The Kamui Gate

by Violent_entertainment

Summary

Ed's attempt to escape Gluttony's stomach doesn't go to plan. But while alchemy may not be capable of bringing back the dead, jutsu has all kinds of possibilities, if only Ed can take a break from trying to get home long enough to explore them.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Prologue

“I still don’t understand why you think haring off on your own in some crazy dimension full of homicidal sideshow freaks is a good idea.”

Ling sat in the window, one leg dangling over the sill as he listened to his companion rant, chin resting in his palm, elbow planted against a knee. His shoulder lifted slightly in a minute shrug.

“My mission hasn’t changed. I still need to bring home a method of immortality to secure my clan’s future in Xing.”

Ed rolled his eyes, dragging open a drawer and beginning to angrily stuff a satchel with the meager possessions he’d managed to procure in exchange for doing odd jobs around town while Ling ‘scouted’.

“Don’t be an idiot. What’s supposed to happen if you do find something? You can’t take it back to your clan when we don’t know how to get back!”

Ling flashed his infuriating smile. “I’ll just have to trust you won’t stop trying to figure out a way home. And that you won’t leave me behind once you do.”

Ed snatched a pillow off the bed and chucked it at Ling’s head. “Leaving me to do all the work like always, lazy prince!” Still smiling, the aforementioned prince ducked out of the way and the pillow continued sailing out the window.

Jumping down off the sill, Ling leaned against the wall, crossing his arms. “I’ve heard whispers of reanimation spells,” Ed scoffed derisively from his corner of the motel room, “and I suspect if there is any true method of immortality to be found,” he spread his hands wide, encompassing their surroundings with his gesture, “it may well be in another world like this, where the natural laws and shaping forces are different than the ones we know.”

Ed threw the bag down on the bed and began to pace, throwing his arms wide in agitation. “That’s another reason why we should stick together! We still don’t understand what this chakra stuff is, but it definitely seems related to chi. I need you to teach me more about the Dragon’s Pulse if I’m going to learn their weird version of alkahestry.”

Ling just shrugged. “I told you the first time we met. I’m no good at that stuff. I can sense it but I can’t use it.” His grin turned sly. “Unless all this fuss is because I can detect the presence of homunculi and ninja, and you can’t.” He tapped the blade hanging at his waist. “Worried I won’t be around to protect you anymore, my little damsel in distress?”

Ed’s face had grown steadily more red until the prince thought steam might come out of his ears. “I DON’T NEED PROTECTION! I can kick the ass of any ninja who dares look at me funny!” He turned and kicked a hole straight through the wall with his metal foot, whether out of frustration or in demonstration, Ling wasn’t sure, and sat down on the bed. “And I’m a perfectly respectable height, you enormous freak of nature!” After a belated pause where Ed clearly replayed the conversation back in his head to make sure he’d covered every slight, he added, “and I’m not a damsel! You have longer hair than me, asshole.”

Ling chuckled, but in the silence that stretched afterward, Edward slumped back across the bed and draped an arm over his face. Only one melancholy golden eye was visible as he turned his head to face the other man.
“It’s a big world, Ling. How are we even supposed to find each other again after this?”

In reply, the other man dipped his hand into the wide pocket of the flowing jacket he was wearing, emerging with something cupped carefully in the palm of his hand.

Curious, Ed sat up. “Huh...a baby bird?”

Ling looked exceedingly proud of himself. “She’s a nin-hawk. They’re different from ordinary animals - they can use chakra just like humans. Some can even talk!”

“Well, I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Really?” Ed looked skeptical. They both turned to the bird as if expecting it to pipe up in defense of itself. It gave an inquisitive cheep instead.

“Maybe she’s too young.” Ling scratched the back of his head with his free hand, before delicately sliding the fledgling into Ed’s outstretched palms. “They’re used to transport messages long distances,” he explained.

Ed glanced up from where he’d been stroking the soft down on the bird’s back to give Ling a deadpan stare. “It’s a baby, Ling. It can’t even fly yet, much less carry a message.”

A look of exasperation crossed Ling’s face before he turned serious. “You need to accept the truth when it’s staring you in the face, Edward. We’ve been here two months already with no progress. We’re going to be here for a while longer. Maybe forever.” He held up a hand as Ed began to protest. “I’m not saying to give up hope. But there’ll be plenty of time to let this bird grow.”

Ed scowled down at the tiny hawk, continuing to stroke it, but not arguing. “How’d you even get it, anyway? I wouldn’t have guessed a ninja would sell a special ninja bird to a suspicious civilian who can barely stumble his way through the language.”

When Ling didn’t answer straight away, Ed felt his face go pale and instinctively pulled the baby hawk closer to his chest as if to protect it. Like whatever lunacy ran Ling’s mind might be catching. “You...you freaking imbecile! Did you steal it?! The last thing we need is-”

Ling laughed, raising his hands up in a defensive gesture. “Relax! I really did buy her! She just didn’t originally belong to the person I bought her from, so if any angry ninja show up looking for their bird, they’ll be after him, not us. We’ll be long gone by then, anyway.” A bead of sweat rolling down his temple suggested he wasn’t as positive as he sounded regarding that fact. Ed scowled but let it go.

“...I was thinking Lan Fan.”

A brief widening of eyes gave way to a soft smile. “That’s a good name,” Ed replied. “You shouldn’t keep her in your pocket, though.” Crossing back to the bed and pulling several handfuls of straw free from a tear in the side of the mattress, he transmuted a small wicker birdcage and slipped the newly named Lan Fan inside.

A companionable silence ensued as they watch the chick inspect her new home before the thought occurred to Ed.

“Uh, Ling, where’d you get the money for her?”
Even as the question was crossing his lips, his eyes slid to the money pouch that should have been under the pillow he’d sent flying earlier. Half a second later, his fingers snatched only air as he watched one yellow-clad castaway carrying one little brown bird fling himself out the window. Racing over and leaning fully half his body out of the frame, he shook his fist at the sight of Ling brushing the dust off his clothes from the landing one-handed, the other clutching the handle of the birdcage.

“I’m going to MURDER you! That was everything we had!”

Ling smiled unrepentantly, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender, before calling up after him, “We should really be going then, before they ask you about that hole in the wall.”

Ed’s face went pale. “Good point,” he murmured, and after grabbing his satchel, jumped out after him.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ed was drowsing in the shade of a tree to escape the heat of the midday sun when a shrill, familiar cry startled him into alertness. Squinting at a shadow passing overhead through the gaps between the leaves, he pushed himself to his feet. Picking a leaf out of his hair with a distracted frown, the blond made his way back to the road, satchel slung over his shoulder. Once he broke free of the trees, he dropped the bag at his feet and lifted a hand to shade his eyes, gaze tracking back and forth across the sky. He broke into a wide grin when he spotted the hawk circling overhead. When it spotted him in return, it shrieked again and swooped down.

Lifting his right arm up as a perch, Ed dug into a pouch at his waist with his left hand, retrieving a strip of jerky. “Hey, Lan Fan,” he cooed at the hawk, offering it the meat once it landed. The nin-hawk never did learn to talk. Still, it, or “she” as Ling insisted, was abnormally intelligent. She never failed to find her way to either Ed or Ling, had unflagging stamina, and was as devoted to Ling as her namesake.

Glancing up and down the road and seeing no one, Ed retreated into the trees again, being careful to keep his arm steady for the hawk. When he had retraced his steps back to his previous spot, he carefully untied the small message scroll secured to her back and tossed his arm upward to send her fluttering to the branch above his head.

Unrolling the scroll slightly, he noted the familiar Xingese characters---just similar enough to the local alphabet not to raise any eyebrows at a passing glance, unlike Amestrian script, but completely incomprehensible to anyone who attempted to read it unfamiliar with the language, which was apparently everyone in this world except for Ling and himself. At least, as far as they’d discovered. It never hurt to be too careful. He sat down to read.

Ed-

A new ninja village is forming: the Village Hidden in Sound, in the Land of Rice Paddies. Word is they are interested in recruiting shinobi with unusual abilities. I think I will make my way there and offer up my skills as an “elite sensor”, haha.

What I find most interesting about Sound is the illustrious man behind it all: Orochimaru, formerly one of the legendary three sannin of Konoha, since banished for his experiments into immortality. Apparently he had to flee his old village so suddenly, a lot of his research was left behind.

Another thing about Konoha - it’s the oldest and largest of the hidden villages. The Hokage’s private library must be a true cave of wonders. Supposedly it even houses a scroll detailing a secret technique of the Fourth Hokage’s, one which allows you to summon a “god”, although the price for its services is said to be rather high. The Fourth himself didn’t survive paying it.

Anyway, just thought you should know!

-Ling

His instinctive reaction was to bang the back of his head against the tree a few times muttering every curse he knew, but his heart wasn’t really in it. A hidden village was where he was always going to end up.
As vague as this rumor Ling had sent him was, it was still the closest thing he’d heard to anything resembling that thing calling itself “Truth” since arriving here. If there was some known method to opening the Gate from this world, then it was knowledge the ninja were guarding.

It wasn’t a new realization. Pretty much as soon as he’d learned of their existence, Ed had considered petitioning one of the hidden villages to allow him to join so he could access the shinobi-only libraries. Heck, that was exactly the reason he’d become a state alchemist! Sure, he couldn’t use chakra, but he could probably fake it well enough with alchemy for just long enough to determine whether or not they had what he was looking for, as long as another war didn’t break out.

But you could retire from the state alchemy program, or just let yourself be phased out through the annual assessment. Shinobi who quit were labeled missing-nin and hunted down with expediency. Plus, there was the fact that ninja were just as cagey as alchemists about hiding the really good stuff from even those on their own side, but they usually protected their secret techniques with murder rather than complicated codes.

He could enter as a civilian, but if he was caught accessing knowledge he wasn’t supposed to have? Well, he’d be killed immediately if he was lucky. Tortured as a spy if he wasn’t. Teacher's lessons had brought him far, but despite how bold he’d been their first few months here, he wasn’t under any illusions about how long his own fighting ability and alchemy would stand up against an army of trained-from-the-cradle killers who shot lightning from their fingers for fun. At least, not without an amplifier like a philosopher's stone.

They’d been trying to work from the fringes. Ling’s uncanny ability to sniff out shady contacts was amazingly lucrative in terms of politics, scandal, and other juicy rumors about what was going on behind closed doors in some very important places, but it often came up short in terms of anything they could actually use, though he sent Ed leads to investigate when he could.

For his part, Ed researched myths and legends, interrogated scholars in the various capitals on space/time jutsu, and hunted down unaffiliated ninja to beg for demonstrations. He’d even hiked out to the ruins of Uzushiogakure, camping among the rubble, looking for a connection between fuinjutsu seals and alchemical transmutation circles.

He’d found nothing. It had been over two years now since he’d become stranded in this world, and he was getting disheartened. This wasn’t like the four years he’d spent with Al crisscrossing Amestris chasing one dead end after another, trying to find a way to restore their bodies—-he wasn’t with Al, that was the whole problem! He had no idea what had happened to his brother after getting swallowed by Gluttony—-if he was still alive, still trapped in the armor, if the homunculi's plan had succeeded, if there was even an Amestris to return home to. And the letters from Ling didn’t come frequently enough.

Ed rolled up the scroll again, and leaned back against the tree, closing his eyes and tapping the scroll against his knee in thought. Well, it was a dangerous favor Ling was asking of him, trying to find this criminal’s lab notes, even with the tidbit Ling was dangling in front of him as payment. But he'd found and deciphered Marcoh's research and lived to tell the tale, so it wouldn’t be the first time.

He was still skeptical of this “god summoning” technique, but he was tired of aimless wandering, just hoping to stumble across something. His eyes opened, determination gleaming in their golden depths. It was time to go straight to the source.

“State your business.”
“Edward Elric, traveling repairman.”

The first guard raised an eyebrow, while the other stood stoic.

“This is a shinobi village, not a civilian one, sir. No solicitors get in without authorization.”

“I have travel papers.” Forgery was pretty easy, after he got a couple practice tries in. Just a little alchemic manipulation of ink here and there, and voila, permission to go wherever he pleased in Fire Country.

The two guards shared a glance. “Let’s see it then.”

Ed handed over the wallet-sized document bearing the seal of the office of the Fire Daimyo and a lesser customs official’s signature to the guard that seemed less interested in pursuing a conversation. Unfortunately, the first guard hadn’t let up.

“Repairman, huh? Where’re your tools?”

Ed made an exaggerated show of glancing from side to side and turning out his pockets before shrugging. “I’m good with my hands.”

The guard growled and placed a hand on his kunai holster. “Don’t play smart with me!”

“Okay, okay! They’re in my bag!” Ed raised both his hands up in a calming gesture, grimacing. He acknowledged the snark maaay have been going too far when he might still be turned away.

Once the guard relaxed enough that Ed decided he probably wouldn’t get stabbed for reaching into his bag, he retrieved a bundle of leather that he unrolled to reveal a variety of small tools—a few picks, a screwdriver, a delicate soldering iron—that he used to conduct basic repairs on his automail.

The guard took the tool roll from him, to his disgruntlement, pulling out each instrument from its pocket and inspecting it. “This is all you carry?”

Ed sighed. “I find it easier to rent whatever I need for any particular job once I arrive. Good quality tools are expensive, and I don’t like needing to replace them every time I get jumped on the road.” Especially since he didn’t actually need tools when he had alchemy.

He gave a small smirk. “Maybe if you guys lowered your prices I could hire an escort between towns instead.”

The second guard finally spoke up. “Watch it, kid. It’s not a good idea to backtalk ninja in their own home.” He tapped the permit in his hand with a fingertip. “Under ‘Nation of Origin’, your papers list ‘none’.”

“That’s correct.” Ed hadn’t seen any point in coming up with a fake hometown when it was a lot harder to disprove nowhere than someplace in particular. And especially when some ninja could sense when you lied.

“As I said, my job keeps me on the move.” True, finding a way home was essentially a full-time job.

“And I have no permanent address.” Because he burnt it down years ago.

“I suspect Mom and Dad weren’t from the Elemental Nations,” this was said with a knowing grin, letting the two shinobi in on the joke about his obviously foreign...everything, as he’d practiced many times over many similar conversations, “but they never said anything to me about it one way or
another.” Also true. Neither of his parents had ever mentioned their families to him.

“They’re gone now, but I’m still on the road.” Let them imply what they wanted. They’d never actually asked about where he was born, just about what his papers said about it.

He shrugged half-apologetically, in a ‘what can you do?’ gesture. “If it helps, most recently I was making my way through the Land of Valleys.”

The first guard continued to look suspicious but the second seemed to take it in stride. “And what brings you to Konoha specifically?”

Ed shrugged again. “It’s big, so there should be a decent amount of work to be had here. It’s on my route through Fire.” He dropped his voice, grinning behind a hand as if sharing an embarrassing secret. “Plus, I like to consider myself a bit of a history buff, so I’ve always wanted to see the place that had so much influence in shaping the modern world.” His eyes deliberately flickered up over the wall to the faces carved into the cliffside.

The first guard snorted and finally relaxed. “A Shodaime fanboy, huh?”

“Well, everything seems to be in order.” The second guard handed back the visa and gestured for his companion to hand back the tool roll he was still holding as well. Turning to make a notation on a clipboard that had previously been hanging off a nail driven partly into the wall of the guard house, he cleared his throat and his tone took on the monotone drone of something recited by rote.

“This card permits you to remain in the village for a period up to three months. You must report your address to the Konoha customs authority within three days of arrival or suffer deportation. This card does not constitute citizenship or any of the rights thereof. Keep this card on your person at all times and be prepared to present it to any working shinobi who asks, identifiable by their leaf headband. And don’t—” here some personality came back into his voice, “let us find out you’ve been causing trouble.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, indicating Ed to step through the gate.

With the first real grin on his face all day, Ed did just that. That hadn’t been nearly as bad as he thought. Maybe he’d been wrong this whole time to be so wary of entering ninja villages.

After the blond had passed through the gates, the first guard turned to the second.

“So, he was weird, right?”

“Definitely. Probably nothing but…” He searched the treeline for a moment, then relaxed as he spotted what he was looking for. “Go shake Kakashi out of that tree and tell him to keep an eye on the new handyman. Kid needs something to do.”

Chapter End Notes

Ed, you’re about as subtle as a brick. Not a very good spy.
Forcibly retired out of ANBU for barely two weeks, and they already had him running shit D-ranks like following some poor sap around the village as he glued broken flower pots back together or whatever it was a repairman did. All because the puffed up chunins at the gate don’t trust orphans and can’t go and blow off steam on real missions. That he’d fallen so low as to have to take orders from... Whatever. If his superiors were that afraid he was going to snap and start killing everyone, they should have been keeping him away from helpless civilians, not throwing him at them.

Part of Kakashi knew he was behaving like a child, and that had he been given this mission while still in ANBU, he’d treat the possible infiltration of the village by a hostile with the seriousness it deserved. But a much louder part couldn’t help but worry he’d outlived his usefulness and this was the beginning stage of phasing him out of the daily operations of the village.

It made sense. Son to a disgrace, student to a dead man (whom he’d failed to protect), and a comrade killer: that was Kakashi Hatake’s legacy. They must have finally decided they couldn’t continue to risk him leading an ANBU team and causing something even worse to happen the next time he screwed up.

He kept trudging on.

Konoha was large, but the restrictions on who could enter the village meant true visitors were few in number and the options for temporary lodging were extremely limited. It shouldn’t take long to sniff out the newcomer. He glanced at the sun and shrugged internally, pulling out a book so no one would talk to him as he headed for the memorial stone. Why risk arriving before the mysterious foreigner?

Halfway there, he came to an abrupt halt and swung around, dropping his book slightly. That hair was exactly as it had been described. Not the pale white-blond of the Yamanaka clan or the ridiculous buttercup-blond his sensei had had, but a darker, golden-blond---long, but tied back into a tail. Its owner was seated at a ramen stand, slurping down the broth in his bowl by holding it up to his mouth. An empty bowl already sat at his elbow. Kakashi felt an eyebrow raise, partly in annoyance and partly in incredulity.

‘Well, well, well, doesn’t life work in mysterious ways.’

“So I hear you’re the new repairman who arrived today?”

Ed jumped in his seat in surprise, spilling the contents of the bowl down his front. Wiping at the broth now coating his chin with a gloved hand and thoroughly soaking the cloth in the process, he scowled at the silver-haired man slouching against the counter.

“You people sure work fast,” he growled, brushing ineffectively at his shirt and then shaking his hands, sending droplets of broth flying. One hit Kakashi in the face just above the mask and under the eyelid. The eye twitched.

“Yes, well. We are a ninja village, after all.” He offered a very insincere smile, making sure it caused his one visible eye to crinkle.
The blond continued to give him the stink eye and started patting his front with a cloth the apologetic stall owner offered him. “You hiding a cleft palate and a lazy eye under all that? Or is it just for fun.”

“Hmmm,” Kakashi pretended to think about it for just a moment. “For fun, of course!” he responded with false brightness.

The blond’s expression didn’t change. “Yeah, I figured.” Turning back to the stall owner who was hovering nearby, Ed asked, “can I get the check?”

He jumped again upon discovering that Kakashi had taken this momentary lapse of attention to move from standing nearby to sitting beside him. Taking the invasion of his personal space for the demand that it was, Ed grudging replied, “yes, I am a new repairman who arrived in Konoha today. But if you are interested in me repairing something for you, you will have to wait until I rent a workspace or cart or whatever, since as your little gossip network has no doubt already informed you, I’ve only been in the village for approximately...”

He pulled out a silver pocket watch attached to his belt by a delicate chain. Kakashi’s uncovered eye zeroed in on it. The front was emblazoned with some stylized animal, possibly a tailed beast? It looked like something was ineptly carved into the inner cover as well, but he didn’t get a good look before it was snapped shut again. “...40 minutes.”

Determining to pickpocket the watch later, Kakashi continued without missing a beat. “Then we should set about getting you a workspace right away.”

Ed eyed him suspiciously. “Are all new businesses given help setting up shop here?”

“Ah, no.” Kakashi gave a small shrug. “But I’ve found myself with a surplus of free time recently, and I would be remiss in my duty as a shinobi of Konoha if I didn’t help.” A note of bitterness crept in as he mused, “what is a shinobi’s purpose, after all, if not to serve?”

Ed continued to stare, but when Kakashi failed to whip out a kunai while shouting ‘I know what you are! Prepare to die!’, he hopped down off the stool, and dropped a handful of ryo on the counter. “Well, okay then.”

He put his hands on his hips and raised an eyebrow. “Lead the way.”

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Many frustrating hours later, Kakashi was more than ready to give up and ditch the brat in the middle of Konoha with a shunshin. Or maybe make an executive decision on his potential enemy status and take him out then and there, witnesses be damned.

Kakashi was not any kind of expert on Konoha real estate, having lived the first years of his life in the secluded Hatake compound, followed by a small apartment Minato-sensei had arranged for him, then all the years after in the ANBU barracks. But due to his recent expulsion from the force “for his own good”, he’d only just finished wrapping up his own apartment hunt and thus still had several real estate listings lying around.

They’d mutually agreed a single location that could serve as both work and living space would be best (Ed because it was more cost-effective, Kakashi because it would make it easier to keep an eye on him). But Edward “Just call me Ed” Elric had turned down every. Single. Listing.

This one was “far too expensive, I’m not made of money”; that one “too crummy, you expect anyone to live like this?”, the next “too far away from the city center, how am I supposed to get any business!”, but the one after that was “nowhere near private enough, I’m not looking to live in my
neighbors’ laps.” And so on.

Just when Kakashi was ready to give in to his worst urges in the middle of the market thoroughfare, one shopkeeper suggested a property owned by a friend of theirs that finally seemed to satisfy the picky foreigner.

The apartment was narrow but long, each room connected in a line and opening into the next as the only point of entry. An exterior half-door opened into what would be the shop. Through the door in the back wall was another room with a tiny kitchenette that could serve double-duty as the shop’s office. Behind that lay a small bedroom, and a bathroom past that made the final room. The extravagantly large grin Ed was wearing as he immediately put down the deposit said he couldn’t be more thrilled with the find.

It did not escape Kakashi’s notice that the apartment lacked exterior windows.

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After shooing off the surprisingly helpful shinobi with the weird headgear and prematurely grey hair, Ed spent his first night in Konoha asleep on the floor of his new apartment, with only a small travel bedroll to soften the chilly wooden planks, and his satchel taking the role of a pillow. He’d figure out how to pick up some cheap (or better yet, free) beaten-to-shit furniture to alchemize to like-new status (with some improvements—it was hard to find furnishing that really fit Ed’s sense of style) tomorrow.

He’d lucked out with this place. It was cheap, and the lack of windows for nosy ninja to spy through would hide the distinctive blue light of any transmutations. If he needed a quick getaway, he’d make himself an exit out the back room where no one would be expecting it (he’d just have to be careful not to burst any pipes in the process...again). But best of all, it was within a short walk of both the Hokage Tower and the library. He wasn’t sure which the good stuff would be secreted away in, but he figured it must be one of the two.

The following morning, he made his way straight to the library. He wasn’t sure yet what excuse he’d need to get into the Hokage Tower—he’d have to find something. Ed had been through Eastern and Central Command enough times to recognize a building that loudly and unabashedly announced to the world, “This is a place where paperwork gets done.”

Important paperwork, which was more Ed’s concern. Mission reports and personnel files, specifically. He wasn’t naive enough to think he’d find the offending lab notes there, but if he could find anything that mentioned Orochimaru’s attempted arrest, it might be enough to point him in the right direction of where to actually start looking. But in the meantime...

The thought of all that information on new and exciting jutsu just sitting there behind the doors of the library was too enticing to ignore. Konoha didn’t build a separate research library strictly for its shinobi it seemed, (but honestly, Ed couldn’t imagine ninja were much in for scholarship, anyway) but rather kept restricted-access areas of the library for the more dangerous books.

Once inside, he was informed, to his disgust, he could not apply for a card to check out any items seeing as he wasn’t a citizen, but he was free to read the books as long as they stayed within the building. He made his way straight towards the chakra theory section.

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Small civilian villages---just large enough to hold a library with two or three shelves, mostly offered up scary bedtime stories about giant monsters made up entirely of chakra rather than flesh and blood,
or fables that told of the first person to use chakra---alternately, a goddess who came down from the moon, or a traveling priest. On one memorable occasion, it was a rabbit.

It was in major population centers that Ed had made his first real breakthroughs, or at least they had seemed like breakthroughs at the time.

He found medical journals on how chakra could effect health even in non-chakra users, dissertations on the symbolic mixing of the spiritual and physical associated with chakra (despite the impression he gave off, Ed was not dismissive of symbolism. For all that alchemy was a science, circles relied heavily on symbolism to convey complex ideas and immaterial concepts succinctly), and descriptions of the feats jutsu could accomplish through chakra’s strong association with five major elements of nature, which only strengthened Ed’s conviction that chakra was related to chi. After all, alkahestry, unlike alchemy, also recognized five basic elements, which is why its transmutation circles were based on the pentagram.

Alchemical reactions were powered by the kinetic energy created by the constant, minute shifts of tectonic plates deep inside the earth. Alkahestry, as Ed understood from Ling’s meandering and nigh-unintelligible explanation, used chi, a slow, steady flow of naturally-replenishing life energy moving over the surface of the earth.

Theoretically, all he needed to do to perform alkahestry was reach for one type of energy rather than the other when forming a circle (easier said than done).

But if Ling’s chi was the same as chakra, Ed could also perform jutsu. Which had been the thing driving him forward---finding a jutsu that could send him home. However, if the book he’d found in the capital of Lightning Country was correct, that didn’t seem to be the case after all. Chakra was a purely internal energy source, generated by the body rather than flowing into it. And based on what Ling had said about how people here felt different, he strongly suspected his and Ling’s bodies did not.

Furthermore, it sounded like a lot of chakra manipulation involved redirecting chakra's natural flow through organic pathways in the body to pool and concentrate in specific body parts, particularly the feet and hands. And, well...

Ed raised his right hand over his head and squeezed it into a fist, then slowly relaxed it open again, waving each finger individually. "Even if I found a way to substitute chi for chakra, I can’t exactly direct anything through energy pathways that don’t exist in automail limbs." He snorted softly. "Unless I plan to hop over the surface of a lake on one foot.”

It didn’t matter, he decided. If he couldn’t perform jutsu, that didn’t mean there wasn’t a jutsu out there that could bring him home. And there were plenty of people in this world who could perform it for him.

The problem with any research conducted by an outside observer was that any practical application would be purely theoretical. Research conducted by shinobi was what he needed, and as he suspected, in shinobi-run villages, civilians couldn't be denied, and may have even been expected to have, a thorough and accurate understanding of chakra. Thus, even the non-restricted section was far more loose with secrecy than any others he’d been through.

Ed let his book fall back onto the table with a dull thump.

Chakra, despite the initial apparent similarities to chi, was a horse of a different color entirely. Chakra
was both the energy source for a transmutation and the material to be transmuted. It didn't just produce fire or water in the way alchemy could, but was itself converted, seemingly completely bypassing the Law of Natural Providence and the Law of Conservation of Mass simultaneously.

It was such a simple conclusion to draw based on what he'd already learned, he wasn't sure why he'd never realized before reading it in plain language on the page. But he did know why. It was simply so absurd that he'd never imagined...a world where "the natural laws and shaping forces are different," as Ling had put it two years ago. How right he'd been.

A world without equivalent exchange...Dropping his face into his palms, Ed wondered. Was this a good thing? What did this change, if anything at all?

Chapter End Notes

More Kakashi next chapter.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ling grimaced as he pushed through the hot, dark woods, clambering over rocks and trying not to lose his footing on the slick lichen coating everything. At least deserts were dangerous in a way he understood, unlike this region, where even the air seemed oppressively thick.

He typically enjoyed the chance to see unfamiliar landscapes and the strange people inhabiting them. After all, once he became Emperor, he doubted he’d ever have the freedom to leave the borders of Xing again as long as he lived. But even so far away from his country and his people, he was never free of his responsibilities to his clan, and he felt the strain of the expectations placed on his shoulders like a physical weight; a heavy chain dragging behind him that with every clink and rattle reminded him what he needed to be doing and where he needed to return. And some days, like today, he just desperately missed the familiar.

But he was here to make an impression, and tumbling off a wet boulder wasn’t it. He’d had better training than to embarrass himself like that, even if he couldn’t stick himself to the surface with an application of chakra like this world’s ninja could. Playing useless and unthreatening was often fairly useful, but it wouldn’t help him get through the doors he was aiming for today. It might even get him a knife through the head instead. But neither could he make himself too interesting, which could potentially be even more dangerous with these people. He needed to be just intriguing enough to spark attention, but not enough to hold it. Tricky, tricky.

And it seemed he’d run out of time to make a decision. On top of that, if what his senses were telling him was correct, his situation was simultaneously much worse, but also far luckier, than he’d imagined when he’d decided to make his way here. Inside, he winced, but he outwardly plastered on an impenetrable smile and stopped where he stood, resting one hand on his sword handle while keeping his stance loose and relaxed, waiting. And waiting.

“Helloo, oto-nin! Ling Yao, at your service. Or at least I hope to be,” he finally called out loudly into the empty air, the occasional soft plink of water dripping off leaves and echoing off hidden ravines the only sound besides his voice in the stillness.

“So you’ve come to join the village, then.” A young man with shaggy grey hair stepped soundlessly out from behind a tree. His purple gear blended impressively into the gloom, and his headband bore a gleaming silver plate freshly engraved with a music note. Ling placed him at maybe 20 years old or a bit younger, although almost certainly older than himself. He was thinly muscled, and his thick glasses indicated poor eyesight...he didn’t seem like much of a threat, but Ling knew how appearances could be deceiving.

The Sound ninja cast a dismissive glance up and down Ling’s person. “Why should we welcome you into the ranks of Otogakure, stranger? What can you offer? I’m assuming you know how to use that sword, at least.”

“Of course.”

“Hmmm. Kenjutsu is more of a samurai art than a ninja one, but it’s not without its uses. Certainly several ninja have found their way into the Bingo Books with their sword skills,” the man mused. “How does your sword style pair with ninjutsu? Genjutsu?” he continued thoughtfully with a glint of curiosity gleaming in his eyes.
Ling chuckled, raising both hands up in front of him. “Oh, no. I can’t perform either of those. I’m really no good with that type of thing.”

The newcomer scoffed. “So, an aspiring ninja who can’t use the ninja arts? What possible use could Lord Orochimaru have for you?”

Ling crossed his arms, leaning back against a nearby boulder confidently. “I’m what you’d call a sensor-type.”

He received a raised eyebrow in return. “Skilled sensors are uncommon, I’ll admit. But not rare enough to offset your clear deficiencies.”

Ling’s grin widened. “You haven’t met a sensor like me. It doesn’t matter how you try to suppress or disguise your chakra, I’ll still be able to find you. It’s how I knew you were here just now, and it’s how I know that you didn’t come to greet me alone. There’s three others in your little party, and eight of those charming chakra-using snakes as well.” ‘And one more besides,’ he thought but didn’t voice.

He stood back up from his casual slouch and stepped closer to the grey haired Sound-nin, letting his hand rest lightly on his sword handle once more and not stopping until he stood only a few feet away, uncaring as two more ninja dressed in light purple and grey materialized nearby, one on the rocks and the other dropping down from a tree. “I’d say that’s overkill for a single swordsman, but twelve is a lucky number for me, so I should say thanks instead. It makes this meeting most auspicious.”

“Any sensor worth his salt could determine the number of our ‘greeting party’, as you put it,” his host retorted.

“Ah, but I also know your final friend, the one who has yet to reveal himself, is in fact the legendary sannin whose reputation has gathered all of us here. At least, I assume it’s him. I don’t know who else would be walking around in someone else’s body.”

The man’s eyes widened almost comically behind his frames before they narrowed again suspiciously. “How could you possibly-” he growled out, before being cut off by an eerie chuckle. Thin white snakes swarmed out from the trees behind him, undulating across the damp earth and spreading out in a wide arc. From the shadows following them stepped a tall pale figure with inhumanly serpentine eyes, long purple marks accentuating the lines of his face.

“Lord Orochimaru!” The young man hastily spun towards his leader. “Please, let me---”

“Now, my dear Kabuto. It’s a little late for that, don’t you think? After all, our new friend is here to join the fold, so we should be appropriately welcoming. I’ll admit,” he said, placing a hand over his heart. “It was rude not to introduce myself right away. I am, as you guessed, Orochimaru. And I have to say,” his voice went high and cold, “I am curious how you knew this wasn’t my original body when my chakra is my own.”

The Xingese teen’s face remained unreadable past his smile. “I told your subordinate already. I can sense it.”

The snake sannin’s smile dimmed, replaced with a look of intense contemplation that made Ling feel like a butterfly pinned to a board. Neither pleased or angry, the expression nonetheless caused the hairs to rise on the back of his neck despite the humid air. With neither Ling nor the other Sound ninja willing to risk movement or speech before Orochimaru did so first, the moment stretched long and uncomfortable. In the pause, another snake, its body as thick around as a man’s thigh, emerged
from the gloom and slowly wound its way up the self-proclaimed Otokage’s legs and waist to drape around his shoulders without his acknowledgment, although its weight and constriction must have been immense.

Finally, the former Konoha-nin spoke, tilting his head back slightly and his mouth quirking up in something that wasn’t truly a smile, almost...jealous. “You’re a sage.”

Ling barked a laugh in surprise. “A sage, huh? That’s something I’ve never been accused of before! But not gonna lie, I like the sound of it.”

Kabuto frowned, adjusting his glasses. “He means your sensor abilities. Are you really sensing our chakra?”

“Oh, that. I can sense your chakra all right, but I’d be able to sense you even if you completely suppressed it. Because that’s not the only energy I can feel. And you can’t hide or disguise chi.”

Ling took several steps back, making himself more visible to the group at large while spreading his hands to encompass the section of forest around them. The action also put several more feet between himself and Orochimaru, which was doubtlessly noticed but gratefully not commented on. “Chi is all around us, everywhere, under the waves and on mountain tops, passing through every human, animal, rock, and plant. We are merely standing in the stream, and there’s nothing man nor beast nor god can do to cease or escape the flow.”

Kabuto breathed out, fascinated. “So your chi is natural chakra? But still, how? I’ve never heard of it being utilized the way you do.”

“Water always takes the shape of its container, right? I can see your shape in the flow as it passes through you. And I can learn everything I need to know about you by how that chi mixes with your personal energy. Which is how I know that’s not really a snake.” He raised one finger lazily to point at the white serpent draped over the sannin’s shoulders.

Orochimaru’s eyes widened in the first visible reaction since Ling began speaking again. He leapt backward so quickly he was a blur, flinging the snake off of him, his fingers already moving in rapid defensive hand signs.

The serpent twisted in the air, crackling with brilliant red lightning. When it hit the ground, it did so on two feet, sinking deep into the soft ground. An androgynous figure, human in appearance, grinned up at Ling from its crouch with smirking purple eyes visible behind long, dark green hair.

Ling drew his sword for the first time that day, pointing it straight at the figure. “I was wondering where you’d scuttled off to, Envy.”

Envy laughed, straightening and stretching with a crack of its spine and ignoring the weapons pointed at it from five directions. “Well if it isn't the idiot prince. Never thought I'd have the displeasure to see you, again.”

Despite the tense mood, Kabuto was heard to softly murmur, “Prince?”

“Oh yeah,” Envy drawled, gossiping as if they were all old friends. “Don’t get too excited, though! He’s one of 50 heirs to the throne. Well,” it smirked. “37 at last count, and probably less now. They were starting to drop like flies when the Fullmetal pipsqueak landed us in this shithole.”

Ling didn’t take the bait. “You’ve got a new master, I see, homunculus. What would your ‘Father’ have to say about that?”
Envy sneered, lacing its fingers behind its neck unconcernedly and pointing vaguely with an elbow back at Orochimaru. “He’s not my master, I was just hanging around for a while. Wanted to see if he’d found a jinchuriki for this new village of his, since all the others have one.”

One of the other two Sound ninja apparently had decided he’d heard enough from the mysterious newcomer, and launched a wall of mud at the homunculus. Envy easily jumped over it, and transforming its arm into a scythe-like blade, rushed the Sound-nin, slicing him in half before he could move away. The homunculus shuddered as it took a fireball to the back from the remaining kunoichi on the rocks, but red lightning crackled over its body once more, growing fur over the blackened skin. Now a large wolf, Envy pounced, ignoring the blade she drove deep into its shoulder, and tore the poor woman’s head from her body, dropping it over the other side of the rock and out of sight before shifting back to its familiar humanoid form. It turned back to Ling with a look of disgust.

“Tch. You annoying humans keep ruining everything.” It gave an annoyed kick to the body at its feet, lifting it briefly with the force of impact. “There’s no point sticking around here now that my cover’s blown. I’d take this chance to kill you, but I got better things to do with my time.”

It jumped down from the rocks. “When you see the pipsqueak next, tell him if I ever run into him again, he’d better have figured out a way back or I’ll put my arm so far up his chest it’s gonna come out his mouth.”

With those lovely parting words, Envy became the wolf again and loped away at unnatural speed.

Kabuto waited a long moment to see if the green haired creature would return, then sighed, and made his way over to the bodies left behind and pulled out a scroll to seal them away for transport.

Orochimaru turned his gaze to Ling. “You’re familiar with that very interesting being that infiltrated my new village. I think we have a lot to talk about.”

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Chapter End Notes

Whoops, no Kakashi
Kakashi sighed dejectedly as he stared at the featureless box of an apartment Elric had picked out. There was no way to tell if the annoying blond was inside or not. He’d made his typical early morning visit to the memorial stone to talk with Obito and Rin, but had forgotten that just because he wasn’t due to meet the rest of Team Ro at the village gates at a certain time didn’t mean he wasn’t on a mission, and he’d let time slip away from him.

At times like these he almost wished Obito had been born a Hyuga. The ability to see through walls would be nice right about now. But if he was going to be required to stake this place out for potentially hours to see whether the blond emerged...he might as well pick up some new reading material.

Once inside the library, Kakashi made his way to the fiction section. Novels were a form of escapism he needed, or frankly he probably would have actually snapped the way his superiors still feared he would years ago. In his novels, the adventures are always fun and thrilling, rather than the physical and emotional drain he’s come to expect during and after nearly every S-ranked mission. Comrades are closer than blood, and no one dies, except for the villains. But even more than his adventure novels, Kakashi loved the light-hearted romances. The obstacles keeping the lovers apart were often inconsequential things, but the emotional catharsis when they finally came together was more satisfying than any rounin hero defeating a bandit king.

Unfortunately, the love triangle in his latest read was starting to feel uncomfortably familiar. He’d felt physically ill when the childhood friend character, whose love for the female lead went unrequited, was injured saving his own romantic rival, the mysterious and cold new arrival to town, from the heavy hooves of a panicked, rearing horse. He’d slammed the book shut and had been unable to make himself open it again.

Something completely different this time, he thought. He’d heard some of the chunin at the gate gossiping that the Toad Sage had written another book under a rather obvious pseudonym. He had vague memories of Jiraiya visiting his childhood home at one point or another to see his father (there’d been no formal funeral, so he didn’t blame the man for not showing, if they really had been friends), and he knew that the sannin had been Minato’s sensei as well. Maybe he’d pick up the first in the series.

So of course he’d run into the very charge he was, if Kakashi was forced to admit in the privacy of his own head, stalling looking for. He spotted him from a distance, pacing short steps up and down the hall that branched into the restricted section, pausing now and again to experimentally press a palm against the barrier sealing the entrance to the room, sending up an unusual burst of blue sparks, or to run his hands over the frame of the archway. He didn’t notice when Kakashi stopped beside him, too occupied with knocking on the wall with a gloved fist, ear hovering over the plaster to listen for changes in the sound.

“You must realize this is very suspicious,” Kakashi commented dryly. The shorter man jumped violently at his voice. “And in broad daylight, too,” he went on, a little incredulous. “Most people would at least wait until after closing to-” He cut himself off when Ed finally turned around. He didn’t look nervous or guilty or even defiant as Kakashi had been anticipating. Instead, he mostly looked confused. Even a little frustrated.
“What is this?!” The words tore from the younger man’s throat seemingly without his permission. “What is this…,” he repeated, visibly struggling to come up with a word to describe the barrier jutsu and ended up just waving a frantic hand at it. “This blue thing?” he eventually concluded, weakly.

Kakashi felt an eyebrow creep up his forehead. “It’s a barrier. To keep people out.” The ‘like you’ was heavily implied.

There was no dawning realization or embarrassment on the blond’s face. Instead he just looked at Kakashi like he was the one missing the obvious. “But what’s it made of? What’s powering it? What defines its boundaries?”

Kakashi glanced slowly between the barrier and Ed. “Chakra. Intent.”

The blond seemed to deflate at the answer. “Of course,” he groaned exasperatedly. “Of course,” he mumbled again, to himself this time, rather sarcastically. “Because at this point, why not? Chakra can be and do whatever it wants, apparently.”

Kakashi felt a little wrong-footed by this entire interaction. “If someone hired you to steal scrolls out of the library, they weren’t very well-informed.”

That earned him a glare. “No one hired me to steal anything. I’m not an idiot, I know what ‘keep out and go away’ look like, but am I just supposed to pretend that I don’t see a giant glowing wall of blue light?! Yeah, I wanna know what’s on the other side!”

The other eyebrow rose to match its mate. “You aren’t supposed to see it. This section of hallway is layered with a genjutsu.”

“Those are those creepy-real illusions, right?” Ed looked thoughtful for a moment then chanced a self-satisfied grin. “Well, I have been told I have my feet too firmly planted on the ground to get distracted by make-believe.” Ugh, Kakashi wasn’t ready to deal with this.

“How does it work? Do you need to take down the illusion and the barrier every time someone wants to access the room?” If the blond was a spy, Kakashi definitely shouldn’t answer. But it seemed far more likely he was just annoying, and curious. It wasn’t like this was something an enemy shinobi wouldn’t already know or guess. And while there were certainly dangerous jutsu and dusty clan histories here, there weren’t any village secrets or forbidden techniques stored in the public library.

“If you have permission to enter, the genjutsu and barrier will part for you.” To demonstrate, Kakashi passed neatly through the barrier and waved at Ed from the other side of the threshold. He didn’t actually have a pass for the restricted section on him at the moment, but his ANBU tattoo served the same purpose. He smirked at Ed’s obvious frustration that the barrier turned permeable only for him rather than opening like a door that he might have slipped through behind Kakashi.

Kakashi dropped his hands into his pockets and slouched back through the barrier. “There’s nothing in there a civilian would need to know anyway. That room is mostly used by shinobi conducting research towards developing new jutsu.”

“If it’s only theory anyway, I don’t see why I shouldn’t be allowed in,” the blond retorted hotly. “But fine, I take your point.” Kakashi highly doubted the teen would really give up after only one try considering how interested he seemed, but he was by this point equally convinced the kid was harmless, and probably driven solely by curiosity. The library occasionally dealt with pre-genin daring each other to sneak inside the restricted rooms, just to see if they could. This seemed a little like that.
With a delicate tap on his elbow, Kakashi subtly turned the kid around, and when he started to walk away the kid followed him as he intended. “What brings you to the library? I would think you’d be too busy setting up shop.”

The blond snorted, either not noticing or resigned to the fact he was being steered out of the building. “There’s not that much ‘setting up’ to do. I’m not a permanent installation.” He waved a hand through the air, gesturing at nothing in particular. “I normally just park myself wherever, so long as there’s four walls and a door.”

“And yet, you made a very large fuss about being close to the city center, as I recall.”

Ed looked confused then suspicious, before realization struck behind his eyes and he laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, I guess I keep forgetting I’ll actually need to drum up customers in a place like this.” He looked around as if expecting a line to be forming up next to him, despite the fact they were now in the middle of the street, then turned to Kakashi with a look of sheepish embarrassment.

“Usually I’m passing through smaller towns? So word spreads quickly on its own, and everyone comes to me without me having to do much advertising.” Huh, guess that’s exactly what he was expecting. “Everyone’s always got some broken item sitting around in a barn they can’t afford to fix, but can’t afford to throw away.”

The silver-haired man rolled his eyes. “Well, that won’t work here.”

Ed frowned. “I guess not.”

Kakashi decided to take pity on him. “Why not hire a genin team for a D-rank mission? The rates are very reasonable. They can copy out flyers for you and post them around the village.”

“That’s considered a mission?”

Kakashi raised an eyebrow. “I know civilians from outside the hidden villages don’t have a very high opinion of us shinobi, but it’s not all assassinations all the time,” he responded dryly.

Absently fingering the leaf emblem on the headband slanting over his eye, he continued blandly, “It’s not Konoha policy to send the new academy graduates on missions outside the village where they can get hurt. They start out running errands for the civilian populace until they’ve learned and grown enough to defend themselves.”

Ed colored. “Ah, sorry.” He looked away. “I didn’t mean offense, I’m just surprised, is all.”

Kakashi shrugged. “Maybe ten years ago you’d be right to accuse, but times are changing and we’re not at war anymore. And you hardly look old enough to remember anything but peacetime anyway.”

Ed went even redder, but for a different reason. “The hell you mean by that? I’m 18, you ass!”

Kakashi stared. “You look about 14.”

The blond threw his hands up in the air. “What kind of 14 year old is wandering around the countryside alone as a repairman?” Ed conveniently chose to ignore the fact he’d been wandering the countryside since he was much younger than 14, while dragging along his even younger brother.

“Maa, you’d be surprised. Lots of war orphans around here who need to make a living.”

Ed thought about the people he’d met as a dog of the military, and people in his own hometown out
on the eastern border. People tired and scarred and broken apart by the Ishvalan Civil War, and the never-ending border skirmishes with Drachma and Aerugo. “No, I’m not surprised.”

He sighed. “It didn’t take anyone from me, but war took my best friend’s parents from her. And it left a mark on a lot of people I know.” Mustang, “Marks that carried pretty serious consequences years later.” Scar.

“But yeah. We’re at peace, for now.”

Kakashi was silent for a long moment. “You don’t sound like you expect peace to last.”

‘Well, I don’t know, do I?’ Ed thought bitterly. ‘There’s still four homunculi, plus their mysterious Father, whoever or whatever he is, running around Amestris, and they’ve already started at least one war that we know of.’

“They’re always people who don’t want peace,” he said instead. “But you don’t seem like that kind of person. So I’m sincere when I say I apologize.” Ed’s hand fell to his side and gripped his pocketwatch in his palm, rubbing his thumb over the Amestrian Dragon. That symbol had caused more than one person to spit on him in the street, even when he was clearly too young to have fought. And the State Alchemists weren’t the only ones to spill innocent blood onto the sand, even amongst the people he personally knew. He didn’t always remember that Hughes and Hawkeye had been there as well until something they did or said, or a certain look on their face, had reminded him.

“I’ve come to recognize that the things people do in times of war...they aren’t doing those things because it brings them any satisfaction.” Unless they’re psychopaths like Kimblee. “They’re only doing what they think they have to in order to defend their home, with the knowledge they have at their disposal. Maybe they would have done differently if only, I don’t know, some small thing had been different. So it’s not fair of me to punish them for that when I don’t really understand what it was like to be in their place and to have to make that choice.” He dropped the watch to let it rest against his hip. “Especially when they’re already punishing themselves.”

He walked a few more paces before he realized his escort was no longer beside him. Turning, he saw Kakashi standing as still as a statue in the street. “You okay?”

There was no reply for a long moment, then the silver haired man let out a shuddering breath. With false levity, he explained, “I just realized I have somewhere else to be.” And so saying, he turned on his heel and quickly vanished.

Ed watched him go.

Then he snagged the elbow of a man walking past. “Hey, do you know where I need to go to hire some ninja kids to handle some errands for me?”

Chapter End Notes

The canon explanation for how genjutsu works is something about it hooking into your chakra senses. But Ed doesn't have a chakra network - that's why genjutsu doesn't work on him, not because he's some super skeptic.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Have a chapter that is almost entirely dialogue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ed stepped through the doors of a small, squat building and up to a counter where a friendly-looking man sat doing a crossword puzzle. He wasn’t wearing a leaf headband.

“Uh, is this where I can hire a ninja team?”

The man glanced up and smiled. “Yes, you’ve come to the right place! My name is Daisuke, how can I help you today?” He removed his reading glasses and placed his newspaper somewhere below the counter, out of sight.

Ed couldn’t help glancing around. “I don’t see any ninja, though?”

The man raised a genial eyebrow. “They don’t wait around to be selected like lobsters in a tank.”

Ed flushed, embarrassed. “Of course not. I just thought I’d see some coming and going.”

“Oh my, no! Can you imagine?” Daisuke chuckled. “Some ninja bleeding all over the floor waiting to get paid while a little old lady haggles over grocery delivery fees in line in front of him. Madness!” He threw up his hands, waving them in the air in a comedic parody of chaotic despair before folding them back down in front of him on the counter. “No, it just makes sense to keep the two sides of the business separate,” he concluded, grinning.

When the teen in front of him did not grin back, Daisuke leaned back in his seat, tapping his pen against the counter. “I see you’re unfamiliar with how this works. I’ll take down the details of your request and assign it a mission classification. You’ll also need to put down a deposit. Then I’ll send a runner with your mission request over to the Hokage Tower where it will be assigned out. You can certainly request a specific shinobi or team and we’ll do our best to accommodate, but that does cost extra. Once the mission leader signs off on its completion, you’ll be issued the remainder of the bill.”

“So what you’re saying is, whenever a mission is complete, they’re dropping that report off at the Hokage Tower, rather than here.”

Daisuke frowned. “Mission reports are generally for internal use only.”

Ed pressed. “What if I want to know how the mission I paid for went?”

Daisuke’s frown deepened and he leaned forward slightly, lacing his fingers together in front of him. “Most of the missions we process in this building take place within the village, or else are escort missions, in which case the outcome is plain enough to the client. If you are interested in hiring for something more, how should I put it…”

The teen shook his head rapidly. “No, no. Forget it. I was told I should ask for a genin team for a D-rank mission? I need copies made of a flyer advertising my business, and for someone to post them around town.”
The man’s face cleared immediately. “Not a problem at all! Have you brought the ad you’d like copied?”

“Yeah, it’s right here.”

When the blond handed it over, Daisuke couldn’t help but cringe. ‘This handwriting is just about the worst I’ve ever seen. And sometimes those jounin sign paperwork with broken fingers.’

“Wonderful. Ah, can I get you to clarify a few lines?”

The blond didn’t look very surprised at the request. This was definitely not the first time someone had commented on the legibility of his penmanship, the desk worker guessed. “Yeah, sure.”

Daisuke turned the flyer back towards the customer, tracing a line with his finger. “This part here says,” he squinted. “Repairs, offers, time, and minting at old land?”

This time the blond sighed, and leaned forward, jabbing at each word vehemently as he spoke it. “Repairs, alterations, and mending of all kinds.”

“Oh, like clothes?”

He shrugged. “Sure. Clothes, weapons, toys, furniture. Whatever. All kinds.”

Daisuke brightened. “Any good with electronics? My grandmother has this radio program she loves, but recently her radio hasn’t been picking up anything but static, and I can’t figure out why!”

“Yeah, I’ve done radios plenty of times. That should be simple.” He gave an easy smile. “I’ll even give you a discount. First customer and all. The address of the shop is on the flyer.”

“Perfect! I’ll make sure to bring the radio by later today after my shift. Grandmama will be pleased. That’ll be 2,500 ryo up-front, another 2,500 upon completion.”

The teen, now revealed to be a repairman, withdrew a few bills from his wallet and placed them on the desk, accepting the receipt in return. He grinned. “Thanks. You’ve been a big help.”

Only after the door had closed behind the blond did Daisuke realize the address scribbled on the flyer was even more illegible than the rest of it. He dropped his head in his hands and groaned.

So, as Ed had assumed (but it was still nice to confirm), mission reports were filed at the Hokage Tower. But he still needed an excuse to go inside and snoop around, and so far it seemed the only options were A. be called to the Tower to receive a mission (for ninja), or B. request a private meeting to solicit one of the more unsavory, clandestine types of missions (for civilians). The first wasn’t possible and the second wasn’t in any way ideal.

The three months his visa would allow him to stay in the village was not a lot of time to break into the tower and find the mission report concerning Orochimaru’s defection (which would hopefully lead him to the location of the research notes), actually find the research notes, break into the Hokage’s private library to locate the god summoning technique Ling had told him about, and systematically search the main library (public and restricted sections, which he also needed to break into) for any other useful information—since he doubted he’d be able to get back into any ninja village again if he made it out of here successfully.

Ed had always had a bad habit of getting so distracted by a difficult problem that he lost track of his
surroundings, which was why he didn’t notice the bright orange, chest high battering ram plowing through the street in time to dodge.

The force of the collision sent him stumbling back a few paces, but instinct had him turning to the side as he did so, placing his hand behind the attacker’s shoulder, and _shoving_, adding to his assailant’s own forward momentum to send them falling gracelessly face-first onto the ground behind him.

“Oof!” Which was when he realized his “assailant” was a small boy. Shit.

“Shit. I mean, shoot,” he panicked, crouching down to offer a hand up. “Sorry, kid.”

The little boy looked up from where he’d been rubbing his head, tears beading up in the corners of his eyes. A pair of kinda stupid looking, now cracked, goggles lay on the ground beside him where they’d been knocked from his head. The pained expression rapidly disappeared in favor of an awed one. “You look like me!”

‘Huh?’ “What are you talking about?”

“The hair, the hair!” The kid scrambled around and tugged on his own locks, trying to pull one down in front of his face to get a better look to verify, but it wasn’t long enough.

“Oh yeah, we’re both blond!” Ed glanced up and down the crowd in the street in thought. “Guess I haven’t seen a lot of other blonds since arriving here.” He grinned and gave a thumbs up. “Looking good, kid.”

The boy grinned back, but didn’t take off running to wherever he’d been headed earlier. Instead, he pushed himself to his feet and toed one foot in the dirt, clearly working up the courage to ask something else. “Are you…are you an Uzumaki?”

‘A what?’ A vein throbbed in his forehead as Ed took a step forward, pointing an accusing finger at the kid. “Is that some kind of dirty word? Where’d you learn that, huh?”

Now the little blond boy stomped his foot, equally enraged. “It’s not a dirty word! It’s my name! Naruto Uzumaki! And you better remember that, because I’m gonna be Hokage someday! Believe it!”

The display and explanation was so unexpected, Ed couldn’t help a burst of startled laughter. “Oh? And then I’ll owe you 520 cens, right?”

In the way of small children, the boy instantly forgot his rage, now just looking confused. “520 what?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it. We’re not long lost cousins, kid. My name is Edward Elric.” ‘Although I suppose it’s true enough that I don’t get my coloring from the Elric side of the family…’

The kid squinted, suspicious. “You sure?”

He snorted, crossing his arms. “Am I sure of my own name? Yes, I am sure. What’s with the back talk? Didn’t anyone ever tell you to listen to your elders?”

The boy scowled. “All the time! But why should I when they’re all big dumb jerks? Gramps Hokage is okay, I guess. But only some of the time.”

Ed grinned again, wider. “Sticking it to the man, huh? You’re a kid after my own heart.”
The kid, Naruto, glanced up and down Ed skeptically. “Are you even an adult anyway? You’re super short!”

He flinched as the older blond dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder in response, holding him in place while the other fist dug into the top of his head in a noogie, grinning evilly. “Watch it, kid. I’m gonna make sure your mother washes your mouth out with soap.”

Naruto pushed him away, shoving out from under his arm and mussing his hair back into place. “Well, then the joke’s on you! I don’t have a mom!”

The awkward silence and trembling of the kid’s lip that followed was all the indication anyone needed that this was not the sick dunk it was intended to be.

Ed rubbed the back of his neck, face falling. “Yeah? That...really sucks. You know, my mom died when I was little, too. I would have done anything to get her back...but the world doesn’t give way just because we push hard enough. You’ll make other relationships that make you feel whole again, and it helped me to know I don’t need to stop loving her, and to know she never stopped loving me,” he trailed off.

‘Aaand that was probably the worst thing to say to the kid if she’s not actually dead and just up and left like Hohenheim.’ But Naruto neither burst into tears nor kicked him in the shin, which seemed to indicate he hadn’t completely screwed up this attempt to offer comforting words.

“I don’t know if she’s dead. No one will tell me who she was,” Naruto offered up. “But I live in the orphanage, and I bet she’s dead, because...she would have come back for me by now if she was still alive! Believe it!” Although he’d started out staring at his shoes, the kid finished glaring up at Ed, daring him to contradict.

“Yeah. Yeah, she definitely would. Moms are like that. Hey, kid. Let me fix those goggles for you.”

Naruto glanced at the goggles he’d unthinkingly scooped up from the ground, now held loosely in his hand, and gave a small cry of distress when he noticed the damage. “You can’t fix them, the glass is cracked!”

Ed gently took them from the child’s hand. “Maybe any old smelly loser couldn’t fix them, but I can.” He paused. “Turn around for a sec and close your eyes.”

Naruto seemed to be second-guessing letting Ed take the goggles from him. “No! You’re just going to keep them and run away!”

Ed sighed in exasperation. He didn’t have much experience with little kids aside from Nina and Elysia, and they’d both been perfect little angels, not suspicious little twerps. “Why would I want broken goggles? They wouldn’t even fit me!”

“I dunno, you’re pretty small,” the blond boy commented thoughtfully, apparently completely serious.

Ed grit his teeth and took a deep breath in through his nose. It wouldn’t do to lose his temper with someone less than half his age. “Look, do you want them fixed or not?”

Suddenly fearful, Naruto grabbed onto the outstretched arm holding onto the goggles and hung off it, begging. “I do!”
“Then let go of me and close your eyes! I need to do a...secret fixing things jutsu. This technique has been passed down the Elric family line for generations!” Internally, Ed couldn’t help but wince at the words coming out of his own mouth. “So I can’t have any random blond kids spying while I perform it and stealing it, you know?”

Now stars shone in the kid’s eyes. “Wow! A real, live secret clan jutsu! A fixing things jutsu sounds kinda lame, but a special clan jutsu!”

“Yes. Very secret, very special. So don’t tell anyone about it. Actually,” Ed glanced around. The street wasn’t that crowded and most of the people who were around were ignoring the two of them, but he still dragged the kid into an alley. “Better to not be in view of the entire street.”

Naruto nodded sagely. “To preserve the clan’s secrets is to preserve the clan,” he intoned knowingly in a way that indicated to Ed he didn’t actually know at all, but was merely repeating something he’d probably overhead.

When Ed gave him an expectant look, Naruto looked panicked, visibly struggling to come up with another axiom.

“Uh, a good ninja always, um…”

Ed rolled his eyes. “Not that,” and he made a twirling motion with a finger.

The lightbulb went off in Naruto’s head. “Oh! Right.” Then he turned around and covered his eyes.

Ed crouched down and brushed at the dirt at his feet, clearing away a smooth space in front of him and placing the goggles down. He eyeballed the blond kid, whose head was very slowly twisting back towards him in what he must have thought was a stealthy manner, and he just knew that the fingers covering the boy’s face were spread wide enough to reveal a curious blue eye between the gaps.

“No peeking!” The small blond head whipped back around to stare straight ahead.

He pressed his hands together softly to mute the sound of the clap and then tapped a fingertip against the lenses of the goggles, sweeping them up in his hand before the transmutation had even finished. It was a simple one and his fingers covered most of the sparks.

“Okay, all done.”

Naruto whirled around so fast Ed was concerned he’d make himself dizzy. “That fast?”

“Yeah.” He watched the orange-clad kid run his fingers over the smooth lenses in awe after he dropped them into the boy’s outstretched hands. “Don’t go running into any more strangers, okay? They’re not all gonna be as nice as me.”

The kid frowned glumly even as he slid the goggles back over the top of his head. “I coulda told you that, mister. Everyone hates me already.”

“Everyone doesn’t hate you, they just think you’re annoying.” Even as the kid opened his mouth to protest, he added, “Shouldn’t you be in school right now?”

Naruto scowled and ran off without so much as a thank you, stopping a few meters away to turn around and blow a raspberry at Ed before taking off again.

Hands on his hips, Ed sighed. “Jeez, I was never that bad, was I?”
I couldn't help myself. I'm resurrecting "Believe it!"
“Elric!” At the sound of his name shouted in the street in a city where no one should know it yet, Ed turned around to see a vaguely familiar face beckoning him from the entrance to a bakery.

“Oh, Mrs. Momomiya.” He gave a hesitant wave back and trotted over.

“Zakuro tells me you took the apartment,” she began once he got close.

He smiled. “Yeah! It’s perfect. I’ll run the repairs business out of the front room. Thanks for turning me on to Mrs. Fujiwara yesterday. I was starting to think I’d have to sleep on the street.”

“Of course, of course! No need to thank me, she should be the one thanking me, after all. I got her a tenant!” The woman laughed at her own little joke. “You’ll be taking customers soon, then?”

“Yeah, I just got back from hiring a team to post flyers around for me, so we’ll see what kind of business I get.”

The woman got a sly look in her eye. “I’d be willing to tell my customers about your new shop...if you were interested in purchasing some buns, that is.”

“Tch. Yeah, alright, lady. You got yourself a deal.”

“Excellent!” She clapped her hands together in satisfaction and hurried back into the shop, speaking over her shoulder. “Now, I made them this morning so they’re not quite fresh anymore, but I still expect full price!”

He rolled his eyes, knowing she wouldn’t see with her back still to him as she rounded the counter and began packing a paper bag with the sad, remaining buns on the rack, still making conversation.

“Did you also register your address while you were out?”

He blinked in surprise. “Did I what?”

She whirled with an exaggerated gasp, hand covering her mouth. “You haven’t yet? But they must have told you at the gate when you entered. Sweetie, you only have three days, or they’ll kick you out! And knowing that Zakuro, you won’t be getting your deposit back from her.”

Ed groaned. Yes, now he remembered. “Where, exactly, do I go for that? I think they said something about a customs authority.”

Mrs. Momomiya paused in thought. “I’m not entirely sure. I guess you could go back to the gate and ask the guards?” She waved that thought away. “I’m sure there’s some horrible little office they send all the merchants to register their hotel at when they pass through on the supply routes, but since you’re one of us now, at least temporarily, I’ll let you in on a little secret.” She spoke behind her hand, but didn’t make any effort to lower her volume, in the manner of a tried-and-true gossip. “All that paperwork gets sent by runner to the Hokage Tower, anyway. They should be able to take care of it for you there. Just look for my buddy Masaya—about yea high? Brunet. Skinny. Tell him Ichigo sent you.”
He gaped. ‘All this time worrying over a plausible excuse to get into the tower...could it really be that easy?’

Misinterpreting his look of shock, Momomiya laughed as she handed over the bag. “Sarutobi may be the ‘god of shinobi’, but that’s not why I’m paying him taxes. For all that that place is crawling with nin like bees from a hive, it’s really mostly boring administrative stuff that goes on in there.”

This time Ed laughed back, trying to hide his excitement. “I’ll walk over there first thing tomorrow. How much do I owe you?”

As he went to pull his wallet from his pocket, he noticed the lack of a familiar chain brushing against his hand and went cold. His watch was gone.

“Did- was I wearing a watch when I came in here? Did you notice?”

Momomiya frowned. “A watch? On your wrist?”

“No, a silver pocketwatch. It would have been hanging off my belt.”

“Not that I noticed, but I wasn’t looking too closely. Sorry, son.”

‘Shit shit shit shit shit. When could I have…’ The answer hit like a freight train.

‘That. Little. Brat!’ His fist tightened around the bag so hard the paper tore, sending the buns tumbling to the floor to the shopkeeper’s cry of alarm. ‘When I get my hands on him I’m gonna punt him into next week!’

______________________________

Naruto giggled from his perch in his favorite climbing tree just past the boundaries of a little used training ground. It was out of the way, and no one could see him from the ground, which made it the perfect hiding spot when he didn’t want to be found. It was also the perfect place to investigate his new find.

The snarling animal on the front of the silver disc was both cool and a little scary, earning the seven-year-old’s seal of approval. The hinge on the bottom clearly indicated the object opened up, but although he turned it all the way around, he couldn’t find the clasp.

He tried fruitlessly for several moments to pry it open by digging his fingertips into the seam and pulling with all his not-so-considerable might, but he couldn’t get a good enough grip on the smooth rounded edges of the object.

Trying to jam a kunai (another great thing about this hiding spot—when shinobi did use the training ground, a few kunai or shuriken inevitably went soaring into the trees, and not everyone bothered to collect them again when they wrapped up their target practice or mock battles) into the seam to pry it open that way didn’t work either. Neither did smashing it repeatedly against the trunk of the tree.

“Grrrr...why! Won’t! You! Open?!” In a fit of frustration, he hurled the silver disc as far as he could. It disappeared into a patch of tall grass, and he wilted, instantly regretting his decision.

He scrambled down the tree, scraping up his palms in his hurry, and hesitantly kicked around the area where he thought it had landed (there were snakes in the woods here—he’d been startled and nearly bitten a time or two picking up abandoned weapons in similarly overgrown spots) but soon reluctantly turned his back and began stomping away with his arms crossed.
“I didn’t wanna see inside anyway! I bet it’s something dumb.” He often talked aloud to himself when he was out here, sometimes pretending he was talking to a friend just out of his line of sight.

A thought occurred to him and he brightened. “Ya’know, I bet it doesn’t even open at all!” He nodded to himself, already convinced of the truth of this new theory. “Yeah, that’s gotta be it! It’s just supposed to look like it can! Like when I glued that coin to the ground and everyone looked like dummies trying to pick it up.”

He grinned widely in fondness at the memory before continuing on in a solicitous tone for his invisible audience. “I guess that new guy can’t be all bad, if he’s a prankster like me. Even if his clan jutsu is boring.”

Encouraged by the idea he might have a willing partner next time he wanted to pull a prank, even if the strange blond man wasn’t the cousin or uncle he’d been hoping for, he decided to make time in his busy schedule of playing hooky to visit him again.

________________________________

Ed had debated heading back to the library, since he’d been so rudely dragged out that morning, but after glancing at the sun he turned back to the new apartment. Today had been a day of far too many unexpected revelations already. He needed some time to digest what he’d learned.

Surprisingly, the man from the desk at the mission request office was indeed waiting by the door with a radio tucked under his arm. Well, he was actually pacing a bit hesitantly a few buildings down, glancing repeatedly between a piece of paper in his hands and the numbers written beside the doors.

After Ed had waved him down and collected the radio from him with assurances it would be repaired and ready for pickup by the following evening (it was probably just a loose wire or tube gone bad, which would only take him a few seconds with alchemy to restore, but no one needed to know that), he headed inside and slowly collapsed backward onto the floor, aiming his head for his knapsack (he’d forgotten to get furniture again).

Things were happening so fast.

He rolled over onto his side, then sighed and sat up. It would probably be better to wait another day until after he’d gotten a look inside the tower, but he doubted he’d find anything on his first peek-through. If waiting a day wouldn’t make a difference in what he knew, he might as well take care of this task now, so he didn't keep her waiting.

Turning over onto his knees, he dug through his bag until he retrieved a pen and paper, and began scribbling out a note against the floor. Rolling the message tightly into a scroll, he slipped it into his pocket and headed back out the door.

The sun was setting as he locked the door behind him, turning the city orange around him. Ed hadn’t seen much of it yet, but started meandering in a direction away from the populated areas. He’d have to hit a wooded patch eventually. The land Konoha claimed included a decent stretch of the surrounding forest, he knew.

He walked long enough that he started to wonder if he’d gotten lost before sighing in relief when he spotted swaying trees over the buildings, growing more and more sparse, ahead. He came out in what he realized must be training grounds. It looked not unlike the state alchemist sparring grounds in Central, in that there was plenty of open space ready to be torn up in mock battles.
Passing thoughtfully by a thick wooden post standing upright, scarred by hundreds of kicks and punches, he made his way to the largest tree on the edge of the clearing and plopped down underneath it.

Giving another glance over the training grounds and nearest buildings to confirm no one was in sight, he leaned back against the tree, arms crossed behind his head, and started to whistle a melancholy tune.

It was an old Xingese lullaby, apparently. Ling had taught it to him in his typical teasing way. He made his way through the simple tune once, then started up again smoothly, running through it another three times before he heard a fluttering above him. Opening his eyes from where he’d closed them, he spotted the black shape of a bird outlined against the deep purple sky, nearly blending in with the branches in the dim light.

“Hey, Lan Fan. Got something for you to take to Ling.” The bird hopped and glided down, waving its wings slightly to arrest its fall so it landed on his knee. It let him slide the message into the harness on its back, then bite his fingers viciously when he pulled them away.

“Ow! I know! I won’t make you hang around so long next time. Now go back to Ling, you recalcitrant feather duster.”

The bird glared, ‘yeah, she definitely understands me,’ then took off again, quickly vanishing into the rapidly blackening night sky. He watched her circle once by searching for where she blocked out the early-rising stars, and then she was gone, presumably to the Land of Rice Paddies, where Ling was apparently busy hunting down the snake scientist himself while he had Ed running his chores.

Getting to his feet, and moving to the center of the quiet training ground, Ed prayed to a god he didn’t believe in that he’d be able to find his way back to his new apartment from here in the dark.

______________________________

Ling-

I’ve made it into Konoha. I hope this letter finds you safely at your destination as well.

Things are definitely different here in the Land of Fire! I paid a visit to their library not long after arriving and read up on a unique local phenomenon. I learned some fascinating things about it I hadn’t ever heard before, and it made me want to share with everyone back home. However, I will hold off on telling them until I’m sure the mail will survive the trip there.

I haven’t had time to look into what you asked me to yet, but it’s next on my to-do list. I’m hoping to get a head start on it tomorrow.

I’ll haven’t gone souvenir shopping yet either, but I’ll be looking for the one you recommended. If Konoha is famous for it, I don’t want to leave without at least trying to find it.

Please, don’t do anything stupider than usual.

-Ed

Chapter End Notes

Whenever I need to come up with a background character’s name, I just blatantly steal a
name from a random manga I read in middle school. This chapter's background characters brought to you by Tokyo Mew Mew.

End Notes

Welcome to Konoha, 5 years before Naruto Ch.1. What canon events have already happened or are yet to happen 5 years pre-? Whatever I decide, when I decide it. I did originally intend to make this canon compliant, but then I did a little looking and realized the timeline is screwed six ways to Sunday, so I didn't try that hard.

Ed: 18
Kakashi: 22
Naruto: 7

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!