new problem simply because he thought I wasn’t pushing myself.

And he was right. A mundane challenge for a mundane day, but it was probably more productive than “guarding” someone who rigged his office windows to kill intruders. At least for today, when there was nothing to talk about.

“I...I guess I can get rid of the remaining water?” Environmental water concentrations had always been a part of my bigger jutsu, so I could probably rip the remaining liquid out of the walls. It wouldn’t undo the damage, but mold would be less of an issue.

“Thank you. Please assist the crew down there.” And then I was summarily waved off.

Once I was outside of Sensei’s office, through the door this time, I cracked my knuckles on both hands and headed downstairs to get to work.

True to Sensei’s word, Kakashi’s arrival heralded the coming of the Party.

It was more sedate than all that, though.

Unlike the welcome back party that had kinda, um, heralded a long-overdue emotional breakdown, this one took place in bright daylight, and included considerably higher numbers of ankle-biters.
“So you *did* adopt them,” Kakashi said, from his vantage point under a nearby tree.

Given that Kaito was running around in my jacket from the Academy incident around his skinny shoulders, I decided I didn’t have much of an argument against that point and preemptively dropped it. In general, I kind of wanted to argue with him about any topic that came to mind, but that was more a manifestation of my low-grade irritation at not being told what his mission to the Land of Snow had been about.

I could guess of course—there had only ever been one mention of the Land of Snow in the old universe—but I had to wonder what might have changed. Since Sorayama, I’d noticed that Kakashi’s chakra had gotten stronger—or maybe deeper? He seemed to have more energy for the Sharingan-based shenanigans that his counterpart had, to say the least, lacked. That could make a difference in any mission he took from now on, but I didn’t really have the clearance to go digging into ANBU mission records.

If I could justify it based on future visit crises, maybe I could weasel something out of Sensei, but the spirit of our agreement had only covered information related to me. And frankly, I could probably live without knowing If, when, or how Kakashi had rescued a princess.

For a while, anyway.

I leaned back against the same tree, and decided to do a bit of people-watching.

We’d actually taken over Training Ground Three, setting up several large picnic blankets with a wide selection of food. Some of them sat on powerful heating seals to keep everything warm, while a container of ice cream had chilling seals worked onto the carton to keep it from melting. There were enough empty spots for all of the guests as they trickled in.

It seemed like Kushina and Sensei were trying to make up for disaster four months ago.

Off on the nearest blanket, the children plotted. I wasn’t sure if any of them really thought about how suspicious it looked when seven kids put their heads together like that.

Well, Kaito, Roku, Aiko, Sasuke, and Naruto did. Tatsumaki seemed to be occupied with messily devouring a popsicle, getting a cherry-red face out of the deal, sitting in Itachi’s lap.

“Naruto-kun, go around the tree that way,” Roku was saying, making a circle in midair with his left hand. “Then jump on Gai-san.”

“And when you do that, we’ll get him,” Aiko said with a grin that was probably about as evil as she could manage. She was holding a red bean bun out to Naruto, who immediately ripped it in half and stuffed his part in his mouth.

The other one, Naruto handed to Sasuke. True to form, the other three-year-old ate it somewhat slower than his friend.

Bribery at its finest.

“Isn’t Gai-san a jōnin?” Itachi asked, bouncing Tatsumaki up and down patiently.

“We got him before,” Kaito said, flapping one sleeve-covered arm at Itachi to chase that concern away. “We can do it again!”

It was a lot more ambition than I’d heard out of Kaito in a long time.
And better yet, Gai was still talking to Genma and hadn’t seemed to notice the nefarious munchkins at all. Sitting with his back against Genma’s, Raidō made small talk to Ebisu, who was pausing every few seconds to watch the kids.

Well, at least someone knew the dangers of letting shinobi children go unsupervised.

“Ebisu-san helped us last time,” Roku admitted, catching the special jōnin’s eye for just a moment. He waved. “But I think we can do this.”

“Do you need me to help?” Itachi wanted to know.

Roku, Aiko, and Kaito looked at each other, then at Itachi. Then Roku asked, “Are you a genin?”

“Yes,” Itachi said blankly.

“Then we need your help to capture Gai-san,” Roku said, nodding to himself. “You can be the distraction.”

With that, all seven of the kids trooped off into the underbrush—though Tatsumaki needed a bit of help, and Itachi therefore carried her.

It was a little like seeing a pack of wolves plot to bring down a bison. The whole of the group was more dangerous than the mere sum of their parts.

As we watched them go, Kakashi said finally, “Those kids are going to be terrifying when they get older.”

“Probably,” I agreed.

For a moment, all either of us did was stretch out in total contentment as the sun shone down on the training fields. Sure, Kakashi and I were in the shade, but it was a lazy kind of day.

But before Kakashi could fall asleep, he cracked his normal eye open and said, “I never did give you your jōnin gift, did I?”

“The book? It’s fine, Kakashi. I liked the armband better, actually.” Seeing as I was wearing it and all. With a smile on my face, I swept my arm from left to right, to indicate the training ground and all of its occupants. “All we’re doing here is using the promotion thing to have an excuse to get together.”

Kakashi nodded. It was certainly why he was there—aside from free food.

On the blanket farthest away from our tree, Kushina and Sensei chatted with Fugaku and Mikoto, while Tsunade lounged nearby and was probably getting drunk.

Yamato, meanwhile, had grown a miniature maple over her head to shade her from the impact of her inevitable hangover, and prodded Hayate’s hand aside so he could get access to the walnut pastries someone had brought along. My brother didn’t snap, instead scooting to one side and continuing his conversation with Iruka.

Yūgao, with encouragement from Rin, had a river fish on a plate in front of her and sent little sparks of her chakra into it. While the fish test was one of those medic-nin tests that could technically be performed anywhere, I’d never seen Rin try to get Yūgao to try it out.

I trained my hearing in their direction, curious.
Yamato wandered over to their group with the walnut pastry in hand, peering at the fish as Yūgao poked it again. “Have you tried channeling Water-aligned chakra first?”

“No, I...wait, I thought you did Earth chakra most of the time, Yamato-kun,” Yūgao said, blinking. Under her hand, the fish flopped feebly.

“It...doesn’t work very well for fish,” Yamato said, scratching the base of his ponytail.

“You shouldn’t be helping Yūgao-chan cheat on the fish test, Yamato-kun,” Rin said. “Otherwise it’s not really a test.”

“...Okay,” I said to Kakashi, “I know I’ve been out of the loop for a while, but Yamato is a medic, right?”

Yep,” he said, from behind a small blue book titled *One Hundred and One Even Worse Jokes*. “He got certified eight months ago. I’m surprised you didn’t notice.”

Well, that hadn’t been a thing in the old timeline. Tsunade’s influence was definitely pervasive.

But had Yūgao been a medic? I couldn’t remember.

As we watched, Yamato and Yūgao continued talking about the relative merits of chakra elements in medical ninjutsu—not really my field—and Rin stealthily got out of their way. With a skip in her step, she headed our way.

Rin sat down on an upraised root, next to my vantage point. “Enjoying the party?” she asked us.

“Since there’s no dancing, yes,” Kakashi said, without looking up from his book.

“Have you seen Obito?” I asked, while Rin gave Kakashi a frown for being a party pooper.

“Obito, um, might still be trying to get something,” Rin said somewhat sheepishly.

I blinked. “...What in the world is he trying to get?”

“That’s kind of a secret, Kei,” Rin said, putting a finger to her lips. “And you didn’t hear anything from me.”

*Well, drat.* I reoriented on a slightly easier target. “Kakashi, do you know?”

“Nope,” he said, without looking up from his book.

*Double drat.*

And at that exact moment, two things happened at once: the Obito’s chakra signature finally poofed into the clearing to Rin’s immediate left, thanks to the Body Flicker jutsu, and five smaller chakra signatures geared up for a pounce.

The smoke cleared just in time for us to witness five children dogpile Gai, with Itachi and Tatsumaki trailing cheerfully behind as though they were hyenas. Strategy had clearly gone out the window.

“I feel like I missed something,” Obito said, tossing the little package to me. “Why are all the kids —?”

Gai surged to his feet, with at least one child clinging to each of his limbs. Kaito and Aiko hung from each of his biceps like he was some kind of bright green jungle gym, while Sasuke and Naruto had
each grabbed one of his orange legwarmers—and Naruto used his teeth to get a better grip. Roku was slung over Gai’s back, and had the jōnin in a headlock that was probably about as effective as one of those U-shaped travel pillows.

Though he had managed to knock Itachi—with Tatsumaki attached to his face—into Genma, who was promptly squashed by them because Team Chōza was always good for comedic improv.

“I have been attacked by devious foes!” Gai shouted, hopping from foot to foot—careful not to harm either of the future members of Team Seven. “Go on without me, comrades! The power of Youth will prevail alone!”

From under his own pile of kids, Genma waved Gai off.

Gai charged off, with children still suspended from every limb, shouting cheerfully, and left surprised laughter in his wake.

It was...nostalgic?

Every now and again, even after things became normal again, I’d be struck by the sense that I was catching up on things I had missed. Like life had gone on without me.

And it had, but I was catching up anyway.

Obito and I both sat down under the tree with Rin and Kakashi, giving all of us a chance to just enjoy each other’s company. Well, the four of us plus one weird package.

“So, what’s that supposed to be?” I asked, while Obito and Rin knit their hands together. Obito’s left hand to Rin’s right.

“Go ahead and open it,” Obito said, and I ripped the paper wide open.

A thin sheaf of paper, composed of fifty or more white squares packed into a sort of notepad, all bound on one side. I didn’t want to rip a sheet off and “...Is this chakra testing paper?”

Obito grinned. “Since you said that you were taking on students, I figured you’d want to know what their chakra natures were!”

“As soon as they get back over here, yeah,” I said, though I had an inkling of what Kaito’s would be. He’d probably need a couple of sheets just to be sure. “Though it might be too early for them to even channel chakra into their hands, Obito.”

“Lucky that the paper doesn’t get old, then.” Obito shrugged and got to his feet. “I’m going to get something to eat. Want me to bring you anything?”

It turned out that answer was not only “yes,” but also “screw it, let’s all get something.” And in typical teenager fashion, we kinda gorged ourselves on whatever tasty things we got our hands on.

What? We were all still kids.

Sort of.

It turned out that even though I could feel Kaito’s Lightning nature, he didn’t have enough conscious control of his chakra to use the paper test that would have confirmed it. He also lacked true control over his Wind and Water natures, but since they made up his Ice Release bloodline, he could kinda manifest both of them without much practice.
A floating blob of water was a long way from the Water Dragon Bullet, but I certainly hadn’t shown half as much inclination toward elemental ninjutsu at his age. Especially not with a fish trapped in it, swimming in sad little circles because Kaito’s water globe was only about the size of a goldfish bowl. For a thirty-centimeter ornamental koi, it was the essence of suffering.

“Kaito-kun, you can put the fish back now,” I said, as the koi made the saddest fish face there ever was. “I think it misses its friends.”

Kaito nodded, then lowered the water bubble thingy back toward the surface of Raiden’s koi pond. To his credit, by the time he lost control, the fish was in safe dropping distance.

The frightened koi swam off, waggling its white tail at us in terror.

Aiko and Roku clapped like spectators at a golf tournament.

“Perhaps you should try for ducks next time?” Raiden asked, still looking a bit shell-shocked. Sure, he lived in a ninja village, but it was nearly his first time seeing shinobi training in action.

Technically, we hadn’t even really been doing that. Kaito’s affinity for water was something I couldn’t actually match without using ninjutsu, while he just seemed to know how to move small amounts of water by instinct.

“Can you imagine what that would look like?” Chihiro mused aloud, as the kids focused on her. “Imagine a poor little duck, trying to stay on top of a floating ball of water!”

“We could show the babies that!” Aiko said, tugging on Kaito’s sleeve. “Can’t we?”

“Maybe after some practice?” Roku suggested, while Kaito started to turn red.

Kaito ducked his head and mumbled, “M-maybe…”

Since the Academy incident two weeks ago, Kaito was still working on coming out of his shell. This was only my second time at the Koizumi household, and already I was seeing more interest from the Koizumi couple and more engagement from the kids than I had honestly expected to see.

That is your unjustified paranoia talking.

Maybe.

Making snap judgments based on outdated information had always been one of those insidious side effects to foreknowledge, and I couldn’t even say that I generally fought it. I just...never had a reason to, unless I knew someone really well.

And Raiden and his family, unfortunately, had never really been on that list.

“Keisuke-san, may I speak to you for a moment?” Chihiro asked, while the kids devolved into cheerful play-wrestling—as always, Roku versus the other two.

“Sure,” I said, getting up.

As the blonde woman struggled to her feet, Raiden and I each took hold of one of her hands—Raiden allowed her to use him as a kind of cane, while I was more of a hand railing. I hadn’t really thought about all the crap that pregnant women had to deal with since Kushina had been carrying Tatsumaki, but this was a sharp reminder.

I followed Chihiro to the kitchen, drifting along like I always had, I could feel her chakra start to
buzz with tension. Crackle, maybe? She was a civilian, so her chakra certainly wasn’t strong, but I could feel just enough to tell that she was as much Fire as Obito was. Land of Fire, born and bred.

And also a bit agitated.

“Take a seat, please,” she said, and we both sat down at the kitchen table.

I did the mental equivalent of spinning my wheels until they screeched while I waited for Chihiro to say what was on her mind.

I was starting to see mental rubber burning by the time she did.

“Keisuke-san, are you—I know you’re a jōnin now,” Chihiro said carefully, and I blinked, confusion mounting as I continued to read her chakra. She was afraid of me? “When the children grow up, I need to know what kinds of—of situations you’ll expect them to be in.”

Civilian.

...Whoops.

“Like what kind?” Grasping at straws, I said, “All shinobi are combat-trained, but...well, most people don’t get into the kinds of fights I did. Ever. And if they do get in over their heads, well, that’s what a jōnin-sensei is for. And that won’t be at least for a few more years.”

And whenever I was nervous, or uncertain, there were two paths before me in a narrow wood.

I picked the one that let me talk the most.

“I—no, what I meant is…” Chihiro bit the inside of her cheek and said, “You’ll be training these children to kill, won’t you?”

...Oh.

You are a weapon, and aren’t. You’re a warrior who clings to peace. Isobu’s grumble seemed to rattle my mental landscape. The world is not simple. This is not simple, and never will be. Make her understand.

I wasn’t sure if I could. How did I approach this?

“No.” I hadn’t learned to kill from Sensei. I’d learned all the techniques I needed from Mom, and she’d talked it out with me afterward.

Chihiro blinked.

“What Konoha teaches is different from other villages,” I explained, folding my arms on the tabletop. “What we teach, first and foremost, is that our strength is there to protect others.”

I thought of Obito who, in a split second, had made the choice to make sure Kakashi and I would go home, with or without him. “We fight—and yes, sometimes kill—because we want to protect our friends, our families, and our villages, and to come home safe to them.”

It’s the part when that urge to protect is cut off that you need to worry about. I didn’t know the details of what had happened to the Uesugi clan, but Mom’s rampage had been complete. And yet, she’d still come to Konoha, and everyone must have found her values suited us just fine. Otherwise, they would never have made her a special jōnin, even for a short time.
Though, of course, there were serious downsides. “Sometimes that means someone ends up dead, but it’s not the goal.” Generally. And that was a little hit-or-miss.

And that didn’t get into ANBU’s existence. Konoha could be a big fat bunch of hypocrites when it came to the moral high ground, insofar as it even existed between shinobi villages.

I needed to get back to the point.

“Kaito told all of us not that long ago that he wants to protect himself by growing stronger,” I said, resting my chin against my upraised palm.

Chihiro nodded along. So she had heard about that part. “But it just seems so...cold.”

“He’s young now, but he’ll learn over time that strength isn’t the key,” I reassured her. “It’s love, and camaraderie, and the bonds that tie all of us together.” Actually… “It might not feel like it, sometimes, but I think these kids have a better idea of what that means than some adults do. And they seem to like you a lot already, even after everything they’ve been through.”

“I just…Keisuke-san, I worry about them and for them.” Chihiro shook her head. “You can’t convince me that everything is going to be safe. Or that being a shinobi means they’ll have peaceful lives, never having to kill.”

“Koizumi-san, I can’t even guarantee that for me, and I’m a lot older than any of them.” How should I put this? “But there is something else to consider—all of the children you see now are growing up in a peaceful era.”

To be perfectly honest, they’d said that after the Second Shinobi World War, too. And it’d only lasted nine years or so until the Third Shinobi World War started up where we’d left off. Dad’s death happened at the beginning of it, and Mom’s was at the very tail end, not long into the era of supposed peace.

Maybe we could pull off a full decade of peace this time.

“And, finally...well, there’s no guarantee they’ll even pass the Academy’s final exam.” Technically.

“What if they do, and decide not to become shinobi?” Chihiro asked.

“Then they can retire,” I said. Satoshi had, instead of being assigned to the Genin Corps. But then, Yamaguchi-sensei had failed his entire team, so it wasn’t like he was getting back into the apprentice system after that. “I just worry that they won’t learn to control their power otherwise.”

Chihiro gave me such a long stare that I felt almost like she was trying to invoke motherhood-derived guilt-tripping powers.

“Even if none of them decide to become shinobi, I can at least help them feel safe in their own skins,” I told Chihiro, meeting her eyes squarely. “That’s a promise.”

After another painfully long moment, Chihiro nodded to me and said, “I’m glad we had this talk, Keisuke-san.”

Given that I’d done nearly all of the talking, I couldn’t be sure I felt the same. But her chakra had evened out and the sense of pervasive fear I’d gotten from her wasn’t focused on me anymore. It settled into the background, into a somewhat healthier form.

But perhaps I needed to offer a better olive branch. I’d never given particular thought to civilians
before, either, except in the context of if someone was going to run away screaming if I walked down their street. My social circle was almost entirely made of people who could kill with a toothpick. But starting to bridge the gap needed to happen somewhere, and it was as good a time as any to try.

So, I told Chihiro, “If you want, you can watch while I teach them. I know it’s only once a week, but it could give you more insight into what they learn at the Academy, too.”

“I’d like that,” Chihiro said, and smiled.

The next thing I was going to teach the kids involved reaching for their chakra, which wasn’t terribly interesting, but I could run them through some of the basic katas I’d learned from Mom as soon as they got bored with that. Again, not exciting, but Chihiro could probably at least guide them through those after I left.

Predictably, the kids got bored with the leaf exercise.

Kaito could use Water Release to a degree that would have been astonishing if I hadn’t known about Haku. The exercise was, to be blunt, just not advanced enough for him. So I had Raiden draw all of the koi off to one end of the pond with food, and asked Kaito try the very basics of water walking. Aside from my brother, I’d never seen another six-year-old set his jaw with such a determined expression, even after the initial, inevitable failure.

I let him get on with it, then focused on the other two.

I was pretty certain I’d felt a metallic warping noise (not unlike someone hitting steel cable under tension with a hammer) from Roku’s direction, but his eyelids were their normal light brown by the time I looked. Unlike Kaito, Roku hadn’t had access to anyone with his apparent bloodline limit, and there was no obvious elemental crossover with Magnet Release. I made a mental note to get him iron filings to practice with.

Aiko simply hadn’t had any luck with her chakra—which might have been related to the mirrored seals on her shoulder blades—but outpaced the other two when it came to physical exercises. She seemed to be the sort of student who learned physically, so I made a second mental note to ask Gai for tips on how to teach taijutsu to a newbie.

Pigs would fly on the day when Gai found someone he couldn’t help improve in that area.

“None of this is supposed to hurt,” I told the kids, when they lined up in front of me about fifteen minutes later. Aside from Kaito’s pants being soaked up to the knees (along with the over-long jacket sleeves), none of them were worse for wear. “If any of these exercises hurt, or wear you out, then you need to stop right away and contact me. At this point, you should still be working on your Academy assignments. This is like, um, extra credit.”

“But we’ll be here to help,” Chihiro spoke up, as I trailed off with that somewhat weak ending. “You three can come to us with anything.”

“Even after the babies are here?” Aiko asked, her gray eyes huge as they focused on the gentle bump of Chihiro’s stomach.

“Yes, Aiko-chan. You can trust us,” Chihiro said, and Raiden took her hand in his.

Roku frowned, bringing his curled fingers to rest over his mouth as he thought. Then, “Really?”

“Really,” Raiden affirmed. While he didn’t have a ton of chakra, I could almost feel him reaching out
for the kids in a way that reminded me a bit of how Sensei had for me, once. There was a way of just making a small space feel like home, through force of will.

I felt abruptly like the elephant in the room. Maybe I should leave, if the kids are sorting out their family...problems? This touchy-feely business was kinda my thing, but not with the Koizumi family. I didn’t exactly know Raiden or Chihiro that well.

“Kei-sensei too?” Kaito asked, jolting me out of my thoughts.

One-track mind on that one.

Since everyone’s eyes were on me, I knelt down to eye level with the kids and said, “As long as you need me, I’ll be here.”

There were some hugs after that, mostly on the part of the children, but I nonetheless left the Koizumi household a little more optimistic. The kids would be all right.

Shortly after I turned eighteen in early July, I met my brother at Training Field Twenty-Two.

(Also known as the training ground that had been the stage of the tree-thumb war between then-Tenzō and Obito. The tree was still there.)

The previous three months, since picking up a gaggle of not-yet-genin apprentices and figuring out the secret to preventing mold buildup, had been busy to say the least, but not in a way that demanded a crisis response.

On Saturday afternoons, I caught up with my trio of dragonlings and helped them sort through the events of the previous week, updated their exercises, and offered assistance on Academy homework where appropriate. All three of them made strides over time, but Kaito in particular seemed calmer, more focused. Like not everything was a battle. Couple that with their recent announcement that they’d made actual friends, and I knew they were on the right path.

The genjutsu development group continued to meet whenever we had time, though Itachi had missions with his genin team more often than not. It was weird to think that within three years, Naruto and Sasuke would be Academy students and on their way to becoming shinobi in their own right, even with the changing curriculum and the slower route the Nara clan administrators had chosen.

I visited the hospital at least once per two weeks for checkups, with Tsunade tutting over my arm and its continued total lack of improvement, and sat through more tests as time went on. Determining the extent of the problem was easier than determining a solution. If there was one.

And I worked with Sensei, here and there and so forth, though I knew that it wasn’t really the point of the whole venture. I spent time with Naruto, and Tatsumaki, and with Kushina as she continued to puzzle over the persistent tenketsu problem I still had. There had to be workarounds, somehow, but they hadn’t been invented yet and we only had a starting point and scraps of time to devote to the problem.

So time slipped onward.

And before I knew it, I was eighteen and going stir-crazy again.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t sparred with people over the past three months, though perhaps against orders from Rin. I’d just been careful to avoid my left arm, and told people straight-up that jutsu were going
to behave...unpredictably. I was still trying to relearn my entire arsenal based on one-handed seals, after all.

Even if I hadn’t truly used hand seals in years, most of my workarounds involved manipulating my chakra in the same way throughout my entire body. With my left arm removed from the equation, spiritually speaking, I had to build everything from the ground up again.

So, when I inevitably built up enough frustration at that weakness that I could feel it pounding behind my eyeballs, I went back to my roots.

Kenjutsu.

While I hadn’t been using my katana as my primary weapon for a while—thanks mostly to my dependence on Isobu’s chakra—there was something therapeutic about the familiar motions. While it was self-aggrandizing hyperbole to say that the blade and I were one, the katas I remembered flowed nearly as fluidly as I remembered.

Here, in this place and time, I knew exactly who I was. I knew where I was. I didn’t have to think about the future, only about the movements.

But sparring with the air was only going to get me so far. Since my kenjutsu relied on my dominant right arm so much more than the left, where my entire ninjutsu arsenal depended on a balance of both I hadn’t gotten back, I was able and willing to take on a sparring partner in this theater.

And my brother had volunteered as soon as I mentioned it.

“Are you sure you’re ready to do this?” Hayate asked, holding his katana loosely from one hand. “You’re still recovering and…”

I lifted mine into the guard position, eyes narrowed and feeling patience bleed out of me. I would not be coddled in this. Not when half of my justification for special jōnin rank had rested on kenjutsu skill. Maybe the glare I was giving him was what was making him trail off.

“Hayate, I’ve been practicing kenjutsu for almost as long as you’ve been alive,” I said in a tone that was not terribly patient, “and I know how to do this. Injury or not, don’t hold back.”

Famous last words, really. I’d be holding back one way or another, but I did want to see what Hayate was capable of. As long as I didn’t try to duel him with my right arm tied behind my back, though, I’d probably be fine.

Hayate nodded, grasping the handle of his katana with both hands. Oh, he was taking me seriously.

Good.

“First blood?” Hayate asked, even as he started to circle for a better position.

“And no nin- or genjutsu.” Plus the standard bag of ninja tricks—even without ninjutsu or genjutsu, the strength and speed bonuses we got for being alive and trained were sort of hard to ignore. Those particular peculiarities of shinobi biology fell under the purview of taijutsu, but hopefully neither of us were going to take that as an excuse to start throwing elbows.

Much. Or often. There were more than a few kenjutsu techniques designed for doomsday scenarios like “losing one’s sword.” And most of them did involve elbows, knees, and occasionally toes.

Head, shoulders, knees, and toes…
Stop singing.

Tough crowd.

“Whenever you’re ready,” I said, because while I was a kind older sister, I had my pride.

When Hayate reached the point in his circle where the sun was to his back and more importantly in my eyes, he kicked off and shot toward me.

I met his blade head-on. His katana’s edge and mine hit one another and made a horrible metallic shriek, but I refused to give an inch unless he made me back up by force. Which, besides being a way for me to test his striking force, was also an excellent way to destroy an otherwise-functional katana’s edge.

But Hayate only kept it up for a moment, using my strength to dart backward and out of range before I could slash at him. It wasn’t that I didn’t try, but rather that Kakashi’s kenjutsu influence meant that Hayate had a bizarre ability to keep all of his extremities out of stabbing range.

It was a good sign.

When Hayate got to his feet again, his mouth was set into a grim line and his brows furrowed.

Yeah, even with one arm I can stop you dead. The question is, what are you going to do about it?

Hayate’s katana started to hum with his chakra, glowing even to normal sight.

My eyes narrowed. Straight to the Lightning manipulation, huh? It’d cut through my sword if I was stupid about how I met that attack. Coating my blade in chakra would likely do the trick to save the weapon, but shifting to Water would just guide the charge down into my arm. Wham, bam, instant loss.

Dodging time.

Hayate’s blade passed neatly over my head and made my loose hair stand on end, but I slid out of the way without a moment’s flinch or hesitation.

I’d been out of the field for a long time, but the reflexes honed by deadly combat were as sharp as ever. Anything less would have gotten me killed in the kinds of fights I kept running into. One-hit-kill jutsu were devastating even to someone like me—but only if they hit.

Being too slow was a death sentence.

I had to wonder how much time Hayate had spent in similar situations. Going by his speed—as I stepped back out of the way of his next attack and felt sparks try to catch on my katana—probably not as much as I had.

But Hayate didn’t have the explosive speed of any of my more recent opponents. He didn’t hit nearly as hard, even if he had the cutting power to make up for some of that gap.

Using a sweeping kick to distract him for just a moment, I caught Hayate in midair before he could come back down and lashed out with the flat of my blade.

The dulled strike hit his right upper arm, sending a jolt of surprised pain down to his sword hand. While he didn’t drop it, the Lightning cutting edge fizzled out—which was more or less what happened with any jutsu that required intense chakra control. The ability to keep up in a ninjutsu
fight, even through sudden, sharp pain, was something that had to be ingrained deep in one’s bones.

But unlike Itachi, I wasn’t trying to break my brother’s wrist.

I might not have pulled my strike enough, though, because Hayate dropped his sword point-first into the dirt. A second later, he landed on his butt in the dirt, wincing.

*The hell?*

Hayate rubbed his wrist as I killed my momentum dead, snatching up his sword and removing it from play. As a precaution, anyway.

“What the hell was that, Hayate?” I asked, as my brother *sloooowly* got his shit together. One solid hit and he was done? This wasn’t the fight I was expecting.

Hayate squinted up at me, since the sun was to my back. Not sure how that had happened. “Sis, you could have killed me easily.”

...Eh?

“Not with the hit,” Hayate said, interpreting my blank silence correctly. “But it only took two moves for me to know you’re too strong.”

“Hayate, I was pulling that strike. And the one before it.” I mean, who the hell really sparred full-pelt against a weaker opponent they *didn’t* plan on humiliating? Or killing.

“If that was a pulled hit, then why can’t I feel my wrist?” Hayate wanted to know, and held up his arm for inspection.

I grabbed his hand and turned his wrist over, inspecting the rising red welt with about half of my attention. It was a decent hit, but I wouldn’t have expected him to drop his sword unless I’d *broken* something, given the usual demands of shinobi combat.

And his chakra didn’t parse in a way that made sense with what he said. I *knew* what my brother felt like when he was in pain—mainly because he’d sure hit his knees enough on tables and chairs around me—and his chakra didn’t retreat back toward his core.

And Hayate made a grab for his sword, his hand sparking with Lightning chakra—not a *lot*, but enough that it would have hurt to hang onto his katana for long.

*One* of these damned days, I was going to badger Kakashi into explaining what techniques he’d shown Hayate how to perform. And then maybe figure out how to reverse-engineer them for my humble Water nature.

It was close—if he’d been a hair faster, or I was a bit slower, the action of yanking his sword back would have cut my left arm open because of the reversed grip I’d had. But *nope*, not quite.

My brother got *far* too much mileage out of the old “oh no, I’m doomed *but not really*” trick.

“Bruises don’t count as first blood, Sis,” Hayate said, which was totally unnecessary. He was just being a brat, but being ten meters away meant I’d have to actually run over there to pinch him for it.

“Well, shame on you for using my sisterly concern against me,” I shot back cheerfully, as Hayate went back to the thrift-shop lightsaber strategy again.

It didn’t work a second time.
Somewhat later, when my brother took a pair of minute nicks to the back of his right hand, he gave up. While he was better than the last time we’d sparred, I’d improved by just as much, if not more. The gap between our strengths remained.

While my brother dabbed at the little beads of blood with his sleeve—ugh, why couldn’t he use bandages?—he looked up to me and asked, “Did you even break a sweat?”

“Yes,” I said, even as I readjusted my hitai-ate on my head. Sheathing my sword at the same time my brother did, I waited for a couple of extra seconds before just deciding that maybe I didn’t need to say anything at all.

Hayate made a face at my answer, though. “Then can we work on something besides kenjutsu for a bit?”

“What do you want to do?” I asked him.

Hayate made a show of thinking about it. Then, “Everything!”

Short of blowing up the training field—which my brother couldn’t achieve on demand—we then practiced everything else in our respective arsenals. Lightning, high-pressure jets of water, a few more kenjutsu clashes, weapon-throwing—everything was on the table.

It was probably about two in the afternoon by the time we stopped, mostly because we were hungry. We walked back into town just in time to catch Iruka going the other way, toward one training site or another. Once outside of Konoha, the possibilities were pretty close to endless, so it wasn’t like I was going to be able to predict Iruka’s whims.

“Hayate, Kei-san,” Iruka said, acknowledging both of us with a nod. At some point Iruka had fallen out of the habit of calling me an honorary sister, which I kind of missed. But if he was growing up and had decided that he needed to be a bit more distant, I could understand that.

(It wasn’t like I didn’t have my brother, all three Chinatsugumi kids on occasion, both of Sensei’s kids, and Yūgao to fall back on, there.)


“Mostly. Actually,” Iruka corrected himself, “I was going to mention something to you.”

Hayate cocked his head to one side, hands in his pockets. “Like what?”

“I was at the Academy earlier, and I overheard someone saying their name was, uh, Kōsuke Gekkō?” Iruka shrugged, even as Hayate and I exchanged blank looks, “And I was just wondering if you knew anyone by that name.”

“I’m pretty sure we’re the only two Gekkō left,” Hayate said, puzzled. “I mean, I guess maybe we could have cousins somewhere, but...it’s not a common name…”

I nodded, frowning a bit. Sure, Dad had never talked about any of our extended family, as far as I knew, and no one else had ever mentioned more relatives coming out of the woodwork except for when Mom had died. Even so, Sensei had been focusing on possible Uesugi clan members, even if there had never been any indication that they’d possibly know we existed. Samurai were an unknown.

The Gekkō family—if we were actually related to any others, and Dad hadn’t just changed his name
at some point—had never come up.

“Hey, do you have any idea why he was around the Academy?” I asked, trying to keep my confusion out of my voice. Sure, just like how not everyone named “Smith” was related, there was no real reason that Hayate and I would be related to any random person with the same family name.

“Mission request at the Administration building, I think. I just heard him talking outside,” Iruka said, shrugging. “I can’t really get into the mission office without an actual reason, so I guess you could ask the Hokage if anything interesting happened.” *Since that’s a thing you do, and everyone knows it.*

Or maybe I was reading too far into his tone.

Hayate and I waved Iruka onward and, by mutual, silent agreement, headed for the Hokage’s office to go and bug Sensei about exactly that.

Chapter End Notes

So this is the last chapter I'll be posting for a bit, since in about nine hours I'm going to be going on vacation for a while. To the Land of Rain and Heat. While I boil alive, there isn't going to be much opportunity to write except late at night. However, I do read every single message you, the readers, send to me, no matter what platform.

Please tell me your thoughts (and perhaps hopes, or speculations) as we move forward!
By the time Hayate and I got to the Administration center, I was harboring a few doubts about this mysterious new Gekkō—which, on reflection, sounded a bit like I was paranoid over the existence of a sticky-footed lizard. Yay, homophones.

Nevertheless, neither of us had ever met a single member of our extended family. It’d always been just us, Mom, and Dad. And then neither of our parents. If this stranger with our family name was here to, for example, try and get us to rejoin some clannish band who had nonetheless ignored us for our entire lives, I had no problem telling them where to stick it.

“Sis, are you nervous?” Hayate asked, once we landed on the roof and slipped toward the stairs that wound around the outside of the building.

There were some advantages to pretending to be like normal people, though most of them came down to “other people won’t look at you funny for spamming superpowers for everything.” Hence why, for the most part, I didn’t bother.

“Maybe a bit,” I admitted, while my brother’s chakra had more of an anticipatory thrill to it. I was better at imagining doomsday scenarios and heartbreaking confrontations than he was. Or perhaps all of that boiled down to a brain built for making mountains out of molehills.

Hayate proceeded to ignore my discomfort—or perhaps tried to distract me—by saying, “I wonder if he’ll look anything like us.”

“Depends on how distantly he’s related, if he is,” I reminded Hayate.

As a mixed-race kid in my last lifetime, I hadn’t really resembled any of my cousins. But here, the extended Hyūga and Uchiha clans looked creepily similar to other members of their respective clans. With the Aburame clan, it was hard to tell, and the other clans were all over the place.

I hoped for a middle ground, if anything at all.

Hayate led the way down the stairs toward the mission office, where I was pretty sure one of Sensei’s clones was working for the mid-afternoon. While his schedule had become harder to predict when I didn’t spend every day at work with him or Kushina, I was almost certain that this was one of those days when he stayed at home in the early afternoon to play with Naruto and Tatsumaki.

I cast my chakra sense outward, just to be sure. Sensei tended not to leave any real perceptible
differences between the real him and the clones he used, but I could check anyway.

“There’s a pair of civilian chakra signatures down there,” I said to Hayate as we headed down the stairs, “but the other three are Sensei and two Chūnin Corps members. That might mean we’re in luck.”

Hayate sagged in disappointment. “I was hoping for another ninja in the family. Like maybe someone in ANBU!”

“If Kōsuke was a Konoha ninja, I’d have a really hard time not being pissed off at him, actually,” I grumbled. “Because that’d mean we had a relative running around for who even knows how long who totally ignored us for that whole time.”

Hayate grimaced. “Yeah. That would…” He shook his head, trying to stave off the negative thoughts. But I knew he was thinking of the time immediately after Mom’s death. “I don’t know if I could forgive someone who did that. Even for a really important reason.”

Which was also why he had such a problem with Sensei’s decision to put me in the field for so long. Where I had been a ninja and had finagled every possible way to stay in Hayate’s life for as much as I could, most shinobi couldn’t. I wasn’t sure if Hayate could see the difference yet, but that wasn’t the relevant issue anyway.

When we finally arrived just outside the Mission Office’s swing doors, both of us hesitated to enter. While there was nothing to fear out of a pair of pissed-off civilians—physically—the only ones with the agitated chakra—we hadn’t been called in for a mission and were really only there because of our burning curiosity.

Said burning curiosity was steadily turning my thoughts away from “what if we’re related to the mysterious new Gekkō we heard about?” to “why hasn’t Sensei made this scratchy-voiced punk shut up yet?” the longer Hayate and I eavesdropped.

Hayate mouthed, “This guy?” as he pointed at the door.

I shrugged helplessly. I didn’t know any more than he did.

A few minutes of muffled, raised voices later, and both of the civilian presences headed for the same door we had been shamelessly listening through. Exchanging looks, both of us vanished under basic camouflage genjutsu just as the door opened hard enough that, if there had been a doorknob of any sort, it probably would have gouged a hole in the relevant wall.

A teenaged boy, probably right around Hayate’s age, stomped out of the hall with his hands balled into fists. Dressed in well-made clothes, he looked either like a merchant or a tailor’s son, with his unruly black hair unsuccessfully pulled back into a high knot at the back of his head. Long eyelashes and a squareish jaw kind of reminded me of Dad, but probably only because I was looking for any sign of a resemblance.

If I was being honest, he looked like any teenaged jackass native to Konoha, given the relatively high proportion of normal human hair colors running loose in town. It wasn’t like we were in Kumogakure.

In the boy’s wake, a young woman who could have been his sister trailed in unobtrusive, serene silence. Like the boy, she had long, wild brown hair that was partly tamed, but by a jeweled headband. It matched her somewhat expensive kimono and geta, even as it made me wonder who the hell had let two teenagers travel to Konoha on their own. The two of them shared a somewhat
stocky build, and both of them were shorter than Hayate or me, but that was really all I could say.

“I can’t believe the Hokage would assign this a B-rank,” the boy ranted as they went down the hall. “It’s a C-rank at most, isn’t it, Sister? We have to pay for it alone! Can’t he lower the price?!”

“Don’t worry, Kōsuke. I’m sure we can drum up funds in town somehow,” the girl said, placating. “I’ll sell my jewelry, and then we should be able to afford to pay these ninja.”

“Why should you have to sell anything? What we brought should have been enough!” grumbled the newly-identified Kōsuke. “Stupid, greedy ninja…"

I felt Hayate’s chakra spike in agitation, and jabbed at him with my chakra to remind him that we were supposed to be spying. Stealth was the name of the game.

Kōsuke rounded the corner, still complaining “under his breath” and drawing the eyes of everyone who crossed their path. His older sister offered more options, but he didn’t sound like he was willing to hear any of them.

Eventually, their voices faded entirely, and Hayate and I both dropped our genjutsu.

Hayate broke the silence first. “What the hell was that about?”

Gesturing at the door, I answered, “How about we ask?”

Hayate made a face. “That was a rhetorical question, Sis.”

“Come on, like you’re not dying to know,” I cajoled.

Hayate crossed his arms stubbornly. “I’m not sure I care anymore.”

Uh-oh. That had been a…less than stellar first impression, true, but I hadn’t realized it was quite that bad.

“Are you two just going to stand out there and argue, or are you going to get in here?” Sensei’s voice cut across both of us, jolting us back to the present and not our sibling squabble.

Somewhat chastised, we headed in.

“You needed to see us, Sensei?” I asked, like we hadn’t just been caught acting less-than-maturely for our ranks.

Sensei, who sat behind the main desk and had his head propped up on his knuckles, said, “I thought I’d see you two here sooner or later. Word travels fast, doesn’t it?”

There was a brand-new mission scroll on his desk, which was snatched up by one of the Chūnin Corps members and stuck into the wall slot that indicated it was a B-ranked mission. B-ranks were more expensive than C-ranks, but not prohibitively so. Unless the client was flat broke, anyway.

I’d have to ask for details on that one as soon as Hayate and I stopped pretending that our presence was anything but deliberate.

Speaking of.

“Who was that?” Hayate asked, jerking a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the long-disappeared other Gekkō siblings. Possibly. As in, they were possibly another set of Gekkō siblings, but Hayate definitely meant them one way or another.
I was starting to wonder if this was what it had felt like for the Elrics to meet the Tringham brothers. “No, the other ones” was probably going to be a phrase that popped up a lot.

“Tsukiko and Kōsuke Gekkō, from the Gekkō tailoring business in Kitano Town,” Sensei replied. “It’s somewhat close to the border with the Land of Grass.”

So they were from the Land of Fire. Kitano Town wasn’t the biggest one on our border with Kusa’s territory, but I was pretty sure I’d been there before on a mission with Ebisu to help with customs chicanery. I mostly remembered the smell of dead fish from the nearby river—certainly nothing like another possible family with our name. I liked to think I was more observant than that.

“Kitano Town’s been having trouble with bandit clans, some of which are led by former shinobi,” Sensei went on, glancing up at the scroll in its new resting place. “I can’t exactly give any mission with a high possibility of shinobi combat a rating lower than B.”

“And?” Hayate asked.

“He’s really asking if you think we might be related to them,” I said, when Sensei didn’t immediately answer.

The Chūnin Corps members were shuffling out of the room as we talked, so maybe they realized that this wasn’t a discussion that really needed to be aired. It was just that we were using their workspace anyway.

“It’s possible.” Well, what a ringing endorsement. Sensei went on, “I don’t have your father’s service records here, but I think he listed a hometown when he first enrolled in the Academy…”

Either that was a no, or Dad had been estranged from his family. Given what I had just seen from our possible-cousin’s behavior, I could see why.

Besides, it wasn’t like that was too uncommon. Sure, most Konoha shinobi had families in town, and that detail was something that separated us from most other shinobi villages. I was pretty sure that say, Raidō, had no family members in town, though I’d never asked why.

But perhaps I was being harsh.

Hayate and I had only seen our weird mirror duo for a few minutes, which was enough to form the negative first impression we had and pretty much nothing else. Maybe if we just asked them what was what, we’d get an answer.

“I wasn’t actually going to hand this mission to you two,” Sensei said, breaking me out of my reverie. “While the possible blood link is interesting, it’s not a C-rank. And I did promise.”

C-ranks always went to shit anyway, so I didn’t really know what to say to that.

“Can we...can we think about it?” Hayate asked, clearly struggling with himself. “I guess I want to know for sure if they’re family, but Kōsuke sounds like a complete brat…” He shook his head. “But if someone’s in trouble with Iwa, and they’re ours, we’re supposed to help them.”

“You’re not wrong,” Sensei replied, once my brother got his rambling out of the way, “but again, you two aren’t obligated to take this mission simply because your family name is the same as the clients’. I’d assign a complete team to handle a B-rank.”

I made a thoughtful noise. “Maybe...we could see if we could get more details out of those two. Or something. Or just think on it?”
Sensei hesitated. “Kei, didn’t curiosity kill the cat? I really don’t think you should push yourself into a situation you can’t handle over a burning need to know something so minor.”

“Well, it is kinda minor—I mean, at most, we might get pen pals out of this,” I admitted. But, looking at my brother’s determined expression, I didn’t think I was getting out of it either. “We aren’t going to stop being shinobi no matter what. Right, Hayate?”

“Right,” Hayate said with a sharp nod.

“So I don’t think there’s...too much harm in poking around. More than we already have,” I hedged, since Sensei had caught us eavesdropping not too long ago.

Also, I kind of wanted to know what the rest of the town was saying about the new Gekkō siblings, since they’d had so long to get used to us. Hopefully, we came off somewhat better by the comparison.

“I won’t stop you. Just try to be discreet,” Sensei said, and I supposed that meant we were dismissed.

Once we left, Hayate turned to me and said, “How do you want to do this?”

For a moment, I scratched the side of my head and thought about it. This self-appointed mission probably didn’t require both of us... Not to mention, I was supposed to be meeting Suika-sensei later. “I can’t follow them around today, Hayate. I’ll have to leave that to you.”

Hayate nodded, accepting my total lack of a spoken reason. He probably had a better idea of what my schedule was than I did, sometimes. “Something’s off about that guy’s reaction. I mean, Konoha makes exceptions for clients who can’t pay for big missions, don’t we?”

“I don’t remember. I know we have standing contracts for a lot of places, but their village might not be included,” I said. I could have asked Sensei, but I got the impression that he didn’t necessarily need the interruption about clerical minutiae. “What bothers me—aside from the part where they have the same family name—is that I guess I don’t see why they had to make a scene.”

“I can find out,” Hayate said, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“Don’t get caught.”

Now, this is a story all about how/My life got flipped-turned upside down...

My first attempt at talking about my old life lacked so much gravitas that it was practically floating.

Nonetheless, I did tell my reincarnation story to Suika-sensei at some point. Just with fewer references to 90s pop culture. And with fewer evasive statements than I’d ever managed before. It was a minor victory in the scheme of things, but a victory hard-won and at long last. Or something.

Being objective, it wasn’t a stretch to say that my life, perception thereof, and my goals had all changed once I died. But there was no California, so it wasn’t like I could take the rest of the song literally.

And after that story, Suika-sensei sent me away so we could both reflect. I got the thing off my chest, and she had to go make some kind of worm-salts tea for her impending headache.

I didn’t ask for details. I’d bounced a lot of them off her carapace, and we both needed a break.

While I could probably go and pester Hayate for a preliminary result on his scouting mission, he’d
have more to report if I waited and let him (and all possible accomplices) go on without interference.

That left me at loose ends.

So, per usual, I decided to find someone I knew and bother them instead of just spending the afternoon reading or something. I was fresh out of books anyway.

First up, Rin. She’d left while I sat and talked and gave Suika-sensei a headache, because she only needed to be there for the initial summoning. My chakra sense put her—and Obito—somewhere toward the middle of town. Probably around the part of the Naka River that ran through the Uchiha district, though not near the waterfall end of things.

Still, I headed in that direction anyway, leaping from branch to branch among the Training Ground trees until I found the first rooftop, and continued from there.

*Parkour!*

_This is not remotely parkour. This is the stand-in for flight that...who is that human who wears underwear on the outside again?_

What a party pooper. Still, I accepted the correction with all due respect. *Not-actually-parkour!*

*Show some respect.*

*I never._

I eventually came to a stop in a tree with its lower branches beaten smooth by many passing feet. I draped one leg down over the curve of the wood, tucking the other underneath me, and gave myself a second to slow down and think.

Obito and Rin were just barely coming into view, visible only as a pair of silhouettes holding each other’s hands. As I half-watched, half-observed via my chakra sense, the two of them headed down toward the riverbank and disappeared from view. Their chakra was bright and clear, a warm flame meeting something that felt the way sun-dappled water looked.

I didn’t have enough of a grasp on how their chakra moved to be able to tell exactly what they were doing once they left my line of sight, but I didn’t need to have the Byakugan to know that they didn’t deserve to be interrupted.

...Maybe it’d be best if I stayed out of their way.

I slid off the tree branch and headed toward the rest of the village.

My next stop put me at the Academy—not so much because I was going to pester someone into interacting with me, but more because I wanted to see how my kids behaved in class.

“Class” turned out to be a slight misnomer. While all three of the former Chinatsugumi children were certainly enrolled, the Academy’s day was ending just as I arrived.

Perched in the tree in the Academy’s yard, I watched the students pour out of the doors. Given that I wasn’t looking down from Sensei’s office or the roof for once, the view struck me as somehow more...realistic, I supposed. It was sort of dehumanizing to look down on everyone from on high, and quite a different thing to just see how people went about their daily lives from around eye level.

Or two meters above it, as the case _actually_ was.
Roku was one of the last ones out, trailed by both Kaito and Aiko, but they didn’t lag behind for long. To my mild surprise, Shisui Uchiha—at least eleven years old and thus probably tall enough to reach my collar—waved them over toward the gates.

Slinging their little school-bags around like orbiting bodies, Aiko and Kaito almost managed to tackle the much taller child to the ground with the force of their hugs. And when their weight didn’t bring him down, their school-bags smacking together behind his head was just enough to make him overbalance and end up on the ground.

I tilted my head to one side, baffled. Since when had they…?

“Neither of them even stopped to ask about candy this time,” Itachi said, appearing next to Roku in a burst of smoke.

“They don’t have to ask,” said Roku, holding out his fist, which Itachi obligingly bumped. “Did you get my book back from your brother?”

Itachi shook his head, his chakra fizzling in embarrassment. “He wants me to finish reading to him. I know I promised, but…”

“It’s okay.” Roku patted Itachi’s shoulder. “If he likes the stories, you can keep it until he gets bored.”

“I don’t know if he will,” Itachi warned as they started to walk out of earshot, following the sudden three-child parade his cousin led—mostly by virtue of being the one with the longest legs.

...Nope, not interrupting that either.

With Kakashi (ANBU captainy things) and Gai (mission) out of the village, that pretty much exhausted my list of close friends who I felt comfortable bothering, since they’d all gone and gotten themselves into situations where I was not comfortable bothering them. Hayate’s friends were his friends, and Yamato fell into this weird purgatory where he was mostly associated with Kakashi or Hayate but not really with me, besides taking on some kind of assessment that Tsunade didn’t seem to approve of.

(It was probably related to ANBU, like a lot of people’s mysterious tests. There had to be better excuses.)

And I sure as shit wasn’t going to go and interrupt Genma and Raidō’s reunion dinner thingy—which, granted, Genma had been planning to last literally the entire day after Raidō got back from whatever ANBU mission he had. With their chakra signatures so close together, I had to assume said reunion thing had already started.

I had a real dilemma on my hands. On one, boredom. On the other, a mysterious void of infinite opportunity that I had yet to explore.

Maybe Kurenai would have an idea.

“...And that’s how I ended up here,” I said to Asuma, from across a shogi board.

Kurenai, who had been halfway out her front door for yet another mission, pointed me in Asuma’s direction like a real delegating champ.

“Given how bad you’re playing, I wouldn’t have guessed this was your first choice,” Asuma
remarked dryly, and clicked one last piece into place to cement my defeat.

I blew my bangs out of my face, making a horselike noise. “Don’t rub it in. Another round?”

“Sure. I’m always up for winning.” Asuma cleared his victorious legions from the board with one sweep of his hand, then started setting up again.

I had a...theoretical grasp of shogi. While the Nara and Sarutobi clans seemed to make a communal hobby of the game, I only recognized pieces in passing and couldn’t remember how any of them moved. Genma knew, but I’d never shown any interest and he’d assumed I didn’t want to learn.

It was an accurate assumption, but one that was biting me in the ass anyway.

And once the pieces were all set up again—with no help from me—I stared at the black pieces for way too long for comfort. At a loss for anything else to say, I meekly asked Asuma, “Uh, remind me how the knights move?”

Shogi wasn’t chess, but the similar roles were making half-remembered rules smack into each other inside my head. It wasn’t helping my already terrible level of skill get anywhere fast, and the knights were always the dumbest pieces on the board.

“You aren’t supposed to telegraph your first play, you know,” Asuma pointed out.

“I can’t help it if I’m really awful at this,” I griped, drumming my fingers on my knee. Then I realized what I just said. “Crap.”

All you did was confirm his assessment of your skills, Isobu told me. Which just so happen to accurately indicate that you are terrible at this game.

“Asuma, did you want an actual challenge?” I asked him, while Isobu rattled off the movements of each of the pieces in turn with what I was pretty sure was pinpoint accuracy. Because of course he could.

Asuma scratched his day’s worth of stubble, then nodded with a bit of chagrin. “Even I have to admit this isn’t really fun anymore.”

Thanks, jerk. Though, of course, he was only telling the truth. There was a reason that good players didn’t generally play with beginners unless it was time to teach.

I got to my feet with a huff and bit down on a hangnail for the required drops of blood. While Isobu’s chakra patched the incredibly trivial injury, I called out, “Summoning jutsu!”

Technically, I didn’t have to say anything, but it felt more official when I did.

In a burst of smoke that nearly filled the Sarutobi clan’s porch, Tsuruya appeared at my back. With her huge wings folded against her sides and her neck and head held nearly level in the available space, she seemed somewhat smaller than normal.

“...You’re going to get your summon to play for you?” Asuma asked, looking torn between being insulted and actually rather eager to take on the challenge. “You really think you’re that bad?”

“I am that bad,” I retorted. “But Tsuruya actually knows the rules, and she’s never gotten a challenge out of me anyway.”

Tsuruya, who had peered down at the starting setup with interest, pulled her head back to bop me in
the head with her beak. “Keisuke-sama, I am not going to play for your sake here. I offered to teach you once.”

“And I turned you down and I’m sorry about that,” I agreed, running my fingers along her glossy white feathers. “But no, you’re not playing for me. You’re playing Asuma so he has someone to play with, and I’ll cheer you on. Or move the pieces if you want.”

Tsuruya fixed me with a wry look. “I think I can manage, Keisuke-sama. Asuma-san, you wished to play white?”

Asuma nodded. “Since I’ve got the longest win record, it only seems fair. Your move, Tsuruya-san.”

Tsuruya huffed. “We’ll see about that, Asuma-san.”

I dozed to the sound of thoughtful clicking as the game unfolded. Aside from the possible utility of thumbs, it wasn’t like Tsuruya needed my input for anything there.

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Once upon a time, someone on Earth had decided that conventional alarm clocks were for weaklings (or possibly too specialized in audio input), and had invented a cheerfully evil device that woke its users by zapping them awake in the morning.

We had them in ninja-land too, but the electrodes were replaced by timed seals in order to be let out into the field. When the other option was accidentally giving away one’s position in the field while badly outnumbered and acting as the quarry in a manhunt, shinobi could put aside their dislike of being zapped at regular intervals. To a point.

No one had hooked me up to one of those hideous devices.

And yet I was awake anyway.

From under Tsuruya’s wing, and to the general noise of another in-progress shogi match between her and Asuma, I felt a faint, rising tension in the air. It wasn’t really anything physical, and it wouldn’t have been important on its own.

But that flash in the figurative dark was one I knew well.

Kakashi’s chakra was a live wire, a sparking power line—but one that was just barely on the edge of my range. He picked his way toward the village and the detection system that the Barrier Team at least put up a pretense of maintaining, accompanied by several less-distinct signatures.

I nudged Tsuruya’s wing off me so I could sit up, making a sound akin to someone dropping a drawer full of cutlery as her feathers banged together. Tsuruya grumbled a bit, still intent on her game, but let me escape her mother hen instincts unscathed.

After yawning, I asked, “So who’s winning?”

“Tsuruya-san is,” Asuma replied, frowning over the board and not bothering to look up from his grand strategies. “ Barely.”

“It has been a close-run thing,” Tsuruya admitted. “But I do not plan to lose!” Her feathers rattled again, the tension building.

I slid my legs off the side of the porch and peered up at the sun. Judging by the angle of the shadows, and the deeper blue in the sky, I’d snoozed a few hours away. Likewise, Tsuruya and Asuma had
pitted their respective brains against each other, continually, for that entire time.

Given how completely wretched I was at shogi, Asuma had to be having fun.

Kicking my legs idly, I closed my eyes and focused on Kakashi’s chakra. He felt a bit tired, buzzing perhaps a little less enthusiastically than normal, but it was nothing compared to what I remembered from his old ANBU missions. Before the Sorayama incident, Kakashi spent at least a few weeks out of every year on the bench due to chakra exhaustion, but nothing like that had happened since he rejoined the active ANBU roster.

Thank goodness for the small side benefits of horrible accidents that could have gone far more wrong, and for Team Minato’s luck finally swinging in a more useful direction.

Tsuruya briefly flicked her beak, then said, “Keisuke-sama, are you still interested in the outcome of this game?”

I made a face, unwilling to admit out loud that the answer was a resounding “no.” I didn’t want to hurt their feelings.

Thankfully, I was spared from having to answer any questions on that front by the sound of footsteps on the roof above us. A quick check with my chakra sense confirmed that the welcome new interloper was someone I knew, so I leaned forward and craned my neck so I could watch their arrival somewhat better.

Yūgao landed in the Sarutobi clan rock garden in front of me, accompanied by one rather peeved-seeming ANBU guard.

There were some perks to being a former Hokage, even if Hiruzen Sarutobi didn’t get out as often as he used to. Or as predictably.

“Hi, Yūgao-chan,” I said, as Tsuruya nearly clocked me with her beak again. I ducked in time, though. “What’s up?”

Yūgao paused, giving one last somewhat miffed look to her ANBU escort as he let go of her arm. Then, with a quick nod to Asuma, she said, “We found out some more stuff about those other Gekkō kids.”

Asuma placed a shogi tile seemingly at random and, while Tsuruya swore very quietly under her breath, asked distractedly, “‘Other Gekkō kids?’”

“...Did I forget to mention them before starting my losing streak?” I wondered aloud.

Asuma gave me an unamused look. “Yes.”

While Tsuruya squawked over suddenly realizing she’d lost—or so I assumed—Asuma scooted around on his butt until he was sitting next to me with his legs also dangling over the edge of the porch.

“So what did you learn?” I asked Yūgao, as Asuma dismissed the ANBU guard.

“Well, Hayate-kun wants you to talk to them, but I think we might be taking that mission.” Yūgao twisted her long purple hair around in her fingers, hesitating.

“So what is the mission?” I asked. I had a higher security clearance than she did, so it wasn’t like there was any reason to be hesitant, right?
To my surprise, that hesitance in Yūgao’s dark eyes didn’t go away. “I think it’d be easier if we go ask them directly.”

...Okay then? What the hell.

I got to my feet, to the sound of Tsuruya sweeping all the shogi pieces off the board in frustration. “Lead the way, Yūgao-chan.”

To my surprise, Asuma stood up too. Spotting my expression, he said, “Hey, I’m curious about this. It’s not something secret, right?”

“No really,” I said, though I did glance to Yūgao to confirm that. At her nod, I said, “Who knows, maybe we’ll get an actual interesting story out of them.”

With Tsuruya, Asuma, and me following along, Yūgao led us to the mysterious meeting place.

It turned out that Ichiraku Ramen was magic.

Kushina’s ramen was better in my opinion, but it was also the only way to get Kōsuke Gekkō to shut up.

Ichiraku’s only had six seats, which wasn’t nearly enough to include me, my brother, Yūgao, Iruka, Asuma, Kōsuke and Tsukiko Gekkō, and finally Tsuruya. So while the two foreign Gekkō got actually seats, and my brother and I apparently got two out of courtesy, Asuma ended up being the one who sat on Tsuruya’s back.

Sure, he wasn’t hungry, but I did offer to take his place since Tsuruya, per usual, started prodding his head with her beak to groom him like a chick. He seemed to take it well, though.

“They refused to tell me what was going on until I bought them lunch,” Hayate griped from around my right elbow.

Given the six bowls piled up in front of the other Gekkō siblings, I could see his point. Part of the reason he’d asked Yūgao to find me was to pay for this shit.

I didn’t ask him what he’d found out without having to spend my money, because that would have constituted admitting that we’d been spying on these strangers.

Tsukiko dabbed delicately at her lips with a napkin, then finally favored me with a polite and totally bland smile. I could see her social mask slide into place with a figurative click. It reminded me of the face Mom would put on when dealing with Sensei when she was already mad at him, and he persisted in giving her justification for it.

Eventually, curiosity got the better of me.

(It took about five minutes total.)

“So, why were you shouting in the Hokage’s office earlier?” I asked, and got to watch Kōsuke perform a perfect spit-take that nearly doused Teuchi’s daughter Ayame in hot soup and spittle.

He missed, and I didn’t have to throw a chopstick at his head.

While Kōsuke coughed to recover, Tsukiko turned to me while patting her brother’s back and said, “You heard that...Keisuke-san, wasn’t it? I wasn’t aware that anyone else was there at the time.”
There was a not-so-subtle hesitation over my name that I didn’t really understand, but we’d get to the bottom of that in short order.

“Shinobi have ways,” I said without batting an eye.

Tsukiko blinked slowly, glancing at Asuma and Tsuruya and their respective bowls of ramen. “I...see. Asuma-san has the same family name as your Third Hokage, doesn’t he?”

Asuma looked rather unimpressed, over the rim of his bowl. “He’s my dad, and you’re not subtle.”

“Hey, don’t talk to my sister that way!” Kōsuke snapped.

Asuma’s thick eyebrows rose by, at most, a couple of millimeters. I would have bet at least one...I probably would have bet a slightly bent kunai that Asuma was thinking something along the lines of Who taught this kid how to show common courtesy? Because they should be fired.

A kunai? Not money? Not even multiple kunai?

Hey, I’m not on his genin team. I don’t claim to know what he thinks.

Except right then.

...Except right then.

While Asuma didn’t exactly ooze political zeal—or skill—there was something to be said for basic survival instincts. It struck me as a kind of common sense to avoid insulting people who were theoretically capable of killing—though not willing to kill—other people with their bare hands.

Just saying.

“Can you answer my question? We might be able to help,” I said, interrupting a possible food fight before it could start.

Watching Kōsuke bite back the first three things he wanted to say was actually rather funny. He had the kind of face that showed every bit of the mental gymnastics he had to force himself through to get back on track. “It’s our town, okay?”

“Kitano Town is a prosperous, peaceful community located near the border of the Land of Fire,” Tsukiko said, as though reading from a tour pamphlet. “Unfortunately…”

“There are a bunch of bandit assholes in the hills,” Kōsuke said, picking up the thread. “And Grandma thinks they’re just going to get worse. They already robbed our cousins on the road, and Sano broke his stupid hand in the fight they had.”

“Why not go to Kusagakure, then?” Asuma suggested. “It’s closer, and we do have something of an agreement with them—they can work in our territory, and it sounds like you could have used the help sooner.”

Kōsuke scrunched his nose and said disdainfully, “We tried that. But the bandits watch those roads way too much. Sis and I only got this far because we hitched a ride with some people from the old Chinatsugumi. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have gotten past them.”

My mouth twisted a bit when I thought of Sorayama, and the incident that made all Chinatsugumi merchants technically “former” members.
“But since Konoha is the one that responded to the attack there, the guys said we’d have more luck with you than like...Takigakure or Amegakure.” Kōsuke flapped a hand, irritated. “I mean, you guys sent a freaking jinchūriki to kick the asses of the guys who did all that, so you’d probably take this shit seriously. Except when we got here, the Hokage wanted to charge us more money than we have.”

Tsukiko patted her brother’s back, while Hayate and I exchanged incredulous glances. Behind the other Gekkō siblings, Asuma choked on his soup and Tsuruya smacked him with her beak on reflex to help him out.

“There are ways around that price tag,” I said, pretending that I didn’t have any idea who this mysterious jinchūriki was. It was just a minor detail quibble—I’d already been at Sorayama, while Kushina had been the one actually deployed. “Payment plans, for example.”

“We’ve written similar agreements, Keisuke-san,” Tsukiko replied. “Should we expect shinobi to be any kinder?”

“...We’re soldiers, not loan sharks,” Iruka pointed out. “We do have a bureaucracy and everything, but you’re Land of Fire citizens and we do work for the whole nation at least some of the time. B-ranked missions are expensive, but we’ve made exceptions for poor villages before. I mean, it’s not like we’re broke.”

Since Sensei’s ascension as the Fourth Hokage and the subsequent peaceful new era—until some new war popped up—we’d actually been doing pretty well as a village. Except for the Sorayama thing, which was definitely still being sorted out. The Land of Fire’s economy had taken a hit from losing such a large merchant group nearly in its totality, and the nasty hit to nationwide confidence, but a quick response and the deaths of all the perpetrators had helped blunt the impact somewhat.

But I wasn’t an economic theorist, or a political one, and I had to admit that I was seriously sort of information past that level of detail.

“Neither of us have the authority to negotiate on Kitano Town’s behalf,” Tsukiko said softly. “The best we can do is ask for the mission to be completed and then pay afterward, but still...”

“It’s still a racket,” Kōsuke complained.

Having never had to hire shinobi for anything, I couldn’t say anything on that topic personally.

Tsukiko closed her eyes. “One would hope that the Gekkō family survives this trial.”

Asuma raised his eyebrows again. “Gekkō?”

“Yes. Our company is Gekkō Imported Goods.” Tsukiko titled her head. “Have you heard of us?”

“Nope,” Asuma said blithely. “But you might be sitting next to two of your cousins.”

Tsukiko blinked. Kōsuke froze.

Hayate waved. “Did I forget to mention that?”

“Keisuke Gekkō,” I said, since that barn door was wide open. “Konoha jōnin, host of the Three-Tailed Beast, and otherwise known as the Tidal Blade.”

“And I’m Hayate Gekkō, chūnin of Konoha,” Hayate said, perfectly in time. “Iruka and Yūgao-chan are my teammates.”
And both of us—and our friends—got to see both of the civilian Gekkō siblings reel back from me as though burned. Kōsuke actually tipped his stool over, making Tsuruya snap when it nearly clipped her face, and Yūgao and Iruka both tensed as though expecting to have to break up a fight.

“Y-you’re—” Kōsuke shook with rage. “What the _fuck_? What the _fuck_ was—you can’t just spring that on us!”

Ayame yelped and clapped her hands over her ears, and Teuchi ushered her toward the kitchen to get her away from the confrontation.

“Can. Did,” Hayate responded. More seriously, he added, “My team and I were thinking of taking your mission pretty much for free. But it’s just a joke. I’m not sure I want to be related to you anyway.”

“We’re always up for helping rescue villages,” Iruka added, before Kōsuke and Tsukiko could recover and start properly _reacting_ to the news.

“But just to be clear, the offer’s real,” Yūgao added. “We’ve had good missions lately so it doesn’t really matter if we get paid for a C or B-ranked mission.”

Oh, how time flew. I remembered days when I couldn’t have been nearly so blithe about money. Of course, Sensei had handled anything and everything akin to haggling back then, so it wasn’t really my concern as a genin.

Kōsuke looked like he was about to say something, but Tsukiko’s hand snapped out and caught his wrist. He visibly bit down on the inside of his cheek to keep from speaking.

Tsukiko bowed, still not relinquishing her grip on her brother’s arm. “We would be honored if you would be willing to help save our village, Hayate-san.”

“Hey, no, you don’t need to act like that around us,” Hayate backpedaled. When Tsukiko looked up, he went on, “We’ll take the mission. No more pranks.” Then he paused. “Sis, Inoichi-sensei isn’t on the mission roster this month ‘cause he took time off, so do you want to come with us as team leader?”

I hesitated. Satisfying my curiosity was one thing, but wasn’t this going a bit far to alleviate my wanderlust?

_Is this a joke? The only thing you have managed to avoid regarding your curiosity is death, and that by slim margins on occasion. How is this any different?_

... _Eh, point. But I can always count on you to bail me out._

_Untunately, yes._ Isobu sighed. _Try to avoid obvious idiocy this time._

“Yes, I’ll come with you. There’s just one thing,” I said, half thinking aloud. To my brother’s team, I said, “Hayate, we can’t just take a mission. It has to be assigned.”

“So?” Hayate had a mulish expression. “Can’t you just ask the Hokage? I mean, we’re probably the only team that’ll take this mission at the price our clients”—and here, he nodded at Kōsuke and Tsukiko, who were watching our banter as though it was a high-speed tennis match—“can pay. And he’s your sensei.”

Well, yes, but… “That’s favoritism.”
“Again, so?” At my raised eyebrow—and those of Asuma, Yūgao, and Iruka—Hayate elaborated with a rather cheeky, “I might forgive him if he listens to my big sister’s request and gives us this mission.”

I sighed, feeling my resolve start to crumble. Dammit, Hayate. “All right, you win. But you need to hold up your end of the bargain, you brat.”

After the impromptu business dinner broke up, I let Tsuruya go home with Asuma so they could continue their marathon best-out-of-infinity shogi series. And while Iruka and Yūgao headed back to their homes to pack, Hayate and I escorted the other Gekkō sibs to their inn. We’d get the mission officially in the morning, but I didn’t foresee any difficulty in getting Sensei to play ball.

It gave us a chance to get to know our soon-to-be clients, too, which went a ways toward satisfying my burning need to know everything.

Mainly because nothing killed my willingness to listen faster than the stupidity that ensued.

As we reached the inn’s front step, Kōsuke finally burst out, “What’s it like to be a monster?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Hayate said, rolling his eyes. Can you believe this guy? his face seemed to say.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Kōsuke snapped, his eyes narrowing.

“Then you should’ve said,” Hayate retorted. “What the fuck kind of question is that?”

Oh, boy.

Tsukiko grabbed her brother’s collar and yanked on it, making him yelp. “Little Brother, they are helping us out of the goodness of their hearts—and despite the emptiness of their wallets. The least you can do is avoid antagonizing them.”

“The funny thing about monsters is that you don’t have to be a hundred meters tall and be able to flatten cities to be one,” I informed Kōsuke bluntly.

Kōsuke frowned, as much puzzled as upset. “But that’s what you are.”

“Kōsuke, that’s enough,” Tsukiko said in the same tone mothers used with misbehaving children. “Don’t insult a jinchūriki to their face.”

Actually, if he had insulted jinchūriki within Sensei, Kushina, Obito, or Kakashi’s hearing range, this mission would probably be in need of a new client. And Hayate was apparently inching his way into that category the longer Kōsuke kept talking.

This was going to be so fun.

Not.

“I sure hope we’re not really related,” Hayate muttered, when Tsukiko shoved Kōsuke through the front doors of the inn as soon as we arrived, aware that they were both pushing their luck. “I’m regretting agreeing to this already.”

“It was your idea,” I reminded him.

Hayate pinched the bridge of his nose. “Don’t remind me. I don’t get how you can let people talk to you like that.”
Hayate blinked. Right, I’d never told him about this, had I? I’d bet that he knew about Kushina one way or another, after the Sorayama thing, but Naruto was still a secret that I never planned to give up.

Assuming that Sensei and Kushina hadn’t just told him at some point while he was babysitting the kid. That was always a possibility.

“I talked about this with Sensei after the Tenth,” I explained quietly, as we turned to go. “And if it helps people adjust to jinchūriki, and makes it easier for us to be accepted in the future, then I don’t care.”

“Sis…” Hayate seemed to sag, as though the realization weighed on him. Then he shook himself, straightened up, and said, “Then I won’t pick a fight with him. But Sis, if he starts this again…”

“Hayate, it’s not important.” I shrugged. “If we’re lucky, Kōsuke will learn to keep his mouth shut and let us do our jobs. If not, we just need to ignore him.”

Hayate crossed his arms. He knew he was supposed to be a disciplined shinobi, and a good soldier. But it was so much easier to adhere to the ideal when someone wasn’t bad mouthing people close to him.

But I had to be certain he’d stay in line. “Promise me you won’t get into a fight with him again, no matter how he acts.”

Hayate met my eyes, then groaned. “I get it, I get it. It wouldn’t be a fair fight anyway.”

Not necessarily the attitude I wanted, but I’d take it.
 Shortly after “accepting” the Kitano Town mission from Sensei, my brand-new team of pubescent teenaged shinobi dispersed to finalize their preparations. As team leader, I stayed behind and requested a few more details.

For one thing, a topographical and geopolitical map—or at least the best we could muster. For another, an updated Bingo Book focused on Iwa and Kusa shinobi to help me remember who I could act surprised to see before I caved their heads in. And third, a…thingy.

That last one was Sensei’s idea.

“This seal will be your emergency beacon if the situation spirals out of control somehow,” Sensei told me, handing me a kunai that frankly looked like something he’d ripped off of Kiri-nin at some point.

Rather than three spiky tips, this kunai had a long, single-edged blade that had somehow sprouted another triangular point at a ninety-degree angle. On its vellum hilt, I read the character for “toad” in Sensei’s calligraphy before he folded my fingers over the weapon.

“Don’t lose it,” Sensei told me firmly. “I might not be able to be there for you this time”—which, given the last mission I’d taken, was a statement that I hoped did not prove to be something I regretted—“but you’re never going to go alone. It’ll summon two toads—one to report the situation to Konoha, and one to stay with you as combat support. I’d have tied it to Obito’s Kamui somehow, but we were planning on going over that technique next week. The toads will have to do.”

I slipped the kunai into my thigh holster and said, “Thank you, Sensei. I’ll take care of it.”

“I’d much rather it takes care of you,” Sensei grumbled good-naturedly. Then he ran a hand through his spiky blond hair, practically radiating worry, and said, “Really, you shouldn’t need to use it. But I feel better knowing that you have options.”

I hesitated to say that the mission would be a cakewalk. Given the C-ranked missions I’d taken, “cakewalk” was a hop-skip-and-a-jump from “clusterfuck.” After all, they all started with the same letter.

“Then I promise that I’ll call for help if I need it,” I told Sensei, shifting my weight from foot to foot. His anxiety was making me start to worry.

And Sensei understood that. Sticking two sensors in the same room meant that there was always an extra layer of conversation.

Sensei crossed the distance between us and gave me a firm hug. As I bumped my head against the
shoulder pad of his jōnin vest, I heard him say quietly, “Take care of yourself out there, Kei.”

“I’m not leaving yet, Sensei,” I said once he—and I—let go, but the teasing tone fell flat thanks to the lump building in my throat. I coughed to clear it, then said, “I’m going to check in with Kakashi and Obito before I leave; maybe they’ll want souvenirs.”

Sensei smiled wryly. “And nothing for Tatsumaki or Naruto? For shame, Kei.”

“And upstage Yamato as their favorite babysitter?” I gasped in mock horror. “How could I?”

Sensei sighed. “Oh, just get out and do what you have to. The mission sets off at noon.”

“By your command, Hokage-sama!” I gave a quick bow, and was chased out of the office by Sensei’s long-suffering groan.

I counted it as a victory and ran off.

Once outside in the morning sunshine, I had about two hours to kill before I was due to meet my team. I’d packed everything I needed last night, thanks to the wonderful physics-breaking power of the humble storage scroll, and had a couple of accounts to settle before I could really embrace the tedium of waiting for merchant brats to get ready to go.

Last I’d checked, the other Gekkō siblings had been working on Kōsuke’s schedule, and he was a terrible morning person. I wasn’t one either, but there was “not a morning person” and then there was him.

But I had Tsuruya watching their inn in case the kid decided to roll the schedule onward without telling anyone, solely to have something to complain about.

So, with administrative and leader duties taken care of, I was free to take care of a few last-minute arrangements. The first thing involved stopping by my apartment and grabbing Mr. Ukki, and then heading out to check on Kakashi.

Ordinarily, I didn’t make much of a habit of making sure my spikiest teammate wasn’t dead. If his chakra was in the village, I relaxed. Sure, my imagination ran away with things if he wasn’t, but it did that for everything from birthday parties to inconclusive border reports. It was just that Kakashi spent a lot of time outside of the village, working on whatever ANBU missions required his expertise, so I worried over him more than, say, Rin.

But since I hadn’t seen him yesterday, after his most recent mission, I decided that he could use a bit of prodding.

Bypassing most of the central part of the village by running across the roofs toward the Inuzuka properties, I reached Kakashi’s apartment in no time at all.

Rather than trying to bug him from outside his bedroom window—which was actually his only window—I headed down to ground level.

Kakashi’s apartment building had a common room of sorts, down on the bottom floor. I never really visited it on the occasions I’ve been here, because he didn’t spend time there and so why should I have done it?

But today, Kakashi and someone—oh, that was Yatsu Inuzuka—had set up shop in the ancient armchairs in one of the quiet corners of the room. From the feel of things, both of them were calmer and more focused than I had really sensed out of either of them for quite some time.
I was still debating how to approach them when one of the dogs in the room—out of five—trotted out of the building and barked, “You!” upon seeing me.

“Me,” I responded automatically, because there were some stupid conversation techniques that I had never grown out of. This dog had a voice that was as low as his actual bark, and this particular dog was larger than all of Kakashi’s except for Bull. I might’ve been momentarily intimidated if I didn’t recognize him. “Hello, Teikō-san.”

Teikō didn’t look as old as his network of cross-crossing battle scars would have suggested. Around his drooping jowls, his brown fur was still as dark as ever, and there was a spring in his step that belied whatever age he actually was. The only thing that was off about him was the fact that his orange scarf was gone.

The dog paused to sniff the air, then perked both floppy ears up as high as they’d go and said, “You’re Kakashi-kun’s teammate. What are you doing here?”

I held Mr. Ukki up for Teikō’s inspection. “I’m gonna ask if someone here can babysit this guy. Can I come in?”

Teikō sniffed the plant, nosing at the armband I’d left around its stalk, and said, “Yes, but don’t disturb their work.”

I was escorted into the building under doggy guard (puppy-guard?) a moment later, Teikō’s shoulder repeatedly bumping into my hip to steer me around. I assumed that he’d learned the behavior from being Yatsu’s guide dog, because even with Mr. Ukki’s foliage blocking my line of sight, I didn’t exactly need help avoiding tables or chairs.

“You have a visitor, Kakashi-kun,” Teikō announced as we approached.

“Thanks, Teikō,” Kakashi’s voice replied from somewhere past Mr. Ukki’s leaves. Okay, so maybe I did need a guide. I tilted the plant out of the way, holding it with only my right arm, while Kakashi waved and said, “Hi, Kei.”

Once I was guided to Kakashi and Yatsu’s corner, I set Mr. Ukki’s pot on the floor and did a quick head count.

In addition to the two shinobi I had been expecting, Urushi and Akino were curled up under the table alongside Shinkō and Chukō. Kakashi and Yatsu, however, we not paying the dogs the least bit of attention—instead, the two of them were carefully stitching something on a pair of neckerchiefs. One of them was Teikō’s, going by the color, and the indigo one belonged to Chukō.

“So, what are you two doing?” I asked, peering at their work like the busybody I totally was.

And you finally acknowledge it. Will wonders never cease?

Shut up.

Kakashi beckoned for me to sit down in the chair next to him, so I did. “See this?” he asked.

If he was talking about the fact that the scarf he had in his hands was on the bluish side of indigo, then I did see what he was talking about. If not, then nope. “The fraying at the edges?”

“No, that’s because one of the puppies chewed on it,” Yatsu said, not looking up from his careful work. It wasn’t like there was much point to him actually looking at what he was working on, given his blindness, but apparently some habits were harder to break than others.
“Then I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said. My skill with sewing started and ended at the extreme basic end—I could patch a hole or mend a hem, but I didn’t create original work by any means.

“Yatsu-san wanted me to stitch the Inuzuka clan symbol onto their scarves,” Kakashi said, turning the scarf over so I could see the twin red Inuzuka fangs, in a white circle. “I’m still working on learning how to embroider, but Yatsu-san doesn’t trust any of the dogs to show him the right color.”

“So, Yatsu can embroider but he can’t see any of the colors he wants,” I began slowly, “while you can see but can’t embroider.”

“Can’t yet,” Kakashi corrected me. Since his headband wasn’t pulled down like it usually was, his Sharingan eye opened slowly so he could copy Yatsu’s steady movements.

If only I could get Obito and Kakashi to copy other people’s *jutsu* at some point, they would finally live up to the bloodline’s name. Like, copying from me hardly counted when I could demonstrate all the live-long day if they needed it.

After a moment’s thought, I remembered why I’d come here in the first place. “Hey, Kakashi, can I ask you to take care of Mr. Ukki for me?”

“You just did,” Kakashi pointed out, but he did put down his sewing and sweep his gaze over the overgrown bamboo plant. “Why?”

“Hayate and I are heading out of town on a mission, so I’m not going to be able to water him or anything,” I explained, shrugging.

“And you decided to ask me?” Kakashi’s tone managed not to be insulting, but he did still sound a bit confused. “I’ll take him, sure, but I honestly expected you to go to Rin first.”

Yeah, well. Um. In hindsight, I hadn’t thought this through, and scrambled for an excuse I didn’t find. So I slowly brought my hands to my face and mumbled, “I forgot.”

**Swing and a miss.**

*Shut up.*

Yatsu snorted, but tried playing it off with a, “Sorry, dust.”

I took a deep breath and tried again, because obviously any social graces or situational awareness I’d picked up over the last eighteen years had fled while I wasn’t paying attention. Honesty tended to serve me better than random scrambling. “I wanted to check in on you after that last mission. And I guess I picked a kinda dumb excuse for it.”

“Teammates don’t need reasons to hover,” Yatsu said, while Kakashi ducked his head with a barely-audible cough. Tying off one last stitch on Teikō’s scarf, Yatsu held it up and asked, “Does this look right?”

Like on Kakashi’s—or more accurately, Chukō’s—scarf, there was a large white circle in the middle of the orange fabric. Aside from a few loose threads that could be clipped, the red Inuzuka fangs stood out like blood. It was a stark look, and Teikō pushed his nose against the fabric.

“It looks fine, but I have to try it,” Teikō said, and puffed air out his nose. The scarf rippled, and Teikō went on, “It’s much better than the ones you used to make.”
“That is a backhanded compliment if I’ve ever heard one.” Yatsu scratched behind Teikō’s ears before he tied the scarf around the dog’s neck.

As soon as the scarf was secure, Teikō immediately bounded over to the nearest clear space on the floor and started testing Yatsu’s knots by rolling around. I was pretty sure I heard the word “mine” being repeated like a mantra as he went, shedding short brown hairs everywhere he went.

“How long have you known how to sew?” I asked Yatsu, since it seemed like a safe topic.

Yatsu, who was bending down to unfasten Shinkō’s scarf, cracked his head on the underside of the table and made the sewing equipment jump. Rubbing his head, he sat up and said, “I first learned to sew when I was a child. Though, as Teikō mentioned, there was...difficulty, when I first lost my eyes.”

He laid Shinkō’s olive-green scarf flat on the table and started running his hands over it.

I was itching to ask him how he’d lost his eyes, and Yatsu turned his head toward me with a faintly amused expression. I fidgeted, unsure of how to phrase the question so I wasn’t rude—but I was curious, dammit.

“She wants to ask you how you lost your eyes,” Kakashi said, finishing up the red fangs on Chukō’s scarf.

“Kakashi,” I said, but I couldn’t exactly deny it.

“Am I wrong?” Kakashi challenged.

I deflated. “Well, no, but...Yatsu-san, I don’t want to ask if it’s not something you want to talk about.”

Yatsu tilted his head to one side, still inspecting the fabric for random frays or tears with his fingertips. “That mission happened before either of you were born. Actually, I thought you’d know about it already.” If he’d had eyes and hadn’t also been wearing a blindfold, I imagined he’d be giving Kakashi a pointed look.

“You didn’t give me permission out loud, so I didn’t tell her much,” Kakashi replied to Yatsu’s unasked question.

“...The short version is that I overestimated myself on a mission,” Yatsu said, and Teikō put his huge head on his master’s lap. It couldn’t have been much more obvious that he was censoring what had actually happened, but I wasn’t sure if it was to spare himself having to explain those parts of the story or if he didn’t think we could handle it. “If Fuse hadn’t, ah, had some strong objections to my decisions, I would have been killed after my eyes were extracted. But even with her help, the damage was done.

“As in your team’s case, I faced...consequences, for failing to uphold the Main House’s security procedures.” Yatsu’s hand drifted to where, if I could see his forehead, I would have spotted the Caged Bird Seal. I could certainly feel it. “I may have lost my temper while recovering from my injuries. I believe the details would bore you, but ultimately I was given a choice to either submit to my new place among my clansmen, or to try my luck on my own—with restrictions.

“My choice was obvious,” Yatsu said, scratching behind Teikō’s ears. “Fuse was kind enough to take me in despite the trouble I had caused her—and continued to cause her—while I relearned many of my old skills.”
I glanced at Kakashi, but he’d already gone back to his sewing. He’d clearly heard this story before, and it wasn’t like Yatsu particularly cared about eye contact.

In a way, it did confirm some of my darker suspicions about large, old clans like the Hyūga. While the Uchiha clan had about as many members, they didn’t have the same kind of leadership continuity as the Hyūga due to Madara’s rather spectacular “fuck you” to the rest of Konoha. The weight of years simply didn’t press down on the heads of the Uchiha clan the same way, and there was no formalized Branch House with slave-making tattoos and other fun developments. And besides that, the Uchiha weren’t all born with the Sharingan unlocked like the Hyūga were.

Basically, Konoha got two large groups of insular, moderately paranoid super-soldiers for the low price of iron-fisted control over an unfortunate few. Branch House members didn’t face starvation on the streets or anything so mundane—rather, they faced a possible lobotomy-by-seal whenever they pissed off someone who knew how to activate the Caged Bird Seal. Their cage was a golden one, but still a cage.

About the only positive thing I could think, in the face of Yatsu’s story, was that at least the Hyūga clan hadn’t pulled his eyes out as the price for leaving them behind. He’d lost those already, and they hadn’t decided to kill him either.

(Clan or not, the Third Hokage would probably have gone apoplectic with rage if the Hyūga had “disappeared” one of their own. Or rather, the Branch House members within ANBU would have made sure he did.)

“Probably not the best sort of story to hear just before a mission,” Yatsu said mildly, when the silence stretched long enough to be awkward. He tilted his head toward me and added, “But I have faith in your ability to recover.”

...Eh?

As though sensing my confusion, Yatsu went on, “I realize that losing my sight and your arm’s condition are very different, but you can work around that injury, Keisuke-kun.”

Oh. There I went, being egotistical enough to think that Yatsu shared that story just because I was curious. He had—had always had—his own reasons for what he did. The weight of that knowledge—that I was being trusted with something so painful—settled on my shoulders like armor, or a chain, and I sank down in my seat in mingled shame and gratitude.

I needed to work on more than just my arm. My attitude needed some recalibrating, too. My arm was a liability in the field, but I just...I didn’t know, but my thoughtlessness could have been incredibly rude if Yatsu had chosen to take it that way.

“I’m not...totally sure I deserve to hear that,” I said quietly, fiddling with the tablecloth. Akino got up and stuck his muzzle up against my twitching fingers, putting his head on top of them to make them stop.

A hand came down on my shoulder and squeezed. I looked up and met Kakashi’s eyes, and he said, “I think you do. And you’re not alone in this. I’m here, and so are Obito, and Rin, and Hayate, and Sensei...and Yatsu and Fuse.”

Yatsu inclined his head. “My offer is open, even if you don’t have time for it now.”

I wasn’t sure what to say aside from, “Thank you.” But Yatsu had a point, and I did need to get going.
Kakashi pulled back and I got to my feet, offering one last affectionate scratch to every dog who wanted one. Akino first, of course, or else I wouldn’t have been able to get up. Yatsu didn’t move, since he seemed to have said his piece, so I figured it was time to get the ball rolling on the last two things I needed to do before I left.

“Kei,” Kakashi said, just as I reached the door.

I spun on my heel, turning to face him and the rest of the occupants of the sewing table. “Yeah?”

His chakra seemed to struggle for maybe a quarter of a second, but all he said was, “Take care of yourself out there.”

I gave him a quick thumbs-up and a grin. “I’ll be fine, but thanks.”

I was still pretty sure I heard Yatsu start to laugh just as the doors swung closed, and I spared maybe a half a thought for the cause—but really, I’d used up my curiosity allotment for the day. I still needed to drop in on the kids and on Rin, to let them all know that I was going to be out for anywhere from a month to two of them.

By the time it was time for everyone to meet up at the gates, I’d put my tutoring sessions and therapy appointments on hold until further notice. And, despite a ten-minute detour to gather all of the supplies I wanted to bring along that I hadn’t already packed away—or forgotten about earlier—I was still the first one at the meeting place.

There was something a little worrying about that.

But over the course of the next twenty minutes or so, everyone else sort of wandered in. Yūgao was first, followed shortly by Hayate and Iruka, and the merchant duo managed to avoid making an appearance for almost an entire hour.

And since no one knew I’d been late, the ninjas of our merry circus band got to meet the full force of my Disappointed Face.

It was pretty similar to my normal face, except for the careful raising of one eyebrow and a tiny, itty-bitty bit of tightly directed killing intent. Or rather, chakra pressure—I didn’t actually want to hurt anyone, after all. And people did tend to get twitchy if the resident jinchūriki started to broadcast dangerous impulses like that.

“Did Inoichi-sensei seriously let you three show up late to missions?” I asked the three of them, genuinely irritated.

It was probably for the best that none of them protested. I felt a little spark of defiance from Hayate—who basically never got lectures from me—but I stared him down until it went away. Yūgao and Iruka didn’t have any reason to expect family favoritism from me, so they kept their thoughts to themselves more effectively.

Still, no reason to belabor the point. “Don’t let it happen again. Anyway, did all of you pack what you needed?”

I got three somewhat chastised nods in return.

“Good.” I sighed aloud. “Then all we need to do is wait for our clients.”

Hayate grumbled under his breath, “What’s taking them so long?”
And about forty minutes later, we got our answers in the form of two sets of hoof beats.

The merchant Gekkō duo had decided that walking was for people who’d survive a ninja pace. Not a bad thought to have, given how much time we’d waste trying to get to Kitano Town if we just hoofed it at a civilian walking pace. Since this was a mission where the clients insisted on coming along, I’d actually been worried that I’d have to order people to carry them if they got tired.

But it appeared that the Kitano Town Gekkō siblings were taking “hoofing it” literally.

Compared to the other day, Kōsuke and Tsukiko were both wearing practical riding clothes—which, in the traditional world they seemed to live in, meant hakama pulled out of the last century and all of their crap piled up on their horses’ saddles like they were settlers on the new frontier. Kōsuke wore what looked like a bokken on his hip, while Tsukiko had a naginata tied to her back—and the pole was long enough that I wondered how the horse was getting along with it.

The two of them slid off of their respective mounts, and Kōsuke demanded, “So are we leaving or what?” He stuck his chin out as though challenging me to say anything about how late they’d been.

I decided not to dignify that attitude with a response. I had more important things to think about. “Hayate, you’re on point. Iruka-kun, Yūgao-chan, flanks. Tsukiko-san, Kōsuke-san, set the pace.”

Kōsuke bristled. “You can’t tell me what to do, you—”

“Don’t,” Hayate interrupted, cutting Kōsuke off immediately. Behind Hayate’s back, Yūgao and Iruka exchanged grim looks while the boys glared at each other. Tsukiko was a serene island in the middle of all the barely-hidden strife, which made me suspicious to say the least.

Kōsuke jerked his head away in a huff, as though trying to shake off Hayate’s glare. Then, he said to me, “Don’t talk to me like we’re friends. It’s ‘Gekkō-san’ or nothing.”

Oh, like that wasn’t going to be confusing as all hell.

Hayate looked briefly confused—shinobi culture was the product of an era where people had repeatedly gotten killed over family names, and thus tended not to include that little detail when meeting strangers who could pose a threat. In the Clan Wars era, just being an Uchiha or an Inuzuka or a Senju could get people murdered by an opposing clan with zero provocation. And cracking open a history book could tell anyone that the really bloodstained parts of shinobi history weren’t really so far in the past.

While the Land of Fire’s shinobi populations had integrated pretty well with the civilian backgrounds of many of its citizens, shinobi could choose to use personal or family names with relatively little significant difference in terms of etiquette.

It was one of those weird cultural quirks that seemed to be in the process of fading, but wasn’t gone yet.

“Then I choose ‘nothing.’” Hayate concluded after only a moment’s pause, drawing Kōsuke’s attention back toward him. My brother crossed his arms over his chest and said, “I don’t have anything to say to you.”

Well, this was going to be a fun trip.

“Did Tsuruya leave you two behind?” I asked, though I was mostly speaking to Tsukiko. Kōsuke was too busy glaring at Hayate to pay attention.
“Yes,” Tsukiko replied, inclining her head. “The horses didn’t react well to her, so she sends her apologies.”

Dang. I’d known horses were a bit skittish, but Tsuruya wasn’t exactly the queen of killer auras or anything like that. I didn’t want to see what would happen if my team started throwing jutsu around on the road. ‘Panic’ would probably be an understatement of the results.

It was just one of those little niggling details of civilian life that, as a shinobi, I generally didn’t need to care about. Like having to avoid crowds on the street.

“Well, whatever,” I said with a shrug. “We’re good to go.”

Kōsuke climbed back onto his horse and yanked hard on his horse’s reins, and the big brown beastie did a quick, unhappy tap dance as a result. After a moment to collect himself, Kōsuke scowled at the rest of us and kicked his horse into a canter, heading for the gates and through them lickety-split.

Tsukiko took off after him in a moment, while I sighed and gestured for my team to move out. Yūgao and Iruka took off through the gate, and Hayate gave me one last long-suffering look before running off ahead to take point.

I probably should have just let these other Gekkō kids muddle their way through whatever was going on in Kitano Town. It would have been better for my blood pressure, at least. But now I was invested, and there was nothing else for it.

We’d beat the shit out of these bandits and get to the bottom of everything.

Day one went thus:

We traveled fairly well for the first day, though the merchant duo needed to change horses halfway through. Something about animal welfare, which made sense since there wasn’t a single other creature that could quite compete with the stamina of a trained human. Particularly a ninja.

Speaking of animals, it was also the first night that Kōsuke woke everyone who didn’t take middle watch—specifically, when he found a frog in his bedroll and apparently decided that this meant he was being murdered.

I retrieved the frog and let it go in the woods, all while backed by a screaming merchant soundtrack. And Hayate spent the night after that on middle watch because I knew he was the one behind it.

Day two:

I caught Kōsuke playing with a dog whistle—no idea where he’d gotten it, since they weren’t popular in the Land of Fire for reasons starting with “I” and ending with “-nuzuka.” But since apparently that sound range grated on Iruka’s nerves about the same way that nails on chalkboard did on mine, I confiscated the offending device and informed Kōsuke that if we were attacked by wolves, it would be his fault.

“It’s just a way to control animals,” Kōsuke grumbled as I snatched the little noisemaker away.

“Then you can control—and offend—your own animals,” I said. “When you are safely back home and around canines that don’t want to eat you.”
Day three:

If there had been more deaths of dysentery, it would have been just like Oregon Trail without the wagons.

It took us a full week to get there, and by that time everyone was just done with the whole concept of being in proximity to each other.

Kitano Town was a fairly large trading town, with a large central road that ran north and south and branched off in a hundred different little side-roads on the other axis. While it was hard to call Konoha a planned city—we basically lived in a giant circle bisected by four different main roads—I still would say it was easier to understand my hometown’s layout than this. Most of the buildings followed a more traditional outward layout, with sweeping roofs and straight walls that didn’t suit my Konoha-born aesthetic sense at all.

There was just enough off about this place to remind me how far from home we were.

Once we found the nearest available stable, Tsukiko and Kōsuke dismounted and led their horses to the care of the nearest stable-hand. Since I’d seen their Pony Express impression all week, and they were on the seventh beasts since we’d started, I imagined that the two of them would walk like drunken cowboys once they left.

Neither of them did, to my disappointment.

“Our home is this way,” Tsukiko said, and beckoned for us to follow her through the town. Kōsuke, as was typical, had already charged off with no regard for the rest of us.

“Is there anything we need to know about this town?” I prompted, as she strode on.

“No,” she said as we turned one of the myriad blind corners in town.

I could practically feel Hayate roll his eyes. “Oh, that’s helpful.”

And neither was his attitude. I needed to pull my brother aside and talk to him as soon as I could, because clearly our talk from before the mission hadn’t sunk in.

As the afternoon sun beat down on us, Tsukiko finally came to a stop in front of a set of wooden gates that cut the associated house off from the rest of the neighborhood.

To be clear, rich people’s houses in Konoha also had two-meter mortar walls to separate the family inside from all of the riffraff outside. It protected the family’s fish pond, which I could hear burbling even through the gate, and it probably kept the family dog from getting loose. Other than that, though, my brain was helpfully providing me with a good dozen ways to breach the building—starting with just jumping the wall.

Tsukiko pushed the gate open, since one of them was already swinging freely. We didn’t need to be told that Kōsuke had arrived first.

Completely expressionless, Tsukiko stopped halfway up the path to the house and said, “If you wait in the garden, my family will provide snacks and tea.”

And right after that, we were bundled into the garden like errant children, listening to the sweet serenade of ten different voices screaming the inside of the house down. It was about as relaxing as being in the same room as a band saw going at full speed.
Yūgao and Iruka sat on the roof, overlooking the house but with better lines of sight, as Hayate and I brought all the tea things up to them. None of us really wanted to have to listen to the shouting match going on inside, and the roof put an extra meter or so of air and wood between us and a bunch of angry chakra signatures, instead of a rice paper screen.

The gist of things basically boiled down to anti-shinobi sentiment clashing with the family’s clear need for shinobi assistance. Thus, shrieking chaos.

“Hayate,” I began, while the bubbling background noise of stupid people died down for a moment. “What’s going on here?”

“Nothing,” Hayate said, and stuffed one of the sakuramochi into his mouth to avoid having to say much else. Over their respective samples of dorayaki and daifuku, Iruka and Yūgao exchanged wary looks with each other from behind Hayate’s back.

*Teenagers,* I thought, and appreciated the irony of that statement. I didn’t exactly have a ton of high ground there, so there was no point in saying that kind of thing out loud.

“Hayate-kun?” Yūgao asked.

Hayate looked away from the rest of us, grumbling under his breath.

Well, it was probably safe to assume he knew what I wanted to talk to him about. “Hayate, we’ve talked about this a few times. I know you don’t like our clients, but you didn’t like the merchant decoy mission you went on a couple of years ago either. What’s the part that’s really throwing you off?”

For a moment, I didn’t think he was going to answer. Hayate kicked his legs idly at the edge of the roof, still not looking at any of us, but said as I was about to give up, “The other clients didn’t matter.”

I tilted my head to one side. “I...didn’t realize you still cared what Kōsuke and Tsukiko thought.”

“I don’t,” Hayate snapped, then subsided. When he’d taken a couple of deep breaths to calm himself down again, he said, “But these people—they’ve got the same name, and they’re sort of like us, so I guess I thought they’d be less stupid. They’re family, right? So how the *fuck* are they so—” Hayate bit off the rest and just dropped his head into his hands.

You might as well ask why Kurama didn’t get along with anyone else until a few years ago. It happens.

“When I was a kid, we only ever talked about what Mom’s family might’ve been like,” Hayate said, though his voice was muffled by his hands. “I guess I just thought...I don’t know.”

“They don’t really know you, though?” Iruka broke in, hesitant. “I mean, I don’t really know much about extended family stuff, but none of you got any chance to know each other before this.”

“So if the third thing Kōsuke says is to call my sister a monster,” Hayate said, incredulous, “I should just forgive that?”

Iruka held his hands up defensively. “I didn’t say that.”

“No, but I did,” I pointed out. As Hayate redirected his look of betrayed disbelief to me, I went on, “And I’m asking you to *ignore* him from now on.”
Hayate scowled. “No.”

I frowned back. “Hayate—”

Hayate stood up, shaking his head. “Just no, Sis. Look I’ll—I’m just going to scout the area. Don’t wait for me.” Without a further word, he leapt off the roof and headed off into Kitano Town.

Well, shit. I turned to the other two people I could count on in this blasted border town. “Yūgao-chan?”

She hesitated. “I...probably shouldn’t go after him right now. Hayate-kun can take care of himself, so he should be okay.”

“I’m not worried about Hayate’s safety in this town,” I said to Yūgao. “I’m worried about trouble finding him and getting its face beaten in.”

“Then I should go,” Iruka said.

Yūgao bit her lip. “Are you sure?”

“I’m not going to be able to help with any negotiations, because no one here respects genin anyway,” Iruka pointed out. “And Hayate listens to me at least some of the time, so I should be able to talk him down a bit.”

Yūgao flicked Iruka’s shoulder, but the tension was gone now that Iruka was stepping up. “You could be a chūnin by now if you wanted to.”

“Yeah, well,” Iruka mumbled with a shrug. “I don’t need to be. And now I can do this, so you two—well, you can do what you have to. I’ll be back soon.”

And then there were two.

“Sorry about this, Yūgao-chan,” I said with a sigh. “We dragged you and Iruka into this...family drama. You shouldn’t have to deal with this headache.”

“It’s fine,” Yūgao said, but she wasn’t particularly convincing. “And anyway, I think it might be good training for later.”

“Later?”

Yūgao shrugged, but answered in a much quieter voice, “I’m thinking of joining ANBU eventually.”

“As a medic?” I asked, since that was what I’d seen Yūgao practice.

“No, I’m thinking...” Yūgao shrugged. “I could be a medic, but I don’t really want to train for that right now. I’m probably behind most of the candidates anyway.”

Eh? “Yūgao-chan, there really aren’t that many medics. Anywhere.”

“As a medic,” Yūgao replied.

“...Yamato’s Tsunade’s adopted son. Or heir. It’d be weird if he wasn’t trained in that direction.”

Though I probably needed to keep an eye on him to see if he eventually picked up Tsunade’s monstrous strength. I didn’t know when he’d have the time to pick it up, but if Sakura could do it, Yamato probably could give it a shot.
“Yeah, well…” Yūgao sighed, flushing slightly. “I don’t want to copy you so much.”

Wait. Kenjutsu, sensing, medi—well, okay. Yes, admittedly our respective skillsets had a lot of overlap, but there wasn’t anything wrong with that. “There’s no shame in being a generalist. And all of the skills are useful, so you can do whatever you want as you get stronger. If you have a ton of skills, you can’t get stuck in just one role.”

“But I want to join ANBU, and they need me to be really good at what I get selected for,” Yūgao explained. “I don’t have time to just become a so-so medic or a so-so kenjutsu expert. I need to get better faster if I want to be able to run those missions. I can’t just…do whatever.”

As someone who was proudly in the “do whatever” camp, I probably didn’t really have much insight into Yūgao’s point of view. I’d gotten Isobu halfway through my development, so it wasn’t like I could say that I’d hit S-rank on my own merits like Obito and Kakashi had. But… “If you want to get stronger, I can give you a few recommendations. I can’t make you do anything, and I guess some of it requires Inoichi-sensei’s permission, but there are options.”

The first of them involved Gai, whom Yūgao had already met. But she hadn’t put her back into training at the time, and it was clear that she was much more likely to take things seriously this time.

Yūgao blinked at me. “Really?”

I nodded.

“Then I’ll take you up on it,” Yūgao said firmly. “I won’t let you down.”

...As someone who tended not to really set expectations, I was really more worried about Yūgao disappointing herself; but didn’t say it out loud. If Yūgao needed a bit of extrinsic motivation, I didn’t mind being the person she projected on.

We sat around for a while after that business was settled, eating the remainder of the tea cakes and drinking all of the tea, and the voices below us eventually quieted down somewhat.

Then Tsukiko’s voice called out from the porch we’d abandoned, saying, “You can come in now.”

Given the barely-hidden hostility between the merchant Gekkō siblings and my team, it was probably inevitable that I would get a bad first impression of the rest of the family. But that, to be blunt, was merely my end of the issue, which could change over time if the others had defied the expectations I was building for them.

They didn’t.

The easiest way to explain the Kitano Town Gekkō family would be to call them a study in contrasts. While the matriarch of the clan, Umeko, was as cold and proud as Cinderella’s evil stepmother, only four other people in the room shared her demeanor. Sure, two of them were Tsukiko and Kōsuke—who seemed to have turned into a particularly surly bottom-feeder—but the other two could only be their parents. I definitely felt like I was looking at a miniature fiefdom, as run by the gnarled fingers of one sixty-year-old woman.

Aside from the-picture perfect family, though, there was a somewhat rougher pair at the far side of the room, acting as though they weren’t associated with the other five. One of them was a man who was, oh, probably three or four years older than me with his hand in a cast, and the other was a woman who was probably old enough to be his wife. Neither of them looked happy, and I kept on eye on them for that alone.
“I thought there would be more of you,” said the man to her right, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose.

To one side, there was a man with a high forehead and square jaw that seemed to be common between the two of them. Behind his glasses, I got the impression that he was measuring Yūgao and me up against some strange standard, and that we had failed somehow.

“I’m sorry. You are…?” I prompted, because I liked to pretend that I had manners.

“Shirosuke Gekkō,” the man replied, his eyes narrowing slightly. He sniffed and said, “You’ve met my children.”

That we did. “Yes. They were kind enough to guide us here.” What I did not say was that they had been complete brats and that we could have found a town along a main road in the Land of Fire with no guidance. I mean, seriously. “My team has split up to explore the town and determine any possible points of weakness in case the bandits approach. You will be meeting the others after they complete their assignment.”

Shirosuke made a noise that sounded like something out of an irked Uchiha. But what he actually said was, “And your name?”

Well, since he wasn’t looking over my shoulder and addressing Yūgao… “Keisuke Gekkō, jōnin of Konoha.”

Kōsuke briefly looked like he wanted to say something, so much so that he almost looked like he was going to explode, but a quelling look from his mother silenced him before he could get started. I assumed that the shouting match from earlier had included the details that had made Kōsuke hate me inside of ten minutes.

But Shirosuke and Kōsuke’s mother stared, even if each of them recovered relatively quickly from whatever shock my name had induced. So the name had meant something. It could have been the shared last name, too, but…

Well. They weren’t going to tell me, so I was free to speculate.

I pretended not to notice.

Umeko’s habitual frown deepened. “That was my husband’s name.”

I didn’t let my blank mask shift. Probably would have been easier with an actual mask like Kakashi’s, but I had gotten a crash course refresher on how not to show annoyance on the trip here. “That is quite a coincidence, Gekkō-san.”

Kōsuke, I noticed, had picked up a scowl to match his old man’s. Probably because there did seem to be something to get the old woman to talk, and it wasn’t him she was paying attention to. On a more encouraging note, the pair in the corner were looking more interested, so I decided not to worry about it.

“It would be most efficient to discuss the mission,” I said, as though none of that had happened.

Rest assured that I will openly remember that.

Oh, I don’t intend to let that go, either. Luckily, we may have less-stuffy family members to interrogate after this.
And so, while my feet slowly went numb underneath me, I got The Story.

Shirosuke spoke at length of the bandit menace, speaking of terrible raids on the roads that led out of the Land of Fire and the terrible powers some of the bandits seemed to have. Some of them could even appear in two places at once! Or spit fire! Or summon great cracks in the earth to foul up wagon tires and scare horses and oxen away from the caravans! It was all quite dramatic the way he told it.

You know, if I hadn’t been a ninja.

And the entire time he spoke, I only got three relevant data points.

One: The bandits were based in the hills to the north of Kitano Town, or at the very least attacks seemed to cluster there. Lacking an appropriate map of the area small enough to have the Gekkō family just point out all the attack sites, I had to go with my gut and assume their stories were accurate until proven bullshit.

Two: The bandits were definitely ninjas. Not all of them, necessarily, but enough that they didn’t seem to give a crap if their prey repeatedly lives to trade again another day.

Three: Several different members of the family were really bloodthirsty.

The rest of it could be summed up as “blah blah blah.”

“Give me five minutes with the leader of these—” was about as far as Kōsuke got before the power of four combined glares shut him up.

For someone whose only weapon on the road had been made of bamboo, he was bursting with confidence. Which, if I was properly correlating chakra with combat ability even in a non-shinobi subject, mostly meant Kōsuke would be the first relative to actually be killed by bandit activity the second he slipped his leash.

“That won’t be necessary.” I said serenely. “There’s no need to risk anyone else being hurt. My team can take care of the problem quickly and efficiently.” I paused, because the young man in the corner—the one who wasn’t Kōsuke and therefore the person I was going to cut a bit more slack—had been building a constant, violent urge that didn’t feel anything like Kōsuke’s concentrated self-righteousness.

Shirosuke followed my gaze, then said, “Those two are Sanosuke and Megumi, shinobi-san. They’ll lead you closer to the bandits’ territory so this ugly business can be over as soon as possible.”

And he wouldn’t even acknowledge my name in the bargain. What a pleasant person.

“Then let’s get payment out of the way,” I said, disguising my eagerness to get this whole thing over with already. “Fifty thousand ryō, payable to Konohagakure upon completion of the mission. Is this acceptable?”

“Yes, shinobi-san,” Shirosuke said, and that was more or less the end of the most awkward family reunion since Obito met Madara.

But as soon as Yūgao and I got out of there to find an inn—like fuck were we staying in that stifling
“Did you need something?” I asked, perhaps a bit more brusquely than I needed to.

So the mask was slipping. After meeting the thoroughly unpleasant people who were apparently the only Kitano Town relatives Hayate and I had, I wasn’t in a terrible rush to spend more time with them.

Sanosuke was a few centimeters taller than me, with hair that really reminded me of the epic spikes Kakashi could pull off—only in black. He had a slouch that made me think he was a street punk playing dress-up in some ways, or perhaps that he just hated all the airs his family put on just because they were rich. There was something sharper, keener in his expression than what I had seen with the other members of his family. A spark of life instead of spite.

Megumi...well, calling her foxlike probably would have pissed Kurama off, but she was someone I automatically felt a certain kinship. She was probably a few years older than Sanosuke, but I got the impression that the core part of her nature was compassion, in a way that reminded me a bit of Rin, and Kushina, and maybe bits of myself on a good day.

And yet, something about them both came across as...brittle. Like they were waiting for the other shoe to drop, somewhere, except that I didn’t know what the first shoe had been.

Sanosuke managed to pull himself together first. “Look, I get it if you probably don’t wanna deal with any of us after that...whatever the hell that was in there.” He stuck out his un-busted hand for me to shake, to my surprise. “But on behalf of my idiot family, I’m glad you’re here to help us.”

I don’t like him.

Well, that was predictable. Still, I shook his hand anyway. “Thanks. By the way, this is Yūgao Uzuki.”

Yūgao offered a shy wave, which seemed to meet general approval. Okay then.

I probably would have said something about the family’s bizarre obsession with the “suke” syllable in so many different names, or maybe asked if they knew a guy named Wataru. Really, I could have asked anything at all, just out of sheer relief that someone I was nominally working for appeared to be a decent person.

But I didn’t, because an explosion sounded on the road leading toward the Land of Grass, and my brother’s chakra was right in the thick of it.

Allow me.

Of course. And my eyes itched as Isobu’s chakra bled into them, just a bit. Just enough to shift my eyes away from their normal black.

Yūgao and I ditched the two non-jerk maybe-relatives immediately, darting toward the source of the sound. As fun as finding out that some people are not assholes was for us, my brother was fighting someone. There are such things as priorities. I’m good at those at least some of the time.

And to my immense relief, the first thing we heard as we approached the roadside crater was Hayate’s voice saying, in quite a tizzy, “What the fucking hell was that?”

“Hayate-kun!” Yūgao shouted as we truly rejoined the rest of our team.
Hayate turned, and was promptly bowled over by his purple-haired teammate. Iruka, who was not caught up in ranting at the sky, managed to avoid being knocked flat.

“What happened?” I demanded of Iruka, while Yūgao tried to choke my brother to death in a hug.

“Hayate found a couple of people pretending to be civilians, but they were shinobi. Maybe missing-nin, since I didn’t really hear any accent or anything before they flipped out,” Iruka reported instantly, having clearly resigned himself to my command.

“And?” I prompted, not really caring who answered.

And at that point, Yūgao let Hayate up for air. And he wasn’t any less upset than he’d been about fifteen seconds previous, but he could articulate it better this time.

“They thought I was you!” Hayate complained, and it took me a moment to realize what he was talking about.

Just a bit too long, in fact, because Iruka filled in, “I definitely heard them scream ‘Tidal Blade’ at least once. And then the road blew up, and I kinda didn’t hear a lot else.”

“I can’t—argh! Does that mean every time I took a mission, it got credited to you?” Hayate asked, sounding crushed.

I didn’t exactly have a recent copy of the Bingo Book on hand but…well. I winced and said, “Maybe?”

Hayate flopped back to the ground with a loud groan. “Dammit.”

Maybe if I re-checked my more recent Bingo Book entries, I’d be able to say for sure. Enemy intelligence couldn’t possibly be that terrible, could it?

That was when I knew that I was caught up in Hayate’s moping, because both of us were more concerned that Hayate didn’t have his own Bingo Book entry than the fact that he’d narrowly avoided being blown up. We probably needed our heads checked when we got home.

But in the meantime, Iruka and I dropped to our heels next to Hayate. I reached out and patted his shoulder. “Come on, I can buy us dinner. Then maybe we can make training plans so you can get your own entry.”

“I’m gonna grow my hair out,” Hayate grumbled. “Maybe grow a beard or something.”

I tried to imagine it. A beard made of pure sulkiness. And I guess that tipped me over the edge because I had to choke down a laugh.

“You’re mean.” But Hayate did stop moping and all of us got to our feet. “Screw it, dinner sounds a lot better than this.”

“I’ll let you borrow one of my hair ties,” Iruka said, grinning.

Hayate sighed. “Thanks.”

So after repairing the damage to the road with Earth jutsu, we retired to Kitano Town to rest, regroup, and plan an avenue of attack. If that was how the bandits were going to react to the Tidal Blade moniker, I couldn’t wait to see how they’d deal with the real thing.
This chapter's pacing is all over the place. It's subtitle should be "Kei indulges in a bunch of sidequests before talking a longer sidequest" or something, but that's not terribly snappy.

Also: The payoff of a joke two actual years in the making.

(The song title for this one is "Try Everything" from Zootopia.)

Hopefully the next chapter doesn't jump around quite as much. They're mostly going to be busting heads instead of talking.
Genealogy Arc: He Lives in You

Chapter Summary

Kei: Wrap up the combat section.

Chapter Notes

This chapter's title is from the second Lion King movie!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Here’s the thing: From my experience, there were two basic ways to remove a fortified position. The first was to break the walls and lay waste to everyone hiding behind the defenses, in a typical siege right out of the Land of Fire’s non-ninja playbook. The second was to get rid of a fortress via deception, like by bribing a guard at the right time.

But while I’d done both at one time or another—thank you, Gai—I’d never done it with this particular team.

My brother’s skillset and Yūgao’s had significant overlap issues with mine. While neither of them were jinchūriki, they both specialized in kenjutsu with some ninjutsu filler (or, in Yūgao’s case, the opposite) and whatever other skills would carry them over the threshold to combat effectiveness. I could give both of them my explosive tags or whatever else I had on hand, but it didn’t really change the fact that I was used to working with people with entirely different skills.

Iruka, meanwhile, could use pre-prepared seals—mine, in this case—in his traps. Which, when on the offensive, was probably somewhat less than useful. It was always more effective to prepare the battlefield ahead of time, lacing the kill zone with mines or razor wire, than to try and rig something up in the middle of a fight.

And then there was me. I was more or less capable of all the things the rest of my team could do, but couldn’t be in more than one place at full effectiveness, and was effectively stuck without access to the V1 or V2 cloaks. I hadn’t gotten around to learning the Shadow Clone jutsu, and Water Clones just didn’t seem up to the task.

“And you’re sure they don’t just hang out all over the countryside?” I asked Sano—as he liked to be called—just to be sure. What had been a vague invite to get to know Sano and Megumi better had turned into a joint planning session of sorts.

Sure, out on the road toward the aforementioned bandit stronghold wasn’t the best place, but my team had three sensors. We weren’t going to be getting any nasty surprises of the sapient kind.

“None of the outlying farms said anything about raids since March,” Sano replied, eying my topographical map carefully in the firelight. “So we’re going with the idea that they’ve hold up in one spot. Gangs like these tend to have a bandit king or somethin’, instead of a bunch of chiefs.”
“Speaking from experience?” Yūgao asked, taking the words right out of my mouth.

Sano shrugged as though the question hardly mattered. “Maybe a bit, since my hometown’s the one surrounded. Still fits the pattern.”

Hayate, who had been setting up our campsite, wandered over and dropped into a crouch next to the three of us. “Do we have a plan?”

I grimaced inwardly. It still amounted to “stuff Sano and Megumi in a hidey-hole and then wreck the place ourselves,” but that was a plan of sorts. Keep the civvies safe, deal with the bandits. At least those were objectives, right?

Still, my brother deserved an answer. “Yeah, though we don’t have a lot to go on.”

Hayate blinked slowly. “Improv?”

“Improv,” I sighed. I hated having to make plans up on the fly, but it didn’t seem like we had any choice. Without forward observers, scouts, or any border resources in the area, we were basically on our own.

...Wait a damn minute. I managed to avoid swearing aloud at my lapse, but it was a close thing.

“Okay, the nearest border posting is here”—and I brought my finger down on a dot on the political map, located well back from the Kusa border—“which is what, ten kilometers from here?”

“Probably,” Yūgao said, peering down at the maps. “I could get there in less than half an hour. Do you want me to carry any messages or anything?”

I thought about it. “If you and Iruka could go and get any information they have on the hill clans around here—or maybe missing person’s reports, or anything—it would be really helpful. We’d know what we’re about to get into, that way.”

It probably said something about me—and the way I tended to look at that year of missions—that the idea of asking around the pockets of Konoha-nin forces for info genuinely hadn’t occurred to me. I tried so hard to blot out the memory that I’d forgotten important things. If I got back to Konoha without this oversight biting me in the ass at least once, I’d be astonished.

Yūgao grabbed the map and took it to Iruka, who had been trying knots on something or other. Perhaps a trap. And if it was, it’d probably either explode in someone’s face or make them wish it had.

And then, in short order, the only non-Gekkō members of our team were gone.

“So we might have a plan in an hour,” I sat up straight, then leaned back to stretch. “Break time.”

As our meeting broke up—not much of a meeting with only four people attending, but whatever—Sano turned to me and said, “By the way, I heard the others. You don’t use the ‘suke’ ending either?”

I shrugged. “Dad gave me a guy’s name, but it’s easier to just go with the shorter version. Easier to yell, too.”

He gave me a friendly thwack on the back. “I knew I liked you. That kinda formality doesn’t work for either of us.”
...*Huh*? Yeah, using my full name was something that only tended to happen when I was feeling like I had to be fancy or unusually precise, but I didn’t *dislike* it. After all, it was my name. There was something to be said for eighteen years of habit. But Sano made it sound like there was extra meaning attached.

“Might wanna explain that,” I said, confused. “There are plenty of people whose names end the same way. What’s special about ours?”

“This has to be a merchant thing,” Hayate said, frowning. “We met Sano, Kōsuke, and Shirosuke, and Umeko said her husband’s name was Keisuke too. This is like how all the names in Himawari-san’s family start with ‘hi,’ isn’t it?”

“Except Neji,” I reminded my brother. Never did figure out why that was. But since Hizashi was alive, I could always go and *ask*.

Hayate nodded.

“It’s not that uncommon,” Megumi said, even as she checked the gigantic clunker of a medicine box she brought with her. I’d offered to seal her items into a more portable scroll but, since she wasn’t a shinobi, she would have needed someone to open the seals for her if she wanted to get anything out. She’d politely declined instead.

Civilian doctors were apparently also weightlifters.

“*Huh*,” Sano said. “Well, the ‘suke’ ending is traditionally used to say who’s gonna be the head of the family.”

Sorta made sense. There were historical notes about the Senju clan, from before the formation of the villages. Hashirama, Tobirama, Itama, and Kawarama all in a row—and then the two younger ones got killed and we got left with the First and Second Hokage. That wasn’t so much a line of succession as a series of backups, given the times they’d been born into. Then there were the Akimichi, Nara, and Yamanaka, who all favored animal names, and the Hyūga obsession with adding references to the sun—as Hayate had pointed out.

“...Okay, then why are there three of you running around?” Hayate asked.

“Mom decided to name me the way she did over Grandma’s shouting, since she’s the oldest kid.” Sano rolled his eyes. “And Grandma pitched a bunch of fits over the years, ‘til she figured only the kid *she* named got to inherit anything. Which is why Shirosuke’s the way he is—he’s technically in charge of everything and he kinda knew he would be, since he’s the only boy. And he had Kōsuke, and you’ve met him, too.”

My thorough and considered opinion on that was, “That’s a load of shit.”

“Mom thinks so too,” Sano said. “Me, I’m not really worried. Grandma didn’t like it when Megumi agreed to marry me either, since she says women can’t be doctors.”

“You can imagine how well that conversation went, too,” Megumi said sweetly, and I got the impression that her smile was worth a drawn sword at the negotiation table.

“...Anyone ever told you your grandma’s a bitch?” Hayate asked.

“Yep.” Sano grinned. “Line starts at my mom and goes around the town, twice.” He glanced up at the sky thoughtfully. “*Y’know,* now that I think about it, Mom used to talk about...I dunno, he’d be my uncle or cousin or something. Said Grandma was the reason he ran away when he was twelve.”
There really was something to be said about the healing power of complaining about people nobody liked. But this missing relative… Something about the idea piqued my curiosity more than normal. “What was his name?”

“Wataru,” Sano said without missing a beat. But he did miss the way Hayate and I momentarily froze up, caught up in stargazing. “Like, you know how sometimes people would run away and join a circus or something? Mom was convinced he got away just in time—Grandma turned our whole family into a circus anyway. Maybe he grew up alright someplace.”

It was the moment both of us had been waiting for.

“That was our dad’s name,” Hayate said eagerly, shaking off his shock. “What was he like?”

Sano’s face fell. “Sorry, but I didn’t know him.” A pause, “And I’m sorry you’re related to my family, too.”

Hayate fidgeted. This mission had been one familial disappointment after another, but… “You seem okay. You and Megumi. So it’s not all bad.”

I patted my brother’s shoulder sympathetically. “Can you tell us why he left? Specifically?”

Sano shook his head. “Mom knows the details, but I think you get the gist of things.”

More or less, yes. Dad ran away from his family in Kitano Town at the same age most kids in the modern Academy would be just graduating. Sensei had mentioned that Dad had attended and graduated—somehow—and I could more or less see the normal, average career that had followed. Given what I knew about the Gekkō family, it seemed safe to say that Dad had been happier in Konoha than he’d ever been in Kitano Town.

Even if he was gone now, it was a strangely comforting thought.

“When we get to the village, you can meet our son,” Megumi spoke up, drawing our attention back to her. She smiled. “I promise that meeting will go better than the other family reunion.”

So it turned out that the map was accurate, but the local intelligence was completely fucking wrong.

Sano and Megumi—they were perfectly kind, sensible people. But shinobi could haul ass when given a reason to, and a Tidal Blade sighting was a good enough reason for anyone with a modicum of chakra control to get the hell out of Dodge. They usually did so by completely abandoning their comrades to the mercies of, well, everything that had been supposedly held off by the whole shinobi thing.

We visited the next town’s lockup for information.

The target for the interrogation was a man who looked like he’d gotten clubbed with a gardening tool—and been lucky enough to take the blunt end. I didn’t know his name at the start and didn’t especially care, but the Konoha headbands got us past the local police without much comment. Ninja handled ninja problems, as a rule, and these guys had been ninja problems for long enough that the chief of police didn’t seem to care what I did to them.

Which was why I was going to do absolutely nothing. I wouldn’t smash the table in half, or shout, or try to smack him around.

I met the man’s eyes levelly over the top of an incident report. While Hayate, Iruka, and Yūgao
stayed out of the way and Sano and Megumi were elsewhere in the station, I had this task.

Lucky for this guy, I wasn’t really a fan of the “traditional” interrogation methods. I was really more of a student of the Michael Weston school of information gathering—and I wouldn’t lay a finger on a prisoner.

I didn’t need to.

The interrogation room in the local jail was really just the result of speaking to someone from outside their tiny cell. While I got a chair and the prisoner got a bench to sit on, it certainly wasn’t a formal arrangement. In deference to my skills, though, the local police had left the jail cell unlocked as long as I sat directly in the middle of the only escape route, and retreated to deal with the rest of the group I’d brought with me.

If I’d felt more compassionate, I probably would have sympathized with the captured bandit for at least a little while. Though I pegged him as a civilian immediately due to his lack of chakra presence, he was still a bandit and that should have lost him major points.

But the guy was a mess. His eyes bugged out of their sockets when he saw me for the first time and hadn’t gotten much better since. He looked like the wrong end of a bar fight on a Friday night. I could guess why.

Townspeople were a little like herd animals—the second a would-be predator showed weakness and the tables turned, said predator would probably end up as hamburger. The fact that this guy was the only prisoner—despite the police chief’s account of several non-shinobi bandits—didn’t really say good things about what had happened to the rest of them. Without shinobi to act as force multipliers, the untrained bandits would have been badly outnumbered. Anyone who got caught, well…

Mob justice at its messiest.

There really wasn’t that much I could do to him that hadn’t happened, in one form or another, already. Luckily for both of us, that wasn’t today’s topic.

“Please look up,” I said, and waited until those twitchy, fried-egg eyes finally met mine. If I’d had any doubt that this bandit probably needed to spend time safe in prison, well, those thoughts were dispelled.

He didn’t have a chance to gather his remaining courage, however, because he was looking right at my eyes when I let a sliver of Isobu’s chakra slip into them.

Between Isobu’s eyes and my killing intent gently permeating the air like fog, I didn’t lift a finger before he spilled his guts.

Ten minutes later, I strode back into the rest of the police station with a whole page of shorthand notes solely from the interrogation. While the interrogation had definitely not been on Ibiki’s level—hell, it was about as subtle and nuanced as a brick to the face—I’d still gotten the information that I wanted.

“Our friends are Iwa missing-nin,” I announced to the room at large. Given that this was a tiny outpost of a town, there were only half a dozen people and I’d brought five of them here with me.

And three of the people in the room tensed automatically—Hayate, Iruka, and Yūgao. Sano and Megumi had probably lived risky lives along the border in Kitano Town, but that was not quite the same thing as the way that, for about six straight formative years, Konoha had kinda been in a war with Iwa. I’d fought in it, while my brother had been spared that part only to be orphaned along with
me. While I wouldn’t kill people from Iwagakure out of hand, most of my contact with their shinobi had involved quite a few deaths.

But that wasn’t really the crux of the issue.

“Not that most of them are around anymore, according to this guy,” I went on, jerking a thumb back over my shoulder toward the man in the cell. “But there may be a little more to it. Like hostages.”

The police chief frowned and said, “How many?”

“He wasn’t sure. Do you have any recent missing person’s reports?” I asked.

“No, the—the incident yesterday has all of our officers out helping with clean up,” the chief admitted. Personally, I wondered if the entire station composed more than a handful of people. “We can’t know for sure until the village is back in order again.”

Which, of course, could take days. If the bandits’ hostages were still alive, they needed to be rescued immediately.

“We can still chase the other bandits as far as we need to,” Iruka pointed out. “That was our mission. Not just to drive them away, but to stop them. For good.”

Megumi, meanwhile, picked up her medicine cabinet thing—I’d never gotten around to asking what she called it, other than possibly “ammunition”—and headed for the door. “I’ll look after the villagers then.”

“But Megumi—” Sano began.

“Sano, you broke your hand and I’m not a fighter,” Megumi pointed out patiently, as though she’d had to explain this concept all too many times. “This is what they were hired to do. Let them do it.”

Sano subsided, grumbling. Following Megumi, he trooped out of the room with the air of someone who would rather have been asked to break faces. Ninja faces were a bit harder to break than the norm, though, so I decided not to stop them.

Well, down to business. “Yūgao, Hayate, check the village for any sign of the enemy before we leave.”

None of us were scent-trackers, but I wanted to give the kids a chance to find some clues before I had to break out Isobu’s chakra. I really wasn’t sure how far I could push myself to extend my detection radius before my left arm decided to melt off. Tsunade’s dire warnings regarding human tolerance of Tailed Beast chakra had been...vivid.

And my range, without Isobu, was maybe twenty kilometers. I needed more to be sure.

As Yūgao and Hayate took off, Iruka and I headed outside at a much more sedate pace.

I’d spoken too soon back when I called Kitano Town a tiny little backwater. This village—with a name I hadn’t learned—had a population of about a hundred people spread out across large family farms. The police station existed, but it was more of a satellite organization to the Kitano Town one. I felt like this was one of those places that fed Kitano Town, like the farmlands around Konoha fed us.

Though the populace was pretty crammed together today, what with the mob from earlier.

I shook my head as I walked, still thinking.
Obviously, it was easier for bandits to isolate places like this village and set up little fiefdoms, but I wasn’t seeing their angle. They had to be keeping the hostages to ward off reprisals, but with shinobi it wouldn’t have made sense that they had anything to fear. Were they planning on getting a ransom?

“Um, I can’t actually read your mind,” Iruka said quietly, breaking into my thoughts. He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “I mean, you didn’t send me off to check anything…”

“I mostly need you to focus on the townspeople and chase a few rumors,” I told him. As he blinked at me—anyone could do that job, after all—I clarified, “Find out who’s missing. The police aren’t going to have enough information for a while, and we can’t waste any time.”

“You don’t think I can track?” Iruka looked crestfallen.

Not as well as a pair of sensors, but… “You’re better with people than they are, especially right now, and your hearing’s second to none. And I need someone to listen to people who doesn’t seem to scare everyone off.” Meaning literally anyone other than me.

Somehow, Iruka’s scarred visage was less intimidating than mine. But hey, advantages were advantages.

“If you turn off the yellow eye stuff, it’d probably help,” Iruka said mildly.

I made a face at him, but my eyes did stop itching. Then I sighed and said, “Just get to work, Iruka-kun.”

He gave me a nod and disappeared into the village.

That left me a moment to try and think my way through what I was going to do.

If—no, when—we found these Iwa missing-nin, we’d probably have to consider our team’s layout again. There was no fortress, and all of us could handle ourselves in a fight, but I remembered the last time a light skirmishing team had run up against an Iwa force they hadn’t been prepared to fight.

Change a few details around, and you had Kannabi.

Never again.

I was...probably not going to get past the lingering anxiety about that clusterfuck easily. I made a mental note to talk about it to Suika-sensei when I got back to Konoha, then tried to marshal my thoughts into some kind of order.

So, when we found the bandits, we needed to accomplish two things: rescue the hostages and get rid of the missing-nin problem by whatever means would keep them from popping up again. I wasn’t...ruling out killing all of them, but would prioritize hostages if given an option. And I wouldn’t put my team at undue risk, either, because this wasn’t wartime and I had more leeway on this mission.

I was kind of hoping that they were more Rikuto’s type of Iwa missing-nin than, say, Deidara’s. There was really only one way to deal with the latter.

And I’m the only one who could do it. Deidara had never been a pushover, and I couldn’t put the kids in danger like that. Sure, I’d be at risk, too, but...

One way for me to deal with him, you mean. Isobu’s tails churned the water into a wild froth in his private bay. I still owe some kind of retribution to that little pest for capturing me in that other
...I think you’re forgetting cause and effect here. Deidara isn’t a part of Akatsuki, because if he was Yahiko would have thrown him out for being an asshole. And since Yahiko’s alive to do that, Deidara wouldn’t have made it into Ame for recruitment in the first place. Because Akatsuki isn’t evil or going after your family anyway.

...You just came up with all of that in that exact order, didn’t you?

So what if my memory’s a daisy chain? It still got me where I was going eventually.

I got the very strong impression that Isobu was rolling his eye at me.

Did you have an idea? I asked him, since he was listening anyway.

Isobu folded his forelegs on top of each other and said, A few. Tell me how you think the enemy will fight. Then I’ll have more of a plan.

I was probably leaning against the outer wall of the police station for a good few minutes, spit-balling with my inner demon, before something else interrupted me. More than five minutes and less than fifteen didn’t seem like enough time for anything to happen, so I might’ve had to shake myself back to reality a bit.

It definitely wasn’t because Sano was in my face, looking like he was about to explode, while Iruka looked mostly like he was waiting for the blowback.

“What is it, Sano?” I asked sharply, since I’d mostly just heard “Aaaaargh” before he actually reached me. It was one of the dangers in getting caught up in conversation with a voice in my head.

Before Sano could grab my uniform collar, I pushed his hands aside sharply and brought my hands down on his shoulders. While it wasn’t an attack, or even a real exertion, I could feel the impact run down Sano’s frame all the way to his feet. And that slowed him down exactly not at all.

“Why the hell are we still standing here? We need to go, now!”

I was pretty sure he didn’t actually hear what I said. When dealing with someone so angry that they were ignoring the whole physical strength gap between the two of us, any mere words turned into nothing more than monkey jabber for all the impact they made. I debated, briefly whether I needed to douse Sano in water to get him to explain his thinking, but his expression was so devastated that I felt my thoughts stutter to a stop.

Pushing him back out of my space, but gently, I said sharply, “Sano, breathe!”

Sano drew a shuddering breath, still trembling with rage. But the pause seemed to give back his verbal reasoning ability. “It’s—Mom, and Haruki”—Sano and Megumi’s son?—“They’re gone!”

Shit. “Sano, do you know where—?”

“The bandits,” Iruka said, while Sano struggled to come to grips with events. “Remember what we were thinking, about hostages? We just found out who’s missing.”

Sano backed away from me, then drove his left fist through the particle board wall of the police station in sheer rage. While shouting started inside, he hissed, “This would never have happened if I’d stayed here.”
...No, instead the bandits would have had *more* hostages, or the villagers would have more bodies to bury. But there was no way I was going to say that to him. Instead, I turned to Iruka and said, “Report.”

It went something like this:

The Gekkō group in Kitano, being a local rich family, had kinda been the only ones who could afford this whole “hiring shinobi” thing. And since the bandits were at least partly composed of shinobi, they figured that taking hostages would curb that problem—hence, grabbing two members of the family.

Except for one little snag: Kōsuke and Tsukiko had *already* headed to Konoha by stealthily joining up with the various merchant wagons heading all over the place, and thus my team had been well on its way before anyone had figured out who was planning what.

If lives hadn’t been at risk, the idiocy involved would have been funny.

But we had people to rescue and faces to beat in, so I absorbed the information with my mouth pressed into a flat, grim line and started thinking over those options I’d discussed with Isobu.

“Why are you just standing around?” Sano snapped, as soon as Iruka finished retelling what he’d puzzled together.

Because rushing in without even a basic tactics session tended to end in blood? “Iruka, go and find the other two. We’re moving out soon.”

As Iruka left, I focused on Sano again and said, “We’ll get them back.”

Sano glared at me, left hand still clenched in a bleeding fist. He’d split his knuckles when he hit the wall. Then, “Fuck.” With that, he brought his right hand up and drew the cast over his face, sinking down against the police station’s wall. “Fuck.”

I didn’t exactly know what to do. This being the case, I defaulted instead to what *I’d* want said or done, because there were only so many points of reference available.

I crouched down in front of him and said, “We’ll get the ones who did this.”

There really didn’t seem to be anything else to say. I got to my feet again once I felt the others approaching, hauling Sano up with me. “Get that hand taken care of, okay?”

Sano shrugged me off, but his eyes still burned. He couldn’t do anything else to help, and it rankled like nothing else. Hopefully, helping put this village back together would occupy him well enough for a while.

Oh, who was I kidding? He’d probably punch something else and *really* screw his hand up by the end of the day.

“Iruka, did you fill them in?” I asked, more out of reflex than anything.

“Yes, I did,” Iruka replied.

Well, good. I omitted honorifics as I turned to the other two and demanded, “Yūgao, Hayate, do you have a direction and a trail?”

I got two nods.
"Good. “Move out!”"

Of course the bandits crossed the border.

I’d been complaining for two weeks about small towns, borders, and border towns in the privacy of my mind—

**Excuse me, not that private. I’m still here!**

—And for some reason, the fact that the bandits actually crossed my least favorite political border made me want to kill them *even more*.

It seemed like every single time I got near Kusagakure, something went wrong. Whether there was a scouting mission that escalated into a massive punch-up for no particular reason, or the mission that ended with me smelling terribly of river fish, or *the fucking Kannabi Bridge*, I got the impression that the spirit of the place just had it out for me. Like a house spirit or some shit, but for a whole country.

And this time I had some kidnapped relatives.

Nice to know that some things were *consistent*.

As we passed through depressingly familiar fields of long grass—*velociraptors!*—I did my best to focus on my team and mission *now*, rather than bits of the past that I couldn’t change. We hurtled through the forest of giant goddamn mushrooms without any particular notice—aside from mine—and we passed into the land of bamboo and bamboo spike-pits that I had never been fond of. A lot of giant plant life for the mission report.

And we found our targets.

Iruka slipped into the underbrush and out of sight, suppressing his chakra down to nearly nothing as he moved downwind of the enemy group. Yūgao went to the left along with Hayate, flanking the group with intent of severe violence in about a minute. And finally, Tsuruya kept some fifty meters back and well above the main action, ready to spring in if any of us needed help.

I closed my eyes and plucked a tiny thread of Isobu’s chakra loose from the whole at his prompting. Once I had a bead on their exact positions I’d get the party started with a bang.

The two civilians are at least together. Let’s kill the rest.

Sometimes, I wondered if Isobu said things like that solely to spite me. On occasions when I didn’t actually *want* to kill everything, he could generally be relied upon to advocate for the opposite. On occasions when I *did*, he tried to hold me back, mostly for my sake.

It’s not that complicated. I want what’s best for you. And here, it’s to kill everyone threatening the only decent humans we’ve found.

*...We need to work on your idea of escalating force,* I commented, but not without heat. Isobu was old enough that this crap probably counted as a habit. But given what I was planning on doing, well, it didn’t seem like the right time for that kind of lecture.

I waited until I felt Iruka, Hayate, and Yūgao all reach their positions.

My chakra sense pinpointed a band of thirteen shinobi—ranging in strength from “barely genin” to “okay, I’m gonna have to kill that guy personally”—arrayed in a loose circle like they were lounging
around a fire. Sort of like a camping expedition, if not for the terrified chakra of the adult hostage. The baby, thankfully, seemed to be asleep.

And Iruka was there, so they’d be okay.

As for the attackers—well, they had me to deal with.

I targeted someone in the middle of the formation for maximum shock value. Then I pulled a kunai out of my thigh holster, wrapped the handle in a paper seal I’d made ahead of time—thank you, Sensei—and lobbed it at center mass of the guy with the strongest chakra signature.

The guy caught it, like everyone was trained to do as a genin. It was a basic survival strategy and it impressed people if it could be pulled off without anyone bleeding. As a jōnin, that kind of thing became second nature, even when catching an enemy weapon stopped being practical and started being an invitation to lose that hand.

And there was a pop, and the guy’s hand and arm vanished into thin air. It wasn’t a clean injury either, given how he suddenly started screaming and woke up the entire camp, but a distraction was a distraction.

Sensei hadn’t been able to figure out how to link Kamui to a kunai, but apparently storage seals were evil enough for his purposes. If I ever got that seal back, unsealing it would result in a severed arm falling out. But that would require a bit more time than anyone had in a melee.

One down. And now everyone knew where I was.

Okay, Iruka needed me to avoid causing undue damage to everyone else with my jutsu so he could get the hostages away. That automatically ruled out larger explosives, a misaimed Rasengan, and probably most of the Water jutsu that tended to work along set-it-and-forget-it lines. And given the potential for panic and how I wasn’t really capable of a V1 or V2 cloak without causing myself to melt or something, I was basically back to my pre-Isobu skillset. Almost exactly.

But it’d been five years since then.

“You,” said the guy I’d have pegged as the group’s lieutenant. Well, so much for the bushes.

Taller than me by at least a head, he...okay, he basically looked like a pirate. Scars everywhere, eyepatch, and a grin that looked like it belonged on the Joker. If his hair had been green, I would have probably looked for a signal in the sky.

He continued on with, “Well, hello there.”

**Kill him.**

I raised an eyebrow and wrapped both hands more firmly around the hilt of my katana. If I was going to buy time, well, no one had said anything about how many I was or wasn’t supposed to kill.

And if I focused on the pirate, no one could follow my eyes to where, just out of view, Iruka had snatched both Sano’s mother and the baby out from the “defensive” ring of shinobi. My chakra sense just barely picked him up, so it was clear that he’d been suppressing his presence with as much skill as he could muster. I doubted anyone else in this group was as perceptive, or else they would have attacked him already.

Hayate and Yūgao were still working on flanking them, so I had to stall a little longer.
“This is the famed Tidal Blade you were so afraid of, Iwata,” said the pirate, aiming a kick at his groaning comrade. There was clearly a ton of team spirit around. “A little Konoha-born brat with scars from a housecat? Pathetic.”

Well, from a guy missing most of the original skin on his face, I could kinda see where he was coming from. While my scar was messy, it certainly wasn’t as bad as some of the possibilities.

Interestingly, he was one of the only ones who was acting like the whole Tidal Blade business didn’t matter. And even before I’d gotten a reputation with a fancy nickname, there was the little matter of Isobu to consider.

**This, I think, is what you call suicidal overconfidence.**

*Just a little longer.* What was taking those two so long?

I opened my mouth and hesitated. I was garbage at banter. People like this guy—or like Sensei or Kakashi or whoever—just seemed to have ready-made action hero lines. I kinda just said what I felt. Usually it came out lame or garbled.

“Cat got your tongue?” teased Eyepatch Guy.

I stared at him, not letting my confusion show on my face. Was he...what, trying to hit on me to convince me not to kill him? Or trying to throw me off? It wasn’t going to work. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Eyepatch McStabface walked out of the crowd toward me, apparently not noticing that his hostages were gone. If he had, I wasn’t sure if he would have changed his tune at all.

“You’re looking at the Sword-hunter, kid,” the guy said. He jerked his thumb up below his chin and shouted, “The notorious anti-kenjutsu fighter, who’s collected a hundred blades off his foes!”

Didn’t ring any bells. Not even as he pulled at the belt wrapped around his waist and...wait. The gleam of steel was distinct, even in a strange form. Some idiot had actually made a sword into something best described as a glorified whip.

I didn’t have the heart to cite physics in discussions of weapon effectiveness in this reality. It just wasn’t worth the effort. If someone had decided to make a whip-sword in a world that already had the Nuibari needle sword, and the fucking Samehada, it was really just par for the course.

“I’ve always wanted to test myself against the Seven Swordsmen,” said the Sword-hunter. He licked his lips. “But I suppose I can start with you.”

...Okay, creepy vibes officially gotten. And in defiance of common sense, the guy started toward me.

**He knows something you don’t.**

*Yeah, and now I’m actually worried.*

And then the other dozen shinobi suddenly stop looking so worried. Their chakra was abruptly less of a power level count and more of a general indicator. I didn’t have the ability to assess chakra control. And while, for example, Kakashi had never been much of a powerhouse, that didn’t make him any less of a threat.

*Crap.*
I slid into an iaijutsu stance, silently picking out targets. Depending on how well the whip-sword performed, I’d have to bump the Sword-hunter further up the priority list, but for the most part I just needed to keep a clear head.

“If you really wanted to scare us, you’d’ve just rushed in and started killing,” said one of the other shinobi—a woman with long blue hair and a purr in her voice. I revised my kill list and did the approximate equivalent of handing Isobu a wanted poster. Anyone who reminded me of Akuro was going to meet the same fate. “So, who are you distracting us from?”

A bolt of panic hit me in the head, but I swallowed it back down. Still, I wondered, What can they possibly do? And hoped I didn’t need to find out.

My eyes itched and I knew Isobu’s gold-on-red was bleeding through. If they wanted me to take this seriously, then I could certainly do that.

There’d just be more corpses to clean up.

Her eyes drifted almost lazily to the side—where Hayate and Yūgao were—right before the Sword-hunter darted in that direction as though it was some kind of signal. Which didn’t make any sense—he was at the front of the pack and she was at least three meters behind him.

What the hell?

Half the group broke for Hayate and Yūgao’s hiding spot.

I let Isobu’s chakra prop mine up. Not with my left arm, but my thought process past that point could be summed up as, Fuck these guys and the horse they rode in on. We’re killing them.

Finally!

And I punched the blue-haired lady in the throat hard enough that my knuckles brushed bone.

While she choked on her crushed trachea, I had to duck under an earthen fist as one of the other shinobi lashed out at me in revenge. Earth-encased fists made for decent stopping power, but slow attacks. All things considered?

With Isobu’s often-unhelpful enthusiasm ringing in my head, I tore after the first rock fist guy and braced a hand against the earthen wall he brought up like some kind of concrete shield. Only about the size and shape of a Jersey barrier, and thinner at the top, so I braced my left hand on the stone and smashed with my right.

I did a thing right out of the movies, ripping the guy out through his supposed shield and flinging him across the clearing.

And if I planted a seal on him that meant he was more or less a human bomb after I let him go? Well, that was me taking out two birds with one stone. He exploded into a decent riff on a Pollack painting—in mainly various shades of red and brown—and I moved on as blood and viscera rained down.

To my immediate right, a different ninja with Earth jutsu tried something a little less stupid in concert with one his fellows. Under my feet, the ground heaved, and I darted for a tree trunk out of some long-ingrained instinct for fighting in forests. Was I going to have to spend the whole fight in the canopy?

As it happened, the answer to that question was “no,” because I never even got close.
“Tetsuo, you fucking asshole!” The other rock fist dude turned the ground to slick mud underneath my feet, but I kept my balance. One chakra-powered leap later, and I was out of the mud but still stuck between multiple very unhappy opponents. I’d just killed three of them, after all.

And who the hell was Tetsuo?

**Question for later! OR NEVER!**

*Right, right.*

“We’re fighting a fucking jinchūriki because of him!” yelled another one of the enemies, before I lobbed an explosive kunai at his face.

I missed, sadly. I blew a tree trunk to pieces, though, and the resulting falling timber buried the guy under it—along with half the clearing. While not quite as big as Hashirama trees in the Forest of Death, these things were no saplings.

“You killed him!” screeched one of the remaining people.

Not one for one-liners, I cut him down half a second later.

**You’re just terrible at them.**

*True.*

At that point, when it felt almost like the fight was winding down, a mammoth boulder shot out of the tree line and hit me head-on. While I wasn’t hurt, mass differences meant I got knocked off my feet and well out of the original clearing, bouncing as I went. I probably ended up a good fifty meters away from my starting point, though by then I had my feet under me again and the boulder had cracked in two from the impact.

I batted at my hair to get the trapped foliage out of my face, and by that point the enemy was pressing their advantage.

The bits of boulder dissolved into mud, coating the *new* clearing with a load of mud and dousing me from head to toe.

And the mud around my arms solidified again into rock, yanking downward and as far apart as the creator of the mess could manage. My arms and shoulders started aching as they were stretched, and I found myself leaning back awkwardly from a kneeling position, with my arms trapped in stone behind me.

With a known enemy looming over me.

*Fuck.*

This kind of position wasn’t *impossible* for me to escape. Most high-level shinobi had a few ways of getting out of jams without using their hands, and I wasn’t short of those. But any delay meant the enemy had time to reposition themselves *and* I had to waste time in the actual act of escaping.

But I could.

Then the guy spat in my face.

“Not so tough *now*, are you?” my captor snarled. While Isobu muttered something that basically
amounted to “Kill him” in about five different forms, I just stared right back into the guy’s face with the best non-expression I could manage. “What’re those fancy eyes worth now, you murdering bastard?”

As I sent chakra down through my right arm toward my fingertips, I admittedly didn’t have a lot of attention to spare for him if he was going to gloat.

“Fucking Tetsuo, getting us into fights like this,” a man behind my captor muttered, eyeing the trees nervously. “A fucking jinchūriki just because he can’t get it up without pissing people off?” His voice took on a gruffer tone to mock his supposed superior, “Oh no, someone’s using a sword when I didn’t say they could! Fuck everything, let’s kill that guy.”

“Shut up, Ryu.”

Fascinating, I thought with all due sarcasm. But I had enough chakra in my hand by that point, and after that it was just a matter of manipulating it the same way I would have if I could move my fingers. Sensei hadn’t really focused on teaching me one-handed seals after seeing the shenanigans I could get up to on my own, and this particular technique was one I’d been able to use since I was nine.

And I got most of the way through it, subtly enough that my captors could just continue arguing over me, before I heard the first sounds of combat and forgot that I was supposed to be subtle.

As Iruka was thrown into the clearing and the crowd of ninja supposedly debating who’d get a chance to kill me and/or their glorious leader, rock fractured in a dozen places to free my right fist. Before Iruka rolled to his feet and into the waiting arms of another enemy, and Tetsuo strutted back into view, I brought my right hand down on the stone holding my left fist.

I heard the words, “Look who I caught—” before I spotted the hostages, with the baby held aloft by his shirt collar. I maybe heard Iruka swear, loudly.

Red descended. Not Isobu’s chakra, overlaying mind and feeding rage, but nothing less than adrenaline and anger and don’t you fucking dare.

There were words, but none made it through. My legs were free in just a moment more and I was moving, Rasengan spinning right into my former captor’s stomach and flinging him into the distance and through a tree or three.

Eyes on me, everyone.

While his captor was distracted, Iruka slipped wire out of his sleeves and yanked, hurling the much-taller captor over his shoulder by her neck. While she hit the ground and wheezed, Iruka flung several shuriken—god dammit, did I give you those seals for nothing?—to scatter the rest of the enemy.

Except for two of them. While Tetsuo just batted the shuriken out of the air with a somewhat familiar-looking katana, I had just pinned another target and stomped on his throat.

But that sword, the sword, what—oh fucking hell no.

“Look familiar?” Tetsuo asked, as Iruka helped Sano’s mother to her feet. Her former captor had ninja wire wrapped around his neck tightly enough to draw blood.

But Tetsuo was looking at me, bouncing Haruki a little to draw our eyes to the kid. Haruki wailed.
My eyes moved back to my brother’s sword. Blue-wrapped hilt, wave-patterned blade, but snapped off in the middle… I could still feel my brother’s chakra, so it wasn’t like he was dead, but Mom would have pulled Tetsuo’s teeth out through his nose rather than let him parade around with Hayate’s katana.

“He ran, rather than face me with his little girlfriend bleeding on the ground,” Tetsuo said wistfully. “Oh, I could have made them match…”

I didn’t let anything show on my face. I was too busy calculating…

“Say something,” Tetsuo hissed at me, dropping his rapidly-shifting persona into one composed of pure spite. “Scream, rant, or maybe plead for their lives. Anything to make this interesting.”

...Nah.

And as Iruka threw a loop of ninja-wired shuriken forward at Tetsuo’s face to distract him, I sprang into action. Ducking under the wire, even as Tetsuo used my brother’s stolen sword to try and deflect a fucking flexible weapon, I jammed my fingers into the side of his left elbow and cut every tendon I could get my hands on.

Unfortunately, my control was just off enough that I didn’t remove his arm below the joint, but the spasm of pain and the way the bone suddenly bent the wrong way meant that Iruka was able to re-rescue Haruki from Tetsuo’s nerveless fingers.

Iruka threw himself out of the fray, whirling once on his heel to kick an approaching enemy ninja in the nose with a vicious roundhouse.

And I let go of Tetsuo’s useless arm, hacked his right arm off with a chakra scalpel turned all the way up, and drove my knee into his stomach as he bent over in shocked pain.

As Tetsuo toppled, I drove my brother’s broken katana down through his gut and pinned him to the ground like a bug on corkboard. As he wheezed and choked on blood, I leaned over him and whispered in a voice as harsh as death, “Don’t touch my team.”

Then I raised my arm and the nearby tree branches bent in the wind as though slapped aside by a giant as Tsuruya made her entrance at last. One storm of steel feathers later, and every other enemy ninja was dead whether they were on the ground or pinned to a tree.

“Iruka, are you okay?” I asked, as I strode away from Tetsuo’s still-living form and toward where I could sense my brother’s chakra. Iruka could keep up.

“Fine,” Iruka reported, pulling out another set of bandages from his many pockets. “I’ll stay here and make sure Haruki-chan and Inari-san are okay.”

Acceptable. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

I cut my way through the foliage rather than struggle through the overgrown shrubbery horseshit the country was famous for. Hacking through the woods in nearly a straight line, I ran across evidence of the second fight—short that it had been—almost immediately.

Unlike my fight with the rest of Tetsuo’s gang and the mass death that had ensued, the first corpse was nowhere near the second.

Instead of what I had rather expected, I followed a trail of bodies all the way back to a second clearing that looked depressingly familiar. Nearly a kilometer from where I’d been fighting, and six
corpses later, I arrived at my destination.

The giant pile of out-of-place boulders was still the same five years later, and some of the old kunai and other pieces of shinobi gear were still in the area. The foliage had grown back, and there was moss where there hadn’t been any before, but...well.

Fucking Kannabi. I’d never be free of this place.

I shook my head to clear it and headed right for my brother and Yūgao.

Going by the bandages on Yūgao’s leg, she’d taken a long scratch right up the length of her thigh. Hayate’s first round of treatment had bled through, given the heavy pad lying discarded on the ground, but round two wasn’t as bad.

Hayate knelt next to Yūgao, looking a little scuffed-up but otherwise okay. His chakra didn’t jump like an angry hornet, so I assumed he wasn’t in pain or in dire straits. His scabbard was empty and his uniform was a little torn up, but the real concern was Yūgao.

“I’m okay,” Yūgao said, meeting my eyes. Her gaze was clear and while her jaw was set against the pain, I trusted her judgment. From one medic to another. “It’s pretty hard to heal yourself, but it’s just a scratch now. I shouldn’t even scar.”

“Scariest part was just getting away from him. I got hit, but...” Hayate wiped at his nose and scowled at the blood along his hand. He pinched his nose and tilted his head down, falling silent.

Yūgao peeked under the bandage and winced. Probably a bit of a mess. “It could have been worse. We weren’t expecting to get ambushed back, but we ran and it’s okay now.” Yūgao looked up at me and said somewhat dryly, “I mean, you wouldn’t be here if he was still a threat, right?”

I nodded. It could have been so much worse, but from the looks of things Hayate and Yūgao had managed to acquit themselves well after the initial shock. Trail of corpses and all. Given my brother’s lost weapon and Yūgao’s injury, it was even more impressive.

“Need a hand?” I asked her.

Yūgao removed the bandage pad again and checked her wound, clearly thinking. Then, “No, I’ll be fine in a second. Go on, we’ll catch up.”

I could hardly ask Yūgao to stay back on her own, so I didn’t argue. But as I returned to the scene of my fight, I checked the corpses left behind as I went. Blades had finished most of them, except for the guy with the crushed throat. If Yūgao had been injured in the initial skirmish, then either she was as good at fighting through pain as I was, or Hayate had been using her sword for the duration. I’d have to check with them when I went through the after-action report or something.

Tetsuo was still alive when I got back. The pool of blood underneath him indicated that this happy state was not going to continue for much longer, so I immediately made my decision: He could fucking die already for all I cared. I wasn’t going to waste a single scrap of bandage or chakra on him.

“Tsuruya, report,” I demanded, unable to summon up my remaining reserves of courtesy on such short notice.

Tsuruya bowed until her head was level with mine. “All enemies are now neutralized. Hostages have been rescued. No one is seriously injured. This mission is a success.”
Not bad for an improvised shitshow of a performance, I supposed. Certainly better than the catastrophic developments of most C-ranked missions, but not great. I was going to have to report this as an A-rank.

_Fucking C-ranks._

Finally, I couldn’t avoid addressing the former hostages. Er. At least, the one who was old enough to talk. “Inari-san? I…” I trailed off, uncertain.

She was probably around forty or so, looking rumpled but unhurt from her captivity. There was a certain cast to her features, though—the angle of her nose, the curve of her brow—that reminded me of Dad. Her pinched expression threw the comparison off by a bit, but there was something in her stare that told me that if I was seeing an eerie resemblance in _her_, she was thinking the same thing about me.

She lifted her chin and looked past the remainder of Isobu’s influence on my appearance. “Who are you?”

Iruka looked like he wanted nothing more than to stay the hell out of this, but there wasn’t really anywhere to run and maintain his dignity.

“Keisuke Gekkō, of Konohagakure,” I said, almost on automatic. “You knew my father.”

“And now you know why my mother and I haven’t spoken since Sano was born.”

Once Yūgao’s leg was fixed up, she didn’t want anything to do with anyone carrying her. By contrast, Inari and Haruki were worn down enough that Tsuruya all but demanded to carry them. When a three-meter bird with a sword-like beak and _actual_ sword feathers finally decided to demand things, everyone listened.

So Inari, when she spoke to us, got to feel about as awkward as someone on horseback addressing someone on the ground for the whole trip back. Self-possession being a significant factor in her personality, the problem lasted approximately five minutes.

Then the barrage of questions started.

“I can’t believe _anyone_ would treat Dad like that,” Hayate said, stunned.

Perhaps it was something about his upbringing—decent parents, decent older sister—that made the reality of Dad’s life with the Gekkō family hard to swallow. Hayate didn’t even have a real frame of reference for abuse except for what facets of the world he saw through missions. While shitty home lives did happen in every human society on the planet, Hayate had been lucky. He’d never had to worry about food, or clothing, or being _safe_ from moment to moment in his own home. With the exception of the Tenth, Hayate’s life-threatening adventures had all been products of his decision to become a ninja.

Made him a bit sheltered, maybe, but there was no way in hell I’d wish Dad’s childhood on anyone.

Yūgao hadn’t been happy to learn about Umeko Gekkō’s heinous child-rearing techniques either. The worst part was the story about the belt, which then transitioned into something with knives, and it ended with Dad running away from home. Inari never saw him again, and hadn’t known he was dead until we told her.

It was an ugly piece to a puzzle that we’d wanted to solve. Now, Hayate looked like he regretted
looking for answers at all.

“How could they get away with that?” Hayate demanded, while I walked stoically on ahead. It was taking all of my self-control not to let the information color my thinking.

This was still a mission, and our shitbag relatives were still clients.

Dad was dead. Quite aside from where he’d taken his life into his own hands long before Hayate and I had been born and cut them all out of his life, nothing could hurt him in the afterlife. It just...it wasn’t something we could change. All we could do was finish the job in front of us and move on.

(But if I ever got my hands on some kind of time-travel jutsu, I knew who I’d shove off a pier. I had a list that kept getting longer.)

“You may have noticed that my mother is rich,” Inari said in a dark tone. She brushed her grandson’s hair out of his face and went on, “I’m a village head, not an employer for hundreds of people across the Land of Fire. If I could throw her out of the country on her ear, I would.”

Tsuruya sighed. “One would hope for a better ending for this story, Keisuke-sama, but it appears it isn’t to be.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said after a moment, glancing up at the sky as we went.

“This part of the mission went okay,” Iruka said, optimism incarnate.

“And we did get all of the bad guys,” Yūgao added. “Even if apparently someone might’ve been working for someone else and we still don’t know who that is.”

“If you can think of a missing-nin named ‘Shinjitsu,’ I’d bet it’s him.” Iruka, it appeared, was still going to take that as a win. Overhearing the last words of a complete asshole wasn’t my idea of reliable information, but at this point we weren’t really spoiled for options.

Hayate had to think longer on the subject before looking up at Inari and admitting, “I guess...your son is cool, and you’re nice. So I guess the family isn’t all bad.”

Inari leaned down and Hayate grasped her hand for a moment. She smiled at him and said, “You know, I was going to say the same thing. Wataru must have grown into a good man if you’re his children.”

Hayate blushed and mumbled, “Yeah, I guess.”

“So it’s not all bad,” I concluded, though my happiness was a bit muted. We still had a long walk ahead of us. “Once we get you home, we’ll be heading back to Konoha to report in, so it’s not like we need to see the rotten branch of the family for...basically ever again.”

“Yeah.” Then it was like a light went on in Hayate’s head. “Oh!”

Iruka perked up. “Was there something else?”

“Yeah, hang on...” Hayate dug through his pack for a minute, mostly because he didn’t take it off to sort through any of its contents, and retrieved something long and slim. “I guess you didn’t see this before since I was kinda blocking it, but I found something cool while we were out there!”

Yūgao leaned over and said, in a somewhat confused tone, “I thought you were hiding it—”

“Shh!” Hayate hissed. Then he held the thing out to me and said, “This blade saved our lives when
mine got stolen and I had to break it. I didn’t think something this short would help, but I guess it really is a legendary weapon.”

Resting neatly in my brother’s outstretched palm was a tantō. Under the dirt and perhaps a tiny bit of rust, the steel gleamed almost white in the sunlight.

The White Light Chakra Saber.

Chapter End Notes

So, it's been a while since my last update. Sorry for the wait, but I have a job and I get paid now! That's a thing!

This also is a somewhat belated thank-you for everyone who participated in fanweek from Beta and I, and for everyone who enjoyed the work that's now immortalized on my CYB-by-Lang tumblr blog. Go check out the "cyb fan week" tag on the blog if you haven't already, since it's GREAT. I hope you enjoy your new chapter, and everyone gets a chance to see some of the awesome stuff that's been made!
The White Light Chakra Saber was just one of many casualties of the Kannabi mission. But between losing Obito, Kakashi’s getting tortured, and all the other fun consequences of that clusterfuck of a mission, this particular weapon had just...fallen through the cracks. Seeing it again was a major blast from the past. Not sure if I’d call those days “better times,” but at the very least the world had seemed smaller back then.

Kakashi hadn’t asked after it, and I wasn’t sure what I would have told him at the time. Given my state after the mission...well, I imagined it’d be a toss-up between “fuck you” and shell-shocked silence.

But really, Kakashi’s over-named tantō wasn’t the most pressing concern I had. While Hayate had promised to take care of it for me—presumably in place of the katana he’d broken—I still had to work out what was going to happen once we got to the village to drop our clients off.

The problem was that I’d been a bit optimistic about never having to see the Kitano Town Gekkō family again. Given that there wasn’t a pursuit team or other reason for a hideous time-crunch, we at least had to make sure that everyone didn’t die the second we turned around, right? I rather doubted there were any bandits left worth noting. But I just didn’t want to.

I don’t see why you should. Isobu rolled his eye and grumbled, They seem to be miserably small-minded, even for humans. Most of the planet would be better off without them.

Most?

Charitably, Isobu explained, They seem to suit each other, if nothing and no one else.

Talk about damning with faint praise.

I sighed mentally, then turned my attention back to my non-internal companions.

“No, see, I don’t think it works like that,” Iruka was saying, looking at the White Light Chakra Saber. “You just swing it and the white streak thing happens.”

Hayate made a face, but obediently swung the tantō somewhat gingerly. Aside from the usual swoosh of air, nothing happened.

“You’re supposed to use chakra too,” Iruka said dryly.

Yūgao cut into the conversation with, “Can the two of you stop arguing and just clean it properly?”

I’d almost forgotten what it was like to have children complaining about road trips. There was no
terrible minivan, just our road-worn feet, but wow did I ever not need to experience that little facet of my old life ever again. It was somehow worse when I remembered that most of these kids had killed people before they turned twelve—and that I’d made my first kill at nine—and yet they still had lapses like this. Two of them were even qualified to lead military units.

The ninja system was so f*cked up.

“Keisuke-sama, would it be better to find a shinobi weapon specialist to treat this blade adequately?” Tsuruya asked, lowering her head to my eye level to hold a proper conversation.

I reached up and scratched the underside of her beak, and she bumped it against my shoulder. “If we’re gonna give it to Kakashi as a birthday gift, we probably should. Our weapon kits aren’t really designed for dealing with rust like that.”

“Can it be from all of us?” Yūgao asked. “I mean, for Kakashi-sensei, there’s not really anything we can buy or find that can possibly top this…”

“His birthday’s in nearly two months,” I reminded them. “If you can’t find anything you’d want to add in to the Team Inoichi collective gift by then, then it can be the sole gift.”

“Team Inoichi-plus-Kei-san,” Iruka corrected. He rubbed the scar across his nose as the rest of us gave him expectant looks. “I mean, Hayate found it, but the mission took all of us, right?”

Sort of? If Hayate had been waiting for a rescue from me, there’d been no evidence of it. The trail of corpses definitely hadn’t been my doing.

...Though maybe Iruka was talking about the rest of the mission. I was still pretty sure that Team Inoichi could have handled basically everything but Tetsuo. His weird weapon might have been a problem even if he hadn’t inexplicably decided to steal Hayate’s sword instead, but he wasn’t a concern anymore and his whip-sword thing was in one of my many storage scrolls.

Souvenirs came in many forms.

I suggested, “Well, if nothing else we can eat the cost by selling Tetsuo’s ugly mockery of a sword.”

I couldn’t really think of anyone in town who’d want to use the Nuibari rip-off, but it would probably make an interesting conversation piece for any blacksmith. And it wasn’t like Tetsuo the Sword-hunter would be doing jack shit with it anymore.

Speaking of, I’d need to check to see if there was any way to add that kill to my Bingo Book statistics at home, or if that was just something people were going to have to learn by osmosis.

“Well, we did sell our house to that one smith, didn’t we?” Hayate suggested.

Tenten’s dad? Yeah, I’d pick him, too. “Ask first, Hayate. Don’t assume.”

And any further conversation sort of drifted off after that. Tsuruya flew slowly overhead, keeping pace with us rather than harrying off into the distance at Inari’s command. We’d decided to stick together, but Tsuruya’s ground-bound gait had turned out not to mix well with a flight saddle. And sitting on the flight saddle—or indeed, any saddle—for six hours was bound to strain anyone’s joints.

Then Tsuruya made a noise like a small elephant getting stepped on—which was basically what a crane of her species sounded like—and started to descend in front of us. At the same time, I got a flash of something that could have been killing intent, but smaller than any similar signature I’d felt before.
Our group slowly ground to a halt as Tsuruya landed. Her eyesight wasn’t anything like a hawk’s, but she had a hell of a view from up there.

Inari sat up as best she could in a saddle designed after a motorcycle one, still holding Haruki, and said, “There shouldn’t be nearly that many people in my village.”

Eh?

“More bandits?” Iruka asked.

I’d be pissed if there were. We’d just cleaned up the actual threat in the area, too!

“They feel like civilians,” I put in, as the sensor with the largest range. But then, civilians were hard to pick up from so far away. “But that doesn’t mean they’re not dangerous.”

The mob from the other day had certainly proved that to my satisfaction.

I signaled for my team to pick up the pace. While we would still need some time to get there, we had a collective top speed of probably sixty kilometers per hour if we pushed it. And Tsuruya could outpace us to shut the crowd down in a single swoop. Inari would probably be happy to shout the villagers into submission if possible, too.

As Tsuruya was about to take off, though, I added, “Tsuruya, play nice with the civilians, okay? They can be fragile.”

Tsuruya’s head bobbed, then she took off with a huge beat of her mighty wings. Hopefully they wouldn’t get too much of a workout.

And the rest of my team and I ran for the village.

When I was fourteen years old, one of the first things I did after outing myself as a jinchūriki was deal with the people who’d wanted someone to blame for the Tenth. Someone—anyone—who they could hate. I talked some of them down, and avoided most of the rest, but ultimately the problem was one that had burned itself out over time. Fighting Orochimaru to a standstill years later had helped, but my reputation had always been a bit of a crapshoot.

I hadn’t gotten any better at dealing with a bunch of angry people since then.

The crowd in front of the village head’s house was mostly made of villagers, which was somewhat heartening. The problem was that the people who weren’t looked like they had wandered over from Kitano Town, and the two sides did not like each other one bit. And then there was Inari, who wasn’t holding Haruki because Megumi was, and quite a lot of shouting, and Tsuruya standing with her head over the crowd and looking at everyone like they were disobedient chicks.

As my team approached, we heard what people were actually saying.

“—if you were the last people on the face of this world—” Inari shouted, as I finally got close enough to pick out some familiar faces.

Shirosuke, red in the face, snarled, “You were declared dead—”

Inari rose up onto the balls of her feet and jabbed a finger right in her brother’s face to cut him off. “That’s no reason to go right over Sano’s head—”

Iruka winced at the noise, putting his hands over his ears and sidling behind me so he was out of
immediate view. Hayate and Yūgao flanked me, presenting an impassible wall of shinobi for the villagers to deal with when they realized that they had an audience.

I tapped the nearest person on the shoulder—a man with a katana at his hip and a cigarette between his teeth—and asked, “So, what’s going on?”

He gave me a very long, assessing look, at which point I let Isobu’s chakra seep through to my eyes again. Without missing a beat, he pointed at the two loudest Gekkō family members and said in a very dry voice, “My brother-in-law and my sister-in-law are sorting out their differences.”

I frowned. What, was everyone here related or something? I sure hoped not—it’d make my plan a bit less tenable.

“Well,” I said loudly, with just the briefest flash of non-Isobu killing intent to get everyone’s attention, “isn’t this nice?”

“Shinobi,” was the whisper that ran around the crowd. Iruka probably could have told me where it started, but it wasn’t important.

Instead, I zeroed in on Inari and nudged my way through the throng of people. Not acknowledging anyone else, I walked directly to her and stood just off to one side, ready to intervene between her and Shirosuke at a moment’s notice. Iruka and Yūgao hung back, but Hayate was just one step behind me.

I hadn’t really thought about it before, but Inari was the second-oldest person in the core of the crowd, beaten out only by her mother Umeko. Then there were, in order, Shirosuke, his wife, and then Kōsuke and Tsukiko. Sano was sort of off to one side, further away from the verbal spat, but Megumi was wrapping his hand again and didn’t meet my eyes.

Everyone else, though? Very cautious.

“The mission has been completed,” I said to Umeko, watching the crow’s feet around her eyes compress as she scowled at me. Don’t take it so personally, lady. It isn’t like I wanted to see you either. “The bandits have all been destroyed.”

Umeko met my stare for a moment, as though trying to strike me dead with her eyes alone. No dice. “Acceptable.” She paused. “Don’t tell me you want your payment now. Damned mercenaries…”

“You were the one who hired us,” I said mildly, keeping a bit of my attention on Shirosuke’s little section of the family. Kōsuke looked like he was going to attempt murder if he could just figure out what to do it with. “It’d be a pity if we didn’t live down to your expectations.”

“Don’t talk to Grandma like that!” Kōsuke snapped.

“Don’t see why not,” Hayate cut across Kōsuke like he’d wanted to do for a solid week, drawing the crowd’s attention to him instead. “I mean, she’s talking to everyone else like we’re sharks even though she’s the one who hurt people who didn’t do anything to her.”

The non-Gekkō section of the crowd fell silent.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Umeko replied, trying to stare my brother down. If he hadn’t been through multiple near-death experiences with actual danger involved, she might have succeeded with him. If she’d been Kushina or Tsunade, I probably would have folded like a paper napkin.
But no.

“I have worked for forty years to secure the future of this family, and I do not need a lecture from a band of murderers on the rightness of my decisions,” Umeko went on, scowling.

“Sure you don’t, Mother,” Inari interrupted, and Umeko tried to pin her to the currently-empty police station with a glare. “I still remember Wataru.”

Umeko did her best to look down her nose at her taller daughter, who was clearly having none of it. Nonetheless, she pressed on with, “He was a lazy, disrespectful, ungrateful brat.”

Those words hung in the air for a moment, while Hayate and I silently debated what to say to that. Dad may have been a goof and an explosives expert, but there was so much wrong with what Umeko was saying that we didn’t really know where to start.

Inari went white to the lips with rage. “No, you were a tyrannical bitch who beat him as soon as Dad couldn’t protect him anymore. Just because he was Uncle’s. You might’ve put him out of your mind after he ran away, but some of us didn’t.”

Next to the cigarette guy from before, a matronly woman with her hair done up in a bun pushed her way through and came to stand next to Inari. She crossed her arms over her chest and focused all the force of her scorn on Umeko and Shirosuke, and for a moment I could see the resemblance between the two women as clear as day.

“I can’t believe you’re bringing him up again,” Shirosuke broke in. “And what are you doing dragging these shinobi into our family business?”

“‘These shinobi’ are his children,” Inari said, sweeping her arm out to encompass Hayate and me. “And luckily they didn’t bear a grudge when they came to rescue me. Unlike you and yours.”

There was an even more thunderous silence.

“Step down, Mother,” Inari said quietly. “Trying to make Tsukiko village head over my son is not something I’d stand for even if I was conveniently out of the way. Maybe you didn’t want me dead, but it hardly seems like you’d like me alive after everything else that’s happened.”

Umeko looked like she’d been slapped, and gaped at the sea of disapproving faces it had apparently taken her ten full minutes to notice. With the exception of the cigarette guy, who looked bored, and Shirosuke’s little band of bottom-feeders, there were at least forty people in that crowd that registered as deeply unfriendly.

It was kinda interesting to see all that societal disapproval aimed at someone else.

Inari took a deep breath, and went on, “I didn’t want to have this fight in public like this, but I’m not sure what else you expected to happen after that little trick. Just go home, Mother. Get out of our lives, and leave the family to someone who actually cares about the people in it.”

Umeko seemed to wilt a little.

I didn’t let it show on my face, but I sort of wondered. In the shinobi world, evil tended to operate on a thin veneer of civilization—we had crime, of course, but we also seemed to have a more-than-usual concentration of people who were effectively supervillains. Some of them had tragic backstories, and some didn’t.

What in hell made people like Umeko, who committed smaller evils every single day? Entitlement?
Complete and total failure to realize other people mattered? Or just a conviction that they’d never be caught?

I shook my head as the proto-mob seemed to finally scare the Kitano Town Gekkō family away through the sheer weight of numbers. My team and I retreated to the roof of the nearest building—again, the poor, beleaguered police station—as the crowd cleared out.

“So I guess we don’t get paid?” Yūgao asked, apropos of nothing, as the other Gekkō family talked below us.

“We weren’t really getting paid much more than spare change to start with,” I said with a shrug. “It’s not a big deal.”

The matronly woman from before waved up at us and called out, “Hey, shinobi, you can come down now! They’re gone!”

I glanced at Iruka, who nodded. Apparently, what conversations he could overhear didn’t worry him. With that vote of approval, I hopped down to ground level and was immediately wrapped up in a hug.

“I’m so sorry you had to see that side of us, and of Mother,” she said as she let go of me. Then a thought occurred, and she added, “I’m sorry, I didn’t even introduce myself. I’m Tokio. Your father and I grew up together.”

“Really?” Hayate asked, from behind me. Apparently as the group’s tank, I was generally expected to lead the way into every single possibly dangerous situation ever. Even if the main risk was getting hugged to death.

“Yes, though I didn’t know what made him leave until much later,” Tokio said, and gave my brother a hug in turn. When Yūgao and Iruka subtly shook their heads, Tokio clasped her hands in front of her and bowed. “And thank you for saving Inari. From the sounds of it, it took a lot to get this far.”

Iruka rubbed the back of his neck, even as an embarrassed red tone crawled across his face. The kid needed to hear more compliments. “It was a bit of an adventure, but we made it.”

“It’s all part of the job, Tokio-san,” Yūgao said, bowing slightly

Tokio frowned for a moment, looking all of us up and down. Including Tsuruya. “Would you like to stay for dinner? Hajime already told me that we’re not paying you worth beans, and considering all you’ve done for us…”

Did I want to deal with that? While most of the villagers were heading back to their homes and the threat of shinobi incursion was over, I was still leery of spending too much time in the company of people who were effectively strangers. And there was still plenty of daylight left, so it wasn’t like we were really going to have that many problems if we got on the road now…

Then Hayate’s stomach growled.

“Suppose that answers that,” he said, even as his face turned red.

“Those gates are a real sight for sore eyes,” I admitted as, a week later, we finally came home. To my team, I said, “Mission office first, then reports, then home. Got it?”

Hayate groaned.
The other two, who were not spoiled, didn’t complain.

“Iruka heard something that might be important. We won’t know until we get that information in,” I pointed out dryly. “Come on, little brother, we’re gonna go get things sorted out.”

The mission office wasn’t crowded at what amounted to teatime—three-ish?—so Sensei and his attendant paperwork ninjas weren’t swamped or anything. The four of us waited for probably a total of forty seconds for the team in front of us to clear out, and then Sensei looked up from his more recent intake form and smiled.

“So you didn’t end up using that kunai after all!” Sensei’s chakra pulsed out, poking at all of us as though testing for injuries since he wasn’t gonna get up from his desk and do it. Yūgao bristled at the unfamiliar sensation, but blinked and was back to normal in a moment.

“Nah, we handled it,” I said, “even if it got kinda rough there for a while. Mind if we make our report?”

Sensei nodded.

“Well, first off, we’re related to a bunch of jerks,” Hayate began. “The Gekkō family out there is a merchant family, but they had a lot of infighting going on and I guess we were sort of...just there. There was definitely a bandit problem and everything, but we’re not really sure who’s going to be actually paying for the C-rank at the end...”

Sensei leaned forward in his seat, but didn’t comment.

“The bandits turned out to be missing-nin, though,” Hayate continued, “and they’d kidnapped our clients’ family, so we went after them, and well...”

The rest of the mission report, in the end, was more or less how I had expected it to go.

My end of the story was pretty straightforward and involved the tortuous death of someone who had hammered my berserk button flat. Once Tetsuo had shown up with Hayate’s katana, all rational thought about interrogation had flown right out the fucking window. I’d wanted Tetsuo the Sword-hunter dead a lot more than I had, say, been thinking about recovering his supposed hoard of swords for Konoha. Sure, putting myself out there as a distraction was something that had Sensei raising his eyebrows, but hey, no mission was perfect.

Iruka, after the initial surprise that involved briefly becoming a hostage himself, did manage to hear quite a bit regarding whoever the fuck Shinjitsu was. I imagined a shadowy overlord—coincidentally similar to Madara or Tobi in my mind’s eye—with a pet cat or maybe a particularly pampered poodle. Sensei didn’t know much about him, but the thing with evil organizations was that, when you got down to it, the rest of the world heard exactly nothing about them until they suddenly didn’t. Boom, Fourth Shinobi World War.

Then it was Yūgao and Hayate’s turn. It was easier to put the two of them together since neither Iruka nor I had seen them until the fight was already over.

“Well, the first thing that happened is that we got jumped,” Hayate admitted, shamefaced. “We should have been more aware, but the Sword-hunter guy went after us instead of Sis like we thought he would, and the next thing we knew he was attacking with this...whip thing.”

Which was something I was gonna have to fork over to Intelligence. It wasn’t like I needed such a niche weapon anyway.
“Go on,” Sensei prompted.

Hayate shifted from foot to foot, still uneasy, and took a deep breath before he said, “Yūgao got hurt, so we were making a strategic retreat. He went after us again, saying all kinds of sh”—and here, my brother paused because he belatedly realized he’d almost cursed in front of the most superior of officers available—“stuff, and we were kinda in a tight spot.”

Yūgao mumbled something, and all of us paused and waited for her to repeat herself. Under the weight of our stares, she said, “I didn’t perform well under pressure. I’m sorry, everyone.”

“Hey, no, you happened to be on the right and got hit first. It’s not your fault,” Hayate insisted. “It’s not a competition.”

“Bad luck, but then you had to carry me around,” Yūgao argued, but without real heat. I hadn’t noticed them arguing with each other on the way back, but perhaps they’d been better at being quiet than I’d given them credit for.

Perhaps this wasn’t the right venue for this conversation, either. I cleared my throat and said, “Moving on, please?”

Hayate shook himself, then said, “The guy—Tetsuo—he got my katana and I guess he wanted it to be poetic or something if he killed us with it? I don’t know.” He fidgeted. “I needed to get my hands on something to fight back with, and since we were under a bush I just grabbed the first weapon hilt I found. And that,” he said finally, as he pulled the White Light Chakra Saber from his pack, “was this.”

Everyone’s eyes were drawn to the faintly glowing weapon as though by magnetism. The shiny effect was down to Hayate channeling a bit of his chakra into it, activating the blade, but it was really all for show. Sensei probably would have recognized that weapon no matter how long he went without seeing it.

Kind of a lot for a tantō, but…

Hayate held the blade out as he went on, “I saw Kakashi carry this around a lot when I was a kid, so I asked Mom about legendary swords. She said there was always a trick to using them, but once I had it in my hand? I cut my sword in half, right out of Tetsuo’s hand.”

I winced mentally. Hayate had never even touched the White Light Chakra Saber before the mission, and now he was down a main weapon as a result of the choices he’d made under pressure. Pressure I wasn’t really sure he would have had to face before—while Tetsuo hadn’t been enough to slow me down by the time I got my feet under me and stopped screwing around, he would have been terrifying for Hayate and Yūgao.

But they’d handled things. And they’d be stronger in the future.

“He left a bunch of lackeys for us after that, then…” Hayate paused, then turned to me. Right, I hadn’t told him this part.

“He thought it was a good idea to show up and pretend he’d killed you,” I told Hayate, but with enough volume that my voice had no trouble carrying. A heavy silence fell. “And now he’s dead.”

Sensei slowly raised his hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. Of course he is, he probably thought. At least Sensei regained composure quickly after that.

“Other than the stuff about Shinjitsu, we were just gonna turn things in, but…” Hayate held the tantō
up again. Sensei’s eyebrows rose and Hayate said frantically, “No, no no no, don’t tell Kakashi yet! It’s gonna be our present to him for his birthday, okay?”

Sensei, who had opened his mouth to say something, shut it. “All right.”

Iruka blinked. “It’s that easy?”

“You’re returning a clan heirloom, just a bit later than expected?” Sensei clarified, and got a round of nods from us. “After...maintenance work, probably. I don’t think Kakashi ever expected to see the weapon again, so it will be a welcome surprise.”

The members of Team Inoichi all grinned at each other, wordlessly congratulating each other for their plan.

Well, that was one more thing taken care of. Before the kids could derail the meeting entirely, I put in, “And the rest of Tetsuo’s gear?”

“Weapons go to R&D, and everything else goes to Intelligence. We’ll see what shakes out,” Sensei replied, and his tone implied well enough that we were all done here.

We did what Sensei asked. Then, the lot of us left the building and reconvened on the roof, still laden with our other mission gear.

Yūgao and Iruka looked at each other, then at my brother.

“Is it okay if we go to the smith’s right now?” Hayate asked, apparently quite conscious of the legendary weapon in his pack.

“It’s fine,” I said. Actually… “Hayate, if you can hold off on going to the weapons’ depot for a new katana, I’ll get something for you.”

Hayate blinked, surprised. “You can’t have gotten me one already.”

I waved him off. “You’ll see.”

Once Team Inoichi took off to prepare their gift, I made a rooftop beeline for home. Quite aside from my dire need for a shower, I could already sense the dust that built up over two weeks absent. I needed to make sure that the place hadn’t, say, collapsed into a sinkhole or something. Or a dust-based black hole. Sure, Kotetsu probably would have mentioned that when I checked in if it had, but...well.

I was probably making excuses anyway.

Regardless of any other concerns, hot water awaited!

But once I got inside the apartment, deactivating its devastating security seals as I went, my step hitched as I passed the weapon rack in the front room.

Mom’s katana was on the wall, underneath her wakizashi. Neither blade had been used in the four years since her death. Instead, we’d left them to sit on the wall as a sort of memorial where photos or the family shrine wouldn’t quite suffice. We didn’t have anything similar for Dad, because nothing but his sealing kit had survived, and I’d used up everything in it years ago.

They weren’t pieces of art. Mom had never been shy about explaining the realities of weapons or war. Things like that...they were meant to be used.
I dropped my stuff in the entryway and wiped my hands on my pants before I walked over to the wall mounts. Carefully, I took the lacquered wooden sheath and the blue-wrapped handle into my hands and drew the blade out. The metal didn’t shine, but it had never really been that kind of weapon.

*Looks all right. Might need some maintenance, but it's not like it's been rusting in some armory.*

The butt of the weapon hadn’t tarnished, and neither had the rectangular guard. I gave the sword an experimental swing, and the balance was still good even though I hadn’t checked the pins keeping the handle secured.

With one last nod to myself, I sheathed the katana and put it back on the wall. My brother would be inheriting it soon enough, but there was no reason to spoil the surprise too early.

Then I cleaned the apartment, because I sure as hell couldn’t trust Hayate to do it.

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After I spent an hour cleaning up the residual dust from my two-week-and-spare-change absence (since I was under no illusions about what my brother would have contributed to the effort), it was time for dinner. With my brother and his friends still dismissed for the day, and not feeling any particular spikes of their chakra in the immediate area, it was safe to conclude that I was being left to fend for myself in terms of food.

Sure, I was the person who could actually *cook* in our family, but I didn’t have much to work with. I’d cleared the fridge out before we left, among my other preparations, so it seemed as though my only option was to head out and go grocery shopping.

After dusting myself off the best I could and picking a new, identical uniform out of my closet to change into, I picked up my grocery scroll from a shelf near the door. Checking my wallet—sufficient—I locked the apartment before I trooped out the door and headed to the market. Since the sun was still up, it’d probably be open and I’d be able to get things done.

There was really something to be said for having five copies of the same outfit, and of using fūinjutsu to avoid encumbrance problems. If I was going to do chores, even for my own sake, I was never going to spend more energy and time than was absolutely necessary to maintain a functional household.

Of course, my brother basically expended *none*, but that was a different issue.

I was in the market for about half a minute before I realized that I felt a cluster of familiar chakra signatures nearby. Lightning, hearth embers, and sunlight on water, if I had to come up with appropriate metaphors. And I immediately strode past the vegetable stalls and toward those chakra signatures, going *just* slowly enough to avoid coming off as rude. Despite my eagerness, I didn’t really want to run anyone over.

And so it was that, in about another forty seconds, I made my way to the opposite end of the market to where I’d sensed Kakashi, Obito, and Rin clustered all together.

I didn’t get a chance to surprise them or anything like that. Mainly because I was approaching from upwind—scent-trackers *always* sensed that kind of approach—and therefore Kakashi was already looking in my direction before I got past the late-afternoon/early-evening shoppers and into plain view. Taking their cue from him, Rin and Obito did, too.

“Kei!” Obito shouted joyfully, and then I was being squashed in a bear hug. I surrendered instantly.
Obito was rather good at them. Being bigger than basically all of our classmates except for Ibiki and Asuma, he could wrap both of his arms around me and have room to spare when Rin joined in. On top of that, he also had enough strength to pick both of us up at the same time. One-handed.

Because that meant his other arm could rope Kakashi into things.

Kakashi, who had a bigger personal space bubble than most people, took being crushed against me and Obito’s right arm with surprising alacrity. For him, anyway. It mostly amounted to making a token “oof” and then not fighting the vice.

Obito put the rest of us down once people started staring. Or rather, when Rin noticed people were staring—Obito could not give less of a fuck.

“You have to tell us all about your mission, Kei,” Obito insisted, while Kakashi and Rin finally disentangled themselves and I got my breath back. “You were gone so fast we barely even saw you!”

“Sorry, everyone, it was just…” How did I phrase this? I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to string words together. “Uh, it was something.”

“We got a bit of it from Kakashi,” Rin said, retrieving her grocery bags from the ground where she’d left them. None of the things she’d bought looked too damaged by the rough treatment, so I didn’t worry about it. “So how did the family reunion turn out?”

I glanced at Kakashi, who had been the last person I saw before I met my team and took off. I didn’t remember telling him much of anything, aside from asking him to take care of Mr. Ukki, but the ninja grapevine was not to be underestimated. If Iruka could hear about the mission and pass it on to my brother and me, everyone in the administration center was probably in the know.

Kakashi shrugged. “I’m curious too.”

I grimaced. “It...could have been worse.”

“The way you’re saying that tells me it couldn’t have gotten much worse,” Obito said, crossing his arms. “Did anyone die?”

“...Not for lack of trying.” If Kōsuke had thrown a single ill-timed punch… “It turned out that the Gekkō family that hired us was a bunch of jerks.”

This, of course, roused some interest. Obito in particular had a lot of experience with turbulent families—and not just his. Hooray, MP probationary periods.

“Are you allowed to share any details?” Rin asked, as Kakashi pulled out a few ryō notes to pay for his own groceries. I’d kinda interrupted them, and thus the shopkeeper was giving all of us weird looks until money got involved in the picture again.

I started looking at the fish for sale again, since admittedly the lack of food had been the main reason I’d even emerged from the apartment. Despite the ice seals, I’d never been too fond of the smell of fish. But Hayate loved mackerel, and thus I needed to make some accommodations. On occasion. When I felt like deboning and descaling things.

“Kei?” Rin prompted.

I sighed. I really didn’t want to think about the mission, but it wasn’t classified and hadn’t put anyone in the hospital. It had just been...tedious. But I also owed my friends a story.
So over the rest of my grocery shopping, I told them. About Kōsuke and Tsukiko, and the way they’d made the trip to Kitano Town a constant slog with their complaining, and so on and so forth. I even told them about the family tree that Tokio had kindly made for me and Hayate to take home—which included Dad and us instead of just the people who were “officially” accepted into the family. I probably wouldn’t hang it on the wall or anything, but it was nice to know.

And eventually I wound my way back to the important part. “…And Hayate broke his katana on the mission.” I shook my head to cover the brief pause as I omitted the White Light Chakra Saber from my account. “He’s going to need a replacement, but I already had a plan. I guess it’s more overdue than anything.”

I hoped that no one had noticed the near-slipup. Kakashi might have given me a funny look over the top of his joke book—apt—but he didn’t seem to focus on it.

I might have gotten away with it.

“What are you going to do about Hayate’s sword?” Obito pressed.

Rin popped up on my other side and added, “It’s not a secret, is it?”

“Only from him,” I said, grinning. I told them, of course, because it was something I could tell all of them. Something we could share for a while until the fun really started.

Anyway, I ended up getting everything I needed to make dinner. But as I was heading home, I remembered something rather important.

“Hey, Kakashi, could you drop Mr. Ukki off at my place sometime soon? I’m finally back to take care of him,” I said, before our group split up.

Obito was stuck by a coughing fit, possibly from eating something that disagreed with his esophagus? Rin also seemed a little suspicious, averting her eyes.

But Kakashi just nodded. “Tomorrow?”

“Sounds good to me,” I said, and trotted off.

I got Mr. Ukki back the next day, in a red pot instead of a green one to give the roots some more space. Since he was taller and in a somewhat tighter coil, I assumed Kakashi had trimmed a few leaves here and there once everything got unmanageable. Still, he looked good for a bamboo plant that had been bought at a store.

“Thanks for managing this little scamp,” I said, cheerfully farcical. “I hope he didn’t grow too big too fast?”

Kakashi shrugged again, affecting indifference. “It’s a plant. How much trouble could it be?”

“Point,” I admitted. More normally, I asked, “Kakashi, are you sure you don’t want to stay for the part where Hayate gets his sword? I mean, you taught him too.”

Kakashi hesitated for a moment, clearly considering his options.

“Kakashi-sensei, you made it!” Hayate shouted as he stuck his head into the hall from the living room. He stumbled over, tripping over one of my sandals, and face-planted into the front pockets of Kakashi’s flak jacket.
Kakashi carefully extracted my brother by picking him up by the back of his shirt, then dropped him on his feet. Hayate bounced on the balls of his feet for a moment, then sprang forward again and hugged Kakashi. Then he let go, saying, “I didn’t think you’d show up…”

“I wouldn’t be late for this,” Kakashi said, as though there hadn’t been any debate. There was something to be said for his tendency to wear a mask—it made lying so much easier. As Hayate steered him past me and toward the living room, I heard him say, “Your team’s in there already, right?”

I shook my head and hefted Mr. Ukki up against my hip, then closed the front door behind me with my foot. As the voices inside rose to a fever pitch—with Gai’s rising above the lot like a rocket—I grinned to myself.

This, right here, was home.

Kakashi’s birthday was on a bright, sunny day dead in the middle of September. Right on the tail end of the summer heat, when the weather hadn’t quite caught up to that little fact just yet. None of the leaves had started to turn colors, but dew on the grass could have been frozen once or twice. I didn’t generally get up early enough to check.

Keeping a secret like the White Light Chakra Saber for more than two months was difficult, but Sensei kept the weapon out of the reports and Kakashi wasn’t one to poke around in a case he’d been told was closed. Given all the family drama that had come out of the Kitano Town mission, it made sense.

And thus, when the big day rolled around, everything fell into place.

“You need to distract him until we can finish the cake,” Kushina told me seriously, her hands on both of my shoulders and making me hunch down to meet her eyes. “This has to be perfect!”

“You got it, Kushina-san,” I said once she let go, bowing immediately.

And so I enlisted Gai, who enlisted Obito, who made it basically impossible for Kakashi to visit Sensei’s house before three in the afternoon. The two of them together basically kidnapped Kakashi from his apartment and kept him busy with training, challenges, and miscellaneous other tasks for most of the day.

Delegation was the best skill.

As for me? I met up with Team Inoichi at Sensei’s house to make sure that everyone had all the gifts that they wanted to bring. Granted, this mostly amounted to “the White Light Chakra Saber and extraneous details,” but it wasn’t like we hadn’t given it our best shot. The weapon was simply too good for comparison.

“This is going to be the best gift ever,” Yūgao nearly squeaked, looking down at the tantō resting in its case. Naruto, sitting on her shoulders and pulling her hair into two long purple tails, giggled in agreement.

Temujin had thoughtfully provided a box so we could give the weapon to Kakashi without tragically failing at wrapping paper. I thought it was a nice touch.

“And you’re sure no one told him anything about this, right?” Iruka whispered to me urgently, as though speaking too loud would somehow disturb the blade.
I gave him an incredulous look. “I know I didn’t tell him. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t know, but…”

“If he did know, I don’t think he’d let us know he knew, would he?” Hayate fretted.

“You’re fine, kids,” Sensei said from the kitchen, even as he and Kushina worked on, respectively, frosting a cake and finishing her special miso soup. I’d never seen Sensei pipe little blue beads of frosting on anything, much less a birthday cake, but he was certainly good at it.

It didn’t hold a candle to the impending feast Kushina was working on, but precision and Sensei went together pretty well.

“Sensei, Kushina-san, do you want me to send someone out to go get them yet?” I asked, raising my voice to be heard over the din of the kitchen.

Through a somewhat garbled response—the kettle chose that exact moment to start shrieking—I managed to hear an affirmative.

Leaving my brother and his team on the couch admiring their collective gift, I headed out the front door and hopped up onto the roof. Ducking under a power line, I made my way to the highest point on the building and reached out with the non-Isobu edition of my chakra sense, searching for Kakashi, Obito, and Gai.

If I closed my eyes, I could feel all three of them at the top of the Hokage monument. If I opened them, I could almost see them. Sure, they were a ways past the top of the ridge, but all three of them were tall and, when you got down to it, I only needed to see three greenish specks from this distance.

What I wouldn’t have given for cell phones.

Nothing for it, though. With a mental sigh, I went to retrieve the guest of honor and his two escorts. Or two distractions? Thought for later.

A couple of minutes and well-timed ninja leaps later…

“Hi, Kei! Is it time to go?” Obito asked, while Kakashi and Gai continued their handstand contest behind him. He had a stopwatch in his hands, but wasn’t really paying much attention to it even as both competitors started to wobble.

I nodded.

“Okay!” Obito said, and turned back to the other two. He even clicked the stopwatch. “We’re done here, Gai.”

“Not yet, Obito-kun!” Gai said brightly, while Kakashi silently swayed to one side before correcting his balance again. “There is no clear winner!”

Obito blinked at them owlishly as I approached, tilting my head to one side to watch the two boys continue their competition. To me, he asked in a stage whisper, “What do you think, Kei?”

I responded with a helpless shrug. Kakashi and Gai’s rivalry was something unique and, when you got down to it, not something I really understood. Interrupting just seemed...unseemly? Against the unspoken rules? I was pretty sure unspoken rules were involved somewhere.

“I think we should walk all the way to the Hokage’s house on our hands!” Gai suggested looking up at Obito and me. He even shifted his balance to one hand for a second so he could give both of us a
“I’m in,” said Kakashi, but without anything like Gai’s energy. Then again, Kakashi almost never sounded excited about anything.

Obito and I exchanged glances. Our thoughts were pretty much the same, and obvious to anyone who knew us: How did we get roped into being friends with these two? Aside from the fact that Gai was magnetic and Kakashi was our teammate, anyway.

On second thought, it was a stupid question.

We ended up walking to Sensei’s house at Gai and Kakashi’s pace, in deference to their ongoing competition. For all that I occasionally gave Kakashi flack about relative stamina levels versus everyone else, the fact of the matter was that that issue was *chakra*. In terms of raw physical endurance, Kakashi put his back into training nearly as much as Gai did. There was a reason that the two of them were rivals and not, say, two mismatched idiots constantly playing catch-up.

“So, am I supposed to act surprised once we get there?” Kakashi asked. It was always a bitch and a half to try and hide things from shinobi, and doubly so from a scent-tracker. He could probably smell everyone well ahead of whenever we got there.

“Play along,” I hissed at him, out of the corner of my mouth.

Ahead of us, Gai and Obito were increasing their modest lead to something that, if this competition was a race, Kakashi would need to worry about.

“Fine, fine,” Kakashi muttered. He lowered his head stubbornly and concentrated on where he was putting his hands. Then, once he was sure of his gait again, he asked, “Do I get any hints about the gifts?”

“No.”

After that point, he let the topic rest until we got to Sensei’s front step, at which point it was kinda pointless to ask again.

I peered up at the house. While it made sense for security reasons, I’d never been able to sense anyone in it from the outside. It made it hard to tell if everyone had arrived yet or not, though there were easily a half-dozen people hiding in the backyard, out of view of the road.

I was just gonna assume that everyone else was inside the house. I didn’t know how to manage people for party-organizing purposes anyway. I just had to trust that everyone else had gotten things ready without my completely superfluous input.

Once we reached the actual stairs leading up to the main floor, Kakashi gave up on the handstand business and said, “Gai, you win this one.”

Gai, who by that point had started walking on the hand railings ahead of Obito, gave Kakashi a thumbs-up. “Then that brings our records to thirty-one to thirty, my rival!”

Obito took one look at the two of them, again, and shook his head. Then he beckoned to Kakashi. “Come on, birthday boy. You only turn eighteen once!”

*Unless you’re me.*

**Being morose again?**
“You know you totally spoiled any chance of this being a surprise party, right?” Kakashi commented, as he finally reached the front door.

“Eh. You’re not an idiot, so it’s not like we were getting much past you. Just act surprised.” Obito paused, thinking that over and remembering the whole ANBU thing. “In a non-stabby way. Good surprised.”

“I’ll try,” Kakashi said dryly.

Gai bounced off the railing and landed next to him, hand on Kakashi’s shoulder. “Ready?”

By way of answer, Kakashi opened the door.

Spoiler: Kakashi totally failed to act surprised in any way, shape, or form. While everyone did _shout_ “surprise!” at the four of us as we entered, and Kushina scooped Kakashi out of our grasp and into the crowd, Kakashi didn’t so much as twitch to show anything _like_ surprise.

Sure, he flinched at the noise, but so did Iruka. And Genma would have if Raidō hadn’t covered his ears ahead of time.

“You know, this is a bigger group than I expected,” I said, in an aside to Obito.

“Gai and I invited just about everyone we could think of,” Obito admitted. “The really hard part was getting the details past Kakashi. The actual _party_ was a lost cause.”

I nodded. Just what I’d been thinking.

“Let’s join in,” Obito said, and we were both swept away by people.

There was the usual hubbub for a while—there was cake, there were people, and several of the people had not seen either Kakashi or cake in quite some time—and thus it took a while for everyone to settle down. After getting all the gifts piled up on the living room table instead of where everyone was actually going to eat, I did a quick head-count just for my own satisfaction.

Aside from Sensei(‘s Shadow Clone?) and Kushina, and Team Inoichi setting up shop in the kitchen, there were a _lot_ of people around. Asuma and Kurenai were on the couch with Tatsumaki and Naruto in their respective laps solely because they were staying still long enough to be colonized by kids. Gai was standing up, nearer the window, and explaining his victory over Kakashi in the hand-standing contest to Genma and Raidō. Rin was maneuvering the cake out of the path of the party, while Obito was trying and failing to shoo Reiko the Pointer out from under the table. From the sounds of things, Fuse and Yatsu were out back and trying to manage the other seven dogs. Yamato hovered around the fringes of the party, only to be snatched up by Gai and dragged over to Kakashi, where he seemed marginally happier than he had been while adrift.

I tried to hang back and avoid much attention by managing the pile of gifts. I mean, I probably wasn’t going to remember any of them simply because _one_ of them stood out above the pack, and there was just no way anyone else would be able to top it.

Some things were just impossible.

So I piled everything on top of that box to give the others a fighting chance. I didn’t rattle any of them, at least. Even if, otherwise, I boasted the kind of curiosity that made five-year-olds on Christmas seem tame.
But while I ducked responsibility for a bit, my mind wandered.

“I don’t even like cake,” Kakashi said, sounding more puzzled than anything.

“It’s more for everyone else, then,” Kushina replied. “But you do still like miso with eggplant and salt-broiled saury, right?”

Kakashi ducked his head. So much for complaining about sweets, when it was apparent that Kushina had his number after all. And that didn’t even touch the half-a-dozen other items on the menu today, miso and rice excluded.

Somewhere across the kitchen, Obito made a noise like a tea kettle followed by a strangled, “L-lemon…”

I winced. Somehow, getting stabbed or slashed in a fight didn’t quite hurt as badly as lemon juice on open injuries, no matter how small. Rin would probably say something about nerve endings congregating near the surface of the skin while fixing the “injury.”

“You’re joking,” Kakashi complained, and Obito was promptly double-teamed by both Rin and Kakashi about knife safety.

It was hard to believe that all of these people—all of these friends—would never have gathered in one place in the old timeline. Watching them interact now was...it was something special.

“Keisuke-chan, are you going to stay on the sidelines all day?” Kurenai asked, snapping me back to reality from nostalgia-land. If that was what it could even be called.

“I’m just a little out of it today, Kurenai-chan,” I admitted, shaking off my melancholy. “But thanks for making sure I’m being included.”

“It’s hard to avoid being included in this crowd,” Asuma said, even as he bounced Naruto up and down on his knee.

Behind him, Iruka crossed the living room with Yamato, and the two of them sat down in a somewhat quieter corner. Given the drama in the kitchen, I could hardly expect anyone with sensitive hearing—or an aversion to crowds—to stick around in there.

Hm. I got to my feet and decided to see if the kitchen catastrophe was any closer to being completed.

Just then, Tatsumaki wiggled around in Kurenai’s grip until she could clamber onto her brother in Asuma’s lap, then stuck her bewhiskered cheeks up against Asuma’s stubble. Asuma froze in place, dogpiled by small children somehow (despite there only being two of them).

“Your face itches!” Tatsumaki declared. Now that I thought about it, other than the Third Hokage, it wasn’t like she hung around with anyone else with facial hair.

“It’s called a beard,” Asuma protested, when Tatsumaki gripped her brother’s hand and pulled it up to touch Asuma’s face as well.

Kurenai, of course, was being no help at all and was busy snickering at Asuma from behind her hands.

Yeah, they could handle the kids.

I made myself busy assisting with other things. And the kitchen didn’t catch fire.
Somehow, we made it through a meal even though things ended up sorta devolving into standing around a lot. While the kitchen table was big enough (with some modification) to suit about eight people, *eighteen* was asking a bit much. Kushina and Sensei’s cooking got rave reviews, per usual, and then we started on the gifts.

All of us were sprawled out all over the house, but we had a good view of the proceedings. I had a better one than most, since I somehow ended up on the couch next to Kakashi and became the designated guardian of the trash bag Rin had provided for all the junk paper.

To be honest, I didn’t end up remembering most of them after the fact. Of course, Gai gave Kakashi a green spandex jumpsuit (for what turned out to be the third time). And Sensei and Kushina gave him one of the distress beacon kunai like the one I’d gotten before going to Kitano Town, and a homemade scarf.

Most of the rest of the gifts just kinda flew under the radar.

“Oh, mine next,” I said as I dug around in my pockets, since there was no way Kakashi was gonna find mine under a ton of wrapping paper—as a result, I hadn’t put mine on the table at all. Foresight!

Kakashi gave me a blank look. The last gift on the table was the box containing the White Light Chakra Saber, but the note explaining how we got our hands on it was on the inside. There was no reason to expect a random extra gift out of nowhere.

And so, I pulled out a slip of paper—about the size of my palm—and handed it to him.

“‘The bearer of this coupon is…’” Kakashi trailed off for a moment, blinking rapidly. Obito leaned over and tried to read it, but Kakashi pushed him away. Before the two of them could start play-wrestling or something, Kakashi finished rapidly, “‘The bearer of this coupon is entitled to one meal with and paid for by Keisuke Gekkō, because I’m a jerk who skipped the bill.’”

“Seriously, Kei?” Obito asked.

“Hey, I ran out of ideas and I *do* owe him,” I said defensively. I poked Kakashi’s shoulder. “And anyway, I can’t compete with this last one and I’m at least mature enough to know it.”

“It’s not like any of us know what’s in the box, Kei,” Rin said, her voice dry. She paused, then she narrowed her eyes at me in a suspicious squint. “And you knew that. Are you just trying to get us all excited about it?”

“...maaaaaaybe.” Wow, I was terrible at deflection. I should have gotten an award for being the worst on-the-spot liar ever.

“Open it!” Hayate shouted from behind the couch.

This, apparently, was enough incentive for Kakashi to zap the little decorative red string apart and then open the box.

The note fell out, unheeded.

“We were on the mission to Kitano Town,” my brother began, leaning over the couch so he could see the top of Kakashi’s head but, as it happened, not his face. “And we got in a fight with some missing-nin and I just happened to grab *that*—”

Since I could actually see Kakashi’s face, I reached up and covered my brother’s mouth with my hand.
Frozen in place, Kakashi hadn’t so much as twitched in response to Hayate’s outburst. His fingers rested against the hilt of the tantō with a kind of reverence I hadn’t seen in years, and never out of him. But he wasn’t taking the weapon out of the box, or channeling any chakra into it, and for a moment I wavered indecisively.

One false move would ruin the moment.

Then Kakashi stooped to pick the note up again, and read it even though his fingers trembled.

Still, no one moved. Gai, caught out of position, couldn’t steady his rival with a firm hand or anything like that. Not without breaking the tableau.

*Crap, what do I do? Did we break him?*

**Wait for it.**

*Wait for wha—*

The next thing I knew, Kakashi wrapped both arms around me and then I was trapped in a steel vice clamped around my shoulders. Momentarily stunned speechless, I lifted my arms and returned the hug more out of reflex than conscious thought, and Kakashi’s spiky white hair brushed my ear as he hooked his chin over my shoulder. And while his fingers dug into my back a bit, I felt him start to shake.

I leaned my head against his right before he buried his eyes against my shoulder, and the first tears finally snuck through his normally-ironclad self-control. Instead of squeezing harder, I just let my hands rest against his back. He’d take a minute and then he’d be okay.

Everyone deserved a chance to cry from joy.

Chapter End Notes

And thus Kakashi is reunited with his dad's signature weapon.

Since Kei and Kushina’s birthday was yesterday (woo, July tenth!) and Kiba’s was on the seventh, I figured we needed at least one birthday to commemorate all the occasions. CYB is almost three years old by posting date, everyone!

(Oh, and by the way? That's not the same Mr. Ukki Kakashi left with Kei.)
“Are you sure this is gonna work?” Obito asked, staring down at my right arm with his Sharingan active.

“Well, there’s no way to be sure until we try. It’s kinda like your arm, too,” I said, even though this wasn’t at all accurate. While Obito took advantage of the Wood Release bullshit that Zetsu had once been able to bring to bear, my proposal was a bit...more intense.

I was pretty sure that no one had ever intentionally tried to partially activate a Tailed Beast chakra cloak. It just kinda happened, and generally all at once. A compartmentalization experiment today could save me a lot of mid-battle experimentation in the future. Sensei had tried to get that into my head after our spar years ago, but...well. I was nothing if not determined to do nothing for long stretches of time.

And anyway, I wanted to see if I could still grow coral swords without triggering all the horrible medical side-effects of going full V2 cloak, which was the only way I’d ever gotten them to work before. Tsunade would probably kill me if I tried something that stupid, but...well, I did need to know what I was still capable of.

Obito’s eyebrows pinched together and he pursed his lips, thinking. “But...uh, you could lose control of this arm, too.”

**No, you won’t**, Isobu interrupted, aggravated by our sluggish implementation of his plan. **Just try it. I won’t let anything happen.**

“Isobu won’t, though. It’s his chakra,” I reminded Obito, though he still looked a bit uncomfortable with the idea of experimenting with Tailed Beast chakra indoors. Even if Sensei had specifically included seals to prevent any chakra inside the apartment from leaking out of it, up to and including intensities that would strain normal security measures.

“If you’re sure…” Obito trailed off, sighing. Then his Sharingan twisted itself into the triple-bladed form that characterized his Mangekyō Sharingan. “I’m ready when you are.”

“Okay.” I shifted my weight so I wasn’t resting the weight of my crossed legs on my toes, then started drawing Isobu’s chakra out of the seal.

I could still remember the first time I’d done this deliberately, spinning Isobu’s chakra through mine like a different-colored thread in a loom. But unlike that time, I was drawing his chakra only through the tenketsu that led to my right arm instead of through my entire body. And Isobu was a lot more
tolerant of me and my weakness than he had been back then.

My arm started to feel almost as though it was sitting in the sun, but the heat came from inside my chakra coils in an inside-out sensation that I’d never really concentrated on before.

“Well,” I said, as the blood-red energy surged over my hand and engulfed my right arm up to my elbow, “it seems to be working.”

Obito nodded, though he sat back on his heels as though recoiling from an open flame. “Yeah, and I’m not seeing any problems. It doesn’t hurt, does it?”

“No,” I said, which was somehow surprising. I flexed my fingers, examining the way that the V2 chakra cloak thickened the digits but didn’t provide any convenient claws. “Though it does seem like it should. I mean, I used to think the V2 cloak melted flesh, but I haven’t had that problem since Isobu decided he liked me.”

As if I didn’t have perfect control over my chakra, Isobu grumbled, shaking his head. What do you take me for, a human?

I notice that you didn’t deny liking me.

Denial is a lost cause at this point. Isobu settled back down onto his massive forearms, huffing in disdain. Don’t give me a reason to change my mind.

Aww, you do care!

I changed my mind. I hate everything.

“Uh, Kei?” Obito probably didn’t mean to interrupt the conversation, but he snapped my attention back to the present anyway. “You zoned out again and that kinda worries me when your arm is still doing the glowy thing.”

Okay, so he definitely meant to interrupt, but with the best of intentions. I looked down at my arm, which still didn’t hurt. But to Obito, the red-black-something glow was probably ominous.

“Sorry, Obito. Back to work now.” I clenched my right fist and tried to remember the way that my chakra had flowed on the occasions when Isobu and I had formed coral swords. Theoretically, using them was similar to my weaponized chakra scalpels, except for the bit where people could actually see them.

...Well, and the fact that they stayed after chakra was channeled into them. The Isobu-sized coral swords were still where I’d left them a few years ago, if in a few more pieces.

“If you could go a bit slower than you normally do, I think I might be able to help more,” Obito admitted. He gave me a wry look. “But I’m not really sure if I’m helping at all, to be honest.”

Eh? “Why’d you think that?”

“Well, I mean…” Obito rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish. “Except for the first time you did this jinchūriki stuff, you...never really seem to need anyone to look out for you. You and Isobu-san are really good at fighting together, and I guess…” Obito let the sentence hang, shaking his head.

“Obito…” It probably wasn’t the best idea to suddenly decide to focus on interpersonal problems instead of the fact that my arm was channeling enough chakra to blow a hole in a steel bulkhead, but I was a proud multitasker. Besides that, I trusted Isobu.
“We haven’t really just...hung out together, have we? Not lately,” Obito corrected himself, fidgeting. When I patted his shoulder--with my non-V2 cloak hand, because that was a horrible idea--he went on miserably, “And I get that we don’t have the same kinds of missions or anything, but we were...I don’t know, we were combat partners before Kannabi and now we’re not. And I don’t know how to feel about losing that!”

I opened my mouth to say something--probably a kneejerk protest, because Obito was still my best friend and how could I have let him think otherwise--before biting down on the thought and actually listening.

Okay. I had to sort through what he said.

Yes, there were rational explanations for why Obito and I generally didn’t hang out much together. Between our mission schedules since Kakashi’s birthday and the fact that I didn’t want to be a third wheel to him and Rin, we didn’t spend much of the same time in Konoha. Obito did stealthy stuff like infiltrating enemy villages, while I did considerably-less-covert operations in the open with the expectation that my reputation could actually be used.

Sensei had a good reason for never assigning us the same missions, but it did make it difficult to keep in touch sometimes.

“We should try to hang out more, then,” I suggested. Seemed like the simple solution. I paused, watching Obito’s face carefully for a reaction, before noticing that his Sharingan inevitably slid back toward my right arm.

Which was still doing the eerie demonic glow thing.

“Uh,” said Obito, because while he’d had a moment of weakness there was a bit of an elephant in the room. Or a hundred-meter three-tailed turtle monster, on a slightly different plane of reality. “So I think Isobu-san might be getting a little bored…”

Thank you for noticing, was Isobu’s biting response. Are we now going to get past this human drama and work on the actual problem at hand?

On cue, my gaze finally focused on my hand again. For all that it’d been a red-black glowy claw for a few minutes by this point, there was no indicator of how long it had been aside from the low, steady hum of powerful chakra. And since it was coming from me, there had been a bit of change blindness going on once I got used to it.

I flexed my V2-cloaked hand and watched the thicker-than-usual fingers move along with my flesh hand underneath. No damage so far...

“Um, you can try to produce the coral swo—okay, never mind.” Obito’s voice ended on a bit of a squeak as a meter of pinkish material shot upward from my curled fingers as though on a spring. But the end of it rested in my palm, almost clinging to my fingers like dough.

“This is a lot weirder when I’m not in a fight and actually get to think about it,” I admitted, turning the blade this way and that by flexing my wrist. Rather than being the smooth curve of the katana I was more familiar with, this blade looked like someone had pulled an airplane wing design out of nowhere and then ripped out random chunks for fashion’s sake.

It’s an organic sword. Be glad you have one at all.

“I wonder if there’s a way to refine the design,” I wondered aloud, responding to both Isobu and
“Obito in one go.

“I don’t see why not,” Obito said, at the same time that Isobu gave me a one-eyed glare and said, What did I just say?

At some point, I was going to have to sit down and just wonder why so many of the people in my life seemed to be down one original eyeball.

“Here, can I take that for a second?” Obito asked, and stretched out a long, winding vine of Wood Release to take the coral sword from my grasp. He tested the weight experimentally once I broke the nascent weapon off my hand, then said, “So, these stick around after you use them, right?”

“Yes,” I said, already growing the next one much more slowly. The blade sort of...extruded, from nothing. If I knew more about physics, theology, or biology, it probably would have upset me.

Obito set the coral down on the carpet, careful not to cut anything with the entirely-to-many edges that had appeared on the first blade.

The second blade turned out lumpier than the first, probably as a result of the production speed. But at least it had only three parts sharp enough to cut through Wood Release.

“This is actually getting a bit scary,” Obito said after the fifth blade almost looked like a katana. Unfortunately the resulting piece was thin, pink, and brittle enough that touching the Wood Release branch at the wrong moment caused it to snap in half.

By the time we gave up due to chakra fatigue, there were seven...things lying on my living room floor, one of which was in a couple different pieces. All of them were Tailed Beast derived weapons, but once they left my grip they seemed to revert back to the physical properties of unmodified coral.

How the hell had I made the Isobu-sized versions?

“Dammit,” I said, when the fifth attempt crumbled under its own weight the second Obito tried to pick it up. Again.

“On one hand, these things seem mostly ornamental,” Obito said, after he’d observed them all carefully with his Sharingan for any sign of dormant chakra. “On the other”--and here, he pointed at my still-glowing hand--“you’ve definitely got access to the weirdest V2 chakra cloak ever. And this stuff might be safe to sell.”

...Eh?

“You might want a second opinion from someone who actually knows like, jewelers and stuff, but I think this,” Obito said, as he picked up a shard of coral, “is maybe something that you could get some money out of it.”

I stared at him. “...I’m gonna repeat what I said in my head a second ago. What?”

“Well, remember when you fought Sensei and one of those big blades got chopped up for souvenir stuff?” Obito asked, and waited for me to nod. When I did, he went on, “Some of it went into jewelry, or like those little ornamental statue things rich people put in display cases. People like having that kind of memorabilia from big events, and cool people.”

“So, what, I should make coral to sell?” I asked, still confused. “I’m not sure that Isobu would...”

“You’re making it anyway for training,” Obito pointed out. Then, he froze, holding up one finger to
signal me that another thought was incoming. “Oh, I know! You could sell this to the Inabi Pet Store. I’m sure Satoshi has a few customers that have saltwater fish.”

I smiled in a wry sort of way. “Getting a bit ahead of yourself there, Obito. But I guess I do need to figure out what to do with all this excess...stuff.”

I mean, I could keep some of it, but what I used in combat was way more than I could ever find a use for around the house...

Speaking of things around the house and its inhabitants, the apartment door slammed open to the sound of my brother’s loud, “I’m home!”

Immediately, I doused Isobu’s chakra and sent it skittering back into the seal on my chest. Though Hayate knew about Isobu and had felt his power before, some deep-seated instinct demanded that I return things to normal before he saw me.

Kind of silly, in hindsight.

While Obito swept the coral carefully away and into the dustpan we’d set aside for the job, Hayate crossed the threshold and the living room before flopping face-down onto the couch.

“...Rough day?” I asked hesitantly, while Obito continued cleaning. I got to my feet and put my hand on top of Hayate’s head. “Hayate?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.” Hayate grabbed the nearest pillow and brought it down on top of his head like a kid trying to hide from thunder, pushing me aside. His voice sounded like it was knotted up inside his throat, but he wasn’t hurt as far as I could tell.

Not physically.

Obito and I exchanged looks. *Uh-oh.*

I sat down on the floor next to Hayate and the couch, putting my hand on his shoulder, since I only had so many standbys for moments like this.

“Hayate, what happened?”

“Don’t wanna *talk* about it,” Hayate hissed, as much as he could while sounding like he was going to cry.

*Yep, definitely trouble.* Obito surreptitiously disappeared out the still-open door, taking up a post outside with all of the coral. I’d invite him back in once the crisis was...well, if not over, then at least identified. Hayate probably wouldn’t want to have a full crying session in front of Obito, even if he’d probably feel better.

“You can tell me,” I offered. When I decided that sounded a bit pathetic, I added desperately, “I’m sorry, I’m just trying to help.”

Hayate seemed to consider this, then loosened his grip on the pillow. Then he nosed his way out from under it and I caught a glimpse of his reddened face before he wrapped his arms awkwardly around me and buried his face in my shoulder.

“Yūgao broke up with me,” Hayate managed, on his second try. He snuffled, and my shoulder got a little damp, but he at least remembered to reach over me and to the box of tissues on the table before he blew his nose on my shirt.
“Oh, Hayate,” I mumbled, pulling back so he could take care of the whole snot business. I kept my hand on his knee, though. “Can I ask what happened?”

It took a few minutes to hear the story from him, in fits and starts.

While Yūgao and Hayate were still friends, it turned out that the breakup was a little more complicated than it seemed. Yūgao wanted space to reassess how she was going to reach her life goals, while Hayate also needed to focus on self-improvement after the scare on the Kitano Town mission. Or at least that was Yūgao’s thought process as far as Hayate knew, because Hayate hadn’t agreed.

And then, one argument later, it was over.

And several hours and a lot of whacking training dummies later, Hayate finally got around to coming home and sitting on the couch with me and an entire kettle of tea. And blankets, and pillows, and one massive case of emotional exhaustion.

I’d thank Obito for the tea later. My best friend had literally anywhere to be that was less awkward, and thus had disappeared into thin air via Body Flicker immediately after making the tea.

I’d have to apologize to him later, too.

But for now, I focused on my brother first.

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**December 24, 1:04 pm**

It took about two days for my brother to get sick of being coddled, comforted, or any other words related to them. He was a grown shinobi! He could take on the world like the tough guy he was, even if he had to get into a sparring match with Yamato and train with Gai and do all of the training tasks he’d been avoiding while dating Yūgao.

And that left me free to do what I wanted, just in time for Christmas Eve. Which no one in this lifetime celebrated anyway.

So I walked to Obito’s apartment.

The Uchiha District had never been my favorite place in the village, for reasons that had barely anything to do with the people currently living in it. In one timeline, it was a ghost district that had once been home to people who, by and large, hadn’t deserved to be slaughtered all the way down to one surviving eight-year-old.

And in this one, I stopped at a corner bakery and bought four packaged melonpan to share with Obito.

There was a moment of dissonance, when I walked down a street I knew would have been carpeted with bodies in another moment years past this one.

“Gekkō-san, are you all right?” asked one of the bakery owners when I froze up on the street. The broom in her hands stilled.

I blinked, then gave her an embarrassed nod. “Sorry, Uchiha-san. Won’t happen again.”

Uruchi Uchiha, probably the most matronly woman since Molly Weasley, waved at me with a smile and said, “Take care of yourself out there, then. Come back any time!”
I acknowledged the comment with a wave, then headed off at ground level. Roof-hopping always felt weird in clan districts, and not just because this particular one could set intruders on fire at a distance that would make a flamethrower proud. It felt a bit like I was running across someone else’s property, since clan members used the skyways as much as anyone. In clan districts, that feeling was magnified to the point that streets became a thing again.

I arrived at Obito’s apartment a little before lunch time, noting that he’d updated the seals around it again. While I could still sense him (and Rin) moving around, sound seemed to stop dead once it hit the physical space that made up his apartment. While it meant the weird echo effect of the hallway was deadened, it still sounded odd.

Regardless, I walked up and knocked on the door. “Obito, I brought snacks!”

Obito’s chakra moved to the door, after jumping in surprise at the sudden noise. For a moment, all I heard was the sound of the door being jostled on its hinges as Obito sorted out the traps and locks he’d put on it at Kakashi’s insistence. Still couldn’t actually hear anything inside the apartment though.

Obito opened the door a crack, only moving it the rest of the way open once he could see it was me. “Hi, Kei,” he said, but he kept his voice low. “You can come in if you’re quiet, okay?”

“Why’s that?” I asked, even as I handed the melonpan off to him and went to shuck my coat off on the chair nearest the door. It was a bad habit, since Obito didn’t actually have a designated junk-collecting chair like I did, but he didn’t have a coat rack either.

Oh well!

But really, the most important thing was the fact that Rin hadn’t said hello when I came in, and in fact she hadn’t even moved. Instead, Obito’s futon was still spread out on the floor, with a lightly snoring lump curled up in the middle of all the blankets like burrito filling.

“Oh, I see,” I said in a voice not much above a whisper. “Sorry for interrupting, Obito.”

“It’s okay. Rin pulled a double shift yesterday. She’s been asleep since then,” Obito explained quietly. With ninja grace, he dug a couple of cans of that sweet green tea out of the fridge and set one out for each of us.

“I haven’t seen this since Ame,” I remarked, a little confused.

“It grew on me,” was all the explanation Obito offered.

Well, it didn’t require a kettle, which would have probably woken Rin up. That was something.

“So, how’s Hayate doing? That stuff the other day sounded big,” Obito said, apropos of nothing. Or not. He’d kinda-sorta been there when the meltdown had happened.

“He yelled, ‘Don’t pity me!’ when he ran out the door, so I think he’s in the angry phase right now,” I said, then cracked the can open and took a long sip. When Obito rolled his eye, I said, “Yeah, I know. I’m hoping he joins Gai on a run around the village or twenty, until that attitude bleeds off a bit.”

“Do you want me to spar with him?” Obito suggested, sounding like he was officially out of ideas.

I shrugged, pushing any affronted feelings leftover from the morning out of my mind. “He’s a big boy now. I’ll offer help, but I can’t solve this for him. He might just need time to think things through.
and decide what he wants to do.” I rubbed the back of my neck, “Sorry the other day ended up just being a Hayate crisis.”

“It’s fine.” Obito fidgeted, then blinked as though a thought had just hit him out of nowhere. “Oh, speaking of crises…”

“Yeah?”

“Uh, I’m not really sure if I’m allowed to tell you this,” Obito fussed, before saying, “but you already know basically all of the village’s secrets anyway and you’re kinda the other half of Operative Crane, so…”

I nodded and waited. He had a point, and another one to make.

“You know how you came back a while ago on that mission to Kitano Town, and there was this mystery guy that the bandits might’ve been working for?” Obito asked.

Wait, they’d put Obito on a basic fact-gathering mission?

Talk about overkill.

“You figured out who he was?”

“Not exactly?”

But any further conversation was put on hold, because at that point Rin woke up.

The first hint I got was when her chakra roused, and then she was rolling off the futon in a way that would have put her on the floor if she hadn’t already been there. She took all of the covers with her, turning into an advanced form of the Rin-burrito from before, with her feet sticking out of one end.

The Rin-burrito gave a loud groan as Obito and I waited patiently at the table for her to learn how to form words again. Or tolerate sunlight.

I glanced at Obito, who gave a shrug that clearly said the rest of the conversation could wait for later. We were secret agent buddies, after all.

Then Obito opened one of the melonpan packages and bit into the pastry, while I leaned back in my chair to watch the show.

Under the covers, Rin managed to slowly extricate herself from at least one layer of blankets. Then, with painful slowness, she dragged the remainder with her to the table and sat down in the third chair, still bundled up, and dropped her forehead to the table. The effect was a little like a giant cloth caterpillar had joined us for lunch.

“Rin?” I asked, peering under the edge of the shuriken-patterned comforter for signs of intelligent life.

“But...early…” Rin groaned from somewhere in the mass.

Obito got up and bustled around the kitchen for a moment, looking for something or other. He seemed to know what he was doing, so I assumed that Rin crashing here was pretty routine.

...For some reason I’d never really wondered if Obito could cook or not. He could make tea, obviously, since he had just the other day, but otherwise I’d kind of assumed that he was about as bad as I’d been when I started out.

Entirely ignorant of my doubts, Obito left the remaining melonpan on the table for Rin and me to
snack on while he made breakfast.

After a while, Rin wriggled out of the blankets and seemed to finally acknowledge my existence. The melonpan seemed to help. “Kei? What are you”—Rin yawned, cutting off part of the sentence—“doing here?”

“I just came to visit Obito, since Hayate’s drama’s been taking up all of my time lately,” I explained, though badly. After a second, I admitted, “And I only have today and tomorrow free before my next mission, and we pretty much never get time off at the same time.”

“What are you going to be doing?” Rin asked, while Obito started to hum as he worked.

“Well, tomorrow I tutor the kids and then I have my checkup about the arm thing,” I said, raising my left hand and wiggling my fingers. “Though we did already figure out that I can form a partial Tailed Beast chakra cloak. That’s progress!”

Rin stared at me. “I...didn’t Tsunade-sama say not to do _anything_ with the Three-Tails’ chakra the last dozen times you spoke to her?”

Whoops. “...Yes?” And that number only counted the times Rin had been there, too. “It was only my right arm!”

“Kei,” Rin said, in a tone that told me I was in deep shit. Then she groaned and, bringing her hands to her face, she said, “It’s too early for me to be dealing with this right now.”

“It’s one in the afternoon.” Obito had _great_ timing. Just great.

“I’ve been awake for five minutes. My point still stands,” Rin retorted. Giving me a long look from between her fingers, she eventually said, “I’m glad you didn’t hurt yourself, but please stop doing things like that.”

_It was perfectly safe._

*Rin would probably kill me if I said that.*

“Especially since Tsunade-sama, Kushina, and I _finally_ had a breakthrough.”

What.

“Didn’t I mention that?” Obito asked, while I choked on a pastry. Rin gave me the customary thump on the back, though mostly because she was being polite.

“You,” I managed, after recovering from aspirating crumbs, “you what?”

“It’s a theory, but once we were on the right track we sort of chased it for...a few hours?” Rin rubbed her eyes, drawing my attention to the dark circles still under them. “While most shinobi don’t get the type of tenketsu damage you did, there were a few people who were willing undergo small-scale corrections of Gentle Fist damage. You’re just going to be the first patient with self-inflicted damage...and so much of it.”

I frowned in concern, trying and failing to squash feelings of guilt related to Rin’s sleep deprivation problem. She’d been working so hard for my sake... “So, what are you going to do?”

“Unless you want us to? Nothing,” Rin replied. “The procedure isn’t...difficult, exactly, but it requires a lot of precision and a _lot_ of time. We’re going to have to essentially overwrite your natural
chakra coil network from your shoulder down, using seals as artificial tenketsu as we go.” She gestured vaguely. “You remember how Tsunade-sama said that your normal coils were atrophying without the shoulder tenketsu, right?”

It was a little hard to forget that detail. If I hadn’t been as good with chakra as I was, that development would have ended my career right there.

“Hikaru-san volunteered to coordinate the Byakugan scans, but the procedure may end up taking half the day,” Rin said seriously, “if you agree to it. And even so, Tsunade-sama was clear that this will not make you as good as new. The damage is too extensive. But you’ll be able to use your left arm again.”

“...Are there needles involved anywhere?” I asked, hesitant. “Because if there are, one of them had better be full of something to knock me out.”

“Jinchūriki physiology doesn’t quite make it that easy, Kei,” Rin said, while Obito checked the rice cooking on the stove behind her. “Even if the Three-Tails didn’t automatically purge most poisons from your system, we need you awake for this kind of procedure, especially as we lay the new groundwork for a functional chakra coil system. I’m sorry.”

I winced. This stuff was so much easier when back when I made a habit of basically knocking myself unconscious ahead of any major medical procedure. Granted, it was generally the same thing that led to me needing a major medical procedure that did it, but still. “So, about the needles...?”

“...We’re going to need to tattoo the new seal lines,” Rin admitted, and I shuddered from head to toe. “But at least we don’t have to cut your arm open!”

I’d probably heal too fast for that anyway.

“I almost wish you had like, I don’t know, just a seal earring or something?” Ao had had one of those, but that was for keeping his stolen Byakugan from constantly draining his chakra. And it would only have involved one needle. Once.

Rin shook her head, but her voice was sympathetic as she said, “It’s not that easy. I wish it was, but we looked at all kinds of removable seals and nothing could handle the level of complexity we need. We’re basically building you a new arm...with the old one still attached, granted.”

Dammit. “Is it too late to go dig up a Zetsu?”

“Don’t even think about it,” Obito said over his shoulder. He rejoined us at the table, doling out rice and miso soup into three bowls. “I don’t know if you know this, but it’s not just the arm. I’m missing my entire shoulder, a third of my ribcage, and like half my original right lung. They all got replaced.” Obito shuddered just as badly as I had a moment ago. “Any less and Tsunade-sama said I’d probably have ripped my arm off the second I tried to punch something like she does.”

...I probably should have wondered about that a while ago. It explained how Madara had managed to put the Puppet-Master Seal directly onto his heart, though.

“Our team is a mess,” I muttered. Two eyeball removals, one impending chakra coil replacement, and Obito’s patchwork biology kinda confirmed my long-standing theory that if any team was gonna get mangled and live, it’d be us.

“I’m just glad I didn’t have to be awake through it,” Obito admitted. “But Kei, are you gonna do this? I mean, I heard the basics earlier, but it sounds like it’s going to be a big deal.”
“I don’t really have a choice.” I sighed. “If I want to keep using Isobu’s chakra, I need to be able to use my entire body and the whole chakra cloak too. And it’d be a lot safer to fight knowing that I didn’t constantly have to guard my left arm or else get wrecked.”

And thus, I resigned myself to the worst tattoo session ever.

Chapter End Notes

Lang: Today's chapter title is from Toy Story. Short chapter today for an intermission as we set up the next long arc.
(It's been a few months since Kakashi's birthday, just FYI. We're heading into another new year soon.)

Beta Note: Sorry for the short chapter, everyone. I'm currently dealing with some health problems that are making it difficult to do some things, including beta-ing for Lang and CYB. As such, the next chapter is also probably going to be delayed while I focus on getting better.
July, nineteen months later

“I think the dummy’s dead now,” I said in a dry tone, holding my hand up to shade my eyes. I could just about see the end of Hakusai’s wickedly-curved stinger, if I didn’t mind looking straight at the sun.

Rin tilted her head, peering around Hakusai’s eight legs and finally spotting the remnants of what used to be a viable training dummy. “Oops. I’m not even sure Hakusai-chan saw it…”

Rin’s latest summon was a good fifteen meters long from claws to tail, with her stinger alone as large as a man’s arm and twice as deadly. She was mostly white along her carapace, with light green chitin for her extremities. And she was heavy as all hell—even with eight feet to spread the load, she left footprints far deeper than Rin’s or mine in the damp morning grass.

“I was aiming for a dummy?” Hakusai asked, and shuffled all of her feet so she could turn around and face us.

Yeah, for some reason scorpions didn’t get better eyes the bigger they got, even if they definitely had the physical space for complex optical structures. Whatever forces of evolution went into them had clearly not seen the point of it.

Ugh.

As she moved, Hakusai also ground the straw dummy into what would have, if there had been much moisture left in it, a fine paste. Scorpions got decent ground clearance if they put any effort into moving, but apparently Hakusai wasn’t feeling it.

“Hakusai-chan, you did very well,” Rin said, resting her hand against the top of the giant scorpion’s left pincer. While she was still trembling a little—summoning something that big was a challenge for her chakra reserves to handle—she was smiling broadly. “I know I can depend on you in a fight.”

“Of course, Rin-chan. I am at your service.” Hakusai coiled her tail and lowered herself back to the ground, relaxed. “Will that be all for today?”

“Yes, I think so,” Rin replied, stepping back. “You’re dismissed.”

Hakusai clicked her pincers twice, then disappeared into smoke.

“You’re getting a lot better at this,” I commented to Rin, once her summon was gone. “I barely remember the time when you couldn’t summon anything bigger than Kyūri-chan.”
Rin stuck her tongue out at me. “That was years ago, Kei.”

“Not quite three,” I corrected, shaking my head. Almost three years… Time flew whenever I stopped paying attention, apparently. Almost three years since I’d fought Orochimaru. Almost three years since I’d finally gotten most of my shit together and decided to see a therapist. More than five since Kannabi.

What a journey it’s been.

“Kei?” Rin asked, prodding my shoulder.

*Oops.* Zoned out again. “What?”

She frowned in concern. “You’re doing it again. Do you need to talk about something?”

I shrugged, sitting down in the damp grass. Given how the sun would heat everything up to scorching levels in an hour or two, I’d enjoy the cool earth for a little longer. On second thought, I just decided to lie down on the grass. “Nothing major. I’m just thinking about life.”

“That could mean anything,” Rin said, sitting down next to me. Only instead of leaving her limbs sprawled out all over the place like I did, she could maintain a *seiza* for damn near forever thanks to cheating with medical ninjutsu. My legs would fall asleep in moments, no matter what I did.

“Yeah, but it’s not a bad thing.” I lifted my left hand and looked up at the sky, fingers splayed out. Like, this, the lines mapping all of my chakra coils out would have been imperceptible, if not for the subtle…clunkiness? Whatever the word, my left arm’s use of chakra was never going to be as smooth or natural as it used to be.

Still, not bad for a seal that had started out as a full-sleeve tattoo. The design had been simple at the start, since it only had to cover almost seventy individual tenketsu points. But then Sensei and Tsunade and Kushina had actually put the *framework* in…

Ten hours of work, but definitely worth it.

“You’re not getting any feedback from the seals, are you?” Rin asked, reaching over to touch my upraised palm. I could feel her testing the artificial tenketsu for any kind of decay, but there was nothing to worry about.

“The only part that hurt was getting them,” I said.

Well, technically speaking it was only the tattooing part that hurt. Ten hours of needles.

If that level of exposure didn’t cure me of my fear of needles, then it was the sort of experience that would have instilled a worse one. As it is, I was grateful for the work that everyone did despite the fact that the passive form of the seals still had the occasional lurch.

Looked cool once the blood was out of the way, though.

“What about you, then? The little diamond’s not causing you trouble, is it?” I asked Rin, and she automatically raised her hand to her forehead before stopping herself short of touching it.

“It’s a work in progress, Kei,” Rin admitted. “It’s not...*quite* the Strength of a Hundred Seal? Tsunade-sama was proud I could get this far, and Shizune-san was a little jealous, but I’m not sure this is really enough to let me throw all the medic-nin combat protocols out the window.”
“So what are you gonna call it? If it’s not the Strength of a Hundred Seal, but it looks like it…?”

“I was thinking more, um, something like… ‘Death Stinger Seal?’” Rin shrugged, continuing with, “Obito suggested ‘Rin’s super awesome explosion’ or something but I don’t think it’s that descriptive. Or needs that much description.”

What. “Explosion?”

“If I punch something really hard it kind of…” Rin pantomimed something either blowing up or possibly shattering. “Boom.”

“But not as much as Tsunade’s version, or else you wouldn’t call it something else.” And it wasn’t like Rin did the thing that I did, where I turned everything I wanted into an explosive of some kind. Woo, seals.

“I don’t know. Maybe I shouldn’t call it anything until I figure out what it’s going to be.” She brushed a few strands of hair out of her face. “And if I do end up succeeding, and making more out of it than just a halfway point, then I won’t need to come up with a name.”

I grinned. “And at that point you’ll be the best medic-nin in the world, barring the woman who taught you.”

Rin blushed, making the marks on her cheeks stand out a little less. “Um, maybe.”

It wasn’t like other candidates were exactly leaping out of the woodwork. And for all I knew, Shizune wasn’t ever going to go as far and I knew Chiyo wasn’t. There just weren’t many medic-nin in the running.

“Congrats, Rin. Always knew you had it in you,” I said, patting her shoulder.

“...Does that include the other me?”

Uh. “Since the other you died at thirteen, I don’t think I’d be able to give you an actual assessment there.”

Rin pinched me. “Kei.”

“Ow! I’m just being honest!”

“There’s this thing called ‘tact,’” Rin informed me dryly.

Hey, I had tact. Why I would need it for a completely casual interaction, damned if I knew. I’d kept multiple actually fragile situations from blowing up in everyone’s faces by using tact.

**On alternating weekends, maybe.**

*Shut up.*

**Is that the best you’ve got?**

*I have more tact in my little finger than you do in your entire body.*

**Are we forgetting that I exist inside you? And how often do you think I talk to humans and practice?**

*You talk to me all the time!*
You don’t count.

Asshole turtle.

“Kei?”

“Sorry, Isobu wanted to share his wit again,” I grumbled. “No big deal.”

“I’m going to meet Obito for an early lunch,” Rin said, apropos of nothing. “Do you want to come with me?”

With no appointments today, it wasn’t like I was going to be needed anywhere. “Sure.”

“No, no no no, you need to give me an idea,” Obito said, with a paintbrush in one hand and a plain white ovoid in the other. While it sort of looked like the flat masks that Kiri ANBU favored, for whatever stupid reason, it was a lot more concave and had more room for actual facial features to be hidden underneath it. And only one eye-hole, in case anyone forgot whose mask this was going to be.

I sure as shit wasn’t going to suggest a spiral.

“Maybe...a tiger?” Rin suggested, tilting her head to one side while squinting at the mask. “I mean, most ANBU are animals, right?”

“I think an owl would work better with a flat-as-hell design like this,” I said. “Why’d you pick this one?”

“Well,” Obito said, and I mentally congratulated myself for setting up a security seal on the table ahead of this conversation. “Uh, I think it looks cool. And I’ve been getting by with like, the Crane mask and whatever I can find when I break it, but I think I want to do my own thing?”

“Did you ask Sensei about it?” I wanted to know.

“He said as long as it hides my face, he doesn’t really care what I do,” Obito said, which struck me as somewhat out of character unless he was taking some liberties with his paraphrasing. “I wasn’t really supposed to have a reputation on my own, but now that I do…”

Yeah, he did: Phantom Obito, the most paradoxically famous infiltrator on the continent. Normal people had to spend weeks or months trying to sneak their way into top-secret places and steal things. Obito? He just had to waltz in and do whatever the fuck he wanted. Outside of Kakashi, no one else had a ghost in a chance of stopping him, and he didn’t stick around places long enough for his Kamui time limit to expire.

It was that kind of talent that led to Obito being the first known shinobi to infiltrate every village on the continent. Normal people had to spend weeks or months trying to sneak their way into top-secret places and steal things. Obito? He just had to waltz in and do whatever the fuck he wanted. Outside of Kakashi, no one else had a ghost in a chance of stopping him, and he didn’t stick around places long enough for his Kamui time limit to expire.

It wasn’t like they didn’t have spies in ours. But that was why we didn’t blow their cover—it was easier to control what information people had when we provided it. Better the enemy you knew or whatever.

“Are you sure you want it to be orange?” I asked him, just to be clear. Obito liked orange, but as far as color schemes went, there were definitely better options. Tigers could get away with it because their stripes helped break up their outlines in places where they hunted, but...well, there wasn’t much
call for a bright orange mask anywhere. And it wasn’t like Obito’s mission outfit wasn’t already a decently-concealing dark gray.

Of course, ANBU masks were mostly white...

Obito nodded. “I like orange.”

...Okay then.

“But I haven’t decided what pattern I want to use.” Obito pushed a couple of sheets of paper toward Rin and me, and put his brush down. Instead, he picked up a pencil from the pile, and we copied him. “Little help?”

Well, if our final design needed to be orange, my mind jumped automatically to jack-o’-lanterns. Not that either of these two would have any idea what those were. In a society that did do harvest festivals and ghost things but didn’t add in commercialization of a co-opted pagan holiday, it was...unlikely that anything like that existed or would exist in this world.

And if, somehow, Halloween was a thing somewhere on this planet, I’d probably assume that the universe was fucking with me on some level.

Still, a carved pumpkin look would work out for Obito’s purposes, assuming I could capture the design in my head and put it on paper. I hadn’t drawn anything purely for fun in forever.

Rin was already scribbling away. While Obito had his Sharingan active, there wasn’t any real harm in letting him copy all of our designs—even the unsuccessful ones. He was the one who’d have to decide on something he liked and paint his mask that way, after all.

I got to sketching. While Obito’s mask only called for one eye-slit/hole/whatever, most of the carved pumpkins I’d ever seen had two. What would I do with all of that extra space?

Uncertain, I started on the mouth first instead. After a couple of minutes, I had a large gap-toothed grin that would have fit in perfectly in a hockey tournament or an orange gourd rind, and I added two triangles for the right eye and the nose. Looked a bit friendly for an ANBU mask of any kind, so I made a weird cross-stitch design for the space over Obito’s empty left eye socket. It resembled a badly-repaired teddy bear, in some strange way. If an enemy shinobi spotted someone wearing this, it would probably be difficult to think of the wearer as a threat, much less an S-class jōnin.

“What did you make, Kei?” Rin asked, looking up from her paper. Which had...oh my.

Well, if I ever needed a reference for an anglerfish’s jaws, I certainly didn’t need a diagram anymore. That was a lot of teeth. Sort of a stub-nosed, frowny look, too. Very wide-set eyes, but she hadn’t drawn them all to one side like a flounder...

Probably more appropriate for Obito’s threat level, but wow did that not fit his personality.

“Uh, I think I got the number of eyes I was supposed to,” I said carefully. Good grief, it looked like it wanted to leap off the page.

“...Whoops,” Rin said, and started erasing one of the misaligned eyeballs.

“Other one,” Obito suggested. “I like the teeth, but not the frowning, and the eye on Kei’s looks better.”

“...It’s a triangle,” I said flatly. “You can definitely do better.”
“I’m not trying to look too terrifying,” Obito admitted. “I mean, yeah, I’ve got a reputation, but...hm.” In far less time than it had taken either me or Rin to draw our designs, Obito copied the bits he liked onto another sheet of paper.

I tilted my head to one side. He’d turned the single full eye into a rounded shape to match the hole punched in his blank mask, while the other one still looked like a bad stitch job. Not like he needed to see out of it. And instead of copying Rin’s array of needle-teeth as they were, he’d flipped the design so that the evil grin actually was a grin and not significantly more fishy.

And he’d gotten rid of the nose. Wasn’t like ANBU had those.

“What do you think?” Obito asked, holding the paper up so Rin could see.

“You’re not going to have to carve the mouth out, are you?” she asked immediately, grimacing. “Maybe I shouldn’t have included so many teeth…”

Obito turned the paper around again, then said, “No, I think I’ll just paint them white on a black border. It’ll look okay, and I won’t poke myself with porcelain.”

It still looked weird to me, but as long as they were both happy with the mask, that part didn’t matter much.

At that point, our lunch finally arrived, and we put all of our doodles and my security seals away so we could have a perfectly normal lunch. As opposed to...whatever the heck happened. I was pretty sure spies weren’t supposed to talk shop while in a public setting, but then Obito was the spy and I was just the wrecking ball. We all made it work out somehow.

“You’re...you’re serious.” Sensei’s voice was downright disbelieving, somewhere on the far side of “baffled.” He blinked uncomprehendingly, with Obito’s mask design on his desk. “It’s based on a gourd!”

“My end of things was,” I said, slightly hesitant. “I mean, he wanted his mask to be orange and my old life had a pretty strong emotional connection to carving pumpkins. Even if they looked completely different, and turning food into lanterns was a pretty childish thing…”

Sensei just stared for a solid five seconds. Then, he started to tremble in place, trying and obviously failing to suppress—

“Hahahahahaha!”

With his head on the desk, Sensei was almost roaring with laughter. And then he exploded into smoke.

*I think I just learned one of the major limitations of the Shadow Clone Jutsu.*

**It wasn’t that funny.**

“Carving lanterns out of vegetables?” Kakashi asked blankly, from the other end of Sensei’s desk. “Where would that even come from?”

Uh...“I think it was a tradition from a different country, somehow, but then people forgot all the context but kept doing it anyway since it’s fun?” Look, I tried. I was never an expert on figuring out why people kept certain traditions going. “But the pumpkins here taste better, so I’m not sure why we’d bother wasting food like that.”
Kakashi looked like he still couldn’t wrap his head around it. But the next thing he said, clearly dismissing the exact thing that prompted the new train of thought, was, “You don’t talk about that world much.”

I winced. “No, I… Okay, I just generally don’t want to talk about it?”

“Why?” Ugh, stab me in the heart why doncha?

...Actually, no, that was a terrible joke and I instantly felt bad for thinking it.

I sighed aloud. “It’s...kind of the same reason you don’t talk about your dad much.”

Kakashi’s visible eye widened slightly.

God dammit. And I’d managed to go for years without mentioning him to Kakashi. Fucking impulse control.

“I don’t...there’s no way for me to do anything about what I left behind by being reborn here. It doesn’t do any good to dwell on it,” I admitted, though my throat was making a valiant attempt to close up. I bit the inside of my lip for a second, trying to get myself back under control. “I lost…”

“Kei…”

“Kakashi, it’s fine. I might as well tell someone, right? Aside from my therapist. And you already know some of it.” I rubbed my eyes. “Since Sensei’s gonna need a minute to come back.”

Kakashi grimaced, and tried to change the subject with, “He wasn’t here in the first place.”

I ignored it and barreled on forward through the conversation like a bull in a china shop. “I guess...if I slow down to think about it, I really lost everything? My family, my friends, my future… You know, when I was born I thought…” I shrugged helplessly. “I lost a lot, but who the hell even knows what happened to the people I left behind? I wasn’t super friendly or anything, but…”

There was a reason I’d spent as long as possible not thinking about this topic. I hadn’t had any control over my death, but it was still...

Fuck.

I couldn’t even think it.

I didn’t even have the right to say that I missed them.

My hands were both balled into fists, my fingernails driving into the palm covering of the armguards I wore. The demands of this life meant that I couldn’t—wouldn’t—dwell on things I never had half a chance in hell of changing. Fuck, for all I knew I’d never even died. I didn’t remember being injured, or doing something stupid, so for all I knew I wasn’t even a reincarnation—maybe I was some kind of brain clone and I was just deluding myself that it all mattered.

Something nudged my wrist, tugging me out of my thought spiral. I blinked my blurry eyes clear, then looked down.

Kakashi’s fingers gently nudged their way forward, intertwining with mine. “I could carve pumpkins with you, if you wanted to try it again.”

Pffahahaha! The knot in my chest released its grip a little, just from the tension snapping.
Kakashi snatched his hand away, apparently affronted.

“I-I’m sorry, I know you meant to cheer me up, but the idea”—of Kakashi up to his elbows in pumpkin guts, making faces with just his eyebrows all the while—“was just…”

Oh god, he’d put the exact same design he put on damn near everything.

Kakashi huffed. “How hard can it be?”

“It’s not about how hard—” was what I was saying when Sensei reappeared with a fwhish right behind his desk. Exactly where his clone had been. “Uh, hi.”

“...Did I miss something?” Sensei asked, raising both of his eyebrows at us.

“Uh...you’ve got a bit...?” I gestured vaguely at my hair, since Sensei’s was quite a sight.

Actually, so was his face. On top of having a mess of hair-ties, clips, and a generous layer of glitter in his hair, someone had drawn a smiley face on his cheek in lipstick, right above an equally-red kissy mark that could only have come from a small child. He was also missing his flak jacket and his flame-patterned coat, but had conscientiously replaced them with a pastel pink apron and a thorough coating of flour.

Sensei scrubbed at his cheek with his sleeve, then sighed when he spotted the red. He left an impressive red smudge on his cheek, but at least he tried.

Kakashi recovered from his shock next. “Sensei, what happened?”

“Baking, until my clone exploded with laughter. Literally,” Sensei rubbed the side of his face again. “It’s not coming off, is it?”

I shrugged. “I mean, you could try mineral oil later, but for now? No.”

“Was the lipstick Naruto’s idea?” Kakashi asked.

“Yes. Hopefully Kushina will be able to talk him out of trying it on Gamakichi. But Tatsumaki will probably be able to help her once she finishes eating her part of the cake batter.” Sensei shrugged, settling more firmly into his chair. I made a mental note that he seemed to avoid looking at Obito’s mask design all the same. “Now, for what I actually called you both here for.”

There was a dramatic pause. Sensei’s circus escapee look ruined it.

And Kakashi broke it properly by asking, “Does this have to do with Shinjitsu?”

I glanced at him. “You read my mission report?”

“It was research for a mission.” And Kakashi was an ANBU captain, and in Sensei’s confidence, and knew pretty much everything I’d ever put to paper for the village’s sake. Why did I even ask those kinds of questions? “They seem to be taking the approximate role of Akatsuki, in the timeline you remembered.”

...Shit. “So Shinjitsu wasn’t just some random jerk with a punchable face.”

“It would make everything simpler, but no,” Sensei told me. “Do you know anything about them?”

“Not without taking a crack at the membership,” I admitted. “If I knew who they were, I could give you an itemized list on how they can be killed...if they were a part of the other Akatsuki, anyway.”
“We already have your initial report after the Mountains’ Graveyard incident,” Sensei reminded me. “If there’s significant overlap, I’ll need to see if we can come up with updated recommendations. It has been a while since then.”

I’d barely been a jinchūriki then. *That* was a while.

“Thus far,” Sensei went on, “we don’t have much. The group doesn’t seem to have a central hub or base, or at least not one that I’ve been able to direct Obito to attack. Mostly, we’ve been finding their agents—or at least people who gurgle the organization’s name as their last words.”

Like Tetsuo. Guess he wasn’t just a random fanatic. Or he was and I was being blasé.

“So we don’t, say, know who the leader is or what their endgame is going to be.” And to that, I got two nods. Crap, this was as bad as what the *canon* crew had needed to deal with regarding *canon* Akatsuki. The only reason Jiraiya had known Akatsuki had existed was because Orochimaru had been a member...up until trying to body-jack Itachi.

That had been a bit of a knot.

“We *do* know that his name is a pun,” Kakashi said dryly. “Makoto.”

Leaving aside that I already knew a Makoto—one of the scarier Intelligence officers running around the village—an organization named “truth” with a leader whose name meant “honest” was bordering on suspiciously appropriate.

The question was how—or perhaps if—the name and its reputation linked up. We didn’t know their end goals, and for all we knew it was an alien-focused band of conspiracy theorists. With knives.

But whatever the case, if the name was popping up...well, there was too much smoke for there not to be any fire.

I did *not* want to deal with a knockoff Akatsuki. Not after we’d all done so much to make sure the first one stayed on the straight and narrow.

...Foooooooor a given value of “straight.”

“So, no clan name?” I asked, shaking off the other train of thought.

Sensei shook his head. “Not that we’ve been able to find.”

I squinted up at the ceiling and the note (and its sibling, bearing the message, “Still not up here,” in Kushina’s handwriting), thinking. “What about a reputation?”

Kakashi glanced at the note, too, then said, “You got off lucky. There is...*some* evidence that some of their agents use samurai techniques to attack before shinobi can use hand seals. Like Mifune from the Land of Iron. Remember how he fought Salamander Hanzō?”

...Hang on.

Strictly speaking, *I* was trained in samurai techniques too. And I sure as hell didn’t need hand seals to fight any more than Sensei did. And with jinchūriki strength and speed and durability, I had a much easier time doing all that samurai stuff without fear of substantial retaliation from overkill jutsu that generally came back the other way.

That power differential—of which jinchūriki and S-class ninja were the pinnacle—was *kinda* one of
the reasons that samurai culture only really flourished in one country. The rest of us had decided that acrobat-wizards were where the money was at, and history had mostly proven us right.

“I remember that Tsunade, Jiraiya, and Akatsuki got Hanzō in the end, though,” I countered, more gently than my thoughts would have indicated.

“It’s true that we don’t really have a shortage of S-class shinobi,” Sensei said, making placating gestures with his hands. “But I’d much rather nip this problem in the bud before we have to deal with a full-blown infestation.”

**Better get the bug-people on it, then.**

_Not helping._

“I can’t really help with information-gathering,” I pointed out, grimacing. “When you get down to it, I’m just...I’m a heavy assault unit in one body. I just have information you might be able to use if these are even the same guys as last time.”

“This is why ANBU agents exist.” Sensei nodded toward Kakashi. “We can make plans once we have more information. Thank you both for coming in.”

Hm, actually… “Sensei, could...I get a look at the Forbidden Scroll again?” I asked, drawing raised eyebrows from the only other two people in the room. “Not for the seal-work, but...”

“Are you worried about facing Shinjitsu later on?” Sensei asked.

“Yeah, and if not them, then there’s always somebody who wants to be the next big bad guy on the block,” I said, shrugging helplessly. “Maybe if I learn the Shadow Clone jutsu, I can work on...” I glanced at Kakashi, did a quick mental run-through of my closest friends’ affinities, and concluded, “Probably Lightning Release.”

I was long overdue for learning a second element properly, anyway. Hayate and Kaito were both Lightning aligned, where Obito, Rin, and Aiko all shared Fire, and Sensei and Kushina and their kids leaned toward Wind.

And I had someone who could teach me Lightning Release right here. “Kakashi, are you doing anything later?”

“You do realize it takes months to learn a whole new element,” Kakashi said carefully. It wasn’t really a question.

“Yes, which was why Water Release took forever,” I responded. Been there, done that, got mobbed by Water Dragon Bullets. “But I might have enough chakra to use the Shadow Clone method, right?”

Sensei and Kakashi looked at each other, and then Sensei nodded. “It should work. But don’t use that jutsu unsupervised.”

“So is that a yes?”

“It’s a yes.”

*YES! No more environmental requirements, here I come!*

Don’t make me burst your bubble. Just get going.
“But it would be better to do this tomorrow,” Kakashi put in. “Unlike you, I’m supposed to be working right now.”

Rats. “Tomorrow, then.”

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Dear Hayate and Keisuke,

Hello, both of you! I have good news and bad news, just in this last month. I knew that my mother’s health was failing, but unfortunately we lost her to a heart attack two weeks ago. And while my brother was...perhaps less happy about this than the rest of us, it got worse. In defiance of all our expectations, my brother was disinherited! My sisters and I all received a portion of the Gekkō merchant company, with me taking the lion’s share by my mother’s own will!

As a result of this, my wife and I have expanded trade routes between the local villages, and have finally been able to organize three full caravans to rotate on the route to Konoha. We have gotten many interesting trinkets and foods that none of us have seen at home in years. I can only assume my mother’s will is being followed to the letter—after all, we are succeeding beyond we ever managed during her lifetime. Her legacy will be magnificent.

Incidentally, Konoha really does do excellent work in paperwork, particularly accounting. Pass my compliments to the Hokage for allowing us to use your auditing services.

Oh, and my family and I will be heading south this winter to oversee the setup of our newest outpost, likely just outside of Konoha. Sano and Megumi-chan won’t be coming—they both need to learn a bit more about village management while I’m gone—but Tsubasa, Ota, and Uki haven’t met either of you, and are looking forward to it. We won’t impose on your home, but perhaps you can meet us a few times while we’re in town. I look forward to seeing you in a few months!

Inari Gekkō

Chief Executive Officer, Gekkō Trading Company

I put the letter down, thinking.

Isobu stirred, having been paying attention for once. Did this human just insinuate that she had her mother assassinated?

Pretty sure she did.

Admirably ruthless of her, Isobu said, somewhat grudgingly. The old woman was deeply unpleasant, and I would have killed her if you had less restraint.

I still wasn’t sure what to think of it. It sounded like a CSI plotline waiting to happen. I trusted ANBU’s assassination division, but I really hoped no one found out about that. As for the morality of it?

To be honest, I didn’t really care. Her death was a net good for the region, if the financial reports I’d seen were accurate. If someone was that terrible to that many people, I’d consider Konoha morally obligated to shove her off a pier. That we’d done it by a completely untraceable method and arranged for her heirs to be the best of the lot, we’d probably done everything correctly. And the Gekkō family was being led by better people now.

Paperwork?
I projected a sense of confusion at him, not quite sure where he was going with it.

_Doesn’t your teacher have a moniker related to that skill? “Paperwork fairy” or something…_  

_It isn’t like ANBU carries out assassinations without Sensei’s approval, _I reminded him.

_That wasn’t my point. I distinctly remember a specific assassin that specialized in untraceable kills, whom you know fairly well._  

Wai—  

..._Kakashi killed my dad’s aunt?_  

_It’s shorter to say “grandmother.”_  

_Or great aunt?_ I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to think my way through it. Okay, I knew that Kakashi was an assassin, similar to Raidō but more successful. Given what I thought of Umeko and her impact on people, did it really _change_ anything that I was pretty sure one of my friends was the one who put her out of everyone else’s misery?

No, it didn’t.

I would be lying to myself if I said otherwise.

But...maybe I could ask him about it. Just to be sure. See what he thought about it.

_You’re already supposed to meet him today. Just leave a few minutes early and bring the scroll along. Last-minute studying, if you want an excuse._

Depressing as the thought was, Isobu had a good point. Several of them.

I packed up all of my gear and the Forbidden Scroll, put my shoes on, and headed out. Maybe Kakashi would have something to add. Or a story I could—with some censoring—relate to Hayate.

---

I found Kakashi’s chakra wandering the village, accompanied by all eight of his dogs for once. While there wasn’t really a reason _not_ to bring out the dogs as much as possible (in my opinion), it was possible that they had other business to attend to in the summon realms. Kakashi was really careful about where and why he called on them, since none of them were really designed to tank hits from some of the crazies we fought. As a result, they didn’t get to just hang around the village that often.

I hopped down from a convenient rooftop to approach the mission office. While Kakashi hung back and had his nose in a blue-jacketed novel, all of the dogs clustered around Genma’s knees. They were polite enough not to talk all at once.

“I’m not sure I can accept squeaky toys,” Genma said, gingerly holding a bone that looked like it had come from a rubber rhinoceros. It was covered in dog drool and bite marks, but it was still clearly serviceable.

“If there’s an Inuzuka in the pool, you should,” Pakkun argued, pressing the bone further into Genma’s grip with one paw.

“You know I can’t tell you who’s betting,” Genma replied. “I don’t even keep the records.”
“You can take that, though. I checked!” Bisuke barked.

Genma gave the dogs an impressively blank look, then glared at Kakashi.

Kakashi rolled his visible eye. “It’s not my fault. I just said they couldn’t all use my money.”

“So Bull is betting his bone,” Akino concluded. “Fair’s fair. And it has sentimental value!”

Kakashi gave the dogs a steady stare, not that any of them were paying him the slightest attention, and grumbled, “Traitors.”

What the fuck did I just walk into?

I sidled closer to Kakashi, while Genma continued to barely avoid being literally dogpiled, and asked, “What’s going on?”

Kakashi sighed, closing his book. “The dogs discovered what a betting pool was.”

...What. “Don’t tell me they’re playing Hanafuda.” Card-playing dogs would just about break my ability to process this bizarre alternate reality.

“They’re not.” Well, that was unhelpfully vague. I wanted to know what they were doing! “Is there some reason you’re early?”

Oh, right. I found myself rubbing the lower edge of my scar, feeling a little awkward. How to phrase this...? “Uh, did you...happen to take a mission to Kitano Town recently?”

Kakashi blinked. In the background, Genma was still arguing with the dogs about valid bets.

Something about insider knowledge?

What the hell were they betting on? Dog races?

“Not...recently, no.” And if I hadn’t known Kakashi as well as I did, I would have missed the hesitation entirely.

I leaned in closer, putting a hand between our faces and Genma’s line of sight. Since the dogs were still clamoring to be heard over each other, I wasn’t worried that he’d overhear us. “Did you get the mission to assassinate Umeko Gekkō?”

“Oh, that mission,” Kakashi said, his visible eye darting toward the ground for just a moment as his chakra reacted ahead of my reaction.

Wait. “Kakashi, I’m not mad. I know what your job is like and if anyone deserved that, it was her.” I patted his shoulder. “So, thanks.”

Kakashi relaxed. “Then you’re welcome.”

“Kakashi, would you please get your dogs to go away?” Genma’s voice demanded, and we both turned our attention back to him. And the fact that Bull was somehow sitting on him. Oops. “This is why I’m a cat person!”

Kakashi nudged me. “Try it. Hopefully before Genma suffocates.”

Why, because I gave them toys? I sighed to myself, because of course Kakashi would prefer to go back to reading rather than actually help Genma out of his conundrum.
Nonetheless, I whistled as loud as I could, and watched eight pairs of ears perk up.

“KEI-CHAN!” said eight dog voices, all at once.

_Oh shit._

_Sow the thunder, now reap the whirlwind._

“No, no no, _sit_—” And then what I said didn’t matter, because I was being crushed by over a hundred kilos of dog.

It took another few minutes to get the dogs to stop enthusiastically licking any skin they could find—and to get my hitai-ate back from Urushi—and by that point Genma had _finally_ stopped laughing. Kakashi gave me a hand up, at least, which was more than I expected from him on some days.

“So,” I said to the dogs, once I got to my feet, “what were you betting on?”

Eight pairs of eyes swiveled to Kakashi, and everyone looked shifty for a few moments. Genma was too busy trying to get his breathing fully under control, so I ignored him for a bit.

Pakkun raised his left paw. “Kakashi has a crush on...someone, and we’re betting he’s going to confess to her today!”

Kakashi hid his face behind his novel, but I could see the top curve of his visible ear start to turn red.

I stared at him. Then I snapped my fingers. “Right, Rin said something about this years ago. Is it the same girl?”

“Yes!” said Pakkun.

That...was a bit embarrassing. Explained Kakashi’s reaction, though. If his face got any hotter I could have boiled water on it.

“Do I know her?” I asked the dogs, since Kakashi wasn’t going to be up for responding verbally for a while.

Genma was making funny gasping noises, bent double and leaning on the doorframe for suppose. He ought to have been more careful, given that _senbon_ in his mouth. He could choke.

“Pretty well, I’d say!” Was that _glee_ in Pakkun’s voice? How obvious was the crush supposed to be? How had I missed it?

I mentally disqualified Rin—she would have said something, and she was dating Obito. That left...how many girls were even in our age group? Uh, Kurenai...but she was so obviously into Asuma that it would have been hopeless. Not anyone in Hayate’s group, because I would have seen that and probably punched him in the nose...

Maybe Shizune? I didn’t remember her dating anyone in the old timeline, and Kakashi at least _knew_ her. I hadn’t really been paying her much attention since Rin was my primary medical advisor...

“Genma, can I place a bet?” I asked him, even if he was slumped over on the street and out of breath from laughter.

“Yeah, can she make a bet?” Ūhei asked loudly.

Kakashi looked like he wanted the earth to leap up and swallow him whole.
“I don’t see why not?” Genma managed, getting to his feet again. He managed to sort himself out, taking deep breaths, before he went on to say, “Oh, yeah, you can definitely put money on this.”

“Great!” I said brightly. I glanced at Kakashi, then turned back to Genma and dropped a ten-ryō note into his hand. “Since he hasn’t said anything yet, and it’s been this long, maybe...I’ll bet that Kakashi won’t confess today!”

“You got it,” Genma said, whipping a notebook out of nowhere and recording my bet. “Thanks for adding to the pot.”

“Hey, I plan to win,” I countered cheerfully. “It was nice to save you from Kakashi’s dogs, but we have to go train...and probably grab Rin just to be safe.”

Kakashi, behind me, was doing an admirable impression of a living statue.

“Come on, Kakashi! Safety first,” I reminded him, as the dogs started to herd us away from Genma and the administration center. “And I haven’t seen Yamaguchi-sensei much since he retired, so we’ll get to say hi to him, too.”

Kakashi shook himself, then managed to say in an admirable approximation of his usual drawl, “Just as long as you don’t make me go inside this time.”

“I told you, he quit after his heart attack.”

Kakashi pulled an impressive disgusted face, which was quite an accomplishment for someone who was hiding three-quarters of it. “They’ll need to strip the floor and repaint the walls before the smell comes out.”

“Whiner. Come on, let’s go!”

Chapter End Notes

Author Note: Before you say Kei can’t be that oblivious, I am. In real life.

Beta Note: And we’re back with a chapter and much planning for future ones. Thank you all for your kind words, and for reading Catch Your Breath. This fic has only gotten where it has because of you. As for the contents of the chapter, I should let you all know Lang and I both are well aware of the reactions this chapter is probably gonna get, and I would love to inform you that laughter was wonderful medicine for me.
Truth and Lies Arc: For Good

Chapter Summary

Kei: Do a different dumb thing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kakashi and I made our way to Rin’s apartment over the rooftop, with eight dogs in tow. They probably didn’t want to miss the show—or the results of their bet. But how could I get Shizune and Kakashi alone together so it could work?

Well, Rin would be able to help, given that they were coworkers. And two heads were better than one!

They can be, Isobu corrected.

He had a point. Hm. I still hoped that the bet I’d made had just put Kakashi on the spot, not thrown him entirely off-balance. But the fact that he was very pointedly not looking at me didn’t really bode well. I’d need to apologize before we could get this plan going properly.

We were just turning the corner-rooftop that led to Rin’s place when I suffered a momentary lapse of impulse control. I said, “Sorry if my bet sounded like I was betting against you. I can help you ask Shizune out if you want.”

Kakashi’s chakra flared for a second—yep, definitely annoyed—before he hopped down to street level without a word to me.

Erm…

I might have fucked up.

You don’t say.

Kakashi leaned against the nearest telephone pole—or what would have been a telephone pole in a world where phones existed—and pulled his novel out from his shuriken pouch. With his dogs clustering around his feet, it was clearly my job to actually head up to Rin’s apartment and say hi.

The power of delegation in action.

I rolled my eyes at him—though he didn’t see me do it—and trooped up the stairs to the second floor. Rin’s apartment was the second door on the left, which I knocked on. I briefly debated flaring my chakra so she’d instantly know who was there, but she’d figure it out the second she opened the door anyway.

“Oh, hi!” Rin said brightly when she opened the door. “What brings you here...before noon?”

I wasn’t that bad. “Two things: One, I’m going to try learning Lightning Release starting today, and it’d be great to have a medic on hand for when I accidentally blow myself up.”
Rin raised an eyebrow at me. “You say that like you didn’t do that while you were learning every other skill you use now, too.”

“Rin!” I was...probably about that bad. Still, ouch.

“Truth hurts. So, what was the second thing?” Rin prompted.

“I think Kakashi’s mad at me, and he’s going to be my teacher, so…” Uuuuugh, how to phrase this? “So I’m gonna need your help with making it up to him.”

“Kakashi’s mad at you?” Rin didn’t have to be that skeptical. Or surprised. It wasn’t like our childhoods hadn’t included a complimentary “Kei and Kakashi are arguing again” sideshow for literal years. “Actually mad at you? What did you do?”

“Uh, I might have joined in on a betting pool”—at this, Rin’s other eyebrow joined the first—“and bet that Kakashi wouldn’t ask Shizune out today.”

Rin’s face did a very complicated dance for a second or two, backed by the sound of Yamaguchi-sensei coughing up a lung at the kitchen table.

I stuck my head into the apartment, over Rin’s shoulder, and yelled, “Take deep breaths, old man!”

“Easy”—hack—“for you to say!” Yamaguchi-sensei shot back. Still, he managed to get it under control after a few more moments, and got up from the table to head to the door, too.

Honestly, despite the fact that he was retired now, Yamaguchi-sensei only looked a little worse for wear. He was older, and what black pigmentation used to be in his hair had faded to silver to match his temples, and there were bags under his eyes that I didn’t really remember. But otherwise, he was still the same mean old cuss I’d known for most of my life.

“Are you making people’s lives difficult again?” he demanded, as snappish as ever.

“Just one person, and I tried to apologize,” I said. “It didn’t work.”

“There are two parts to an apology, Kei,” Rin reminded me. “Are you going to change how you act?”

“Well, I offered to help him confess to Shizune, but…” I wobbled a hand in midair. It hadn’t really worked out how I wanted it to, so I had to go to plan B. “So, can I count on your help? I mean, you know what Shizune’s schedule is like.”

Yamaguchi-sensei started coughing again, and Rin facepalmed. “Oh, Kei.”

“Did you actually give up smoking, or were you just saying that so I wouldn’t nag you anymore?” I asked Yamaguchi-sensei, since I wasn’t sure what to do with Rin’s reaction. I knew what I was doing!

Sort of.

“Kei,” Rin interrupted, before we could really get going. “It’s rude to leave Kakashi waiting out there.”

“But I don’t have a plan!”

“I do,” Rin replied. She patted me on the shoulder. “I’ll talk to Kakashi and get this sorted out, okay? Just...don’t talk about this with Kakashi without me.”
I trusted Rin to know what to do, here. She knew more than I did about unrequited crushes, as awful as that sounded. She would do better than I would.

Jeez, I’d hammered that sore spot. I was such a shitty friend.

When Rin ran down the stairs and was swarmed by dogs at the bottom—standard, really—I tried to hang back and be unobtrusive. Inasmuch as someone as tall as me...could. Oh, I wished that Konoha uniform designers understood camouflage so much in that moment.

Maybe I could talk to Genma and get the bet rescinded? No, it was too late for that...

Oh man. Rin was already talking to him. It...maybe it sorta looked like it was going well? Hopefully?

Are you going to get to the part where you electrocute people anytime soon? Isobu could charitably be called bored. I didn’t really know how to respond to that.

I didn’t remember the Dreamer being this pushy. Or opinionated. Or...occasionally hostile.

“Kei, you can come over here now!” Rin called, one hand cupped around her mouth and the other raised in a wave. “It’s okay!”

Oh thank fuck. I’d have to get Rin ice cream for this or something. And get her to tell me how she calmed Kakashi down.

I made my way meekly back over to them, rubbing my arm awkwardly. “So, um…”

Kakashi shook his head. “It’s fine, Kei.”

“Uh, the offer to help is still open…” I tried, but Rin made frantic throat-cutting motions behind Kakashi’s back and I let the offer drop like a lead balloon.

“Let’s just go train,” Kakashi said shortly.

“Forgiven, but not forgotten” about sums this up.

Unsurprising. Now get to the explosions.

Aye-eye, captain.

The training field we preferred—Training Field Three—had a lovely river running through it that we were not going to be making use of. Not unless I screwed up in a different way and set something on fire.

I was...kinda hoping not to set something on fire because, given my luck, it was probably gonna be me.

Nonetheless, today’s training found Kakashi and me standing kind of close to the water’s edge, while Rin and the dogs sat back in the shade. While they didn’t really need to be ready to jump in at a moment’s notice, I couldn’t help but feel like their confidence in my ability to use Lightning chakra was a bit...disheartening. Sure, I wasn’t totally sure what I was doing, but they could have had a little confidence in me.

Even if it would be a question of “what would I set on fire first?”
“First thing’s first,” Kakashi said, without a hint of the trouble I’d caused him before. “Did you bring the training paper?”

“Yeah, I did,” I said, and retrieved a scroll from my hip holster. Flipping through the seals for a moment, I popped one open and the stack of chakra-sensitive paper into my hand. Though it was silly of me, I’d never quite made the connection of using them to help train myself.

Showed what I knew.

“Take one piece in each hand,” Kakashi went on, as I pulled two sheets out of the stack and did as he asked. “Now channel chakra into the left.”

“Er, gimme a sec…” Drawing chakra up to my shoulder, I let it pool against the seal node that marked the end of my original chakra coils. Normal flow didn’t quite do the trick, but if I charged the seals correctly… There was a sensation like someone had taken weight off the joint, letting blood flow again. But in my chakra coils instead, and with a sort of humming sensation instead of the harsh buzz of pins and needles.

The sleeves of my training gear ended at the elbow, so I got to put on a bit of a show from there down. The active form of the seal resembled a true sleeve tattoo, and not just the utilitarian medical prosthetic that Tsunade had originally been going for. No, Sensei and Kushina had gone all out, because they had no concept of leaving things un-awesome.

Which was why the seal took the form of a classical ink painting of Isobu and his long spiky tails, with his head and body taking up a position around my upper bicep and his tails spiraling down around my arm to my wrist. Tsuruya’s inked image was ahead of Isobu’s, on my shoulder with her wings outstretched, with her feathers raining down to connect any tenketsu points that the initial design might have missed.

It was beautiful. But also really, really showy, so I tried not to depend too much on it when I didn’t have to. Much like electric cable, energy was inevitably lost as heat as the power moved from place to place. The people who had worked on me had done their best, but I didn’t have enough control over my artificial chakra coils to avoid that problem. And I never would.

Kakashi was staring at me. More specifically, he was looking at the seal on my arm with an unreadable expression, headband up and Sharingan almost glowing.

I didn’t really have it in me to tease him at the moment, but it felt a bit self-indulgent to show off like that. “It, uh, it’s pretty cool, right?”

Kakashi blinked twice, then nodded. “And the needles didn’t bother you?”

“Oh no, they did.” I shuddered at the memory. Still… “But it was worth it.”

Kakashi…actually smiled. Like, I couldn’t tell he was smiling because I’d never seen him do it without his mask on, but his eyes did the crinkly thing and he felt content. “Then I’m glad it turned out well. It looks good on you.”

I felt my face heat up a little. Gah, why did I suck at taking compliments? “W-well I wouldn’t do it again…”

“Can you please get started on training?” Rin called from the shade.

I want to see things explode now.
Ah, right. Both of us got back down to business, which really amounted to seeing if I could make the paper do something new.

Kakashi coughed to clear his throat, then said, “Anyway, channel with your left hand first.”

With my seal tattoo active, it wasn’t like I had anything better to do. I did as Kakashi asked, sending the somewhat-controlled chakra down my arm and toward my fingertips. Once it reached the paper, it was as though I’d run the sheet under a faucet.

Well, at least that was a decent baseline. Wasn’t like I didn’t already know what my chakra nature was.

Kakashi had his own sheet of paper between his fingers, and a spark of chakra from him sent the whole thing crinkling up as though crushed by an invisible hand. And I already knew he could use as many different nature transformations as different kinds of jutsu he’d copied, so I had to tamp down on the surge of jealousy. The Sharingan was such bullshit.

I grumbled and tossed the used-up paper aside.

“I have no idea if I’m going to be able to copy that.” Sure, I had more control with my right arm, but this process still involved stripping my chakra of its natural nature transformation and trying to convert my energy into something else.

“Barely anyone gets this right on the first try, Kei. That’s why this is training,” Kakashi pointed out.

I didn’t really want to hear that, mostly out of pride. I was so used to being good at chakra control that it felt like an insult when I couldn’t do everything I wanted to do. Even if I’d lost medical ninjutsu years ago already, I took failures way too personally.

But I did try. In a way, it was like my rip-off of the Samurai Sword technique—filing everything down to a single cutting point—

The paper split in two.

“God dammit!”

Kakashi made a confused noise. “What?”

*Why did I have to do that in English?* That was two fuckups in a row. A fuckup squared.

I facepalmed with my right hand alone. “Don’t mind me. I just—that wasn’t even *Wind Release*. That was me fucking up the chakra scalpel visualization, which is *not* what I meant to do.”

“And the shouting?” Kakashi reminded me, somewhat dryly.

That was a...a bit harder to explain. “I, uh…” Well, “The world I used to be a part of...had a lot of different languages. That was a small part of one of them.”

“...And probably a rude part.”

He knew me all too well. “Jackass.”

Kakashi raised an eyebrow at that. “Really, Kei? Foreign language insults?”

Argh! “Just let me try this again.”
“Go ahead,” Kakashi said mildly, and let me get back to work.

I sat down on the ground and crossed my legs as though preparing to meditate. Then I got another piece of paper out of the stack and set the rest down next to me. Something told me that I’d be going through a lot of them.

We wasted at least half an hour out there: me, trying to work on a technique that didn’t easily jive with what I could already do, and Kakashi eventually deciding that his time was better spent reading his novel rather than watching me fail at a basic exercise that many times in a row. Granted, he wasn’t a great teacher—Lightning for him was about as easy as pie, and being a genius meant he didn’t often think about why other people didn’t learn something as fast as he did. Or how to help them.

Meanwhile, Rin and the dogs played fetch downriver.

“How about we try something different?” he asked after I’d wasted yet another sheet of chakra-sensitive paper. While I was busy folding it into a very tiny paper airplane out of sheer annoyance, I did nod to him.

“Trying to do this from memory isn’t working,” I complained, throwing the paper airplane out across the river. Once the needle-nosed little monster got to the middle of the water, it exploded into a two-meter fireball.

“From memory?” Kakashi asked, even as he glanced at the remnants of the explosion with some trepidation.

“I know how your chakra feels, and I’m trying to copy it,” I explained. “But it’s not working.”

“Then let’s move on to the Shadow Clone Jutsu instead,” Kakashi suggested.

I made a face at him. Sheer stubbornness said I could do this without needing to divide my chakra into half a dozen different bodies, but this had clearly not been the case. “Okay. Guess we might as well use the Forbidden Scroll for something.”

Kakashi sighed. “Shadow Clone is the easiest jutsu on the scroll.”

Maaaybe Sensei shouldn’t have made a habit of letting us do whatever we wanted with one of the village’s most dangerous resources…

But whatever. It was in one of my supply scrolls, which was about as secure as it had ever been. It had been stolen by a genin last time around…or a not-even-a-genin. Naruto had failed his graduation exam three times by that point, hadn’t he?

Aside from the Shadow Clone Jutsu, the rest of the techniques on it were dangerous enough that I, personally, would have sealed the entire rest of the scroll in a concrete bunker. The world did not need a preview of the regenerating, super-powered uberzombies that the Impure World Resurrection technique made.

Or at least not another one, I thought grimly as I unrolled the scroll. Orochimaru had been enough for anyone.

“The Shadow Clone Jutsu is objectively fairly simply to perform,” Kakashi said, sitting down across from me as I got to the part where the Shadow Clone Jutsu was described. I had a grasp on it in theory, but I’d known better than to try it out unsupervised. “The scroll tells you that the jutsu fully divides your chakra between you and any clones you create, but it’s a little more complex than that.”
“How so?” I asked, since it had always bothered me that Naruto could spam the hell out of the jutsu and somehow not die. Come to that, I didn’t know how Kakashi had managed to use the technique when he was a kid either, and that didn’t even get into the whole Lightning-based clone business.

“The chakra transfer that allows you to use a clone’s memory also returns some of it so you can use it again.” Kakashi raised two fingers. “So if you only make one clone and it stays within, say, a hundred meters of you, you’ll get at least ninety percent of your chakra back. That decreases with distance and by the number of clones you make, so be careful. And since you have Isobu-san with you, you should be able to handle many more clones than, for example, Sensei tends to use.”

For reference, the highest number of clones I’d ever seen Sensei use was five, and that was only so he’d have some distractions-slash-Sage Mode batteries for the fight with me. And then we had his son, whose first use of the Shadow Clone Jutsu had produced five hundred viable clones...and then used them to beat a single chūnin into submission.

One had to wonder about efficient use of force in that situation. Luckily, I wasn’t aiming to be that ambitious.

I got to my feet. “I’m ready. Just the Tiger seal, right?” In execution, the Shadow Clone technique was pretty simple—gather chakra, wait for threshold...and then let it poof away into a brand new me! At least, I hoped so. Water clones were so much easier. Still, the chakra requirements for this technique probably would have killed me before Isobu had come into the picture and done some body work. Even now, I was a bit leery of a technique that demanded that much chakra in one go when it wasn’t even guaranteed to work.

Kakashi simply said, “Whenever you’re ready.”

I gathered my chakra, pulling out all the stops—

Roaring ocean waves filled my ears. My vision went black.

And then.

I—

Kakashi

When Kei’s arms go slack and she starts to topple, I catch her without thinking. My head fills with noise, like power lines buzzing or cicadas screaming, and it’s not until Kei is limp in my arms that I realize I’m not breathing.

Fumbling, I turn Kei over in my arms until she’s face-up and I can check her pulse at her neck. My hands shake, but I at least remember not to use my thumb. There is a pulse, and she’s breathing, but she’s unresponsive to touch and—“Kei!”—and sound, and this has never happened before without an obvious reason.

“Kei, come on,” I hear myself say, ragged and desperate. “Don’t do this.”

There’s the sound of rustling fabric, and Rin’s hand clamps around my wrist and then Kei’s off my lap and on the ground. Rin’s hands glow and they’re on Kei’s head and heart, and she’s talking and I can’t—I can’t—

“—kashi!” is all the warning I get before Pakkun sinks his teeth into my calf. Immediately, I focus on
him with a reprimand stuck behind the knot in my throat, but he’s entirely unbothered. “Kakashi, the clone’s unconscious, too!”

The—what?

Pakkun bares all his teeth at me and growls, so I get the picture. *Focus, dumbass—this is important!*

I tear my eyes away from Kei and shove my headband up and away from Obito’s eye. The clone shouldn’t be unconscious—any kind of hit that would disable a person would outright disperse the clone—and Kei shouldn’t be unresponsive with this much chakra left in her system. This doesn’t make sense.

But the incongruity is enough to snap me out of my daze. “Urushi, Bisuke, go get Sensei and Kushina. Bull? Tsunade. Tell them Kei’s unresponsive with no visible reason, and that it seems to be related to the Shadow Clone technique we were working on. Tell them everything.”

The three dogs barked in unison before taking off in the direction of the village. I’d have sent one more to Obito, but he was on a mission.

That left me and the other five dogs to deal with what might have gone wrong with the clone.

Kei’s clone is face-down on the ground, looking...somewhat warped. It looks younger than she is, with glasses askew on a face that doesn’t have Kei’s distinct scar. It has long hair, pulled back in a tail, and is dressed like a civilian in a loose sweater. Its chakra, too, feels and looks off. The balance of Yin and Yang components is a complete mess—there’s so little Yang that it’s a wonder the clone can even exist.

*What the actual hell?*

The obvious solution to this problem is to just stab the clone and hope the missing Yin chakra returns to Kei’s body and allows her to wake up, but this entire situation is unprecedented. People who end up unconscious as a result of the technique are supposed to be dying, not stuck in some indecisive half-state. It doesn’t make sense.

“Kei?” I hear Rin’s voice say, as I pick the clone up off the ground and turn around. Kei’s—she’s sitting up but—

Two glowing eyes—gold encased in red—pin Rin and me in place as the Three-Tails’s chakra floods the clearing. Her eyes are open, but Kei’s not in there.

It’s Isobu.

Obito’s eye itches like there’s an eyelash in it, but I clamp down on the urge to use the Mangekyō Sharingan in any way, shape, or form. This isn’t like the time at Sorayama, not when the chakra Isobu is using is fully under his control and not mimicking the worst typhoon I’ve ever seen. The pressure here is just what Isobu is.

“What did you do?” Kei’s voice, at the bottom of her register, still sounds like her. But it’s definitely Isobu speaking.

“The jutsu didn’t work how it was supposed to.” Which is an understatement of the worst kind, but Isobu tilts Kei’s head to one side, just slightly, to show that he’s listening. I shift the clone in my arms and say, “This doesn’t even look like her.”

“That,” Isobu growled, “is not my concern. What I want to know is why I am here, and why
Kei is not.

Oh no. “She’s not in there with you?”

“If she was, I would not be asking!” Isobu snarls, but is too uncoordinated to get Kei’s body up on her feet and lunge at me. Instead, he drives Kei’s fingernails into the dirt in frustration, maintaining a low, harsh rumble in her diaphragm.

“Kakashi, the clone—” Rin prompts, not that she has to. I can feel the clone stirring and lower Kei’s botched copy to the ground. As angry as Isobu is, there’s a possibility that this is Kei.

It makes no sense in the context of the technique, but stranger things have happened. Mostly to Kei.

The clone opens its eyes and immediately adjusts its crooked glasses with one hand. It doesn’t even sit up first.

Its eyes aren’t like Kei’s. They’re lighter, duller, and lack the depth in hers. Kei’s a whole person. This...isn’t.

“Kei?” Rin asks, hesitant to turn her attention fully away from Isobu. But he’s looking at the clone, too, and his expression, on Kei’s, looks downright murderous.

The clone focuses on Rin, then on Isobu’s eyes coming out of Kei’s face. Its gaze is still dull and unfocused, acting as though the lights are on but no one’s home. And still, in an approximation of Kei’s voice, the clone says, “We are experiencing...difficulties. I do not know where Kei...is.”

“You.” Isobu struggles to get up again, but fails once more. He doesn’t know what to do with legs.

“What are you doing here? You should be dead!”

A chill runs down my spine.

The last time I heard that tone from Kei, Isobu was fighting her to escape from the seal. The Dreamer had only emerged from sheer desperation, because all of us were going to die if we were down a fighter. And somehow, her existence had let us keep fighting long enough for Kei to recover, Obito to return, and Sensei to rescue us.

“There was a complication with the jutsu.” The Dreamer blinks heavily, as though sleepy, and lies down on the ground again. “I do not have further information.”

If I disperse her—No, not yet.

I don’t know what’s happening, and it could make things worse. “Dreamer—”

“The Dreamer is...what I was.” I don’t miss the definite article there. “But I am not fully her. I am not supposed to be here.”

“And what would happen if I dispersed you?” I ask, as she continues to lie there.

“You have no idea.” Isobu’s voice cuts clean across us, and I turn back to see Rin’s hand resting against Kei’s shoulder to support him. Isobu’s chakra runs across what rudimentary danger sense I had like a saw on a harp, sharpening the world. “Do nothing without information.”

Hard to do that when I don’t have any. All I have is the smell of mud and grass and summertime heat, of sweat and nonexistent blood. It rips through me, drilling in between my eyes like a stake,
reaching down my throat.

The Dreamer sighs. “I do not know.”

I don’t—I don’t know what to do.

I leave the Dreamer lying there and get up. I can’t do anything right now and that’s—it’s not something that’s happened in years. Not like this. There’s no one to hurt, no convenient target. I’m helpless. Kei needs someone, but I’m not that person. I can’t help. I can’t—

I don’t know what to do. I know there aren’t hands on my throat but I can’t breathe. I know there’s no blood but all I can smell is—

Just like when Dad—

Something round and furry butts up against my calf, and I reach down reflexively to scratch Akino’s head. My fingers catch on his sunglasses, drawing them across the circular metallic edge as Akino pushes more into my grasp. His fur catches if I stroke him the wrong way, pulling me back.

Pakkun pushes his paws into the hollow of my knee and I drop to the ground and into the hundreds of blades of grass. This is real, this is here. Pakkun makes sure to leap onto my shoulder immediately and shove his nose in my ear.

Cold!

Pakkun’s tongue rasps against the side of my face as the other four dogs pile in, weighing me down. I’m not running anywhere with them intervening, warm and real and solid. They’re the only thing that’s real. Shiba pushes the top of his head up against my fingers, and I can feel myself clinging to him, and to my other dogs.

Focusing on the pack—on my pack—allows the fog to lift.

Rin’s voice sounds like it’s coming from far away when I finally sort it out of the noise. “Isobu-san, do you think the Hokage will be able to help?”

How much time did I lose? I wonder, from under a pile of squirming fur. I can’t quite string together enough words to ask. I can hear, but I can’t...

“He and Kushina-san did help create the seal here,” Isobu says, experimentally raising Kei’s left arm.

“This has nothing to do with that seal,” the Dreamer says, but without any particular inflection.

“Given how helpful you have been, you would do better to keep your mouth shut,” Isobu grumbles. He glances over at me again, leaning on me with the pressure of his chakra. “Are you back with us, boy?”

He noticed. Damnit.

I just about manage an affirmative grunt, but my tongue feels too heavy to make words. It’s taking all of my concentration to just follow the conversation.

I’ll have to snap at him later.

“Kakashi,” Rin says, since it’s not as though she has anything else to worry about. When I glare at
her, more embarrassed than angry, she just scratches Akino’s chin. She meets my eyes for just a moment, then says, “Leave it to me.”

Not like I have any *choice*.

I’m useless. And my dogs won’t let me move if I try.

Guruko fixes his teeth around my ankle as a warning and I return my hand to stroking him. Calm, calm, I need to be calm—

*Fwish.*

A hand lands on top of my hand and I hear Sensei’s voice saying, softly, “We’ll take it from here.”

I lean into his touch, just for a moment, before he moves on to the important part. *Give me an order,* I think. *Give me something I can do.*

“Kakashi, take your dogs and set up a security barrier.” I catch the packet of seals as it’s tossed in my direction. “Use Shiranui-kun’s link scheme. It’ll hold until Kushina sees what we’re dealing with.”

Things slot into place. I know how to do that.

**“Hokage,”** Isobu says clearly, as I get up to leave. **“Find my partner.”**

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**Kei**

On the whole, a featureless black void was not the most pleasant place to wake up no matter what way I sliced it. The lack of any kind of binding sensation meant I hadn’t been kidnapped and shoved in a basement, at least, but the world held a ton of terrible things that segued better from a training session. Since Kakashi had been there, and so had Rin, anyone trying to get to me would have probably gotten electrocuted and gotten their limbs surgically removed, regardless of what I could do.

That said, where was Isobu?

If I was unconscious, well, it wasn’t like I’d *know,* but Isobu was always with me. Though the big old turtle was distracting as all hell, I couldn’t see anything other than solid black and I couldn’t even hear the ringing noise in my ears that was supposed to be “silence.”

Well...shit. The fact that I was still capable of thinking making the whole situation deeply uncomfortable. If I wasn’t aware of the passage of time, via being *actually* unconscious, I probably would have been happier about it...assuming I woke up.

Speaking of waking up.

Could I try...opening my eyes? Or was this another one of those times when I didn’t even *have* eyes because all of this mind business was complete malarkey?

*No time like the present.*

I opened my eyes.

The first thing I saw was gray. Not solid gray, but the vague, somewhat ill-defined white-gray that made up an overcast sky that just *refused* to allow for rain. The clouds overhead moved fast enough to track and almost hurt to look at directly.
Then I sat up. Still had all my limbs attached, which was nice, but the giant chunk of bone-white driftwood I’d been using as a bed was somewhat less welcome. Gray sand stretched out toward the field of mottled, rounded gray beach stone, interspersed with fresh, dead, and rotting seaweed all along the shore. The sound of water was everywhere—carried by the wind from between two small isles of tree-topped rock in the distance, cut through by a knife-shaped white speedboat. Nearby, a tributary creek of some sort dumped fresh water toward the coast in an unending stream, while beach buzzards combed the sand for shellfish.

From the train tracks that shielded the rest of the world from the sea, to the water stretching out into the distance, I knew this place.

I knew it like the back of my hand, and only one person had ever seen it. And my turtle kaiju friend wasn’t here to share it.

I got to my feet and, for lack of anything better to do, started hiking through the sand, rocks, and driftwood. I didn’t know where I was going, but if I found myself in a place like this again...well, I’d probably know it when I got there.

It only took a few minutes of exploring for me to start to worry. Doubts stirred in my stomach like butterflies of the worst sort, trying to claw their way up my throat to choke me.

*I never dream about this place.* I hopped up onto the sea-rusted train tracks, placing one foot in front of the other with an ease that could only be me. Not the old me. Just Keisuke Gekkō, Konoha shinobi.

What was this all supposed to mean?

There was a voice from behind me, barely audible over the sound of the ocean wind. “You don’t know by now? I mean, shit, you really haven’t been paying attention.”

It took me a second or two to realize the voice was in clear, unaccented English—aside from the customary drawl from sheer Not Giving a Fuck. By that point, I had already turned around on the spot and dropped into a fighting stance.

“You’re kidding me,” said the woman standing in front of me, on a fallen log. She wore glasses thick enough to distort her face, and Kurenai-style hair crammed into a ponytail instead of short and loose like mine. She had a stronger jaw, jutting out a bit since her chin was in her upraised palm. With her legs crossed one over the other and her hunched body language, she looked like the exact opposite of a threat. She looked more like a bored civilian than anyone I’ve ever met in Konoha.

There was a mole under her left eye. Exactly where mine was.

Her eyebrows lifted just slightly. “Hey. How’ve you been?”

“Dead,” I said, more out of reflex than any pretense of wit.

“Uh-huh. You don’t look dead to me,” the woman said, adjusting her headphones so they’re not falling out of her ears. They’re pierced, unlike mine. “But hey, I’m the one who’s blind. Do I look dead to you?”

What kind of question was that? “You’re me—my definition, you had to die so I could even exist.” I flapped a hand in her general direction, unable to string enough coherent thoughts together to form an argument. But I had—had a thing to say! “So this is it? I find out how I croaked last time? Then...what? I die again?”
The woman—the other me—shrugged, while I continued to chase my brain in circles. Oh man, oh god—“I don’t want to go!” I blurted, my hands clutching at my face. I didn’t even look like her anymore. “I managed—it took me twenty fucking years but I-I’m almost as far as I got last time! And things are trying to kill me a lot more than they did with you! I had to—I’m not you anymore! You—you didn’t fight to protect anything! You didn’t give up what I—what I—”

My doppelganger drummed her fingers on the sleeve of her hoodie, waiting for something. Something I might not be able to give.

Dad. A flash of his funeral, when the recovery team hadn’t even recovered enough to bury. The feel of his stupid permanent stubble as he kissed my forehead.

Mom. I saw her last moments on earth, spent protecting me and Hayate and never getting up again. Her hands on mine, bandaging split knuckles and telling me it’d be all right.

“You d-didn’t lose anyone,” I said, tripping over my words. “I lost them. I lost everyone. You never even knew—”

Obito. His hand in mine when he’d thought he was going to die, clinging to me with everything he had left until—at the last—he found the courage to let go. Messing with his too-long hair the day he got back, showing me that the agony of my failure was worth it for the things I still had a chance to change.

“You never knew when it was over,” I said, looking down at the steel under my feet, which was starting to vibrate. “When I—when you died, I was the one who kept going. Who picked up things where you left off.”

She stared blankly at me. “Yeah. And?”

I made a noise of pure frustration. “You—we—”

“You literally just said that I didn’t have anything to do with it,” she pointed out. “So why are you pissed off at me?” She stood up on the log and held up a hand as though to stop me from saying anything further, which was even weirder coming from someone shorter, softer, and less authoritative than me when I got going. “Look, lemme be clear here. I’m dead. Gone. Absolutely not a thing. But you? You exist. You’re just using my form as a sounding board because you lost the habit of talking to yourself a while ago.”

Well, that was just great. On one hand, it wasn’t like my dream-world wasn’t going to be populated by mental projections. The fact that one had turned out to be an Inception-level self-destruct impulse was distinctly unhelpful, but not entirely unexpected in hindsight.

...Why was I such a jackass to myself? That was a question for the ages.

“You should probably think about talking this over with your scorpion therapist,” the other me said into the silence.

“Oh, like hell this conversation is gonna wait for that,” I snapped. Oh, I recognized this trope. I’d only had to deal with it about eight times! “This is one of those stupid, forced confrontations with my evil inner self or some shit.”

The other me nodded. “Yeah, probably.”

“You’re not helping,” I told her.
She shrugged. “Really? You needed a version of you to yell at to resolve your issues, right?”

Twisting her earbud cords between her fingers, she added, “So, what are you thinking?”

About three different things that were unhelpful, in fact. The first of which was that I didn’t really want to deal with another version of myself in full troll mode. “There must be a reason my mind decided I needed to talk to you.”

“Yeah. And what else?”

“Reincarnation and Shadow Clones probably don’t mix.” Two could play at this game. What else? What other completely accurate but useless non-sequiturs did I have on hand? “Orochimaru’s opinions on souls should probably have come from a peer-reviewed journal.”

“Probably right, but not the point,” the other me said without a scrap of interest.

Dammit, that didn’t work.

I tried not to let my frustration show, biting the inside of my lip since it was about the most subtle sign I could manage. If I’d had a dime for every time I had to deal with pointless information fetch-quests...well, I’d actually be broke. But this was a version of me and I wasn’t exactly a font of patience at the moment. “Then can we skip all the soul-searching, vaguely-mystical bullshit and get right to the point?”

One of her eyebrows slooooowly rose.

I waited, crossing my arms.

Lightning struck a tree in the distance, making the tall birch explode into flying, flaming splinters. That was probably going to start a fire shortly enough. That...might mean that I needed to hurry up.

“Well, if you insist.” She cleared her throat and sat back down on the log, adjusting her glasses. “This is your life.” She glanced away, as though uncomfortable. “Let me go.”

Underneath my feet, the rumbling in the train tracks started to intensify. Wind tore through the upper branches of the nearby birch trees, setting a shower of leaves spinning across the clearing.

It was easier to look at them than to look at her.

Holding on to what I used to be was one of the few cornerstones of my life I’d had left when I had come here. It was pathetic, but I’d held myself apart from the shinobi world simply because I’d known something different—softer, broader, or perhaps just simpler. I’d been coping with this world by clinging to the old me, and my old life. I’d...been in between stops.

I watched the rocks on the tracks start to jump.

I just didn’t want to admit that everything back there was over. I’d done everything I could to make it relevant to my new experiences, clinging to predetermined information and forms and hoping to hell it worked. I hid a sad little core of myself away from everyone else, because I was the only one who could remember any of it. Hiding it so it was mine.

But it had been a very, very long time.

Twenty years there.

Twenty years undecided.
And...maybe something more, here.

The other me gave me a crooked smile. “Just a little further.”

The wind howled. My fingers tingled, and I felt a chill run down my spine as I looked at them. My fingertips were glowing blue, and were dissolving away like smoke. I needed to stop fucking around and get back to my body.

“I’m—” I needed to finish my thoughts, before the train got here. I didn’t really know why, other than the idea that a train stop wasn’t where I wanted to be. It was a halfway point to where I wanted to go.

“Leave me out of it,” the other me said in a voice that sounded like it was coming from far away. “Who are you? What are you?”

I...It was kind of funny, but I’d never really started counting my years cumulatively? I was twenty inside, and was always twenty inside. It was just that my body in this life had been a little behind. Then a little less. Then...I was here. Perhaps it was almost apt that I’d tripped headfirst into more philosophical, existential crap right when I’d finally got that detail figured out.

The sound of a train horn split the air, and I hopped down off the tracks and clear, just as the massive cargo train and its hundreds of cars started to turn the bend. This wasn’t a commuter train track, after all—this was a way for things to end up somewhere else.

Where they were asked for and needed.

The engine of the train roared by, almost deafening me with another blast of its horn. Then the many shipping containers, chugging on southward with the inevitability of a force of nature. I’d probably have been flattened if I’d stayed on the tracks.

“It’s not like you were ever planning on taking the scenic route,” the other me said, shrugging. “You’ve got places to be.”

“Well,” I said after a second, watching the cars storm past us, “this isn’t gonna stop.”

“So? You’re a ninja.” The other me jabbed a finger at me. “Act like it.”

“I’m not just any ninja,” I corrected her, turning toward the train again. My eyes flicked over the train, calculating distances and trajectories. I knew how to do this. In deliberate Japanese, I said, “I’m Keisuke Gekkō, jinchūriki and S-rank shinobi of Konoha. And I’m not you anymore.”

The other me waved as I leapt, hitting the top of a car and digging my fingers into solid steel with unearthly strength. I twisted around, still flat on the top of the train, and saw her still waving for a little longer. As the train tracks curved away, she turned and started to walk away.

The beach, the tracks, and the other me all faded away, spinning away like so many leaves in the wind. It was like the world was dust on a black background, being blown away.

I let my head drop to the rumbling surface of the train, closing my eyes.

I was going home.

It was a rough homecoming.
“Where have you been?” Isobu demanded, with his three-story face right up at the edge of the beach.

It was my mindscape. For reasons mostly related to Isobu and his sense of interior decorating, this beach had never been purely mine. There weren’t nearly enough rocks or dead things. Isobu, unlike me, actually knew what a white-sand beach was supposed to be like.

It was nice to be home. “Uh, possibly dead. Was talking to the personification of my old life or something.”

Isobu surged forward, out of the surf, and nearly flattened me with the wake before I managed to float up and out of the way. His huge armored forearms curved around me in a giant scaled bowl, or at least as well as he could manage it, and the sunlight overhead got blocked out by the sight of his three tails curling over his back.

I floated closer, landing on the uppermost spike of his lower jaw, and put both of my hands against his permanently closed eye. “Love you too, Isobu.”

Isobu made the same kind of rumbling noise as the train from before. “Don’t do that again.”

“I promise,” I said, as his great golden eye finally flicked to one side to meet my gaze. Like absolute hell I was going through that song and dance again. I was much happier right here, thank you.

Isobu’s spiky head shifted somewhat, as though he was listening to something I couldn’t hear, and then he said, “I believe you. But now you need to convince the others.”

“Others?” I repeated blankly. Oooooh fuck. I’d left Rin and Kakashi out there and then there were all the dogs and whoever they’d called in—

“And then there’s the clone to consider. As in, consider popping her,” Isobu added, as though the situation that had gotten me into this mess was a mere afterthought.

On one hand: I made a clone! On the other, somewhat more important hand: I was never going to use a technique that apparently punted my soul out of my body ever again. There was little else I could have possibly done than that, since Isobu couldn’t find me and there wasn’t exactly a lot that medical ninjutsu could do about it either.

“I suggest you get moving before they call in the Rinnegan boy for a...sixth opinion,” Isobu said, because apparently he’d studied up on “having the last word” since the last time we’d spoken. So much sass, so little time.

“I’m going, I’m going.”

One of these days, I was gonna stop using terrible metaphors for bouncing in and out of my mindscape, but that day was not today.

So I woke up again, like I was someone who’d watched way too many screenings of Inception. Goddamn layered consciousness.

“—waking up!” Kushina? Well, given all the other crap I’d gone through recently, calling in the only other jinchūriki seal expert was probably a good idea.

I made the mistake of opening my eyes before I was ready, and thus spent the first fifteen seconds being squished by Kushina. Her hair was about the only thing I could see—pure, solid red that poked me in the face—until she finally decided to let go and let me sit up on my own. Mostly.
“I’m so glad you’re okay!” Kushina held me out at arm’s length, clearly checking for any injuries. Just faintly, I could make out a spark of red in the depths of her eyes that told me Kurama was watching, too. And while she did that, I looked over her shoulder.

Aside from Kushina, there was a bit of a crowd around me. Sensei was scribbling something on the edge of a large circular sealing array around us that didn’t really seem designed to *do* anything, but instead to monitor the people inside it. Tsunade peered over Sensei’s shoulder, murmuring corrections to a thing or two that apparently he’d forgotten in his haste. Rin hovered outside the faintly glowing seal-work, anxiously twisting a shell bracelet in her hands, while Kakashi stood nearby with his arms crossed and his Sharingan slowly spinning. His eight dogs crowded around, knocking into knees and generally making sure no one forgot they were there.

I made to get to my feet so I could show everyone I was okay, but one of Kushina’s Adamantine Sealing Chains was wrapped around my chest, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to be able to break it. Or budge it.

...Welp.

“I’m all right, Kushina-san,” I said, though it was probably one of the more blatant lies I’d ever told.

Kushina booped my nose. “I don’t believe you. And I don’t understand how using the Shadow Clone technique could lead to all of this!”

“...That is a very, very long story,” I said, eying the others. I didn’t want to talk about it. Maybe not *never*. Just...not yet.

“Well, you’re still not going anywhere until we figure out what was wrong, and make sure it won’t happen again,” Kushina told me firmly. I twisted in her grip to so I could see what she was looking at, and spotted a rather *creepy* Shadow Clone lying on the ground in the seal with us. “You made a clone correctly, but...well, enough other things went wrong that I don’t want you anywhere near this technique.”

Well, considering that it felt entirely like Yin chakra...

**It's exactly who you think it is. Or it was. After you came back, it stopped responding.**

I suppose that after seven years as a non-independent piece of me, there wasn’t much of the Dreamer left. Aside from being composed of Yin chakra, there wasn’t much in common with the splinter I remembered. All that was really left to do was to disperse the clone and get all the pieces back together.

“Way ahead of you,” I half-mumbled. I tugged experimentally at the chains. “Can I get up now?”

Kushina gave me one more careful look, then nodded. “But I’m not letting go of you. The last thing I want is for your soul to fly off again!”

...Leaving aside the fact that a human soul was one of the *very* few things that Kushina’s chains didn’t work on, I was actually touched. A little annoyed at her overprotectiveness, but still mostly touched.

**Be careful when you disperse the clone. I have no interest in going back to being the only one in charge of this body.**

That...well, that explained what Isobu had been doing while I was out on spiritual walkabout, but I could wait for the full story there.
I got up and, with Kushina’s chain around my waist still, I walked toward the unresponsive clone. While I didn’t know what it had looked like before, in terms of coloration, it currently looked like it had fallen into a barrel full of bleach. Or something.

“I’m just going to disperse the clone, Kushina-san. And then never use the jutsu again.” I had had quite enough of the whole consciousness-splitting experiment. Any more trauma, and I had no idea what would happen.

Kushina glanced over her shoulder at Sensei, who happened to be looking up (and probably listening to her). I saw him nod, and took that as a sign that was allowed to go ahead.

Kushina loosened her hold on the chain, just a bit.

I walked over to the clone, which wasn’t breathing, and put my hand against its forehead. The Yin chakra inside the clone was entirely still, consistent with an inanimate chakra construct. Of course, pretty much every other point about it was wrong in a different way, but after a certain point I just had to accept that I’d botched every relevant step of the Shadow Clone technique.

One pulse of chakra from me, and I got the Yin chakra back along with a skull-splitting headache. There were memories in the mess, but my main relevant thought after the experience was, “Ow…”

Kushina’s hand on my arm managed to steady me, but it was a close thing. If that was what Shadow Clone bullshit was supposed to feel like when it worked, it was just as well that I was staying out of it. “Never doing that again.”

“I hope not,” Kushina said.

With that, Kushina steered me out of the sealing circle and the barrier seal. Sensei started clearing up his work, while Tsunade patted Rin’s shoulder and nudged her forward as soon as the containment barrier—probably Kushina’s—finally went down.

“You are in so much trouble!” Rin said, and I winced. Noticing my headache problem, she tried again, “Please, I need to make sure you’re okay. Can I check to make sure?”

Like I ever really said no to Rin. She pinched. “Go ahead.”

I trusted Rin, and with Tsunade hanging out right next to us, there was little chance that anyone would miss anything wrong with me. Tsunade wasn’t a miracle worker, but for Konoha she was the next best thing. And I think that Rin liked having the oversight.

One glowing set of medical checks later, and I was given a clean bill of health. Which, admittedly, made not one whit of sense. I had kinda fainted due to soul displacement shenanigans. The fact that I could be fine just after a few literal soul-searching moments sounded completely pat.

“One hand,” Sensei said, once the situation had finally calmed down, “that was a very interesting study into the nature of souls, and I’ve never had to make a soul-catching seal before that didn’t involve summoning and sacrifice. On the other...Kei, never do that again.”

Pff. He’d have added that jutsu to my curriculum eventually. It was only a matter of time. And besides, I was fine. “It’s not like I knew that was going to happen.”

“You didn’t,” he acknowledged carefully. “And truth be told, it was probably for the best that your experiment happened with this much supervision.”

Kakashi looked away, his Sharingan covered once again. I must have really scared him. Once I got
past the headache fun, I’d be able to fully process that.

I put him out of my mind just for a moment. To Sensei, I said, “Yeah, but I’m sorry I scared you.”

Sensei and Kushina exchanged looks. Kushina either lost or won whatever silent conversation the two of them had, and said, “We’ll talk about some of the specifics tomorrow. For now... well, no more training for today. Rin-chan can check tomorrow to see if everything’s still working as it should.”

Pakkun nosed my ankle, so I reflexively reached down to pick him up. With the dog secured for petting, I turned my attention to Rin, who set her jaw and said, “And if there’s no sign of trouble, I... guess you might be okay. But we’ll find out tomorrow!”

“I promise I’ll visit you at work,” I offered. But to be honest, there wasn’t anything else to do. If Tsunade hadn’t wanted to put me under observation, and Isobu confirmed that I wasn’t dying… What else could anyone do?

One by one, and with a hug each (except for Tsunade), everyone besides Kakashi filed out of the clearing to go on with their daily routines. Rin looked like she needed a moment just to think on her own, possibly overstressed, and I was left holding Pakkun while surrounded by six of the other dogs.

Bull was by Kakashi, who still looked... brittle. Felt it, too.

“So, uh,” I began. “You’re not going?”

“You have my dogs,” Kakashi said, but there was something in his tone that was, at best, concerning. After a second, he shook his head and went back to petting Bull’s wrinkly forehead.

Mindful of the dogs herding me at knee-level, I made my way over to Kakashi and set Pakkun down on Bull’s head. “Kakashi, did you have something on your mind?”

“More like something in this book,” Kakashi said, and pulled his romance novel from before out of his shuriken pouch.

Um.

Before I could say anything, Kakashi opened the book and handed me a somewhat dog-eared ticket. “Found it today.”

Recognition made me snort with laughter, just for a moment. He still had the IOU I’d given him for his birthday? I’d been half-convinced he’d lost it ages ago, solely because it had never come up.

Still, he got me. “Guess I’m paying this time, then?” I chuckled. “You got me.”

“I didn’t think your pride would let you accept a babysitter,” Kakashi said, somewhat dryly. He looked away. “I don’t want to find out tomorrow that you passed out and got hurt.”

Pffft. Okay. That worked. “Am I paying for the dogs, too?”

Pakkun waved a paw. “We’ll take a rain check. Human food has too many carbohydrates.”

I glanced at Kakashi. “You have something in mind?”

“I was thinking udon,” Kakashi replied, as all eight of his dogs turned their attention to him. “You’re all dismissed. Thank you.”
Instead of the usual round of protests, Pakkun just saluted and said, “Later, Kakashi.”

All eight of the dogs poofed out of the clearing, leaving us alone.

Hm. After a second, I shrugged, walked over to Kakashi, and the both of us started heading back into town. Though I’d gotten a clean bill of health, I’d get my ass whooped by Rin if I tried ninja-traveling without getting very specifically cleared first.

I debated linking arms with Kakashi or something, but I’d probably been enough of a wreck today. It was still pretty early in the day, and Kakashi probably would have been able to salvage things if not for deciding to keep me company.

“I’m sorry I wrecked your chance to go talk to Shizune,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck guiltily.

“I drew everyone’s attention, and now you’re gonna hang out with me to make sure I’m okay…”

“It’s fine,” Kakashi said, shoving his hands in his pockets.

The brittle edge was back, but not as sharp as before. The Dreamer’s memory clearly showed him freezing up in a panic, but I couldn’t do anything about that and I wasn’t going to ask. Kakashi deserved better than to be a target for my curiosity.

I let it drop. I was gonna buy him food and he’d get a chance to recharge and perhaps plan a better day. When I got a chance, I’d withdraw my bet from Genma, too. It was a stupid joke anyway.

Kakashi and I found a nice udon restaurant. While I ate modestly—wasn’t like I’d expected to use that much energy, and dying didn’t apparently take that much out of me—Kakashi took advantage of having someone else foot the bill. While we didn’t talk much, I liked to think that the four empty udon bowls, stacked up next to each other, made up for the apology I’d never have gotten him to accept.

Seeing him smile, between slurping noodles and letting his mood build back up moment by moment, was worth the dent in my finances and every other thing that had happened today.

Chapter End Notes

The song of this chapter is from Wicked, but works best if you remove a bit of the specificity of Glinda and Elphaba's lines that pertain overmuch to the plot.

(Also, that "other me" was essentially the manifestation of Kei's feelings toward her past life, which have been holding her back for quite some time. In several areas. Which will be explored later in this arc, too.)
It took me entirely too long to get back to Genma about the bet, since the next day basically involved getting jumped by half the medics I knew. Rin was concerned, Yamaguchi-sensei was a concerned asshole, and there was much to-do about what amounted to basically nothing.

Yamato was generally nicer about the entire thing, merely taking my hand and giving me a cursory scan before carrying on with whatever he’d been doing before I showed up. Since it involved multiple IV stands, I didn’t want to ask. Tsunade, who had more faith in her students than I’d expected, carried on with her day with barely a glance at me to make sure I was still breathing—and only bothered because I happened to be in the hospital at the same time they passed me in the hall.

It was hard to say which style I preferred.

Still, I eventually got to go the Administration center. I didn’t exactly cross my fingers that he was there—I knew the schedule better than that—but it was still a relief to spot him carrying a gigantic stack of manila folders on top of a box with more folders. Sensei clearly believed in putting people to work while they were at work.

“Hey, Genma,” I said, holding up a hand in a half-wave. Not like he could return it. “About the bet…”

“The Hokage’s the one with the book now. You can collect your winnings from him,” Genma said, not stopping to chat. Thus, I decided to follow him.

“And if I want to withdraw my bet?” I asked, lengthening my stride to match his.

Genma glanced at me, one eyebrow raised. “You already won. Wasn’t your bet that Kakashi would chicken out yesterday?”

“Yeah, but…” I averted my eyes. “You might’ve heard that yesterday was a mess. And it was my fault. I did take him out to lunch to make up for it, a bit, but I think I kinda ruined his chance to ask Shizune out.”

Genma stared at me for three solid seconds, senbon drooping. It took him a bit to get his expression back under control. With forced casualness, he said, “Then take the bone and the money Kakashi’s dogs wagered and call it even. They’re the only others who made a bet centered around yesterday.”

“I can do that,” I agreed, deciding not to comment on the awkward pause. I’d just have to give the
dogs their bone back, and ask them if they wanted the money. “Sorry for bothering you.”

“It’s fine, Kei,” Genma said. He paused again. “Actually, you’re supposed to be taking over for me after this, aren’t you?”

That was...certainly a thing that was true. I made a face at him. “Is that a hint?”

Genma took the opportunity to dump the files in my arms. “Yes, it was. Later, Kei.” And with that, Genma wandered off and out of the building in a deceptively quick saunter, just to get away from any potential negative response.

...Well, I couldn’t say I hadn’t asked for it by coming in when I had. Sensei made allowances for me when I was supposedly on light duty anyway. With a clean bill of health, he would have expected me to arrive sometime today, though not necessarily when he’d ordered Genma to do something.

*Oh well.* I shifted my fingers to get a better grip and continued my trip through the building to Sensei’s office.

I had to elbow the door open, which was never the most graceful solution, but I made it! Per usual, Sensei was at his desk and sorting through the usual mountain of paperwork that a village seemed to generate *ex nihilo*. His head was bowed over his work, and every once in a while he’d drop one paper or another into his outbox so it could be sent on its way to whatever part of the village needed his input. Today didn’t feature barrettes or rubber bands, so perhaps the kids were learning how to write instead of baking.

I hefted the pile of paperwork a little higher, resting the box against my leg to balance it. “Sensei, where do you want these?”

Sensei took a second to look up, recognize me, and then pointed at a corner of his desk that was neither full of paper nor occupied by his organizational system. “Right here is fine, Kei.” As he got back to his work, he said distractedly, “I was expecting Shiranui-kun.”

“He clocked out,” I said, doing as he asked. Once the paperwork was out of my hands, I started wringing feeling back into them. While doing so, I looked around and commented, “Busy morning?”

Sensei shrugged.

Yeah, that about summed it up. The village’s paperwork burden had become less Sensei’s problem over time, thanks to the improvements he’d made to the management system that put more work in other people’s hands, but he still spent quite a lot of time going over other people’s problems. If he didn’t have the knack for it, and an abundance of patience besides, he probably would have gone gray from this job’s requirements a long time ago.

Well, I did have a few actual things to talk to him about. “Sensei, can I collect my winnings while I’m here? Genma said I won Bull’s bone and some money when I talked to him today, and I need to give them back.”

Sensei looked up again, blinking. Then, “Oh, right, the betting pool. After yesterday, I almost forgot about it.” With that, he opened a drawer on his desk and started digging around for what I’d requested. As he did, and plopped a somewhat gnawed-on bone on his desk next to someone’s expense report, he added, “Though if you’re going to return these things, you’ll have to wait.”

“Oh?” I asked, as Sensei finally emerged with a small paper packet filled with, from the sound of it, an array of coins. Had the dogs gone digging around in couch cushions for their wager?
He placed both the packet and the bone on the edge of his desk so I could collect them. Then he said, “Kakashi left on a mission earlier this morning. He’ll be gone for about two months.”

What? D-Did I have something to do with this?

While the memories were still a bit muddled after going over them with Isobu’s help, the botched Shadow Clone had still been a clone. And thus, its memories were mine no matter what form they’d arrived in.

The clone had seen Kakashi have a panic attack. I wasn’t a psychologist or a psychiatrist, but the clone’s memories were pretty clear. Kakashi had lost control, lost his ability to talk, and his dogs had brought him back around as best they could. Sensei had helped a little bit more by giving him something simple to do. Something he knew down to his bones.

And it had started almost immediately after I’d gotten punted out of my body and Isobu and the clone had had to field people’s concerns.

While I was making a point now to be less attached to my past life’s memories, it was hard not to recognize the fact that Kakashi had post-traumatic stress disorder. His dad’s death, Obito’s, Rin’s and then Sensei’s and Kushina’s all in a row had carved themselves into his core, coloring how he interacted with people from then on. What I’d seen then had been mostly averted here—but saying that downplayed how much had still happened.

Sensei and Kushina and Rin were all alive. I’d managed that much, with help and a lot of luck. But Sakumo Hatake still died, and Obito still ended up crushed half to death by a boulder. On top of that, Kakashi had been the one taken and tortured by Iwa-nin, and I’d gone boldly toward my death on several more occasions than Rin had ever wanted anything to do with. Willingly, each time.

Was I a new trigger for his trauma? I’d known that I’d had a huge effect on his life, and he cared about me, but I’d never wanted to cause him pain like that.

Especially not after Sorayama.

“Did...did Kakashi happen to say why he left?” I asked, having made myself thoroughly miserable.

Sensei, who had let me wallow in guilt for a few minutes while I thought, looked back up from his work and said, “I wasn’t going to let the Shinjitsu issue rest, Kei.” Sensei straightened up and stretched in his chair, and I heard several joints pop. As he went through and cracked each of his knuckles separately, he explained, “Kakashi volunteered to go on an information-gathering mission to reinforce Obito. He’s read the reports and is suited for the job. Yesterday’s events meant he put off leaving for twelve hours, but he was already scheduled to be deployed.”

Oh. So much for my drama-fueled internal monologue.

Still, everything not pertaining to his mission could still be somewhat true. And I still needed to make up for screwing up his schedule—and keeping him from talking to Shizune. Maybe I could talk to her once I finished my shift.

But for now, I was still with Sensei. And I could probably ask him the other thing that had occurred to me late last night.

I shook myself out of my daydreaming, deciding to ask one last question before I let Sensei work in peace. “Sensei, something occurred to me a little while ago. My mother’s file said she had a few living relatives left. Is there any more information on them?”
Sensei blinked. “I didn’t know you cared about that.”

“I...had a bit of a realization,” I admitted. Which downplayed the significance of yesterday rather a lot, but I had a thing for humorous understatement. But it was long past time I found out where I came from here, in the world where it mattered. “Since we already know the Gekkō family—and sort of like them—I thought it might be time to think about Mom’s half of things.”

Sensei tapped the end of his pen against his mouth, thinking. “I’ll look into it, but it may take some time. We don’t have much information about the internal politics in the Land of Iron at the moment, but I’ll keep an eye out for anything relevant.”

“Thank you, Sensei,” I said, and left him to work. I dug my personal project—my best guess at the form and function of a fūinjutsu barrier called Four Red Yang Formation. Sensei hadn’t gotten around to explaining it, but there was a vague memory bouncing around in the back of my mind, of some big barrier being used to contain the Ten-Tails. And I was...mostly sure Sensei knew how to do it?

After the drama of the last couple of days, it was therapeutic to work on a problem I actually had the tools to solve.

“Hey, Shizune-san, can I talk to—why is there a piglet on the table?” I asked, reversing myself most of the way through a sentence.

I didn’t make a habit of bothering medics at work unless I was the one being worked on, but I’d still volunteered at the hospital once upon a time. I knew where all the rooms were, and asking around for a bit had given me a chance to find the break room. Or one of them.

This particular break room was out of the way, and happened to include Shizune, Yamato...and a piglet.

Which brought me back to my original point.

“This is Tonton,” Yamato said, as the piglet pushed her nose up against the side of his hand. Yamato didn’t budge, because otherwise the piglet would have gotten into his lunch and eaten all the...everything, actually. Pigs were omnivores. “She’s our new teammate.”

“Is that why she has a pearl necklace?” I asked, unsure if I was allowed to pet what I was rapidly deciding had to be the cutest pig in the universe. “I mean, it looks good on her, but…”

“I think it does, too,” Yamato said with a firm nod, before allowing Tonton to steal a whole mouthful of carrots from a nearby container—which was notably not Yamato’s actual lunch. I had yet to find anyone under the age of about thirty here who liked carrots, for some bizarre reason.

Tonton was the first.

“The necklace was Tsunade-sama’s idea,” Shizune said, even as she reached over to scratch behind Tonton’s big rectangular ears. Even while eating, the piglet leaned into her touch. “Did you have something to ask me, Kei-san?”

I did, buuuuuuut… “When she’s done eating, can I hold her?”

“Just as long as you wash your hands afterward,” Shizune reminded me. “We are in a hospital, and Tonton’s still in training.”
“As a ninja-pig or as a service pig?” I asked, sitting down with them in one of the empty chairs.

“Both. We’re getting her used to people and the hospital environment.” And as Tonton lifted her head out of the plastic container, chewing contentedly on the remaining carrots stuck between her teeth, Shizune crooked her fingers and said, “Here, Tonton.”

Tonton snorted happily and trotted across the table to nuzzle up to Shizune instead. The fact that Tonton also got access to Shizune’s lunch—until she lifted the piglet out of reach—was more icing on the cake. Once in the air, Tonton looked around and then turned her little piggy eyes on me. “Bui?”

“Hi, Tonton-chan,” I said, my voice having already jumped one octave. Oh goodness. She was so cute.

Tonton oinked in what I hoped was an approving manner, then wiggled all of her legs in an attempt to get out of Shizune’s grip to introduce herself to me. Shizune set her on the floor, and the little ball of pink cuteness barreled into my shin.

Lowered my hand for Tonton to inspect, like I did with cats and dogs I met in and around the village. Basically every animal had a better sense of smell than I did, and that went doubly or triply so for dogs and pigs alike. I was pretty sure Tonton could grow to be a tracker, and one that rivaled Kakashi’s dogs. Sure, for now she was small, but the potential was already there.

Tonton sniffed my hands, then bumped her nose against my knuckles with a happy oink. After a second’s thought, she maneuvered my hand for optimal chin-scratching, and I obliged her.

“She is the cutest little thing,” I whispered to Shizune. “The cutest.”

“She’s got a lot to learn,” Shizune commented, as I picked Tonton up carefully and set her in my lap. “Once Tonton is trained and grows up, she’ll be fine.”

And here I was, probably facilitating a very spoiled Tonton in the future. And given how smart pigs were—even without the existence of summon contracts to consider—she’d have to be put through her paces fast to break up these bad habits.

“Kakashi’s dogs will help,” Yamato said, once I put Tonton back on the ground. She took this dismissal with good grace and trotted off to what turned out to be a small pet bed under the table. “The rest of us have trouble talking to her, but Pakkun translates when he feels like it.”

Tonton turned around twice in her bed and then curled up in it, still looking up at us through her eyelashes when she thought none of us noticed.

And to think I had taken the talking dogs running around all over Konoha for granted. “But if Kakashi isn’t around…?”

“Tsume did volunteer one of her clanswomen,” Shizune said, nodding at Yamato. “Yamato-kun knows a…Fuse-san?”

“Oh, I know her too. Her dogs are pretty awesome.” Which meant I was officially out of things to talk about. I barely knew Shizune, and Yamato felt a little antsy to me.

Then Yamato made a hand sign at Shizune—ANBU sign for over—before packing up the remnants of his lunch. I swore I saw Shizune’s expression soften a bit, and at her nod Yamato had all of his things sorted and was out of the room in less than twenty seconds, Tonton on his heels.
Shizune went to wash her hands in the nearby sink. As she did, she asked over her shoulder, “Oh, Kei-san, did you have something to ask me about?”

And now we came back to the elephant in the room.

I leaned against the counter, trying and failing to act casual. I’d already screwed up so many different things to do with Kakashi’s crush that I had to get this right.

I didn’t know how.

Though it was silly, and defensive, my mind automatically started tallying up everything I knew about Shizune.

She was maybe a year (or a year and a half) older than I was and noticeably shorter and more lightly built. She had big, dark eyes that reminded me of a doe, black hair that looked like it actually knew the touch of a hairbrush and a decent set of scissors, and had probably forgotten more about medical ninjutsu and poison than I could remember on a good day.

It didn’t take all that much wrangling to see how Kakashi could like her. Even more than Rin, she was outside of all the drama that touched every aspect of our lives. There wasn’t any unresolved business when it came to Shizune, in any form. She had her mother-figure Tsunade, her mostly-nonexistent rivalry with Rin, and her little brother Yamato, whom Kakashi already looked out for.

And for some reason, I had basically nothing to do with her. That made this whole process about twice as awkward.

“You’re not sick, are you?” Shizune asked, as she dried her hands.

...Sick to my stomach with guilt over maybe convincing Kakashi to leave to get away from me, maybe. But I was taking appropriate steps. “I’m fine, Shizune-san. Thanks for asking.”

This is painful. Isobu shifted his weight onto his elbows. Continue.

Oh, shut up.

“Do you see Kakashi often?” I asked, and was proud of myself for how even the sentence came out.

Shizune blinked. “Well, peripherally. I’ve treated his injuries a few times, but he makes a habit of...escaping.”

Pffft. Definitely sounded like him. “Yeah, that’s something Rin and I have been dealing with for pretty much forever. Teammates, I swear.”

Shizune nodded, apparently feeling that she was on much more familiar ground if we were mutually grousing about loved ones. “How do you deal with it? Until I came back to Konoha, my patients never tried to run away.”

“I had Sens—the Hokage on my side,” I said, catching myself mid-sentence. Sensei was famous, sure, but Shizune was super respectful of Tsunade in any universe. It was probably better if I didn’t sound too rude. “But you know, he’s gotten better.”

Shizune shook her head. “I don’t want to know what ‘worse’ is, then.”

Not terribly encouraging...

“Is there something going on with him?” Shizune asked, turning to face me fully. “Because unless
you’re here to ask about his health, I can’t really give you any answers you don’t already have.” And it wasn’t like she could answer the health questions even if I knew the answers already, since there were some things for which “patient confidentiality” was a severe understatement, because ANBU.

“It’s...well, I sorta wonder if he talked to you about that...village-wide betting pool.” And if some higher power had any mercy whatsoever, it would have given me better phrasing. Because...well, that was just painful.

I should have let Rin handle this entire thing.

“Oh, that one,” Shizune said. As silly as it was, Shizune was nearly guaranteed to know about any and all forms of gambling within about fifty kilometers, solely because those places drew Tsunade in like a moth to a flame. And though Tsunade wasn’t nearly as bad about wasting vast sums of money since she’d returned to Konoha, the village did have a remarkable tendency to spontaneously organize betting pools among the ninja population.

Like that time I’d fought Sensei. I shrugged and said, “Yeah. I’m just glad this one isn’t about me.” Shizune looked completely flabbergasted. “Oh, I... Yes, that’s surprising. You do draw attention.”

“Not Kakashi’s, though.” I clamped down on the flash of confused disappointment that came with that thought. It seemed like every time I had his attention, it was because something had gone horribly wrong yet again.

...Where the hell had that come from?

I cleared my throat and went on, somewhat faster, “That’s the point of this whole thing. Because he likes you.” Which was not what I wanted to say at all, but that was what I got for having a big mouth.

Argh!

Isobu sounded like he was trying to suppress his laughter and, with the inevitability of a glacier on the move, was failing.

I should really have let Rin handle this.

Shizune was frozen, one finger poised in the air like she’d been planning on making a point, and her mouth sagging open like that point had been thoroughly lost. “Wow, I...”

Thankfully, the hospital intercom turned on at that moment and barked, “Code Blue, floor two, room thirteen.”

“I’m sorry, Kei-san, but my break is over now.” Shizune was gone within a heartbeat, the door still swinging behind her.

I gathered up the remnants of Shizune’s lunch, packed them all back up, and stuck them in the fridge with a note attached to the top of the bento box. It read, Sorry about that.

That, Isobu said as I scuttled out of the building, was the funniest thing I’ve seen in years.

Oh, just leave me alone to sulk.

No, because all you’re going to do is mope about how you ruined everything.
I’m...okay. I won’t sulk. I rolled my eyes at nothing in particular, but no one could see me do it while I was running across the rooftops. My hair got in my eyes a bit, but the wind when traveling at high speeds was nice enough that I was willing to put up with it for a little longer.

...Hm. Shizune’s hair was about the same length as mine. If I turned my head to the side and squinted, she looked a little like me. Sure, she was...well, generally prettier, but…

Okay, nope, not having that thought.

What thought?

I am not jealous of Shizune!

I never said you were. But now that you’ve said it, what are you jealous of?

I am not having this conversation.

On one somewhat lazy Saturday afternoon, someone knocked on my apartment door.

It was the kind of day when all I was planning on doing involved trying to make red bean-filled mochi in large enough quantities to scare people. There wasn’t any particular reason behind it, other than the perennial (and highly specialized) cooking itch that hit me every few months—and by the end of one of those sessions, I always ended up with things to give away. No one had complained about the little malformed sweets yet, so it was win-win.

Someday, I would create the perfect mochi. But it was not going to be today.

Washing my hands in the sink, I deactivated the more hostile security seals on the apartment before I went to greet the...that was a lot of people. So, I had several guests.

I opened the door and looked down into six little faces. Aiko, Kaito, Roku, Itachi, Shisui, and...a kid I didn’t recognize off-hand, but who was smaller than the rest of them and not looking at me. A cursory glance and four school bags later, and I hazarded a guess that my apartment was suddenly the kids’ after-school meeting place.

“Hi!” said Aiko, and she lifted her arms for just a second before she wrapped them around my waist and clamped down. At nine, she was a fair bit taller than the little blonde kid I’d helped learn how to channel chakra, and her grip was far stronger. Her hair was in two long brains that ran down to her waist, making her resemble Pippi Longstocking. “We’re here to visit you!”

“I see that,” I said, patting her head. “So, what brings you here instead of your dad’s house?”

Kaito rolled his eyes. The other nine-year-old of the pack, he was still the shortest of the Chinatsugumi kids. Still wearing my old blue jacket—which fit him better nowadays—the main change in him had to do with his vocabulary and, somewhat relatedly, his attitude. “Fujiko and Hisato don’t sleep through the night when it’s this hot out, so Uncle Raiden told us to go play somewhere else. Aunt Chihiro is trying to catch up on sleep.”

Well, that made sense. I’d almost forgotten the many problems that came with having small children in the house. And the twins were probably...what, a year and something? These kids had made the right choice to get out of there and enjoy the sun.

There was just one lingering question I had to ask. “...How do you kids know where I live, again?”
Itachi coughed and raised his hand. “That’s my fault.”

Right. I’d almost forgotten that Itachi was a prodigy—and that he’d been here before, if only briefly, back when I was still moving in. “Well, you can come in. Just don’t touch any weapons lying around.”

Aiko let go of me, barreled right past the entry hall, and bounced off the couch.

Kaito and Roku’s waist-hugs were a lot tamer. Part of it was that Roku was generally just a calmer kid, and in Kaito’s case he had the littlest one of the bunch clinging to his shirt.

Roku was twelve, like Itachi. Despite coming up to my shoulder, he still came across as the thinker of the bunch and almost seemed shy to people who didn’t know him. That, to me, seemed to mostly be a result of his chosen hairstyle, which entirely covered his right eye and made it much harder to tell what he was thinking.

Roku just rested the back of his hand against the littlest kid’s shoulder, and he jumped from Kaito to Roku with completely predictable eagerness. “We brought someone new,” Roku explained, nudging the kid forward.

I knelt down and said, “Hi,” to the new face. “I’m Keisuke Gekkō, but everyone around here calls me Kei, or Kei-san. Can I get your name?”

“Rock Lee,” said the kid, bowing with his hand still in Roku’s. “Thank you for letting us visit!”

“No problem, Lee-kun,” I said, though it was a bit of a shot in the dark. This kid was what, six or seven? He was a class ahead of Naruto, but apparently two behind the Chinatsugumi kids. How had they all even met?

“Are you making mochi?” Kaito asked loudly, peering past me. “Can we eat some?”

“No yet, but in a while,” I said, as the pair moved past me. “Itachi-kun, Shisui-kun, do your parents know you’re here?”

Shisui laced his fingers behind his head, deliberately casual. “They don’t know I’m not here,” he said.

Itachi sighed. “We’re chūnin.”

Good enough. “Don’t eat my mochi dough,” I said, mostly to Shisui. Itachi may have had a sweet tooth, but he was also the only person who could keep Shisui from doing what he wanted when the whim struck him.

On the couch, the other kids were already deep in conversation. By which I meant that Aiko, Kaito, and Lee were all talking—Roku seemed to just be listening and waiting for a chance to jump in.

I got the impression that my input wasn’t needed just yet, and retreated to the kitchen to continue working on what, it seemed, would turn out to be snacks for the kids. I probably would need to consider buying a watermelon or something if this turned out to be the start of a new habit.

“What part of the homework’s confusing you?” Kaito asked, unpacking his schoolbag. There was a commotion of fabric and papers rustling as the others followed suit. Except Itachi and Shisui, presumably.

Yeah, I definitely didn’t miss that part of being an Academy student.
While the kids continued to talk, I mixed water into the rice flour and sugar with a whisk. Sooner or later, the recipe said this was supposed to result in something that was a lot like raw pancake batter. Approximately. Though it didn’t use those words and the recipe didn’t include eggs.

“I don’t know, all of it?” Aiko replied, though perhaps it was more of a gripe. “They’re not talking about the same kind of jutsu we learned when we were little.”

“That isn’t uncommon,” Itachi replied. “Most clans trust the Academy to teach teamwork and basic skills, and leave specialized training to clans or to jōnin-sensei later on.”

“Tell me about it. The only jutsu the Academy even teaches are the three on the final exam,” Shisui complained, and I felt his chakra shift positions slightly as he moved. “You need way more than that to be a ninja.”

That kid had better not be putting his feet on the table. I had to clean things, and blue scuff-marks were not on my list of favorite things.

By this point the mochi mix looked...well, acceptable. I took the bowl and put it on top of the steamer I’d made out of two pots and crossed my fingers mentally. Hopefully, it would be actual mochi in fifteen minutes.

...Assuming I remembered to stir it halfway through. The possibility of failure was still a thing.

“It would probably be really hard to teach Magnet Release, though,” Roku countered evenly. “I don’t know anyone in the entire village who uses it. Not even Kei-sensei.”

Shrugging to myself, I left things to boil for a while. Since that left me with relatively little to do—I already had a rolling pin, a work area, and a lot of potato starch prepped, I headed over to the living room to join the kids with about twice as much stealth as I usually used. Just because.

“Well, that’s harder, but they could still try,” Shisui said, unwilling to give up on his prior argument. His feet were on the table. “Right, Lee-kun?”

“I don’t know,” said Lee. “We haven’t learned any jutsu yet.”

“Right, you’re a first-year,” Shisui said breezily, having apparently not noticed me yet. “They don’t teach you anything.”

I poked him in the back of the head and said, when he jumped to attention, “First: no feet on the table. Second: no shoes past the hall.”

With Shisui scrambling to obey, I plopped down on the floor next to the table like a completely irresponsible adult and said, “You kids are being too serious. Are you sure you want to do homework right now?”

Kaito considered this reasoned argument. For about two seconds. “Nope!” And with that, Kaito’s homework went back in his bag and he slid to the floor like an enthusiastic slug to enjoy the cool floorboards.

“The work is due on Monday,” Roku said. “I need to finish now.”

“I always do my homework before playing!” Lee agreed.

I was starting to see how Lee had made it through the Academy before meeting Gai. As I watched the byplay, I thought. Just to survive the parts of the curriculum that didn’t work for Lee in the
slightest, he doubled down on what he could do. And he’d clearly passed the final exam despite not being able to use the three Academy jutsu…

Aiko looked guiltily between the two boys who had come down on the side of homework. Her eyes darted to Kaito, who was frowning already, and she bit her lip. “Um…”

“It’ll only take a few minutes,” Roku reminded Aiko. “Kaito, you know that too.”

“But it’s so boring,” Kaito griped, even as he was slowly coming around.

Maybe I ought to have stayed out of it. Still… “Well, they do have a point. All of this is necessary so you can become ninja for real.”

Kaito crossed his arms and muttered, “I just wanna learn new jutsu.”

“And I can’t be your teacher if you don’t become genin,” I reminded Kaito, as Itachi started flattening out the crumpled paper that used to be his homework. “I can’t take you on missions or anything.”

Kaito blinked, twice. I could almost see the thought run through his head. “Then, Itachi-san, I can do it! It’s okay!”

Within a few moments, Kaito was back on the couch and had his homework back in hand, shoving Roku more toward the middle of the group as he got comfortable. Roku had to dodge one flying elbow to keep his spot more or less intact.

Conflict (admittedly of my own design) resolved, I headed back to the kitchen to stir the mochi...dough. It had been batter before, but the results of my steam experiment would need to be kneaded and rolled before I could bring the bean paste back into play.

Itachi and Shisui joined me in the kitchen, because there was a bit of a gap between the way they thought and the way four Academy students did. Sure, Itachi and Roku were the same age, but there was kind of a reason that Itachi had graduated so early. There was no guarantee either of them could help younger kids with this particular part of their homework.

“How are you two doing these days?” I asked, while scraping sticky mochi off the sides of the bowl I was using. And then, because of course I found myself saying automatically, “Shisui-kun, your butt does not go on my counter. Use a chair.”

“Fiiiine,” said Shisui, and both Uchiha boys sat at the kitchen table instead of messing with my cooking space. At, not on.

“I am considering promotion to jōnin, if I can manage it,” Itachi said, as he toyed with the salt shaker on the table. “But my family would prefer that I take a different route.”

Hard to believe the kid was just eleven and still being pressured into ANBU even in this peaceful timeline. Hadn’t he only made chūnin a little while ago?

I put the mochi back on the steamer for another few minutes, then joined the boys at the table. “Do you want to be a jōnin?”

“I think… I would like to be a teacher most of all. But I will have the skill to be promoted soon enough,” Itachi explained. There was a flicker of red in his eyes—a fully-developed Sharingan, like I had expected of him. “Umino-san just started as an assistant teacher at the Academy, and he seems happy there.”
“Good for him,” Shisui said. “But you know your parents expect you to get farther than ‘schoolteacher.’”

...Hm. Maybe they did. But I didn’t really think that the Mikoto I knew would be quite so enthusiastic about pushing her sons toward the kind of path that had...kiiiiinda ended in an awful lot of deaths. Without Danzō, and with more access to the Hokage because of Obito and the concessions Sensei had made to the clans over the years, the entire conspiracy should have been nipped in the bud.

I rested my head in my palm and tapped my finger against my brow as I thought. It was less of a tell than, say, panicking. In the meantime, I had a ready avenue to stall. “What about you, Shisui-kun?”

Shisui leaned back in his chair and thought about it. “Well...I think I could make a pretty good guard for the Hokage.”

I nodded. “We do need some more people.” While pretty much every organization got new recruits as the years rolled on, the Hokage Guard had only gotten Iwashi Tatami over the last few years. I didn’t even really know the guy that well, but he was young and seemed to be picking up the job. “Once you’re interested in taking the half-step up to special jōnin—minimum—let the Hokage know and we might be in business. I might be able to endorse you.”

“You’d do that?” Shisui asked, surprised.

“As long as you don’t mind me being a mandatory part of your combat exercise.” And every day, Iwashi thanked his lucky stars that I hadn’t been in town that week. And neither had Obito or Kakashi.

Shisui winced, but he took the joke with good grace.

“ITACHI-KUN, IF YOU’RE FEELING UNFAIRLY PRESSURED...YOU COULD TALK TO KUSHINA-SAN,” I suggested, though I wasn’t sure if it would be appropriate to leverage Mikoto and Kushina’s relationship that way. Itachi and Sasuke had been raised to think of Kushina as their aunt to the same degree that Naruto and Tatsumaki thought the same of Mikoto. “She might be able to help you get your mother to come around to your side, if you feel strongly about your choice.”

Itachi went very still for a moment. Then, hesitantly, and in almost the softest voice I’d ever heard from him, “Do...do you think that could work?”

Oh, Itachi. Though I’d never really faced that kind of situation in my family, I knew at least a little of how he felt. As the oldest, all the expectations for success got piled on him instead of giving him any room to breathe. Poor kid. “I think you have a good chance of making your feelings heard. It’s better to get that stuff out in the open instead of being dragged into something you don’t want to do.”

Especially if it was ANBU. Why someone would push a kid with Itachi’s pacifistic tendencies into black ops was just baffling. He was twelve and...and he’d massacred his clan in the other timeline within two years.

Except that timeline wasn’t for this world, there was no Tobi, and like fuck I would let everything happen like that again. Itachi was going to be okay if I had to twist Sensei’s arm into a pretzel to make sure of it.

Itachi nodded solemnly, unaware of my internal conflict. “I will speak to her today.”

Pressure was definitely ramping up at home if he was that eager. I’d had exactly zero influence in how Itachi was turning out, being neither a parent, friend, nor a particularly constant figure in his life,
but I felt a swell of pride in my chest at his determination anyway. He could do this.

Shisui patted Itachi’s shoulder. “I can come with you, if you want.”

“Thank you,” Itachi said, and got up from the table. He bowed to me and added, “Thank you for listening to my worries, Kei-san.”

“You’re going already?” I asked, looking pointedly at the mochi that was almost ready to go.

“I…” Itachi trailed off, then sat down again. “Um, maybe not. I do want to see what your cooking is like.”

Hah! Hopefully I would meet his lowest expectations. But as I turned back to the mochi and thus, preparing what the kids all seemed to have showed up for, I said offhandedly, “So, since when do you two spend time with Academy students? I don’t remember that happening when I was a kid.”

“Well, Itachi’s friends with Roku-kun, and I’m Itachi’s best friend, sooooo…” Shisui shrugged, as though that was all the explanation anyone needed. “It made sense!”

I found one flaw with this. “What about Lee-kun?”

“That I don’t know,” Itachi said. “But I admire his work ethic.”

Before I could ask any further on that topic, Kaito walked into the kitchen and piped up with, “Can I get a glass of water?”

“Yep. The glasses are in this cabinet,” I replied, making a vague sort of indicating motion with my elbow. The rest of my arms were busy rolling out mochi wrappers…or whatever these things were called. I just knew I needed to roll them flat and cut them up before I could call my attempt at daifuku mochi a success.

Kaito clambered up the counter with all the dexterity of someone who couldn’t reach the lowest of the upper shelves. He did keep his feet off the wood, though, so I let him get on with his search. Once he found a glass, he reached past me and turned the faucet on so he could get what he needed.

“So,” I said as Kaito slid off the counter and scooped his glass up again, “how do you know Lee-kun? He’s a few years younger than you are, isn’t he?”

“Aiko found him behind the school fence a week ago,” Kaito responded instantly, but much quieter than I’d expected. As I leaned down so he could whisper to me more conveniently, the two chūnin in the room gave up any pretense of not being just as curious as I was, and leaned in to listen. “Lee can’t use chakra like the rest of us, so some other kids were bullying him. They ran away when Aiko yelled at them.”

“Did you go to a teacher?” I asked, though I knew that shinobi children liked settling their differences on the field of combat almost as much as grown shinobi did. We were in the business of training soldiers.

“No. We took Lee home,” Kaito said, entirely honest in the childlike way that doubled as bluntness. And also dared anyone to stop him. “We’re keeping him.”

Shisui exchanged looks with Itachi, then said, “So, if Itachi didn’t have a clan…?”

“We’d keep him too,” Kaito said, and went back to his homework. “We’ll be genin by January, so we can do it.”
I wasn’t sure if he meant Raiden could afford another kid financially, or if genin could just adopt random people. I mean, I’d done that with Rin and Obito too. As a genin.

I couldn’t think of anything to say to that.

I continued the process of constructing mochi for a little while longer, while the two Uchiha boys contemplated the less-literal clannishness of the Chinatsugumi children. In a relatively short time (or something), I had daifuku mochi for all of the kids. They were lumpy and uneven, and two of them outright leaked, but I considered it a good job for a first attempt.

“Kei-sensei, do you think Gai-sensei will let me learn his style when I get bigger?” Aiko asked, having scarfed down her first mochi without breathing. Choking hazards aside, it felt nice to have my work appreciated.

“I don’t see why not.” Obviously, Gai wouldn’t have time for Aiko’s training once he got his genin team, but I trained with Gai enough that I could probably give her some pointers to tide her over between sessions. That said, the idea of Aiko, fully trained in Gai’s Strong Fist style and with the Kasai clan chakra-burst seals was something so terrifying that it had to exist.

Eventually.

“But if Gai-sensei gets a genin team,” Aiko went on, apparently reading my mind, “he won’t have as much time.”

I glanced at Lee out of the corner of my eye. He was drawing a dozen recreations of the Konoha leaf symbol on the back of his homework with a pen, without looking. It’d be a few years before he was old enough to even think of introducing to Gai.

To Aiko, I said, “Gai enjoys training and does it all the time. Assuming he’s not out of the village on a mission, your real concern is if you’re too busy to train with him. Most of the time you’re in school, he’s just doing his own thing.”

Aiko pursed her lips thoughtfully, as though this had never occurred to her.

“We’re gonna be on Kei-sensei’s team, though,” said Kaito, in a tone that implied he’d stage a revolt if it didn’t happen. “Kei-sensei’s better than Gai-sensei.”

Roku absented himself from that debate by shoving his second and third mochi in his mouth at the same time, so he looked like an overambitious squirrel. Between him, Itachi, and Shisui, the unclaimed mochi—including a few I had been planning on saving for Hayate—ended up disappearing in short order.

I didn’t have the heart to scold them. It wasn’t like I couldn’t make a ton more after they left.

...Speaking of. “I think I might have ruined your dinners, but you kids probably need to go home now.” I scratched the back of my neck, feeling a bit silly for enforcing a curfew. Honestly, though, I hadn’t planned on my apartment becoming the kids’ equivalent of a study room at the library.

Then again, the library wouldn’t have let them take food in the building to study with. Not from what I remembered, anyway. Stupid cross-cultural memories.

“Awwwww,” was the chorus from anyone under the age of ten.

Roku, who planned ahead somewhat better than the others, handed Itachi a plate that held the remaining daifuku mochi, “Kei-sensei, can Itachi take these home to Sasuke-kun?”
...I was a complete and total sucker. I’d just have to make more for Naruto and Tatsumaki. “Sure.”

To Itachi, I added, “You can bring the plate back whenever you feel like it.”

“Thank you, Kei-san,” Itachi said, accepting the gift like it was something precious and not just the result of an hour’s clumsy work. The kid liked his sweets.

I waved as the kids took off, with the Uchiha boys vanishing almost instantly and the Chinatsugumi kids (plus Lee) moving as a pack. And just to be safe, I sent Tsuruya to follow the second group and make sure they got home okay.

There was something to be said for delegating childcare responsibilities.
Truth and Lies Arc: This Close

Chapter Summary

Kei: Consider your shit and the flipping thereof.

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is "Konna ni Chikaku de (This Close)" by Crystal Kay.

Warnings for: Bodily fluids and descriptions of such.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hayate got back from his mission to the Land of Grass on a random Monday when I happened to be at the administration center, picking up a mission of my own.

Mine was just a B-ranked bounty hunting mission, but I could probably handle it solo. I certainly didn’t have any of my usual mission partners available for this kind of thing, but it paid the bills and kept me out of trouble, and I got to field-test new seals as I learned them. It also wasn’t particularly high-priority, which was why I figured I could just pick it up and get it off the administration’s to-do list.

I got about a foot out the door before my brother cornered me. In a long hallway with no real alcoves, it was an accomplishment.

“Man, I leave for a few weeks and then you almost die again,” Hayate scolded me, but he sounded more exasperated than anything. There was probably something to be said for over-familiarity with death, and most of it was either outright bad or just in bad taste.

August was off to a wonderful start.

“I’m fine,” I insisted, because that was the kind of thing you did after a scare like that. I had my pride, after all.

“Are you sure?” Hayate made a face at me, like he was five all over again and didn’t like the sound of the word “no.”

It was somewhat less effective with the amount of road dust on his clothes and the fact that he had a scrape along his nose that nearly matched my scar. He should have seen a medic about that before asking me how I was doing. I’d only been dead for a little while.

...Though maybe that was an understatement.

“Hayate, if I wasn’t fine, I wouldn’t have this scroll,” I said, holding it up. Sure, it was a “go here, kill this guy, and get paid” kind of mission, but it was a mission that took me out of the village. If Rin hadn’t been sure I’d be okay, then she’d have strapped me to a hospital bed.
Hayate gave this fact his due consideration. For my part, I tried to steer us out of the hall since we were taking up space people actually had to walk in. Hayate didn’t come up with anything to say until we’d gotten to the roof, or perhaps he was just playing along.

“...You know I’m just worried about you, you know?” Hayate said, once we were on the roof of the administration center. He sat back against the railings where, some six years ago, Sensei had officially become Hokage.

“Yeah, but you know how well I deal with people’s concern,” I said, shrugging. Still, I stood next to him and nudged the back of my hand against his shoulder. “I’m never taking that kind of stupid risk again. The Shadow Clone technique is off-limits.”

Hayate blinked. “That started this whole mess.”

“Yes, it did,” I said slowly, raising an eyebrow at his tone. “Don’t tell me…”

Hayate grinned. “I guess I finally learned something before you, Sis.”

I opened my mouth to say something, then thought better of it. The first couple of thoughts were semi-wordless sensations of alarm, because how the hell had my brother learned it? But that wasn’t helpful, so I squished them down until they stopped threatening to come out. Then, “Congratulations. But how, exactly?”

Hayate blinked. “I just requested access to the scroll and worked on it a little before I left. Didn’t you do that?”

If viewed in the right lighting, I kinda had. But I had kinda called in an ANBU captain to supervise, along with a powerful medic, and I was a goddamn jōnin and the Hokage’s student. “That is...not really what I expected to hear. I thought the scroll was more secure than that as a rule.”

...Even though I’d been able to take it home. Erm.

Should I be concerned?

Well, if we face an army of undead soldiers from nowhere at any point in the future, you can tell Tobirama Senju’s ghost “I told you so.” Or possibly his uberzombie form...

Of course it would be something stupid like that, Isobu said, but he subsided without a further grumble.

“Obviously I couldn’t take it anywhere, and there were two ANBU breathing down my neck the entire time,” Hayate said, oblivious to my internal conflict. “But I got it down before I left.”

That was still less stupid than I’d assumed.

“But hey, I did it!” Hayate went on, much more cheerful. “So I bet that means I’ll learn how to use a new nature transformation before you do.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. “How many clones can you make at once?”

“...Two.” Hayate recovered quickly, at least. Hurriedly, he said, “But that still cuts down on the training time by two-thirds!”

Did math work like that? “Just be careful. Just because someone like Sensei can make a ton at once doesn’t mean he uses it for training, and you’ll definitely need a spotter for that.”
Hayate scoffed, but he knew better than to argue with me. After my scare with the Shadow Clone jutsu, it was just sensible.

We sat in silence for a little bit. I rolled the mission scroll in my hand for a moment, looking out at nothing in particular. Hayate sighed and started toying with a lock of hair that had escaped his low ponytail.

If I looked down, I could see Iruka being a recess supervisor in the Academy’s yard. From how his chakra felt, he was happy running after kids and keeping them from touching practice weapons or the targets that were all over the grounds. Sure, it was colored by frustration at the kids’ antics, but the Academy made him happy on the whole.

If I looked a little closer, I probably would have been able to spot Yamato taking a break in the big tree in the Academy’s yard. I could certainly sense him, even if my impression of his chakra just so happened to match how I’d describe that tree anyway. The overlay was amusing, but the ANBU security tattoo was a little disquieting. I hadn’t known he was already in it.

“Are you worried about Iruka?” Hayate asked, looking down at the Academy yard too.

“Not really,” I responded. “I think he’s got things figured out for the most part.” A thought occurred to me. “You know, he wasn’t nearly that loud when you were kids.”

“No while you were around,” Hayate said, as Iruka gave an impromptu lecture to the kids about why throwing frogs was rude and not to do it. The fact that he had to raise his voice was more a consequence of being outside than anything, but I’d heard worse since he wasn’t exactly competing with wind or traffic.

I’d generally done worse, come to that.

Ah well. He’d grow into his role. But I had another topic to broach to my brother. “How’s your kenjutsu coming along?”

Hayate groaned. “Not you too.”

My response was a defensive, “What?”

“Yūgao-chan asked me the same thing the other day,” Hayate explained, which wasn’t a full explanation by any means. I needed more exposition! “I’m fine, but I’m still trying to work out the last hitch for the brand-new technique.”

Going down the list of the random silly names Hayate had come up for his “special techniques” over the years in my head, I came up with the answer in what I thought was an acceptable amount of time. “Dance of the Crescent Moon, right?”

“Yeah. But I can only practice it so many times,” Hayate said, casual in the sort of way that was really a mask for a bit of bragging. “It costs a lot of chakra, but I’m sure it’s a guaranteed kill.”

Like the Chidori? Because that hadn’t worked out. What I said instead was, “And each time your clones get better, so will you.”

“Right!” He appeared quite pleased that I had followed his train of thought. What else were siblings for?

Though I did have something else to bring up. While it was only tangentially related to anything, Hayate’s ponytail had reminded me of it. “Hayate, do you ever wonder what Mom’s family was
“Sometimes?” Hayate prodded experimentally at the scrape on his nose, then winced. Yep, he was going to need a bandage for that. “Once we met the Gekkō family, I sort of stopped looking at any of that stuff. Even if Umeko’s dead now, she still put me off meeting anybody new just because we might be related.”

“I don’t blame you for that.” I’d been in the same boat until not too long ago. “But you remember the story about Yuki?”

“Yeah, I do, but I’m not sure what we should do with any of that stuff.” Hayate shook his head. “And I’m not planning on going out and looking for anyone who probably has his own life and doesn’t even know who we are.”

“And if, someday, someone from the Land of Iron asks for our help?” I held up a hand before he could protest. “I know we didn’t get the best experience out of the last mission we volunteered ourselves into, but…”

“If someone needs our kind of help, I kinda hope they’d go to samurai first.” Before I could comment, though, Hayate blew his bangs out of his face and said, “But look, if we’re needed, I’m not gonna say no.”

That was probably the most I could ask of him. If it came up, I’d go despite his reluctance and see for myself just what further secrets were hiding in our family tree. But at least I’d asked.

Hayate glanced down at my scroll again. “So I take it you can’t train with me?”

“Sorry,” I said automatically. I really didn’t want to get into another kenjutsu match right before I went out to kill someone. “But Yamato’s in the tree down there, if you want to find someone.”

Patented Keisuke Gekkō signature move: Throwing someone else under the bus.

But, for once since meeting Yamato for the first time, Hayate demurred. “No thanks. If he’s down there, he’s spending the day with Iruka. I’ll go find Anko.”

“You hang out with Anko now?” I asked, since I hadn’t exactly made a habit of tracking my brother’s whereabouts. As a result, I was somewhat out of the loop.

Hayate just shrugged. “I pay her in dango.”

Pffft. “Need any help with that? I can at least make those by hand instead of paying for them.”

“Do you do shop-quality dango?” Hayate asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow. When I deflated, he said, “Yeah, that was my reaction too.”

I patted his shoulder. “Well, good luck with that. And take care of your face, okay?”

Hayate ducked his head, self-conscious about the scrape once again. “Fine, fine! Enjoy your mission.”

I left him there to go pack my things.

Once I got back from a couple of B/A-ranked missions without a hitch, I was perhaps slightly ready to get my head back in the game. While sitting around and studying yet more advanced seals would probably have been productive, I instead did something a bit...ill-advised.
Admittedly, working through katas on my own would have been a waste of a training field. I needed a sparring partner on my level to push myself to new heights, and there weren’t that many people who could give me a real fight. Of those who could, Kakashi and Obito were on a long-term mission, Sensei was busy planning for the next Konoha Chūnin Exam, and Gai was doing his own thing. Genma and Raidō had un-volunteered themselves for that job until the end of time, so it would be impolite to ask.

And that left Kushina, who presented a different problem entirely.

Ten years ago, Kushina would have been a good fight for me now. After the drama regarding my tenketsu, V2 chakra cloak was entirely off-limits and V1 was pushing the tolerances the seals had for high volumes of chakra. I still had an arsenal of other seals, but...well.

I was a jinchūriki with an automatically-expanded chakra capacity. So was Kushina, but with a higher peak output and a much longer transformation timer because of Kurama and Isobu’s relative strengths. And when it came to Tailed Beast transformation shenanigans, I was woefully behind the curve. Sure, so was everyone else on the continent except for maybe dead people who were definitely not coming back no sir, but the thought stuck in my brain like a Post-It note I hadn’t written. I acknowledged it routinely, but often found that I never ended up being able to do anything about it.

I was a fūinjutsu specialist. Kushina had literally taught my teacher. I could use seals instantaneously, as long as they were the kind that exploded. Kushina had Adamantine Sealing Chains, which had been strong enough to pin Kurama in place even if Kushina herself was half-dead from chakra drain and exhausted from giving birth to Naruto.

Basically the only thing I had going for me was the fact that I knew kenjutsu and she didn’t. Not much of a game-changer in the grand scheme of things.

This was not even going to be a contest.

“Mommy, win this thing!” Tatsumaki shouted from the top of Gama’s bright orange head. She even had a homemade sign proclaiming her allegiance to her mom’s end of this fight.

The completely foregone nature of this event did not prevent spectators from gathering anyway. In this case, Sensei had allowed Naruto and Tatsumaki to come with their mother to a training field in Mount Myōboku. Sure, he’d sent along one of his Shadow Clones and enlisted the two Toad Sages in addition to Gama, to look after the kids, but it said something that he was willing to let his kids out of his sight for something like that.

Just looking around, it was pretty obvious that this combat arena was used by the largest of the toads, given that the battlefield was a roughly circular clearing that stretched for multiple kilometers in each direction. It was deeply eerie, with wind whistling across the...plateau? Whatever the battlefield was, it reminded me of a place where people would fight with giant mecha. Preferably animal-shaped ones, for theming purposes.

“You’ll be fine, Keisuke-chan,” Shima assured me as I walked past her and toward where my doom—who also known as Kushina—was waiting.

“Or if you aren’t, we have medical help on standby,” Fukasaku said, holding up a little flag with Konoha’s spiral leaf on it.

Naruto, sitting next to his sister and Fukasaku on Gama’s head, gave me a thumbs-up and a wide grin. “You’re gonna be okay! You’re strong.”
...Sure thing, kid.

You volunteered for this.

Leaving the cheering section behind with a nervous wave was probably one of the hardest things I’d done since August, and I was including two separate bounty-hunting missions where I had been on my own. I probably looked like someone staring death in the face.

What did I just say?

I KNOW.

“Are you ready to begin, Kei-chan?” Kushina asked with a grin that was as bright as her son’s. She’d tied her long hair up into a bun and donned all of her mission gear. This did not include twin hip scroll holsters like mine, but instead one large scroll mounted above the small of her back.

From what I remembered, she’d never used any scrolls in her mission gear, which was a brand-new worry. Nor had she ever fully tied her hair up.

I was dead meat. I was roadkill.

And yet, I was still doing this.

Just so you know, Kurama is laughing at you.

Of course he was. Far be it from him to do any less.

“I’ll take it easy on you,” Kushina said in a bright tone, even as her eyes started to glow an ominous red.

I dropped into a kenjutsu starting stance and braced for impact. Isobu’s chakra leaked into my coils more slowly, and though my eyes itched it didn’t take any enhanced vision to tell that Kushina was going to flatten me. It barely took eyeballs to see that.

Kushina grinned. Her chakra surged, and eight golden spiked chains sprang out from her back. “Adamantine Sealing Chains!” When she lifted her arm, the chains whipped around in midair and tore through the space between us like musical metal whips.

This looked like an excellent excuse not to be there. Experience—earned by Obito and Sensei instead of my own pain—taught me that Kushina’s fūinjutsu could cancel out any chakra used by literally the rest of the planet. Replacement jutsu? Get real.

Not actually being in the line of fire and instead making a Water Clone take the brunt of the hit? That worked.

It wasn’t much of a reprieve, though. I hopped out of the puddle—ubiquitous in the Toad clan’s territory—and lobbed a few exploding kunai in Kushina’s direction. Short timers meant they’d actually explode on contact—as long as she didn’t move too much.

But Kushina was already turning to face me with her chains batting projectiles out of the air almost by reflex.

Actually, no—she’d set up a barrier. Fuck. At least with automatic parrying abilities, there was the vague hope that the defense would fail. Kushina’s barriers never did. 
Do you want my advice here?

Do you know how not to lose?

...Eh. Never mind. Have fun getting smashed flat.

There were only so many ways to get around the fact that Kushina had Kurama for a partner. And I had like...two. Neither option really played to Isobu’s strengths.

“Nice trick, Kei-chan,” Kushina called to me, as her chains dissolved into golden sparkles and faded back to nothing. “But not good enough!”

Not what I wanted to hear at all.

Kurama’s chakra surged again, coating Kushina in a thick layer of orange-red energy. After a second or two, it resolved itself into Kurama’s shape by growing a long translucent tail and pointed ears above Kushina’s head. And that V1 cloak, right there, was as high as I would be able to go for this fight.

Kushina’s upper limits were somewhere in the stratosphere. While I doubted that Kushina made a habit of reveling in her power (given that Konoha was a village full of relatively squishy humans), Isobu’s personality showed through whenever I used that much of his chakra. Kurama was a lot less subtle than even my partner, which was really just a polite term for “showboating.”

Excuse me?

I slipped a seal from my sleeve and onto the wrap of my next kunai. You’ve got to admit that you like being really strong. And letting other people know it.

...Not all the time, Isobu huffed, but he sent me another thread of his power without waiting for the request. The thread expanded into a rope and then a coil, pooling inside my body until I, too, had a V1 chakra cloak protecting me.

“Fight me!” Kushina and Kurama roared together.

Yep, that was definitely personality seepage. Running was out because Kushina was faster once she got Kurama’s chakra boost, and she could sense just like I could, if not better.

I ducked under a barrage of flying chakra-made shuriken, skidding on my knees briefly at one point to get closer without losing too much speed. By the time I found my feet again, Kushina was already close enough that she would have been able to reach out and touch me, but—

Curve of the Moon!

—I could still manage some kenjutsu even at an awkward angle. And the relative simplicity of samurai techniques meant my left arm could just about pull it off. When the iaijutsu technique hit the leading edge of Kushina’s chakra cloak, the cloak parted like the sea for just a second.

Then it slammed shut on my wrist and yanked me into the air. A second later, the cloak had rotated in place and I was suddenly making plenty of me-shaped dents in the surrounding ground. In hindsight, Kushina had seen me spar with Sensei, so maybe this was a just comeuppance for showing off my entire arsenal five years ago.

“Almost, Kei-chan,” Kushina said, with a smile that showed off both the dark whisker-marks on her cheeks and her elongated canine teeth. The hand behind the chakra that gripped me? Claws.
Kurama had cool physical enhancements for his hosts. In between my hammering heartbeats as a result of the induced terror of Kurama’s presence, I could almost appreciate it.

Isobu, from his corner, let out another irritated huff.

I’d learned one or two tricks since then, though. Isobu’s chakra-cloak tail was composed of a ring of spines at the end that almost mimicked a human hand in the right light. At my command, the tail lit up with purple flames on each point, and I threw everything I had into a blow aimed at Kushina’s midsection.

Kurama’s arm manifested out of Kushina’s seal—oh come on—and deflected my attempt at the Five Elements Seal off to the left. After a second, he and Kushina seemed to think this was quite enough from me, and the two of them hurled me to the other end of the training field.

I bounced once, then twice, leaving rooster-tails of dirt behind me as I tumbled out of control. Then I finally remembered that Isobu’s chakra cloak was at least as versatile, and three of his tails tore out of the cloak’s nebulous form to keep me from rolling into the next province. Sure, I went through a tree that looked like it would have fit in among the denizens of the Forest of Death, but it was a small price to pay overall.

It’s too bad you can’t use V2 anymore. Isobu’s single eye seemed to focus on the middle distance for a moment, before he shook his head. Not that it would make much difference. Kurama would just match us.

You’re telling me. I got back to my feet with dirt and splinters cascading off the chakra cloak. I assume that’s why you’re not really helping me with this fight?

The best thing you can do is actually land the seals you’ve been trying to use, Isobu said simply, and besides, Kurama isn’t contributing tactically to how Kushina-san fights. No more than I am, anyway. And if I try much more, he will too.

And then I’ll just lose faster.

It might be an idea worth considering, at least.

...I’ll give it one last shot, okay? Kurama can see the Five Elements Seal coming, but I’m hoping the Chakra Suppression Seal isn’t something he’ll try to help Kushina with automatically. I glanced down at my right hand, and at the kunai still tightly clenched between my fingers. Not if he can’t see it.

And Kushina?

Um. Again, hoping they don’t see it.

To make a not-so-long story even shorter, the end of the fight went almost to plan. I certainly got to employ the Chakra Suppression Seal, almost like Sensei had used on me six years beforehand. It proved itself effective against jinchūriki.

...Except for the part where Kushina batted my hand back into my face, sans kunai, and the seal activated on me.

As they say, better luck next time.
A couple of days after my complete curbstomping via Kushina, I was back to mission fitness and had taken the opportunity to spar with Gai, because my teammates were still gone doing whatever covert thing Sensei needed them for. In between punches, kicks, and on one occasion being hurled into a tree—needed to stop letting that happen—I could almost manage some annoyance over it. The rest of the time, Gai kept me too busy to think about their absence too much.

“A toast!” Gai said, holding up his second water bottle. He was almost entirely drenched in sweat, as was I, but I was still halfway through my first water bottle because I didn’t have the ability to suppress my gag reflex on demand.

“For what?” I asked, even as I was automatically raising my arm to clink our plastic bottles together. Not super dignified, but Gai had a way of adding gravitas to a moment before abruptly yanking it away.

“I heard about your sparring match with Kushina-sama! A fine showing,” Gai said. He even gave me one of his thousand-watt smiles for emphasis. “Naruto-kun was very clear that his mother had a lot of fun!”


“I am sure it was a glorious defeat!”

Depended on his definition thereof. “Well, Kushina-san might’ve broken a sweat for five seconds there.”

“See?” Gai patted me on the shoulder. “Progress!”

Given that it was the first spar, I’d have to wait and see if I got any further the next time. And probably prepare a lot more seals of every kind I could get my hands on. Still, Gai had a point, so I reached up and let him help me stand back up. The log wasn’t a great bench anyway.

As I methodically popped the joints in my hands, I asked him, “So, what are you going to do now?”

“I am going to train, of course!” Gai said cheerfully. Then he paused. “On the other hand, perhaps I am needed in the mission office today.” He nodded to himself. “If I am not needed by the citizens of the Land of Fire, I will devote myself to training once more!”

Gai shot off like a green arrow for the center of the village, taking his gear and recyclables with him.

I screwed the cap back on my water bottle, tucked the second one into my hip pouch, and set off for town from Training Ground Seven at a much more sedate pace. It would have been hard to be less sedate than Gai, but such a state was theoretically possible in some universe.

Konoha in early autumn was a bit of a wreck, weather-wise. While we had sunny days in years where summer dragged on a bit too long, today in particular was a patchwork of sun, rain, and indecisive overcast skies. Even as I walked back toward town for lunch—probably soba—the heavens opened up and started dumping fat raindrops on my head in a way that might’ve been great during the spar with Gai. I always needed more ammo against him.

At the moment, though, rain was just a pain. I knew a few Water jutsu that could shove the water around so it’d inconvenience other people more than me, but the idea of having to maintain any of them for the entire walk back struck me as a waste of chakra.

Still, teaching Kaito how to make a miniature Water Dragon Bullet for the explicit purpose of water fights went in my mental training notes for future reference. Maybe if I could come up with some
kind of thin metal shield for Roku to manipulate, and if I walked Aiko through a few barrier fūinjutsu…

Hopefully I’d have a genin team to throw them at by the time I finally got a chance to put together a sparring match like *that*.

While eating lunch, I had a chance to sketch out a few more rough ideas on a napkin that eventually ended up in my pockets. Otherwise, eating alone was pretty boring.

**I’ve been here the whole time.**

*Do you actually care what I do with my future genin?*

**No. But you still should have asked.**

I just lifted the brim of my bowl to my mouth and drained the soup. That wasn’t worth commenting on.

But just then, before Isobu could come up with something else to say regarding my future genin, I felt a flicker of familiar chakra well within my detection range. Frowning, I set the bowl down and set a mess of ryō notes down on the counter. While it was bad form to just walk away from a bill, even if I’d overpaid, my mind was on other things.

*Do you happen to remember when Obito was due back in the village?* I asked Isobu as I slipped out into the rain again. A quick hop brought me to the rooftops, and I stuck there in spite of the running water thanks to chakra in my feet.

**Another month, I think,** Isobu said, giving the impression of looking up. **But I think both of them were on the same mission.**

I grimaced as I headed in the direction of Obito’s chakra, and the Uchiha district. *Yeah, that’s about what I thought.*

As the only person on the team without independent teleportation abilities, it took me a few minutes to make it to Obito’s apartment building. But I was probably the only person who was quite so jumpy about my friends’ chakra signatures.

I made it up the stairs, sensing Obito’s panic before I even got close. And yet, it was somehow…muffled? Fatigue was a factor, possibly…

*Fwish.*

Sensei raised a hand in greeting as I spun in place on the stairs to face him. I might’ve done an undignified pirouette if I hadn’t been keeping such close track of my traction. “I don’t know why he’s here early either.”

“Well, that makes two of us.” I popped a seal along one of my belt holsters, and help up one of Obito’s spare keys. Rin had the other. “Unless you just want to teleport in, Sensei.”

Sensei’s gaze slid toward Obito’s door and focused there for a moment. Then he said, “No.”

*…Ominous.* I knocked on the door first, calling, “Obito? It’s Kei, and Sensei’s here too. Can we come in?”

We got a miserable-sounding groan in return. Sensei and I exchanged grim looks, and I inserted the
key to disable the security seals Obito used. Nothing like the comprehensive set Sensei and I had put around our places, but still plenty dangerous.

I entered the apartment first, and got to hear the dulcet tones of Obito throwing up in his bathroom. With that as the backdrop, I glanced around his usually-neat apartment and spotted melting snow, loose globs of mud, and rusty-red blood footprints. From the evidence in front of me, it didn’t take much to conclude that he’d come straight from the field, dragging a foreign disease in his wake.

Behind the bathroom door, Obito was apparently in the process of coughing up everything he’d eaten for the last week.

“That...is not good.” I swallowed against the urge to throw up, myself. I’d...never really gotten used to the ickier parts of hospital work, and I rarely stuck around battlefields long enough to start dealing with this end of things. Instead of thinking too much on that, I said, “Sensei, the hospital needs to be ready for this. If Obito caught something we’ve never seen before while on that mission...”

Sensei didn’t need me to finish that thought, thankfully. In our world, becoming a field commander was a matter of experience and strength, and everyone remembered what it was like to be knee-deep in disease and muck in the aftermath of a battle. We had more than enough historical texts about shinobi and other warriors dying in droves when something got into the water at camp. And because we were shinobi, those records never minced words.

We’d learned the lessons of our past in some areas.

“Quarantine procedures, then,” Sensei remarked, half to himself. “Kei, I’ll transport Obito to the hospital. It doesn’t sound like he’ll be able to get there on his own without straining himself.”

“I don’t know how far he transported himself with Kamui,” I said pointedly, “so I’ll take your word for it.” The hospital was a relatively short jump, but even so. Then another thought struck me, “Wait, Sensei—if it’s airborne...?”

Sensei mimed punching himself in the jaw. “Shadow Clones are convenient that way.”

_Dammit, Sensei._ Sometimes it felt like he was mocking me. But instead of voicing that thought, I just sighed and crossed my arms. “...I guess that means I’m going to be stuck in quarantine, then.”

**Like I’d let you get sick from something so mundane.**

_Doesn’t stop me from being a Typhoid Mary,_ I pointed out.

**A what?**

_Spreading the disease while not showing the symptoms myself._ Damned English idioms. Since Isobu still felt curious, I explained, _The original term referred to someone who worked in public places and refused to believe she was killing people everywhere she went. They had to lock her up on an island somewhere to get her to stop “helping.”_

**I suppose that means the hospital might have to burn all your clothes.**

..._Argh._ I _hated_ hospital gowns.

Sensei’s Shadow Clone prodded my arm. “Still with us? You were making complicated faces for a moment there.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m all right. Isobu just had a few things to ask.” I cleared my throat anxiously and
knocked on Obito’s bathroom door. “Obito, you’re going to need to go to the hospital now.”

We didn’t get much of an answer aside from another miserable groan, but the fact that he’d had enough presence of mind to go for the bathroom did seem like a good sign. Or would in hindsight. Probably.

Whatever the case, Sensei’s clone and I hauled Obito’s half-delirious carcass out of the bathroom. I had to make sure not to breathe too hard, thanks to the obligatory smell of sickness and other fun things, but it was at least short-lived. Sensei’s clones, after all, were just as capable of folding space-time like a napkin as the original, and the last thing we needed was to leave viral or bacterial contamination anywhere.

Sensei’s clone dropped Obito and I off at the hospital before exploding into smoke. Not in the foyer, because that would have been stupid, but in a completely white ward. The air buzzed with chakra from two or three layers of powerful barrier seals. Besides that, the air itself made my ears want to pop thanks to the lack of pressure, and I didn’t have to look around much to confirm that the quarantine ward was designed to keep a whole lot of dangerous microscopic shit in.

If any got out, it would do so only after being violently atomized.

There were two medics in the room already, dressed head to toe in clothes that looked about up to clean room standards. Sensei had apparently also told the hospital how many people were exposed, which was why there were two beds, a shower section cut off from the rest of the room by a curtain, and all the other fun stuff to take care of.

Since I was already exposed, I just sighed to myself. This was going to be a long, long day.

One of the medics said, “You know the drill. There’s a gown for you in there, so get moving.”

I glanced at Obito, who still seemed out of it. I wasn’t going to argue with the medics, but I worried.

“And—?”

“We’ll take care of him,” said the other medic.

I nodded and headed to the shower without another word. Sure, I had to dump all my training gear into a garbage bag, along with all of my clothes, but it was a small price to pay for not being a plague vector. I’d just have to re-draw all of the seals whenever I had time. I had no doubt whatsoever that contaminated items would probably not come back in the same condition that I’d had them.

Antimicrobial soap and hot water went a long way when it came to preventing disease. Both of these things also meant coming back out into the room felt like stepping barefoot into a refrigerator, but it was a small price to pay.

The hospital gown was more annoying. I happened to like wearing actual clothes, dammit. This papery bullshit did not count.

In the time I’d spent in the shower, a third medic had appeared and was taking careful notes on a clipboard while the other two were bagging all of Obito’s extra mission gear. On a rolling table, I could see his headband, shoes, and the long pressure glove that ordinarily hid his Zetsu arm from direct line of sight. Sure, Obito was having his sponge bath taken care of behind a portable screen, but at least that was progress.

“Gekkō-san,” said the newest masked medic, and I blinked. That voice sounded rather familiar. If I tilted my head the right way, I could see her green eyes past the reflected glare from the overhead lights.
“Yakushi-san, I didn’t expect to see you again here,” I admitted. I’d kind of assumed that the once-member of ROOT had permanently retired from any and all shinobi business to run that orphanage. To see her back here and helping out again was a...surprise. I wasn’t sure if it was welcome or not, yet.

“It’s a favor,” Nonō replied. Then she held up her clipboard pointedly and got right back to business. “Now, as I understand, you were one of the first people to see Uchiha-san after his return to the village?”

“Yeah. Sensei’s Shadow Clone met up with me there, but clones don’t transfer matter when they disperse. Just chakra.” She probably knew that, though. “His apartment is probably a mess…”

“We’re taking care of that,” Nonō informed me, even as she scribbled something in her notes. “Decontamination procedures are quite thorough.”

Thank goodness.

“The Hokage mentioned that you’ve had some medical training.” Nonō said, endlessly patient. “Could you please tell me what symptoms Uchiha-san was showing at the time you entered the apartment?”

I did so, more or less as follows: Besides the obvious delirium that had scrambled Obito’s reactions, I’d also noted the sunken look to the visible parts of his face and additional lines that hadn’t been a part of his pressure scars. Five seconds of investigating his bathroom had also revealed both diarrhea and vomiting, which did not bode well for avoiding dehydration. His skin had been clammy and hadn’t contracted the way it should have when I pinched him.

Nonō nodded along with my explanation, taking notes as I went. When I finished, she said, “We’ll get him started on fluids immediately. Taking samples and processing them will take time, so please be patient. We don’t know for sure if you’ve been exposed to airborne pathogens, but it’s better to play it safe.”

I winced anyway. Medical quarantine was going to suck.

Nonō glanced at the curtain again, where the other two medics were still making sure Obito was clean, and finally said, “I will leave you here to rest. If you save your strength, perhaps you might not catch what he has.”

With that, she left. Over the next few minutes, the other two medics finished with Obito and finally got him into one of the many itchy hospital gowns that I hated so much. IV stands were set up (but not for me), Obito was not really sleeping but still not talking to me, and I sat on the edge of my bed with boredom slowly eating the rest of my mind.

I should have asked Nonō to get me a book.

It was a few hours before anyone checked up on me. Medics came in and checked on Obito, but my stubborn immune system refused to show any signs and left the medics feeling safe to ignore me.

“You know, Obito,” I said (after the most recent batch of medic-nin came in and fussed over us quarantined patients and then left), “this isn’t really how I pictured our reunion going. I was expecting you and Kakashi to both come back and...I don’t know. Maybe we’d go out to eat and celebrate. But I didn’t imagine you’d get sick.”

He did look somewhat better after a few hours of bed rest. Less...dried-up. He’d also stopped muttering at the ceiling tiles not long after getting the IV hooked up to his left arm, because the
medics couldn’t figure out where the veins were in his Zetsu arm. I wasn’t completely convinced that he had conventional physiology as far as his upper-right torso went, but clearly his Zetsu-derived resilience didn’t apply to diseases.

At that point, the door opened again. The air took a few seconds to regain equilibrium, and I stretched my jaw to get the pressure in my ears figured out again before I turned to our visitor.

“I’d love to know why you always end up in these messes,” Rin said as she headed over to our isolated cots. Unlike the medics from before, she was only wearing gloves and medic-nin uniform, rather than the full contagion gear.

“Because the universe hates it when things go too well,” I suggested, holding up a hand in a half-wave. “Hey, Rin. Any news?”

“A diagnosis,” Rin told me. Making a few quick hand signs, she approached my bedside and I was briefly lit by the glow of her Diagnostic Jutsu.

“How long do I have?” I asked, only half-joking.

“It’s not funny, Kei,” Rin said, but she let the jutsu dissipate. “You’re fine, at least for now.”

_Forever_, Isobu insisted.

“It’s not as though you were really exposed the way this disease propagates, but even so! You should be more careful,” Rin said. She made a sweeping gesture that encompassed the room we were all in. “Otherwise, you end up in here!”


“Sorry, did you say you knew what Obito had?”

Rin nodded, dropping the topic of my bad judgment. Snapping over to medic-mode again, she headed to Obito’s bedside. As she went, she explained, “The test says that Obito has cholera. It’s not really that dangerous if you get the patient to a hospital as fast as you can, or if you keep them hydrated, but…” For a moment, I saw a wince behind her professional facade. “But otherwise, in small villages? Away from medical help? It really doesn’t look good.”

“And if, say, Obito was in hostile territory on a mission…” I trailed off, letting the thought hang in the air unsaid.

“I-I’m sure Kakashi took proper precautions before dealing with infected food or water,” Rin blurted, obviously uncomfortable with the idea I’d brought up. She shook herself, then went on, “There are, um, vaccines that prevent some strains, and this one’s one of them. I’m sure Kakashi is careful about that!”

“Obito would have brought him back if he wasn’t,” I agreed. “He held himself together really well until he was safe.”

“Right! And your team—and anyone else with type O blood—is more susceptible to cholera than people with other blood types,” Rin said, hitting another tangent and running with it. “No one really knows for sure why that’s the case, but I...erm.” _Yeeeah, about that..._ “Uh. That’s not really a comforting thing to hear, is it? I should stop talking...”

I shrugged. “It’s fine. If talking helps, you can keep going. I actually didn’t know that about cholera.”
“I just…” Rin shook her head. “I’m sorry. I know Obito’s going to be fine now that he’s here, but…”

But while Obito was safe in the village again, that still left Kakashi out in the literal cold. Stuck in quarantine, there wasn’t much else for me to think about other than my friends. Even when I tried to focus on stuff I’d rather be doing in the village other than sitting in the hospital, the worry seeped back into my thought process.

Stupid mental feedback loops.

I just crossed my arms and said, “Don’t worry about it, Rin. How’s Obito doing?”

“Better,” was Rin’s initial assessment via Diagnostic Jutsu. “He’s not as dehydrated anymore, but he’s definitely still infected.” Her hands stopped glowing. “It will be a few days before I’d be even halfway comfortable with letting him leave.”

Sitting at a marginally more favorable angle, I saw Obito’s eyelid flutter a moment before he started to move. Given Rin’s jutsu, she probably knew he was going to wake up, but she still jumped the slightest bit when he started to stretch his Zetsu hand’s fingers.

“R-really, Rin…?” Obito rasped, probably in response to that little mandatory hospital stay. While any attempt at puppy-dog eyes would have been downright pathetic given how terrible Obito still looked, he tried anyway.

He still looked like something a seabird had coughed up.

“Yes, you’re staying in the hospital,” Rin said firmly. “E-Even if I have to have Kyūri-chan make sure!”

“The scorpion seems like overkill,” I commented. “I don’t think Obito would be able to fight his way out of a paper bag right now.”

“Kei,” Obito whined, and then coughed so hard he almost sat up from sheer momentum. Given all the throwing up he’d been doing, I imagined his throat felt roughly comparable to sandpaper, and that he would have problems getting the taste of his own stomach lining out of his mouth. “Ow…”

“Don’t talk right now,” I suggested, entirely extraneously. Not much of a suggestion given his condition, but I at least put up a pretense of not making it an order.

Obito complied, for about the second time in his entire life. “But…”

Okay, so maybe not. There’d be plenty of time for his second time obeying my medical directions later.

“You need to save your strength and get better,” Rin said firmly, neatly overriding me and getting Obito to listen, since he closed his mouth so fast that his teeth clicked. “I don’t know what you did to get so sick, but I can hear it from you later. As it is, I don’t think you’re getting out of here for a week.”

Obito made a noise in his throat that might have been another complaint, but it didn’t get that far.

“Medical quarantine, if you’re wondering,” I added, since I wasn’t sure what Obito understood about the situation. He’d been lurching in and out of full consciousness rather a lot.

Okay, that was definitely grumbling from Obito.
“Oh, and speaking of,” Rin said, as though just remembering something rather relevant. “Kei, you’re probably going to be fine. Between the lack of exposure and what I know about how your immune system works...well. I don’t think bacteria stand much of a chance.”

I told you.

And I knew you’d look out for me. Thanks.

I picked at the slightly frayed edge of the hospital gown I was wearing. “So I can leave when I get my stuff back?”

“Well, if Tsunade-sama says you can…” Rin hedged.

“I’ll look forward to it anyway,” I said, as I settled back into my cot for the wait.

The wait, by the by? Three more hours. While Rin was only around for a little longer, given that she had rounds to complete, I didn’t have much to do other than to keep track of Obito’s progression through cholera symptoms and worry about everything.

And I still didn’t have a book.

Obito, when he wasn’t back to drifting in and out of intense intestinal distress and throwing up, wasn’t much for conversation. Aside from obeying Rin’s directive with much more care than he ever had with mine, being sick with cholera was terrible. And I wasn’t much of a distraction from that.

And on my end? Well, Obito was with me and I knew he’d be fine. I was less sure of Kakashi, out in the field alone. While I was peripherally aware of his ANBU missions, he was generally on a team for most of them—even the assassination ones. Up to a point, having people help watch one’s back was a wonderful force multiplier and risk reducer.

So what if he’d stolen half the jutsu arsenal of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, even before getting his dad’s tantō back? So what if he was trying to reengineer the Fourth Raikage’s signature technique (and seemed to be succeeding)? So what if he had one of the highest attributable body counts in ANBU history?

As long as I had enough free time and mental processing power to contemplate it, I’d always be trying to ensure everyone’s safety.

“He’ll...be okay,” Obito rasped, while I tried to stare a hole in the nearest white wall.

Well, he didn’t quite sound like he’d gargled gravel, but it was close. “Yeah. Kakashi’s strong. He’ll be fine. I mean, you’re the one back here, right? He has to be.”

I needed to learn how to stop babbling when nervous. But the idea of Kakashi being out there without Obito, in a mission that had originally been assigned to the only other teleporter on my team, when the environment had taken the one-eyed wonder down… Well, to say I was nervous about the guy originally assigned as a backup was a serious understatement.

Obito snorted, apparently reading my mind. “C-Convince...yourself.”

I looked away, ashamed. I wished I had that much confidence in anyone.

Come back safe, Kakashi.
One week later, when Kakashi and Obito had *originally* been scheduled to come back to Konoha, my nerves had mostly sorted themselves out solely because I couldn’t sustain a nervous reaction for that many consecutive days. And besides the limits of human biology (which in some ways were more suggestions for me than for other people), I had a few distractions.

Aside from being stuck in quarantine and then on medical watch and *then* being bothered into submission by Hayate’s concern, I wasn’t able to take a mission even if I wanted to. *That* came down from on high, so I wasn’t going to disobey and wouldn’t have been able to unless I wanted to go AWOL.

Instead, I bought four novels and went to town.

Yeah, sounded boring. I knew that. Rin wouldn’t have killed me if I’d tried much more strenuous than glorified bedrest, but that was mostly because she was still occupied with work and Obito’s recovery. She would have sent Yamaguchi-sensei instead, and there were some things I wasn’t willing to put up with even for the sake of scratching an adventurous itch.

Aside from my attempts to kill boredom, there were a couple of other developments, too.

Hayate went on a mission, about halfway through my week of enforced downtime. An A-rank this time, which got my heart thudding away from sheer nerves even though I knew he could handle it. You know, the normal big sister jitters about that kind of thing.

“*Oh come on,* we’ll be fine,” Anko had said when they set off.

Since Iruka had decided to devote his time to the Academy, Sensei had removed him from the mission roster and put Anko on this team instead—not a bad choice, given what I knew of her capabilities. I had faith in them.

Didn’t make me any less nervous, though.

Still, they left and my apartment was once again empty except for me. On one hand: Hayate wasn’t leaving his dirty clothes everywhere and generating work for me. On the other: I found I didn’t have much to do after completing my chores and rewriting those seals that the decontamination process had destroyed. No training meant hanging out with Gai was a wash, and everyone else had either work or recovery to worry about instead.

Me? I had my ways of wasting time productively.

**And I win with this circle. Lowest left box.** Isobu sat back and radiated an aura of solid smug.

I looked down at the tic-tac-toe board I’d made on spare seal paper and subsequently lost at, then sighed as I put my brush down. Maybe next time I ought to set up a mental checkers board for him to play with?

**Actually, I think we should read more of that book before you go to bed,** Isobu suggested, even as he scratched another tally into the sand of my mindscape. Isobu had five wins to my two. **You always have weird dreams when you worry too much instead.**

Sadly, as I’d proven time and again, he not only had a point there, but a point sharp enough to stab me with. I got up from the couch and started to obediently pack up my sealing supplies. It wasn’t like the project I’d been working on was particularly time-sensitive.

**I hope your friends appreciate the work you put into all these fūinjutsu gifts. If my spine**
wasn’t attached to my shell, doing this kind of thing all day would give me a nasty back ache. If I was making these seals in the first place, Isobu commented as I sorted out my brushes and cleaned them.

On the table, a seal-laden chain was the first stage of my contribution to Kakashi’s upcoming birthday. Once it was done, I’d probably be able to give it to him...whenever. If he was late coming back home, then my gift would magically not be late because he’d been late first. Logic!

“Well, maybe the next time I get a chance to halfway manifest you in the real world, we can work on that? I’m sure Kurama would be up for any kind of handwriting challenge now,” I said, since it wasn’t like there was anyone around to hear me talk to empty air.

With his competitive spirit? Probably, Isobu agreed. Isobu tilted his head to one side, thinking. You know, I wonder how Shukaku’s doing with that…

“Maybe we can check up on him and ask, after story time.” Okay, perhaps I shouldn’t have put it like that, but it wasn’t like I was just reading to myself with my mental voice anymore. And I was sure Isobu secretly enjoyed it about as much as I’d missed reading to Hayate when we were kids.

Isobu shrugged as best he could for a giant turtle. It’s easier than keeping you updated when you don’t visit.

Pfft. Softy. Nonetheless, I got ready for bed and got the aforementioned novel out as requested. Maybe reading would really help me get back into a normal groove for a while.

Just get started.

And so I did. It must have worked better than intended, because I ended up falling asleep with my thumb still between the pages as a bookmark.

And I knew that because I snapped awake a little while after that. From one moment to the next, I went from drowsy and content to having a head filled with screaming static and my heart doing its best to beat its way out of my chest before I even understood what the fuck was going on. It was like hitting a brick wall of chakra sense input, which had the net effect of waking me up just in time to actually deal with the problem.

The amber street lamps outside cast a dreamlike light wherever they touched, and my night vision wasn’t the best. But it didn’t take a Hyūga to feel the way the air twisted in on itself when a Kamui portal formed two feet above my bed. It barely took two functional brain cells.

“Obito, I swear to fucking god—” I began, before my brain caught up and started adding details together.

They went thus: Obito didn’t have Lightning chakra by default, he didn’t have any reason to be using Kamui this late at night, and he wasn’t the person who fell out of a fucking portal and landed on me.

For a moment, I struggled under the surprise dead weight of a horribly familiar person across my legs. I couldn’t see color but I could see the outline of ANBU armor and the way the bits that should have been gray-white were dark and felt sticky. The smell of copper hit my nose a moment later, and the warm liquid seeping into my sheets and my clothes couldn’t be anything but blood. His chakra was still there but fading fast, and his breathing sounded like something had come loose inside his lungs.
“K—” *No, no, no— “Kakashi!”*

At the sound of his name, Kakashi’s chakra seemed to pulse. No louder than a breath, I heard, “K...Kei...”

By the time my fingers closed around the emergency Flying Thunder God kunai under my pillow, the last spark of his chakra—

It—

*Help me!*

—died.

Chapter End Notes

So, I was late for Kakashi’s birthday. Oops.
Chapter Summary

Kei: Finally get around to that feelings biopsy.

Chapter Notes

Today's chapter title is from Tangled, because I happen to rather like that song.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At the sound of his name, Kakashi’s chakra seemed to pulse. No louder than a breath, I heard, “K...Kei...”

By the time my fingers closed around the emergency Flying Thunder God kunai under my pillow, the last spark of his chakra—

It—

Help me!

—died.

I hurled the kunai blindly, hitting and puncturing the drywall.

“No, no, no,” I heard myself say, detached from everything but a sense of growing horror.

No ANBU mask, no porcelain pressed into my stomach. For half a heartbeat, I waited for him to snap up, mission discipline in place and a complaint on his lips. This—this couldn’t be happening.

It didn’t happen. Every inch of him lay slack and unresponsive. Dead weight.

A pulse, a pulse, I needed to find his pulse.

Kakashi’s white hair fanned out against my blankets as I tried to turn him over for it, but I got as far as tilting his head before I remembered I had no idea how badly he’d been hurt.

My fingers fumbled at Kakashi’s neck, feeling for a pulse even as I felt that start to slip.

No! “Don’t fucking do this to me!”

Okay, okay, he’d just used Kamui and his chakra had—guttered out, died, something. Chakra exhaustion. There was blood, yes, but the blood loss wasn’t the worst—

Sensei’s chakra popped into existence just to my left—slamming into the wall—and made me jump when I didn’t have time for that. “Kei, wha—”
I ignored Sensei. I was already sending my chakra, Water-aligned, into Kakashi’s coils. The gaping emptiness in Kakashi’s coils and the stillness was too terrifying to allow any interference.

*Please, work. Please let this work.*

My bed stand light flicked on, and then I could really see what had happened.

There was even more blood than I’d thought. Something long and thin had left a gaping hole through Kakashi, tearing right through as though there’d been nothing in the way. The back of the vest only showed a hole, but the size of the blood stain and his rapid decline said the opposite happened on the way out.

I was keeping Kakashi’s chakra hanging on by the thinnest of threads, Water conducting Lightning, but my world narrowed to a needle-fine point when I did. Splitting my attention, even for that—

Any other injuries were so far beyond me that they might as well have been fatal then and there.

Sensei grabbed my forearm and a fistful of Kakashi’s heavy uniform, and then we were gone.

_Fwish._

I hit cold linoleum ass-first, with Kakashi still lying on top of me because like _fuck_ I was letting go when I had his life in my hands.

His head drooped limply, but I could feel him breathing just faintly. Maybe I was fooling myself. Maybe the blood on my skin was doing it for me.

All I could do was keep channeling chakra and pray for something to change.

It was like trying to grasp air.

Sensei’s shadow vanished from above me in an instant. I could hear him shouting at someone, but the only person who mattered was dying in my arms.

_Come on, Kakashi!_  

For a second, it was almost like he’d heard me. I could almost feel him take a deeper breath. His heart stuttered back to life. And his chakra seemed to pick up some of the slack in his system and flow on its own. Someone still needed to take over and actually put blood back in him, but as long as I could get him partly stabilized—

The little spark of hope died when he stopped breathing.

*You’re not going to die on me—you can’t!* I scrambled for anything I could _do_, even as he resumed dying under my hands. I couldn’t let go of his chakra, couldn’t touch his lungs or heart while doing it —

**Let me try**, Isobu said, and that sounded like a _fucking terrible_ idea except that I didn’t know what else to do.

I didn’t get a chance to think on it.

There were people, suddenly—more people than made sense—but there were hands prying at mine and Isobu’s chakra flared defensively on automatic. They didn’t _understand_. None of them understood. I couldn’t let go!
There was no way I could possibly let him go. I just couldn’t.

The world was red. Wind pulled at my hair and my eyes burned as much from tears as Tailed Beast chakra. It didn’t matter if there were people shouting and panicking. It didn’t matter if Sensei was channeling chakra pressure for all he was worth.

None of it mattered as long as I could give Kakashi the strength to live.

“KEI!”

...Kushina?

My thoughts had slowed to a crawl, but I lifted my eyes and there she was. Hair flying everywhere, chakra pressure screaming at me even as she did. I couldn’t—maybe if she could do something—

Kurama, Isobu clarified. Together, we have a chance.

Hope’s embers were still there. Maybe if I just...

Isobu’s power bent inward, allowing Kushina and Kurama through. I felt her approach more than saw it, with my focus back on Kakashi, until her red hair swept forward and engulfed us.

Through a haze of mingled panic, despair, and uncontrolled power, Kushina’s hands turned Kakashi’s head. She pried his mask down and away from his mouth, shifted so his jaw was open and pushed her arm against his pointed teeth.

Then she shoved his teeth into her forearm.

Wha—

Kushina’s chakra seeped into Kakashi’s coils, pushing Isobu and I out of the way with more care than we really deserved. Even through blurry eyes, I could see steam rising from Kakashi’s leg and back, and even a faint wisp from his hair.

And he—he was breathing. Slowly and haltingly, but it was there and the spark was back and—

“Kei-chan, the medics need you to let go,” Kushina said, one hand clamped over her bite wound as the blood trickled down. There were people moving around us, but I didn’t really process them.

I stared at her like I’d never seen her before. Words didn’t form.

I was...a wreck. Hands shaking from stress and chakra overload. Eyes burning. Heart still hammering away. But I got myself together enough, in increments, to nod. Once.

When they took Kakashi away, Kushina got me to my feet. Sensei got a blanket for me and teleported all three of us to one of the less-traveled waiting rooms. And I had to put my shattered composure together again over the strongest tea I could stand.

It turned out that Sensei had teleported Kakashi and me directly to the underground ANBU medical center. Not technically the hospital, but ultimately everyone answered to Tsunade and the point was moot. Except for the security aspect. When he teleported me out, I landed in the hospital because of those same security concerns, because there wasn’t really another convenient area to wait, and because I’d flatly refused to be sent any farther away. I wasn’t considered a security hazard, exactly, but the jinchūriki light show had rattled everyone.
Once I had enough cups of tea in me and had washed my face to get rid of some of the tears and lingering redness, I was finally able to figure a few things out. Like where I was, since that little detail had slipped my mind. And the realizations after that point just kept piling up.

The blood on my pajamas had dried into a crusty mess. Besides the massive stain that seemed to take up half the pant leg above the knee—where Kakashi’s through-and-through stab wound had rested—I had smears on my shirt and on my arms. Cleaning up my pajamas would require a lot of work. And they made me deeply uncomfortable for about half a dozen reasons.

I refused to wear a hospital handout, though, so I was a tiny bit stuck until the cavalry showed up.

**Why did it have to be the set with me on them?** I heard Isobu ask, miffed.

*Your guess is as good as mine.* I rubbed my eyes again, staring into the depths of what was probably the third cup of truly abominable tea I’d downed in the past...hour? It didn’t feel like it could have been longer than that, at least.

“You probably shouldn’t drink that,” said a soft voice, as a pure-white hand covered the paper cup and slid it away from me.

My eyes tracked the Zetsu arm upward until I met Obito’s gaze for a few seconds. Then my vision started to swim again and my breathing hitched.

Warm arms wrapped around my ribs as Rin sat down next to me. From around my hunched shoulders, I heard her say, “We’re here, Kei. You can let it out.”

Obito slotted in place on my other side, helping Rin hold me together as I started to cry again. It didn’t take either of them too long to join me.

For a long time, I couldn’t find the words to describe the sheer terror I’d felt when Kakashi had appeared in my apartment. Not even in my own head. But after the fact, and in between Obito and Rin’s supporting arms, I managed to put my thoughts in order.

Kakashi had almost died. Technically, he *had* died, and more than once. In my arms, while I was helpless to do anything but chase the first desperate notion that crossed my mind.

That had never happened in the old timeline. *Not,* I thought as Pain’s invasion of Konoha flickered across my brain, *this early.* *Not in ANBU.*

Outside of the scare back when he’d picked up Yamato, the idea that Kakashi might die had been a distant thought if it crossed my mind at all. Even at Sorayama, when he’d scared me shitless by *not running,* there had still been a vague, half-formed idea that he was a survivor. It was his *thing,* when his world fell down around him over and over again. He’d just make it through by the power of sheer terrible luck, because of *course* he would.

Someone needed to teach Team Seven. Someone needed to confront Tobi at the end of days. Even if there wasn’t a Tobi in this timeline, the idea that I’d taken his survival for granted so *callously* made my blood run cold.

This wasn’t then. This was now, and *now* Kakashi was in the hospital after having crashed twice before even getting to surgery and scared the living daylights out of me.

I didn’t know what I’d do if I lost him.

Sometime between stringing all those thoughts together, I’d stopped crying or trembling. That was
probably what prompted Obito to ask, “Feeling any better?”

Mostly, I felt washed-out and dull in between the spikes of fear. But it probably wasn’t helpful to say that aloud. In a rusty croak, I said, “Less bad, maybe.”

Obito nodded, giving my shoulder a comforting squeeze. “Then do you wanna go change? That stuff looks kinda...not comfortable at all.”

...I was still covered in blood, wasn’t I? Looking down confirmed that much. I probably looked like a murder victim.

**You know you’re upset when even your terrible jokes don’t help,** Isobu said gently, giving me a mental nudge. **Go ahead and take care of yourself.**

“Yeah,” I mumbled, taking the bundle from Obito’s lap. “I’ll...I’ll be right back.”

The nearest bathroom had a mirror. And even after getting changed, I still looked like someone who had been through hell. My eyes were red again, and not because of Isobu. I had deeper bags under them than I had in years. My mouth seemed to just turn down at the edges, and my scar stood out on my face like a still-open wound thanks to all the cold water.

And, looking like that, I walked out of the bathroom and straight into Shizune.

To be more accurate, Shizune had joined my friends with a box of tissues and yet more tea, but didn’t seem to be staying. While Rin, Obito, and I were various stages of ragged, Shizune was in full uniform and looked like she was actually going to face the day. Whenever the hell that was.

Rin kept her hands busy out of habit. Today, that meant taking a tissue and reducing it to paper scraps. But she found the wherewithal to answer me with, “It’s four in the morning.”

“Didn’t realize I said that out loud,” I admitted. This had been a uniquely godawful night. I could be forgiven for not looking at a clock.

Shizune fidgeted as she looked between us. None of us wanted to continue the conversation, though. Eventually, she had to give up or get sucked into our collective silence.

“It’s time I get going anyway,” Shizune finally admitted, defeated. She left without another word, which left me to deal with the confused tangle of emotions I’d been trying to unravel for far too long.

I sat down again and grabbed the tea that Obito had told me not to drink before.

“You okay?” Obito asked, though it didn’t sound like he expected a positive answer. Less pressure that way.

“I’m just...not dealing with things well, I think,” I admitted, like that wasn’t incredibly obvious. “I...I haven’t been scared like that for a long time.”

“I get the feeling you’re not just talking about...” Obito waved a hand as though trying to find a word and failing. He gave up and tried instead, “Sensei didn’t tell us much, but it sounded pretty bad. And I didn’t tell him how I woke up, but I get the gist.”

I blinked at him, not quite making the connection for an embarrassingly long time. “Oh, the double vision thing? I...um, I’m not sure if I should apologize or, uh, if there’s nothing...”

“Kei, I woke up because the last thing Kakashi saw was you,” Obito said, and there wasn’t much I
could say to that. “It was just a second, but that’s the most scared I’ve ever seen you.”

I drew my knees up to my chest. “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost him.”

Rin tucked the blanket more thoroughly around my shoulders. “You won’t lose him. We have the best medics on the continent.”

I tried to focus on that. Kakashi was in surgery, yes, but Kushina had stabilized him where I failed, hadn’t she? He had to be okay.

But Tsunade hadn’t been able to save Dan. That thought was fucking terrifying.

“If—if I could have traded…” I shook my head. No. Not a good place to go. “He didn’t—he’s never used Kamui on himself, has he?”

“Not until this time,” Obito confirmed. “I didn’t really think he could, given everything else.”

I put my hands over my face. “Of all the—if he figured out how to do it now, why did he come to me? I’m—I’m not a medical ninja anymore and I couldn’t have—”

I couldn’t have saved him myself.

But it didn’t matter. Just like when Kakashi had been in trouble, my world had narrowed down to just us. When he’d been faced with the choice of dying alone or burning chakra and dying with me...there hadn’t been a choice at all.

That fucking asshole.

And with perfect timing, I was crying again. Indecisive angry crying, but crying nonetheless. “H-He was going to—to pull that stupid cliché on me!”

I got a solid ten seconds of baffled silence from Obito and Rin. Rin spoke up first, and got as far as, “Kei, what are you talking about?” before I made a noise like a particularly angry tea kettle.

“It’s a—okay, y-you know how we both read romance n-novels?” I managed, after trying and failing to force my voice back under control. I took another deep breath as the two of them nodded, and went on, “The love interest dying in the hero’s arms after confessing is a tragic ending.” I clenched my fists. “It’s not even good writing! It’s cheap and it comes out of nowhere and it scared the shit out of me.”

“...What?” asked Rin.

“He’s in love with me and he never fucking told me!” I screeched, then put my hands over my face again as I tried to avoid melting on the spot from retroactive mortification. “The bet and the thing with Shizune and everything and no one told me jack shit!”

“Oh,” said Obito.

I rounded on him instantly with, “How long did you know?”

Obito did not say anything, because I was probably not in the best mood. Explosions were a consequence of being anywhere near me, but this type was new and foreign to him.

Rin raised her hand, meek as a mouse. I tried not to explode, even if it was about a minute too late, and gestured for her to say her piece. “Um, Tanabata?”

Ohhhhh no. Oh no. No.
“Which,” I said, and it was not really a question. I knew which one. *Oh my fucking god.*

“Five years ago,” Rin confirmed, in a voice not much more than a squeak.

*Oh my fucking god,* I thought again, uselessly.

“If it’s not a bad time…?” Obito piped up, but more cautiously than I’d ever heard from him. Recently. “I’ve known since like...uh, before that.”

Probably a *lot* before that. I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I don’t even want to know.”

“It was the shuriken thing,” Obito blurted, because of course he did.

**That early, hm?**

*Oh, don’t tell me you knew.*

I’ve known since he let me hit him with a full tail’s worth of chakra just to save you.

Which was almost two and a half years ago. There were *things that lived under literal rocks* that were less oblivious than I was.

I could have screamed.

What did he say, before? Three times, even if I hadn’t been in any state to appreciate the ideas at the time. At any of the times. *“No matter what you think, I’m glad you exist. Not your prophecies. Not your power. Just you.”*  

I sat down hard, once again between Obito and Rin. Reflectively, I clasped my hands together and tried to think through it all. “Is...is it weird that between wanting to strangle him for that kind of risk with Kamui and also being *really* embarrassed at myself, I don’t really know how I feel?"

“I think it’s pretty normal to be confused after a night like this one,” Rin offered, leaning against me. “No—well, yes, but...” I shook my head, as though that would chase the interfering thoughts away. No such luck, of course. Especially not once another occurred to me. “Obito, Rin, do you...how do you know if you’re in love or not?”

I was nearly certain the two of them were making panicky faces at each other behind my back. But I didn’t look. No need to see their deer-in-headlights impressions.

I sighed. “No, you know what? I’ll deal with that.” I had no idea how to approach this when I knew Obito and Rin were basically as good together as Sensei and Kushina. I was still fumbling around, trying to sort things out. “Who did you two bet on? Me or Kakashi?”

“You say that like it’s a better question,” Obito said, with just a bit of grumbling. When I nudged him, he admitted, “I was actually betting Kakashi would confess before you figured it out. I mean, it’s been years.”

I sank into my chair, shamefaced. It would probably have been easier on Kakashi if he *had* been in love with Shizune. That kind of obliviousness wouldn’t have happened with her.

“I had faith in you!” Rin assured me, while I rubbed grit out of my eyes. But she hesitated before saying, “But maybe not for a while? I knew you’d figure it out...”

I really was that bad, wasn’t I?
At least I didn’t get too long to stew on that problem. In fact, I was distracted in fairly short order by the arrival of four familiar faces.

“We’re finally back,” Kushina said, carrying a sleepy-looking Tatsumaki in her arms.

The head of the Uzumaki clan looked more awake than I would have expected for well before sunrise, and like she’d actually seen the inside of a shower. Her left arm was bandages, but the linen was clean and I imagined that she’d healed up pretty quickly after donating even that much chakra to keep Kakashi alive. Generally speaking, she probably looked the most put-together out of all of us.

Tatsumaki, meanwhile, looked like she had been roused from bed and resented the rest of the universe for it in between wide, gap-toothed yawns.

Naruto clung to Sensei’s back, with his legs around his waist and his arms wrapped around his father’s neck. The older of the two Namikaze kids didn’t look terribly awake either, but it was a sort of content drowsiness rather than Tatsumaki’s grumpy face.

“I left another clone in the office,” Sensei said to my unasked question, since I always had to ask something. “We can all wait here together.”

With that, Sensei and Kushina joined us in what was quickly becoming not just a waiting room, but occupied territory held by Team Minato and associates. Pretty much everyone else who came by would probably feel too out of place to stick around for long. Even the medics, assuming they didn’t have actual business with us.

When they sat down, Sensei and Kushina slowly ended up swapping kids. Not on purpose on their parts, but Tatsumaki sort of oozed onto Sensei’s lap while Naruto climbed his dad like a jungle gym until he ended up on Kushina instead without disturbing his sister. After that point, both kids settled down for a very early morning nap.

“It’s been a long morning, hasn’t it?” Sensei murmured, rubbing his eyes with the hand that wasn’t being used as Tatsumaki’s pillow.

“You can say that again,” Obito said, and then yawned widely. And after that he pinched his left wrist and twisted the human skin experimentally before saying, “Oh man, there isn’t enough tea in the world to help right now. And since pain isn’t really working either, I need to get up and do something before I fall asleep.” He got to his feet, stretching as he went. “Can I get anyone anything?”

Rin’s fingers twisted the tissue in her lap and she bit her lip like she had second thoughts about it, but she said, “If...if you could find a bakery that’s open, I think we all need some food. If we’re going to be awake for much longer.”

I doubted that Rin was really all that hungry—I sure wasn’t—but I eyed Obito’s nervous bouncing in place and decided to second that idea. “If you can find melonpan, that’d be great.”

“Oh, okay,” Obito said. “Sensei, Kushina-san?”

“I’m fine, I think,” Sensei replied.

Kushina held up three fingers and said, “If you can find anyone selling anpan, I’ll pay you back.”

“And if I can’t?” Obito teased.

Kushina shrugged. “It’s too early to think up revenge schemes for anyone but the ones who hurt
Kakashi.”

Valid point. I hadn’t even started on that.

Obito was gone in a burst of Body Flicker speed, and Rin got to her feet just afterward. “I’ll be right back. I just need something to fidget with that isn’t, well, the tissue box. I’ll clean that up when I get back.”

There was a small pile of shredded tissues that attested to her accuracy. Any more and she would have made a perfect nest for a hamster.

And then Rin was gone, too. Most likely to retrieve a shell bracelet from her locker, or her usual one with large black beads.

I spared a glance for my long-neglected tea, then sighed again. I drew one knee up to my chest and hugged it, letting the other leg dangle.

“Asking if you’re okay seems...off,” Kushina said after the silence must have gotten oppressive. She drew my attention away from my aimless staring at the other wall, at least. “But do you want to talk at all about...anything? Just to get it off your chest?”

...Not with her. Not really. I’d gotten the screaming out my system earlier, but the thinking part seemed better done quietly for once.

And besides, Sensei felt really uncomfortable. Maybe he had some idea of what I was thinking about?

Oh, he’s more observant than you are, Isobu commented, when my thought process stalled out for a moment. Remember that the betting pool regarding your teammate was run out of his office. And you were shouting at the top of your lungs not long ago.

Well, that was a nice cherry on top of the mortifying sundae. If there was any time in my life where the phrase “epic fail” was apt, that...situation was definitely something that qualified for the label a few times over.

I rested my cheek against the top of my knee. I was avoiding the subject, like I did with everything that made me question my behavior. Or thought processes. Hiding was a job skill for me, but hiding from myself? From the truth? To live in a blissful little lie where nothing ever changed?

No.

I would face this...thisness head on until I had a name and a face for all of it. Until it was in the light.

You’re off to a great start there.

Not helping.

I closed my eyes. I took a deep breath. And once I had that breath, I asked myself: Do I love him?

N...not sure if I could answer that.

I put that thought aside for a moment, just so I could come back to it later. There was time for it.

First, then: Did I think Kakashi was attractive?
I felt my face start to heat up just from that question alone, which was probably a sign of something. That part, at least, was a definite yes. I’d managed to avoid letting that little fact distract me whenever I saw his face, but the physical attraction was definitely there. It would have been inaccurate to say my feelings stemmed solely from looks of all things, but they were undeniably a part of the mix.

This was the bad side of avoidance. Of denial. I was….really good at both of those. To the point that I was scaring myself.

Well, no more.

I braced myself and put it into words. Kakashi is hot, and I’ve been avoiding thinking about him that way.

....Okay, that was one truth out of the way. Good grief, I was going to need to go over that perception filter with a chisel just to figure out where the fuck it began and ended.

I could help.

Oh no, you don’t.

I want to use a chisel, Isobu griped.

Not. Helping. At this rate I’d be able to cook an egg on my forehead. Definitely one per cheekbone. Okay, nope, no longer thinking this angle through. I can do it later. I know there’s a thing there and augh don’t even think the word—

I thought your human cycles were stopped. So there wouldn’t really be—

SHUT. UP.

Forget the eggs. I’d be able to bake a goddamn cake with the heat I was giving off.

“Kei-chan?” Kushina asked. “Your face is...very red.”

“’m fine,” I mumbled, but I still felt like I was running a fever or something. Oh man. Why did I have to process these things with people around me?

I could have used some privacy so I could scream my head off in relative peace.

Except for me, Isobu said, because of course he did.

If I had owned a large enough pair of hands and Isobu had been corporeal, I might have strangled him. A little.

I had to take a moment to count backwards from ten just so I could move on. Trying to melt away into the floor wasn’t helping—and it wasn’t like I was a Hōzuki and could do it manually, anyway. I just had to press on and plumb the depths of my feelings. And then put them under the microscope.

I’d avoided everything for far too long, and I owed Kakashi an answer. I rather thought I owed myself an answer first, though.

Okay, the second part. The less-awkward part. The improved sequel question.

And I didn’t have a good phrase for it. Emotional connection? Romantic attraction? It was there nonetheless, but I needed to figure out what it was more than I needed a snappy phrase for it, I
supposed.

I was...I was happier when he was with me. We’d been on dates before—though damned if I’d known that at the time—and we’d had fun at all of them. Sure, life sometimes interrupted, but I wouldn’t have traded that time away. If it hadn’t been for the chaos this morning, I would have gone out with him again and enjoyed it just because he was back and we could laugh and discuss books and spend time with each other again.

We’d obviously never kissed one another on those excursions—even I wasn’t inobservant enough to miss that—but hand-holding? Hugs? Yeah, we’d done that and even now, my fingers itched to find his again as much from a sort of cautious joy as from the lingering fear of this morning.

Except I...I had kissed him, hadn’t I? Years ago and on the cheek in an attempt to cheer him up after that hell butterfly mission, but that counted. And...I wouldn’t mind if he...

I touched my fingers to my lips, blinking as I straightened in my seat. **Yep, that thought was just thoughted. Oh my.**

*I’m in deeper than I thought.*

“Are you *sure* you don’t want to talk?” Kushina asked again.

“Um,” I managed. Then I swallowed and said in a very tiny voice, “Maybe later?”

“Okay,” Kushina said, but her expression said that there would definitely be a “later.”

Next to her, Sensei had fallen asleep with his head on her shoulder, and the kids were equally dead to the world. Small mercies. Kushina...well, aside from the fact that she could see my face, Kushina was a sensor. Whatever flashes of emotion were reflected in my chakra, she could feel them.

And yet, the idea of just leaving offended me on a visceral level. I needed to be here, not to run and hide whenever things got difficult. Or embarrassing. I just needed to keep working at this until I understood it.

And what I understood thus far...well. I could look at that first question again, now.

Did I love Kakashi?

I...I was willing to put the tentative “yes” down as an answer. I needed to talk to him first, clear up a few things, before I could think of doing anything with my feelings. I needed to be able to see where he was coming from and clear up the remaining misunderstandings.

**No chance, no way, I won’t say it—**

*I literally just said I would!* I couldn’t really shout appreciably inside my head, but I could try when Isobu pissed me off. *Stop playing that song! I get it already!*

Isobu laughed. His tails curled up and around in the air, like lazy S-shapes to show he was content. **Well done, then.**

So I hugged the trolling bastard. Sure, I was tiny compared to his head and my mental avatar was certainly not winning any prizes in arm span, but I’m sure his forehead spikes got the message. **Thanks for putting up with all of this.**

**It was the most fun I’d had in quite some time.**
...I am really close to retracting that “thank you,” just so you know. But I won’t. Because I’m a nice person.

Isobu just laughed again. Never change, Kei. I’m proud of you for facing yourself again.

But I haven’t even gotten to Kakashi yet...

You will.

I didn’t go home until the medical experts on hand finally gave the news to Sensei: Kakashi would be okay. I missed most of the details by virtue of falling asleep once my stress levels and adrenaline supply both crashed, but Kushina was quite definite about that once I got around to asking her.

It was just that he wasn’t expected to wake up for a while, so sitting around in the hospital wasn’t doing much good. And, love or not, there were things I needed to accomplish before I could so much as sleep in my own bed again.

Which was why I had every door and window in my house open as I cleaned my room. Bleach was a bane on every sense capable of acknowledging its existence, but I had to get the blood out of...well, everything. And that meant both bleach and maybe an assorted mess of other cleaning products, where and when I could get them to work.

The bloodstains did come out, somewhat. Not particularly well, but they faded and ended up being more of a really eerie, suspicious brown after my best attempts to purge them. Or purge the memory attached to them.

At least the mattress and was okay. Not a drop, bizarrely enough. And I managed to save my pajamas, but the bedding was a lost cause.

I ended up dragging my bloodstained sheets and the comforter into a giant pair of trash bags. Then I sealed them into a strip of sealing paper that I’d otherwise screwed up on twice and made mostly unusable.

Then I took them to the dump and set the bad memory on fire. I stayed there until the last curls of ashen paper disintegrated into nothing more than smoke. I scuffed the rest of it into the dirt with my sandals so I’d never have to think about it again.

Then I went home to pile fresh linens on and figure out how to get rid of the smell.

In the end, I more or less turned my apartment upside-down again. I cleaned everything that could be cleaned, not just in my bedroom. I patched the hole in the wall with spackle—or tried to—and dusted everything that had a flat surface. I dug out kunai to sharpen, redrew security seals that seemed faded, and otherwise burned daylight while waiting for news.

I also found the dog bone I’d won from Kakashi’s dogs’ bet, and felt bad for a bit until I decided that Bull would probably just be glad to get it back. Aside from Pakkun and his shampoo preferences, none of the dogs were all that picky.

I was roused from my somewhat meditative cleaning spree by A) running out of things to do other than make tea and settle the hell down and B) a person knocking curiously on my open door.

“Gekkō-san?” said a somewhat strangled voice. I’d gone nose-blind to the smell of bleach and other cleaners, but it was possible that it was still an assault on the senses to unsuspecting passersby. Of whom Itachi was but one example.
“Be there in a moment, Itachi-kun,” I said, getting up from the kitchen table and making my way to the front hall. I probably looked quite alien in all my cleaning gear, but it wasn’t like I was going to be that put together after a morning like I’d had.

Itachi stood a little outside my door, holding a rather familiar plate. ...Point of fact, I’d basically forgotten I’d loaned the Uchiha family anything. Getting it back with a bakery’s worth of sweets on top had not even crossed my mind.

He bowed just the slightest bit and presented it to me with a painstakingly polite, “My mother asks you to take these, with our compliments. I hope you enjoy them.”

“Uh, thanks,” I said, wrong-footed. I accepted the plate more out of reflex than anything and noted that about half of it seemed to have come from that one bakery in the Uchiha district that I’d forgotten the name of. “Itachi-kun, I didn’t give you mochi so you’d owes me one.”

“My mother insisted,” Itachi said. His eyes flicked to the side uneasily for just a moment, then he said in a quieter voice, “And I owe you this much for helping me with...that.”

For just a second, my breath seemed to freeze in my lungs. ANBU.

“Did it work out?”

“Yes. I’ll be working on my Academy credentials in a few years if all goes well,” Itachi confirmed. His eyes darted downward and he added, “I might even be there before Sasuke graduates.”

I debated for a moment whether I dared, but I ended up patting his shoulder with my free hand anyway. “Then I’m glad you’re okay with this. And hey, I can take these with less guilt now.”

Itachi’s lips quirked. “Yes. Again, thank you.”

As he took off, I waved goodbye even if he couldn’t see it.

It was nice to know I could make some kind of difference in people’s lives without having to punch other people. Kushina must have gotten through to Mikoto, who then talked to Fugaku somehow, and he in turn would have been able to persuade the clan once his doubts were cleared. Made things a bit awkward if Kushina had bull-rushed everyone, but ultimately Itachi’s happiness was the important bit.

The biggest problem I had to work on, now, was what to do with more sweets than I could eat.

In the end, I ended up dropping half of them off at the Koizumi household for my future students as well as their somewhat extended family to enjoy once they had time. The rest? That came with me as I trekked back to the hospital with Bull’s bone and a few apples in tow, so the medical staff could enjoy something sugar-laden before they got back to work.

And then, more waiting.

I was mostly left alone through the afternoon and into the evening. I ate one of the apples as a light dinner rather than leaving, and thus I was probably the first person outside of those involved who noticed Kakashi’s chakra finally reappearing in the hospital proper as they moved him out of the ANBU wing.

When a medic finally stopped by to let me know he could take visitors, I went.

Time ticked on by.
Sitting by Kakashi’s bedside, amidst the monitors and IV bags and wires, gave me more than enough
time to think late into the night. He didn’t need an oxygen mask, so the medics had deferred to his
noted preferences and given him a surgical mask because he probably wouldn’t have been happy
otherwise. Aside from being even paler than usual and the medical patch over his eye to remind him
*not to fucking use it*, I could almost imagine that he was just sleeping. Like this morning hadn’t
happened.

I whiled the time away playing games with Isobu inside my head, or wrestling with the realizations
I’d gone through earlier as my turtle friend laughed at me. I also had the same novel from last night
because neither Isobu nor I were finished with it, and bedtime stories were apparently still a thing.
Even so, I...wasn’t in the best state for concentrating, so we gave up after the third attempt.

**He’s taking far too much time,** Isobu complained, even though he’d just won our most recent game
of Battleship in less than twenty moves. Sharing headspace meant that keeping the position of my
imaginary plastic boats safe from his gaze was kind of a losing prospect.

*You can’t rush recovery,* I told him. Not that either of us really knew what all that Tailed Beast
chakra from before would have really *done.* Without Kushina’s intervention, though, I doubted it
would have been enough.

Or it could have made things worse.

My stomach twisted into a Gordian knot. The last thing I needed to worry about was the idea my
attempts to help could have killed Kakashi, and yet there it was.

Almost without thinking, I reached out and gently took his hand in mine. It stilled the trembling that
had *almost* started, and it gave me a chance to just focus on something small until my brain calmed
down a bit.

Kakashi’s hands were larger than mine. It was probably obvious, but it felt like something I’d never
really put actual *thought* into before. Where Lightning and other nature transformations had left faint,
smooth scars on his fingers, mine had slightly raised lines and calluses from blade-work. His nails
were a little ragged from weeks in the field, where mine were just bitten down from nerves.

But his hand was warm, and that was so much better than the cold I’d been so afraid of that I almost
didn’t have words.

Then Kakashi’s fingers twitched and tightened on mine. As I watched, his visible eyelashes fluttered
until his eye finally focused in the darkened room. He shifted his weight, clearly trying to take stock
of how many limbs he still had, or maybe try to get up. The latter idea was one I very much did *not*
approve of, even if he hadn’t made a habit of thumb-pushups while an IV was still in his damned
arm on previous hospital stays.

Kakashi seemed to let the room sort itself out, closing his eye again with a faint sigh. His hand
relaxed, but he didn’t pull away or do much else. Belatedly, I realized that I was sitting on his left,
and since he couldn’t open his Sharingan and was probably drugged to the gills, he wasn’t
connecting enough mental dots to notice that I was there.

I ran my thumb over his knuckles, more to test that he could feel me than anything. He stirred again,
his grip tightening on my hand again.

“Wha...?” was about as close as he got to forming a full word. He was clearly in no real state to hold
a long conversation.
“Hi,” I said, and was struck immediately how deeply inadequate the word was. It utterly failed to encompass the terror of this morning or the relief when I’d finally heard that Kakashi would recover. It couldn’t communicate any of the internal turmoil—both self-inflicted and not—that had characterized the dead space in the middle of those two endpoints.

Awkward silence ensued. Kakashi didn’t seem to know what to say next, and I was out of words anyway.

I let go of his hand and moved to his right around the end of the bed, so he could finally see me without straining. I saw his mouth move under the mask, but words didn’t come.

“I—” I blinked rapidly, trying to get my traitorous eyes to stop watering as I sat down on his other side. I didn’t take the chair with me, but the other end of his bed had enough space. “I-I’m glad you’re okay.”

“...Yeah,” Kakashi managed to say, sinking back into his pillows. I was hard to tell if that was because he was exhausted or because he remembered the last thing he’d consciously done with me around. I couldn’t extrapolate from a single word.

“Hey,” I murmured, taking his right hand in mine this time.

Riveting.

Shut up, please.

Tell him about me, Isobu demanded.

“Isobu says he was worried about you, too,” I said, with Isobu continuing to prod at the back of my mind. But I couldn’t deny that it was a serious turnaround from the complete mess that had been their original “working” relationship. Isobu had spent such a long time denying that Kakashi even had a name that I felt like the moment deserved some kind of...celebration.

Don’t push it.

“Ah,” Kakashi mumbled in acknowledgement. “D...didn’t expect that.”

“You did fall out of a portal on top of me and nearly die,” I reminded him, with just a touch of reproach. If there was a ruder awakening possible aside from attempted murder, I couldn’t picture it. “I think it was the shock that did it.”

“...Did what?”

“Isobu likes you now because we nearly lost you,” I tried again, my gaze dropping toward his hand in mine again. Luckily, it was dark and he couldn’t see the color rising to my face. At some point, I would be able to force my thoughts into order and actually deal with this...thing between us.

Maybe when he was capable of stringing thoughts together, too.

Kakashi considered the logic—or lack of it—between the two facts. Thanks to the painkillers, he didn’t apparently get that far before just sighing and saying, “Thank him, then…”

Speaking of thanks… I retrieved Bull’s bone from one of my many pockets and set it on the bed, within reach if Kakashi wanted to either grab it or summon a dog to do so. “I have this, from the bet I won earlier. Bull will want it back.”
“Okay,” Kakashi sighed. His eye had closed again.

“I’ll let the nurses know you’re awake so they can check on you,” I said, squeezing his hand again. “And we can talk in the morning, okay?”

Kakashi made a vague noise and his fingers tightened around mine for a moment. Then, so quiet that I almost didn’t hear it, “...Wait.”

I froze in place, halfway off the bed with my hand still around his simply because I was reluctant to let go. Without any further prompt, I sat back down and leaned over so he could speak without trying to raise his voice too much. “What is it?”

“Stay, please?” Kakashi asked, opening his eye again. “I...I can still sleep...if you’re here...”

I’d always been a sucker for puppy-dog eyes. Still, I asked, “You sure?”

He nodded. While he couldn’t move that much, he tugged at our twined hands and seemed to mean that he could move his arm without trouble. Or at least that I could, and he wouldn’t mind. “...There’s room.”

Couldn’t argue with that after a night like I’d had. Or a morning. I badly needed actual sleep, and not just copious amounts of caffeine placeholders.

I scooted closer, moving Kakashi’s arm mostly out of the way so I could clear a space for myself, even lying on my side. After a bit of contorting, this put me more or less buried in his side, with my ear just above his shoulder and his arm across his stomach. Not the most comfortable position in the world, but as far as I was concerned, it was a power nap and I’d be up in a few minutes to let the nurses know what was happening.

“Y’know,” I said somewhat drowsily, as I started to drift, “this’ll be the end of that pool.”

Kakashi shifted and I felt his heart thud even harder against his ribs. He spent a solid ten seconds trying to process that, before dropping his head so his cheek rested on the crown of my head. I heard a faintly exasperated, “...What?”

Heh. “Good night,” I told him, leaning into him.

And just softly, hardly louder than his slow breathing, I heard him say, “...Love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

The betting pool will resemble a kicked-over anthill come tomorrow morning.

Also, there may be a hiatus starting after this chapter, depending on how things work out. If I don't have something out by end of the second week of October, it ain't coming until the week of Halloween at the earliest. I'm gonna be out of town and having non-writing fun on an epic vacation. :p
Chapter Summary

Kei: Break personal blush record.

Chapter Notes

Beta: There is all kinds of relationship awkwardness, but your health class would get a MUCH higher rating than what is included in this fic. A semi-health class type discussion happens, but nothing informative is explained. The focus is on the characters, not their discussion.

Additionally, I am aroace and both romance and sex repulsed, and I pretty much react like a little kid who goes “Eew” when people kiss. I have a rather low tolerance for that kind of content, and as Beta I am the filter for this fic, which means nothing gets written or included that I am not comfortable beta reading. So, there shouldn’t be anything to worry about content wise, barring differences in personal preferences and comfort levels with the topic.

We also will not be writing anything Lang is not comfortable writing for whatever her reasons are.

Additionally, please do not ask if we will be including X, Y, or Z. It will either count as asking for spoilers and/or is something we will not be including for reasons above.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kakashi

At first, all I can feel is cozy warmth. The sensation cradles me as I float in gentle darkness, free and content. No pain or fear follow me to this space, and yet… Something isn’t quite right. The void isn’t a perfect one.

I can’t float freely. Something solid and quietly stirring presses against my side, pulling me back down to earth. A lifeline, pulling me toward shore again.

I open my eyes. Or just the one—Obito’s eye is firmly shut, and covered to keep me from changing that.

The world swims for a moment, but I blink again and it clears up somewhat. I’m…in the hospital? The green walls are familiar, but I don’t understand how I got here. I try to move my head or shift my weight—

I hit a solid wall of ow.

I had a crick in my neck, but now it’s joined by a whole-body ache that runs down to my bones. It
feels like I’ve spent the entire day sparring full-strength with Gai, with aching fatigue punctuated by sharp pain in my stomach and both legs. If I’d been run over by an oxcart, it probably would have explained things.

I try not to move much until I feel less like I’m on fire. As I wait, I wonder, *What happened yesterday?*

I...I was fighting, and I remember two men. Or three? My memory is *there*, but it’s almost like it’s behind a glass pane that’s been sanded opaque. I can only visualize indistinct shapes, with the occasional flash of detail that vanishes a moment later.

After that, though? It’s a vague mess. I *think* I can remember something, in the dark. It was...ink and stress and mochi? Kei. *Kei* was there. I know her scent as well as anyone’s, and the memory cuts through my mental fog just as I’m about to give up. She showed up, even though I could hardly see her, and she...said something about a pool? Something about wrecking that *damned* betting pool on me and on her.

Must have been my frustration getting the best of my subconscious. Wishful thinking, maybe.

I made vague plans in the past to tell her how I felt, when I got back. The specifics are gone now, but so is most of last night except for fragments of that taunting dream.

Someday, I’ll learn not to get dragged into those. Even if the idea of reciprocity—of actually getting the words and having them *accepted*—is tantalizing, it’s a fantasy. She wouldn’t hear me. I keep getting so *close*, but can’t get the words out. Barely can even when I’m dreaming.

Maybe I’m in that dead zone between too many drugs to think properly and not enough to not be in pain.

I test my limits by taking the deepest breath I can. Something pulls, down around my stomach, and my vision goes black for a moment.

N...Not doing that again. *Ow.*

The solid weight at my side bumps up against my cheek, drawing my attention back to it. Feels like...hair? I can’t move much to see what’s going on. But there’s still smell. Antiseptic and cleaners always dominate in hospitals, but...it’s not overpowering everything. I can get something even past the scratchy sterile mask on my face. I sniff as deeply as I can without triggering any pain.

Wh— I blink, stupefied, as the creeping realization finally finishes the windup and hits me.

Ink. Mochi. Right on top of me. All around the room. It was half the reason I even *thought* about that dream.

Suddenly, the weight pressed into my side is a lot more important. And on cue, the entire hospital cot shifts on its wheels as the extra *person* wakes up and starts to stretch. As Kei sits up, deepening the impression in the mattress and pulling me toward her—

I let out a sudden hiss of pain, and Kei jumps as though scalded. Distantly, I hear her hit the floor, but my body is too busy making me pay for moving—for being moved—for me to do much. I take careful breaths, hands flexing against the pain by digging into the sheets instead.

It’s all too long before I can focus again.

By the time I can, Kei’s face is hovering above mine, pale with worry. “Kakashi, are you with me?”
I manage a grunt of assent, letting my head drop back against the flat hospital pillow. Under my mask, I lick my cracked lips and croak, “I’m...I’m here. Okay.”

I sounded worse in my dream, I think. And I’m not so sure it was a dream anymore.

“Good.” Kei looks up, eyeing the IV bag on my blind side. I can feel the line in my left arm. “Where the hell is the replacement bag? Look, lemme get a new one…”

Another sliver of understanding slips through. She’s been here long enough for the bag to run down entirely? More evidence that the fragmented conversation from last night had actually happened.

If I could raise my hands to my face, I would be pinching the bridge of my nose with all the force I could stand. It’s so impossibly frustrating, and yet still quintessentially Kei. She didn’t hear me. Last night happened, and nothing changed. This morning happened and it’s all the same.

One step forward, two steps back.

“Hey,” Kei interrupts, her eyes locked on mine. Framed by her usual epic bedhead, her brows are furrowed and her dark eyes impossibly deep. There’s something... “As soon as you’re not in pain every time you move, we can talk.”

“How?” I ask her roughly, with my throat still a gravel-ridden mess. Did I fall asleep with my mouth open?

Kei pauses, pursing her lips as she thinks. Then she just shakes her head and says, “Why you ended up in my bed last night, maybe?”

I feel my face start to burn. I didn’t—wait. I can remember using Kamui and...seeing Kei, but that had been in her bed? All I’d known was that she was safe and real and I knew I needed both. The “where” didn’t come into it, from what I remember.

I just needed to see her again.

Still, that can’t go unanswered. I clear my throat and ask, “Is it the same reason you’re in mine?”

Kei blushes crimson, averting her eyes for a moment. It takes her a while to just say, “Um.”

That’s different. I blink heavily at her, waiting for some kind of response that gives me something more to work with. When none comes, I hesitate before asking, “Is that a yes?”

Hell, I don’t even know what I was thinking. This is turning into an ANBU briefing when agents have different security clearances.

Kei sighs, pressing her fingertips against the bridge of her nose for a moment. Whatever curse she uses is muffled by her hands, and then she says, half to herself, “I knew you weren’t awake enough for that.”

“For what?” I ask, though hope flutters in my chest. She can’t possibly be talking about…? I swallow hard and decide to just get it over with. “I was awake enough. And I meant what I said.”

Kei freezes in place for a heartbeat, then two. Her hands fall away from her face. And then she smiles at me.

Kei’s smiles aren’t usually just what the word brings to mind. There’s almost always a twist of something else, whether it’s wistfulness, or sorrow, or half-a-dozen other things. The few times I’ve
seen her lay her happiness out for the world to see, like all her secrets don’t matter, are moments I treasure.

This smile is more of a flustered mess, hidden almost immediately by her hand. “S-Sorry, I just—I’ll get the nurse and be right b-back.”

She scurries away, and I sigh as deep as I dare.

_Dammit, why am I so terrible at this? _No amount of novel-reading can prepare me for these moments, when the characters there had it so easy.

Still, I resolve to talk to Kei as soon as I can. That conversation we had is painful enough, even just a moment after. We have to sort this out.

---

_Kei_

I was a fucking _coward_.

Though I did make it to the nurses’ station to talk to someone about the mysteriously-unchanged IV bag, I didn’t follow it back to Kakashi’s room. No, instead I trekked back to the floor’s bathroom and stuck my head under the faucet. This was less due to any need for a shower than the fact that I was in dire need of a wakeup call and was thoroughly sick of tea. Maybe if I’d had coffee in the room instead, I wouldn’t have run off the second Kakashi threw my smart remark back in my face. Or maybe I would have been struck just as dumb and done the same thing anyway. I couldn’t be sure.

I picked dream sand out of the corners of my eyes, then looked in the bathroom mirror. Between the water stains on the glass, I could see my ragged-looking reflection and had to heave a sigh. I looked genuinely rough around the edges, but I knew for a fact that I’d been in worse shape just yesterday—back when I’d been biting my nails to the quick over whether Kakashi would be alive in the morning.

Didn’t really take the edge off my nerves, but it was at least a valid observation.

I considered my reflection for a moment longer, then dunked my head under the cold tap again. Once I was sure there was no way my face could still be red, I shut off the water and shoved my bangs back out of my face.

...Well, “wet dog” was at least _different_. I finger-combed my hair into some kind of order and found a towel to solve at least part of the problem with my new look, but anything past that was for another time.

Still, dripping water followed me on my way back to Kakashi. My motions were best described as a bit of a slink, given that I had no intention of speaking to anyone else and getting sidetracked before I finally got the talk I—we—needed.

When I approached the door to his room, I heard a nurse say, “—you were cute together!” before he left to go about his duties. He missed me completely because he turned back to make that little quip, allowing me to sneak into the room undetected.

I felt accomplished for about two seconds. Then I remembered stealth skills were a basic part of the shinobi package and let the good feeling die. To the room at large, I announced, “I’m back.”

Kakashi looked up from examining Bull’s bone, turning it slowly over in his hands. He let it drop into his lap and get lost among the blanket folds.
Kakashi was sitting up in bed, though only through the assistance of a small mountain of pillows. He seemed more alert than before, his eye actually tracking as I headed for his right. The medics hadn’t stuck him in a neck brace, so I supposed that he’d just been stiff before. Or rather, I hoped so and hadn’t seen much evidence to the contrary.

I licked my lips. *Think, dammit! “Um…”*

A brilliant start. I should have written Sensei’s speeches.

“If,” Kakashi began hesitantly, after waiting for me to come up with anything else to say. “If you need to sit in one of the chairs, or….”

That was the easy way out. Putting distance between us.

Instead, I sat down at the foot of his bed, crossing my legs into a meditative pose and fidgeting with my hands for entirely too long. What could I even say?

“Kei,” Kakashi tried again, but it didn’t go anywhere.

We were the *definition* of “twice shy.” What a pair we were. “Well…this is awkward.”

Kakashi nodded, his eye downcast.

*This is like watching the world’s saddest hedgehogs.*

*Not helping.*

Isobu rolled his eye. *Neither of you are. I can’t make it worse.*

Then, “What actually happened last night?” As I blinked at him, Kakashi went on quietly, “I don’t remember much.”

It was as good a way to start as any, I supposed. “What do you remember? I can help fill in the parts you missed.”

Kakashi closed his eye as he thought. Then, as though trying to dig through layers and layers of debris in his mind, “I remember fighting members of Shinjitsu.” Given that he’d just spoken to a nurse, I imagined he was reconstructing his day piece by piece. After a moment, his hands flexed again, with one of them over the former gut-shot that had nearly killed him. “I was injured. Badly.”

That was…pretty characteristic of Kakashi, really. Downplaying his injuries. Then again, I didn’t need to relive that and neither did he.

“And you came to me,” I said, folding my hands in my lap. “I…I didn’t understand why you would for the longest time. I couldn’t help you—Kushina saved your life in the end. I kept thinking you’d have picked someone who would have been able to do something, but that wasn’t the point.”

“…No.” Kakashi took the deepest breath he could, then said, “I don’t know what I was thinking, but I can guess.”

“Was it because,” I began, over the butterfly swarm taking up residence in my stomach. It didn’t work so well, so I had to try again. “Was it because…?”

Swing and a miss, again.

But Kakashi understood perfectly well what I couldn’t put into words. “Yes.”
If his chakra hadn’t been going haywire in a nearly literal sense, I would never have guessed he was as nervous as I was. His eye darted to my face, then to the side once, then twice.

And then I belatedly realized I’d spent the last ten seconds without so much as twitching in response. Too long.

All of my mental preparations for this moment abandoned me. I didn’t know what to do with this. I built up my understanding and acknowledged my feelings and made a giant deal out of things, but when push came to shove? Nothing.

I could feel a desperate, discordant laugh trying to bubble up at the sheer absurdity of my freeze-up. Of all times to pull this shit—

“...Kei?” I hated hearing that kind of tone in anyone’s voice. Making people feel small and ignored wasn’t what I did, and here I’d made myself a liar.

While Kakashi watched, I ran my hand over my face and said, “I suck at this.”

Kakashi paused, then shook his head slowly and added in a dry tone, “You don’t say.”

“I had half a million things I wanted to say,” I admitted, leaning back and putting my weight on my palms. “And the second you said that, I forgot everything.” Maybe it was a good thing he’d confessed while he’d been high on painkillers and I’d been half-asleep. It avoided all this awkward runaround.

This is painful.

Shh. I had a point to make.

I didn’t know where to start, but I had a point nonetheless. It was just that I wasn’t any good at putting it into words. I scooted closer on the bed, until I could hold Kakashi’s hand without reaching for it. His grip was stronger today than last night, and I leaned toward him with our gazes locked. “I don’t know how to say how I feel about you.”

“Then don’t,” Kakashi said, drawing our interlocked fingers to his other side to pull me closer. Gently—not insisting—but I followed of my own accord.

My heart hammered against my ribs. Any closer and I’d practically be sitting on him. This was where I wanted to be, and here I was getting caught up in the details. Our faces were hardly a foot apart. His mask—

“I can’t take this off,” Kakashi added quietly, his eye darting downward. So we were on the same wavelength after all. “But you can.”

While he let his other hand rest against his stomach, I hooked two fingers behind the hospital mask and drew it down until I could see more of his face than I ever saw normally. His lips twitched upward, as though he wanted to smile but still hesitated. His eyelashes fluttered briefly, like he was trying to figure out if this, too, was a dream or wishful thinking. The moment he decided to trust me, he closed his eye and tilted his head toward me.

And like that, the ball was in my court. My left hand moved away from his mask and cupped the side of his face, and he leaned into my touch. He sighed, giving me a momentary glimpse of his Inuzuka canines. I swept my thumb slowly over his cheekbone, taking in every detail of this moment.

His eye opened halfway. And when he spoke, his voice was dry. “Kei, you’re thinking too much.”
As a blush bloomed across my face, I had to agree. So much for not being caught staring.

But the longer I didn’t say anything, the less comfortable he felt. “Kei?”

_Fuck it._

I kissed him.

I caught him by surprise, so it wasn’t a classic fairytale “true love’s kiss,” like in the movies. His mouth was open, so I felt our teeth hit and it wasn’t a great first impression. Somehow, it was fitting that my first kiss would be a fumbling rush job.

But it got better. We actually got to enjoy the second attempt, making sure not to hit teeth or noses again.

I pulled back, considered, and then pushed my way up against his side so we were almost in the same positions we’d fallen asleep in. The main difference was the addition of the pillow mountain, which gave him enough leeway to drape his left arm around me as well as he could. I was wedged in place well enough to make his dogs proud.

“Once you get out of here, we can go on a date,” I said as he rested his cheek against the top of my head, just like before. “A real one.”

“So we just do what we were already doing,” he half-teased, but it was true. All we’d been missing was the mutual understanding necessary to actually call them what they were.

And now, it worked. Worked as _what_, I wasn’t sure, but I just leaned back into him and let the moment stretch out. Aside from the steady hum of the observation machines Kakashi was hooked up to, and our synchronized breathing, all was quiet in our little world.

“Are we... ‘together’ now?” I wondered aloud, even while I ran the pad of my thumb over Kakashi’s knuckles. Invisible to the naked eye, I could feel the faint smooth scars his Lightning Release jutsu had left behind over the years.

“I don’t see why not,” Kakashi replied, angling his body more toward mine as best he could. “We’re already going to have our friends in a frenzy about their bets. I don’t see why we have to be that dramatic.”

“And this is coming from the guy who nearly died in my bed,” I reminded him, and Kakashi snorted. It would have been a reprimand if I hadn’t had such a good point. I had a feeling it’d be my trump card for any accusations of drama for the next ten years. “Still, are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’m pretty sure all we’ve done is kiss,” Kakashi said dryly, deliberately missing the point as far as I was concerned. I could practically feel him bite back a smart remark past that, probably to do with the quality of the aforementioned kisses. But maybe that was just me.

“I’m talking about something else, you jerk,” I complained. “I mean, are you sure I’m not too old for you?”

I could practically hear Kakashi suppress the urge to facepalm, and not just because he couldn’t actually pull it off. He was trying to be nice. “...Kei, we’re the same age. You’re barely three months older than me.”

I opened my mouth to argue before my brain caught up and threw numbers in my face. Okay, yes, if I disregarded the reincarnation shenanigans—like I’d been trying to do for a solid month and mostly
succeeded at—then he was right. Completely. And really, it wasn’t like I had any more experience with relationships than he did even with the other life taken into consideration. Here and now, I certainly wasn’t any more mature.

Unless paying bills, cleaning house, going to work, and cooking counted?

...Past-me wasn’t exactly a Jack-of-all-trades. I wasn’t now either, but I was better than my other self had been. Just saying.

I sighed and squeezed his hand. “You win that one.”

Now that Kakashi wasn’t at risk of dying, we had plenty of time to figure out the details. For a while longer, we sat in relative silence and, in my case, gathered strength to face the rest of the day despite a crick in my back thanks to sleeping in a weird position. Kakashi wasn’t going to be going anywhere except the bathroom, or possibly into the grasp of more serious medics like Tsunade. I, on the other hand, needed to head home to feel less like a strung-out mess underneath the staggering relief that everything was going to be okay.

It’s what I got for staying in the hospital overnight when I didn’t technically have to.

Anyway, the peaceful moment lasted until my stomach saw fit to remind me that it was time to take care of rather more practical problems. I was hungry, stiff, and in dire need of a shower.

“I’ll be back in a bit, okay?” At his understanding nod, I let go of Kakashi’s hand and slipped out from under his other arm. Getting to my feet took a bit of work after not moving for so long, but a couple of quick joint pops sorted that out enough that I could walk.

“Heading home?” he asked, as I turned back and courteously readjusted the pillows and blanket so he could rest comfortably.

“Just to get cleaned up and grab some food. If you need anything, I can bring it back with me,” I said, thinking automatically of the novels I hadn’t gotten around to finishing. I wasn’t going to tempt the wrath of the medical profession by outright offering food he probably wasn’t allowed to eat yet.

**You read the same paragraph four times in a row yesterday. All of those books are unfinished.**

Well, maybe Kakashi would enjoy some of them.

Kakashi looked around the fairly bare hospital room for a second or two, then said, “I could use a book.”

My thoughts exactly. If he’d be able to hold one was a different concern, but knowing a book was available held some comfort regardless. I consulted my mental map of my bookcase. “Icha-Icha, or something else?”

“What about that one over there?” Kakashi asked, jerking his chin in the general direction of the chair I’d used last night. Resting long-forgotten on its pages, the novel I’d been reading to Isobu was as plain as day.

I got it for him. And before I left, I kissed his forehead.

It was about the only bit of exposed skin that felt right when his mask was back in place, but I made do.
I ate a container of takeout when I got home, because it was the least effort I could put into food prep. The rest of that late morning haze was taken up by trying to clear my head. Copious amounts of hot water helped.

Once I stumbled out of the shower and back into reality, I looked around my apartment for any changes since the last time I’d been here. There was nothing, of course, but it helped bring my brain back down to earth.

The past twenty-four hours felt almost like a long, super-realistic dream. In that time, I’d experienced enough ups and downs to give a roller-coaster designer some ideas. While this was not that unusual in the life of a ninja, having all of it happen in my hometown was. Especially when so many facts had hidden right under my nose, and then exploded in my face for good measure.

I stared into the middle distance, bemoaning my derailed train of thought. I couldn’t even make decent overdone metaphors. My usual coping mechanism, exhausted. There was a little white flag and everything.

I’d kissed Kakashi. We’d made out, if in a clumsy way. Almost ten years of unresolved feelings and now there was a thing between us. It looked like a good thing from where I was standing. Even if I only had a few examples to work off in that department, and no actual experience. The thought of getting experience sent all those butterflies a-flapping again.

My mental feedback loop was interrupted by a knock at my front door. I dropped the pillow I was supposed to have been putting on the couch, snapping back to reality and left wondering why I was staring at a wall.

Maybe I was more tired than I thought. Nonetheless, I headed to my door to answer the knock, because people did not keep Kushina Uzumaki waiting.

Quite aside from the fact that it was rude, I’d promised to have a conversation with her at some point in a nonspecific “later” timeframe. Apparently, the time was now.

“Hi, Kushina-s—” was as far as I got. In half a moment, Kushina had loaded me down with food and whatever else was in the basket she shoved in my arms. And then she was ushering me back into my own apartment, plunked me down at the kitchen table, and put a kettle on the stove to boil.

I didn’t have the heart or the guts to tell her I was really tired of tea.

It took me entirely too long to put the things she’d brought down on the table, then to sit down and rest my face against the cool wood to try and think. And the thinking itself was like trying to wade through molasses, explaining the first two points.

Kushina joined me at the table and started rubbing circles against my back. “You’ve had a long day, haven’t you?”

I grunted something that might have sounded like a confirmation. I drew my arms up and crossed them under my head to act as an improvised pillow, but I was tired. Even after sleeping...relatively well, I pretty much had the emotional equivalent of a hangover.

**There may be a word for that.**

*I bet.* In English, anyway. Mongrel language that it was.

“Though I did hear that you slept the night through,” she went on, since I obviously wasn’t holding up my end of the conversation.
“You heard about that?” I asked, twisting around so I could look her in the face instead of at the grain of the table.

Kushina smiled. “After the tomato impression you did and the hospital rumor mill, it wasn’t hard to guess what happened. I can put two and two together.”

I stared at her.

“Which is why we need to talk before Yamaguchi gets to you.” Kushina paused for a second. “Or Rin-chan, given what Obito said.”

What.

Wait. “Is this the sex talk?” Because I did not need that. I had been medically-trained—or to some degree, anyway—and I did, in fact, own both biology textbooks and a healthy selection of romance novels. And in one lifetime, I’d attended a high school health class. There wasn’t a whole lot I still needed to learn, academically speaking.

“Yes, but you’re a former medic. I don’t think you’d have gotten this far if you didn’t figure things out,” Kushina said, seemingly happier now that she’d roused me from my slump. “I’m just warning you about Rin-chan.”

“...What did Rin do?” I asked, because of course my curiosity was running on ahead and my imagination was scrambling to keep up. It did not paint a pretty picture along the way.

“I heard there were diagrams.” Kushina reached around with one of her Adamantine Sealing Chains and plucked the just-screaming kettle from the stovetop. While she prepared tea, she went on, “After they got to the part about disease transmission, Obito thought he was going to die if they did anything other than kiss.”

I gave Kushina a long, level stare even as she set my teacup down in front of my nose. This, apparently, was a cue to return to the land of people capable of holding conversations. I took my first baby step by holding the cup. “So...he didn’t notice that you and Sensei obviously didn’t have any trouble with that.”

Kushina shrugged. That...about summed up that sort of situation, from Kushina’s perspective. “They worked it out.”

“And, what, you’re thinking Rin’s going to ambush me?” With diagrams. Good galloping grief.

“It’s more of a fair warning at this point,” Kushina said mildly, still smiling. “You know how she gets.”

Did I ever. “Are you gonna warn me and Kakashi to be careful, outside of”—I made a vague hand gesture that went in the vague direction of the hospital to indicate Rin—“whatever she might be planning?”

Kushina looked like she was biting down on the urge to laugh at me. “You mean about sex?”

Argh. Yes, but— “Kakashi and I don’t have the slightest clue what we’re doing,” I pointed out, ignoring the heat crawling across my face as best I could. “But not just—not about sex. Neither of us have ever done this before. Dating, romance—none of it!”

“My advice,” Kushina said slowly, as she turned the question over slowly, “is that you take it slow and always, always communicate with each other. Not just talk, but really work things out.”
...And that had gone so well. If the past nine years had been much of an indicator, we were so far from being able communicators that we would have been outdone by soup cans on strings.

You can manage when romance is not involved. Else you’d be dead long ago.

“It’s not that we’re bad at this,” I muttered to myself. If I had more energy, I would have probably smacked my head against the table. “It’s that we’re bad at this.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Kushina said. As I looked up at her, probably looking kind of pathetic, she added, “What works for Minato and I, or Rin and Obito, doesn’t necessarily have to work for you. You two aren’t any of us. Understand?”

I nodded.

“Good. Then drink your tea,” Kushina said. “Because I think you’ll need your energy.”

Oh?

Ooooooh.

I sat up fully, chakra sense actually primed for once today, and felt Rin’s chakra signature approaching my street. Obito followed along, feeling approximately the same way I did on shopping trips.

“This is gonna suck.” Still, I got up and trooped toward the door with Kushina giggling at my retreating back.

If it makes your friends happy…

Aaaaaaaaagh.

If you die because of some human reproductive quirk I don’t know about… Isobu trailed off ominously.

Oh my god.

Also, he said in a somewhat cheerier tone, I like you. Breaking in a new host would be somewhere between “painful” and “impossible.”

I tried very hard to decide whether to scream at him or not.

I didn’t quite manage by the time Rin and Obito reached my door.

“Hi, Kei!” Rin said as I let them in, immediately hugging me hard enough to get a squeaky-toy noise out of me. She may not have hit the training fields much, but what she did do, combined with her height, meant she could compress my lungs pretty damned effectively.

Behind her, Obito could best be described as looking like he was walking to meet the hangman on business. He was carrying what looked like an easel, along with a selection of rolled-up scrolls. I didn’t have to think very hard to work out what was on them.

My greeting smile froze on my face. Obito about matched it.

“So, how do you like kissing?” Rin asked cheerily, apparently oblivious to the sense of impending doom following her like a cloud.
I managed my fiftieth tomato impression of the day. Rin went for the throat, didn’t she? Point of fact, yes, kissing was nice, but there was oblique questioning and then there was this. I was not prepared, despite Kushina’s warnings.

Which really dealt with what was to come. “Um.”

“I think it’s fun! Don’t you?” Behind Rin, Obito was doing his best to disappear without using Kamui. Since that option was denied to him, he quickly shifted to a series of facial contortions that really would have looked right at home in the old timeline. On everyone.

His expression screamed, *Why is she saying this about me?*

I did not have an answer beyond “Rin.” Heading the rest of the conversation off at the pass, I gestured for the two of them to enter the apartment proper and said, “Hey, let’s go to the table.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you’d be here, Kushina-san!” Rin said as she swept past me.

Obito, on the other hand, stopped and clapped his free hand down on my shoulder. “You’re dead.”

I patted his head. “And you’re sitting through this again, so you’re double-dead.”

Obito cringed. “She improved it. Maybe it’ll be easier the second time.”

“Doubt it,” I sing-songed. After all, this probably was my second time getting this lecture, and I was still very much not looking forward to it. The things I did for friends.

“Wait until you see all the work I’ve done on these!” Rin’s voice rang out from the kitchen. We were all dead. We just hadn’t stopped breathing yet.

In short order, Kushina and I were on the couch with additional cups of tea and a mess of pamphlets with worrying titles that were all at least twenty words long while Rin set up her presentation. I resolved to burn them as soon as she left. If they were in pamphlet form, there were more of them out there and she wouldn’t miss these.

Even if they looked like med school theses from where I was standing.

Rin probably could have taught a medical class. Scratch that—she needed to get this urge out of her system and put her energies to more productive use. Making med students faint seemed like so much more fun than...this.

“I just want to make it clear,” I said, as Rin finished the last touches on her setup, “that this is excessive.”

“No, it’s thorough,” Rin insisted. “Deciding to have sex is a serious decision and you should know if you’re ready for it!”

“Rin, I literally found out about his feelings last night,” I argued, even in the face of certain defeat. “You’re going way faster than we are.”

Rin blinked, nonplussed. “But...you were yelling yesterday morning. And you spent last night with him. And the duty-nurse said—”

*Oh my fucking god.*

“Then we didn’t do anything!”
And now I needed to explain *that*. Me and my big mouth. As I ran a hand over my face, I tried to think. Kushina patted my back encouragingly, which helped.

“Look, Kakashi woke up really late and wasn’t up to talking, and I stayed later than I planned on. And…” Oh, right. “We talked about things, and we kissed, *but that was it.*”

The declaration hung in the air like a death knell. The elephant had been called out.

“Oh, um,” Rin mumbled, her tattoos standing out a little *less* as her face turned red enough to match me at my worst. “I…”

“Oh, Rin,” I said, getting to my feet and hugging her just as Obito wrapped his arms around her shoulders. She’d tried really hard, but this was definitely getting ahead of herself.

“You must think I’m—” Rin shook her head and trailed off as I let go, burying her face in Obito’s shirt. “I’m sorry for assuming, Kei. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble.”

“It’s okay, really.” Even if it was embarrassing as hell, I supposed there were few people I’d stand to be embarrassed around outside of this group. I knocked my knuckles against the presentation easel. “And this’ll be good to know before the topic comes up.”

“Really?” Rin asked, perking up.

I sat back down and picked up my cup of tea. “When you’re ready.”

Kushina nudged my elbow knowingly as Rin bounced in place. Obito let her go, and she whipped a presentation pointer out of her sleeve and extended it to its full length. If Rin was this happy about getting to educate *me*, I could only imagine how much fun she’d have if she had an actual, formal class.

Oh boy.

In the end, I made it back to the hospital about an hour later than I expected. Rin’s presentation was quite *thorough*, so most of the time was quite informative in a way that was still far too detailed for anyone without medical training. I could see why Obito had been scared half to death.

When I headed out, Rin and Obito took off with promises of gifts for Kakashi, while Kushina ordered me to deliver the heaping gift basket she’d got for me. Apparently, she’d decided that some things were best shared. Given that Hayate wasn’t around, it wasn’t like I had a ready teenager to dump any excess food into. “Everyone at the hospital” was a good substitute.

“I’m back, Kakashi,” I announced as I entered with my basket blocking my entire view. At least I had muscle memory for the door. “Hi, Yamato!”

There was a pregnant pause.

*Given the recent discussion, that phrase is a terrible choice.* Isobu had not had fun. Childbirth—and what effects it *could* have on a seal even where mine was located—did not tend to be.

I set the basket down on a nearby chair, then actually looked up to take in the room. Kakashi was still sitting up in bed, and had my novel in his lap. He looked a bit better, like he’d actually had chance to eat since this morning, or maybe cat-nap. Perched on the rail at the foot of his bed like a particularly large, lumpy owl, though, was an ANBU agent in full uniform. Hood and everything.
Oops.

Said agent very slowly looked between Kakashi and me, and seemed a bit at a loss. Yamato’s voice came out from behind the cat mask, saying in a plaintive tone, “She shouldn’t know that. Did you tell her?”

“You get used to it,” Kakashi advised him, as I stuck a security seal to the wall to forgo further screw-ups. “You should hear Falcon complain sometime.”

Yamato cocked his head to one side, imitating a rather different animal, and then just sighed. “Of course.” He swung his legs around so he finally had his feet on the floor again. “Don’t do that again. It could be a security breach.”

“I get that a lot,” I admitted. I considered my options, then shoved the gift basket onto the floor because I wanted the chair. As I sat down, I piped up with, “Can I hear what you’re talking about, or do I need to leave so you can finish your conversation?”

Yamato sighed again.

“Yes, you can hear it,” Kakashi said, because it was clear Yamato wouldn’t.

I was pretty sure I’d exasperated him the second I’d talked to him and Shizune in the hospital a month ago, and he hadn’t recovered since. It was a gift. “Thanks. So, what were you talking about?”

“I was getting Kakashi’s mission report,” Yamato said, though there was something in his voice I didn’t quite catch. It was a bit higher, sort of like he was trying to be more polite despite the fact that we actually knew each other decently well.

I paused at his word choice, though. Generally speaking, Yamato used “ore” like pretty much every guy I knew. “Watashi” was something new out of him. Out of most of the people I knew, even—we were generally a pretty informal bunch.

“It’s a ‘she’ day,” Yamato explained, while the gears in my head turned.

Oh. Okay then.

“Back to Shinjitsu, though.”

Kakashi glanced at me, waiting for the reaction that Yamato clearly wasn’t, before he said, “I only recognized one of them.”

“You didn’t mention that before,” I said, frowning. “Which one?”

“The one that’s full of black thread instead of blood,” Kakashi lifted his left hand with difficulty and indicated the gut wound that Kushina had saved him from. “Kakuzu, from Takigakure. The briefing said he was a free agent, but the Land of Iron was far enough out of his way that we never expected to see him there.”

Jesus fuck. Not good! “Please tell me you didn’t try to kill him one heart at a time.”

Kakashi gave me a flat look. “Of course not.”

“I’m sorry, Kakuzu has multiple hearts?” Yamato cut in, before we could argue or I could pick a direction to flip my shit. “I don’t think the Bingo Book said that.”

“It didn’t,” Kakashi said. “It’s another Kei thing.”
I couldn’t see her face, but Yamato was obviously brought up short by the idea. “How?”

“I can see the future!” I put in.

I was about ninety percent sure Yamato’s eyes were rolling about as hard as they ever had. “If it’s beyond my clearance, just say so.”

Welp. I tried.

“Long story short, I wrote up more detailed profiles on a lot of possible persons of interest,” I said. “And Kakuzu was one of them. I made sure they were comprehensive.”

“But, again, the other two members of Shinjitsu who jumped me were not a part of the data,” Kakashi said clearly. “They were probably samurai, but I can’t be sure so long after the fact.”

“...Were there any glowing swords?” I suggested.

“No. But they fought more like…your mother,” Kakashi admitted after a second to think about it again. “It’s hard to describe in words.”

But I could give it a shot! Samurai tended toward wearing heavy steel armor that was treated to reject chakra hits, whether jutsu or not. They usually fought by projecting constructed weaponry rather than just plain stabbing people, at least while in armor. While not in armor, they were fast, preferred iaijutsu, and were annoyingly good sensors. Take all that and turn it around and you (more or less) had shinobi.

“I could see how that could get overwhelming,” I said distantly. Kakuzu wasn’t exactly slow or weak, but having two more fighters to fill in the gaps in his style? No wonder Kakashi had almost died.

Kakashi nodded. “It does confirm our suspicions, though.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Shinjitsu is outside our grasp, officially,” Kakashi explained. “We barely have any diplomatic relations with the Land of Iron.”

And ANBU missions were all the ones that Konoha already couldn’t be caught dead handling. Sending Obito and Kakashi after a group that might as well have been Akatsuki 2.0 had been Sensei’s best shot at taking Shinjitsu out without any diplomatic consequences, and that gambit had failed. With people like Kakuzu in their midst, it would be a tough sell to send anyone after them. We could make the mission a success or undetectable, but not both.

I brought my knuckle to my lips as I thought. “So, we’re going to sit and watch.” For now, anyway.

Yamato and Kakashi exchanged a look that was mostly ANBU subtext. It was okay, though, because I didn’t really think I was missing much.

“And ANBU-san,” I said, because I needed to get back into the habit of using formalities for people in uniform, “I’m not sure the Hokage has checked in with Jiraiya-sama recently. Maybe that could help.”

“I’ll make the suggestion,” Yamato responded, though her tone implied that she thought I was perhaps stating the obvious. Polite.
Well, I was stating the obvious in a polite tone, so that phrasing worked both ways. “Oh, and how’s your rivalry with my brother going?”

If Yamato had been less disciplined, she probably would have been tempted to boot me out a window. Or, in this room, make a window by hurling me through a wall. I had a knack for being terrible with security levels, and not just because I didn’t have discipline of my own. The only reason my clearance was so high was because I already knew shit and no one could bring themselves to kill me over it. Something, something, golden goose, something.

“It’s calmer,” Yamato admitted, after visibly swallowing her irritation. “With him on missions, I can spend more time with Iruka.”

Iruka and Yamato?

See, it was things like this that made it so hard for people to believe I could see the future. It was far more accurate to say that I had seen one conditionally-accurate and mostly-useless vision of a future, but that was far too long. And I had a massive blind spot regarding relationships that the past twenty-four hours had proven repeatedly.

In hindsight, it wasn’t surprising that I’d missed this.

“I kept expecting the rivalry would be like Kakashi and Gai-san, but that isn’t the case,” Yamato went on, since I didn’t give a verbal response. She shrugged. “But it’s motivational.”

“You’re already way ahead of most rivalries I see,” I muttered. Most of them ended up toxic.

Kakashi glanced at Yamato, then said, “Speaking of, make sure he doesn’t get in this room with a bouquet.”

“Hayate?” I asked blankly.

“Gai,” Kakashi corrected me, sniffing. Ohhhh. “He forgets.”

“I’m not sure I can stop him,” Yamato said, as I tried to convince my brain to imagine Kakashi in the middle of a sneezing fit. Gai couldn’t be that bad, right?

I quickly learned, because Gai chose that moment to appear out of damn near nowhere and shout, “My Eternal Rival, I have brought flowers to speed your recovery!”

Yamato was gone before he finished the sentence.

Kakashi just sighed.

I couldn’t blame Gai for being glad to have his best friend back, and thus didn’t say a thing as the greenest champion of Konoha presented Kakashi with a massive bouquet full of yellow roses. I just leaned back and let the scene unfold.

“Thanks, Gai,” said Kakashi. He didn’t do anything with the roses other than set them carefully aside and probably thank the relevant authorities that he was allowed to wear a surgical mask even as a patient. It cut down on the mucus levels.

“I am also here to congratulate you on your blossoming Springtime of Youth!” Gai said as he pulled something out of his flak jacket. It was long and green and—since when could Gai knit? Heedless of my confusion—something of a theme today—he dropped the scarf in Kakashi’s lap alongside the flowers.
“I’m not sure what’s going on,” I said after a moment of silence for, well, the silence that certainly didn’t exist with Gai around. His personality was too big.

Kakashi ran his fingers over the scarf and said, without looking up, “He won his bet.”

“And I bought yarn with my winnings!” Gai gave me a thumbs-up. “I have spent the past several hours learning how to knit just for this moment!”

Even if the stitching was a bit uneven, it was really a nice scarf. Gai could do quite a lot when he put his mind to it. And Gai, now that he had this one part of the skillset figured out, was probably never going to stop until he mastered it.

“What’d you bet?” I asked, since it was beyond pointless to ask who knew by this point. From what I could tell, Gai and the hospital grapevine didn’t overlap, but rumors moved fast in this town.

Gai grinned. “I had faith that you would resolve your romantic endeavors through the Power of Youth!” He nodded to himself seriously. “When I heard Tsunade-sama had bet you would never succeed, I had to bet against her!”

In a really bizarre way, Tsunade had kind of been on our side there. If she’d been right, disaster would have followed pretty much immediately.

...I did not want to think about how close a shave it had been. “Gai, do you happen to know when she placed that bet?”

“Two days ago, I believe!”

And it was, what, eleven in the morning on the day after Kakashi had teleported back to Konoha? The woman’s timing was terrifying.

“I’m glad we didn’t break her losing streak, then,” I muttered.

“While it is unfortunate that Tsunade-sama loses so often,” Gai said, “I am also glad that you are both healthy! I look forward to seeing you on the training fields soon!”

A little after that, Gai left to buy more yarn. I didn’t have much interest in learning to knit, but Kakashi probably wanted to add to his needlework skills. Bigger needles, but still arts and crafts.

“D’you mind if I stick some of this stuff here?” I asked, holding up the long-neglected basket that I had brought along.

“Anywhere you...is that one of Rin’s pamphlets?” Though he managed to make it a question at the very last second, Kakashi’s voice had gone flat with horror. “Yamato warned me about those.”

“Kushina warned me,” I said, as I plucked the offending item out of the basket. I didn’t even remember which one it was, but all of them were information-dense and more than a bit disturbing. “I had about a minute’s head start before Rin and Obito showed up.”

“...My condolences,” Kakashi muttered. “Why did she think you needed to…?”

I flushed red. One of these days I’d pop a blood vessel doing that, and then where would I be?

“Oh. Oh.” Under his mask, Kakashi blushed too. Out of the two of us, Kakashi was the one who could actually look like he wanted the earth to leap up and swallow him. Or like he’d turn into lava and melt his way down to meet it.
Both of us sat in silence for a while, solely because this was our life now. Our romantic non-adventures had been a thing for so long that now everyone was invested in what we did. It was like the village’s very own reality TV show.

This is what made people hermits.

Thankfully, we were saved from contemplating public scrutiny of our private lives by yet another set of visitors.

Several of them were on four legs.

“Kakashi-kun,” said Teikō, as the big scarred-up Tosa-Ken stepped into the room. He strode right up to Kakashi’s bedside and put his front paws on the linens, nosing his way under Kakashi’s hand for scratches.

Behind him, Chikō and Shinkō trooped into the room on silent paws, and the former stopped at my feet to lick my pant leg.

“The dogs have missed you,” Fuse announced as she entered, with Yatsu on her arm.

“It’s hard not to!” Shinkō said in his piping voice. “You’re very nice!”

“Mm-hm.” Kakashi continued to scratch under Teikō’s chin, and the short brown fur got everywhere on the linens. “Thank you.”

Chikō pushed his way into my lap, as Fuse helped Yatsu find one of the room’s chairs. They seemed to have multiplied somehow since the last time I’d been here and I hadn’t noticed before.

“I doubt you can tell us what you were doing,” Fuse said as she took in Kakashi’s visible injuries. When Kakashi shook his head, she sighed. “Then I hope you get better soon, Kakashi. And that you have more luck on your next mission.”

“I doubt I’ll be going on any for a while,” Kakashi admitted, while Teikō tried to stick his nose in his ear. Dog affection was more or less the same whether the dogs in question talked or not.

“I’ll say,” I muttered under my breath. Kushina had saved him from dying horribly, but a gut wound was a gut wound. I didn’t know when he’d be released from the hospital, but he was definitely off the active roster for the foreseeable future. And if he wasn’t, I needed to go yell at Sensei.

“Will you be around, Keisuke-kun?” Yatsu asked, not turning to face me.

“Yes.” To be honest, I wasn’t sure if I could stand to take a mission at the moment. There were plenty of other people who could take bounty missions.

“Then will you help look after him?” Yatsu asked.

Kakashi sighed again. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. “I don’t need—”

“Finish that sentence with ‘babysitter’ and I will be very unhappy with you,” Yatsu warned, frowning severely. “Or I will hire a genin team.”

Kakashi subsided, grumbling silenced.

“Can you stay at Sensei’s house?” I asked, as I stroked Chikō.

“Kushina already set up the guest room,” Kakashi said. “I’ll be fine.”
And Kushina, frankly, would be a lot more use in a medical crisis than I would nowadays. The past twenty-four hours proved that.

“Scratch behind my ears, please!” Chikō barked, pushing his head up against my hand. I promptly lost my train of thought and complied.

Though Shinkō eventually wandered off into the rest of the hospital, the Inuzuka couple and their two other dogs stuck around for the rest of the morning to catch up with us. Kakashi didn’t talk about his missions, but he enjoyed their company and I entertained the fluffiest dog for most of it.

That ended when Tsunade poked her head into the room. “All of you, get out. I can’t run a medical exam with this many distractions.”

Needless to say, we got out. Arguing with Tsunade was not a thing people did.

On my way out of the room, though, I asked, “Tsunade-sama, have you given any thought to letting Rin run a few classes for medic-nin?”

Tsunade’s eyes flicked across the room until she spotted the pamphlet, lying abandoned under a chair. “That kind of class?”

“...And others. To use her powers for good.” As opposed to just scaring people without medical training. Out of love. “She needs an outlet.”

“I’ll think about it,” Tsunade replied. She peered at me for a moment, then looked at Kakashi. Then she returned her gaze to me and poked me in the forehead with one manicured nail. “Congratulations on losing my bet for me, kid.”

Um. Okay?

“Now get out so I can do my job.”

I skedaddled.

Chapter End Notes

The song of the chapter is "The Science Love Song."

So I did manage to get a chapter out of the way in less than the span of eternity! Go figure.

So, quick WOG for stuff that was covered in the chapter. In no particular order: Yamato is genderfluid. Kakashi and Kei are together. Tsunade totally bet against them. The Inuzuka couple's dogs are all therapy animals. Rin's classes are comprehensive. Iruka and Yamato are figuring out their dynamic.

And Shinjitsu is gonna continue to be a thing.
Within the village, there was something akin to a social positive feedback loop hard-wired into shinobi culture. Most people outside of its influence didn’t even know it existed, and were probably happier not thinking about what their esteemed super soldier protectors did in the time between missions. It was capable of extracting, processing, and distributing information at a speed comparable to the internet, as long as everyone was in the know.

It might’ve been more frightening if not for its more mundane name: the shinobi rumor mill.

Shinobi were horrible gossips. If I could write any particular piece of advice for those who might end up caught up in its machinations, well… My advice basically went thus: Run.

Not that running would be any help. Kakashi was benched for obvious reasons that (had) included a gaping hole in his gut, so he couldn’t exactly flee into an ANBU mission. Sensei had also gone as far as to ban Kakashi from even completing ANBU paperwork, which was probably supposed to help him relax. Mostly, it meant Kakashi blitzed through my novel collection while “babysitting” Naruto and Tatsumaki. Really, Kushina watched over all of them together.

As for me? Well, I... I didn’t exactly want to leave. Kakashi was in the village for the time being, so I could spend more time with him than I had in years. I wanted to. So I didn’t run either.

That meant facing the rumor mill and its reinforcing factor, the betting pool, at the same time. Head-on.

“So did Kakashi crack first, or did you figure it out?” Genma asked, spinning one of my teacups on the tabletop as though it were a basketball.

I sighed. “We’ve been over this.” Turnabout was fair play, though. Somehow, this was payback. Probably for Kakashi, by proxy.

If I had to be interrogated by representatives of the Konoha grapevine, Raidō and Genma were probably the best available options. They’d just showed up, I’d invited them in, and then they’d sprung their trap over daifuku mochi and green tea. I’d basically set myself up for it.

“I still don’t believe that’s it,” Genma complained, though he stopped spinning the cup so I could fill it. “Him confessing while high on painkillers doesn’t really count, does it?”

“I think it does,” Raidō said. “He confessed first.”

“But she figured it out before then,” Genma said, as Raidō continued to take notes in the little black notebook that had rested in Sensei’s office. “Make sure you write the last part down.”

I didn’t even want to start to look in that book. I didn’t want to see how much of a mess the betting pool had become.

“Nothing personal, Kei-san,” Genma added after a second or two of thought. “But I’m the Hokage’s personal gofer in this...thing.” Genma shrugged.

“Then why is Raidō writing it?” I asked.

“ ‘Cause I don’t feel like it,” Genma responded. Delegation in action. Genma had learned well.
I peered at them suspiciously. “If you’d said it was because he had better handwriting, I would’ve called you a liar.”

“Good thing I didn’t, then.” Genma took a long sip of his tea.

Raidō looked up from his scribbled notes, thoughtful. “You know, I can kinda see it.”

Huh? “See what?”

“I can see why that nightmare scenario the other day would be what broke the ice,” Raidō explained, while I started to turn red very slowly, like a cooking lobster. Genma, however, just looked intrigued. Under our stares, Raidō shrugged. “High-stress situations can make people say things they otherwise wouldn’t.”

If it wasn’t for the flicker of lingering pain in Raidō’s chakra, I would have assumed he was citing some half-remembered textbook. Genma’s eyes narrowed like he’d picked up the same hint in Raidō’s voice instead of his chakra, and he snaked one hand around Raidō’s back until he was half-hugging him around his waist.

I wordlessly pushed the plate of daifuku mochi in their direction.

Genma glanced at the plate, then changed the subject with, “So, about the payouts.”

Isobu rolled his eye. **Subtle.**

**Wasn’t it?** But I didn’t blame him for trying to avoid the topic. This wasn’t the kind of thing Genma talked to me about—and neither did Raidō, for that matter. I imagined they’d prefer not to have an audience for things like this.

“I hope we didn’t make people lose too much money,” I said, since I had thus far adhered to my resolution not to look into the black hole that was Konoha’s betting record.

“I lost,” Raidō said, picking up one of the mochi and squishing it experimentally. “But I only bet fifty ryō, so it’s not a big loss.”

Okay, cue the morbid curiosity. “What exactly did you bet on?”

“I bet that Kakashi would crack before you figured it out,” Raidō said, after turning the mochi into a disc. “But you figured it out even if I got the timing...mostly right.”

Oh dear. “How long did you think it would take?”

“Two years minimum,” he replied. “Though it really took five.”

I put my head in my hands.

“You have to admit that you deserve pretty much every joke about that,” Genma said, though his voice was somewhat muffled by mochi.

I bonked my forehead against the tabletop and let it rest there.

“It could be worse,” Raidō said in a philosophical tone.

“Nope,” I said without raising my head. “Don’t wanna hear it.”

“Well, I bet you two wouldn’t get anything figured out until something drastic happened,” Genma
said, because of course he did. “And something did. But the bet was so vague that the Hokage said I
couldn’t win more than fifty ryō anyway.”

I made a pained noise.

There was a sound of rustling paper. “Oh, and your brother bet it wouldn’t happen until he got back
from his mission, so I guess that’s his loss. His friend apparently believes true love conquers all or
something, which is basically Gai’s bet but quieter.”

“How do you make a bet quieter?” I wondered aloud, drawn back in. I was frowning by the time I
saw Genma’s little grin. Oh no.

Genma turned the book around and let me see it. True to form, Gai’s bet was actually in his own
handwriting, with five exclamation marks. In one sentence. A bit below, Sensei’s handwriting took
over again to record Iruka’s bet verbatim, which did not include any excited punctuation.

“That...that’s definitely less energetic,” I admitted. Curiosity continued to prod me insistently in the
back of the brain, but at the same time I didn’t want to know who else had profited off the awkward
social dance Kakashi and I had done around each other.

For a little while, the conversation about my social life and the village’s fixation on it faded out so my
two guests could eat all the sweets I’d set out. I didn’t tell either of them that I had made enough
mochi for a small army of children, because there was such a thing as planning for the inevitable, or
else they would have tried to one-up many sweet teeth at once. Or at least some of my friends would
have—I liked to think that Raidō wasn’t like that. Genma probably was, though.

The moment might have lasted a little longer if not for the bright flash of chakra I recognized as Rin,
hopping across rooftops in a clear beeline for my apartment. When not trying, my sensing range
wasn’t a whole lot larger than Genma’s hearing range—so he sat up like he’d been shocked,
automatically turning to face the exact direction and angle she approached from.

“That’s probably about her new lecture,” I said to Genma, given that Rin’s chakra felt cheerful
enough for Gai.

“She’s humming,” was all that Genma said in response. Instead, he turned his attention to Raidō and
said to his baffled boyfriend, “We’re leaving before we get caught up in it.”

Raidō’s expression remained bemused as Genma hauled him to his feet, and the two of them
disappeared into—oh come on, the bathroom window wasn’t even that big!

“You’re both chickens!” I shouted after them, but by the time I made it down the hall in pursuit, the
room was empty and the window was open.

Apparently my friends were spiritual disciples of Harry Houdini or something. I was almost certain
that the bathroom window was too small for human shoulders to fit through, but both of them had
managed to escape without screwing up the frame. What the hell.

I don’t see why she wants to come here and give you the lesson, Isobu said, while I returned to
the living room to clean up after them. You’re not even enough of a medic to be qualified for
most of the contents.

I shrugged. Maybe she just needs someone to practice with. I’m a little better than delivering the
presentation to a bathroom mirror or something like that.
You’re not going to be able to see the final version, though. What is an “educational workshop” and why aren’t you qualified to see most of them?

You know, I began carefully, as Rin finally knocked on my door, I’m going to leave that one for Rin to explain.

I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted down at the training field, “Obito, quit screwing around!”

“You know every time you do that,” Kakashi remarked, as sparks flew from clashing weapons, “he looks over here.”

I put my finger to my lips. “Shh!”

Kakashi’s visible eye widened just slightly. Then he shook his head slowly and redirected his attention back to the sparring match, settling deeper into the mound of blankets we’d all forced him to take everywhere he went.

Outdoor sporting events hadn’t been much of a feature of my old life, but whatever entertainment slot it ought to have occupied was now taken up by watching other people training. In this particular case, Kushina had done the mom-figure thing and packed us lunches, snacks, hot tea, and whatever else would fit inside a storage seal labeled “provisions.” Out of consideration for Kakashi’s recovery from chakra exhaustion and assorted other injuries, heating blankets, painkillers, and replacement bandages had been included in the deal.

Between Obito, Rin, and me all nagging in concert, we even got him to actually use those supplies as necessary.

From the inside of his blanket-burrito, he could still see the ongoing match. And thus, he still had some commentary. “Obito leaves his left side too open.”

“Well, usually we’re there,” I pointed out.

True to Kakashi’s word, though, Obito took an elbow to the side from Rin that made him flinch backward. Rin followed up with a side kick, missing only by a hair, and Obito brought the back of his right hand up against Rin’s ankle as the pair of them maneuvered for a more advantageous position. While Rin was sent spinning into an unintentional cartwheel, Obito passed on the chance for a follow-up and pressed his right hand against his side.

My fingers itched, but this was a sparring match. Obito was a big boy. He could handle himself against Rin.

Rin, for her part, didn’t seem to need any help at all. Good on her.

“That’s no excuse for getting sloppy,” Kakashi muttered. I wasn’t sure if this was a sort of misdirected frustration due to Kakashi’s current inability to walk more than fifty paces in a straight line without supervision, or the fact that he was still going to be on enforced medical leave months from now, but either way he still had a point.

Obito tended to outright evade attacks by using Kamui if they were too big to outrun, or just dodge given his Sharingan-granted precognition if they weren’t. But because Kamui was overkill for this kind of sparring match and the Sharingan in general wasn’t warranted, we were seeing a lot of holes open up in Obito’s general combat style.
Granted, most people weren’t Rin, and thus absurdly specialized in picking out every weakness in a human being’s movements for several different reasons, but the idea remained. Even if the two of them didn’t basically live together and know each other’s habits inside and out, Rin was probably one of the worst people for Obito to fight at this level. She probably knew how he’d react better than he did, in some aspects.

“Wow, it’s almost like he needs to spar at this level to be a rounded fighter,” I said, with an entirely appropriate amount of dry humor.

Kakashi nudged me. “Don’t get too complacent. You’ve been relying heavily on Isobu-san since we were teenagers. You have no room to talk.”

I frowned.

Truth hurts, doesn’t it?

Yeah, well, I don’t use your power if you don’t offer first.

So it’s my fault now?

No, no. I mean...it’s more like I shouldn’t use your power unless my opponent is genuinely too strong to handle. I thought back to whenever Naruto from one timeline over would get into fights with Akatsuki members after training with Jiraiya. He didn’t tend to go for Kurama’s chakra until the situation had thoroughly gone to hell. Maybe I’ve been relying too much on you and not my own strength. Sorry, Isobu.

“Talking to him?” Kakashi asked, drawing my attention back to the outside world.

“Yeah, I was. What’d I miss?” I stopped slouching in place and looked around, as though I’d been caught napping. Spacing out was a little embarrassing, but mostly I’d feel bad if I missed something awesome and wasn’t able to talk to Rin and Obito about it later.

“Obito can’t use his left arm anymore,” Kakashi said, as though commenting on the weather.

I did a double take as I looked down at the fight. True to Kakashi’s statement, Obito’s left shoulder drooped and he was not able to easily meet any of Rin’s subsequent attacks on that side.

Every so often, I saw her hands glow in bursts—either she was pouring a huge amount of chakra into her chakra scalpels, or something else was happening that I didn’t understand. Rin didn’t stop to explain, of course, but a near miss from one of her hands scored a long line along the log Obito used for his Replacement technique. She was not playing with safety gloves on.

Much.

“What kind of damage can unstable chakra scalpels do?” Kakashi asked.

Below, Rin struck again and again without fear of retaliation. Between her open-palm and knife’s edge strikes, Obito didn’t have a lot of room to safely approach her from the front even before she started reincorporating kicks into her routine.

Given that Obito definitely didn’t want to be touched by those hands right now, well... I said cautiously, “Think of what a scalpel looks like. She’s putting the same amount of chakra behind each cut, but if the blade is fatter or wobbles when she makes contact, it could be as gentle as a punch or like being hit by an axe.”
Kakashi blinked. “I didn’t realize there was that much variation.”

“They’re not supposed to be used in combat,” I reminded him. I had a few apples to demonstrate with, so I picked one up with my right hand and held it where Kakashi could see it. As I turned the apple slowly, I explained, “I mean, sure, I use the same principles for my samurai techniques, but they’re designed to be used more like this. You take your time, and you cut slowly and precisely. And the blade doesn’t need to follow the way your hand moves, either.”

“I remember you doing this when we were kids,” Kakashi remarked as he followed my movements. When the apple inevitably split into roughly equal halves under this kind of attention, he caught his half without missing a beat. “I didn’t realize this would become Rin’s only attack.”

Thinking of Kabuto, I murmured, “Does she really need another one?”

Kakashi met my eyes squarely. “Yes.”

_OKay, okay, no need to get so serious._ “We can suggest it to her once they’re done here.” It wasn’t like _Obito_ was in dire need of more jutsu or ways to use them. If anything, he needed more means of adapting if he _couldn’t_. “Honestly, I feel kind of bad asking for Gai’s advice so often, but I think they might need him to talk them through this instead of us.”

“Gai likes being asked, though.” Kakashi was cutting the remainder of his apple core out of his piece with a kunai. Maybe he’d eat it after mangling it. “In fact, I think he’d be upset if you _didn’t_ ask when stuck on a taijutsu problem.”

Point. And Kakashi did know Gai best, so I’d do what _I_ did best and refer to the expert(s).

“Ow!” Rin shouted from the training field, while _Obito_ squeaked something like “I’m so sorry!”

By the time Kakashi and I turned to look, Rin was hopping on one foot. I could see little black specks spread out across the ground, almost like seeds.

“Caltrops?” I wondered aloud, frowning slightly. Not something that came up much in _Obito_’s mission supply lists, but very useful to the average shinobi as long as there was a way to make certain the enemy got a spike in the foot.

“The soles of Rin’s sandals are so thick, I’m surprised she noticed,” Kakashi said, mask down and biting into the apple. I debated elbowing him, but Rin’s footwear had been a minor point of contention between me and her a couple of times in the past.

Granted, the gist of these was generally that I hated heels and she didn’t, but that still counted as an argument over shoes. While shopping for them.

As we watched, Rin pried one of the evil little tetrahedrons out of the sole of her shoe, then took off the shoe and examined it for damage. _Obito_ hovered nearby, clearly uncertain of how to proceed.

“I think that’s the end of this training session,” I told Kakashi in a stage-whisper. “Unless she’s—”

_Rin_ lashed out with one hand, pinkie edge glowing blue, and _Obito_ was forced to let the attack pass right through him as though he was made of air. The next few seconds were a flurry of motion as _Obito_ realized his gaffe, tried to go back to _not_ using Kamui, and then had to bend over backwards at the waist and into a flip to avoid getting his nose kicked in by Rin’s bare foot.

_Obito_ made a hilarious yelp when it happened, though.
“Should we break them up?” I wondered aloud, while Rin chased Obito across the training field and up a tree, still missing one shoe.

“Mm, no.” Kakashi leaned to the side and rested against my side. Given that even while sick he was a bit heavier than I was, I put my left hand down against the ground to brace myself. “Let’s stay here a bit longer.”

I was about to say something—or maybe do something—that could maybe kinda be romantic, if my awkwardness didn’t get in the way.

But at that point Rin decided to cut the tree down with her chakra scalpels, and the crash ruined the mood entirely in favor of baffled laughter instead. Obito needed some help to get out of that one.

There was a small benefit to working in Sensei’s office, even when everything had gotten pretty awkward thanks to him running the betting pool. Between being used as the office’s designated paperwork delivery fairy, or getting tea or snacks where necessary, the actual job of being a Hokage Guard consisted of a lot of free time unless otherwise specified. When Sensei felt like breaking that up with further fūinjutsu lessons, we could talk about whatever we felt like.

Sensei peered down at my design of the left corner of what might have been the Four Violet Flame Formation seal.

It wasn’t a real fūinjutsu, but Sensei had apparently looked at my copy of the Uchiha Flame Formation with some interest. Like the other jutsu, it was really a type of barrier ninjutsu I was modifying for more efficient use, but apparently the genjutsu study group had helped change my thinking enough for me to adapt other things, too. I still hated the fact that it required four separate seals in order to put up each corner, where the Uchiha barrier ninjutsu was a self-contained cylinder of doom, but compression just didn’t seem to work.

“You can stop glaring at your work now,” Sensei said in a somewhat dry voice.

“I’ll stop glaring when it starts working,” I grumbled, which wasn’t even a full reason for my dislike of this technique. In one future, Orochimaru’s Sound Four had used it to isolate the Third Hokage for his assassination, and even if summoning the Shinigami had taken that decision out of Orochimaru’s hands, I saw no reason to ease up on something that couldn’t flinch at my resentment.

Nothing akin to that had happened here. I would kill anyone who tried. Still, the feeling lingered.

Sensei sat down next to me, next to the ink and paper mess I’d made in my designated corner of the office. “Having trouble focusing?” When I didn’t respond, Sensei tried again with, “Are you that nervous about your date after this?”

I couldn’t exactly tell Sensei I was still freaking out about a different timeline and a dead snake summoner. I made a face and just said, “Sure, let’s go with—”

Poof!

As one, Sensei and I both whirled toward the noise. Sensei’s pronged kunai appeared in both of his hands as if by magic, where my chakra scalpels flared to life over my fingertips solely because my sword didn’t quite feel fast enough.

“Wait, wait!” screeched the toad on Sensei’s desk, holding up his forelegs in surrender. Blue marks on a generally red body, goggles around the neck—
“Kōsuke?” Sensei asked reflexively, easing out of his combat stance. The knives in his hands disappeared to...wherever they’d come from while I let my chakra scalpels fade back into nonexistence.

I’d kinda forgotten that there was a toad that shared a name with my asshole cousin. Maybe it’d be best if I mentally appended the other one with a label. I fully expected to see more of the toad than I did of my cousins. Ever.

“Reporting with a message from Jiraiya-sama, Minato-sama,” the young toad rattled off in a single breath. “Jiraiya-sama requests reinforcements from Konoha immediately!”

As the bottom dropped out of my stomach, Sensei’s expression flattened into deadly seriousness and his chakra pressure dampened everyone else’s throughout the building. I could feel other people startling as his killing intent generalized outward in a wave, and if I looked at him I could almost see his eyelids darkening to orange before reverting. Isobu’s influence shielded me from the brunt of Sensei’s worry and undirected wrath, so I could actually make pointless color commentary.

But inside, my mind spun. Jiraiya was one of the Legendary Sannin. While, yes, Konoha forces (including me) had killed Orochimaru relatively recently and proved that the Sannin weren’t untouchable, there had only ever been a handful of ninja in history who could match him. Most of them were either dead or allies, at least in this timeline, so it seemed more likely to me that Jiraiya would be calling in reinforcements for someone else. Someone he needed alive was hurt, or maybe a village needed a few more numbers on his side. The idea of Jiraiya needing backup for his own sake just didn’t compute.

“Did Jiraiya-sama say what reinforcements he needed?” I asked Kōsuke, already mentally bracing myself for the inevitable. If Jiraiya thought he needed help in combat, he was probably going to pick the nuclear option.

“Um, I remember some people were hurt,” Kōsuke said, hesitant. How much of the battlefield had he sent on his courier mission? Not really what I wanted to hear with lives at stake.

Still, that made a medic mandatory. Which was standard procedure when dealing with reinforcement assignments, really, but it did mean there would have to be a team involved.

Sensei took a deep breath and the oppressive chakra finally stopped pressing down on the building.

So is he finished with his tantrum? Isobu asked.

Shh.

You know he’s sending you out there. Isobu turned his head until there was a popping sound, audible from ten meters away from his mental avatar. He had a big neck. I could use another punching bag.

Yeah, I know. There was a certain level of inevitability to being sent after people to maul them, at least as far as my life went. Then I turned Isobu’s remark over in my mind a second time. Also, since when have you ever thrown a punch?

Hush, you.

“Kei,” Sensei said, as I redirected my attention away from my literal inner demon. There was no arguing with his voice, which was in full command tone. “You and Obito are going to be on the team.”
I inclined my head. “By your command, Hokage-sama.”

Sensei said nothing for a moment, and I watched the gears turn in his head. “Rin-kun has the largest summons of the medical staff aside from Tsunade. How soon can she be ready to go?”

Well, I didn’t exactly keep the mission log between my ears, but if Obito and I were going, Rin could be out the door just as quickly. Thus, I said, “Immediately.”

“I’ll take your word on that,” Sensei replied, making a quick hand seal. A second later, there was a swirl of chakra and a loud popping sound as air was displaced. “Get the two of them right now.”

Sensei’s clone extended a hand to me. Oh, so now it was a clone relay? One of these days, Sensei would run out of ways to exploit the most exploitable technique in this universe, but today was clearly not the day.

**Focus.**

I grabbed onto clone-Sensei’s hand. Between one heartbeat and the next, the Flying Thunder God jutsu put me through the usual sensation of getting yanked through space-time with a vaudeville hook. Never pleasant, but I had to wonder if it was because I wasn’t the one teleporting willy-nilly. I was just going along for the ride.

We popped back into reality right next to Obito. Specifically, we managed to catch him *just* inside his apartment, in the narrow hallway that gave us exactly no room to maneuver.

Obito yelped in surprise, dropping his bag of groceries when he jumped. While the clone caught the bag (mostly), and Obito’s flailing left arm phased through its head, I was already stepping back as far out of the line of fire as possible. As such, I managed to avoid being beaned in the head by a pumpkin.

“Sorry, Sensei!” Obito said, even as a Wood Release...lacrosse net caught the pumpkin bare centimeters off the ground. Somehow, it wasn’t all that surprising that Obito could make one of those without using hand seals.

“Kei? What are you doing here?” Rin asked from behind me, and when I turned I found her sitting at Obito’s desk with two medical reference texts. “Actually, wait—Hokage-sama, why are you both here?”

“You three have a mission,” Sensei’s clone said, while Obito quickly shoved everything into the refrigerator.

Rin shot to her feet, then zoomed around the apartment gathering her mission gear. Mission gear and casual clothes, at least in peacetime, were pretty interchangeable as long as everything was made of durable material. Rin, who shopped for the both of us when it came to clothes, had this principle well in hand and just threw all of her medical aids on top in scant seconds.

Obito, on the other hand, just grabbed a...okay, so he just had a belt full of weaponry and clipped it on. True efficiency in a nutshell.

“As soon as my original has more information, he’ll be able to fill you in,” Sensei’s clone said, as Obito and Rin stood at attention in front of us. The clone held out both hands to them, while I was stuck just latching onto its shoulder.

Obito blinked. “Wait, you’re a—”
“—clone?” Obito blinked and looked around the office, noticing the original Sensei scribbling details of a mission down on a long green-backed scroll. “Oh.”

The clone nodded. “Good luck on your mission.” And with a poof, it was gone and its chakra returned to Sensei. He shook his head abruptly when the feedback hit him, but that was all he did. Otherwise, he continued to write as Kōsuke made small corrections here and there.

Obito, Rin and I all glanced at each other out of the corners of our eyes as Sensei finished his work, unwilling to interrupt. I knew what kind of mission we’d be going on, so the other two were probably busy wondering what kind of fresh hell we were going to be walking into. Obito and I hadn’t been on the same mission—when specifically summoned for it—in more than a year. And Rin? She never deployed with either of us.

Not on purpose, anyway.

Sensei stood up from his desk. “All three of you are going to the Valley of the End. Find Jiraiya-sensei and kill whatever is threatening him. And bring back the body.”

How the fuck were we supposed to get there in time to make a difference? That was at least a four-hour flight on Tsuruya’s back, and that was when she was actively shaping the wind to speed things up. It was much better to use space-time shenanigans to cut out all of the intervening time. Only Sensei’s teleportation range wasn’t that large, and I had no idea what kind of mission would lead Obito there.

Kōsuke hopped forward on Sensei’s desk, then leapt off of it and into my flailing arms. For a frog the size of a golden retriever, he was a lot lighter than he looked. “Ready?” he asked us.

...Right, summon shenanigans. The other kind of space-time manipulation.

Obito and Rin each grabbed one of my arms. “We’re ready,” was the unanimous verdict.

Ker-poof!

The Valley of the End was, if anything, the single greatest monument to the power of S-class shinobi in full DBZ-level bullshit mode. It had nothing to do with the statue of the two culprits—which had been put in much later—and everything to do with the fact that the valley had not existed prior to the First Hokage’s epic throwdown with Madara. Cartographers had fits over this place in the history books.

Strictly speaking, the place wasn’t a valley. It was a canyon with a massive and artificially-redirected river running through it. Steep cliff sides kept non-shinobi from maneuvering enough to be effective fighters here, with two paired statues pinning the bulk of the river between them and compressing the lake above. To one end of the valley, the Land of Rice Fields stretched out into the distance, as the final goal of Sasuke’s ill-advised abandonment of Konoha.

And on this end, there was another epic furball of a fight, as though the original brawl needed a sequel. My chakra sense gave me a sensation akin to a spider web flying in my face—too many interconnected lines, all of which were just there enough to be annoying. I could make out two monster chakra signatures below, in the tangle. The first was Jiraiya, and someone I didn’t know by feel but probably would by sight. There weren’t that many people who could give Jiraiya a decent fight.
I could see something like a hundred red-cloaked figures darting here and there, with a black-cloaked one in the approximate middle of the mess. The white-topped speck had to be Jiraiya. And, woven here and there all across the valley to various thicknesses, black iron thorns made half the space inaccessible on pain of tetanus.

“I’m going in,” Obito said, as we peered down from the clifftops and tried to figure out what was happening. First one off of Gama’s back, and the first into the fray. Some things never changed.

“Obito, wai—” Rin began, but he was already gone. He was running down the side of the cliff, faster than falling, and Kamui did make him effectively untouchable.

Isobu?

**Here you go.** Isobu’s chakra flooded into my coils, free for the taking. Maybe, for once, he wouldn’t cut me off before the bad guy was dead. **Don’t die.**

“Are you going down there too?” Rin asked, as I slid off Gama’s back.

Well, I didn’t especially want to head down there. I wasn’t invulnerable, just tough. Leaving Gama and Rin behind, however, was a choice I had to make for both their sakes as soon as I started glowing red.

By way of reply, I threw myself off the cliff. I was pretty sure I heard Rin screaming at me until Isobu’s chakra tail whipped out and slammed into the rock, slowing my descent like the world’s largest and most insane fast-roping exercise. Rock fragments showered down around me, and then Isobu’s tail detached from the wall so I could hit the water’s surface in glorious freefall.

Isobu unfurled all three tails as we brought the V1 cloak to bear. I could feel my tattoos start to warm up a bit as the Tailed Beast chakra flowed cautiously through them.

As I took to the field in probably the second-loudest manner I could manage, a number of the red-cloaked figures peeled off from the fight to hurl themselves in my direction. I felt the spider web of chakra signatures constrict as though around an unwitting fly, but that wasn’t as big of a hint to the reality of the battle as this simple fact: none of the red-cloaked fighters needed their limbs to move.

Instead, they jerked around on invisible tethers and hurtled toward me, revealing themselves as combat puppets.

Specifically, as a lot of shinobi combat puppets, with only one master’s hands at the controls.

Sasori of the Red Sand versus Toad Sage Jiraiya. If the latter hadn’t called for reinforcements, I would have looked around for someone selling tickets. It was a rehash of the First Hokage’s fight with Madara, but Kakuzu would have made money off the bout. Or tried to.

I smashed the first puppet to meet me between two of Isobu’s tails. Wooden limbs and chakra strings flew, the former shattering and the latter dissipating with the hit.

There were a couple of core principles of fighting puppets. The first of them was that, since they didn’t feel pain or react to injury, every active puppet needed to literally be smashed into unrecognizable chunks in order to fully disable them if they were being used by a skilled puppeteer. The second principle was generally to attack said puppeteer as soon as possible, because they had a nasty habit of pulling yet more puppets out of thin air and because, generally speaking, puppet masters weren’t great at close-range combat. The third? Watch for tricks, traps, poisons, and possible body-swapping bullshit.
Since I was effectively immune to disease and poisons thanks to Isobu’s...proactive approach to protecting me in a bubble of demonic chakra, my main concerns involved getting through the horde while inflicting as much mayhem as physically possible. Obito had his end of things covered, thanks to Kamui’s five-minute running time, but I needed to make enough of a gap that Rin could get through.

Allow me.

Isobu’s tails stretched backward, reaching behind me and whipping around to clear the back-field of roving puppets. At the same time, the V1 chakra cloak decoupled from my arms and Isobu’s grabbed the two nearest puppets and crushed them into splinters in his spectral grip.

Rin’s voice cut through the sound of continual destruction, “Coming through!”

In the next moment, she and Gama were through the hole I’d cleared in the crowd of puppets, hopping past Obito in turn. But if I could get rid of all the puppets, then Jiraiya and Rin would have some breathing room, and Obito wouldn’t need to keep running Kamui’s passive mode to avoid getting skewered.

Isobu, if I could…?

If you’re doing what I think you’re going to do, aim for the iron construct. I want that eyesore gone.

Well, okay then. Let’s reset the battlefield. My painstakingly relearned grasp of hand seals wasn’t perfect with my left arm still acting as the lesser contributor in the process, but some techniques just needed a lot of chakra thrown into them with relatively little consideration for such niceties as “form.”

Thank goodness for environmental water. The Great Waterfall technique took the black iron tree—likely leftover from Sasori deploying the Third Kazekage puppet—and rendered it into so much twisted metal. While the Third Kazekage’s iron sand manipulation was utterly terrifying while active, I hadn’t spotted the puppet anywhere and water? To be blunt, once chakra was out of play, physics came back in. And water moving at barely fifteen kilometers per hour had ten times the kinetic force of air at the same speed. Which was why floods were so dangerous.

I had basically picked up the power to create a waterspout as an opening gambit in any fight I got into.

The world around us got very loud.

As the water settled back down into its natural flow—or unnatural, given the whole S-class shinobi thing—Obito tossed a puppet limb that I’d either displaced or missed into the water. “Nice shot.”

“Pretty sure I missed Sasori,” I said, as Isobu lowered our shared chakra usage and stopped making independent chakra arms. But as long as Rin and Jiraiya were on their way to whatever shelter they’d found, my job was one well done.

As though to prove me right, half a dozen cloaked figures emerged from the still-disturbed murky water as though someone had installed an invisible platform under their feet. Kinda creepy.

The black-cloaked one finally threw back his hood.

I’d never seen Sasori in person before. His Bingo Book description pegged him as a redhead, but I was really seeing more pink than red. Without his big scorpion puppet to act as power armor, though,
he was probably smaller than Obito and considerably less emotive than the average rock.

“Who’s that?” Obito asked instantly.

“Do you even read the Bingo Book?” I asked him in return.

Obito managed a sheepish look. “Well…”

“Are the two of you supposed to be diversions?” Sasori asked, before I could figure out how I wanted to yell at Obito. For some reason, S-class shinobi did have a tendency to treat other people’s conversations as sacrosanct and not interrupt, but mostly because they (we) tended to view personal drama as a bigger deal than probably realistic.

“That depends,” Obito responded, because he was polite. Somewhat. “I’m pretty sure a distraction doesn’t usually kill you.”

Sasori glanced at me. Then he looked at his minions, some of which felt like they were being held up by his chakra strings, and some of which...did not…

Wait.

Five more hoods came down. Obito and I both recoiled reflexively.

Realistically speaking, the three puppets among the group were last week’s news. Both of us could tear them to hilariously tiny bits in a split second if we wanted to. I’d destroyed as many of them as I could easily catch just one attack ago. But the sight of those blank yellow eyes and chalky white flesh was one I had hoped never to see again. I had managed to get the mummified Ten-Tails thrown into space for the sole purpose of avoiding this kind of shit.

But apparently Zetsu clones were like cockroaches. There were always more.

“Wh-where’d you get those?” Obito demanded, his Sharingan shifting between three-tomoe and full Mangekyō as he tried to stare down the Zetsu clones at the same time. It was a task made more difficult by their position—the puppets (and Sasori) were in the middle with the Zetsu clones acting as bookends in a line.

“I don’t think you deserve to know,” Sasori remarked as he gave us both assessing glances and his lackeys...might have been licking their chops. Anyway, Sasori had a combination of vocal range and tone that radiated unadulterated smug. “Phantom Obito and the Tidal Blade...my, your reputations don’t illustrate much about either of you. Disappointing.”

Oh no, not the art thing. Not again.

Besides, I preferred Deidara’s approach anyway.

“Says the living puppet,” I said, watching for any change in Sasori’s body language. Of course, there didn’t really have to be any since he was both a living puppet and a puppetmaster, and thus some simple considerations flew out the window, but it was the thought that counted.

Obito’s visible eye widened and he did a brief double-take, but when his gaze fell on Sasori again afterward, it was like watching the pieces fall into place.

“That explains what I was seeing. If that’s your secret, you don’t understand who you’re dealing with at all,” Obito muttered. He shifted his weight on the water’s surface, and I saw him change his fighting stance entirely as he drew on a different skillset. He put most of his weight on his left leg,
pulled back and knee bent. One arm tucked in against his side while the other was raised in an
unmistakable tribute to Gai’s Strong Fist starting pose.

I knew how to take a hint. As far as combat went, anyway.

I brought out yet more of Isobu’s chakra as a general deterrent, then leaned forward over my leading
foot. Hand low but on the hilt of my sword, ready to draw at the first instant—

Two of Sasori’s puppets leapt at us first. Coordinated, of course, because he was a puppeteer second
to none, but Obito and I had been fighting together for almost as long as Sasori had been a household
name. And of the two sides involved in the battle, one had a jinchūriki and an Uchiha. The other had
killer puppets.

Even when the third puppet joined in, it wasn’t much of a contest. While I swept my sword across in
an overhead arc that split one puppet in half from crown all the way down through one foot, Obito
backflipped over me in the wake of my strike and cut the other two puppets down with perfect Wood
Release javelin shots. He couldn’t have done better with two Sharingan.

And then the Zetsus.

Now, to be perfectly clear—Zetsu clones were not and have never been skilled fighters in the sense
of being trained. But they were fast, strong, unrelenting and unresponsive to pain, and there were
always more of them than anyone could spot off-hand.

And as soon as the two corner Zetsus rushed Obito and me, fifteen more of the bastards erupted from
the water all around us.

Two sweeps of Isobu’s tails cleared them out before they could touch solid ground again, and in that
brief gap, Sasori was nothing more than a black shadow hauling off in the direction of Jiraiya and
Rin’s chakra signatures.

“Oh no you fucking don’t,” I snarled, half under my breath and buoyed by Isobu’s chakra.

Obito vanished into thin air next to me, reappearing just to Sasori’s left in the distance and sawing his
leg off at the knee. Being Sasori, this meant exactly nothing, and I spotted the severed leg flying back
under its own power to rejoin the whole.

It wasn’t enough just to cut him to pieces, given the lovely demonstration of his self-assembling
skills. Sasori’s...whatever his heart was in? That bit had to die first. Or last, depending on what way
we looked at the problem. And I hadn’t told Obito about that explicitly, but he was smart enough to
read his opponent’s’ chakra for anatomical anomalies. A big knot of chakra like that stuck out like a
sore thumb to me, so I couldn’t imagine what kind of hideous mess it made in Obito’s vision.

He apparently chose to deal with that problem thusly: “Fire Release: Fire Dragon Flame Bullet!”

Obito’s signature oversized fireball twisted in midair, forming three separate streams of flame the size
of tree trunks. Each one promptly sprouted a long, narrow head complete with fangs, and all of them
rounded on Sasori’s puppet body. While Obito pumped yet more chakra into his fiery chakra
construct, giving it more coils and more heads, Sasori stopped dead on the water’s surface in the
midge of all that fire.

...Of course, puppets with no internal organs didn’t need to breathe. Fire did. And immediately after
I remembered that little tidbit, Sasori dropped through the water’s surface like a rock.

Obito landed on the water’s surface a moment later, and then immediately got out of the way as
Isobu’s chakra permeated the river like a cloud of blood.

I lifted my hand, visualizing the orb Isobu and I were creating. Chakra flowed down through my legs and stopped the flow of the river dead in its tracks for a dozen meters around me. “Water Prison.”

All the water in the area jumped, waves I didn’t control sloshing over the watery cube that I did. And somewhere in the middle of the not-an-ice-cube, enveloped in water made solid, was Sasori’s puppet body. Once I had his little fishbowl of a trap isolated, I lifted it out of the water to view my catch.

Obito sauntered back over, stepping carefully around the body of the Water Prison. I wouldn’t let him get sucked in, but there was no harm in being cautious. He looked up at Sasori’s limp and unmoving body in the jutsu, perhaps a tad smug. “Ha! Not so slippery now, are you?”

I frowned and turned the Water Prison over in midair so I could see more clearly. A quick hop brought me close enough to examine my prey, and the problem therein.

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me,” I muttered, upon spotting the gaping hole in my plan. Or, to be more specific, the gaping hole in puppet Sasori’s chest where his heart should have been. The soda bottle sized cylinder was distinctly absent, which sort of put a damper on my plan to use the Water Prison and crush him under as many fathoms of pressure as I could manage with Isobu’s help.

Yeah, this was leaning toward doubleplus ungood. “Obito, this puppet’s empty! Get the other one!”

Obito saw my expression and, between me collapsing the bubble like a dwarf star and atomizing Sasori’s puppet body, was already moving at a dead run directly toward Rin and Jiraiya’s chakra signatures.

And then more Zetsu clones burst from the ground like daisies from hell, and I cut the nearest two of them down with a pair of Water-coated kunai just to clear Obito’s path.

I didn’t know how this area was laid out, before or after the big historic throwdown. I didn’t have some kind of mental catalog of hiding places, but I was suddenly sure that none of that mattered. No matter how well-hidden Rin and Jiraiya were, we couldn’t let Sasori get that far. Jiraiya wouldn’t have left the battlefield unless something was badly wrong, and the idea of Rin trying to confront a S-class missing-nin who had given super-strength Sakura pause didn’t bear thinking about.

Obito disappeared through the trunk of a tree. I clawed my way up the cliff face with Zetsus barking at my heels, then followed suit into the forest.

“So, where’d you jerks come from this time?” I yelled at the nearest ones, because the Putties were pretty fast and agile when they wanted to be and were keeping up.

Madara was too dead to be behind this new incursion, and damned if I knew who else would willingly hook himself up to a Zetsu control module. Which, then, begged the question of where exactly they’d come from. Given Nagato’s Zetsu-magnet power and the fact that he’d figured it out before leaving the Land of Fire that first time, did that mean that these things had lain dormant for almost six years solely to jump out at us again now? Or had something happened to the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path’s orbit?

“You really wanna know?” asked the nearest Zetsu clone, as I ducked behind a tree in a blur of Isobu’s red chakra.

If I didn’t think too hard about the implications of the Statue being relevant again, I could pretend
that this was just a high-stakes game of tag. If the Zetsu clones could corner me, they’d do their
damndest to rip me to pieces. This after we’d killed the original White Zetsu, either in the Amegakure
purge or when Kurama had gone all Godzilla back in Konoha. All that really meant was that when
the White Zetsu clones decided to kill us all, it was partly motivated by revenge and not just orders
from on high.

“I’m sure it’s a good story. It might be funny.” I forced some levity into my voice, which came out
funny with Isobu’s tones overlaying mine. Due to several additional factors—anger, fear, and so on
—the attempt failed miserably.

“Funny?” asked another one, before Isobu’s left chakra tail flattened into a blade and sliced the
speaker in two.

And yet, another clone picked up the slack. “Do you think it’s funny that the original died because of
you?”

Actually, I kinda did. An immortal monster bent on using the Tailed Beasts to destroy the entire
human race, only to be thwarted by a bunch of people applying their resources rationally? Sounded
appropriate to me. Even if Madara had gone and died of old age, I was including both Black and
White Zetsu in my “monster” category.

I had a somewhat twisted sense of humor.

“Shouldn’t I?” I asked them. There were easily a half-dozen now, trying to avoid being cut down at
the same time that they were constantly keeping me from making much progress through the forest.
Obito didn’t have to worry about them with his powers, at least.

One of them let out a wordless snarl and charged me, but Isobu’s tail batted it aside and through a
tree.

Someone was going to be getting yelled at about all the ecological damage we were doing. Probably
me, since I planned to live long enough for that lecture.

“I mean,” I went on, as I ducked under another flying Zetsu and casually cut him in two at the waist
with a chakra-charged katana stroke. The two halves landed somewhere behind me, but I didn’t have
much time to dwell on that if I wanted to keep bantering. “It’s not like you’re planning on adopting
all the puppies in the world or ending poverty. You eat people.”

“That was only one person, and one time!” said one of the group, only to be punched in the head by
his nearest comrade.

This is the best the enemy could send against us?

They pretty much never are. Without the forward planning necessary to grab a chakra sample for a
disguise, Zetsu clones were mostly cannon fodder. Sure, I couldn’t really determine which people
were Zetsu clones and which ones were the real deal, but…

Ah, hell.

I hadn’t seen Obito in two minutes and my paranoia was already back with a vengeance. This was
why I hated Zetsu clones, aside from the fact that they were a merry band of people-eaters.

Water Trumpet. One fountain of water out of nowhere, right on cue, blasted the Zetsus out of my
way and into various shrubbery. While making hand signs for my next trick—Water Dragon Bullet
—I kept half a mind’s eye on Obito’s chakra as it continued to move.
Sasori was still ahead of him somewhere, but it wasn’t going to stay that way for long. When those two clashed…

*Actually, you know what? Screw this.*

And Isobu dropped a miniature Tailed Beast Bomb at our feet. The world got really loud for the second time in about ten minutes, as earthen and wooden debris flew everywhere, leveling the forest for fifty meters directly around me.

While there was certainly no more Zetsu problem in the immediate area after that, that still left us with some catching up to do.
I levered a piece of mangled tree trunk out of my path, grimacing at the amount of damage I’d done in a bare handful of seconds. While I was a poor environmentalist, almost everything taller than a coffee table had been leveled in a twenty-meter ring of death around me. Isobu, for all that he’d helped me construct a miniature Tailed Beast Bomb, had a couple of problems with scaling things down. It probably came with the whole “being a giant monster” package.

The damage isn’t that bad. Isobu surveyed the world through my eyes, then rolled his. Now, if I’d managed to place the secondary compressing layer and added a counter-spin to the surface—

Can we please save that particular refinement for when we can practice with Kushina again? I asked him, clambering out of the crater we’d made. And it was a mess of a crater, full of debris and mud and Zetsu corpses. For all that they didn’t have organs, they squelched as much as any mundane life-form. I tried to avoid getting it on my shoes.

Outside of the immediate blast radius, the terrain gradually shifted from “thoroughly demolished” to “eh, maybe” as I ran toward my friends’ chakra signatures. While there was a possibility that Zetsus were lying in wait for me, whether among the un-flattened trees or underground, moving at near top speed let me avoid their attention. Or perhaps they just knew a losing fight when they saw one.

Maybe.

It could happen, I thought defensively.

I won’t hold my breath.

...Do you even do that? Ever? I ducked under a tree branch that, if I had hit it head-on without my V1 cloak active, would have probably decapitated me from physics alone. I wasn’t currently in danger, but recklessness was a bad habit to get into. And Isobu’s blessings never lasted quite long enough to get the job done.

Your body is the problem here, not my power, Isobu pointed out in an annoyingly reasonable tone. You should be able to last this fight with time to spare.

I made sure my mental avatar gave him my most skeptical expression. Dubious, lifted eyebrow included.

Just get back to work.

I tossed him a grin and did so.

Forests could be tricky terrain, and not just when traversing the lower levels at night. Contrary to popular belief, as inspired by movies and probably a few featuring vampires or werewolves in particular, people simply didn’t move that fast in heavy brush. Caution was the name of the game, because the only thing worse than being in the midst of uncharted wilderness and needing to travel through it is to do so while injured. That didn’t even cover elevation, unexpected geography, or wild animals that might be lurking in the area.
But as a shinobi, I had two major cheats. Even beyond just being trained for this kind of terrain, Konoha shinobi were pretty much all literally superhuman. Bear Grylls had nothing on us. The combination of speed, strength, endurance, and experience were pretty hard to beat. The widespread gymnast’s grace was also pretty helpful. The second cheat was, well, that I was a jinchūriki, and petty concerns like inanimate obstacles didn’t factor into my pathfinding much if at all.

The shortest distance between points? A straight line. Cue me, the turtle-shaped freight train.

I’d never been the kind of person to participate in foot races, for reasons ranging from lack of interest to reincarnation trauma related to gym class, but Isobu and I working together could probably travel a hundred and eighty kilometers per hour in a straight line. Without using a specific technique for a speed boost.

Finding my friends didn’t take all that long.

I just had to keep going past the hundred yards of new charcoal that indicated where Obito made his stand. Knowing him, he only stuck around long enough to confirm that his enemies were doing a Wicked Witch of the West impression before waltzing off into the sunset. His chakra was safely out of the way, though agitated, and I couldn’t pick up any other hostiles near him.

At least, there were none close enough to bum rush Obito. Not that it would work.

“Hi, Kei!” Obito shouted, spitting a cloud of smoke to shroud the battlefield a moment later. Obito, being the kind of person who would find a way to set asbestos on fire with brute force if necessary, wouldn’t be held back by his literal smokescreen. I made a mental note to consider introducing him to thermite later.

“Any news?” I asked him, after three of Isobu’s chakra tails had brought me forcibly to a stop. His tails left massive furrows in the ground behind me, but better brakes had yet to be invented.

Obito shrugged, letting his hand drop from his mouth. He’d long outgrown needing his hands to direct his flames after completing the relevant jutsu, but some habits were hard to break. “I’m just holding everyone here. Rin went on ahead, so go join her. Then I’ll just burn everything and catch up.”

“Bye, Obito!” I shouted back, though Isobu’s chakra colored my response into something a little more guttural-sounding than usual. Since I was leaving faint trails of red chakra as I moved—not enough to be detectable long-term, but still there—Obito’s help in cutting visual contact with pursuers worked out in my favor.

Shortly after I resumed my run, it seemed like everything I’d already damaged was the recipient of a massive, fiery coup de grace. There was no mushroom cloud, or excessive pressure wave, but everything in the area was probably wishing that “stop-drop-and-roll” was still relevant to the situation.

Wasn’t like there weren’t more Zetsus where those came from. I didn’t know where exactly the “where” in that equation was, but it could wait a little longer. I’d burn that bridge when I got around to it.

Well outside of the original battlefield, I finally let the V1 cloak drop and drew Isobu’s chakra back into my body. If I strained my left arm’s seals too much, I wouldn’t be using that arm for a damned long time. On the other edge of the concern-o-meter, Rin wouldn’t like it if I disturbed any kind of delicate medical procedure with Tailed Beast chakra flying everywhere. And I had no idea how Jiraiya was doing.
I tracked Rin’s chakra more than Jiraiya’s, solely because I was more familiar with hers, and found their hiding spot in a shallow cave. More of a lean-to, really, with a rock wall that had tree roots growing over the edges as an improvised wall. The roots, feathery and brown, neatly broke up Rin’s uniform outline and let her work in peace.

Rin’s voice rang out before I could get too close. “Stay right there, Kei.” Or else went unspoken.

Infiltrator protocols were fun. Unfortunately, they were also a reality we had to live with. Zetsus could talk, but their judgment was spotty and their aggression was all too real.

“You know that if I was actually a Zetsu, I’d totally disobey that order,” I reminded her.

Rin’s response was gratifyingly quick. “And you would spend your last minute wondering why your teeth were in your sinuses.”

I’d give her seven out of ten for creativity. “Okay, I’m sitting.” To emphasize my compliance, I plunked my butt down on a tree trunk a good ten meters away from Rin. Sure, it was well within a kill zone but the fact that I was obeying was probably a point in my favor. Then a stray thought struck me. “Do Zetsu clones actually have sinuses?”

“Keep pushing and we might find out,” Rin said over her shoulder. While she’d hidden the chakra her patients gave off by existing thanks to the power of security seals, it didn’t take a Hyuga to know that she had two patients and one of them was Jiraiya. The other patient was hidden by a dip in the ground, while Jiraiya was sitting up. The dull red was perfectly visible if I was looking right at it.

So I was a nosy person. Sue me.

Since my own work was blurring out chakra signatures I wanted to read, I cast my metaphorical line further out into the water. There were other chakra signatures out there, including Obito and Sasori repeatedly trying to kill each other with slightly smaller jutsu than before and the requisite gaggle of Zetsu clones. But as long as Obito didn’t seem to be in distress, I’d let him handle that. Even if Rin could deliver death threats like a champ, I needed to stick around in case she needed to make those threats a reality.

*Isobu, if we need to use summon contract...things, I asked him since I had nothing else to do but wait, can I ask you to lend chakra to Rin, if she needs it?*

**Are you certain we’d need it?** Isobu asked back. **I can do anything the largest summon animals can do, and I don’t get hurt.**

I frowned. **Yeah, but you’re held back by, well, me. And Tsuruya should never be within half a kilometer of any fight you’re interested in.**

Isobu gave me the equivalent of a shrug, which I had never really understood in a mechanical sense when it came to giant turtles. Isobu having arms just made the whole thing more confusing.

I probably would have gone on in that vein for a while longer if, at that moment, the security seal hadn’t been deactivated. I didn’t stand up, because Rin probably would have mauled anyone making sudden movements around her vulnerable patients, but I did look at the entrance to the improvised medical tent in time to see Jiraiya emerge.

He looked like hell. The last two feet of his spiky white ponytail had been roughly hacked off, and the smell of burned hair hit my nose like a hammer. His clothes were torn and covered in blood, dirt, ash, and whatever Zetsu clones were filled with. One of his eyebrows was split and held together by
a butterfly bandage, with dried blood trailing down over one eye. But the big thing, which sent a shudder through me, was the fact that his left arm ended in a bloody stump.

And somehow despite that, Jiraiya met my eyes squarely. Oh, he was in pain, but there was a thing in this universe where limb loss didn’t slow S-class shinobi down nearly as much as would make sense.

“When killed me?” Jiraiya demanded as he approached, his eyes narrowed. His chakra didn’t outright dwarf mine, but the fact that he could still focus it enough to remain a coherent threat? I knew better than to argue.

I had to admit, putting that kind of info to use as a password? Good idea. “Nagato.”

Jiraiya relaxed millimeters at a time, but I wasn’t sure how much of that tension stayed due to pain or just because of how terrible of a situation we were in. Zetsu clones tended to do that. “Took you long enough to get here.”

If I had been more inclined to joke and probably a lot more of an asshole, I might’ve made a crack about him needing a bunch of kids to give him a hand. As it was, I was pretty sure he wouldn’t appreciate me helping him sit down on the log or anything, so I got to my feet to match him and tried not to hover. “Jiraiya-sama?”

“It’s nothing,” he replied, though the way he was swaying slightly—probably from blood loss—betrayed him. “So take it Kösuke got through. How many people did Minato send?”

“Me, Obito, and Rin,” I said. At Jiraiya’s expectant look, I clarified, “Kakashi’s hurt, so it’s just us three this time. Against Sasori and his goons, that should be enough.”

Jiraiya stared at me, then very slowly raised his remaining hand and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Tell me you didn’t just say that.”

“...At least it wasn’t ‘nothing can stop us now’?” I suggested weakly, wincing as I replayed that last statement in my head.

Jiraiya set his mouth into a grim line. Then he said aloud, “Rin-kun, is it safe to move your other patient?”

“That depends,” Rin said, sticking her head out of the lean-to. “Can you summon anything?”

Jiraiya grimaced.

“Then we just need to move faster.” Rin’s expression was entirely closed-off, blank in a way that only ever boded ill. Her eyes met mine and my stomach dropped even before she said, “Kei, if we can’t get him to a hospital immediately, your brother is going to die.”

The world stood still.

Jiraiya was almost frozen with his mouth open, like he had something to say that would matter. Rin was frowning in concern, but her attention was already back on her patient and getting him out of the cave. After flexing my fingers, more to see if I could still move than anything, I joined Rin at the lip of the cave without processing the space between me and it.

His headband was gone when I looked, so dirt caught in his hair when Rin started to move him. A clear mask covered Hayate’s mouth and nose. Blood flecked the inside when he coughed. His eyelids twitched a little, after, but he didn’t get up or notice anything before going limp again.
“Sasori poisoned him,” Rin said, in case I was listening. “I don’t have the right treatment here, but I did have a breathing mask.”

She went on for a while about the exact symptoms. I heard maybe two things. Three at the outside.

My brother was coughing blood.

He’d drown on dry land if he didn’t get help. More help than Rin could provide.

I rested my hand against Hayate’s damp forehead, feeling heat running up my fingers. Rin stopped talking about technical details then, and let me say, “W-we need Obito.”

“I can get him,” Jiraiya suggested. One part of me was shouting about his hand, but the rest didn’t hear it until he was already gone.

“Obito can only move so many people without wearing himself out,” Rin whispered, though she had one glowing hand against Hayate’s chest. “Triage. We get Jiraiya-sama and Hayate-kun out, then we look for Anko-chan ourselves.”

“Anko?” What—

“Obito will be back to help us fight and look,” Rin assured me.

That did not answer my question. I didn’t know what I was asking, but the answer was still not what I was looking for. No, I needed to—

Hayate coughed again and more complex thoughts flew out of my head. He was halfway across my lap and I was trying to soothe him by whispering before I knew it. “Shh, shh, I’m here now. You’re going to be okay.”

Except for my utter lack of advanced medical techniques. I didn’t have the knowledge to fix anything. All I could do was support Rin.

“Kei, if Obito leaves, you need to take his place,” Rin reminded me, and I blinked at her in sheer confusion. Her jaw worked for a moment as she tried to find the right words, and then she said, “You’ll be able to make Sasori pay.”

Isobu rumbled, **To say the least.**

I looked down at Hayate, leaning down so I could give him a hug. Gently, and even yielding when he coughed blood again. Then I let Rin pry him out of my arms with as much care as she could manage. He was bigger than her, so his arms dragged on the ground.

I got to my feet just as Jiraiya and Obito arrived, pursued by Zetsu clones.

I turned my head and spat a ten-meter waterspout in their general direction. Obito had the level of prescience necessary to drag Jiraiya bodily out of the way, but the Zetsu clones were blasted back where they’d come from. **Look Ma, no hand seals!**

“Close c—Hayate?!” Obito yelped when he finally had a chance to see everyone. I didn’t ask what kind of silent conversation he had with Rin a second later when their eyes met, but things moved fast after that. He got a firmer grip on Jiraiya’s sleeve, then sucked the Sannin into his Kamui dimension with zero warning.

I was never going to get used to seeing the taffy puller visual effect of that jutsu. Ever.
“Take him to the hospital right now.” Rin produced a list of medical notes, all in hospital shorthand, and tucked it into the collar of Hayate’s shredded flak jacket. She said to Obito, “Make any medic-nin read this first before they start treatment.”

I didn’t even want to think about what might happen if they didn’t.

Obito nodded, then reached down and made Hayate vanish as well. Once both patients were secure in his pocket dimension, he turned his attention back to us. “Rin, you’re staying here?”

“I can hold out for as long as it takes to make a return trip, Obito,” Rin reminded him. She got to her feet and brushed dust from her clothes, then pricked her finger with a needle-thin sliver of chakra. A single drop of blood ran down her finger, and then she brought her hand down on the ground.

Obito and I both knew where this was going, and stepped back post-haste.

“Summoning jutsu!”

If I considered Suika-sensei a representative of average size for the scorpion summon contract, the next oversized arachnid was something two standard deviations too large. Suika-sensei was the size of a minivan, but this scorpion was about as big as a city bus if not counting her tail, which added another entire body length onto the measurement. Her stinger, claws, and thorax were a pale yellow-green, where everything else on her body looked an almost ghostly white. When the summoning smoke cleared, all eight of the new scorpion’s eyes focused on Obito and me, then slowly rotated to look as far back as they could manage and catch a glimpse of her summoner.

“This is Moyashi-chan,” Rin said, patting her eight-legged steed.

I supposed that, if I ignored literally everything else about Moyashi aside from her coloration, she sort of resembled a soybean sprout. She also was about as well-camouflaged as a white whale on a black backdrop.

“What are we fighting today, Rin-sama?” Moyashi asked, clicking her pincers. The eyes focused on Obito and me again. “Are we fighting you two?”

“No, Moyashi-chan,” Rin said, even as she healed the pin-prick in her finger with hardly a thought. “When Sasori comes over here, though, Kei and I will fight to the death.”

“Specifically Sasori’s death,” I added for clarity’s sake. When the scorpion did her best to nod without having an actual neck, I turned to Obito and said firmly, “And Obito, be careful when you get in and out of the area. If I’m gonna break Sasori’s heart, I’m going to be completely literal and it will involve explosives.”

“You got it.” And with that, Obito disappeared into a wormhole of his own creation.

I closed my eyes. Isobu, cut me off if I go too far.

You say that like I don’t.

Deep breaths. Deeeeeeep breaths.

I was going to kill Sasori. It would take time, effort, and a lot of explosives to finally turn him into paste, but there was a reason he was the first member of Akatsuki to bite it.

Jiraiya was missing a hand and we don’t know why, Isobu reminded me. He slapped the surface of the mental sea with one tail, then said, Do not underestimate him.
I glanced at Rin while she stuck herself to Moyashi’s back like Spider-Man at his best. I wouldn’t be involving Tsuruya in this fight, but Rin’s summons were more suited for close-range violence. The three of us, like this, would probably be able to pin Sasori down long enough to make a kill-zone around him.

I needed a chance to test my new jutsu anyway. And Sasori needed to learn to appreciate...science. Rin, to my everlasting disappointment, found Sasori before I did. Sure, he and a couple of puppeteered Zetsu clones and maybe two actual puppets threw the first figurative punch, but I was fifteen meters away and elbow-deep in more Zetsus at the time. Out of position. Sure, taking point kinda meant that kind of thing happened, but I would have given...something to be the first one to cave the local Ken doll’s face in.

But Sasori’s attempt to kill the medic first did not go according to plan.

Rin’s chakra blazed and she thrust one hand forward into the empty air between them—and Sasori’s arm flew off, severed by an invisible blade. Not just from a joint, which he could have easily reattached with chakra strings, but I heard later that she cut through the wooden bicep and the control cables that had replaced the missing-nin’s tendons.

Moyashi called it a “perfect shot.”

I wasn’t inclined to agree, given what happened immediately afterward. Rin’s first hit had apparently only been a range-finder of sorts, because her next scalpel hit was very much not one—instead, she punched Sasori’s legs off the rest of his body by hitting him square in the cable reel.

It was located where his intestines ought to have been, but made him look a bit like a fishing rod in reverse. Rin didn’t do the obvious thing and grab the cable to reel him back in for more face-punching, but that was fine.

Sasori shot off into the depths of the valley from the force of Rin’s punch (or possibly fear), while Moyashi’s long stinger impaled several Zetsu clones in rapid succession. Her claws were like oversized bolt cutters instead of mere appendages, and thus did Rin and her summoned partner scythe through the Zetsu clones like wheat.

Obito would probably have been applauding by this point.

I held up the last Zetsu of my target group by the throat, shrugged, and knocked his head off with a chakra-enhanced palm strike. Then I bounded back over to Rin and her mobile Cuisinart for a status update.

“So, did you ever finish that White Strength Seal?” I asked casually, even as I slid a few of my more wicked-looking weapons out of my thigh holster. Really, they were mostly iron balls that I could rig to explode with a thought, but shrapnel was one of the more effective weapons in my arsenal for squishy targets.

Sure, Sasori mostly wasn’t squishy, but I was willing to experiment.

Rin turned her head to face me, and the purple mark on her forehead matched her cheek tattoos perfectly. As I watched, the little diamond melted away into her skin at the exact moment that dark lines spread out from the same spot and engulfed Rin’s tattoos.

Rin smiled, and the black marks seemed to glow with eerie power. “Does that answer your question?”
I grinned savagely back. While I could safely leave Sasori to Rin now, I wanted him dead just a little too much. I couldn’t stay out of this. “I call dibs on Pinocchio.”

Rin blinked. “What?”

Wrong universe. And language.

I sighed. And it was such a good line, too. “Never mind. I’m gonna stick him in the nastiest barrier ninjutsu I have and then kill him. You in?”

“Lead the way.”

Obito

I first met Hayate back when I was eight, a little after the first time I met Kei. He was a little kid with a serious case of hero worship for pretty much everyone who’d spend the time to teach him things. I didn’t teach him all that much, but I made him laugh and I’m sure that counts for something. Mostly we just kinda grew up together, with his mom acting like my mom couldn’t, and him acting like the kid brother I didn’t have at first. It’s been more than twelve years since then, and while I’m not as smothering as Kei is, I still think of him as family.

I first met Jiraiya when I was ten, and he’s been the weird uncle or grandpa pretty much since then. He knew what it was like to be the one no one expects to be anything. The class clown. The failure. It took me way too long to see it, but he’s been one of those kinda weird role models for me that I’m sure Kei would have tons to say about if she knew I was thinking of it.

I’m not gonna let either one of them die today.

The medics flood us, since this isn’t the first time I’ve showed up with a lot of people in need of surgery. Rin has the main receptionist pretty well trained, and a hospital-wide alert is already going on.

“Get the kid first,” Jiraiya orders the nearest medic, resting his remaining hand on Hayate’s forehead. “Most of this blood isn’t mine.”

“You’re missing a hand, Jiraiya-sama,” the medic squeaks.

“So I’m missing a pint and a hand,” Jiraiya allows, and I wince when I see the bloodied bandages again. He tucks the injury closer to his chest and adds, “But the other liter or so still isn’t mine.”

“Where’d it even come from, then?” I want to know, though Jiraiya’s already being packed up to be...probably yelled at by Tsunade, if I’m being realistic. Maybe she knows how to do something for him.

Zetsu clones don’t bleed, Hayate’s only been coughing and Rin would have caught everything else, Kei and me didn’t get there until after all of this started, and Sasori is a puppet. Who else was there?

“This is Anko-kun’s.” Jiraiya grimaces as one of the medics tries to peek underneath the bandages. Blood tends to stick.

I only really know Anko from a distance, through Hayate or through Yūgao or through other people, but she’s someone I know. And that’s her blood all over Jiraiya, and it got on me and did Rin even know about this? What kind of insane mission did these kids go on, anyway?
“Sasori took her alive, Obito. Get her back,” Jiraiya orders, before the medics finally drag him off.

I don’t leave immediately. Instead, I warp to my apartment and dig through the medicine cabinet for soldier pills. Rin probably has a set with her, but I’m going to be using a lot of chakra if I want to get Anko back alive and I don’t feel like taking any chances.

Then I use Kamui and walk through the dimensional doors to the battlefield.

I think I was gone for about two minutes. In that time, Rin and Kei have torn the place apart. Anything taller than me is now not, because there are smashed tree trunks and upended boulders and decapitated Zetsu clones lying absolutely everywhere. Nothing is flat, but the rubble left after this kind of clash of wills looks like something out of an action manga. Jiraiya wishes he could write this much destruction in this short of a timespan.

Off in the distance, Kei’s reddish chakra glows like a star as she tears her way across the area over and over again. I don’t have perfect Hyuga vision, but I can see one of Rin’s combat summon animals ferrying her around as they rip through the chaff of Sasori’s forces.

I have no idea where he’s getting so many flunkies, but I need to cut them off.

I take a deep breath. No, first I get Anko out of danger and then I burn everything to the ground. It has to be in that order. Anko is more important than any of them.

First, I need to find her.

I’m not a tracker or anything like that, and I can’t really see chakra once the owner’s run off somewhere else. But picking out really large masses of concentrated chakra is dead easy with a complete Sharingan, as long as it’s active.

There’s a little knot of them half a kilometer that way. Luckily, it’s around the side of the cliffs that I’m already on, so I can avoid having to cross wide-open areas and possibly get caught up in the S-class brawl going on between Rin, Kei, and Sasori. Sooner or later Kei is going to break out the Uchiha Flame Formation I taught her, or Rin will punch Sasori to pieces with Tsunade’s strength. I almost feel sorry for Sasori.

Almost. He still hurt my friends. He’s going to pay.

I use my Sharingan as little as possible on my approach. A quick camouflage genjutsu does the job of getting me close to the mob undetected just as well as Kamui would, and it doesn’t have nearly the same risk of dumping me right in the middle of the mess. I can’t risk people finding out what Kamui’s weaknesses are, even if otherwise the approach should be foolproof.

Eventually, I slink through the forest to the clearing I spotted from such a long way off. It’s not all that big, but it’s been cleared of debris from either flying trees or whatever else gets kicked up in S-class fights. Though there aren’t any anchoring stones, the site is clearly a big, fat seal that’s already active. Someone’s inked a whole ring of calligraphy in a circle about two meters across, and the Zetsu clones are all standing around outside of it.

Well, almost all of them. One of them is standing in the middle. Standing over Anko, who’s face-down in the middle of a circle that looks all too much like the one Kushina was trapped in once. Its hand is over the Curse Seal on her neck.

I clench my right hand next to my thigh, then grow a meter-long length of wood from my wrist. Even to my sight, my arm blurs and then suddenly there’s a stake sticking out of the lead Zetsu’s eye socket. The intervening air cracks a fraction of a second later, and the Zetsu takes a little longer than
that to flop over backwards.

Then a lot of things happen all at once.

Anko slumps over while *something* bulges from the inside of her flak jacket collar, and the fifteen other Zetsus turn on me like a pack of pasty wolves. The seal on the ground crawls across it like a length of rope, centering on Anko, and I drive a second spike through the nearest Zetsu clone at the same time that my Sharingan goes momentarily flash-blind.

Who the *shit* uses that much chakra in such a narrow—

 Nope, eye shut—*I know how to do this*—and a quick series of stabs rips right through my opponents as easily as one of Kei’s fragmentation explosives. Each Zetsu that charges takes too long to get to me, so I go to *them*, pulling a secondary javelin out of my sleeve and impaling everyone not named Anko.

Shrapnel is just a bunch of metal or stone flying ‘cause of an explosion, but I need to move almost that fast to really get what I need out of my Sharingan’s viewpoint. Or at least it seems like it right now.

Everyone’s dead inside of a second.

“Kukukukukuku…”

*Or not.*

I open my eye again.

---

Kei

I was something of an expert on swords, at least from the user end of things. Weight, balance, and cutting edges were as familiar to me as the back of my own hand. I’d trained for over half my life for the level of skill I had at age twenty, and tended to default to using my katana if jutsu weren’t absolutely necessary. Or if Isobu was staying out of the fight for whatever reason. Or if my opponents were too far away and I didn’t feel like chasing them down.

Look, the point was that I used edged weapons an awful lot.

Rin had never been one for any kind of weaponry bigger than a kunai. She used traps when she had to, but for the most part her personal instant death radius wasn’t all that big. She had more range on chakra scalpels than I did, but didn’t channel them through anything to extend her reach any farther, and anyway she needed her chakra for her medical miracles. To waste energy on killing people while she had teammates to do it for her was unthinkable for any medic.

And then she’d gotten a summon contract.

I still wanted Sasori in pieces at my feet. If at all possible, I’d rip his heart out and stomp on it, then mail the rest of him back to Suna so they could use the wooden bits left over as a trophy. It would be *just about* enough to smother the rage pounding through my system.

Rin was making the entire process of getting a clean shot at him impossible, because she was taking all of them for herself.

“Leave some for me!” I shouted, as a puppet’s crushed arm flew up and over my head. If Rin kept
going, Sasori would be reduced to puppeting Zetsu clones or trying to use one of us against the other.

“Never!” Moyashi snapped, as she grabbed a slower Zetsu and crushed it to death in her claws. Over the summoned scorpion’s head, Rin had impaled another Zetsu clone on a near-invisible chakra blade and jerked the blade upward, bisecting its upper ribcage and head.

I’m starting to like this human. More of them should make contracts with summons like this one.

That was about as close as Isobu had ever gotten to giving Rin compliments.

That said, she’s being selfish. I want to tear this puppet master into small pieces myself.

Or through me, you mean?

Semantics.

Well, I couldn’t argue with Isobu’s whims when I shared the sentiment. I didn’t have much in the way of moral high ground.

So, while Rin sliced Sasori’s chakra strings apart for the umpteenth time since activating her White Strength Seal, I used the Body Flicker to interpose myself before Rin could slash at him directly. One seal wrapped around a kunai later, and one underhand toss directly into Sasori’s face... “Uchiha Flame Formation.”

A massive, cylindrical column of blood-red fire sprang up around Sasori, trapping him and his very flammable chassis in a space that was barely six square meters. Even if he could touch the walls without instantly immolating himself, the column of the barrier ninjutsu extended so far vertically that there wasn’t a way to leap out safely.

It was kind of the reason I’d modified the technique for single-target use.

“You know,” I commented mildly as Isobu’s chakra tails joined Rin and Moyashi in swatting the remainder of the Zetsu swarm, “I think I might just want to try Fire Release for my next nature transformation. What do you think?”

Even when trapped in what amounted to a test tube made of fire, Sasori’s face didn’t shift. Sure, he had the ability to make expressions even as a puppet, but why bother? He couldn’t fight well enough to get away from both of us, and I’d just felt Obito pop back into the battle a few seconds ago. Sasori was basically a charcoal briquette already.

“For poisoning my brother, I’m just gonna kill you,” I told Sasori flatly, and flexed my fingers. The cylinder of fire started to contract. “Go to hell.”

Sasori still didn’t flinch, even as the ends of his cloak caught fire and started to smoke. “I hope you enjoy my last work, Tidal Blade. It’s going to be spectacular.”

And before I could really think on what the fuck that meant, Sasori stuck his arms and face into the flames. Since I’d gotten the jutsu from Obito, and his clan as a whole were basically pyromaniacs pointed in the right direction (read: not ours), Sasori burned to death inside of a minute. Silently.

I cancelled the jutsu once his heart-box fell through the remainder of his body. Moyashi caught it on the point of her stinger, ending Sasori with a little more finality than would have happened otherwise.
I didn’t feel any better.

Hayate was still fighting for his life, I didn’t know why Obito had run off away from the fight, and Jiraiya was still missing a hand. Sasori being dead didn’t change any of that. It just made it so future victims of his mad artist tendencies would be spared of him.

Gaara would never need to know who Sasori even was outside of history books.

I shook my head and turned to Rin, who was sitting next to Moyashi as opposed to on her back. It looked like the scorpion had taken a leg hit, though I didn’t know when or how. “You both okay?”

“We’re fine, Kei,” Rin answered over her shoulder, as though she wasn’t carefully knitting Moyashi’s carapace back together. Once she was finished, she wiped her forehead with her forearm and turned to face me. At some point, the black marks on her face had faded back to the lone purple diamond. “But I think I need a little time to recover.”

I winced. Yeah, the White Strength Seal was looking a little faded compared to standard. I didn’t know how long Rin had been building the chakra to use it, but from the claw-marks on her clothes, she’d gotten some use out of the regenerative part of it in addition to the strength boost. At least it looked like none of those hits had involved poison—not that I thought the White Strength Seal wouldn’t be able to handle that.

“Then I’ll find Obito and we can get out of here.” I still didn’t know what was taking him so damned long to get back to us, but he should have at least arrived in time to see Sasori burn.

After a second’s thought, I dismissed the roiling cloud of Isobu’s chakra from around me. For once, his energy had lasted me the entire fight as opposed to crapping out in the middle and almost killing me.

The fight was shorter than I expected. We could have left most of that to the scorpion. Possibly. I’d still been hell-bent on getting my hits in where I could, even if I wasn’t as effective in the short term as Rin and her battle partner. Maybe someday I’d actually be able to enter V2 again, but for now V1’s longevity was giving me enough to still pass muster as an S-class shinobi.

Or, I thought as I looked at Rin, enough to keep up. She was on a hot streak.

Burning him to death was at least interesting, Isobu allowed after a pause, sensing my melancholy. That was adequate for today.

I wasn’t sure I agreed. After all, I still couldn’t pinpoint Obito.

Right as that thought crossed my mind, Obito’s chakra flared from half a kilometer away. He’d been hiding before, slipping below my detection threshold, but the sensation of summer was suddenly there in a way it hadn’t been since the start of the fight. Immediately, I snapped to attention, reaching out to try and investigate the cause of the sudden shift.

Scales, shifting and sliding over each other—oh fuck.

I knew that chakra. I’d killed the owner of that chakra. His bounty was closed.

“Kei, what—” Rin began, her eyes wide.

Unintentionally, I started pumping out wave after wave of killing intent. It wasn’t so much a conscious reaction as something that kicked me in the hindbrain and sent the “fight” part of “fight or
flight” into complete overdrive.

It was a challenge.

Not a challenge between two pure fighters, each wanting to dominate the other. The nature of this challenge was more...basic, than that.

**Come over here and I will kill you. So stay the fuck over there.**

Not that he needed to know I was afraid.

Then Obito burst out of the side of the cliff, having tunneled through *solid stone*, and threw a fireball over his shoulder that was big enough to vaporize the Konoha Administration Center. He was already falling, but the blast wave from the fireball shoved him toward the bottom of the Valley of the End faster than gravity. It got him out of the way and crashing into the river below just in time.

The fireball he’d created stopped dead when it hit a...fucking *dammit*. I recognized the skyscraper-sized Rashōmon Gate just before the fireball plowed into it like a car hitting a brick wall. It didn’t go down without a fight, but that “fight” mostly consisted of setting *yet more* of the forest on fire.

And knowing the guy who used the fucking Rashōmon as a defensive jutsu, flash-cooking the environment wouldn’t be nearly enough to kill him again.

I could practically hear his stupid laugh ringing in my ears. **Kukukuku...**

“Obito!” Rin yelled from beside me—and I had no idea when she’d gotten there. Hadn’t she been by Moyashi a second ago? Nonetheless, she was there and shouting as Obito emerged from the river about ten meters downstream.

I looked back at the gigantic defensive summon, inwardly screaming about how that bastard didn’t *deserve* to be on this planet for even a second longer—and then Isobu cut me off entirely.

No.

I hissed through my teeth, but I knew he was right. We’d accomplished our mission and Orochimaru was...he didn’t have any resources this time and I was *perfectly* willing to go kill him again later. Preferably before he could reestablish Otogakure. With ANBU backup if I had to. Even if I was sick to my stomach already and whatever animal instincts that carried over from Isobu were telling me to leave it be. To let Orochimaru go in exchange for actually sorting out what the hell had happened here.

And without access to V2, I didn’t know if I could really face off against Orochimaru and win.

Trembling just slightly, I made my way over to where Obito and Rin were—not standing, kneeling. On the ground between them, Anko was breathing shallowly as Rin pumped healing chakra into her.

*I guess that explains how the Oreo came back,* I thought. Half-hysterical thanks to the adrenaline crash, I probably wouldn’t be any use to Anko. I sat down heavily on a brand-new piece of driftwood, then ran my hand over my face.

I must have zoned out harder than I thought, because my next coherent thought was the observation that someone had pinched me. I looked up and met Rin’s eyes.

“We’re going back to Konoha,” Rin told me. Her expression could have been carved from stone.

“She needs medical attention right now.”
And Obito couldn’t use Kamui on someone he was carrying as well as on other people. I looked over at our still-unconscious patient and noted absently that Obito had grown a neck brace for her out of wood, just in case. No backboard, so Rin must not have detected any spinal damage.

“I can carry her,” I volunteered. It wasn’t like I needed my hands free for any kind of medical whateverwhatsit or convenient teleportation jutsu.

This met with general approval, apparently, because Rin only fussed over the way I was carrying Anko for a few seconds instead of correcting everything. Wasn’t like all the members of Team Minato didn’t know what a fireman’s carry was.

Obito and Rin glanced at each other, and then Obito clasped Rin’s hand. A heartbeat later, she was sucked into the stark Kamui dimension.

Then Obito poked me in the forehead, and got Anko and me at once.

The arrival at the hospital was hectic as all hell, with medics swarming like agitated ants and sweeping Anko away from the main lobby almost before I got the wherewithal to ask an intelligent question. Thanks to Jiraiya and Hayate arriving earlier, the medics must have already been prepared for a few more casualties.

Rin drew both of us over to the side once the commotion was over and the bubble of silence in the lobby was starting to get awkward.

Once Obito was seated in a lobby chair, Rin started healing his eye. I rubbed my temples against an oncoming headache as the last of the fight’s adrenaline finally ebbed away. Still, I paced.

Hayate was two floors above me, and just the fact that I knew that was a relief. Sasori was a master poisoner, but my brother was a fighter and Tsunade had repeatedly stopped all of Suna’s poisons dead in their tracks. It didn’t matter what Chiyo and the other puppeteers had tried to pull, because Tsunade had thoroughly invalidated their effort and, in the nonexistent canon universe, her student Sakura had also been enough of a master of poisons and antidotes to screw Sasori over. At age fifteen, to Sasori’s thirty-five.

Hayate would be okay.

He had to be okay.

My eyes started to burn.

I didn’t know what to do if he wasn’t.

**We destroy the ones responsible.**

*Then why didn’t you let me go after him five fucking minutes ago?* I demanded silently.

**Recklessly charging after Orochimaru without a plan was going to get you killed.** Isobu’s tails twisted and he growled, *Or don’t you remember what happened the last time you fought?*

...*All too well.* My entire left arm ached at the reminder. That I’d survived that fight was still something of a miracle in my eyes. If it hadn’t been for so many of my friends showing up to help, I definitely would have failed.

It didn’t really lift my mood, but it doused the anger down to something like hissing coals.
Kinda not helpful, because anger was still more productive than anxiety even if it made me want to punch training dummies into sawdust.

It had taken less than an hour for two things to put our timeline back in line with the canon one: Orochimaru not being dead and Hayate getting his lungs sand-blasted again. I didn’t know how the universe planned on making up this kind of railroaded bullshit to me or anyone else still living in linear time, but at some point it was starting to seem like I was being deliberately targeted.

Saved Obito? Fuck you, Konoha gets invaded anyway! Mitigating circumstances? What are those?

Killed Orochimaru? Well, it turns out no amount of suppression would remove his soul from the Curse Seal and make him perma-dead!

Basically throw all the medics in my life at Hayate the second he started to get a cold? Well, clearly if this hadn’t happened he would have picked up smoking or something!

I felt like punching a wall. Or, better yet, Orochimaru’s stupid face.

“—ei? Kei, stop!” I blinked and spotted Rin’s finger directly in front of my nose. Clearly, the fact that I my face probably looked like a thundercloud didn’t scare her at all.

“What,” I snapped, more out of reflexive anger than anything. Or at having my train of thought interrupted before I could fantasize about a karmically appropriate amount of violence.

“You’re leaking killing intent all over the place,” Obito said, and I belatedly realized that he was right. And yet, his Sharingan wasn’t active.

Rin pulled me over to the line of waiting room chairs and made sure I sat down next to Obito. After a second’s thought, she hugged me around my ribs and Obito looped his left arm around my shoulders.

Come on, what would be distra… I paused. Took a deep breath. One, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen… Sure, I didn’t know a lot of prime numbers off the top of my head, but thinking about that was probably less likely to give someone on a different floor a terror-induced heart attack. Twenty-three, twenty-nine…

After about thirty seconds of me sitting with my head in my hands, Obito asked, “Feel any better?”

I gave that question all the consideration it deserved. Otherwise known as “none.” “I still want to kill something. Preferably Orochimaru, but I’ll take a training dummy at this point.”

I could practically feel Obito and Rin exchanging alarmed looks over the top of my head.

I dug my nails into the bags under my eyes, slowly dragging my lower eyelids downward. If any of the kids in my life saw me or felt my chakra, I would’ve given them nightmares just from the expression on my face. I needed to do things slowly or else I’d wind up doing something even more reckless than broadcasting killing intent in a hospital.

“D-did someone report to Sensei?” I asked, still glowering at the floor. The hitch in my voice was a warning that the waterworks were incoming, trying to drown the anger once and for all.

Going by their chakra, I was gonna say the two of them hadn’t. How could they? I hadn’t given anyone any time.

“I’m going to report what I can to Sensei,” I said in a surprisingly steady voice, poking and prodding until my two best friends finally let me get to my feet. I didn’t look at either one of them. “He needs
to know what happened with Sasori and Orochimaru.”

If I thought too much about Hayate, I wouldn’t make it out of the hospital without crying. I had
discipline. I did. I’d been in this goddamn career for twelve straight years. I would not leave this to
someone else.

I was gone before either of them could argue with me.

Once I was outside, I made a rooftop beeline for Sensei’s office. In no time at all, I was gently
knocking on his office window with a stick I’d pulled from a nearby tree. His stupid security seals
were too dangerous for anything less.

Sensei opened the office window. He stepped back so I could get inside the room, then closed the
window. “How bad was it?”

I told him. I didn’t know everything, but what I did know was enough to make Sensei’s expression
go flatter and darker the longer I talked and (eventually) speculated. The mission to rescue Jiraiya
had been a success in the loosest definition thereof—no one was dead except the mission’s target—but it was clearly cold comfort to Sensei as well. Especially since that could change in an instant.

At the end of everything, Sensei didn’t say much. He sat down at his desk and started moving
paperwork around, though I wasn’t keeping track.

“Kei?” Sensei said after a while.

I’d been counting ceiling tiles in an effort to get my mind off of the last two hours, so my return to
attention was somewhat abrupt. “Yes, Sensei?”

“Go get some rest.”

While a small part of me wanted to protest, since I was still capable of fighting if I wanted to, the rest
of me shouted that part down. “Emotionally exhausted” was not a state I needed to get too familiar
with.

I bowed before turning and exiting the office through the actual door.

One self-appointed selfless/selfish task completed. Selfish because I wanted to get out of spending
my entire emotional cooldown in the hospital for the second time this month. Selfless because,
frankly, I doubted Rin or Obito wanted to give that report anyway.

I took a deep breath and finally decided to go after the agitated Lightning signature I’d been sensing
for the last half hour. I didn’t have all that far to go.

Kakashi probably didn’t expect that our reunion would start with me hugging him as soon as I saw
him. I figured out later that he’d probably been heading to Sensei’s office to check if anyone had
heard back from us yet. At that moment, though, the only thought that crossed my mind was that he
was here and solid and okay.

The same medics were working on Hayate and Anko and Jiraiya. If Kakashi could almost get killed
two weeks ago and pull through, I could have faith in the others. So what if it wasn’t a logical
argument?

It helped.

I buried my face in Kakashi’s shirt and held on.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay, everyone!
Years ago, my recurring nightmares showed me Hayate’s death. Over and over, with a dozen sick permutations just to keep the horror fresh. Every time a particular component lost its edge, my brain would collaborate with the clip show in my head and come up with some new aspect I had either never considered, or perhaps invent something out of whole cloth. A few featured Baki, fueling my now-pointless grudge against him for a crime he might never commit. But the majority twisted every guilty feeling I’d ever had and piled on a healthy dosage of utter failure for every drop of blood.

I started having those nightmares again.

After the second time I tumbled out of another nightmare with dried tears on my face in a single night, I gave up on sleeping. Instead, I pulled out my fūinjutsu desk, a notebook, and a number of writing implements. Then I wrote down everything I remembered about the Chūnin Exam invasion until either the sun came up or my hand completely cramped.

I wasn’t sure which one came first.

Rubbing my eyes with my left hand, I set my pens down. I opened one eye and stared wearily down at my work. The lines had smudged, bent, or devolved into scribbles at a couple of points, but it was still mostly legible. Sensei would be able to put this in a file if he felt like it, though the cryptography department would probably give him weird looks.

I didn’t have all the troop formations noted because of a lack of information, but the big snake summoning circle had been too obvious to miss. A hastily sketched diagram included the barrier ninjutsu the Sound Four had used and I still wasn’t learning, along with a question about why the Third hadn’t just knocked the building down and escaped that way. My handwriting transitioned to something nearly at chicken scratch levels, despite my fūinjutsu specialty, around the time I explained the effects of Kabuto’s mass-genjutsu and theoretical countermeasures.

Then I got to the part about Hayate’s death, and my pen refused to move. Ink had bled into the paper, creating a dark stain that blotted out other lines wholesale.

My vision blurred. What good was any of this if I couldn’t protect him? What was the point of any of the strength I’d gained if I couldn’t save my own little brother?

I pushed the pile of notes off my fūinjutsu table in frustration. Resting my head in my hands, elbows on the slanted surface, I sat there and tried to breathe.
Every meditative technique I’d ever learned seemed grossly inadequate at a time like this, but it was what I had. I needed to focus on anything other than my brother’s chakra sparking away in the hospital, where I still couldn’t make myself go and listen to his monitors beep. Not yet.

It took a long time to get myself under control again, even with my senses turned so far inward they were practically inverted, and I didn’t succeed by the time someone knocked on my front door.

I pulled the bottom of my shirt up so I could wipe my eyes, then blinked at the wall as I tried to maybe make myself look a little more together through mental gymnastics alone. Then I remembered to extend my chakra sense outward again, recognized the lightning bolt at my door as the one I wasn’t avoiding, and decided that it wasn’t worth it.

I went to go answer the door. Kakashi had seen me at my worst already. Multiple times, if I was being honest.

Kakashi let out an “oof” when I opened the door and instantly hugged him. He’d angled his shoulder a bit toward me so I wouldn’t smack directly into his still-sore right side, but otherwise let me hang on for dear life. I pressed my face against his neck and felt him wrap his free arm around my shoulders, resting the side of his jaw against the top of my head.

“It’s going to be okay,” Kakashi murmured into my hair. “They’re going to be fine.”

For a second, I couldn’t remember who else I was supposed to care about other than Hayate. Then a perfect still image of Anko smiling cheerfully hit me like a punch to the chest. I’d forgotten her. Even if I knew, as plain and drab as a report, that Anko had gone on the mission with Hayate and if anything come back in worse shape, my emotions hadn’t registered it. And that didn’t even cover how Jiraiya didn’t have a left hand anymore.

I was a horrible person.

I stopped crushing Kakashi in my grip once that thought sank in, opting instead to let him just hold onto me. Since his right arm could finally move again, he rested his weight more on the crutch and tilted his head so he could look me in the eyes.

Well, his eye, my eyes. Close enough.

His face crinkled as though he was smiling, but it wasn’t much of one. He was at least trying, for my sake. “You look terrible.”

“I guessed as much,” I admitted. “I didn’t sleep well.”

“Nightmares?” he asked, probably taking note of my puffy face and the deep, dark circles under my eyes. He didn’t have to ask, but it was probably polite of him to do it.

I made a vague noise of affirmation, then let my gaze drop. I couldn’t remember if I’d ever explained this properly to Kakashi, as opposed to letting him overhear things or bother Obito for details. “Same ones I used to get when I was a kid. Hayate dying, me unable to do anything about it…” I swallowed. “The usual.”

“Is this something from…last time?” Kakashi asked in an undertone, while I pressed my fingers against the side of my throat as though that would clear the lump inside it.

“Kinda.” I sighed, though my breathing stuttered a bit. I drew in the deepest breath I could manage, then said, “It’s… Can you tell me how Hayate and Anko are doing?”
I felt him nod. “Hayate’s still on a ventilator, and Anko is in recovery. He’s not conscious yet, but we’re allowed to visit them both. Anko was asleep when I was there.”

That was…that was good enough. For now. As though to make up for forgetting about him earlier, I asked, “And Jiraiya-sama?”

“He’s short a hand, but he’s already talking about getting a hook,” Kakashi said, and I thought I felt his chest jerk in an inaudible laugh. My imagination was too worn out to imagine exactly what a pirate Jiraiya would look like, but I kept the idea in my head for later. “If Tsunade-sama didn’t force him to stay in his room, he’d already be visiting and scheming with Sensei.”

“And not visiting the public baths?” I suggested, in perhaps the weakest joke I’d ever made.

Kakashi shrugged. “He hasn’t said anything about that. He just said the next book in the series is going to take longer without two hands.”

My shoulders shook.

“Kei?”

A dissonant laugh bubbled up in my throat, at the sheer—I didn’t even know. I needed a glass of water or something before I started to sob uncontrollably.

I got another hug, but Kakashi shouldn’t have worried. Though my vision was badly blurred, I refused to let the tears actually fall before I saw Hayate again. If I had to bite the inside of my cheek until it fucking bled, I could do it. I could keep some semblance of control if it was the last thing I did.

Kakashi helped me back into my apartment’s kitchen, where he limped around to make a pot of tea like I always did. Meanwhile, I soaked a washcloth in cold water and pressed it over my face. While not a solution I’d have recommended to anyone else, the sensation brought me back from the brink of bursting into tears again. By the time the kettle started screaming, I almost felt back to a sleep-deprived version of myself. If my head still felt like it was full of cotton balls, well, that wasn’t anyone’s business but mine.

“Here,” Kakashi said, setting the teacup down in front of me.

“Thanks.” I let the washcloth flop back to the table, then dropped my forehead to meet it again. The cloth made a squelching sound. “…I’m being selfish.”

Kakashi made a neutral noise, acknowledging that I’d spoken but not forming an opinion just yet.

I pushed the washcloth away as Kakashi sat down at the table, pillowing my head on my crossed arms. Still, I moved my head so I could see the cup of tea and Kakashi slouching in the other chair. “You came here to get me, didn’t you? You said you visited Hayate and Anko and Jiraiya and I’ve just been—I’m just sitting here doing nothing.”

“Have you?” Kakashi challenged me, but in a tone that didn’t quite match his words. I looked at him sidelong, waiting for an explanation, which he immediately gave as, “You’re hurt. Beating yourself up for not getting there in time. And it eats you away inside until there’s nothing left and you can’t even stand to look at the people you failed.”

I stared at him. How could I forget how Kakashi’s emotions worked? He had to be feeling the same way I did, if not worse, but I hadn’t been able to see it. Oh, I knew I was being selfish, but now there were words. Concepts. People.
Shamefaced, I swallowed hard and said, “Y-Yeah. Exactly like that.”

“You already know I feel the same way,” Kakashi murmured. He reached over and pushed the teacup a little closer to me. “I’m worried too.”

And even beyond Hayate’s personal social circle, I just kept meeting new people and having them help out with his training, or look after him while I was gone, or just hang around. Sooner or later, he wormed his way into everyone’s hearts.

I sighed and sat up. “Kakashi?”

He straightened in his seat, just slightly. I was suddenly reminded of Pakkun deciding to focus instead of just letting events roll onward.

“I’m gonna go get dressed and visit Hayate in the hospital. Can you come with me?”

He nodded.

“Thank you.”

“Oh, hey. Where’ve you been?” Anko asked once she spotted us, sitting up in bed and amazingly not looking like she’d almost died on the table four times. She was a little paler than usual, and her eyes had dark circles that might’ve been somewhat akin to mine in bad lighting, but she was alive.

“Home,” I admitted, since I had enough of a spine to acknowledge when I’d been hiding. Reaching behind my back, I produced a storage seal I’d made on loose paper and set it on the table next to Anko’s hospital bed. When I flared my chakra, the seal spat out a puff of smoke…and one perfect plate of dango, complete with sticks and sweet sauce.

“Awesome!” Anko said, beaming before she clapped her hands over her mouth. Her brown eyes darted to the side, where Hayate was sleeping in the next bed over.

He didn’t stir, but the machines around him continued to beep on undisturbed.

“He’ll be fine,” Anko said, once she realized I was staring. “But you should go sit by him. I’m good here.”

By way of response, Kakashi sat on the end of Anko’s bed while I took the room’s spare chair and set it at Hayate’s bedside. I sat down in it and leaned against his bedside, taking his hand in both of mine.

I heard Kakashi and Anko start talking in hushed voices—with hers muffled by her favorite snack—but didn’t bother listening in.

Hayate would live. They wouldn’t have put him here if he wouldn’t recover, not when the ICU was half the building away. That said, a nurse’s station was just outside the door in case something did go wrong, because Tsunade was a percussive remodeler if the hospital’s departments were not to her specifications. Whatever emergency procedures they’d used on Hayate would hold, come hell or high water, because the Konoha hospital gave up on patients when they were dead as doornails. Until then, everyone from Tsunade down would fight tooth and nail for their charges.

And with people like Rin and Tsunade in the mix, there was no way he wouldn’t live. He’d gotten this far, hadn’t he?
At about this point, I realized my thoughts were going in unhelpful circles and had to sigh. But at least I recognized that now.

The swing doors to the recovery ward creaked just on the edge of human hearing, but it was enough for me to turn slowly toward Rin’s chakra signature as she entered. Rin was dressed in her hospital scrubs once more, and looked like she’d actually gotten sleep the night before. She was definitely in full medic mode.

“Hi, everyone,” Rin said, in a voice that was both politely quiet and somehow cheery. “I’m just here to check in really quick. I’ll be back after my shift is over, too.”

“Feel free,” said Anko, who had finished off the dango. She chewed on one of the sticks, then cocked her hand back like—

“Do not throw those into the ceiling, Anko-chan!” Rin said sharply.

“Pff, you’re boring.” Anko pouted. “I was halfway through a perfect Konoha symbol pattern last time.”

“I know you’re bored,” Rin said, “but save that for when you’re discharged. And who brought her dango this time?”

Kakashi immediately threw me under the bus. “She did it.”

“Thanks,” I grumped. When Rin whirled on me, I held my hands up defensively and said, “Hey, I didn’t know anyone else was giving Anko-chan ammo.”

Rin groaned. “It’s her name, I swear. No one can help it.”

“I’m right here, you know,” Anko protested. And yet, she was still grinning like the cat that swallowed the canary.

“We know,” Kakashi, Rin and I droned in unison.

“Good!” Anko chirped. “So, does that mean I can get out of here soon?”

Rin plucked the chart off the end of Anko’s bed, though she was already carrying a clipboard. She set the other one in Kakashi’s lap, then kept digging through the medical data until she found what she was looking for. “Your vitals are good, chakra levels stable…and your Curse Seal isn’t there anymore?”

Anko rolled her shoulder, then said, “Honestly, I feel better than I have in a while. Now, if someone would take the monitor seal off my ankle…?”

“Not until I report in. And then not until you’re actually discharged,” Rin reminded her. She picked the clipboard back up, barely missing bonking her head against Kakashi’s—since he was trying to read his latest novel on top of it for lack of anything better to do—and nudged the thing against Anko’s head. “Understood? Because otherwise, I’m going to be very unhappy with you.”

And no one liked it when Rin was unhappy. Especially now that the village grapevine was starting to circulate about that rhombus-shaped seal on Rin’s forehead and where we’d all seen it before.

“G-Got it, Rin-san,” Anko said, though her smile had gone a bit twitchy. “I’ll be good, I swear.”

Rin stared Anko down for a few more seconds, then patted her head. “I’m glad you’re all right,
Anko-chan. Take care of yourself and try not end up back here again too soon, okay?"

“I’ll come back only on social calls, I promise!” Anko said, clapping her hands together. “Really I promise.”

“Maybe don’t go quite that far,” I suggested.

“Hush,” Rin said. “I’ll be right back so you can get out of here as fast as possible.”

Rin Body Flickered away, leaving the rest of us just sorta sitting around awkwardly while the doors swung in her wake. Other than Anko’s relieved sigh and the steady beep of Hayate’s monitors, all was quiet.

“What were you up to, little brother?” I wondered as I went back to holding his hand. Even if he was safe now, that had been too close. After a second’s thought, I brushed his hair back and out of his face. “You’re lucky Jiraiya was there.”

“It wasn’t luck,” Anko interrupted, drawing me back to reality. When I looked at her, she said, “Hayate and I were Jiraiya-sama’s contacts for Konoha. He was gonna head out to the Land of Grass after.”

And now Jiraiya was short a hand, Anko’s old sensei was back like a bad burrito, and Hayate was right next to me with a machine breathing for him. My hand tightened on Hayate’s, but none of this was Anko’s fault. She was just the messenger—and just a little earlier than Sensei would break that kind of news.

Speaking of, I didn’t sense one of those people in the hospital when he should have been. Which meant I’d have to hunt him down—though without using enough of my chakra to blanket the village and disturb small children and animals. And if he was hiding his chakra… “Kakashi, where’s Jiraiya?”

“How would I know?” Kakashi asked, but his chakra did the guilty twisting thing and I knew he was a liar.

“Kakashi,” I said more firmly.

Kakashi fidgeted almost imperceptibly. “…He was in Sensei’s office last I heard.”

He probably thought that counted as being home free. Well, fuck that.

“Are you gonna kill Jiraiya-sama?” Anko asked. “Can I watch?”

“You’re staying in the hospital until Rin says otherwise,” Kakashi told her, getting to his feet just as I did. “Kei—”

“We’re just going to talk,” I told him. So what if I had an expression like a thundercloud? “Come with me if you don’t believe me.”

Kakashi snapped his book shut and followed me out of the room without another word.

“Jiraiya,” I snarled as I entered Sensei’s office, Kakashi on my heels.

Jiraiya, with his bad arm in a sling and probably a mountain of bandages, stood next to Sensei’s desk with a smile pasted badly over his face when he saw who was coming into the office. Sensei, on the other hand, was behind his desk like normal and looking for all the world like nothing was amiss—
but his chakra told a very different story. The very air seemed agitated, though he was being careful not to project killing intent.

I made a split-second allowance for the fact that Jiraiya was hurt and decided not to tackle him, punch him, or kick him through a wall. Even though my anger was making me shake right down to my bones, mingled with fear and guilt and just eating me alive.

Then I remembered that not only had Jiraiya not done anything wrong, but that he’d been the reason Hayate had lasted long enough for Rin to get there. And the guilt nearly swallowed me.

“Kei,” Jiraiya said very carefully as he moved toward me, a slight limp in his step. “How’s your brother doing?”

“H-He’s going to be fine,” I said, though I wasn’t sure. I hadn’t read the chart on the end of his bed before running over here. “And you?”

“Minato still says I can’t get a hook, but I’m wearing him down,” Jiraiya joked over Sensei’s near-silent scoff. He leaned down and met my eyes more firmly. “I’m going to be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

And he only had to relearn every single jutsu he’d ever learned, one-handed. Which was something only Sensei and Haku could do. Even for someone as talented as Orochimaru, losing his arms had cost him most of his options until he’d gotten around the restriction by changing bodies.

“We’re here to hear more about the mission,” Kakashi said, steering us back on track. “What happened?”

Sensei clasped his hands in front of his face, glancing to each one of us in turn as he either thought about what we could hear or tried to decide what would go first. He’d prepped a thousand speeches in one form or another, but this one was one of the more important ones.

“I could start at the beginning,” Jiraiya suggested, looking to Sensei for approval. Then again, this was his part of the story, and maybe Sensei had already heard it before.

“Go on,” was all Sensei said.

I don’t think I could do it justice after the fact.

Jiraiya might’ve been a bestselling author of a trashy romance series, but he was also the second or third most famous philosopher on the entire issue of shinobi existence in a world that, to be honest, really needed some deeper thinking. He was the first proponent among ninja to really make a point of trying to end the cycle of hatred that haunted our world, and later passed the idea down to Sensei. The teachings kinda skipped a generation to Naruto, but as far as I was aware, the kid had really taken the idea to heart and made it work.

I was never sure how much Sensei really absorbed on that front. I certainly couldn’t adhere to the idea when there was still shit left to do, when I was so tied up in this world and my bonds that pursuing peace at the price of pain felt like giving up. Felt like spitting on the sacrifices of people who’d lived and fought and died before me.

But Jiraiya was a pretty damned good speaker when he wanted to be.

I didn’t know much about how Jiraiya ran his information network, other than that he did so personally and that becoming Hokage would have ruined it. He needed mobility and schedule flexibility, and in return did his best to keep the village safe from threats brewing in places that we
couldn’t always reach. That job became easier when the Ame Trio finally got their big break and declared themselves allies to Konoha, but ultimately there was still a lot of work involved.

“How are the three of them doing?” I asked when Jiraiya paused for breath. I hadn’t heard from any of them in months.

“They’re fine, Kei. Changed their refugee policy to get everyone back on their feet as fast as they can, they have a new public hospital…” Jiraiya trailed off, smiling faintly. “They’re making their dream of a better Amegakure come true. They’re calling it the ‘village of second chances,’ now.”

Yahiko must’ve been thrilled, perhaps carrying Nagato and Konan through the process of nation-building. Or exhausted, given how much effort he put into fighting for that exact cause. All the same, I thought he would be happy whether the dream had an ending or not.

“Anyway, where was I?” Jiraiya considered, then went on as though he hadn’t needed to stop.

From Ame, through former/current Oto territory, and back through the Land of Fire, then on through the coastal regions to catch any whispers of goings-on in Kirigakure. Jiraiya covered land that most Konoha shinobi didn’t see in a single patrol, stopping in bars and slums and anywhere else that he could move unnoticed and still keep his ear to the ground. Not always as himself, either.

And everywhere he went, under the rumors and whispers, there was a sinister undertone. People disappearing and coming back different, or heavier armed presence of bandits, or just a general sense of unease.

Shinjitsu was moving. If anything, the Zetsu clones and Kakashi’s run-in with Kakuzu were pregame warmups.

“Wait, Sasori was a member?” I said blankly.

“And they burned him—however unintentionally—to get Orochimaru back,” Jiraiya confirmed. “I was going to include it in the report I gave to Anko-chan and Hayate-kun, but you saw what happened.”

Yeah, I saw what happened. I’d killed Sasori over that with Rin’s help.

I looked down. “And your hand?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Noticing my expression, Jiraiya added, “Kei-kun, it’s true that I would’ve preferred if everyone went home in the same shape they went out. Me included. But I don’t regret looking out for those two.”

It didn’t exactly make me feel much better to hear that. But the knot in my stomach pinched just a little less.

Jiraiya still seemed to take that as the silver lining it was. Barely. “Now, about what I did find out about Kirigakure…”

In Kiri, Mei had her hands full. Even if she hadn’t been my age, trying to repair the damage done to her village was the kind of task that would take a lifetime’s dedication. Unlike Akatsuki in Ame, she didn’t have a convenient Rinnegan on her side or six straight years of building up a power base. She had closer to four, in between the civil war with Yagura, and only one jinchūriki.

“Utakata is the Six-Tails’s current host,” Kakashi said, because ANBU had their fingers in pretty interesting pies. His eye narrowed. “I didn’t think he’d be interested in nation-building after what
happened during the civil war. ANBU lists him as being close to the Third Mizukage.”

“I thought his teacher tried to kill him over Saiken.” When that got me a couple of confused looks, I added, “That’s the Six-Tails’s name. And it’s what happened last time. Utakata ended up abandoning Kirigakure and becoming a missing-nin.”

“I didn’t hear that,” Jiraiya said, “but the rumor mill believes Mei is going to marry either him or one of the Seven Ninja Swordsmen.”

How many of those did they even have? Because the answer hadn’t been “seven” in at least a few years.

“Anything to secure loyalty, huh?” I murmured, shaking my head. If this version of Mei was anything like the one I remembered from the Fourth Shinobi World War or the Kage Summit, I didn’t really want to know that much more.

“I wonder if ANBU set up a pool,” Kakashi said, equally quiet.

Jiraiya snorted as he bit down on a laugh. “Just don’t let Tsunade know.”

“ANBU doesn’t take outside money,” Kakashi responded, but I was pretty sure he muttered “Raidō” while Jiraiya cracked up. Then I snorted just like Jiraiya had.

“Oh, that hurt,” Jiraiya admitted once he stopped, pressing his injured arm closer to his ribs. “But somehow I’m not surprised that’s the only condition.”

Sensei’s eyes scanned the room briefly as we got ourselves back under control. It was sort of like being scrutinized by the strict teacher at school. Which, well, was at least halfway accurate. Then he said, “I wonder if I could participate this time.”

Jiraiya grinned, but he didn’t comment on that. Instead, he mused, “Maybe Obito-kun could check in on Kirigakure later to confirm what I learned. I had an ocean between them and me, so for all I know the happy couple is already terrorizing people.”

“I could also try,” I said after a second to think. “I mean, if Isobu and Saiken want to talk?”

You want to see if I could bother one of my brothers about human gossip?

I hesitated. It did sound a bit strange when he put it like that. …Maybe?

I’ll see what I can do. Saiken is probably bored anyway.

“That’ll be amusing for ANBU, but we should get back on topic,” Sensei said with a cough. His expression went cold. “Moving on. Kisame Hoshigaki is a person of interest with regard to Akatsuki in at least one world. Is he still with the Seven Ninja Swordsmen, or do I have to add him to Shinjitsu’s roster?”

“Thus far, the Seven Swordsmen are at five members.” Jiraiya paused for a second to think, then said, “Sharkface is still with them, as far as I know, but they’ve lost two of the swords already. I just can’t remember which ones.”

“They’ll be down to one by ten years from now if they aren’t careful,” I added. The only one I remembered actually being loyal to Kirigakure was Chōjūrō, but that kid was around Naruto’s age. All of the older members were either dead or had defected by then.
Sensei was already getting a clone to write everything down for him. The man really was the ultimate paperwork ninja. “Anything else, Jiraiya-sensei?”

“Shinjitsu is definitely in the Land of Iron,” Jiraiya said. He nodded at Kakashi. “Which you already know. But I’m fairly certain something big landed there recently, given all the rumors about a blessing from the moon. There’s a massive sinkhole or something in the middle of the country now, but Three Wolves was mostly unaffected.” He sighed. “Hence the Zetsu clones. Shinjitsu barely needs to recruit anymore.”

Fucking hell that statue was never going away, was it? Of course, I’d suspected as much as soon as I’d seen the Zetsu clones with Sasori, but having it confirmed still felt like a Strong Fist punch to the gut.

“I suppose it was never a matter of if, but when,” Sensei said, shaking his head slowly. “I know Nagato did his best, but not even he could destroy it in the end.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop by ten degrees as that sank in. Kushina, Naruto, and I were all jinchūriki, and the Statue being back in play meant that we could all be fed to it. And that was just our village—one that plan got rolling, if it got rolling, our world was doomed.

…Again.

“Then we just need to kill everyone who can control it,” Kakashi said in a tone that could have been used for discussing cloud formations.

“Easier said than done, Kakashi-kun,” Jiraiya countered.

“But it can still be done,” Kakashi insisted. His hand sought mine, and when I twined our fingers his were shaking faintly. “We just need to figure out how.”

I bit the inside of my lip until it almost bled. “Then I may have something to help with that.” Before anyone could talk, I rushed on with, “Not to do with the Statue. I don’t—I said everything I knew last time. But if we can pick off the Shinjitsu members that control it…”

Sensei sighed and it seemed to go all the way down to his bones. Not exactly the positive sign I was looking for.

“Who do you think is the weakest link?” Jiraiya asked, since Sensei looked like he was already getting a headache.

“…I just have this from last night,” I said, and popped a storage seal at my hip with my free hand. Taking the resulting sheaf of papers, I put them on Sensei’s desk. “Not…not all of it is in the best shape, but I wrote down all the things Orochimaru took advantage of when he tried to destroy Konoha in the other world. I don’t have formations, and anyway he planned with Suna that time and he might not do anything now, but I have all the summoning tricks and the Impure World Resurrection and…well.” I stepped back. “It could help.”

“Did you include…?” Kakashi prompted, and though he didn’t complete the thought aloud, I knew what he meant. It wasn’t much of an intuitive leap to conclude that all of this had quite a lot to do with Hayate almost dying here and actually dying there.

“Y-Yeah. It’s all there.” I could do no less. There were a lot of people who died in that invasion who didn’t deserve it, and a lot who did and didn’t die. Maybe this would balance the books a little.
Sensei picked up the first page, which was probably the neatest of them, and handed it off to his clone to copy as soon as he’d scanned it. “Is that everything?”

“I’m nearly certain that Shinjitsu’s base of operations is in the mountains,” Jiraiya said, “but I haven’t found the particular one.”

And Sensei didn’t want to send Obito back without some kind of backup. Unfortunately, Kakashi was still unable to head out on missions, on pain of Tsunade and Rin.

I was going to get the biggest case of cabin fever on the planet if I didn’t have something to do other than wait around for Shinjitsu to hit us again. The only thing I could think of, though, was basically up Gai’s alley. Between my inability to fully suppress my chakra and the fact that I was a known jinchūriki, the subtle options ahead of us were out of my reach. And that meant I just had to train, and train, and train until…

Well, until we could all make it. Not knowing where that threshold sat, it was a perpetual sort of goal.

“Then we’re done here for now,” Sensei said, as his clone finally poofed out of existence.

The tension in the room, which had been steadily draining the longer we all talked, finally died. Though I’d stormed into the office and probably been the cause of said tension, I noticed that I felt a little lighter now that we had something approaching, well, an approach for how to handle the new situation.

Ten percent of a plan was better than nothing.

“I’m gonna go back to the hospital,” Jiraiya said, since no one else seemed all that eager to talk. He looked Kakashi and me up and down, then said, “Come on, kids.”

I didn’t protest. I still needed to know exactly what was wrong with my brother and what his recovery timeline would look like. And Kakashi probably needed to get off his remaining crutch for a while. Sitting in the hospital, while not fun, would fulfill both objectives.

I needed to get my head back in the game.

That resolve took the first of many hits when I heard the diagnosis.

Irreparable lung damage. The best Rin could assure me of was that Hayate would be able to continue his shinobi career, but it was like the ground had fallen out from under my feet the instant I heard those words. Everything I worked for had not literally been undone, but the Plot was peeking out over the horizon like some unknowable elder god.

Maybe I was just being dramatic. Maybe none of it meant anything.

“It’s just a cough,” Hayate grumbled, off the ventilator at last and eating ice chips. He was awake, he was cognizant of his surroundings, and held my hand while I went to pieces for the third time in two days. His sleep-rumpled appearance, overall, seemed to imply that he was just recovering from another stupid mishap.

But I heard the rasp in his voice and felt the worried flicker in his chakra. As long as he tried his best to be strong, though, I felt like I was spitting on his efforts.

I needed to pull myself together. “C-Can you blame your big sister for being worried?”
“Not really,” Hayate said. When he was going to sigh in frustration, he coughed again instead and ended up wincing when he finished. “Ow.”

“Like about that,” I said in a steadier voice, though seeing him fall into a coughing fit would probably rattle my nerves for years to come. No, no, I had to focus on being productive. “Do you need me to get anything for you?”

“I kinda want to know when I can leave,” Hayate replied, still looking at me like he expected me to crack at any second and start crying. Which, well…fair enough. He’d only known me for his entire life.

“I have no idea,” I admitted, then sighed. “I just—I’m sorry, Hayate.”

He frowned. “For what?”

“I didn’t get there fast enough! If I had—”

“Sis, you didn’t know anything would happen,” Hayate cut me off, though he coughed again as he raised his voice.

While I leaned forward and rubbed his back, he covered his mouth with his elbow until it was over. When he recovered, he hooked his arm around my neck and tugged me closer for one of the least comfortable hugs I’d ever experienced, but I wrapped my arms around him anyway.

“I should’ve known,” I mumbled into his hair. “It’s my job to know.”

“You can’t control the whole world,” Hayate told me, equally quiet. He swallowed a cough down, then went on, “But you already got the guy who did this, didn’t you?”

If I was being strictly honest about Sasori’s physiology? “…Rin did.”

“But he’s dead and he won’t hurt anyone ever again.” My brother gently nudged me back, making sure I could see his smile. Sickly as he looked, and as deep as the hollows under his eyes were, I couldn’t see an ounce of blame in his eyes.

When had my brother become so strong? Why could he see the silver lining when the world seemed so dim?

I started smiling faintly, reflexively, just because Hayate still could. There was a subtle distinction between feeling “better” and feeling “less terrible,” and seeing my brother’s optimism handled both.

“After I get out of here,” Hayate began, pausing only briefly to try and clear his throat again, “I’m going to train.”

“Already?” Rin would not approve.

As though reading my mind, Hayate gave me a flat look and said, “Not right away, but I need to get stronger. I know I won’t always be able to handle everything, but I need to do more.”

Given which one of us was the jinchūriki here, I probably needed to take that idea even more to heart than Hayate did. More seals, more strategies, more emotional discipline… Well, at least I had room to improve. Gai would say that was the important part—as long as I actually followed through.

“I might have…give me a few days and I might have some ideas,” I corrected myself. At that exact moment, I wasn’t sure if I could put my brain to work on something quite so complex so soon.
Thankfully, I was saved from having to worry about coming up with something Nara-worthy by four bright chakra signatures trooping down the hospital hallway. I looked up, past where Kakashi sat by the door like a lanky sentry, and my fuzz-filled brain identified our new guests.

“Hello!” chirped three small voices all at once. One after another, Kaito, Aiko, Roku and Lee all trooped into the room carrying get-well-soon flowers.

Kakashi scooted away from the door and the flowers without making a sound.

“Mitarashi-san told us you were here,” Roku said by way of explanation, as the other three kids put flowers on the nightstand. Once Roku added his bouquet to the lot, it looked like someone had decided to grow an entire planter on the table.

“Big bro, are you gonna be okay?” Kaito asked, laying his arms flat on the hospital bed though he could have probably climbed up on his own.

“I heard you fought an evil shinobi!” Aiko added, holding her arms out as far as they could reach. “Was he this big?”

Lee clambered up onto the bed next to me, braid swinging, and said, “You look super tired.”

Hayate looked blankly around at all the kids for a moment, then said, “I’m glad she’s okay, yes, I did fight someone though I think he was bigger, and yeah, I am.”

“Was he this big, then?” Aiko asked, while Kaito barked, “Get better soon!”

Roku, slightly late to the punch, said, “Can we hear some of what happened? Or is that against the rules?”

“I want to hear a story!” Lee added, like this was a democracy.

Still, that many small votes added up to a victory. Hayate and I both folded like origami.

At least, we explained what details could be told to civilian children, even if they were all Academy students. Raiden would probably be pretty unhappy if we managed to give the kids disturbing imagery to share over the dinner table. Well, more disturbing than what they made up on their own—ninja children could have some impressive imaginations, and frankly there was enough ninja bullshit to make most of it possible.

Lee sat there on the edge of the bed for a long moment, eyes wider than ever as he stared at Hayate. “…Did you die?”

The other kids exchanged looks, because they were old enough to know better, but didn’t say anything to Lee. I was pretty sure I heard Kakashi choke down a laugh when he thought none of us were listening.

“Maybe a bit?” Hayate shrugged. “But I’m fine now.”

“And you’re never doing that again,” I added fiercely.

Hayate coughed twice, and I glared at him since it didn’t sound genuine at all. More like he was trying to hide sarcasm, really.

Roku tapped my leg. “Can I ask something?”

“Kinda just did,” Hayate put in, so I poked him square in the shoulder without looking. “Hey!”
“What do you want to know?” I prompted.

“If—we’re going to be ninja soon. Except for Lee,” Roku explained, stumbling just a bit. He turned his dark eyes on Hayate for the most part, then continued, “We’re going to need to train, and not just with Kei-sensei. Can we train with you?”

I did a few mental calculations, and the blood did not drain from my face when I remembered that Roku, Aiko, and Kaito would be shinobi in less than three months. Oh jeez. Just putting those facts together with the reality of what I could face in the future made my knees feel weak.

I was going to have to watch these kids like a hawk.

Oblivious to my internal conflict, Hayate managed a playful smile. “You bet. Hey, Kaito-kun, don’t you use Lightning Release?”

“Kinda maybe sorta,” said Kaito, dangling off the bed to amuse himself. His feet kicked idly in thin air. “Kei-sensei says so but I’m just doing Water Release stuff and it’s pretty cool.”

Behind the entire group, Kakashi glanced up from his paperback and met my eyes. Yes, I had wanted to learn Lightning Release to help Kaito and possibly Roku with their jutsu, but if my brother volunteered? I could seek out a different nature transformation to cover bases that these two teacher’s assistants would be less suited for.

Kakashi let out a resigned sigh, but knew when he was being volunteered.

“Oh, oh, that means we can call you Hayate-sensei!” Aiko cheered, both fists in the air. “Kei-sensei and Hayate-sensei!”

“I can’t teach you that much yet,” Hayate pointed out, coughing once as he tapped his hospital bed.

“It is okay! Kei-sensei will just do it until you’re better,” Lee said, patting my brother’s knee. “Teach me too, please!”

Lee was still a first-year kid, but maybe…

“Kei, no,” Kakashi said, spotting my scheming expression. He even shut his paperback to focus his accusing stare on me. “Gai’s training is too intense for kids his age.”

**Does it really matter? I thought you only wanted to introduce them.**

*Kinda!* Only meeting Gai would start an epic chain reaction.

Aiko’s eyes widened. “Ah, Lee hasn’t met Gai-sensei! This is bad! Lee, Lee, Gai-sensei is super strong!”

Lee’s head might as well have been on a swivel given how fast he was looking around at all of us to follow the conversation. “But I am not good at ninjutsu or genjutsu…”

Aiko latched onto Lee, grinning widely. “He’s taijutsu! All taijutsu, all the time.”

“Kei-sensei is the one who teaches ninjutsu,” Kaito said. Then he looked up at me and reassured me, “That’s okay, too.”

“Ninjutsu is very nice,” Roku added, though more in a consoling sort of tone.

I was being condescended to by small children. How had this become my life?
Kakashi looked from child to child and knew he’d lost. Hell, I’d lost. But since the kids all ended up winners, that was fine.

“We’re creating a monster,” Hayate muttered.

He wasn’t wrong. And it was going to be great.

**Talk to me once your hatchlings manage to become truly destructive.**

*Fair enough.*

“Hit me again,” I ordered the moment my vision was clear again.

Kurenai’s hands flashed through her five-seal sequence in no time at all. “Demonic Illusion: Tree Binding Death!”

The other kunoichi swirled away into midair in a fashion worryingly similar to Obito’s Kamui, if the effect started at his feet. Shortly thereafter, the jutsu started in earnest: A tree sprang out of practically nowhere, its branches growing to bind me to the trunk as though it hated me in a way that plants tended not to. Mr. Ukki wasn’t dead, so as far as I was concerned this was disproportionate behavior.

I kinda sat through the genjutsu for a moment longer, though I couldn’t move my hands, then flared my chakra with enough force to disrupt the technique.

Then I grabbed Kurenai’s descending hand, stopping her dead.

The future-past Itachi could have sued me for plagiarism. But with any luck, Kurenai would see this little trick coming the next time she saw it and never fall for a fake-out again.

“Maybe next time I won’t say what jutsu I’m using,” Kurenai muttered, letting the kunai in her hand drop.

I caught it before it hit me in the face with my free hand, then said, “Probably a good plan.”

While ordinarily I had Isobu to shake off genjutsu for me—pretty much none of them were designed to hit targets with two independent chakra types—self-improvement was the name of the day. To that end, I asked Isobu to butt out for a bit and had every member of the genjutsu study group hit me with their best shot.

With that attack foiled, Kurenai sat down next to me to watch the next round. As soon as she did, Kushina shook off the effects of my genjutsu seal and peeled the paper off her forehead.

“That sucked,” Kushina complained as she sat up, fingertips pressing against her temples. “I don’t care how catchy you think that was, Kei-chan, but I’m going to have that song stuck in my head for hours.”

I was probably a bit evil for including “Yakety Sax” in my genjutsu, but I’d needed something distracting and hyperactive brass instruments were it. Sure, the genjutsu tag probably already constituted cruel and unusual treatment of enemies. And sure, using material from my old life was probably cheating. But I hadn’t been able to resist.

“I’m sure Kei-chan didn’t mean to be that annoying,” Mikoto said, but she was really too distracted by overseeing the boys’ autumn adventures to be all that sympathetic. “Naruto, Sasuke, what are you two doing?”
“I’m gonna get more chestnuts than Naruto!” Sasuke shouted back, carrying at least two handfuls in his shirt. With the hem held up, it was almost like a basket.

“No, I’m gonna beat you!” Naruto screeched, having turned his jacket into a collection sling. “I already—I have thirty!”

Must’ve stopped to count.

“…Is it really safe to let them collect those, given all the spikes?” I asked. Back when we had been setting up for our outdoor meeting, we’d been sure to clear the area of the spiny little menaces ahead of time. Even if they tasted all right once they were turned into sweets, I’d never liked shelling them.

“It’s safe enough. I use chakra to—” Mikoto paused as she remembered that neither boy was Itachi’s age and therefore well-versed in basic safety precautions. “Oh dear. Sasuke, Naruto, you need to wear gloves!”

Kurenai winced. “Or maybe we should just gather leaves to roast sweet potatoes…”

“Oh, that sounds better,” Kushina said, and started digging through the picnic basket.

With the boys pulled away from their self-imposed chestnut hunt, we collectively broke up the meeting of the genjutsu experts. With a group composed of Naruto and Sasuke versus Kurenai and me, we competed to see who could make the best pile of loose leaves to slow-cook the potatoes Mikoto and Kushina prepared.

The boys won, but really, as long as we all got a sweet potato of our own, we were all winners.
Intermission: Lesson Number One

Chapter Summary

Kei: Try to get back into the swing of things.

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place over the course of about three months, spanning early January to late March. Turns out the true timeskip got shoved to the next chapter.

Between Kakashi, Rin, Obito, and me, it was hard to say which one of us was most terrible at being a morning person. Kakashi stayed up late and got up early, but the latter part was mainly Gai’s influence because skipping out on training with him would be the height of rudeness. The former was Kakashi’s reading habits. Obito didn’t have a sleep schedule, given his weird mission parameters, so whether he’d be awake enough to join anyone for breakfast was a coin-flip at best. Rin fueled her early mornings and late nights with quantities of caffeine that would have killed anyone with less medical expertise, but was consistent about it to the point that only a few people knew how much suffering was involved.

On the particular day that my genin graduated from the Academy, it was definitely me. I was the worst.

What kind of horrible person slept through the entire morning when it was the kids’ big day? I excused Kakashi’s lateness by thinking that, though he wasn’t always where he was supposed to be, he was at least up and wandering around the village. Probably.

Er, maybe.

At the very least, I was buoyed by the fact that I couldn’t be too much worse when it came to actually getting my kids out of there. Right?

“You’re late, Kei-sensei,” Kaito greeted me from the first row of desks, where he was sprawled out and looking at the ceiling.

Roku had opened the teacher’s desk at the front of the room and was making paper farm animals out of the contents, while Aiko was basically running stairs on her hands. Once the two of them noticed me, they zoomed to the classroom door and stood at attention while Kaito slid off the desk like some type of ooze. Wait, no, he’d literally iced the desk so he’d slide off faster. Oh, dear.

A quick check with my chakra sense confirmed that my team was the only one still in the room. Whoops.

“You don’t even have an excuse?” Kaito asked, from the floor. The ice, having formed the approximate pattern of a giant snowflake, melted away into a puddle someone else was going to
have to deal with.

I thought about answering that in a way that would probably come across as Kakashi-lite and flown right over the heads of two out of three kids. But then, I wasn’t good at coming up with lies on the fly anyway. “No. So, ready to head out to the training fields?”

“Yeah!” the kids responded, though Roku’s enthusiasm for it came across as a little flat. He looked back over his shoulder at the origami farm animals, then scooped them up and took them along with him by stuffing them into his shuriken pouch.

Well, it wasn’t like any of those papers could be important if they were left alone in a room with ninja children.

“Do all of you have your weapons?” I asked, as we walked down the Academy’s halls toward the yard.

“I am a weapon!” Aiko said cheerily, flexing her biceps in a “strongman” pose I was sure Gai had taught her. Then she paused to think about it, patting her pockets. “But, um, maybe I should get my kunai and shuriken.”

“And it’s almost lunchtime anyway,” Kaito added, toying with the water left over from the ice he’d made in the classroom. While he knew a few jutsu, I had always found the free-forming exploration of his elemental affinities too interesting to ever scold him for it. And thus, he kept going.

“I need to get my collection of iron filings,” Roku murmured, and dark markings formed around his eyes for just a second before he sighed in defeat. “I didn’t carry any to class.”

I nodded along as the kids decided what they’d need to do. They clearly had an idea of their capabilities, and I’d be able to run them through a couple of drills just to be certain. Roku’s comment also inspired me to say, “After today, remind me to start teaching you storage seals.”

“Can you do that?” Roku asked, blinking. “Itachi hasn’t learned any fūinjutsu yet.”

“I started learning when I was your age. We’ll see how all three of you do with some of the basic exercises, then go from there,” I said mildly. “And what Itachi does doesn’t determine what you will.”

Roku chewed on that for a while, and the four of us headed for the Koizumi household in thoughtful silence for the most part.

Sure, Aiko was humming under her breath the entire time and trying to get Kaito to join in, but I had a feeling my team would be the type where moments of peace would be few and far between once we got going.

The kids stormed into the house, while I lingered for a second like an interloper on the threshold. Kaito, Aiko, and Roku did not shout as they thundered inside, because from the feel of it there were two sleeping chakra signatures in it, but they certainly weren’t quiet by anyone’s standards. Except maybe Gai.

“Kids, please try to be quiet for your brothers,” Chihiro’s voice drifted softly from the kitchen. She peeked into the hall, noticing me standing awkwardly across the threshold, and said, “Hello, Kei-sensei. Would you like to come in?”

“If it’s not any trouble,” I said, and followed Chihiro to the kitchen. “How are Aoichi and Akahito?”
“They’re doing very well,” Chihiro replied, heading back to the sink. While I sat down at the table, she talked on in a cheerful tone. “They’ve made friends with the little neighbor girl, Shiemi, but she’s sick today. I was thinking of sending some soup over with the boys, but only once Lee gets home to help them. Do you think that might be too presumptuous?”

“As long as Ume doesn’t have allergies, I think it should go over well,” was my somewhat baffled reply. I didn’t know who half the people the Koizumi family associated with were, but it sounded like the household was a happy one.

There was a loud bang as Kaito tripped over something and might’ve dropped a box. The lack of swearing with what curse words he’d figured out by age nine indicated that at least nothing important had broken. The Koizumi family tended not to keep their weapons in plain sight because there were toddlers in the house, which apparently meant that Roku’s collection of scrap iron was put on the top shelf of someone’s closet space.

Perhaps that hadn’t been a great idea.

“I think so, too.” Chihiro hummed for a moment, then asked, “Kei-sensei?”

“Yes?” I asked, looking up from where I’d been daydreaming a bit.

“Did you notice Kaito’s headband?”

That question struck me as a somewhat abrupt change of topic, so I looked over at her back. “I did. What about it?”

In fact, I had noticed that Kaito went for the bandanna style, as opposed to his teammates’ preferences of either a belt or a plain headband like the ones most of my friends wore. It wasn’t a significant difference in the end, because people customized their accessories all the time, and I was a walking testament to how many times a single headband could be replaced. I was almost certain I was on my third or fourth one.

Chihiro stilled. Her hands gripped the side of the sink. Her faint chakra swirled in agitation, and I got to my feet automatically in response to the apparent crisis.

“Chihiro-san?” I asked.

“He looks like you.” Chihiro shook herself, slamming a polite mask into place over her fear. When she turned to face me again, her expression was placid and almost pleasant, but brittle. “Kaito looks up to you so much. He had me cut his hair like yours, he still loves that little jacket you gave him…”

Kaito still wasn’t anywhere near growing into that old jacket of mine, but he wore it anyway. I hadn’t noticed our haircuts being similar because I didn’t think of my messy mop as a style at all, and Kaito’s tended to lay flat.

Chihiro clasped her hands in front of her apron. “I just… Please, take care of them. Don’t let them down. Promise me that.” She briefly looked away, hesitating. “I mean, I know you can’t, and we’ve talked about this before, but I just want them to be safe. To be happy.” She bowed, angling her head toward the ground. “Please do your best.”

“Chihiro-san,” I began, as she jerked back to standing upright as though nothing had happened. “I promise I won’t take any risks with them that I wouldn’t with my brother or the rest of my family. They’ll have as much space and safety as they need, while still getting stronger. Does that work?”

“It’ll have to,” Chihiro said, looking away. “I’m sorry for putting you on the spot like this. I just…” I
worry.”

Well, we had that in common. “You’re a good mother to them, you know. Don’t be too hard on yourself for trying your best to look after them.”

“Yes, well…” Chihiro smiled weakly. “Um, don’t let me ruin your team’s big day! I’m sure you have missions to think about.”

“Just wait until they figure out what D-ranks are like.” I didn’t have to force my grin. “And a little… tradition my sensei passed down to me.”

Someone had to get the bell test. I’d never especially wanted to play mind games with small children, but it would be interesting to see how much the Academy had managed to teach them regarding combat exercises versus what Gai and I had drilled into their heads.

Chihiro thought that over, trying to decide if she ought to worry about my cheer or not. Finally, she settled on, “I’ll take your word on it, Kei-sensei.”

We managed to have about a minute of comfortable silence between us before Aiko slammed into a wall and woke up the entire house. While the kids quickly tried to soothe their younger brothers and failed with the lack of Lee’s help, Chihiro went to their rescue.

Roku skidded to a stop next to the kitchen door as the three older children made their escape, and managed a “Kei-sensei—” before Kaito and Aiko slammed into him from behind and knocked all of them right out the front door.

I got up from the table and followed them. Not for the first time, I was struck by how young they all were. It was like leading the Konohamaru Corps with Naruto at the helm, at least considering the old timeline. I wondered if that would cause problems later. They were the last class that was likely to be graduating this young, but…

“Kei-sensei, where are we going to train?” Kaito asked from the middle of the kid-pile in the middle of the street, shaking me from my thoughts.

“Training Ground Three,” I replied, because there was never another location better-suited for the bell test. Plenty of trees, river access, and the three old posts that I’d never seen anyone tied to. Nostalgia had its claws in me and wasn’t about to let go.

“Sounds good to me,” Roku said, from the bottom of the kid-pile.

“Let’s go!” Aiko cheered, scrambling back to her feet. She helped her teammates up as though they weighed no more than toddlers, grinning like Gai on a good day, and did a quarter-turn jump that had her fully facing me. “We can take whatever training you can put us through, Kei-sensei!”

I raised an eyebrow. “You don’t even know what the exercise is.”

“That’s fine,” Roku said, and looped an arm around each of his teammates’—siblings’—shoulders. “Whatever it is, we can handle it together.”

What could I say to that, other than— “Then let’s move out, Team Kei.”

I got three answering grins.

So, the Bell Test.
I was not going to give my kids the version that Kakashi had, in one version of reality, clubbed Team Seven over the head with. The new Team Kei didn’t need the teamwork lesson that Naruto, Sakura, and Sasuke had. My kids all knew and trusted each other, and all three of them had trained with me since Kaito’s freezing-the-classroom incident. And given that all of them were also all too familiar with the concept of death and of people dying around them due to inaction, the other half of the lesson was something that didn’t need to be reinforced through violence.

Likewise, my team wasn’t actually ready for the pure combat exercise that Sensei had made out of it. Sure, I could throw explosives at my teacher willy-nilly because I knew he could handle it, but I wasn’t certain that the kids would be interested in doing the same to me. We had trained together, but not nearly to the same extent or the same extremes as that.

So, after ruling out both examples, what was left?

Well…me.

I’d have loved to be able to say that I had a curriculum to work from, but shinobi tended to be the “learn on the job” types. Most of the lessons I’d learned during my wartime education tended to be sharp, and there were holes—like the fact that I hadn’t been taught a single genjutsu until I was thirteen, solely because Sensei had forgotten about it. While it was true that higher-ranked shinobi only taught small teams rather than the classrooms that Academy teachers dealt with, there were clearly some holes in the methods we used to teach our teachers.

Hm.

My team lined up in front of each of the ancient training posts that had been there since the founding of the village. Aiko stood in the middle, cracking her tiny knuckles like she planned on really showing off in front of me. Kaito was to her left, his hands stuffed in his jacket pockets and his gaze shifting between my face and his siblings’, watching for a cue. Roku, the tallest by a head and by far the most relaxed-seeming, nonetheless had his chakra primed and ready for a fight where the other two were simply excited.

“So, before we get started, I’d like to ask you a question,” I said, resting one arm on the katana hilt at my hip. “What do you want to get out of this training? Or out of being shinobi?”

The kids looked at each other, then got into a huddle. After a silent conversation consisting of mouthing words at each other and some very complex expressions and hand gestures, Aiko stepped forward and raised her hand. “I’ll go first, Kei-sensei!”

“All right,” I said, ceding the figurative floor to her.

“I wanna be the best taijutsu master ever!” Aiko chirped, grinning widely as she bounced on her toes. “And I’m gonna have the best adventures with my brothers and I’ll make everyone proud!”

“Together, we’re unbeatable,” Kaito put in, nodding. He looked up at me with determined eyes, his chin jutting forward as though daring me to argue. “I’m going to get so strong I don’t need to be afraid of losing anyone ever again.”

And just like that, I had an idea for today’s lesson.

Roku remained silent for a little while, perhaps long enough that the other two got confused about why he wasn’t joining in. The sole almost-teenager of the group had a pensive look on his face, and he brushed his bangs to one side before he spoke. “I’m gonna make sure everyone stays safe.”

“Well, that last part isn’t just going to be your responsibility,” I said gently, and he gave me a shy
little smile that vanished a split second later. Moment over, I stepped back from my students just slightly and said, “Before we move on—”

“Kei-sensei, you didn’t share your goal!” Aiko interrupted, hands on her hips.

“My goal?” My goal was mostly to get them through their training alive, safe, and whole. While a small part of me insisted that this would best be accomplished by wrapping all three of them in bubble wrap and preemptively killing everyone in the world with a wanted poster in Konoha, that was a little extreme. So, I said instead, “My goal is to help the three of you reach your dreams.”

I got a grin each from Aiko and Kaito, and a fainter smile and nod from Roku. Well, good to know they had faith in my teaching skills. Now I just needed to make sure they learned the first lesson.

I cleared my throat. “Now, the journey is probably going to be difficult, and there are some pretty harsh lessons ahead. You ready for this?”

“You bet!” Aiko and Kaito said together.

“In that case,” I said slowly, digging through my pockets until my fingers closed around the objects I was looking for, “your first task is to get these.”

The kids stared openly as I jingled the two bells in front of their faces.

“And you’re not getting near ‘em if you don’t go all out,” I said, spinning them around by the strings. Then I tied them to the scroll belt I kept around my waist. Sure, today the scroll slots were empty, but it was good for the kids to see mission gear in action.

Kaito recovered first. “They’re just bells, Kei-sensei. I thought we were gonna do something hard?”

“Yeah, Kei-sensei! That isn’t that bad,” Aiko added.

Oh, kids. It was cute that they thought it would be easy.

“I could just…” And Roku trailed off, because nothing on me moved in response to his chakra. “Huh?”

I fought down the urge to smile. “Magnet Release is a good idea, but you’re not getting past me that easily.” I lifted one finger and said, in a tone usually used by Academy teachers, “In theory, a team of three genin with perfect teamwork can defeat a jonin. But I want to see if you three genin can. So, come at me with everything you have.”

“What if we hurt you?” Aiko asked, her gray eyes wide.

Their concern was admirable, but misplaced. “Aiko-chan, I’ll be fine.” Because I was, on average, moderately terrifying even to other jōnin and had a big, fat moniker that parents in Iwa used to scare their children. More importantly, I knew the kids’ fighting styles and jutsu inside and out, having taught them half of what they could do.

Don’t forget about my contributions, Isobu butted in. Though he didn’t have a particularly mobile face, I got the impression he was grinning in anticipation anyway.

Kaito pursed his lips. “We’re gonna be throwing everything at you.”

“Bring it.” I’d had worse. There was no timer, so I’d just have to see how long the kids could sustain an attack as they did so. I just raised my hand and made the Seal of Confrontation, while the kids got
into their ready stances.

Aiko and Roku rushed me first, only to get nothing but handfuls of empty air when they tried to grab my legs. Aiko was quicker than Roku, but not by enough to catch me. I left both of them where they’d tripped in the dirt, then pinpointed Kaito’s location with my chakra sense in time for him to launch his attack.

The thing was, Kaito was the first one to use a ninjutsu aimed at my back, from the nearby riverbank. “Water Release: Wild Water Wave!”

And then he was spitting water like a busted fire hydrant. It was the only proper Water Release technique I’d actually taught him, oddly enough. Perhaps he thought that using Ice Release would be cheating.

He’d have to start cheating better.

Though Aiko aimed a punch at my kidneys, I grabbed her wrist, redirected her momentum, and tossed her into Roku. The impact knocked both of them sprawling, with Roku rolling to make sure his sister landed safely, but it mostly made certain that neither of them were in the way of Kaito’s somewhat overenthusiastic offense.

I shot twenty feet to the left in a blink of an eye, and Kaito’s attack missed entirely.

“I missed?!” Kaito gasped, his chest already heaving.

He didn’t have a whole lot of chakra to start with, and ninjutsu ate through most people’s reserves faster than sharks did seals. I could still remember what it felt like to experience that problem with smaller ninjutsu as opposed to the A- and B-ranked mainstays I used now, but it had been a very long time since then. I’d have to revise my half-formed idea of how to train these kids, because I had no intention of throwing them into anything like the Chūnin Exams until they needed to worry about that a lot less.

You’re welcome for that, by the way.

You already know you’re the best.

“Try not to shout what jutsu you’re using before you pull it off,” I suggested, while Aiko and Roku rushed over to him. While the kids regrouped, I added, “Though if you say it afterward, that’s fine.”

“Don’t charge again,” Roku said, when Kaito was on his feet and glared at me. He also caught his younger brother’s sleeve before he could act on that frustration, which gave him a few points in my mental scoring sheet.

“It’s my turn, then,” Aiko said, out of Roku’s grabbing range. “I learned taijutsu from Gai-sensei, you know!”

So did I, kid. And I’ve been doing it longer than you’ve been alive. But since that would be unhelpful to say aloud, I angled my body so I faced Aiko with my right side alone. It wasn’t the Strong Fist, but I didn’t want to reveal that little secret at the moment. I didn’t know if Aiko would be enthused or crushed to realize that I knew every taijutsu technique she did and then some.

Ah, well. She’d find out.

Aiko charged, reinforcing her legs with chakra just as Gai had taught her how. She was even faster than she’d been before, aiming a roundhouse kick at my head after a picture-perfect leap.
It didn’t change the fact that she weighed less than sixty pounds. In a single deft motion, I manually repositioned the angle of her leg and sent her sailing over my shoulder, careening into the river with a shout of surprise.

**KER-SPLOOSH.**

“Aiko!” Roku and Kaito shouted together, their eyes wide.

“I’m okay!” Aiko called, after a bit of sputtering. “Aaaah, it’s cold!”

Well, it was January. She’d be fine once she got out, though—each of the kids wore their sparring clothes, which dried quickly with little prompting. Aiko didn’t even have accessories to bog her down, and anyway her preferred outfit was basically a swimsuit with bike shorts.

While Kaito went to go drag Aiko out of the river—not that she needed the help—Roku squared off against me. “You’re just playing with us, aren’t you?”

“You could say that,” I said, not wanting to crush their ambitions too quickly. Hm. Maybe I’d step things up after this? “So, your turn?”

Roku dug around in his backpack and pulled out a half-liter-sized jar full of iron filings without looking.

I raised an eyebrow. “What are you going to do with that?”

“Not gonna tell you,” Roku said, and unscrewed the lid before throwing the entire thing at my face.

Roku could have flooded the iron with his chakra before he threw it, since any ordinary opponent would just dodge the flying jar and force him to have to move the magnetized particles back into the fight. Just rushing things like this worked for people like Gaara, who had chakra to spare and moved tons of sand with no more effect than flexing a muscle.

I’d have to make a note to remember that.

As it was, I avoided the glass and most of the dust, but that stuff clung like hell.

“You didn’t even try to dodge that,” Roku said, frowning. “What’s your trick, Kei-sensei?”

“I want to see what you can do,” I replied, holding out my hand in a thumbs-up like Gai would have. The kids saw more of him recently than they had of me, so why not? “So I’m covered in iron dust. What now?”

Roku hesitated, his dark eyes searching my face for a hint to the inevitable reversal. “You’re…not worried. Not at all?”

“Hit me with your best shot,” I said, still unbothered. Sure, I was keeping track of the other two kids with my chakra sense, just in case, but I genuinely wanted to see how creative my mini-Magneto could get.

“Uh,” was what Roku managed. Shaking himself, he managed a Snake hand seal, then said, “Magnet Release: Binding Iron Cuffs!”

The iron flowed off my flak jacket’s various nooks and crannies, then swirled along with the particles I’d supposedly dodged until I had a pair of neat, dark gray handcuffs on each wrist. Roku’s chakra ran thick among the particles, tightening to the point that they’d chafe if I let them stay on for
“Now, uh, you’re going to have to fight me every time you move,” Roku said, though his confidence was clearly shot to hell.

I nodded along with his half-hearted explanation, then said, “When we finish this exercise, I’ll have a few suggestions. But this jutsu is really cool, Roku. Well done.”

“Thank you?” Roku glanced past me, to where Aiko and Kaito were very pointedly not attacking, because they didn’t know what was going on, either.

“So, what happens now?” I asked, stepping to one side so he could see his teammates more easily. “If I’m an enemy ninja, and you’ve just weighed down my arms, what are your teammates doing?”

“We attack, duh,” Kaito responded, and his chakra started swirling around in what felt like the first combat usage of Ice Release all day.

“We tried that,” Aiko reminded him, squeezing river water out of her hair.

“No, no.” I held up my hand, and Roku winced when he realized he wasn’t slowing me down much. If at all. “Kaito, feel free. Ice Release works just fine.”

“Stop saying that!” Kaito shouted, clenching his fists at his sides. “You’re not supposed to be just playing with us! This is a real fight, right?”

Well, the hoarfrost he was introducing to the riverbank was a hint that it could be. As Roku skittered over to join his teammates and Kaito continued to turn red a shade at a time, I simply said, “If you want a real fight, sure.”

I drew my hand over my face, slamming my self-control down over my previously playful expression until all that was left was a blank, deadly mask when the kids could see it again. I met each of their eyes in turn, letting a tiny slip of lethal intent leak out through my chakra. Though I didn’t draw on so much as a sliver of Isobu’s chakra, the combination of my lack of emotion and the pressure of pure evil weighing down on them changed the character of the fight entirely.

I hadn’t needed to so much as draw my sword. All three of them tensed up like a sudden cold wind had crossed the village, and Kaito doubled down on his glare in an effort to control the creeping awareness that something fundamental had changed.

“Kaito. Attack me,” I ordered, resting my hand against the hilt of my katana once more.

Kaito snapped his hands into a Dragon seal, causing water to drift out of the river and form a dozen globes about the size of his fist. When his chakra twisted, every single one of them turned into a rough kunai shape and hovered behind him. “Ice Release: Flying Daggers!”

Then they were all flying my way, per the name.

Kaito knew how to throw kunai because all Academy students had to learn, but he was an Ice Release user. He didn’t really need to carry equipment unless he wanted to save chakra. That said, his aim with his ice kunai was only just good enough to manage a glancing hit if I hadn’t been dodging. It was one thing to throw with the hand, and quite another with one’s mind.

I put that on my mental docket as well.

I smacked the last projectile aside with the back of my hand, sending the icicle spinning off into the
distance. When it landed point-first in the river, leaving Kaito weaponless for at least a little while, I just said, “So, what are you two doing to help your teammate?”

“Ah!” Aiko clapped her hands to her cheeks, blinking rapidly. “I can—Kaito, let me help!”

“Stay out of this!” Kaito snapped, but Aiko just ignored him.

Uh-oh.

While Kaito drew a kunai and charged after her, Aiko threw herself at my knee with a shout of, “Bird Kick of Rage!”

I lifted my leg out of the way, but she turned her attack into an impromptu baseball slide and latched onto my other leg just in time for Kaito to arrive, with Roku on his heels as they bowled me over.

Or at least they tried. *Replacement Jutsu.*

And then they were attacking a log.

Kaito let out an almost incoherent shriek of rage, kicking the log into the river. “Ow! Stupid log!”

“That was better than last time,” Roku tried to reassure him, but Kaito didn’t apparently want to hear it. “I can still feel Kei-sensei over there. She’s wearing the cuffs.”

Okay, kids. What are you gonna do about it? They knew I was in the trees, I knew where they were and could hear them, and this was still my game.

Hm, time to be a little less nice.

*Water Dragon Bullet.*

Out on the river, a pair of glowing yellow eyes formed in the depths. When the kids turned to face the new threat, the dragon-shaped water construct spun up and out like a waterspout. It bared its fangs, then let out a horrific roar that would rattle windows in nearby buildings if there’d been any.

I pointed two fingers at the kiddie ninjas.

The dragon bellowed again, rearing up and scattering the group as it went on the attack. Aiko dodged left, Roku dodged right, and Kaito barreled into the canopy with no regard for my position. He hadn’t had time to ask Roku where I was, not that I’d have let him get the answer right.

The dragon swept onward, its head going after Roku while its body flooded the training ground as its bulk crawled up from the river and spewed freezing water everywhere. I heard Aiko scream again, but her chakra indicated that she was almost more angry than afraid, and Roku backtracked toward her at the sound.

Still, Kaito continued alone.

*Body Flicker.*

I landed silently in a tree just above Kaito’s position as he said more than a few words a kid his age generally oughtn’t know. He was soaked to the skin, having failed to reach the trees in time, but he was still more than ready to take me on if he could tell where I was.

Humans so rarely looked up.
I was going to hate myself for this later.

I ghosted out of my hiding place, reaching Kaito just as he got to his feet again. With my chakra dialed down to almost nothing besides the general flood of killing intent, the most warning he could get might have been if I ever let my sword rattle in its sheath.

My hand rested flat against his back, between his shoulder blades, before he had any idea I was there. I drew up behind him, then leaned forward and said quietly, “If I’d been an enemy, you’d already be dead.”

Kaito froze. More than that, his breathing stopped in the middle of inhaling for another shout. His chakra shrank so far down into his coils that if I’d been less sensitive to fluctuations, I would have assumed he died.

He made a faint choking sound, which was all the warning I got before his chakra exploded outward. He jerked away from me. Lightning lashed across my senses and I ducked back as the temperature dropped by half a dozen degrees, just before ice bloomed across the ground in my wake.

While I’d been forced to back up, I wasn’t hurt. That was more than I could say about Kaito, who was curled into a ball on the ground and pressing both hands against the scar on his clavicle. He gulped air in irregular, heaving sobs, shaking with the force of them.

**Do you need my help?**

_Give me a second._ I let out a breath and systematically unwound every nerve in my body, dismissing both my killing intent and the ninja persona I’d snapped into place. Now the area was just legitimately cold instead of being influenced by any psychological warfare measures.

I couldn’t believe how thoughtless I’d just been. I _knew_ Kaito had been traumatized by his experiences at Sorayama. Hell, a similar incident was half the reason I’d decided to take over his extracurricular training from the Academy teachers in the first place! I may not have _intentionally_ triggered another panic attack, a flashback, or anything else, but I’d been fully prepared to “scare” him into taking a lesson seriously.

Fucking hell. I was repeating my sensei’s greatest hits.

I shook my head. Okay, no. Beating myself up wasn’t helping. Isobu’s chakra wouldn’t help either.

“Kaito!” both of his teammates called, rushing into the clearing. They were damp, shivering, and covered in twigs and mud, but I had no doubt whatsoever that the pair of them had realized what was wrong and instantly rushed our way.

Roku knelt next to Kaito’s huddled form, and the ice parted around him. Roku’s voice was already quiet as a rule, but as soon as he saw his brother’s agitated state, he softened it still further. “Hey, Kaito.”

I deliberately didn’t hear anything Roku whispered past that point, or what Aiko actually said when she dropped onto the ground next to Kaito and started to sing softly under her breath. However, I kept a close mental eye on his chakra as it slowly shrank back down from clear distress signal. With his teammates around him, his breathing slowed back down to something akin to normal, and his trembling slowed somewhat.

Rather than being in the depths of a panic attack, he just felt utterly exhausted. Between the attack and the amount of chakra he’d used today in less than ten minutes, he deserved nothing less than a warm blanket and a bowl of soup and a whole day to rest.
I sat down heavily, well out of arm’s reach. If Kaito still saw me as a threat, I didn’t blame him. I didn’t want to crowd him, either. It wouldn’t help. And the guilt eating through my insides made that point perfectly clear.

“K-Kei-sensei?” Kaito mumbled, leaning heavily against Roku as he sat up. His eyes were half-lidded at best, and I winced inwardly once again at the trouble I’d caused. At the pain and the fear.

“I’m sorry,” I said, bowing my head to all three of them. “I should never have done that.”

“What did you do?” Roku asked, since he’d missed the initial incident.

“This entire lesson was supposed to be about how to react when your opponent’s too strong to beat,” I explained, though it still felt deeply inadequate. These kids weren’t experienced enough for this. I should have never gone this far. “But I screwed up. I’m sorry.”

Kaito hiccupped, scrubbing both pulled-up sleeves over his eyes. Fat tears slid down his face when he stopped, but they were slowing down. “Y-you did.”

And the trace of anger in his chakra, cutting through the fear, was the best news I’d had all day. It even made it into his voice, which told me he’d gotten through the worst of the attack. Thank goodness.

While Kaito snuggled deeper into his siblings’ grip, I sat back a little farther, resting my hands on my knees. “The purpose of the Bell Test—originally—was to teach genin the importance of teamwork. You three already understand, as long as you’re not angry, so I wasn’t going to give you that version of the test.”

“So what were you testing us on?” Roku asked, his eyes still a bit wide.

“My version? I wanted to see if you knew your limits,” I said, drawing a confused look from each of them. I went on, “Sometimes, enemy shinobi are just too dangerous to face directly. I’ve fought people like that, and I’ve had to keep fighting them because I didn’t have the option of running away. But sometimes the first try isn’t going to work. Or the second. And you need to know when pulling back and attacking later is a better idea.”

It didn’t work for all missions. Often enough, shinobi had to take the seemingly impossible route to reach a goal. Chūnin Exam proctors liked to test for that level of determination, because many missions couldn’t be refused. For the sake of the village, failure was not an option.

People died on missions like that.

“My goal is to keep all of you safe until you’re strong enough to take care of yourself,” I reminded them, “and that includes teaching you when it’s better to avoid a fight and wait for a better time. So, I made myself too tough to beat.” I did not fidget. I needed to remain in control. I needed to make these things absolutely crystal clear, with no visual distractions. “But I forgot your limitations. You’re new genin, and I’m a jōnin. And I need to remember that it’s not just genin who are learning, here.”

Kaito hiccupped again, but pushed his way out of Roku’s grip. Whether he’d decided that he was a koala for today or what, he wormed his way into sitting on my lap. I automatically looped my arms around him, and Kaito leaned into my chest despite how uncomfortable my flak jacket had to be, fighting back the urge to just sleep.

“So…” Aiko began slowly, sitting up. “Sometimes fighting won’t work?”

“Right,” I said with a nod. I’d… never really learned that one, if I was being honest. Or rather, I had,
and then promptly unlearned it in order to be more effective in my new role. The net effect was the same. “Especially at your ages, taking on adult shinobi is a bit much to ask. That’s why genin teams are assigned a jōnin-sensei in the first place.”

“Itachi said stealth is a big part of ninja missions,” Roku said thoughtfully. “And…we didn’t really sneak around at all.”

“Also right. We can work on that later,” I said, and Kaito squirmed a bit in my lap. At first, I didn’t give it much thought, but then I heard the faintest jingling sound.

I heaved him up so he could easily withdraw his arm, and what did I find but a pair of bells dangling from his fist. He gave me an exhausted but triumphant little grin, mumbling, “Told ya I could do it.”

And what could I do but smile? “Sneaky, sneaky. I never said the test was over, did I?”

“Nope,” Kaito said into my neck as I hugged him again, and as his teammates rushed forward to cheer his victory.

He was asleep in seconds, with the bells still clutched tight in his hand.

After getting a very pointed lecture from Chihiro about follow-through, Team Kei was ready for D-ranks. Since we’d gotten such an emotional start, we definitely needed more time to get to know each other’s limits as well as just explore the village. None of them were impatient to get to the business of rescuing princesses or anything so adventurous, so we had a month or two of relative peace. The more time the four of us spent out and about, the more we settled into a much more sedate routine.

With some exceptions.

“Did you decide to hire us so you could be lazy?” I asked Kakashi, who sat on a park bench next to me while the kids earned their allowances.

Kakashi just shrugged, his nose in his book.

My three students attempted to walk his eight dogs. Really, Pakkun didn’t even need a pretense of a lead, since he was sitting on Bull’s back the entire time, but he got one anyway. Even for a dog-walking mission, Kakashi’s pack made for a very easy afternoon. All of them except for Bull would just give the kids advice straight to their faces, which would be useful if they ever decided they wanted a non-summon, non-Inuzuka dog.

“You know, you can always just ask when you want to spend time with me,” I said, leaning up against his shoulder.

“It wouldn’t be as much fun,” Kakashi replied. “Besides, I wanted to see the kids you’re always talking about. It’s been a while.”

“Point,” I said, as the kids took a break from walking the dogs to talk with Pakkun about something. Given the gestures, it might have been a mission-related story, but I trusted the pug to know what to say. “Still, the next time you want to go on a date, let’s go someplace with food.”

There was a flash of amusement in his chakra, and a second later, he snorted. “Of course.”

“Kei-sensei, I have a question!” Aiko called, rushing over toward us two lazy jōnin. “Oh, oh! Kakashi-sensei, I wanna know something from you, too.”
“Ask away,” Kakashi said, which was probably not the correct thing to say.

Aiko bounced in place, looking between the two of us, and asked, “Are you boyfriend and girlfriend?”

It was really a lucky thing that Kakashi was wearing a mask, because otherwise I was sure his sudden blush would be seen from space. The tips of my ears heated up a little bit, but after Aiko asked the question, I had a hard time believing that they’d even notice my reaction compared to his.

“I knew it!” Aiko cheered. Without waiting for a reaction, she started to sing, “Kei and Kakashi, sitting in a tree—”

Kakashi’s shoulders started to shake as he suppressed a mix of nerves and nervous laughter. He would have probably lifted his book to cover his face, only it was already covered and Aiko was still in front of us. He wouldn’t hurt her feelings, even if he wanted to avoid the embarrassing situation entirely.

“K-I-S-S-I-N-G!” Aiko went on, while her teammates looked up and seemed to be thinking about joining in.

“First comes love—” Pakkun howled, conducting every dog except Bull into a chorus.

“Dismissed,” Kakashi managed to say in a strangled tone, and all of the dogs poofed away under the cover of chakra smoke. I was still pretty sure Pakkun was laughing at us.

Roku looked around at the empty leads he and Kaito were left with, then asked, “Does this mean we don’t get paid?”

Kakashi took a second to force himself to put his embarrassment aside, his lightning chakra shifting down through his body. When he finished the focusing exercise, he was able to say in a completely even voice, “Of course you do. I did hire you, after all.”

“I’m gonna buy takoyaki,” Kaito said, rolling the leash up into a coil. “And no one can stop me.”

There was something to be said for modest goals, I supposed.

“Aiko-chan,” I said, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees. “What are you going to get?”

“I dunno. Melonpan?” Aiko shrugged, spinning in place. “I’ll figure it out!”

“Roku-kun?” Kakashi prompted, as Roku gathered all of the leashes on his arm like coils of rope.

“I was thinking of a new jacket? Maybe that’ll take more than one mission, though,” Roku said. Once all of the leashes were secure, he said, “Kei-sensei, are we done for today?”

“I think we can fit one more mission in,” I said, “so get ready for one last trip to the Mission Office.”

“Woo-hoo, missions!” Aiko tossed a bright grin over her shoulder, and then she was gone.

The boys shot after her an instant later, leaving me to catch the leashes they threw haphazardly in my direction.

“Well, they’re certainly full of energy,” Kakashi commented, his nose already back in his book. He still held out an arm so I could hang the leashes on him, though. After all, they were all his.

“That they are,” I replied. “Oh, and Kakashi? Thanks for spending time with us.”
And I gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

He gave me a side hug instead, because there was no way he’d take his mask off in public. As he
drew back, he asked, “Ichiraku’s at seven?”

“It’s a date,” I said, and then had to run after my students to make sure they didn’t break anything.

I arrived at the Academy ahead of my students because I knew the Body Flicker and they didn’t.
They were fast little tykes, especially when powered by what little chakra they could channel at their
ages. I would probably be able to teach them a few of my smaller techniques someday soon.

The mission we got was a simple one, thank goodness. While Roku sighed, Kaito and Aiko were
happy for a chance to test their strength pulling weeds and the like. They got the client’s address
from the mission desk workers, while Sensei sat by and watched them rush off. If they were ever
interested in going to a new location without running, I would have assumed one or more of them
were sick.

“Hokage-sama?” I asked, as my students disappeared in a cloud of dust. “While my kids go on
ahead, do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Sensei replied. He got to his feet, letting a chūnin take over his spot at the big desk for a little
while longer. In all likelihood, I was addressing one of the three or four clones Sensei used to help
manage his time, but that part didn’t matter.

We wandered into a side room, and I automatically slapped a security seal up against the wall once
the door closed. At some point, I was probably going to confuse any of my other seals with
explosives, and that’d be hilarious assuming I lived.

Maybe I just needed to stop using paper-based explosives…

“What did you want to talk about?” Sensei asked. Or a reasonable facsimile of Sensei, anyway.

Million-ryō question, there. I paused for a second to get my thoughts in order, tapping my index
finger knuckle against my lower lip. Sort of a thinking pose for people who weren’t Nara clan
members. “Sensei, how much do you know about what they teach in the Academy?”

“Not all that much,” Sensei admitted. “Shikane gives me reports, but the most time I’ve spent in a
classroom recently was when Naruto went through the entrance ceremony.”

“Okay, that’s…something you’ll have to talk to Shikane about, then,” I muttered, shaking my head.
“Did you get any kind of classes or lectures about how to teach genin when you got Obito and me?”

“No,” he responded blankly. “I’d already taught Kakashi for a few years by that point, so I think
Sarutobi-sama fast-tracked it.”

Aaaagh. “Wait, so how did Kakashi end up as your apprentice?”

“His father decided he needed a tutor while he was away,” Sensei told me, though his eyes darkened
a bit at the thought of Sakumo. “After Sakumo’s death, I was the only consistent adult in Kakashi’s
life, so we ended up sticking together. It wasn’t the best arrangement, but we did what we could.”

Aaaaaaaaagh. Fuck. I ran a hand over my face, trying to think my way through the question. I
needed to be a bit more direct. “Okay, I didn’t get any kind of lessons on how to teach genin. And
given what happened the first time I tried to train them for real, I think I needed the advice more than
they needed to learn the lesson I taught.”
Sensei nodded. He’d heard my self-recreminations over weekly team dinners within two days of that disastrous bell test exercise, and for the next week as well. While it had been a while since I’d done my signature headless chicken impression in the Namikaze household, Sensei had a good memory. And so did his clones.

As did his kids. I was never going to be capable of maintaining ninja mystique around small children, apparently. Just wasn’t in the cards.

“I feel like…okay, hear me out,” I said, thinking aloud as much as I was just talking. “Jōnin-sensei need to actually learn how to teach before they get a genin team. I know that the idea is to pass on our skills to the next generation, but most of us have never really had to teach before.” Though obviously, my social circle had a higher-than-normal proportion of people who had taught someone something in a ninja context. Gai was head and shoulders above the rest, while Kakashi’s “learn by doing” method worked once in a while. “And… I know you weren’t that much older than Kaito and Aiko when you graduated from the Academy. I was their age. But don’t they…seem almost too young? We’re not fighting the Third Shinobi World War anymore.”

Sensei—or his clone—had taken a notebook out of nowhere and was scribbling down notes as I talked. “Anything else?”

“Well, there was—” And that was as far as I got.

“STOP DISRUPTING CLASS!” shouted a chūnin-sensei from across the hallway.

“NO!”

Aaaand that was my team. All together.

“I’ve gotta go, Sensei. Sorry.” And then I was out of the room, tearing the security seal off the wall as I went. I just barely caught Sensei smacking his own forehead so hard that his clone poofed before I was around the corner and picking up speed.

I ended up having to extract my team from the classroom before the chūnin Academy teacher punted all three of them out the door, making frantic apologies as I went. While I chased the kids back off to their actual mission, I made a mental note that there was no way they were mature enough to handle a mission outside of the village. No C-ranks for Team Kei for quite some time, if I had anything to say about it. And since I was the jōnin-sensei, I did.

Something interesting has happened in Kirigakure, Isobu said mildly, as I sat on a rooftop to make certain the kids didn’t try to escape their afternoon work again. None of them were all that happy about being caught in the act of slacking off, but I had to be a nag about at least some things. If they wanted to be shinobi, then they’d need to learn to follow directions from the squad leader, or else something was going to explode.

Sure, in a fenced-in garden there wasn’t much space to go, but they’d already proved they could be sidetracked.

Interesting how?

You recall how you asked me to speak to Saiken, Isobu said, like I couldn’t remember a conversation I’d had almost two months ago. Which, well…I supposed that was fair.

Let’s say the answer is yes. I gave Kaito a thumbs-up when he correctly identified and extracted a weed, then went off to freeze it and chuck it in a compost pile. Then I asked Isobu, What exactly
happened?

Saiken would like me to tell you that he is doing just fine, and that you seem like a nice human, Isobu went on, with just a trace of teasing entering his tone. Now he was messing with me.

Okay. Gotta say, it’s about the second time ever that a Tailed Beast has ever complimented me directly, I replied, playing his game for a little.

Isobu snorted. Saiken reports that Kirigakure has finally managed a full ceasefire rather than continuing its most recent civil war or revolt, or whatever they want to call it. I got the impression he was folding his arms one over another, like I would. I expected the Mizukage to enforce the peace with a few dozen executions, but apparently it was unnecessary.

As long as Mei didn’t end up turning Kirigakure into the Bloody Mist, there was relatively little that could probably go worse than the old timeline. Then again, that had been a mind-controlled Yagura’s doing. And the man behind the man certainly hadn’t cared about how many lives he’d been ruining.

She has decided to secure peace by binding Saiken’s host to her, Isobu told me, in…some human ceremony. Saiken didn’t know the term.


Granted, I didn’t know much about Utakata. He had an entry in my Bingo Book and I knew that he used a form of Water Release called Soap Bubble ninjutsu, but I was also pretty sure he was the only jinchūriki in the old timeline to desert his village of origin. Honestly, the fact that he’d managed that while his primary weapon was a bubble wand made it more impressive.

Someone was going to get money from this.

He doesn’t appear happy about it, Isobu said, though I didn’t really know enough to be concerned or not. But that is what Saiken says is going to happen. Not soon, but certainly in the future.

Hm. I wonder how that’ll turn out… Then again, that wasn’t my business for now. The only kage-affiliated family I really cared about was Sensei’s. Gaara’s came next in distant second place, and the rest were mostly concerns of the “I am going to get punched in the face” sense. Anything else?

Saiken thinks that we’re right to be concerned about Shinjitsu, Isobu said, after a brief pause to think. Kiri’s intelligence corps seems to believe the inroads made by such a force are more dangerous than they seem. Kisame Hoshigaki has abandoned Kirigakure.

Well, fuck. Any other roster shifts I should know about?

Nothing else of note, aside from Shukaku saying that Gaara has entered the Academy. He’s doing well.

“Kei-sensei? Did you fall asleep?” Kaito asked, interrupting by waving a hand in front of my face.

I caught his hand and gently pushed it aside. “I was meditating.” Which was…close enough to what I’d been doing to pass for it at a distance. Sort of like different subspecies of the same animal or something, I supposed.

All three of my kids had dirt up to their elbows, and both Kaito and Aiko had dirt in their hair. Roku had snow, instead. I probably should have been paying more attention to them before they started getting a bit too bored.
“Come to think of it, all of you need to learn a bit more about that, too,” I said, shaking my head. Kaito was probably a bit ahead of the class on that score, but I’d need to polish all our skills as we went. “Well, did everyone finish their part of the garden?”

“Yep!” Aiko said cheerfully. “And we put everything in the compost that’s ‘sposed to live there!”

“In that case, it’s time to report to our client and have her inspect our work.” I got to my feet and stepped off the roof, with Kaito following in my wake.

While my team got the usual “good job, tiny children” response from the homeowner, I tried to figure out how to avoid today happening again. We’d had two successful missions today, but I was all too aware I was basically acting as a babysitter instead of a jōnin-sensei. If the kids acted out while on a more important or dangerous mission, there was no way of telling what could happen. At the least, their behavior reflected on the village. At the most, we could get into very deep shit.

Kaito was too impulsive, often getting the other two into trouble. Aiko was like Lee without the discipline that made him effective five years from now. Roku could have a degree of responsibility that would help rein his siblings in, but thus far he was more likely to go with the flow.

And then, as we were splitting up for the afternoon, I uttered the fatal words. “We’ve got a long way to go.”

Instantly, Isobu’s end of my mindscape started to play a rapid-fire drumbeat. Let’s get down to business—

Oh, no. Isobu, please don’t tell me you have that memorized.

Of course I do.

I sighed. And then I went to go get ready for my date, with that song stuck quite firmly in my head.

Chapter End Notes

So, this chapter is named after a song from Mulan, but not the one referenced in its text. Because we already used that title.
Intermission: Melt

Chapter Summary

Kei: Have a decent time, despite yourself.

Chapter Notes

And the song for this chapter is "Melt," which is one of the first VOCALOID songs I ever heard.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Seven years since October 10th (and five years before Naruto's graduation)

*Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes, five hundred twenty-five thousand moments so dear,* I hummed to myself as I headed to the village gates. Unheard by anyone but my literal inner demon, the words went on, *Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes, how do you measure—measure a year?*

*It probably says something about both of us that the only time we can maintain a tune involves wishful thinking. Or mind control.*

*Spoilsport.*

*I do try.*

Nonetheless, I was in…a fairly chipper mood, all told. Which was not what I had expected to be able to say after getting the news this morning.

*They will be fine,* Isobu said firmly. *This is almost an insultingly easy mission, even for children.*

*Genin,* I replied, but didn't argue past that.

"Kei-sensei, you're late!" Kaito and Aiko accused simultaneously when they spotted me.

"I said we were gonna meet at eight," I said, raising my hands defensively. "And it's seven fifty-five!"

Roku looked up from the book he'd been reading and added, "I told you two the clock back home was early."

Aiko puffed her cheeks out as she pouted, then sighed. "Okay, fine. You're not late."

And far be it from me to pull a Kakashi twice. Ever.

"But we're all here, so let's just go already!" Kaito put in. Now, if only he was blond, he'd be a pretty
good stand-in for Naruto in terms of overexcitability about missions. It certainly wasn't Team Kei's first rodeo, but it was the first time that my genin would get to take on a job that took them so far away from Konoha. Our previous C-ranks had mostly taken place in the farming areas immediately around the village—larger-than-average pest removal, occasional bandit patrols, and other low-risk assignments. This meant that not only did bigger fish tend to stay out of the area, but also that the kids could cut their teeth on a facsimile of real shinobi life in a safe zone. Help was only ever one Body Flicker or summon contract away, even if I pretended that Sensei didn't monitor my health via Flying Thunder God Seals.

Even this mission was mostly a C-rank because it took place so far from home, not because it was going to present a massive challenge.

"Kitano Town is a week away," Roku informed Kaito in a slightly sarcastic tone, or at least as well as he could as a crackly-voiced twelve-year-old. Didn't do drama all that well, really. But he tried to be the voice of reason on alternating mornings.

"For civilians, maybe!" Aiko said. "Kei-sensei, you did it in less, right?"

"No, I've only ever been there once. And it took a week." Because horses did not compare to ninja. And my cousins made the entire process terrible enough that the story did not need to be repeated for young ears. "But we could probably do it faster."

"Then we should," Kaito concluded, hands on his hips. "Going slow for no reason doesn't make any sense."

Sightseeing tours said otherwise.

"I didn't realize you were so interested in supply chains for border stations," I said mildly. "Maybe I should have put you on busy work rotations earlier."

"It's not the things we're doing that we're excited about." Roku glanced at his teammates for confirmation, and after getting two nods, said, "It's the fact that this is the farthest we've ever been from Konoha."

Well. Recently, anyway.

If this was a world wherein watches existed, I would have made a show of checking mine. We'd probably wasted the allotted five minutes of spare time to head out, right? "Move out, team. We're heading to Kitano. Might as well actually do this on schedule."

The kids raised their fists. "Right!"

With that, all three of them took off ahead with ninja speed, leaving me in the dust. They did seem to enjoy using their powers for the silliest things.

Now who could they have gotten that habit from?

Excited, aren't they?

Well, it is a special occasion. Let's see… I started to hum as I launched into a run. For a long time we've been marching off to battle… In a thundering herd, we feel a lot like cattle…

The second trip to Kitano was at least less awful than Oregon Trail or any of its affiliated games.
There were no beasts of burden, the trip didn't take long enough that it felt like months, and no one caught any road diseases. There were also no pranks to be played on various members of our little troupe, because no one hated each other nearly as much as Kōsuke and Hayate had after their first interaction. Because there was no Kōsuke.

All in all, I'd call it an improvement.

Kitano Town was nearly the same as I remembered it from years ago. The aura of pervasive evil and the bizarrely manicured environment had both been modified by time and the rearrangement of power structures, but it was still fundamentally a trading town.

Hard to believe we'd let a family matriarch get assassinated here. And that I felt absolutely no guilt whatsoever about enabling that conclusion to family drama, though only by rescuing the woman who'd hired Konoha shinobi for it. Sure, I hadn't been precisely involved, but no one would have bothered taking that mission if my team hadn't saved the woman who paid for the job later.

Gah, that sounded more complicated than it really was. But the kids kept asking questions and occasionally their request for details threw everything off.

Aunt Inari was cool, though. While she hadn't made a habit of sending letters all the time, she did like sending monthly things like shirts or whatever along with the merchant caravans that traveled the route between Kitano and Konoha. The shirts basically never fit, but Hayate and I understood the intent behind them. Inari meant well.

"Is that where all the weird shirts you give us come from?" Kaito asked, once I explained that little problem.

"Not all of them," I said, "but apparently Aunt Inari has a similar sense of humor."

"Which house is hers?" Aiko asked as we entered the town, looking around so much that I wondered if she wished she had her head on a swivel instead of a spine. "Does she live in the same house as you told us about?"

That would… That would probably be kinda creepy if that was the case. "No, the address doesn't match. I think her brother's family still owns that one." I pointed down a different street than I had originally visited during the mission to Kitano. "She has a townhouse down that way, probably."

"Then let's go," Roku said.

As we walked, we passed the faint remnants of cracks in the pavement that Hayate's brief encounter with Iwa missing-nin had left in town. Funny how no one seemed to care to fix it. I didn't point the damage out to the kids, but they were so busy looking at the trappings of a merchant town that I doubted they would have cared about that bit of trivia.

"Are we there yet?" Kaito asked, as we walked past row after row of fancy gated houses. People who lived around here tended not to treat shinobi as honorable soldiers—rather, we were expensive servants. He was right to be wary, and perhaps a bit impatient.

It was kinda weird to think that, at one point, these would have been more the kids' people than not. While they were descended from shinobi, their parents had taken on a merchant lifestyle instead and intended to raise their children in it. After Sorayama and after being adopted by Raiden's family, each of the kids seemed to have broken with that culture and ended up in shinobi-land as a result. Mostly.

Anyway, we made it to Aunt Inari's townhouse within another five minutes or so.
"You're looking for Inari? No, she's out of town at the moment," said the person who greeted us at the door. Then, "Wait a second. You're Keisuke, right?"

"Keisuke Gekkō, yes," I replied, stepping back to briefly bow and give my students a good example. For once in my entire career. As my students lurked and tried not to draw too much undue attention to themselves, I added, "These three are my students, Aiko Kasai, Roku Chigami, and Kaito Yuki."

"Hi!" Aiko said, smiling brightly. "Did ya call for a ninja team?"

"I didn't, but Inari told me to expect you." A matching smile split her face. "Tsubasa Fujita. It's a pleasure to finally meet all of you."

Aunt Inari had never actually said what her wife looked like, but I could definitely see the resemblance to Sano from the last time I'd seen him. He had his other mother's jaw and hair color, and the same somewhat lanky build. I was slightly envious that Tsubasa seemed to have also given Sano her height, but heck, I had enough of that to spare for myself.

"Well, come in," Tsubasa said, turning so she could let me grab the door instead. "Just mind the threshold—Ōta hasn't been putting his shoes away properly."

Sure enough, Kaito nearly tripped over a stray set of sandals, but we were able to head into the house without further issue. In a way, it was kind of a relief. While I'd been able to sense building tension in my team throughout our walk through Kitano, being indoors seemed to have quelled it. All three of the kids were relaxing for the first time since we'd left Konoha, just from meeting Tsubasa's friendly face and being invited in, no ifs, ands, or buts.

"I wish I'd had more notice to make something," Tsubasa said as we sprawled all over the family quarters. "But your room are clean and I can send Uki out to get food in a few minutes."

"We do stuff like that all the time in our village, Auntie Tsubasa," Aiko said instantly. "Just tell us where to go!"

"You're guests, Aiko-chan," Tsubasa replied. "That'd be pretty rude, don't you think?"

"…No?" Kaito tilted his head to one side. "Kei-sensei makes us do it all the time. We usually even get paid."

"And each one is another D-ranked mission for your official records," I pointed out in a dry tone. "It's good for you."

"I think we'd better go shopping before Aiko and Kaito explode from too much energy," Roku put in, blowing his bangs out of his face. Or at least over one eye. He pushed himself to his feet and started to stretch. "Kitano's not that big. We'll just approach it like an intel mission."

"Yay!" Aiko said instantly. As she hopped to attention, she gave Tsubasa a thumbs-up in a manner nearly identical to Gai. "This is a freebie, Auntie Tsubasa! We'll be back in a flash."

And here I thought only Sensei used that particular pun.

"If you're sure, I have a list." Tsubasa still sounded a bit unsure, but she dug a piece of paper out of her kimono sleeve and handed it to Kaito.

"We've got this," Kaito assured her.

And then they were off, in a blur of motion and childish enthusiasm.
That left me and Tsubasa in the kitchen, and I got up after a second to close the front door the kids had left swinging in their wake. By the time I turned back, Tsubasa was already digging through kitchen cabinets to find all of the cookware.

"Need any help?" I asked.

"You're a guest," Tsubasa said, as though that determined whether I could help or not. "Please, relax."

"Okay," I said, and took a spot at the dinner table. "I didn't get a chance to thank you earlier for opening your home to us. Especially since we've never met before."

"Oh, it's nothing," Tsubasa replied, setting a large pot on the stove. "Inari talks about you every time she gets one of your letters, so it's almost like you've been here a few times already."

"Thank you anyway," I insisted, because it didn't seem like enough.

Tsubasa finally gave up. "You're welcome, then."

Victory! I wasn't so crass as to actually celebrate employing my manners properly, but I was sure Tsubasa could tell anyway.

"By the way, did you say that girl was a Kasai?" Tsubasa asked after a while, after cleaning out the next few cooking vessels. "It's been a long time since I heard anything from that family. All news out of Sorayama stopped years ago, and the few Chinatsugumi I still see don't seem to talk about what happened."

I winced. Even years later, I could still hear the screaming if I let my thoughts dwell on it for too long. "If it's just curiosity, please don't ask that when my students are around."

Tsubasa thankfully didn't ask anything more. She and I waited in comfortable silence—or at least that's what an awkward silence could develop into if left alone for long enough.

"We're baaaaaaack!" Aiko's voice announced about half an hour later, as one of the boys probably planted a size-something shoe in the door. They may have been taught their manners, but that alone wasn't a guarantee that they'd put them to use.

"Wipe your feet, please!" Tsubasa called from the kitchen. Between the two of us (with only token assistance on my part) we had prepped all the ingredients that were on hand at the time.

The three kids trooped to the kitchen and started unloading their purchases, chattering with each other without a hint of frustration. Seemed like the sub-quest had gone well. Maybe I'd need to assign more of them in the future, just to see how they handled the pressure?

Honestly, they were probably overdue for more complex missions. Aiko had picked up Gai's Strong Fist to a sufficient extent that her opponents were almost obligated to say their prayers before fighting her. Roku's metal manipulation was precise enough that he could almost pull material out of stone if he needed to. And Kaito had long since started developing ways of using Ice Release that had to be unique. They were probably ready for a step up.

While I had avoided getting my team put on missions higher than C-rank thus far, my reasons were a little less high-minded than I liked to pretend.

Simply put, I was afraid.
As I watched the kids leap into dinner preparations with a will, I sighed inwardly. It wasn't that uncommon to hold a genin team back from taking the Exams when there wasn't a pressing need for new chūnin. People would be assigned missions of the appropriate difficulty regardless of rank, in the end, and promotions just determined chain of command.

I was being a coward again.

"Kei-sensei?" Kaito asked, and I glanced to the side to spot him next to my elbow. His eyebrows scrunched together as he tried to read either my face or my mind. Probably both.

"What is it, Kaito?" I responded, snapping out of my slumped position. It was probably rude to not pay attention to the kids' antics, even if they didn't involve me much.

"Is something wrong?" Kaito pressed, while Aiko bounced around the kitchen in an attempt to help cook and Roku started unpacking our travel bags. Kaito poked me in the shoulder and said, "You've been kinda quiet since we got here."

"I'm just thinking about the future," I said, shrugging.

"While making that face?"

I reached out and poked Kaito squarely in the middle of his forehead with two fingers. "You win that round. Now go help Roku unpack."

Kaito rolled his eyes and wandered off to do just that.

Are you still worrying over them? Isobu asked, in an exasperated tone.

I don't think that ought to be such a surprise anymore, I said to him, directing another slightly exasperated tone right back at him. I mean, you know me. I'm a born worrywart. It's half my job as a sensei and half the fault of the old timeline making me wary as hell.

Excuses, excuses, Isobu replied, rolling his eye. Did you ever speak to your teacher about this issue?

We're talking about the same person who threw his genin into the Exams when they'd been ninja for six months.

And you failed, and then several years later you tried again and succeeded.

I made a grumbling noise at him, at least inside my head. But what if they get hurt worse than I did?

Are they shinobi or are they not? For that matter, are you?

I mentally balled up a piece of sealing paper and beamed him in the head with it, because my mindscape had enough flexibility for that. Shut up. I know you're right, but shut up anyway.

Isobu let me go with one final laugh, just to rub in the fact that he'd won.

The next day, the mission began in earnest. After saying goodbye to Tsubasa and her two kids who hadn't moved out yet (Uki and Ōta, whose names I was sure my students immediately forgot), we headed out for the day. We mostly focused on taking only what we could carry with us to the border post to report for specific orders. I grabbed Aiko's and my sealing supplies before we left, though, because I had no intention of being any more reckless with explosives than was strictly necessary.
Explosive seals weren’t as dangerous as unexploded landmines, but I still wasn’t going to leave them lying around where civilians could trip over them.

Heck, I had better explosive management than that even on active battlefields. Chakra-sensitive fūinjutsu mines were an absolute pain in the ass to make, but they got their actual targets nearly every time. The only time I had to worry much about collateral damage was when the explosive was big enough to kill a lot more things besides a single person.

"Kei-sensei, do you know who’s at this border station?" Roku asked, while we approached the border with the Land of Grass. And, per usual, we approached it at shinobi speed because there was no one else to slow us down.

It wasn't like I memorized the duty rotations, but... "I'm sure the commander is a special jōnin, minimum. Other than that, I'll probably figure it out once we get in range."

"You're kinda slacking, aren't you?" Kaito said in a dry tone.

"Kaito, focus on the path ahead of you a little more and on sassing your sensei a little less," I replied, in the same manner. "Just because I know a bunch of high-ranking shinobi doesn't mean I can spot them from this far away."

Sure, thirty kilometers was respectable by sensor-nin standards, but I still didn't pay attention to every little blip I could pick up. Hostile shinobi stood out, and so did allies, but only in a general sense until I got close enough to identify the specific people.

But my reading was better for people I knew well, and I picked Genma's chakra out of the background noise in another few minutes. "Genma's there, but everything else is up in the air. That good enough, Roku?"

Roku made a show of thinking it over. Then, "We don't have any pumpkin to bribe him with."

"He doesn't bring his cats on missions, though," Aiko said with a slight pout. "We'll have to wait until we get back and until he gets back before we can play with them."

This earned a groan from Kaito, too.

Not because they missed Genma or his barrier fūinjutsu practical lessons. But because they missed being able to play with his cats.

*Kids these days.*

**Hypocrite. Or do you think I didn't notice that you're a dog person?**

I hurled another mental paper ball at Isobu's face. *Shut uuuuup.*

Once again, Isobu gave a cackle before he left me to my own devices.

We approached the border station at a walk, once we got within about fifty meters or so. The kids had never seen one before but I'd been stationed here and at almost every other site within a hundred kilometers, during my Hell Year outside of Konoha. Dread pooled in my gut at the reminder, but three years had passed. The old misery was not as sharp as it once was.

Anyway, the old tree complex was at least full of friendly chakra signatures. I couldn't ask for more than that.
"Kei-sensei, what do we do to let them know we're here?" Roku asked, eyeing the structure carefully.

There was a loud pop and a puff of chakra smoke large enough to obscure a shinobi's approach. As the kids instantly reached for their weapons, I rested a hand on my hip and waited for the show to end.

"Speaking in recognizable voices helps," said Genma, as the smoke faded. As his usual senbon twitched in his mouth, he tapped his earlobe. "As does a good set of ears on the other end."

"How's it been out here, Uncle Genma?" Aiko asked instantly, even as she held out her arms for a hug.

Genma allowed her to latch onto his ribs, saying only, "Boring food, but there's good company. Now, anyway."

Aiko grinned. "We can fix the food problem!"

"My hero," Genma replied as Aiko let go to do a quick triumphant twirl. Obliging her whims as usual, he held a hand up so her pirouette looked even more polished.

I caught a gleam of silver on one finger. So he did get around to exchanging rings with Raidō. Good for him. I'd made the mistake of asking about that only once, while the two of them were still trying to settle on a design. Never again.

"If you have time, I wanna work on the ice senbon again," Kaito said. "I'm getting the aerodynamics wrong and I need help."

"You already tried your sensei, right?" Genma cast a knowing glance at me.

I held up my hands defensively. "Hey, senbon aren't my thing. That's your field. Now, if it was kunai—"

"Senbon are easier," Kaito retorted, as he had the last four times we'd talked about this topic.

"Sounds like a work in progress," Genma commented while fishing around in his thigh holster. Retrieving three senbon and passing them to Kaito's eager hands, he asked, "And you, Roku? Got anything you wanna take care of while you're out here?"

Roku blinked slowly, then shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe something will come to me later."

"How long are you all here?" Genma asked, as he led us to the border station proper.

"About two weeks. We'll be doing daily supply runs until you're fully stocked for the next three months," I replied. And immediately handed him two full storage scrolls. "Speaking of, here's day one."

Genma gave the scrolls a skeptical look. Then he said in a dry voice, "You were supposed to tell me when you decided to work on storage seal modifications, you know. Because if this is what you're using to resupply us, you're gonna be finished in half the time and just train for the rest of it."

"Yep," I said.

Genma looked at the kids, two of whom were out to bug him for additional lessons (and cats) and the last of whom was still deciding. Then he sighed. "Sounds about right."
"Don't worry, you won't be handling the lessons alone," I reminded Genma, nudging him with my elbow. "Now, let's get started."

"You're a liar," Kaito said.

Genma raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"You said 'it's all in the wrist' when it comes to senbon, and you just spat one hard enough to hit the twenty-five meter target."

"This is coming from the kid who just materializes them in midair."

"Shut up!"

"Do you want my opinion?" I asked, from the branches of the nearest tree.

I got two shouts of "No!" in return for my concern. Well, since my specialties tended to be things I needed to keep in my hands to be effective, it wasn't like I had a lot of room to talk anyway. Except for the explosive tags. That would have been a bad idea.

"Also, Roku, don't think I can't tell when you steal my senbon," Genma added, as my tallest student dropped the Magnet Release eyeliner and looked sheepish. "Just because they're made of steel doesn't mean you lift 'em before I throw 'em."

"I'm trying to work my way up to bigger things," Roku said, though he still should have asked permission.

The rest of the conversation was lost in a minor cacophony, because Aiko ran headlong into the tree I was sitting in and shook it from trunk to canopy. I leaned over the edge of my branch and eyed my student, who was shaking her head. Aiko had never been the type to take things slow.

Then she shot to her feet, blindfold still in place, and chirped, "I'm okay!"

I'd tried telling her earlier that even if Genma's sensor ability was based on hearing, it was probably a better idea to start with meditation first. Even if wearing a blindfold would help with her sensitivity, it was still something she hadn't practiced with that much and ought to have been eased into. But nope. Luckily, she healed fast and had high pain tolerance to start with. If she hadn't been that tough, I would have glued her sandals to the ground to force the meditation-first strategy, but as long as she wasn't hurting herself, it was okay.

Well, that and Aiko had reasons for bouncing off everything in… Uh. Everything she could. Since she couldn't currently see anything other than the inside of her headband. Taking superficial physical hits just helped her in the long run, anyway. She'd save up her real strength for any fights we ran into that got serious.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this!" Aiko whooped, before crashing into a bush and landing in a handstand after she tripped. As she cartwheeled away, she sing-songed, "Nailed it!"

I still wasn't sure if she was truly as clumsy as she acted, even when she could see. At least this time she hadn't hit a…fifth tree. In a row.

"Kei-sensei, can I try practicing with kunai instead?" Roku called up to me, right as I felt my thigh holster start to vibrate.
I slapped a hand over it to keep the kunai inside still and reminded him, "Get an answer first, Roku."

Roku waited, his chakra flickering slightly in impatience.

"Roku."

He rolled his visible eye. "May I use your kunai, Kei-sensei?"

Ignoring the attitude he'd clearly picked up from someone (with one Sharingan and white hair), because knew who the other bad influences were, I unhooked my thigh holster and tossed it down to him. "Just be careful."

Why I always felt the need to remind my students of basic safety rules, I had no idea.

Wham! "I'm still okay!"

Oh, right. That was why.

Roku flipped my kunai holster upside-down and added the three weapons to his pile of six. With about a dozen shuriken to play with on the side, he made the Snake hand seal and focused. Metal danced, floating around his head in somewhat wobbly formation, because juggling multiple objects of different dimensions was always harder than just juggling things that were all the same. The principle applied better to when he was using his hands than his powers, though. His hands weren't really in play if he was levitating things.

Besides, Roku had nearly impaled his foot the last time he tried adding my katana to the mix. Maybe he was working his way back up to it.

"Roku, are you watching?" Kaito called out, while he materialized half a dozen ice senbon. "Kei-sensei? Aiko?"

"Can't see anything, Kaito!" Aiko reported.

"Busy," said Roku.

"I'm watching, though," I replied, because Kaito looked like he wasn't happy with that turnout.

Genma didn't let him dwell on it. "When you're ready, aim for the vitals. Ten points in the head, five in the lungs or heart."

"And if I just wing him?" Kaito asked, eyeing the straw dummy they'd set up. It didn't have convenient marking points for all the valid targets, so Kaito would have to draw on his anatomy lessons or on muscle memory from our other training sessions.

"One point," Genma said. "No points for misses."

"Wait, wait, can I—" Roku began to interrupt, his eyes snapping open.

Kaito fired. Instead of the six I'd expected him to stick with, Kaito was producing more senbon as I watched and firing them in volleys. The senbon themselves weren't perfect, because he was still learning, but for the most part his attacks made contact.

"And that's...thirty-seven," Genma said, once the ice stopped moving around. "I like the double eye-shot. But that's half as many hits as I'd expect from someone throwing those manually."

"Give me a break," Kaito complained. "I hit the guy enough to kill him! That's the important part."
Genma didn't look impressed. "Uh-huh. Roku, your turn."

Roku waited long enough for Kaito and Genma to get out of the way, then muttered some attack name under his breath. I'd ask him about it later, but even so, all of the accumulated weaponry he'd been practicing with hurtled toward the now-punctured target.

Genma counted quickly. "...And with less than half as many weapons, Roku ties."

"What?!"

"Thought so."

"Kei, did you teach them to fight the same way?" Genma asked me as my boys walked up to the training dummy to count for themselves. "Because right now the main difference I'm seeing is in the control levels."

I slid down off the branch and landed, idly steering Aiko away from a bush with my free hand. It felt a little like she was playing Pin the Tail on the Donkey on her own, but without pins. "You can take that off now, Aiko. Weapons time."

"I'll do it this way as a challenge!" Aiko said, and mostly ignored me.

"Anyway, Genma," I said, "they're showing off for you. Neither of them really fights like that."

Genma blinked. "...What, just because I throw weapons?"

"No, I mean they're trying to show that they're really paying attention to what you're showing them," I explained. I jerked a thumb over my shoulder, to where Aiko was still stumbling around. "Hearing-based sensing, senbon usage, weapon throwing... See a pattern? They're like sponges."

"Really eager-to-please sponges. Like puppies or something," Genma commented, but he couldn't hide a pleased smile. "So they do this for everyone?"

"If they like somebody, yep." I still hadn't gotten over the realization that Kaito patterned his hairstyle and clothing choices after mine. And he was still doing it. "Congrats. You're a part of a pretty exclusive club."

"Do I get a membership card or anything?" Genma mused.

"You get the undying admiration of a bunch of genin," I replied. "And free cat sitters."

Genma nodded sagely. "Sounds like a good deal."

"You say that now, but they can and will eat your entire pantry," I said. "Be prepared."

"Speaking from experience, I take it?"

Whatever protest Kaito was about to lodge, given his sudden chakra flare, was drowned out by the sound of Aiko finally finding the training dummy and promptly launching it into the stratosphere with a cheerful bellow of, "Bird Kick of Joy!"

"Well," Genma said, shading his eyes and peering after the flying dummy, "that's a lost cause right there. I'm not going after it." He rolled his shoulder, then stretched. "Time for lunch."

"But we don't know who won!" Kaito shouted from ground zero of Aiko's kick, avoiding being caught up in her victory dance through sheer stubbornness.
"We'll settle it later, Kaito," Genma replied, and then vanished in a Body Flicker blur.

Aiko finally pushed her headband up on her forehead again. "I got it, right?"

"You did. It was a perfect shot," I said, while the boys offered their congratulations. "Now go get the dummy so we can use it later."

I got three perfect groans in response. But they'd do it, because impressing Genma was worth a bit of a jog.

"Kei, gonna need to borrow your brain for a sec," Genma said, on the fifth day of supply delivery.

"As long as you give it back," I joked, looking up from a pile of scrolls my team had obligingly filled at the Kitano market and then delivered earlier. They were out getting the last set filled up, but would be back soon. "What's up?"

"Kiku-san says there's someone suspicious approaching the border a bit down the way," Genma explained, as we headed out of the treehouse fortifications. "Screaming about getting ripped off on the price of local peaches, I think."

"…Okay, but we're not really the local police," I said, sort of confused. "What's the problem?"

"You're the one who memorizes Bingo Books," Genma replied in a dry tone. "Tell me if this sounds familiar; tall guy, low voice, borderline glowing green eyes, and he's covered head to toe in black and gray." Genma gestured to his temple, "And with stitch-scars all over the place."

Kakuzu, I thought instantly, a chill running down my spine.

Of course, there was no way it was. Kakuzu was almost ninety in a business that tended to kill people by forty, and he hadn't gotten that old by being careless. Sure, his bizarre string-dependent biology played a major part in why he'd never seemed like he'd keel over in canon, but he was a smart one. And greedy. He wouldn't flip out on a merchant over produce.

But the idea that it could be was sinking into my brain with fishhooks.

He'd hurt Kakashi. He was not going to get a chance to touch my kids. Not ever.

"It sounds like it could almost be Kakuzu," I said, in a voice too calm to be mine. "But if it is… I don't know. I have to see for myself."

I'd need to see for myself because like hell I'd risk anyone else here in an S-class fight. Unlike practically anyone else in the entire village, I could and had killed opponents on Kakuzu's level before. And of the shinobi posted at the border station, Genma included, none of them had the rank to overrule me.

This had better not be a delayed start to the C-rank curse, or else I'll probably end up flattening the area.

"Kei?" Genma asked, though he could probably hear my heartbeat picking up for all I knew. His senbon twitched in agitation. "You're planning something."

"Just a friendly… chat with someone," I said, forcing a smile and failing utterly at conveying any sincerity. "I'll be right back."

Genma paused, scrutinizing my expression carefully. Then, in a perfectly level voice, he said, "I'll let
"Keep an eye on my genin," I reminded him, though he hardly needed it. It was nervous energy doing the talking. "Don't let them get in trouble."

"Have you met them?" Genma asked sarcastically, but he was already walking away to take care of it. As soon as he was out of sight, I could already sense my students heading back toward the outpost, their bright little chakra signatures standing out against the background.

Anticipating trouble, I formed a tiny chakra scalpel and drew the point across one of my knuckles. Blood price achieved, I summoned Tsuruya on the glorified game trail that led to the border post.

When the smoke cleared, Tsuruya shook out her feathers with the sound of someone dropping a box of cutlery, then said, "Did you need something, Keisuke-sama?"

"Do your best to help Genma keep my team out of trouble," I said, because basically everyone short of Sensei would need a hand with that. And even then, I wouldn't make large bets.

Tsuruya cocked her head to one side to eye me pointedly. "Have you met them, Keisuke-sama? I'll do my best, but my goodness, that is quite a mission."

And it was one I'd failed at more than once. I still patted her side and said, "Good luck."

Once Tsuruya was resigned to her fate, I turned and headed for the Kusa border.

I was never going to stop hating this place. While there was nothing wrong with Kusagakure, or any of their shinobi from what I could recall from my brief encounters with them, every time I got within a hundred kilometers of the border, something happened. It was like the local equivalent of the Bermuda Triangle, but only for me.

Like Genma had said, it wasn't a long walk. I found the guy with the agitated civilian-level chakra signature within about five minutes, even without looking that hard. The man was probably taller than me, with all the features that Genma had mentioned, but there was one big, gaping hole in my fear-fueled assumptions. A detail that Genma hadn't seen fit to mention.

The guy, in between his rants, only resembled Kakuzu superficially. And even then, only between titanic sneezes that shook him from head to toe, justifying the full-body getup.

In a voice that was muffled by both cloth and an incredibly congested nose, the man shouted at the rather amused-looking fruit vendor, "And anoder ding—"

"Sir," I said, popping up at his left elbow after he'd just made a pretty expansive arm-flailing gesture. As the guy jumped back at the sight of my Konoha headband, I went on, "Could you please explain the situation to me?"

"Oh, please do," said the fruit vendor. "It'll be funny."

 Under his mask and the piles and piles of clothes, the mysterious man groaned out loud. "Again?"

"I'd like everyone to walk away from this happy," I said, ignoring the vendor's contribution. "But to do that, I still need to know how to help."

"Ugh," said the man who was probably being cheated out of his groceries.

"Well?" said the vendor who was probably doing the cheating.
"Den stob making fun of me!" He sneezed again, nearly upsetting the bag of groceries already in the crook of his other arm. "M stob a cold. Grandmoder's recipe dakes a while dough…"

"And I told you before, you're short by five hundred ryo," said the vendor, unsympathetic.

…This guy was being a pain because of a price-versus-wallet difference of five bucks. This situation was a waste of my time. Still, if it wasn't resolved, I wouldn't have a weird story to tell my kids. With that thought clenched firmly in a mental fist, I dug around in one of my many pockets. "If I might interrupt? I'll pay the difference."

This, apparently, pleased both parties enough that they parted on halfway-amicable terms. The big guy even gave me one of the peaches as a thank-you, though he'd sneezed into his hands at one point during the encounter. I accepted it in an effort to get the poor guy home as fast as possible, but shoved it into a storage seal at the first opportunity and went to go wash my hands afterward because ew.

**That was a job well done.**

*You'll have to forgive me for really not agreeing there,* I told Isobu, grimacing. *Ew, ew, ew.*

*You have been up to your elbows in human blood before,* Isobu said in a withering tone.

*That's different. Also, bring up bedpans at your own peril,* I grumbled back.

**Why would I when you saved me the effort?**

I sighed inwardly. It seemed like I was going to continue my losing track record with Isobu snark-offs for the foreseeable future, then.

I hiked back to the border station and was promptly attacked by preteens. Behind the the kids that mobbed me, incredulous and offended that I'd leave them behind to deal with possible danger, were Tsuruya and Genma and a total lack of concern for all the shouting. Instead, Tsuruya made a point of shading Genma from the bright spring sunlight and totally ignoring me.

*Guess I asked for that.*

"Don't leave us behind when it's something that trivial," Kaito said, radiating as much disapproval as he could.

"If it was someone only I could handle," I told him, "I wouldn't be able to fight him off and protect you at the same time. All three of you would walk right into danger."

"You have to admit that's true," Roku commented.

"So what?" Aiko wanted to know. "The guy wasn't bad. He just needed some oranges."

"Peaches," Kaito said.

"Whatever!"

Apparently, I was forgiven as far as the kids went. Tsuruya made sure to whack me over the head with her wing to make her point plain—summons were not babysitters, no matter what Kakashi could talk his pack into. Then she decided I was forgiven, too, and poofed out without another show of her metal feathers without a goodbye, for reasons I suspected related to Roku's trigger-happy usage of Magnet Release.
Genma, last of all, approached when my kids were done admonishing me and went back to their training.

"So, nothing interesting happened?" Genma asked.

"Nope," I said. "Other than discovering that reading a Bingo Book before bed is a bad idea."

Genma shook his head. "That's…not exactly what I expected to hear, but okay." His senbon twitched as he smiled and then said, "Not a bad run for a supply mission you cheated the hell out of faster than I could have. Back to training?"

"Yep. Come on," I said, pushing past him. "Maybe this time Aiko'll get a bit further on that sensing technique."

"You know you could have probably started her off with your sensing technique, right?"

"And deprive you of eager fans? Nah," I replied. Besides, mine couldn't be taught. "Move it, Genma-sensei!"

"Sheesh, fine." Genma strode on ahead of me and shouted to the kids, "Hey, do you want to see a new jutsu?"

"Hell yeah!"

"Complete your reports, and then you're dismissed for the rest of the week," I told my students, once we got back to Konoha. I'd need to write up a more elaborate document, because I was the commanding officer and my account was supposed to tie all of them together, but it was really a trivial difference. On a mission where everything went as planned, there wasn't much to say. Within limits, "no news is good news" applied.

"Come on, it's almost time for dinner," Roku said to his teammates. "Aunt Chihiro probably has something good."

"I vote hot-pot!" Aiko said, already charging off.

"Bye, Kei-sensei," said Kaito, and I gave up on being able to tell the bureaucracy that those reports would be in by the end of the day. At least, without tracking my students down and standing over them like Iruka would have when they were Academy students.

I decided to do that later, after I got home and could relax. No matter how far I wandered afield, or how stir-crazy I sometimes got, I always felt my tensions drop whenever I could finally close my apartment's front door behind me.

"Hey, Sis," Hayate greeted me, from the kitchen. "I'm heading out soon."

"Anywhere you can talk about?" I asked while I took my shoes off.

"Nope. See you when I get back," Hayate said. He picked up his mission backpack from next to me, slinging it over his shoulder, and was out the door in a few seconds at most. He paused on the threshold, though. "And Sis?"

"Hm?"

"If Yūgao-chan stops by," my brother said, "give her the present in my room, okay?"
"Are you two—?" I began, but he shut the door in my face. Rude. "Well, whatever."

After getting the road dust out of my hair and taking a few minutes to laze around and eat takeout, I cleaned the house because I'd been gone for two weeks and my archnemesis of domesticity had taken root once again. Thus, I broke out the duster and a mop and opened all the windows. I prepared a bucket of soap suds and sealed furniture into scrolls to keep it out of the way. Then I went to war on the dust and grime that accumulated whenever Hayate was the only one taking care of the apartment. I was taking no prisoners, offering no terms, and going to kick the asses of every dust bunny brave enough to intrude.

About an hour and a half later, my mission was a success. The apartment sparkled where it could, was neat where it couldn't, and I decided to call it quits for the time being. I was in the middle of cleaning up after my cleaning up when a familiar chakra signature arrived at my door.

"Come in, Kakashi!" I called, wringing out the mop in the sink. After some thought, I dumped out the mop water after it.

"I'm not intruding?" Kakashi asked, though I heard him kicking his shoes off. When I made a dismissive noise, he changed the topic with, "Also, what happened to your couch?"

"I put the furniture in a scroll. Give me a sec to get it all back out again…" I turned away from the sink, drying my hands on a towel.

Kakashi was already picking up the seals and examining them, while carrying a backpack full of lumps. "Couldn't you seal up multiple pieces in a single seal if it just says 'furniture'?"

"Oh, I wish," I said, untying my hair from under a bandanna that was really more of a hairnet. "So, Kakashi, what's on the table for today?"

"If I had a table," Kakashi said in an extremely dry voice, even though he was unpacking my furniture for me, "it'd be The Romance of Otohime and Shirogane. I promised not to read ahead, remember?"

"And I keep telling you to go on without me," I replied, heading to my room to change. "Because I don't have a spoiler policy."

There were two loud poofs as Kakashi unsealed the couch and the kotatsu, then started popping the other seals. He was already well into rearranging the living room into something workable by the time I emerged, wearing my Isobu/bubble-patterned pajamas. He'd set his flak jacket over the back of the couch and the backpack on the table, and was looking at the blanket I usually left folded up with a speculative tinge to his chakra.

"You haven't had this one out before," Kakashi commented, even as he settled into his preferred spot on the left and continued to toy with the olive green fabric. "It's softer than the usual blanket."

"The other one's being washed," I replied as I sat down near the couch's other arm. I snagged the edge of his backpack and tugged it over until I could see down the neck. He had something like ten books in it, mostly medium-sized paperbacks that weren't his special collection of signed Icha-Icha. Discount bookstores were full of great finds. "And besides, this one's big enough for two people."

"I agree," Kakashi said, and the next thing I knew, I was underneath the blanket. I felt a bit like I was play-acting a ghost as Kakashi added, "So why don't we?"

"Get over here, then," I said, and he did.
I ended up with the blanket for the most part, since Kakashi was still wearing street clothes. His head rested in my lap, and he had his copy of this week's book leaning against an upraised knee. Meanwhile, I had the book pinned between my arm and the couch's, with my spare hand resting in Kakashi's hair. When he and I finally got back to the business of reading, we both cracked our books open to chapter four and I zoned out for a bit.

Until, of course, I hit an objectionable section. "Okay, I have to ask. Does this man have four legs or am I getting really confused about the number of pairs of pants someone can wear at once?"

"You're not," Kakashi responded. "This is a first-edition printing. Though the author and the publisher…"

_Oh joy. Vanity publishing._

**What in the world does that mean?**

I flipped to the back of the book and checked the industry names there. Then I re-checked the author's name and sighed. _You can get anything out on the market if you own a printing company._

"Editing time?" Kakashi asked, holding up a pen he'd procured from… Hey, that was _my_ pen. He must have taken it the last time we had one of these book club meetings.

I plucked it from his fingers and said, "As usual."

Kakashi sighed and let me get to it. He, on the other hand, continued to actually read the book for the first time without dealing with me ripping it to shreds. He'd join me later, once he felt like listening to my spoiler-ridden rants. We passed an hour or so in relative silence, other than the _scritch-scratch_ of my pen and the sound of turning pages.

And at some point, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, my apartment was dark except for a reading light. While I hadn't drooled while I napped sitting on the couch, I flexed my jaw and swiped at the corner of my mouth anyway, just to be sure. Then I looked down in my lap and realized that even if Kakashi was a dog-summoning ninja, he had some real feline tendencies. While I napped, he'd somehow managed to sprawl across my lap without waking me up, then settled down and fallen asleep himself. And given that my apartment was both clean and nearly impossible to get into without my express permission, Kakashi had taken his mask off and left it bunched around his chin. Since the couch was really too small for him to stretch out to his full height, he'd almost managed to curl into a ball to fit against me.

Therefore, I couldn't move. Aside from setting the book I'd been shredding on the table, along with the pen that was the murder weapon, I just leaned back into the couch and continued slowly carding my fingers through his hair.

Though I couldn't express it too well when my students were jumping all over each other to tease me and Kakashi into blushing, frantically backpedaling submission, moments like this were some of my favorite ones. Just Kakashi and me, enjoying each other's company without expectations or outside pressure, or outside prying.

"I love you," I said in a whisper, so I didn't disturb him.

Kakashi turned his face a little toward me as he moved in his sleep, then settled back down with a contented sigh.

Though I was safe—_home_, in some ways—Kakashi generally didn't fall asleep with a book half-
finished and dangling from one hand. He must've been exhausted. I hadn't asked if he was on a mission before meeting up with me, and he hadn't volunteered any anecdotes. Must've been a bad one.

Isobu?

Hm?

Do you mind if I sing? In my head, anyway.

No. I assume you don't want to do so out loud to avoid disturbing him?

Yep.

Then feel free. You won't bother me.

I gave a thoughtful, though effectively toneless, little hum, just to try and figure out a starting note. Even in my head, I needed a bit of a hook.

All those days watching from the windows, I hummed mentally. All those years, outside looking in... All that time, never even knowing just how blind I've been...

I must not have actually kept the song in my head, because Kakashi stirred around the time I finished replaying the song. His normal eye's gaze met mine, while I brushed his bangs back from his face.

"Hey, sleepyhead," I said, though I'd probably fallen asleep first.

"Coming from you," Kakashi said, in a voice muddled by sleep, "that's funny." He reached up and caught my fingers with his, knitting them together. "Guess you were tired, too?"

"Pff, your eyebags are almost as bad as mine," I muttered.

"You fell asleep sitting up," Kakashi pointed out.

"You fell asleep on me," I countered. I scratched the back of my neck, noting the tension knotting in my lower back. So much for jinchuriki regeneration powers, at least as far as this kind of thing went. "So... Still tired? 'Cause I think it might be easier to fit both of us in my bed."

Kakashi blinked up at me for a second, his uncovered eye boring into mine. "Just to be clear... We're not doing anything like any of the books, right?"

Though my cheekbones heated up a bit, I still managed to joke, "Even if we're shinobi, I don't think we're flexible enough."

Kakashi gave a brief, huffing laugh. "Point." He rolled off the couch, then held out his hand to help me up. I ended up putting the blanket in his hands instead, but he didn't mind. "Definitely bringing this."

My bedroom had been one of the last things in the house to clean, and I admittedly hadn't done the best job. But it was dust-free and my sheets were soft. While Kakashi hung back in the doorway, I divested my bed of extra pillows and at least one stuffed bear. The bear, unfortunately, landed on my sealing desk and probably ended up a dollar-store panda, but I'd deal with that in the morning.

Kakashi got into bed before I did, putting his back firmly to the wall. A lot of combat shinobi did that on instinct alone, though I wasn't one of them. Learning all too much about explosives had
convinced me that the best place for breaching charges was an innocent-looking wall, preferably as far from the door as possible, so my instincts were a bit unusual. One of the remaining pillows made the position a bit less uncomfortable, but I still winced when Kakashi's elbows hit wood.

I climbed into the bed after him, and Kakashi draped the blanket mainly over me. I made sure I wouldn't roll onto my back—which Isobu still influenced—by moving Kakashi's arms and one of the other leftover pillows, then slotted myself into place.

"You were singing before," Kakashi mumbled in my ear, his arms wrapped around my ribs. His nose was against my shoulder, his forehead resting along my neck.

"Mm-hm," was my response.

"Can…" Kakashi hesitated, then asked, "Can you do it again?"

I thought about it. "Yeah. Hang on," I said, and took a couple of experimental breaths. Then I hummed one note, and another. Once I found my tune, I kept humming until I felt Kakashi's chakra settle down as he fell asleep.

Then I let myself drift off, too.

Chapter End Notes

Uh, sorry about the delay, everyone. I didn't want to post a not-chapter just to get the announcement out there, so I kinda...put it off until... Well, here we are. Also, from this point, I'm gonna include timestamps at the tops of chapters so it's more obvious how much time has passed. At some point, I hope to be able to go back and edit the rest to follow that trend, but for now, this is what we've got.

Kei sings three different songs in this chapter: "Seasons of Love" from Rent, "A Girl Worth Fighting For" from Mulan, and "I See the Light" from Tangled.
Chapter Summary

Kei: Run more-than-usual errands.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay, everyone. But the plot is rolling now!

Fast-forward five years.

So, the Uchiha clan. The powder keg of Konoha as a whole, and historically in charge of the police force or as near as they could get, with the membership numbers they had.

About that…

"So, you're thinking of Itachi?" Obito asked, leaning over Sensei's desk in a blatant attempt to peek at the genin team assignments. When Sensei moved his notes, Obito held up his hands and whined, "Come on, Sensei, Itachi won't be a jōnin-sensei voluntarily for like, at least three more years. He likes the Academy too much."

"You could try to float the idea of him leading Tatsumaki's genin team, someday," Kakashi suggested, though his nose was still in a novel. "They get along."

"Do you think he'd be interested?" Sensei wondered aloud, though he still wasn't letting Obito see his notes.


Obito looked like he would have appreciated having a Byakugan, just for that timespan. "Sensei, lemme see who Kakashi's got this time!"

"Obito, who do you think it could be?" I asked in a dry voice. The Rookie Nine were graduating this year. Tomorrow, in fact, with a big ceremony that all of us were already invited to. There were only so many options when Sensei had tested the waters with Kakashi four times by now.

"Hey, he might've done something different than the Third would ha—dammit." Obito had finally gotten a glimpse, and it wasn't hard to recognize Naruto's orange jacket and blonde hair among the profile photos. "Kei, spoilers!"

"How is it a spoiler? You've known those three were going to end up with Kakashi since you were fourteen," I said, baffled.

"Still," Obito grumped, though he didn't argue further.
Even if Team Seven's old incarnation had crashed and burned and then rebuilt itself (probably) with two extra members in time, the team wasn't unbalanced. A son of the Uchiha clan, a non-clan kunoichi with the potential to match Tsunade, and Sensei's son, altogether, would take the world by storm.

It helped that the shinobi system had undergone a few revisions at not-so-gentle prompting. At least within our little circle.

The "current" generation of jōnin-sensei were pretty much all friends, which meant we compared notes and cross-referenced what worked and what didn't. I'd gotten a team first, and thus they had been the experimental group whenever one of my friends came up with a new idea or a new training method and wanted to see how genin would tackle it. Gai's team had been his for about a year, meaning that he reaped the benefits of the first round of training and could set his genin in sparring matches against mine whenever we both had spare time. Asuma, Kurenai, and Kakashi were next. And they, unlike me or Gai, basically got an actual training manual composed of genjutsu group notes, Itachi and Iruka's Academy observations, and experience with real, live genin before it was their turn. It helped that, for the most part, they'd cut their teeth there first.

Kakashi was a bit of an exception, in the opposite way that Kurenai was. While Kakashi had been out of ANBU for two years, his primary experience with non-Team Kei genin involved handing out a series of rejections. In the months leading up to Naruto's graduation, though, he'd been spending more time with Gai's team to get out of those bad habits.

Kurenai, meanwhile, had only recently been promoted and had perhaps been lulled into a false sense of security by missing my genin team's growing pains for the most part. But knowing the future Team Eight, she'd make it work. Their personalities were less explosive.

Which brought me back to the whole Uchiha clan thing. It wasn't that I'd done anything to ensure the clan's survival. I hadn't in any direct sense, and I was only friendly with Obito, Itachi's immediate family, and Shisui, out of everyone in a clan of hundreds. Clans in general were still off-putting, and I was never one for politics. If I had, I probably would have managed to make things explode in both literal and figurative senses of the word.

The exact wording of Obito's prophecy, from what I remembered, was that he needed to be kind to the right man at the right time for the right reasons. If that prediction had been laid at anyone else's feet, they would have probably gotten a giant sign in the stars letting them know if the conditions had been fulfilled. But this was Obito. He'd likely saved the Uchiha clan from destruction by giving a kid candy one day, and neither he nor I would ever know. While curiosity was one of my (many) vices, I found I didn't feel any need to pry.

It was all right. The Uchiha clan lived, the village had a wider extended family, and time rolled onward.

"You're not objecting to my team configurations, are you?" Sensei asked, resting his forearm over the file so Obito couldn't take it without using Kamui. And even then, it wasn't a guarantee.

"Well, no," Obito admitted, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. "But I still wanna see."

"You'll be hovering around the Academy tomorrow anyway, Obito," Kakashi said, unconcerned. "I'm sure you'll probably steal my introduction speech or something."

"I'd never—okay, maybe I'd do that." Obito grinned. "Are you worried about having students, Kakashi?"
Kakashi closed his book and made a show of thinking about it. Then, "No."

Obito made a skeptical noise. Sensei shuffled paper around, now that we'd turned our attention away from bugging him about team assignments. I inspected the ceiling for a new note ("File your mission reports early," in Sensei's handwriting), then scowled up at it.

Guilty as charged, though. I'd even passed my bad habits down to my genin.

"I wouldn't say 'moderate terror' is on the same level as 'worry,'" Kakashi said at last. His voice was level, but his chakra was doing its best impression of a fallen power line. In a puddle. He stilled it by force, then continued without any external sign of distress, "But I'll get over it. I already know Naruto and Sasuke."

Translation: "If I give them an inch, they will take a mile and keep going." Sasuke was the more reserved of the two, but Naruto could make anything into a competition and Sasuke would jump in with both feet. And he wasn't at all afraid of Kakashi's set of serious mannerisms, not like less-familiar genin might be. The only strategy left open to Kakashi involved annoying them into submission, which was a nuclear option if there ever was one.

I made a mental note to check in on Team Seven as soon as possible, preferably with my genin to throw at them as distractions.

Aiko would get a kick out of the experience. Probably literally and figuratively, if I understood Itachi's occasional mochi-fueled gushing about his brother's taijutsu proficiency correctly. Sasuke would hit a fellow firebrand like a battering ram if he got a chance.

Obito patted Kakashi's shoulder. "You'll handle them just fine."

"I'm not convinced I know how to teach," Kakashi muttered. He didn't brush Obito off, though. "ANBU was one thing..."

Well, Itachi wasn't dead. That was something, though obviously I didn't know who had been in charge of Itachi's training. Maybe Yamato had been the one to take Itachi under his wing. Seeing as voicing this thought would be both a breach of ANBU protocol and not all that helpful, I dismissed it.

"Hey, Gai and I have been teaching genin for ages. Your genin are unique, but sheesh, you've been helping with our teams too," I pointed out, squeezing Kakashi's other shoulder. "You can do this."

Kakashi sighed, then held out his hand. "Sensei, the file?"

Sensei handed it over without a second thought. While Obito pouted at him for a bit, Sensei added for Kakashi's sake, "I have no doubt you'll be an excellent sensei, Kakashi."

Kakashi stuck his pocket novel in his shuriken pouch to free up his hands, then walked out with the file—or rather, files—with me on his heels. Before we left the round hallway outside the Hokage's office, he paused for a heartbeat or two. Then he took a long, slow breath and said, "I can do this."

"You can," I agreed.

"...How did the story...?" Kakashi prompted, trailing off before he could finish the sentence when Iwashi walked around the corner, carrying a box of files tall enough that he had to peer to one side to see where he was going.

"They'll have a better sensei," I replied, while Iwashi passed. "If you want, I could go over my notes..."
to help you decide where you might want to start tomorrow?"

"That would help," Kakashi said, leading the way out. "Your place?"

"Sure," I replied, opening the door for him as we left the building. "So, wanna know the first hint?"

"If it's not a secret." Kakashi fell into step beside me as we walked through Konoha, file tucked under his arm.

"Well, the first thing is to always keep them a bit off-balance on the first impression," I suggested. "Granted, I did it by accident when I was late…"

"Sounds like a great idea," Kakashi teased, extending his hand.

"It was even less impressive than it sounds." I twined my fingers with his. "You've got more time to plan and be creative. Mess with them a bit."

Kakashi made a thoughtful little noise in his throat. Whatever ANBU training he'd had would lead to perhaps more lethal surprises than anyone wanted to see, but Kakashi had a sense of humor that didn't revolve around death. It mainly involved puns, messing with Obito, and pretending not to be paying attention, but most of that could be adapted for kids. Sure, genin were more resilient than average children, but they were still young. And unlike my team, there was no Roku to act as back-up babysitter or sensei-translator if the other two got confused by things slightly beyond their maturity levels.

We arrived at my apartment after a leisurely stroll, but I stopped dead on the threshold before heading inside like I normally would have. Instead, I focused on the two chakra signatures that I could pick out from behind the seals, which no one else but Sensei could manage. It was the approximate equivalent of being able to check the backseat of a car for zombies, but far less dire.

Just a lot more awkward.

"What is it?" Kakashi asked, effortlessly in tune with me.

My hand was on the doorknob, but honestly I half-wished I could back away. Unfortunately, my notebooks were all in my apartment. It wasn't like I just carried them around when really, they were modified diary entries.

"Yūgao's here," I told Kakashi in a voice hardly louder than a whisper. "And so is Hayate."

"...Ah," Kakashi said, considering our options. "Where, exactly?"

"The couch," I muttered. Right past the threshold, leaving us no way to avoid them unless I could break the seals on my bedroom window from the outside. Which was rather not what they'd been designed for. "Which means I need to wash everything."

Kakashi nodded, then drew back his hand and knocked three times on the door.

Both chakra signatures startled like deer. Whoops.

I waited a few seconds for Hayate's to get out of immediate view of the front door, since Yūgao had already reacted and retreated faster. Then, while heading inside, I raised my voice to say, "I'm home, Hayate!"

"Welcome back!" Hayate's voice responded from down the hallway. Probably his room, which
Yūgao was firmly not in. No, instead she was occupying the bathroom like it was some kind of linoleum fortress.

Man, there was enough awkward I could cut it with a knife. I left Kakashi on the threshold as he studiously avoided the couch, deciding that I would not let this bother me.

"You know he's not going to be able to look us in the face for a while," Kakashi commented, though not loudly enough for Hayate or Yūgao to hear even with ANBU hearing tricks. "He'll know, she'll know, and we'll know. And no one is ever going to say it out loud."

"Could be worse," I replied, in a fake-chipper voice. As I headed down the hallway to retrieve my notes from my room, I stopped at Hayate's bedroom door for just a second. "Oh, Hayate?"

"What?" he asked, his voice strained.

Thank fuck I didn't have the Byakugan. With that thought spinning around in my head as though to mock me, I said through the door, "Do I have to give you the Talk?"

"Shut up!" Hayate wailed back, his chakra and his voice full of nothing less than pure, unadulterated mortification.

"Just remember not to get anyone pregnant," I said with a cackle, letting it go. Then I retrieved my notes from my room and left him to pick up what pieces of his dignity he could still find. It was a bit of a lost cause, but hey, he could try.

"You're more embarrassing than Sensei," Kakashi said when I reappeared in the kitchen, though he was less flustered than expected. "And that was pretty bad on its own."

"Rin killed my sense of embarrassment sometime after the third lecture. Sensei never got a chance," I said breezily. "Anyway, I got the notes."

"And while I didn't expect a demonstration, I see the point of that first tip. Non-threatening flustering and so on. If I didn't know you better, I'd almost think you planned that." Kakashi glanced down the hall, while it sounded like Hayate was beating his head on a wall. Dismissing my brother as a concern, Kakashi opened the front door. "Lunch?"

"Sure. I'll pay." And before he could register that I'd called dibs on the bill, I planted a quick kiss over his masked cheek. Then we were out the door and on our way.

Kakashi and I managed to go over what few tips he hadn't basically figured out already before lunch was over. After, we mainly planned on reviewing his team's files, but a messenger hawk put a kibosh on those plans before we all the way through got through Naruto's and the redacted mess of black ink regarding his medical history (thanks mainly to the events around his birth). I had a mission in the morning, and Kakashi was going to have to deal with his genin...well. Not alone. But without a kenjutsu master cheerleader, like me.

"I'll get Gai if I need more support," Kakashi said, to assuage my worries as I walked him back to his apartment. Not strictly necessary, but with a time limit on my time in Konoha for the immediately foreseeable future, I planned to make the most of it. "I'll just read the rest on my own."

I eyed him, then looped my arm through his. "Are you going to actually read their files or stay up all night reading novels again?"

"Well, I have another idea if you're interested," Kakashi said slowly, smiling behind his mask. His voice had flirty tone that he probably wouldn't have been able to pull off a few years ago, though I
was still sure he was blushing under his mask. There were a lot of advantages to being able to hide ninety percent of his expression under fabric, in hindsight.

"We'll put off the novel talks until I get back," I told him as our fingers twined together. It prevented him from putting an arm around me, but there'd be time for that shortly. I smiled up at him. "And this time, read ahead!"

"Where are we going today, Keisuke-sama?" Tsuruya asked, the next morning.

"Solo mission to Amegakure. The Hokage doesn't expect fighting, but hey, flying minimizes most risks of that," I said, holding up the saddle I generally kept around for moments like this. "Know the way?"

"In fact, I do not," Tsuruya replied, "but I am willing to learn it."

Well, that was a bit of a snag. I didn't exactly have topography map with elevations or anything. The last time I'd been to Amegakure, I'd basically run the entire way with Obito and Kakashi. Now that I thought of it, I hadn't summoned Tsuruya while I was there. Before, while fighting Sensei? Sure. And after visiting Ame about the Statue, Kakashi, Obito, and I had used the Flying Thunder God Formation to skip most of the intervening space.

*Oops.*

**Such foresight.**

*Hey, we hadn't been to Tanigakure either when I first visited there. And we made that trip just fine. Though I'd had a team trained to use the Flying Thunder God formation then. Not so much the case with a solo mission.*

Isobu made a skeptical noise, but subsided. We hadn't exactly been on the best terms back then, either, so I didn't blame him if he didn't remember that little butterfly-filled excursion.

Tsuruya bonked me in the head with her beak. "Focus, Keisuke-sama. I can't hear your internal conversations, remember?"

"Isobu was just throwing in his two ryō," I said in a dismissive tone, though I rubbed my head where she'd caught my attention. Regeneration or not, she could make the initial contact sting a bit. "Ready to go?"

Tsuruya bent her legs so I could fasten the saddle properly. "As always."

Once I had everything packed away and Tsuruya confirmed it was all balanced correctly for walking, I stood back just for a second or twelve while she threw herself into the air for a quick circuit of the field. While she did that, I fished out my flight goggles and snapped them into place over my eyes, then tied my headband around my face instead to fend off bugs. I wasn't gonna lose my fifth bandana if I had anything to say about it.

Tsuruya landed, beating her wings with the sound of someone dropping a box full of kunai. "Everything is in order. Shall we?"

I hopped onto her back, looping my fingers into their proper places on Tsuruya's saddle. Wasn't like she needed reins, after all. And even if she did, why in the world would I assume I had the expertise to know where to lead her? Kinda didn't have wings of my own, though Tsuruya had walked me through Wind Release where Sensei couldn't. Even learning from a bird didn't make me as good as
The actual trip to Amegakure took a total of two days, flight-time. For Tsuruya, that meant two ten-hour flights. For me, that meant muscle cramps the likes of which shouldn't have been possible to stand. But I did it anyway, because the only other method faster involved involving Obito and spamming Kamui, or the Flying Thunder God Formation. Not really a route I could take.

I still fell to the ground when I slid off Tsuruya's back, because my legs had fallen firmly asleep. I was just lucky that my crane companion didn't happen to stop in a tree, thus saving me a longer drop. Still landed in a puddle, though.

"I hope not to make such a trip again too soon," Tsuruya murmured, shaking her wings out. Rain rattled off them like a tin roof. "That was not as strenuous as migration, but it was certainly something."

"With any luck, you'll have a few days to recover," I said from the ground, with rain soaking into my clothes and the puddle wreaking vengeance on my pants. After a moment's consideration, I said, "Ow."

"Quite," said Tsuruya. She looked around, then added, "I can see a paper crane heading in our direction. Is that supposed to happen?"

"Yep," I said, and pushed my goggles up onto my forehead as I rolled into a sitting position. Every muscle protested instantly, but I silenced them with a pulse of Isobu's chakra. That just left my joints to complain, but at least I hurt less.

Tsuruya braced her beak against my back, making sure I was stable before she let me balance on my own. Then she lifted her head again and said, "I will leave once your transportation arrives, Keisuke-sama. Not a moment before."

"Oh?" I prompted.

"You have this amazing ability to find trouble," she began, before I groaned aloud. Her next sentence was perhaps a bit annoyed with me. "I only speak the truth."

"I don't exactly go looking for it," I protested.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" Though I wasn't.

"Am I interrupting something?" Konan asked, having landed her paper bird about ten meters away. Both Tsuruya and I had been a bit too distracted by our back-and-forth to notice. Though it had been something…sheesh, ten years since I'd seen Konan in person, she still had the unassailable public persona I remembered, and didn't seem at all surprised to find me arguing with a giant bird. At most, she smiled slightly.

I wasn't sure if that said more about me or about her.

**You. It's always you.**

**Pssh.**

"Nothing serious," I said, when Tsuruya poked me with a claw to snap me out of the peanut gallery impression. I waved weakly. "Yo, Konan-san. Been a while."
"More than ten years, if I remember correctly," Konan said with a nod. Her gray-eyed gaze landed on Tsuruya, and she said, "It's nice to meet you. I am Konan, one of the leaders of this village."

"Tsuruya, Konan-sama," my first flight-capable friend said, bowing deeply. She turned her head to one side as she eyed the paper crane, just before it flew to pieces and all its component paper squares darted up Konan's sleeves. "My goodness. I can see how you can lead a village. I've never seen paper ninjutsu before."

"You flatter me," Konan said, and bowed back.

Any more of this and we'd be stuck here forever. Like two people trying to hold two doors open for each other and getting caught up in a passive-aggressive politeness standoff. Only with bowing.

"Now, while it's very nice to meet you, I think I ought to head home," Tsuruya said, extending one wing slightly shakily. "I'm afraid it's been a very long trip for both of us."

"Of course, Tsuruya-san," Konan said.

Tsuruya bowed one last time, to me, and I smiled in return though we both were still sore. After a complimentary bop of her beak to the top of my head, she threw herself into the air above Amegakure's giant lake, then disappeared in a midair burst of smoke a moment later.

"Let's get you out of this rain," Konan said as she helped me to my feet. Paper shot out from her other sleeve to form a new construct—a semi-realistic bird that more resembled Deidara's clay creations than the origami from before.

While we rode back to the village-slash-city, I thought. In the years since I'd last physically visited Amegakure, more than a few things had changed. For one thing, there were about fifty more skyscrapers. At this point, I couldn't remember which Path was the cyborg zombie even if I did know what the other timeline's corpse puppet looked like, but was sure Nagato had been busy. Konan's flight path carried us over the non-skyscraper parts of Ame as well, letting me see hundreds of little buildings that resembled Konoha's neighborhoods.

"We expanded somewhat," Konan said in a proud tone.

"No kidding," I murmured, surprised.

While I hadn't given much consideration to Ame's expansion either in the other timeline, the general fallout from border conflicts and a hundred snowballing changes had basically turned this formerly isolated chunk of steel into the next candidate for being one of the Great Elemental Nations. Sure, they still had about as much territory as Kusagakure did, and their power was highly centralized because Nagato's rain-based monitoring system only went so far, but there was something to be said for that kind of model. Having a stronghold was a good place to start for nation-building purposes.

A few minutes later, Konan and I hopped off the giant bird—which now resembled a hummingbird in everything but coloration and size, and onto one of the many tenth-story balconies that were a feature of Ame's skyscrapers. I recognized this one and the fierce oni visage a little above our landing point, which had only been a little tarnished with age and the unrelenting rain.

Konan led me into the Akatsuki skyscraper, her bird dissolving into individual strips of paper. "Make yourself at home, Keisuke-san."

"Thanks," I said. I poked around once she left until I could find the old guest rooms my team had used last time.
As usual, I trapped the hell out of the windows and doors in such a way that my hosts wouldn't be too inconvenienced if I forgot to remove any at the end of my stay. It was a bizarre advantage to having as much experience with explosive notes as Konan did, and a shared fūinjutsu master back along the social family tree somewhere. Then I started to unpack my stuff and dig through a few storage scrolls for the paperwork I was supposed to present to Yahiko.

**Or Konan or Nagato. There does not seem to be a reason to specify the person you've interacted with the least.**

_Point._ Now that I thought of it, while Yahiko had been the one to inspire his friends—lovers?—to build Ame into what it was now, as opposed to the war-torn wreck that Hanzō had left behind, there was no one person in charge. Instead, the original Akatsuki trio were all basically equals.

There was a knock at the main door, as opposed to the paper screens used to delineate the various rooms. Yahiko's chakra was bright and bubbly, and he was one of the people who could feel it if I deliberately pinged him like a submarine's sonar.

"Yahiko here, Keisuke-san," said the man behind door number one. "When you're ready, meet me downstairs in the office!"

I didn't get to ask which one before he was gone again, and wondered if his laissez-faire approach to scheduling was why I was here in the first place. I looked down at the paperwork again, scratching my head. Honestly, it was just a courtesy, but…

**If someone can't manage to file paperwork for entering a Chūnin Exam with nearly three years of warning, I have to wonder if it was simply lost,** Isobu grumbled.

_Not every village is run by a one-man bureaucracy._ If I recalled correctly, Ame had a few hundred people in their equivalent of a cube farm. Besides, the paperwork was just a flimsy excuse to get me this far out here to talk about other things. Konan could have made the trip to Konoha herself if all she needed was a diplomatic formality. _But I wonder what else is lurking below the surface here?_

"Underneath the underneath" again, huh? Isobu's presence reared up in the back of my mind, as though he, too, was taking a careful look around from as much of a vantage point as he had.

_Probably._ Lo, a return to form after who knew how long. I tucked the paperwork into a folder and headed downstairs. _Better go see what's really going on._

Tracking Yahiko's chakra, as well as that of Konan and Nagato, meant that I could pin them down if they were anywhere in my range. Sure, I knew other people better, but each of them were a league above their Akatsuki compatriots. Thus, I located their new office space in about two seconds.

But before I entered it, I paused. There were a few distinct chakra signatures in Amegakure, and some of them were familiar. I could pick out two individuals whose energy was fairly similar to that of the Uzumaki-blooded people I knew, and half a dozen different bloodlines had apparently also joined up with Ame's forces. While I couldn't expect to meet any of them unless they were public figures—I was a foreigner, after all—I'd carry that information back to Konoha anyway. Kushina would want to know she had more relatives out in the world, and Sensei would want to keep track of Ame's growing strength.

_Get on with it._

I knocked on the office door, though it was a formality at best. Yahiko already knew I was there.
"Come in!" said Yahiko's voice, and I obeyed.

Konan was already heading out the office's main window as I entered, paper wings sprouting from her back and supporting her as she took flight. Nagato, on the other hand, stood behind what I assumed was Yahiko's desk. Each of the trio had one, and they could be identified at a glance even without nameplates. Nagato's was the messiest of the lot, Konan's had a paper flowering tree on it, and Yahiko's had a model of Amegakure, scaled down well over a thousand times and reproduced in metal. And each desk had a mess of picture frames, which I was quite curious to see once the formal meeting was over.

"Did you bring everything we needed?" Yahiko asked, getting to the heart of things immediately.

"I sure hope so, because having to send a message to the Hokage now would be a little embarrassing," I said, placing the folder on his desk. "Chūnin Exam treatises, directives, and a request from the Hokage to please send actual genin."

"Has that really been a problem?" Nagato asked, as Yahiko flipped through the pages.

"Every Exam seems to have a few people who get accused of being plants," I said, shrugging. "But you can ignore it. The nobles mainly just want a good show."

"Of course they do," Nagato murmured, shaking his head slowly. "Some people never change."

"You can say that again." Yahiko reached across his desk and plucked a stamp from somewhere within the model of Amegakure. So, it wasn't just a statue. It was also a bunch of disguised office tools. "Let's see… Sign here, here, and here…"

I knew what I was putting on the list for Sensei's next birthday.

While Yahiko sorted that out, Nagato sidled around the desk until he could whisper, "So, how's everyone been doing in Konoha? I heard Naruto's graduating soon. Do you know anything about what team he might be on? Or when we can visit?"

Oh, goodie. The customary Family Reunion Interrogation. I held up my hands in surrender and said, "I'll tell you once this official stuff is over, Nagato-san. There's a lot to tell."

Nagato deflated slightly. Then a thought occurred to him, and he snatched one of the photographs off Yahiko's desk, apparently deaf the other redhead's protests. "Here, though!"

While Yahiko complained Nagato stuck the landscape-oriented photo under my nose and I automatically grabbed the frame. Then I looked at the people in the photo. Nagato, Konan, and Yahiko were in the center, amidst a crowd of black Akatsuki cloaks and at least thirty grinning former rebels. I could pick out a few faces I remembered, like Kie and Ren and Kyūsuke, as well as many other Akatsuki members I only knew by sight. It looked almost like a college graduation photo, but no one wore silly hats.

Well, no square silly hats.

And right in the middle, surrounded by the leaders of Amegakure, were four children dressed in what looked like Jiraiya's old style of training gear. Three older ones, and one a little past toddling age. Each of the older kids resembled one of their parents, and the youngest was a little blue-haired shape in the other three children's combined grip.

"Tsubame, Ryōma, and Mikuru," Nagato said, pointing out and naming the kids that resembled Yahiko, Konan, and him, respectively. "And the youngest is Kiku. Aren't they cute?"
"How old are they now?" I asked, like I hadn't just been cornered by Maes Hughes. Raising an eyebrow at Nagato, I added, "And why haven't I heard anything from any of you about them?"

"Tsubame is nine, Ryōma is eight, and Mikuru is six. Kiku's three. We wanted to wait to tell anyone outside of Ame until the first three started their training, since they were born close together," Yahiko said, from the desk. While Nagato took the photo from me, he went on, "Though it doesn't seem like it now, at first… Well, there were a lot of people who'd target the children of village leaders. And you probably noticed they look like all three of us, right?"

"Bit hard to miss it," I admitted. I briefly shook my head, then said in a more upbeat way, "But can I tell Sensei and Kushina she has even more family now? And I'm sure Naruto and Tatsumaki want to meet their cousins…"

"Yes!" said Nagato, at the same time Yahiko said, "Maybe."

"Anyway," Yahiko said, ignoring the way Nagato was making puppy eyes at him, "the paperwork's done. Now, the serious part."

I tensed slightly.

Nagato stopped trying to act a third of his age. Instead, his visible Rinnegan narrowed.

"The Hokage asked us for information regarding the group called 'Shinjitsu.'" Yahiko dug around in his desk, then retrieved a black-marked manila folder that was about as thick as a book. "Take this to him. Don't let it fall into anyone's hands."

And my job would be to destroy it if it did. Or else kill everyone else who got their hands on it. Or both. Oh, the duties of a distinctly un-glorified postal worker. Since I wasn't Kisame and didn't have any teammates besides Tsuruya to freak out at, it would probably involve fewer casualties than the average mission. "Understood. There aren't any storage seals in this, right?"

"No," said Yahiko. "I prepared it myself."

I nodded, and once I could seal the packet away in the lining of my Konoha flak jacket, everyone relaxed.

"Do you mind if we order out for lunch?" Yahiko asked, much more casual than before. "There's this really good takoyaki stand nearby."

"Sounds good," I replied.

"Great! Then after that, we can go introduce you to the rest of the Akatsuki clan," Yahiko said, "and Nagato can hold down the fort."

"Hey!"

"I'm kidding," Yahiko backtracked, before Nagato could pout. "So, lunch!"

Food was duly sent for, and I was bombarded with more family photos. It appeared that one of the leather-bound books in Nagato's desk was an album, and he was eager to make up for lost time regarding the family. Yahiko joined in with double the enthusiasm he'd shown before, noting whichever pictures had even sillier stories behind them than usual.

"And while this was happening," Yahiko said, pointing out a shot that included all four kids, nestled around Konan, "Nagato was trying to take the picture with two spare arms—"
"And I nearly dropped the camera in a puddle," Nagato added. "I almost forgot about that. And you were too busy laughing at me for having two left thumbs to help."

"You didn't do that badly."

There was a knock at the office door. "Delivery!"

Well, it wouldn't be pizza, but…

"Come in, Karin-chan!" Nagato called, and I did a double-take as a pink-haired Ame genin walked through the door.

With hot pink hair and eyes to match, Karin had probably one of the odder variations on the usual Uzumaki red. Her hair was chopped rough and short on one side and long on the other. She had had a dull brown jacket and wore a black skirt, while making use of a ton of shinobi mesh like I had when I was younger.

I didn't know when Karin had originally joined Orochimaru's forces. But because I remembered she was a sensor, too, I clamped down on my initial reaction to her appearance with a vengeance.

"Karin…Uzumaki, right?" I asked, when she dropped off a mess of takeout containers.

"Right," Karin replied, though she was clearly wary of me. Given how precisely she'd been able to read Naruto and others in canon, even if they were suppressing their chakra, I doubted she was all that fooled even by my control. Then again, since Isobu, I had never really been a paragon of it.

Because of your utterly lack of inclination toward stealth missions, I assumed it wasn't a real loss.

Before we started working together, it might've been. Now? Meh.

"Karin-chan, Kei-san is a Konoha jōnin," Nagato said, scooting across the room to stand somewhere between the two of us. Sensor or not, he could pick out the tension. "She's harmless."

"Hey," I protested weakly. "I know I'm not as strong as you are, but…"

"See? Harmless," Yahiko repeated, more firmly.

Karin was still looking at me like she expected me to rear up and bite her.

"The name's Keisuke Gekkō, Karin-san. I'll be out of your way soon," I said, trying my best not to loom or otherwise appear intimidating. Sitting in an office chair like a dork took care of both.

"...Fine," Karin said, crossing her arms defensively and clutched at them, trying not to look at me. She was afraid of me, even with Nagato—who could have thrown me out a window and skipped me across the lake like a stone with a mere thought—in the same room and obviously on her side.

"Karin-san," I said, and her pink eyes focused on mine. They looked almost red in the office lights. "Is it my chakra that's making you uncomfortable?"

Karin sucked in her lower lip and nodded.

"I can't really turn my chakra off," I said in an apologetic tone, "but I won't keep you here. Nagato-senpai?"

"You can head home, Karin-chan," Nagato said instantly.
"By your command, Nagato-sama," Karin said, and left post-haste.

Yahiko stared after her for a bit, then shook his head. "I didn't realize Karin-san was that sensitive."

"I'm not sure..." I trailed off, shaking her head. If Karin was innocent of anything to do with the world's one and only Voldemort cosplayer, it'd be cruel of me to accuse her of being a spy. I didn't have enough evidence, or even a read on her, because her chakra had vanished the second she realized I was acknowledging her existence. "Never mind."

"Is this one of those..." Nagato trailed off for a little, then finished hesitantly, "predictions? Is it going to be important later?"

Well, since I couldn't really see the future and hadn't sensed any Curse Seals in the entire village... "Maybe," I said, unsure. "I don't know enough about Karin-san to be sure. But once upon a time..."

Stop hesitating.

"In another lifetime," I said, refusing to respond directly to Isobu when Nagato and Yahiko were both looking at me, "she was Orochimaru's agent within Kusagakure. The circumstances of her life here are different, obviously, but even if she's innocent here, that knowledge colors how I perceive her."

Well, whenever a teenaged Karin hadn't been busy fawning over Sasuke. I'd skipped most of her focus episodes by virtue of being sick of Uchiha drama. Aside from recalling that she had the powers that the Uzumaki clan were once known for, her devotion to Sasuke was the third item on a short list of prior knowledge I could bring to the table. Nagato had never displayed either chakra chains or any inclination to have people bite him to heal themselves (that I knew of), which made Karin semi-unique even in a town with a higher-than-average Uzumaki population.

...That thought was depressing.

Given that I was sure Karin and Sasuke had never met in this timeline, hell if I knew what would be relevant anymore.

"That's...worrying," Yahiko said after a while, resting his chin against his hand. He hadn't touched his lunch. "We'll check in about that later."

"Preferably after you've gone home," Nagato added, sending a concerned glance in his partner's direction. After a second, he snapped his fingers and smiled, somewhat shyly. "But this is heavy for lunchtime. Come on, dig in!"

And after that, I met the kids. Even after what I'd said about Karin, the Ame trio didn't have any real reservations about letting me see their overgrown gang's youngest members.

Part of that had a bit to do with the brief base-jumping session we had afterward, where Nagato demonstrated the ability to catch me after a multi-story such a fall with no problems whatsoever. The display of power reassured everyone who saw it of Nagato's strength and my easygoing nature, and I got to fly without a bird or a turtle or a parachute. Win-win, overall.

So, it was with a thoroughly ruffled countenance that I met the children, as about as harmless-looking as I could get.

"So, does that make you our auntie?" asked Ryōma. With blue hair and gray eyes the exact same shade as Konan's, I had to wonder if Akatsuki had a cloning facility somewhere. He had pierced ears that he enjoyed showing off, with two studs in the cartilage, and in those ears was his only obvious
deviation from his mother's looks. Not that I knew if Nagato or Yahiko was his father.

Since he and the rest of the kids called Yahiko "Daddy" and Nagato "Papa," I supposed it didn't matter.

"If you want me to be," I replied, kneeling in front of the kid so he could easily speak face-to-face with me if he wanted. My voice was much lighter than it had been earlier, too. "Though I think you've got a lot of aunts and uncles already, right? What's one more?"

"It's still nice to have more," said Tsubame, who had spiky hair like Yahiko's pulled into a knot at the back of her head. She leaned over her brother's shoulder, adding, "Akatsuki is a big clan, and there's no rules about clans having people everywhere."

Technically not. We weren't samurai, with domains and simple laws that involved war on a hair trigger, but shinobi culture wasn't that far removed from our Clan Wars roots. Some clans would never be able to spread outside of the villages their ancestors had sworn loyalty to, and villages were pretty damn possessive. Nagato's Uzumaki heritage got a free pass because there wasn't enough of an established Uzumaki clan anywhere to really lay claim, and it wasn't like Kushina would ever try to drag Nagato to Konoha even if she hadn't pointedly abdicated the entire clan head role after adopting him as her brother. On the other hand, a free-roaming Uchiha was likely to get some serious glares at the very least. Or bounty hunters.

"From revolution to established clan in less than ten years," I said to Konan, as Tsubame wandered off to argue about adopting me as an aunt with some of the adult Akatsuki members. "That has to be a record."

Konan preened. "We are a nation of overachievers."

That was one way of putting it. And it wasn't like Nagato ever really used his inherited/adopted clan name anyway. While he was certainly an Uzumaki by blood, his first loyalty was always going to be Amegakure and Akatsuki.

"And we are looking toward the future," Konan added, when I didn't have anything to say. As I watched, she looked out onto the training field, to where Mikuru—the child who most resembled a Rinnegan-less Nagato with purple eyes and Konan's skin tone—was sparring with Kie of the veteran Akatsuki. "Now, we have peace between our nations without a spilled drop of blood to ruin it for the past ten years. I'd like to see all of our children—and all children of Konoha—grow up without needing to know war."

I thought of Orochimaru. Of the Suna invasion force I fervently hoped would never materialize.

And I thought of how little many nations had seemed to learn over the past eighty-plus years of bald-faced lies and kunai to the back. Three Shinobi World Wars, and I kept expecting a fourth. And I knew I wasn't alone in thinking that. Preparing for it would, in time, give us a fighting chance if war did eventually come. I just didn't know what angle it would use.

"It's a good dream," was all I said to Konan.

A futile one.

"Akatsuki was a dream, once," Konan said, unperturbed by my pessimism. "And now it's gotten out of Yahiko's head and into the world."

"You say that like it just ran away," Yahiko complained, after somewhat blatantly eavesdropping from under a nearby pink umbrella.
With the constant rain, outdoor spectating spots came with a selection of what looked like patio furnishings. Umbrellas were the most popular. Enterprising merchants—usually former Chinatsugumi remnants—set up their shops with covered seating most of the time. Even the carts. Especially keen merchants knew where the money was, and there was an umbrella-renting business attached to darned near everything in Amegakure.

It was mostly for the benefit of the tourists and visitors, like me.

"None of us really thought it'd get this big," said Nagato, gesturing vaguely at the Ame skyscrapers with a dango stick. "It's something to look forward to."

Given that this society was probably never going to discover gunpowder, Ame's daring leap forward along the whole technological advancement thing was a surprise to everyone. Ame was an unusual light of innovation on the continent, though I wasn't sure how far the ideas would spread when most of said advancement was the near-literal brainchild of someone who didn't understand how his own powers worked. Innovation didn't mean much if the only means of making the ideas carry over involved finding someone else with the freaking Rinnegan.

But perhaps I was being too harsh. I wasn't allowed to see what Ame was really up to, being a Konoha-nin and all. For all I knew, they were mass-producing cannons in a cave somewhere.

…Wait, no, that was more like Orochimaru's modus operandi. But with fewer bioweapons.

"If Tsubame-chan wants to make me an aunt," I said, changing the topic, "does that mean Obito and Kakashi get to be uncles?"

"Once she realizes? Likely so," Konan replied. "Though now that I think of it, Kei-san, you were already sort of in our clan as soon as Minato-dono reached out to us. It's only that you didn't realize quite how large the clan was."

"Fair point," I admitted. Though to be honest, I had never known. "But Konan-senpai, am I allowed to tell them?"

"If you weren't, you would never know about our children in the first place," Konan replied, because as the village's effective spymaster, she could make those sorts of calls. People feared Nagato if they didn't know him, because the Rinnegan was just that infamous. But if they overlooked Konan, they were living on borrowed time. "If you stay until tomorrow, I can see if there is anything else we may want to send back to Konoha with you."

"Of course, Konan-senpai," I said. While this visit may not have put me at Konan's disposal, I wanted to put at least another day between me and having to ride with Tsuruya all the way back home. Tsuruya would probably appreciate the break.

"Oh, wait," Yahiko said. "You've been kinda pushing the Chūnin Exams. Do you have students in it?"

"It's not for six months," Nagato reminded him.

"I know that, but our village starts looking for candidates early," Yahiko said, probably mostly for my benefit. Then he turned his attention back to me in full and said, "So, are you going to? Actually, wait, do you even have students?"

"Well…"
I arrived back in Konoha with a couple of leg cramps, a completed courier mission, four pieces of art from the youngest Akatsuki members, paperwork galore that I was not supposed to be reading, and a pamphlet's worth of information that Konan had pulled out of a filing cabinet and told me to give to Jiraiya when I saw him. It went in the storage seals along with everything else, but separately because I had already put the other resources away.

Given that the man still walked the length of the continent every few months, hook hand or no, I wasn't sure when that last part would be feasible. But it had the seal of the Land of Iron separately from the alleged intel on Shinjitsu, so I handed it over with everything else.

"And now," I told Sensei, after explaining everything that had happened during the mission, "I am going to see how Kakashi's genin are doing."

"Not your trio?" Sensei asked distractedly, already reading the smaller of the reports. It wasn't like Jiraiya wouldn't just give the information to him eventually anyway.

"I checked in with the chūnin downstairs," I admitted, because he knew me all too well, "and they're not back yet."

It was one of the problems with having a reputation like mine—if the Hokage needed a jōnin of my qualifications somewhere, there often wasn't anyone else to send. And even if there was, the Hokage's orders were orders. In this exact case, Obito might've been able to go if he'd been cleared to use Kamui. Kakashi, though? Not with a brand new genin team. My team could operate on their own, and already had been sent out with Shisui (to his fond exasperation). And Jiraiya was out wandering, Tsunade was literally always more useful in the hospital…

I didn't really mind, though. Kushina got to learn she had an even bigger extended family than she thought she had. That was reason for celebration enough.

"Kakashi's team is on their second D-rank today," Sensei told me, "so perhaps you should wait until later."

Hm. Given what D-ranks generally entailed, I was better off skipping out. "Okay." But before I thought about leaving, I paused with one finger poised in the air. "Wait, Sensei, what day is it?"

"It's a Wednesday." Sensei looked up from the files I'd brought him. "Why?"

"Gotta go!" Because I had a meet-up to get to and a friend to bother. Since I was actually in the village on time, I could still make it. And I exited Sensei's office at speed, without using the ventilation system at all. It would've been rude to kick Raidō out of the ceiling in my haste.

I made my way via the rooftops to the hospital, after pausing for a few heartbeats to confirm that Iruka was around and Itachi was still shadowing him. Yamato was nowhere to be found—probably on a mission—and I felt Anko hanging around a nearby training field, surrounded by smaller chakra signatures. Probably students or genin who were brave enough to approach her for senbon lessons. Kurenai and Asuma were around the village, escorting their teams, and I could sense Kakashi's little band of marauders on their day trip.

And Rin and Obito were in the hospital. Likely in one of the meeting rooms, given Tsunade's presence. Mind made up, I beelined for them.

When I got to the hospital and the relevant room (after getting turned around by the fact that my chakra sense had never compensated for corners), people were already filing out. From their bookloads and excited chattering, the class had gone well and left them with plenty to think about. Some
of the students—no, fellow medics—looked like members of major clans, which meant Rin had finally drawn the audiences she wanted. Now she just needed a proper Academy-style lecture hall.

"Back already?" Tsunade's voice asked, drawing my attention back into the room.

I nodded as I headed inside, surveying the repurposed meeting room. Though it didn't have enough seats for more than, say, twenty people, more than thrice that number had left just a few moments ago. Standing room only, I wagered. In the back of the room, Rin and Obito were packing up her medical charts and packing them safely away for next week's session.

"I'm sorry I missed the fun," I said, sheepish. "But I probably wasn't qualified to hear half of this."

Tsunade didn't seem to mind, casting a fond glance back toward the duo hard at work. "And Obito-kun is? I'm sure Rin-chan is mostly grateful for the moral support, not one more head that understands chakra interactions with rare herbs half the people here haven't heard of."

"Fair point," I admitted. As Tsunade strode past me to resume her hospital duties, I stuck my hand in the air and said, "Rin-sensei, what did I miss?"

Rin spun in place, a smile spreading across her face. Obito waited a little longer, since he was busy packing up a (hopefully) model skeleton, and therefore Rin's flying hug-tackle hit me first. "Welcome back, Kei!" she said as she pulled back. "And… Well, you missed a lot, and the summary isn't nearly as interesting, but these classes are really getting off the ground! Soon, we may have a comprehensive understanding of Mount Myōboku herbs and how they interact with Konoha bloodline limits!"

Which was about fifty miles past my understanding, but undoubtedly useful. "And the plan to start headhunting early?"

"Well, Yamato-kun has Iruka-kun on board," Rin said, waving in the direction of the Academy. "And Itachi-kun promised he'd make sure his brother takes a look, too. The whole Academy may not be willing to adopt medic-nin practices yet, but we have full elective classes of first aid training. It's much more advanced than the usual version."

Shikane would have been probably the fastest of the administrators to bow to the sound logic of making everyone at least halfway a field medic, though I had to wonder who else was holding up the process. I couldn't make waves in the Academy—it wasn't my place—but Iruka and the others could. With Tsunade's backing, they'd probably manage something even more helpful by the time the next class graduated.

"Wish I'd known half that stuff when I was a kid," Obito commented, and we fist-bumped once he was within arm's reach.

"You're telling me you haven't watched Rin-chan since then?" I asked. With his Sharingan active, preferably.

"Then, not now," Obito corrected gently, while Rin stuck an extendable pointer into a pocket on her hip. "I've got it now. If there's an Uchiha who can stitch a wound faster, I haven't met 'em."

"Itachi?" I guessed.

Obito pouted theatrically as he hefted his part of Rin's lecture supplies. "Clan geniuses don't count. And since he copied me, it doubly doesn't count."

"Aaaaand done!" Rin declared, clapping her hands. "Let's get out of here and have lunch!"
"...What time even is it?" I wondered aloud. There weren't as many convenient clocks as one would hope for in an official building, and I hadn't checked in Sensei's office before leaving.

"It's 'I'm hungry now that I'm not busy,' so let's go!" Rin said, and we headed out together.

"Ichiraku?"

Obito pumped a fist. "Yes! Oh, and you should fill us in on what we missed. What happened on the mission?"

"Well," I began, because Konan had effectively told me I could share with the ninja-family extended tree, "did you know Konan-senpai, Yahiko-senpai, and Nagato-senpai have four kids?"

"What?!" Obito and Rin gasped together, disturbing nearby pigeons as we exited to the hospital's roof.

"That was my reaction too! I'll tell you all about them over ramen."

It wasn't until after what turned out to be a late lunch, a very long conversation about possibly getting scrapbooking material from Amegakure, and an impromptu Gai challenge (which Obito lost, because taijutsu masters ate more), before I got a good look at the new genin.

At first, I was blatantly people-watching. Ichiraku was dead in the middle of town, so I got to see Kurenai's Team Eight—with Hinata on point—headed back to the Hokage's tower for to report in. I waved as Kurenai headed past, and though she couldn't stay and chat, she reminded me that the genjutsu development group could still use me running around and blundering into new discoveries.

Then Asuma's Team Ten roof-hopped by about fifteen minutes later, also finished with their assignments. They didn't stop to wave or anything, but going by the faint smell of explosive residue that lingered in their wake, maybe that was for the best.

"Do you think they might be taking on harder missions than usual?" Rin asked, watching them go.

Obito shrugged. "Unless it was the old 'dog walking near a minefield' one, I think they'll be fine."

"That happened once, and Pakkun apologized," I reminded him dryly. I looked up once I felt more familiar chakra signatures draw closer, then said, "And here are the last ones."

Team Seven trooped up the street with the three component genin covered in dust and with Naruto in the lead.

"Kei-sensei, Rin-sensei," Naruto greeted our group as he approached at a trot, "and Uncle Obito. Have you been eating ramen without us?!"

Obito cast a pointed look at the ramen bowls stacked on the counter. Then, with an innocent smile on his face, Obito declared, "Nope! We were reading our fortunes in tea leaves."

"Since Kei can see the future," Kakashi added with a serious nod.

"Pff, way to put me on the spot. Still, I could play along.

"It'll rain tonight," I put in, casting a look at the perfectly placid, clear sky outside.

"Liar!" Sakura and Naruto said, but pointed at one jōnin each. Sasuke, after a brief pause to realize that his teammates were both going to goof off, shrugged and pointed halfheartedly at me to round out the triad.
"Are we, though?" Obito asked, as a Water Clone of his creation popped onto one of the street lamps outside Ichiraku. When the clone exploded violently, makeshift rain pattered outside for a few seconds and drew the genin team's attention to the street.

"Eh?" Naruto blinked. "Sasuke, did you-?"

"Not me," Sasuke said, holding up his hands to show that he wasn't making seals.

"Well, if not you..." Sakura began.

**CLANG CLANG!**

All the genin jumped, and Rin's bright laughter almost cancelled out the thunder-like racket she'd made. Sure, Teuchi and Ayame were a little more careful with the pots and pans than Rin was, but they were certainly in on the joke. And at the same time, Kakashi's chakra gave a little jump and static made everyone's hair stand on end all at once. Not that most people would even notice with Obito and Naruto's respective haircuts.

"Gotcha!" Rin said, even as she hopped the counter back to her seat. That way, Naruto couldn't steal it.

"Told you it'd rain," I said, as though none of the steps to the prank had happened.

"Does it even count if you make your own?" Sasuke wanted to know.

"Ah, but I didn't," I replied. "Did you see me make any hand seals?"

Naruto made a face. "Kei-sensei, everyone *knows* you don't need to."

"You can use jutsu without hand seals?" Sakura asked, as a mark against the truth of Naruto's statement.

"I can, but I didn't," I replied. "You've got the wrong jōnin."

Obito made a coughing noise that sounded suspiciously like laughter.

"Agh! Come on, Sasuke, Sakura. Mom promised she'd make us dinner," Naruto said, beckoning to his teammates. "We don't need Kakashi-sensei and the others pranking us."

"At least until we get back at them," Sasuke said in a voice that he probably assumed none of us could hear as they walked away. "Sakura, can you get your hands on—?"

"You don't even need to ask!" Sakura replied as they turned a corner and wandered out of sight.

"Ominous," I commented. My, the kids were scheming together already. For all Kakashi's fears that he'd be a terrible sensei, he seemed to have gotten them off to a good start.

Kakashi slid onto the stool next to mine, bumping our elbows together in a way that *didn't* send pins and needles up our arms. "Teuchi-san, can I get a bowl of pork ramen?"

"Of course, Kakashi-kun," Teuchi said, and got his cooking implements back in order with Rin's and Ayame's help. "Coming right up!"

"So, Kakashi, what d'you think your kids'll do to us?" Obito asked, leaning forward over his bowl so he could peek past me. "Hot sauce? Glitter?"
"I think Sakura dislikes spicy food—" Kakashi began, interrupted only by Rin's quiet gasp of horror, "—so, I'd lean more toward the glitter. But they are going to have dinner with Sensei and Kushina."

"Oh, so we're a bit doomed," Obito concluded. "Cool."

**Sounds like an ordinary day.**

"It's nice to know we've still got it," I said in satisfaction, resting my arms on the countertop. The bustle of Teuchi and Ayame, and my friends' easygoing chatter let me know whatever the future held, we'd face it as one team.
"Give it your best shot, Sasuke-kun!" Aiko called out, settling into a taijutsu stance that was half-Strong Fist and probably half-boxing. While she was perfectly capable of doing the usual flips and airborne maneuvers as any ninja, she preferred to dodge by sliding from side to side when her feet were on the ground. It was just that, to a more extreme extent than most uncannily tough shinobi, she preferred taking direct hits and blocking instead of dodging where practical.

Sasuke eyed her warily. "You first."

Covered in dust and dirt after their initial exchange of blows, because even Aiko's lighter hits could send a lighter shinobi skidding, Sasuke edged around her to avoid getting caught within her range. Because Aiko was a little taller, her reach was theoretically better, but she didn't use weapons to capitalize on that advantage. Having felt exactly how much Aiko didn't need so much as a shuriken, he knew better than to rush in.

Again, anyway.

"If you lose initiative, you lose the fight!" Aiko reminded him, before taking a running leap directly for him. "Take this! Bird Kick of Rage!"

Sasuke darted out of the way in time, and thus Aiko ended up stomping a crater in the training ground. From a safe distance, I'd felt her only commit to the blow once she realized her opponent was going to be able to dodge, making her super-strength hits score a bit higher on the intimidation front.

"Joint training days are fun," Roku said mildly, while Aiko picked up a clod of broken earth and hurled it straight at Sasuke's head. With her real strength behind it, the supposedly-soft projectile shot across the training field like a bullet.

He ducked in time, then started making hand seals for one of the many, many Uchiha Fire Release techniques. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Unfortunately for Sasuke, Aiko had his number. My blonde student shouted, "Earth Release: Earth Wall!"
The battlefield got a bit hard to see after the fireball hit the earth wall, compressing almost immediately and blasting hot air out in every direction, so the sidelines amused themselves by chatting with each other. Today's benchwarmers were me, Kakashi, Roku, Sakura, Kaito, and Naruto. At least until the gloves-off sparring session was finished and we could rotate participants.

But in the meantime, Kaito put his hands on his hips and demanded, "Okay, seriously. Naruto, you sure you don't need a break?"

"No way!"

Naruto, enterprising kid that he was, had decided on the most difficult possible way to learn how to use handholds and footholds effectively in midair combat. Which was why he was standing on a pair of floating kunai-shaped icicles, above a bed of spikes that looked like something straight out of a jungle warfare movie, and was slowly climbing on free-floating icy rungs to a dubiously-existent invisible ladder. Credit where it was due, because even Kaito had trouble creating that many ice constructs at once and keeping them in midair, but Naruto's idea of a challenging training regimen still oughtn't have involved so much potential frostbite.

Sure, at some point he'd master the ability to use those icicles like stepping stones, but why on earth did he want a spike pit? No one knew.

Stubbornness, probably. He'd have an easier time throwing himself around in the air via Shadow Clones.

Sakura, on the other hand, had teamed up with Roku. Since Roku's preferred medium was iron sand and not something below freezing temperatures, Sakura was having a much easier time of the acrobatics. As she leapt from one disc-shaped collection of iron scraps to the next, she said, "I think I'm getting it, Roku-senpai!"

"Better you than me," Roku responded, though Sakura knew better than to take that kind of remark personally. Like Kaito, he'd gotten out of more than one untenable scrape by using his bloodline-granted medium and just running across gaps in terrain that his enemies couldn't. That didn't mean he liked to, though.

"Is it better or worse than climbing trees?" Kaito asked, as his Icy Stalagmites of Doom started to melt. He wasn't putting nearly as much chakra into them as before because Naruto was high enough that the fall alone was a risk, and the ice collapsed in the mid-afternoon sun. And from the backwash of Sasuke and Aiko's ongoing firefight.

"They don't move in the wind," Sakura said, as she jogged a circuit over our heads, "so it's like I'm compensating for what's not happening instead of what is. It's weird, but it's a good kind of weird."

"In that case, try something a bit more extreme. I'll catch you if you need it," Roku said, already working his way through his hand seals.

Sakura planted a hand in one of the iron sand discs, then did a one-handed back handspring into open air. Before she'd fallen more than a meter, Roku had already made an entire blanket of Iron Sand to cushion her trip to the ground. Sakura got her feet under her, and thus the sand parted in time for her to stick a gymnastics landing.

"Nicely done," Roku told her, as the sand whirled out of the air and back into the rice bag he stored most of it in. The storage seal he used to lighten the load was sitting right underneath it, ready for use whenever.
And Kakashi was napping with a novel over his face, so he'd missed seeing the little performance. Then again, that little bow-and-twist, arms in the air as though to receive applause? I recognized that as one of Kakashi's little flairs when he felt like showing off. Seemed like his kids were picking things up quickly. Even if he'd handed off the reins of today's training session to me and my students, he knew what he was doing. Compared to his crisis of "oh my god what am I doing" the day before assembling Team Seven for the first time, it was a nice change.

Speaking of changes, Team Seven had a much more unified skill level this time around. While Sakura was still the one most devoted to the art of being a bookworm, and had correspondingly devoted her time to passing the written tests in the Academy with flying colors, Naruto and Sasuke were both well-rounded. Naruto was far better at academics than his other self had been, because many of the skills involved in test-taking and fūinjutsu overlapped, and he had an actual taijutsu style that relied heavily on his flexibility and countering his enemies' movements, sort of like his dad's. Sasuke, on the other hand, was the group weapon expert and the best at his clan's nature transformation, as well as being the fastest member of the team.

And then there was my team. They were still genin, which was primarily my fault, but if anything, they were overqualified for chūnin by leaps and bounds.

Aiko was fifteen, petite, and basically a tiny blonde Gai. She had a braid on one side that was styled the same way as the one she'd put in Sakura's long hair to control it. While she hadn't gone so far as to wear the green jumpsuit and the orange legwarmers like Gai and Lee did, her clothing style featured fashionable bandages on her limbs and a pair of gloves complete with knuckledusters for good measure. Spandex—in blue, not green—was the name of the day otherwise. If she wasn't still small enough that Kakashi's genin were a single growth spurt from overtaking her, she'd have cut an intimidating figure like her aunt and mother had before her.

Kaito, meanwhile, was marginally taller than Aiko and still wearing his hair nearly the same way I did. At some point, he'd added much longer open-toed boots to his shoe collection instead of sandals most people wore, and he wore mesh instead of bandages or sleeves over his arms. Now, if only he ever made use of the hood attached to his jacket, and all of his outfit would be function-first.

And there was Roku, eye-obscuring hairstyle and all, and he dressed like he'd wandered off the set of a kung fu movie where the only colors were neutral tones. He was also taller than I was by a tiny margin, with long sleeves he tended to use to store weapons, and gloves like Kaito's. A bit more fashion than function on his end, though. Since he was almost nineteen, I supposed it made sense. There were more options for him.

Kaito cupped his gloved hands around his mouth and said, "Keep going and you'll be able to see the Hokage Monument from here," to Naruto, who was indeed still climbing the world's most hostile ladder. "Let me know if you're getting sick of being hit by low-flying birds!"

"I'm fine, Kaito! Quit nagging," Naruto responded, looking down on reflex. Then he went still for a second, except for a faint swaying as he kept his balance through sheer force of habit. "...Okay, this is kind of high. Hey, Roku, do we have a safety net?"

"Are you a ninja or not?" Kaito challenged him, trying to wave Roku's assistance off.

Roku fixed his wayward brother in place with the sharpest glare he'd used all day. Given his perpetually sleepy expression and the Magnet Release-marked eyelids that made him look like a panda, it wasn't much of a feat. "Can we not commit involuntary manslaughter today?"

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Kaito rolled his eyes, but he kept making ice-handholds for Naruto to continue climbing, even as Roku wove his metallic net.
"Fire Release: Phoenix Flower Jutsu!"

"Earth Release: Earth Dragon Bullet!"

From my spot on a nearby bluff, it looked like things were going well. Team Seven and Team Kei got along like a house on fire. Now, if they could just avoid committing arson before they were done training today…

Luckily, perhaps, Sasuke slumped down onto his knees after that last exchange of jutsu, narrowly missing Aiko's Earth Release jutsu hurling mud the other way at high speed. While one of the bigger shots hit a tree, and blasted a handful of branches off, it looked like Sasuke was no worse for wear. Aside from being out of chakra for a while.

Still, I got to my feet just as Naruto plummeted out of the sky, landing safely in Roku's iron net. Once he bounced to his feet again, he pointed straight at Kaito's nose and declared, "My turn now, Kaito!"

"Yeah, yeah, go check on your friend first," Kaito said in a dismissive tone.

With the next match order decided, Naruto and Sakura darted toward their teammate, skidding to a stop on her knees. "Sasuke-kun, are you okay?"

Sasuke sat back on his feet, in an exhausted imitation of a seiza pose. "Fine." Sasuke staggered to his feet, with only minimal help from Sakura's concerned hands. "You didn't use Fire Release at all during our match, Aiko."

"I'm not gonna fight fire with fire," Aiko replied, once he was steady on his feet. "Even if it is cooler than Earth Release."

"Hey," Roku chastised Aiko, though he clearly wasn't serious about it.

Oh, figurative language, how silly you can get, I thought, allowing myself an internal sigh. Still, it seemed like the kids were mostly managing themselves. I could afford to space out.

As though you have any room to talk. You twist words in circles if you have half a chance. Hey, it's fun.

"When was the last time you even used plain Earth Release?" Kaito asked, peering at Roku suspiciously.

Roku shrugged. When not speaking sufficed to communicate his point, Roku tended to keep silent.

"Regardless, it's time for you to swap. Sasuke, Aiko, you're going to go over the match you just had and talk about what you did," I said, clapping my hands to get their attention. "Aiko, you're our expert on Fire Release, so maybe if you had any pointers for Sasuke…?"

"Sure thing, Kei-sensei!" Aiko said, and escorted him toward the sidelines. "Sorry about not showing you this earlier, but…"

"It's fine. You can just do it now," Sasuke replied, and before long they were out of immediate earshot.

"Naruto, Kaito, the field is yours. Don't break anything important," I advised them, but both boys were already making tracks toward the impact crater Aiko had left earlier. I still shouted after them,
"Including each other!" just to be on the safe side.

"Kei-sensei," Roku prompted me. "What about Sakura-san and me?"

Well, since Sakura hadn't been doing much in terms of chakra expenditure… "How do you feel about spotting her for a few chakra exercises? Kaito and Naruto won't last too long, so you'll still be ready to go after they finish with the field. It'll be a good warmup."

Sakura glanced between us, probably checking my logic and finding it wanting, but only said, "All right, Kei-sensei!"

Unfortunately, an explosion from Naruto and Kaito's direction cut off Roku's reply, but I assumed it was also an affirmative. While the two of them headed for the nearby stream, I strode directly into the cheap seats of the genin fight and parked myself where I could easily intervene. Pairing Naruto and Kaito kept two competitive kids with high chakra capacities focused on each other, but it did have risks.

"Mass Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

"Ice Release: Mass Ice Kunai Clones!"

Like that. I tilted my head to one side and one of Kaito's misfires slammed into the tree behind me, splintering bark. A quick glance confirmed that the construct was well-made, but of glittering clear ice. I could have sworn I'd once told him to add wood shavings or sawdust if possible, but it was just a sparring match.

"Cheap shot," Naruto complained, after his clones had fully dispersed.

"It's not a cheap shot if any shinobi could do it," Kaito argued.

"You have Ice Release!"

"Like I couldn't do the same with regular kunai! And you use Shadow Clones like they're nothing!"

"I-It's just something I can do, okay?!"

After he'd invented his own hand seal for it, sure. Naruto hadn't been able to make the three-seal sequence fast enough for his purposes, at least until a thought or two about hand seals had boomeranged back into his head and inspired the creation of the cross seal he'd used thereafter.

Still, I sighed inwardly. Wonderful.

**Inevitable**, Isobu remarked.

"Naruto, Kaito, you're allowed to use your unique advantages in a fight. Both of you." Once I was sure I had their attention, I went on, "This may be a sparring match, but you can't expect an enemy to hold back against you in the future. Knowing your friends' strengths is one of the best ways to get stronger together. Don't waste that time by arguing over whether a jutsu is 'fair' or not."

I had the worst lectures. It was probably a side effect of hanging out on the sidelines with a running commentary in my head. But at least the two hottest heads on each team were listening to me.

"Naruto, you don't have iron skin or anything. Don't confront Kaito directly," I suggested. "You've got a prankster's mind, so think your way around him."

Kaito, eying the younger genin, didn't say anything about me giving him advice. This was a lesson
Kaito had needed to learn when he was younger, but I'd been much clumsier on the execution. Kaito had about as much leeway with his bloodline limit as his distant cousin Haku did, even if he wasn't as good at precision attacks. And though I had never told Kaito about Yang Kurama, he wasn't going to try and outlast an Uzumaki.

Even though Naruto's favorite multipurpose technique was about as draining as anything short of resurrecting the dead.

"Get ready, Naruto. I won't hold back!" Kaito said, which was of course a blatant lie.

Not that Naruto seemed to care. "Bring it!"

The clash continued, and Kakashi kept sleeping with his favorite novel over his eyes.

Later that week, Shinjitsu cropped up again, as they'd been doing every six months or so since we'd first heard of them. Konoha was still far from their usual stomping grounds, but what information Obito tended to come back with painted more and more of the same, ugly picture. Unlike Otogakure, they had more than one big name involved, but Obito's stealthy approach did leave us without a perspective on how they operated on a general basis in the field. Sure, we knew how much their star players hated our guts, but their field agents were too many and too lightweight to send Obito after them directly.

Kamui was a great weapon in the war of information control, but only when used correctly.

"It may just be something about Amegakure, but I could never have gotten this kind of information without sending Obito to the exact right place," Sensei said in a resigned tone as he stared down at the report on his desk. "And he'd have to steal it."

"Konan got it, didn't she?" I guessed, because nothing happened in or around Amegakure without the Akatsuki's knowledge. Kinda police state-ish, but there were so many outside threats to an upstart village like Ame that I couldn't speak against their approach.

"She wrote this, at least," Sensei replied. "I take it you didn't read it?"

"I was asked not to," I replied. I shifted my weight from foot to foot to avoid fidgeting more noticeably, though I was sure Sensei caught it. "I tried to at least listen to Konan-senpai."

Y'know, because communications between heads of state was supposed to be secure. Sensei probably could have chain-teleported his way to Ame, but hell, it'd been decades since the last time Konoha had really sent the Hokage willy-nilly all over the continent. The death of the Second Hokage had something to do with that, even if staying behind in the wake of the disastrous negotiations and save his guard unit had been his choice. And while Sensei had a very nasty reputation, he was also the Hokage who was good at bureaucracy and paperwork on his own initiative. The village didn't want to lose him to anything short of a Ten-Tails attack.

"It deals primarily with the Land of Iron. And there are a few names in here I never thought we'd see again." Sensei spun the report around on the desk so I wouldn't need to read it upside-down—not that I would—and said, "Here. See for yourself."

Speaking of the Ten-Tails and the likelihood of running into the damn thing...

I shook my head slowly, because of course there was still something going wrong in a country we couldn't affect, and then continued reading. After another second or two, I paused. "Wait, there's a guy named Yūki Uesugi in this mess?"
Sensei nodded. "I thought the name sounded familiar. The Uesugi clan did have two survivors, didn't it?"

"More than that, I think, but this sounds like it could be the kid Mom rescued back then," I admitted, scratching the back of my neck as I thought. "I mean, it could be a coincidence, but…"

**Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Thrice is enemy action.**

*Not sure we've crossed that threshold yet, but this is the ninja world we're talking about here.* While I wasn't all that interested in getting involved with yet another branch of the extended family, dealing with Shinjitsu seemed to demand more attention every time they came up.

Sooner or later, Sensei would find a reason couched in political nonsense to send me in there to cause mass destruction. Probably sooner. After all, one encounter with the Ten Tails—sort of—hadn't ended badly. Perhaps a second wouldn't either.

"I don't know," I finally said, shaking my head. "There's not enough information yet. But if he is… Well. I'd suggest treating him like any other member of Shinjitsu."

I'd never met the guy, so it wasn't as though I was overflowing with sympathy for a man whose cause might well involve the destruction of the planet. Even if sometimes humans were pretty terrible, most of my friends were human. It didn't take much thought to decide to oppose that kind of villain.

"Most of your friends." Hah, I like that. *Thought you would.*

"That's perhaps a bit cold," Sensei remarked, as he drew my attention to a letter left on his desk. I hadn't paid it much attention, because there was such a thing as prying, but I saw it now. "Since he was kind enough to request an A-rank mission that you would be **perfect** for."

"Think it's a trap?" It was my first thought, at least.

**Trap.**

*Hush.*

"It easily could be," Sensei agreed, though he couldn't hear Isobu. He steepled his fingers in front of his face. "Samurai almost never lodge mission requests. It's a point of pride among their forces that they've never needed shinobi for anything. And given that your mother's old clan name isn't public knowledge"—which was, if anything, a gross understatement—"I doubt they know you could be related. It seems more that they simply want to attract a powerful shinobi team… Probably for nefarious purposes."

There was something funny about Sensei using the term "nefarious" without a hint of irony. After all, shinobi were supposed to be the sneaky, backstabbing rogues. And here we were, anticipating being betrayed by "honorable" samurai. Japanese historians would probably have laughed at that incongruity, because a reputation wasn't necessarily a reflection of reality. My mother's family history would have attested to that much.

I sighed inwardly. Oh dear. "Is the village accepting the mission?"

Sensei's response was immediate. "Of course."
Far be it from the Hokage to pass up an opportunity to demolish an enemy force's ability to threaten Konoha, even if there were some risks. I'd been on a mission where the sole goal was to reduce an Otogakure bunker to smoking ruin, and the resulting underground firestorm hadn't cooled to habitable levels for weeks. Yamato's Earth ninjutsu-made clay and mud had taken care of any additional concerns by baking solid. And while that last part hadn't originally been in the plan, no one had minded.

"Tell me, do you think your students will be up to the task?"

"Yes," I replied. Aiko could store kinetic energy for later use, Kaito used ice, and Roku was the village's only Magnet Release specialist. Given how we were going to spend plenty of time on the road, there was time to brush up on their winter combat skills on the way, too.

"It's good that you're confident," Sensei remarked. With a faintly dry tone, he said, "I hope that means you're going to finally enter them in the Chūnin Exams this time."

"Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves," I muttered, a bit embarrassed. Keeping my students out of foreign Exams was almost a running joke at this point, and they'd been patient with me for entirely too long. If only this upcoming Chūnin Exam didn't have an engraved invitation for Orochimaru plastered all over it... "Though if they perform well in this mission, I'll definitely give them the option."

Sensei smiled with perhaps just a bit of exasperation at my attitude. All he said was, "I'm sure they'll leap on the chance."

Like big cats. Or drop bears.

"I'll have the office convert the request into a proper mission scroll, and I'll work out an expense estimate. You'll leave for the Land of Iron with your team as soon as we've finalized the details," Sensei went on briskly, already starting to slip into the bureaucrat mindset. "And I'll tell you how much your team can probably expect to be paid, even if we have to pry the money out. Travel times, expected enemy armaments...maybe if I send..."

While Sensei trailed off, thinking aloud in a mutter, I bowed as a silent request to leave. As soon as I spotted his quick, distracted nod, I disappeared from his office and went to start preparations.

My explosives hadn't been even utilized in our last attempt to destroy the Ten-Tails' mummified form, and likely wouldn't have worked any better than Konan's. But I'd been learning new tricks since then, and planned to eradicate Shinjitsu if given half a chance to do so. They'd been allowed to fester for far too long. This golden opportunity to deal with the organization was probably a trap from the word "go," but I was one of the people Konoha could rely upon—usually—to fight my way out. It was a one-two punch of destructive capability and craptons of chakra to utilize it.

And I really wanted to track down Kakuzu and rip his lungs out. Screw going for a heart when he had five of the damn things. He was about the only person who'd hurt one of the people I loved and gotten away with it thus far, and Orochimaru's bullshit Horcrux strategy didn't count. I'd need a few more shots at him (and perhaps the invention of nitroglycerin) to make it stick.

I went home to prepare my arsenal.

"Are you going to take all of the ration bars?" Hayate asked from the kitchen as I prepared my storage scrolls.

While my team was going to be given expense money for buying food in villages or towns we
passed through, I still enjoyed the idea of not needing to use that allowance. Sure, I wasn't going to start packing everything until I knew for sure what the mission parameters would entail, but with the drafts down on paper my students would also be able to pack their own supplies, too. Aiko had the best calligraphy out of my three students, but would appreciate the thought.

"If I can pack them all into a single seal, yeah. Do we still have the box?" I asked, because scrolls and loose items in pocket dimensions did not interact well.

"Yeah, lemme just grab it," Hayate said, and I felt him reach above our fridge for the relevant supplies just as two chakra signatures trooped up to our front door.

Hayate didn't notice until he could hear them.

"Hayate-kun, Kei-chan," Kushina's voice rang out as she—or, more likely, a smaller set of hands that accompanied her—knocked. "Good morning!"

I emerged from under a pile of sealing supplies and loose scrolls, trying to avoid disturbing anything unstable as I picked my way toward the front door. One of the problems of using the living room table instead of the desk in my room to work on seals involved losing track of things. Or possible tripping over them. But I'd wanted to give my poor ink-splattered floor a bit of a break.

I opened the door and was almost immediately latched onto by a tiny redhead. While scooting out of the way for Kushina to more easily carry her huge armload of baskets, sweets, and who knew what else into the apartment, I gave Tatsumaki essentially free reign to hug my waist hard enough that she probably could have only been dislodged with a crowbar. I felt her lock her hands together behind my back for good measure.

"Hello to you, too," I said to the top of Tatsumaki's head. When she responded by looking up and digging her chin into my sternum, I took it as a sign that I'd passed inspection. Her whisker cheek marks stretched a little as she smiled. "Did you help your mother make these?"

"With the mochi. Make sure you eat them right away, otherwise they won't be as good," Tatsumaki reminded me sternly, letting go of my waist. She did it in such a way that, if she'd been a little better at leverage, might've been her setting me back on my feet after an impromptu lifting competition. With gravity, anyway. "Dad said you'd be on the road for-freaking-ever!"

"That sounds about right," Hayate said, as I led Tatsumaki into the apartment to help her mother and my brother unload all the gifts. Or supplies, given how much of this stuff I was bound to take with me. Aiko's sweet tooth was not to be denied.

You say that like you are not in possession of a sweet tooth prominent enough for any two people.

Hush, you. Stop making good points.

You've already taken all the bad ones, so what else is left?

"Here, Maki-chan," Hayate said, after unpacking one of the baskets Kushina had brought. He held out a neatly wrapped pastry from the Uchiha bakery, because the Namikaze family knew where to find the good stuff.

Though the bushy-haired redhead did wait until her mother confirmed that she had permission to eat a part of the gift, she tore into the anpan with all the restraint of Aiko once permission was got. While I hadn't seen Aiko visit the Namikaze household often, I knew my team had a marked tendency to
pop by the Academy. Usually with the intent to bring treats to the students. Since Itachi had a fondness for sweets that was a bit of an open secret in their age group, the Academy teachers tended to tolerate their interference perhaps more than they should have. Especially when leftovers ended up in staff lounges for quite unknown reasons.

"Dorayaki?" I asked, as Kushina sat down at the table with us and I poked through the rest of the "eat now" basket. "It's barely noon."

"We went shopping all morning, and Tatsumaki has been very patient," Kushina said, even as she gently adjusted her daughter's fluffy pigtails. If they were a little looser, and if Tatsumaki had tolerated having a center part in her hair, she would have resembled a red-haired miniature Tsunade from the correct angle. "And I wanted to make sure your team left with all the comforts of home in a back pocket."

Once she'd finished devouring her treat and dabbed at her mouth with a napkin, Tatsumaki said, "Kei-sensei, Hayate-sensei, do you pack books for long trips?"

Hayate blinked. Tilting his head to one side, he clearly thought about it, then said, "No, Maki-chan. I mean, I don't want to let anything get destroyed by accident. Besides, most of the missions I've been on involve a lot of running."

Kakashi sure as shit did, though. At least he made sure to only pack the editions of _Icha Icha_ that weren't signed. Sensei hadn't been on a real mission in years, but during diplomatic events (like the many Chūnin Exams I hadn't entered my students in) he tended to either take non-secure paperwork, sealing supplies, or a stack of nonfiction halfway up his shin. Or all of the above, really.

"Not even a field guide?" Tatsumaki pressed, leaning forward. Her elbows were on the table and her face was squished between her hands as she scrutinized my brother's life choices. Oh, the judgement of an Academy student.

"I took a decommissioned Bingo Book once," Hayate said, after some thinking. His eyes shot toward mine across the table, and I figured the rest of what he'd bothered taking along on missions was either imminently burnable or not supposed to be seen by anyone but the recipient. Courier missions were not fun once people started trying to kill over things we hadn't read. "And a guide to local plants while in, uh, a few places I don't want to be caught again."

At least he'd never had to contemplate eating his own shoes, I supposed. Or worse: _natto_.

"I've brought novels before. Only for missions when I expect to stay in the same place a lot," I said, mostly to rescue my brother. That discounted my long stint of bounty hunting and other miscellaneous filler missions during my year away from home. "As for the rest... Well, your dad brings half a library with him when he goes anywhere. Fūinjutsu is awesome that way. I learned some stuff from him."

"Fūinjutsu is pretty awesome," Tatsumaki agreed. "Someday, I'll make my own big storage seals and carry all my stuff wherever I go. I just need to find a way to make it stop making a mess."

"If you do, please share your secret with your father," Kushina put in, smiling. "He'll love to find a way to take _all_ his work home with him."

"I might, if he lets me teach Gamatatsu and Gamakichi how to make mochi," Tatsumaki declared. "I'm almost good enough that I can work around their slimy hands!"

"I don't think Gamabunta would ever forgive us," I muttered under my breath.
Anyway, you should bring books,” Tatsumaki concluded, folding her hands neatly in her map. In a tone that sounded like she'd heard it all too many times before, "Knowledge is power. And you can learn all the time with books."

And power corrupts, and so on and so forth.

And here I thought you were going to skip the school truisms and move straight to Star Wars and cookies. The Dark Side's got nothing on Uchiha baked goods.

Imagine the devastation they could wreak if they had better chocolates.

I did my best not to smile. The others wouldn't get the joke. Forget the Sharingan—world domination is one bake sale away.

"Maki-chan, did you ever decide if you wanted to learn kenjutsu or not?" Hayate asked, steering the topic away from one where he was clearly not meeting Tatsumaki's standards. He needed to bring more books to strange and unknown places.

"I thought Kei-sensei said your family style isn't complete," Tatsumaki said, frowning slightly. "Or do you just mean the basics?"

"The basics," Hayate confirmed. "Since my sister will be out of town for a while, she'll catch up with you after she comes back. By then, you might have enough of a grasp to work on some of the more advanced stuff."

Tatsumaki stared down at the table for a little while, then said, "Yeah, I think I should do that. Dad and Mom always say it's best to learn things when people offer to teach you. Especially if it's a technique! I'll learn since I like you and kenjutsu would be good to know. Can I have another dorayaki? Or anpan?"

Tatsumaki got a nod from her mom, and selected her next treat with a little more care.

"I wasn't aware the Hokage used kenjutsu," Hayate said to Kushina, after coughing to clear his throat.

"He knows the basics, but it's mainly due to association with Kei-chan and Kakashi-kun," Kushina replied. "Not to mention observing other people in the field. It's just that he is less interested in learning anything except how to counter it."

Given Sensei's sheer speed, that didn't seem like something that had stayed on the Yellow Flash's to-do list for very long. Sensei plus katana would be deadly, but not much more than he already was. Which was already enough to intimidate other countries into ditching battlefields if he showed up.

"If Dad doesn't know it, I should learn it," Tatsumaki said firmly.

Well, if Naruto and Kushina had already decided against learning the art of the sword… Why not? Tatsumaki was tiny, adorable, had whisker-marks, and was a redhead. She was half a degree (and at least one universe) away from being Kenshin Himura. I'd be interested to see if she had a knack for it.

"How about you help me pack, first?" I suggested, because it was something I was sure Tatsumaki already knew how to do. Learning could happen once I was out of town.

"Okay!"
While Tatsumaki and I sat down with Kushina to complete the storage seals—and snacked on whatever wasn't going in them—Hayate dug around his room before retrieving his old training shinai from the depths of his closet. He waited until we three were done with the fūinjutsu before speaking to Tatsumaki quietly about practice and forms and getting used to the weight. While he couldn't guarantee he'd be in town much longer than I was, because missions happened unexpectedly all the time, there were enough shinobi with kenjutsu in their arsenal that Tatsumaki could find experts anywhere she needed them. I'd have picked Raidō, at least if he wasn't rushing off to do more ANBU missions.

"And we're all set on snacks," I announced, once (almost) all the sweets had disappeared into their proper seals. Thanks to that box Hayate had found earlier, it had only taken two seals to pack everything up tight. "Thank you, Kushina, Tatsumaki-chan. You were a great help."

"Oh, I wouldn't be sure about that," Kushina demurred. "You've got a long road ahead of you. I'd be surprised if these last the whole trip."

Given that getting to the Land of Iron seemed to take almost two solid weeks even at the fastest shinobi sustained travel speed, and the utter lack of convenient Flying Thunder God seals along the appropriate path, this was going to take forever.

Hrm. "Kushina, do you think it would be appropriate for me to break protocol a little?"

"Regarding what?" Kushina asked, as Hayate once again distracted her daughter. From the looks of things, our living room had become the site of Tatsumaki's first impromptu kenjutsu lesson. I told her my basic outline of a plan to save time.

"Well, they are old enough to make that kind of choice," Kushina mused, tucking her arms into a thinking pose. She tapped her cheek once, twice. "You probably have enough time before you leave, too. It won't do any harm to give it a shot."

"I'll run it by Sensei, then. Thanks," I said.

Hayate's voice washed over us as he crouched next to Tatsumaki, who held her shinai a little awkwardly. "And if you keep your hands spaced out like this…"

"Oh, I see," was her response. She swung experimentally, and the bamboo slats slapped together with a loud crack. "That works a lot better!"

"That's the idea, Maki-chan," Hayate said. And so, the lesson continued.

On the morning my team was scheduled to leave, Aiko was nearly late. After poking around the village for about fifteen seconds with my chakra sense, I traveled across town and half-kidnapped her from a meetup with Team Gai (wherein she, Lee, and Gai all said tearful goodbyes while Neji and Tenten mostly pretended not to be involved) and stuck her portion of the supplies in her arms to save time. Her teammates/brothers had already gotten her supplies out of the house and to the village gates, but I couldn't make them carry them forever.

"It's gonna be months before we can do the epic sunset genjutsu thing again," was what Aiko said when I asked about the delay. "I'll miss them."

I flicked her in the forehead anyway, my nails plinking off her headband as she secured her mission pack to her back. "That's no excuse. Now, let's get going."
As it happened, I did not get permission from Sensei to teach my students the Flying Thunder God Formation. While they were trustworthy, some techniques were the explicit and implicit purview of the Hokage's equivalent of the Secret Service and not supposed to be exploited for the sake of saving on travel time. Sensei didn't say most of that, but I caught the subtext just fine. A different set of contextual clues let me theorize that he had his own way of making sure we didn't stay out of contact with Konoha for longer than strictly necessary, even if he hadn't seen fit to explain his reasoning just yet.

Ah, well. C'est la vie.

In fact, it wasn't until my team hunkered down for the night that we found out what Sensei had chosen as an alternative solution.

Vwip! The air in front of our campfire twisted like water going down a drain, only in reverse as it spat up an Uchiha in a Konoha uniform.

"Hi, kids!”

And Sensei's contingency plan happened to be the only other habitual teleporter in the village. Once he'd fully materialized just outside of our little campsite, he raised his right hand and said, "I'll be your handler for this mission."

"What the hell does that mean?” Kaito demanded, peering over his shoulder.

"It means I'm not technically on this mission, but I'll be around if you need me. Also, I'm your quick escape." Obito nodded at me. "Kei said something that let Sensei know it might be a good idea."

"And I assume you're gonna take the opportunity to spy on the Land of Iron while we're there." I steepled my hands in front of my face like Sensei, though I looked less like a savvy politician and more like a crime lord when I did it.

"Well, sure," Obito replied. He sat down next to Roku, who immediately handed him a flame-roasted...thing that was probably a lizard. Even though we hadn't reached the point where we needed to live off the land, Roku liked to stay in practice. "Thanks. And as I was saying, I can also cut your trip shorter by like...weeks. I've been to the Land of Iron before."

And come home with one hell of a stomach bug. He'd learned his lesson, though. At length.

"Sounds good to me;" Aiko said. "The less time we spend outside of the Land of Fire, the better."

It was difficult for Aiko to act as a human seismograph when she wasn't in the correct country to get readings. The more warning people had of any activity around Mount Soragami, the better.

Obito shrugged, because he was the type of person who tended to assume that the Kasai clan seals were well beyond him. He was right, but that didn't necessarily mean that it wasn't an item of concern anyway. Instead of dwelling on it, he just said, "Maybe you'll change your mind once we get there. But for now, let's relax a bit! The samurai won't be expecting us for weeks."

"That's at least half a reason not to rush to their gates before they'd even expect a reply," I informed Obito dryly.

Obito did his best to argue with me on that, though. As a teleporter and an infiltrator extraordinaire, it wasn't like he generally had to worry about that kind of consideration. "We could just say we handed off the mission to the closest team."
Which would be a load of shit of the highest order. Every team on the border would've won out over us, because it was hard to be farther from the Land of Iron than Konoha was and still be on the same continent. The Land of Water was the only major shinobi nation without land borders shared with anyone else, as much good as it seemed to do them. That said, the Fourth Mizukage at least pretended to be civil, and according to Obito the last Chūnin Exam there had included a free spa day at a beachfront resort. The Land of Iron's idea of civility was less papered over by shiny things—for the most part, they turtled up and made everyone else leave them alone.

Ahem.

*You're better at it than them.*

**Just so.**

"We're not going to skip straight to the Land of Iron," I told Obito firmly. "We're going to get some more experience with their climate, we're going to check in at their border, and we're doing this above-board." When my students *and* Obito looked at me with perfect skeptical expressions, I added, "At least where people can see us."

We wouldn't be shinobi if we didn't have a few extra cards up our sleeves. Mine mostly exploded when I wanted them to, with a few exceptions.

"Do you think we'll run into any other shinobi there?" Aiko wondered aloud. When the rest of us turned our attention to her, she went on, "I know the geography lessons at the Academy say that the Land of Iron is super far away, and history says shinobi aren't supposed to be there. But there's been a lot of trouble out of Shinjitsu since years ago, and we know some of their members are in the Land of Iron and that they're shinobi. So, what gives?"

"I'm not sure how much the Land of Iron really knows about them, though," Obito said. He crossed his arms, leaning back as he thought. It was a bit ruined by the half-gnawed lizard on a stick in his hands. "See, I got to dig through a lot of their records, and I've actually met members of Shinjitsu before. Most of 'em are missing-nin, and we've sent hunter-nin after people with smaller bounties and bigger targets on their backs before. I don't think Mifune would be happy to know his country's been sheltering people like that."

"So… You're going to tell the general about the creeps in his country?" Kaito asked.

It was more likely that we'd kill the lot of them, torch their base, run for the border, and send Mifune a postcard once we were safely home. Better to ask forgiveness than permission. At the very least, we needed to provide enough leeway for Sensei to deny everything if asked.

My problem-solving skills occasionally left something to be desired.

"I think it'd be better if we took them out first." Obito, in some ways, was entirely too much like me. His powers, likewise, made him a little less than interested in following the proper procedure. "Keeping Mifune out of our hair, you know?"

Or keeping us out of his. Really, since we were the interlopers, we were the ones who'd be scurrying around and rabble-rousing. I was sure everyone involved would have plenty of things to scream at us after the fact. Some of them might even be nice enough to avoid being scrubbed from the reports.

Kaito said, "So, instead, we're gonna have to not-explain the giant smoking crater."

"Shinjitsu already did that, so who cares?" Obito shrugged. "Anyway, do you want to know who's
made their roster? Or are you more worried about this Yūki guy?"

Kaito made a face, annoyed. "Let's not call him that. It'll get confusing way too fast."

"Whatever you say," Obito replied.

In the end, we decided to spend at least two days hoofing it. Obito could conserve his uses of Kamui.

It ended up paying off in ways we did not initially expect.

See, when ordinary people take a road trip, they expect the usual hazards. Such as wearing comfortable shoes, or not being able to find the correct turn and ending up in the mountains north of nowhere. Or having to shoot buffalo for food. Shinobi tended to expect many of the same things, minus one or two details related to technology and lack thereof. Characters in a horror movie, on the other hand, tended not to expect the hotel on the side of the road to be run by a serial killer and then died as a result. They'd have been fine if the only danger was poison ivy instead, but ended up in a situation beyond their abilities.

We weren't a normal group.

Thus, when we ran into our obligatory hazard just a day after we passed through the Land of Fire's northeastern land border, the universe was poised on a knife's edge. We could determine our genre via sufficient stabbing.

It was "action-adventure." With a dash of comedy.

Now, Obito and Aiko and I all had sweet teeth that were at least a standard deviation past what was considered "normal." It was one of the traits that had allowed us, and others, to bond over my attempts at both baking and making sweets based around mochi. Roku and Kaito ended up sharing the love for sweets somewhat more reluctantly as they grew up, but on a road trip it was traditional to make a pitstop for snacks when convenient. See, by the time we were a week into our travels, we'd eaten all the refined sugar I had brought from home in all its myriad forms. Which was a lot.

For that reason, we visited at a roadside tea house that served dango.

It also happened to be serving a Jashin cultist named Hidan. Who had, to my later astonishment, not randomly butchered the proprietors and stolen everything. No, instead he was being almost nice. I assumed later it was either because he was looking for a change of pace or because he couldn't cook.

Until he saw our headbands, anyway. As much as I swore daily, I'd hesitate to repeat everything he said to us for being supposed lawful authority. Suffice to say that we stalled fighting long enough to lure him away from possible civilian casualties, with Obito on point because he had five minutes of effective invincibility with which to make a mockery of Hidan. As far as my team was concerned, if he was going to be an ass, then we could return the favor with an eye toward making him harmless. By force.

"Quit running, you one-eyed son of a bitch!" Hidan yowled, which was about as polite as he got.

Obito responded with all the maturity that deserved, spinning around in midair. He pressed his cheeks together with both hands and blew a raspberry.

Hidan's scythe shot directly through Obito's chest and slammed into a tree behind him, to no effect.

Hidan shrieked in rage while Obito nonchalantly stepped off the side of the branch and laughed all the way down to the ground.
Obito vanished into solid earth-passing directly through Kaito on the way-and Hidans scythe stopped dead in midair before it could even approach my youngest student. A faint grayish cloud of sand could slow even Hidans swings, apparently.

"I will shove you ass-first onto a fucking cactus," Hidan snarled, even as Roku was already letting go of the weapon and letting me move in. Not that he needed to be in stabbing range to piss Hidan off, but he was a little easier to hurt than the primary combatants here.

I stomped on the back end of the scythe to imbed all three blades into the dirt, keeping it in place against even Hidans unnatural strength by using mine to match his. I wasn't digging into Isobus chakra just yet, because I didn't feel like being the one to utterly break our group's cover. Whenever I wasn't in immediate view, with my hair flying back from the scar on my face, I could be any random jōnin in Konohas ranks. And while there were plenty of shinobi with scars, only one had a face-splitter like mine with Isobus chakra waiting in the wings.

I didn't want anyone to be able to mark our presence on a map. Our progress, rather. Shinjitsu didn't need to know we were even out of Konoha.

"Hands off, you fucking—" Hidan didn't get to finish his sentence, because at that point I removed my foot and Rokus Magnet Release manipulation sent Hidans scythe springing back up into his grip. Or rather, into his face hard enough to crack a normal man's skull.

"Here we go," said Obito as he shot past me, Wood Release spear already at the ready before he swung it straight into Hidans left elbow.

Without three extra years of roaming the countryside, as much a serial killer as any missing-nin, Hidan wasn't as strong as he'd been in that old world. Without Kakuzu at his side, correcting his blatant disregard for his own safety by flinging string-animated puppets with hearts for cores into the fray, Hidan wasn't as able to compensate for varied attacks. Without the advantage of surprise, because his powers were alien as all hell, he couldn't rely on his favorite technique—to basically weaponize his sadomasochism.

Obito was as aware of these facts as I was. And together, with only the briefest support from my students—distracting Hidan, flustering him, adjusting the weight and swing of his weapon on the fly—Obito and I took our opponent apart.

"Mark," I called, and Obito whirled away into empty air just before I passed through his former position, carving Hidans legs open and severing vital tendons in the backs of both his knees.

It was the same principle as disarming a zombie, really. If one's opponent refused to respond to pain, well, there was still the matter of the structural integrity of the human body. Between combat experience and my half-remembered medical training, Hidans immortality was more an interesting factoid than a cause for concern. Ultimately, a skeleton couldn't move without tendons or muscle, and even Hidan needed to bow to the inevitability of physics.

Obitos hand snaked up from the ground, shoving a wooden stake through Hidans foot and nailing him to the dirt even as my best friend once again pulled a disappearing act. Sometimes, Obito did a better mole person impression than anyone from Iwagakure ever had. And though Hidan wasn't a vampire, a stake in the heart wouldn't go amiss.

"Iced!" Kaitos voice called, just as Hidan swore horribly again as he put his other foot down, slipping backwards on a patch of ice that certainly hadn't been there before.

Aiko was already scooping her teammate off the ground and ferrying him away before Hidan could
even attempt to get up. Once the ice devoured Hidan's scythe in a storm of angry-looking icicles that had clearly been mixed with sawdust for flavor, Hidan was bereft of his favorite weapon even if he hadn't had several ligaments rearranged.

"FUCKING C—" was exactly as far as Hidan got before cutting himself off and trying to bite my fingers after a desperate lunge.

Perhaps it was Isobu's influence or Sensei's, but I had enough reaction speed to both dodge and coat my fingers in an inch-thick V1 chakra cloak, which would have deflected any damage even if I hadn't avoided the attack. My sword was also back in its sheath in preparation for the next round of attacks.

"What the fuck did I ever do to you?" Hidan howled, twisting his torso upright despite any damage we'd done.

*Trying to kill the shit out of us with a dango stick in your mouth was a good place to start.*

*I was going to refer to an occasion when you have befriended someone attempting to kill you, but now that I think of it? I do not believe you ever have.*

*Guess we can't all be Naruto.*

And with that, I drew my katana from its sheath in the Curve of the Moon technique and severed Hidan's left arm at the elbow. Ordinarily, the mass of bone and tendon that made up a hinge joint would have slowed a normal katana. But a sword like mine, wielded by someone who knew how to use Wind Release on top of samurai techniques? I barely felt any resistance on the upswing.

"One down," I said quietly, while blood splashed across my flak jacket.

Hidan's arm pinwheeled across the ground, trailing blood that probably didn't affect its owner much. Before Hidan could do more than swear, again, Roku seized the loose limb with a coil of iron sand and dragged it well out of range. He may have also hurled it down a nearby embankment, but I was a little too busy to check.

And on the downsing, chakra charged enough that the blue glow was visible to the naked eye as well, which made the blood spurting out of the stump that used to be Hidan's right arm appear almost black.

Hidan overbalanced without the weight of his arms to steady himself, still cussing a blue streak as though any of us were listening. And once Obito followed up my attack with a touch of Kamui's paper slicer qualities, Hidan was down to one leg he couldn't quite get enough coordination to hop on. He was still standing, somehow, but that was it. Roku was already gathering up his severed limbs as though collecting firewood, and seeing that was enough to make our favorite Jashin cultist almost foam at the mouth with rage.

None of us were really impressed by that point, but Kaito was the one to put it into words. "Dude, you might wanna quit while you're ahead. Before all you are *is* 'a head.'"

"Fuck off, you little—"

Aiko cracked her knuckles pointedly. A man who ended a fight with only one remaining kneecap was not one who ought to have been making threats.

"Hey, Roku, gimme those," Obito said and, one by one, sucked each one of Hidan's severed limbs into his Kamui dimension with all the gravity of a juggling act. He even gave a little bow at the end,
"Give those back," Hidan said, but too late. "You think this'll stop me?! I'll never die as long as Jashin—"

"So fuckin' what?" Kaito wanted to know, wrinkling his nose in disgust. He jabbed a finger at the oozing wounds that made up three of Hidan's once-limbs. "Next thing you're probably gonna say is that this is just a scratch, aren't you?"

*That isn't how that reference is supposed to go,* I thought idly, as my student continued to argue with the now-harmless cultist. As long as no one got near his teeth, anyway.

**Perhaps not. But I doubt you could reenact the scene at all with any other enemy.**

*That's...true.* Thankfully. We were lucky *we* were the first ones to run into Hidan, not any of the other Konoha teams who didn't routinely travel with powerhouses. For them, an initial encounter with Hidan's powers might've proved fatal. He didn't tend to give people much time to gape at his open wounds before attacking. Lucky us.

"As fun as this's been," Obito said, his voice as dry as he could make it, "this guy's not our priority here. So, Kei, you take the kids and keep going. I'll take this one back to Konoha."

I had flicked almost all the blood from my katana in a single motion, but it wasn't clear just yet. I was in the process of getting out my actual cleaning kit when Obito made his little announcement. "Are you going to find us afterward?"

"Yeah," he said, hauling Hidan up by his shirt collar. "I mean, without me, you're not gonna able to go so far that I can't follow." He grinned. "Isn't that why I came along to begin with?"

"Just get him out of here," Kaito grumbled, while Aiko and Hidan continued to make ghoulish faces at each other. Even without being able to access his power, Hidan was winning on sheer spite.

Obito faked another bow, then the pair of them swirled away in midair.

"Kei-sensei?" asked Roku, once they were gone.

"Hm?"

"Who was that guy, anyway?"

In one lifetime, a serial killer and an S-class missing-nin who might've been able to get the drop on Asuma. Here? I shrugged and said, "Some jerk."

**An auspicious start to this murderous field trip.**

*I'll take it over some of our other options.*

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Chapter End Notes

Hi, everyone! Sorry for the long delay, but I've been preoccupied by story ideas (which have sidetracked me) and now I'm an official teacher, which means my students get the majority of my energy on most weeks. Doesn't leave a whole lot of time or motivation to
write. I hope you understand.
Tempering Arc: Thunder

Chapter Summary

Kei: Have a heart-to-heart with your best friend. (Or: Find all the event flags in this sidequest and hate every second of it.)

Chapter Notes

Oh goodness, I'm really sorry it took so long to get even this short chapter out. It's been almost than three months since I've posted anything, and more like six for CYB. Writing really got away from me when life stuff was going on. Sorry, everyone who's still reading.

Anyway, this chapter's song is that one by Imagine Dragons.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I see why you had us pack socks,” Kaito said, as the first snowflake of our journey drifted down onto his outstretched hand.

“Konoha spoils you so,” I told him. Not that he hadn’t trained in the mountains—all Konoha shinobi had to take advantage of what opportunities we had in a temperate country—but it didn’t really change the fact that socks and sandals were a garbage combination.

We had boots.

Aiko’s had steel toes, because she wanted them. Incidentally, I was a doormat.

“Excuse you,” Kaito said, “we grew up on a mountain. It just seems outside of Konoha’s usual mission parameters.” He held up his hands as though imagining a billboard. “Going to the Land of Iron? Pack some fucking socks! Seems pointlessly specific. ”

Roku rested his elbow on the crown of Kaito’s head, making my most snippy student sputter with feigned outrage. But it did at least distract him from distracting me from mission planning.

Environmental chakra shenanigans or not, I’d given my students a shopping list once we hit a town that looked like it had snow in winter. Kaito was just the only one to kick up a fuss about it, despite having Ice Release, because it was in his nature to complain. Roku was chill with things, like he always was, while Aiko had made a point of running around for a couple of hours kicking everything.

There were a few rocks that were rather farther over the horizon than they ought to have been.

“I take it no one’s really impressed with their first look at the Land of Iron.” Obito’s voice was dry, but his grin was almost infectious. For a man who’d been gifted with a hell of a stomach bug by his last trip here, he seemed excited. Even his chakra was bouncing a little.
“It’s cold, it’s snowing, and it looks like every mountain range between here and Konoha. Except for the three-headed one,” Kaito said, running his fingers through his hair to unruffle it. Seeing Three Wolves, apparently, hadn’t made much of an impression on him from a distance of two hundred kilometers. “There’s not much to see.”

“Oh, oh, but the samurai would be cool!” Aiko wasn’t a ballerina, but she’d been bouncing around literally on the toes of her boots for a little while now. “I’ve never fought someone wearing tons of metal armor in a blizzard before.”

“Our goal isn’t to fight them,” Roku reminded his younger siblings/teammates. Some days, it was more one than the other. He glanced up at me from beneath his near-blinding bangs. “Are any of them sensors?”

“Didn’t feel like it, before,” Obito said, bringing his right hand to his chin as he thought. “I mean, obviously there can be sensors in any population, and it’d be weird if they didn’t have any at all, but if we stay out of range…”

“Which is fifty kilometers,” I said to him. “For me, anyway. If they’re using a sensing technique, I should be able to pick them out.”

Or hear them coming in your direction, what with all the clanking.

Says the giant turtle.

“Then we’re fine.” Obito gave each of my students a quelling look, which was much less effective than mine on anyone who’d interacted with him for more than ten minutes. “Unless one of you wants to just start sending up all kinds of chakra flares right now and give away our position.”

“Nah,” said Kaito.

Aiko saluted, but her impish smile undermined it. “We’re good.”

Roku just gave Obito a blank stare right back, until he moved on.

“Right! So, we’re gonna just kinda hike our way around…that.” Obito waved a hand in the direction of the mountain. “I didn’t ask for permission from Mifune last time, and I don’t plan to start now.”

“What was your mission even about?” Kaito asked, arms crossed.

“Classified!” Obito said, without missing a beat.

“Don’t ask any more questions,” I continued for him, “and he won’t have to tell lies.”

Kaito groaned, but it was an answer that would have to suffice in the face of his theatricality. Besides, Aiko and Roku didn’t have a problem with it. Despite their silliness, they were shinobi at their core. They’d dealt with far worse than thwarted curiosity.

We left off the conversation there, hiking through the snowfield wilderness of the Land of Iron.

Much like Russia, it wasn’t like the place was constantly blanketed in ice, snow, and the regrets of would-be conquerors. When Obito had visited a few years ago and made a bunch of suboptimal survival decisions, much of the area had been mud, colorful deciduous trees dotted among conifers, and abandoned villages. While some of the conditions hadn’t changed, these were far more favorable to the locals than to us. We, after all, had to wear gloves.
I took point, because as the group’s sensor I could generally steer us around population centers. We were mostly wearing shades of gray and white, which kept us from being easily spotted from a distance, and had even gone so far as to requisition winter camouflage versions of the standard Konoha cloaks. Samurai may not have had immense sensing ranges—that we knew of—but they had eyes. Best not to draw unneeded attention in a place where genjutsu and ninjutsu disguises didn’t work all that well. It was a bit over-cautious of me, but I would assume my mother’s sensing ability was well within the possibilities we would encounter. Kaito and Roku were just behind me, Aiko filling out the diamond pattern, and Obito bringing up the rear because his reaction time was by far the best.

The trees and snowy rocks passed quickly as we broke into our cross-country pace. Twenty, thirty, and then forty kilometers passed in an hour, because ninja in motion were rather like over-enthusiastic kangaroos. We tended toward long leaps and sustainable superhuman speed—we could save the outright uncanny Dragon Ball Z vanishing for a fight.

The Land of Iron was kind of pretty, in a Christmas card kind of way. But then, a lot of things looked great on paper only to involve negative-fourteen degrees Celsius of suffering.

It took us a day and a half—due to terrain, mainly—to get to a place Obito recognized. I had to assume it was the layer of snow that made us backtrack twice, bounding across the would-be tundra like indecisive hares. With the ability to leap tall buildings instead of a bunny hop.

Isobu looked out across the fifth or sixth abandoned village we visited, through my eyes. In my mind’s eye, I saw him rest a thick finger against his beard of spikes.

Do not let him drink from the well.

Skepticism reared its ugly head. It’s frozen.

He is an Uchiha. It is amusing that you think it matters.

I considered that for a few seconds. “Hey, Obito?”

“Don’t say a word.” Obito replied, while studiously avoiding the village’s well. He’d been melting snow for water all through the trip, rather than stopping anywhere in particular for groundwater refills. I hadn’t wanted to touch his canteen at all without having Kaito go over it first with his bloodline powers, because it was boiling what seemed like all the time.

“I was gonna ask if you had any snacks.”

“No, you weren’t.”

“No, I wasn’t,” I admitted.

“I learned my lesson the first time, dammit,” Obito said in a somewhat crabby tone.

I eyed him, then dropped back in our group’s marching order and patted his left shoulder. “Good. So, do you need to get out of here before we reach the Shinjitsu site?”

Obito shrugged. “I think we’re gonna need to make a few stops. Think your kids can handle themselves out here in the sticks for a while? You and me need to make your cousin think we’re playing this exactly the way we said we would.”

“Do we, though?” I wondered aloud. Obito’s eye flashed Sharingan red for an instant, but then went back to plain black as he rethought using Kamui. “Hear me out. We could try something else, since we already don’t think Yūki—”
“Stop calling him that,” Kaito muttered.

“—is an ally,” I said, ignoring the confusion. “Do you think we ought to just take Shinjitsu on, pull their crater in after them, and run like hell?”

“Could,” Obito said, noncommittal.

I wasn’t sure if he could really get away with saying that. Kakashi was the only one on our team who’d actually fought a member of Shinjitsu, and he was busy showing mini-ninjas how to kill people. And he’d nearly bled out in my bedroom, and been put on a recovery waitlist for months, and I had absolutely zero intention of repeating any aspect of that situation.

Other than attacking Kakuzu. Killing him would probably make my day.

And I had no real intention of investing emotionally in a relative I’d never met, even to keep up a pretense. Dad’s side of the family had set half the tone for me. The Gekkō family, in fact, had been working from the advantageous spot of “not actually allied with/capable of killing me.” This new face didn’t even have that much going for him.

So, I said, “Let’s just bring the house down. I’ve got some feelings to work out.”

The kids, perhaps realizing that Adult Conversations were not for genin, retreated a semi-safe distance with a half-hearted pretense of scouting the area. There wasn’t anything capable of killing us within my range in any direction, barring chakra suppression techniques that most people didn’t have, but the excuse got them out of our radius.

“Kei,” Obito began, once the kids were pretending to be out of earshot. “About the Shinjitsu thing…”

“What about ‘em?” I asked, affecting nonchalance though I had a good idea of the direction this conversation would take.

“This isn’t gonna be like when Kakashi did this on his own,” Obito told me, arms crossed. Yeah, I wouldn’t have bought my act either. “No running off, unless it’s into a Kamui portal, and there aren’t any points for heroic duels or whatever.”

“I don’t think I’ve had a ‘heroic duel’ in my life,” I told him.

My voice came out a little firmer than I would have liked. But really, I didn’t tend to call dibs on opponents. If I ever had, there were sound tactical reasons to throw the team’s only jinchūriki at the biggest threat on the field. For the sake of being practical, in the “I won’t die in the face of S-class ninjutsu and can kill the guy using them” way. Otherwise, Team Minato didn’t have qualms about piling on the enemy and tearing him into chunks like a bunch of humanoid piranhas. We’d been trained for it since childhood.

Obito frowned, then reached out and poked me square in the center of my Konoha headband. “I call bullshit.”

“Hey, you haven’t been on most of my missions. I don’t do duels.”

Then what the hell was—” Obito bit off the rest of the thought. I wasn’t sure if he’d run out of steam on that argument because I wasn’t guilty of what he was accusing me, or if he’d just decided not to bring up something potentially painful. “Look, if you wanna kill Kakuzu for Kakashi, I’m helping. And I’m pretty fucking sure you want to mount his head on a stick and march it through town.” His frown deepened. “Am I wrong?”
Oh. I hadn’t thought he’d noticed that. “Obito—”

“But we make it quick, clean, and we tell Kakashi once we get home and that’ll be the end of it.”

Obito wasn’t interested in hearing whatever excuses I might’ve made. “I mean, he’s got five hearts or whatever, and probably tons of minions, but me and the kids aren’t just your backup dancers. We’re helping.”

I looked away first. The twinge of shame burning in my gut was just…just a passing thought. And a small, googly-eyed crustacean with supersonic punches could have seen the sense in what I said next: “Okay.”

When I met his gaze, Obito’s visible eyebrow was raised. “Huh. Didn’t think it’d be that easy. I mean, from one point of view, it’s sort of like kill-stealing, and Kakashi’s the one whose near-death experience kinda became the grudge you picked up, but…”

“It’s not kill-stealing if I’m sharing,” I pointed out, then sighed. “But while I don’t mind if we do it mostly your way, we are not going to do it the way Kakashi did.”

“I never did get that entire story,” Obito admitted. “Spill.”

“None of that center-mass Raikiri-stabbing bullshit. Kakuzu may have five hearts,” I said, to Obito’s instantly recognizable disgust, “but he’s only got one brain. I am not playing Pin the Tail on the Donkey with amateur heart surgery.”

“I’m not much for that plan, either,” Obito said with a huff of a laugh. The tension in his shoulders settled back down. “Okay, we’re doing this. Glad we’re on the same page.”

I fell silent, and Obito let me. While he went to go gather the troops again, I poked at the shape of my thoughts as though they were my worry beads, *click-click-clicking* between my fingers.

Career shinobi fought often, fought well or badly, and collected scars like stories. Sometimes in the same breath. Obito was a prime example. Isobu’s chakra reduced my version to a highlight reel, leaving such standouts as the near-fatal Kusanagi stab, the scar across my face, and my messed-up left shoulder. I could look in the mirror and—with the exception of some of my kenjutsu training scars from before I stopped being clumsy—name every incident that gave me a little something to remember it by.

Kakashi, though… Kakashi had kenjutsu training scars, too. Patterns like fern leaves along his hands and lower arms from chakra lightning burns. Obito’s left eye, in Kakashi’s eye socket, qualified for its own saga. There were deeper cuts along his forearms that had come from missions he didn’t tell me about, where his ANBU gear failed, but those were job hazards I tried not to think too hard about. What I couldn’t ignore, even years after the fact, were the injuries Kakuzu had given him. The big one was, of course, the giant gash that had nearly led him to bleed out on top of me. The memory of that wound had burned into my mind far harder than it had his.

He also had an uneven ring of tiny divots, almost like acne scars, around his heart. Too faint to notice except by touch, almost nothing in the face of everything else that fight had put him through. But I’d found them.

And I’d pressed that thought as far down into the mire of my soul as I could, letting Isobu keep it for a rainy day.

Or snow, given the local weather patterns.

“Earth to Kei,” Obito called to me, having dragged my students back. “That frozen bush didn’t do
anything to piss you off, did it?”

I leaned a little to the right, scooped enough snow off a long-neglected windowsill to form a misshapen snowball, and threw it at him.

He batted it aside, though my students were probably going to remember this and use the incident against me in future arguments about maturity, or a lack thereof.

**Being you, I have no doubt whatsoever that there are far better examples of behavior unbecoming of a jōnin.**

_Hush._

“Kei-sensei,” Aiko said, “are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. *Once I kill Kakuzu._

It was probably a lie. Revenge was a zero-sum game. I knew that. Tearing Kakuzu’s felt-stuffed head off and mounting it on a wall in an ANBU basement wouldn’t help me sleep better at night. I’d be naive to think it would. But since this mission put him in my path anyway, I’d get what satisfaction I could, no matter how cold it would be.

There was a not-abandoned town unacceptably close to Shinjitsu’s lair, as Obito remembered it. Several of them, in fact, and together they formed a cordon of watching eyes that I was quite unhappy to meet. But even when dealing with people who, perhaps, could have detected and stabbed themselves some Zetsu clones, there was a way forward.

Namely, disguises.

It was pretty straightforward, all things considered. Some samurai had eyepatches, scars, and all sorts of otherwise-ninja-exclusive traits that civilians did not. The hair genetics that let Aiko be naturally blonde despite being fantasy-Japanese—and Kaito have green hair despite being *human*—worked against us outside of ninja territory. So, she got a hat, he got a hat, and Roku looked askance at Obito and me for offering him one. The hats ended up being the part of the entire ensemble, which started from hakama and worked its way up. Luckily, boots weren’t verboten.

Kaito, despite whatever experience he’d accumulated about formal wear, clomped around stiffly in what was a child-sized set of perfectly normal peasant hakama as though every square centimeter was over-starched somehow. “Why the _fuck_ do samurai wear this stuff?”

“They’re old school,” Roku said. Rearranging his hair into more of a topknot was par for the course, but he’d taken one look at his reflection and Obito’s Transformation impression of the locals before accepting the aforementioned farmer’s hat. “It could be worse. Hayate-senpai had all those stories about having to fake being _nobles._”

“That’s funny. I remember him complaining about merchant kids before remembering who he was talking to,” Kaito replied.

Obito chimed in, with perfect timing, “And then you guilted him over it for two hours and four pounds of candy.”

Aiko had her gloved hands on her hips. She had her hair hidden, but there was really only so much one could do without dye around these parts. Even Gai’s set of green, orange, and red scarves didn’t soften their appearances that much. “What next, Sensei?”
Eyeing the village and making a mental note of our distance from it, I pulled a scroll out of my pack and started to unroll it. “If we want to pretend to be natives, we need to carry samurai weapons. Everyone’s kunai and senbon are already hidden, but…” I let the thought hang. A drop of blood and a tiny surge of chakra later, and my spare weapon scroll spat out three noticeably cheap katana.

It’d probably be better to say what they were—iron work in the shape of a sword. I’d pulled them out of the iron scrapyard behind the blacksmith shops, because while my students had zero interest in kenjutsu beyond the basics of my training, Roku could make devastating use of iron better than any other metal. He had to, what with it being his kekkei genkai and all.

“Didn’t spend much on this, did you?” Kaito asked, though the usual note of petulance was absent from his voice. His green-eyed gaze was level as he accepted the holdout weapon.

Obito snapped his fingers and a thin spike of wood started to grow out of his right sleeve. “I could spring for a bokutō.”

“That’s…actually worse,” Kaito said, and retreated with his dubious prize.

Roku and Aiko, as always, were a little more gracious about it. Roku allowed his eyelids to darken in the Magnet Release pattern, while the iron sword writhed under his grip like a serpent before settling back down to normal. While Roku hid it well, he had a quiet dramatic streak.

“I’m still going to drop this and punch people,” Aiko said, after considering her sad excuse for a weapon.

Roku patted her shoulder. “Just be sure to throw it my way.”

“Wouldn’t that waste chakra? Since like, well, the enemy tends to be farthest from you and then you’d have to send the metal all the way back.”

“Point,” Roku said, and the pair took up their usual positions on our formation.

“Let’s get moving,” I suggested to the rest of the team, and we went to face our disguises’ trial by fire.

There was a hubbub in the snow-covered village. People were gathered between the most closely-packed buildings in the center of the village as the sound rose. Even if our goal was to avoid trouble, the clamor drew the eye back to it. Much like the mess with Kitano Town a few years back, something had gotten the civilians up in arms, and it was hard to tell if it pertained to our goals at first. Generally speaking, it was best to avoid scenes of public strife while trying to not attract attention, but there were ways of screwing that up. Some of them even involved subtlety instead of explosives.

Obito skulked forward, chakra penned up tightly inside his skin. The kids had all learned chakra suppression in a fairly hit-or-miss way—by being poked at by my chakra sense until they were about as subtle as a house cat—but Obito was professionally tested, too. He’d done the ANBU thing. He’d been the spy in the Land of Iron before.

And he waved us over.

The village wasn’t anything to write home about. It was any old backwater, as boring as the days were short around here. With practiced grace and uncanny stealth, we five ninja made our way through the crowd toward the center of attention.

The crowd screamed, and we flinched a quarter-second behind the general consensus. Fear surged
through every person there, leaving babies in slings crying and elderly people around the crowd cowering along with the rest. Chakra flared bright blue in my mind’s eye, steel ringing almost out of earshot. Ducking my head at the right angle let me see past the bowed heads, the upturned market stalls, and the backs of panicking horses before the animals began to stampede.

A lone man stood in the middle of the rapidly-clearing town center. Dressed in a blue hakama with an even darker top, he stood out among the townspeople not just because of his position. To me, the man damn near glowed with chakra, almost all of it focused along the length of his tachi’s blade. An empty scabbard hung on his back, which faced us, and every scrap of his concentration was focused toward his three opponents.

The first was a man with long, lank green hair. He held two forked blades in his hands, each half the length of the tachi the first man wielded. The other two were…basically backup dancers, standing still while the civilians ran. I saw black cloaks cut in a style that looked like they were derived both from ANBU captain gear and Akatsuki coats. Their faces were thoroughly hidden, their chakra muted, and I couldn’t get the read on them I would have liked.

“Is that—?” I heard Kaito begin to say at conversational volume, before Roku yanked on his collar and pulled him under an awning. Even if his voice wasn’t loud enough to attract too much attention over the remainder of the crowd, Roku wouldn’t allow him to take chances.

“Kiri missing nin,” I confirmed softly to Obito, who was eying the fighters’ reflections in a beauty mirror a fair distance away. The Sharingan wasn’t the Byakugan, but his eyesight was pretty good for detail work.

“Yeah. Raiga Kurosuki,” Obito said, because of course he’d memorized the Bingo Book. “Other two might be Kurosuki Family gangsters. Not sure.”

“Shinjitsu?” I murmured.

“Probably,” Obito replied under his breath. His Sharingan deactivated. “Play it safe. I’ll be right behind you if you need it.”

I took that as permission and, with a quick hand signal aimed at my kids to keep them away from the impending fight, wove through the crowd like a salmon fighting the current. Raiga didn’t need a chance to see Kaito’s signature jutsu. At all. And so, I’d keep my students out of trouble for as long as I could.

Creeping closer took some doing. Without ninjutsu or genjutsu to grease the wheels, so to speak, the process depended entirely on my vanilla mortal sneaking skills. Mine were nothing to scoff at, but it was pretty clear that there were two major factors working in my favor: sheer overconfidence on the missing-nin’s part and a great big dose of acting.

I’d never been to the Land of Iron before, but I had samurai techniques and samurai customs drilled into my head since childhood. My mother’s work, of course. Chakra suppression was second nature by now, much like it was for Obito. At first and second glance, I was just another two-bit samurai poking around in this podunk town, and ninja—especially when on a power trip—looked on samurai with disdain. Neither I nor the man in the center of town cut imposing figures.

Probably for the best.

Kaito, Aiko, and Roku’s faint chakra signatures retreated, only to loop around the town to work on what was probably a flanking maneuver. Obito vanished outright.
I leaned back against the nearest market stall’s half-shattered wall, katana across my knees, and listened.

“—order of General Mifune,” was what I caught from the lone swordsman. He had his blade sheathed again, one hand on the saya and the other on his tachi’s handle when I looked. “You’re under arrest, Raiga Kurosuki. Come quietly and I won’t hurt you. Don’t, and I can’t promise anything.”

Iaijutsu. The old samurai special. Well, not a bad choice against a shinobi. But I was pretty sure Raiga’s Bingo Book profile included a Lightning jutsu proficiency. Maybe that was why this supposed country cop wasn’t wearing the usual samurai armor?

Raiga threw back his head and laughed. “And who do you think you are? Who does the general think can capture Twin Fang Raiga? What will I engrave on your tomb, weakling?”

The spiky-haired samurai flexed his fingers where they rested, and replied, “Captain Yūki Uesugi. And you’re coming with me.”

If stealth wasn’t a concern, I would have smacked my forehead. Hitting myself with the hilt of my own sword would have been a distant secondary concern. Even if I gave myself a black eye, it wouldn’t bother me for long.

Once again, your uncanny luck strikes true, Isobu remarked smugly.

Sometimes, I really hate it when you’re right.

But that was the extent of my whining. Even without Isobu’s color commentary, the mature thing was just to deal with the situation as it was. With that in mind, I shifted my weight off my heels to the balls of my sandaled feet instead, eyes sliding shut as I focused on the combatants’ chakra. If it also let me keep track of my team and any other concerns with perfect accuracy, that was just a bonus. Except for Obito.

Captain Uesugi’s chakra sharpened nearly to a singular point, likely using his sword as a focus. If I could concentrate on the way his affinity leaned more toward Wind than my mother’s Lightning, the familiarity hurt less. Their techniques were the same. My kenjutsu felt like a wild, unintended derivative than something directly descended from samurai techniques. Captain Uesugi felt cold, calm, and professional.

And Raiga was some shinobi asshole with two sai blades.

I presume you mean to intervene.

If I have to. It’d be convenient to get an in with the local authorities, but perhaps not convenient enough to justify blowing our operation wide open.

Captain Uesugi’s chakra signature started circling the demolished square. “This is your last warning. Are you choosing to resist arrest?”

Why did people bother with bantering? Captain Uesugi probably got a pass for doing his job correctly, but—

Raiga scoffed. I heard his blades scrape against each other, Lightning chakra racing up the metal. “I don’t like the idea of me in chains. But you would make a great corpse!”

Some people, I thought, and threw myself out of the way of the first murder attempt of the day.
Lightning split the street and scorched wood where I’d just been, throwing dirt, ash, and bits of rock everywhere. I ducked behind a covered well, straw hat held low so it wouldn’t go flying out of town, and kept close watch on the combatants as their chakra clashed again.

Lightning lanced down from the heavens, cutting through cloud and snowfall with a deafening crash. The ground buzzed where it struck, but not nearly as far as natural lightning might’ve done. No, instead I got to keep my shoes and eyebrows when the charge went dead a little before it got close enough to leap to my katana.

Going by the lack of triumphant hooting or screaming, I had to assume Captain Uesugi had gotten out of the way in time. The second threatening peal of thunder told me Raiga was also unharmed, unfortunately. Such a pity. Pretending to be some random stooge meant I had to scramble out of the way when the tussling pair threatened to head back my way, though, and I acted on that impulse rather than sticking around to get turned into charcoal.

I did stick my head out a bit when the fight was far enough from me, though. See, I’d never had a chance to study the paired Kiba swords. Not to be confused with the Inuzuka kid, they were Kirigakure specials and supposedly powerful enough to compare to the Second Hokage’s low-budget lightsaber. The way Raiga’s chakra spiraled heavenward told me they could really call down lightning like the rumors insisted, but I wasn’t seeing an awful lot of control or thought going into those attacks. Raiga would swing his swords, miss, and then find that while Captain Uesugi’s sword did attract lightning to some degree, it wasn’t enough to overcome lightning’s attraction to the ground.

And then he’d get punted across town by a samurai who hadn’t skipped leg day.

“So this is why you’re not bothering with armor! Very clever!” Raiga roared. His chakra flickered, and the sky above rumbled in answer and warning. “But you can’t escape judgment forever! Die!”

*Raiga must’ve had a field day here. Maybe that’s why there’s only one arresting officer?* Steel and lightning didn’t mix all that well.

Captain Uesugi’s chakra closed the distance in a blink, and thunder crashed. When I peeked around cover again, he’d been blasted back and was sprawled out on the ground with his sword embedded in the dirt just in front of him. Despite erratic twitching as his muscles tried to overcome a nasty zap, Captain Uesugi gamely forced his hand back around the hilt of his tachi.

Sparks leapt from the Kiba blades as Raiga approached.

Captain Uesugi staggered to his feet, sheathed his tachi, and settled into a slightly unsteady iaijutsu stance.

My fingers twitched on the hilt of my katana, though neither fighter had taken notice of me. That could change in an instant. While I couldn’t easily signal Obito and my kids without using chakra spikes like we’d trained for, we did have an entire vocabulary of battlefield explosions to use as the world’s least subtle code.

Maybe things would come to that.

Both of Raiga’s bookend cronies’ chakra signatures, as faint as they were, vanished into thin air. In another reality I might’ve worried about that, if not for the twist of Roku’s chakra explained the sudden lack. Obito’s, a second later, took care of cleanup.

*Now, to finish this.*
I agreed, coiling my chakra for the perfect moment. *Any second n—*

Then Captain Uesugi’s and Raiga’s chakra flared simultaneously.

“*Nine-Headed Dragon Strike!*”

“*Lightning Dragon Tornado!*”

And cue the overkill jutsu. Just my luck.

Chapter End Notes

The next part of this arc should be coming along relatively shortly. I mean, jeez.
Tempering Arc: Heart of Sword

Chapter Summary

Kei: Split the chapter with your buddy and get sassed constantly. Not in that order.

Chapter Notes

Sorry it took so damn long to update this.

Y’all ever heard of real life getting in the way? Well, this time it did the opposite: It's NaNoWriMo, so it's time to blow the dust off the disk and get back into things. Here we go!

This chapter’s song is one of the *Rurouni Kenshin* endings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kei

There was no logical reason for two high-powered techniques involving neither flames nor combustible substances to end up causing an explosion.

They did anyway.

I was flat on the ground by the time the chakra signatures collided, conical hat clamped down over my head to keep it from flying away in the blast. With my nose nearly in the dirt, I kept an eye on the continuing action more through my chakra sense than any physical sense. I wasn’t playing dead deliberately; rather, keeping out of anyone’s attention seemed like the best way to continue the mission.

Captain Uesugi was busting out big kenjutsu techniques in sequence. I could have named them after the fact, but in the moment the blur of up-down-cross-spiral was all that needed to be recorded. Lightning flared out from Raiga every time he took a hit or attempted not to, bursting off him in undirected sparks that sought the nearest metal. Since the samurai was the closest target who didn’t wield the Kiba blades, he was taking the brunt of it.

I am bored.

*This isn’t our fight.*

**Which is clearly why you are lingering within stabbing distance of everyone involved,** Isobu said tartly. He sent me the impression of one massive eye, narrowing suspiciously. **And why your team has killed both of our missing-nin’s compatriots.**

One of them must have made the mistake of putting up a fight while Obito wasn’t around, I guessed. For all that the kids *could* subdue people a majority of the time, only Obito could do it effortlessly.
That said, killing both of the enemy shinobi was a bit negligent.

Meanwhile, Captain Uesugi dug himself out of a pile of broken pine branches and wood chips, swearing loudly enough that I could hear it. If I had to assign a relative strength level to them, Raiga was sitting pretty at approximately jōnin-level strength and genin-level situational awareness. By contrast, the little sharp spike of Captain Uesugi’s chakra told me that he’d probably realized he had an audience.

Across the way, Raiga was laughing as though seeing someone get repeatedly struck by lightning was the funniest thing he’d seen all week. His laughter was drowning out the sparse background noise of my students shifting position and dragging bodies with them.

Like I said. Observant, he was not.

Captain Uesugi booked it for the wilderness immediately.

Which also happened to be nearly directly in the direction of Obito, before his chakra vanished and reappeared elsewhere. Typical Obito, really.

Raiga immediately turned to pursue, lightning stabbing down from the clouds and landing wherever it pleased.

As for me?

I shook debris from my clothes and waved my hat to get the worst of the dust off of it, then shifted across the battlefield with half of my attention on the would-be enemy. Despite not having spotted me, Raiga’s Bingo Book profile painted him as a murderous thug with a tendency for burying people alive. If he did see me, he’d attempt murder just because I happened to be in the area.

It wouldn’t go well for him, but that was more attention than I wanted.

“Hey,” said Obito, warping into existence next to me as soon as Raiga was out of easy hearing. He landed with a little puff of dust and was on his elbows in the dirt, hat held low over his face.

“Hey yourself,” I replied, angling my hat upward so I could see him better.

“Are we gonna do this?” The twisted side of Obito’s mouth pinched further as he frowned. “Much as I like stealth, offing Raiga would get us an in with that guy, won’t it?”

“Not sure how much attention we want from the legal authorities,” I said, as though we hadn’t been discussing how to subvert the Land of Iron’s security measures less than a week ago.

Obito paused, Sharingan spinning slowly. “His clan name’s ‘Uesugi,’ isn’t it?”

Curse his lip-reading. Curse it!

“So what?” I kept my voice from sounding either defensive or snappish, but the result still came out a bit flat. “Anyone can use a name.” But under Obito’s gaze, I admitted in a low tone, “Even if he is related to Mom, he doesn’t mean anything to me. If I had to kill him for the sake of the mission, I wouldn’t lose a wink of sleep. You know that.” Pause. “And you don’t like it.”

Obito’s Sharingan faded. “I don’t really think you do either.”

“I wouldn’t feel anything, Obito. That’s not liking or disliking an idea.”

Are you so certain?
I’m not attached to any member of the defunct Uesugi clan other than my brother, I told Isobu. Not with Mom dead. She’d never even tried to get us in contact with any survivors, so that branch of the family might as well have been dead to me. No matter how cold that makes me sound. People don’t get extra chances just because we might share blood.

Obito eyed me for a long moment, during which Captain Uesugi and Raiga resumed trying to kill each other. “Nah. You’re a giant sap who only wants to come off as cold and clinical. You’re not fooling anybody.”

“Obito,” I began, before he disappeared into his pocket dimension to avoid actually hearing my comeback. Not much to say to that. “Dammit.”

Obito’s chakra reappeared on the opposite end of Captain Uesugi and Raiga’s ongoing fight, well inside the treeline. While I couldn’t tell precisely what he was doing, knowing him as well as I did meant I had a pretty good guess.

*Step one: Camouflage.*

Well, no one seemed to be attacking him, so he’d gotten that first part down.

*Step two: Sabotage.*

Raiga’s chakra flared high and bright with pain, and if I looked I could just barely see a wooden javelin sticking out of his bicep.

*Step three—*

And at that point, Captain Uesugi shook out his rattling nerve endings and drove his sword directly through Raiga’s ribcage. The last rumble of thunder stuttered, clouds overhead freezing for just a split second, and then Raiga’s inner light went out.

Didn’t even need a step four. Might as well have been “omelette du fromage,” then, just to keep up with the rhyme scheme. I’d never taken a lesson in French in my life, but apparently my vocabulary didn’t care much. What of it remained, anyway.

Captain Uesugi did the sensible thing and made sure his opponent was dead, by twisting his sword while it was still pinning Raiga to the ground like an artistic thumbtack. Any living opponent, no matter how good an actor, would have probably screamed or something when the blade carved out a cork-sized divot of flesh all the way through. That left me to consider whether recovering the corpse would be worth the bounty.

Not my kill, I supposed.

Captain Uesugi’s chakra got more intense, and putting my chakra sense on passive mode meant I could feel his attempts at scanning the area. It was a little like someone trying to search for a single screw in an unfamiliar tool shed at night, with a shitty hand flashlight. Samurai sensing techniques weren’t anything like radar, and only worked their best within about five meters.

Inside that range, of course, they were the best in the business. But otherwise, I’d been told it was a little like looking around with blinkers on.

**Strong words for someone who has never been a samurai.**

*Hayate’s close enough.*
Captain Uesugi did not call out to us. When one is supposed to be alone in enemy-held territory, that kind of behavior basically never pays off in a way that benefits the one doing the shouting. Instead, he skulked sort of vaguely in the direction of town, because the last he’d seen, there were still enemies left to harass the fleeing villagers.

My kids had taken care of that, so it was probably time to get lost while the getting was good.

Obito warped back into normal reality practically at my elbow, dropping to the ground with a faint poof of dust. He nudged me, then signaled for a silent retreat with his free left hand. In his right, he held the beginnings of another Wood Release weapon that hadn’t decided what it wanted to be just yet.

I nodded, so the two of us Body Flickered back over to the kids.

Roku was sitting on one of the corpses when we got back, with the near-rusted scrap katana driven straight through the cloaked man’s back. The other one, pinned to a market stall backwards with arm-length icicles through his neck and head, had clearly died just as silently. Those would melt soon enough, even in this cold.

Kaito and Aiko just shrugged when I raised an eyebrow at them. Well, I’d get that report later.

Obito repeated the “retreat” gesture, and the five of us bugged out.

Obito

“We’re being stalked,” Kei said a couple of day’s walk later. It wasn’t exactly news, after the fight in the village. The only real surprise was that it’d taken so long to pin down the misguided fan. Something of a problem in samurai lands. “He slipped up.”

“It’s Uesugi again, isn’t it?” Kaito had taken up a habit of just using Kei’s possible-cousin’s clan name, which at least cut down on the confusion before it could build. But considering that Kaito barely ever used his clan’s name to identify himself, Obito thought it was a little petty. Then again, Kaito was both of those things, so maybe it evened out somewhere.

Kei sighed. “I’d love to know how he got our signatures figured out in all that mess, but maybe we didn’t get enough distance before he got his bearings.”

“He must’ve recovered in seconds, then.” Roku was looking back in the direction we’d come from, which was probably the same direction our stalker would need to approach from until he got closer and decided to flank us. “Samurai sensing range isn’t that wide.”

“That we knew of,” Kaito put in. “I mean, we only have a sample size of about three.”

Kei’s mom and Hayate were about it, from what Obito remembered. Close enough. “Maybe he figured someone had to have offed both of Raiga’s cronies.”

“Yeah, necks don’t just break by accident,” Aiko added. She immediately had second thoughts and corrected, “Uh, mostly.”

Obito, who was still on point, kept pushing forward into the snowy brush. Hopefully, the others would remember to follow him. To this end, he asked, “Does anyone want to see if we can get him off our backs?”

“I mean, he didn’t do anything to deserve getting killed,” Aiko said, suddenly a little nervous. Her
footsteps crunched in the snow. She was leaving a path.

Obito hadn’t said anything about that, but Kei had definitely made her feelings known. Kei could put on a mission mask better than almost anyone Obito knew, and it rightfully scared people. He had to wonder if her persona’s bitter cold was because the kids were along for the ride this time. On their rare paired missions, or the ones where they grabbed Kakashi for old time’s sake, Kei didn’t slam doors on peaceful options nearly as fast.

This was becoming a problem. Well, a second problem.

Still, Aiko followed after Obito without any real hesitation, with the rest of the group trying to be only marginally more stealthy. There were shinobi who could move through snow without leaving traces, but only in the Land of Snow and only when their chakra armor was behaving.

Heading where this team was going, though, would probably mean Captain Uesugi would die whether the team had a hand in it or not. That didn’t quite seem fair.

Putting the team on higher ground, no matter how subtle, got them enough breathing room to settle properly. Between the gear Obito and Kei kept in storage for the trip, the terrain having a grudge against people’s eyeballs through the power of glare of snow, and the power to suppress their chakra signatures down to almost nothing, they had something like the makings up an ambush. Sort of. They also had a trail of footprints leading directly off the road and into the woods, but that was a separate concern.

Obito wasn’t worried that they couldn’t overpower Captain Uesugi—that wasn’t in question—but instead on what kind of first impression the team could afford to make. The poor samurai was walking into a worse fight than his last if he thought he was gonna get away with even halfway threatening Kei’s students. Especially with Kei already agitated. It was sort of like handling explosive tags.

As for establishing themselves, stealthily picking off the Shinjitsu members in the middle of a fight, without being caught, was probably enough of a start.

“For what it’s worth, I agree with Aiko,” Roku said once they were all settled. The Magnet Release panda spots were already around his eyelids, and Obito heard metal starting to shift in sheaths and holsters.

Kei didn’t seem all that happy with her students’ opinions, though. If she wanted, she could have overruled them in a second—Sensei used to—but all she did was rub at her permanently-shadowed eyes and say, “I take it we’re not voting on this.”

“We already know the outcome, so what’s the point?” Kaito asked. “You want to meet the guy, we’ll go with whatever you want, and Obito-sensei will probably just follow your decision, but better.”

Kei sputtered, a protest already building before Kaito stared her down.

“Hey,” Obito and Kei said at the same time. But only Kei pinched Kaito’s ear and went on, “I can talk people around.”

And Obito wasn’t that much of a doormat, thank you very much.

Kaito did not take the hint. “You can’t even talk us into splitting Ichiraku bills.”

Kei probably needed to work on getting her students to cut the backtalk on missions, even if it was
just what she called “banter.” Joking loosened the pre-fight tension wrapped around everyone’s thoughts. That could be helpful in the correct doses, and her kids were great at quips where Kei just wrecked people. Mostly because they kept practicing on her.

Obito, for his part, was already half-buried in their snow with his cloak wrapped entirely around him. Bundled securely even as the others crowded in around him, Obito debated his phrasing for a second. Then he began, “Kei, do you think…?”

Afterward, Obito couldn’t recall how he planned on ending that sentence. The bedraggled look in Kei’s eyes stopped him before he could put his thoughts into words for real, but the ideas just kept coming. That you might be able to talk him around because he’s your cousin? Even though you were talking like killing him wasn’t any more important than the weather? Obito liked happy endings, and Kei looked half-scared she’d ruin this one before it could even decide what it was.

“Maybe,” was all Kei said.

Liar, Obito thought. But Kei didn’t lie directly if she had other options. Instead, she was a master of redirecting people’s attention when she actually wanted to. She liked to drop hints and let people draw the wrong conclusions, so their curiosity would die off before they figured out too much. She just wasn’t bothering now.

“Kei,” Obito said softly, while her students pretended they couldn’t hear him.

“Look, you’re the handler,” Kei said with frustration leaking into her tone. If his Sharingan had been active, a hundred ryō said he’d have seen her reach for Isobu’s chakra, at least by reflex. The red threads were hard to miss, and so was the spark of gold and red in her eyes. “Make the call.”

All three of Kei’s students turned their attention to him. Because they were ten years out of the puppy-dog stage and one of them was nearly his height, it was a bit more intimidating than he’d initially assumed.

Then again, this was the same group of goofy kids he’d practically helped raise in some ways.

Obito thought about it for a few seconds. Then he clapped his hands and said, with his best smile in place, “I’m gonna go say hello.”

He was immediately countermanded.

“Fuck that,” said Kaito, at the same time as Roku said, “Oh, no,” and Aiko went, “Not without us!” Kei, meanwhile, glared at him and pointedly shook her head just out of her kids’ line of sight.

Well, he’d tried. “Then we can all try this together!”

Kei sighed as though Obito had just told her that the actual reason volcanoes existed was because a Magma Release user got real pissed off back in the day and broke something important. Which he had once, back when they were guppies. It was a sound that might’ve once made him wince, but he’d figured out a long time ago that she hardly ever meant it seriously. Her kids, though, looked at him as though he’d just been handed his own death certificate.

“Captain Uesugi is out that way,” Kei said, pointing firmly toward the direction from whence they’d come. “And I’m going to go talk to him.”

“Didn’t we just talk about how bad you are at talking to people like that?” asked Kaito.

“Let me rephrase it this way: All of you are terrible at kenjutsu, and I’m not dependent on hand
seals.” Oh, now she was actually grumpy. Obito watched her students recoil to varying degrees as Kei turned on her heel and marched back out into the snow. She didn’t even bother to disguise her grumbling as she went.

Obito made sure Kaito, in particular, didn’t follow her. The kid had a hell of a mouth and a tendency to overuse it. Samurai tended not to appreciate that. At least, the ones Obito had met didn’t.

Then again, he’d kind of been stealing from them at the time…

Obito’s long-distance vision, especially in the glare off a snowfield, wasn’t as great as Kei’s sensor range. But given how dark her outfit was, it wasn’t so hard to focus on her like a dark spot on clean paper. From there, he activated his Sharingan and waited for something else to light up near her.

It didn’t take that long, really. The Sharingan was designed to track and predict movement with chakra behind it. And it was awful hard to get across the Land of Iron without cheating at least a little, like Uesugi was doing.

Obito drummed his fingers on his leg. Left-handed—his right didn’t ever give the proper feedback. He felt Kaito and Aiko to his left and right, bunched up under snow-gear as they tried to get a better look at what he could see. Not quite possible, unfortunately—Roku’s panda eyes from his bloodline did more against snow-glare than their sensing capacities were worth. And even he didn’t really compare to the Sharingan’s enhanced sight.

Obito still wished they had a Hyūga. The Byakugan would’ve strained less.

Kei

In my samurai clothes, I was nearly inconspicuous.

In my ninja body, I might as well hang a sandwich board around my neck with the slogan “ninja here; please stab” with a big arrow aimed at my head. Samurai sensing abilities, at least at very close range, were as close to bullshit as such a specific skill could be. Didn’t necessarily save them in a fight with shinobi, but it was a nasty surprise for a proper infiltrator to run into right out of the gate.

I didn’t have the specific skillset for it. So, I wasn’t going to act like what I wasn’t.

I was, instead, going to get into my first proper argument with an extended family member in nearly ten years. It sounded like a riot. In both senses of the word.

Probably.

**Are we going to actually fight?**

_Dunno. If he makes it one…_ Kei sighed inwardly. _Maybe._

I see. He sent me the impression of a jaw-cracking yawn. **Let me know when something interesting happens.**

_I think you’ll know the second I do._

I kept walking down the snowy slope, keeping Captain Uesugi’s chakra signature fixed in my mind’s eye. He didn’t appear to be struggling with the weather any more than I was, and was getting steadily closer. I couldn’t quite see him just yet, given the random dips in the landscape that I wasn’t quite willing to fight, but I knew exactly where he was. The only sound to mark either of our
approaches was the sound of disturbed snow hitting the ground.

His chakra jerked to attention the instant I entered his range, which was only about twenty meters. My range was…hilarious. Twenty meters made sense for the kind of fights samurai tended to get into—close-range duels and a lot of stabbing generally sufficed. My range was a combination of Isobu’s influence, my inherent ability turned outward, and probably mental schema. It was more useful for shinobi fights, at least once people got as dangerous as I’d turned out to be. Getting a long-range fireball tossed in one’s general direction had a way of putting a damper (or blaze) on the whole day.

The two of us were on the same path that cut through the snow, tamped down by the occasional footprint and animal track. The fields around us were empty or overgrown, with no villages within line of sight and nobody other than each other visible at all. Just two figures in hakama and haori, slowly walking on a collision course.

I made it sound a lot more dramatic than it was. If not for my hat cutting Captain Uesugi’s ability to read my expression, I doubt a scrap of our encounter would’ve been worthy of a high school foreign language project. And, once upon a time, I’d made a few incredibly shitty films for Spanish class.

He stopped in front of me, blocking the road. I could see his evenly-spaced footsteps come to a stop and his stance square up about five meters off.

“Stay where you are, stranger,” Captain Uesugi said, in the kind of tone generally associated with military police who were already certain that they had a suspect dead to rights, but were waiting for the person in question to take a hint. Further hints could involve violence, genjutsu, or shouting quite loudly. All of that tonal information was conveyed badly by a rather raspy voice from a man only a handful of years older than I was. “You don’t look like you’re from around here.”

I could also only see his legs. Owing to the hat. I had to angle it a bit to even see that his left hand was on the hilt of his katana.

Guess that was what police work was out here, nowadays. I didn’t know for certain if Shinjitsu was the problem. Maybe Captain Uesugi was just an ass. Maybe this was all that samurai were, beyond the blustering.

Maybe I was making things up to fill time as we stared each other down and tried not to be the one to move first.

“Who the hell’re you supposed to be?” I asked. Obito was the real voice and accent changeling, out of everyone I knew, but I could lower mine by an octave and swap out polite phrasing for vocabulary worthy of a yakuza enforcer. All I really had to do was voice my thoughts more often.

I basically sounded like a lower-pitched Kaito.

…I probably needed to be harder on him about not sounding like that.

Captain Uesugi’s weight shifted. I could feel him getting a little antsy, because suppressing my own chakra signature against a samurai was frankly a lost cause. Hayate had won most of our hide-and-seek practice since we were kids for a reason (and that reason was that I let him, but meh). But he only said, “Captain Yūki Uesugi, under General Mifune.”

My eyebrows rose. He was just…telling me that. Immediately. While not wearing his armor or anything resembling a uniform. What the hell, man. “Cool. Why’d ya stop me?”

“To get a better look at my savior, I think,” Captain Uesugi replied. His chakra, about as sharp as the sword he carried, started doing its best to poke at me as though it would reveal some weakness. “My
Well, I did say I was shit at infiltration. And Captain Uesugi wouldn’t find weakness if he tested me. The closest he’d get would be an Isobu-charged punch to the face to show him exactly what was hiding under my human chakra. “Interesting view. Thing is, I dunno why we’re not fighting if you’re gonna talk to me like that. Been attacked for less.”

Captain Uesugi took a step closer to me. I didn’t flinch.

I could kill him where he stood if I had to, kenjutsu or no.

“I don’t have a warrant for your arrest,” Captain Uesugi said, to my mild surprise. Maybe he’d felt my chakra take its own step closer to violence and wanted to de-escalate before he ended up a smear on the pavement. “Therefore, we don’t have a problem.”

“...I don’t think it works like that.” At least, it hadn’t. Um. “So, uh. Hi, I guess.”

Captain Uesugi bowed, and I bowed back on reflex.

I’d ended up doing exactly what I told Obito not to do. Hooray.

**You ruined the fight.**

*And I’m still not sure how.* “Uesugi-san,” I went on, once I was sure all he was going to do was bow, “what now?”

“Now? Now I ask a lot of very specific questions about why you helped me clear the village. Please answer them honestly.” Captain Uesugi’s chakra flattened out a bit, forcing itself still for the sake of his professional pride.

“Uh, no. I’ll pass.” And I turned around to walk away.

I knew it wasn’t very diplomatic of me, but I hadn’t signed up to be interrogated by anybody on this mission. Even nominally friendly police officers. Or whatever Captain Uesugi was.

Captain Uesugi didn’t seem to care. Instead of being put off by my refusal, his footsteps followed. I couldn’t signal the kids to ditch and take Obito with them without Captain Uesugi seeing it happen, but it looked like I’d be keeping up a stream of conversation for the next few minutes before I could shake him.

**I can make him stop following you.**

*I’m sure you can.*

“Look, if you have something important to say, you’re gonna wanna spit it out,” I told him, because a weird guy following me was *not* subtle. At all. “I don’t appreciate stalkers.”

“I could just be escorting you to where you’re going.”

“But you’re not.” I stopped and bit down on a sigh. “You want something.”

It wasn’t a question. Not in the slightest.

Captain Uesugi’s chakra flickered with uncertainty. His voice betrayed none of that conflict as he said, “Don’t you, cousin?”
How the fuck even. My mouth opened to protest, which was thankfully about all he could see of my expression. I couldn’t decide what I was even going for, because how.

While, sure, I had a file folder about Captain Uesugi’s existence and survival tucked into a storage seal in a closet, he’d been a toddler at the time. Mom hadn’t known if he’d lived to be an adult and had never checked, because she’d cut ties with the Land of Iron so thoroughly no one even remembered her name. She’d never, for example, sent letters home talking about how cute her kids were. Certainly no pictures. There was nothing to indicate we were related.

I considered possible responses for half a second. What came out of my mouth was, “What the hell are you talking about?”

I would never be a diplomat, and I was fine with that.

“Stop pretending ignorance. It’s an insult to both of us.” Trying to talk my way out of a conversation with a man who was effectively a telepath was a pain in the ass. Captain Uesugi had at least let his hand fall to his side, though, and didn’t feel like he would go for his katana unless I did first. Once again, his hesitation didn’t make it as far as his voice as he spoke. “You read exactly like you’re descended from the Uesugi clan, same as me.”

Okay…what? Leaving aside my preconceived notions of what, exactly, someone else’s sensing technique could be, I’d only heard of this kind of precision from the Second goddamn Hokage. Between Sensei and Karin’s methods, there was some wiggle room. And Hayate hadn’t ever said clans had distinct chakra markers outside of those with notable bloodline limits.

I tilted my hat up, just a little.

I was pretty good with faces, if only because recognizing certain people saved me a lot of waffling about what abilities I’d have to use to shut them down. People like Kabuto made a point of being forgettable? Not on my watch, dammit.

Captain Uesugi, up close, had the same eyes as my mother. Not the eyebags, but the angles were identical.

And so did I.

Dammit.

“What, exactly, do you want?” I asked him in a low voice, as irritated as I’d ever been with anybody from this side of the family. Owing mostly to how I’d never met any of them before, the Uesugi bunch was coming off a little better than the Gekkō clan’s first impression, but the needles were moving closer. This guy was more capable of being a pest than the merchant brats I remembered, for one.

Uesugi’s chakra pressure pushed back against mine. It was an attempt.

“You helped me before,” Captain Uesugi said, which didn’t directly answer my question. He edged closer despite the “fuck off” aura I was lacing across the immediate area, clasped his hands together, and bowed. Deeper than a stranger ever had to me.“I hate to ask, but I need you to do it again. Please.”

“…Okay, what?” As an actual question this time.

“I have arrest authority,” he explained, “but I’m the only one out here trying to root out Shinjitsu. I don’t have backup, I couldn’t bring my armor, and I barely got past the first line of defense.” His
eyes seemed to flash. “And I felt the second you jumped when I mentioned that name. You’re already after them, aren’t you?”

I hated being an open book to complete strangers, samurai or not. Still, I asked, “…Your boss sent you out here with nothing?”

Captain Uesugi scratched the back of his head. “I’m supposed to be in Three Wolves right now.”

Oh for fuck’s sake. A cowboy cop. I was half tempted to start looking out for a Clint Eastwood homage the second I turned around. Besides the one in front of me. Captain Uesugi had already done the “this town ain’t big enough for the two of us” bit with Raiga, now that I thought of it. Only there hadn’t been any ten-gallon hats.

It was like my mom’s family, somehow, had a tendency to spit out vigilantes.

“I swore an oath to defend the people of the Land of Iron. To protect and serve,” Captain Uesugi said, when I didn’t react outwardly. “Not to obey General Mifune.”

Not exactly my marching orders, but hey, I was in a foreign country to punch a hole in its seedy underbelly. I didn’t have the high ground, here. I couldn’t feel any deception in his chakra, but I still hesitated. I didn’t particularly want to begin this Land of Iron mission by being backstabbed. It set a bad precedent.

Still, a native guide could be useful.

Captain Uesugi, seeing me stare him down, unclipped his katana from his belt and set it in the snow as he bowed again, almost forming a right angle with his body.

I sighed inwardly. It felt weird watching a guy bow to me on the best of days. I said, rather than acknowledging the whole presentation, “What’s your name? I mean, what do you want me to call you?”

“Yūki, if possible,” he said without lifting his head.

_That’ll go over great with Kaito_, I thought. But I said, “Fine.”
Chapter Summary

Kaito: Wrest a chapter from Sensei.

Chapter Notes

This chapter's title is from "Family" by Mother Mother, I think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kaito didn’t like the Uesugi guy one bit.

Kaito didn’t like most people, but he was firm on that point. It wasn’t his job to be the friendly one, or the diplomatic one, or the one who wanted to interact with village kids when they went on missions. Kaito’s job was to hang back and counter everything he heard to make the others think through their options. So while Aiko was happy to have an ally and Roku reserved judgment until he got a signal from Sensei or Obito, Kaito tried drilling holes in the back of the samurai’s head with his glare alone.

Worse, Sensei and Obito seemed pretty conflicted already. That wasn’t a good sign for this mission as a whole.

Kaito trudged through the snow with a grumble practically rattling through his frame. He felt a little like a cornered alley cat, already poised for a fight before anything materialized. He could ice Uesugi easy if only he’d give Kaito a reason to kick his ass.

“Still mad?” Roku asked out of the corner of his mouth.

Kaito rolled his eyes. “Bubbling.”

“On a scale of one to steam explosion?” Aiko prompted, while adjusting her hat. It was nearly the same color as her hair was normally.

“A little more than a simmer,” said Kaito. He knew perfectly well that his teammates were making fun of him, but it was a long-standing joke. For some reason, referring to his temper like it was made of water just seemed like the funniest thing in the world when they were kids.

Roku didn’t even glance in Kaito’s direction. “Oh, good. If I had to shove you into a pond to make you get over yourself already, I think you’d make sure I died of hypothermia right now.”

“Probably,” Kaito agreed. His eyes darted toward the adults—minus Roku, who didn’t count even if he was nineteen—and he grumbled, “You two don’t honestly think Uesugi is helping us out of the goodness of his heart, do you?”

Roku’s already-dark eyes dimmed a little more as he activated his Magnet Release bloodline again, if only for a split second. It looked like he recovered from the world’s most literal black eye faster than
humanly possible. Then, in a whisper, “He’s only carrying what we can see. At least as far as iron and steel weapons go.”

“That doesn’t mean much,” Kaito insisted, equally quiet.

Their team, of all teams, knew better than assume that someone not being able to lay hands on spare steel made them harmless. One of the first true lessons Kaito ever had with Sensei—as a shinobi and not just a kid trying out inherited power—involved making as many senbon as he could out of ice. Kunai and even tantō blades followed. Roku got most of the same kinds of lessons, but earlier, since he was the oldest student on their team. Sensei spent a lot of time trying to weaponize other people’s bloodline limits, and everyone benefited from it.

“He is one of Sensei’s relatives,” Aiko suggested, while toying with the braid hanging from her left temple. “I mean, I think so.”

It was a weak argument, and her fidgeting proved she knew it. Kaito hadn’t had a ton of luck with his extended family, who all lived in a totally different country and probably wouldn’t be happy if they met the members of Team Kei. Kaito couldn’t really remember his parents that well, but he did know that Kirigakure wasn’t someplace he was ever supposed to go. Sensei’s refusal to let them go to the Kiri Chūnin Exams seemed to bear that paranoia out, making those childhood warnings that much more real.

He didn’t see why the Land of Iron was any different for Sensei. Just because they were samurai didn’t mean they had any honor. And Kaito did remember Hayate’s stories about how terrible the Gekkō family had been until somebody got assassinated. Anybody from outside of Konoha played by rulebooks written for them, by them. All of this stuff was just too convenient.

But explaining that to Aiko kind of felt like it’d be bullying, especially because Kaito knew his temper got away from him most of the time. Aiko’s family was okayish. Roku didn’t know who his was. Kaito was pretty sure he was the only one who’d ever really been told to run when anybody from the Yuki or Hōzuki clans ever came looking for him.

Or fight back.

Maybe kill them.

He could do that now.

Kaito finally just blew out a frustrated breath. Ice and snow melted to give them better footing, with hardly any effort on his part. “Sometimes families suck. Especially the parts you don’t know anything about.”

Aiko opened her mouth to argue, then sighed. She picked her way around the suddenly-clear path, dodging snowmelt without looking. “Sometimes.”

“At least if he has some creepy puppet collection or something, we’ll never see it,” Roku said, with a theatrical shudder.

“That bunraku puppet show got to you, too?” Aiko asked, her gray eyes wide. She was keeping pace with Roku by walking sideways with her hands casually behind her head, even if they threatened to dislodge her hat. “Because I think the worst part was really the way the joints—”

“Shhhhh, they’re talking!” Kaito hissed, because he’d had his eyes on the adults.

“—call bullshit,” Sensei was saying.
Uesugi protested, “I’m telling the truth.”

“I’m not sure I believe you, and I actually think most people are honest,” said Obito.

Kaito formed an ice knife in his left hand, under the long edge of his haori sleeve.

“My wife’s name actually is Keiko.”

_Dammit._ It seemed like they weren’t arguing for real. A real argument might’ve had jutsu flying before Kaito had a chance to do anything, but he remained optimistic. For a given value thereof. Something nearly in the same country, maybe. Countries were nice and big. Plenty of space for gray areas.

“You’re doing the thing again,” Roku muttered, while the sheath of his salvaged katana poked at Kaito’s side. “Don’t get caught up thinking of ways to justify it as self-defense.”

Kaito snorted. “It’ll be over too fast for anything _after._”

Roku put a hand on Kaito’s shoulder. “Kaito.”

“Roku,” Kaito sniped back.

Metal creaked; a sign that Roku’s patience had limits, somewhere. “Kaito, don’t push it.”

“I’ve never seen a more obvious trap in my _life,_ Roku.”

Roku was not impressed. “That’s what you said when I went on a blind date. And followed me.”

“Anko could have set you up with anyone!”

“You’re just mad they left and you didn’t get takeout and you couldn’t raid the fridge,” Aiko rattled off all at once, because she was a traitor. Kaito felt his face heating up even before she said, somewhat defensively, “It’s been a month. Statute’s over! Right, Roku?”

Roku sighed.

“If you kids don’t stop arguing, I _will_ mail you back home. Possibly in a shipping crate,” Sensei called over her shoulder. “Don’t think I won’t.”

And with Obito right there, she probably _could_ really do that. She’d originally tapped Obito for the handler role because he was so good at folding space-time into a dumpling. The three students quieted, though Kaito’s cheeks still burned a bit from the scolding. It was phrased like it could be everyone’s fault, but he knew better. He ducked his head before Uesugi looked back to see what the big deal was.

“I didn’t believe Aunt Sumomo’s stories until now,” Uesugi said, apparently accepting that none of Team Kei were going to give him any ammunition. With Kaito’s glare burning a hole in the back of his topknot-adorned head, he continued obliviously, “After bringing me to her home, we never heard from Aunt Tomoe again. No letters, reports, or anything else.”

“That must’ve been nerve-wracking,” Sensei commented, and Kaito cheered up slightly at the thought that she was still on guard. She might’ve been remarking about the weather. Which was snowy, forever. It was fucking awesome.

“It was over thirty years ago,” Uesugi said after a while, shaking his head slowly. “Aunt Sumomo was the one who had time to worry. And…I guess she was sure her baby sister would be able to
accomplish anything. And you’re here, so she must’ve managed to survive.”

“Mom’s been dead for twelve years,” Sensei said, as blunt as a hammer. Even Kaito wasn’t that bad most of the time. She sighed, still stomping through the snow. “But, well, I do have an idea of what she was doing right after you got dropped off.”

Not for the first time, Kaito wished he’d been able to meet more of the people who helped make Sensei who she was now. From the scraps of stories he’d gotten from Hayate and sometimes even from Sensei, their mother had been about as fierce as Aunt Misaki and Aunt Chinatsu. Kaito didn’t remember either of them that well anymore—ten years felt like a whole lifetime ago—but he got the idea. There was a personality type that was made of solid steel.

“Wait, you mean you guys never figured out what she was up to?” Obito asked. Kaito couldn’t sense chakra nearly as well as Sensei (or Uesugi, apparently), but Obito wore his heart on his sleeve. His scarred-up face never hid his emotions, except in a fight.

Sensei poked his shoulder, hard. “She couldn’t exactly tell them, Obito.”

“I’m not sure this guy ought to know, though,” Obito protested. When Uesugi gave him a funny look, he held up his hands defensively. “Look, there had to be a reason she never came back, right? Even if she’s dead now, it seems a little…weird.”

“I’m not sure if I would use the word ‘weird’ to describe what happened,” Sensei muttered, as all of them rounded a curve in the road.

“Story time?” Aiko asked from the flank of their group.

“No,” said Sensei.

Aiko groaned in dismay and Kaito decided to follow suit a second later. Roku grabbed both of their haori collars and just dragged them forward into the snow, practically off their feet, before either of them could take a second breath and try wheedling the truth out of Sensei again. It made ignoring the urge to jump Uesugi a little harder, because they hadn’t had a single fight since coming to this weird snowball country.

Kaito knew that was the point of dressing up like samurai, but still.

“I can feel that,” Sensei said, as Kaito picked up the pace a little to get away from Roku and almost smacked into her. When Kaito got closer, she looped a long-sleeved arm around his shoulders and squashed him against her side for a split second. “Keep a lid on it.”

Kaito sighed when she let go. This was going to be such a long mission. And it had already been a couple of weeks. Or felt like it. “Sensei…”

“If I know anything about fighting,” Sensei told him, her voice a little lower so it wouldn’t carry at all, “you’ll miss the boredom when it’s gone.”

Kaito eyed her grim expression and then shook his head slowly. It was one of those things Sensei said sometimes, in the same vein of remarks such as, “You’ll understand when you’re older.” That particular promise never seemed to come true. Kaito might’ve been forgetting examples, but if he’d forgotten it was a bit pointless to remember them now.

“You’ll see,” said Obito. He thumbed the warp of his mouth, where the pressure scars changed its shape. Kaito didn’t know if it was a nervous tic, or just a show he was putting on for Uesugi.
“Maybe,” said Kaito, but he at least remembered not to stick his tongue out at anybody.

“Are any of you hungry?” Uesugi asked. The not-quite-genuine concern made Kaito’s skin crawl. “We have been traveling for a while…”

“Yes,” said Kaito.

“I’m good,” Aiko said.

“I brought my own snacks,” said Roku, pulling onigiri out of a long sleeve. Because of course he carried his stash everywhere. His exact loadout changed with the times, but somehow he always had food on him. Local dogs loved him. Cats, less so, but only because they tended to have marginally more of what humans called dignity.

It looked similar enough if people squinted.

Uesugi looked a little surprised, but he didn’t comment further. He was going to be doing a lot of that, and it’d only get worse the more he hung around the team. If Kaito let him.

He still hadn’t decided yet.

“I don’t like him,” Kaito said, once the adults moved off again. Except for Roku. He didn’t really count, nineteen or not.

“You’ve made that obvious,” said Roku, because he was an adult in a specifically annoying way.

Kaito grumbled. Whatever he said seemed to bounce off everyone’s ears like someone had put wax in them. What, did he have to break out an itemized list (which he didn’t have) to make his case against Uesugi’s involvement in this mission? Or a chart, like Rin-sensei used for explaining complex biological concepts.

Bleh. This sucked.

The rest of the day passed with more meaningless conversation until frigid nightfall.

Uesugi led them to a village he assured them was abandoned, or near enough. Kaito didn’t relax until Sensei confirmed it, saying that she couldn’t sense anything more threatening than a winter fox for four kilometers. Her range was way larger than that, but even the omission impressed Uesugi, from what Kaito could tell.

They found a house with an intact roof after searching for only a few minutes, and then it was time to camp. Indoors, for once. Only two rooms, for all that it mattered in a country overrun with glaciers and a barely adequate growing season.

“I’ll get a fire going,” Aiko volunteered, once Obito dug enough wood out of the pile in the back of the house and dumped it in the hearth. The firepit in the center of the room was practically iced over, but it’d serve. And in the end, Aiko kind of liked starting fires. Her chakra nature pointed that way to start with.

Sensei had talked to her about that once, so it was under control.

Sensei and Obito dug the rest of their supplies out of scrolls. Though Kaito didn’t like showing exactly how many concealed resources their team had to Uesugi, seeing his eyes bug out was pretty
funny. He only carried what turned out to be the basics, packed into a pair of bundles that swung from his neck all day. Seeing the samurai balk was just weird, and Kaito had only known him for like a day.

Did fūinjutsu not exist out here? Out of all of Sensei’s skills, it was probably the one that got the most use. Out of her students, Aiko was the expert, mainly because she had to learn it just to use her family’s techniques. It was the same way Roku was the best at kenjutsu, of the three of them. Kaito kept all of Sensei’s Water Release and Wind Release ninjutsu, though all of them had the basics of all of those disciplines.

The only thing Sensei wouldn’t let them touch was the center of it all—Isobu, the Three-Tailed Beast.

It worked out for the best.

Kaito helped set up the various sleeping bags, once they were free. They didn’t have a spare, but searching the house turned up a futon that hadn’t been aired out in months. It’d work in a pinch, but seeing the comforter and everything else made Kaito frown nonetheless.

They’d also found an old, well-loved cooking pot, the better part of a family shrine with the portraits and incense missing, and other signs of habitation cut short. Any fields outside were long snowed under, and breaking into the well required Kaito’s skills instead of just Obito’s right arm. A thick layer of dust covered everything, shifting when disturbed.

It reminded Kaito uncomfortably of Sorayama, during annual trips to see the wilds reclaiming the village. So much for a fortress of a town. Kaito hadn’t trusted static fortifications since.

Judging by the shadow over Roku’s expression, even with the firelight casting everything with a warm glow, he felt it too. Worse, maybe, because Roku had been older then.

Still, might as well consider it dinnertime. It got dark at like three in the afternoon here, at best. Not that Kaito could really tell, given the snow-laden clouds that had blocked the sun all day.

Sensei didn’t bother with melting suspect snow for the cook-pot. She flexed her hand into a half-seal and water streamed out of the air exactly where she wanted. Kaito wasn’t there yet, but it was always cool to get an idea of where he could be if he kept training.

Cup ramen for dinner, but Kaito wasn’t going to whine about not getting to eat anything better with Uesugi right there. Sensei’s scrolls contained fresh food on long-term missions like this, so the cup ramen was just a way of staving off any questions from someone they didn’t fully trust. They’d lived through worse. If they didn’t go for the ramen now, it’d be a matter of breaking into yet more storage scrolls. Far on the end of the preferences list lay a hazard no one wanted to chance—standard-issue rations.

Obito once told them that he had nightmares about living off of those things, and Kaito was never entirely willing to chance it. Ten was a formative age for those kinds of stories to stick, though Kaito had long figured out that whoever made the things didn’t actually intend to poison whoever ate them.

“Thank you for the food,” was whispered all across the circle, though only half of them meant it.

So there they all sat, lounging around a now-snuffed fire and digging through packaged food. With a stranger in their midst, they couldn’t speak freely, but hell, it was dinner. If everyone was talking, then they hadn’t come up with anything to complain about yet.
The silence couldn’t last forever. They still needed to figure out watch rotations.

“Why was this village abandoned, Uesugi-san?” Kaito finally asked, when curiosity got the better of him. He kept the hostility well out of his voice or face. Mainly by curling up in his sleeping bag with his chin on his folded arms, but who cared?

Samurai did the thing where they responded best to being addressed by family or clan names. It was weird after a lifetime of being raised in the shinobi model, but if he fell out of the practice now, he’d never get back into it. And there was still no way in hell he was calling this guy “Yūki,” even at swordpoint.

“‘Yūki’ is fine, kid,” Uesugi said, but Kaito ignored that. Wasn’t like he was using his name either.

“Still waiting on an answer,” Kaito insisted, a bit less polite this time.

Uesugi hesitated, glancing at Obito and Sensei. Without his hat, it was a lot easier to read his pinched expression. The flecks of gray at his temples weren’t as extreme as the white streak in Kaito’s hair, but everything about the firelight made the guy look older somehow. Even though Kaito was pretty sure he wasn’t even half a decade older than Sensei.

Kaito glared at him for real this time.

“The hell are you looking at me for? They’re adults here,” Sensei told him. Oh right, the Land of Iron thought people were adults when they turned fifteen. It still sounded back-asswards every time Kaito remembered. “Get on with it.”

“If you insist.” Uesugi pinched his chopsticks together and laid them across his empty cup, signalling that he was clearly done with the whole eating business. With entirely unnecessary gravitas, he asked, “How much do you understand about the way the Land of Iron is put together politically?”

“Enough,” said Kaito. Which wasn’t true, and Uesugi could probably tell, but he was sticking to that story. His teammates nodded along.

Uesugi gave him a skeptical look, but Sensei cut off the potential interrogation with, “How many villages has Shinjitsu taken from you? How many local lords are either dead or scattered?”

“The word you’re looking for there is probably ‘disappeared,’” said Uesugi. He sat in seiza on his borrowed—stolen?—futon, hands on his thighs. Formal and uncomfortable, except for the bit where he wasn’t directly on the wooden floor. “The local government was gutted years before Shinjitsu set up shop in our country. Around here, —He waved a hand, indicating the windows— “there’ve been several groups of magistrates and other officials, but no one’s lasted more than a year or two. Landslides, fires, sickness.” Uesugi sighed. “The only real difference with Shinjitsu’s influence is that we have an explanation better than ‘bad luck’ for all of this.”

Kaito frowned into his crossed arms. While this particular political lecture didn’t sound familiar, a lot of things never filtered down to lower-ranked shinobi, who wouldn’t generally be asked to do much more than “go here, stab things” on most missions. Even on this one, the briefing was aimed mostly at Sensei and somewhat less at Obito, who probably wasn’t really supposed to be traveling with them the entire way. He didn’t have to, and he didn’t like snow anyway.

“For how long?” Aiko piped up from her sleeping bag, gray eyes wide.

“The destruction of the Uesugi clan,” was the reply. As the rest of them watched, Uesugi stared blankly into the fire for a long moment. When he looked up, it was like the orange glow got caught in his eyes. “This land’s overrun with ghosts.”
Sensei, leaning on one hand and expression forced impassive, said, “Makes sense to me.”

“I was two years old when it happened,” Uesugi said, shaking his head slowly. “I don’t remember any of it. But I’m almost the only officer ever stationed here who came back to the capital with all my limbs after the second rotation. Strange, isn’t it?”

_It’s not if you’re working for the shitheads out here_, Kaito thought. By now, even a better class of sensor-nin would’ve probably just given up on trying to befriend Kaito. Putting out hostility consistently saved time.

Obito was lying on his sleeping bag, head propped up on his right arm. The one that wasn’t really his, according to what he said about it. “So, question.”

Uesugi blinked, either expecting more of a reaction or less of one. Saying stuff that was supposed to spook people had a way of killing conversations. “Yes?”

“Do you actually know what happened back then?” Obito frowned. “Because if you were two, and you don’t remember anything, there’s a lot of holes in the story that might or might not make it a better ghost story, you know? Sorry to kill that dramatic moment, but seriously.”

“I…I’m sorry?” Uesugi didn’t have feathers to ruffle, but Kaito figured he could use it. “What does that mean?”

“It means my mother gave a full account of the events of the Uesugi clan’s demise, as far as she understood it, when she applied for asylum in Konoha thirty years ago. I read the censored report a while ago,” Sensei told him, after only the barest glance at Obito. She took a slow sip of her lousy road-quality tea, then added, “Do you want to hear it?”

During Sensei’s little speech, Uesugi leaned forward with interest by centimeters. By the time she finished, he was almost bowing, and actually did so once he realized what she was offering. Without looking up, hands crossed in front of him, he said, “Please!”

“Okay, then get up. And get comfortable, all of you,” Sensei said, while she settled into a more comfortable position, too. With her headband gone, her hair flopped forward over her eyes like a real ghost, and the grin Kaito always associated with Story Time appeared on her face. He wasn’t sure how real it was, given how little she trusted Uesugi, but it was something.

“I think I know this one, but let’s hear it,” Obito said. He rolled onto his back and rested his head on his hands. “It’ll be fun.”

“Not sure if I’d use that word, but sure.” Sensei cleared her throat. “All right. A long time ago—”

“—Thirtyish years—” Kaito interrupted.

“—Yes, thank you, because you’re being picky about things.” Sensei rolled her eyes. She tossed a chopstick at Kaito to shut him up. “Before I was born and when Yūki-san was two, there was a castle in a snow-cloaked country. Which is where we are.” This last was added with a glare at Kaito, who smiled. “The owners were the Uesugi clan.

“There were plenty of other clans around here, near as I remember. One of the bigger ones was the Asakura clan, who decided to marry their adopted youngest son to the youngest daughter of the Uesugi—my mother,” Sensei said. “The head of the Asakura, Murasaki, was a proud woman, and so was our great-grandfather. The two clans had clashed over their shared borders for so long that nobody remembered who originally owned what. But because of it, they hoped that intermarrying would finally allow the two clans to have a lasting peace. Or at least as long as the married ones
managed to live. Maybe their kids, too.”

Sensei wasn’t the best storyteller in the world, but Kaito figured that a story that got passed down as badly as this one was just going to have to work. None of her students lived in Konoha early enough to have met Sensei’s mother, but they got little things sometimes. This kind of night was the closest they got to learning anything about Miyako Gekkō.

Besides, it had Uesugi distracted. That way, Roku could find his spot for first watch without really being noticed and start setting up traps.

“Mother met her future husband, Isshinta Asakura. They prepared for the wedding like anyone would,” Sensei said, “with her entire family invested in the party. It was probably a pretty big production.” She poked at her container of instant ramen. “It was probably better than this.”

Uesugi had his eyes closed. “I… I almost…”

Sensei forged on without acknowledging him. “Isshinta Asakura was a kid. Barely an adult even by samurai standards. Mom said he got along well with all the children of the clan. You probably knew him back then, or your cousins did. And the Asakura used him and the wedding to get them into the Uesugi castle in the dead of night. After drugging all the Uesugi clan members they could find, they killed everyone.”

Uesugi bowed his head. His fists clenched against the comforter atop his futon.

“Isshinta Asakura died saving my mother’s life, and she saved yours,” Sensei told him, merciless. “Then she took everything she had—every clan secret she buried with her old life and took to her grave with her—and killed them all. Every Asakura clan member she linked to the attack. Every official who turned the other way. Six months of death and bloody vengeance in the name of dead family.” She turned a kunai over in her hands. “The Ghoul of Three Wolves is your aunt, and my mother.”

*Or she is if you are who you say you are,* Kaito thought. He’d heard this story before, even if he could tell that Sensei was leaving things out of this version. Even when he’d been a kid—for real, not just by technicality—Kaito liked the stories where doing evil meant punishment. The person who razed the world didn’t get to sleep peacefully in the ashes.

But this had strategy behind it.

“I…” Uesugi looked up. “Isshinta had red hair, didn’t he? The only person I’d ever seen with it.” In the tone of someone trying, desperately, to chase down a far-off memory, Uesugi said with his face scrunched, “I think my mother stopped me from pulling his hair.”

Sensei shrugged. “After that night, Mom took you to your other aunt, with the Kato clan. Crossing enough borders meant you’d never be chased down and could live whatever life you wanted.” She waved a hand to indicate all the snow. “I don’t think she ever meant for you to come back to the Land of Iron, but you did.”

“She wasn’t my only aunt,” Uesugi said after a while. The man wasn’t half as tense as before, but he was still cautious.

“Oh?”

“Grandfather’s sister married into the Takeda clan, here,” Uesugi said. Eyes open now, he looked away. “I’m just the only one who still carries the Uesugi name. No one from that side of the family could tell me anything, you know. Aunt Tomoe never went to them.”
Kaito got the impression Uesugi had done a mock interrogation of his distant relatives to be that sure. “Does that mean we’re gonna drown in more of Sensei’s relatives?”

“No, no—they wouldn’t come this far out into the snowfields,” Uesugi said dismissively. “But… They were the ones who kept the Uesugi sword style alive. Not really on their own, though. It turns out the one who actually knew how to perform the last few techniques was a mountain hermit. I think he’s a potter now. Or he was. It’s been years since I last saw him.”

Sensei sighed. “I’m going to assume this mountain hermit taught you.”

Uesugi winced. “More or less?”

“We should probably compare notes,” Sensei suggested, but not like she cared. Like it was just a passing whim. “Or we could get some sleep and start early tomorrow.”

“We could do both.”

All five shinobi gave him skeptical looks until Uesugi gave in with a jaw-cracking yawn. “Fine, fine. I know when I’m beaten.” He nodded to Sensei. “I… You’ve given me a lot to think about. I’ll meditate on it before going to bed.”

“Fair enough,” Sensei told him placidly.

A flick of her fingers, however, let her team know that their watch order. Roku and Aiko first, then Kaito and Obito, and finally Sensei herself. They were to wake her if there was any trouble at all, and damn the consequences. Obito could get them out of the Land of Iron if they needed to leave in a hurry. Uesugi could die in the snow for all Kaito cared.

Kaito planned to sleep with one eye open that night, just to be safe.

He didn’t manage it, but at least he tried.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT 7/12/19: Fixed minor issues here and there.

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