Settling Hot Water
by Y_Rako

Summary

You wake up in a world not your own; or is it? It doesn't matter. You've come equipped with a bit of science, some modern ideas, and the plot. You decide to figure it out day to day as you go along.
I was about three-years-old when I had to deal with the confusion that results from stuffing a lifetime of experiences into the brain of a toddler.

Was it a lifetime? I'm still not sure.

All I know is that suddenly I went from being an average three-year-old to an average three-year-old with all the knowledge and personality of a 20 something adult, but entirely missing in specifics of where, when and who. I had no idea how I got here, what's happened to me, or why.

I wake up to the feeling of the sun hitting my face, and as is my custom as a habitual procrastinator I try to turn away to steal a few more minutes of sleep.

As I twist about in my blanket, still partially dozing, I can't help the feeling of something being amiss. I figure it can wait for later as right now the simple joy of curling in my bed is dulling any and all concerns that are sure to make themselves known once the time to roll out of bed came. Considering the amount of light coming in through windows, I'd wager I have about fifteen minutes before the caretakers come to rouse me and the rest of the children for breakfast. Might as well make the best of what little time I have left curled up in my blanket.

Wait…

What?

Caretakers?

Rest of the children?

I'm an adult. I don't have caretakers. I live alone in my apartment

Except that wasn't true.

I'm a child. I have older people that take care of me. I share my bedroom with some other children, with a whole lot more in the rest of the building

My name is Hakaru, definitely Hakaru, no duality there. At this point, I'm not sure if that should be disconcerting or not.

While I am confronting clear memories of living in what I now realize to be an orphanage for as long as I can remember myself, a significant part of my mind is repeatedly attempting to assert that none of that makes any sense at all. That this is some weird dream at best, or maybe a brain seizure. Heck, a child isn't even capable of handling this level of confusion without bawling their eyes out.

The damnedest part is that while my mind is trying to assure me that I am an adult by drawing memories to contradict my current perception, the resultant images are only increasing my confusion. I have some strong impressions of memories, experiences and who I was, but with little to none actual concrete, solid specifics. I can't even remember my name!

Starting to feel lightheaded, I realize that I've been hyperventilating for a few minutes now. I make myself stop examining my mental state and begin to take slow, forceful breaths to try calm myself and avoid blacking out, the last thing I need right now is to draw attention to myself. What I need is
to stop, take stock, and reach some equilibrium. To that end I swing my feet off the bed, get up and start wobbling towards what one set of memories -not now!- tells me should be a door to a plain bathroom with toilets and sinks equipped with mirrors and stools.

Pushing the door open and stepping on a stool (and wasn't that a foreign concept), I reach for the faucet to wash my face when a familiar stranger greets me in the mirror.


What the actual f-.

Reincarnation.

I've been trying to come to terms with whatever it is that happened to me for most of the day as I've gone through the motions that seemed to be the norm to me, or who I was, or the body I inhabited, or however you want to put it. Sigh.

After the shock I received in the bathroom, I trudged back to my bed and waited for one of the minders to arrive to rouse the rest of my roommates and ensure we took care of our hygiene needs and got dressed to face the day. We plodded down to breakfast where the cuisine, along with the paper sliding doors, clued me in that I was in some Asian country, possibly Japan.

After eating, we were divided by age for morning classes. My class was composed of what you'd expect of education for three-year-olds, mostly reciting words, letters and correcting pronunciation with a lot of colorful pictures and a very slow pacing to account for the sparse attention span that age usually showed with plenty of games in between. Thankfully, it seemed that the prior rudimentary understanding the three-year-old part of my current self, combined with the mindset of my adult self, elevated my mastery of the language to the point it seemed I practically absorbed everything our teacher said and showed us.

Following that was lunch in what I now noticed to be communal hall where all the children ate together. The food's Asian theme persisted.

Later it seemed that my age group had no more dues and so we were released to play in the orphanage's playrooms and its large yard. I followed some of the children outside in an attempt to blend in and quickly found myself running around and playing all sorts of stupid game, surrounded by an abundance of youthful energy that I took to imitating. I quickly grew irked with the entire exercise, however, and left to find a tree's shade to sit in and try to finally sort myself out.

All of that brought me to my current headache, contemplating the big fat question mark that was my current situation. I'm leaning my back against a hard bark of a mighty oak and churning over what I know as self-described science enthusiast. I'm certainly not a neurologist, but I am pretty sure that the human mind simply isn't capable of simulating this level of realism. So that negates the possibility of some manner coma or drugged induced state. If the technology existed, I'd be considering the likelihood that I've been abducted and placed into a sort of virtual world with additional knowledge being fed directly into my brain, but that was probably decades away if it was even possible. And… what else?

I slouch down and start mindlessly tearing at the grass around me. The fact facing me is that I can think of no more science-oriented solutions and so, grudgingly, must force myself to turn to what little I know about a more esoteric option.

Reincarnation.
Quite honestly, it fits very well, which is galling because I consider myself a man (child?) of reason and science, and to find myself seriously contemplating that I've been reborn into another body felt like I'm betraying some core part of my psyche. Nonetheless, I decide to use as much logic as I can, and with as many unknowns as are facing me with, find that it does make a sort of sense. Gaining awareness at an age the brain was finished with most of its development, so that it can handle accommodating an adult mind. The holes in my memory as to who I was to prevent any hang-ups to my previous life. It seems like something decided to set me up for a new life.

My face scrunches up in frustration. But why? And how? The universe was supposed to be indifferent and cold, with no inherent meaning. I myself an insignificant speck; my entire existence could be summed up by the biochemical processes in my brain. There was no evidence of a spirit or a soul, no need for it to explain the human condition. I clench my fists. And yet somehow, I find the bulk of my ego, my self, transferred to a ready-made receptacle to just wake up and supposedly start a new life.

Sigh.

Laying my back to the tree again, I try to re-assert my calm by taking slow, deliberate breaths.

Faced with no other alternative, I resolve to assume I was reincarnated until evidence to the contrary present themselves before me.

Having come to that decision, I must now decide what I'm going to do.

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Enjoy my vacation? I snort.

Seriously, what am I supposed to do? I figure that I'm in some rural part of Asia seeing as the only signs of technology I've seen so far were electric light bulbs and various synthetic fibers and plastics. The orphanage appears to be well funded, at least. All the children have clean clothes, we get three square meals a day with meat in at least one of them, and everything looks to be in good repair.

Childhood is basically one big under-appreciated vacation. I guess I'll try to keep my grades in the top five percentile of my age group or something like that to try and get set up on a course for higher education and better opportunities later in life. From what I remember your future was just about decided pretty early on over here, and they were quite zealous on education.

Mostly, though, I think I'm going to lie back, relax and enjoy my vacation for the next few years.

I settle on the grass, look to the sky, and begin cloud gazing.

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**Three weeks later**

Vacation canceled! I repeat, the vacation is canceled!

I'm currently pacing back and forth in front of my tree, trying to reconcile what I just witnessed.

It started the day I awoke and has been bothering me ever since. Like there was something major that I was missing, something that wasn't quite right in the conclusions I reached on the day of my awakening. Various little things that I couldn't even put my finger on if asked to do so. I mostly just chalked it up as my unfamiliarity with eastern culture, however, and tried to continue as is.
Today it came to a head when the leader of the village the orphanage situated itself in came to talk to, and meet the parent-less children under his purview. Our caretakers explained to us a few days beforehand, and I figured I'd be able to catch a few hints about exactly where I was, or when. I managed to find a Georgian calendar on one of the walls in the communal hall, but was stumped to find the current year to be designated as 72 post-founding.

Imagine my surprise, no, my astonishment when the staff had just finished organizing us into a neat half-circle in the orphanage yard, and Sarutobi Hiruzen, the third fire shadow, Hokage outfit and all, leisurely strolls up to the gathered crowd. He proceeds by giving us a speech filled with thinly veiled propaganda about how Konoha was the greatest place to live in the elemental nations, ninja were cool and awesome and protected us, and wouldn't it be great to become a ninja and carry on the Will of Fire. Finally, to cement the fact that this wasn't some weird cosplay to entertain us, the Hokage demonstrated some actual freaking ninjutsu for us. As in, manipulated the universe with his mind to play around with the classical elements as if they were a thing.

Thankfully my dumbstruck face wasn't exactly out of place among the audience as most of the kids were pretty awed with the grandfatherly figure. When the time came for asking questions, I forcibly restrained myself from raising my hand and asking him about all the laws of physics that he was so callously breaking. Once the children started asking the typical questions you'd expect them to come up with, my attention quickly slipped as I tried to ponder the implications this new revelation. I barely even noticed being dismissed as I absent-mindedly drifted back towards my favorite tree.

I see that I'm starting to create a groove, so I make myself stop pacing and plop down with my back against the tree. I look at the rays of light streaming through the canopy and wait for whatever otherworldly power brought me here to cough up some answers. When I find none forthcoming a few minutes later, I choose to once again think about the ramifications of me actually living in the Naruto-verse. Frankly, they are awesome, both the good and the bad types.

On the one hand, the rulers of this world are feudal lords and super powered humans with morals and ethics that moved on the spectrum between little and none. Fundamental human rights probably weren't even a thing. My chances of dying an untimely death have risen exponentially even as a regular civilian citizen of Konohagakure, arguably the most powerful military entity on the continent. The village suffered two major invasions during the series, and that's without counting the various fillers and movies that I'm not entirely certain are even going to happen (I shudder thinking about the Sky Nation's air raid). Following those horrors, facing me is the possibility of being put to sleep to briefly dream of my perfect world, while a tree slowly eats me.

On the other hand, super powers ahoy!

Snort. In all seriousness, there is no way in hell I'm passing up on the opportunity to get me some of those sweet, universe manipulating, physics defying, chakra powers. To weather the things that were to come, I need every shred of power I can get my grabby hands on and use whatever underhanded tactics I can connive. And as far as the risk of changing the plot for the worse, I'm pretty sure that's already a moot point. The original story was full of close calls and split-second decisions, which the tiniest of changes in could have resulted in far different outcomes. As they say, the flapping of a butterfly's wings could cause a hurricane on the other side of the planet. My awakening has, and will continue to produce a continuous stream of minuscule changes, impossible to predict or compensate for, propagating outwards from my position in all directions at the speed of light. Canon is screwed.

Having reached some semblance of a resolution, I decide to lie down on the grass (the lotus position being far too conspicuous for a three-year-old), close my eyes, and start looking deep inside myself for the key to everything this world has to offer. Chakra.
This life is going to be an unbelievable power trip.

September 2nd, 3rd year after Kyuubi

It took me a month.

A frustrating and stressful month filled with anxiety and doubt.

Before I had any success, I was constantly fretting about my capability to use chakra, either because of the method which brought into this world or the presumed existence of some part of the population that simply wasn't capable of using chakra and myself belonging to that group. If that were true I'd be completely helpless, bound to the whims of chance. At best I could pass intelligence to the Hokage and hope that warmonger Danzo didn't get his hands on it and make a mess of everything. I think I'm the only person impartial enough on the damn continent qualified to mess with canon.

It took me some time to get the hang of meditation, especially while lying down and trying not to fall asleep. I used every minute that could be excused for this endeavor, either under my tree or faking sleep. Eventually, I think I've gotten pretty handy at centering myself and reaching a sort of Zen-like state. I may have completely misinterpreted what meditation was supposed to be about, but fortunately, my method eventually served its purpose.

In the end, the primary key to cracking the issue was looking for something new. I came from a cold and dull world, constrained by regular old laws of physics, where chakra is not a thing. I had to look inside, to feel out for something new, a new sensation or sense that I've never experienced before. I think I'd have probably been much faster to succeed by beginning the search on the day of my awakening before I had any chance to get accustomed to my new reality.

When I first started making progress I could barely feel it, like something at the corner of my vision, always fleeting. The sensation would be lost entirely at the slightest bit of distraction or lack of focus. As time went on, I slowly started to get a better grasp of what it was I was looking for, constantly trying and failing. Every minuscule success spurred me onwards with greater determination.

And it all culminated now, in this one moment.

I can feel it!

Like a dam breaking in my mind because, I suddenly notice that the feeling is suffusing my entire body. It's not some great frothing mass, just a gentle creek flowing around my frame. Nevertheless, I find it to be very reassuring.

I break from my meditation to find myself lying in my bed, curfew having past about an hour ago. I'm exhilarated and barely hold myself from cheering loudly, not wanting to wake my roommates, and settle for a stifled giggle.

Unfortunately, this almost entirely solidifies my reincarnation hypothesis. Chakra is ethereal, a whole new sense. I can no more explain it to a person who has never experienced it than I could explain the color red to someone blind from birth. It was, simply put, out of this world. My original world at least. I can't help but grimace and feel a pang of loss for a life I can't even remember.

Anyway, this was it, my first step towards achieving independence and conquering the terrors this world was ready to unleash. In this place where might makes right, I will be the sovereign of my own fate. Still, I can't stop now, to settle for knowing it's there. To stand a chance I must master my
chakra. I need to sleep, breath, eat and think chakra.

Gathering myself, I smoothly enter a meditative state again, and I'm genuinely thrilled by how infinitesimally easier it is to find my chakra on the second time. I realize meditation is probably not even necessary anymore, which makes plenty of sense considering the most I've seen shinobi do before performing ninjutsu is tensing up. I try to grab hold of my chakra then awkwardly move it around, my reward is a slight increase in the speed of it circulating through my body. Emboldened, I continue the exercise for a few minutes. While doing so, I try and concentrate my chakra to various points to different degrees of success, finding it most easy to pool it in my stomach where the chakra already felt strongest.

About twenty minutes in, I start feeling a bit light headed. A cursory inspection reveals that my chakra has thinned noticeably from my trial-run. Choosing to push through and continue with the exercise for five more minutes rewards me with dizziness and a slight ache in my stomach. Deciding not to overdo it any more than I already have, I call it a day and immediately black out.

I'm idly munching on some breakfast the next day and planning my next course of action. Thankfully, it seemed that a good night's sleep was all I needed to remedy the aching and dizziness I suffered from in addition to my chakra completely replenishing itself. Was it flowing slightly stronger? I'm not entirely sure, and I don't trust my new-found sense enough just yet to be certain, definitely something to keep an eye on looking forward.

I focus myself back to the matter at hand, planning what to do now. The thing is, I don't have any advantage to exploit, no clan to give me training or kekkei genkai to grant me an edge. If I want to even the odds I have to use the only leverage available to me, start training as early as possible on all the things that I needed and would be extremely hard to learn later in life. I need to take advantage of my young brain and body as long as they are still malleable.

First is chakra: the primary currency of power in this world. I need to work on it daily and deplete my reserves, I'm pretty confident it works like a muscle, and I'm probably at a stage in life where it will be the most receptive to growth, subsequently increasing my potential later in life and allowing me to rely on high-end techniques. I reason I'll use chakra control exercises for the added benefit of improving my chakra control, besides the increase in efficiency it could also open a lot of doors whenever I decide to take up any of the more delicate arts.

Secondly, building up a highly acute level of situational and spatial awareness. I could be the most powerful of ninja with the most badass techniques, but still get my throat cut if I fail to pay attention to my surroundings.

Finally, I want to be a chakra sensor. In a profession where chakra was the primary tool of the trade, the number of tells I could gather from being able to sense it would be invaluable. My hope is that combining my training in chakra and spatial awareness will allow me to attune my chakra sensitivity not just inwards, but outwards as well, while my brain is still receptive and capable of any substantial growth.

Unfortunately, this is about the extent of the things I'll be able to train at this point given the resources that are available to me here in the orphanage. Keeping my body in top physical shape is pretty obvious, but I don't want to do anything to extensors without first consulting an expert for fear of hobbling myself. Mm… Throwing stones to improve hand-eye coordination? I guess more training exercises will occur to me as I go along.

I suddenly look up from my plate to realize that while I was ruminating most of the children have left the communal hall to head to the morning's classes and the last stragglers were already at the door.
I'm almost certainly late. One of the staff members is frowning in my direction, and I can't help but chuckle nervously as I quickly get up and run to my class. That situational awareness definitely needs some work.

The next three months were stimulating.

As much as I worked with it, handling chakra always managed to be a novel experience: it felt like every day ushered a new discovery. My first practice with the Leaf Sticking exercise was exhilarating; for the first time, I had used chakra to affect a physical impact in the world around me. Albeit a tiny effect, the implications were heady and progress after the first exercise was swift. Over a few days additional leaves were added to various points on my frame, and at some point, I even started experimenting with using chakra to spin the leaves stuck against my body. All of this was done as sneakily as I could manage, usually with my great oak standing between the rest of the orphanage and me.

After deeming my progress with the leaf to have reached a sufficient point, I was eager to attempt the Tree Walking Exercise. I quickly found out that whatever level of control I had over my chakra, I was missing another essential ingredient to make defying gravity feasible. My childish and underdeveloped frame simply did not have the lower body strength needed to support it when suspended parallel to the ground by the soles of my feet. Inadvertently, that setback made me come to realize that there was an application for chakra I've overlooked, muscle enhancement.

Consequently, my chakra control training was split into two parts. Continuing with the Leaf Sticking Exercise and its various interpretations I'd managed to think up. Interpretations such as Dirt Sticking Exercise, to which there was ample supply in the orphanage's yard, and the Water Sticking Exercise involving holding a sheet of water against any part of your body. The later, I was only able to manage covertly thanks to the communal showers having doored stalls. The second part of my chakra control training was now composed of very carefully circulating small amounts of chakra through select muscles, and performing various physical fits more suited to a child twice my age. I was working at doing pushups and lifting several heavy rocks I found at the edge of the yard.

Thankfully, my hypothesis about chakra appear to be true, and I've seen a noticeable deepening in my reserves. I try using up whatever chakra I have left at the end of the day, draining it by rolling and sweeping it around my body. Though I worry that may soon prove to be an insufficient measure as it takes longer and longer before to reach a satisfying level of depletion.

The Less fortunate news was that situational awareness has been a headache so far. Progress was slow, and I was finding it hard to assess any measure success. As no my chakra sense have yet to pick up on anything external, I've taken to covertly meditating whenever I'm near other people in an attempt to feel out for them using my chakra.

Getting back to playing with the other kids was initially tiresome, but as the weeks went by, physically exhausting myself with simple games became a welcome respite from the constant work with my chakra. I have even started a new game involving throwing small stones at targets like trees and walls and got the other children to play along. The rest of the kids called it playing ninja, I was just glad none of them thought that ninja should have more human-like targets yet, I didn't want the orphanage staff to ban the game.

I've been reminding myself that all the incredible progress made was largely in thanks to my body's young age and that said growth should not be used as an excuse to slack off, but to press on and reap whatever benefits I can while possible. However, the realization that this pace was not sustainable has slowly made itself known, so in an attempt to not lose my mind I have decided to allocate myself a daily half hour for idle lazing.
I’m sitting in the communal hall during lunch, brooding.

There has to be something more I can do besides training to increase my long-term chances.

The plot was probably not going to play out in exactly the same way, but I’m pretty sure that the general line of events could be pretty similar. My best chances are to derail the plot before it reaches its climax in the 4th Great Shinobi War or I’d probably be joining the supporting cast no matter what level of strength I attain.

It seems there exists an insurmountable power gap between most shinobi, including most S-Ranks, and the members of the Otsutsuki clan and its progeny who have reached their heritage's potential. Senju, Uchiha, Uzumaki, Hyūga. I don't belong to any of those clans, and it would be wishful thinking to assume that my unknown family will resolve itself to be an offshoot of any of them.

Thinking about the Hyūga, they really got the short end of the stick, as far as all-seeing eyes could be considered the short end of anything. Compared to the Senju and Uchiha with their ridiculously powerful shinobi, and the Uzumaki who were resourceful enough to build a village of their own that was feared for its fuinjutsu, the Hyūga are practically mediocre. Hmm, maybe that's why the entire clan acted like they have a pole stuck up their nether region. That and the fact one half of family is practically enslaving the other. I really can't blame Neji for being the uptight tool he was before Naruto beat some optimism into him, besides his father having died for his main-family twin's blunder.

Wait…

What?

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The Hyūga Affair! I give myself a mental face palm. Did it already happen? Can it be prevented? Should it?

On October 10th we commemorated the 3rd year since the Kyuubi attack on the village. Combined with my date of birth which I got from one of the caretakers to be on July 1st, some three and change years ago, I inferred what I should have probably assumed from the start. I was part of the rookie 9 generation.

But anyway, the point is that the Hyūga Affair is supposed to happen right around now. I'm just not entirely sure if it occurred yet or it will take place in the next couple of months.

I gather my thoughts and try to answer the question of should this event even be prevented. Net value is Konoha gets to keep one extra A-Rank jōnin. Neji and Hinata get to have a less stressful home life, Neji because he gets to keep his father in addition to not feeding his complex with the main\branch family issue and Hinata because she doesn't grow up with a cousin who resents her.

Konoha\Kumo relations are probably a bust either way at this point in time, unless something drastic happens, like if Obito decides to start abducting jinchuriki early.

So Hinata and Neji growing up to be slightly and very different people respectively… Was that a plus? I already determined that all close calls were a lost cause anyway, so restraining myself in the hope that Hinata still jumps in front of Pain while he has Naruto pinned and triggering his six-tails mode is pretty much a fool's errand. The best I could do was help them become better people than
Ok, so I determined that the benefits outweigh the possible negatives, now I just need to find a way to check when the Hyūga Affair is going to happen if it hasn't already happened.

Despite my reservations about my chances of success I can't help but feel an electric excitement. This is going to be the first significant plot changing difference that I was going to introduce to the world, and the potential repercussions were unknowable.

Having concluded that the thing I lack the most of at the moment is accurate intel, I get up from my seat and head to the front door with an extra spring in my step. It’s time for my first broad excursion out of the orphanage and into Konoha.

December 15th, 3rd year after Kyuubi

I slump in my seat at dinner after wasting another afternoon traipsing around the village trying to figure out whether Hyūga Hizashi was still alive or the status of the Kumo delegation to Konoha. Regrettably, I have yet to find answers to either of those queries. Walking around the village while trying to be inconspicuous and eavesdropping on adults is incredibly tiresome, particularly as a three-year-old child. I repeatedly got asked if I'm lost and where my caretakers are. At that point, I usually whip out some excuse and make a tactical retreat since I don't think the orphanage staff will be agreeable with my little trips. Thankfully, people don't bother chasing me, likely because my clothes are clean and I don't look like some street rat.

On a more positive note, my tours of the village have yielded me with the answer to how I'm going to drop an anonymous tip to the Hokage. It's going to involve gloves, heaps of scented shampoo, and a little something called the post office.

As has lately become my habit during meals, I concentrate on my chakra and approximate what I think to be the feeling of stretching out my chakra and trying to feel out for anything else around me. Thus far, since deciding on a direction for my training on the day after I unlocked my chakra, I have not made any progress, but I persevere.

I continue concentrating through most of the meal when it happens.

I feel as if my chakra bumped against something, something foreign. My spoon drops from my fingers, and I barely have the presence of mind to swallow before any food can spill out between my lips. Immediately all my attention is turned to my chakra, and the feeling solidifies, there is definitely something there. My eyes go to where the chakra tells me I'll find the disturbance and see an adult female I am unfamiliar talking with one of the minders… Is that a new staff member?

Following a hunch, I continue to track her with my chakra while covertly watching the intruder and trying to gather as many details as I can. She looks to have a well-defined physique usually not found in women, along with an exceptionally balanced gait. They walk up to the area where the five-and-six-year-olds are sitting, and on the way pass close to me. I manage to get a glimpse of her hand as she gestures while talking and I see some callusing. She seems to be inspecting the children and looking for something.

That woman is almost definitely a kunoichi. And if I had to guess I'd say she is trying to assess the orphans and look for prospective students for the Academy.
However, that doesn't matter at all because I'm finally a Chakra Sensor!

It makes a lot of sense that first thing I'll be able to sense is a ninja. They naturally have many times more chakra than a civilian and so a much more noticeable presence. I just don't know if this is a recent development or something that's been going on for a long time because I never paid particular attention to any of the caretakers aside from noting their positions as part of my awareness training. For all I know, there could have been numerous shinobi streaming through the orphanage over the last few months, and I'd never noticed.

Still, this is a golden opportunity for me, and I'm going to capitalize on it as long as it lasts. I'm going to refine my sensing abilities as much as I can, before this scouting mission or whatever business the kunoichi was here on account of was done.

Over the next few days, I've been mostly concerned with practicing with my newfound ability, keeping track of the unnamed kunoichi, while she was, in turn, evaluating my older compatriots.

I was working on improving the power on multiple fronts. Foremost was extending my awareness training to my sensing abilities, to try and keep them on at all times and to make it so they will come as naturally to me as breathing. To date, that exercise was not succeeding as much as I'd hoped to it would, and I'm still forced to employ a large part of my attention for feeling out the visiting ninja. A secondary variable I was seeking to improve was the range of my ability. Here, the results of my practicing were showing some fruitful results. Where on that first dinner I could only feel her from a few meters meters and with no significant obstruction between us, I could now feel the kunoichi from almost a much greater margin and even through walls, though they cut my range to a fraction of its full length. I also attempted to fine-tune my chakra sense to be able to detect and perceive individuals with very little chakra, namely civilians. On that front, I've had slight but promising results. Now that I understand the feeling of foreign chakra a bit more, I'm able, with intense concentration, to feel wisps and whispers from most of the adults and a few of the children. It's fleeting and hardly precise, but it's still invigorating progress.

The entire discipline was exhilarating, to feel other people's chakra was the closest to a spiritual experience as I have ever gone through.

I am, however, starting to feel guilty over putting the matter of the Hyūga affair on the back burner. I resolve to continue with my trips to the village soon, even if the kunoichi remains at the orphanage.

December 26th, 3rd year after Kyuubi

Is my decision to pick up where I left off with my excursions to Konoha to gather intelligence on the Hyūga Affair today pure dumb luck or sheer stupidity on my part? I can't tell. The entire village is abuzz about a contingent of Kumo shinobi who are arriving tomorrow to sign a peace treaty.

I have just reached the orphanage after having run the entire way here and immediately hit the showers. After using a copious amount of soap and shampoo in an attempt to hide my scent, I dry off with a freshly laundered towel and don clean clothes. After finding one of the first-aid kits spread throughout the building, and taking a pair of latex gloves, I head over to one of the empty arts and crafts classrooms. Digging through the cabinets, I gather unopened package of pens and papers. Deciding to go with simplicity, I pen out a simple message, my calligraphy skewed but readable. "Kumo is going to abduct a Hyūga clan member." I persued upper year books to learn how to dictate that specific message. After folding the paper and writing "Hokage" clearly on top, I head out of the orphanage again at a more sedate pace.

After finding the post office, I use my burgeoning sensor talents to wait for an opportune moment.
where I can sense no nearby ninja, and no one seems to be paying attention to me or the mailbox. Once such moment arrives, I quickly walk by, slip my letter in and continue without breaking my stride. Turning at the nearest corner and breaking into a run, I cross my fingers in the hope that message makes it in time to make a difference, and that I made the right choice.

And that I don't come to regret this decision.
It turned out that my slapdash solution worked.

A few days after the fact, Konoha's gossip vine went whirring with news of a Kumo shinobi being apprehended while attempting to kidnap the Hyūga heiress. The same shinobi was also Kumo's head ninja and signee of the new peace treaty between the two villages, to add insult to injury. Subsequently, many people now viewed the piece of paper as worth less than nothing since not only was it veracity spoiled, but it also allowed a foreign agent to infiltrate the village and attack one of its most honored clans.

Kumo immediately washed its hands of the entire incident and disavowed their head ninja, claiming that he had been operating independently. The man seemed to have had the presence of mind supply a similar story when under the tender care of Konoha's T&I Division, and it was decided not to push him for an actual confession, seeing no benefit from rekindling aggressions with Kumo. Kumo's head ninja was summarily executed, his body cremated and ashes spread outside the borders of the Land of Fire. Some no-name Kumo ninja re-signed the treaty and relations between the villages normalized to a grudging cessation of hostilities.

Bonus point, I have yet to be dragged to the T&I Division to answer some very uncomfortable questions

About two weeks into the new year, the kunoichi masquerading as a staff member in the orphanage. At some point, I've come to dub her as my chakra sensing practice target, and have taken to keeping tabs on her for most of my waking hours, so her absence initially came to me as very bewildering. Ultimately, though, I was glad that she left. Firstly, sensing her chakra in the orphanage was like looking at a spotlight in a pitch-black room, blinding. With her gone, I finally started making breakthroughs in my efforts to pick up on civilians and lowering my threshold for detecting small chakra signatures. Secondly, and although I didn't care to admit to myself that this was the bigger reason, after spending so much time scoping out the kunoichi I began fearing I'd pick up some weird stalker tendencies.

Eventually, life returned to the routine it's been in before the debacle. However, I did continue venturing out of the orphanage on occasion, though now my destinations were some of the woods dotting the village. After reasoning that my physical conditioning and my ability with muscle enhancement have reached a passable stage, I wanted to take another shot at Tree Walking.

January 24th, 4th year after Kyuubi

This spot seems good enough. No road or building in sight, and I can't detect any shinobi either. I look around and try to find a tree suited for my purpose here today.

Lately, I've been finding my dwelling to be stifling my progress somewhat, what with my desire to progress to more advanced skills. Skills that are regrettably quite showy in their nature. The orphanage just lacks an appropriate place where I can both train said skills secretly, and damage to a certain extent.

Therefore, today, I set out in a random direction heading towards the outskirts of Konoha in the hopes of finding a suitable, unmarked, training ground.

That trek brought me to the wooden clearing I currently find myself in. It really is quite beautiful; the
smell of the leaves in the wind, the sound of running water from a nearby stream, I should get out more. Best of all, though, is that all of my senses are telling me the same thing. I'm completely alone.

After a quick survey, I pick a suitable tree and walk up to place my right foot against it. Spreading my chakra to said foot, I begin to very slowly build it up until I feel myself stick to the tree. A few minutes spent tugging and pulling on my leg assure of the strength of my chakra's hold of the tree. I start to concentrate my chakra in the various muscles and ligaments of my lower body as I'd been practicing and begin to feel the weightless sensation I've come to associate with augmented muscles. At this point, I start lifting my left foot off the ground and start swinging it towards the tree as well. Before managing to reach the bark, however, I find myself flung off the tree to skid for a meter on the grass before coming to a stop.

Blinking, I take stock of myself to make sure nothing is broken. Finding myself fine and generally no worse for wear I sigh in relief. The bark where my right foot previously sat has an impressive depression. Getting used to concentrating simultaneously on both my enhancing my muscles and streaming chakra through my feet is going to take time.

There were many reasons I didn't subscribe to Kakashi's, run up the tree and mark your progress method, and instead, choose to take the slower and more deliberate approach. For one, I don't have a kunai. Two, I don't support vandalism. And finally, I don't want to break my neck. Kakashi's genin had half a decade of training under their belt, whereas my skillset doesn't even include how to land on my feet properly.

A skill which, now that I think about it, should definitely go on my to-do list.

Sighing, I gather myself, straighten up, and approach the tree again.

This is going to take a while.

A while later

I'm shaking a little, but I've finally done it. It took me three days, with plenty of tumbles and too many close shaves for comfort, but the upshot is that I'm standing upside down below one of the tree's branches, and my stance, sans the shaking, is almost as steady as it would have been on the ground.

"Take that! Ground!" I flash my middle finger downwards, exclaiming "Send as many gravitons as you fucking want Earth! I've got your number now bitch!"

I pause, realizing I've now stooped to shouting at inanimate objects, barely stopping myself before I was going to raise my arms and tell the planet to come at me. Finding people I can talk to is something I really, really, need to do.

Taking a deep breath to compose myself, and making my way back to the tyrannical clutches of the ground, I flop down on the grass and lean my back against the mutilated trunk of my now second favorite tree.

All the training in the world isn't going to help me if I go insane.

Then again, Orochimaru, for example, is pretty darn insane, and he is a very accomplished shinobi. Maybe what I need is a hobby, I'm not a Nara, and cloud-gazing lost its novelty a long time ago. Something to think about. Which I immediately resolve to do some other time as I proceed to take a break, and pass a few minutes mindlessly picking at the grass.
Eventually, I decide it's time for the exercise I've been waiting for since I first started enhancing my muscles. Having gathered my second breath, I climb back to my feet and begin concentrating and molding more chakra. Slowly, but gaining speed, my chakra accelerates its circulation throughout my body. Pooling in my muscles, tendons, and bones, it strengthens and enforces. I feel my frame thrumming with energy, but I'm not sure how long I can keep it up.

ELECTING TO MOVE BEFORE LOSING MY NERVE, I VAULT UPWARDS TO THE NEAREST TREE.

A surprised whoop escapes my lips as I'm buffeted by the wind and sudden vertigo, barely righting myself to land feet first on the side of the trunk about four meters off the ground.

TAKING A MOMENT TO APPRECIATE WHAT I JUST ACHIEVED, A MANIAC GRIN SLOWLY STRETCHES ACROSS MY FACE. I PROCEED TO JUMP TO NEXT TREE WITH A MAD Cackle OF PURE JUBILATION.

THIS IS WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT! ALL THESE PEOPLE STUCK IN THEIR DAILY DRAMAS, BURDENED BY THEIR DUTIES. THEY FORGET TO ENJOY THE SIMPLE PLEASURES THIS LIFE HAS TO OFFER. MAYBE JUMPING AROUND AND TWISTING AT SPEEDS THAT WOULD HAVE MOST ACE PILOTS THROW UP AT COULD GET TIRESOME AT SOME POINT, BUT I'M SURE THERE ARE PLENTY OF WAYS TO LET LOOSE AROUND HERE. GET THOSE ENDOPHINS AND ADRENALINE RUNNING!

At first, I'm a bit shaky, almost missing a few trees, and getting the occasional mouthful of leaves. If nothing else, my chakra allows me to shrug off most of my mistakes. Half-way through I think I hit my stride, beginning to look half-way competent. After a few minutes I succeed in exhausting myself and manage to stumble onto flat ground, I tumble down in an undignified heap. Righting myself, I lie flat on my back and start gasping for air.

Or maybe, everybody here suffered from so much PTSD that they couldn't enjoy any kind physical exertion without getting flashbacks from past battlefields.

Damn, that's a depressing thought.

Back to getting a hobby. Mn. Kakashi reads porn in public, Jiraiya writes porn in public, Asuma smokes, Anko is an exhibitionist, and Orochimaru is a generally creepy SOB who likes to experiment on human beings.

What kind of hedonistic pleasure can I find to obsess over to keep me from going crazy?

Suddenly remembering my recent bout of yelling at the ground, I amend. Crazier.

By the time I wangled myself to an upright position and start my trek back towards the orphanage, I still don't know. Mentally shrugging my shoulders, I figure I have about a decade before I begin taking violent missions and the PTSD starts setting in.

Meh, it'll probably be some unhealthy combination of fatty foods, alcohol, and porn.

February 3rd, 4th year after Kyuubi

Water Walking is trickier than Tree Walking. But, it isn't a whole magnitude trickier. Also, I'm not forced to split my attention by simultaneously enforcing my body.

Having said that, I did suffer more plunges into the river than I'd care to admit before getting the knack for it. Luckily, I had the foresight to strip down to my shorts earlier, so my dry clothes are waiting for me on the bank, warming in the sun.

I situated myself on the river I've been hearing in the background while practicing Tree Walking
about a week ago, not far from a copse of scarred trees to which I've decided to deny any relation.

Another half hour and I figure my Jesus impression is good enough. Maybe I can try for a Plushenko. Modulating the chakra flowing out from the bottom of my feet, I attempt to prevent them from sticking to the surface and instead get slightest of lifts to reduce friction.

A few more plunges and I'm skimming over the surface of the water, as graceful as a swan. Fine, it's more like clumsy hippopotamuses, but this is a blast. It's even fun to fall if you don't mind skipping on the water for a bit when you manage to stumble with enough speed behind you.

When the initial excitement begins to wear thin, I come to a stop, and after a minor adjustment of my chakra, sit down in a cross-legged position. I entertain myself by gliding and spinning around on my ass while trying to think of more use I can draw from this exercise.

Recalling the issues multiple chakra manipulations gave me when I started Tree Walking, I contemplate what drill can be combined with Water Walking to verify my capability to do it without taking a dive.

I select Water Sticking, my shower-time chakra control trick.

Bobbing up and widening my stance, I focus chakra to the sides of my feet and my ankle. Soon, water is slowly beginning to be drawn up and shortly afterward, engulfs both my feet. Encouraged by my success, I send chakra to the skin of my shins and legs and smile as they're encased as well. Some wobbling ensued, but eventually, a continuous sheet of water covers every part of my body from the neck down. I also find that holding the water this way is easier than trying to balance multiple smaller sheets.

When I attempt to take a step, however, my legs protest from underneath me. Without realizing it, I've encumbered my small frame under a mass of water it could barely stand.

I go with the notion that has been slowly solidifying in my mind since coming to this world; most problems are solvable with the correct application of chakra. Molding yet more chakra, I start reinforcing my muscles. However, a third simultaneous chakra exercise quickly proves too much, and I take another plunge into the river.

February 7th, 4th year after Kyuubi

The surface of the river is disturbed by a great splash of water as if caused by a heavy object falling from significant altitude. That splash is soon followed by a similar one, and another, and another, soon turning into a chain with no end in sight.

I grin like an idiot and heave myself into the air again. My feet, emitting a steady stream of chakra towards the water to stabilize the launching point. My muscles, thrumming with chakra to support the tremendous weight that I'm carrying. And my skin exhausting chakra to hold together the giant sphere of water which encapsulates me completely below the neck.

Bouncing about, my sphere acts like a cushion as I find myself hitting various trees and rocks dotting the area, not yet used to maneuvering with the added weight. A few more minutes of jumping back and forth, and the practice, along with the rest of day's drilling tops me off. I jump onto the bank, softening the blow by letting my liquid envelope absorb the impact, setting off ripples across its surface. Once on dry ground, the sudden urge for one last bit of showmanship strikes me. Twisting my chakra and pushing it outwards, the sphere explodes in all directions in a dazzling spectacle.

Moments later, my lack of judgment becomes apparent as water sprays the entire area. Specifically,
because the clothes I've painstakingly placed at a safe distance from the waterfront have now become water-logged.

Idly lamenting at the fate of my wet garments, I crouch down and prod them in the hope that they aren't quite as soaked as they appear. Alas, my hopes are unfounded, and I'm about to set them out to dry when it happens.

A disturbance in the force.

Ok, more like a chakra signature that I've somehow completely missed, moving in my general direction. It seems that in all the excitement; my situational awareness has slipped somewhat because I'm now finding a signature pinging against my sensor abilities, just beyond my range of sight, obscured by the tree front.

With the signature too close to make a clean getaway, I observe my surroundings for anything suspicious. Not finding any, aside from an unusually wet ground and set of clothes, I decide to hold my ground and see what I'm facing.

Making sure not to turn towards the approaching intruder, I try to glimpse from the corner of my eye to where I'm feeling them coming from. Slowly, a figure started to appear from between the trees. Shorter than what I thought it would be, considering the amount of chakra I feel permeating it, but I definitely catch the glint of a forehead protector. Eventually, the stranger makes a noticeable sound, brushing against the greenery, and I make my best acting at a fumbling turn and falling on my ass to finally get a look at my mystery guest.

While I probably won't make it in Hollywood, pretending to be a child for the last few months has sharpened my acting skills to a halfway believable level, in my humble opinion.

Still, taking stock of the shinobi before me, I can't quite believe my luck. Wearing navy blue T-shirt and black shorts, a thigh kunai holster along with bandages covering his legs and forearms. Jet black hair and onyx eyes, pointed directly at me, are set in a face that would have looked its age if it weren't for an iconic pair of deeply pronounced tear-troughs. At what I guess to be about eight years' old, there can be no mistake.

Uchiha Itachi.

I'm thankful the surprise on my face doesn't appear entirely out of place considering the situation. As he steps beyond the tree-line and comes to a stop a few feet away from me, I'm suddenly reminded that I'm facing a certified genius. I try to school my face a bit before he notices any tells of recognition I may be unconsciously showing. Figuring the best bet is to channel my inner three-year-old, I take the initiative.

"H-Hey mister, you scared me!" I exclaim. Again, I'm probably not the best actor, but the hitch in my voice can probably be explained away as apprehension natural to a child meeting a stranger. Not to mention the real anxiety I feel at this very moment.

Disquietingly, Itachi doesn't immediately respond to the call. Instead, he takes his time to slowly survey me and the area, taking in every detail. I notice his eyes sliding over my wet clothes, laid out on the grass, the river, and the unusually wet patch of land surrounding us, before finally turning to me.

At last, he responds, "Excuse me, but aren't you a little young to be out here by yourself?" he smiles at me with what I assume to be a disarming expression. I'm surprised by the tenor and tone of his voice, light and comforting, probably similar to how he addresses his little brother. I note once more
that this is just an eight-year-old boy, despite how prodigious he is, and his perception is probably a bit skewed as to what to expect from a child my age.

Feeling calmer despite myself, I shoot back a not entirely thought out response. "Aren't you a little young to be a ninja?" He seems taken aback for a moment, but his face is soon overtaken with a more genuine smile. He chuckles freely for a bit, only to take on a more melancholy look once the apparent humor subsides.

"I guess you're right, but the needs of the many overtake the needs of the individual, and so we must sometimes suffer through hardships we would not have wanted to otherwise." He replies.

Whoa, I did not expect a philosophy dump.

So this is it. The child who will become the man who would shoulder a burden inconceivable to any sane person.

I haven't had the chance to flex my philosophical muscles beyond internal debates since coming to this world, and I'd love to try to discuss the merits and faults of his little spiel. Unfortunately, as fun as waxing on about philosophy is, there is no plausible way for a child my age to debate at a level I'd enjoy or be taken seriously. Besides, I need consider the possible consequences if I actually succeeded in turning Itachi's outlook on life.

"Huh?" There, that should do it. Classic three and a half years old. I could have gone with the tried and true method of asking "Why?" until the adult quit in frustration, but I neither have the patience nor is it appropriate to the situation.

In the face of my eloquent response, Itachi blinks and adopts an apologetic expression. "Sorry, sorry, it seems I've gotten ahead of myself." He smiles at me and gives a little bow as he introduces himself. "My name is Uchiha Itachi, genin of Konohagakure."

Pointing my thumb at myself, I return, "I'm Hakaru!" Happy go lucky is an attitude I've gotten quite good at channeling since waking up.

"Well Hakaru-san, would you like me to take you back to the orphanage?" Damn, he's quick, I don't even catch a pause. Itachi immediately deduced my familial status, probably already guessed it, with my lack of family name clinching it.

Most times, kids my age are too self-absorbed to notice when people pick up on details they haven't already relinquished. However, while I can leave it at that and ignore the issue, this is Uchiha Itachi, I figure I'd challenge him a bit on this front and get another feel for the guy. Partially because of my pride, and part because I want to appear a little interesting to have some chance of a future in with the guy.

"How do you know I live in the orphanage?" Itachi is already passed me and walking towards my clothes, not even waiting for a response.

Instead on answering, he crouches down and makes a few of what I guess to be hand-seals in rapid succession, far too fast for me to track. Without yelling out any technique name, he takes a deep breath and breathes out a small but sustained stream of flames just above where my water-logged garments lie.

After half a minute the stream abates, and he stands up to look at me. "How about you clothe yourself, and we head on home?" He remarks expectantly, again with that disarming smile.

I mentally narrow my eyes. He ignored my question.
Being ignored and having to repeat myself are two things I'm not particularly fond of, the first even more so than the second. I completely understand this approach when dealing with children, whenever most of my year mates opened their mouths most things that came out were meaningless drivel. Furthermore, now that I think about it, Sasuke is just about my age, and he's probably just a mindless little bundle of cuteness at this point. Still, it is grating.

Suddenly no longer in the mood for this conversation, after realizing that there is little chance of me getting more out of it without divulging anything I'm unwilling to reveal, I swiftly throw on my clothes. Thankfully, Itachi's technique was effective, and I find myself comfortably warm. Muttering a quick thanks, and begging off the unwanted escort since orphanage staff still aren't aware of my little excursions, I begin running back to my current abode.

As I move further away, I leave behind a perplexed genin.

After my anticlimactic meeting with Itachi, I tried to make sure not to be caught unprepared again, which is harder than it sounds. As much as I tried to train my young brain to constantly pay attention to my surroundings, especially with my new found sensor ability, I found that I couldn't gauge myself without someone to test me. There was no way of knowing how many important details I was constantly missing.

I did occasionally run into shinobi while training in Konoha's woods, though more often than not my they were noticed far earlier than in my encounter with Itachi. Most ninjas didn't even come into my line of sight, and of those that did only a singular few bothered questioning what a young child was doing alone in the woods. Thankfully, no one has yet to spot me manipulating chakra, and I'd like to think it's partially the result of my improving perception.

At some point near the middle of March, my senses started to regularly pick up on another ninja in the orphanage. This time, I had no idea if they were a shinobi or kunoichi as rather than worm into the orphanage workforce, this one seemed to observe from the shadows, a practice in which they were very proficient. I only ever managed to catch a silhouette, mostly not even that, and even then only after my chakra sense has alerted me to their presence. There was probably some jutsu involved.

The mysterious intruder eventually left about a month later, leading me to conclude that Konoha probably made a quarterly one-month inspection of its orphans to scout for potential ninja. I also started to notice that there seemed to be a similar pattern of batches of children, ages five to six, bragging about going to become ninja and leaving the orphanage. Later, some of this children quietly returned, shamefaced and refusing to talk about their experience, doubtlessly washed-out of the program after proving inadequate for the shinobi lifestyle.

It was from those kids that I succeeded in learning my first few hand seals. I approached them individually and asked about the cool things they learned. Although initially stubborn in their silence, I was able to win over many by appealing to their baser emotions. Kids have the vanity of any adult you will meet. Coupled with wounded pride, I soon got to hear about the lessons they had in the Shinobi Academy. It wasn't much; these were the dropouts after all. Still, I did manage to gather what I think to be the correct form for some hand seals. As a result, I had something new to add to my list of things to practice.

Which was great, since I was in dire need of some variety in my routine. Chakra control exercises were getting dull. I had reached a plateau in the sum complexity of simultaneous chakra manipulations I can perform, pushing past it was proving to be discouragingly challenging. My physical conditioning was at what I figured to be far ahead of the curve for my age group, and I was leery of attempting to take it further. Stone throwing, or playing ninja, was inevitably forbidden from the playground after some of the kids got overzealous. As a result, I've mostly dropped accuracy
training since there was no noticeable benefit anyway.

On a more positive note, my reserves have now reached the point where a single night's sleep was insufficient to replenish them completely. Though, I didn't know if that was a deficiency on the side of my chakra regeneration. I was already eating nearly twice as the kids around me. Nevertheless, I resolved to make sure that my reserves were never full, so that were no part of the day where my chakra wasn't replenishing itself, in the hope that the continued stimulation will cause my body/soul/whatever to regenerate it faster.

As time went on, I thought there might have been an improvement, but gauging myself was not a trivial thing when all I had to go on was feeling, without even a clock to try to take any measurements.

A few months after my first encounter with Itachi, with my chakra control training starting to show increasingly diminishing results, I thought it was time to start experimenting with something new.

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June 11th, 4th year after Kyuubi

Chakra chakra chakra chakra chakra... chakra chakra...

I've been doing nothing but playing with it for months now, but my understanding of its nature is barely any better than it was at the start. Supposedly, I mold chakra by combining my physical and spiritual energies, yang and yin respectively, and I kind of understand that. I sort of get what those two things were.

What I don't understand, however, is why some people are more predisposed for one than the other, or why some people simply have greater physical or spiritual energies than others. This isn't about amounts, oh no. A handful of the shinobi I sometimes sense had energies that felt denser... broader. More potent is perhaps the best description.

From what I remember and understand, I think the Uchiha clan, descendants of Indra, are an example of strong spiritual energies, yin. While their Senju and Uzumaki counterparts, descendants of Asura, are examples of strong physical energies, yang.

A question arises as a result. Are those qualities solely inborn, or can they also be cultivated? And if so, how?

If I want to strengthen my physical energies, do I need to train like Rock Lee? To bring my body to the peak of physical conditioning and beyond? Or maybe it's just about eating a healthy diet and having a healthy lifestyle... And as for spiritual energies... what? I consider myself as a relatively enlightened and open minded individual, but is that what this is about? Knowledge? Meditation? So many questions, and no one to turn to for answers.

Deep breaths.

No answers are forthcoming, the best I can do is try a bit of everything and hope for the best. This are the most significant years in a person's development; I must make the best of them.

Still. I survey the plot of woodland I currently find myself in. That isn't why I'm out here today.

Aside from yin and yang, I've yet to touch upon five more facets to chakra.

Nature transformations.
I walk to a nearby pond and silently observe my reflection.

Light skin, now tanned by countless hours spent outdoors. Spiky brown hair. Blue eyes. About four years old. No strong resemblance to any major Naruto character that I can think of. Also, I look like a damn anime character.

The reason for the self-inspection is me trying to guess my nature affinity by looking for physical traits I share with a shinobi of a known affinity. Not the most scientific method, I'm aware, but needs must.

I got nothing.

It's pretty much a moot point anyway, I know about the basic methodology behind only two of the five elements.

Wind and lightning.

... ...

Lightning it is!

There are actually a few reasons why I decide to go with element I know the least about, from the show's perspective that is. Firstly, it's incredibly unlikely I share an affinity with the protagonist. Secondly, I'm not sure if it's fanon, but there's a chance wind affinity is exceedingly rare in Konoha. And lastly, I'm from the 21st century; electricity is figuratively in my blood.

Besides, whichever one I choose, there's an 80 percent chance I'll miss my primary affinity. But that's fine; I'm not shooting for one affinity. Jōnin are supposed to have two or three, and I need to be far stronger than your average jōnin. Worst-case scenario, if lightning proves to be practically impossible, I'll switch over to wind. The chances that those two are my bottom affinities are like… 10 percent.

I can live with numbers like that.

Having concluded that little dilemma, I proceed to grab a leaf, sit down with my back against a tree, and begin figuring out how to get the leaf to crinkle.

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**June 18th, 4th year after Kyuubi**

So far, nature transformation training is proving to be just as hard as advertised in the original story, if not harder. I've been going at it for a week now, and the best success that came my way thus far is my hair standing up straight, and the occasional self-inflicted zapping. I can't even properly direct what little electricity I do manage to churn together, resulting in the aforementioned self-inflicted zapping decorating my hands with light singe marks. At my current level, occasionally, the leaf does deform a little, but not nearly enough, and I have yet to pull it off without electrocuting myself.

Vibrating chakra to produce electricity is hardly a sufficient explanation for the level of control necessary here. Unfortunately, aside from my basic understanding of electricity, that half-remembered description is all I have to go on. Playing around and attempting to create positive and negative charges seems to improve my proficiency a bit, but I barely understand what I'm doing half
the time. I'm becoming increasingly convinced that the shinobi in this world simply weren't sufficiently scientifically fluent to adequately explain the mechanics of lightning nature transformation.

Who am I kidding? They are probably just hoarding the knowledge like the paranoid schmucks they are.

Today, as has become the norm for me over time, I'm once more hiking to one of the secluded areas dotting the village to practice with my chakra. However, whereas on any other day I don't bother with bringing anything besides the clothes on my back, for the first time, I come equipped with a specialized training instrument. A pocketful of balloons nicked off of one of the orphanage's cupboards.

You see, while I had initially thought to start this training at a much later stage, nature transformation training got me thinking. Thinking about the parallels between my training and Naruto's.

While it isn't a particularly correct comparison to make, some lines could be drawn. All that Naruto was taught in the realm of chakra control was Tree Walking and Water Walking before he learned this technique. I knew Tree Walking and Water Walking, so by extension, I am also ready to learn the technique. Pretty simplistic thinking, I know, but the point remains. I want to try my hand at the so-called highest form of chakra shape transformation. The Rasengan.

I don't think my eventual fighting style will be a sort of replica of Naruto's. It's just that the Rasengan has shown itself to have a lot of utility, so I figure it's a tool I want to have under my belt if the situation ever called for it.

Also, on an entirely, completely and totally unrelated bonus point: unlike that damned lightning nature transformation, this technique actually has a well-documented, multi-staged, instructive program.

Having concluded that little bout of internal musing, and having found my wandering legs have brought me to a suitable forest clearing, I turn to a nearby stream and fill my first balloon with water.

After a few steps away from the water, I widen my stance and bring my dominant right hand clutching the balloon up. Channeling chakra into the water within is a simple enough task.

I then spend the following half hour spinning my chakra clockwise and counter-clockwise until I'm sure of the right orientation for me. It may be pure paranoia, but I don't want to ask anyone in what direction the grain of my hair spins.

Slowly and deliberately, more axes of rotation are added to the chakra. Once the total directions of rotation in the water are judged to be enough and the balloon is slightly roiling beneath the surface, I begin accelerating the rotation.

Two minutes in, the balloon bursts.

Blink.

Further attempts prove that the first try was not, as a matter of fact, a fluke. All in all, I have completed the first stage of the Rasengan in about an hour. I assumed that by now my chakra control is a few steps ahead of where Naruto's was when he underwent this training… Then again, I do know all of its secrets rather than needing to figure them out by myself.

Trying the reproduce my success in my non-dominant hand is slightly more challenging and doing the same with air in the balloon instead of water is harder still, but doable. Overall, this
accomplishment is a great change of pace from the snail-paced progress I'm having with lightning nature transformation.

Because I haven't come prepared with a rubber ball for the next phase, and since I feel like having a bit of fun. The rest of the afternoon is spent practicing balance and acrobatics by jumping between the trees like a jacked-up monkey.

Even hours later, after thoroughly exhausting myself, there's a spring in my step as I make my way back to my current dwelling.

> August 29th, 4th year after Kyuubi

"Why won't this damn ball burst???" I shout at the darkening sky.

For the umpteenth time, the cynic in me tells me I should have seen this coming. First step, easy. Second step, not so much.

It turns out that it takes quite a bit more than control to complete the Rasengan. There's something I'm missing, something that came so naturally to Naruto they didn't even bother mentioning it in the story.

I've been accelerating my chakra as far as I could until the whirring drowned out all other noises. I even tried drawing a little spiral on my palm to focus on, to ensure that my concentration isn't faulty. I've been pushing as much chakra as possible into the ball, but at some point, it just becomes immovable and won't accept any more.

Eventually, I tried forming the technique without using the ball so I could inspect it. The shape was right, spherical and smooth, and so was the movement inside, a chaotic maelstrom of manic energy. However, it looks shallow and muffled. It doesn't glow like I remember it should.

Until I figure out whatever it is that I'm missing that Naruto takes for granted, it seems, there's little chance of me completing the Rasengan.

The ball drops impassively from my sore hand. My chakra circulatory system has become stressed for what I think is the first time, which made sense. I have never spent so much time pushing it like with the Rasengan, channeling large chunks of my chakra through the same spot over and over again.

Flopping down on my back, I rest my head against the cool grass. I stretch my arm up to the sky and inspect my aching hand, revealing it to be decorated by scuff marks from light chakra friction burns. The primary reason the pain isn't any worse is that I'm diversifying my time by cross-training this technique along with my lightning chakra nature transformation.

On which, I think, I'm making some real progress. Crinkling leaves has been mastered a few days back, and while in the process I've taught myself to more or less insulate myself from my own lightning chakra and its electricity byproduct, so no more self-induced electrocution.

Truly a momentous achievement to celebrate.

Heh, sometimes I wonder if I'm as funny as I think, or it's just the isolation creeping in.

My arm comes back down to rest comfortably beside me on the grass.

Anyhow, I’ve picked up a few packages of lightbulbs from orphanage to play around with. It's
quickly becoming apparent that as much as lighting them is an issue, to not fry the lightbulbs is so much more so. Some burn out instantly, but I’m sensing that I might manage a modicum of restraint soon. Lightning chakra is a fickle thing, not easily curbed. Overall, a great exercise in control. When the lightbulbs run, I don’t think I’ll make to plunder the orphanage again anytime soon. Hope I’m not left hanging.

My restful contemplation is disturbed when my sensor ability tells me of a nearby chakra presence, moving in my broad direction. Not bothering to move, I elect to inspect the foreign chakra.

It's significant, definitely ninja, but calm at the moment. Also, this presence feels familiar.

I feel no rush; there's nothing incriminating to be found in my little clearing. Still, I am interested in seeing who it's going to be, so I start pulling myself to a more upright position.

I bounce the rubber ball idly while waiting.

Soon enough, a familiar pint-sized shinobi appears from between the brush.

"Hello Itachi-san!" I call quasi-excitedly.

An interesting opportunity.

Since my first meeting with Itachi, the eventual massacre of his clan by his own hands has been a matter of internal debate for me. Weighing the pros and cons of preventing the massacre, and wondering if I should just keep my nose out of the issue entirely. All this without considering how I'd even go about it.

The risks are great. Foremost, if I prevent the massacre, but fail to prevent the Uchiha coup, the result could be a civil war that may incite a shinobi world war that will leave all the villages weakened before the looming threat. Secondly, the Eye of the Moon Plan is entirely reliant on the existence of a pair of Rinnegan. Obito and Danzo having access to a few extra Sharingan pairs is problematic, the chance of there being even a single extra pair of Mangekyo Sharingan running around is far more so. Madara already proved that the Mangekyo Sharingan is only a bit of Senju DNA away from becoming a Rinnegan. Finally, without Obito and Danzo hogging all the Sharingan to themselves, a pre-self-redemption Orochimaru could get his hands on a pair.

Shudder.

On the other hand. Konoha gets to keep a few dozen shinobi. Plus, this is probably about 200 people overall whose life I weigh here. As a somewhat sane and functional member of society, I must place value on the life of a human being. As mitigating factors for the risks, I do remember that Madara's Mangekyo evolved to become a Rinnegan many years after Madara incorporated Hashirama's cells into himself, heck, maybe it's only possible for an Eternal Mangekyo Sharingan. Also, the secret of that evolution is known only to Madara and perhaps Obito. Additionally, while Orochimaru gaining a regular pair of Sharingan will give him an edge, at the levels he is already fighting at, that advantage isn't a game changer.

Sigh. If only the Hyūga and the Uchiha realize that the middle ground is the best place to be on this matter. Put on a seal that destroys the eyes on death, but don't add a freaking brain destroying remote trigger to enslave half your family. Simple, right?

In the end, I decided to proceed with a tentative yes, but only if I find a way to also prevent civil war in Konoha.

Itachi pauses and turns to face me, appearing startled by his solitary jaunt through the woods being
disrupted. Sharp eyes scrutinize me, expression turning from confusion to recognition.

"Hello, Hakaru-san" he replies, as he veers course to walk towards me.

"I see you still like to go out on your own. Has no one ever explained to you it's dangerous for a small child to be alone here in the forest?" he says in an entirely pleasant manner before stopping in front of me.

I crane my head a little to meet his gaze. "They forgot to explain that to you too" I respond amicably. A grin forms on my face when I can't help but notice how this conversation his mirroring the one we had during our first meeting. By the light smile sprouting on Itachi’s face, I'd guess he realized the same.

"You know." I start before he has a chance to offer another escort out of the forest. "I've thought about what you said last time." I fake a look of concentration.

"Oh?" Itachi makes an interested expression, though I can't tell if it's genuine or if he's just humoring me.

"Yeah, you said that one person should make sacrifices if it's good for a lot of people" I choose my words carefully, appearing like a child attempting to sound smart when actually, I'm dumbing down my expressions while trying to preserve the overall message. "And I think that you should definitely become Hokage!" I announce proudly as if I had just imparted a great tidbit of wisdom.

Whatever it was that Itachi expected to hear; if the wide-eyed facial expression is anything to go by, this surely is not it. In fact, this is probably the most taken aback I'd ever seen him, in this reality or otherwise.

I continue, "We had an old man in a red robe who came to the orphanage and told us about Will of Fire and the Hokage, and how it's their job to protect the whole the village." That lecture was so long ago I can't even remember anything relating to it besides a sense of propaganda, but Itachi doesn't know that, so I continue eagerly conveying my message. "And I thought it must be very hard to protect an entire village by yourself, so it's like a sacrifice, so there!" Concluding, I beam at the Uchiha's face, which now shows a guarded smile.

"Is that so?" he tries to hold it back, but his tone has taken on a much warmer tune from before, he almost sounds excited.

Yes!

I cross my arms, give a voice of affirmation, and nod my head.

This is it, my in with Uchiha Itachi. To have any chance to derail the massacre, I need to get close to one of the major players. Itachi is probably the sanest and most rational of them, besides the Third Hokage, and has also shown himself to be the most accessible thus far.

It may be cliché, but compliments can get you far if you know the right ones to use. Itachi is far too used to people praising his prowess as a shinobi, and if anything, being a pacifist, he may even resent those praises. To butter him up, I need to turn to the qualities he most appreciates. Qualities that due to his pacifistic nature, rarely get admired in a militarized village like Konoha.

By lauding and recognizing his views, to the point of suggesting he should be Hokage because of his outlook rather than his skills as a ninja, I may have endeared myself to Itachi in a way few have. While my status as a young child is liable to lessen the impact of my commendations, Itachi is still only a child himself, and being a child prodigy he probably has a different outlook on such things.
Finally, Itachi brings himself to answer. He starts hesitantly, "Well actually-." Itachi pauses suddenly, superstitiously scanning the area. Or not, you can never really tell with shinobi, and I'm sure it's possible to fool even chakra sensors like myself. Apparently, he judges the area to be clear because he leans closer, and continuous nervously. "The truth is that my dream is to become Hokage," he says it like he's revealing an embarrassing secret.

My next smile is entirely genuine.

Not only was this something I had no idea about, and it appears that I'm making actual progress in befriending Itachi, it's also a pretty great idea. In the short-term at least, the guy does die of some terminal illness a dozen years from now.

Hmm, I wonder if any of the changes I bring about will inadvertently prevent that from happening.

"Unfortunately," My musings are interrupted by Itachi, his demeanor having taken a turn to the melancholy during my short lapse of attention. "Such dreams are not meant to be."

Before I have a chance to question that statement, he abruptly straightens. "Goodbye Hakaru-kun, I hope that we meet again," he tells me and withdraws back the way he came from.

Rather than push, I settle with answering with similar parting words and a wave goodbye.

Not meant to be my ass. The next time we'll meet I should try to talk to Itachi about that fatalistic self-sacrifice thing he has going on. He needs to tone it down a bit; extreme utilitarianism has some questionable consequences in the long run.

Still, nice talk.
There's no real instruction that I recall for lightning nature transformation beyond vibration. Even leaf crinkling was a conjuncture thought up after by borrowing a concept from wind transformation training. Before coming up with the lightbulb idea, I'd considered teaching the other children how to produce static electricity with carpets and the like so they'd start zapping each other, and I could covertly test my control by zapping them lightly with chakra. Thankfully, for the children and the soundness of my own mind, I swiftly realized that experimenting on children is Orochimaru's thing. The fewer parallels that could be drawn between him and me, the better.

So, I've messed around with holding a current between my hands, burning letters on the ground, and generally being a safety hazard. That is until I recently dug up a little tidbit from the back of my head. Chakra Flow is a technique that can be used to imbue an object with nature element chakra to various effects. And, while I do not have access to the chakra conductive metal weapons a shinobi would usually use in conjunction with the technique, such a weapon is not actually necessary. I have a fuzzy memory of Killer B imbuing a plain pencil, an item with very low electric conductivity, with lightning chakra to multiple its penetration potential many times over and using it as a throwing weapon.

As such, I've taken to attempting to replicate this feat myself with the means available to me. Namely, various writing utensils nicked from arts and crafts classes, with the occasional stick of wood picked up from the forest ground. So far, it seems my lightning chakra is more inclined to use up what little electricity conduction potential my Chakra Flow targets have before burning them to a crisp, rather than enhancing their piercing capability in any way. And that is the best kind of failure I can hope for currently. Sometimes, whatever it is that I was channeling my lightning chakra into could almost spontaneously explode, not to mention the fumes I inhale when some of the more synthetic components burn up. This training is proving to be one of the most traumatic I've had to go through.

Nevertheless, my resolve is firm. Lightning may be a bitch to handle, but it's a bitch I mean to one day master.

November 7th, 4th year after Kyuubi

A buzzing sound permeates the woods. An irregular cacophony abnormal to the area.

I sit cross-legged, balancing destructive potential. Each fist rests on a knee, together they grasp between them a metal ruler sheathed in a blue aura of crackling lightning chakra.

While some would say that using an electrically conductive material for lightning Chakra Flow is a crutch, I will... Agree with them. Imbuing metal with lighting chakra was so much easier, and it's not like most any weapon I'll ever use with chakra flow won't be metallic anyway, so I don't think the word crutch is appropriate anyway.

Even so, I have made significant progress with the junk I'd been using up to this point. Whatever stick or writing instrument I choose to practice on, is now preserving more or less whole for an increasingly prolonged period. If only I didn't have to split my attention between keeping my lightning chakra from destroying the receptacle and shaping it to my desired effect.

Metal on the other hand, unlike plastic and wood, it is just so malleable. The way it interacts with lightning chakra makes both tasks much simpler.
It just goes to show Killer B's talent, to be able to charge a pencil so nonchalantly.

Another peeve-

ZAP.

"Youch!"

The ruler flies out my stinging hands after a slip in concentration inflicted me with accidental self-electrocution.

SSSSSST

Coincidentally, the ruler fell to the ground edge-first and sunk in about five centimeters through.

Between cursing myself and rubbing feeling back into my hands, I jump to my feet and start pacing, and trying to sum up my latest accident.

Despite the advances brought on by the ruler, I'm having trouble getting the penetrating effect to last after throwing it. My latest try was similar to the previous ones, except for infusing as much lightning chakra as I could handle, or apparently couldn't handle, into the makeshift weapon.

That was like, what? Half a second airtime? That's a very close range throw. On the other hand, there was practically no force behind it when it reached the ground. The soil is soft. Semi-sharp object…

Bah! It doesn't matter if I can't even pull it off without zapping myself.

After crouching and pulling the ruler up, I face a tree at tossing distance and prepare to try again.

Lightning chakra engulfs the ruler as a buzzing sound returns to the clearing. Adjusting my grip and quipping an insincere "Sorry tree," I fling the implement forward.

Being untrained in weapon throwing, the ruler flips through the air as it flies towards its target, bleeding chakra the entire way. The missile hits the tree with a side rather than an edge, bouncing off ineffectually and leaving behind only a shallow gash.

Not deterred, I walk up to the tree to grab my ruler and step back to try again.

On my second attempt, the ruler luckily happens to collide with the tree edge first, though only penetrates a centimeter. Seconds later, gravity reaffirms its hold, and the implement is pulled from its tenuous hold of the tree to fall to the dirt.

For my third attempt, I push myself further with the amount of lightning chakra saturating the ruler, demanding the lion's share of my concentration to keep in check. Pulling my arm back, I prepare-

ZAP

"Shit!"

I immediately grab my hand and begin massaging it, willing the burning sting and subsequent numbness to go away.

SSSSSST

This time, the ruler plunges halfway through in the ground.
Whipping my hand forward and pointing, I exclaim "Fuck you, tree!"

A few moments later, when no response is forthcoming, I sigh and bend forward to pick up the rule-

"ZAP"

"GRRRR."

Only to be rewarded with a light electrocution by the latent electricity still present in the metal.

"You think this is funny, tree???

"The steady silence I receive in response only serves to infuriate me further.

Bending forward again, with my other arm now engulfed in a nimbus of lightning chakra, I close my fist around the ruler. The aura extends to encompass the metal strip as well while I swiftly march up to the tree.

Drawing my hand back, I spit "Well fuck you too! Prison yard-jutsu: Shank no Jutsu!" I propel my arm forward and drive the ruler into the bark up to my fist.

"Shank! Shank! Shank! Shank!"

Woodchips and pieces of bark fly in the air as I vent my frustrations on the hapless tree, interposing sporadic cleaving motions between all the stabs. Soon, the tree starts to creak under its weight, on a trunk that is deteriorating by the minute.

CRUNCH

When the trunk can bear no more and finally snaps, in an obvious final attempt of retribution for the unwarranted assault, it predictably falls in my direction.

Thankfully, as the once proud tree comes tumbling down, I have the presence of mind to notice and jump sideways to the ground rather than be squashed like an insect.

CRASH

Ha! Presumptuous sapling, your death curse holds no sway over me.

---

November 12th, 4th year after Kyuubi

I'm slowly coming to the understanding that this isolation is... unbalancing me.

Human beings do not function optimally in prolonged seclusion. And, while I'm probably more adept than most at weathering loneliness, perhaps only the mentally disturbed are truly exempt.

I feel that my training may be suffering as a result. My mind not as focused, resolve, not as strong. Progress is being made, indeed, but maybe not as much as can be. Even my concentration, and therefore my situational awareness is suffering. I worry this might lead to an inadvertent exposure.

Aside from an increasingly erratic behavior that may or may not be a humorous attempt at levity, there are also additional symptoms. Conversations with the children surrounding me in the orphanage, which I have initially found mind-numbingly inane, were slowly becoming more attractive. Degradingly, I am slowly becoming needier of physical human contact, such that I've taken to occasionally demanding hugs from some of the nicer caretakers like most of the children my
age do once in a while.

Unfortunately, while these interactions offer a respite from the isolation, they are deemed insufficient. Perhaps it's just pride and vanity, finding the type of socialization that can be made in the orphanage to be embarrassing, and a possible sign of mental degradation. Or it could just be how thoroughly everything I do in that place feels fake.

Showing myself to be significantly more intelligent compared to other children of my supposed age to try to get more stimulating interactions is regrettably not an option. A genius child orphan is interesting, and everything interesting gets a target painted on it in a village populated by paranoid ninja. Maybe I'm wrong, and the one who is paranoid is me, but there's another matter. I'm not a genius, honest; I just have a ridiculous head start on everyone else. Initially that can be enough, but eventually, people will start to notice that I'm not as sharp as I should be, not making logical deductions fast enough, or whatever it is geniuses do. That's the point where I turn from interesting to suspicious, a label even more dangerous to carry in this world.

Therefore, to ease my fraying nerves, today I'm trying a new approach of adding variety to my life.

As I walk out of the front doors, I note that the Sun is shining, the birds are singing, and the weather is comfortably warm. A great Saturday morning to tour Konoha.

While I've traversed parts of the village in the past, it was always with purpose. Mostly in search of areas to train, and gathering intelligence on the Hyūga Affair close to a year back.

Today I'm going out as the tourist that I am, albeit an inter-dimensional one, to enjoy drifting through an exciting and foreign new place, the Hidden Leaf Village. I intend to take in the sights and the smells, look at the people, and get a more personal feel for this town.

Taking a deep breath of fresh air, I set my shoulders and begin marching towards the most prominent hallmark of the village, Hokage Rock.

Konoha, though it is called a village, is more like a large city, and consequently, cannot be toured in a single day. Which was good, as I found sightseeing to be a genuinely enjoyable experience, and planned to make time for it on a weekly basis. If nothing else, it was probably also wise to have the town's general layout and its famous sites fixed in the back of my head.

December 17th, 4th year after Kyuubi

In a multitude of ways, Konoha is a prosperous city.

Everything looks vibrant and full of life. The foreign and colorful architecture, the plethora of flora planted throughout the city, and the lively populace.

A variety of folks crowd Konoha's streets. People going about their daily routines, foreigners with various destinations, children running and playing, and more.

Oh. And ninjas.

Walking side by side with their civilian counterparts are a great many shinobi. Some are walking leisurely on the ground, while others are running on some task or errand. I even spot a few jumping between the rooftops. Few are missed, as each is a beacon to my chakra sense.

I walk through the morning market, enjoying the upbeat ambiance while munching on an apple. I have no money to pay for the healthy treat, but Konoha is a place of abundance, and its people are
generous. A charming child of four can only walk empty-handed so far through the market, before receiving some manner of fruit or treat and a pat on the head.

An inkling as to the reason for the fervent loyalty most of its shinobi hold for the village is forming in my head. That which men and women have laid down their lives to preserve, this feeling of home, family, and community. A place of harmony, something precious to those who can appreciate it, who understand the hefty price of discord and war.

It's impressive and educating, but I want to see the rest of this world, to visit all the great ninja villages, the capitals, and other large cities. Being a resident of this world, I want to know it, to get its measure.

As if summoned by the heavy topics my thoughts have turned to, I spot one of the individuals who may one day prove to cherish this village more than almost any other. Ironically, on his shoulders, he is carrying a person who, in another time, spat on everything for which this place stands.

Uchiha Itachi comes into view, with a piggybacking chibi version of Uchiha Sasuke.

Sasuke is something of a sore spot to me. Initially, before resolving to see if the Uchiha massacre can be prevented, I didn't know how to handle him. In the future, he'd proven himself to be too powerful, and his mental state too mercurial to be deemed anything but a threat. Coupled with the strong bond he developed with Naruto; he has the potential to throw a wrench in any plan I might devise.

Raising my arm, I wave and call out. "Itachi-san!"

Unfortunately, Sasuke also plays the vital role of insurance in case we accidently reach a similar ending to the original story. Being the reincarnation of Indra, he is one-half of the whole that is necessary to seal Kaguya a second time. The only silver lining here is that should the downfall of his clan be averted, something I have no clear idea how to go about, I'm pretty sure he will end up becoming a far more reliable and stable asset.

As we approach each other, I can't help myself and indulge in small guilty pleasure. "Is that your little sister?" My straight face almost slips, but I manage to keep it on. Barely.

Itachi greets me in his usual calm demeanor. "Good morning Hakaru-kun." Tough, I might have caught a bit of humor in his expression. He then gestures to his little brother who is studying at me with an adorable expression of childish indignation from his position sitting on brother's shoulders. "This is Sasuke, my cute little brother. Sasuke, this Hakaru-kun, a friend of mine." I then greet Sasuke appropriately.

Sasuke's response to my cheerful salutation is a bit faint. He seems to turn disinterested after the initial exchange, content holding on to his older brother. That lasts up until Itachi raises an arm holding a previously overlooked paper bag, and invites me to eat Dango with him and his brother. I happily accept of course. At that point, Sasuke's demeanor subtly changes from bored to annoyed. If I had to guess, I'd say he's upset that someone is intruding on his time with his older brother.

While saying that I couldn't care less about what four-year-old Sasuke thinks of me is an exaggeration, I'm exactly not concerned with currying any favor here. My primary concern is Itachi and will remain so for the next few years at least. However, one the defining characteristics of the older Uchiha is his unconditional love for his little brother, so a modicum of cordiality will still be necessary.
We walk in silence as I let Itachi lead me to a familiar wooden dock on one of the lakes dotting the village. We sit on the edge with our legs dangling in the air, Itachi in the middle with Sasuke and me on either side.

The Dango is incredibly sweet, which I find to be very agreeable with my childish palate. We don't get many sweets in the orphanage, so this rare treat is much appreciated. I say as much to Itachi.

"You're welcome Hakaru-kun, I'm glad to share." Although Itachi's modest response is somewhat expected, I've been hoping for a reply with a little more substance. Something of an awkward silence has developed between the three of us, and I hope to fill it with a light conversation.

"Of course, Itachi-nisan is the greatest!" Sasuke to the rescue. It seems that no matter the circumstance Sasuke is always excited to praise his older brother. "Not only is he a great ninja, he's also a kind and generous person!" And there's my conversation starter.

I give Itachi a toothy smile and turn back to Sasuke, "It must be nice having a big brother like that! Are you going to be a ninja like him one day?"

At my question, Sasuke puffs up with pride. "Of course, as a member of the Uchiha clan, it is my duty to become an outstanding ninja to serve my family and Village." He happily recites this words that were probably drilled into his head from the day he could talk. Itachi's face is impassive, but I guess it's not the most comforting thing for him to hear.

Sasuke continues, oblivious to the thoughts of his audience. "One day I'm going to be a first-rate ninja just like Itachi-nisan!" He announces and turns adoring eyes to his big brother.

If only you knew.

Itachi's response is to reach forward and poke his brother on the forehead. Sasuke is momentarily startled, and takes a moment before he starts to whine, "Itachi-" He is quickly cut off, however, as Itachi proceeds to place his hand on Sasuke's head and ruffles his hair.

That seems to mollify Sasuke, and he leans into the hand placed on his head.

Meanwhile, I reach my fluff threshold, and some stifled laughter manages to escape.

It seems that Sasuke takes exception to that, as evident by him crossing his arms and his face puffing up.

Sasuke's expression only serves to make me laugh harder. Itachi joins me, though his laughter is more lighthearted, and works to assuage Sasuke, who is soon smiling with us.

After settling down I address Sasuke, "I'm sure you'll become an awesome ninja just like Itachi-san. After all, you are brothers."

Despite the dubious logic of that statement, the four-year-old eats it up, if you go by the bright smile he shoots me.

"Besides, if that's your dream," I give Itachi a meaningful look, "you shouldn't let anything stop you from pursuing it. Dreams are what makes life worth living!" Sasuke nods enthusiastically, oblivious that a child his age is lecturing him.

I give Itachi a cheeky smile, to which he responds with a strained one of his own.
BZZZZ
SWISH
THUNK
BZZZZ
SWISH
THUNK
BZZZZ
SWISH
THUNK

I use my right hand to grab a random writing utensil from the bunch in my left hand, lightning chakra is imbued into it, and I fling the scrap forward into the tree serving as today's practice target.

The improvised missile penetrates about three centimeters in. Compared to where I was a few months back, this is a significant improvement. Otherwise, this is nowhere close to where I want to be. I'm having major problems getting the lightning chakra to retain its cohesion after losing contact with it, that's the main reason why it doesn't penetrate as far it should. I think.

Still, can't be helped.

Rinse and repeat.

BZZZZ
SWISH
THUNK
BZZZZ
SWISH
THUNK
BZZZZ
SWISH
THUNK

I reach for another item to throw only to find my left hand empty, having used up all the scraps I've brought with me today. I feel too weary to continue this exercise today, so rather than walk up to the tree and regather my mismatched collection of projectiles like I've already done numerous times, I figure it's time for the grand finale.

Snatching the metal ruler protruding from my pants pocket, I charge it with lightning chakra and hurl
it forward.

The ruler flies straight and hits the trunk, sinking its entire length in and…

Stops.

After walking around the tree and failing to find an exit hole, I return to the front and inspect the ruler's point of entry. If I squint, I can see the metallic glint a few centimeters in. The penetration was pretty clean, and so the slit is far too thin for me to slip my fingers in to extract my favorite projectile.

A tree ate my ruler.

"Heh."

Time to cultivate a new skill then.

Facing away from the tree, I sit down in a cross-legged position to think.

While I could probably use chakra enhanced brute force to extract the metal sliver from the tree's trunk, this little mishap gives me an incentive to tackle an issue I've been ignoring. Chakra flow is a great technique; it's a power multiplier that turns everyday items into deadly weapons and deadly weapons into… deadlier weapons. But, the issue that it relies on tools remains. Tools that, like I just witnessed, could easily be lost.

What I need is a lightning technique that doesn't rely on any tools, a technique with numerous variations. Something powerful.

I need the Chidori.

Snort.

I'm a walking cliché. Both the Rasengan and the Chidori? Do I really need it? Won't my time be better spent refining my basics even further, or branching out to get an early start on other disciplines?

Am I just indulging myself?

…

…

…

Fuck it.

I have no clue if I need it, my basics are beyond refined, and I have no ideas or materials with which to get started on new ninja arts at my current stage of development.

I am definitely indulging myself, but that isn't a necessarily bad motivation to learn the Chidori. It will also help me affirm that I have the potential to someday step up to big league around here and to placate me of my lackluster success with the Rasengan.

If nothing else, it will make for fantastic lightning chakra nature transformation and chakra shape manipulation training.

With that resolution behind me, I begin channeling hefty amounts of chakra and lightning chakra to
my hand. Without knowing the hand seals, and only having a half-remembered description of the technique, I figure reverse engineering is going to take a while.

---

*February 25th, 5th year after Kyuubi*

Another Saturday, another trip around the village.

In the nearly three months since I started going on this weekly expeditions, it seems that I've covered every road and street within the walls of the village. All the key landmarks I felt comfortable getting close to were checked off.

Today I've returned to Konoha's version of Mount Rushmore, though this time I'm situated above it rather than below. It is a very scenic view, to see the entirety of the village stretch out before me, enclosed within its massive walls.

So far, I've spent a few hours lazing in the shade of some trees at the top of the mountain, though at a distance from the monument itself. The overhead view of the village helps me fuse together a more coherent mental map of Konoha.

It's getting to be the time when I should head back to the orphanage for dinner, when I sense another presence beside myself, walking up one of the paths to the top of the mountain.

It's powerful, impressively so, and potent. Bright and sunny, but with a tinge of something dark- Oh.

Oh!

Naruto.

His unexpected arrival raises a matter of internal debate that has been bothering me since the beginning. Do I want to befriend Naruto? And if so, when?

Whereas changing the Hyūga Affair was a pretty easy decision, and saving the Uchiha barely won out due to morality and the potential benefits, the decision to provide a lonely Naruto with a friend early on should be weighed with extreme care.

Naruto had the ability to inspire people and bring them together. To arouse hope, and, most impressive of all his skills; to change people's minds. Those things can't be learned, not to the level Naruto displayed. They are intrinsic to his personality and his unrelenting will. I'm not a psychologist, but from my understanding, those are all character traits that are established and set in a person's first years. Is my befriending Naruto and integrating myself early on as one of his "precious people" running the risk of him losing some of that core feature of his psyche? I consider him to be something of a safety net in case everything gets messed up, what with his apparent ability to beat the odds. Also, what are the benefits? Aside from soothing my own conscious and worming my way into the high regard of an already extremely compassionate and benevolent person. I can't teach him anything he will need later on; he doesn't need help at this point.

No. I'm sorry Naruto, but it's too risky to befriend you at this point.

As if to cement my decision, I notice a non-civilian presence tailing him, no doubt an ANBU shinobi assigned to guarding Konoha's jinchūriki. Being seen making friends with an otherwise isolated Naruto will cause me to stand out, and I'm sure I'm not ready for that.

I don't know what his being the reincarnation of Asura means, if Naruto's personality was always predestined to be some variation of Asura's. As sickening as that sounds. So I'll probably
compromise by waiting until the start of the academy to acknowledge his existence. Nevertheless, if by any chance I notice a deterioration in his mental state, if I see him slipping towards Gaara's condition, that's when I'll step in. The only reason something like that could happen is as an incalculable result of my awakening. Unlikely, but it's important to consider all possibilities.

As I begin walking away, ensuring that my path doesn't cross with Naruto's, I feel out for his chakra once more. It's so ridiculously broad and expansive. Increasing its potency is something he will never have to bother with.

Hmm…

Never have to bother with.

Something he takes for granted.

…

Heh.

March 6th, 5th year after Kyuubi.

A whirring sound fills the forest.

Like everything in this world, the answer was in the chakra.

Come on. I can feel it; the damn ball is going to burst.

Apparently, to achieve its effective potential the Rasengan requires chakra of extremely high quality. Something that I currently lack.

Grinding my teeth in concentration, I intensify my efforts. I will the chakra to spin faster while focusing on maintaining its shape and center.

There has been some progress since I turned my attention to the matter a few months back. I can feel that both my yin and yang have matured to a degree, but the progress is slow and I'm unsure whether it's the result of my training, natural aging process, or both. Still, it isn't close to the level needed to form a complete Rasengan.

The only sounds in my world are the humming of the fledgling Rasengan, my beating heart, and gnashing teeth.

Thankfully, that wasn't the end of my endeavor to learn the Rasengan. I suspect that part of the reason it took Minato Namikaze three years to develop the technique was that he had to figure out all the different stages while also refining his chakra to an unknown quality. He must have had to go through countless iterations before he got it just right. I on the other hand, already know all the stages, and I know exactly the chakra potency to shoot for: Naruto's.

In fact, even higher than Naruto's current stage development since I'm sure it's going to mature even more, over the next eight years.

It took me a while, but I eventually discerned how to get my chakra to a higher potency than its natural level. It was all in the molding. The cost is that it takes increased concentration, and the amount of chakra you get is far smaller, both are proportional to the degree you condense the chakra.
Now, knowing how to mold more potent chakra doesn't make it easy, it takes intense concentration to bring it to Naruto's level. And having that chakra doesn't mean I can control it either. This broader chakra is more malleable, but also far more volatile. It's making me question how my supposedly fantastic chakra control stacks up. I've even had to go back and reaffirm my mastery of the Rasengan's first stage before resuming my efforts with the second.

When it feels like I'm going to collapse, I make one final push-

BANG!

I cry out in shock and fling my hands away, dropping the rubber ball to the ground.

Damn… scared myself. Upon calming my pulse down, quieting myself, and ensuring that no digits are missing, I hunker down to review the ball. As evident from the fact that there's a single piece to look at, the disintegration I was hoping for wasn't exactly achieved. Nonetheless, the ball does look a mess. It's perforated with holes of varying sizes, most notable is a yawning hole that takes up an entire side.

I need a new ball.

While practicing the second stage without the ball is a possibility, I figure the step I just made earns me a break from working on the Rasengan for the rest of the day.

Picking up the mangled piece of rubber, the sound of chakra returns to permeate the forest, though now it's more of a chittering static noise. Sheathing what's left of the ball in lightning chakra and pitching it at a tree, the fraying mass flashes forward. When the ball crashes against the trunk it punches a hole halfway through, before the collision along with the unstable chakra disintegrates what's left of it.

I wrinkle my nose at the stench of burnt rubber.

Another benefit of molding highly potent chakra is that my efforts with lightning nature transformation are yielding far more impressive results. The prickling numbness in my hand, however, reminds me that this isn't a net improvement. As stated, this chakra is more volatile, and as such, I'll need to reestablish my control over both its neutral state and its nature transformation. Still, it probably won't take more than a few months to reach the level of control I presently hold with my normal chakra.

After appraising the mangled tree and confirming its steadiness for the time being, I walk up its trunk and gather lightning chakra as well as regular chakra. My will shapes the energies to a diamond-like shape around my hand, and I begin shaving off parts of the tree.

Rather than copying the Chidori, a technique I have no valid excuse to know the mechanics of, by charging a single point with a stupendous amount of chakra for maximum penetration power, I opted for a different approach. Aesthetically, this technique I have been developing is more reminiscent of A's lightning cloak, though much brighter and naturally encasing only my hand. Also, I don't think it's quite as noisy as the standard Chidori.

Once all that is left of the tree is a naked trunk, I jump down to the ground for the final blow.

"Karateee chop!"

The horizontal swing is met with some resistance, but I struggle to power through, and my efforts are rewarded with the feeling of wood parting before my hand. The tree is left with a significant gash, though not enough to bring it down.
"Karateee chop! Stab! Chop! Stab!

A few more swings rectify that last statement and leave the tree with a deep furrow decorating its trunk. Soon, gravity does its part, and the tree comes toppling down. A quick side-step removes me from harm's way.

Now, where did I leave that ruler…

April 1st, 5th year after Kyuubi

"I think you should be more selfish."

"You sound like my mother."

Who would have thought? Humor from Uchiha Itachi. He's probably just trying to derail the conversation and fluster me, but still…

"Then she must be a very smart lady." I'm hardly deterred.

Itachi sighs. "The fact remains," he says in a tone that tells me he'd like this discussion to be over. "Self-sacrifice is one of the most celebrated virtues of a true shinobi."

I'm wandering one of Konoha's main thoroughfares with Itachi, debating the merits of his ideology. Well, I think he sees it more like me pestering him, so to avoid annoying him too much I might need to change my approach.

As Itachi walks up to a stall to buy something, I try to think up ways to stomp him.

We happened upon one another during one of my tours of Konoha, and after learning he'd been sent to go shopping for groceries by his mother while she took care of other errands, I promptly told him I'd accompany him. Itachi of course graciously accepted my offer, and soon we came to our current situation.

When he returns, I think I'm ready for our next bout. "Hey, I have a riddle-"

"Here." Itachi hands me a stick of Dango, and without another word gets started on his own. We resume our stroll through the village. As far as ways to get me to shut up go, this one is pretty sweet, pun intended, so I acquiesce, and we spend the next few minutes in relative silence.

"Let me ask you a question Hakaru-kun." Itachi preempts me by being the first to break the silence after we are both finished with our treats.

I nod for him to continue, trying to guess at what he could want to know.

He stares directly at me, "Are you planning on becoming a ninja?" His look is so piercing I'm surprised he hadn't activated his Sharingan.

"Yes." An obvious truth.

"Why?"

That was a harder question, and it raises issues that are far more fundamental. Why am I training myself to the brink of insanity? Why am I making plans years ahead of events that might not happen? What are my motives?
I remember my resolution from the day I came to understand where and when I am. I want to be strong, so I can feel safe, to have a measure of control of my life, to survive the coming horrors, and lead a happy life afterward. However, on the way, I realized that there are also ways for me to make this world a better place.

"I want to be a ninja to protect." Technically true.

"Who?"

"Innocents, the people I care about, myself." In ascending order of importance.

I may be a mostly-benevolent person, but that doesn't make me a saint. The second and last items might be subject to swap places, but right now the most important bond I have is with Itachi, and that's partly because I want to influence him.

Itachi makes a humming noise that might mean agreement before he continues, "Are you prepared to-" This time, it is Itachi who is interrupted, though not by me.

We are just passing under a bridge when a tide of orange paint splashes down, engulfing us and an entire section of the road.

For a moment, everything was deathly quiet. Then, the sound of a child giggling madly broke the silence. My head snapped in the direction of the noise, and I was just able to rub the paint off my face and catch a glimpse of a mop of blond hair before it disappeared into an alley.

At least Naruto is acting normally.

I study the people around us and see shock and confusion quickly turning to indignation and outrage. Itachi however, just sports a wide-eyed look of bewilderment. Covered in orange paint, the otherwise solemn boy appears so hilarious I can't help bursting out in laughter.

Itachi initially stares at me with puzzlement before he catches on to the humor of the circumstance, and joins me in lighthearted laughter. Meanwhile, the rest of the prank's victim seemed to split between those that run off to chase the prankster and those that settle for grumbling and leaving to look for a change of clothes. Both groups give us funny looks when they pass by, the two strange children that respond with laughter to being drenched in paint.

Once I'm composed, I appraise myself. Most likely the clothes are a total loss, and even if a good washing could fix them, I wouldn't subject any of Konoha's bodies of water to the pollution that came with the amount of paint I'm currently wearing.

I never bothered checking how aware or accepting the orphanage's staff are of my many excursions, preferring not to instigate problems that are better off left alone. Now, however, I'd need to be incredibly sneaky if I want to avoid exposure and increased scrutiny. Maybe I can trash the clothes and enter only with my underwear? Hmm…

"Come." Itachi grabs my hands and starts leading me away, derailing my train of thought as I let him drag me along. When he sees my confused expression he explains himself, "I think Sasuke's clothes will fit you. If you don't want to get in trouble, you can borrow a set." How perceptive is this guy? I also notice that he's yet to let go of my hand.

It's a nice feeling, comforting physical contact with other people, and while holding hands isn't quite as good as a hug, I'm so deprived it barely matters. Ignoring my pride as someone who is mentally an adult, I don't remove my hand from his, and focus on the pleasant feeling caused by my body releasing endorphin, oxytocin, and serotonin.
For shame.

Maybe this how Itachi walks around with Sasuke when he isn't carrying him around. I'm not exactly sure how to interpret that possibility.

May 21st, 5th year after Kyuubi

HMMMM

WHIRRRRR

POP

"Crud."

Another balloon popped.

Sigh.

My hand reaches for the tree I'm sitting next to. With my index finger sheathed in lightning chakra, I carve\scorch another notch into the bark. The freshly added notch join countless others on a trunk that's now more black than brown.

Initially, I thought it would be fun to tally how many balloons it takes me to master the third stage of the Rasengan. Now that I've nearly finished encircling the trunk and can't be bothered to count out the notches, the activity has lost most of its novelty. The only reason I don't stop is that interjecting the minor lightning chakra trick between each attempt adds some much-needed variety to the routine.

At least I finally reached my final balloon.

I take it slowly, making sure that the outer shell is solid, and then start to pump the power.

HMMMM

2 Seconds.

HMMMM

7 Seconds

HMMMM

18 seconds

HMMMM

I'm doing it!

WHIRRRRR

Dang it!

POP

SLAP
This time, when the balloon bursts, the bulk of the rubber is thrown back at me and smacks me in the face.

The piece of rubber falls to the ground.

…

Substantial amounts of lightning chakra are gathered in my hands.

…

Remember, burning rubber stinks horribly.

…

The energy dissipates, and I settle for tired laughter.

Glancing at the mutilated tree, I can't help but feel elated by my progress. Despite the frustration, I can tell that mastery of the Rasengan isn't far-off. There might even be a chance to grasp it before I cover the entire surface of the trunk.

Still, there are no more balloons, and it's too early to head back.

Time for something new.

Upon mastering the Rasengan, I'll have access to three devastating close range techniques. The Rasengan, Chakra Flow, and my Chidori variant. On the other hand, Chakra Flow also presently stands as my only technique for long-range combat. It also relies on a supply of tools and my currently questionable ability to throw them.

What I need is the capability to wage battles at a distance… I think. Will I benefit more from investing my time in a defensive technique? The Academy, where I'll start rounding out my skills, is probably the earliest I'll get an idea as to what kind of fighting style fits me best.

I want to further develop my proficiency in chakra shape manipulation and lightning chakra nature transformation, but I also want to develop something that won't be purely offensive.

After scratching my head and entering a thinking position, I concentrate, trying to remember any techniques from the story that fit my criteria.

Ah.

Post time-skip Sasuke had all kinds of neat variations for the Chidori. One of which released arcs of lightning from every spot on his body in all directions. It could prove to be a pretty effective defense if multiple opponents ever assault me or if an enemy comes at me from a direction I'm unprepared to dodge or block. Like the Chidori, it most likely involves some a type of shape manipulation to control and spread the arcs of lightning since any pure emission of electricity will be immediately grounded.

Now, what would be an appropriate name for this hypothetical new technique? It will get very tiresome very quickly referring to it as Chidori variant number two. Though come to think of it, Chidori variant doesn't actually roll smoothly off the tongue either. Not to mention, it isn't something I can call out.

So… Names…
Screw it. I'll just call them Lightning Blade and Lightning Surge. No need to be especially poetic.

Eventually, I did manage to get the hang for the Rasengan, but lamentably, disfigured another tree before my mastery was deemed sufficient. Likewise, my two lightning techniques were progressing nicely. I appraised Lightning Blade to be pretty much combat ready due to the ease with which it allowed me to cut through trees. Training Lightning Surge, though not as near completion as Lightning Blade, taught me a valuable lesson by dismissing any skepticism I might have previously held for the Rock-Paper-Scissor kind of relationship the nature elements of chakra share. Watching out of control arcs of lightning driving furrows in the ground and cleaving into rocks really hammers in the edge Lightning Release has over Earth Release.

On July 1st my fifth birthday came, and with it, beside an extra helping of dessert, came extra scrutiny. Coincidently, my birthday landed in the middle of one of the quarterly inspections of the orphanage, made covertly by one of the village's shinobi. As a five-year-old, I was now being appraised as a potential shinobi of Konoha. As a result, I took a two-week vacation from training, feeling that I'd rather not risk the resident ninja noticing I'm missing and report it.

The involuntary vacation was a mix between relaxing and mind numbing, and once it was over, I returned to training reinvigorated and galvanized. The realization that a third of my training time until I enter the academy has effectively been cut spurred me to pick up the pace.

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August 2nd, 5th year after Kyuubi

Yawn

Like myself, some of the children around me fail to stifle a yawn as we are hurried out of our dorms in the early morning, the staff having roused us especially vigorously today. Similarly, we are urged to eat quickly, before, rather than being sent to classes, we head to the orphanage yard.

There, our caretakers speedily and efficiently arrange us in a neat half-circle. A configuration in which we are made to wait for a few minutes before our honored guest finally arrives.

I sense him before I see him. A substantial presence, moving at a steady, but leisurely, pace towards our assembly, shadowed by two muted signatures. The chakra presence eventually resolved itself to be an old man with a white goatee, wearing robes and hat with a color scheme of red and white. The two shadowing signatures remain out of my line of sight.

Like two years ago, today the third Hokage arrived in the orphanage for another speech and appraisal of his village's orphans. My memory of that experience is faint, but I think his speech to a carbon copy of the one he made the last time.

Overcome by boredom, I refocus my attention on the Hokage, but this time with my chakra sense, trying to make a more active scan of his chakra. It is large, more so than most other shinobi I'd sensed, and similarly potent. There was also a feeling of organization from his chakra, like each and every sliver of it went exactly where the old man wanted it to go.

However, all thoughts and reflection about Sarutobi Hiruzen's chakra are thrown to the curb as I sense one of the muted presences suddenly flare.

Before I realize what is happening, the presence launches itself at me from behind. I barely turn my head in time to turn rigid as I see a dog faced, silver-haired, ANBU freeze behind me, holding a tanto poised to pierce my heart barely a centimeter from my back.
I can't think. I can't move. My entire body freezes as I try to process what's going on.

At the sound of a throat clearing, I blearily notice that a hush has fallen over the area. I slowly face forward, wary of making any sudden movement, feeling my heartbeat pulsing behind my ears.

The third Hokage is frowning at me and holding up one of his hands in some hand sign. I only just have the presence of mind to comprehend that was probably the only thing that stopped Hatake Kakashi from skewering me.

Shit!

I messed up.
Stepping

August 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 5\textsuperscript{th} year after Kyuubi

Sarutobi Hiruzen's POV

What a mess.

While the term might lean more to the side of the dramatic than was deserved, Hiruzen found it a fitting way to describe the morning's debacle.

'What was Kakashi thinking? To kill anyone, let alone a child, in front of all those orphans!' Kakashi's senses might not be sensitive enough to allow him to recognize a chakra scan, but still... It was likely that some would be ninja among that crowd have been traumatized for life due to the event; sworn off violence entirely and turned to pacifism, or otherwise damaged. Either way, Hiruzen expected the orphanage's shinobi export to thin out for a few years. Such a harsh reaction... 'Perhaps a mandatory hiatus from his current posting is in order?'

A thought for later.

Inhaling from his pipe, Hiruzen peeked from under the brim of his hat at the youth standing awkwardly before his desk.

All things considered, the child didn’t seem to take nearly being run through with a blade as badly as he’d expected; fidgeting, twitching, and glazed eyes aside. That being said, the worst has probably yet to come as the traumatic event hasn’t had the time to be fully processed. The kid was likely still in shock.

As it was unfitting of a Hokage to sigh, even when his audience was just a five-year-old, Hiruzen settled for a slow and deliberate exhale of the smoke in his lungs.

Despite the number of potential shinobi Kakashi's rash action may have cost the village, at the moment, Hiruzen's primary concern was salvaging the future career of the orphan standing before him. 'To think, a confirmed sensor at the age of five, not to mention that tremendous chakra potential!' The question that remained to be asked was whether the child was a genuine prodigy or a kind of chakra savant. 'Either way, Danzo really dropped the kunai with this one.' The third Hokage was aware that his longtime friend had some sort of stake in the orphanage, and would comb it for potential recruits for his clandestine organization from time to time. For him to have missed this unpolished gem was something he was sure to lament. Now, instead of joining Danzo in the darkness, the child will be made to embrace the Will of Fire and become a splendid ninja of Konoha.

'I may have to post an ANBU watch, in case Danzo tries to "recoup" his loss.' Another incentive to place such a watch was the prospect of gaining additional insight into the child's capabilities.

The kid may be a bit young to enter the Academy, but only by a few months. Hiruzen just had to figure out how to placate the kid and devise a way to convince an orphan to become a ninja after being traumatizingly exposed to the occupation's darker side.

The third Hokage was aware that far fewer children would be signing up to the Academy if they were able to truly understand the reality of the shinobi lifestyle. It was an unfortunate truth of the world they lived in, one that Hiruzen could never quite let go of, that the village's recruitment pitches were mostly composed of panderings to a youth's baser desires. Only clan children had an inkling to
the real nature of the profession, and in those cases, they either didn't have a say in the matter or were indoctrinated from birth to serve the clan and village.

While on that subject, according to the papers Hiruzen acquired from the orphanage, the child's family were a mystery. Not in the sense that they were unknown family; there was simply no record of origin. Appearing at the age of twelve months at the orphanage's doorstep with only a note specifying a name and date of birth, the kid's history was a perfectly blank slate. The circumstances would have been suspicious if it wasn't for the aforementioned age of arrival, as a twelve-month-old infiltrator was far too ridiculous to even contemplate.

'No use delaying the inevitable' Hiruzen noted. The prolonged silence was undoubtedly causing severe discomfort, even most shinobi weren't immune to being made to sweat it out before the legendary Hokage.

"I must apologize," he began, projecting his grandfatherly persona. Previously wandering and unfocused eyes snapped to face him, posture turned rigid, and as was usual in this office, the third Hokage had the undivided attention of his guest. "For Dog's rash action, he did not understand what it was that you were doing and merely wished to defend me. I hope that you can forgive him."

A meek nod was the response he received.

"Good, that is good. I'm sure Dog will be thankful for your understanding." The third attempted to sweep the incident under the rug, so to speak. Children often shaped their response to events by taking cues from the adults around them and reacting proportionally. Hiruzen hoped to minimize the ensuing trauma by underplaying the severity of the incident. "I'll also make sure that Dog won't make a mistake like that in the future." However, care must also be taken to ensure that apathy to such acts of violence didn't develop as a byproduct.

Deciding to push forward rather than letting the child dwell on the matter any longer, Hiruzen attempted to broach the matter of the reason they were in here in the first place. "Tell me," he started, trying to inject a more jovial tone to the conversation, "do you know what it is that you were doing back in the orphanage that caused all this excitement?"

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*August 2nd, 5th year after Kyuubi*

The door shuts behind me as my escort leaves, satisfied that I've understood most of what they've attempting to impart to me.

Back still stiff with agitation, I start exploring my new apartment. My eyes aren't entirely focused, as I'm hit with flashes of recollection from what has to be the most… eventful day I've had to endure since waking up in this damn world.

After the initial shock had subsided, and terror had a chance to set in, I was surprised that rather than being sent directly to Konoha's T&I Division for what was surely going to be a thorough and unpleasant questioning, I was led to the Hokage's office. Where, after a quick and painless interrogation, I was, for the second time in this life, presented with that old, life-defining question: "Do you want to be a ninja?"

At that point, most of my initial fears dispersed as I began to rationalize the course of events that led me to that point. However, my blood was still saturated with adrenaline, and thus I was in a weird state of mind where pushing the Professor didn't seem like the terrible idea that it was. So, not wanting to let the old man have me to his army, to commit to a being marked as property of a Konoha, without a token defiance, I answered with a question of my own.
"Will I be happy?"

I remember feeling a sort of vindictive pleasure from seeing him visibly age from the weight of a supposedly innocuous question coming from the mouth of an innocent child. Now, though I feel some guilt from trying a weary old man, I still do not regret that part of my question's impact. For all that Sarutobi Hiruzen is the lesser evil of all of his contemporaries, he remains a merchant of death and peddler in child soldiers. It might not be my place or my right, but his conscience ought to be reminded that the status quo is far from ideal.

Then, so fast that his initial reaction was barely registered, the old Hokage pulled his expression into one of jovial promise and answered in the affirmative. A bold-faced lie told with more conviction than it had any right having.

Seeing no plausible recourse or alternative, I mimicked Sarutobi and promised to become a great ninja of Konoha.

Like that, in an office with two people donning masks, wearing fake smiles, and making false promises; my destiny was sealed.

Next, Sarutobi summoned an aide, who ushered me to the Academy where I was administered the entrance exam. Only when I was about halfway through and answering most questions effortlessly, did I realize that breaking Minato's record might not be in my best interest. I blamed the stress, and then 'corrected' my answers to place me at a more modest ranking.

Once my test was checked, and it was affirmed that I'll be joining the Academy in the coming term, the aide returned and brought to my present location. We set down in the tiny living room that the already furnished apartment came equipped with, and my new situation was explained to me.

In summary: as long as I remain an academy student I'll be provided with this apartment and a monthly stipend, it's my job to manage both of those responsibly. The building the apartment is situated in houses other Academy students like myself and contained most of the facilities I'd likely require on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, I'm automatically registered to a subsidized hot meal service that delivers weekly shipments of prepared nutritious meals to my apartment for a fixed amount, deducted from my stipend. I can opt out of the service at any time but am heavily discouraged from doing so until I learn how to prepare my own meals.

Furthermore, starting tomorrow and continuing up until the Academy term begins in December, I will be joining a remedial course in the Academy. The course is meant to ensure I have all the necessary skills, such as reading and writing on a sufficient level, to effectively sit in the Academy's lectures.

With that, the aide's mission was complete, and he left me to my own devices after encouraging me to endeavor to succeed in the Academy.

While I should probably start analyzing the consequences of me joining the Academy a year ahead of my age group, I can't gather the will to do so right now.

Walking past the living room and into the bedroom, the trauma of the day catches up to me. I almost died. Kakashi almost killed me. *Kakashi*, one of the good guys. All my awesome techniques. Useless. My situational awareness. Useless. My body simply froze in the face of the unexpected. I'm not ready.

I can't remember feeling so weak and helpless.
Not bothering with throwing off my clothes, I climb onto my new bed, push my head into a pillow, and start screaming.

August 10th, 5th year after Kyuubi

I'm being watched.

Literally. There's a chakra signature squatting on a tree at the edge of the grassy forest clearing I'm sitting in.

After the incident, it seems that Konoha designated me as a target of interest. Best as I can tell, in most any waking moment there's an agent of ANBU keeping tabs on me. Some more competent at hiding their chakra than other. At times, flickers of chakra would flutter in and out of my senses, not letting me pinpoint the signature's position. For others, I'd detect a consistent presence shadowing me. I'd like to think that the later can be partially attributed to an improvement in my capacity to sense chakra, rather than an inability to properly mask one's presence of the shinobi sent to stalk me. Either way, at least I get to practice that skill.

Which is good, because that's just about the only thing I can practice of all the different techniques I've accumulated. As reluctantly, I've made it a point to appear as non-interesting as possible.

I've reasoned that the trigger for the entire incident was my focused scan of the Hokage. The best explanation I've come up with is that chakra sensing works somewhat like passive and active sonar; reflexive environmental sensing is more or less undetectable, but aggressively trying to divine anything is much more noticeable. As for everything that followed, my guess is that a natural sensor is not that much of an uncommon thing that it could not easily enough be rationalized, hence the reason I'll soon be joining the Academy rather than rotting in a cell.

On the other hand, a chakra sensor with advanced chakra control along with chakra shape and nature transformation abilities? At the age of five? The village could show no leniency when dealing with such an improbable unknown. So, for the time being, what with the current surveillance that I'm under, my training has been put on hold. Moreover, regardless of how much my sensor abilities progress, it's inadvisable to rely on them alone to ensure that I am not being spied upon. The third Hokage could just as easily assign a Hyūga to observe me from out of my range of sensing, or simply use that ridiculous crystal ball of his.

I mean, talk about an invasion of privacy. Are the women of the village even aware that a closet pervert has access to that kind of monitoring instrument?

Anyway, as stated, the only thing I can do is train is chakra sensing. That, and go to the mind numbing remedial course. Prior to the incident that saw me leaving the orphanage and jump-starting my ninja career a year early, I've had a very busy routine. Two years of nigh-uninterrupted training. Now… now I'm left with plotting and drafting future plans for when I'm no longer under watch.

My current tail is pretty incompetent when it comes to masking his chakra, I've been able to sense them consistently from the moment they entered my range. In all honesty, I much prefer the competent ones. At least with them, work can be done to improve my sensing abilities. This one; the only thing they're useful for is reminding me of the mistake that brought me to this predicament.

Hmm.

Maybe…
Standing up and brushing the grass from my pants, my eyes travel to the position of the chakra signature. They are hiding up in the canopy, obscured by leaves and shadows. If nothing else, they are capable of remaining unseen.

Walking up to them and placing myself at the base of the tree, I crane my neck to stare directly at the shinobi. My new position partially exposes the shinobi, and I see tiger-like mask gazing back at me. The frame appears to be male.

"Teach me how to throw kunai."

The ninja stares at me for a while. Twisting his head as if studying some weird curiosity.

Then, he produces a single hand seal and disappears with a Body Flicker.

"Ass."

A few minutes later, he is replaced by a ninja marginally better at concealing their chakra.

---

**September 6th, 5th year after Kyuubi**

"-And so, Hashirama Senju, the first Hokage, defeated Madara Uchiha at what is now called the Valley of the End, bringing peace to."

Make it stop…

The instructor doesn't stop and continues spewing a doctored version of the history of Konoha, the Land of Fire, and the Elemental Nations. The kind meant to portray Konoha in the most positive light possible. Aside from granting us a bare-bone grasp of the village's past, it's probably also intended to instill prospective ninja with the correct mindset for entering the Academy.

Though, I really shouldn't complain much. This is miles better than the revisioning on reading and writing we went through during the first month. Watching some of the kids flounder, and then get kicked out of the program before it even started was a sad cross between funny and embarrassing. Still, all things considered, they were probably the lucky ones.

The remedial course class appears to be composed exclusively of the civilian children. With the shinobi clans probably turning their noses up at the thought of sending their scions to such a program, or that they even needed one. Civilians like myself have no such privileges and are forced to attend the course to prove that the village will not be wasting its resources by training them. Yes, militant-aristocracy is a thing here, but I'd probably be more appreciative of the Village's efforts to create equal opportunities if I the remedial course wasn't such a tiresome bother.

All that resolves to, in the end, is that I share the classroom with Tenten and Rock Lee, but not with Neji. I'm currently avoiding any unnecessary contact with those two, hoping to minimize my effect on how they mature. Tenten needs to develop her ambition to one day become legendary kunoichi like Tsunade, and Rock Lee needs to cultivate a mental illness I have no name for. Any unnecessary interaction on my part might derail their resolve, and as a result, their ninja career before it even begins.

Or again, will that be me doing them a favor?

Also, they're just so uninteresting as far as plot impact and abilities are concerned. Since I realized
that they will be sharing my Academy classroom, I have yet to devise any feasible plan to capitalize on the closeness I've been afforded to those two. Sure, sparring with them will be great for preparing me to defend from taijutsu and shurikenjutsu, but that's years from now. Rock Lee is going to become competent only after he attains the rank of genin, and I'm not exactly comfortable with the thought of letting Tenten try and pepper me with pointy instruments of pain.

"-Class dismissed."

And that's my sign.

Getting up from my sit in the back-most tier of the classroom, I join the flood of children rushing out, and soon find myself in the Academy's courtyard. I don't enter any of the discussions, and talk only when addressed, avoiding any large congregation. Conversation wise, these kids are barely any better than what I had to deal with back in the Orphanage. Chakra-wise, I have yet to sense any outliers that merit my attention.

Cold? Maybe. I just can't be bothered. More social interactions is a thing that I want, but this just isn't it…

Incidentally, it's as I'm considering how to pass another afternoon devoid of training that I notice a familiar silhouette standing by the exit to the Academy grounds. A look over with my chakra sense confirms my hunch, and I wave over to what may be my only friend in this world.

"Itachi-san!"

Did I just echo?

Rather than turn fully in my direction, Itachi's focus looks to be split between another individual in the crowd and me. Moving forward reveals a girl whose undivided attention belongs to Itachi. She soon approaches Itachi as well, so far oblivious to my presence.

She finally notices me when we're both a scant few meters from Itachi, who himself has a blank expression. The unnamed girl looks at me questioningly, while I appraise her in turn.

Long brown hair with bangs framing her face and onyx eyes. Probably Uchiha. She wears a sleeveless, high-collared purple shirt, red armbands, short baggy blue pants, and blue shinobi sandals. She is familiar in only the vaguest of senses.

I try smiling at her, and she returns the gesture.

So probably not a crazed fan-girl. Well, not crazed, the fan-girl part remains a distinct possibility considering the way she looked at Itachi a few moments ago.

We both turn back to face Itachi, who belatedly brings himself to make introductions.

He starts with the unnamed girl. "Hakaru-kun, this is Uchiha Izumi, a clan member, and friend of mine." A light bulb switches on in my brain. Itachi's would-be girlfriend!

My introduction follows. "Izumi, this Hakaru-kun, another friend of mine." Itachi then abruptly twists back to face me and ask, "What are you doing here Hakaru-kun?" With a fair bit of apprehension.

Heh. Kind of forgot about the setting of this chance meeting.

"I'm taking a remedial course before joining the Academy to become a ninja." When in doubt, state
the plain truth. There's no need for Itachi to know the exact details of that little debacle. Next, I try to divert attention from myself by doing the polite thing and acknowledging Izumi.

"Nice to meet you Izumi-san! Are you a student at the Academy?" I ask with half-feigned excitement, splitting my thought process with trying to recall any notable facts about her. Nothing of importance rises forth from dark recesses of my memory of the story.

She returns a broad smile and replies, "Likewise Hakaru-kun! I am. After all, I'm not at all a genius like Itachi-kun who can skip the Academy after just one year." Unlike myself, her manner is entirely earnest and welcoming. And, you'd think a statement like that would come with some inflection of bitterness in her speech, but as far I can tell the girl is quite cheerful, and completely obsessed with Itachi.

"Hakaru-kun…"

"Huh?" Izumi and I both turn our attention back to Itachi, who seems to be upset about something. On seeing our quizzical looks, he deflates and mutters, "I guess it can't be helped." He seems resigned. Did he honestly not expect me to become a ninja? Or maybe it's just that I started earlier than most?

Meh. He'll get over it.

Instead of dwelling on the matter, or at least shelving it for later, Itachi pushes ahead and addresses me. "Izumi and I were planning to go eat lunch together, would you like to join us?"

Was that a flash of annoyance in Izumi's expression, or is it just my imagination? Either way, it's gone before manifesting itself, trampled before the tenacity of a girl's crush. To not even check with her first… Oblivious was never something I'd expected to attribute to Uchiha Itachi of all people.

"Sure!" Screw it. It might be rude, but Izumi can be Itachi's girlfriend after I manage to dissuade him from killing her and the rest of his clan in a few years. Besides, I need someone to talk to who isn't an irresponsible porcelain mask, or a child liable to eat their own snot.

As Itachi starts to lead us away from the Academy, I notice the familiar feeling of a presence tailing us. As far as masking chakra goes, this one's capability is above-average. Any other afternoon, I'd have been content spending prodding the operative's chakra to improve my senses. Now, I worry Itachi is going to catch on and detect my stalker.

They will probably know to be extra careful around two Uchiha.

...

Wait…

Did I just make myself appear a lot more interesting by exposing my friendship with the Uchiha heir/prodigy to Konoha's ANBU?

Damn. This may have consequences.

We eventually arrive at a takoyaki stall, and after ordering, sit down on a nearby isolated table with our food and some green tea.

Since Itachi now knows I'm entering the Academy, and a year early at that, I figure that showing myself as a bit more on the mature side won't be too disconcerting. If I want to sway Itachi in any meaningful way, the level of our debates will need to be elevated somewhat. Izumi aside, this as
good a time as any to try to make some progress on influencing Itachi towards less extreme solutions to his problems, or as I like to call it, Operation Moderation. I just hope my shadow isn't within hearing range.

After finishing my first octopus ball, I begin with, "Hey Itachi, I have a question for you about sacrifice."

Izumi's eyes pop out in surprise as she almost chokes on her food. A worried Itachi hands Izumi a cup of tea, who breaks her coughing fit to take a gulp. After she washes down the lodged piece of takoyaki, Itachi pins me with a long-suffering look as he pats Izumi's back and beckons me to continue.

"Well..." Clearing my throat as my cheeks color a bit, I continue, "Suppose you know five people with jobs, families, and friends, who each have an important organ that is failing and will soon die without a transplant." Itachi nods slowly, Izumi looks slightly apprehensive. "Now, you also know of a person who doesn't hold a job, or has any family or friends, but that person is a match to all five of the people who will die, and by taking from him you could save all of them. What will you do?"

Surveying my audience, Izumi appears aghast, likely having not expected this type of question from a five-year-old. Itachi, on the other hand, has a faraway look in his eyes. And when he responds, it's in a soft and measured tone.

"I was once posed with a similar riddle... And I will answer now as I did back then. I would make the choice that will bring about the greater good in the world, by sacrificing one individual to save the many."

Nodding my head, I ignore Izumi gasping at Itachi's provocative response. This is what I expected, nothing less could have been expected from someone who may one day offer up clan and family on the pyre of the greater good. Thankfully, I have come prepared with a retort that will hopefully give him pause.

"But... Is that really the greater good?" I rejoin. Itachi tilts his head in askance, prompting me to elaborate. "Won't that make the world a scary place? If everybody agreed with that and people had to live in fear of having their organs taken, of not being asked what they want or don't want to give up." For others, for the greater good, for the country, for the clan, for the village. No crime is too great, too heinous.

Itachi furrows his brows and adopts a pose of deep contemplation as he tries to reconcile my statement with his own world views. Meanwhile, Izumi looks on with an anxious hopefulness. It seems that Itachi's resolve, and justification, to perform unscrupulous deeds has rattled her quite a bit. I wonder if depending on how this debate pans out, the way Izumi views him might change.

When Itachi finally answers, he is despondent, as if greatly burdened. "Unfortunately, that is the way of the world that we live in, the world of shinobi. We toil and suffer, and bring suffering to others in order to prolong our way of life. To elevate our village and clan."

"It doesn't have to be like that!"

It's Izumi that abruptly disrupts Itachi's rationalist monolog rather than myself, and she is looking pissed!

Izumi faces Itachi. "The world doesn't have to be like that! It can be better. We can make it better." She pleads, "Maybe if we act with good morals, and work hard enough, then maybe one day we'll wake up and see that the world has become a better place!" She's tearing up, caught up in her own
emotions. If Itachi's gob-smacked expression is anything to go by, he's never seen Izumi assert herself like this. He gives her a shaky nod, and I spot a hint of a smile forming on his face.

Before I can think up of anything appropriate to say, Izumi is rounding up on me. "And you!" She sniffs, and her face breaks up into a bright smile, "No wonder you're Itachi's friend Hakaru-kun, you're just like him; always going on about lofty ideals, and far too smart for your age." I can't help the embarrassed smile that sports on my face. Despite his shortcomings, being compared to Itachi is a special compliment in a lot of ways. Not that it's particularly true, for I'm not nearly as altruistic.

Izumi is unabated, "You're probably another prodigy too, unlike me." Here she gets self-recriminating, "You'll be able to stand by Itachi and help him achieve all your goals. Even your chakra…" She trails off momentarily, and I suddenly get a foreboding feeling. "You haven't even started learning in the Academy and your chakra is already far more powerful than mine!"

My mouth works faster than my brain and I exclaim, "You're a sensor too?"

Shit. Bad mouth, bad. I should not have added that last part.

Any more chiding to myself is made to wait for later, as without warning, I sense a flash of chakra from Itachi's direction and feel my hairs standing on end. Turning back to face him, I see a pair of Sharingan staring back at me. It's not a pleasant sensation. Itachi is looking taken aback, like he's never seen me before, and I wonder what he sees with those wondrous eyes of his. Izumi falls silent, as our previous discussion is temporarily put to the side.

Well, at least that answers one question. My watchers likely aren't keeping close enough watch to overhear us if they haven't interposed themselves at this point. From my understanding, an activated pair of Sharingan is just a step down from openly declaring an intention for violence. Never mind that Itachi is only using them now for their ability to grant incredible insight into chakra. At least I hope that's the reason.

When he finally says something, it's a single word.

"Too?"

That one word conveys a whole range of emotions, but those can also be summarized back to another word.

Explain.

I chuckle nervously, mind whirling for the least incriminating answer I can find. A few moments later I come up with something, "Well, turns out I can sense chakra! Lord Hokage came by to the orphanage, and I could sense something different about him. Lord Hokage noticed that there was something different about me as well and said I can become a ninja too!" There. Again, plain truth with gross omissions of detail makes for a great evasion tactic. Although I suspect Itachi is starting to catch on.

Itachi surveys me for a bit, before sighing and deactivating Sharingan. "Hn." Itachi gets back to eating his takoyaki, leaving all the possible questions my explanation left unanswered unasked. I'm grateful for the patience, and the faith he has in me to not press the issue. Meanwhile, Izumi sighs in relief, no doubt glad that the tension was broken.

I completely emphasize.

We continue eating in relative silence, a bit subdued after all the excitement, each one lost in his or hers thoughts.
After a time, an idea comes to me.

Hmm…

Maybe…

"Hey, Itachi."

Chew. Swallow.

"Yes?"

"Teach me how to throw kunai."

"No."

Ass.

Izumi giggles while I pout. Itachi resumes eating.

September 30th, 5th year after Kyuubi

Another afternoon, another wasted day with no training. The remedial course isn't getting any more stimulating.

I want to do something. Learn something new. Train. Anything.

Since experimenting with chakra is out until I'm no longer under constant watch, all that's left are the more mundane shinobi skills. Unfortunately, you can't just pick up a kunai or shrunken and start throwing until your aim gets better. Not unless you're a genuine genius. There's too much of a risk of picking up bad habits that will have to be unlearned at great pains later on. Same goes for taijutsu.

Still, I'm terribly bored, and if it weren't for the fact that the real Academy term starts in just two more months, I'd be tempted to give it a try anyway.

Snort.

Just two months.

As fed up as I am with my current routine, it's probably going to feel more like two years. And that presence making a terrible job of hiding their presence up on one of the trees surrounding the clearing isn't making it any better.

…

Wait, is that?

It is.

I recognize the chakra signature as Tiger, the same ANBU that rebuffed my request for training. His ability to mask his chakra has improved, but almost imperceptibly so.

And that gives me an idea.

Once more, standing up and brushing the grass from my pants, my eyes travel to the position of Tiger's chakra signature. Walking up to the base of the tree I can tell he is situated on, I crane my
"Teach me how to throw kunai, and I'll help you learn how to hide your chakra."

"No," is his deadpan response.

Sigh.

The rest of the afternoon is spent performing the most invasive chakra scan I can manage on the hapless operative.

---

October 21st, 5th year after Kyuubi

Bored…

It's a peaceful Saturday afternoon, the kind meant for idle lazing about.

I'm sitting at an open teahouse, enjoying my newfound capital courtesy of the Academy stipend by splurging on green tea and dango. Sure, dango and green tea aren't precisely the epitome of luxury, but I'm trying to be thrifty to save up for more important investments. Besides, of equal value to the refreshments themselves, is the novelty in my recently acquired autonomy.

So bored…

Regrettably, the simple joy of independence is marred somewhat by the chakra presence hanging in my vicinity. Of my watches, this one is somewhere in the middle in terms of capability to mask their chakra. Meaning that I can tell I'm being followed, but can't confidently pinpoint the signature's exact position.

So Bo- What's this?

…

Two familiar chakras, ambling by on the street the teahouse is situated on.

Focusing, I try to figure out who…

What are those two doing together???

Getting up and moving to the counter, I quickly shell out the needed ryō to settle my bill and then step out into the street.

The sight that greets me doesn't correlate with my knowledge of the Naruto-verse. A seemingly disgruntled Uzumaki Naruto marching up the street, a step behind him, trudging along, is a dog masked silver-haired ANBU operative who can only be Hatake Kakashi.

I did this. Somehow.

My own shadow is somewhere behind me, unseen, but I pay them no mind. I call out and bustle over to the pair.

Having paused at my salutation, they turn to face me. Naruto's face is cast in confusion, and he gives me a questioning look. Kakashi wears his AMBU mask and so gives away nothing but impassive disinterest. Though, he may or may not have tensed the tiniest bits upon seeing who it was that called.
Naruto reacts first, "What do you-" He is cut off, however, as I move past him and stop before Kakashi.

"Excuse me Dog-san," I begin, while Naruto sputters irately. Kakashi just stares at me expectantly.

It's a spur of the moment idea. I wouldn't have approached either of them on their own. Kakashi just really, really, scares me right now. And Naruto, for the same reasons I didn't cozy up to him until now. Reasons that have become exacerbated with the recent attention I've received.

Bring them together, however, and I suddenly have an opportunity to introduce myself to Naruto. Since I've been bumped up a year, and therefore will have Naruto's exposure to me reduced drastically in the Academy and likely in the subsequent years. Now, there's an unexpected urgency to acquaint myself to him early on. I'll just have to swallow my apprehension of Kakashi and deal with it.

"I just wanted to say that I forgive you for what happened the other day." I consider adding that I'm sorry for scaring him, but ultimately decide that will be laying it on too thick.

While my statement isn't entirely truthful, I'm not feeling particularly resentful either. I have immense respect for Kakashi. I'm not over him almost killing me, but the guy has proven countless times that he's one of the good guys. Holding a grudge will be entirely without benefit.

At this point, I just stand before Kakashi expectantly, awaiting a response. Yet, Kakashi doesn't seem inclined to chip in a reply to my heartfelt statement. Instead, he continues to watch me with that dog mask covering his face. I can't tell if he's lost for words, or just waiting for me to go away.

This staring contest is getting to be a tad uncomfortable.

"You're supposed to say thank you!" Naturally, it's Naruto that comes to the rescue.

We both turn to face Naruto as he continues to berate the elite jōnin. "When the old man said you had to relearn kindness or whatever he wasn't kidding. Sure, you're a jerk, and you stop me from pranking, and you don't take me out to eat ramen often enough, but I didn't know you needed to learn manners too!" Kakashi stands there, being lectured by a barely five-year-old without any discernable reaction. Eventually, he brings an arm to rub the back of his head, though whether the gesture stems from sheepishness or exasperation remains a mystery.

Once finished with his rant, Naruto turns to face me. "I'm Uzumaki Naruto, future Hokage. Who are you?" I'm taken aback by how forward he is, I shouldn't be.

"Hakaru" I reply blandly, and then ask, "How do you know Dog-san?" I have a pretty good guess, but morbid curiosity spurs me to know what exactly brought this on. This may be the change with the most potential for far-reaching change that I caused in this world thus far, and it wasn't even intentional.

Naruto crosses his arms and dons a fake put upon expression as he answers, "Well, like I said, the old man called me a while back and told me that Dog needed to relearn kindness, whatever that means, so he was going to be my cus- custa-", "Custodian, Naruto-kun" Kakashi chips in. I flinch, suddenly realizing that Kakashi hasn't said a single word during the entire exchange up to this point.

Naruto presses on, ignoring Kakashi's and my reactions, "-for a few months to teach how to live all by myself."

There he pauses and flashes a manic grin, "But he's not all bad. I even got Dog to promise to teach me how to throw kunai!"
I feel one of my eyes developing a twitch.

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*December 27th, 5th year after Kyuubi*

"Oof."

The air is forced out of my lungs after a high-speed collision of my back with the ground.

"Winner, Hyūga Neji."

Again.

Neji may be a genius, and prodigy of the Hyūga, but that doesn't make getting repeatedly beat down by the same person any less vexing.

However, when Neji walks up to me and offers me his hand, the light scowl is wiped from my face, and a smile replaces it instead. The reason for that is that a similar smile decorates Neji's face. Not a scowl, or a smirk, or some other expression of haughty superiority, but a genuine smile.

In the occasions I'd interacted with Neji since the start of the Academy term almost a month ago, I've found his disposition to be nothing like that of the brooding boy I remember from the Chūnin Exams. He still carries that silent Hyūga pride but in a much more composed and cheerful manner. I'm certain there's still some resentment for the main house holed up in there, but without his father's sacrifice, it never manifested itself any more than in any other branch house member.

We perform the Seal of Reconciliation and join the rest of the class to the sound of cheering. Turns out that without his scathing temperament, and yammering on about fate all the time, Neji was a prime candidate to have a fan-club form up around him. A cluster of Academy students forms around Neji as our instructor picks out another pair for a taijutsu spar. I stand to the side and observe the next bout to try to glean any new insight that will help me improve my own skills.

There's a fire burning in me, spurring me onwards to advance, and not just because of the four months I've wasted before the start of term. Three weeks into my first year in the Academy I came to a profound understanding. There is no way in I am going to waste six years of my life in this place.

The chakra control exercises the instructors give us are worthless to me, and the academic study material moves at a snail's pace. Taijutsu and shurikenjutsu are the skills I need the most work on, and even there I excel among my classmates. In taijutsu, after the first week, Neji remains the only academy student in our class who regularly beats me. The basic level of physical conditioning I've maintained for the last two years is serving me well. I also refrain from enhancing my muscles with chakra as bulldozing my way through Academy students will defeat the entire purpose of learning taijutsu. My shurikenjutsu, despite not receiving any personal attention from a professional in the previous months, is lagging only behind Tenten, who is already showing herself to be a natural in the handling of all things metallic and pointy. I've been using the vast majority of my spare time to try to keep ahead of my peers in all subjects.

While I may not be capable of replicating Itachi's feat of graduating from the Academy in a single year, I'd wager that with some smart training, my own tenure in the Academy won't be much longer. I'd already missed my own generation. Maybe, getting a few more years on the field before the shit starts to hit the fan will be far more valuable than graduating in the same year as Team Guy.

I don't have access to the wealth of knowledge that exists in a shinobi clan, amassed over countless generations of shinobi warfare. Every new technique or skill will need to be developed from scratch,
and then rigorously tested in the field to see what works and what doesn't. If I am to develop a fighting style that will take me to S-Rank a decade from now, there's simply no time to waste.

Unfortunately, convincing myself that the extra attention I'll receive when I start steamrolling through the Academy Curriculum is worth it remains a work in progress. I'm dreading that the end result of me showing myself to be too extraordinary will be to one day wake up in a cell, or to not wake up at all. I may be blowing Konoha's paranoia and ruthlessness out proportion, but still, the fact that my outwardly visible progress will have to be gradual is clear to me. Maybe I should start making a few friends as well, so as to not stand out so much…

Why can't anything ever be simple?

After taijutsu, we wash up and head to the classroom to work on theory.

If nothing else, the Academy staff understands how to teach, and have distilled the task of instilling prospective ninja with the necessary skills to a form of art. On most days, we start off with chakra control exercises and meditation to ensure that everybody has woken fully. Then, when we are at our sharpest, we work on shurikenjutsu. Taijutsu practice comes immediately after launch, utilizing the physical activity to prevent us from getting drowsy after a heavy meal. Following that, comes theory, where most of the students are able to sit quietly and focus after having spent any excess energy they had in the previous lesson.

Although theory is a yawn, I strive to pay attention, aware that what I learn here is just as likely to one day save my life when out on a mission as knowing how to perform a roundhouse kick. Today we are discussing some of the noteworthy fauna and flora native to the Land of Fire, which to avoid, and which are safe to approach and even eat.

Pretty dull, but I manage to stay conscious.

As the day wraps up, I step out of the Academy and stretch out my chakra sense. Sensing, or to be more accurate, not sensing anything noteworthy, I smile in triumph and start trekking towards a very particular shop in the village.

Today marks the tenth day in a row where I sensed no masked or partially hidden presence following me. There have been singular days, or even two consecutive days on one occasion, where I didn't sense I was being followed, but never for this long. Three days into this most recent respite from my stalkers, I decided that if the lull reached ten consecutive days, I'll conclude that my time under observation has ended and that the village no longer perceives me as an immediate concern. I'm in no way naïve enough to think that my progress in the Academy is not being reported, or that the occasional ANBU operative won't be sent to inspect me, but at least I'll have a semblance of privacy in my solitary time.

And most importantly, it means I can get back to my real training.

As my destination draws near, I can't help but feel an apprehensive excitement. My target is one the many shops in village dealing in shinobi supplies, and as an Academy student, I'm allowed to purchase gear and supplies there.

A bell rings as I walk into the store, ignoring the many aisles bursting with equipment that will have no use for me for a few more years. I step up to the counter and flash my Academy student ID to a clerk who looks at me dubiously. He raises an eyebrow when he sees the card.

"One Chakra Paper please." The second eyebrow soon follows.
It's far past the time I learn what my primary affinity is.

I've read up on nature affinities in the Academy library. Partly to have an alibi in case someone questioned me about my purchase, and partly to understand if my advancement with lightning nature transformation, in the case that it isn't my primary affinity, will interfere with results of the chakra paper. Fortunately, it won't. Apparently, while my chakra may now be slightly more inclined to lightning nature transformation, a primary affinity is supposed to be so distinct that it would take some truly stupendous effort to disrupt the results of the chakra paper.

The clerk goes to the back of the store, and returns a minute later, slapping a single piece of brown paper on the counter. "That'll be twenty thousand ryō." Almost prohibitively expensive for an Academy student relying on Konoha's stipend, but I've been thrifty with spending my money with this expense in mind.

I hand over the money, and take the sliver of precious parchment, thanking the man as I leave the store.

Later, in the privacy of my apartment, I inject the Chakra Paper with a speck of chakra. An instant later, a wetness begins to form as if from nowhere and the paper becomes damp.

Water.
Ambling

January 14th, 6th year after Kyuubi

WHOOSH

A glowing, bluish, bullet like projectile is hurled away from my palm of by a strong hand thrust and a pulse of chakra.

The missile whistles through the air, its trajectory aimed to bring it into a collision course with an unfortunate tree situated a few dozen meters or so from my position, at the other edge of the forest clearing.

WHAAM

When the projectile hits the tree, my view of the collision and its effect is swiftly obstructed by a cloud of smoke and chakra. I slouch for a moment, breathing deeply in an attempt to recover my strength after the umpteenth attempt at the latest idea I've come up with.

Since the traumatic event that heralded my early introduction to Konoha's shinobi program, a feeling of supreme inadequacy plagued me. My near-complete impotence upon facing my first life threatening circumstances raised many question marks concerning my efforts to become strong. Perhaps I've been too templated in my approach. Taking the familiar routes. Making the obvious choices. The time reluctantly spent in inaction gave me an opportunity to stew on that matter to try and figure out paths to power besides the lowest hanging fruits.

One of the ways I have been playing around with in my head was to abuse my knowledge of my original universe to fashion a new and novel manner of warfare unfamiliar to this world. My initial excitement waned considerably after I found the idea to be, lamentably, easier in theory than in practice.

The initial concepts I thought to pursue were, upon deeper reflection, recognized to be unfitting for my purposes. Due to either being infeasible to develop, prone to promoting an escalating arms-race, likely ineffectual against end-game opponent, or some combination of the above.

Only upon reorganizing my thought process to seek solutions and tackle known obstacles, did I make a breakthrough and managed to conjure up an idea that might prove fruitful.

Gaara's sand, Orochimaru's Rashōmon, the Uchiha's Susanoo. All so-called absolute defenses. Not exactly correct, sure, but they were still damn useful. I haven't been able to come up with an absolute defense of my own, though, whether that is due to an unconscious fixation with offense or sheer difficulty is up in the air right now. Also, none of my current techniques are really suited to stand up to those defenses and penetrate them.

Though, speaking of penetrating, that's where the only viable solution conceived thus far comes in. A simple idea. Simple, ingenious, and extremely deadly.

I'm going to devise this world's first shaped charge.

As the cloud of smoke dissipates, and my breath returns to me once more, I jog over to the tree to inspect the impact site. The trunk sports five sizable craters, one from my latest attempt and four from previous trials. The tree is bowed, ready to fall over, and from my efforts thus far I know that my next try will either cause the tree to yield and tumble down, or simply plow through the already
damaged trunk.

The concussive force is vaguely impressive. As is the ability to deliver said force at a distance with a modestly fast projectile. However, those two achievements are completely overshadowed by the fact that, as it stands right now, my new technique is a near complete failure.

The idea behind a shaped charge is to control a rapidly moving and malleable mass via a specially designed shell, and shape it into a ridiculously fast stream of matter, packing sufficient kinetic energy to pierce through most types of conventional armor. Whereas in an RPG missile that approach is implemented using explosives and a mass of copper, I intend to replicate the feat by means of chakra alone.

My plan is to use extreme chakra shape manipulation to form a rigid outer shell filled with a dense, free flowing chakra. Through careful molding of the casing, upon collision, the front part will fold inwards in a controlled manner and hopefully apply enough force to the already compressed chakra inside to reproduce the forces created by conventional explosives. The chakra inside the shell is then supposed to escape through a hole positioned at the tip of the shell with enough velocity behind it, to rip a tailed beast a new asshole.

And they call the Rasengan the pinnacle of chakra shape manipulation...

The Rasengan's reign at the top stands to continues, however, because the greatest improvement I've managed today was to stop the Chakra Shaped Charge from blowing up in my face.

The main issue that is stumping me right now and preventing any meaningful progress is that I can't observe the collision. Even without taking into account the cloud of dust and debris that forms whenever the shell collides with a tree, I need to view it up close and from the right angle to have any chance of discerning whether I'm even close to producing the necessary effect. It takes a special kind dedication to fire an experimental explosive technique at point blank just to get a better look at how it works. I'm thankful that my mind hasn't been skewed to that point. Yet.

I look up at the afternoon sky and sigh. The things I'd do to get my hands on the shadow clone technique right now… There isn't a maturity rating qualified to describe.

It's as I'm deciding whether to vent my frustrations on the already mutilated tree with a Rasengan or a Lightning Blade, that I notice an approaching chakra signature.

That’s… Sasuke. Definitely Sasuke. I recognize his chakra from our first meeting. I wonder what brought this far from the village proper, and alone at that. He's only five years old. Moreover, Sasuke is the second heir to what is arguably Konoha's most powerful clan. To be so negligent in looking after such an individual… Then again, I don't have an in-depth understanding of this world's mindset on matters like this.

There's no specific plan of action to how I should conduct myself with Sasuke that I shelved for a situation such as this. The earliest I'd expected to meet him when not in the company of Itachi was after he joined the Academy, and even those encounters weren't meant to be particularly meaningful. Sasuke starts off as a popular child with a large family standing behind him; a nameless orphan isn't going to have any form of significant influence on him.

Though, that means I shouldn't put any real weight to any chance meeting I have with Sasuke in the foreseeable future, provided that I don't do anything too drastic. Choosing to avoid or confront him is an inconsequential decision-

"Hi! Hakaru-san! What are you doing here?"
And he's already here.

Seems that in mulling over my potential encounter with Sasuke I've lost my focus on him, and failed to properly keep track of his progress. Furthermore, while pondering the nature of my meeting with him, I've neglected to take into consideration the location of said meeting. Specifically, a forest clearing I've been using to practice high yield, explosive, experimental ninjutsu for the last few hours. The grass is littered with wood littered with wood splinters and pieces of bark. What few trees there are that remain standing in my vicinity are chewed up and battered messes.

As I see Sasuke ambling towards me, it's becoming quite clear he has noticed that little detail. At least if the way his eyes appear to be swiveling around, taking in the deforestation I've wrought here, is anything to go by.

Face impassive, I rack my brain for an excuse to my being caught in the scene of the crime, so to speak. Meanwhile, Sasuke’s face lights up in excitement, and he picks up the pace, hastily covering the distance between us before coming to a halt far closer to my personal space than is polite.

Sasuke tries again to squeeze some form of response from me. “Oy! Did you see what caused all this?” His entire body seems ready to burst with pent up energy.

He doesn’t think it has anything to do with me, I realize while shaking my head in denial. On second thought, linking a five-and-a-half-year-old with this kind of destruction wouldn’t have been my first guess either. Though, seeing Sasuke’s expression turn ponderous, it occurs to me; I really ought to supply an excuse to my presence here before Sasuke makes that unlikely connection.

“Emm,” I start, grasping for a reasonable explanation. My brain stalls for a moment, but then I remind myself that this is a child that I’m dealing with. “I heard noises, so I came to see what’s going on.” There. Simplicity would probably work best. As an afterthought, I added, “It was like this when I got it here!”

Wait… Isn’t that the default excuse children make when they want to disassociate themselves from something? Too late to take it back now.

Here is to hoping Sasuke accepts my reply doesn’t notice the gross brevity of details in my account. I’d come up with something if he decides to dig in, but the simple lies are easiest to maintain.

“I can’t believe it! I was so close.” Sasuke doesn’t seem to take my answer with much excitement, going by the disappointment he’s giving off. Also, what? What the fuck did he mean by that? I verbalize that last question, minus the swearing.

“My father was complaining about it all week,” Sasuke begins to explain. My question hasn’t been answered yet, but I can already feel a sense of dread creeping into my stomach. “There’s a ninja training with dangerous jutsu outside the sanctioned training grounds!” His tone seems to suggest he just shared a part of some dastardly mystery. “A lot of trees have been destroyed or scarred, and the Military Police are the ones charged with cleaning the mess and trying to find who’s doing it. Father is pissed, he says that when he finds whoever it is that’s giving him all this trouble, he’ll throw them in a cell and melt the key!”

Shit

…

…

…
Shit!

The head of the Konoha Military Police harboring a grudge against me is not something I’d call a happy time. Regardless of Fugaku not actually knowing that it’s me he wants to string up by my toes.

Ok. Resolution time. First, drop the shaped charge jutsu until I come up with a better plan of action. Second: cut down on the vegetation mutilation. Drastically. Finally, never, ever, ever, reuse a trashed training area.

“-Itachi was here he’ll have already caught the rogue shinobi. I’m sure of it!” I’m so caught up in taking in how close I was to being completely screwed if Sasuke hadn’t decided to share that little tidbit, I fail to listen to the rest of what he has to say. However, my attention swings back to Sasuke once he mentions his older brother.

“Itachi is what now?” Honestly. He’s probably right. Itachi wouldn’t have needed more than a second to deduce I am the culprit if it was him who caught me here instead Sasuke. Heck, if he suspects what I suspect he suspects… Well, he’d probably suspect it was me anyway.

Sasuke’s disposition turns dejected, and he despondently informs me of Itachi’s whereabouts. “He left for a month to train with Shisui for the Chūnin Exam finals.” Though at the next breath he seems to rally, and in a more cheerful tone adds, “Not that he needs to train or anything. Itachi is going to stomp everyone!” Again, Sasuke is probably right about that.

I’m still pretty agitated following Sasuke’s revelation, but I’m also glad. Glad that he doesn’t know any better and just rambles on, divulging possibly classified information to people who have no business learning it.

Like a puppy. An adorable, retarded, puppy.

In fact, I’m so grateful for the unintended tip, and too rattled to pick up my training before recomposing myself, that I find myself offering Sasuke my assistance in the search for the mystery ninja. Also, it seems like a fun idea.

Sasuke happily accepts my proposal, and we begin combing through the wreckage previously dubbed as my practice area. Our “investigation” is mostly just kid’s play and make-believe, though the raven haired boy looks to be taking it somewhat seriously. I use the time to get the hang of Sasuke, and find the spare heir to the Uchiha to be a generally normal kid. Open, and joyful, and even a bit shy. No hint of that dark, brooding child he can one day become.

About an hour into an investigation preordained for failure, we are interrupted by a sound of approaching footsteps and the chattering. Sasuke pauses his inspection of a particularly trashed trunk lying on the ground, and straightens, facing the direction of the noise. I follow his example, and moments later two figures enter the clearing.

We’ve met before, though I doubt if that’s true for Sasuke as well. Joining our company is one blond haired jinchūriki with an affinity to the color orange, along with his dog masked, silver haired, ANBU caretaker. Naruto, oblivious to our presence, continues to yammer on at Kakashi, completely ignoring the fact that the man is engrossed in some book.

“-d the paint splattered everywhere, coloring everything in awesome orange. There was even a pair that got covered with an extra thick coating, and they stood there like idio- Oh, hi there Hakaru!”

“Hello, Naruto-san!” I grin despite myself, recalling that little incident on one of my encounters with
Itachi. If it was anyone but Naruto, I’d assume that last part was intentional. However, Naruto has such a proclivity for bone-headedness that outbursts like this should really be expected. My manners are not forgotten, and so I make introductions for Sasuke. “Naruto-san, Dog-san, this is Uchiha Sasuke, a new friend I just made.” Did he just jerk? “Sasuke-san, this are Uzumaki Naruto, a very gutsy kid, and Dog-san, a very viol—“ killer intent, cough, clear throat “a very nice person.”

Fuck you too Kakashi. Can’t take a joke?

Naruto looks at me a little funny, but his attention soon turns to the setting. “What the crap happened here?”

“Naruto, what did we say about the words you use” Kakashi interposes, lightly chastising his charge while at the same time his mask twists about as he takes in the brutalized flora.

Naruto doesn’t appear contrite in the least, and whines to Kakashi. “But Dog, you said I only have to watch what I said in front of Jiji so he wouldn’t demote you to back genin.” He then adopts a cheeky grin and adds, “and we agreed you had to get me ramen every day in return.”

“Now now, Naruto,” Kakashi replies in his nonchalant tone, “this isn’t just anyone. This is Uchiha Sasuke, son the Uchiha clan head.” His inspection of the clearing comes to an end, and I feel the weight his gaze dropping to rest squarely on me.

Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit.

Oblivious to my mounting dread, Naruto continues his banter with Kakashi. “But he’s a friend of Hakaru, so he must be a cool guy.” He turns back to address us. “So what’s with all this mess?”

I’m too preoccupied to answer, torn between trying to conjure up a way to distance myself from my work, and not giving away any sign of the distress I’m feeling right now.

Thankfully, Sasuke is eager to join the conversation and chimes in. “We don’t know who did it. Hakaru and I are trying to figure it out!”

Damn. The way he phrased that... Just might be enough to mislead Kakashi. It’s concerning that Kakashi has yet to give up any outward reaction, but then, he’s far too much of a pro for those.

I should do something nice for Sasuke.

At that point said boy decided to invite Naruto to join us in looking for the mysterious rogue shinobi, to which the blond jinchūriki responded as expected.

“You know it! We’ll find that no good criminal in no time dattebayo!”

Sigh. Naruto’s reply looks to have reinvigorated Sasuke. And here I was hoping to wrap this up and go home.

It’s another hour before Naruto’s endless energy finally exhausts Sasuke and hangs the towel, heading back after saying his goodbyes.

As Sasuke’s back disappears between the trees, I seize the opportunity and make my own excuse. Naruto, unperturbed, decides to leave as well. “Come on Dog, I want an extra-large bowl of pork ramen. Oh! And then one with miso ramen, and after that.”

Watching the two trudging back towards the village proper, a bratty blond and his reluctant dog themed man-servant, I can’t help but be reminded of a similar pair from a far different world.
Good thing Kushina wasn’t blond.
Or Minato’s twin sister.

February 5th, 6th year after Kyuubi

Grass is trampled underfoot as I dash forward, closing the distance to my opponent, and meet his defense. I throw a right punch only to have it redirected to the far side. My body pivots with the momentum, and I swing my left leg in a hook kick, trying to tag his chin. A slight shift is all it takes for my strike to miss, and leave my left side wide open to attack.

Recognizing my vulnerability, I rapidly push against the ground to launch me away, disengaging from my foe. Before I manage to make it out of his reach, however, I feel palm brush against my left arm, and it flops limply to my side as a sensation of pins and needles to blazes across the appendage.

After gathering enough distance, I turn back to face my rival’s serene, smirking face. Feeling miffed at being taken so lightly, I start circulating chakra throughout my body, enhancing my strength, and of more importance, my speed. Asserting, “This isn’t over,” I rush back in.

If he’s bothered by my claim, or sudden spike in speed, Hyūga Neji doesn’t show it. Instead, he calmly replies with, “You should have started off with that,” as he continuous to deflect my blows, now limited to my right hand alone, and occasionally trying to sneak in another paralyzing jab by my own defenses.

“Then, you might have a chance to beat me rather than barely holding on.” He’s right, of course. Despite now surpassing him in speed, my assault has been reduced to hit and run tactics, as I’m no longer able to maintain a sustained exchange of blows without use of my left arm.

“You know very well why I didn’t want to use chakra enhance from the start,” is my undaunted reply. Closing in, I unleash a series of lightning fast jabs, hoping to overwhelm his guard. In response, Neji deftly avoids most of my strikes, deflecting those he can’t. The retaliation is swift to come. “It’s a bad habit to always rely on being faster and stronger than your opponent.” He barely misses out on paralyzing my right arm as I quickly retract it and backtrack.

Running after me, Neji shoots back, “if your adversary is both more skilled,” cue smirk, “and more physically able than you, then you should not engage them in the first place,” he chides me. Coming from my vulnerable left side, Neji concludes, “Or, as a shinobi, you must use misdirection and deceit to attain your victory.”

“I know.”

Just as Neji is about to reach my torso, a surge of chakra sweeps across my left arm. Though his eyes see it, the warning comes far too late. Unbalanced and overextended, Neji can do nothing to stop the full force of my chakra enhanced fist from planting itself in his stomach, driving the air out his lungs, and bowing him over.

For a whole minute, the only sound in the Academy’s sparring ground on this late afternoon is the noise of my exhausted pants, and Neji’s frantic gasps.

This is a recent development.
Seeking a friend in order to appear more a well-adapted child, and out of a genuine desire for companionship, I decided to try befriending Neji. I went about it as one would when trying to coax a child prodigy hailing from a clan renowned for its taijutsu style. By offering myself for after-
Academy sparring, and infusing my muscles with chakra to enhance them, I force Neji to face a proper challenge.

Eventually, as his breath is somewhat recovered, and he manages to gather himself, Neji groans. “I should have known that glancing strike wasn’t enough to properly paralyze your arm,” he laments.

“You should have, could have, would have,” I fire back in a teasing tone, and offer my hand to help him up. “Misdirection and deceit is the name of the game my friend, just like you said.”

A faucet of shinobi warfare I’ve been sorely neglecting.

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*February 18th, 6th year after Kyuubi*

Concentrate.

Theory lessons aren’t any less of a bore than they were at the start of term.

Modulate.

I strive to keep abreast of the subject material, to avoid any deficiencies that might prevent me advancing.

Spew.

Still, the material moves dreadfully slow, such that I can make better pace by studying on my own.

Concentrate.

Up until recently, that would have been a pointless endeavor since I had no productive alternative to the time spent in Theory classroom to listening to our teacher.

Modulate.

Over the last several days, I’ve come about a method with which to utilize the idle time in Theory more efficiently.

Spe- Choke. Cough.

“Hakaru-san, why don’t you put down the water flask and pay attention with the rest of the class?”

“Yes, sensei.” Go suck an egg.

The reason behind my latest in a series of mild disruptions to the classroom is my new technique for practicing water nature transformation. According to the books I’ve been pouring over since learning of my primary nature affinity, the source water for the nature transformation come in two distinct flavors. Water gathered from the environment, and water temporarily modulated from the user’s chakra. The latter of the two, often used for techniques expelled from the mouth, is the style I’m working on refining at the moment.

My class-time practice involves producing chakra water in my stomach, then pushing it through my throat into an opaque water flask I hold to my lips. A few minutes later the chakra water dissipates, and I start over. Rinse and repeat, literally.

That’s my intention anyway. It’s difficult to be discreet and at the same time avoid drowning in your own chakra water.
The principle behind this style of water nature transformation is using water chakra to mimic actual water. Theoretically, all you need is some seed water to wrap your chakra around to copy its properties. As to why this is possible with water and air exclusively, rather than for every other conceivable molecule, well… That’s where things get murky. The prevalent theory is that humans’ innate familiarity with air and water as fundamental life giving compounds is the basis for this ability, and that a significant part of the labor to accomplish the feat is done in the shinobi’s subconscious mind.

Frankly, subconscious or not, at least one part of my brain isn’t doing its share here. I’m finding water nature transformation to be far more challenging than expected. Not as difficult as lightning nature transformation to be sure, but I expected, with all the available reading materials I now have access to through the Academy’s library, and my personal advancements in the field of chakra, that acquiring a semblance of competency with my primary affinity would be a cinch.

Most likely, the advantages of the adaptable mind of a young child are slowly dissipating.

As the teacher turns back to the board to resume the lesson, I notice Hyūga Neji glancing my way. I smirk, to which he replies by mirroring my expression. Having shared a moment of silent humor at the expense of our teacher, we both untwist our necks and face forward.

As the day’s classes draw to a close, the usual flood of children spills out of the Academy’s front doors. Trudging along, with Neji at my side, we make our way to the gates. Along the way, Neji inquires as to my earlier disruption. “What are you doing with that flask all day?”

“What? I’m thirsty.” The Hyūga prodigy raises an eyebrow, giving me a look that seems to say, ‘Do you think I’m an idiot?’. “I want to go on as many pee brakes as humanly possible, a person should only stand so much mind-numbing lecturing in one go. We must strive to achieve balance in our lives.”

“Be serious.”

“I’m trying to master water nature transformation.” Blunt truth, don’t fail me now.

Neji rolls his eyes and huffs, “Fine, you don’t have to te-”

“Neji-oniisan!”

Is that? Yes, that dark blue hime-cut hairstyle is unmistakable. Standing just beyond that gates to the Academy grounds, far more adorable than your everyday five-year-old, is Hyūga Hinata, heiress to the distinguished Hyūga clan. At her side is a person I’d have ungenerously dubbed as a generic male Hyūga clan member, if it wasn’t for the top-knot adorning his scalp, wearing the complimentary severe Hyūga facial expression.

As we draw closer to her, Hinata repeats herself more softly, “Neji-oniisan.” She sure looks eager to see her cousin, don’t they live in the same compound?

Neji steps forward and acknowledges her presence by bowing and warmly replying. “Lady Hinata.” Standing straight, he turns to her escort, and with a nod, he adds a casual, “Hoheto-san.”

He then gestures to me to make the necessary introductions. “This is my classmate and sparring-partner, Hakaru-san.” Facing me, Neji gestures to his relatives and continues “Hakaru-san, this is Lady Hinata and-”

Hinata, in a manner entirely uncharacteristic of her original story’s self, abruptly disrupts her cousin. “Is this person the reason you’ve been gone from the compound so much?” Her cheeks are puffed
up, and she’s giving me the mean eye.

Hyūga Hinata, the single nicest, most kind person in this universe, is giving me the mean eye.

What the fuck happened in the Hyūga estate after I prevented the Hyūga affair?

“Lady Hime …” Hinata’s caretaker, I already forgot his name, attempts to lightly admonish her, but his efforts are ineffectual. Neji appears to be at a loss for words. A moment later he opens his mouth and makes to speak, but Hinata beats him to it. “And didn’t I ask that you call me imoto?”

Suddenly, her entire demeanor changes as she shrinks into herself and brings her pointer fingers together. “Or nee-chan, or,” her face flushes, “Hinata-chan.” Hinata becomes more flustered with every word. “That is…”

That’s more familiar. I was worried for a second that her personality somehow did an 180-degree turn. But, seeing her right now, stuttering and blushing while struggling to talk to Neji, Hinata looks just like she used to whenever she tried to form a complete sentence when speaking to Naruto.

…

Wait…

Wait one god damned moment!

I scrutinize the scene… Hinata flustered, Neji looking lost… and reaffirm the same uncanny conclusion.

Genetically, they’re technically half-siblings, what with their fathers being identical twins. I mean sure, she's five, it'll probably pass. Still.

Hiashi definitely doesn't approve.

“Well,” after Hinata trailed off, an awkward silence built up, one no one else appears inclined to break. “Seems like the rest of your day is taken Neji.” I ignore the chagrined expression he shoots me. “I’m very busy anyway,” my lips twist into a cheeky grin, “got to master water nature transformation.”

With, I beg off and leave the Hyūga clan members to sort themselves out.

Though, one thought nags me. Was Hinata falling in love with Naruto just her latching onto the first person who showed her genuine kindness?

May 2nd, 6th year after Kyuubi

“Today we’re going to follow up on our hand-seals exercises, by going over the three basic Academy ninjutsu.” The chūnin instructor gestures to the classroom’s chalkboard, where hand-seal sequences for the aforementioned techniques have been illustrated with care. “The Transformation technique, the Clone technique, and the Body Replacement technique.”

“Joshu-san, if you could please demonstrate the Transformation technique for the students.” The instructor’s assistant does as requested, going through the necessary hand-seals slowly and deliberately, calling out the name of each one.

“Dog.”
“Boar.”

“Ram.”

I sense a slight burst of chakra, and the assistant is engulfed in a cloud of smoke. When the smoke dissipates, the spitting image of the third Hokage is revealed.

After a brief explanation as to the nature and mechanics of the jutsu, the process is repeated for each jutsu on the board.

“Now, one student at a time, you are going to step up the front of the class and try performing at least one technique.” When the student body starts raising sounds of protest, the instructor quickly gestures for silence, and then explains, “None of you is expected to be able to perform any of these techniques right now. We just want to observe the way you approach these techniques individually to see where you need the most work.”

The clarification alleviates my classmates’ worries, and soon, one by one, the prospective shinobi find themselves demonstrating their budding skills before their peers. The display is about what you’d expect from students who spent half a year in the Academy. Most fail to even produce the smoke screen affiliated with these basic techniques. Of those that manage to call up a smoke cloud, fewer still achieve any semblance to the technique of their choice.

The chūnin instructors’ tips and direction are less than specialized, or particularly invaluable. Most often comprised of such generic comments as “Focus on your chakra”, or “Be more careful when forming hand-seals.” It’s probably exactly what students need to hear at this stage, but I was hoping for something more illuminating.

Among the various failed attempts, there are a few noteworthy successes. A frizzy-haired blond with bottle-cap glasses trying her hand at the Transformation technique is asked to take the image of the instructor’s assistant. After a cloud of smoke bursts into existence and quickly dissipates, the same student is revealed, with only the marked difference of her glasses being absent. The instructors are left scratching their heads on what to make of it, though the blond seems satisfied. When Neji attempts the Body Replacement technique with a chair he fails to switch places with the piece of furniture, but a close inspection reveals that he and the chair had both moved a few centimeters closer together. Before long, a murmur builds up as the children try to guess what spectacle the next student will present to the class.

When my turn inevitably comes up, I muster up the nerve for the step I’m about to make and amble over to the floor.

Tiger. Boar. Ox. Dog. Snake. As I mold my chakra, I feel it being twisted into intricate patterns by the shapes I’m contorting my hands into. As I call out the name of the technique, an application of will directs the carefully shaped chakra towards a chair positioned across from me.

A sensation of intense vertigo swamps me as I experience a dizzying sensation of extreme acceleration followed by an equally intense deceleration. I almost stumble but manage to right myself, breathing deeply to try to settle my churning stomach.

My senses return to me just as the smoke cloud dissolves, and I find myself at the other end of the class from my prior position. A hush falls over the room.

The Body Replacement technique. No other technique is more indispensable to an aspiring ninja. The ability to slip away from a bad situation with five quick hand gestures cannot be overstated. Moreover, my intention is to reduce that number to a single seal at most as my proficiency improves.
The chūnin instructors are trading hushed words while shooting me appraising glances. At the same time, a hum rises from my classmates. This achievement will not be overlooked.

Finally, the chūnin conclude their little conference, and the senior instructor brings himself to address me. “Hakaru-san, did you- is that by any chance your first attempt at performing the Body Replacement technique?” There’s a hedge of excitement to his voice.

I disappoint him. “No, I’ve been working for months to get it right.” Weeks, more like. The Academy’s library contains all the material that we are coached on in the classroom. It’s a prospective shinobi’s prerogative to advance ahead of the Academy’s pace. And, should a student attempt to bite more than they can chew, and hurts themselves when not under the watchful eye of the chūnin instructors, well, that is also within their prerogative.

The man deflates a bit but still appears impressed. “Nevertheless, to successfully use the Body Replacement technique in your first year in the Academy is a great achievement. Well done.”

I try to make myself appear small and meek. “I was motivated.”

From the look of sympathy on his face, I can guess that my instructors have probably been briefed about the incident that proceeded my early enrollment in the Academy. Aside from my appreciation of the technique, and my desire to move ahead, this is the reason I eventually caved-in to myself and showed some genius-esque level of skill. Let them think I’m just a shaken child, trying to cope with the trauma by learning an escape technique.

Sarutobi is going to just eat this up.

May 13th, 6th year after Kyuubi

Today, my showing with the Body Replacement technique finally bore fruit. I was approached by my chūnin instructor and offered the choice of joining a second-year class starting on the June 1st.

Assuming an average career length of twenty years, it is mathematically impossible to maintain a shinobi population of thousands by graduating a single class of thirty once a year. Appropriately, the Academy opened multiple classes each year, whenever a sufficient quantity of students was found to fill up a classroom. As such, at least one new class of every year grade began on a monthly basis.

The chances of the genin 9 finding themselves sharing a classroom in the Academy were incredibly slim. If made to guess, I’d assert that it was an intentional effort to foster bonds between the clans’ progenies, the children marked as likely to become pillars of strength in the village.

A student given the opportunity to skip ahead, as the chūnin instructor explains, would be allowed to take it only should they receive the consent of their guardian. Being an orphan, and subsequently a ward of the village, means I am granted a blanket permission to advance at the pace my instructors think most beneficial to me. The only stipulation is that in addition to having the significance of the decision clarified in a one-on-one discussion with an instructor, I must also have an older Academy student who has accelerated their own education share with me the highlights of the experience from a perspective closer to my own.

Which brings me to the classroom doorway I’m currently passing through, where my meeting with a senior peer is scheduled to happen. I can’t help but wonder who-

“Hakaru-kun! I’m so proud of you!”
And… It’s Uchiha Izumi.

A few minutes pass by in a blur.

We’re sitting together on one of the front benches, next to the window. I’m slouched in my seat, craning my head to face Izumi, while she does her best to impart me with knowledge gained through personal experience.

“-And you have to give up the typical month and a half vacation we’re usually supposed to get between Academy years. Also-”

My neck is starting to hurt.

“Actually,” I cut into Izumi’s spirited speech, “I was hoping you could tell me more about what drove you to take this path.” Mostly, I’m just indifferent to the concerns of advancing ahead of my classmates and wanted to change the subject. “If you don’t mind, that is.”

Izumi lapses into silence, my question having given her pause. When she regains movement, she turns to stare out the window as her eyes gain a faraway look.

“You know,” she starts, “my clan isn’t very fond of me. Or wasn’t, actually.” I give her back a quizzical look. “My dad wasn’t an Uchiha, so I’m seen as something of an outsider. But that didn’t matter to me. It was like we talked about that afternoon, I just wanted to be strong so I could help people. So I could support Itachi, in everything…”

This is not the expected outcome I had in mind when diverting the conversation.

“They clan didn’t look positively on the time I spent with Itachi, but when my performance in the Academy started to improve, when it was decided that I would graduate early, that changed. Suddenly the looks I got from my clansman weren’t harsh or impassive, they were kind and proud.”

Is she listening to herself? Doesn’t she care about the hypocrisy?

Finally, she turns back towards me, and her face is glowing. “But the biggest change came thanks to you Hakaru-kun!”

Huh? “What?”

Izumi blushes in embarrassment, and then blurts out “I didn’t actually know that I’m a chakra sensor before you pointed it out to me.”

My puzzlement increases, and it must have been reflected on my face, because Izumi hurries to explain herself. “I did- I could sense chakra for as long as I can remember. I just… I never thought it was anything special, that being a chakra sensor was some kind of other level to what I could feel.”

“And Itachi-kun, he told me he mentioned that to his family while having dinner one night.” Girl has it bad. She can barely say his name without flushing. Also, am I the only one weirded out by the fact that they’re probably third or fourth cousins?

Oh, she continued. “- Lady Mikoto even invited me to have lunch with her, and we talked about Itachi-kun!” Izumi clasps her hands over a chest and gets a dreamy look in her eyes.

Time to cut this short. I get the point.

“I’m very happy for you Izumi-san.”
Something about my blank tone seems to break Izumi out of her daydream and makes her looks at me again. She opens her mouth, probably to say something in gratitude, when a look of horror overcomes her face. She gasps and brings her hand to her lips.

Alarmed, and sensing nothing wrong, I make to question Izumi, but before I can say a word she exclaims, “Six-Paths! Hakaru-kun, I’m so sorry!” What is wrong with this girl? “What are you-”

“I’m so stupid!” She smacks her forehead. “Here I am, talking about my silly family issues, just throwing it in your face, when you are- when you don’t…“ Izumi brings her palms together and bows her head. ”Please forgive me Hakaru-kun!”

Ha… That.

“Don’t worry Izumi-chan, that’s what I have friends for,” I try to assuage he worries. “It doesn’t upset me.”

If the shimmer in her eyes is any indication, my words aren’t entirely effective in pacifying Izumi. “But tell me,” I grasp on to something to divert the conversation back to Izumi, “Don’t you think that being closer to your clan will make it harder fulfill your promise to Itachi?”

My question throws Izumi off. She tilts her, trying to make sense what I just said. I elaborate before she has a chance to come to some ridiculous interpretation. “I mean, they’re a shinobi clan, there could be times when trying to change the world for the better and going by your morals will be against the wishes of the Uchiha.”

"Don't be silly," she giggles, "the Uchiha make up Konoha's Military Police, they uphold the law."

"The law of a hidden village," I interject.

"Besides," Izumi continuous, and her tone shifts to a more thoughtful tenor, "I'm glad to have more people to care about. You can't just obsess over ideals, I think friends and family can give us a good dose of perspective." She gives me a look, "It's also why I'm so happy to hear that you have people that are close to you as well."

"A well-intentioned person who doesn’t stop to see the smaller details can lose track the bigger picture."

---

June 29th, 6th year after Kyuubi

The surface of the river is disturbed by a great splash of water, as if caused by a heavy object falling from significant altitude. That splash is soon followed by a similar one, and another, and another, soon turning into a chain with no end in sight.

My face is decorated with a carefree smile as I spring skywards once more. The water of the river beneath me twist to my will, launching me up. A great swell of water encases my form, but it does not encumber me. I feel my own chakra dancing within the mass of liquid, tethered to my mind and pliant to my desire.

The water enveloping my body takes the shape of some giant humanoid suit, dwarfing my six-year-old frame, and standing taller than most men. Its steps are ponderous and lumbering, but firm. I feel as though a single blow from its flailing arms could break an ordinary person. Submerged within the mass, with only my head picking out, the water moves unanimously to my own motions. Physical concurrence is not strictly necessary, but it significantly lessens the strain of manipulating such a large quantity my affiliated element.
I’m finding myself quite taken with the first style of water nature transformation. The utilization of water gathered from the environment, via infusion of water chakra and the application of will, allows for far longer lasting and energy conserving techniques. That this flavor of Water nature transformation also makes for a watery reinterpretation of Gaara’s sand is just pure icing.

In due time, when the exercise shifts from trying to tedious, the construct is lead ashore. There, I finally allow water and chakra to untangle themselves, causing me to plop down on my feet as the liquid suspending me loses rigidity and slides back into its source. My right arm alone remains sheathed in a tendril of water.

As far as techniques go, my water suit is far from battle effectiveness. Movement too sluggish, and offering less than impressive protection, the technique is more of a spectacle to illustrate my progress in water nature transformation manipulation.

Speaking of, addressing the watery encasing of my right arm; a more practical application of water manipulation that I’ve come to simply dub as a Water Whip.

Trekking along the bank, my arm swings back and forth, causing the pole of water to whip about. It cracks rock and gouges earth. A fairly crude and unsophisticated technique, and not particularly dexterous, it isn’t suited to grasp anything. Though, I guess refinement will come with time.

Coming to a halt, and bringing my arm forward, a pulse of chakra launches the mass of water back into the river, where it disappears with a great splash.

In another time, I might have finished my exercise by blasting an unsuspecting tree. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, Sasuke’s warning has left me far too wary of causing any undue damage to Konoha’s flora in my private training sessions.

The tension usually released through wanton destruction of hapless trees, instead, is now released upon the hapless students of my second-year grade at the Academy in taijutsu sparring.

Really. Entering the new grade at the start of June, and immediately finding myself located near top of the class, I couldn’t help but feel some disappointment.

October 7th, 6th year after Kyuubi

The chūnin instructor hums and haws as he studies the paper I’d handed over for examination. “This is impressive work Hakaru-san,” she finally proclaims.

“Thank you sensei.” It’s horseshit.

She continues as she hands me the strip of paper back, one of its sides is decorated with a network of glyphs and squiggly lines, “Of course, it’s still far from precise enough to safely activate.”

With little ceremony, the paper note is crumpled into a ball and chucked into a trash bin.

“Don’t lose heart Hakaru-san!” The teacher of my third-year Academy class chirps, “Your calligraphy is quite remarkable for an effort of just a few months. At your current pace, I’d wager you’ll draw up a passable storage seal before the end of the year.” By which she means the end of her class’s grade level, i.e. nine to ten months from now. She’s going to be sorely disappointed if she thinks third year is where I slow down.

Despite myself, the chūnin words cheer me up a bit. For some reason, I expected faster results when first deciding to supplement my workload by trying my hand at fūinjutsu. I guess it’s a matter of me
not being an actual prodigy slipping my mind on occasion.

Seriously though, calligraphy is bullshit.

Aside from my foray into sealing, third year, which I managed to advance to on the first of September, is proving itself to be almost as dull the second one.

Neji, who I’ve continued to spar with, despite having left him behind in year one, can wipe the floor with any of my current classmates in taijutsu. In fact, in our bouts, in contrast to my hopes, I find myself barely keeping up with him at the present level of muscle chakra enhancement utilized. Ambitions to gradually reduce the amount of chakra needed to stand on equal grounds with him are abandoned, as I realize in hindsight how silly it was to assume I’d outpace a prodigy where he shines brightest.

Still, my not being prodigy isn’t going to stop me from pursuing long-term avenues of power.

I’ve given up on the chakra exhaustion training I’ve been using for three years now. Once the benefits diminished to somewhere between indiscernible and nonexistent, it became obvious that path has run its course. Motivating me to seek out other routes to power.

Sealing was one such avenue. My comprehension of the art is not cohesive enough to accurately judge it, but I’m starting grasp at its potential.

Another, a path I’m more leery of and would avoid altogether if I could get my way, is summoning. Frankly, signing a summon contract unsettles me, for the only reason that I would overlook my worries and sign one anyway. Sage Mode.

Sure, Jiraiya’s appearance in the empowered state can be explained easily enough, he was always meant to be the toad sage, he used the summoning technique without a contract and got sent to Mount Myōboku. I can accept his taking on toad-like characteristics when immersed in natural energy. Uzumaki Naruto’s and Namikaze Minato’s rectangular irises, however, fill me with dread. There is simply no way that those two were predestined to be toad summoners as well.

What did signing the contract do to Naruto and Minato that it changed the fundamental way in which their bodies interacted with natural chakra? And if it could touch such an intrinsic part of your being, where else could it affect you? Your sensibilities? Your preferences? Priorities?

Maybe I’m overthinking it. The change could be entirely superficial, giving the summoner no more than a nudge in the right direction, with the natural energy doing the rest of the work. These fears may just be a misplaced product of vanity and pride, qualities I know myself to harbor in some form. Still, I’d avoid the risk of if I could.

Lamentably, summoning is the only concrete gateway that I know of to learn senjutsu, a skill I’m extremely keen on acquiring.

December 1st, 6th year after Kyuubi

A snowy morning greets me as I leave my apartment building and start making my way to the Academy.

Seems that for all that a butterfly can cause a hurricane on the other side of the planet, my presence here for other three years has yet to create a drastic shift in the weather. Sensible of course, as snowy days are not uncommon this time of the year.
It’s just that today is a very special day, a day I knew to be snowy due to my knowledge of this world’s future history. Today, the Rookie 9 enroll in Academy and start their career as ninja of Konoha.

Like at the opening of every month, upon entry to the Academy ground, I see clustering of families. Parents having come with their children to see them off on their first day in the Academy.

Today, however, among those are an unusual number of clan families present.

Nara, Akimichi, Yamanaka, Inuzuka, Hyūga, Aburame, Uchiha.

I even spot Naruto, standing glaringly alone. Kakashi’s assignment must be over then. I wonder who’s more heartbroken.

Ignoring them is probably the best course of action, so I proceed to head straight for my classroom. The sound of someone calling my name cuts that plan short, however, and brings me to a halt.

Looking around, my gaze falls on Sasuke, who appears to have spotted me and is running over to greet me. Naruto, who must have heard Sasuke, is marching over as well. I do my best to ignore the speculative glances some of the people in the crowd shoot me.

When Sasuke comes to a halt before me, he proclaims, “I knew you’d be here!” He’s looking thrilled. “If we work together, the Academy won’t know what hit it.”

Naruto arrives just behind Sasuke, and adds in, “Hell yeah, dattebayo!”

What?

Doesn’t Sasuke know?

I mean, I never told him explicitly that I was already enrolled in the Academy in the times we ran into each other over the last year. I expected Itachi to tell him.

Sigh.

“Sorry Sasuke,” I apologize, “but I’m joining a fourth-year class grade today.” By the skin of my teeth too. If my showing was just slightly less impressive, it could have been postponed to January. “I won’t be in the same classroom as you.”

Sasuke tenses for a moment as he tries to understand the words I just said. Slowly, his face contorts in anger, and his eyes gain a watery sheen. “You’re,” he chokes out. “You’re just like him,” Sasuke manages to spit out before turning tail and running back to his family.

I spot Itachi standing with Sasuke’s parents. He spares me an apologetic expression, to which I respond with a resigned look of my own, before he turns to speak softly to Sasuke.

Naruto seems to have just grasped the meaning of what I said, and figuratively ignites. Snapping his arm forward, he points his finger at me and yells, “Just you wait! So what if you have a head start? I’ll definitely surpass you anyway, dattebayo!” He then runs off as well.

Yes Naruto, you most likely will.
Reeling

March 26th, 7th year after Kyuubi

I’m being watched.

Again.

The Academy just let off for the day and I, as I am wont to do, take a hike to one of the secluded areas in Konoha’s forestland. Overall, it’s another lovely spring afternoon. The birds are chirping, fish are splashing in a nearby creek, and perched on one of the trees, a trained killer is tracking my every movement.

Seems that skipping ahead thrice in a single year in the Academy has rekindled interest in me. Not that I can blame whoever it is that decided my progress warranted further observation, even disregarding the way I am hurtling through the Academy curriculum. What with my contacts in both the Uchiha and Hyūga clans, Konoha’s most prominent clans, not to mention my passing acquaintance with Naruto Uzumaki, the village’s resident WMD. Why, one could mistake me for a protagonist.

Existential trepidation aside, this reinstatement of surveillance over my spare hours is exasperating. The last month spent refining my sensory abilities and fruitlessly attempting to perceive natural energy left me so frustrated, in fact, that today I decide to simply not give a damn anymore.

I kneel down near the waterfront, mold a speck of water chakra, and infuse it into the stream. A precise flex of willpower siphons tiny streaks of water that dart out of the creek to coalesce into a glob bobbing in the air over my outstretched palm. With little ceremony, I twist to face the estimated position of today’s stalker and exert the control held over the sphere through my chakra to send it zooming towards them.

The stalker is spared from a midday shower, however, as the minuscule amount of chakra imbued in the glob exhausts itself halfway, and the mass careens, hitting the tree’s trunk. Soon, another sphere forms over my palm, and I try again.

And by not giving a damn, I mean that I intend to train, despite my many misgivings. It’s already been firmly established that my aptitude sits somewhere and the outer edge of the curve, a bit of nature transformation is par for the course. Given that I refrain from making too much of a spectacle, and focus exclusively on control and making the most of as little chakra as possible, there’s little I can conceive of in terms of fallout.

Fifteen months. Fifteen months since I last had to suffer these asshats, and they’re not going to disrupt my growth like last time.

Speaking of, either fifteen months makes for a discernable change in a person’s chakra pattern, long-term chakra signature memorization isn’t reliable, or I’m dealing with an entirely new set of asshats. Maybe tailing nameless prepubescents is simply a task reserved for new recruits.

Eh. My old watches are moving up in the world. Probably graduated to stalking Naruto instead.

When a few globs hit too close for comfort, my shadow finally reveals themselves. A cat masked kunoichi with long brown hair, donned in standard ANBU gear appears in a Body Flicker, invading my personal space and towering over me. “You will cease this childishness at once!” That demand
comes attached with a healthy dose of killer intent.

Sheesh. Overreaction much. Scared to get your hair wet?

Having mentally prepared myself for this response, my heart barely skips a bit before my own frustrations come spilling off my tongue. “The way I see it Cat,” I backpedal a few steps, “you can either teach me something interesting, become my practice target,” a water sphere I’ve prepared behind my back is propelled at the kunoichi, who sidesteps it seamlessly, “or go away!” I jab my finger to the side as if shooing some annoying pest.

Somehow, the buildup of pressure from sheer killer intent doesn't force me to my knees to beg for forgiveness, but settles for inducing a dizzying lightheadedness. Then, it just stops. Stiffly, the kunoichi forms a single Tiger hand-seal and disappears with another Body Flicker. I sense her squatting on a new tree, chakra slightly more muted than it was previously, further away than her previous position.

Good, I need a head start.

Maybe Naruto was onto something with all that pranking. Being chased by ANBU has got to count as some kind of training. She’s not going to catch me, but she does have to keep me in her sight. If you think about it, I have full-time access to an ANBU shinobi willing to help me practice my evasion and pursuit avoidance skills.

Chakra saturates my limbs as I dash away from my shadow.

“Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!”

May 10th, 7th year after Kyuubi

Another generic woodland clearing in Konoha bordering a generic river. Another battered tree. Its trunk is riddled with a holsterful of kunai and shuriken, today’s vandalism instruments of choice.

It’s one of those days.

They come every three days or so.

Days where, no matter how much I concentrate, no matter how fast I tear through the Konoha’s uninhabited forests, I can’t catch or discern anyone tailing me. It’s tempting to assume there was some kind of mix-up and someone missed their shift, or simply a lack of inclination to spend too many resources keeping track of an Academy student.

Just as likely, it could simply be a Hyūga spying from far beyond my range of perception, or a ninja actually competent enough to properly conceal their chakra. Either way, the uncertainty leaves me incredibly self-conscious.

It’s a shame really, being chased by ANBU is exhilarating. Although I never manage to make a clean break, pushing myself to the limit trying to outpace an experienced ninja is a great learning experience. Without a clear target to drag into a shinobi themed game of tag, and Neji being unavailable due to Hinata monopolizing his free time, I am forced to compromise on more casual forms of training. Chakra control, my seemingly futile pursuit of natural energy, and the standard Academy regimen of taijutsu and shurikenjutsu.

The latter of which, I need to pay particular attention to. Having just advanced to a fifth grade Academy class at the start of the month, my position as a top student sits in a perilous position, a
situation that needs to be quickly rectified. I’m not done promoting my promotion to genin.

Reaching into a tool holster strapped to my thigh, my fingers meet a smartly disorganized pile of sharp metal. Muscle memory guides me and prevents nicking myself while nimbly pulling out the last handful of shuriken. My arm bends inwards at the elbow as I concentrate on the target crudely carved onto the tree’s bark. The proper movements have ingrained themselves through hours and hours of instruction, practice, and repetition, but refinement is an endless process.

In the time before my return to Konoha’s watch list, without the prevalent risk of being observed, every single one of the shuriken clutched in my hand would have been thrumming with lightning chakra. Multitasking can be achieved even without access to shadow clones.

A swift extension of the elbow sends all four throwing stars flying down range to be embedded in the tree—chakrasomethingwrongsmothering—in a pretty decent pattern.

What?

What was that?

Something flashed in my chakra sense, only to vanish before I had any chance to grasp whatever it was. I spread my awareness outwards through my chakra, aiming to pinpoint the source of the disturbance. The feeling of uneasiness typically associated with those days, where there’s no clear tell of my observers, rears its head.

I’d normally be ecstatic by the new challenge. Finally, a ninja that can fully suppress their chakra. However, something seems wrong.

My agitation isn’t helped by the unnatural silence that overtakes the area. A forest is not supposed to be so quiet. Sunset is near, and the long shadows cast by the trees do nothing to alleviate the tense ambiance that’s settled over my surroundings.

“Whoever’s out there, you’d better come out!” I shout, and immediately feel like an idiot. Not only did I just reveal my awareness of something being awry, but whoever’s out there has absolutely no motive to comply with my demand.

I stand there frozen, the sound of my own breath the only-

Ok. Screw this nois-

WHOOSH

A shinobi flickers into existence across from me, at the edge of the clearing.

“H-Hello shinobi-san” That’s not supposed to happen.

Aside from the physique clearly belonging to a male, and the stock ANBU garb, the ninja reveals no distinctive features. Even the mask, commonly the only form of individuality ANBU are encouraged to exhibit, is devoid of any distinguishing markings.

The shinobi does not deign to respond, and instead maintains a grim stillness. The black eyeholes bore into me.

On a more positive note, this guy’s chakra signature is no longer invisible to me. A chakra signature, I now notice, that feels like- Oh shit!
Chakra floods my frame as I blink and the ninja instantly transitions from inertia to full-tilt sprint, tanto drawn, zeroing in on my position.

The first slash, horizontally aimed at my throat, is dodged through a hurried leap backward. My sensory skills having granted me the crucial split-second foresight necessary to prepare myself.

A moment later, the shinobi closes the distance between us. Bereft of means to defend myself save for my fists and feet, and with no inclination to risk my limbs against a proficient blade wielder, a haphazard backpedal is my only recourse.

I duck, and skirt, and hop, my movements becoming increasingly urgent as each strike comes closer than the last to making contact. When the tanto first finds my skin, decorating my bicep with a shallow gash, a hissing noise escapes from between clenched teeth. Even that small, involuntary reaction proves to be more allowance than I can afford, as the slight distraction is sufficient to mar my cheek with another small laceration.

A mantra envelopes my mind. Get out! Get away! Get out! Get away! Get out get away get away get away!

All I can do is continue to frantically maneuver to evade the flurry of blows, too unbalanced gather the will necessary to use my chakra in any way other than the most intuitive manners of muscle enhancement. When Blank Mask takes half a step back and reaches for a weapon holster, granting me a split-second reprieve, I don’t stop to think and wrench my fingers in my haste to twist them into hand-seals. Chakra eagerly rises up to fulfill my desire, and I’m launched away, leaving behind a block of wood and a cloud of chakra smoke.

Before regaining my bearings, or letting the vertigo from the Body Replacement Technique leaves me, I continue moving, spurred by the THUNK of a throwing weapon embedding itself in wood.

After grasping my frame of reference, I adjust my course and dash towards the tree that last served as my practice target, with my weapons left affixed to its trunk.

A few steps away from the tree, a searing heat at my back warns me away, and I lunge sideways and roll back to my feet, hedging an intense blast of fire that immolates the tree, rendering my kunai and throwing stars either slag or impossible to wield. A spare thought is all the lamentation I allow myself for the expensive equipment, and ignoring my singed behind, put my next gambit into action.

“Bunshin no Jutsu!”

Just as the shinobi is nearly on me, a great cloud of chakra smoke forms around me and obscures my position. Moments later, myself and a dozen intangible copies burst from the cloud and take off to the four winds. My own heading will take me back to the village proper.

A miscalculation in the execution of my plan is soon revealed, however, as strands of chakra smoke trail behind me, whereas the immaterial chakra constructs cause no disturbance as they exit the cloud. I keep running regardless.

That plan is cut short when a wave of fire cuts off my path, forcing me to make a hard turn, flying through the foliage and getting scratched up. Before I get a chance to readjust my course back to the village, another torrent of flames almost intercepts me, and I find myself backtracking even further.

This asshole is herding me away from the village.

The pattern continues until I find myself back at the starting point, gasping for breath, and blackened from soot. That’s when the ninja gets really fire-happy. I’m offered the chance to prove my competence with the Body Replacement technique, or get charred alive.
It isn’t the best of tactics, as I’m pretty handy with the technique, and the small hiatus between each
great fireball allows me to regain my balance somewhat.

After passing up another chance to make a human torch impression, the lake’s shore is where I next
appear. I form a dog hand-seal to increase the ease of manipulating water chakra, as it goes to work,
sipping into and binding to the water. This had better work, I’m only going to surprise him once.

Blank Mask catches up, appearing midair and already speeding through the hand-seals to make
another attempt at murder via incineration. A fraction of a moment later a fireball the size of a horse
comes pouring from his mask. My response is to bend my knees, tense up, and release my
counterattack.

In retrospect, the high-pitched war cry that comes out of my soon to be seven-year-old lungs sounds
far more hysterical than threatening. Nevertheless, the literal tidal wave surging up from behind me
more than offsets my prepubescent scream. More water than I ever manipulated at any one time, and
far, far, more than I ever showed my watchers.

The mass swells upwards and towards the hurtling ball of destruction, submerging me for a second
as it flows around my form. The significant chunk of river current that I liberated for my purposes
bulldozes through the blaze’s fury, vastly exceeding its mass, and picks up the airborne shinobi.

I then direct the water to plow into tree after tree, using the woeful ninja engulfed in its bulk as a
hammer-head, to smash and uproot trees many times my age. The sound of tree and bone cracking
and splintering is indistinguishable to my ears. However, when I lose count of the number of trees I
destroyed, when the strain of imposing my will on such a great volume of water becomes too much
to bear for much longer, and the formerly picturesque setting is warped almost beyond recognition, I
assume my effort was sufficient.

A last exertion of will brings the chakra infused body of water to float at the center of the clearing
before I relinquish my hold on and allow the mass to flop and splash against the ground. An
application of the Tree Walking exercise prevents me from being swept away as the water surges
outwards and reveals Blank Mask, bonelessly sprawled on the wet grass. I pant, holding my knees,
every muscle burning, my body numbs and becomes leaden as the adrenaline rush leaves me. My
chakra system will take a few minutes to recover from channeling so much chakra.

The lack of chakra presence only serves to reinforce my previous assumption. “Next time, try maybe
not being terrible with the only ninjutsu you know,” I quip dryly, still not having fully come to terms
with what just transpired.

“In my experience, I’ve found that having an extensive toolset often outweighs a deficiency in any
one skill,” a gravely voice coming from seemingly nowhere interjects, causing me to reel back.

That’s when the clapping starts.

The corpse slowly cooling on at my feet is gone. The scorch marks decorating the clearing are gone
as well. My cheek no longer stings from the cut delivered to it during the start of the bout. A
sideways glance reveals the tree I previously used as target practice to be whole, as are thrown
weapons pinned to its bark. I freeze like a deer caught in headlight as the feeling of a veil has been
lifted from my brain sweeps over me.

All of those details serve as little more than background noise, though, when weighed against the
figure now standing a scant few meters before me.

Black, shaggy hair sits atop an aged face whose right side, eye included, is partially concealed by
bandages. A prominent x-shaped scar sits beneath a mouth stretched in a mockery of a smile. The man is donned in a white shirt, with a dark grey robe draped on top, hiding his right arm. His left hand is grasping a cane.

God damni-

Wait.

Clapping?

“KAI!” A pulse of chakra travels through my chakra network and clears my mind further. The sound of clapping vanishes, along with the shroud that somehow had me ignoring the sound’s impossibility with no free hands to produce it.

I’ve been played. And the only reason I’m not a stuttering mess right now is the familiar chakra presence of one of my watchers. Asshole probably thought it’s funny to watch me flailing against a non-existent opponent.

Though, where were they before…

Danzō continues speaking, demanding my undivided attention, “The detection and dispelling of genjutsu, likewise, is a skill that should never be overlooked. I’m glad that such a gifted aspiring ninja as yourself shows promise in such a vital craft.” His tone is gruff but also instructive. This is so bizarre… I am actually being lectured by Shimura Danzō of all people.

“Though,” and here his tone becomes disapproving, “it is evident that you still require significant effort to reach any degree of competence.” Danzō is clearly referring to the desperate battle for survival that apparently took place in my head. Conversely, one of the most traumatizing events of my admittedly short life, right up there with that time Kakashi almost killed me and the day I woke up not knowing who I am.

Bastard!

The severe frown that forms on Danzō’s face likely indicates he noticed my shift in mood. “It’s considered borderline treasonous to direct killing intent at a village elder.” The sheer intimidation he manages to squeeze into that one sentence startles me and pushes me to bridle my anger for the moment, stopping just before I can bare my teeth at him.

Killing intent? That’s interesting. Also, son of a bitch!

A tense standoff settles for some time before Danzō decides to break the silence.

“Did you know,” he starts, “that killing intent is considered by some to be the first genjutsu?” I shake my head in the negative with some hesitance, wondering at the tangent Danzō chose to take.

“It is said that even before the great sage taught mankind the secrets of chakra, that terrible, barbaric outburst of rage and hate could produce detrimental effects in one’s enemies. Paralysis, seizures, and even visions of an imminent death were some of the more common symptoms.” I never took Danzō to be a talkative person. “With the advent of the understanding of chakra, shinobi started to realize that killing intent is simply the unconscious leakage of an individual’s hate and bloodthirst into his chakra, which in turn, when sufficiently forceful, will affect a primal part of the brain of the targeted party.”

“With refinement and alteration, an ability born in savagery evolved into one of the great ninja disciplines. You, Hakaru-kun,” He makes a sweeping gesture, pointing out the watery bedlam
surrounding us, “have recently received a taste of its potential.” As I return to dwell on Danzō’s
transgression against me, he surveys the damage.

It could be worse. Danzō only looked underneath the underneath. If he dug a bit deeper, pushed a
little harder, I’d have pulled out all the stops. Lightning release, Rasengan, the works… My holding
back my full capabilities with Water Release is practically expected of me.

"My old sensei would have been proud to know that this village still boasts shinobi who show such
promise in his element of choice." Keen eyes take in the damaged surroundings, no doubt gleaming
intricacies I wouldn’t even know to look for. He turns back to me, face still entirely unreadable,
"Yet, I’d be remiss to forgo providing counsel to such a talented young ninja, to help avoid… a less
than ideal development."

Danzō raps his cane on the ground three times, and in the forest canopy, a muted chakra presence
flares up. An instant later, a shinobi garbed in ANBU gear flickers into existence beside me. That is,
beside where I previously stood, as I had performed a seal-less Body Replacement the moment I felt
the outburst of chakra.

Upon realizing who it was that I was facing, my guard had snapped right back up. That includes
molding and preparing my chakra for an emergency withdrawal. Yet, it seems I needn’t have
bothered. Despite my worries, no one tries to follow me. In fact, my most recent assailant has yet to
move at all. Kneeling on the ground, head bowed, the ANBU operative holds up a simple scroll.

Hold on. I recognize this chakra signature... This is- this is one of my regular watchers, from the
batch that’s been observing for over three months now. If he’s following Danzō’s commands, then
that means…

A rasping chuckle draws my focus back to Danzō, as he walks over to his stooped subordinate. He is
either oblivious to my ability to recognize chakra presences, or purposely revealing the fact that he’s
been keeping tabs on me for months. “While the first style of Water Nature Transformation is
versatile and powerful, in time, you will find that it’s often unsuited for the furious pace set by ninja
combat.” Danzō proceeds with his lecture, not even bothering to acknowledge my quick flight from
the ANBU ninja. No doubt he approves of my paranoia and rapid reaction to a perceived threat.

“The second style, albeit somewhat more limiting due to the water’s tendency to evaporate over time,
more often than not, allows for the quick reaction time necessary to decisively end a conflict.”

He places his back to his subordinate and faces me. “This scroll contains detailed instructions to the
Water Bullet Technique, including specifics of its mechanics. As good a foundation as any to build
up your proficiency from.” Danzō always struck me as the kind of guy who’s comfortable having
one-sided conversations. And it’s fortunate, because this man is dangerous. The less I talk, the less I
unintentionally give away.

“You find the Academy confining Hakaru-kun, do you not?” The sudden change in direction throws
me off, but I manage a stiff nod. Danzō seems pleased at that. “Then I urge you to preserve. You will
find that genin-hood to be just as underwhelming, but should you continue to prove yourself, I’ll
allow you to join my own foundation.” This is a lot of work for a sales pitch. “There, I’ll grant you
strength and help you reach your full potential, so you could stand amongst the Konoha’s greatest
protectors, under my command.” Can’t forget seducing children with power. Now I know where
Orochimaru learned that one.

With a final nod, Danzō raps his cane against the ground once more, prompting the kneeling shinobi
to stand and toss me the scroll. “We’ll be watching.” Before the scroll reaches the peak of its arc,
both men disappear in a Body Flicker.
Which is why they miss me sidestepping the thrown item and allowing it to tumble to the muddy ground.

I cautiously glance to where my previous company was situated, before directing my attention to the now stained scroll lying on the ground, eyeballing it.

Heh.

May 19th, 7th year after Kyuubi

"It's definitely the Water Bullet technique, and then some. Who did you say gave you this scroll again?"

"I didn't, he never told me his name."

The chūnin instructor looks up from his desk, and the open scroll whose contents he's examining, to give me a dubious look, before returning to studying the scroll. "Try describing this mysterious benefactor to me," he asks absentmindedly.

"Well… he was kind of old." "Aha." "And he walked with a cane…" The instructor makes an impatient, signaling me to get on with it. "He also had an eyepatch." The teacher sighs.

I wonder if he wants to go home. After class was dismissed, I stayed behind to ask the chūnin to inspect the scroll for me.

A deadpan look. "You just described a tenth of Konoha's retired shinobi." And back to the scroll.

"I don't think he was retired."

Almost imperceptibly, the hands of my instructor stiffen.

Like hell I was going to just use the hand-seals in a scroll provided by Shimura Danzō, let alone open it. For all I know, it could have been booby-trapped, or the hand-seals could belong to some kind of suicidal jutsu.

"He had an ANBU ninja following him around, taking his orders." His face snaps to meet mine, alarm written all over it. "Oh, and he also said he was a village elder."

The man swallows. I can barely catch him whispering to himself, "Elder Danzō …"

Sheesh. Sure, Danzō is a scary guy, but what the hell?

"Elder Dango?"

That seems to break him from his trance and brings his focus to me. The chūnin looks to be fighting himself over something, before making up his mind. He promptly rolls up the scroll and stands up. Walking around his desk, he kneels to bring us to eye level. There's a feeling of intensity in the air.

"Listen to me very carefully Hakaru-san." I blink, the skin around his eyes draws tight. "You are a student of the Ninja Academy, and you do not belong to any of Konoha's recognized ninja clans. By decree of Lord Sandaime, you cannot be conscripted against your will to any of the special units outside the regular ninja forces." Taken aback by his vehemence, all I can do is stare.

So that's why I'm still a student at the Academy, and not undergoing indoctrination in Danzō's Root. That law probably wouldn’t have stopped him on most occasions, but I’m guessing he’s being
careful since Sarutobi has already noticed me. The man needs to woo me.

Shudder.

My scroll is shoved back into my hand. "You didn't hear it from me, this conversation never happened." Nodding, I thank the chūnin and make my way out of the Academy.

As my feet take me on an aimless trek through the village, I begin to carefully mull over my next course of action.

While Konoha probably sees me as a kind of genius, only Danzō has an inkling to the extent of my capabilities. An advantage, one he may hold over my head in the future. No clue as to how, but still… how would one go about minimizing that advantage?

My gaze wonders to the scroll clutched in my head, and I’m hit with a terrible, terrible idea.

…

Fine. Damnit.

The lazy stroll comes to an end with a heel turn as I scamper to my newest destination, leaving behind Konoha’s bustling streets in favor of its sprawling woodlands. In short order, a sign designating the area ahead as Training Ground Two enters my line of sight. An expanse of grassland, nestled within Konoha’s woods, and skirting a small lake.

I pretend to ignore the shinobi present. A squad of genin sparring with fist and kunai, one chūnin coaching another through a ninjutsu, and a jōnin meditating in the shade.

It feels awkward to walk here uninvited, a green Academy student who arguably has no place in a shinobi training ground. The sound of grass being trampled beneath my steady gate is deafening to my ears, and I feel myself being eyed with curiosity, but I force myself forward.

Eventually, I come to stand before the lakeshore. I unroll Danzō’s scroll, sit down, and begin reading.

Time to become a “known entity,” but only as far as my skill with Water Nature Transformation goes. At least now, if anyone finds something wrong with an almost-seven-year-old possessing my current skillset, they can blame Danzō. With all of his infractions to common decency over the years, it could be refreshing for him to be wrongly accused of anything.

As for the technique itself, there are a lot of mixed feelings about learning it.

Danzō likely wasn’t mistaken when he claimed that the Water Buller technique can make for a great foundation to build upon. Being a measly C-rank, it isn’t particularly specialized and can help me pick up the basics in regards to the first style of Water Nature Transformation. I have been struggling with it, hitting a wall so to speak, and subsequently neglected it in favor of its sister style.

That being said, I have no intention of abandoning the manipulation branch of Water Nature Transformation on Danzō’s say-so. Following that man’s advice, and adhering to other common wisdoms will have me plateau as an A-rank ninja at best. Sarutobi Hiruzen is the most powerful generalist shinobi known, with Kakashi as a close second. Both are recognized prodigious geniuses in their own right, superb leaders and killers of man, and they didn’t hold a candle to the monsters that came out of the woodworks during the endgame. It’s why learning a thousand different techniques is useless for what’s coming.
It's all about finding your strengths and exploiting them to the absolute limit.

September 20th, 7th year after Kyuubi

Fūinjutsu is marvelous.

Following the advent of me practicing in the formal shinobi training ground, in full view of whoever cares to observe, and in the presence of other ninja making use of the public facilities, Danzō’s surveillance teams seem far less willing to maintain a persistent watch. Leaving me with more days without shadows, and greater freedom to actually pursue private training. Specifically, secretive fūinjutsu practice in Konoha’s woodlands.

You got to have a card or two up your sleeve.

It takes excruciating precision to inscribe an effective seal, where every regression from the necessary rigor correlates to a decrease in efficiency and an increased possibility of the seal functioning incorrectly. While composing a seal, a portion of my concentration is wasted ensuring that the scroll parchment stays flat on my working surface and remains stationary.

A disk of wood shaved from a log does not make for a proper surface to draw on with anything resembling accuracy.

To my shame, it takes far too many miswritten seals due to poor working conditions for me to realize the solution to my woes lies in the problem itself. I put my practice scroll to the side and examine the disk whilst slowly scratching my chin. The general scheme of what I need to achieve takes form in my mind's eye. A brush picked from a pot of chakra-conductive ink is placed over the wood as I start to throw together an improvised seal.

Once the seal is finished, I flip the disk and repeat a nearly identical design on its opposite side. When that's done with, a flash of chakra brings both seals life.

When prodded the disk resists being uprooted, nor does it move along the ground. Only with an application of strength does it separate from the soil. Releasing the bit of wood causes it to thud harshly upon hitting the turf. Placing the unrolled part of a scroll on the surface of the disk results in the parchment sticking similarly, though it isn’t quite as rigid.

A fūinjutsu recreation of the Tree Walking Technique.

Sitting down, I return to my exercise, making copies of the basic storage seal. It’s going to take diligent effort to reach competency, and part of that means grinding some seals until I know all their ins and outs.

Because fūinjutsu isn’t some mystical art, despite how it’s portrayed in some of the reading materials I’ve had to sift through to gain a kernel of truth. Its glyphs don’t stand for any arbitrary or subjective concept made up by the human mind, like wind, or strength, or luck, or love. It’s an exact science, where the seals make channels for chakra to flow, shaping and tempering it, using the interference waves between adjacent channels to modulate it and affect the chakra’s properties.

No wonder there are so few fūinjutsu masters. No wonder it’s shrouded in mystery. I’m humbled by the feats the people of this world managed to achieve with such an extraordinarily complex art.

After drawing each seal, a kunai is stored inside to ensure its correct function. Once the first batch is finished, filling my working surface to the brim, an attempt to unroll the scroll further to place fresh parchment on the improvised desk is met with unexpected resistance. Seems that the top-side seal's
grip was made too strong, despite my precautions, and refuses to unclasp from the paper. Countering the hurdle by applying additional physical force appears promising, as a sliver escapes the disk's grasp, but ultimately proves erroneous when my work gets ripped in half.

Huh. So that's how violating a law of physics feels like. There goes a pound of metal that is no longer accessible from our universe, and I don't think that sits well in any way with conservation of energy.

I fix the seal on my workstation and get back to work.

An undetermined number of storage seals later, the creeping monotony gets to me, and I turn to another well-known fūinjutsu formula. The explosive tag, another essential step for any fūinjutsu journeyman. Not a seal I'd have wanted to practice inscribing with my own hands, but lacking a jutsu for a physical clone, I resolve to keep my senses sharp and hands steady.

I nearly jump out of my skin at the sound of a throat clearing, towards the end of the first batch, and my eyes snap to the source of the noise.

“Itachi!”

The Uchiha heir grants me a wan smile.

“It’s been a long time Hakaru-kun.”

Yes. Months since we last talked. Judging by the ANBU uniform Itachi is wearing, I can make a guess as to why. He’s taller now, and his hair is longer, pulled in a low ponytail. It strikes me, how similar Itachi looks to that half-remembered memory I have of the night of the Uchiha massacre.

As my heart settles following his unexpected entrance, a glaring question comes to mind. How did Itachi manage to surprise me so? Is it the laser-like focus I devoted to writing the explosive tags, or can Itachi conceal his chakra completely from my senses?

“It has,” I give voice to my previous thoughts, “and you’ve been busy,” pointedly looking at the ANBU gear Itachi is donning.

“So have you,” he returns, gesturing to the unrolled scroll lying on my improvised desk.

Touché.

We both stare at one another for a moment, before we start chuckling lightly together. It’s an old joke and serves well to break the ice.

My eyes travel down, landing on a smudged explosive note, ruined beyond repair during the scare Itachi gave me. A single unusable seal among many that might not be. I pull out a kunai to cut out notes for testing.

“So how are things with Izumi?” I prod while carefully extracting the paper explosives.

Itachi mulls over my question. “Things are well…?”

Reassuring. “Ha-ha.”

Eventually, he finds the words he needs. “She’s been spending a lot of time in my home, though I don’t really get to see her due to my duties.” Itachi smiles then, “Sasuke tells me he likes her,” though it’s laced with guilt.
I’m done, and a stack of explosive notes of dubious quality rests in my palm. I stand, but before I have a chance to start painting a very, very, long line of ink to test these babies from a safe distance, Itachi steps forward and holds out his hand. Feeling amiable, I pass over the seals without question. He proceeds to hold up two fingers in his free hand, and in a burst of chakra and smoke brings a clone into being.

The clone takes a note from Itachi and springs away to a relatively safe distance. “So… Is she ok with you putting things on hold?” Hastily adding, “Not that I’m judging or anything…” In the distance, Itachi’s long lost twin ties the explosive note to a kunai, and arms the seal while pulling back his arm-

BOOOOM

Woohoo!

Did I vocalize that? I shoot Itachi an enthusiastic grin, to which he replies with an indulgent smile of his own. “Point six seconds from arming to detonation,” another shadow clone, another explosive note, “and put what on hold, exactly?” He inquires, sounding genuinely puzzled.

“You know… that little heart-to-heart you had with Izumi about making the world a better place,” I explain, “heartwarming stuff.”

A second note detonates in the distance as Itachi looks at me in dubiously, “I can’t discuss the detail my duty, but I thought you had a general idea of the nature of my work.” He gives me a pointed look and adds, “Also, point two seconds, these are not combat ready.” Damn.

“Oh I have an idea what ANBU does,” I drawl, “You promote Konoha’s interests in scrupulous and unscrupulous ways, you probably also save many Land of Fire citizen’s lives. It’s important, truly,” deep breath, “but this…” I wave my hands at Itachi, at the uniform and the tanto strapped to his back, trying to encompass the concept of him serving in ANBU, “this isn’t making the world a better place, it’s… more of the same, and little else.”

Itachi looks ready to interject, so I hold up my hand, begging a moment to finish. “It isn’t my intention to disparage you, and I hardly think you need my approval, but to me, the real issue is that I don’t think the decision to join was yours.” We match gazes as another explosion rocks the forest.

“You’re right,” Itachi opens, “your approval is unasked for,” ouch, “and that description of ANBU responsibilities leaves much to be desired, but,” and here he sighs, “I did not enter into ANBU of my own volition.” Do I get a cookie? He makes another shadow clone and sends it off with an explosive tag.

“So why?” The trepidation in my voice is not solely for Itachi’s benefit. As far as conversation destinations go, it couldn’t get much more dreary and uncomfortable. Still, fascinating.

His eyes take on a distant look, as though deep in thought. Probably weighing what, if any, he should share with me. Meanwhile, the shadow clone returns unharmed to take another tag, the last seal turned out to be a dud.

“My clan…” There’s a tired edge to him, “They’re not in good standing with the village.” Did he intentionally say they instead of we? “Too much bitterness and distrust have seeped in and settled since the Kyuubi incident, on both sides. It was thought that by taking a place in the ranks of the Hokage’s ANBU, I could serve as an example for my clansman to put effort into reintegration with the village.” That’s a lie, I don't think either Danzō or Fugaku ever saw Uchiha reintegration as a viable option. I wonder whose lie I just listened to.
“But that’s just silly,” I exclaim, and Itachi looks to me with askance. “How can you show them the light from the shadows?” How will you rekindle their will of fire when you’re submerged in darkness?

Yes, cheesy as hell, but it holds a kernel of truth. It’s unnecessary to subscribe to that moral code to know how effective it can be. Giving humans a higher moral principle to adhere to, creating a selfless cohesion in a community. The value of those things to a shinobi village cannot be overstated. The Will of Fire has real, tangible power, and it serves to pay lip service.

Another explosion goes off, and its backdrop paints his face in stark shadows. Itachi just matches my stare.

“I need to go.”

“Itachi.” He pauses for a moment, and I seize it. “If you need someone to talk to… about anything… I won’t turn you away.”

Itachi gives me a small nod and disappears in a Body Flicker. I stare at the spot where he stood for some time before sighing.

Damn it.

History is repeating itself.
January 17th, 8th year after Kyuubi

Due to being an unfairly deserted venue, the Third Training Ground makes for a good place to train in peace and quiet.

To the inattentive, there is little sense in the disparity of visitors between the Second Training Ground and the Third Training Ground. Possessing of similar size, and sharing features such as open pastures, surrounding woodlands, and sizable bodies of water, both training grounds should suffer a similar influx of shinobi eager to hone their skills. Ask any ninja of Konoha, however, and you will learn of the landmark that stands behind the Third Training Ground’s desertion.

Konoha’s Memorial Stone monument ensures that any shinobi think twice before visiting, and most choose to take their training elsewhere. I’d wager you’ll be hard-pressed to find a ninja above the rank of genin who wouldn’t recognize at least one of the names etched into the black, kunai shaped stone. With genin training where their jōnin’s direct them, few shinobi remain that are willing to make use of the Third Training Ground.

Which makes it an excellent place for me to experiment in private.

Would have made it, that is, if it wasn’t for the Root operative who decided today was a good day to snoop.

Technically, it is.

The midday sun beats down on my neck as I’m sitting on the lake-shore, facing the water. A portion of my attention is directed at a blob of water hovering between my outstretched hands. It stretches and constricts to my will, endlessly twisting as it shifts from one amorphous shape to the next.

While I wouldn’t quite say that my progress with Water Nature Transformation is stagnating, it wouldn’t be entirely incorrect to call it stale. Experimentation with Water Nature Transformation’s steadily reveals its deficiencies to me.

The blob fluctuations momentarily cease as it reverts to sphere form, before it restarts its movement, beginning to spin rapidly. The sphere flattens to disk form and loses its center. An additional exertion of will causes the disk’s radius to shrink as simultaneously four prongs protrude outwards. The water fights me every step of the way, but not nearly as much as for other, less organic shapes.

As I stand up and turn away from the water, looking for a target, one of my hands cedes control of the watery shuriken to the other. Upon finding a suitable tree, the arm holding the rotating, elemental throwing weapon is pulled back, before being thrust forward. Momentum and chakra propel the projectile forward.

When I first started this exercise, the shuriken would lose cohesion and splash apart upon impact. An inspection of the trunk would reveal a slight cave-in of the bark at the point of impact. The damage was more reminiscent of blunt trauma, instead of the intended piercing effect.

A process of refinement ensued.

Today, many attempts and trials later, the shuriken makes a solid THUNK against the tree trunk, and the water maintains its form for a couple of moments after hitting a target. Regrettably, that's about it. Liquid water appears a poor base to mimic rigid and inflexible shapes. Ordinary shuriken, forged by
whoever's supplying Konoha's stores, beat my water shuriken in every aspect aside from my ability to conjure them at will. Even that is arguable considering the hidden storage seals woven into bandages wrapped around my wrists. Storage seals stuffed with shinobi tools.

If the desperate struggle for survival/hallucination Danzō saw fit to inflict on me was useful for anything, it is instilling me with a distinct appreciation for preparedness.

Paranoia aside, I refuse to be deterred by this stumbling block and grudgingly continue working on the technique, garnering little to no discernable progress, before quitting in disgust to press on to the next exercise.

A few tendrils of water spring from the lake at my beckoning, zooming towards my position a few meters from the shore. They come together and coalesce into a sphere before the open palm of my outstretched arm. Closing my hand around the sphere causes it to elongate upwards while also adjusting to comfort my grip. The watery extension draws the lion’s share of my attention as I force it to contort to a shape contrary to its nature.

For several moments the prevalent sound in the clearing is of grinding teeth and the bubbling and frothing of a liquid that would not submit. As is the usual outcome with this technique, a compromise is reached. It isn’t the sleek, katana-like blade I want, but something resembling a misshapen jumble of edges and spikes shaped vaguely like a single-edged sword.

An experimental swing leaves a gash in a tree’s trunk, sending pieces of bark and wood splinters into the air. A steel sword would probably have yielded a similar result, and it doesn’t even begin to approach my Lightning Nature Transformation’s cutting capacity. I continue swinging regardless of the sword’s less than adequate performance, hoping to eke out some small, incremental improvement.

Thus far, my venture to replicate edged shinobi tools using water is yielding underwhelming returns.

As if to highlight my frustrations, the next swing I take at the tree causes the water sword to burst like a bubble, showering myself with the cold liquid.

GRRRRR

I restrain myself on account of that Root creep stalking me. Otherwise, the tree would have already been halfway to a smoking pile of ash. Oh, and because any attempt to mold lightning chakra will more than likely fry me like an insect on a bug zapper. What with being drenched in water.

I’m tired.

My body goes slack as I release a breath.

The truth of it should come as no surprise. An endless grind would wear on almost anyone, and this is more than grinding. Progress does not come free, not without pushing yourself, not without sacrifice and toil. To stand in place is to regress, and to walk is to remain static. Only by running can one truly move forward, doubly so for an ordinary individual in this world where much was determined by birth alone.

Turning around, I lean my back against the tree and survey my idyllic setting. As is often the case in Konoha, even in winter, the weather tends to a side most suited for an outdoor picnic. As if the village has been blessed with eternal spring. The lake’s water sparkle with endless diamonds and the smell of forest wafts softly in the air.

In retrospect, perhaps pursuing a civilian life would have seen me better served.
Snort. That is if I hadn’t died of boredom. Though, thankfully, whenever my resolve is tested, I needn’t look far to find it bolstered. The occasional Root watcher reminds me that I’m now past the point of going back. No, it won’t be a peaceful story for me, if it ever could have been.

I turn my focus to my now soggy clothes.

As I puzzle out the mechanics of drying wet cloth, my most recent failure nags at me. A momentary lapse in concentration was all it took for the construct to collapse when faced with substantial resistance. Today I merely drenched myself, out in the field that could have meant my head. The Water Sword is far from the reliability necessary for combat readiness as it presently stands. Its potential lies in question either way.

Sigh

Placing my left palm flat on a right fist forms the dog hand-seal, and refines my manipulation of water chakra. It radiates outwards from my pores to reestablish control over the water saturating my attire. Once the chakra has set in and fused with the water, I make my attempt at separating liquid from cloth, forcibly wrench-

“Fuuuuu-”

Heaven and earth switch places as I find myself tumbling ass over teakettle, my own chakra having failed to detach the water from my clothes. Instead, it jerked the fabric, yanking me with it in a dozen different directions. I’m sent on an uncontrolled jumble to the air.

Feeling myself fast approaching the ground, I brace myself. “Gah!” Preventing a head-first plunge to the ground with an awkwardly placed hand, I tumble to my knees.

I punch the ground. Sage damn it! Why can’t this be any easier-

My eyes snap forward, locking onto my sparring partner.

Shit! “The tree saw everything!”

I jerk my arm back towards the lake and curl my hand as if grasping at something, projecting my chakra.

I stare at the tree.

The sound of water frothing and gushing rumbles as it’s violently injected with water nature chakra. The tree stares back.

My arm whips to the front as I bellow my battle-cry.

“Treeee!”

A pillar of water bursts from the lake at my beckoning, and follows my hand. It does to the tree what weeks of a careful combination of chakra shape and nature manipulation couldn’t even hint at, and smashes it apart. The shattered pieces are swept away in the torrent until all that remains of the once proud sapling is a misshapen stump.

Teach it to mock me…

Deep breaths.
I suffer the silent stare of the Root ANBU in the trees with a smile, because as far as cathartic releases go...

"Hasn’t even been hit by puberty, and already unhinged,” Someone drawls from behind, “kids these days…” Several meters off, the intruder doesn’t even deign to look my way, appearing deeply engrossed in the contemplation of the object he’s inspecting.

“You’d find yourself unhinged too, D-”

“Kakashi.” He cuts me off, still not pulling himself from his scrutiny Konoha’s Memorial Stone.

“Huh?” It strikes me that this is the first time I’ve met the silver-haired cyclops sans his ANBU mask and gear. I slink closer to Kakashi, making sure to approach from the side of his covered eye.

“It’s Kakashi when… not in work clothes.” Seriously? He must be hoping that his enemies will confuse him with that other very distinct ninja who has an extremely distinctive mop of spiky silver hair. Still, if Kakashi wants to reveal his name I’m not going to complain, most any headway in integrating myself with the main cast is well received.

Anyway. “You’d find yourself a bit unhinged if a bunch of creeps in masks shadowed you daily.” He glances my way as I approach from his blind spot, and I nod my head in the direction of the Root ANBU observing us.

His eye follows the direction I indicate until it appears to lock onto the hidden ninja, then flash back to me. Kakashi exhales, somehow managing to convey his exasperation with most of his face covered. “How should I know?” He shrugs. With that, what little attention I’ve been allotted seemingly dissipates, and Kakashi returns to his vigil before the Memorial Stone.

I somehow refrain from growling. The dismissal stings, and it’s almost like he’s trying to get under my skin. On most days this would have been a cue to take my leave, letting Kakashi to his own devices, as I’m not generally inclined to make a nuisance of myself. Right now, my petulance and the prickling sensation of a Root ANBU dissecting my every movement leaves me irritated and unusually bold.

Then I pause. Why should I think he would know? “Hmm,” I clear my throat, “considering your… work clothes, well…” I make some unintelligible gesture.

Kakashi gives me another silent stare, then pulls one of his hands from its pocket to lean his chin heavily into it. The exaggerated thinking position is accompanied by a myriad of equally hammy sounds of deep contemplation.

Eventually, the mime act comes to a stop, and he shrugs again. “You’re a special kid Hakaru-san,” I don’t like the way he said special, “They probably want to ensure you don’t trip over your own feet and crack your head open.” Don’t give them ideas!

I deadpan, “I don’t think that’s it.”

Kakashi snaps his finger with a “Darn.” He lifts his hand as he shrugs again, “Whatever it is, they’re Konoha ninja, I’m sure they serve a purpose.” Kakashi throws out.

I foresaw Kakashi being difficult to a certain degree, the sass less so.

Serving a purpose... Probably, but its nature is dubious at best. “Spying on a seven-year-old doesn’t quite meet up with the principles of the Will of Fire they teach us about in the Academy!”
“Wouldn’t know,” Kakashi dismisses in his uninterested tone, all that’s missing is a certain orange book and the image will be complete, “always thought that people who stayed there for more than a few months were a bit on the slow side,” he brings a finger to side of his head. As if calling me “special” earlier wasn’t enough.

I really shouldn’t have expected any better than this, but I just need someone to condemn Root, or at least get an outsider’s perspective at the least. The current foremost source of my frustrations is the lack of contact with Itachi over the last four months, who has no doubt been sucked into Danzō’s dark web.

I have long since forgotten whatever specifics I might have remembered that could have clued me in on an imminent Uchiha Massacre. Perhaps I could have kept a record of important facts, but Laziness and complacency overcame prudence on that matter. The anticipation leaves me tense, and I periodically remind myself that the issue is out of my hands. Influencing Itachi to best of my ability is as far as I could realistically interfere. Disclosing information directly to the Hokage would be foolhardy, as preventing the massacre without a concrete way to avert a civil war will weaken Konoha considerably more than a killing of a single clan, no matter how powerful.

There’s a need to be vindicated for the scrutiny I’m suffering, and a general antagonism I’m feeling towards Root. “It reminds of another subject that the instructors have been skirting in the Academy,” I press on, “the Darkness of shinobi.” A cutthroat part and paranoid of our psyche. The primordial lizard brain, prone to tribal, xenophobic thought processes that categorize people as threats and—.

“And yet,” Kakashi interrupts my internal tirade, “here you stand,” he says. There’s a keen look in his eye.

“Yes…?” I don’t exactly follow, but there’s a glimmer of hope to finally receive a serious answer.

“Did you know, Hakaru-san,” Kakashi drawls, “of the talk in the grapevine about Konoha’s most recent prodigy?” My curiosity is piqued. Also, is Itachi serving as part of Root supposed to justify their procedures? There’s something I can’t decipher in his eye.

Making an effort to conceal my interest, I rise to the bait. “What about Itachi?” Tell me something interesting.

Kakashi raises an eyebrow, “Itachi?” There’s clear amusement in his voice, and he even chuckles lightly, baffling me. When Kakashi’s snickering comes to a stop, and his eye regains that look I can’t quite place, he addresses me again. “You’re a scary kid Hakaru-san,” he crouches down to put us on eye level and offers me an eye smile, “but still a kid. I guess being a little dense is expected.”

Oh

“Me?”

A poke to the chest forces me to backpedal a few steps. “Yes, you. The reclusive little genius who used to hide in the darkness, and now freely broadcasts his skills in Konoha’s training grounds.” His voice turns grim, “You came from skirting the edge of the Third’s leniency to being the latest buzz for gossip about the next generation.” The eye smile returns, “All from getting a taste of the true darkness of shinobi.”

I’m a subject of conversation?! Blegh. Not an entirely unforeseen outcome of revealing some of my capabilities, even partially by design, but still an unpleasant suspicion have verified. I can’t imagine
the consequences should I reveal my control over Lightning Nature Transformation or other skills I’ve kept hidden, though I have no doubt that the more astute have probably deduced there’s a couple of cards still up my sleeves.

The assumption that my encounter with Danzō rattled me to the point of shying away from the darkness is convenient, despite its use to validate Root being a load bull. On that point, “That’s just a coincidence!” I exclaim, “what if I had taken up with them?” No need to debunk the image this image of me that’s been built up.

“Then we wouldn’t be having this conversation.” Kakashi cheerfully chippers, and I refrain from analyzing that statement.

I redirect the conversation away from me. “Konoha’s greatest strength is the Will of Fire, cooperation and goodwill are some of the greatest forces in the world. Danzō’s will subverts it.”

Kakashi gives me a long look, I figure he’s impressed with that last statement.

“That’s a pretty hollow statement coming from a person as standoffish as you.”

Prick.

“Do you really trust them?” I grumble tiredly.

Kakashi snorts, “More than I trust you, I trust them to act in Konoha’s best interest.” With a sense of finality, he turns back to face Konoha’s Memorial Stone.

Not satisfied to let the matter lie without one last shot at Root, I pipe up, “If you sleep with dogs don’t be surprised if you get fleas!”

“I take offense to that.”

April 4th, 8th year after Kyuubi

The most annoying part of having a Gentle Fist practitioner as a sparring partner, I reflect, is, well, having a Gentle Fist practitioner as a sparring partner.

Not the most eloquent wording, for sure, but that's hardly my first concern from my position, lying on the ground, panting and temporarily half paralyzed. Clearly, this latest bout didn’t end as I had hoped. Teach me to hold off upping the chakra output to my muscles, believing I can maintain the status quo. Eight-year-old Neji’s progress in taijutsu is evidently faster than mine.

I need to be better than that. It'd be pretty sad for pride to be my downfall.

"Yata! I knew Neji-niisan could do it!" Also, there's Hinata.

Neji steps over to my prone form to help me pick myself off the ground. He grasps my two noodly arms and together we manage to hoist my frame into a semblance of an upright stance. Using the close proximity, I murmur, "Why is she here again?"

Taking a step back, Neji gives me a long-suffering look before he reactivates his Byakugan. Examining me, he begins to circle my form, humming to himself. I myself struggle to remain standing, failing to enjoy the late afternoon breeze. Eventually, Neji comes to stand behind me, shielded from Hinata's eyes. "Kō-san was indisposed, so Lady Hinata demand that I be the one to chaperone her today. Naturally, Lord Hiashi acquiesced," he whispers back, "just be glad we even
get to practice today and please, please don't antagonize her needlessly."

Which would have been a shame. Aside from my spars with Neji being one of my favorite pastimes, spending time with the Hyūga has an added benefit. Should our bout be scheduled on the occasional day where a Root ANBU operative shadows me, the presence of a wielder of the all-seeing Byakugan quickly spurs them to vacate the area.

I give Neji my best carefree smile as he finally comes full circle and takes up some kind of Gentle Fist stance facing me. "You know me Neji, I'm mister tactf-agh!" A jab to my shoulder makes me choke on my words, and a second jab to my other side nearly causes to lose balance. Before I can gather myself, Neji appears in my personal space, tapping and jabbing various points on my body. When the assault abruptly comes to a halt, I lose the battle to maintain my stability and find myself landing on my butt.

Ouch.

A flustered Hinata makes use the opportunity to pad closer to Neji, and I lose interest as she begins to fumble trying to speak to her cousin, the tingling in my slack extremities draws my attention.

The return of feeling prompts some experimentation, stretching and testing my newly reanimated limbs. "A warning would have been nice," I grouch, though to be fair, Neji entering a Gentle Fist stance is an obvious statement of intention.

After pulling myself to my feet, I find my personal space invaded from the side by a self-satisfied Hinata. "Don’t worry, it’s not your fault" she cutely states. "You never stood a chance against Neji-oniisan anyway," Hinata happily informs me, as if sharing an unshakable truth of the universe.

Hinata receives a long stare, during which I pointedly ignore Neji’s frantic use of standard Konoha hand-signs, signaling me to break contact with the enemy. “Sure, except for all those times where I thrash him,” still not going all out, ”which are about the half of our matches.” Hinata’s eyes me with disbelief, to which I respond by shooting a look to Neji, who has transitioned to observing our interaction with trepidation, “Tell her, Neji.” I prompt.

He gives me a vexed look before replying, “I’m afraid Hakaru,” Neji crosses his arms, “that I have no idea what you’re talking about.” His tone his grave, but the cheeky smile he has on display tells a different story.

I’ve corrupted Hyūga Neji. Hurray!

My eyes narrow, “That’s Hakaru-senpai to you,” I grumble as my gaze to returns Hinata, whose eyes widen with a dawning look of horror, “After all, I’m already in my last year in the Academy.”

And all it took was a showcasing of my proficiency with all three basic Academy ninjutsu, now there’s just the wait.

“B-But,” Hinata stammers before blurting out, “We’re the same age!”

“Yess,” I draw out my agreement, almost a hiss.

I’m not usually this vindictive, or prideful, or at least that’s what I like to say myself.

Hinata does not seem to take well to that revelation if the vibrating, clasped fists at her side and expression filled with indignation are any indication. Did I already mention how adorable a seven-year-old Hinata is? That attribute is not diminished as her face shifts to a show comic grim determination. Hinata takes a few steps back and slides into a Gentle Fist stance, finding her rebuttal,
“Neji-niisan is better than you, I’ll prove it.”

Not about to turn down a fresh new challenge, I step into a stance of my own and use two fingers to beckon Hinata, “Bring it, Blue.”

A throat clearing in an intensely exaggerated manner breaks me from the tunnel-vision I’d fallen into in anticipation of my bout with Hinata, and I turn my head to Neji. Where previously I’d have put him as reasonably irritated, Neji’s current expression clearly places him under the label of ticked off. I give him my best winning smile, trying to ignore the way his eyes promise there’ll be hell to pay later.

“Don’t worry,” I shake my head, trying to dismiss his worries, “kid gloves are on. I’ll barely even use any cha-.”

A hard twist and pivot bring me out of harm’s way, as a palm strike sheathed in a shroud of fluctuating chakra passes through space previously occupied by my ribcage. Already regretting my last, unfinished promise to Neji, I continue to backpedal whilst reassessing Hinata’s threat level, said girl having returned to her starting stance.

Nothing to it now I guess.

Realizing that my self-imposed handicap is probably going to place Hinata at an advantage, a reckless grin overtakes my features, and I jump into the fray with an excited battle cry.

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**June 23rd, 8th year after Kyuubi**

The coming of the summer’s stifling heat waves has driven me to seek shelter in my small, Konoha assigned apartment.

Usually, I’d endeavor to endure any discomfort imposed by weather, as there is little in the way of acceptable activities to pass the time in the confines of my apartment. Most types of training are unsuited for the fragile space also serving as a place for me to sleep and eat my meals. This world also lacked in readily available means of home entertainment.

On such occasions when the weather cannot be born, once I grow weary of reviewing academic material, my time is spent in idle lazing. Despite what the demanding pace of my training might suggest, rest and relaxation remains one of my favorite pastimes. There’s nothing quite like lying back and letting the mind wander.

Today I’ve resolved to include a craft that my appreciation for is steadily growing to the list of occupations appropriate to the boundaries of my apartment, sealing techniques. It had taken me appraising my level of competence to be sufficient with respect to not overly risking damaging the place where I sleep and take most of my meals. The seal I’m currently working on is one of my own design, a chakra disturbance seal, meant to scramble the chakra of the individual it’s affixed to in a short burst so as to dispel any genjutsu that might be inhibiting them.

Danzō left his mark.

All of that sums up to me hiding from the summer’s high noon in my living room, hunched over a pile of parchment, windows closed and air conditioning flowing.

The seal is mimicking a simple internal chakra manipulation, reconstructed as a fūinjutsu formula. The achievement is unremarkable, but it hints at a possibility that any chakra technique may be subjected to similar principles to be reproduced in seal form. Heck, forget jutsus, from what I gleaned
thus far seals are limited only by their energy requirements and the fundamental laws of this reality, the former likely assisting in bending even the latter.

The primary function of the seal itself is simple enough, but it’s the triggering mechanism that stumps me. Stomps me, as in, can’t even start designing it. I have no clue as to how to recognize an illusion technique has been applied to a person through chakra, it’s not a subject that’s been thoroughly explained in the Academy. Once I figure it out though, there’s little doubt that a seal capable of recognizing the symptoms of a genjutsu could be created.

I’d say my profession in my previous life was computer programming if asked to guess, judging by all the knowledge about and pertaining to computer code I have cluttered up in my noggin. Knowledge that up until recently would have been branded as useless. My burgeoning understanding of fūinjutsu is slowly reversing that opinion.

Consistent behavior can be expected of identical chunks of inscription given a channeling of quantity and quality of chakra of fairly similar levels. I recognize the familiar patterns, even though the texts that I’ve read suggest that no one of this world has yet to really catch on. Simple building blocks used in conjunction, building upon themselves, creating increasing complexity and allowing innovation constrained by logic and creativity alone.

A coding language for reality, dealing in chakra rather than bits and bytes. The implications…

Why am I hot?

I almost snap my neck turning my head to the living room window, and stare in curiosity. The window is conspicuously open, despite having closed it, letting warm air invade the formerly cool living space.

A cough from behind jolts me, and I spring to my feet as my heartbeat skyrockets, eyes shooting towards the sound’s origin, a chakra presence unnoticeable until moments ago.

My gaze almost immediately lands on the far side of the living room, where I come upon the familiar form of one Uchiha Itachi. Lounging in full ANBU gear on an armchair across from me, the pair of the couch I’ve been reclining on, the Uchiha examines the sheets of seal work spread on the table with mild interest.

Before my breath has a chance to settle, I decide to express my irritation. When Itachi takes his eyes off of my work to look at me, I wave my arm in a mockery of welcome and wheeze out a snarking, “Come right in…”

“Hn.”

Typical. At least I now know that there are levels of chakra suppression beyond my ability to detect.

In truth, Itachi’s visit is significant enough that any displeasure at his mode of arrival is cast aside. For months I’ve been waiting for any hints as to the outcome of Itachi’s tragedy. Initially resigned to a repeat of canonical events, as week after week inexorably passed with no news of a massacre sweeping through the village, a glimmer of hope began to grow that my influence might have pushed Itachi to somehow waylaying the miniature genocide.

Itachi clears his throat once more. There are bags under his eyes. Perhaps that dream was too farfetched to have arisen from my meager meddling. "Hakaru-san," Itachi says, "I was hoping to get your input on a matter of… ideology and ethics." I catch glimpse of something I’d never seen him display openly before me, hesitation. As though he's like to leave at slightest of disagreeableness
from myself.

Unbidden, the memory of my parting words at our last encounter surfaces. “I think I’ll make us some tea.”

When I return, unceremoniously dumping my fūinjutsu work to the side, and place two steaming cups of green tea between us on the now clear table, Itachi spills.

“Relations between the Uchiha and Konoha have worsened since we last talked.” A clan torn between love and hate, intertwined in a mess of bitterness and pride. “A disastrous inevitability is fast approaching.” The traitorous conspiracy, a misguided call to action.

“Your father…” I hold up, playing my part in this charade, “He’s the clan head! Can’t you…?” I gesture weakly with my hand, “Can’t he-”

Itachi cuts in, “My father can’t-won’t,” he bites out, “do what is necessary to stop this folly.” A father and a clan head, who cares too much to put them in their place, but not enough to save the clan from itself. Itachi sighs, and raises a hand to massage the bridge of his nose. “He is but a man, not immune to a growing resentment towards a village that has all but turned its back on his family.”

“And…” I start, “Did it?” If I am to suggest my plan, there are certain subjects this conversation needs to be steered through.

Itachi looks at me in askance, and I clear my throat, hurrying to explain myself. “Did Konoha turn its back on the Uchiha?”

Hesitation shrouds his eyes for a moment, as Itachi weighs what to divulge. “There is… a village elder,” he rallies his nerves, “Danzō,” Itachi whispers into the room. “I’ve been assigned to his command, to take part in the surveillance of my clan,” Go on… “He speaks of caution and preparedness, but my eyes reveal the greed and malice hidden in his.”

“Did he-” I bite my lip, “did Danzō implicate himself?” I jump to the point, anxiously elaborating, “Has he overtly acted against the Uchiha?”

Itachi gives me a guarded look. “Yes… he has,” he breathes out with a sense of loss that has yet to be fully grasped, his mind traveling elsewhere.

I see the pain in his eyes and know Uchiha Shisui to be the most recent source of Itachi’s anguish. A cousin more elder brother. Wielder of an ocular power that should never have existed. Loyal shinobi to both Konoha and his clan who tried to break the spiral of hatred, only to be betrayed. His final act bestowing Itachi with bloody gifts.

With Itachi displaying his emotions as openly as I’d ever seen of him, I do my best to hold back the glee I’m feeling. Itachi just gave me justification to suggest my plan, but it’s no excuse the disrespect the trust he’s showing me.

Eventually, Itachi wrenches himself from his brooding, “But it matters little. Danzō is too slippery to be charged effectively.” Itachi sighs, “I’ve taken your words to mind, and tried to untangle myself from the plots weaved by Danzō and my father, but found myself curbed at every turn. Things of self-interest, they serve neither the village nor the greater good.” I’m surprised by how disillusioned he sounds with not only his clan but his service in ANBU as well.

I take in the tale, refreshing and reaffirming my memory of the events preceding the Uchiha Massacre. Itachi falls silent for a moment, nursing his cup of tea. He does not appear to have relinquished any of the hefty weight he carries, but his poise has become somewhat more composed.
"I have been issued an ultimatum by elder Danzō," he says with a detached calm, "to join my clan and be slaughtered alongside them, or to eliminate the Uchiha for the sake of the village and allow Sasuke to be spared." With that he drains the last of his tea, smacking his cup to the table, and leans back into my armchair. Itachi gazes at me with a resigned expectancy.

The fact one of those options is outright treason, against a village that I'm a part of, hangs heavily the already tense air. It probably took a lot of nerve to come, something I never doubted Itachi possesses in spades, and trust in me, which is far more heartening. Perhaps he'd caught on to the apathy I hold for the traditional kind of loyalty fostered in shinobi villages. Unsaid, and sequestered to darkest reaches of my mind, is the fact that Itachi could quite easily kill me.

"Itachi," I say, my mouth opens and closes several times, before snapping shut as I fall into a brooding silence of my own.

I do not refrain from speaking for a lack of words. Receiving this opportunity was something I'd amused myself with on occasion, and have already come to a feasible resolution in my endless mental meanderings. It's figuring the right tone of delivery that gives me pause.

A few minutes of silence remind me that I'm not the type of person to find the 'right tone of delivery.'

Screw it. Here's my input.

"You're not going to do either!" I almost snap at him, abruptly breaking the silence. "A person who would give you these kinds of options," and here I use quotation marks, "is your enemy, despite whatever common goals you may have. You must never let your enemies dictate what you can or cannot do." A matter of ideology and ethics… Ha! Shows the kind of insidious bastard Danzō is to tie Itachi into knots like this.

While Itachi's eyes are rarely anything less than sharp, there's something more to them now. Suddenly filled with excited energy, I jump to my feet and begin to pace in the confined space.

No more dallying, I kick off and say, "Konoha and the Uchiha cannot coexist as they presently are, that much is clear." Itachi opens his mouth and I raise my finger, "However," gesturing for him to let me finish, "that isn't a necessarily permanent state of affairs." There are certain contrary elements in both entities that have brought us to this junction.

Looking directly into his eyes, I cut straight to the most critical question, on which my entire plan rests.

"Itachi, can you assassinate Danzō?" Asking if he can eliminate his father and the clans’ loudest advocates of rebellion is superfluous, of course he can.

Whatever excitement Itachi has built up is shut down, and he closes up as he broods over the question. The old warmonger alone would be a tricky pickle without even adding in his numerous fanatical underlings. I see him hesitate, and we can't have that. "Let me rephrase. You are a shinobi of Konoha and defender of the Will of Fire. Can Danzō be killed?" It barely takes a moment for him to understand. Itachi exhales heavily.

"Yes," he says, with a firm nod. There's almost excitement in there, though he's yet to quite see my intentions. He stands as well, and we step closer.

I suppress a grin, a crescendo of understanding is coming together.

"Will your mother keep the peace?" Asking of the same of the Third Hokage is superfluous, of
course he will.

Itachi stands perfectly still for a moment-

A raised eyebrow, a twitch of his hand, and a widening of his eyes. These are all the signs I need.

Itachi caught on.

“It’s not a perfect solution,” I admit.

More a lesser evil.

A convenient one, which rids me Danzō.

Itachi shoots me a look of bewildered wonder and begins to pace. “…The underlying sickness won’t be cured, but it’ll buy years to…” He trails off as his expression changes to one of intense concentration, seeming to forget my presence. His understating of both the village and his clan eclipses mine by a wide margin. I’d be of little help in ironing out the details required to make this scheme work, his thought process easily outpacing mine on this matter.

My eyes spot some of the tension visibly leaving Itachi’s frame over the next few minutes, walking back and forth in my living room. I imagine the turbulence of thoughts his mind rushes through when he stops and moves to stand before me.

Itachi’s face is a mask of complete seriousness. A sense of purpose and unyielding resolve. Backed by the skill and power of one of the Uchiha’s greatest prodigies, I figure you can count on a single hand the number of shinobi alive today who could stand against him.

The mask is pulled back for a time as Itachi gives me a melancholy smile. “I’m forever in your debt for this,” he says easily, “I imagine we won’t meet again for years.” And I feel an actual pinch in my heart at that.

My first friend. Kin in mindset. The person closest to seeing. To understand how utterly broken this world is, and willing to do something to change it.

“We’ll see about that,” is all I manage to say, and hold out my hand for him to shake. Itachi grasps my forearm, and a camaraderie silence blankets the room, the late noon sun washing over us from the window.

When the moment grows long, we unclasp our arms and step back. “Before you go, two things.” I raise two fingers.

Itachi nods for me to continue.

“Danzō’s right arm, I sensed something incredibly wrong with it.” A lie, the sealing work is top notch, but I couldn’t let Itachi face the man without some warning to the depths Danzō was willing to go to. “I’d suggest its removal as a priority.”

Itachi’s eyes gain a distant look for a few seconds, contemplating that statement before he shakes himself and asks, “And the second thing?”

I smile.

"Teach me a jutsu."
A cloaked figure slinks through Konoha’s underground passages.

The tunnels are poorly illuminated and seemingly deserted, yet the interloper takes care to silently slip from one shadow to the next. Spotting a niche, bracing, a flash of motion, scanning for alerted sentries, and back again. The figure makes steady pace towards Root’s section of Konoha’s subterranean causeways.

Though familiar with the layout of the maze-like corridors, the prowling shinobi is intensely alert, all too aware of the paranoia rampant in the clandestine unit’s leader. New traps, a change in patrol, even adjustments to the structure itself. Every new hallway is considered as unknown territory.

The hooded individual was loath to engage with Root, but needs must.

Hesitant at first, the boy he’d regarded as something of a protégé had made a compelling case as to the importance of this course of action. Above all else, to ensure the future of his little brother.

Those sentries that cannot be avoided are neutralized. A flash of red and spinning tomoe, a swift chop to the back of the neck. For those that neither is viable, an even swifter kunai to the jugular. It pains him to put down loyal ninja of the village, but that pain does not outweigh the price of failure.

At last, the cloaked shinobi reaches a great pit, intertwined with catwalks and pipes. Halfway to the dark abyss below, an enormous wooden bridge stands, leading to the four sides of the chasm.

From his position near the pit’s top, the ninja could make out two figures facing one another where bridge’s two walkways intersect. Treading to a closer vantage point, the sounds of conversation become apparent.

Uchiha Itachi’s aloof voice is just loud enough to hear from this distance, “…my father accepted his role in this with humility,” though it is colored by an irregular hint of pride. “He has entrusted me with the future of the Uchiha.”

“I respected your father, he was an honorable man, though misguided.” Danzō’s voice has never sounded quite so corrosive and deceitful, the spy could almost imagine Orochimaru’s sibilant hiss. “Now is the time to do your duty to not only your village but also your clan. Put them down as you would a rabid animal.” Danzō implores, “Make it quick. Make it painless.”

Itachi tone remains detached, “I have come to a preferred alternative,” he says.

“You dare strut in here and ask for my life?!”

“I was under the impression you were willing to give your life for the village,” Itachi replies with ease.

“I’d put my life on the line for Konoha a thousand times before you were even born, boy!” Any veneer of courtesy is slowly but surely being stripped from Danzō’s words. “I’d gladly die a thousand deaths for this village!”

“The Uchiha are a part of the village,” Itachi says.

“The Uchiha were never a part of the village,” Danzō mocks, and there’s a hint of something insidious there. “An enemy tricked. Bridled and chained with duty. The military police, a mundane task to dull their edge.” Danzō’s single visible eye bulges out as spittle flies from his mouth. “Some would think you’re as any other clan of the Konoha. But I always knew! Always prepared for the day I’d need to put you down!”
Enough.

Even the hooded shinobi’s stomach is turning at the repugnant words coming from Danzō’s mouth. Itachi’s composure may be staunch, but best not to test it needlessly. No doubt the real intention behind Danzō’s tirade.

It’s time.

The watcher discards his robe and jumps. Plunging down, he prepares his signature technique.

As he falls, his body contorts to minimize air friction, increasing speed and reducing sound. When the technique is ready, however, that notion becomes moot.

Lightning comes to life beneath the earth, to the call of a thousand birds.

His quarry becomes aware of the approaching danger and begins to move, but he is far, far too late.

Between one heartbeat and the next, spearheaded by the unreal concentration of lightning chakra produced by Chidori, Hatake Kakashi’s hand plunges into Shimura Danzō’s back. Flesh and bone part before the piercing ninjutsu with no resistance, and Kakashi’s hand bursts from the man’s chest.

Even though the Uchiha were the clan of his dead teammate, Kakashi could have still balked at Itachi’s request for assistance.

Danzō slumps forward.

Itachi was a former teammate, yet Kakashi might still have sent him away or turned him in upon hearing of his intentions.

But upon hearing that the old warmonger had managed to steal a Mangekyō Sharingan, Kakashi could not remain idle. Inevitably, Kakashi knew, Danzō would turn that eye upon the Kyuubi

No hint or prior warning is given as Danzō’s form disappears before Kakashi’s eyes, something considered impossible due to the Sharingan residing in his left eye socket. Itachi rushes forward. Steel clang behind Kakashi’s neck, the gust of wind caressing his collar a deadly whisper of might have been. Swiftly turning and joining his own blade to Itachi’s, the two put Danzō on the back foot.

Naruto. The only remnant of the family that has been ripped from Kakashi one by one. His little brother in all but blood, who he only got to truly meet so early due to a twist of fate. In Kakashi’s eyes, Naruto is a perfect amalgam of his parents, bearing Obito’s will.

His priorities have never been clearer.

Danzō jumps back to create breathing space. “Hatake!” he spits out in rage as he rips away the bandages covering his face, throwing them aside and revealing a sightless white orb in his right eye socket. His chest inexplicably whole. Danzō recognizing Kakashi doesn’t come as much of a surprise. His eye-catching hair has always made the ANBU mask more of a formality. It doesn’t matter. Only one side would remain standing come morning.

Kakashi’s sensitive hearing picks up on a familiar sound, he signals Itachi, and they leap from their position as a rain of kunai and shuriken descends. As he weaves between and deflects the thrown projectile, Kakashi spots half a dozen Root agents. Alerted to their master’s peril, they have come to assist him.

They form up around Danzō, despite Kakashi’s and Itachi’s the renewed assault, allowing him the
time to unseal his right hand. The appendage is pale and deformed, dotted with unblinking red eyes and crowned by a face Kakashi recognized from Konoha’s Hokage Monument.

Unexplained cases of Uchiha clan members KIA are suddenly not so mysterious.

Feeling the strain on his diminishing reserves, Kakashi notes that it’s going to be a long night.

June 24th, 8th year after Kyuubi

Uchiha Itachi’s POV

Judging by the color of the night’s sky, Itachi can tell daybreak is fast approaching.

The Third Hokage appears to be studying the sky as well, silently gazing as he is through the panoramic windows of his office, his back turned to the other occupants of the room and lit pipe in hand.

Exhausted and hurting, Itachi dares not move a muscle from his kneeling position. At his side, Kakashi holds a similar posture. Bearing pains no lesser to Itachi’s, the older jōnin keeps his expression impassive.

Before them laid out on the floor are five black storage scrolls. Four sealed and one rolled out, contents spread out around it. The grisly, dismembered remains of Shimura Danzō, Elder of Konoha, and a traitor. Body, arm, and head.

The corruption Danzō inflicted upon himself is apparent for all to see.

Arrayed around them are two elite ANBU squads, ready to end their lives at the slightest of infractions.

There might have been more, had not most of Konoha’s ANBU presently in the village been scrambled to contain Root. Killing Danzō could be likened to kicking over a bee hive and squashing its queen. The drones are in dire need of direction, erratic, and liable to lash out. Hopefully, most could be reformed and absorbed back into the standard ANBU platoons and regular shinobi forces.

The office’s inhabitants have been holding to their positions for an achingly long period, and not a single limb will shift, nor sound come out until the Hokage’s say so.

Itachi would easily wait whatever time the Third needed to accept the foregone conclusion. For much as he displays deference, inside, triumph blares most prominent. It is merely a matter of knowing, and trusting, the aging Hokage for any other conclusion to be conceivable.

Someday, Itachi swears, he will find a way to repay the debt owed.

With a tired exhale of smoke, Sarutobi Hiruzen turns his back to the window and addresses the room. “Itachi, stay. The rest of you, out. I’ll deal with you later, Kakashi.”

“Lord Hokage-” One of the ANBU starts to protest, but Sarutobi cuts him off with a hard look. They all call out, “Lord Hokage!” and then the ANBU disappear with a Body Flicker. Itachi knows they won’t go far.

Kakashi’s departure is less urgent, adding in his own subdued, “Lord Hokage,” he pushes himself to his feet and trudges to the door. Once the door closes behind him, the office plunges to silence for a time once more.
Sarutobi studies offerings laid out on the floor. What remains of Danzō, he eyes with alternating disgust and a deep set weariness. All the words said, and all the words that will never be said be spoken between the lifelong friends and rivals passing before his mind’s eye.

When the sting threatens to disrupt his composure, the aging Hokage forces himself to turn his eyes to the unopened scroll. He spends a particularly long time studying one of them. “For a son to be forced to kill his own father… I have failed you, Itachi.” His voice brooks no disagreement.

Itachi remains silent, but in his eyes, where Uchiha Fugaku redeemed himself only thanks to his acceptance of death at his son’s hands, he reflects that he might have argued given a chance.

Sarutobi appears to galvanize himself, “Stand now, Itachi.” As he Itachi does so, he continues, “This village has suffered enough of me dwelling on what could have been, instead of what is. It will have no more of it.” Itachi agrees. Thinking on the course of action he had previously been preparing himself to go through, he promises to never fall to such complacency.

The Hokage goes on, “I have a great many plans to be implemented. Things that must be done going forward if the sacrifices made are not to be wasted. I’ll hear your ideas, you would not have taken this step without thought. Your input would be much appreciated.” That Itachi will be banished and branded as missing-nin following this meeting is implicit.

The Uchiha, one of the village’s founding clan, planning a coup. A village elder practicing bloodline theft against one of Konoha’s clan. If made known, those facts could muddle the very bedrock on which the village was raised up. Revealing the Uchiha’s infractions would all but destroy any chance of Itachi’s clan returning to the fold.

It is a price Itachi would pay with ease, for his clan’s salvation. It is so close now…

He starts without stalling, “The Uchiha must reintegrate into the village. We are predominantly a ninja clan. The location of the clan’s compound is not truly important so much as this Uchiha’s place in the shinobi forces.” Taking a breath, Itachi makes a proposal that will have is clansman cursing his name, even more than they already will, “The Konoha Military Police hereditary connection to the Uchiha must be dissolved. A commander not of the Uchiha should be appointed, in time, and more of the clan’s shinobi persuaded to join different branches of the shinobi forces.”

The Third nods along, seeing the merit in Itachi’s ideas. “And what about prejudice held against your clan?” Sarutobi asks, “Quite a few in the village still blame the Uchiha for the Kyuubi’s escape and the ensuing rampage.” The loss of that night will hunt the Konoha for many years. The Third Hokage, in particular, lost both his wife and successor in one fell swoop.

How will you alleviate my concerns?

Itachi can’t help but feel as though the Third already knows what he intends to offer up as appeasement. He is reminded of the shrewdness of the man standing before him, who has served in his current position for longer than most shinobi get to live.

A shadow separates from Itachi, and in a flurry of dark feathers coalesces into a crow perched on his shoulder. Itachi reaches to the crow’s plumage and somehow draws out a scroll. A storage scroll of red and black. The Hokage regards the item with fascination as he holds out his hands and Itachi relinquishes it.

“My father’s eye, surrendered by the Uchiha clan as payment for its transgressions against Konoha, to be bestowed upon Konoha’s Nine-Tails jinchūriki, and no other, when the time is right.” Sarutobi’s grip on the scroll tightens, “To ensure that no Uchiha may ever dominate him, and to
allow a measure control over the beast within.” Itachi sees that Sarutobi sees the endless possibilities spread out before him. “My clan will accept these terms.”

Sarutobi face turns wistful at that, “The eyes of Uchiha Mikoto’s husband, in the possession of Uzumaki Naruto…” he mumbles, something unfathomable passing behind his eyes, “Yes, I believe your mother could come to accept that, and with the right motivation she’ll work to maintain peace.”

As the first rays of dawn begin to break over the horizon, Itachi resolves he will not settle for belief alone. Not on this day. “My mother will be made to understand, there is no recourse.” Even if it necessitates cutting into his heart again.

On his shoulder, the crow caws and turns its head, revealing a blood red orb. The last remaining Sharingan of Uchiha Shisui.

And old man and a young one in an office. The old man sits in his chair, regarding the younger man, who stands at attention before him.

“I’m glad you chose to follow Itachi in this, it seems you’ve finally found your purpose again.”

“…”

“I’m not truly mad. My right hand in ANBU is expected to have a sense of initiative. Extreme as this course of action was, I can only blame myself for forcing you to follow it.”

“Yet, I’d hate to stand in your shoes.”

“Lord Hokage?”

“I can read underneath the underneath quite well, you should be well aware. It is surely a difficult thing, to balance your loyalties between a useless, has-been living kage, a worthier dead kage, and a kage yet to be.”

The young man makes to object, but the older silences him with a gesture.

“I’m sorry, Kakashi, but whatever your plans after today were, they’ll have to be suspended. Your stint in ANBU will be prolonged beyond what I initially hoped to be your time to rejoin the regular forces. Naruto will have to wait.”

“…”

When Kakashi shows no inclination to challenge the Hokage, he elaborates.

“From your summary of Danzō’s and Itachi’s confrontation, there is one particular point on which Danzō wasn’t wrong. Tying the Uchiha to the Konoha Military Police has dulled their edges, though I know not if that was the Second’s intention.”

“War runs deep in the Uchiha’s blood, it is where they shine brightest. Even with Uchiha Mikoto working on our side, hellion that I remember her to be in her prime, I fear that the thrill of active duty will embolden some to act on any misplaced resentment harbored towards the village.”

“Your left eye will be needed in the coming times.”

“Both my eyes and blade are yours for as long as you have need of me, Lord Hokage.”

Sarutobi nods his acknowledgment. The two relapse to silence to silence for a time.
“…”

“What is it?”

“And Itachi?”

“An agent from a group called Akatsuki has made contact with him, an unusual gathering of extremely skilled rogue shinobi. A concern for the future, no doubt. Itachi will enter deep cover to gather intelligence.”

A long silence.

“It’s strange…”

“Lord Hokage?”

“I never expected a prodigy such as Itachi to resolve the Uchiha’s predicament in a manner so… down to earth.” Sarutobi chuckles to himself, “Teach me to underestimate a genius.”

“…”

“What is it?”

“I can think of where he might have received the push.”

“…Tell me everything.”

July 4th, 8th year after Kyuubi

Exploring Konoha’s backwoods has never felt quite so liberating.

It’s been days, and the Uchiha aren’t gone. There hasn’t been a single ANBU watcher in that time either. I can only summarize that Danzō is dead, and Itachi is no longer in the village.

A voice in the back of my head cackles, and I maniac smile forms on my face.

Danzō crossed me, so I made Danzō go away!

Although I remind myself with a sense of melancholy, there won’t always be a desperate juggernaut to sway to do my bidding.

It’s not as though my friendship with Itachi could have lasted, there was only ever the tiniest of chances of making any change beyond what I’d already wrought.

The extra weight in my kunai pouch blunts the sting further. Itachi didn’t have time to teach me a jutsu, so he hastily copied the instructions to a scroll.

Finding a suitably isolated patch of forest to start learning the technique, I hunker down and pull the scroll from my pouch. A fanciful thought comes to me. Could this clearing be where, in another time, in an alternate universe, Naruto learned the same technique?

A power multiplier in ways both obvious and subtle.

The Shadow Clone Technique.
I could make a thousand plans on how I’d use this ninjutsu, but until I can get an accurate understanding of its mechanics, they will serve as little more than daydreams. Best to focus on learning the thing.

Time passes as I study the instructions, the necessary chakra flow, and the single hand-seal. I make sure to drill myself on all of them, apart and then together. This is a forbidden technique renowned for its intense chakra demands and subsequent risk to its users. Confident as I am in my reserves, I’ll take no risks.

The first time must be perfect.

When the time comes, I make the cross-shaped hand-seal and focus on producing a single clone.

“Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!”

The smoke clears, and I see the clone staring at me.

…

I blink. Something’s wrong.

…

Why did we switch places?

…

No.

I… am the clone?

…

No, no, no, no no, nononono- I clutch my head. My goes blank as-

It’s there. I can feel it. Everything is the same except for a knot of chakra in my stomach, tethering me to the orig- to the other.

I instinctively know. A single flex of will is all it will take, and I go puff.

No!

He is looking at me with a curious expression, and I feel a flare of hatred.

It dissipates just as quickly, there’s something foreign in my brain that won’t let me retain animosity to the other.

Am I going to die? To disappear? I’m not ready yet!

Wait…

The memory retention! It’s my only hope.

My existence continues in the original. It will, there’s no alternative.
Acting before my nerve leaves me, and grabbing at the knot of chakra in my core, I scream defiance at the void.

“I live, I die, I live again!”

The memories hit me like a truck, and I physically stagger, heart rate skyrocketing.

“The hell?!” I wiz out a ragged breath. What was that?

I fight to calm myself.

What the fuck was that?!

The clone- no! The me that wasn’t I, but is now a part of the whole. Is every shadow clone like that? What’s wrong with Naruto and every witless fool who uses this technique? What was wrong with Tobirama to create this monstrosity in the first place?!

…

Am I just so narcissistic and frightened of my own death?

Probably.

My breath evens out.

Settling down to think, my ass flops to the ground. This can be worked through. The other me wasn’t wrong. His memories are in here, and they have influenced my being, as is the nature of memories.

Not a clone, or a copy. An extension of my consciousness, separated for a time, always to return to me in the end. I think I can live with that, to not break down in a gibbering mess if I wake up to realize I’m a clone.

I think on his words, my words, and a snort breaks out. Even facing oblivion, I can’t help being a smartass.

The same thoughts circulate in my mind over and over as I build up my resolve. Seeing no excuse to delay any longer, my fingers twist to form a cross-shaped hand-seal.

“Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!”

The clone appears in a burst of smoke, and freezes. A storm rages in his eyes.

I keep silent, there’s no need to patronize myself.

As no picture of me has ever been taken, I examine myself for the first time, not through a mirror image, but as others truly conceive me. My complexion remains as it has for years, a modest tan over light skin, as has my hair, a spiky mess of brown. The plain shirt and shorts do not scream ninja as much as the bandages wrapped around my wrists and my shinobi sandals. Access to limited funds and the rapid growth associated with my age have pushed me to put off purchasing a proper shinobi outfit until graduation.

The other takes a shaky breath and straightens his posture. Matching my stare, he says, “We’re cool.”

A grin forms on my face, mirrored on his. “We have work to do.”
July 15th, 8th year after Kyuubi

Ugh.

The Academy’s instructors’ lecturing in theory class was something I’d considered for a long time to be the low point of my routine, a dull monotony that couldn’t possibly get any worse.

I was wrong.

“-agriculture subsidy clause in the Sand-Leaf peace treaty-”

Ugh.

Turns out theory class while suffering from a headache is much, much worse.

Naruto may be an Uzumaki and a jinchūriki, but I refuse to believe he wasn’t also some kind of shadow clone savant. The second thing I learned about the technique, is that it is a terrible idea to work alongside a clone on mentally intensive tasks for hours on end before dispelling, forcing an already strained mind to cope with a sudden influx of stimulating thoughts and memories. That event nearly laid me out.

Since then I’d been experimenting with the technique, finding how best to utilize it while remaining functional. Fūinjutsu is the most demanding mental discipline, while taijutsu is the least. Ninjutsu falls around the middle. The amount of time an extension of myself should exist before dispelling derives directly from the type of task he carries out.

No more than two clones at a time, and they can’t dispel at close intervals.

An incredible boon.

Despite my precaution, I’m still new to the procedure. I was a clone working on a particularly tricky piece of seal-work and forgot to dispel myself, still a novel concept, resulting in the headache currently blotting my awareness.

To the point where I fail to notice my name being called.

“Hakaru!”

Fumbling with myself, I snap to attention, “Yes sensei?” There’s no reprimand in his expression, just a resigned acceptance.

“You’ve been called to the office of the Academy head.”

The head jōnin’s stare bores into me. He seems the no-nonsense type.

“I have been ordered by village administration to select an Academy student for a genin cell that’s being put together.”

About damn time.

“It is my personal opinion, and the general consensus amongst your instructors, that deems you as the student most ready to be committed to shinobi duties. You will be tested, of course, but I believe that to be a formality at this point.”
Or maybe they’re just tired of the anti-social child destroying the curve and making the older Academy students feel inadequate.

“Do you accept?”

“Yes.” I just approved of life serving as glorified muscle.

So excited.

“Good. Welcome to team 6. Your teammates’ names are Uchiha Izumi and Sai. Your jōnin sensei is Inuzuka Gaku. You’ll meet them on July 19th, at the ninth training ground, 7:00 AM sharp.”

An Uchiha, a Root operative, and an Inuzuka.

Sounds like the start of a bad joke.
Striding

July 19th, 8th year after Kyuubi

The weight of the forehead protector resting above my brow is a new sensation.

I come upon the Ninth Training Ground with some minutes to spare, I think. There’s a wrist-watch somewhere in the list of things I’m going to get once I have ryō to shell out.

The place is an archetype of Konoha’s practice fields. Plenty of trees, dirt, and grass, with a side-order body of water. Namely, a miniature lake. I have a running suspicion that during the founding someone did a bit of landscaping to ensure a nearby supply of water to counter and contain any fire ninjutsu related accident, and to avoid burning down the village. Smart move, as this is the Land of Fire.

While it appears as though I’m first to arrive, one of the trees dotting the training ground draws my attention, chakra senses lightly brushing against something. I arch my eyebrows. Someone conceals themselves in that canopy. The presence is unfamiliar, and not substantial enough to belong to a jōnin.

Stifling a sigh and marshaling myself, I stride over to the tree.

Overt displays of power are still something I shy away from, holding on to the belief that keeping as many cards close to my chest would serve me best in the long run. Disclosing a measure of my capabilities to my future teammates, however, may be an unavoidable course of action. If I am to risk my life alongside these people for the foreseeable future, they will damn better have an idea of my strengths and weaknesses. Any less is to court trouble.

The tree’s shade offers a welcome respite from the sun’s rays.

I raise my head to stare directly at the pasty white form crouched among the tree’s upper branches, meeting cautious dark eyes.

“Yo.”

Leaves and twigs are harshly displaced as Sai launches himself from his ‘compromised’ position. He lands a few meters removed from the cover offered by the tree, already facing me as he slips into a ready stance.

I show no sign of being perturbed by his actions as I blankly watch at him, allowing myself the time to inspect this miniature version of Sai. The only thing that truly stands out is an ordinary-looking long-sleeved black shirt, complementing the rest of his black shinobi garb. Seems that he’s yet to come to the dubious conclusion that an exposed midriff somehow makes any kind of sense as shinobi attire. Welcome deviation aside, a nine-or-ten-year-old Sai looks about as I’d expect. I note his equipment; a kunai holster strapped to his thigh, hints of a small pack slung behind his back, and a hand gripping the handle of a tanto peeking above his shoulder.

When common sense prevails over the paranoia instilled by Root, and my lack of aggressive intent becomes apparent, Sai shifts to a more neutral stance and tilts his head to the side as he examines me in turn. I smile to diffuse tension further.

As more time passes, I concede defeat and settle for being the first to break the silence.
“…Izumi, right?” The full-body twitch Sai gives my nonsequitur is something to remember.

Sai finally drags out a response, “That is incorrect, Hakaru-san,” he composes himself, “the alias I’ve issued to me for the duration of this assignment is Sai.” Still has a social butterfly I see.

I frown, “Hey, there’s no need for that honorifics junk, you know? We’re going to be comrades soon.” No point in delving into how he knows my name. Although I doubt it’s a case of an educated guess based on a process of elimination.

Sai nods his head and gives me a closed-eyes smile, “Indeed, Hakaru-san.”

Right…

The awkward moment is cut short, to my relief, when fast approaching chakra signatures ping against my senses. I about twist my head to catch sight of two blurs appearing from the trees bordering the training ground, coming to a halt on entering the clearing. Swiveling my head again, I see a third figure emerge from the foliage.

Uchiha Izumi.

My eyes take in her form for but a moment, searching for changes from previous encounters. I note an arm-length fingerless glove in place of her right armband, along with shuriken holster strapped to her thigh. We match stares for a second before turning to the other arrivals.

Of the two leisurely approaching arrivals, the dog is the first to draw one’s attention.

Though dog might be a bit of a stretch for the term. Shoulders coming higher than my childish frame, perhaps a meter and half tall, the great beast padding towards me clearly has a bear or two in its not so distant lineage. A coat of light-brown fur does poor work hiding bulging muscles. A creature bred for war.

The man at its side is impressive in his own way. He dons in Konoha’s regular shinobi-corp garb. A flak jacket, a long-sleeved shirt, and dark blue pants taped off with bandages at the calves right above shinobi sandals of the same dark blue. Like his canine companion, the man’s figure is taller than average, and bulkier, topping one eighty meters tall. The fang marks on his cheeks say Inuzuka, and his chakra calls out jōnin. The smattering of salt in his swept-back mane of brown hair whispers veteran.

Really, the pair would have made an impressive sight if it weren’t for the dog’s lolling tongue and happily wagging tail, or the man’s bleary, sleep crusted eyes. “Good,” Gaku, because who else could it be, rubs his eyes and looks around. “Everyone’s…” The dog yawns, eliciting a mirror expression from its master, “…here. Best we all sit down and get to know each other.”

I catch echo of my impassive nod from Izumi and Sai out of the corner of my eye, and the man directs everyone to join me in the shade. We sit down on the grass, three genin facing their new jōnin leader. The dog is content to continue sleeping at his master’s side. “Right then…” Gaku scratches at his goatee as he gives each of us a once-over, “we’ll start with standard procedure team introductions, I’ll go first to show you how.”

With that, the Gaku shakes off any sign of lethargy as he slams his fist to his chest, “My name is Gaku Inuzuka,” he pats the dog’s head, “and this is my partner, Kumanaru.” A deep grunting sound that might have been a woof comes from the canine beast. “I like extra rare meat and my cute little nephews. I dislike my crazy baby sister thinking she can boss me around, and grooming Kumanaru.”

Izumi wrinkles her nose, and I can’t help agreeing. Gaku must have noticed too as he brings a hand
to rub the back of his head and puts on a sheepish smile. “Well… Komamaru is the one that dislikes the grooming. It’s just that the mutt has a habit of turning his dislikes into my dislikes.” The ‘mutt’, now identified as a he, responds by reaching over to his master and delivering a slobbery lick to his chick. “Yeah, yeah… you’re a spoiled pup.”

They seem nice.

“My dream,” Gaku continues as he looks to the distance, “is for men of all creeds to come together,” he clenches his fist, “and unanimously recognize the superiority of the loyal canine companion type over the capricious feline!” I can almost hear the trumpets. Gaku turns back to face us.

... 

Is this where we’re supposed to call out a ‘Hear! Hear!’?

... 

Gaku coughs into his hand and continues, “…Right then, dark and pale, you’re up,” passing the proverbial mic to Sai. I lean to my left to catch the full details of Sai’s introduction.

I probably needn’t have bothered.

“You may call me Sai,” the boy’s voice is entirely lacking in inflection, “I like to draw. I have no dislikes or dreams.” It seems that even with cut short by my machinations, his indenture in Root left his personality stunted.

Gaku’s expectant expression morphs into a frown when it becomes apparent that no further details are forthcoming. “I see…” He nods to me, “pint-sized genin number two, you’re up.”

Having been prepared for the possibility of my first team meeting going this way, I’m somewhat prepared. “My name is Hakaru, and I like training and sleeping. I have no particular dislikes or hobbies. My dream,” I elect to share one of my general long-term aspirations, “is to die of old age with more good memories than regrets.”

Izumi reservedly nods along at my reasonable goal, and even Sai adopts a thoughtful expression—“Booooooooring!”

Gaku is less than impressed. “Come on,” he complains, “don’t you have any bigger-than-life dreams to strive for?”

I might, but revealing those is for much, much later.

My shrug and uncomfortable smile cause Gaku to let out a breath. Finally, the jōnin addresses Izumi, somewhat hopeful, “The girl in the team, shoot.”

“My name is Uchiha Izumi.” At the subdued tone of Izumi’s voice, my inattention is replaced with trepidation, and I twist my neck to look, truly look, at Izumi for the first time today. “My likes are helping people in need and…” she twists her lips and curls a bit into herself. After a pause, Izumi continues, “My dislikes…” only to fall silent once more, a sore tinge to her voice.

There are bags under her eye. Coupled with the slouch of her form and lack of vibrancy I’ve come to associate with Izumi, it occurs to me that I’d never really considered the implications of Itachi’s sudden departure from Konoha in regards to his supposed girlfriend. The extent to which Izumi’s world seems to revolve around Itachi makes for a striking mirror of Haruno Sakura’s obsession.
“My dream is- is-“ a spark ignites in Izumi's eyes as she straightens her shoulders. “My dream is to make the world a better place!”

Not all hope is yet lost, it appears.

I try to nod and smile encouragingly, but Izumi isn’t looking my way. Instead, she focuses on our prospective teacher, who has returned to scratching his goatee. “I see… that was certainly an interesting,” terrible, “round of introductions. You guys are a bit, eh… reserved.”

Gaku is silent for a time as he slowly strokes Kumanaru's fur, and I look inquiringly to my teammates. There is little insight to be gained there. Sai is impassive and Izumi morose. The quiet breaks as Gaku proclaims, "Right then!" Jumping to his feet, he smacks fist to palm, "Time for an evaluation." Kumanaru produces a muffled bark of excitement, content to lie at his master's feet.

We follow the jōnin's example and stand. Excitement and a measure of boldness well up as I look between Gaku and my new teammates. An Uchiha with a year's experience under her belt, a genin with Root training, and myself. We'll breeze right through whatever test our new jōnin leader has in store for us.

Gaku pats down his vest and picks through his pockets, eventually retrieving an unassuming scroll. Crouching, he unrolls what I recognize to be a storage seal. "Your task is simple," he intones gravely as forms a hand seal to release the contents of the scroll, "though not one to be taken lightly," revealing buckets, brushes, and… dog shampoo?

"Wash Kumanaru."

I'm still in the process of processing that single befuddling statement when an unearthly roar shakes my world. Instincts, from the time men's prehistoric ancestors scuttled and hid before mighty predators surge and scream at me to run and find the nearest hole in the ground to curl up in and shiver in fright until the apex predator goes away.

"This bodes poorly," Sai mutters.

As I consider the snarling mound of muscle, fang, and claw that is Kumanaru, and the fact that these are the first words that Sai has yet to volunteer unprompted, I come to realize that my instincts might have the right of it.

All vestiges of drowsiness completely evaporated, the dog sniffs at the air, and his furious gaze snaps to- me???

I take a step back as Kumanaru growls deeply, thinking if this is when I should start running. Gaku steps up to his dog's side with ease, patting his flank, "Don't worry, Kumanaru won't hurt- ooof!" Kumanaru pounces at his master, shoulder tagging Gaku and throwing him to the grass. He bowls Sai and me over in a mad dash to the clearing’s edge and disappears in the trees.

Gaku croaks from the ground as his eyes follow Kumanaru, "That rascal..." He looks to us as we pull ourselves to our feet, undisturbed by the creature’s demeanor, “What are you waiting for? Get.”

The three of us exchange wary nods. This is going to be… interesting.

We move over to the supplies lying on the ground. Sai and Izumi each grab a bucket and rush to fill it in the training ground’s pond, while I pick up a brush and a bottle of shampoo and reseal them in one of my own storage seals.

My new teammates return with full buckets, and I wince at their jolted movements. While that mass
of water isn’t a very strenuous weight for a child using chakra, running and jumping between trees, it will wreck their balance something terrible.

Izumi hurries to me, “Hakaru-kun?” She indicates to the loaded bucket swinging at her side, “We need to put in our all if we want a chance at this.” No tells of irritation bleed into her voice despite the trying circumstances.

No point in putting this off.

“No need,” I wave her off, ”I’m pretty decent with Water Nature Transformation.” A bit of smug oozes unintentionally.

Izumi smiles, “Good,” but then it turns catty as she pushes her bucket into my hands, making me stumble, “but we don’t want to make it too obvious.” Izumi runs off to fill the last bucket, leaving me to digest her words.

…

Girl knows her stuff.

We head out to hunt Kumanaru, together. It is implicit that our only hope to force a bath on the wayward mongrel is a coordinated effort. We weave between the trees, pursuing the beast. Sai shows himself to be exceptionally well-trained in field tracking. Izumi’s eyes flash red to get us back on the correct path whenever ordinary eyes falter in recognizing the signs of our query’s tracks.

The buckets leave our sides wet, and shoulders stiff.

I mostly trail along, my contribution minimal, until a signature other than the hidden specter of our sensei pings at the edge of my chakra sense. We realign and cut a straight path towards the stationary chakra presence.

I call out, “Fifty meters!” and my teammates split off while I make a beeline for Kumanaru.

Pouring on the speed, I dash between the trees as my target comes into view. Lying in a pool of sunlight on a small forest clearing’s floor, a snoozing Kumanaru appears unconcerned with his watery fate. Sacrificing some speed for stealth as I close in, I swing my bucket just as Kumanaru’s eyes snap open.

In a feat of agility unexpected from anything of that bulk, the dog somehow transitions from sprawl to a backflip quickly enough to evade the spray, pushing himself several meters into the air.

As Kumanaru begins to descend, Sai soars in from the right, a flurry of leaves fluttering in his wake. His trajectory takes him above Kumanaru, and Sai heaves his bucket to propel a deluge from above.

Gravity appears to be on Kumanaru’s side as he touches down moments ahead of the flood, enough time to flash to the left.

We allow Kumanaru no reprieve, the clanking sound of Izumi’s bucket forewarns him as she comes dashing in from behind.

Despite the blazing red of her Sharingan, Kumanaru manages to dodge again but is pushed to bolt closer to me. I twist my fingers to form a Rat seal and mold chakra.

As Kumanaru nears, Izumi, who has been tracking his movement with her Sharingan, yells, “Hakaru! Fifteen degrees to the right, now!”
I head Izumi’s call, adjust my aim, and inhale deeply before expelling a continuous jet of water.

While Izumi’s eyes have been following Kumanaru, his eyes follow me in turn. Kumanaru comes to a screeching halt ahead of the gush, crouching down to redirect the tension of his momentum, before springing backward in another high backflip.

Kumanaru starts twisting in midair, gaining speed from seemingly nowhere until his form is a blurry whirl. I swing my head to follow him, to redirect the flow of water-

Something warm and wet splashes against my face, and my concentration shatters. The stream sputters to nothing.

Sage help me. The smell…

An outraged shriek rings out, and I belatedly notice a bushy tail disappearing amidst the trees.

“Inuzuka ninke urine,” My gaze moves to Sai. Like me, he is ineffectually attempting to wipe away the pungent liquid. “A marked target may be tracked for up to a week, and from great distances,” Sai explains, and I turn to look at Izumi.

She is livid.

And marching up to me.

“I need water.”

“Huh?”

“I need to wash this out of my hair. Now.” Her eyes, reverted to their usual dark color, bore into mine.

We should be regrouping and resuming pursuit, but… “Right.” A few hand-seals, some chakra, and I’m spewing out a tepid stream of water. Izumi promptly places her brown locks under the flow and tries to rinse out the foul stuff. Even Sai steps into the stream.

Recuperation is the right thing to do. When we next confront Kumanaru, better that we be focused than frantic and furious.

Besides, we need a new plan.

“Sai, Izumi. Give me your buckets…”

We pick up the chase, Sai and Izumi efforts allowing us to regain Kumanaru’s trail. Their buckets are empty, decorated with storage seals I’ve quickly put together and filled with water transferred from my on-hand repository. The bucket encumbering me is left behind, as exposing my prowess over water rendered its purpose moot.

The tracks take us to a denser area of the forest, and we ascend, following them to the canopy. We leap between tree limbs for an undetermined time.

When Kumanaru does finally reenter the range of my senses, his signature does not tell of a stationary target. More so, it appears to be somewhat aware of our relative position, keeping a gap despite us charging in his direction, beyond the range of sight or hearing. Kumanaru seems content to maintain a constant distance.

My teammates break off again, sprinting sideways to go around while I slow down. Despite Izumi’s
and Sai’s rapid movement, my senses tell me that Kumanaru has not hastened his movement, instead, matching my leisurely pace.

Having not enjoyed the benefits of a quick shower, I retain the stench of the ninken’s marking far more strongly.

As I sense that my teammates are close to interception, shove a mass of chakra into my limbs, and explode forward. The scenic forest backdrop blurs to streaks of green and brown as I zoom towards Kumanaru.

I can tell that the ambush has already been sprung. My own gap closes as the final foliage divide comes into view, and a powerful leap propels me through it and above the scene of conflict.

Izumi stands at a distance to the left. Her bucket is empty, and I notice a small wet patch adjacent. My chakra, saturated in the liquid, calls out to me. I ignore it for the moment.

Sai is perched on a tree nearest Kumanaru, somewhat to the right, and upon noticing my arrival, he springs to action. With a clever twist on the Tree Walking Technique, he slides down the trunk while remaining adhered to its surface, unsealing the water in his bucket as he descends.

With Kumanaru placed between us, Sai pounces. He slings the water to push the dog towards me. He hops back, already twisting to face me while I move to head him off. Our eyes meet. I see wariness.

Noting Sai’s and Izumi’s positions, I bring a finger to my lips as I spit out another Water Bullet, splitting it in two. It passes on either side of Kumanaru, who stalls at the unexpected tactic.

My teammates, however, are ready. They intercept the projectiles with their buckets and jump at Kumanaru.

At the same time, after landing on a thick tree branch, I reach out to the water previously carried by Izumi and Sai, already infused with my chakra. A mental connection snaps into place. Imitating a conductor, two globs of water rise from the forest floor to my will and fly at Kumanaru.

This is it! Strikes incoming from four directions, Kumanaru’s neck twists back and forth, looking for an escape, but the ensuing bath is inevitable.

Kumanaru jumps to the air. My teammates follow, along with two guided water projectiles.

Unbalanced, and with no leverage to push against in the air, a great spray envelops-

Kumanaru disappears in an explosion of smoke.

The Body Replacement Technique.

…

That is not fair.

Now, where did… Oh, snap-

“Ooof!” Something big and furry tackles me from behind and throws me off my feet. I twist in the air and my back slams against the branch.

Before my senses have much chance to clear, a paw presses down on my chest. A deep, feral growl reverberates through my being. I freeze under Kumanaru’s glare.
Intellectually, Danzō was infinitely scarier than Kumanaru could ever be, but the startling frightfulness of a mouthful of incisors inches from one’s face cannot be understated.

The sound of a chakra smoke cloud puffing into existence breaks my stupor, piercing the coiling choke of primal fear.

“Kumanaru! Stop being difficult you dumb mutt!” A throaty new voice doesn’t command so much as it growls at the beast.

A yelp-like sound slips from between Kumanaru’s teeth, and he spins in place, any gripe with me forgotten. I jump to my feet, and my gaze follows the unfamiliar voice to its source.

Tsume Inuzuka, in full domineering form. Kumanaru shrinks before the feral woman. What the actual…

Ah.

I turn around and eye the ground, scanning to locate my water. The sound of sniffing and growling behind me tells me that Transformation Technique’s usefulness is at an end. Scrambling to reestablish a connection, I wrench back my water.

We spin back to match glares at the same time. Two orbs of water float at my back. I see Kumanaru tense, his hackles rising, and I consider my next step.

“Kumanaru! Heel!” Izumi tries again, but where I see through the technique with chakra, Kumanaru does so by smell, and we ignore her.

Well, nothing to it. I crouch, preparing to…

A torrent of water blindsides us, blasting Kumanaru and me. Coughing and sputtering, I don’t give much thought to the unexpected deluge and launch my own offensive at the startled dog, who twists away to face its origin. With Kumanaru’s distracted, it’s a simple matter for the animated water to find its mark, drenching Kumanaru further.

It’s at that point that the beast starts whining.

The torrent pitters out, and I spot a panting Izumi at its source.

…

Of course.

The Sharingan.

Brush and soap in hand, Sai appears before Kumanaru. He lets out a despondent snort, and Sai takes it as a sign to start working. Is Kumanaru pouting?

Deciding to let Sai have that one, I trudge over to Izumi, who’s transitioned to a sitting position now that the excitement is over.

“Nice save, Izumi,” I thank her. “How’d you figure who’s Gaku’s crazy sister?”

“Lucky,” huff, “guess,” puff. Izumi takes a deep breath and gathers herself. “I’m friends with her daughter, Inuzuka Hana. We went to the Academy together.” Izumi explains, and her face shifts to show a strained smile. “Let’s just say that woman leaves an impression.”
I find myself snickering at the mental imagery behind that statement.

Izumi raises a hand to the side of her face and stoops her back, “I’m sorry.” She seems uncomfortable.

“Huh?” I can’t seem to follow her line of thought today.

“I wasn’t thrilled when I found out I’d be babysitting two young genin,” Izumi admits. “But you guys easily pulled your own weight.”

“Shows what I know… Underestimating genius after all these years,” she mutters bitterly and falls silent.

A few moments after, I find my voice. “You weren’t that far off. I don’t see how Sai and I could have succeeded without you. Thinking on your feet like you did,” I shake my head, “I know that’s not something two greenhorns can do very well.”

My attempts to cheer her seem to work as Izumi smiles at me, “No need to butter me up, Hakaru-kun. I’m not toast.” Or maybe not.

I open my mouth to refute her assertion, but she cuts me off. “You should go bathe as well,” she sports another smile, this one more playful and genuine. “You smell like wet dog.”

My hand comes up in a mock salute, “Yes, mam.”

Hearing Sai call out to me, I turn to appraise his work. He seems to have transformed Kumanaru into a mound of foam. A last Water Bullet, one not evaded by a resigned Kumanaru, washes away the sods.

Later, we return to the training ground, and Gaku deigns to show himself. He congratulates the team on a job well done and looks about ready to dismiss us.

I pipe up, raising an issue that’s been bothering me. “Kumanaru looked kind of, em, watchful of me from the start.” Wary. “What’s up with that?”

“You notice that?” He asks, a shrewd expression on his face. “Kumanaru here,” Gaku pats the ninken’s flank, “he probably smelled your water affinity.”

What?

Kumanaru barks his agreement.

…So that’s a thing. Two hypothesis spring to mind. A subtle scent difference from proteins produced by chakra nature related genes. A faux interpretation of a dog-nin’s innate chakra-sense through the sense of smell…

My internal ramblings are cut short as I realize my new sensei is speaking to the team.

“…really useful during the last war. With Kumanaru here, we could make some pretty good guess s’ to which village’s forces we were going to run into,” Gaku boasts, joyful to reminisce of battlegrounds past. “Lord Minato always used to praise…” he casually name-drops one of the most influential figures in recent history, hinting at old comradery.

A juicy tidbit.

Today’s session is over, and we are informed of our next rendezvous. Before our leader turns to
leave, he comments on the sorry state of my soggy attire, ordinary civilian clothes close to their limits after a single day as genin. Something to the effect of not being fit for active duty. He adds in an order, thinly veiled as a suggestion, to replace them with a proper shinobi outfit. I nod my compliance as our sensei, Kumanaru in tow, disappears in a body flicker.

Sai is next to depart. Without a word, he blurs to the training ground’s edge and towards the village proper. Izumi shoots a look at his retreating back.

With the meeting effectively dissolved, Izumi sighs. Waving a lazy goodbye and starts trudging after Sai.

“Izumi,” I stop her. Curiosity drives me, sprinkled with a smattering of something between concern and empathy. “Is everything… Are you ok?” A couple of steps bring me to a more comfortable talking distance.

Her back stiffens, and she swings about to face me. “No,” she looks at me with guarded eyes, “not really.” An expected answer, but such gestures are more important than the queries themselves.

I crane my head to return her gaze, momentarily reminded of the irritant that is my relative diminutive stature. That line of thought is swiftly banished. “Want to talk about it?”

Izumi’s fists clench at her sides. “Which part?” She asks shortly.

I don’t get a chance to find a response before a stormy expression overtakes her features.

“That I didn’t see anything was wrong until he was accused of murdering poor Shisui?”

“That everyone but Sasuke and I are trying their best to forget he’s ever existed, following his mother’s lead?”

“Or that suddenly everything seems better, and the clan looks so hopeful and full of pride.”

The fury is overwhelmed by misery. Izumi’s eyes glisten.

“…That he left… left without even saying goodbye?”

Damnit, Itachi.

July 23rd, 8th year after Kyuubi


Mornings in the Mission Assignment Desk are not an ideal place for the faint of heart.

“Hey!” “Watch it!” “Damn greenhorns…”

Or the late.

I squeeze between bodies and step on a few toes, cutting the line to reach my team. Hopefully, before their turn to be admitted to the main hall. Gaku hates waiting, and so promised that failures to arrive on time would result in any offending parties being made to solo the mission.

Sans pay.

You’d think that after advancing from the Academy to active shinobi service, I wouldn’t still have to
get out of bed at-

Wait, no. My bad. This… This makes sense.

Premonitions of petty pay appropriation prove unwarranted as I catch sight of Team 6. Sai and Izumi are standing behind our esteemed team leader and his pooch. I slide in, to Izumi’s left, as the team turn their eyes to me.

“You were almost late, Hakaru-san,” Sai provides helpfully, his soft-spoken manner already grating on me. Not exactly emotionless, but that’s all I managed to gleam in the short time we’ve worked together.

“Ah,” I smile, “But a shinobi is never late, nor is he early, he arrives precisely when he means to.” Gaku snorts in amusement and turns away, uninterested now that I’ve arrived.

Sai appears deep in thought, contemplating the filched maxim. He opens his mouth after having formulated a response, “Won’t-”

“Hakaru!” He is cut-off by Izumi, however, as she catches the change in my appearance. “You got rid of those rags!” She grabs the sleeve of the white jacket covering my torso and arms, fingering the material. She seems satisfied with the quality and considering the salesman promised it to be tear resistant, weather resistant, and everything-in-between resistant, she’d better be. Izumi reaches for my collar and pulls it back, “Hey!” revealing a wire-mesh armor that’s been peeking from inside the not entirely zipped up jacket.

She spares a single glance to my legwear, a simple pair of black shinobi trousers I’d opted for, before grabbing my shoulders. Izumi manhandles me to take several steps back, inciting sounds of protest from the people shoved aside in the crowded space. “Sorry, sorry,” Izumi even looks apologetic, but a blink later, she steps back to appraise my new outfit in full. Coupled with my black shinobi sandals and wrist bandages, I think I fit the shinobi mold well enough.

“Passable.”

And that’s that.

We head out after receiving our mission for the day. Namely, planting tree saplings in one of Konoha’s outdoor areas. Seems that an upstanding Hatake clan member has noticed a depletion of forestry at a rate higher than the natural environment can compensate for, and commissioned D-ranks to help rejuvenate those affected woodlands.

That my team got saddled with the task… It’s not quite on the nose, but message received. There are more tedious duties a team of fresh genin may be assigned.

“…routine patrol on the Iwa-Kusa border. It’s not all that uncommon to catch sight…”

Gaku tends to share tales of missions past while watching us toil.

“…referred to us as tree-buggers. My perfectly thought out and formulated response was to piss over to her side of the border.” Izumi scandalized cry of “Sensei!” is summarily ignored. “Naturally, she and her hyena companion took exception to that.”

From his own accounts, the man’s portrait is drawn in typical Inuzuka colors. Brash and loyal. His personal touches accented in broad strokes of a free-spirited recklessness that makes delicate missions with him a mixed bag of comical and nerve-racking.
“I see,” Sai joins in, expression contemplative. “You baited an enemy kunoichi and provoked an imitation of conflict, creating precedent to terminate her.” He pulls one a notebook from his pack and starts taking notes.

I snicker, waving him away when Sai pauses to shoot me a quizzical look. Izumi's expression is strained. She doesn't seem to appreciate Sai's obliviously unscrupulous mentality.

Gaku stops short and eyes Sai. “Err… No, nothing like that.” He scratches his chin. “It wasn’t a very agreeable encounter at first, but we found common ground. We had, ah, a bit of a tussle.” Gaku looks away, and my lips stretch to a knowing grin. Izumi is quick to turn her face away from us.

“In the end, she retracted her initial statement. That bite mark is one of my proudest scars…”

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_August 16th, 8th year after Kyuubi_

RINNNGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG

My eyes snap open as my consciousness forcefully retunes to reality.

RINNNGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG

“ngaaaaa…”

RINNNGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG

I fling the blanket to side and lunge from the mattress, hand slapping onto the alarm clock resting atop the dresser sitting before the foot of my bed.

Blessed silence.

The still warm bed sits innocently in its place, inviting me to return and engulf myself in its warm folds. The team’s disapproval of tardiness comes to the forefront of my mind.

“Not today, deceitful temptress. Not today…” And never again, should my will hold steady for a few more weeks. The bed in my new apartment challenges my cultivated habits each morning with its soft yet sturdy materials.

I proceed to my morning rituals.

I’ve been kicked out of my village-provided, Academy student apartment. My new place is a slightly more spacious flat. It is situated at a complex meant to house loner shinobi, where Konoha partially subsidizes genin apartments. In truth, there is little change in my housing condition.

All things being equal, the new bed is fantastic.

With the increased expenditure on both housing and gear, I’m glad that a week’s worth of D-ranks usually tops the monthly stipend provided to Academy students. Probably another subsidy by the village.

Stepping out, I join throngs of my fellow shinobi heading out of the complex to face the day. Some take to the streets and some to the rooftops, interposed between are occasional bursts of chakra smoke from those who utilize the Body Flicker Technique. I’m part with the middle group, monotony having failed to stifle vertical freedom’s charm.

The team meets at the Ninth Training Ground for the day’s plan — Taijutsu practice and polish. I
can’t say it’s my favorite team exercise. The pecking order in this particular skill-set has already been established in the time since the team’s formation.

A kidney punch from the left forces me to block with my left forearm. I respond with a right hook, but my adversary leans out of reach and lands a snap kick to the back of my left knee. Unbalanced, I lunge away. Bracing and rolling, I regain my footing on the upshot only to be re-engaged.

Sai spars with mechanical fervor. There is no ebb and flow, just a relentlessness offensive. I imagine it is a trait ingrained from his Root training.

I cut his momentum with a front kick. As he evades with a sidestep, my other foot lifts off the ground and transforms the maneuver into a butterfly kick. My superior speed and strength allow the move to hit, and though Sai manages to brace with both arms, he is sent skidding on the grass.

The spar drags on. Sai’s greater skill allows him a lead in ‘points’ scored. Being pushed by a near equal, however, does not stop it feeling more like a chore than anything else. I persist due to a firm belief a solid sense of familiarity and control over my body could help me get out of some dicey situations.

Our relative standing in taijutsu is somewhat murky. As it turns out, skills developed learning to counter a Gentle Fist practitioner don’t translate very well to being able to counter most other close quarter combat styles. My remaining practice partners have consisted of lackluster Academy students and lax chūnin instructors. Sai, on the other hand, has probably been on the receiving end of semi-personalized Root instruction from for nearly as long as I’d been conscious in this world.

So Sai has a distinct advantage in taijutsu technique and a slight advantage in physical conditioning. My superior skill in chakra muscle enhancement coupled with oversized chakra reserves counterweigh that edge and leave us on fairly equal footing. I have an idea as to how I could further our physical gap, but experiments with chakra are not for sparring.

At some point, the balance between us shifts in my favor as the pace of the spar begins to take its toll on Sai. His reserves can’t match mine. Not long after, Gaku calls a stop and we spring back from one another.

Gaku, having broken his spar with an exhausted Izumi, directs her to start a new bout with Sai. Despite the fatigue, an eager smile forms on the Uchiha’s face.

Poor bastard, that Sai.

Among the genin in the team, Izumi claims the top spot in taijutsu by a wide margin.

There is little Sai’s and my youngish selves can do to challenge an older, more experienced, clan-trained, Uchiha specializing in taijutsu. Izumi’s stamina is below average, but spars with her don’t last long enough for that to become an issue.

…and that’s without accounting for the Sharingan.

We watch from the sidelines, and I make use of the opportunity to find a nice spot in the shade, next to Kumanaru, to recline. I’d expected to receive my share of personalized taijutsu instruction, but Gaku seems keen on observing those two brawl.

Not complaining.

Especially as Gaku sees fit to pass the time regaling me with another one of his war stories.
“...infiltrate Mokuzai fortress. 't was wartime, so the place was sealed tighter than a Suna wind
mistress’s- eh, never mind. Anyway, Lord Minato came through as always. Showed us this crazy
jutsu he developed. Made us promise never to tell Lord Jiraiya or his wife. Said its name was the
'Inverse Heart Seductive Temptation Burst.' We just called it the Sexy Technique...”

September 8th, 8th year after Kyuubi

From a cross-legged position situated before a bank of one of Konoha’s lakes, I examine a blob of
water floating above my outstretched palm.

I had my reservations on first finding water to be my primary nature affinity, of all the elements.
Earth is staunch and physically powerful. Lightning is swift and brutal. Untamable, unstoppable
Wind. Endlessly destructive Fire. Water is... flowing and malleable?

On the surface, compared by combat potential, Water looks like an unwanted stepchild — the poor
man’s chakra affinity.

Yet flexible it is, and I intend to divine every facet of its utility. I concentrate on the chakra holding
the water.

Expand.

The blob balloons in size. Water tension quickly loses its fight for cohesion, and the mass separates
into countless droplets.

I take a moment to admire the sight of hundreds of twirling prisms twinkling in the sunlight. The
Leaf Village’s foliage serves as a backdrop of red, orange, yellow, and stubborn green. It’s always
pretty here, no matter the season, and life is comfortable. No wonder most Leaf shinobi consider
themselves the good guys.

Sigh.

Best continue – my goal for this exercise is yet out of reach.

Breathing in through my nostrils, I center myself in calm. Spreading my consciousness further along
the tendril connected to the water, I push it apart. Hundreds of droplets become thousands.

I grit my teeth. Not enough. The individual specks are barely discernable to the naked eye. Pushing
and pushing, the water will not separate beyond that point, will not turn to mist. It is beyond my
present facilities to manipulate non-negligible volumes at such scales at on pure control.

Previous trials have shown that achieving the next stage is possible with the Ram seal. Today’s goal,
however, doesn’t involve hand-seals. Not due to some misplaced desire to abstain hand-seals, for
their usefulness is unquestionable, but to press myself. Instead, I simulate the Ram seal.

Visualizing the channels of chakra formed by the hand-seal, my chakra reroutes to take similar paths.
Hopefully reproducing the hand-seal’s effect of filtering and spreading it apart.

The transition starts quickly. The droplets simmer and shake. One by one they dissolve to puffs of
haze. Soon, the water is converted in its entirety, and a fog of cold mist envelops me.

Nice.

A clenched fist emphasizes my desire as the mist pulls together, condensing in growing batches until
the original shape of the watery blob reforms.

Now to do it again-

A shout of surprise and an outburst of violent buzzing is the only warning I get before a new set of memories crashes against my grey matter.

“Gah!”

Fun fact. Being broiled by an explosively expanding cloud of electrically charged water-turned-steam is not a fun way to go.

…My turn. Damn it all.

I create a shadow clone to take my place, picking up on the mist exercise, and walk over to the site of my most recent demise. I take my water with me.

In a clearing right over from the previous one, the only evidence of the clone’s existence is a wet patch of grass and scorch marks on a few trees. I sigh, and after choosing a dry spot, reassemble a cross-legged position. My eyes go to the sphere of water bobbing in the air at my side, and I direct it to rest above my outstretched hands.

One hand forms a half Dog seal while the other shifts to a half snake. An aura of crackling lightning encompasses the water, which in turn starts to hiss and wobble in place. I make yet another attempt at the endeavor that in the last few weeks sees to the rapid rise in the number of violent deaths cramming my cranium.


Two elements that do not play nice together. Left unchecked, the lightning chakra heats the water until it evaporates. Controlling lightning chakra is no cake-walk. Controlled lightning chakra is best described as an exercise in futility. A better term would be directed, and directing lightning to occupy the same space as water without interacting with it is a right headache. The focus needed to manage lightning chakra does no favors to my control over water, either. It inhibits me from allowing the free-flowing form water takes most naturally. I preserve despite the difficulties and the trauma, envisioning having the best of both elements in a…

Hot water droplets sting me as they strike my face.

A bubbling sound belatedly warns me that I’ve spent too long in reverie. The water and lightning are fluctuating wildly, whirling between mutual annihilation and explosive synergy.

Just like that, I’ve lost control. I try to compensate, but as the competing elements expand around me, my last thoughts are that I’m a maso-.

I dispel in a cloud of smoke.

“…paths crossed. ‘Got the impression he didn’t particularly care…”

Gah!

“…boy was he strong though…”

Only force of habit keeps my outward reaction to a bare twitch as yet another train wreck of memories are planted in the back of my head.
But that is but par for course.

“…lava everywhere! Crazy son of a …”

As a clone, I fear little and so take risks in my training I’d have not dared to prior. The memories are unpleasant, but the increased returns help counterweigh the diminishing pliability of a brain fast approaching adolescence. My greatest worry is desensitization to fear of bodily harm.

Naruto is a freak of nature.

“…tell you, Kumanaru was on the verge of pissing himself when Lord Minato reappeared…”

Another day, another D-rank mission. Running grocery deliveries as Gaku shares stories from the Third Shinobi World War. All is right in the world. Like me, Izumi and Sai remain reverently silent as our team leader shares annals of the Fourth Hokage.

“…cool as a pickle. That red monkey was so unnerved, he turned tail and ran!” Gaku concluded the tale.

That’s a new one. Stories involving Namikaze Minato usually don’t include enemy survivors. That man’s reputation was well earned. Then again, considering who they were up against, the wiser choice may have been de-escalation.

The quiet does not last.

“Yo! Dog-breath!” From further up the street approaches a person I hadn’t really thought about.

Anko Mitarashi.

Gaku waves back, “Little snake lady.” I pick up familiarity, comradery, and a touch of trepidation. Smart.

She stomps up to Gaku and jabs his flak armor covered chest. “I told you not to call me that,” she says, and my sensei grins. Anko’s eyes snap to the side, spotting us, “Huh?” Her head quickly follows, “The Third actually gave you a genin team? Damn. The years must be getting to him…” Anko laughs. It’s a light, lively sound. I like it.

Aside from Gaku, the team can get kind of anemic at times.

“Anko,” Gaku grumbles, “that’s no way talk about-

“Shush.” Anko isn’t looking at our team leader anymore, her attention diverted to inspect my teammates and I. “Eh? they don’t usually make them this small nowadays.” She puts her hands on her hips to lean forward and - oh wow! That open trench coat and mesh armor really leave nothing to the imagination…

Is that you, puberty?

I come to my senses as Anko zeroes in on Izumi. The girl has the look of a deer caught in headlights. Anko smiles at her, “I hope you’ve been putting these oafs in their place.” Anko happily imparts pearls of wisdom to her junior, “Being the girl on the team, you can’t let them walk all over you.”

Izumi’s eyes widen. “What? No. They wouldn’t do that.” She scuffs her sandals. “I really can’t complain.”

“Not with that attitude.” Fast as a viper, Anko steps forward and grabs Izumi’s hand, making her
squeak, “Come on,” and starts dragging her away, “I’ll make sure you know all about keeping these boys in line, you don’t even have to thank me.”

Reaching over and relieving a bewildered Izumi of the grocery bag she’s been clutching like a lifeline, Anko chucks it over her shoulder. Kumanaru leaps to catch it in his most helpful act to date, I absently note, while Gaku pinches the bridge of his nose. “If she comes back in a trench coat I’m seeking Kumanaru on you,” he warns her. The beast growls in agreement.

“Ha! Try it. I could use a new coat.” Kumanaru’s growling chokes off with a yip.

Meanwhile, Izumi is unable to do anything against the force of nature that is Anko Mitarashi. Looking over her shoulders, she turns her pleading eyes to me on realizing our jōnin leader is not going to help.

I just smile and wave, silently wishing her good luck, until they disappear behind a street corner.

I have no idea what just happened, but it looks promising.

We continue the mission.

A thought crosses my mind. An unexplained detail from Gaku’s latest tale. “Hey, sensei?”

He glances my way, “Yeah?”

“How did the Fourth get the drop on the Four-Tails jinchūriki if he kept melting his seals?” I inquire.

Gaku face turns contemplative. I manage to hear him muttering to himself, “Doesn’t matter now…” A touch of grief vanishes as fast as it appears. “Lord Minato’s special kunai were the most iconic part of his technique, but he had other ways to use it.” Gaku explains, “He could use moving seals to seek out his enemies.”

Moving seals.

A form that is defined by its function, and in turn, a function that is defined by its form.

Marvelous.

Gaku pushes on, “For a shinobi of that red monkey’s caliber, it’s a pretty stupid mistake. Never think you’re safe, it makes you predictable. A predictable shinobi is a dead one.” He looks at us, and all I can do is nod my head. Sai does too.

We complete the mission with no more fuss.

Outside the Mission Assignment Desk, Gaku dismisses the team for the day. As an afterthought, he adds, “Do you guys have any hobbies? They’re a good way to keep the mind fresh, stop things from the getting too repetitive.”

Sai says, “I paint,” and leaves.

I never quite got him to open up, not much for social interaction with a stilted eight-year-old. Izumi doesn’t seem much inclined to help him, and Gaku is largely oblivious. Meh. He has years to develop a personality. I’m confident experiencing puberty outside Root will shake him up.

A slap to the back makes me stumble as Gaku looms over. “Tell me, Hakaru, what do you know about swimming?”
Kumanaru ears perk at his master’s words, and he bolts.

“Nothing, never went,” I shrug.

After scowling at Kumanaru’s retreating tail, Gaku’s face turns back to me, and he smiles, “Than prepare yourself, to bear witness to the magnificence that is the doggy paddle!”

My team leader lauds the benefits of recreational swimming as I follow him. It sounds appealing. At some point on the way, Kumanaru makes a tentative return. Upon hearing that no, he doesn’t need to get in the water too, he happily trots up to rejoin us. We leave Konoha’s urbanized streets, approaching an area allocated for training grounds.

Not long after, a scent catches Kumanaru’s interest as he sniffs excitedly at the air. Zeroing in on something in the distance, Kumanaru shifts as if preparing to bolt again—

A blur and a rush of displaced air. A bark of surprise.

I blink.

Gaku and his dog are wrestling on the ground, the former having tackled the latter before he could move. What the…

Following the direction of Kumanaru’s fixation, I spot two distant figures slowly walking in our general direction. Their chakra is familiar.

Is that… Are those Naruto and Sasuke?

The two are still struggling, Kumanaru excitement barely being held back by his master’s efforts. “We’ve been over this Kumanaru,” I hear Gaku’s voice leaking frustration as he does his best to curb Kumanaru’s intention to reach the pair. “He can’t—mff,” Kumanaru plants a paw on Gaku’s face, cutting him off.

I slowly swing my head back and forth, trying to make sense of the…

Ah.

…

Better cut him a break.

“Hey, I…” I try to butt in, but the two seem too preoccupied with their tousle. I raise my voice, “Gaku-sensei!” Kumanaru and Gaku freeze momentarily, eyes fixated on the source of the interruption.

I flash an uneasy smile, “Yeah, em, how about a range check on that swimming lesson?” My thumb goes over my shoulder, gesturing at the two Academy students, “I think I see some friends I’ve kinda been neglecting.” If nothing else, a status update would be nice.

Surprise plays across Gaku’s face as he studies me, before receding in favor of cheerfulness. “Of course, of course!” Kumanaru struggle renews, “It’s important to maintain a good rapport with our friends.” Gaku’s puts on a blinding smile, unruffled by his ongoing wrestling match with Kumanaru.

“Right.” Giving them a thumbs up before leaving, I try to ignore Kumanaru’s stink eye.

It occurs to me that I might be a bit of a shit for not offering to make introductions. Then again, considering that… At present, it’s likely impossible.
Naruto and Sasuke are staring my way as I jog over and greet them, “Yo!”

Naruto’s eyes shift slightly, “Hakaru! Long time no see!” He says before his attention slides away. Sasuke is similarly distracted, sparing me a single glance. “Hey, Hakaru,” Naruto points behind me, “What are they doing?”

I peek back to follow his finger, finding the ongoing spectacle put on by my team’s leadership. “My jōnin commander, he… doesn’t want you to come any closer, he’s trying to do his best.”

“You graduated?!” Sasuke blurs out, and I see his gaze fixed to my forehead protector.

At Sasuke’s outburst, Naruto forgets about Gaku and Kumanaru and turns to me as well. “What?!” He points a shaky finger.

My easy smile does little to disarm them. Sasuke’s face darkens, and I hear him muttering, “Just like him.” Naruto meanwhile, twists his head to the side as if trying to make sense of some riddle.

His eyes light up, and he jabs his finger at me again, “Ha!” His face stretches into a foxy grin, “Hey, hey. You shouldn’t steal forehead protectors,” Naruto crosses his arms and nods solemnly, “Gramps promised he’d spank me if I ever do it again.”

I stare blankly at him, and then take a deep breath as Naruto reminds me of how dense can be. Still, the suggestion gets under my skin somehow, and the notion of a display of skills springs to mind. I dismiss it as an exercise in excess. I’m no showboat, and it’s best not to encourage a dialog of one-upmanship with these two.

I’ll get stumped in the long run.

Light needling, on the other hand…

“Well,” I adjust my headband, “it’s not that hard to get the real deal. It’s just a matter of not being a slowpoke.”

Sasuke scowls at me while Naruto’s face scrunches up in indignation, “No way! Me and Sasuke are awesome, top of the class and everything!” Naruto stops short for a second before picking up. “Except for written exams, but that’s just because they’re out to get me!”

Sasuke rolls his eyes as Naruto continues babbling. “And taijutsu, but Hinata-hime is crazy strong, so it’s not fair.” Naruto’s eyes light up, and he sports a sly smile. “Sasuke can definitely beat her though, but he doesn’t because he-mmfff,” Sasuke, eyes twitching, clamps his hand over Naruto’s mouth. Naruto tries to bite Sasuke’s hand and the two tumble to the ground as the latter tries to silence the former.

This is neat.

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*September 21st, 8th year after Kyuubi*

The brush dances over cloth, a trail of incomprehensible squiggles forming in its wake. The material does not shift or wrinkle under deft strokes.

It also helps that there is a sticking seal placed under the fabric. I would have preferred to work on a proper surface, out of Konoha’s woodlands, but my role is that of a placeholder. When the me in next clearing eventually fail in some spectacular manner and disperse, I’ll take over his part. It is a cycle I’ve been through countless time.
The seal progresses. Every so often, as what a knowledgeable observer would see as a defined section of fūinjutsu is completed, it shrinks. Lines and glyphs compress to an indecipherable uniformity, taking the shape of a single sign and join their brethren on a tapestry of ink.

Even with what advancements I have accumulated in my fūinjutsu skills, the pace in which seal takes shape is noteworthy. There’s a breeziness to my work, such that I’d not allow myself were I the original. It is energizing, the absence of anxiety of a critical failure of even a mundane seal. Alterations and experimentations are performed much more readily.

There have been… hiccups, but those are a concern for the original.

After drawing one final glyph, the last module shrinks and the seal settles. Eyeballing the algorithmic structure of my newest creation, I pick up the canvas, my jacket, to get a closer look. It’s disheartening that my labor will be undone when the construct I presently occupy inevitably unravels. Yet it is worthwhile. I can already think of tweaks to add to the design on its next scribing.

When the original puts brush and ink to the real jacket, the seal will be perfect.

I put it on and feed chakra to the seal. Soon, a perceptible drop in temperature trickles in from the newly inscribed personal climate control scheme.

It’s an embarrassment that it took me so long to come up with this idea. Summer in the Konoha is hot.

Noting an excess drop in temperature of the left sleeves, I fiddle with the seal’s control nodes to glean a measure of the malfunction. When that avenue is exhausted, I peel off the jacket and spread it out. A steady trickle of chakra keeps the seal running as I track the problem. My hand drifts over the seal as I inspect its parts. I force its constituent signs to expand one at a time and use my chakra senses to review their inner workings.

My search turns up a couple of inexact strokes, one of whom in a section perhaps more precarious than it should be.

I’m done. Beyond this point, recreating the seal and correcting the mistakes is the only way to progress.

Efficiency dictates that I should ask the other clone to conjure a new one to take my place, a clone’s whose jacket is unmarked and can continue to develop the seal. Thereupon I’ll dispel myself to put as much distance between one memory influx and the next, lessening the risk of suffering a migraine down the line after merging with the original.

Sigh.

Clone lives don’t matter.

Which reminds me of something… I think I’ll have a poke at the original. It’s always difficult to get over the realization of one’s clone-hood. I never quite forgive myself.

My approach is silent. The volatile mass of chakra floating between the clone’s hands does not allow him to spare any attention for distractions. Even standing in range of his chakra sense, I doubt the required focus leaves room for a conscious acknowledgment of my presence. Binding water and lightning together is, to borrow a phrasing, akin to looking left and right at the same time. Every muscle in my mirror’s face is tense, his eyes are closed, and memories of clones past provide me insight into his state of mind.
A frenzied serenity.

I mentally step back and shake my head.

Endless iterations. Pushing myself and my capacity to manipulate chakra to new heights, but lacking in solid grounding. No practical experience to guide me, to lead away from dead ends. I mostly cultivate my finesse now, instead of developing discrete techniques. The preferred route, I believe, with so little in the way of anything resembling actual combat to assess them.

My mind takes to the Rasengan. A waste of countless hours, for a technique I can never be seen using. Mitigated only by virtue of the greater understanding of chakra I’d achieved in my pursuit of mastering it. Hopefully, the design I’m recalling would prove more beneficial than just another training regimen.

The water’s shape is spherical, the simplest form to handle in these early stages. A flickering envelope of lightning chakra envelops the sphere, fused to its surface. The envelope furiously revolves along the water’s outer layer. A modicum of stability found in movement.

That is, until a spear of chakra lightning lances through the sphere, upheaving that delicate balance. The clone’s eyes snap open, and he only has a moment to notice the spear of lightning is emanating from my hand, and my apologetic grin, before an explosion of electrified steam engulfs him.

Wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise.

The memories are not so disconcerting. Being irked at one’s self is not a foreign emotion, now, superficial separation of reference point aside. As it takes two to conduct this experiment, a new clone puffs up taking the place of the most recently vanquished extension of my consciousness.

I look on, waiting for him to move. I frown when he doesn’t, our expressions mirrored...

“Not it!” we both shout at the same time. My frown deepens, mimicked by the clone. He’s not a good sport.

We play Rock-paper-scissors. I lose.

Damn it!

I flip him the bird, baring my teeth. He gives me a cocky grin.

Cursing myself, in more ways than one, I turn away. A sense of the chakra being gathered and shaped at my back aggravates a mix of annoyance and trepidation. To an individual frail minded enough to believe in such a nebulous principle as karma, this outcome might have seemed well deserving. To me, the irony’s inherent humor provides little solace.

Reaching an appropriate distance, I face my counterpart. Before the palm of his outstretched hand, a bullet-shaped chakra construct is solidifying. A shaped charge. It doesn’t consolidate with the swiftness I remember, but over two years disparity from my last attempt at the technique a buildup of rust is not shocking.

This was a long time coming. The ability to get up and personal with the point of impact without dying will, if nothing else, allow me to put this venture behind me. A faint wind rustles my hair and clothes. The amount of chakra I’m calling up to reinforce my frame creating a pressure differential. With luck, it’ll buy me enough time to glimpse in and realize the technique’s hitch.

None of this offsets my displeasure with the predicament I’ve placed myself in. Really, the only
silver lining here is the original shitting himself when he gets my memories.

The shaped charge is ready. I cross my arms and brace.

There’s something wrong with me…

Sai’s POV

Their quarry is slippery. Vicious in ways Sai’s training at the hands of all of his previous Root handler had not prepared him for. Not a first-hand account, as Sai has yet to close distance with the target, but the outcome of his teammates’ interceptions of the target are telling enough. Neither has yet given him much reason to question their aptitude.

Blaring marks traced along every patch of exposed skin. Every attempt at apprehending their quarry has further showcased its dastardly nature. Slippery as mercury and unmerciful in its defiance. Sai will not emulate his teammates’ mistake.

Hakaru is dashing at his side, keeping pace as they pursue the target in an open field of an unattended training ground. His teammate’s usual leisurely attitude, bordering on disinterest, is nowhere to be seen. There's a twitch in his eye, face crisscrossed with lines of red. His other teammate took a different route, hoping for a flanking maneuver.

Shin suggestion is that he should make friends with his teammates. Sai isn’t sure how to go about achieving that, but he felt that Hakaru made for the best candidate. He appeared the least uncomfortable in his company from their squad, that Sai could gather. More often than not, Sai would draw laughter from the other boy. It wasn’t his intention to do so, nor did he know how to induce such a reaction intentionally, but Sai read that laughter is often shared between friends. He couldn’t be too far off.

“It’s making a break for the trees!” Hakaru shouts.

Seeing that he is right, Sai snatches a scroll from his backpack. He prepares a brush and snaps the scroll open with a flourish. A steady hand traces a long rectangle over the paper as it whips through the air. The scroll buckles in Sai’s hands as the construct separates from the paper and surges forwards. A volume-less plane constrained between strokes of ink and held together by chakra.

The recoil blunts Sai’s momentum, and he falls behind while the rectangle stretches rapidly during its short flight. It slaps onto the woods’ face on its intersection with their prey’s path, blocking a lengthy stretch to either side.

Forced to veer to the side, the target bleeds precious speed.

Sai watches as Hakaru capitalizes on the opportunity presented by the shrinking gap and prepares to jump, and freezes.

Mid lunge that costs him, and he trips. Instead of a graceful leap, a tumbling dive. By sheer chance, a flailing limb happens to clip the target’s nose. Tora, the Fire Daimyō’s wife’s pet cat, yowls its displeasure.

Proceeding as he believes a friend should, Sai dashes towards the still stunned cat and skips over Hakaru’s downed form. Crouching, he palms a kunai from his holster thrusts-

“-The hell?”
The kunai’s edge halts bare millimeters from the feline’s jugular. A moment of hesitation, brought on by his usually soft-spoken teammate’s exclamation.

Sai and Tora stare at one another. The cat’s eyes are dilated, its body stiff. He holds the blade in place and turns his head to Hakaru. “Excuse me?”

Hakaru shakily picks himself off the ground, “What are you doing?” he asks, brushing away the dirt and eyeing Sai sideways.

Sai can’t find ambiguity in his course of action but fails to see harm in indulging his teammate. “As the mission parameters have not included a specification on whether the target should be retrieved alive, standard rules apply,” Sai supplies helpfully. “Previous attempts have shown that adequate containment of the subject is outside of this team’s capacity.”

He pointedly moves the kunai a fractional closer to the now shivering feline’s neck. “Hence, termination seems a prudent discretion to assure successful completion of the mission.”

It’s happened again. Hakaru chest is shaking slightly, as he bites his lip to keep from laughing outright. Sai’s suspicion of there being something wrong with his friend is reinforced, as there just wasn’t anything humorous to be found in his previous statement. Hakaru takes a moment to examine his exposed skin and a brush a hand against his face, observed in the numerous scratches inflicted by Tora. He focuses on Sai.

“Yeah, sure. Go ahead.”

CHINK

The kunai is ripped from his hand by its flying counterpart, leaving behind a numb sting. Sai does his best to follow his training and disregard the sensation.

Then Izumi is standing over him. Her hair is a maelstrom of violent energy, a shroud over two red beacons of wrath. The red lines traced on her skin complement the wrathful image.

Izumi tersely leans forward and lifts a struggling Tora by the scruff of its neck, bringing the cat to eye level. Tora quells, though Sai can’t tell if from the intensity of her gaze or some manner of Sharingan administered genjutsu.

He hopes it is the former and dreads the latter, as it will invalidate a known factoid of her having not yet developed her skills in that facet of the Uchiha’s bloodline. Sai knows no counter to that power aside from averting his eyes at all times, and he does not trust Izumi. Her smiles are fake, as is any most expression she directs at him. Sai has a great deal of experience in those.

Livid still, Izumi turns and marches on Hakaru. Sai wonders at the swiftness in which a face can shift from mirth to alarm. Hakaru barely has time to open his mouth with terms of appeasement before a fist crashes into the top of his skull.

“Ow!”

“What were you thinking?!”

Rubbing his head, Hakaru offers Izumi a fuddled smile, “You know, I had a similar question, but you saw that woman. The cat’s not gonna last a fortnight.”

Izumi crosses her arms, hugging Tora to her chest. “This isn’t funny, Hakaru,” she sighs. “That woman is the wife of our monarch. You permitted an attempt to murder her beloved pet.” Izumi
gestures to Tora, “It might be the latest of dozens and regarded more as a joke than anything, but actions have repercussions.”

Hakaru makes to retort, but Izumi steamrolls over him, “I’m an Uchiha, worst I’ll get a slap on the wrist.” She throws her arm to the side, pointing to Sai, “He is too oblivious to know any better, or doesn’t care. Probably both.” Sai thinks that he should feel a certain amount of affront at Izumi’s words, but he can’t bring himself to detach from the spectacle playing out before him. “You know better, I think. Do you want to be sent back to the Academy?” She demands.

In the quiet that follows Hakaru cycles through a myriad of expressions too fast for Sai to properly categorize them. He looks ready to argue but then thinks better of it. Hakaru forces on a chagrined smile and manages a mixture of earnest and subdued, “You’re right, thanks for the save, Izumi.” The stalemate is broken as Izumi huffs, steps past Hakaru, and starts walking to their rendezvous point with Gaku.

Sai picks himself up, and the two follow in what he believes can be described as an awkward silence. He couldn’t help but notice how Izumi’s body language held no deceit as she confronted Hakaru, as per usual. Sai wonders as to how he could achieve the same for himself.

No matter the content of her words, at least Izumi was earnest when sharing her thoughts about him. He thinks that constitutes a good start.

When they meet with Gaku, his partner conspicuously missing, the man easily notices the tension in the group. Gaku offers up his own experience as a genin attempting to retrieve the then Fire Daimyō’s wife’s pet cat, trying to restore some levity.

“…soon as it caught whiff of Kumanaru it bolted. Somehow the furry devil managed to get passed the village walls…” “…weeks of tracking…” “…finally caught up as it tried to cross the border with Suna…” “…almost triggered the Second Shinobi World War a few months early…”

Factual or not, the staggering scale of disarray in that tale seemed to reestablish Hakaru’s and Izumi’s sense of perspective, alleviating their stiffness. They smile and even laugh at the more scandalizing snippets.

The mission concludes successfully, much to the disagreement of Tora. Cries of woe muffled in its master’s bosom.

The team is dismissed, and Sai takes his leave.

He goes to the market and arrives as the first stands begin packing their wares for the day. Sai manages to find a fruit vendor holding out a bit more and buys a basketful of pears the salesman assures him are just at the right point of ripeness.

On the way to his next destination, the individual of he intends to visit intercepts him.

“Shin, why have you left the hospital?”

Shin, the person Sai has come to think of as an older brother remains silent, staring intently at him. An uncharacteristic undecidedness he cannot identify seems to permeate Shin’s frame.

Sai lifts the basket, “I brought pears. I remember you pref-”

“Leave them.” Shin cuts him off, steel in his voice. “Come, we’ve been summoned.”
He follows Shin’s lead, as he always had.

They take to a path unknown to Sai. A tunnel starting at the outer edge of the Hokage Rock, roughly hewn rock rather than the familiar cement and metal of the pipe-ways beneath Konoha. A sparse few torches placed intermittently light the way.

Though he cannot see them, Sai can tell that their progress through the maze-like tunnel is being watched. It brings up feeling and memories of things that were explained to him to no longer be. A concoction of concern and curiosity churns in his guts, but Sai long ingrained habits hold from airing his questions.

Finally, they arrive at the entrance of a chamber, the light shining from within obstructed by a single sentry barring the way. Sai recognizes the mask the kunoichi dons, cat-like purple markings, his memory places her as a former member of Root.

Shin exchanges a sequence of hand signs with the sentry and they are allowed entrance.

Inside is a mute congregation of familiar masks, all members of the now-defunct Root. Although the validity of the latter part of that statement is suddenly placed in doubt.

To the side, the inert and cooling bodies of yet more former Root members are piled—a purple-skinned man, a man bearing markings of an Inuzuka, and more.

Sai stands still at the near the entrance as Shin moves to stand among the ranks of faceless shinobi. He takes notice of a silhouette of a man reclining in the back, shielded from the torches’ light by pillars of rock.

A red glow draws his attention to the figure’s face.

Sharingan.

The man stands and begins to walk forward, the tapping of a wooden cane against stone echoes eerily in the silent hall. Taking a last step, the figure unveils itself in the light.

Shimura Danzō, whole and hale. A Sharingan freely displayed resting in his right eye socket.

Danzō addresses him. “Ah… Sai.” hard-learned lessons prompt Sai to kneel immediately. “Good of you to join us. There is much to accomplish. Know that our efforts are not yet undone, despite their lies.”

“Rumors of my demise have been grossly exaggerated.”
December 3rd, 8th year after Kyuubi

“…following rendezvous you will escort the caravan through the Land of Rivers, into the Land of Fire, and ensure their safe arrival at Susuru, capital of the Land of Noodles…”

Gah.

Our planned course, a stretch of land in a Byakugan's range of a thousand kilometers. No sweat for any ninja worth his forehead protector, traversable in a few days of tree hopping and chakra enhanced sprinting. Tied down by a convoy of civilian merchants, however, we won’t be returning to Konoha before year’s end.

"…accommodate breaks at the commerce stations specified in your mission scroll.” Sarutobi rolls up said scroll, hands it to Gaku, and as our jōnin leader steps back in line with the rest of Team 6, Sarutobi directs his attention to the genin. “Your sensei is already aware, and our intelligence division designates the concerned sectors to be low-risk zones, but I’ll be remiss omit to mention a recent development,” at this, the Hokage’s wrinkled face turns grave. “A chūnin squad has been labeled MIA following a week-long failure to establish contact at one of our northeastern border checkpoints.” Steely eyes pass over each of us in turn, “Teams leaving the village walls are cautioned to maintain high alert.”

“Yes, Lord Hokage,” we acknowledge in unison. I chew my lip while mulling over that tidbit, searching for threads. Nothing about some chūnin getting ambushed screams S-rank threat to me. Is this event worth notice in the scheme of things?

At a glance to my teammates, Sai display of aloofness is as expected, whereas Izumi’s stoicism puzzles me. How frequent are incidents like these to leave Team 6’s more emotionally expressive member unperturbed?

A beat. Sarutobi leans back in his seat. “Which brings us to the last matter,” his gives us a wistful smile, “A shinobi’s first excursion from the village is an important career landmark.” Of course, can’t let a little thing like an unknown party taking out Konoha nin distract us for too long. More green child soldiers for the war machine to churn.

But who am I to complain? There is no fine print for those who sign up for this life.

The Hokage spreads his arms magnanimously, “I urge all three of you to make use of this opportunity. Observe, listen, and contemplate. A well-rounded shinobi or kunoichi must possess insight into the lands without their village’s walls, and the concerns and inclinations of the people there.” Agreeable enough, Sarutobi’s suggestion lines up nicely with my own wants.

“Of course,” he continues, “You mustn’t forget that out there, your conduct and choices are representative Konoha foremost…”

“No worries, Lord Hokage,” Gaku butts in, sporting a particularly toothy grin “I’ll make sure there’s no monkey business.”

I manage to divert an involuntary facepalm, clutching the back of my neck in embarrassment — a terrible pun.

The Third massages his temple, “I believe that one lost its zing around the time you were born.”
“Sorry, sir,” Gaku’s enthusiasm is undiminished, “just monkeying around.”

“Get out.”

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**December 6th, 8th year after Kyuubi**

**Izumi’s POV**

Snow crunches underfoot as Team 6 moves in a practiced formation. It’s morning, three days following their departure from Konoha. The fast-approaching meetup point with their clients already in view.

Ahead, stretching to the horizon, Land of Wind dunes sparkle with melting vestiges of the night’s snow. The trade convoy, numbering perhaps three dozen carriage wagons, straddles the border. Between them and Team 6, a more persistent layer of snow blankets a quickly shrinking stretch of the Land of Rivers.

Although Konoha’s backdrop of nigh-eternal spring reigns uncontested in Izumi’s heart, she cannot see herself tiring of these scenic landscapes found outside the borders of her home village. Perhaps part of what Lord Hokage meant.

An idle thought prompts Izumi to wonder if Itachi ever stops to take in the sights, but hurries to shelve it away.

Before Team 6 can reach their target, three figures peel away from the caravan to intercept. The newcomers draw close before coming to a halt, near enough to unveil details of their wear and chakra to Izumi, allowing her to distinguish them as Suna shinobi, the traders’ current escort. A chūnin and two genin, she guesses.

A notable disparity in the strength two villages allocated to what is, by most degrees, the same missions. Did that make Konoha spendthrift, or Suna stingy?

As Gaku steps forward with Kumanaru in tow to negotiate the handoff, Izumi arcs her head to Hakaru while keeping an eye on her sensei’s standoff with their counterparts. “They seem a bit… grouchy,” Izumi keeps her voice low, “You think Suna nin are usually like that?”

He’s scrutinizing them as well, reflective, and but for a slight tilt of Hakaru’s head she might think her question went unheard. “I can’t imagine it’s pleasant,” he mutters, “Having a client display blatant bias towards another village’s services.” Hakaru explains, “They’re allies. Can’t imagine it’s an issue to escort the caravan through the Land of Fire.” He shrugs, airy disgruntlement, “At least up to our border with the Land of Rivers.”

Izumi looks back to the scene and reassesses. A smaller squad, fewer people split the mission’s pay...

Izumi bites her lip. “You think this is common?”

Sai chooses that moment to add in his two cents, “It is irrational to hold sympathetic concerns for another village’s troubles,” he advises, “Assuage yourself knowing that Konoha’s leadership is surely capitalizing on our advantageous position. Our duty is to follow suit.”

No- just no. Izumi plants her fists on her hips and leans closer, “Suna’s our ally!” she hisses.

There is hint of neither contrition nor irritation in Sai’s expression as he replies, “Irrelevant, the shinobi rules clearly state that a ninja must prioritize the interests of their village to the exclusion of all others.” He’s been like this for a time now. An inter-personal regression to his disposition at the
team’s inception, only now far more likely to cite the shinobi rules at perceived infractions.

A clan child, it didn’t take much for Izumi to come to suspect that whatever clandestine organization Itachi was inducted into before he left, Sai was somehow related as well. She wants the truth, badly, but a shinobi of his strain can’t be pressured to share. Izumi can only wait for Sai’s disposition to shift, keeping him in arm’s length until then.

Though, each flash of Sai’s impassive façade is a twinge of aggravation, contradicting all previous hints of his budding headway. It’s wrong. She wants to yell, to shake him — Auntie Mikoto’s preferred method of browbeating uppity clan members. A spur of spitefulness has Izumi considering her self-appointed role model’s approach. Anko’s distinctive mix of kunai, snakes, terror, snakes, blood, and more snakes.

It will wipe that stupid aloof expression off his stupid face if nothing else.

“Ai, Sai, Sai…” Perhaps sensing Izumi contemplating the merits of subjecting her other teammate to Anko’s brand of consoling, Hakaru butts in. “Don’t you know?” He wags his finger, “Ask not how to serve your village, but what the village can do for you,” Hakaru delivers with a beaming smile and crass indifference.

A saying as dissentious as any she’d heard. Sai blinks perplexedly at Hakaru, “The shinobi rules c-”

“Were written by a tool,” Hakaru cuts him off jovially. Izumi hides a snort behind her hand after failing to smother it, and he shoots her a wink.

“Indeed,” Sai agrees slowly, Hakaru’s choice of double entendre going over his head, “But it has little bearing on the point.” Sai’s obliviousness makes for an odd mix of unfortunate and amusing.

Hakaru nods, but the mirth playing in his eyes speak apathy as he shows a side contrary to his previous display of thoughtfulness.

Gaku’s call cuts short the dysfunctional display of team-mating, beckoning the genin. The Suna team is leaving, speeding off into the Land of Wind’s vast desert with nary a glance to their discharging clientele.

Sai complies first, dropping the conversation. His carelessness comes in a similar flavor to Sensei’s, a detachedness of shinobi attuned to their lot in life.

Izumi finds that she’s in no mood to emulate any of her teammates’ temperaments. The looming shadow of an unknown threat striking at Konoha teams would have been bad enough without a clan member being among the missing. Poor cousin Nezumi.

Maybe if she pretended long enough though…

December 22nd, 8th year after Kyuubi

Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.

It’s an overcast day in the Land of Noodles’ countryside, not far from the Land of Fire border. A wide dirt path carved into endless forests. Today’s traversed section of the road is bent more closely on the side of dusty than muddy, a small comfort for which the whole convoy is thankful.

Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.
A two weeks’ routine, immersed in features of uneven roads, neighing horses, and haggling merchants, ends to the sound of a horn.

I stir from my lounging spot on a carriage wagon’s roof as a din builds up. Panicked cries signaling a likely danger prompt me to stand.

A dust cloud picks up, and wood creaks as the convoy sharply comes to a halt, and an application of the Tree Walking Technique keeps my feet beneath me. I try to get a sense of the situation from the back of the caravan, my post for today.

That’s when the arrows start falling.

With a swish, the first one pierces the right side of a wagon ahead, and from within frightened cries ring out. I’m spared less than a moment to track the arrow’s origin when another flies from the opposite direction.

Then I’m standing over the wagon’s driver as chakra quickens beneath my skin, an arrow plucked from the air pointed at his heart. More shouts echo from up and down the caravan, but the minute details fall to the side as the rush of blood fills my ears, and my teeth clench. In the time it takes the panicked man to stumble from his sit and scurry under the carriage wagon, I miss five and swat three more arrows out of the air with thin streams of water from between my lips. A slow to hide merchant, two carts ahead, is hit before reaching cover and goes down screaming.

Invisible behind dense foliage, non-shinobi chakra signatures. A tenacious blind spot in my chakra senses.

A bandit ambush. Place a self-imposed restriction, minimizing material damage springs to mind, and this nascent altercation might serve as benchmark for my progress.

“YRAAAAAH.” Two men in mismatched armor bursts from between the trees on either side of the road, katanas held overhead, and battle-cries in their throats. Rushing forward, they veer towards me.

Discharging a spark of chakra into one of the storage seals bandaged around my wrists unseals a watery volume of which I take hold with my chakra. I thrust my hand in and grab at the water. Wrenching my hand back, a taut cord unspools from the blob. The bandits leap forward as I sidestep an arrow whizzing by my ear and mime a whipping motion to sling my water whip at the one to my right.

Midair, an attempt to parry the water fails as his sword phases through it. The whip continues to smack him center chest to the sound of cracking bones, the back-strike against his fellow inflicts a similar result. Flung away like rag dolls, the bandits crash against trees on opposite sides of the road and crumple to the ground.

No lull grants itself, and already the distraction dotted the besieged convoy with yet more arrows. I unseal greater volumes of water, and it quakes in the air before liquid and focus both expand and stretch into deflective sheets against the raining arrows.

Between cues from lodged arrows, our assailants’ failures to caution, and deft maneuverings of the watery shields, the number of arrows meeting their mark is driven down. I manage only a single water bullet to plow the trees at a likely archer position before, donned in full samurai plate, another outlaw comes stomping on to the road bellowing, “Aim for the kid you fools! Ten thousand ryō to whoever offs the little bastard!”

Nascent thoughts of retaliation are cached as two incoming bolts force me to hop and twist and
contort horizontally. Midair, I grind my teeth in frustration, pulling inward my water whip and chakra, cramming them into a marble of constrained violence in my cupped palms. To be put on the back-foot by these scrubs... Embarrassing.

Encumbered by defenseless civilians or not, the indignity stands.

My arms stretch out as I land in a crouch. Following my arms, a sphere of water and force explodes outwards. It sweeps the bandit off his feet like so much trash and slaps him back to the trees. Unsatiated with that reprisal, and disinclined to leave my charges undefended, I unseal the totality of the water in my storage seals.

I cross my arms and spread my legs to brace against the pressure in the eye of an airborne maelstrom as it manifests. The focus to coordinate the expanse of water leaves me lightheaded, and I emulate a recent training exercise on a macro scale. Instead of droplets, the water vortex shatters to hundreds of watery sheets, and an exertion of will spreads them out.

Stacked together, the shields turn to walls. An enclosed corridor stretching up towards Sai’s post.

I glim a sense of the outlaw breaking off, their morale fragmenting with the completion of my barricade. A jump through the barrier carries me out unimpeded.

Now, to clean up.

My first three quarries are comatose and probably heavily bruised. I spew streamers of water that sweep in and loop around each in turn. Their forms bob in the air, trailing behind me. The captives being unconscious, they don’t sound complaints about the unorthodox manhandling.

From there, I plunge into the trees, stalking from the canopy.

Two muted points of chakra huddled close draw me. A first-class buddy helps his concussed friend to hobble away, a victim of my only counterattack. On the ground, a broken bow left discarded. They wear crummy, mismatched, leather armor. An application of the Body Flicker Technique puts me in a position to deliver quick chops to the back of their necks, and both drop to the ground. The water cord gathers them up as well.

I secure another outlaw in similar fashion, before coming across three bandits sprinting away in a bid for safety: two men and a woman.

Huh... Equal opportunities in the bandit work sector.

A water bullet sends them tumbling, and the men crash to the ground, hard. Chance has the bandit lady win only a sample serving of kinetic energy, and a forceful stumble lands her in an awkward sprawl.

Fine, chance has little to do with it, more like an uncharacteristic chivalrous whim. Or is chauvinist the better term?

My approach is bereft of stealth. Unlike her friends, being still in possession of some mental faculties, the bandit’s complexion loses color as she inhales sharply. Perhaps it has to do with the limp bodies bobbing in the air, bound in my water.

“Bastard!” She spits at me, fumbling for her bow. I brace to dodge, but it proves redundant as a pained cry from looks like a sprain has the weapon slip and clatter to the ground.

Maybe not quite that, chivalrous.
A bout of expletives ensues as bandit lady draws a knife with her other hand. “Don’t get any closer! Shinobi freak!” Shaking knife. Quivering voice. “I’ll cut off your private parts and—”

“Shut up,” I cut her off, voice low as my childish vocal cords allow. I couldn’t care less for what some degenerate outlaw has to say. “Your… friends are just unconscious.” Water whips forwards to loop around the three. She screams as it secures her hands to her body, either from fright or the rough jostling. She quiets after, reduced to a rattled panting.

Immediate surrounding scoured, and unwilling to pursue further afield, it takes me but a minute to get back. My watery wall parts around me to reveal the convoy. I deposit my captives in the dirt and gather overall impressions.

Soggy, bruised, and largely dead to the world, they’re a motley bunch. What ignorance drives such weak individuals to challenge shinobi? As I set about relieving them of weapons and binding hands, an asinine notion pushes to the forefront of my mind. I almost feel cheated, to be forced to contend with these louts, as if the standard I hold my training to demands a proper challenge to prove its worth. It’s ridiculous, of course, and I best shove that thought to the furthest reaches of my mind.

Some of the caravan’s braver passengers make tentative probes, poking their heads out from the relative safety of their wagons. Of those that do not hasten to pull back, some cautiously stumble their way out. Their numbers split between those marveling at the unnatural barricades I had erected, and those taking stock of the damages and wounded. A few warily eye the subdued bandits.

An appreciative whistle penetrates the din, and I turn away from the prisoners, “You certainly don’t settle for half-assing Hakaru.” Gaku comes into view with Sai and Izumi in tow, marching down the length of the water corridor. “Still, we’ll clearly need to talk about subtlety,” he adds, “A discipline I myself had a bit of trouble with in my youth.”

I feel something unclench at the sight of my teammates whole if a bit dirty, and slowly exhale. They come beside me and pause. “Mmm,” Gaku stares at the bound bandits, eyes crinkled, “you didn’t kill them?”

What?

I open my mouth to enunciate that thought but stop short. A hurried reexamination of Izumi and Sai admits some striking smatterings of splattered blood. From there, the conclusion does not require a chakra sense sufficiently acute to detect non-shinobi chakra signatures to grasp.

Huh… They’ve killed them all.

From behind, a gasp casts my captives’ presence in stark highlight.

“Ehhhh,” I fumble for words, to explain my mindset with care, “it seemed the most instinctive response at the time.” Sai radiates disapproval, and Izumi gives me a strange look. Doubt grabs perch in the back of my head.

Gaku crosses his arms, and with an arched eyebrow asks, “And what do you suppose we do with this lot?” His tone suggests he’s humoring this situation for its novelty.

That one is easier. “Take them to the nearest settlement,” I start, then pause to recall. “…We’ll reach Shizai tomorrow. Let their policing force put them on trial.”

Gaku scratches his goatee, eyes dart between our would-be assailants and me. There’s a distinct feeling of me missing something, and my confidence falters as the seconds tick away.
Maybe I should grab a kunai and-

“Sure,” Gaku drops his hand, smiling, “Let’s do that.” He snaps his fingers and points in my direction, “I trust you’ll have no issue handling their guard duty until we drop these off?” The jovial offer is a thin veil to the underlying command. The bandits are my responsibility.

Craning my neck to glance at the bereaved bandit band draped haphazardly on the road, I mentally shrug and turn back to Gaku, “Right,” and nod my acquiescence.

“Great!” The two other genin on Team 6 flinch as our team leader’s hands come down on each of their shoulders. “Now I think is time for some quality 1-on-1s,” Gaku says as he begins to escort my teammates back, “Sai, I think we’ll start with you. Could you go make sure Kumanaru doesn’t gnaw on anything he shouldn’t, Izumi?”

Their first kills.

Izumi looks a little green as she ducks her head and pushes forward. Sai and Gaku follow at a more sedate pace, until the latter pauses and jogs back. “Almost forgot,” he blurts, and grabs the bandit decked in samurai garb, carrying him off like a sack of potatoes. Over his shoulder, he calls out, “And clean up all the water, too,” before dragging off Sai.

…Right

By the time the merchants’ caravan is ready to resume its trek, my charges are awake, either through natural course or liberal application of water. A variety of terrified and mutinous looks meet my disinterested gaze, and a water whip demonstrates my desire for silence to any who break it. Chakra enhanced superhuman strength simplifies the manhandling required to have them tied to one another and walking in line, secured to the last cart in the convoy. The two remaining swordsmen are too battered to keep pace, and so retake their position in the grip of my chakra construct.

Gaku visits, after a time. He drops the previously taken bandit, now conscious, at my feet, and grunts, “Going to take care of some business. Kumanaru is team-leader for the next hour or so.” Gaku flickers away without waiting to see me roll my eyes.

Pressing the outlaw to the back of the line, the visibly shaking man offers no resistance. Traumatized, despite not looking particularly worked over. Then I catch a scent and sniff in... Eww. At least his pants are brown.

The convoy braves no more incidents today, and come sundown, set camp. On his way back, Gaku nabbed a wild hog, and so the smells wafting from the campfires are especially enticing. Unfortunately, for obvious reasons, the bandits are to be kept well away from our clients, preferably out of sight. Someone also has to keep an eye on them.

That someone is me.

I watch the subdued bandits chowing on surplus food rations in a sequestered forest clearing, and my eyes turn to a similarly pale slab of trail food in my hand. Lips pursed, and feeling somewhat forgotten; I weigh the merits of divulging my proficiency with the Shadow Clone Technique to obtain a cut of wild-caught pork.

Then, I sense Izumi approaching.

She crosses our divider with the rest of the camp and, and I catch sight of the offering in her hands. "You're the absolute best, Izumi, can you make I write that down later?" My outburst is received
with an indulgent smile as she hands me one of two plates loaded with an actual proper dinner.

We eat, sitting in companionable silence until Izumi speaks, "It's nice out here, on the road. You know, Hakaru?"

I hum my agreement.

"It's peaceful…" she sighs.

Unable to help myself, I crane my head to catch her eyes. My mouth is full, and I smile in mirth, pointedly glancing towards my captives huddling to the side.

"…For the most part," Izumi admits unabashedly, and tilts her head upwards, "and the night sky is beautiful here."

I swallow, "It is." Unshrouded by Konoha's light pollution and the waxing moon, the light of a trillion blazing stars dots the sky in brilliant hues…

"I still miss my bed, though," Izumi admits, making me snort.

“Yeah.”

Speaking of, “That reminds me,” I pipe up, and as Izumi looks at me, gesture to our unwilling company, “Could you possibly, maybe, please cast genjutsu on these guys? Get them to sleep until morning…” Using my best pleading look for added effect probably doesn’t do much, lack of practice considered, but damn it, I want to sleep tonight. “…Please?”

A seal could have done the job, easy. I see it my mind’s eye, a skin contact tag that induces sleep and or paralysis. Given time, it’s feasible to develop with enough shadow clones, but hindsight is about as useful as people make it out to be. I’ve no intention to delve into fūinjutsu experimentation out in the field, least of all on human test subjects. Best as I can tell, Orochimaru’s image never recovered from the PR hit.

“I can’t.” Izumi’s words cut off my musings.

“Huh?” I blurt and instantly regret it on seeing her embarrassed expression.

“Sorry. Genjutsu isn’t a skill I ever really focused on,” Izumi confesses, “Anko likes to monopolize what time I spare for training, and it’s hardly her specialty. Before Anko…” and here her embarrassment compounds into something heavier. “I had other things on my mind…” Izumi falls silent.

Other things?

…Oh.

Oh!

Itachi.

Welp, time for plan B. Putting my plate to the side, I hurry to wave off the issue, “Don’t worry about it.” After sprigging upright and brushing dirt from my pants, a puff of smoke heralds an ink brush materializing in hand from a storage seal. I hold it up and give Izumi a conspirative smile, “To the journeyman seal artisan, there is always another path.”

While conducting fūinjutsu experiments on the roadside middle-of-nowhere remains subject to
hesitation, I’m perfectly willing to employ known formulas. Now I need to combine a climate control seal and an extra powerful sticking seal in a circle large enough to accommodate nine people lying down. They won’t need to worry about hypothermia, and I get to sleep without getting my throat slit. It’s almost definitely, certainly, probably not going to explode.

Maybe.

Hm. I’m almost sure this counts as a hypothetical Geneva Convention violation.

December 23rd, 8th year after Kyuubi

Rain arrives come morning, and Sai soon drops in to pick up my guard post so that I could attend to a drudgery Gaku aptly named de-muddyfying duty. A task marginally superior to managing morose marauders.

Keeping the caravan going for hours on end in the muddy roads provided by the season is a uniquely exhausting exercise. Still, I should technically be thankful, as drawing liquid from the soil counts as Water Nature Transformation, and the only form of practice available to me. Singular bandit ambush notwithstanding.

Before I can convince the leading cart’s driver to let me draw a structural integrity seal on the wheels, at around noon, a not insignificant village greets us. We are granted passage through Shizai’s walls easily enough, and gate guard runs off to notify an appropriate authority of the captured outlaws. Our clients push ahead at speed to set up shop in the marketplace, wanting to make the most from what’s left of the day.

“I’ll go with them,” Izumi volunteers to look after the clients, “Really,” she huffs, ”the first real market we see in…” Izumi trails behind them

That leaves the four male members of Team 6, Kumanaru included. The latter growls at the nine apprehended bandits as two gate guards stare at us funny.

Before long, a company of guardsmen approaches, led by a man whose quality of robes and manner place him as an administrator of sorts. He bows, “Greetings honorable shinobi. In the name of my lord, I, high secretary Bantō, welcome you to Shizai.”

Bantō’s eyes find the bandits, and he claps merrily, “I would also thank you most graciously for your service to the greater Land of Noodles, bringing these ruffians to justice.” He pulls a handful of parchment slips from the folds of his robes, “Please accept this grateful tribute as a sign of our gratitude.” His manner is such that it appears a product of custom.

As the guardsmen drag the bandits away, I idly inspect one of the cards. It’s a coupon, for a deluxe, extra-large bowl of ramen in one of the local establishments. Lost in musing over the repercussions to the Land of Noodle’s bandit population should Naruto hear about this transaction, I almost miss Bantō’s hurried parting words. “The execution will take place shortly, in the main square, just as soon as preparations are complete.”

“Wh-” An iron-clad grip closing on my shoulder makes me choke on my protest. Gaku doesn’t make eye contact with me and instead responds. Some hollow courtesy, but I’m no longer paying attention.

Understanding comes.

Gaku knew. There was never going to be a trial. This is a bandit’s justice in the Elemental Nations. I frog-marched men and woman to the gallows. They probably knew it, too.

We are left alone, then I shrug off the hold and round on Gaku, fist clenched tightly, “Did you think I couldn’t murder...” But he is shaking his head slowly.

His hand moving to pat Kumanaru’s back, Gaku takes a moment before speaking. “A shinobi upholding his duty to Konoha is never a murderer,” he wags his finger, “But, should the situation calls for it, he may play the part of executioner.” Judge and Jury too, apparently.

Sai is looking on blankly from the side. Uncharitably, I assume he probably doesn’t understand the distinction.

Gaku’s face shifts to chagrin and bares some discomfort. “Forgive your overly sentimental sensei, Hakaru,” he laments, then admits, “I’ve no doubt in your nerve, just a wish to not mark the start of your career on that kind of note.”

Damn it.

Closing my eyes and breathing in deeply before sagging, the hostility melts, drenching me in resignation. I can stomach Gaku’s motivation. Still, “I’d prefer the truth,” I snap as my shoulders slump.

“Now, now,” Gaku voice returns to its usual spirited tilt, “Your efforts haven’t gone to waste.” At my furrowed brows, he puts a hand to his mouth and says under his breath, “It’s good to let the civilian’s take an active part from time to time, gives them an illusion of power and makes them less skittish around us ninja.”

Huh. Crafty, that. This all thing was pretty traumatizing, so... “Anyone up to go watch an execution?” Might as well see it through to the end, put this farce behind me. Closure is the aspired to outcome, anyway.

Gaku and Kumanaru pass up on my offer, but curiously Sai elects to accompany me. As our distance from the village’s gate grows, dirt roads gradually shift to cobblestone paths, until we stroll into a public square where the sight of a crowd gathering around nine hastily erected posts greets us. The people are lively, and a buzzing drone permeating the air intensifies as the condemned are escorted into the plaza at sword point and made to stand on wooden boxes.

Is culture so meager here to have a hanging double as pastime entertainment?

Standing beneath a post, bandit lady is wailing, insensate, holding the hand of another. The man is biting his lips, face a mask of misery, and tightens his grip before the couple are wrenched apart, their hands are tied behind their backs, and necks fastened in nooses.

Sai’s voice sneaks up on me. “Those two are engaged to marry,” he puts in, voice not unlike a researcher discussing a dissection, “Formerly farmers faced with destitution and hardship, they turned to banditry.”

“How do you figure?” There are another two holding hands to eke out some comfort beside first the pair I caught sight of, before they too are bound.

“I questioned the captives this morning.” Seriously? Sai looks at me strangely, “Do you not intend to carry out the Third Hokage’s orders?”

What...
The sound of clattering wood, followed by straining ropes and strangled gasps forces my attention to the hanging’s culmination. Despite my lack of concern, the visceral spectacle of dangling, choking bodies leaves my mind blank for a second.

Sai’s uncharacteristically perceptive expression only compounds my agitation.

I was not prepared for today.

Winter sunsets in the Land of Noodles are pretty enough, and our inn’s roof tiles hardly make for comfortable sitting, yet both are insufficient to derails my thoughts. Today’s procession of peculiarities left me with a serving of disagreements to digest. Izumi poking her head out from a window below, however, is a much superior distraction.

Izumi sots me and climbs. “Hi,” she offers. I crane my neck to nod mutely, and hum in reply to her monosyllabic greeting. Izumi sits to my right at the roof’s edge, joining me in staring at the twilight horizon, our feet dangling in the air. The silence rebounds, but a glance at Izumi tells of a short-lived lull.

She’s hesitant, twiddling locks of her hair. A flight of whim prompts me to prod Izumi, “You don’t usually struggle with words,” I say, pushy above the norm.

She scoffs, a first. “Not any more than you struggle with your choices,” Izumi retorts without looking.

Objection bubbles up, and an urge to needle her. “You know Izumi,” I monotone, “It’s sooo peaceful here…”

This time Izumi meets my eyes. “Hakaru,” she weekly intones her disapproval.

“…For the most part,” I finish, deadpan.

Izumi looks away, docking her head. “Sorry,” she mutters, “Gaku filled me in.”

I exhale, pushing a twinge of guilt to the side, and my resolve to stop this uselessness waffling solidifies. A glance at Izumi, “Well yeah,” I try again, “You’re kinda right. I am contemplating.” stressing the last word, “Did I do right. The next time …” I trail off. Might as well get a relatively unindoctrinated second opinion.

“It could be the right choice,” Izumi says as she pulls up her legs to hug her knees, “What you did.” In her mulish voice, an uncertainty born of challenging ingrained upbringings, a bloody legacy of countless shinobi generations.

“Why, though?” I rest my right cheek, trying to challenge her, “Everything else being equal, the bandits you killed suffered the least.” The “Humane” approach, or at least a short-sighted version of it.

“Bandit.”

“Hm?” What?

“Just the one,” Izumi grimaces, “A textbook kunai throw, just like Anko taught me, and my Sharingan recorded everything... I spaced out.” Damn. Embarrassed, she looks away, “It felt wrong. As if I betrayed…” Izumi bites her lips, then skips ahead, “I was out of it, and Kumanaru had to save my skin and take care of the rest.” She leaves it at that.
So not particularly humane after all. A riled Kumanaru comes to mind. Fang and claw, bristling fur, and a feral howl. Helpless as civilians for all that matters, those bandits probably knew a singular terror before the end. Still, it doesn’t answer my question.

“I think maybe,” Izumi’s voice carries a thoughtful inflection, “Maybe it doesn’t have to be about them. Just us, ninja, being decent whenever we can.” She turns resolute eyes to me, “And I realized I admire what you did, even if most genin don’t have the luxury of measuring to that ideal, the fact you chose to…” Izumi pats my shoulder, her expression chagrined, “Just don’t give up yet, ok?”

It’s hardly the bandits’ fate that truly bothers me in the end. What rankles most is being just another mercenary in service of the status quo.

Izumi is not entirely off target though, and I can see how her approach could lead a ninja in general to improved mental health on the long-term if they could be convinced to practice it. That being a pretty big if. Still, I don’t see much hope for change following that avenue alone, even if a deluded idealist might conceive of a farfetched outcome of mutual de-escalation.

A “Sure” and a slow nod assuage Izumi, and she gives me a relieved smile as she leaves me to stew.

“Maybe,” I sigh, after a time. If this mission taught me anything, it’s the limitations of my perspective.

Easy enough to amend.

A minor discharge of chakra smoke heralds the appearance of shadow clone beside me. There’s a frown on his face as I open my mouth-

“Don’t…”

But I can’t resist, and grin, “Go, my pretty.”

The more transient version of me grumbles to himself as he bounds away, but not without a parting shot… Now that’s a rude a gesture.

I lose sight of me as the last slivers of sunlight slip behind the horizon, allowing Shizai’s nightlights to take prominence.

“Hakaru!” Gaku hollers, “Get down here. We’re going to find dinner.”

Right.

Picking myself up, I fish out a crumpled coupon from my jacket. It’s worth, a bowl of ramen, or an outlaw’s life in the Land of Noodles.

I eat ramen that night; it’s delicious.

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January 5th, 9th year after Kyuubi

Sai’s POV

Sharp eyes scan the target, searching for obstructions to his orchestrated plan of action.

Sai’s master had once explained to him that much like in a physical clash, those who struck the first blow on the mental field of battle are afforded the opportunity to set the tone of conflict.
Squinting eyes and an unaffected smile turn slightly, “Izumi-san, could you please pass the soybean sauce?”

Strike one – a probe.

She blinks, “Sure,” and hands over the condiment, “Here you go.” Izumi’s smile doesn’t reach her eyes. A masterful parry, but, to what is ultimately a feint.

Spreading it over a slice of grilled pork, Sai takes a moment to feign an appreciation for the savory flavor. “Thanks, Crybaby.” A decisive blow.

Sheets of rain drumming on the booth’s window is the only audible sound as its occupants pause to digest those words. Gaku and Hakaru pull their gazes up from the sizzling grill, stirred from their meat induced stupor, they quirk their eyes at Sai. Kumanaru remains unconcerned, however, and seizes the opportunity to gobble up any unguarded slice of premium Konoha barbecue meat.

Slack mouthed shock transcends to seething outrage as Izumi’s eyes flash something dark. Her visage turns almost demonic, “What,” Izumi growls, “did you just call me?”

Sai, in response, smiles.

Success.

So much as Sai’s most recent assignment made sense to him, it was equally regretful that his conduct following the renewal of his service to Lord Danzō had alienated his team some. Sai was to seek closer ties with his official teammates, Uchiha Izumi and Hakaru, a member of the treacherous Uchiha clan and an acquaintance to Konoha’s jinchūriki respectively. It confounded him initially that Lord Danzō only now saw fit to charge him in this undertaking, but it is hardly Sai’s place to ponder his superior’s motives.

Shin came through for him, as always, and provided a booklet describing techniques to foster camaraderie. According to it, assigning nicknames is an excellent way to break the ice and strengthen bonds. The following outburst from Izumi is, as explained by the author, a simple example of increased expressiveness accompanying effective relationships amongst teammates.

Snatching a lean piece of beef from the grill, more in line to Sai’s tastes than Hakaru’s praised marbled cuts, he dabs it with a hint of fish sauce for added umami. Chewing on the slice, Sai dismisses putting any effort to interpreting Gaku’s or Hakaru’s efforts to dissuade Izumi from strangling him. The violent charge in the air and the inflection of Izumi’s emotions immaterial to his purposes.

Several meat platters later, Gaku’s congratulatory outing for the completion of Team 6’s first C-rank mission concludes. “Take it easy,” Gaku orders as he walks out, “reassemble in two days. Usual place and time,” and disappears with Kumanaru into the rain using a Body Flicker, then Sai approaches Hakaru.

“Sap,” Sai addresses him. On the devising of nicknames, the booklet recommends using either exaggeration or contradiction.

Stealing a glance to the side, Hakaru exaggerates rolling his eyes to Izumi and waves her off. For some reason, she is tense again and muttering angrily under her breath too low for him to pick up on her words. Izumi shoots Sai a glare for the establishment’s entrance and bounds away.

“Sai,” Hakaru returns, nodding to him after straightening his gaze. No other outward reaction ensues, and Sai suppresses a frown as is second nature. It appears his earlier success has made him negligent,
failing to prepare a proper set-up to the nickname’s inauguration.

Shin’s booklet warns that indeed, not all methods of approach would work for every individual. Time for another approach.

The manual lauds synergy as a hallmark of successful camaraderie. “Would you take part in a joint skirmish revision drill?” A twitch of Hakaru’s face signals his surprise before he shifts to thoughtfulness, scrutinizing Sai.

“Sure…” Hakaru drawls. He then brightens, a speculative gleam in his eyes, “I’m down for some, eh… mutual betterment.” Hakaru spins in place, beckoning Sai to join him, “No chance for much of that out on a mission.” Sai falls into step as they propel themselves atop Konoha’s buildings. From Hakaru’s bearing, Sai recognizes a likely destination to be the Ninth Training Ground. Keeping silent, he notes the sun’s place in the sky indicates that plenty enough daylight remains.

Soon as they arrive on the field, at the team’s customary meeting point, Hakaru turns to Sai. “So, what can you tell about the chakra mechanics of animating ink?”

Sai’s practiced smile drops from his face as he fails to respond, trying to make sense of this sudden tangent. The quiet stretches, but fails to disturb Hakaru’s expectant state, before his mouth twitches and he snaps his fingers. “My bad, it’s easy to forget with the… Never mind, I’ll clear up a bit.” Nonsensical words uttered, Hakaru forms a few hand seals, and the ensuing pulse of chakra wafts against Sai’s skin. Opening his mouth to question Hakaru about the purpose of his jutsu, Sai’s ears pop from a shift in air pressure as excess moisture on his person starts to evaporate.

Stretching his neck skywards, Sai squints. There’s a break in the air, a dome in which raindrops dissipate. Sai wonders if the opposite is within Hakaru’s ability also, and then blinks. His teammate rests cross-legged on the grass in excited anticipation, fūinjutsu instruments arrayed around him. Hakaru’s query makes its way back to Sai’s thoughts.

Seals are creations of introspection and imagination, as Lord Danzō explains it, a tool only the rare adept may wield with anything approaching proficiency. Thus, it’s unsurprising Lord Danzō disinclined to invest in its learning among his subordinates, and therefore, Sai’s grounding in the subject begins and ends at recognizing the few mass-produced schemas. Sai almost twists his lips, ruminating that he is likely to achieve insight only insofar as Hakaru chooses to share. A less than equivalent exchange.

Still, the shinobi rules demand that the mission supersedes such concerns, and gathering martial intel is not his first objective.

Sitting down beside Hakaru, Sai recounts the first lesson of his art. Picking up a scroll and brush, he makes two quick strokes. “If there are two lines of ink,” Sai feeds the ink chakra and forces them to wobble, “then the stretch of space defined between is subject to manipulation…”

Hakaru subjects Sai to an hours-long inquisition into the principles behind his techniques. His expectation for a gratifying, hard-fought sparring session, with the welcome exacerbation of a mid-winter downpour, is subverted. Rather, Sai is consigned to squat in a circle of grass untouchable to the elements, rehearsing jutsu theory. Jutsu theory he has been made able to recite in his sleep, on pain of pain. Hakaru’s experimentations, drawing seals and discarding them at an abnormal pace, in turn, are incomprehensible to Sai. The progression of his mission aside, a wasted afternoon.

Subsequently, Hakaru defies Sai’s expectations again when he proceeds to present the diagrams for a new seal to Sai, one he states is designed specifically for Sai’s techniques. A beacon-marker seal duo.
“Tap the marker seal on one of your constructs,” Sai does as instructed and touches the tag to an ink snake of his creation, which stirs, and starts to slither towards the tag’s pair, “and it will try to make its way to the beacon seal.” The ink snake slides up the tree trunk where the beacon seal is plastered, then on reaching its goal, sinks into the wood.

Scratching his head for a moment, Hakaru makes a quick adjustment to the marker seal, “That should fix that bug.” Sai doesn’t understand what insects have to do with fūinjutsu, but then, he is more concerned with how he might apply this useful tool to facilitate covert, long-distance communication with his allies.

Synergy indeed.

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*February 26th, 9th year after Kyuubi*

The westward path to Nankō stretches like any other road winding about the Land of Fire, differentiated only in that it is part of the minority surrounded more by fields than woods. By way of my trek on the dusty path, I’m finding walking to have a modicum of meditative quality to it through my ceaseless wonderings.

At least, that’s what a couple of the me that came before figured.

I can’t tell what those me were thinking; well I can, but prefer not to. The minute circumstances of my inceptions left my leanings further the part of individualistic and less inclined to accept my predecessors’ perspective. Consequently, following morning me’s decision to walk today for the sake of structure has a smarting sting to it — that privileged bastard.

But then, that’s just me cloning around.

Now, there’s no clear objective on the horizon, and so clone hours are spent training in the deeper forests, or either hiking or tree hoping to whichever destination I last picked. Previously, I’d been tracking the bandit couple, the ones Sai helpfully pointed might have a history that could summarize beyond: here hang horrible people.

Adopting the guise of a nondescript traveler under the Transformation Technique, I followed leads of past movements of the now wiped out bandit band and snooped for stories similar to Sai’s second-hand account. That, surprisingly, wasn’t the hard part. Cases of couples and new families being forced to seek out new livelihoods after losing theirs are common, too common to be sure if I found the right pair.

I decided to conclude my search in an entirely unremarkable village near the south-eastern edge of the Land of Fire. There, four aging parents described a pair similar enough to match my memories and told of crops destroyed by unkind weather, of hope for something better, and of promised letters never received.

All I said, was that the two had had a run in with bandits and did not survive.

The road is awfully silent today.

Visiting all those villages and towns, then and since, I’ve been drawing a picture in my head of economics outside a hidden village. In truth, their lack. The peasantry don’t have much of anything: wealth, hygiene, education, or a hope for something better — no sign of the modern comforts prevalent in Konoha. In their ignorance, I believe, they are content in their lot and anxious to write off incidents like the one that started of my investigation as-.
Memories.

Days’ worth of recollections crash into my brain, and I almost miss a step. The original finally deigns to send an update, and it is a dichotomy that rattles and calms in unison. A gap nearly a week in the making, a sense of differentiation from the original, evaporates — a conflict between prideful egoism and fear of missing out.

In the middle of the road, I stop and recollect. Not overmuch new. Another D-rank. More Team 6 antics, an amalgam of polar personalities. Another sparring session with Neji, Hinata tagging along as is becoming the norm.

Ugh. That particular deviation from canon is never not creepy.

“Kind travels, stranger.”

I jump, hurling myself away from the voice’s origin.

Chakra surges in my veins, a tide of energy saturating my senses. An airborne moment is simultaneously stretched and compressed, my perception a pinprick of instinct and reflex. Touching down is a smooth transition to a ready stance, and across from me, I take in…

An old man.

Barefoot, the man wears white and gray robe-like garb beneath a red sash. Palms pressed in greeting; he raises his head and bows again, “Ah, excuse me, that’s quite the scare I gave you.” He lifts his head to meet my eyes and a broad smile stretches across his face, "Though, I hadn't seen anyone jump like that since I hid a horned viper in one of the temple's wilier pupil's smallclothes when he elected to duck his duties to go swim in a nearby river," the man lets out a guffaw. Leathery skin, tanned by the sun and marked by smile lines. A wild wreath of silvery hair on the sides and none up top, "Unfortunately, young Chiriku never quite forgave me the transgression."

Tension bleeds from my tendons, and I deflate. Still, I do not let down my guard fully. This man’s chakra is not a civilian’s. “Hisomeru is my name,” I give out my chosen alias when under the Transformation Technique, “honored elder.” The common people are humble, for they have claim to little.

He stiffens on hearing my name and replies as soon as I’m done, “Forgive my manners friend, many moons in stranger lands to the far west may have dulled my senses. I am Arataka, a monk of the Fire Temple, now returning from a prolonged pilgrimage.” Supposition affirmed I relax further.

Arataka gestures to a grassy patch beside the road, “Please, may we share in your company and my tea?”

I mentally tally up the time I have left and nod my agreement. Figure there’s enough to enjoy a cup and maybe listen to an interesting story or two.

One of the necessities to sustain a long-distance clone journey is regular self-replacement every two hours. Portioning out the memories in short chunks is best to minimize strain on my original. That every lengthy conversation has to be interrupted by a "bathroom break" is a small price to pay for freedom allowed through my abuse of the technique. And yet, all this still would not have been possible if it wasn’t for the Shadow Clone Technique’s most confounding aspect.

The chakra divided equally, always.

Every time a clone is conjured or dispelled, the chakra reshuffles among all instances of the user.
unanimous distribution of experiences and chakra potential, and perhaps there’s more...

“...And after we finish deliberating and I suggest we part for solitary meditation, that albino spinster declares that since I’d abstained from undertaking her trials, she’ll eat me for lunch.” Arataka slaps his knee and hoots, “But what she didn’t expect,” he points to his temple, “is this devilish mind.”

“You outwitted a sage?” I furrow my brow, finding myself grinning, infected by Arataka’s good cheer.

“Bah,” Arataka waves his hand, “outwitted nothing. It’s her nature I used against her. None of us can escape our innermost natures.” He reaches into his satchel and withdraws a handful of leaves. “Lemongrass,” he says and deposits them in a bubbling pot he had set up after lighting a stick of incense. “Grouched and moaned about it the entire time I was leaving, but that she let me leave is a sign of a good sport.”

Arataka produces two cups, a pair of old and beaten clay utensils. “Tell me then, young Hisomeru, what is it that you,” he pointedly points to me, “seek in your travels?”

“Understanding mostly,” I say. “My home is a sheltered place, and there are holes in my education in need of filling.” A vague truth.

The pot pauses above the first cup, and Arataka’s gaze returns to me. “Might it be that you, as I do, tread the wanderer’s path to enlightenment?” He asks and leans forward.

I shrug, “Enlightenment is easy enough; it’s life after that’s the real journey.” As candid a comment as I’ve shared on this subject. I attribute my charitable response to the Transformation Technique and Arataka’s strangeness. “Knowledge is what I want.”

Arataka exhales an overdramatic sigh, “Ha,” and proceeds to pour tea, “the hubris of youth.” I wave off on sweetening my drink, and Arataka drowns his in an avalanche of sugar. “A forgivable, if poor, justification for such an aloof claim for that which so many spend lifetimes striving for…” He says with little venom and hands me a cup. Despite the nettling sting of the underhand slight, we take a sip together.

Still, my counter is quick to come. “It’s clear enough, for those who do not deafen and blind themselves to the truth like frightened children,” I say, feeling a bit heated in my retort.

Bringing a hand to his chin, Arataka meets my eyes, “Do… enlighten me.”

The terrible pun defuses the tension some, and I inhale deeply to try cooling some of the heat that’s built in my gut. I oblige Arataka’s request and spell it out, “Meaning and value both exist only in the eye of the observer, in the most absolute of ways.” The subjective is the only real objective. ”Go live with that.”

Arataka declines to respond immediately, his face impassive.

I look down and put a hand to my stomach as the heat becomes a burn. “I think there might have been something in that tea.” My vision loses some focus despite repeated blinking as my world becomes swabbed in cotton.

“How typical of a shinobi,” the cold disdain snaps my gaze forward more than the words, to meet a half-lidded stare. “To shake off the bindings of xenophobic nationalism only to sink to an egoistical rut.”

A shiver of comprehension sends clarity lancing through the mounting pain, even as I lose balance
and fall to my side.

There was definitely something in that tea.

“Was the-mrrm,” I grunt, “counteragent in sugar?”

“No,” the man shakes his head and sips from the tea, “a sweet tooth is my one great vice,” he says with mirth. Aside from poisoning people, I would have said, if not for the paralyzing pain. Arataka is undisturbed by my silence, it seems, as evident from his continued monologuing. “It was the incense that loosens your tongue and clouds your thoughts, in case you were wondering.”

Sonofabitch.

My eyes widen, and my teeth clench harder. It should have been obvious, in hindsight, that something was wrong when I started orating personal observations that I’d barely hinted at to anyone.

“Hearing of that old bastard’s death,” Arataka continues, “I knew the Land of Fire was ripe for my return. All I need to ignite the conflagration is a following of virtuous disciples.” He frowns sadly at me, “I tried to grant you fair chance, truly, but such blatant disregard to the wider world and the greater understanding, the delicate balance between all living things and nature itself…” He sighs with a sense of finality, “So arrogant. You shinobi see what you want to see, and in turn, what I want you to see.”

Spittle drips from my mouth as I lose more motor functions and I clumsily wipe it away before forcing out a response “Your wider world wouldn’t even exist without the me there to observe it.” Arataka’s expression of serene condescension makes me wish to see his face on realizing his mistake. “And I’ll remember your face, bastard.”

I dispel.

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