Gu(il)tless

by soranoyume

Summary

What is life after death? Certainly, it's nothing I expected it to be. For one, it's life. For another, it's in a completely different universe, one I once thought fictional.

I just wanted peace, or nothing, but now I have to live again. Because I can't leave my new brother alone. I'm not that cruel.

Even though this world is cruel, and I hate it, and why can't I still be dead?

Notes

So, here goes my attempt at a Naruto SI/OC.

Disclaimer: I do not own the manga Naruto nor any of its characters.

Edited on 4/11/15.

They’re fighting again, a high voice over the speakerphone, dad’s frustration leaking through his voice. Upstairs, my brother has his headphones on, playing a game on the PS3. The cats are sleeping, curled up in separate parts of the house.

No one notices me.

The pop of a pill bottle opening, a bottle of water in my other hand. My headache ebbs away.

I step outside; no jacket.

(Freezing fingers, cold hands, the chill seeping through the doors and windows. The sun beats futilely, warming nothing and no one.)

Snow crunches under my feet. A long stretch of forest in our backyard beckons me. I walk, stumbling, freezing. The cold metal in my hand burns.

(The cold people. The dark. Nowhere to go, nothing to do. Stuck. Feeling and hurting and crying, and no one cares. No one to talk to, no one to share with. There is nothing.)

There is a patch of ice up ahead, but I don’t care and I keep walking. It’s slippery; the weather is starting to warm up. My eyesight is blurry, my head woozy.
I can see my breath, puffs of white escaping my mouth as sharp air enters my lungs, stabbing me like knives, over and over with each inhale.

*I am nothing.*

Then, the shaking starts. Mild at first, then harder and stronger until I’m slipping—I’m slipping. A crash, screaming. I try to steady myself as I look behind me (is that dust what happened that’s where the house is) but the shaking won’t stop and I can’t stand still and my mouth feels woolen as I try to shout but then.

I slip. And there’s a sharp pain in the back of my head and I can’t see anything and oh god it hurts so much and I can’t see. I can’t see, can’t feel can’t can’t.

I can’t.

I.

I become

nothing.

Warmth. Blazing heat, an infernal chaos; comforting? I feel a presence, next to me, always, always there. And around us, something, a protector. A soothing calm.

*...Hey, who are you?*

I can't talk. No voice. I can’t see, can’t feel anything. Dark, but warm. I can move around, a little—we can move. We hit something, sometimes, with our hands and our feet; soft and pliable, like a bubble around us, wrapping us safely. Sometimes we hit each other, not hard, though. No pain. But it's pleasant, soothing and freeing and so different from the everyday cold from before.
What did I expect?

Pain, or nothing, or who-knows-what. Instead, this? What... what is this? This, this isn’t like the Nothingness, the void, the pushandpull. The empty gaping nebula of being nothing and everything.

Is this what comes after?

I don't know. I tell myself not to worry. Enjoy it.

Then, there is pain, and squeezing, repeated over and over and over until—cold. Cold cold coldcoldwhyisitscold? I breathe, shocking gasps of sharp air. Wailing. Where is the warmth? Where is the Other? My Comfort? And why whywhywhy does it hurt so much? Something touches me, holds me, but it isn't the Other.

Moving, someone (something?) carrying me.

Wait, no. No no no, what are you doing? I can feel it, my Comfort is over there. Don't take me away from it! Take me back! Where are you taking me? Where are you taking me? Something else is holding me, different, gentler, but not my Comfort. Warmth enfolds me, but not like before. Everything is different. What's happening?

Lots of jostling, moving, sound of wind in my ear. I'm moving fast somewhere. Why can't I see? Why can't I speak? I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I can hear the wailing of a baby nearby.

Suddenly, we slow down. The wailing stops, I close my mouth. I hear something. Someone talking? Whatever is holding me lets go. Then, softness. But I can't feel the Other, can't sense my Comfort. Where are they? Where am I? Warmth, the pain ebbs away.

More voices, the sound of running. A loud explosion, the sound of an alarm, blaring loudly. Then, my Comfort, except not. The presence of Comfort burns, corrupted, makes it hard to breathe. More explosions. Shouts, yells, cries, the sound of fighting? Except, no gunshots. The clang of metal on metal. The smell of sulfur. Smoke clogs the air, making it harder to breathe.
Something picks me up. What's happening? Why can't I move? Why can't I do anything? Can't see, can't talk, can't move, can't can't can't. Wetness trickles down my face. More running. A rocking sensation. A voice, shushing.

Time passes, unsteadily. After a while, I'm put down. The sense of my corrupted Comfort disappears. The fighting stops. Sounds die down. Silence, for a while. Then, raised voices, yelling. Loud crying. A shout. Silence, again. Footsteps approach me. Voices, talking. The area near me dips, tipping my body in its direction. Something bumps into me, latches onto my hand. A familiar presence. The Other, and Comfort, nearby, only a little hotter than before. I can feel warmth again.

There is something wrong. At first, I think I had a dream or a nightmare. But that isn’t possible. I'm dead. Dead Girl. Dead Girls don’t dream. They’re dead. They don't do much of anything; or, they do whatever Dead Girls do (which should be nothing why isn’t it nothing). I'm Dead Girl. So what just happened?

By the time I can open my eyes and see, by the time I can hear and distinguish things, by the time I can move even the slightest bit, I've realized something important: I'm not dead.

I was dead, though. Before. Not so much now. I'm a baby. The Other is a baby, too. Possibly, most likely, my twin (together in the womb of a woman I've never met, incubating, waiting to be born). I don't know what Comfort is, but Comfort is always with us, with Other, always close.

The first time I realize I'm not dead, I cry. Other cries, too. I try to stop, closing my mouth and breathing heavy through my nose, because I don't want Other to cry, and Other stops, too. I try my best not to cry anymore, because whenever I cry, Other cries, and it hurts when Other cries. Not... physically, but I feel pain, nonetheless.

Other is almost always with me. Whenever we're separate, we both cry. I don't know who cries first, but we don't stop until we're touching each other. I don’t want to be separate from Other, from Comfort, from warmth. It's no surprise when Other is the first thing I see. Other has a miniscule tuft of wispy bright blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale skin. Other also has, oddly enough, three lines on each cheek. I wonder if I look like Other.

I look around, but I can't see Comfort. I can feel Comfort, though. Comfort is close, Comfort is....
Oh. Comfort is *in* Other.

I don't know why and I don't know how. I do, however, see someone nearby. The person (a male?) wears a white mask with something I can only vaguely see painted on it, bright green lines with red around the eyes, some type of gray vest, and dark clothes. Mask just sits there, staring at us (or at least I think he is; hard to tell, with the mask in the way). I stare back for a while, before my neck starts to hurt and I can't anymore. Mask leaves soon after, though, through the window.

Other is asleep, next to me. Chubby faced, drooling, Other has one of his grubby hands wrapped around mine. Usually this would gross me out. Kids are disgusting. But Other... Other is my twin, Other *grounds* me. Sometimes I feel like I'm far away, like I'm not really here, in this body. It's a feeling I'm familiar with, but it's worse, now. Other makes that feeling go away. I feel alive, like a human, like I *belong* when Other is nearby.

...I don't know how to feel about this.

Thinking about it makes my head hurt, so I try not to. It's still weird, though, being alive. I don't know how to feel about that. Disappointed? Sad? Certainly, I never expected to take another breath, to ever *see* or *feel* again. Yet here I am, alive—a baby. I try not to think about this, either.

Eventually someone comes in to check up on us and feed us. (It's disgusting and humiliating and I *don't think about it.*) She looks old enough to be our grandmother, from what little I can see. She's the only person I've seen besides Mask, and is our caretaker. I don't think she's our mother, though. She doesn't seem to like us; she's always muttering discontentedly to herself, words indiscernible, voice sharp. Her hands are rough, and the way she treats us lacks gentleness, and she spends more time away from us than near us.

But she wakes up Other and now that she's gone, Other stares at me. I stare back. He gurgles and smiles and makes grabby hands at me. I try to make a face back, but I can't tell if my facial expression changes at all, and give Other my hand again. Other's hand is warm, and mine is so so cold, but Other makes a content noise and sticks my hand in his? her? mouth.

I *know* I make a face of disgust at this. Retrieving my hand is futile, though, so I grudgingly bear through it.

This is how we fall back asleep, me with a disgusted face, Other gripping my wrist with my hand in his mouth.
It isn't that I died and then was immediately reborn. Dying wasn't painless, either. I remember the cold, and the pain, and then the Nothingness.

I was nothing, in nothing, surrounded by nothing, part of nothing. Just nothing. And yet, everything. Like something was stretching my body but I had no body, like my mind was nowhere and everywhere. Like I was dead and alive, feeling everything and nothing, being and not being. Like I was stuck in a whirlwind, a whirlpool, spinning and spinning but not moving at all. Like I was weightless, floating like a cloud, but heavy like a rock.

The emptiness, surrounding me, in me. Away from the pain, the cold, the hurt. But. Only because there was no such thing as pain, and cold, or anything at all in the Nothingness. There was just nothing. Yet, there was me, and others (others? Who? I can't remember), but there wasn't me and others but me and others. We were separate beings made one, feeling each other but not knowing.

It was.... Nothing could accurately describe it. But then there was the Warmth, and the Other, and Comfort. And it was so so different.

(But the Nothingness never left.)

Maybe it was like entering the Lifestream. Maybe that's what comes after death for everyone. Or maybe it was my purgatory, or a waiting room for what comes next. I don't know. Maybe I'll find another Dead Girl or a Dead Boy, maybe I'll ask them.

Being a baby is boring and tedious, and more often than not, I feel like I'm not actually there, my body and movements sluggish, not matching what I want to do. Other grounds me when I feel like I'm about to float away, though. The Old Lady takes care of us, but leaves us alone for the most part, so I have to keep a wary eye on Other. Other isn't like me, doesn't know not to do certain things. Not that Other nor I can do much. We can roll and wriggle around, touch things, and put things in our
mouths, but that's about it. There are no toys and nothing to entertain ourselves with except for each other. We gurgle at each other and at the things around us, but try as I might, no real words leave my mouth. My tongue is unmanageable and my limbs won't listen to me, but I bite back tears of frustration because crying would only make Other cry, too.

Sometimes, I feel like nothing's changed. Sometimes, I feel the same as I did Before. Hopeless, stuck, a nothing. But Other is here, and Other cheers me up and grosses me out, but Other is always always here with me, and with Other is Comfort. Is warmth.

Mask comes by, every now and then. Or at least, I assume it's Mask. It might be someone else wearing a mask, but just how many people go around wearing masks? Mask always sneaks through the window when Old Lady isn't going to come check up on us any time soon. Mask tends to just sit and stare at us.

This time, Other stares at Mask, too, fascinated. They have a staring contest for a while before Mask turns his head away. Other gurgles and laughs and slaps his hands together. In response, Mask reaches over and picks up Other and just. Tilts his head. I wriggle over, watching Mask carefully. Who knows what he'll do to Other. Other just gurgles and laughs and makes grabby hands at Mask's mask.

Mask puts Other back down, where Other stares up at Mask with big, big eyes. Mask just pats Other's head then hesitates, hand hovering, before patting mine, too. I feel put out, Mask treating me like an animal, and I can feel my face contort into a moue of distaste. I hear what might be a chuckle from Mask and then he says something, low and under his breath.

"Nadesareru no ga iya?" (1)

His words sound familiar.

Japanese?

Is this Japan? I don't... I don't know how to feel about that. It means learning a new language. But I've always wanted to learn Japanese. It was one of the many things I never did, that I thought I would never get to do. And now.... Now it's a necessity.

I can feel my face puckering, and Mask and Other are looking at me, so I try to smooth my face, but it's harder than I thought it would be. My eyes are starting to tear, but then there's a smack! And
Other's grubby hand is on my cheek and he's staring at me with a frown. I can only stare at Other in shock as Mask panics next to us. No one's ever slapped me before (except a cat, but does that even count?).

"Nakanaide kudasai!" (2) Mask shout-whispers, waving his arms around uselessly, and I let something like a giggle slip out before I start laughing because what else can I do? Other starts giggling, too. Mask only slumps in either relief or exhaustion, I guess, and decides to leave us with a huff.

One day, Old Lady comes grumbling in rapid fire Japanese and sets out some blocks for us, square ones with kanji or hiragana or katakana or what-have-you written on it, others in shapes and colors with a board that you're supposed to match them with. She carelessly tosses them onto the ground and leaves without a glance toward us. She's displeased with us having toys, though I have no idea why. She hates us, probably.

Other doesn't hesitate a moment to wriggle toward them and shove them into his mouth (by this point I have realized Other is a guy and that, thankfully, I am a girl—imagine my surprise when I see Other's privates when he gets his diapers changed). I go over to the blocks with writing on them and stare at them while resisting the urge to chuck them at the wall (not that they would actually get that far. Babies are weak, and I'm no exception). I thought I left all this behind when I died, I thought I'd never have to learn another thing. No school, no essays, no learning a new language or new concepts. No tears and frustration and anxiety and I can't do this anymore help please don't make me. I'm the Dead Girl who dropped out of college because of stress and anxiety and never had the courage to tell anyone. I'm the Dead Girl who's never had a job in her life.

But I bite back the tears and the urge to scream in frustration because see—just like magic, Other wriggles over to me and slaps his hand on my leg. And slaps and slaps. I slap his hand, because babies have no coordination and how do you touch without slapping? Other grins at me, picks up one of the blocks I was staring at, and offers it to me. I think, why the hell not, and shove a corner of the block into my mouth.

That's how Mask finds us.

Other—Brother (he's my brother my twin not four years older not from Before but here and now). Brother grins at Mask as I gnaw on the block of wood and I can hear a sigh before a hand gently tugs the block from my mouth. I look up at Mask, and I try to frown but I think my face muscles
don’t move an inch so I’m just staring at him, deadpan, and Mask says something I can’t understand (why Japan why Japanese why why I can’t understand please just) as he places the block down.

"Sore wo kuchi no naka ni irenaide." (3)

He's crouching in front of me and maybe he's frowning or making a stern face, I don't know, but Brother doesn't like it when someone ignores him. I track him through the corner of my eye (or more like my face is turned in his direction, but semantics) as he valiantly wriggles his way toward Mask and latches onto his leg. Mask doesn't even teeter at the force of Brother's tackle, he doesn't react at all for a while. Then he tentatively pats Brother on the head, making Brother smile, and of course I smile because Brother's smiling.

Mask makes a noise of surprise in the back of his throat. "Waraerunda!" (4)

I'm not sure, but I think he said something about doing something? I don't really understand, but my smile peters out and, because why the hell not? I wriggle over and latch onto Mask's other leg and smoosh my face into it. Overhead, Mask lets out another sigh.

In the middle of the night, my mind runs a mile a minute, I start breathing quicker, I can't think can’t breathe oh god why I'm supposed to be dead whyamIhere whyaren'tIdead just. Please.

And then something wet touches my face and I can breathe again and think clearly, and there is Other, next to me, with Comfort in him. He is warm, they are warm, and shouldn't I be the one looking out for him? I'm the older one, I should be comforting him, and yet. I bite my lip and I resist the urge to cry, but I'm a baby and babies have only so much impulse control. So I cry, and Other cries, and Old Lady barges in and she is so angry.

Sometimes I miss the Nothingness. In there, I was nothing and I had to do nothing, feel nothing. I
could be nothing. And that was what I wanted, Before. That's why....

Sometimes I miss the Nothingness.

But Brother always comes looking for me.

Brother's taken to trying to roll the blocks around despite them not being round or roll-able, but I'm not the one who's going to stop him, and I usually just watch because there's not much else to do. Mask visits, sometimes, and those are usually the most entertainment we get because he seems both wary and fond of us. I don't understand why he's wary, but his reactions are usually funny, and he takes better care of us than Old Lady does, so I like him. I wish I could see his face, though. I'm not even sure what his mask is supposed to resemble. It's white, slightly rounded out around the mouth like puffed up cheeks or something, and there's some colored lines around the eyes and cheeks, red and bright green (though nothing like Christmas-themed colors). Maybe it's the baby eyes, but I can't identify it at all.

Mask brought some new toys with him, except they don't really look like toys you should give a kid, let alone a baby. They're toy weapons, shuriken and kunai, and they're soft and easier to gum than the blocks, but they're weapons so I stay away from them. Brother's only slightly more interested in them, probably because they're new. Currently, Mask is trying to teach Brother to stack the blocks instead of rolling them, but Brother is obstinate and Mask is having no luck.

The more I look at Mask, the more his clothes seem familiar to me. He wears dark clothes, a sleeveless turtleneck and pants that tuck into odd toeless shoes, with bandages wrapped around the outside of his right pant leg and a holster attached to it. Then, roughly elbow length gloves with some type of arm guards over them, three pouches attached to his waist, and a gray vest-cHEST guard.

I wriggle-crawl closer to Mask to get a better look at him when I notice something on his arm. A tattoo? It's... a swirl-spiral with two lines extending from it, one from the bottom, one from the top. It looks familiar, somehow. Actually, his whole outfit looks familiar. Sort of ridiculous, but familiar. Why, though? No one from Before would wear something like this, unless they were cosplaying or wearing a costume.

Is that it? Is Mask cosplaying? But each and every time he visits? And why does he always come
through the window, making sure Old Lady doesn’t know about him.

He.... No.

I look from him, to the tatami floor, to the drab walls, the shoji door, the futon (why a futon why not a crib what’s wrong with these people that’s dangerous), the light bulb overhead, the window and outside at the clear blue sky, the toy weapons. I tell myself, don’t jump to conclusions. Maybe he’s a weirdo. Maybe he’s a weird relative that our parents or family don’t want us to meet. Even though I’ve never seen our parents, even though Old Lady definitely hates us.

But my mind is already there, my mind is already jumping to conclusions. It can’t be, but maybe it is. So I wriggle a little closer to Mask and I pat at his holster. I can’t really feel through it, but I catch Mask’s attention. He must think I’m interested in what’s inside, and he’s hesitant, but he slowly unlatches it and there’s a glint of metal and he pulls out a kunai and it’s shiny and sharp and very much real.

No no no no no.

Oh god no why why I’m supposed to be dead dead dead and now this this can’t be real.

And I might be hyperventilating and Mask quickly puts the weapon back (oh god he’s been carrying weapons near us he actually showed me a weapon what is wrong with him what is wrong with these people) and Brother is next to me, clutching my hand, babbling nonsense and somehow I calm down. Slowly, slowly, breathing slower. Brother is here, and Comfort, too. And Mask has never hurt us, he’s had so many chances and he hasn’t. And this, this isn’t my world, the same world as Before, but it should be okay.

I should be okay.

Maybe this is punishment. Maybe I deserve this. But it’s okay. It will be okay. Because Brother is here.

I tell myself this and I tell myself this, but I’m not sure I can convince myself. But I have to be okay, for myself and Brother. So I take a deep breath and I push the thought back and I squeeze Brother’s hand and smoosh my face in Mask’s leg and pretend to be okay.
Because Mask is wearing the Anbu uniform, he’s part of Anbu, he—we—are in Konoha, and Brother and I are orphans, most likely destined to become children soldiers, cannon fodder to be used and abused and left dead.

But that’s okay, because I was dead anyway.

That’s okay… right?

Right?

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I'm alive I'maliveohgodwhy why am I alive I'm supposed to be dead (deadbleedingoutsocold so cold just let it end letitendletitend. Let. It. End.) dead dead not breathing can't feel anything so numb oh god why am I alive it was supposed to end why why WHY

AM

I

aLive N ot dEad KiLl me I

KILl ed mE

Chapter End Notes

I'm really sorry about the Japanese; I used Google Translate and some of it sounds really
awkward, but I just don't know Japanese, so there you have it. I really struggled to make it not keigo (because that would be just weird, talking keigo to a baby).

1. Don't like being patted?

2. Don't cry, please!

3. Don't put it (that) in your mouth.

4. You can smile!

A bit disjointed, but that's to reflect how the main character feels. It's shorter than I would have liked, but I doubt it'd be really interesting to read more about the first couple months. (Like, would you really want to read about diaper changes or drinking from a bottle or even learning to roll over?)

On another note, despite being a word used three times, smoosh is not an actual word found in a dictionary, but is instead slang.
Is this the real life?

Chapter Notes

Chapter 1 was edited some, though not enough that you have to go back and read it, except for the first part.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I’m not really sure which parts of myself are real and which parts are things I’ve gotten from books.” – Beatrice Sparks, Go Ask Alice

I have yet to come to terms with my realization. Mostly I’m pretending that I’m wrong, because there is a chance that I am wrong, and I don’t... I just don’t know what to think about it.

Dying was supposed to make everything easier, simpler. Just heaven or hell, or whatever afterlife exists (if it exists ohgod what if there isn’t an afterlife what if this is it, the Nothingness and then being reborn again and again, recycled endlessly pleaseno
Though, I wonder why an Anbu member keeps visiting us. Maybe my earlier theory is correct and he is a relative, but he couldn’t get custody over us (is that a thing? Do they have custody battles? I don’t know, I don’t know). Though that doesn’t explain why Old Lady is the one “taking care” of us, it does explain why he sneaks in. Unfortunately, it also doesn’t explain why he wears his Anbu uniform each time, which one would think is against some type of shinobi rule.

I don’t care, I decide. I don’t care if I’ve been reborn in a fictional world, or if this guy is just crazy or even just a huge Naruto fanatic. I don’t care.

If this is Konoha, then I can just steer away from everyone and everything to do with the plot. That should be fine. I’ve never been good at making or keeping friends, anyway. I’m fine with just Brother. And I never....

I never expected to live again, so I’m fine with dying. I am. I really, really am. But. What if I’m reborn, again? Will it be the same? Will I be in this world, again, or my old, or a completely new one? Maybe next time I won’t remember anything, maybe next time it’ll be okay. Who knows when I was born, anyway? I don’t know when in the timeline I am (if I am).

(Why couldn’t I just stay dead? I’m supposed to be fucking dead. Why? WHY?)

But it’s okay.

It’s okay (I keep telling myself but I don’t think I believe myself but at least I’m not alone right?)

Shit.

Mask’s visits break up the monotony of being a baby. His appearances stop me from slipping into my mind, and he likes playing with me and Brother, though I can’t understand what he says. He’s probably usually reprimanding us or pleading for us not to do certain things, even though I do them mostly to see his reactions. It isn’t every day you get to see an (supposed) elite ninja panic so much.
I’m probably a bad influence on Brother.

But it’s fun messing with Mask, using him as a prop to try and stand, and to try and repeat the words he says. (Unfortunately?) Brother tends to follow my lead, so when I use Mask as a prop, Brother does, too. And when I try to repeat Mask, Brother does, too. Which tends to lead to hilarious and (hilariously) disastrous situations.

Being a baby means our balance is shitty, so even when I use Mask to try and stand, my whole body wobbles dangerously. Letting go usually ends with me falling either on my ass or on my face. The same thing happens to Brother. This usually leads to Brother crying, which leads to me crying, which leads to Mask freaking out.

Unfortunately, Mask has to beat a hasty retreat when we cry, because Old Lady soon storms in, loud and angry and yelling, looking ready to slap us for being loud, which only makes Brother cry harder. I have to comfort Brother the best I can before Old Lady really does hit us.

She... she hit Brother, once.

And I remember being so so fucking angry and I just wanted to (strangle her stab her kill her how dare she lay a hand on Brother unforgivable die diediediedie motherfucking bitch I’ll kill her) punch her because how dare she hit Brother, how dare she hit a little kid. Who leaves kids with someone like her? Brother is so small and the force of the blow made him fall so, so hard there were bruises all over his body, Comfort roiled in Brother, and I just.

There was nothing I could do. There’s nothing I can do. I’m just a baby.

It just makes me try harder to stand, to be able to walk and talk, so that I can do something about it, talk to someone, get us help. Get us away. Just do something.

Mask never said anything about the bruises (they disappear so quickly like they were never there no lasting evidence of violence abuse no way to prove what happened). I’m not sure he saw them, or if he thought anything about them, or maybe he just thought they were from us being too rough or careless, something that just happens to babies left without much supervision.

I don’t know.
I wish I can understand Mask: his motives, why he watches over us, plays with us, indulges us. But there’s always a part of him that seems somehow wary of us, of Brother. It makes it hard to trust him, to rely on him.

Not that we have much of a choice.

He’s a resource, though; someone I can use, and I’ll use him ruthlessly. Because what else can I do?

Learning to talk is almost as hard as learning to walk. Sometimes it’s hard to remember that I’m smaller, younger, now.

All my limbs are unwieldy and feel heavy, including my tongue. I stumble and trip over my limbs and tongue, and everything seems like an endless battle. But Brother is amused by my efforts and claps gleefully in support, then tries to follow my example. Which is always funny to watch.

We make noises at each other, vague imitations of real words (Japanese words because here they speak Japanese, not English or Korean or Spanish), me trying to speak, him imitating me.

Sometimes I wonder if he’s like me, someone reborn with his old memories. He probably isn’t, and I wouldn’t wish it on him, either, but it doesn’t stop me from wondering. I try to talk to him, sometimes, usually in English and once in Korean (but none of the words came out right and they didn’t sound like words at all and god is my Korean rusty), and maybe it’s because we’re twins or maybe he’s just emphatic, but it’s like he tries to respond, not just in sound but in motion, too.

Mostly it’s funny and makes no sense, but sometimes I feel like I can understand him, if only a little. I’ve managed to say the closest thing to Brother, which sounds more like “Bwoh-ah” than anything else, but. It’s a start.

(It’s also the wrong language but that doesn’t stop me because I don’t fucking know Japanese where am I supposed to learn it Old Lady won’t teach us and Mask isn’t here often enough but—)
I’m covered in bruises as I try valiantly to stand.

Some of the bruises are from tumbling, but most of them are from Old Lady. I know Old Lady doesn’t like us. I know. But it doesn’t make it right, what she does. It’s not our fault we’re children. We cry when we’re hungry, or lonely, or have to use the bathroom, or when we’re hurt.

Babies cry a lot. But Old Lady doesn’t like us, maybe doesn’t like babies in general, and she takes it out on us. If we’re too loud, if we cry too much, if we wake her in the middle of the night. She’s rough, barely treats us like humans, and it makes me so, so god damn mad. But. But Brother’s wounds always heal so fast, Comfort blazing heat from Brother, and it makes Old Lady angrier, makes her face turn red then purple and she hurts him more and there’s nothing I can do and why won’t anyone stop her?

But Brother’s wounds heal quickly (why do they heal so quick oh god is it chakra is that it is this really the Naruto world), and I’m a quieter baby so I don’t have as many injuries. Most of our bruises, Old Lady easily hides beneath our too big clothes, and our only visitor is Mask who’s been showing up less and less and we can’t even talk, can’t even tell or show him. So there’s nothing we can do. In this child’s body it makes me sometimes cry, which makes brother cry, which makes Old Lady angry.

And.

One day. One day I’ll get my revenge. I will.

Because—because how dare she hurt Brother.

(And I’ll never tell anyone that my first word was “Fuck!” when I saw the bruise on Brother’s face watch it start to fade, shout it again and. Listen to Brother try to repeat it.

I’ll never tell anyone. Because it’s funny, but it’s not. Because these are things a baby shouldn’t experience and words a baby should never speak and.

I’m already corrupting Brother.)
I have no way to keep track of time. I’ve never been outside this (houseapartmentIdon’tknow) place and isn’t that just depressing.

But today. Today is something special, different. It’s loud outside, the sound of voices, talking and laughing and shouting. The sky’s getting dark and Old Lady’s only come to us once, to feed and change us early in the morning, so we’re hungry and dirty and soiled and Brother’s been crying for a while and nothing I do will make him stop.

Then—

There’s a loud noise. The sound of pounding feet. Old Lady running toward our room. She throws the door open, yelling and shouting and cursing, voice loud and words stringing together in a speed I can’t follow, can’t understand, spittle flying. Her face is red, her fists clenched tightly together.

I can only understand a few words she’s saying.

Brats. Demon. Die. All your fault.

(How can it be our fault we’ve done nothing wrong we’re only children only children—

Brother can’t even talk barely walk no motor control he’s innocent so innocent and warm and Comfort, in him always there but can’t do anything and Comfort burns whenever Brother’s hurt red hot rage that doesn’t touch Brother doesn’t touch anyone but it makes Old Lady angrier and hurts hurts)

She comes at us, me near Brother but unable to shield him, and she hits and hits and hits. And I try to block but I can’t and it hurts. It hurts hurts hurts and Brother’s crying he’s in pain and I can’t stop it. Can’t fucking stop it.
And then.

Suddenly Mask is here, with another person—another Anbu-dressed person, face covered in one of those vague masks—and they’re picking us up, Brother with Mask and me with Mask-2. And they’re leaving through the window, where there’s another Anbu, on the roof, who nods at our Masks and then enters where we just left. Where Old Lady is, screaming and crying.

And then we’re flying. No, not flying. Jumping. Roof to roof, jumping. Below us, stalls line the streets, colorful and crowded. People are dressed up, celebrating, covering the sound of our crying.

(Ohmygodno this. This really is. Ninjas they’re ninjas this really is the. Nonononono. Why this isn’t supposed to be possible how is this fucking possible oh god oh god oh god oh—)

And then we’re in a building, smell of antiseptic hurts my nose and makes me sneeze. I look around, squint, as we’re rushed into a room and we’re laid down and someone in white comes in and then.

Green. Glowing green light, covering me, healing me, making bruises old and new disappear. I feel warm and cool and tired, and so, so drained but I keep my eyes open. Watch as the white person (iryo-nin medic-nin a trained killer who heals instead but still blood on his hands) goes over to Brother and heals him, too. Then he goes to talk to Mask (or Mask-2, I don’t know), but all I have eyes for is Brother, who isn’t crying anymore but he wants me, I can tell. His hand is out, stretched toward me, his fist clenching and unclenching so I reach out and take his hand.

And then.

Sleep.

Dead souls creeping out in me infecting me using my body to move to speak to live but we’re all dead.
We’re all dead.

Puppets moving on unseen strings. Gods laughing at struggling mortals.

Nothingness seeps in, curling tendrils touching everything, but no one can see them stop them. Too late. Too late.


So cold.

So cold socoldcoldwarmthwhere. Where is warmth promised to me given to me should be here beside me next to me heating me up keeping the cold away

blazing hot melting melting

me

melting away washed away disappearing

i (don’t) want to go

I want to go

I want

i
I wake up to the sound of laughter—Brother laughing, still bright, but subdued compared to his usual laughter. I roll over and push my body up and look around, ignoring my body’s protests. I’m still in the hospital, but the medic-nin and Mask are nowhere to be seen. Instead there’s an old man in long white robes holding Brother, who is still laughing.

The old man looks vaguely familiar, like from an old memory or a picture, but I’ve never seen him before. Wrinkled with laugh and worry lines, liver spots, and gray hair and beard. He’s....

Oh, he’s the Sandaime Hokage.

The Hokage is holding Brother. Brother with his blonde hair and his bright blue eyes and the three lines on each cheek.

Oh. I get it. I get it now.

Brother... Brother is Naruto, isn’t he? Jinchuuriki, vessel of Kyuubi. Son of the Yellow Flash, Yondaime of Konoha, and the previous Jinchuuriki, the last known member of the Uzumaki clan.

And I’m his twin sister.

So much for my plan to stay away from the plot. Damn it.

(And it should change so much because this is an Important Person the main character of a story I once read, but it doesn’t. It doesn’t. He’s just my brother, my twin, and I need him and he needs me. And I don’t care about the rest.)

Brother’s voice breaks me from my thoughts. When I look back to him, he’s staring at me, arms stretched out as he cries out for me.

The Hokage turns and looks at me, smiling, but there’s worry in his eyes. Of course there is. His
weapon was abused.

“Renge,” he says. “You’re finally awake! Naruto—”

He says more, but that’s all I understand. And.

And that’s... that’s my name, isn’t it? Renge. It’s the first time I’ve heard someone say my name. It makes me want to laugh and cry but I do neither. I just reach out for Brother because I want him here, but the Hokage misreads me and picks me up, too, so that I’m cradled in one arm and Brother—Naruto—is cradled in the other.

But that’s okay, because Naruto’s in reach, now, and we latch onto each other’s hand and he’s smiling at me and I’m smiling at him.

The Hokage’s saying something. I don’t know. I don’t know what and I don’t really care. All I can do is look at Naruto and think: he’s okay, he’s okay, oh thank god he’s okay.

Eventually the Hokage starts moving. We leave the hospital, onto the streets and under the bright, bright sunlight. And it’s so warm, and I realize I’ve missed the sunlight, missed the warmth from it (so different from the warmth from Naruto, from Comfort inside Naruto—and that must be the Kyuubi, isn’t that funny—but still so good), missed being able to go outside. There are people, staring people, whispering but not approaching us because it’s the “demon” but he’s with the Hokage and I hate that I know this, that I can guess this about these people but it’s so obvious.

And the Hokage’s hold on us tightens.

We’re taken into a building, up up up stairs until we reach a door, where the Hokage knocks. Mask opens the door and standing behind him is an old lady, different from the last one (the bitch I’ll kill her I’ll kill her and make sure no one can find her body just die die die), older with completely gray hair and more wrinkles, especially around her eyes and mouth, someone who used to laugh a lot. But she isn’t smiling. She’s staring grimly at us, at the Hokage.

They’re talking, but I can’t understand what they’re saying. The Hokage brings us to another room, our room, where two futon are laid out and he gently places us on them. Then he’s standing back up and talking to the new Old Lady, their voices carrying over as they leave the room.
“Happy Birthday,” he says, voice low and sad, as he reaches out and ruffles our meager amount of hair. Naruto smiles brightly at him, opposite of my pout, and gurgles out some amalgamation of words to express his thanks. I reach out and pat Mask’s knee, instead, which is more a very weak slap than anything else.

(That’s so sad it’s our birthday was our birthday and we spent it in the hospital because of that stupid bitch I’ll kill her. Naruto doesn’t deserve this deserves better his first birthday oh god please let him forget this later don’t make him remember this please)

He ruffles our hair again and stands, leaving the room quickly and quietly, footsteps unheard. The voices of the Hokage and Old Lady die down before there’s the sound of footsteps moving away, and a door opening then closing. Then, shuffling footsteps come toward us until Old Lady stands in our doorway.

Her face is blank for a moment, staring at me, then Naruto, then the pile of blocks. She sneers and kicks the blocks away from us before stalking away, slamming the door behind her.

Naruto frowns at the blocks, tears forming in the corners of his eyes, and all I can think about is the fact we’ve traded one Old Ladyfuckingbitch for another, and life definitely isn’t going to become easier.

“Repeat after me. Na. Ru. To.”

“Nawuo!”

“Naruto.”
Mask lets out a sigh and tilts his head upward, as if asking why him. Which. Is a good question. Because why is Mask teaching us how to speak? And it’s not the only thing he’s teaching us during his sporadic visits.

For a while now, he’s been teaching us how to talk and walk and read and write (though our progress is very slow and our writing is more a bunch of squiggles and tend to degenerate into random doodles, because learning to write in a language that uses a completely different type of characters is hard and Naruto has a short attention span), and even a few games. Maybe the Hokage’s paying him extra, or maybe he’s bored, or maybe he’s taken pity on us because heaven knows Old Lady won’t teach us a thing.

But since his visits are sporadic, we don’t learn as much as we could. I do try to supplement some of the teachings with what I can, though there’s not much I can do with a limited vocabulary. And I try to encourage Naruto to learn as much as he encourages me to move around. Naruto’s an energetic kid who likes to play and move more than he likes to read or talk, or at least to talk properly, because he likes to babble incoherently. We even each other out.

I can’t hide my laughter at Mask’s misery, but then he turns to me, and I’m pretty sure his face is pleading under his mask, so I cave in. This time, I try to coax Naruto into saying his name properly.

I turn to him and reach out my hand. Automatically, he reaches his out toward mine, but I pull mine back and frown at him.

“Say Naruto.”

He frowns at me, not understanding. I reach my hand out and he goes for it again, but once again I pull mine back.

“Naruto.” I carefully enunciate his name, over exaggerating the movements of my mouth.

We repeat this a few times before he starts to understand.
“Nawudo,” he says. But I shake my head and repeat his name, putting emphasis on the “r” and “t.”

“Nawuto!” he shouts, getting up and reaching for me.

“No, Naruto,” I respond, also getting up. On shaky legs, I start to walk away from him as he follows me on equally shaky legs. This goes on for roughly a minute, me saying “Naruto” and him shouting “Nawuto.” I can see he’s getting upset, though, and I know he’s trying. So, with a sigh, I stop and hold out my arms.

He tumbles into them, making us fall, as he clutches me and shakes his head, repeating “Nawuto, Nawuto.”

(He’s so fucking cute why’s he so cute I hate babies they’re so gross but oh my god Naruto why are you cute. So so different from my brother from Before oh god what do you do with a younger brother is this how my brother felt when I was born and now he’s gone oh god don’t think about it.)

Well.

I just stare resignedly at Mask, who is probably laughing at us, the jackass, but is too disciplined to show it.

And, ugh, at this rate Naruto’s going to think that Naruto’s my name.

I sit up carefully and try to push Naruto away from me, but he’s stuck to me like a leech, though at least he’s stopped repeating his name. I try again, shooting a glare in Mask’s direction because he is not helping, before giving up.

But maybe Mask understands my plight because he makes his way over and effortlessly plucks Naruto off of me (maybe I should just start calling Mask “Jackass,” it suits him) and sets him next to me.

Then, placing a hand on my head, he says, “Renge.”

Naruto frowns at him, then me, not understanding.
I take Naruto’s hand and place it on my chest while saying, “Ren. Ge.”

“Renne?” Naruto asks, tilting his head, and if that isn’t cute.

But Mask shakes his head. “Renge.”

“Renne!” Naruto insists.

Which. Close enough?

Eventually Mask moves on to try and get Naruto to say his codename. (“Yamori [1], Naruto, say Ya. Mo. Ri.” “Amowi!” “Yamori, Naruto, Yamori.” At which point Naruto gets fed up and just starts shouting: “No!”)

And this. This is going to be a long battle.

But it will also be one of our happier memories.

(And it’s still so weird. Naruto. My brother. My twin, younger brother. I’m so used to an older brother, sometimes aloof and sometimes a friend, someone I could rely on at times but at others he frustrated me so much and it left me feeling so lonely and god I know I shouldn’t because I don’t have that right but I miss him.

And Naruto’s so different. But at least it doesn’t hurt to look at him because he’s nothing like my older brother he looks nothing like him sounds nothing like him just isn’t him. And it’s less painful this way.)
At some point I wake up and I don’t know why I’m awake but my side is cold—

My side is cold. My side, where Naruto is supposed to be sleeping. I turn over, reaching out for him, but he isn’t there. He isn’t there where is he where he’s supposed to be here next to me where—

Whimpering.

Over in the corner, slumped against the wall, Naruto is whimpering. Why? wHY.

“Naruto?” I call out, voice heavy with sleep but body alert. I crawl over to him, slump against him, ignore his flinch (alarming, why is he flinching from me? I’d never hurt him, never). “Naruto, what’s wrong?”

He only shakes his head, whimpering, but at least he leans against me, warm against the cold air, my cold body. And how am I supposed to know what’s wrong? How am I supposed to fix him?

He’s crying.

Is it a—“Bad dream?” Naruto nods, a small gesture I could have easily missed in the darkness, but his head is next to mine and I easily feel the movement. I reach out, slowly, and hug him to my side. “Tell me?”

“No,” he says, voice small and quiet and hoarse, quivering. His body’s shaking. I only hold him closer and pet his head, because I don’t know what else to do.

How do you comfort someone? I don’t know.

I don’t know, damn it.

But it’s enough, because eventually he stops shaking, stops crying. And his breathing evens out. Asleep.

And I can’t move him or get up to get a blanket or anything. And it’s cold.
So I wrap myself around him as much as I can, soak up his warmth and give him some in return. Comfort—Kurama in his stomach exudes warmth, restful in sleep.

And I stay awake, carefully not thinking about how no one ever did this for me how I used to lock myself in the bathroom and turn the fan on and only then start crying, muffling it in my hand my arm biting my finger to stop sounds from escaping. How it isn’t fair. How nothing is ever ever fair.

I don’t think about it.

But my hold tightens on Naruto he’s so warm and he’s constant he won’t leave me he won’t.

(Darkness behind my eyes nothingness creeping in shadows lengthen in a small room no way out stuck)

“Nee-san, where Yamori?”

Naruto stretches his arms up to grip the windowsill and pull himself up, though he only manages a feeble pull-up, toes scrabbling for perch, before his weak grip slips and he lets go, dropping down with a thud. We both wince at the sound, holding our breaths. When we hear nothing, we let out a simultaneous sigh, Naruto rubbing the back of his head sheepishly. I don’t even need to look up from my picture book to know this.

I shake my head without glancing at him, squinting at the image in the hopes of identifying it (and it’s still weird, looking at things without the need for glasses, eyesight so good now so much better than it ever used to be. I still remember being so blind that without my glasses on, I would have to hold something right in front of my face to be able to read it). And I reach up with my small and chubby fingers (so small so fat so very different from my old hands dainty and skinny and oh so pale) and touch the bridge of my nose where glasses used to rest because I can’t resist, because it’s an old habit that I’ll never need again. And.
“Don’t know. A mission?” The book says it’s a dog, but it doesn’t look like one to me…. Hm.

“I’m boooood!” Naruto whines, childishly throwing his fists and legs out and almost throwing a tantrum. He freezes before I even have to warn him, knowing the consequences of being too loud. They’ll be worse, too, because Mask—Yamori— isn’t here, and our other Anbu guards never interact with us (if we have any).

I close my book with a sigh and set it aside. I’ve read it countless times already and truthfully, I’m bored, too.

“Let’s do stretches?”

Naruto frowns in thought, obviously trying to remember what stretches are, before he brightens. He probably remembers Yamori telling us to stretch before moving around a lot, and so equates stretches as a before-playing activity. Also he’s probably just bored enough that any activity is good activity.

I wouldn’t have done anything like this, Before, but in this world I have to get into the habit, we have to get in the habit, because we’re going to become ninja and there’s just no fucking choice because Naruto’s the Jinchuuriki and I’m his sister and we’ll always be in danger. So. We have to get ready. Which is probably why Yamori taught us warm-ups and stretches in the first place.

“Yeah!” he shouts, and throws himself into sloppily doing stretches.

Quickly standing up, I go over to him. “No, wait!”

He freezes, sitting with his body bent in half, and squints at me in confusion. I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

“Warm up first, remember?”

Naruto shoots back up, smiling sheepishly.
“Right, right,” he says, nodding his head in what he probably thinks is a sage manner but makes him look more like a bobble-head than anything else.

This time I do roll my eyes. And then I start us off on our warm-up. We can’t do anything too noisy, though.

First, we start by walking around the room, getting quicker and quicker on each lap, but no quicker than a jog, with our arms swinging wide. Then, we start adding movements, like lifting our knees high while touching our elbow, and then walking lunges. Always making sure we’re quiet. (This is... hm. Oddly enough, stealth training. Naruto, stealth training. Ha.) We do this for roughly five minutes, which at this point is the longest Naruto can stand doing them without whining.

Then we move onto stretches, with some yoga interposed. Child’s pose to start, then sphinx pose (or as close to it as we can get). Then: arm stretches, up, to the side; shoulder, one arm pushing the other toward you; triceps, push bent arm toward middle of back from overhead; butterfly for inner thighs; straddle stretches for the back to hamstrings; lastly leg stretches, heel of foot touching butt, stationary lunges, reach to touch toes while standing, fold one leg and extend the other and touch the toes of extended leg.

It’s more than I’ve ever done Before, except when I took P.E. in high school (which was hell) and yoga in college.

“Done!” Naruto shouts, because with how much we’ve been moving around and no protests from Old Lady, it means she’s either still asleep or out, but Naruto doesn’t care which because he’s already rushing to eat something before we’re kicked out of the apartment for the day.

There’s a small amount of leftovers in the fridge for us to eat before we leave, because otherwise Old Lady will kick us out without feeding us, saving the leftovers for our dinner. It’s never enough for us, especially Naruto, but what can we do?

When I get to the kitchen, Naruto’s already stuffing his face with cold rice and fish, not bothering to heat it up. He’s also eaten most of the food, not that I’m complaining. I couldn’t stand the smell or taste of fish Before. And. Ugh. Even though it’s not as bad now, in this body, I still retain the hatred of fish. I stick to eating most of the pickled daikon with the rice, instead, though I do force myself to eat some of the fish and for Naruto to eat some of the daikon, despite his hatred of vegetables. It’s not the best or enough or healthy, but there’s nothing we can do about it, not that Naruto realizes (or maybe he does, but doesn’t say anything. He’s sharper than most people give him credit for).
He makes a face at me, impatient to leave, dashes to the door to put his shoes on and start jogging in place. I sigh dramatically, slowly slipping on my shoes while Naruto drags over the stool, placed near the door so that we can stand on it to open the door (we’re too short to reach the door handle, but that doesn’t stop Old Lady from kicking us out every day).

As soon as he gets the door open, I latch onto Naruto’s hand so that he won’t run off without me, and close the door behind us. Naruto barely waits a second before he’s off running. He has so much energy, he would have tired me out in a second, Before. Now, I easily stay even with him, and we make our way quickly down and out the apartment, and then out the neighborhood. It’s dangerous to linger, because people have already caught on that the “demon boy” and his sister live around here, and it’s never good when they catch sight of us.

We’re lucky today, and no one stops us. Naruto runs straight to the playground, which is empty for now, and, as my grip on his hand grows lax, takes a running jump at one of the lower monkey bars. He pulls himself up with great effort, legs flailing, to stand at the top.

He strikes a pose, hands on his hips, and shouts, “I’m daimyou of the playground!”

I take a second to contemplate what to do (because god he’s such a kid but I’m a kid too and it’s still so weird what am I even doing), before deciding what the hell, and join him on the bar next to him. It’s higher up than I thought it would be, and for a moment I feel woozy, but I remind myself not to look down and instead stare straight at Naruto. And I strike a dramatic pose, one hand on my hip, the other with my thumb pointing at myself.

“I’m daimyou!”

“Nu uh! You can’t! You’re a girl!” Maybe he can sense that he said the wrong thing, or maybe it’s the face I’m making, but Naruto freezes, sweating buckets, and hastily backtracks. “You can be a princess, instead!”

But the damage is done (not that being labelled a princess will appease me, anyway), so I look at his precarious position on the monkey bar, think about toppling him over. There’s a better solution, though.

“Fine,” I say, smirking at him (and I bet that’s a weird look, on a kid’s face). And he looks dubious, because it can’t be that easy. “Then I’m Hokage.”
He doesn’t understand what I’m getting at, but he still reacts in indignation.

“So? Daimyou is better than Hokage!” he shouts, arms swinging wide, making him teeter, and if that doesn’t shave a few years off my life.

Maybe I shouldn’t have jumped up, too.

But... hm.

I guess Naruto hasn’t set his sights on Hokage... yet. Which. Makes sense. I guess.

And it’s actually the truth, that the daimyou outranks the Hokage. Which is all kinds of weird and stupid, but then again you really don’t want the Hokage to outrank the daimyou, either, because then this would be a military state. Country? Ugh. Don’t think about it.

But how does Naruto... oh right, we read that one children’s history book Yamori left us (also weird because they make *history* books for *children*) about the relationship between ninja villages and the countries they’re located in.

Shaking myself out of my thoughts, I grin at Naruto’s glower.

“Well, *I’m* Hokage and the Hokage is a ninja, not like the daimyou who only eats and gets fat! I bet I can kick your ass!”

“No way!” Naruto shouts, “You can’t beat me!” (And wow I should probably sensor myself, because Naruto actually understands what I said.)

Which.

Really, as an adult I shouldn’t get offended by this. It’s probably true, anyway. But that doesn’t stop me from being offended.

So I put both hands on my hips, lean forward precariously, and challenge him: “Wanna try me?”
And Naruto being Naruto, he launches himself at me with a war cry, forgetting that we’re on top of the monkey bars. He knocks into me and we soar through the air for a heart stopping moment, before we plummet and I land on my back with Naruto on me, killing me with his weight and I can’t breath and—

“I hate you.”

“...Sorry.”

There’s some paper and crayons Yamori left us once and in the middle of the night I take them and I write and write because my memory from Before wavers and fades and there are some things I shouldn’t forget can’t forget they’re important and so much happens to Naruto shouldn’t have to happen to him but.

But do I really care? About him? About others? About myself?

No. I care about Naruto. He’s—

Without him I am nothing. Dead. I should be dead I would be dead without him. He’s the only thing keeping me here keeping me sane keeping me alive and. And I don’t know.

But just in case, I can’t forget.

So I write it all down. In English. Letters scrambled but with the first and last letters in the correct position. Words big and messy because this hand isn’t my hand but it is and it’s stubby and small and not used to writing. And then I tape it to the bottom of the third drawer in our dresser.

And then I crawl in next to Naruto and I let him latch onto me like a limpet and I fall asleep to his
warmth.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

1 Gecko

New chapter with 80 percent more curse words! Or something. Please stay tuned for more (cursing, that is).

So, yes, child abuse/negligence (and I know they’re not the same thing, but look at how much Naruto gets tossed around and beat up and how unfazed he is by it, like he’s used to it) is pretty canon for Naruto’s childhood, though we never learn its extent.

I don’t know if you can tell, but in the name part, Renge is trying to use touch as an incentive to get Naruto to say his name correctly (since Naruto’s a very touchy-feely type). AKA, saying his name correctly = cuddles. Doesn’t work, though.

Quick question: Should there be more canon characters or more OCs? I can’t decide, and it will really effect the future chapters. Aaagh I wish there were more canon characters to play around with, instead of just pretty much two age groups with a really huge age gap. C’mon!

And oh my god I need a beta because my mind is a ridiculous place and the ideas I keep getting for this story need to be shot and buried because some of them are just so freaking ridiculous and aaaaaugh.
The first time I realize just how messed up this village is (and I should have realized sooner, because two caretakers in a row that are like *that?!*), Naruto and I are at the playground.

And.

And there are kids there, running around and screaming and having fun. Which. I am wincing and regretting my decision to come here, but Naruto is excited and tugging on my hand to go go go because look! People! Kids our age that he can play with!

But I *hate* kids and I don’t want to deal with them so I let go of Naruto’s hand. I’d rather just watch from nearby, thank you very much. He gives me a backward glance, frowning in confusion. He only needs a smile of encouragement, a vague upward tilt of my lips (because it’s all I can manage), before he shoots off to make friends.

And he does.

He joins a group of kids, running around and laughing, playing tag or something. I don’t know what. I keep a wary eye on him as I walk over to the swing set and slump onto an empty swing. The other is occupied by some kid too busy trying to swing himself as high as he can to pay attention to me. Which is a relief.

For a second, I feel the novelty of being on a swing again. I hadn’t been on one for years, not since... Middle School? My memories are fuzzy, but I don’t try to force them forward. It’s too painful.

So instead I swing my feet back and forth, grip the cold metal chains of the swing, and lean back to look up at the sky. The bright blue sky so wide so open swallowing everything up sucking us in the
sun beating us down with beams rays of warmth heat damaging our skin warming us up into the sky up up uppppppppppp—

But this is boring. I wish there was some music I can listen to, or a book I can read. A laptop and internet would be a godsend. Or a tablet, to draw. I’d even settle for some knitting needles and yarn (and doesn’t that make me sound like an old biddy).

Well.

At least I’m not the one Naruto’s chasing around. I may be more athletic (much, much more) and have more energy and stamina than I used to Before, but that doesn’t mean I want to run around every day for hours. It’s like Naruto has endless energy to waste.

...He probably does have endless energy, all that chakra and vitality from his Uzumaki heritage, on top of the chakra from Kurama (and I still find it weird that his presence is comforting—was comforting while in Kushina’s womb, which is something I really never want to think about—and that I’m so used to it, to his chakra. That I instinctually key into it. Well, at least it helps me keep track of Naruto, if nothing else).

Hm. Maybe I can redirect that energy, to training or something. Or, well, and I know this isn’t really ethical and I shouldn’t be contemplating introducing it to my little brother and we can get into a lot of trouble but screw these people, but I can totally get Naruto to help me get revenge. In little ways. Like stealing. Or “pranking.” Because these people are assholes and they treat us horribly and they overcharge us and what the fuck.

Seriously.

I should probably stick to pranking, though. Don’t want to teach Naruto harmful habits.

But god am I hungry. And I know Naruto is, too. We probably need to eat more because of the amount of chakra we have. Didn’t Kushina use to eat a shit ton? And Naruto (future Naruto, from the manga, the one I read about but don’t personally know, the one who isn’t my Naruto) ate a lot, too.

Well. It’s something to think about, even only just idly. Hmm. I wonder if they have different cuisines, not just Japanese food. They should, right? I remember smelling Chinese food. Maybe there’s Thai food? I’d kill for some Korean. Oh god, I just really want to eat something spicy. All the
food Old Lady gives us is bland and—

—Something’s wrong.

I was too deep in thought so I didn’t notice at first, but something is definitely wrong.

Naruto. Where’s Naruto?

I’m quick to look for him, using Kurama as a compass. I don’t see him, at first, but then I sense-spot him, over at the other end of the playground. He’s standing near a group of kids (grouped away from him isolating him why). I can’t see their faces clearly from so far away, but with the way Naruto’s shoulders are slumped, something’s definitely going on. I’m on my feet and halfway over there before I notice something else.

There’s an adult standing right behind the kids, one hand gripping tightly the shoulder of a kid standing in front of her, glaring fiercely at Naruto.

Oh god why did it take me so long to notice?

And the kids, they’re bunched together with uneasy faces, not sure what to do. And Naruto—Naruto’s shaking. And oh god it’s like with those vendors, isn’t it, the ones who hurl insults and chases us off when all we want is something to eat and.

And the adult, a young woman, probably the mother of one of the kids. She’s hissing at Naruto, hissing at him.

“—You’re just a monster! Why are you even here? Get away from my kid!”

And I’m running toward them and I oh so want to fucking punch the bitch but I can’t because I’m just a kid and so small and too weak so I just grab Naruto’s hand and I glare at her.

“Shut up!” I shout. “Shut up! You don’t know what you’re talking about!”
And I don’t give her a chance to rebut and I ignore Naruto’s startled face, the glistening tears in his eyes that are about to fall, and I ignore the gaping faces surrounding us. And I pull Naruto far, far away.

We’re never going to that playground again.

It’s okay to cry, I know it is. It’s healthy and you definitely shouldn’t bottle up your emotions. I mean, look at all the ninjas in this world that are just so messed up because they believe emotions are weaknesses. That they shouldn’t cry.

So it’s okay to cry.

It doesn’t stop me from hurting because Naruto is a blubbering mess, crying into his arms because life just isn’t fucking fair. It doesn’t stop me from being so so angry at that woman—that woman who has no fucking right to treat Naruto like that, to call him a monster.

And he isn’t a monster! He’s just a kid. He’s just a kid who wants friends, who wants love and attention and a family. (Even though I give him all of that am I not enough am I not enough?)

“Oh that bitch I’ll kill her she made Naruto doubt himself she’s making him question his own existence I’ll kill her I’ll kill them all.”

I don’t hesitate a moment. Despite the tears and the snot and the general grossness. I pull Naruto close and I hug him as much as I can, cursing my small body cursing that I can’t do anything, and I reassure him as best I can. (But I’m not enough, am I?)
“No, Naruto. You’re not a monster. She’s the monster. Anyone who calls you *that* is the actual monster.”

And so what if bitterness seeps through and my hatred for this village colors my voice? It’s their fault. They’re the ones treating us like this, treating Naruto like this. We don’t deserve it. We don’t.

But the villagers will deserve Naruto hating them.

Even though the Naruto (*not my Naruto*) that I read about loved this village, wanted to protect it and be acknowledged by the people. But that Naruto didn’t know better. Didn’t know what love was or the amount of injustice heaped onto him or the fact that he didn’t have to put up with it.

We can leave. Someday, we can leave.

(Even though the other villages aren’t that better even though this whole world is messed up even though there’s nowhere safe we can go.)

I tell myself this and I try and try to convince myself. But I know. I know I’ll never be able to get Naruto to agree. It would be me against the village, and Naruto will choose the village. He will. I would, too. I wouldn’t follow me.

But there’s still the possibility.

After that, I just feel spent. I feel like I was bubbling, boiling water, and someone doused the flames, cooling me, leaving me to simmer for a short while before turning cold. I can’t muster up enough energy to do anything. As much as I’m angry, as much as I want to go out and *do something*, even if it’s punching a tree, I just... feel too tired to do anything.

I’m not good at this, being an older sister. I’m so used to being a younger sister, the baby of the
family. People don’t usually come to me to cry, don’t emotionally rely on me.

It really is different, having a younger brother. A twin. The same age as me (except not, because I’m so much older than him). Naruto relies on me. He needs me. Half of me is happy about this, and really really grateful.

The other half is just so tired. I’m not usually the responsible one. I’m a follower, not a leader. But Naruto needs a leader, someone to look up to, whose example he can follow.

Which sucks for him, because he got me.

But maybe I shouldn’t think like that. I mean, originally he would have been all alone. And now he doesn’t have to feel that loneliness. Even me just being here is better than nothing, right? Even if I can’t do much for him, at least I can support him and just be there for him (like no one else was for me). Well, I’ll try to, at least. I don’t know how successful I’ll be.

But for now, I can’t even muster up the energy to do anything except sit here. Naruto’s stopped crying. Now we’re just sitting in this disgusting alley, doing nothing, sitting in relative silence. Naruto’s warmth against my side is a comfort.

He’s the first to break the silence. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

It takes me a moment to respond, and all I can give is a half-hearted: “Yeah.”

He huffs, rubbing at his eyes to clear any traces of tears, making his still red face even redder, and stands up quickly. I almost fall over without him to lean against. He reaches down and grabs my hand, and tries to pull me up. I resist for a moment, unwilling to move, watching Naruto’s face turn from determined to constipated. Or maybe it’s concentration. But eventually I cave and let myself be pulled up.

Naruto frowns at me, and my lips twitch downward to match his expression.

“What,” I say, what’s supposed to be a question instead coming out as a statement. He looks hesitant for a moment before he nods to himself.
“Let’s go, nee-san. C’mon!” And he grabs my hand and starts dragging me behind him.

I let him. It’s a bit relieving, letting someone else take the lead. While he takes us through back ways and alleys, I concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. It takes more energy than I thought it would. Surprisingly, we pass very few people. My brows furrow unconsciously as I wonder just when Naruto figured out how to navigate this town. He must have a better sense of direction than I do (which isn’t actually surprising, because I have a shit sense of direction). He’s probably also more observant than I give him credit for.

Soon I recognize where we’re headed. It’s the forest near the training grounds. Sometimes you can find some of the younger shinobi, usually Academy students, training in this part of the forest. Usually, we avoid this area. Or at least, I usually steer us away from here. I don’t want to trip over any ninjas, especially when they’re training. But today I let Naruto bring us here, curious as to why.

As we enter the forest, he starts talking. And though all I can see is his back, he practically glows with determination. “I want to become a ninja. That way, no one can talk down to us! We’ll be able to stand up to them!”

Oh, Naruto.

He’s so naïve. So young and already he’s buying into the ninjas-are-awesome propaganda. It’s everywhere. In our books, in the way the civilians defer to ninja, in the casual displays of thwarting physics ninja showcase every day.... What’s sad is that it works. I wouldn’t mind having that kind of power, being able to use it to stick up for myself, protect myself. *(To get back at my tormentors.)*

Except that’s not what it’s used for. It’s used to fight, to kill, to slaughter and intimidate on the orders of a leader who is usually chosen because of his or her *strength*, not their policies. This is a military country. More than to “protect,” a shinobi learns to “kill,” and not just physically, too.

But it is true that we’ll need that power to protect ourselves. And even if Naruto refuses to become a ninja, the village will still force him to become one. He’s their jinchuuriki. Their tool. They won’t let him go that easily.

And as much as I dread becoming a ninja, a murderer, I don’t think I’d be able to live as a civilian. Not in this world, where one swipe of a ninja’s hand can kill a person. Not where civilian women are expected to get married and have children and do the housework. Even some kunoichi become housewives in the end. But I’m not going to let that happen to me. No husband, no kids.
Besides, Naruto’s enough kid to last me a lifetime.

And I’ve been quiet for too long, because Naruto stops walking to look at me in worry. I muster up enough energy to quirk a smile at him, unable to discourage his decision to become a ninja, because what’s the use? And there’s no way I’d let him go at it alone.

“Yeah,” I say instead. “We’ll both become shinobi.”

Naruto smiles at me, his eyes squinting as his mouth splits into a grin. Then he lets go of my hand and sprints toward a clearing in front of us.

“C’mon! We might find some kunai or shuriken laying around!”

Um. Well, scavenging isn’t a crime, right? I didn’t teach Naruto to break the rules, right?

...Right?

“Does whoever collect the most get a prize?”

“Yeah!”

Despite my initial misgivings, I follow after Naruto for an afternoon of scavenging weapons. It’s surprisingly fun, especially when we started up a guessing game to figure out where certain scorch marks or dents in the clearing came from. Like a tree that was cut in half, which I guessed was from a sword (probably a katana) but Naruto guessed was from a wind jutsu. We argued more than we agreed on our theories, with Naruto’s ideas being the wilder ones, but it was fun. It brought some levity to our situation.

By the end, our tally was: 6 kunai, 4 shuriken, 3 senbon, a half-used roll of ninja wire (which, I have no clue why someone would leave behind), and a blank scroll. I’m not sure why there was a blank scroll. A completely blank scroll. I unraveled it and found nothing written on it.

Naruto wasn’t sure why, either. Of course, genius that I am, I take the opportunity to try something I really shouldn’t.
I take one of the shuriken, lightly cut my forefinger with it, ignoring Naruto’s squawk of panic, and use my blood to write the kana for storage on the scroll. Then I try to force the shuriken into it. Except all the shuriken does is stab through the scroll and into the ground.

How disappointing.

Well, I suppose if fuuinjutsu was that easy, everyone would be doing it. Anyway, I think I’m supposed to use ink, not blood, but oh well.

“What the hell!” Naruto finally manages to shout as he flails his arms in panic.

I roll my eyes at him. “It’s not that big of a deal. It’s fine.” Then I stick my finger into my mouth to suck the blood and spit it out.

...Maybe I shouldn’t have done that. Who knows where that shuriken’s been? What if I get a disease or—what if it was poisoned? Oh, great thinking, genius.

“Why the hell did you do that!”

“I just wanted to try something.” I barely pay attention to him as a look down at my still bleeding finger, curious. I know Naruto has accelerated healing because of Kurama, but do I? But I’m distracted by Naruto’s panicking. Letting out a huff, I reach out and grab the front of Naruto’s shirt, pulling him toward me, eliciting a shout of protest from him. “I’m fine.”

“But—!”

Before he can say anything more, I stand on the tip of my toes to kiss his forehead. I pull away to look at Naruto’s stunned face.

“I said I’m fine so I’m going to be fine,” I say with finality. “...Thanks for worrying, though.”

Naruto breaks out of his astonishment, his face flushing red. He mumbles something under his
breath, turning his face away, but I can’t understand him.

I roll my eyes again and bend over to collect our booty. “We should get going. It’s getting late.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Naruto replies as he squats to help me.

I pause in the middle of rerolling the scroll. Is that sass I’m hearing from him? Quickly rolling up the scroll, I reach over and use it to hit Naruto’s backside. He jumps in surprise, letting out a squeal as he teeters and almost falls. His hand flails out and grabs onto the nearest object, which is unfortunately me, causing us to both fall over, scattering weapons around us. I let out a wheeze as a fall on my side, winded.

Once I get my breath back, I roll over and smack Naruto’s stomach. “Ass.”

“You started it!”

My response of “Yeah, yeah, whatever” has us rolling in laughter, even though it’s not that funny. Eventually we get up, smiles on our faces, and re-gather our scavenged items.

And by the time we return to the apartment, there’s barely a sign that I cut my finger.

Half a year since we last saw him, Yamori reappears. And.

And I don’t know how to feel about that. I feel disappointed. But then, when did I get so attached to him? It’s a bad habit of mine, from Before, becoming emotionally attached to people. It’s so easy for them to abandon you, for you to abandon them. I don’t have to worry about it as much with Naruto, because we’re twins, and this is Naruto, who grows to love a village that hates him and vilified him as a child. Who rescues people, even enemies, from others and from themselves. Who knows what it’s like to be hurt and alone, and doesn’t want that for other people. (So different from me I’m
probably the worse choice for his sibling so why—)

In contrast, I know nothing about Yamori, except that he’s part of Anbu and was assigned to guard us (is still assigned to guard us? I don’t know), and that he’s probably going against some type of rule or law whenever he reveals himself to us. Unless that’s some sort of calculation on the Hokage’s part. Or Yamori’s. To ingratiate himself with us. Or something.

So.

I don’t know.

But I—I did miss him, the jackass.

(But I don’t trust him. I don’t trust him enough to tell him about the Old Lady, I don’t trust him because surely he knows but he hasn’t done anything and how am I supposed to trust him? How am I supposed to trust someone whose face I’ve never seen?)

So I allow Naruto to drag me over to him and give him a hug, though his legs are all that we reach, so we just latch onto his legs, one for each of us. Yamori probably finds it annoying, which is a plus. Maybe.

It’s one of the rare days where Old Lady’s out, doing whatever the hell she does when’s not here, so Naruto doesn’t bother being quiet in his greeting.

“Where the hell were you, you bastard!” he sobs into Yamori’s leg.

Which. Um.

So maybe I’m a bad influence. And I’ve yet to learn to completely sensor myself. And I definitely had a potty mouth problem, Before. Still have a potty mouth problem.

...I try to sensor myself. I really do. (And isn’t it revealing, what type of person I was Before, that I knew curse words in a language I only barely knew through anime and manga?)
Yamori pauses in the middle of reaching down to detach us and I can practically sense him mentally scrambling to remember if he ever cursed in front of us, to make sure the blame can’t be placed on him. He hasn’t. But that won’t stop me from blaming him, if it comes to it (and I’ll get Naruto to back me up, if I have to).

“I apologize,” he settles on, choosing to ignore Naruto’s cursing (at least for now), and ruffling our hair. “I was on a mission.”

Which is a bit alarming, unless he’s not actually part of our guard and only visits us on his time off, because. Well. It’s better if I don’t think about it.

“Don’t care,” Naruto murmurs into the pant leg.

I contemplate slobbering on the one in my grip in revenge, but think better of it because Naruto and I already have a plan for that. Sort of. But I don’t let go, and neither does Naruto, so Yamori will have to walk with us attached to his legs. Instead, he slumps to the ground, eliciting a yelp from us.

“I see you missed me,” Yamori deadpans.

“Yeah,” I respond.

“A lot!” Naruto shouts, thumping his fist against Yamori’s hip.

The Anbu makes a small sound (a grunt?), scratching the back of his head.

“I do not supposed you two will release me any time soon?”

“You didn’t even say goodbye,” I pout, while Naruto shouts his protest.

“No way!”
With a sigh, Yamori tries to pull us off, but we just cling tighter. I’m doing this because I want something, but I know Naruto genuinely missed the bastard (I missed him, too, but I’ll never admit it. It’ll hurt too much when he leaves again) and he’s hoping this will convince him to stay with us longer and more often. I don’t know if it will work, but Naruto’s optimistic (he’s almost always optimistic, though, so that isn’t really saying much).

Yamori tilts his head upward heavenward, sighs, and asks in a resigned voice, “What do I have to do to get you two off—” Naruto thumps his fist against Yamori’s hip, hard “—to forgive me?”

Looking up at the Anbu in unison, we give him the widest puppy eyes we can, and say:

“Teach us to use chakra/chatara!”

...Cue exasperation.

“Chakra, Naruto!”

“Yeah, that! That’s what I said!”

And—would you believe it—mister calm and collected (even though half the time he never seems to know how to react to us) bursts out laughing. Naruto openly gapes at him, and maybe I do, too, because he’s never been so open around us. He’s never laughed like this before. Sure, he’s let out a laugh or a chuckle, but never full-blown, body shaking laughter.

And then Naruto’s smiling because he’s happy, because here is a person who genuinely likes him and.

And maybe that makes me a little jealous. But I’ll forgive Yamori, just this once, because the next thing I hear is:

“Okay, I’ll teach you.”
He doesn’t teach us right away, though. Not how to use it, at least. First, we’re interrupted by Old Lady (and when the hell did she come back?), who comes storming in ready to—well, ready to beat us for being loud. But then she sees Yamori and she turns purple in rage, sputters, and flees the house. Which. It’s really suspicious. But Yamori doesn’t follow her, doesn’t do anything. Just stands there, for a while.

Maybe he’s thinking, maybe he’s shocked. I don’t know. But Naruto’s quick to pull him out of thought (he always is).

“Hey, hey! You said you’d teach us chat—chakra!”

Yamori doesn’t visibly shake himself or anything, but there’s a second’s delay, like he’s collecting himself, and then he’s responding.

“Right. Have you unlocked your chakra yet?”

...Unlock your chakra? Is that a prerequisite? Is that why nothing happened the one time I tried to stick a piece of paper to my forehead (and Naruto looked at me funny but copied me anyway and pouted when it just fell, god he’s so fucking cute)? And. And would kids our age even be able to unlock their chakra?

Well. There is Kakashi, who became a genin at what? Five? And Itachi who unlocked his Sharingan at around the same age (1).

When he meets with equally blank stares from the both of us, he sits in front of us and makes us sit up straight. He’s entering lecture mode, probably.

He clears his throat before he starts speaking.

“All people are born with chakra. However, not everyone can access or use their chakra. To do this, one must first unlock it. This is done in two ways: either naturally or forcibly. However, there are risks with both methods.
“Chakra can be unlocked naturally at any moment of one’s lifetime, between when they are born to when they die. It is possible to never unlock your chakra. There is also the possibility of unlocking ones chakra and not knowing.

“A person who naturally unlocks their chakra but does not know that they have unlocked it may use it unconsciously. This may lead to chakra exhaustion and even death. Many ninja must undergo extensive training until they can use their chakra effectively to enhance their body, speed, or strength.

“In contrast to naturally unlocking ones chakra, there is risk in forceful unlocking. Some may die from the shock, others are overwhelmed by the feel of chakra, and there are even a few who die because the person unlocking their chakra uses too much force. This is why only qualified people are allowed to unlock chakra. It is also recommended for this to be done when a child is between six to eight years old and by their assigned Academy teacher, who is qualified for such a process.”

Here, Yamori pauses to gauge our reactions.

Naruto, predictably, zoned out toward the beginning of his speech. He’s fidgeting restlessly in his seat, fiddling with a stray toy kunai. All he’s probably heard is “blah blah chakra blah blah chakra chakra chakra.”

I’m suitably terrified, though I can’t seem to get my face to make the correct expression, because what if something bad happens to Naruto when he unlocks his chakra? What if something bad happens to me? If one of us dies or are unable to use chakra or—or I don’t know.

...If he hasn’t already unlocked it. Which. He probably has. Because of Kurama.

But what about me?

“Question,” I say, raising my hand to humor Yamori’s lecture/teacher mode. Yamori nods. “How can you tell if someone has already unlocked their chakra?”

“Good question. There are multiple ways. One is to have someone who can sense or see chakra examine the person. Unfortunately, I am not one. Another is to try chakra control exercises to feel for and access one’s chakra, which we will now—Naruto, stop stabbing the floor.”
Naruto pauses, mid stab, and stares up at Yamori with wide blue eyes and guh, I can’t go against those eyes, so I quickly look away. Yamori must have more willpower than I do, though, because Naruto is soon pushing the toy weapon away and straightening from his previous slouch. He grins widely.

Yamori starts talking again, this time while keeping a close eye on Naruto (or, at least I think he is. It’s hard to tell what he’s doing behind that mask, but his face is tilted more toward Naruto than previously).

“The first step is for you to meditate—yes, Naruto, that includes you. I will not teach you how to use chakra until you meditate.”

Here, Naruto grumbles but doesn’t protest because while meditation is something he definitely doesn’t want to do, he still really wants to learn how to use chakra. Though, when I look at him again, I see him raising his hand.

“Question!” he shouts, and continues on without waiting for acknowledgement. “What’s ‘meditate’ mean?”

This.

This is going to be a long day.

After Yamori gets Naruto to understand what meditation is, and then get him into compliance to be taught, and us into comfortable positions, Yamori finally coaches us through.

“Relax. Close your eyes. Focus on your breathing, but do not try to control it. Let your breathing happen naturally. Follow the path of your breathing through your body. Do not think about anything except for your breathing.”

This reminds me a bit of shavasana from the yoga class I took once, which eventually became relaxing enough that I started to fall asleep during it, even though it only lasted ten minutes. Thank god I chose not to lay on my back, unlike Naruto, who may actually have fallen asleep. Instead I’m sitting in lotus position, back straight, hands on knees. Which is a bit more difficult than I thought it would be, in this small body.
...And I need to stop thinking.

Focus on my breathing. Feel it flowing through me. In and out.

After a minute more of silence, Yamori starts talking again.

“Can you feel an energy deep in your stomach? It should feel warm. Try to bring that warmth out of your stomach. Make it follow the path of your breathing. Into your chest, through your limbs. Try to coax it to your right hand.”

Locating it isn’t hard.

It’s weird, though. A good kind of weird. Warm, like Yamori said. But a different type of warmth than Naruto and Kurama. Mine.

Making it move, at first, is difficult. Like it doesn’t want to move, like it’s saying, no thank you, I like it here very much. It takes a while, but I get a trickle to move, up up up into my chest, and more follows, like opening a crack in a rock to let some water pass and then more and more water pours out. Everywhere it goes through tingles, warms, but not altogether unpleasantly. It dissipates before I can get it into my arm, but it’s a start.

I’m about to try again when Naruto, when Kurama, warms up, more than usual, heating hot hot hot ablaze. Yamori makes a startled noise and I open my eyes in time to see his hand jerk toward his hip pouch and his other hand flutter next to him as if to make hand seals or hand signs. And I stand, quickly, and turn to Naruto who’s still laying down but there’s red around him, red consuming him red he is red he is he is—

He is tapping into Kurama’s chakra unconsciously and Yamori thinks he’s a threat and I have to stop him I have to do something I have to. Before Yamori does.

“Naruto!” I bark.

And the red dissipates, pops like a balloon, gets sucked right back into him like an implosion. And Naruto jolts up, blinking slowly, looking at me in confusion. He doesn’t realize what he’s done, doesn’t know how people will react to him accessing Kurama’s chakra, and we’re just kids—I can’t protect him.
So I quickly turn back to Yamori and I widen my eyes and I ask:

“What was that? Was that chakra?”

And I ignore the kunai in his hand as much as I can, but I move so that I’m blocking Naruto’s view of it because he’ll be so so devastated if he realizes Yamori was about to attack him, might still attack him. Because too many adults attack him attack us already and it’ll be so heartbreaking for him because he likes Yamori. He really really likes Yamori (I do too but does that matter who even cares about my opinion Naruto’s the important one Naruto’s the one who didn’t fuck up so much—).

Yamori pauses, probably debating what he should do, before he slowly, oh so slowly, lowers the weapon. But he doesn’t put it away, he doesn’t fucking put it away. So I turn back toward Naruto and latch onto him and smile at his confused face.

“Was that chakra?” I ask him, mindful of the lethal shinobi at my back but unwilling to leave Naruto open for attack.

“And then he turns his bright wide eyes toward Yamori, hopeful.

“Um,” Naruto mumbles, “…Maybe?”

How the hell you gonna react to that, Yamori? You gonna attack that face? Look at that face!

…And maybe I’m reacting a little strong, and maybe I’m a little hysterical, but don’t I have a right? There’s a member of Anbu here contemplating killing my twin brother because his—our—dad (and isn’t that just sad he chose the village over his family what kind of person does that) decided to seal a god damned monster in his newborn baby’s stomach!

Oh god oh god oh shit oh god don’t kill Naruto please don’t kill Naruto don’t (leave me alone please don’t leave me alone don’t) kill him don’t don’t please just—

Yamori nods his head slowly, placing his kunai back into his pouch.
“Yes,” he says, and that fucker his voice doesn’t waver at all doesn’t even hint at his almost-homicide is that what Anbu are like I need those skills I’ll need them. “But yours is special, Naruto.”

“Special?” Naruto asks, his eyes widening even more, so wide I can see Yamori reflected in them. I didn’t even know that was possible.

The Anbu squats in front of us, hand slowly reaching out and poking Naruto in the stomach, making him burst into giggles. I can’t help but let a giggle out, and maybe a bit of my hysteria shows, because Yamori pokes my stomach, too, which makes me laugh even more.

He waits calmly for us to stop laughing before he continues.

“I do not know everything about it, but you have two types of chakra. The one you used just now, the red one, is very dangerous. You should never use it.”

Naruto’s eyes are wide again, this time in fear. I tighten my hold on him in reassurance, wishing all the while I can refute Yamori, because Naruto will need that chakra, will need Kurama, and if Yamori tells Naruto not to use it he might actually listen and then where will all of us be when Gaara attacks when Pein invades when—fucking Obito fucking Madara—there’s the Fourth Shinobi War? I’ll tell him otherwise, I’ll try to convince him that it’s not true, but I don’t know if Naruto will listen to me. I’m his sister, his peer, not an authority figure, and adult, like Yamori.

“How dangerous?” my twin asks in a wavering voice.

Shit. Shit shit shit god damn shit. Naruto don’t listen to him, don’t don’t. It’s true it’s dangerous but you can learn to control it to use it to be friends with Kurama.

No, actually.

Actually. They’ll deserve it, if Naruto never uses Kurama’s chakra. They’ll deserve it. They shouldn’t rely on Naruto. What does Naruto owe these people? They’ve treated him like dirt like he’s nothing like they can just keep kicking him down and it’ll be okay. They’ll keep hurting him and hurting him and then they’ll treat him like a weapon like something to be used and discarded.

But he’s not. He’s not. He should be treated better like a human like someone who fucking matters because he does, and what does he owe them, anyway? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.
We’ll leave here. When we’re older, when we’re stronger and more skilled, I’ll take Naruto and leave this place. They don’t deserve him. They don’t.

So I don’t say anything. I keep quiet and I listen as Yamori speaks lies lies filthy lies. (But they’re not lies because it is dangerous, it is, and Naruto can’t control it yet might not be able to control it for years who knows how long but that’s okay because even if he hurts me it’s okay because death isn’t the worse that can happen it’s the furthest from the worst and I’ve died before anyway I’m still—)

I feel like I’m watching on from outside my body. Watching a little girl clutching her twin brother close as someone her brother trusts tells him that something inside him, part of himself, is dangerous and shouldn’t be used and.

And I feel myself whooshing back in when I have the thought: will he tell the Hokage, will they keep a tighter watch on us, will Jiraiya be called in to check on the seal, will Yamori stop teaching us?

By the time I start listening again (too late no clue what he said, what Naruto said), Yamori’s finished talking and Naruto is nodding as gravely as a four year old can. My grip on Naruto unconsciously tightens before I force myself to let go and turn back toward the Anbu.

“Will you teach us more?” I ask hesitantly. Can’t trust him, but he’s valuable. And if he likes us, if he comes to really like us, he might keep our secrets, might become of more use. And Naruto needs all the allies he can get.

Yamori doesn’t move. But Naruto looks at him, blue eyes bright with unshed tears, a frown tugging at his lips, and I can practically hear Yamori cave.

“Yes,” he says with a sigh. “Just... not today.”

Naruto looks half relieved, half disappointed. I am, too, though for different reasons. It means he’ll continue teaching us, that he might not tell anybody that Naruto can access Kurama’s chakra. It’s a start.

We should definitely use the innocent children angle more often, though. To ease his mind. Or something. But what the hell is an innocent child like? ...Maybe Naruto can think of something
I turn my head and give Naruto a long look, which he is quick to return. We don’t actually say anything through our eyes, we don’t know how to, but somehow Naruto picks up on what I want. And isn’t that amazing. I wonder if it’s a twin thing (and that thought still startles me, that we’re twins, that I’m a twin. Will I ever get used to it)?

So he turns back to face Yamori, eyes shining with mischief this time, and says:

“Hey, hey! Teach me how to make things go boom!”

...Or maybe not. I think I’ll go find a corner to retreat to, hopefully with a new book Yamori brought.

There’s a face in the mirror, frowning. A distorted image (low quality mirror, cheap). Red hair, like I always wanted, like the color I used to dye my hair Before, except real. Blue eyes? Dark, though. Maybe purple. It’s hard to tell without a better quality mirror.

But it’s a child’s face and a child’s body, reflected to me. It’s mine. Intellectually I know it’s mine, and the reflection follows my movements, but it doesn’t feel like me.

(Dark hair dark eyes Asian short with short hair and glasses a perpetually frowning face all gone dead doesn’t exist did it ever exist?)

I only vaguely resemble Naruto. We look like we can be related, siblings or cousins, but not like twins (fraternal twins not identical which should be obvious since I’m a girl and Naruto’s a boy but originally Naruto never had a sister or a sibling or anything so—). It’s only a passing resemblance. We don’t even have the same coloring, my red hair to his blonde and my dark eyes to his bright ones, though I suppose our skin shade is similar.

Thank god I’m not a blonde, though. I don’t what I would have done. Probably kill myse—
Yamori’s “teachings” are enough to get me started on trying to control my chakra. I’m afraid of letting Naruto try again, unsupervised, because what if someone senses it and thinks the Kyuubi is acting up or surfacing and attacks us?

So I have to find ways to try and access my chakra, to mold and control it, without Naruto knowing what I’m doing. And I feel a little guilty about it, but more than that, I’m freaking worried about what might happen if he tries, too.

Unfortunately, the only time I can practice is at night while Naruto is dead asleep (and that’ll be dangerous when he’s older not that I can say anything but eventually we’ll have to learn to sleep lightly and it’s not something I’m looking forward to) and my body wants to sleep, too, because this is a child’s body and children need sleep. But this body doesn’t sleep as long as I used to Before, when everything made me so so tired, this body has more energy and it takes more to tire it out, not that it’s a problem with Naruto around but—

I close my eyes and focus on my breathing and try to stop thinking because I need to practice.

I feel for that place deep in my belly, reach for that warmth. It’s easier to find it than the first time, though still a bit reluctant to move. But eventually I coax it out of my stomach and up up up to my chest and back down except through my right arm and toward my hand but then—pop!

And the connection breaks.

Maybe I’m doing it wrong. I’m not sure. But I should be able to get it to reach my hand, shouldn’t I? So I try it again, and again, and again. And then I get fed up and I pull and pull and pull until there’s so much chakra and I move it up my chest and down my arm but it doesn’t tingle it burns but I want to get this I want to get it to reach my hand. And finally my hand’s tingling except it’s burning and it hurts oh god it hurts why does it hurt?

My vision is blurring and there’s so much pain but there’s nothing I can do and god what a stupid thing to do so so stupid you’re such an idiot. Oh god the pain make it stop make itstopstop stop.
And I black out.

Chapter End Notes

1 Itachi actually activates his Sharingan when he’s nine, so at this point in the story hasn’t happened yet, but will in the next few months.

Please don’t take Renge’s word as gospel. She’s an unreliable narrator and slightly unhinged and she used to have shit memory in her previous life so she misremembers some things and comes to incorrect conclusions.
When I wake up it’s to the blurry view of Naruto hovering over me, expression marred with worry and are those tears in his eyes? I try to sit up to ask him what’s wrong except—ow ow ow oh my god what the fuck? My chest hurts and my right arm hurts and I have a killer headache (like a hangover except I haven’t touched a drop of alcohol in years and never in this body so what the hell) and when I look down to see what’s wrong there’s bruises all over my arm and blood coming from my fingertips. And when I carefully peel away the collar of my shirt, there’s bruises on my chest, too.

“Ouch,” is all I manage to croak out.

Did someone run me over (except there are no cars no vehicles in this world)? Or beat me up? But I would remember something like that—no wait, I do remember.

I remember trying to force my chakra (too much too soon not enough control what was I thinking?) to my hand last night and I guess I overdid it. No, I seriously overdid it. I try to move my arm and my hand but it hurts too god damned much so I stop and just.

Naruto’s definitely crying now. “Nee-san, w-what’s wrong? What happened?”

And oh no I still don’t know what to do with a crying kid what do I do what do I do!? I grit my teeth and push myself up slowly with my left arm, but Naruto takes that as a sign that I need help sitting up so he props my back up and oh god that fucking hurts and I hiss through my teeth and Naruto flails around because he doesn’t know what to do.

“Naruto,” I say through clenched teeth (don’t think about the pain don’t think about it), blowing away an obnoxious piece of hair that decides to fall in front of my eyes. “Can you get the first aid kit?”

“Yeah!” he shouts as he rushes out of the room.
Leaving me to sit here alone in so much fucking pain oh my god I’m such a fucking idiot! No wonder you need patience and lots of practice to be good at chakra control. But why the fuck am I bleeding from my fingertips? It—it, ugh. To quote my dad, it makes no fucking sense (even though that phrase pisses me off and I wanted to punch him each time he said it, said because he isn’t here I’m not there I’m dead but I’m not because dead people can’t feel pain oh god it hurts)! 

Naruto rushes back in, the first aid kit clutched tight to his chest, and he dithers next to me, unsure of what to do next.

“Put it down and open it,” I instruct him.

Though, now what? Because I don’t know what to do next, either. Bandage it, sure. But do I need to disinfect my fingertips first? Or rub on some kind of medication? Or... or what? 

Naruto’s quick to follow my instructions. He’s even quicker to follow up by digging out the roll of bandages and antiseptic wipes and a bottle of pills. And I feel like a shit sister, because he shouldn’t have to do any of this. I shouldn’t have done anything to lead to this.

But I’m impatient, I was impatient, and look at what it fucking led to. God, they were right, they were so fucking right. I’m just such a mess, such a fuck up. No wonder my parents were so disappointed in me.

Naruto opens the packet of wipes with his teeth because his hands are shaking and god does that make me feel worse and he hands them to me before rushing off again to do who knows what. I’m worried, but I have to focus on patching myself up first, because I don’t want Naruto to worry about me more than he has to and I can’t run after him because I’m in too much fucking pain. So I take the wipes and I carefully wipe the blood from my fingers and my hand, red and dry and caking, trying to ignore the pain with a litany of *don’t think about it* running through my head. And I bite my lip to stop myself from making a noise because dear god it hurts so damn much and it’s all my stupid stupid fault.

Soon Naruto returns with a cup of water (so that’s what he went to do) which he practically forces on me to free up his hand to open the pill bottle. I can’t help but flinch because—a handful of pills numb the pain but only physically and soon it won’t hurt anymore because this is the end—they’re a painful reminder but I need one for the pain. So I dutifully accept the pill he pushes into my mouth (and what the hell is the dosage, anyway) and I take a sip of water. And another, to wash out the taste. Oh god that shit tastes horrible.

“I’ll do the bandages,” Naruto says, voice solemn, and I’m about to protest because I’m already a
horrible sister don’t make me a worse one, but he continues on before I can say anything. “You can’t do it on your own!”

And he’s right.

God damn it.

So I bite my lip and tell myself to shut up and suck it up, and I let him help me take off my shirt (and it’s kinda hard to be body shy around the twin brother with whom you take baths together), the pain bringing tears to my eyes. I hear Naruto suck in a deep breath because, yeah, it looks really bad, like someone struck at me until my whole chest and arm resembles a blueberry or a rotting kiwi it’s so blue and black and some parts are turning green.

Naruto’s hands as he wraps my chest are shaking and clumsy and it really freaking hurts because he keeps brushing and hitting my bruises on accident because of his short reach. And holding and passing the bandages to him hurts my chest with each movement and I want to stop and curl up into a ball and cry except that would hurt more.

It feels like we sit there forever, wrapping me up, in silence except for the sniffles from both of us and the hisses of pain from me, but eventually we finish. And then Naruto’s looking at me with a frown and a tear-stained face asking why and what happened without saying a word.

I let out a deep sigh and rest my head on his shoulder, because I feel so so weary and I never signed up for any of this and god I should have known better than to do something so stupid. But eventually I cave.

“I tried to practice with my chakra.”

Naruto reaches up and pets my head and it feels better than it should and no one’s ever done that to me before and I really need that comfort right now.

“Don’t do it again. Not without Yamori.”

And god he sounds so serious. He probably has a determined look in his eyes but I can’t be bothered to move my head. And I must have scared him so so much. So I nod my head and agree. For his sake.
Even if I won’t keep my word. Because I won’t always be able to wait for Yamori.

And I’m sorry. I’m so sorry Naruto. Oh god I’m such a horrible sister but I can’t keep my word. But I’ll make sure he never knows. He can’t know.

And.

In a better world, we would have immediately alerted an adult. In a better world, I wouldn’t have to practice chakra control in secret.

It takes about a week and half before my bruises fade, though they’re still tender. During that time we have to be extra careful not to provoke Old Lady. We wake up earlier to make sure we leave the house before she wakes up, though we always have to return by a certain time, otherwise she’ll lock us out (it happens, once, and I’ll never forgive her for it because we are so so cold and hungry as we huddle in front of the door and no one helps us).

Naruto is subdued the whole time. It makes me feel terrible. Here is a boy who is usually happy and loud and energetic, and look at what I’ve done to him. He sticks to me like glue, holding my good hand in a strong grip, glaring at anyone who walks too close to us. We mostly hide out in the park, in the more secluded areas.

Mostly it’s boring and depressing and I never want to experience it again.

The first hour is spent in silence, but Naruto and silence don’t get along, so he is quick to break it. He starts pointing out things. The clouds, bugs, the plants around us. He recognizes a lot of the things we’ve read/seen in the books Yamori left us, though their names elude us, for the most part. He makes up his own names for them, instead. Some really ridiculous names that we laugh over, even though he insists that they are really good names. Well, it’s not like my naming sense is any better.
But that doesn’t last, and soon we lapse into silence again. It is the most awkward situation we’ve been in together (except the first time we were bathed together, though it was only awkward for me. Oddly enough I’m used to it now. Besides, there’s no way I would ever trust Old Lady with that task). The awkwardness lasts until I can’t take it anymore, because I never was good with awkward silences—and I can’t just ask him if he likes Mudkips—so I try to tell him stories I remember from Before.

Try being the key word.

I can’t even remember half the details from most of the stories, I often backtrack and correct myself, and Naruto asks so many questions that I don’t have the answers to. Half remembered fairy tales: the little mermaid who became foam in the end, the girl in the red riding hood eaten by a wolf and rescued by a huntsman, Rapunzel and her long golden hair.

I’m surprised by how easy it is to tell Naruto these stories. How I don’t stumble over my words, how my mind doesn’t go blank and my hands don’t shake and my face doesn’t burn from embarrassment. I’ve always been a shit storyteller, unless I wrote it down instead of speaking it, but even then my stories always lacked something. But telling these stories to Naruto, even though I barely remember them, is easy.

But as I mentioned, I don’t remember much of them, and eventually I run out of fairy tales I remember.

So I give up and try to think of a better story to tell, something I can remember better.

Which is when I have the genius idea of retelling the *Katekyo Hitman Reborn* story to fit the Elemental Nations.

“Kufufu.”

Naruto gives me a funny look. “Nee-san?”

“Oh, sorry,” I say, blushing. With my guard down, Mukuro’s signature laughter escaped me.

Which.
Thinking of Mukuro (and seriously, he and Tsuna would be so cute together. So cute) reminds me of Orochimaru. And of their similarities. Possessing/swapping bodies, obsessing over a younger male, wanting to destroy what had a hand in creating them and oh god if they ever met.

(And. And does this—the Narutoverse—mean that the KHR-verse exists somewhere out there, too?)

But I ignore that thought and instead start the retelling of civilian Tsuna, the long lost descendant of the first Sorakage, his complete refusal to become the tenth Sorakage.

(“But why didn’t he want to be Sorakage?” “Because he wanted to be a normal boy. He wanted to be lazy and unmotivated and not have to worry about things like being killed or his friends being hurt.” “But don’t all his friends want him to be Sorakage?” “Yes, in the sense that they believe he can be a good Sorakage, but no in the sense that they just want him to be happy. Even if it means being a normal boy.” “...But they don’t actually believe he’ll be a normal boy, do they?” “...No.”)

The trials he goes through, and all the friends he makes. And wow is the story easier to translate into an Elemental Nations story than I thought it would be.

I don’t remember the whole story, though; my memory was never good enough for that. But at least it distracts Naruto—distracts both of us—for most of my recovery period.

Then I am left with nothing to distract him with. I’m desperate. So I do what I used to do Before, sometimes, with my brother (even though it hurts to think about him, even though it shouldn’t hurt because I don’t have the right).

I meow at him.

Naruto looks at me funny, again. Which, I don’t blame him. But he surprises me by playing along. We actually spend the whole day making animal noises at each other, and making up noises when we don’t know what noise certain animals make.

I still can’t believe how much fun it is.

At one point, we went to the library. I’d finally mustered up enough courage to go there. The
Konoha Library is a public one, located near the center of the village. Anyone can access it.

Anyone should be able to access it.

We should be able to, we would be able to, if only Konoha wasn’t so biased against Naruto—against us. If only they would take their blinders off and think. Everything would be so much different if they would. But by now I know this is a futile thought.

We spent maybe half an hour in there, marveling at the place. Or at least Naruto did, I was a bit disappointed. I’d forgotten to take into account the fact that I can barely read most kana, though I’m definitely better at speaking Japanese than writing it, and that some of the books would be in kanji. Of which I barely know a few words. And I didn’t have enough time to thoroughly search the place, but I tried valiantly to find something on chakra theory and maybe a dictionary or thesaurus, because I really need one of those books (all of those books).

But before long, the librarian spotted us and flew into an apoplectic rage and threw us out. Just lots of screaming and yelling, accusing us—and here he called us “demon brats”—of trying to steal knowledge or cause mayhem or something, and physically threw us out!

The asshole. Won’t stop me from trying again sometime later, though. I really need more info on chakra and chakra control. I don’t want the same incident as last time to happen again, and I really need to learn how to use chakra. But I’ve been too afraid to touch it or do anything with it while I’m injured and uninformed.

But today my bruises are faded and every move I make doesn’t hurt, so it’s back to running around for us! (And it’s still so weird that I run around and play so much I used to be a couch potato and there was usually a cat pinning my legs down and nothing to do and—don’t think about, don’t think about it.) So, hands clasped tightly together, we’re quick to make our escape into the wild wild jungle known as Konoha.

And as a treat, I might have filched some money from Old Lady. She really should secure her money better. Anyway, I wouldn’t have taken the money if she actually fed us, the bitch. Because we’re too skinny, and too hungry, and no kid should ever be treated in such a manner, no matter who or what they’re like. And especially not Naruto.

Naruto’s babbling, he’s so excited. Excited enough to ignore or not even notice the looks the villagers are throwing us, as they are wont to do. I glare right back at them, which makes about half the population of Konoha flinch, because how many four year olds run around glaring at people? Exactly one, apparently. (But they deserve it.)
I should be paying more attention to Naruto and where we are going, but I don’t, and that’s a mistake, because suddenly Naruto’s hit something and he’s stumbling back, pulling me down with him. And it *hurts*.

I suck in a deep breath to cut off my hiss of pain, carefully picking myself back up. Before I can turn to Naruto, however, a large, meaty hand reaches down and grabs his shirt collar and pulls him up so that he’s dangling in the air. Naruto’s tiny fists try to claw the hand away from him, to make the hand let go. I’m frozen in shock, unsure of what to do.

“Watch where you’re going, you brat,” the owner of the hand snarls. He’s a bulky man, rotund with unkempt hair and yellowed buck teeth (from drugs or tea?), towering over us. Another man, probably his friend, stands by his shoulder. He’s dark skinned from exposure to sunlight, with slicked back hair and a disinterested look on his face. Which quickly turns to shock as he gets a good look at Naruto.

“Hey, isn’t that the...”

Shit.

As the man holding Naruto turns to face his friend, ignoring Naruto’s struggles, his yelling to “let go!” I take my chance and kick him between his legs, grimacing. He lets out a whoosh of shocked air, doubling over in pain, and lets go of Naruto who lands on his butt with a sound of surprise. I’m quick to take Naruto’s hand back into mine and pull him up and run away. There’s a shout and a yell and the sound of pounding feet after us.

“Nee-san,” Naruto wheezes from behind me, surprised and winded from his fall.

“What?” I reply, but I barely pay him attention because we need to get away quick or they’ll catch us and do who knows what and I really wish I knew this place better because I have no clue where the fuck we’re going or even where we are. And they’re behind us, getting closer and closer, their longer legs eating up the distance between us. Curse this child’s body!

Then Naruto’s the one tugging on my hand, pulling us into an alley. “This way!”

And then we’re twisting through streets and alleys, some so small we barely fit, and then out into a street packed with people. He stops running so suddenly I run right into him, but luckily we catch
each other so we don’t fall. But we’re huffing and sweating and it takes us a minute to catch our breath. We lost our pursuers a while ago, I don’t know when, because I can’t hear anyone running after us. Then Naruto looks at me and I look at him and we’re laughing.

It’s not even funny, but we’re laughing. It must be the tension suddenly leaving us, or the nerves or adrenaline, but we spend a full minute laughing, ignoring the looks we get, until we calm down. Naruto’s smiling, like he hasn’t just spent most of two weeks looking glum and worried, and it’s such a relief that I can’t help smiling back. So much so that my cheeks start to hurt.

I look around a little to try and see if I recognize where we are, but this is further from the apartment than we’ve ever gone.

Shit, we’re lost.

I’ve always had a horrible sense of direction, so we’re going to have to rely on Naruto to get us back. Which might not actually be a bad decision, seeing as he’s the one who got us here.

...Which actually makes no sense, because if I’ve never been here, then Naruto’s never been here, either. Ugh, I’ll think about it later.

For now, I should be more worried about how Naruto’s practically vibrating in place in his eagerness to look around. Actually, I’m excited, too, because maybe they’ll have something good to eat!

Seriously.

I’m so hungry, and sick and tired of all the (crappy, meager amount of) Japanese food we’ve been eating. Too much fish and salt and pickled stuff.

...Even though kimchi’s pickled, too, and I love kimchi.

But there should be more than just Japanese food, there should! I remember that one team, the younger Ino-Shika-Chou one, eating kalbi/Korean BBQ. Yakiniku? I think that’s what they call it in Japanese.
So I let Naruto drag me into the fray without protest, dodging people and looking around, desperately searching for something that isn’t Japanese. It takes a while, with many stops for Naruto to look at something that’s interested him, before we finally find a food stall that’s selling something non-Japanese.

Stopping before the small stall, I take a good whiff of what’s cooking. Mm. Orange chicken? Naruto stops beside me, head cocked, and copies my action, his nose pointed up in the air, and—sneezes.

Which brings the proprietor’s attention to us. He looks down at us curiously, Naruto with his nose scrunched up, me biting my knuckle to stop myself from laughing out loud.

“What are you kids doing here?” He studies us closely for a moment, looking bemused, before he freezes, eyes stuck on Naruto’s face.

Oh no. Not again.

But before I can react, before Naruto even suspects anything, the man’s rounding the stall with a spatula in one hand, waving the utensil violently at us.

“You! Get away, demon!”

And Naruto’s frozen in shock, so I pull him away, and I bite my tongue to stop myself from yelling because this isn’t fair. This isn’t fair!

We go further down the street and around the corner before Naruto suddenly stops. I look back at him, confused, only to see the confusion and fear in his eyes.

Shit.

“You’re not a demon,” I say, because what else can I say? I pull him into a hug and hold him tight. “You’re not.”

God I’m not cut out for this. I just want to punch and kick and beat the shit out of these people and I don’t know how to make it better, how to comfort Naruto. And it’s just so fucking wrong.
And Naruto’s hesitating, I know he’s hesitating, because it takes far too long before he hugs me back and I can feel a small patch of wetness on my shoulder where his face is resting. God this is fucked up.

I squeeze him tighter then pull back and wipe his eyes for him. He makes a face at me, disgruntled, so I stick my tongue out at him.

“Right! Let’s go get something to eat, okay?”

He looks uncertain again, eyes flicking around, probably wondering where we’ll get food, if people will react like the proprietor earlier. And maybe they will, or maybe they won’t. But we won’t know until we try. Which is what I tell him (and the way his face lights up, uncertain but so hopeful, god it breaks my heart).

And these people. They’ll continue to kick him down. Because they’re so stupid, because it’s like kicking at a—a bomb! Like they’re trying their luck, like maybe they’re waiting for him to explode, like they’re suicidal and—don’t think about it don’t think about it.

But I’ll pick him back up, because he picks me back up.

We never find a restaurant or a stall to eat from.

We’re chased away from seven different places before Naruto seriously starts to flag, and we’re so so hungry from all the running and the emotional exhaustion that. I don’t know anymore. I just don’t care.

So I find a target, and I turn to Naruto, and I tell him, a (fake, so fake, god I lie too much to my brother and he deserves so much better) smirk on my face. “Wait here.”
“Why?” Naruto asks, but he’s nodding, and that’s all I need.

So I give him another smirk. “Just wait.”

And I walk off in the direction of a corner store we’re next to, small enough that there aren’t a lot of people in it, but large enough that the clerk can’t see me at all times. A bell chimes as I push open the door, and I look straight at the clerk, who looks torn between glaring at Naruto standing near the front peering curiously at me, and keeping an eye on me. And I give him a big smile, all teeth, and he flinches away. Then I make my way slowly toward the back where the drinks are, where there are no people, perusing the items in the isle near me, and try to look as nonchalant as I can (I’m not sure how successful I am).

When I make it to the drinks, I’m hidden from view enough that I snatch up an item near me without looking at it and stuff it into the waistband of my shorts, thanking the fact that my shirt’s so large it easily hides whatever it is from view. I stop in front of the drinks, pretending to be indecisive, then go down the row until I reach the end where I’m once again hidden from view, and I snatch something else up. Then I meander my way over to the ice cream, because I really can’t resist.

And oh my god, jackpot! Mochi ice cream. I’m quick to snatch one up, checking the price to make sure I have enough money for it (I do) before I head over to the cash register, where the clerk is glowering at me.

Ha, probably doesn’t like the fact I took my time. But I set my bounty down and grin wide at him, making him flinch again, and wait for him to ring the item up.

He does it quickly. The price on the register reflects the price tag I saw earlier, but what the clerk says instead makes me grit my teeth to stop myself from exploding.

*That asshole.* He practically doubled the price! I pinch my leg to stop myself from snarling at him and I keep my smile going as I pay him with all the money I have, and I take the ice cream and I leave as calmly as I can.

Because fuck that asshole. And yeah, I stole from him, but he tried to steal from me! As soon as I reach Naruto, I take his hand and I smile at him and I give him the ice cream.

“Here.”
He peers curiously at the item and *oh my god he’s never had ice cream before probably doesn’t even know what it is except that he’s seen some people it eat* and that’s just so fucking sad. But I try not to think about it too hard as I start to drag him away.

“Ice cream?” he asks, voice hesitant, as he lets me pull him in a random direction. *For me,* he doesn’t voice.

“Yeah, well, since you’ve never had it before....”

“You too,” is his quick rejoinder.

Which. Well, I guess he’s technically not wrong. “You should eat it before it melts,” I say instead.

He looks at me dubiously, but opens the container to peer closely at the ice cream. Two mochi ice cream lay in it with a small plastic fork. He stares curiously at them. I roll my eyes and steer us toward a bench, now we’re far enough away, pull him down to sit next to me, and remove the bounty from my pants (and I will *never* say that *ever* again. *Ever*), placing them next to us. Then I snatch the ice cream from his hands, eliciting a yelp from him that I ignore. I quickly pick up the fork and cut one of the mocha in half, jab at it, and then hold it up for him.

“Say ‘aaah.’”

“Aaaaah?”

As soon as his mouth is open, I shove as much of the ice cream as I can into it. In his surprise, he bites down, allowing me to jerk the fork out. He looks at me, wide eyed, as he slowly chews. I ignore him as I cut the other one in half and pop some of it into my mouth.

Mmm. The chewiness of the mochi and cold sweetness of the ice cream…

“So good!” we say at the same time. We look at each other and burst out laughing.
When we get back to the apartment, it’s late. Old Lady has already set the table and is eating. Across from her is two sets of dinner. Ours.

Our good mood from earlier dissipates as soon as we see her. She doesn’t look up as we shut the door behind us and take off our shoes, shuffling around as quietly as we can. We don’t want to provoke her. It’s always eerie how quiet Naruto gets around her, but I don’t blame him. I get equally as quiet.

“Go wash your hands,” Old Lady says sharply, her brown eyes glaring at us as if asking us to try and disobey her.

We don’t.

By the time we get back to the living room, Old Lady’s already started eating. We sit cautiously at the table, murmuring “itadakimasu” as quietly as we dare (because not doing so will make her angry), and start eating.

Dinner is a quiet, awkward affair. As usual, the food is completely Japanese, too salty and fishy for my tastes, though today there’s an odd aftertaste to it. Probably the ingredients were starting to go bad. But I force myself to eat as much as I can, because I need the food and this is the most she feeds us each day. Old Lady’s own meal, of course, is better and bigger than ours.

Naruto eats quicker than I do, quicker than is actually healthy (though I don’t blame him, because once Old Lady took away our food because we didn’t eat it quickly enough, calling us “ungrateful”), and he finishes soon. As usual, I give him some of my food. But soon, Naruto’s done, his stomach gurgling in upset, and he’s standing and excusing himself to go to the bathroom. Old Lady barely acknowledges him, though her eyes follow him as he leaves the room. My ears start to ring from the silence.

Her eyes turn toward me, making me tense automatically. I hate it when she looks at me, glares at me like I’m some kind of monster, like I shouldn’t be alive. Like I don’t deserve to breathe. Because she’s right, I don’t. But I don’t like being reminded of this by the likes of her. She has no right to judge me, no right to—
My hands feel numb. There’s a tingling in my feet, like the pins-and-needles sensation you get from sitting on them too long, but it hasn’t been that long. The ringing in my ears gets louder and my head feels heavy but my mind feels light, like it’s floating away. Spots dance before my eyes, blotting and blurring my vision, and they refuse to go away, no matter how much I blink. I’m having trouble holding onto my chopsticks and they fall out of my fingers, clattering onto the table.

I can’t—

I can’t feel my fingers. I try to clench my hands into fists and it takes too much effort, too much time. They curl, but don’t clench, weak and limp. The room’s shaking—no, I’m shaking. My eyes fly up to Old Lady, accusing. She’s looking at me with glee in her eyes and a satisfied smile on her face.

*That bitch!*

She’s poisoned me, she poisoned *us!* Oh, no. No no no no no. Naruto!

Naruto, he’s—is he alright? Shit, does Kurama negate poisons? I don’t know!

I try to force myself to get up and go check on Naruto, but all my body does is fall over so all I can see is Old Lady’s legs under the table and my body’s convulsing and—

Pain. Oh god it *hurts.* It hurts so fucking much. Tears are forming in my eyes as the poison tears at me, forcing bile up up up my throat and out, choking me, falling on me, and my body thrashes.

Oh god oh god make it stop make it stop oh god please make it *stop!*

Old Lady starts talking, though I can barely hear what she says over the ringing in my ears.

“I had a grandson,” she says, but I can’t see her, can barely understand her. My mind whirs in English but she’s speaking Japanese and it takes *so long* for me to translate. “He’s supposed to be graduating from the Academy today. But you—”
I can’t understand. What is she saying? My hearing is fuzzy, my brain rattles in my head as my body shakes, continuously. The agonizing pain distracts me. Oh god the pain.

And there’s footsteps, coming toward us. Naruto. Oh thank god he’s okay, he’s okay.

I can hear him, saying something, yelling something, but I can’t understand. And then Old Lady’s legs move as she stands, as she shouts, voice shrill. I catch only a few words.

“You... dead... Demon!”

And oh god. Oh god, what is she doing? Her feet are thundering, moving toward Naruto, behind me.

Move. Move, damn it! I have to fucking move, to see what’s going on, to stop her!

My body flails as I force myself to move, to crawl, and I pick my head up as it tries to swim away. Look up to see Old Lady throwing herself at Naruto, who’s frozen in shock, staring at me, something glinting in her hands.

Bright blue eyes meet mine. “Naruto,” I mouth, my hand reaching out slowly, oh so slowly and—

My hand catches something. The bottom of Old Lady’s kimono. She trips, falling heavily onto the floor, jarring my body. She yanks her feet away from me, snarling, and oh god Naruto’s still frozen, just standing there and that’s a kunai in her hands.

Don’t run with sharp objects, I think, giddily.

Old Lady tries to stand, to attack Naruto, but I force myself to move, god damn it! And I grab her ankle before she gets further than onto her knees and I try to pull but I don’t have the strength, I can barely hold on to her as she yanks her foot back and forth, trying to dislodge me.

And it hurts. Oh god it hurts so fucking much. But I force myself, because I have to. Because I fucking have to, because otherwise she’ll attack Naruto, hurt Naruto, try to kill him. So I force my body that doesn’t want to listen to me, I force it and I move and I throw myself onto her.
But I can’t do anything else, I can’t move my body, I can’t feel my body, only pain pain pain. And Old Lady’s screaming and yelling and trying to push me off, but I’m just dead weight now, pinning her legs down. She slaps at me, sharp pain that I barely feel. Slap slap slap slap—

A sharp, stinging pain, blooming fire on my cheek. My face splits open and warmth flows down my cheek as it burns and stings and hurts so fucking much. Oh god it hurts.

There’s a shrill sound, ringing in my ears. Shrill and HIGH and cONstAnt and tHE Pain anD the bURniNG fiRE and—

Darkness.

Oh god why can’t I just wake up why is this happening this has to be a dream it has to be it can’t be real this isn’t real I died I died I died I’m dead did I fuck that up too did I somehow survive and this is just a fever-dream a coma something produced from a head injury it just can’t be real please just let me wake up whatever god or deity or higher being please just give me mercy wake me up let this end I just want it all to end why couldn’t it have all just ended

please

let me

be—
I wake up in the hospital, blinking blearily at the white ceiling, the smell of disinfectant burning my nose, making me want to sneeze, but I don’t. There’s a warm weight against my side, a beeping in the background. Heart monitor, probably.

I try to move, but everything hurts, burns. My brain feels fuzzy. I’m tired. So so tired.

I close my eyes and fall asleep.

When I open my eyes again, I feel cold. The warmth next to me is gone. But I can feel the warmth of Kurama, of Naruto, nearby. I don’t hurt as much, so I cautiously, slowly, turn my head toward where I can sense him. He’s in a seat next to my bed, head bowed. He’s holding my right hand, but I can barely feel it. I try to squeeze his hand, but all I can manage is a twitch.

It’s enough to alert Naruto that I’m awake, though. His head shoots up and he stares at me, eyes wide and bright with tears and so so devastated. No. Please don’t look like that. Please don’t look at me like that.

“Nee-san!” he shouts. Tears spill over as he grips my hand tighter and he climbs onto the bed to get closer to me. I try to squeeze back, and this time I manage to curl my fingers a little. “Thank god you’re awake! I thought!—Hic!—I thought—”

—you wouldn’t wake up, he doesn’t finish.

I try to smile at him in reassurance, but as soon as I move my lips, they start to crack. I lick at them and try again. I don’t think it works.

Naruto keeps talking. “When Old Lady—when she—there was so much blood! And you were screaming and Old Lady was screaming and I didn’t know what to do! And then Yamori and those mask guys came and—Hic!—Nee-san!”
Naruto cries and cries and cries, and there’s nothing I can do.

No, there is.

Ignoring the pain, how much it fucking hurts, because it’s worth it, I push myself up with my shaking arm and I slump against Naruto. I’m shaking and huffing and probably crying, but I manage to wrap an arm around him. I try to speak, but all I manage is a croak, so I just hold onto him. And we cry together.

Because I really thought. I really, really thought—that I was going to die again. And. I don’t know if I’m relieved I didn’t die... or disappointed.

That’s how a nurse finds us. She’s quick to separate and chastise us, but at least it gives me a chance to look Naruto over. Despite looking a bit haggard and tired, he seems fine, physically at least. Which is good.

Relieved, I look over to the nurse, who’s still lecturing us.

“—and really, look what you’ve done! Now we’ll have to rewrap the bandages around your face.”

What?

Startled, I bring up a still shaking hand up to touch my face. Oh. There are bandages around my head, wrapped across my cheeks. I feel around them and hiss in pain when my fingers brush the cheekbone under my right eye.

“Don’t touch it!” the nurse shouts. “Really!” And she launches into another lecture, but I’m not listening.

I’m remembering the pain, the sharp, stinging pain. The burning feeling, the—the kunai that struck my face, dug in. Oh god.
Oh god oh god oh god.

My breathing quickens, my vision swims, spots appear before my eyes. I can’t… I can’t breathe! Can’t think! Sharp pain blooms on my cheeks, little points digging in. Can’t can’t can’t oh god can’t __

Something strong grips my wrists, pulling my hands away from my face. The sharp pain disappears. I flick my gaze up and meet determined blue eyes.

Naruto.

Right. I shouldn’t... shouldn’t react this way. I have no right to. Naruto’s unharmed, safe. We’re both safe (but how safe are we in a village that hates us that abuses and hurts us that will one day use us use Naruto until there’s nothing left of us until we can’t be used until we’re broken pieces to be discarded—)

“It’ll be okay,” Naruto says, his child-like voice steady and so so determined. *I’ll protect you.*

“It’ll be okay,” I parrot. *I won’t let myself need protection.*

Even though I don’t believe myself. (Even though I don’t believe Naruto.)

We stare at each other, making a solemn promise, until the nurse shoos Naruto off the bed. She then peels my bandages off, tsking and complaining, and wipes the injured area with a disinfectant wipe. I wince and hiss, trying to move my face away, but she just grabs my chin to hold me still. Then she rubs a paste on it, something that smells *awful* and makes my face sting like a motherfucker, and rewraps my face.

I wish she would hand me a mirror or something. I want to see the damage. I’ve never been particularly vain, but I’ve never been stabbed in the face, either. My biggest face wound was when I busted my chin as a child when I fell off my bicycle going downhill at a fast speed. My friends and I had walked around for at least an hour searching for my parents before we finally found my mom and she took me to the hospital. I’d needed stitches. Ever since then, there’d been a faint scar on my chin that was only really visible whenever I pursed my lips or frowned, which was quite often. (And for the first time, I don’t feel pain when thinking about my mom.)
I’m morbidly curious about what this new scar looks like. I don’t think I’ll ask in front of Naruto, though. It might upset him. Though I wonder why it wasn’t healed up. Didn’t want to waste chakra on it?

“Aside from the face wound, you’re fine. You’ll be a little sore for a while, but that’s to be expected. You’re lucky you were brought here so quickly. Mogusa-sensei managed to extract all of the poison from your systems.” She holds up two items, a tube of paste and a sheet of paper. “Change your bandages twice a day. Put this paste on the wound when needed. The instructions are here. You can leave in a bit; the Hokage’s sending someone to pick you up.”

And just like that, she breezes out of the room, closing the door none-too-gently behind her. Man, what a bitch.

Naruto’s quick to pocket the tube of paste she left behind and hands me the paper with the instructions on them. I just fold it and hand it back. I’m too tired to read it right now. I just want to leave this place and—what? Go home? Go back to that apartment?

Oh god. If we have to go back there... I don’t know what I’ll do. I’d rather live on the streets than go back! I turn to Naruto, who’s staring at me intently, as if he’s afraid I’ll disappear or something if he looks away.

I open my mouth to talk but all that comes out is a few coughs. Naruto jolts, arms flailing, unsure of what to do. I mime drinking, trying to convey my thirst. Eventually Naruto understands and he quickly fetches me a glass of water. I drink it gratefully, taking large gulps and uncaring of the fact I’m spilling some.

Finished drinking, I hand the glass back and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

“How long has it been?” Naruto looks unsure, hesitant to answer. I roll my eyes. Even if he doesn’t answer my question, I can just ask someone else or look at a calendar to find out. “How long?”

“...A week.” His answer surprises me.

A week!? I’ve been out for that long? And has... Oh my god, did Naruto stay with me the whole time? I look closer at him. His clothes are rumpled (though at least they’re not the same clothes he was wearing that day, thank god), his hair is oily, and there are dark circles under his eyes. Why hasn’t he—right. There’s nowhere for him to go. Even if he was willing to leave me alone, which he
probably wasn’t, there’s nowhere he could go. The Hokage might have arranged for someplace temporary, but Naruto and I have never spent extended periods away from each other. This is probably the longest we’ve gone without talking or interacting.

Oh god. How lonely, how alone was Naruto this whole time? He must have been so scared, so frightened that I’d go and die and he’d be alone. And no matter how much the doctor or nurse reassured him (did they? Or did they just ignore him?), he probably wouldn’t believe them until he saw it with his own eyes.

“I’m sorry.” I clear my throat and blink my eyes rapidly, praying I don’t cry. If I cry, it’ll only make Naruto cry, too, and I don’t want him to cry any more than he already has.

Naruto rapidly shakes his head. “No. No! It’s not your fault! It’s mine! It’s me! If only—”

“—No!” I’m quick to interrupt, because I don’t want him to finish that sentence. Because he’s wrong. “It’s not your fault! It’s theirs! It’s Old Lady’s! You’ve done nothing wrong. We’ve done nothing wrong!” I take a deep, shuddering breath and reach out for Naruto’s hand. He grasps my hand tightly. “You shouldn’t listen to them. They’re all just—just stupid fucking people, okay? Okay?”

Naruto startles at my curse, but is quick to nod his acquiescence. I smile at him, and maybe it’s wobbly and small, but it’s all I can manage right now. Naruto’s return smile is equally wobbly. We sit for a while, holding hands and taking comfort in each other’s presence. Then I get out of the bed with shaky limbs, Naruto helping me, to change out of the hospital gown. I feel gross, but I’ll have to wait to wash later—just later, because I don’t know how much longer until later, or where, for that matter. But as soon as I finish getting changed, we sit on the edge of the bed, waiting for our “escort.”

Chapter End Notes

So. Um. On a positive note, things will get better for them? Also, no more disjointed narration now that Renge’s been kicked into action. Er, that is to say, Renge’s been battling with depression about being reborn, especially about being reborn in the Narutoverse, and hostility with her environment because it’s something she doesn’t want. Though she’s never done anything to change her life/position except to get angry and irritated at people (which not a healthy way to deal with things).

To clear things up a little: Renge doesn’t do a very good job of hiding the fact she’s smarter than the average child. Actually, she doesn’t really hide it at all. This is reflected
in how she talks and interacts with others, which influences how Naruto talks and interacts. So Renge goes around talking like someone who is at least a few years older than she physically is, and Naruto tends to pick up and repeat the words she uses. And then Renge is openly hostile to many of the villagers, not just the people who treat them badly, but even to people who might grimace or move away from them. Basically, Renge’s hostility raises the villagers’ hostility, because at first they would only hate Naruto, believing him to be the Kyuubi, but then there’s his twin with her red hair and her hostility, who is smarter than normal. Is it so odd then that some people might come to the conclusion that the Kyuubi’s influenced her/part of her?

By the way, Yamori vaguely realizes that Renge’s oddly smart, but he chalks it up to her being a genius like her father, because ninjas believe a lot in genetics and things like “if your parent was this way, you should be this way, too!” Which is only half true, at most.
We don’t wait long.

There’s a knock on the door and then the person on the other side opens it without waiting for a response. It’s Yamori. He steps inside, closing the door behind him, and stares at us. We stare back. There’s a sniffle—I sniffle—and then Yamori’s kneeling in front of us, hugging us, and we’re hugging him and I’m crying and Naruto’s crying and.

God, Naruto said he’s one of the people who rescued us. He saved my life. After everything, after all the doubt and suspicions I’ve had about him, he fucking saved us. And I know it’s his job and he’d be in a shit ton of trouble if he didn’t, but. But he’s really relieved to see us alive. He’s not faking this. I can feel him shaking under my hands. He might be crying. Jesus. A crying Anbu. You don’t see one of those every day.

And god my horrible sense of humor; what is wrong with me? I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing, half hysterical, and pull back to scrub the tears from my face. Naruto pulls away, too, sniffling still, and I quirk my lips as I reach over and wipe his face. We’ve got a Hokage to go see. Can’t show up all tear- and snot-faced.

Yamori breaks the silence. “The Hokage is waiting.”

We nod and hop off the bed and stand next to Yamori, who’s still kneeling. I tilt my head, curious, and open my mouth to ask, when he loops his arms around our knees and under our butts and picks us up. I let out a squeak matched by Naruto as Yamori stands.

And then he moves to the window and moves Naruto toward it. It takes a moment, but Naruto gets the hint and opens the window (what’s up with Yamori and windows, anyway), and then we’re out, as Yamori jumps onto the windowsill then propels himself toward the nearest roof. His feet touch the tiled roof for barely a fraction of a second before we’re up in the air again. Each jump creates that bottom-dropping sensation in my stomach, leaving me feeling queasy. Naruto, in contrast, lets out a whoop of joy. But it takes us barely any time to reach the Academy, where the Hokage’s office is located.
Yamori lands in front of the Administration Building and places us gently on our feet. We both wobble a bit, disoriented, though Naruto’s quicker to recover than I am. We automatically grip each other’s hand. Soon we’re making our way into the building and winding our way up to the top. We barely pass anyone and those we do pass barely even glance at us.

At the top is a wide, open waiting area with a desk and two doors, though there are no chairs except for the one behind the desk. A woman, probably the Hokage’s secretary, sits behind the desk. As soon as she sees us, she gives a grim smile and motions toward one of the doors.

“The Hokage’s expecting you.”

Nervous, bile tries to claw its way up my throat, but I swallow it back. Stress always makes me want to puke.

Yamori gives her a brief nod before knocking curtly on the door. If there is a signal and I just don’t hear it, or Yamori opens the door without waiting for one, I don’t know. But Yamori waits only a second before he pushes us through. Naruto and I inch forward only enough for Yamori to stand behind us and close the door. Usually I wouldn’t feel secure with Yamori towering so close behind us, but today it reassures me. I don’t feel secure at all. I feel... I don’t know how I feel.

Empty? Apprehensive? Maybe I’m in shock. I’m not sure. All I know is that I’m tired, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to fall asleep anytime soon. I don’t feel safe enough. If I hadn’t thrown myself at Old Lady....

My grip on Naruto’s hand tightens. Naruto squeezes back.

I take a deep, steadying breath and take a quick survey of the room we’re in. It’s open, and circular, with little furniture, with one part of the wall almost completely made up of windows. (A spacious office with barely anything in it. No furniture for guests. A statement? A power-play?) Directly across from us is a desk with neat piles of paperwork on it. Sitting behind the desk is the Sandaime Hokage, sunlight illuminating him.

He’s staring at us with indiscernible eyes, fingers interwoven in front of him, hiding the lower half of his face. Without meaning to, I press back, up against Yamori’s legs. The last time we saw the Hokage, he’d left us with Old Lady. She’s the second caretaker we’ve been left with, and look at what happened both times! Part of me blames the Hokage.
Why couldn’t he have vetted these people better? Why didn’t he ever remove us from their custody before it was too late? Surely our Anbu guards must have reported how we were treated! Yamori must have, at least. Right?

As doubt for Yamori edges into me again, I pull away from him.

Naruto’s been silent the whole time. It’s making me worried. When I glance at him, I see he doesn’t know what to do. Logically, he knows who the Hokage is, though he might not remember meeting him. He probably doesn’t know how he’s supposed to act in this type of situation, or what will happen if he does something wrong. So far the two elders we’ve been in contact with have treated us badly. Who’s to say the Hokage won’t, either? And besides, he’s the leader of this village. Why would he want to meet with us? Naruto doesn’t know that the Hokage’s invested in him, that he knew Naruto’s—our—parents, and Yamori’s one of the few people watching over us. “Guarding” us.

Naruto might actually be waiting for me to take lead. So I suck it up, set aside all my worries and doubts, take a half-step forward, and bow. “Hokage-sama.”

Naruto follows my lead, though his movements are clumsier than mine in his hesitance. I only hold the bow for a few seconds before I’m looking up again. The Hokage’s scrutinizing us. His expression turns... sad? Why is he sad?

Oh. We don’t really act like most four year olds, do we? He must think it’s because of what happened to us. Which is partially true. And I remember from the manga that he’d had a soft spot for Naruto. (Just like his soft spots for Orochimaru and Danzou; my thoughts turn insidious.) Except that was from a manga and this is real life. He may just be faking it. Or, maybe he’s sad that his weapon was almost killed.

Or maybe he is sincere. I don’t know. But before my thoughts can continue in a downward spiral, the Hokage lets out a sigh.

“Naruto. Renge. I’m glad to see you two out of the hospital,” he says, moving his hands away from his face to show a small smile, though his brows are still furrowed. “What Kinoshita-san did is very wrong.” Kinoshita-san? Who’s Ki—oh, he means Old Lady. “I’m sorry that she hurt you. She was arrested and will be punished for her crimes.”

Well, I would hope so. If she isn’t sent to prison I’ll—well, I don’t know what exactly I will do.
Probably take matters into my own hands. Maybe even poison her. That would serve her right. (And I should probably feel guilty about contemplating murder, except I’ve contemplated killing people before. Except I might actually go through with it this time.)

Then he runs a hand down his face, sorrow shining through. He pushes away from the desk and stands, turning to face the window behind him. He’s hesitating to say something, but what?

“I know this will be difficult, but I wish for you to understand her actions. Maybe one day you will be able to forgive her.” He turns back to face us, walking around the desk to approach us. I tense without meaning to. I don’t want him anywhere near me, near us. Especially with what he’s saying. He kneels before us, oddly subdued for such an important figure. “Kinoshita-san lost her family the day you two were born. A lot of people lost their families that day, including you two. But it doesn’t excuse what she did—what she tried to do.

“Truthfully, many are still mourning. Their grief controls them, making them say and do things they don’t mean. Please, don’t hold it against them.”

Seriously? Is he... is he listening to the words coming out of his mouth? Don’t hold it against them? What a fucking joke.

God, he makes me sick.

Of course I’m going to hold it against them! Those fuckers can’t see past their fucking preconceptions to realize that Naruto isn’t the fucking Kyuubi, that he’s just a little kid—the kid of their fucking “hero!” Naruto should be their fucking hero. He’s the one Kurama’s sealed inside of, the one who has to shoulder the burden of being a jinchuuriki, of being hated for something he never had a choice in.

And the Hokage’s banking on a child’s naivety and innocence for Naruto to “overcome” this incident. Yeah, like that’s gonna happen. What four year old is okay with almost being murdered? In what world do you ask that four year old to forgive their wanna-be murderer because she’s grieving!? This one, apparently.

But I don’t say anything. I bite my lip to stop myself from saying what I want to. Naruto’s silent, too. His grip on my hand tightens. When I glance at him from the corner of my eye, he’s frowning. He doesn’t accept what the Hokage says, either. Good.
Perhaps sensing our unwillingness to listen to him make excuses for others, the Hokage sighs. He reaches out his hand slowly toward Naruto. I have to resist the urge to knock it away, to pull Naruto away from him. I watch, tense, as the Hokage lays his hand on Naruto’s head and pets him. Naruto’s face becomes lax in shock, before he starts leaning into the Hokage’s hand. Naruto’s always liked having his head petted for whatever reason.

“I’m sorry. You’ve been through a lot already. I shouldn’t be asking anything more from you.” The Hokage looks to both of us as he retracts his hand. For a moment he looks like he might pet my head, too, so I glower at him. He gives me a sad smile. “I’ve called you two here today to ask what you wish to do.”

I jolt. What? What does he mean, what we wish to do? Naruto and I share a confused glance. We look back to the Hokage, who stand and walks back to his desk without saying anything more.

“What do you mean?” I blurt without meaning to. I almost bite my tongue in my haste to shut my mouth. What the hell? I was going to let him talk himself out before saying anything, but my impatience is rearing its ugly head. I’ve always hated it when people are too longwinded.

The Hokage turns his head toward us, though he keeps his body facing his desk. He picks up a folder and holds it up so that we can see it. “I know you two are having trouble with the citizens of Konoha. The way they react to you two is... not good.” That’s an understatement, but I force myself not to interrupt. “Unfortunately, there is nothing I can do about their attitude. However, there is something the two of you can do.”

He walks back toward us, folder in hand, and extends it to us. I nudge Naruto into taking it so that I can keep most of my attention on the Hokage. Naruto doesn’t hesitate to open the folder, his curiosity influencing him. I glance at the folder to see what’s inside.

The top page is a lease for an apartment. Underneath that is... an application to attend the Academy.

Oh.

But we’re four! Did this happen to the Naruto I read about? Is that why he’d gone through the graduation exams three times?

I get that attending the Academy will allow us to learn to protect ourselves, but why is the Hokage suggesting—no I shouldn’t jump to conclusions. Hear him out.
When I return my full attention to the Hokage, he’s returned to his seat behind his desk, waiting patiently for us. When did *that* happen? I nudge Naruto, making him grunt and look at me. I nod toward the Hokage to transfer Naruto’s attention. Once we’re both looking at him, the Hokage starts talking again.

“With the way things ended with both of your caretakers, you two are in a delicate position, as I’m sure you would not want a similar... situation to happen again. Right now the two of you have two options: either live in an orphanage or enroll in the Academy and live on your own. If you choose to live on your own, you will still have someone with guardianship over you, though he will only need to check in on you two once a week.”

Here, he pauses, giving us time to digest what he’s said. It’s.... I’m not sure if that can actually be considered a choice. I mean, yes, we can decide to live in an orphanage. But that means surrounding ourselves with children and adults, many of them victims of the Kyuubi Attack. We’ll only be subjected to more of the same treatment we’ve been receiving. No, it might even be worse.

On the other hand, living on our own will be difficult. I’ve never lived by myself before, and Naruto certainly hasn’t. And then there’s the Academy, where we’ll learn how to become killers. I don’t want that for us, even though we don’t really have a choice about it—*Naruto* doesn’t really have a choice.

But I suppose we’ll have some freedom. A chance to learn to protect ourselves. And it will give us something to do besides try to avoid trouble (while causing trouble, because when do we not? Naruto’s a trouble magnet and I’m not exactly a squeaky clean individual). I just... I wish we had more time.

But I don’t want to be weak. I don’t want the same thing to happen again. I don’t want to be so vulnerable.

And.

*Oh god. I almost died we almost died there was so much pain oh god it hurt so much I can’t I can’t I can’t please just make it stop make it stop someone help please just—*

There’s a squeezing sensation around my hand.
Naruto’s clutching my hand tightly. He must have sensed my distress. And god, it really isn’t a choice, is it? If I don’t get stronger, if we don’t get stronger, who knows what will happen next time. And there’s guaranteed to be a next time. Naruto will have so many enemies, so many people he fights against. And we’ll both need to be stronger to be able to face them.

I don’t want Naruto to die.

He’s all I have, now.

When I turn my attention back to the Hokage, I’ve missed most of what he’s said. Or maybe he hasn’t said anything else. Maybe he sensed my distress as well. (I’ll need to do something about that learn to hide my emotions don’t give away anything to the enemy they’re all enemies.)

He’s talking again. “Whichever you choose, I’m hoping the two of you will come visit me once a month so that I can see how you are doing.”

Naruto’s looking at the Hokage, his expression unreadable. It scares me a bit, that I don’t know what he’s thinking. He’ll chose the Academy, won’t he? He’ll want to get stronger, too. I... I remember, when Old Lady charged at him, Naruto froze. He couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t do anything. And I don’t want that to happen again.

And Naruto said he wants to become a ninja. We both agreed to it earlier that day. This is an opportunity for us. Isn’t it?

But what’s the Hokage getting out of this?

I suppose bundling us off into the Academy means we’ll be running around town less. He also won’t have to find us another caretaker, or an orphanage willing to let us in. Is that it? That no one is willing to take care of us?

Or is he genuinely worried about us? About Naruto.

No, he must want his weapon to become stronger, to not let himself be trampled by mere citizens. That must be it. That has to be it.
(Because otherwise what has he been doing up until now? What has he done for us? Why did he allow this to happen to us he’ll keep letting it happen they hate us they’ll keep hating us I hate them hate hate hate him why why won’t it stop make it stop)

My feelings are conflicted. I want to believe one thing, but I have my doubts. I wish I can trust the Hokage. I wish I can trust someone, anyone. But I can’t. Not even Naruto, not yet. Not until he’s older, when he can understand the importance of keeping a secret. (But I don’t want to burden him more than he will be. But that won’t be fair to him. But I’ll be keeping secrets. I’ll hurt him. I don’t know. I don’t know what I’ll do.)

The Hokage’s probably one of those Dumbledore types. For the “greater good” of his village. Even though he has soft spots for the worst type of people. Maybe... maybe he actually does have a soft spot for Naruto. For us? I know he cared for Minato, liked him and believed in him enough to make him the Fourth Hokage. And Naruto’s Minato’s son. Must look like Minato a lot. And isn’t his personality similar to Kushina’s?

...No, actually. Naruto’s—different. He’s not like his manga counterpart. Well, he is. But he’s not as loud. He doesn’t shout a lot, doesn’t run around playing pranks on people or yelling “dattebayo.” He’s—oh. Is it my fault? Because Naruto has me, has Yamori, too. He doesn’t need to go around shouting for attention. He already has attention and, dare I say it, love. Because I do love him, the idiot. I don’t know what I’d do without him. No, I do know what I’d do. (Just like I did Before just like I’ll do if I ever lose him I won’t lose him I won’t.) But he’s similar enough. Fundamentally similar. Right?

I don’t know anymore.

My head is starting to hurt, so I try to distract myself. I turn away from where I’d been aimlessly staring in thought to look at Naruto, see his expression. He looks determined.

“Naruto?” I ask. I’m pretty sure I know what his decision is, but I want him to say it out loud. For him to confirm it. Seal our fate. Ha.

Naruto nods his head, once. “We’ll attend the Academy. We already said we’ll become ninja, anyway.” Then he proves himself to be my great, amazing brother by finishing up with: “And don’t worry, jiiji (1), we’ll visit and make sure you aren’t too lonely! This place looks super boring!”

Looking at Naruto’s grinning face to the Hokage’s gob-smacked one just makes me crack up. I cover my mouth to try and stymie my laughter. Jiiji! God, that just. Makes me think of the Korean word for dirty. The baby word for dirty. Pfft.
Behind me, I can hear the sound of something dying. No. When I turn my head I see that it’s Yamori. Which. I completely forgot he was there (dangerous, I let my guard down). He’s... either resisting the urge to laugh or is exasperated at Naruto. I’m not sure which.

Eventually I calm down. The Hokage, who settles on humoring Naruto, makes us sign a few papers, and then explains that we missed the Academy Opening Ceremony a few days ago. Imagine that. (“I had a grandson. He’s supposed to be graduating from the Academy today. But you—”) We’ll have two days to get used to our new apartment and to rest before we’ll start attending. It’s a bit of a rush, but maybe it’s a sign of what we should expect from a career as shinobi. Short periods of adjustment.

Maybe he thinks the busywork will make us forget what happened to us. It won’t.

But soon we’re walking out of the Hokage’s office, out the building, with our apartment key in hand (one for each of us). Yamori scoops us up, carries us again, jumping across the rooftops. I don’t protest because honestly I’m tired. I feel too drained to do much walking. None of us say anything during the trip, the swooping sensation in my stomach rendering me unable to speak in fear of upchucking. Naruto’s oddly quiet, but maybe that’s to be expected.

I’m too tired to pay attention to what’s happening, and before I know it we’re in an apartment—our apartment, and I’m crawling into a futon. There’s another one next to mine, but Naruto ignores it to crawl into mine as usual. I roll onto my back and I look up at Yamori, his masked face hovering creepily (comfortingly) over us, watching over us as my eyes grow heavier and heavier until—I’m asleep.

|—Demon! You’re supposed to be dead! Why aren’t you dead— |

I’m supposed to be dead why aren’t I dead I remember the numbness and the pain so why does it still hurt why do I keep getting hurt—

We’ll become shinobi—
I had a grandson—

Oh god the pain please let it end just let it end I just want it to end dead I’m supposed to be dead please let this punishment end—

Am I a monster—

Comfort where are you stop the pain please stop it Other oh god why why why—

I can’t feel my fingers—

blooming fire on my cheek—

let it end let it end stop stop stop please why—

You’re weak. Can’t even protect yourself your brother can’t protect anyone. It’s your fault you died you wanted to die you’ll die again and no one will mourn you.

Naruto. Where’s Naruto?

He won’t help you can’t help you because he’s dead you let him die. You killed him.

No. Nonononono stop lying stop it he’s not dead he’s not. I am. Dead. Dead dead dying dead.

Alive living breathing hurting relying on a four year old how pathetic are you so weak so stupid repeating your mistakes over and over—

I’ll get stronger we’ll get stronger. He’ll live living breathing hurting but happy and I’ll be there for him live for him and—
Thankfully our new apartment is nowhere near our old one. Unfortunately, the neighborhood is just as bad. It must have been hard to find a place that’s willing to let us move in, though the Hokage probably started searching (or assigned someone else to search) for a place not long after he heard about what happened.

The complex is five stories, with our apartment on the fourth floor (and isn’t that ominous), room 405. There’s a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen/living room. Which is okay. Except the place is dilapidated, with cracks in the walls and chipping paint, and there’s still no bed. The walls are a yellowish-white from old age and the bedroom door sticks one a bit. At least the place is semi-furnished. In the living room/kitchen is a couch, bookcase, fridge, oven, and dining table with chairs (unlike the floor table we’re used to).

Maybe it’s the morning light. Maybe it’s the situation sinking in, but I just. I don’t know what to do. Half of me wants to curl back up in bed and—cry, or something. The other half wants to go out and just punch something or someone. Just thinking about what happened—no, don’t think about it. Don’t think about it. Don’t don’t don’t it’ll only make things worse and

Dead why aren’t I dead why am I living why is this happening why why—

I don’t know what to do about this place. Where do I even start? There’s a long list of things we’ll need to buy and only so much money. I don’t even really know how to tell if something is reasonably priced or not. There are a few things already, like some toilet paper, toothbrushes and toothpaste, towels, a few kitchen appliances and dishes and utensils (for two four-year-old children to cook), and even some groceries in the fridge. Though I’m tempted to chuck the stuff in the fridge. I don’t know if it’s trustworthy. But would they really try to poison us?

Well....

First, I should probably make a list.

“Naruto!”
“Yeah?” Naruto’s voice comes from our room where he’s doing who-knows-what.

“Can you bring me paper and a pencil?” I ask.

I hear him grumble before there’s the sound of shuffling, then Naruto hops out of the room to me, where I’m sitting in front of the couch, leaning against it. He holds the items out to me, but I only point at the floor in front of me. Naruto sticks his tongue out at me but complies, placing the items down, before sitting down next to me.

“Thanks.”

Picking up the pencil, I write down:

“To Buy: toiletries, clothes, school supplies”

And then I draw a blank. What else? I don’t... I don’t know. I don’t even know if we have enough money to buy everything we need.

“What’cha doing?” Naruto asks as he peeks over my shoulder at my list.

It’s pretty self-explanatory, but I respond anyway. “Making a list of what we need to buy.”

“Oh,” he says. Then, “What’s toi-re-tu-reesu?”

“Toiletries. Bathroom stuff, like shampoo, conditioner, soap, towels.” Next to toiletries, I write the items down as I list them. But, hm. I’d automatically written an English word using kana. Well, at least I’m assimilating?

Is that a good thing?

...Probably. If I don’t assimilate, I’ll only cast suspicions on myself, and who knows what will
happen to me. Being smart is one thing, but knowing things that there’s no way for me to plausibly
know? Previous Hokage’s daughter or not, they’d probably cart me off to T&I. And I don’t want
that. I don’t want to be separated from Naruto. And. If it came down to it, if it really came to it, I
don’t think I’d be able to kill myself, to prevent being tortured, to prevent my knowledge being used
by others.

They’d abuse it. (And you wouldn’t?) I don’t even want it. I don’t want to remember, not the story of
a sister-less Naruto, not the life I had Before. I don’t want any of it. Right now I just want to be
Naruto’s sister, a little girl with no worries. But that’s not what I am, it’s only half the truth.

“Neeeeeeeee-san,” Naruto whines, latching onto my arm and shaking me vigorously. I grunt in
response, wondering if this is what my brother felt like, exasperated and annoyed, but also fond. If
anyone else tried this with me, I’d probably kick their shin. Or something. It’s annoying being short.
Shins are pretty much the only place I can kick. And feet. Not that I’m not used to it. “Nee-san, I’m
hungry!”

Right on cue, I can hear gurgling coming from Naruto’s stomach. It reminds me that we haven’t
eaten anything since.... Since.

I haven’t eaten anything since I was poisoned. I—I don’t. Oh god. No. No no no don’t think about
it.

Naruto. Naruto’s hungry. We should make something to eat. I should? Yeah, because Naruto’s never
cooked before. And. And I might be bad at it, but it’s better than nothing, right? (As long as I don’t
give us food poisoning.)

So I stand up and make my way to the fridge, Naruto excited bounding after me (and that kid
seriously has too much energy), and look at what we have. Eggs, milk, green onions, onion, garlic,
potatoes, some type of meat—beef?—chicken....

I can try making an omelet? I’ve never made one before, but it shouldn’t be too hard, right?

“Put these on the counter;” I tell Naruto as I hand him the milk and green onions.

“Okay!” Naruto shouts enthusiastically.
I can hear him running over to the kitchen counter, even though it’s not that far from us, as I turn my back on him to get the eggs. Hmm. Is two enough? Well, Naruto has a large appetite, so maybe four....

When I glance over at the counter, I realize a glaring miscalculation on my part. I’m not tall enough to reach the counter. Naruto’s barely manages to put the milk on it by standing on his tippy-toes.

Shit.

Now what? Well, there are chairs.... So after putting the eggs on the counter, hoping they won’t roll off, I get Naruto to help me drag a chair over. That helps, but now I realize we can’t even reach any of the bowls or plates.

This. Ugh, this is going to be harder than I thought it would be.

Roughly twenty minutes later, after a harrowing trip half-climbing the shelves, we’re eating slightly bland omelets-turned scrambled eggs. Or, at least Naruto’s eating. I’m just staring at them. Intellectually I know I need to eat, and that it’s highly unlikely that anything was poisoned, that I’m the one who made the food. But the possibility is still there.

But Naruto’s eating and he’s fine. But he was fine last time. But didn’t he have to use the bathroom? So what? All the poison did was give him indigestion? What the fuck!

Letting out a huff of frustration, I start shoveling food into my mouth and force myself to eat. If it’s poisoned, it’s poisoned. If it’s not, then it’s not. I can’t always be cautious of what I eat. And I do need food. You can’t survive without eating. (But do you want to survive?)

I eat roughly half of what’s on my plate before giving up and pushing it away. “Naruto.”

“Mm?” Naruto responds through a mouth full of food.

“Where’s the paperwork? The one the Hokage gave us?” I watch curiously as Naruto pauses mid-chew to think. Eventually he opens his mouth, food half-chewed, to talk. I scrunch my nose up in distaste.
“In our room! I think.”

Letting out a sigh, I reach over to flick Naruto’s nose, practically crawling onto the table to do so. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Naruto’s nose scrunches in pain, reflecting my earlier expression, as his free hand flies up to his nose, a short whine escaping him. I ignore his complaints as I push away from the table and hop out of the chair (and isn’t that a pain in the ass, having to climb onto it and hop off it).

“Oh! Since I made the food, you get to do the dishes!”

“Hey! That’s not fair!”

I don’t bother responding to him.

The walk to our room is short.

Calling our room a “room” is a bit generous. There’s barely enough room for the two futon laid out and the dresser. Though I suppose we can make more room by putting away one of the futon, since we only need one. It’s nice curling up next to Naruto at night because he’s like a furnace and this place doesn’t seem to retain heat very well, especially at night. I woke up a few times last night, shivering (but it might have been from the nightmares the phantom pain the pulling skin on my cheek healing scarring), but Naruto was always a steady warmth next to me.

My feelings about Naruto are a mixed bag. At first, when I didn’t understand what was happening, what had happened, I was grateful for him. He was a steadying presence. Still is. But. But now that I know. Now that I know that I’m alive, now that I know where and when I’m alive... it’s best not to think about it (like everything else? Like Before and Old Lady and the poison in your veins killing you the pain in your cheek the blood the clawing loneliness the cold the pain pain nothingness—).

The folder full of paperwork is on the dresser. Next to it is a coin purse in the shape of a frog. Except I don’t remember receiving one. Did Yamori leave it behind last night? Or did... did someone come in and put it there? Did someone sneak in while we were sleeping? While we were eating?
I hurry over to the window to check it. Unlocked. But was it locked before? I don’t know.

Damn it.

There’s no way to know. Maybe we can set up a warning system, or a trap of some sort, though it’ll have to be benign. Don’t want Naruto to hurt himself with it. But while I’m in here, I might as well investigate the dresser. Who know, maybe there’s clothes or something in there.

As it turns out, there’s a few shirts in one drawer, pants in another, and underwear in the last. Along with, oddly enough, two red scarves. Curious, I touch them. They’re soft, and obviously hand-knit. Where did they come from? Who knit them? Certainly not Yamori. Right? I mean, he doesn’t seem the type....

Pfft. Now I’m imagining him sitting around Anbu headquarters, in his uniform and mask, knitting. I have to bite my knuckle to stop myself from bursting out in laughter. Shit. Bad thought.

Quickly I pick up the coin purse and the folder and escape back into the kitchen/living room. Where Naruto’s making a mess of things. He’s standing on a chair in front of the sink, which is overflowing with water and soap suds.

“Naruto, turn the water off!”

“Sorry!” he yells as he complies. He quickly scrambles off the chair to stand guiltily in front of me, his eyes downcast. His arms and the front of his shirt are completely water-soaked and covered in suds. He’s managed to get some on his chin and forehead, too.

I bite my lip, unsure if I should scold him or laugh. I settle for neither. “Go clean yourself up. I’ll do the dishes.”

Naruto brightens and moves to hug me, but I’m quick to stop him. I don’t want to get wet, too. I watch his retreating back as he runs to our room before turning toward the sink. Water and suds have overflowed onto the floor. I heave a sigh. At least the floor isn’t carpeted.

Today is going to be a long day.
Eventually, we do go out and get some of the things we need—sans clothing since we already have some—though by the end of the trip we’ve blown through most of our budget for the month. I tried to split it up and set aside some of the money we have into categories, such as food, rent, and supplies, but I’ve never been the best at budgeting. Or math. So I don’t know if what we have left will be enough to last us.

Well, if we really need to conserve money, I can go without some things. Like a few meals. But maybe I shouldn’t have let Naruto buy some of the things he did. Like that nightcap that matches the coin purse (which he latched onto as soon as he saw it, proudly proclaiming it as his “Gama-chan”). God, why is this kid so cute! Seriously. I’m having too much trouble saying no to him.

Which is why I’m not so sure about my decision to let him hold onto the money. Not that I’ll be able to separate him from his precious Gama-chan. But I think we were overcharged for about half the stuff we bought.

We’re really going to have to figure out budgeting. Maybe Naruto will have better luck than me? I mean, manga-Naruto successfully lived on his own, so maybe my Naruto will have some of those skills?

...Yeah right. How would that even work? Through some wonky transitive property?

“Hey, Naruto?” I call out to my twin who’s rolling around on the floor, bored out of his mind. He stops mid-roll and tilts his head at me. “We can’t buy anything else this month, okay?”

Naruto’s face scrunches in consideration. “But why?”

“We don’t have a lot of money.”

“We don’t?” Naruto looks confused. He rolls fully toward me and sits up.
I let out a puff of air. “We only get so much each month from the Orphan Stipend.”

“Orphan Stipend?”

“Yeah,” I say with a nod. And wow, this kinda feels like game dialogue or something. A new question for each statement. “Money for people like us, who have no parents and live on their own, instead of in an orphanage.” The paperwork the Hokage gave us covered this, and more.

“Oh.” Naruto looks thoughtful. He sits quietly for a moment, deep in thought. “There are people like us?”

I resist the urge to tense. He’s probably asking because of how the villagers treat us. If there are more people like us, then that should mean there are more people who are treated like us. Which is true, though not in the sense he’s thinking. People don’t treat us badly because we’re orphans (and isn’t that a weird thought, still. Being an orphan. I don’t know what I would have done if I’d been reborn with parents. But that doesn’t mean I agree with Kushina’s and Minato’s actions). People treat us badly because Naruto’s a jinchuuriki. Because they’re assholes.

I can’t tell Naruto any of this, though. He’s too young to understand fully. To keep a secret, because him knowing—me telling him—will have to be a secret. So I can’t tell him. Not yet. Maybe I can test him, tell him a harmless “secret,” see if he tells anyone.

First I’ll have to tell him a half-truth. “There are a lot of orphans. A lot of people died the day we were born, like—like Old Lady’s family.”

Naruto falls silent again, lost in thought. I slump across the couch. Eventually Naruto migrates next to me on the couch, where I lean against him, automatically seeking out his warmth.

We’re silent for a while, both of us deep in thought. After a while, I speak. “Hey, can I tell you a secret?”

“Hm?” Naruto turns his head a little to squint at me.

“When we’re older, I want to write a book.”
Naruto reels back, making me almost fall over. I catch myself by grabbing the back of the couch. “A book? What about becoming a ninja!”

“...I’ll do that too,” I say with a sigh.

I’m sleeping, warm but a bit uncomfortable because this is a new place and it’s so so different from our old place, smaller and older. I’m sleeping, but I’m not.

Because it’s like I’m on the cusp of a realization, like my brain won’t completely shut down, like it’s still gibbering at me, words undecipherable in my sleepiness.

And then I’m not sleeping, because my notes! My god damned notes! I shouldn’t have written them shouldn’t have put them down in words shouldn’t have left them there taped to the bottom of the drawer.

Because—because they’re still there. They’re still there and someone might find them and read them and figure it out because it’s not a hard code and these are shinobi I’m dealing with. Or. Or someone already found them. And they’re already decrypting them.

Which.

What the fuck. What the fuck am I going to do!? What?

_Oh god oh god oh god now what oh god—_
I didn’t get much sleep last night, evidenced by the dark circles under my eyes and the yawns intermittently escaping my mouth. After the freak out over my notes, I panicked for a while about the fact that I’m going to school again. I thought I was done with that and oh god I’m going to be surrounded by kids.

Then after a very short, restless sleep, I’d spent more time than I should have standing in front of the mirror and just staring at my reflection, telling myself: you’re Uzumaki Renge, you have red hair and blue-purple eyes, and you’re four years old. Over and over and over.

Because I still have trouble remembering that that’s who I am now. Sometimes I feel like I’m no one, sometimes I feel like I’m just dreaming this all up. But I know I’m not. The pain I felt, the throbbing scar on my face, hidden behind gauze and tape, the four years of living in this god awful world, tells me that this isn’t a dream.

And it sucks.

Naruto has yet to notice any of this in his excitement, his mouth split in such a wide smile it hurts to look at, incessantly tugging on my hand to get me to move quicker. He’s babbling at a speed too quick for me to follow, though he doesn’t seem to mind my inattention.

Naruto, I’ve learned over the years, is a morning person. I’m not. I certainly wasn’t Before, and even now I find it a struggle to wake up so early in the morning. Naruto’s all too happy to be my alarm clock, jumping on me and shaking me and yelling at me to wake up. Sometimes I think he takes pleasure in my pain.

I wish I can take some of Naruto’s enthusiasm and make it my own. I wish I am excited to go to the Academy. I mean, it’s the place you get to learn to be a ninja! Except. Except it means little kids, belittling teachers who drone on and on, and ugh. The ever so dreaded school work and tests.

(And eventually we’ll all go out and kill kill kill because that’s what ninjas do that’s what we’ll do. For the village—screw the village curse it curse them I won’t be used I won’t be a pawn)

I thought I’d escaped all of that when—when I died. I thought I’d never have to do any more homework, write another essay, or sit through another exam or test. Yet, here I am about to subject myself to more torture.
Not that I have much of a choice.

Eventually we reach the Academy, Naruto dragging me the whole way, where we hesitate. I’m not actually sure what we’re supposed to do now. Where do we go? As we stand there, unsure of what to do, a family walks by to drop of their child.

The child happily chatters with his parents as they stand by the gates, saying their goodbyes. There’s a slight noise from my side.

Oh. Crap.

Naruto.

I instantly turn to look at him, worried. And I’m right. He’s staring at the happy family with a forlorn expression. He... he really wishes he has parents. That he has a family. (But I’m his family! Aren’t I good enough?) I tug on his arm so that he stumbles into me, and wrap my arms around him.

“Nee-san?” I can hear his obvious confusion, making me smile.

I turn my face to whisper into his ear. “I’ll always be here for you, okay?”

I wait for him to nod before I let go and retake his hand. Then I pull us toward the building and inside. I look around for a teacher or a map or something. I quickly spot a map, which we make our way to, before I pull out the sheet of paper with our classroom number on it.

Let’s see.... We’re on first floor and our classroom is on the second. According to the map, we have to go to the end of the hallway and then up the stairs. By the time we get to the stairs, Naruto’s the one who’s pulling me forward. I’m reluctant to go to class.

It’s a bit daunting. All those icky, gross, prepubescent kids. My—our—classmates. Naruto throws open the door in his excitement and barges in without a second thought. There are a few kids in the classroom already, spread throughout the room. A few of them are chatting excitedly, though all activity ceases at Naruto’s loud entrance.
They stare at us, bewildered, not that Naruto notices. I glare at them as Naruto makes his way to take a window seat, dragging me behind him. As soon as we’re seated, Naruto throws open the window and sticks his head out to look around. I grip the back of his pants to make sure he doesn’t fall out, continuing to glare at the others.

No one approaches us, and eventually they go back to what they were doing, though they keep glancing at us intermittently. Eventually Naruto settles into his seat and pulls out a sheet of paper and a pencil to doodle. I take the pencil from him to start up a game of hangman.

More students trickle in as time passes, each one casting curious glances our way. We stick out. We’re at least half a head shorter than the rest of the kids. Some of them are pointing at us and gossiping, no subtly whatsoever. I have to resist the urge to start glaring again. Naruto hasn’t noticed, though.

Eventually the teacher, a portly middle-aged man in typical chuunin clothing, enters. He takes one look at us and his face contorts into something unpleasant. Great. He’s one of them.

I think I might encourage Naruto to make his life hell.

“Naruto, Renge, come here,” he says as he sits at his desk.

Naruto and I share a glance, both reluctant. Standing with a sigh, I make my way slowly to the front, Naruto close behind me. When we get to the teacher’s desk, he looks up from whatever he was looking at, a sneer on his face. I resist the urge to sneer back.

“Something you need?” I ask.

Our teacher presses his lips together in a thin line, irritation written clearly across his face. I bite back a smirk and wait impatiently. Next to me, Naruto fidgets. The man’s eyes flicker toward Naruto at the movement and his face hardens.

“For some reason, the Hokage has deemed you two worthy of being in my class.” He pushes away from his desk to reach down and pick up a stack of books that he places none-too-gently in front of us. Then he places a folder on top of that. “These are for you. We’re already a few days into class so you’re behind your... peers. Try to keep up.”
Then he visibly dismisses us. What an asshole.

I pick up half the stack of books and hand them to Naruto, stopping him from retaliating in any way, and pick up the rest. Then I nudge him back toward our desk. Naruto complies, grumbling under his breath. Once we’re seated again, I take a quick look at the contents of the folder. It contains a syllabus, rules to follow, and a list of optional classes we can sign up for.

Which is interesting, though I’m not sure it’d be worth it to sign up. Not with the village’s general antagonism toward us. I don’t think Naruto would show up for them, anyway. Not unless the subject really interested him. Maybe if they have something on trap-making?

I’ll have to talk to Naruto about it after class. For now, I pass the folder over to Naruto, who went back to doodling, and flip through the text books. From what I can tell, this year will be about teaching basics, such as reading, writing, history, mathematics, and such. Except there will be a general gearing toward Konoha is awesome, being a ninja is awesome, as such propaganda. According to the syllabus, there will also a lot of time spent on physical training, though no actual taijutsu. You can, however, sign up for extra taijutsu classes to take after the Academy lets out for the day.

Soon everyone’s present and the teacher takes roll call and our first lesson starts. Kanji. Joy.

Before we left, I almost forgot to pack us a lunch, though luckily Naruto reminded me. It’s been forever since I had to worry about packed lunches. And now I’m the one who has to make them! Much fun.

Unless I can somehow convince Naruto to make them...? I look over to Naruto, who’s busy stuffing his face with the plain onigiri I made as an after-school snack, and rescind the thought. I don’t think I can particularly trust him with making food. So far he hasn’t been very picky, though he does tend to boycott vegetables. If I leave it to him, we’ll be eating the unhealthiest meals ever. Well, maybe not, since he doesn’t have access to a deep fryer. But I’ve been forcing myself to eat vegetables, so Naruto has to suffer—I mean, enjoy—them, too!

Naruto notices me looking at him and smiles with his mouth full of food. I crinkle my nose in
disgust.

“Eat with your mouth closed.”

Naruto just rolls his eyes at me and sticks his tongue out. I snatch one of the onigiri off his plate in retaliation.

“Hey!” he shouts, reaching out for the food in my hand. I lick all over it before he can get his hands on it. It’s his turn to crinkle his nose. “Ewwww!”

I smirk at him and shove part of the onigiri into my mouth so I don’t have to say anything. I soon lose myself in thought again.

Not only was class boring, but the teacher sucks, too. He made his hatred of Naruto so obvious. Even the other students picked up on it! All those eyes, watching us and judging us, wondering just what was so wrong about us, about Naruto, that the teacher hates us.

As if it isn’t bad enough that their parents are going to warn them about us, now that they know Naruto and I are in their class. Ha. I bet all those parents are panicking. They were probably secure in the knowledge that their children would have nothing to do with us, would never have to interact with us.

Yeah, well, screw them. And screw that teacher. I’ll show them, I’ll—

“Nee-san!”

I look up from where I was staring vacantly at the now empty plate. Naruto is bouncing in his seat, excited. “What?”

“Let’s go out and play!” And he’s starting to give me those puppy-dog eyes, preempting my curt refusal.

I don’t particularly want to go outside. I don’t want to play. I just really want to curl up in bed with a book or something. At least get a head start on our homework, or something. I want to be proficient
enough that the teacher won’t be able to pick on and humiliate me—*us*, because I won’t let Naruto fall behind.

But I’ve always been a procrastinator at heart, so I easily cave. The first week should be easy work, anyway.

“Fine, let’s go.”

“Yes!”

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

1 A shortened/slang version of ojiisan (grandfather) which can be taken to be insulting, derogatory, or a familiar way to refer to your grandpa, depending on the context. Jiji is a baby-talk word for dirty in Korean, though it normally means support.

Oh god, that scene with the Hokage is so horrible. So, so horrible. It doesn’t help that half the time Renge’s completely misreading him. Renge goes into that conversation with the opinion that the Hokage is a horrible person (because of his handling of their situation). But the truth is, the Sandaime is a bit of an optimist (which might have been what originally influenced Naruto into being an optimist). More than that, though, he is “the Professor,” someone who was Hokage for a long time, retired, and became Hokage again. He needs to be optimistic to keep his sanity. And he truly does want what’s best for Naruto and Renge, though since he’s a lifetime shinobi, what he considers is the best differs vastly from Renge.

I hope that clears up some of the weirdness of the scene. I might have to go back and edit it later.

So, I keep getting ideas for this story that changes so much of what I originally had planned, and it keeps becoming more and more canon divergent. Maybe I should have wrote this in the summary: In which I endeavor to completely ruin the Naruto storyline and no one’s here to stop me. I think I need to be slapped.

Quick question: Someone commented that they want to see other peoples’ POV. I already have some intermissions I’m planning on writing and posting either at the end of chapters or collected together in a separate chapter. What do you guys think?
God school is boring. This is all easy, kiddy stuff (much learning, wow, so facts). I really wish I had a laptop or a phone or a book, or something. Anything to alleviate the boredom.

Oooh! I could try and make a code so that Naruto and I can converse without words! That’d be fun. We can like, tap codes. Or maybe use sign language. Or body language. (And maybe one day we’ll actually be able to talk just by looking at each other.) That’d be so cool. I just need to run it through Naruto when we get home.

But for now I’m still super bored. At the front of the classroom, our teacher what’s-his-face drones on, trying to teach a bunch of stupid brats how to do math. *Now Timmy, what does three plus five equal?* Wait, damn it. No one’s named Timmy in this ‘verse. Um. Kensuke?

Wow, way to ruin your own attempt at mocking someone. *Help.* I need adult conversation partners STAT. I think my snark’s disappearing. Hard to keep being sarcastic around a kid who takes almost everything you say at face value.

Hmm. Maybe I can teach Naruto the art of being a dick. A smart-mouthed dick. *(Be a penis, Naruto. Be a fucking penis. But not a fucking penis. Gross.)* Not like an Uchiha. Screw them.

And fuck this shit. This is *so boring.* So. Boring.

*(Monotony days months years learning nothing wasting money wasting wasting away washing away blurring pain bringing pain is pain)*

I take a loose sheet of paper and decide to make a paper crane out of it, folding it as carefully as I can with my chubby hands. And then another. And another. And then I make smaller ones because these
are too big and the teacher’s bound to notice them if I keep piling them next to me. Thank god for these lecture hall-type classrooms; it’s easy to hide what I’m doing under the desk (and wow that kinda sounds perverted what the fuck).

Naruto’s dozing next to me, so I put some paper cranes on his lap, but my other seatmate (who took the seat very reluctantly. His fault for being late. Not like I want anyone sitting next to me) is giving me the stink eye. I think he’s contemplating telling the teacher. So I give him my best, widest smile, and bare my teeth. He flinches away and turns back to look at the front and doesn’t dare look at me again.

Huh.

Just how is that threatening? I’m two years younger than him, for Christ’s sake! I guess that “Demon Brats” rumor/gossip comes in handy, sometimes.

But god, come on! Let class be over already! Lunch naow! I’m really fucking hungry.

Just as I’m contemplating chucking my paper cranes at people, the bell rings. Naruto shoots up, startled awake, and mumbles, “Huh? Wha?”

“Lunchtime,” I reply, stuffing my books and notebooks and paper cranes into my backpack.

“Oh.”

Naruto slumps back over the desk, blinking away his tiredness. I roll my eyes at him and toss him his bag, which he’d never bothered unpacking. I don’t blame him, though. Everything we’re being “taught” is stuff I already know, that Yamori and I taught Naruto. It’s actually a bit surprising that much of what we taught him actually stuck (which goes to show how low of an opinion I have of Naruto’s intelligence. Though, can you blame me? The Naruto I read about wasn’t very smart... which was probably a product of child negligence, the fuckers). But no brother of mine is going to be stupid. Not if I can help it. It’s the kind of help and support I used to wish for, the kind canon-Naruto probably never got. But canon-Naruto and my Naruto are two different people, so why the fuck am I even thinking about it.

Pulling Naruto up by his arm, I drag him out of the classroom. We’re the last to leave. And the only ones to take our bags with us, but that’s because we’ve learned our lessons. Kids can be absolutely horrible. I’ve always known this intellectually, but to actually experience it?
The first time we left our bags unattended, we returned to see the contents completely ruined and tossed all over the place. One of our textbooks ended up on the roof. And then we were fined for replacement textbooks, like it’s our fault we’re surrounded by snot-nosed brats. *(I’ll kill them the fuckers how dare they screw them.)*

Once we’re outside, Naruto starts leading the way to our corner of the courtyard. (For some reason, the Academy doesn’t have a lunchroom. I say “our corner,” but really it’s just the only tree we can climb. It gives us a small viewing vantage over everyone else and keeps us out of reach of the goblin-children. Naruto climbs first with me supporting him from underneath, then he reaches down and helps me up. We make ourselves as comfortable as we can get, me deliberately not looking down, because of fucking heights, and open our bento.

Today I made bibim-kimbap, or at least the closest facsimile to it as I can make it this ‘verse. Imagine my surprise when I found something similar to gochujang while out grocery shopping. Sadly it’s not as spicy as I would like it to be because this body isn’t used to spicy foods. I’m also gradually working on getting Naruto to eat more spicy foods, but he doesn’t seem to enjoy it as much as I do. Pity.

And sure enough, Naruto lets out a whine. “Spicy food again?”

“Yeah, well yesterday we ate fish because you wanted it, so don’t complain.” *Because I really fucking hate fish.*

Luckily this body isn’t like my old one, where so many foods made me gag, otherwise I wouldn’t be able to eat much. Especially since my cooking skills are pretty much nonexistent. Unless it’s something I’ve made multiple times Before. Like kimbap. And bibimbap. Hence the bibim-kimbap.

Ugh, just leave me be Korean in this world without Koreans. Half-Korean. Bleh, technicalities. Not that it matters anymore. Since, you know, I died. (And here a roll my eyes at myself.)

Naruto grumbles to himself, but starts to dutifully eat. We sit in blessed silence for a few minutes as we stuff ourselves with our not-spicy-enough food, me willfully ignoring the sounds of children running around nearby. Unfortunately, our peace doesn’t last.

Something slams into the tree, making us rock precariously. I grip the tree branch with one hand, my other going out to grab Naruto, which unfortunately leaves my bento unguarded. I mourn its passing as it falls off my lap.
“Augh!”

“Oh no! Michiko!”

I can hear someone, but I ignore them. As soon as we stop shaking, I turn to Naruto.

“Are you okay?”

Except Naruto’s peering down, disregarding our close call. I bite back a sigh and look down too. Below us is a group of three girls, all of whom I have never seen before. Two of them are hovering worriedly around the third who has... oh. My bento landed on her. She has seaweed and red grains of rice on her head.

Involuntarily, I let out a snort. Well. At least my food didn’t go to complete waste.

One of the girls looks up at my noise, startled, as if just remembering that Naruto and I are here. Like they didn’t deliberately come here and what? Kick the tree? Shake it? ...Maybe we should switch to a sturdier tree.

“You!” the girl shouts.

“Yes?” Naruto and I say in stereo in an unplanned in-sync twin-speak. (And I will never think that again.) We look at each other and grin, because that’s never happened before, and how cool is that?

The other two girls are staring at us too, now. All three of their faces are red in rage. The girl who’s wearing my lunch stomps her foot and points dramatically up at us.

“You! Look what you did!”

“You mean, look at what I did,” I correct automatically. “And I’m not the one who did that. It’s the fault of whoever made me drop it, because it was either me or my lunch that was going to fall, and it definitely wasn’t going to be me. Ergo you. Or one of your posse.”
Gradually, their faces turn more and more red. One of the girls, Lefty (the girl on the left), scrunches her face in confusion. Righty adopts a defensive pose. Accidentally, Naruto elbows me, his body shaking from ill-concealed laughter.

Lunch-face stomps her foot again and opens her mouth, but I cut her off before she can say anything. “Did you need something? Or did you just want to show us how much of an obnoxious little snot you are? Because we’ve got better things to do.”

I turn away from them to pull Naruto’s and my backpacks off of the branch above us, ignoring the sounds of frustration coming from below us, and hand Naruto his. Naruto looks at me curiously, but I just point down, motioning for him to get down. He jumps down effortlessly, the bastard, while I’m left to scrabble without looking down.

I’m almost completely down when something jerks me backwards, making me fall and land on my backpack. I’m stunned, breathless and in pain, my eyes screwed shut. Fucking hell. Mother fucker! I’ll kill that fucking bitch!

There’s a shout. “Nee-san!” Sound of flesh hitting flesh, a girl screaming, someone calls out: “Sensei!”

Roll onto my side, curl into a ball (painpainshit that fucking hurts), squint my eyes open. Lunch-face on the ground, screaming, clawing at... Naruto? Naruto, with his hands in Lunch-face’s hair, pulling, pulling. Defending me?

“Sensei!” someone shouts again.

Sound of footsteps, running. Toward us. I push myself up, carefully, suck in a deep breath through teeth clenched in pain. Tears sting at the corners of my eyes but I will them away. One of the teachers rush into view, harried face turned murderous as he pulls Naruto off Lunch-face. Naruto detaches with a clump of hair in his hands, snarl on his face. Struggles in the teacher’s grip. Lunch-face cries, gets swarmed by Lefty and Righty.

I struggle to my feet, hunched over, back burning in pain. Naruto sees me, renews his struggles to get to me. “Let go!” he shouts. “Nee-san!”

Keeps shouting. A hand goes up to cover his mouth, but Naruto bites it. The teacher lets go of him,
 cursing. Naruto rushes to me, grips me tight, makes me hiss in pain. He pulls away but keeps a hold on my hand. The teacher marches over to us, steaming. His hand goes up, palm flat and tensed and —

“What is going on here?” Yamori’s familiar voice washes over us.

After a very tense visit to the school nurse, who confirmed I have bruises on my back and that I need to be very careful (like I didn’t know that already), with Yamori guarding us, we’re sent to the Teacher’s Office. Waiting for us is a group of six: our teacher, the teacher who almost slapped Naruto (the fucker), the three girls, and another person. A female chuunin; probably the three girls’ teacher. Lunch-face (fucking bitch) no longer has the rest of my lunch on her. Parts of her face and clothes are wet from her attempts at getting it off, though she still has some red stains. Her hair is mussed and tangled from Naruto’s attempt to de-hair her. A brief feeling of vindictive satisfaction surges through me. Naruto attacked her for me!

As soon as she sees us, Lunch-face makes a face as if she smelled something horrible and starts shouting. “You! This is all your fault!”

She moves to start stomping toward us, but Lefty reaches out to hold her back, one hand gripping the other girl’s shoulder.

“Michiko,” Lefty says hesitantly. “Michiko, stop.”

“It’s true!” Righty butts in, scowling. “Why are little kids in the Academy! Demon brats!”

What? Where does this bitch get off calling us demons? She’s the demon, throwing me off like that. I could have been seriously injured! And what was she planning to do to Naruto?

I squeeze Naruto’s hand tightly, moving to stand slightly in front of him, and ready myself to retaliate. But Yamori’s hand on my head stops me. He steps in front of us, obscuring us (protecting us), but not blocking our view, and doesn’t say anything. He... isn’t looking at the girls. Instead, his
body is angled toward the teachers.

Curiosity shines through my rage, stopping me from saying anything. I follow his gaze to try and discern what he’s seeing. Naruto steps closer to me; I absentmindedly squeeze his hand. I take a deep breath and try to remove myself from the situation, calm myself. Observe.

Our teacher looks impassive, surprisingly. (Or not so surprisingly, since he probably agrees with the Brat Brigade.) The asshole who raised a hand against Naruto just looks angry, with a glower on his face. His arms are crossed and his fists are clenched tightly. The woman is looking at the three girls, an odd look on her face.

She interrupts the squabbling girls. “Where did you hear that?” All three girls quiet, glancing at each other in confusion.

“Hear what, sensei?” Lefty speaks up.

Their teacher clears her throat, throws Yamori a nervous glance. “The... uh, ‘demon brats.’” Her voice tapers as she looks anywhere but at me and Naruto.

I look more closely at her, curious. She looks nervous, uncertain. She keeps shooting Yamori nervous glances. Why...? Oh, because they’re her students, and she’ll get in trouble because of them, if Yamori informs the Hokage. (If.) But it’s not her fault....

Is it?

As much as I’d like to assume only their parents poison their already mush minds, there is the possibility that their teacher had a hand in their attitude toward us. As evidenced by our class, where our teacher makes obvious his dislike of us and our classmates are starting to follow his cue.

What makes this whole situation worse is that it’s only been five days since we started here.

My attention falls back onto the girls when Lunch-face starts talking.

“Daddy calls them ‘demon brats.’ Says they shouldn’t be allowed in po-lite com-pa-ny.” She says
the last two words slowly, uncertainly, like she’s never said them before. (God, just how stupid is she?) Then she perks back up. “He says they should just die.”

What.

_Fuck you why don’t you die you deserve death you and your dad just go—I take another deep breath. Exhale slowly. Naruto crowds me, pushes closer to Yamori, grips his cloak. Yamori reaches back slowly to pat Naruto’s head reassuringly._

Rightly nods along with what Lunch-face says, but Lefty starts to look nervous. She subtly backs away from Lunch-face.

“Michiko,” she whispers, but Lunch-face pays her no mind.

Their teacher’s spine stiffens. Her hands form fists. She looks toward Yamori, face grim. Behind her, our teacher’s impassive façade falters. A sneer forms on his lips for a second, before he schools his face. But it’s long enough for me to notice. For Yamori to notice. The other male teacher hunches into himself, a little, finally realizing that things are not going well for the anti-Naruto-and-Renge side.

“I apologize for my students’ behavior,” their teacher says. She doesn’t take her eyes off of Yamori as she speaks. Lunch-face looks stunned. Righty’s face crumples into confusion. Lefty just backs away even more. “It was very unbecoming of them. They will be punished accordingly. I will also speak to their parents.”

Yamori is silent for a moment. Then he gives a brief nod, followed by a head shake.

“I am not the one who deserves apologies.”

The female teacher stiffens as Yamori takes a step aside to stop shielding us. Eventually she drags her eyes down toward us, as if she forgot we are here, or she wanted to forget. She gives a shallow nod. Takes a deep breath.

“I’m sorry.”
Apology accepted. Is what I should say. But I don’t want to accept her apology. I shouldn’t have to. She’s not the one who did anything wrong. She’s not the one who tried to makes us fall out of a tree, or throw me to the ground, or try to slap Naruto.

But Naruto beats me to the punch.

“You don’t need to say sorry!” he shouts, indignant. His face is scrunched up in frustration. Then he points toward Lunch-face and her cohorts. “They do! They hurt nee-san!”

Lunch-face’s expression contorts as she winds herself up to launch into what’s probably a bitch-fest, but her teacher stops her.

“You’re right,” she says, ignoring Lunch-face’s gawping. She turns a stern look onto the three. Lunch-face puffs up, but Righty shrinks away. “Apologize.”

“But—”

“Apologize. Now.”

The other teacher, not ours, fidgets uncomfortably as the silence stretches. Eventually, Lunch-face lets out a noise of frustration and glares at us, biting out an apology.

“Sor-ry.”

Lefty and Righty echo her, Righty in a mumble. Their teacher gives Lunch-face a gimlet-eyed stare. She looks dissatisfied (I am, too). Lunch-face squirms under the look.

Finally, she breaks. “I’m sorry, okay! Happy? I’m telling Daddy about this!”

Then she storms out of the room. Righty hesitates for a moment before following her. Letting out a sound of exasperation, their teacher rushes after them.

“Michiko! Kaoru! Come back here, right now!”
Lefty stays behind, however. She fidgets with her fingers, looks up at Yamori curiously, before sliding her gaze toward me and Naruto, and flinching away.

“Um,” she mumbles. “I—really am sorry, okay? I didn’t know. Michiko—she said she wanted to talk!”

I don’t say anything. I don’t know what she wants me to say. It’s okay? It’s not your fault you’re friends with such a horrible person? Naruto doesn’t say anything, either. He looks confused, uncertain. He sneaks a glance at me, as if asking what to do. I bite back a noise of frustration. Of course, it’s me who has to take the lead.

“Okay.”

It’s all I can manage to say. Lefty wilts a little, but she also nods in acceptance. She probably realizes it’s all she’ll get out of us.

Our teacher interrupts the awkward exchange with a loud sigh as he walks toward us. Yamori’s left hand, the one closest to us, twitches minutely.

“Alright, let’s get to class. The bell’s about to ring,” says our teacher as he ushers us out without touching us.

Naruto makes a noise of protest, craning his neck back to look at Yamori. “But what about—”

“Class, D—Naruto,” our teacher bites out, stumbling awkwardly over Naruto’s name.

As we exit out into the hallway, I turn to get one more look at Yamori. He stands in the same position, unmoving, staring at the only other person left.

And then there was one.
Having decided not to sign up for any after-school classes, Naruto and I head straight home after class.

When we get to our apartment, I find a note written by our landlord slipped under our door. In it is information on how much the rent is and when it’s due. I set the money aside (actually, I get Naruto to do it, since he insists on taking care of the money) so that we don’t accidentally spend our rent. I’m not sure how we’re going to last with the amount of money we have left over. Already we’re running short. If only people didn’t overcharge us....

I let out a sigh, determined not to let my thoughts consume me, and look down at the homework I’ve been steadily working on. And resist the urge to scowl.

After class, we were originally going to go to the shopping district and try and set up some trip wire we scavenged the other day. But now that I’m injured (again), that’s out. It’s too bad; I was looking forward to it.

And we’ve got to use some of the things we scrounged up, just yesterday, from an empty training field. The kunai are too big for our puny, pudgy hands and the shuriken are just too fucking pointy, so there’s no way I’m letting either of us handle them. Not until we’re older.

I’ve never done anything like that before. I mean, c’mon. Trip wire. For once, I’m no longer the girl who trips over her own feet. Well. Still kinda am, but that’s because I’m so tiny, okay! And some people just like tripping us up. You would think, now that we’re officially on our way to becoming professional killers, that people would be a bit wary of getting on our bad side.

Apparently not. Or maybe they’re just stupider than I thought.

But....

Now I can have hella fun watching other people trip.

Except not, because I’m injured. I don’t get why they couldn’t just use iryou ninjutsu and heal it up.
Maybe I’ll ask Yamori later.

Actually.

Will I even see Yamori later? That was the first time we’ve seen him since... *(pain sharp blooming pain bleeding can’t move)* since we moved into our apartment. Is he still guarding us? If so, why hasn’t he revealed himself to us? Why did he *wait* until Naruto almost got slapped?

Maybe he isn’t guarding us anymore. Maybe he just sensed Naruto’s distress (how?) and showed up with *impeccable* timing. Who’s guarding us, then? *Is* anyone guarding us?

*Maybe you should stop thinking and start focusing on your homework.*

I bite back a sigh.

Right. Homework. The bane of my existence. The easiest and most annoying fucking thing I’ll be doing for the next few years. The only new thing I’ve learned, so far, is that Naruto and I need to *exercise* more instead of just running around. Plenty stamina, no strength. At least I got to sit out from PT today.

For now, I’ve been steadily working through my kanji workbook. I want to get through it as quickly as I can, learn as much as I can, because I need a larger *reading* and writing vocabulary. So that I can read more complicated books. I’m tired of reading children-level stories. I’m tired of having so much limited access to knowledge. I need to be able to read more before I try going to the library again. What’s the use of having a book if you can’t read it?

Kana was definitely easier to learn, though I still have trouble with it sometimes, but kanji’s a bitch.

I’m still surprised I learned how to read and write Japanese (kana and kanji), especially with how horrible my memory used to be. Learning Spanish was easy enough at first because it uses the same characters as English. But Korean.... It’s hard to call yourself Korean when you can barely write in the language. I blame all the American schooling.

Not that any of that matters anymore. (And I ignore the pang in my chest that thought causes, because it’s true.) But this body—Renge’s body—*my* body, and that’s still a weird thought, is different.
(Stupid stupid little girl why won’t you use your brains do your homework get better grades earn lots of money why have kids if they won’t support you why bother—)

But maybe I’m smarter now because I’ve been using this brain a lot since I was… reborn. The brain is a muscle, too.

Actually, that would explain a bit about Naruto, too.

Across from me, Naruto is working on the history homework I finished yesterday. He’s squinting down at the book in front of him, flipping through the pages while looking up the answer to whatever question he’s working on.

(Not that he’s the studious type. I have to regularly bribe and goad him into doing his work. After that disastrous try at doing the dishes, Naruto loathes doing them. Which is why I have him do it. I hate doing the dishes, too. And anyway, I do all the cooking. I don’t really trust Naruto to be able to cook something edible.)

You would think learning the history of what you once thought of as a fictional world would be interesting (or at least more interesting than the history classes you used to take). But it isn’t, at all. It’s just as boring. Worse, because it’s all kiddy stuff. And propaganda. Which really shouldn’t surprise me. The only interesting part is parsing through the information we’re given to try and find a kernel of truth.

It’s a bit disgusting, actually. Witnessing just how biased all these accounts are. How much false information is being spread as truth. The only problem is that I don’t know what’s true, either. I can make guesses, but that’s all they are: guesses.

But I wish they would teach us about the Uzumaki clan or Uzushiogakure. Wasn’t Konoha allied with them? And their jinchuuriki so far have all been Uzumaki members. I want to learn more about the clan this body of mine comes from.

I only know a few things. That they were known for their fuuinjutsu, longevity, fast healing, and having lots of chakra. Also those chakra chains, right? I know Kushina had them, at least.

I want to know what I can use. What to expect.
And.

The one thing I dread above all is the longevity. Uzumaki Mito lived from the founding of Konoha to sometime in Kushina’s youth. She outlived her husband, her children, and probably even her grandson, Nawaki or whatever his name is. (Was.) And Kushina survived the extraction of Kurama, which most jinchuuriki cannot survive. Doesn’t Naruto survive it, too? But Gaara died from it.

But these are all events from a manga. Who knows how much of what I know/read is accurate? The mangaka was only human. And how did he even get his hands on the knowledge of this world?

*Ugh.* Thinking about it hurts my brain.

Longevity, though. It’s something I don’t want, something I never wanted. Even Before, I could never picture myself living until thirty. I once jokingly imagined I’d kill myself before reaching fifty. And maybe it’s my morbid humor, but I have to stop myself from laughing. Because I died before I turned twenty-five.

Died.

*Ha.*

And now look at me.

I’m not even sure how long I’ll live this time (*why bother why live*). Not with so many overpowered people, so many enemies Konoha has. Naruto will have. And I don’t want that for Naruto. Fighting and fighting and losing all those people he... loves? Likes? His “friends.” It’s one of the many reasons I just want to take Naruto and leave.

But I don’t want to risk losing him. I don’t want to risk him rejecting me. (*Even though there’s the possibility he’ll reject me, anyway.*)

I hope to at least live long enough to see Naruto have a wife and kids, or something. Maybe a boyfriend instead? I don’t know what Naruto’s sexual preference is. (Will be?) Just. As long as it’s not Sasuke, I’m fine with whoever. But if it is Sasuke.... I’ll have to kill the Uchiha, last of his clan or
“Neeeee-san,” Naruto whines, breaking me from my thoughts.

“Hm?” I look up to see Naruto sprawled across the table and his homework, arms stretched out to try and reach me. My lips quirk up into a half smile.

“I’m boooooooored!”

Picking up my pencil, I poke at his fingers. “Did you finish your homework?”

Naruto pushes himself back up and nods enthusiastically. “Yeah! So let’s play!”

I bite my lip. He’s done already? Well....

I should check it over.

“Let me see,” I demand, holding my hand out.

Naruto pouts at me but complies. With just one glance I can tell he’s half-assed it. His handwriting is sloppier than usual and the first answer is incorrect. I look at Naruto with an unimpressed expression, except he counters it with his hopeful one, eyes wide and shining. Guh.

I have to look away quickly. Shit. Why can’t I resist those eyes!?

“Why don’t you get the groceries while I mark your answers?” Which isn’t what he wants to hear, evidenced by his downtrodden expression. I send him a smirk. “Next time, put more effort into this, okay?” And I wave the sheets of paper at him.

“Fiiiiine,” he whines again, pouting. But he’s quick to bound out of his chair and toward the door.
“Don’t forget the list!”

Naruto skids to a stop, turns around, and snatches the list pinned to the fridge. Then he rushes out, shouting a quick, “Bye!”

I sigh and go back to correcting Naruto’s homework.

Not even half of it’s correct. He really didn’t put much effort into it. I really wish he would, though. (Like you did? Lazy, procrastinator. Skipping class, not doing homework. How did you manage like you did? Did you really think you would be able to graduate college like that?) I’m trying. I’m different from how I used to be. I’m making sure I’m different. It helps that the schoolwork is easy. So far we’ve been working on the basics: reading, writing, math, and history, with PT every day (which sucks but is probably a good thing).

But—it’s so silent, without Naruto. I’m not used to it being so silent. I don’t want it to be silent. Which is.

I used to love the silence (Not the Silence, though. Creepy buggers). I used to hate it when my dad wouldn’t shut up, when he would watch TV shows for hours and hours and there was no silence. But now the silence hurts. It makes me think. And remember.

And I remember. My hand rises unbidden to touch the gauze taped over the scar on my right cheek. I haven’t had the courage to look at it yet. Naruto insists on taking care of it. He probably blames himself. I don’t blame him, though. It’s Old Lady’s fault.

It’s my fault. I should have realized something was wrong. I never trusted her, never liked her. The way she treated us.... But I still ate the food she made! I thought she wouldn’t do anything too bad, wouldn’t want to risk it. (Like what she did wasn’t bad enough? Like the way she treated Naruto—treated us—was in any way okay, as long as she didn’t cross a line?)

And now—now I’ve let Naruto go outside on his own! Damn it! What was I thinking? Where is he? I close my eyes and breathe deeply and concentrate. And I feel for him.

There. Not too far away, on the stairs a floor below. He should be back soon. Except—something’s wrong. Kurama’s chakra feels agitated.
I quickly hop down from the chair and rush out of the apartment, not bothering to close the door. When I turn to make my way toward the stairs, what I see makes me stop.

Naruto’s at the top of the stairs, bag of groceries gripped tightly in his right hand. His left is pressed against his forehead. That isn’t what makes me stop, though. It’s the girl crouching in front of Naruto. I can see her mouth moving, but I can’t hear what she’s saying. And she’s too close to Naruto.

“What happened?” I shout, rushing toward him. Both Naruto and the girl look toward me, my brother with a frown pulling down the sides of his lips. I push my way between the two, taking the bag from Naruto so that I can grip his hand.

My twin’s face twists into exasperation. “Nee-san!”

I’m about to turn my face away from him to glower at the girl, who is still too close, when I get a good look at Naruto’s forehead. He’s holding a handkerchief in place. My face contorts into a scowl that I direct toward the girl who... actually looks concerned for Naruto.

“What happened?” I bite out without taking me eyes off her, though my question is for Naruto.

“Dunno,” the girl responds instead, her brows furrowing as she peers cautiously at me.

I grit my teeth. “I wasn’t asking you.” As her face turns from cautious to something else (I don’t know what, though), I glance at Naruto. He’s scowling at me. “Well?”

Except he doesn’t answer me, instead turning his face away. His ears turn red, however. Doesn’t matter, though. I can guess what happened. I throw one last glance at the girl before dragging Naruto back toward our apartment. Naruto makes a noise of protest, grumbling under his breath, but I ignore him.

As soon as we’re inside, I make sure to close and lock the door and set the bag of groceries down. Then I examine Naruto more closely. His knees are scuffed and there’s dirt all over the front of his shirt and pants. Biting back a sigh, I pull Naruto into the bathroom.

We don’t say anything as I pull out the first aid kit, but when I try to pull the handkerchief away from him, he pulls away. For a second, I’m shocked into silence.
Impatient, I bite out his name, “Naruto.”

“No,” he says, frowning at me. “Why were you mean to her? She was just being nice! She gave me this!”

He pulls the handkerchief away from his forehead and waves it around to make his point, but all I can focus on is the revealed bloody gash. Reflexively, I suck in a breath. I take my chance and use the disinfectant wipe, holding his head in place with my other hand, lest he tries to flinch away (which he does). But when I wipe away the blood, all I see is a mostly-healed scab. I almost frown at the sight. Sometimes it’s easy to forget that he heals so quickly.

Pulling away, I slap an adhesive bandage (since they aren’t called Band-Aids here) onto the scab.

Naruto rears back, a hand going up to rub the spot. “Ow.”

“Just because she was nice doesn’t mean she can be trusted.”

Naruto squints at me. He hops down from the toilet seat he was sitting on and watches me as I put away the kit. He’s silent as we make our way back into the kitchen and as I put away the groceries we won’t need for dinner. He sits at the table, staring down at it. I pull out the rest of the ingredients.

I’m scowling at a mushy tomato when he speaks up. “But how do you know she can’t be trusted?”

“How do you know she can be?” I respond automatically, then bite my lip.

Because.

I’m infecting Naruto. My negative thoughts, my distrustful nature, I’m affecting Naruto. I’m making him question things he normally wouldn’t. And though in some ways it can be good, is this really what I want for him? To not be able to trust anyone? (Like me?) What if he comes to distrust me?

“Just... be careful. Maybe she can be trusted. Who knows.”
We’re silent again. In the silence, the sound of me dragging a chair over to the sink is dramatically loud. As I wash the vegetables, I bite my lip again and curse myself mentally. I really am a bad influence, aren’t I? I’ll have to watch what I say around him. God, where’s a parental figure when you need one?

I shake my head to rid myself of these thoughts and turn back to making dinner. “Fix your homework.”

Naruto groans and grumbles, but ultimately complies.

My worries about the notes, it seems, are unfounded. Or they’re worse. I’m not sure which it is yet.

But here I am, staring at my “coded” scribblings, and wondering what the fuck. Because.

Because today Yamori came over. Except not as Yamori.

It’s the first weekend since we started at the Academy. I’m standing in front of the stove, wondering what the hell I’m going to cook, Naruto whining from his position slumped over the table, when there’s a knock. At the door. I startle so badly I almost ram into the counter.

Naruto, on the other hand, perks his head up like a dog and stares wide-eyed at the door. Before I can shout out a warning, he’s up and opening it. We never have visitors, and I know he’s just a kid, but that might be an enemy!

So I rush right after him to see him blinking up, mouth agape, at a tall man with spiky brown hair and dark eyes, with a puckered scar on the left side of his face and across the bridge of his nose, staring down at Naruto, brows furrowed. He’s wearing the standard Konoha shinobi attire and has a backpack over his shoulders and a grocery bag (or so I assume, going by the green onions poking out of it) in one of his hands.
I stand next to Naruto, reaching out to grip his hand tightly. “Can we help you?”

The man blinks slowly at me, brows still furrowed, and gives a short nod.

“My name is Namiashi Raidou,” he says, voice gentle and unhurried (*why does it sound familiar I’ve never met this man before*). He’s probably worried about startling us, since I’m doing nothing to hide how tense I am and Naruto’s starting to pick up on that. “The Hokage has assigned me to regularly review your situation... living without a caretaker.”

My brows furrow. He’s here to check up on us? Of course. That was part of the agreement. And the Hokage probably doesn’t trust us to take proper care of ourselves. Which.

Well.

So maybe I’m not the best of caretakers. And I’m in a child’s body. So. Valid point?

But before I can say anything, Naruto shakes himself out of his stupor, shouting:

“You’re Yamori!” (1)

Both my and Raidou’s (*Yamori’s?*) eyes widen at the declaration.

Yamori? Really?

But—

Well. Hm. His voice sounds familiar. And on further inspection, he *is* around the same height. And the hair’s similar. And his reaction....

But how does Naruto know?
“How?” Raidou blurts out. He straightens, stepping inside uninvited (rude) and closing the door behind him, forcing Naruto and I back into the living room.

The Anbu pulls a slip of paper from his pouch and places it on the door, sending a pulse of chakra through it. When he removes his hand, the paper sticks.

Fuuinjutsu?

What is that, a secrecy seal? Which makes sense, actually. Because Naruto just blurted out Yamori’s codename for anyone to hear. But now I stand awkwardly in the middle of the apartment, hand still clutching Naruto’s, warily watching someone who….

I don’t know anymore.

The Hokage’s spy (because why else an Anbu)? Or are they genuinely concerned for us? And that’s why the Hokage assigned someone familiar to us. Even if normally we would’ve never known that we know him. I don’t—I don’t know.

But Naruto’s excited to see Yamori again, bouncing on the heels of his feet, watching Yamori—Raidou—with wide eyes. Raidou rubs the back of his neck, glancing at Naruto in consideration.

“Naruto,” he begins, his lips twitching down into a frown. “How do you know I’m Yamori?”

And Naruto is so eager to answer.

“I recognized you!”

Which. Ha.

“How did you recognize me?” Raidou asks as he quirks a half-smile.

Confused, Naruto tilts his head and glances at me out of the corner of his eye. I just shrug. I’m curious, too.
“Well,” he says hesitantly. “Your voice—it’s the same, right? And so is your height, and your smell, and you look the same, too! Just in different clothes.” Here, his brows furrow. “Hey, why are you in different clothes? Where’s your mask? Oh—I can see your face!”

The same—really? I thought...

I’ve been underestimating Naruto. He probably has enhanced senses because of Kurama. Ugh, why haven’t I thought about that?

And why haven’t I noticed any of the things Naruto pointed out? I mean, sure the smell thing is impossible for me (or is it? Can you train that?), but what about his voice or his height, or even the way he carries himself?

...I really need to train my awareness. Ninja skills, damn it. I need them.

But Raidou just blows out a breath of frustration. He doesn’t slump, but he looks like he wants to.

“I see,” he murmurs, giving himself a little nod, and seeming to come to a decision. “You cannot mention I am Yamori to anyone, understood? Yamori is my secret codename.” He waits until we both nod, Naruto enthusiastically, me easily (because it’d be dangerous to admit knowing that to anyone). “Call me Raidou from now on, unless you see me in the clothes I used to wear. Understood?”

Naruto and I nod again.

“Well then,” he says, quirking another half-smile. “I brought some of your belongings retrieved from your old apartment and some groceries. Have you eaten yet?”

“Not yet. Nee-san’s horrible at cooking!” Naruto makes an over-exaggerated look of disgust, sticking his tongue out at me.

Offended, I consider flipping him off, but decide against it. My cooking isn’t great, but it’s not that bad. Besides, I’m the only one of the two of us who ever knows how to cook! “Yeah, well, do you want to cook?”

“Erm, no. Nee-san, your cooking is great! Fantastic!”
Yamori—Raidou,darn it—leaves us to squabble, making his way uninvited into the kitchen, where he puts down the backpack, to put away the groceries. Naruto and I immediately set upon the backpack, pawing through it to see what he brought. We don’t have much, so every little thing counts, even if it’s the stuff that we owned while living with *that woman*.

*(The pain the blooming fire the screaming make it stop make it stop)*

There are some books, the blocks Raidou got us, and baby toys. Actually, everything in there is something Raidou got us. (Disappointingly, there is a distinct lack of all shinobi tools we’ve scrounged up.) But what really gives me pause, what really trips me up, is my stack of notes I find at the bottom of the bag. Pages covered in big, colorful letters, sloppy, looking like a child’s scribbles. But a little too organized for a child.

I sneak a glance up at the man peering closely at the contents of our cupboards. He… he really cares about us. How much money has he spent on us over the years? I doubt the Hokage reimbursed him for everything. Actually, does the Hokage even know? And then after, at the hospital. The way he hugged us, cried.

God. Either he’s an exceptional actor. Or. And it’s something I’m having so much trouble accepting, because how do you trust someone? How do you care for someone so much? I like to think I really care for Naruto. I mean, he’s my twin (*except I’m not his*). We’ve spent four years together. I should trust him, love him.

I do. (Don’t I?) And Yamori’s really grown on me. He’s also been with us for (most of) four years. I know he’s a bit reticent, and polite. But that just might be because he always interacted with us as an Anbu member. Now he’s just Raidou. Just... what? What is he now?

And.

What I don’t get. What I really don’t get, is why? Why didn’t he deny that he’s Yamori? Why is he checking up on us in person? He can probably get away with just spying on us without revealing himself to us (like he could have when he was our Anbu watcher, but he didn’t and he isn’t). So why?

And my notes. They....
He could have given them to the Hokage, or their Cryptology team, or who knows. But he didn’t.

He gave them back to me.

He gave them back to me so nonchalantly and he didn’t even ask anything about them. Doesn’t even mention them. (Shouldn’t they be suspicious? Shouldn’t he wonder?)

I just.... I just don’t know anymore.

I don’t get it. I don’t get him.

And I make sure to keep a close eye on the food he’s handling as he cooks us breakfast. Breakfast! I don’t understand him, and maybe I trust him a little, but I’m definitely not going to let another Old Lady incident happen again.

I don’t... I don’t want to be poisoned again. (Don’t think about it don’t think about it.)

Raidou leaves soon after feeding us (and the food must not be poisoned, because he doesn’t hesitate to eat it, and neither Naruto nor I have a reaction—though maybe it’s a delayed type. And it’s not paranoia if they’re actually out to get you, damn it), perhaps sensing the fact Naruto and I need to talk in private. The whole affair is awkward, though maybe only for me. Naruto’s excited enough, babbling about his week to Raidou, who seems genuinely interested. Or he’s good at faking it. But we do need to talk. I just don’t know what to say.

I don’t know what to think. About Raidou. About this whole situation. I mean, we’re two kids, living alone. Two four year old kids. Is this the same age Naruto started living on his own—the other Naruto? Without me. It isn’t much use thinking about what-if scenarios, I know, but I can’t help it.
As much as I hate thinking too heavily on things, I can’t help but worry. It’s exacerbated by the fact that I have my notes back. I haven’t thought about them since I wrote them. Like so much else, I put them out of thought (out of sight, out of mind). I thought I’d have more time before I really had to worry about things.

No, I should still have more time.

We’re only four, we just started the Academy. The schoolwork so far is agonizingly easy. Even Naruto has only a little trouble keeping up with children two years his senior. The only problem we’ve had so far (aside from the people, students and teachers alike) is the physical training portion. We’re younger and smaller than the others. Weaker.

(I don’t want to be weak, don’t want to be used.)

I finger the stack of notes listlessly, watching from the corner of my eye as Naruto stacks the reacquired blocks before rearing up and knocking them over with a shout.

Oh, Naruto. You’re such a kid.

Which.

Really means I can’t confide in him, can I? He’s just too young. Too young for so much, living without adult supervision being one of them. Being cynical and paranoid (like me) being another. So I can’t talk to him about Raidou.

Actually....

I flip through my childish notes, looking for the “Characters” section. My eyes scan the page quickly, looking for a certain entry. Sure enough, Namiashi Raidou is listed.

This is what I have written:
“Name: Namiashi Raidou; Age: late 20s, early 30s (Kakashi’s generation); Note: Konoha Jounin? Friends with Shiranui Genma. Minato’s bodyguard?”

My eyebrows raise involuntarily. That’s it? That’s all I have on him? Well, I suppose it’s more than some people. Like Nara Shikaku, whose entry only states that he’s Shikamaru’s dad and the Jounin Commander.

But the note about being Minato’s bodyguard.... Is that why he treats us so well? Because he knew Minato? And Kushina. Maybe he associates us with them. My grip on the page tightens, crinkling it. I set it down before I mess it up more, giving the pages a frustrated look.

I should get a notebook. Pocketbook. Something to carry around that I can update regularly. (Like to change Raidou’s status to Anbu.) Actually, I can go do that now.

Rearranging my notes, I call out to Naruto. “Hey, I need to go buy some notebooks.”

Naruto pauses from where he’s stooped over picking up blocks. He haphazardly drops the pile of blocks in his arms and hops over to the door.

“No?” he asks belatedly.

I snort. “Yeah, now. Just let me put these away.”

I wave the papers for emphasis before going into our room and stuffing them into the bottom drawer. When I get back to the living room/kitchen, Naruto’s already got his shoes on. He’s too busy stuffing Gama-chan into his pants to pay me any mind. Shaking my head at him, I slip on my shoes and open the door before pushing Naruto out.

“Hey!” he shouts.

I only snicker at him, turning away to lock the door behind us.
Sometimes I lay in bed, Naruto drooling on my shoulder and just—freak out. My mind runs in circles, panicking. I can’t sleep and I keep thinking what am I going to do!? This world, this place, these people. My brother and the monster locked in him (I’d be a monster, too, if people locked me up—that salieyoufilthyliaryou’lljustdowhatyoudidbeforedeathissomuchbetter).

And I wonder about my family. Are they dead? Alive? Do they miss me?

But I don’t have the right to miss them. After everything, I don’t have the right. I gave it all up. I wanted freedom, and I went out to get it, and I did. Just not in the way I planned to. Wanted to.

Would I really have gone through with it? Did I have enough courage? All those years fearing pain, trying so hard not to feel it—all those years trying to avoid pain, would I really have done it?

I don’t know.

I’ll never know (or will I? Will I follow the same path? Finally do what I didn’t get to? Reach for freedom again? But it isn’t freedom isn’t what I want isn’t oblivion but Nothingness empty and full everyone and no one surrounded and lonely whirling whirling the push and pull). Never find out. Never find the peace I wanted. The freedom.

And I should miss them, my family. Others would, wouldn’t they? But I don’t. I don’t think I ever will. Sure, I think about them sometimes. Some of those memories are even fond. But this all started because I wanted to escape them.

It hurts, sometimes, thinking about them.

No, it used to hurt. Not anymore. Now I have someone who wants me, who needs me. (Who is drooling on my shoulder right now. Gross.)

It doesn’t matter anymore. It doesn’t fucking matter. I’m free of it, of them.
Free, but not free. This isn’t the freedom I wanted.

Instead, there is Naruto. And Kurama. And Raidou (and I still don’t know if I can trust him). And I have no clue what the fuck I’m doing, what I’m going to do. I’ve written down all that I know about the version I remember (because that mangaka’s telling of Naruto’s story has to be a version now that I’m here). Now that I’m living this life—unless I’m hallucinating, dreaming this up to fill the Nothingness, but it’s best not to think like that. This way leads madness. Ha—things are different. Will be different.

Naruto needs me. (But for how long? Eventually he’ll leave me, too. Just like everyone else. He won’t need me. And then what?) He needs someone he can rely on, someone he can trust. (Can he really trust me?) Screw the plot. Screw everyone else.

I just don’t want to be weak. I don’t want to be like I was before. I don’t want to rely on anyone (but I already do) or let anyone use me.

I need to get stronger. I need strength. (But not power.)

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

I Raidou is listed as a Tokubetsu Jounin, assassin, and elite bodyguard, and was part of Minato’s Hokage Guard Platoon. In this, he’s part of Anbu, because otherwise that’s just a waste of skills, and Anbu is about assassinations and being the Hokage’s bodyguard.

Oh my god. No. Why are these chapters getting longer!? Urg.

(I just recently had the thought: “Wow, I need to think about/plan on killing some characters, because no one’s dying.” Completely disregarding the Uchiha clan and like a bajillion background characters that are gonna die.)

A special thank you to Ensavondel for letting me hash out an idea with her (which doesn’t come into play for a few chapters yet). Also thanks to Yozakura for fixing the Japanese spoken in chapter one!

And a great big thank you to ElectraSev5n (electraposts on tumblr) for recommending my story! If you haven’t read her stories yet, you definitely should. She does the SI-as-Naruto’s-twin trope too, differently from me. But her stories are really great. And finished (which is a huge plus, because how many of these actually get finished?).
“What’s that smell?”

“Ugh, that is gross!”

Holding the disgusting, molding thing as far away from me as I can, I turn to show it to Naruto. He’s dramatically pinching his nose with both hands and leaning away from me. As soon as he gets a glance at it, he makes a face of utter revulsion and drops his hands to point at it—only to gag from the smell.

Quickly, I toss the thing into the trash bag and step far away from the fridge to take big, gulping breaths of air. Holding my breath for so long was difficult, but so worth it.

Today, we are cleaning.

Because so far we’ve been doing a shit job of keeping the apartment clean. Can you blame me? I’ve never been all that gung-ho about keeping a place spotless. I mean, it’s not like we’re living in a pigsty. Sure, there’s some clothes strewn about, and some trash, and there’s that stain in the couch that I still don’t know when it got there. And something was molding in the fridge (which I found out the hard way), though that’s not exactly our fault when stupid people won’t let us buy things that aren’t already going bad.

Besides, it takes too much energy to keep a place spotless. Once every week or two should be enough, right? It’s not like Naruto’s going to listen to me about cleaning up after himself when I’m not so great at it.

I glance at Naruto to see him glowering at me and can’t help but smirk. “Shouldn’t you start cleaning, too?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbles as he bends down to pick up the scarf he’d dropped in his rush to cover
his nose. I watch, curious, as he drapes it over his head and then wraps it around the bottom of his face. The only part of his face that’s visible is his eyes. He dramatically tosses the end he’s holding over his shoulder and strikes a pose, both fists on his hips. “I’m a ninja!”

He’s probably grinning at his own cleverness under the scarf. I can only shake my head at him as he wildly glances around, pauses, shouts “enemy spotted!” and pounces on the nearest piece of trash. He starts to wrestle with a candy wrapper.

Which is when I decide it’s better not to watch Naruto’s brand of lunacy and continue working on clearing out the fridge. There’s not much in there, and the only thing that’s gone bad, aside from that molding thing, and as far as I can tell, is the milk. I take a look at the expiration date, see that it expired three days ago, and wonder if it might still be good.

Probably best not to tempt fate. So I dump it down the sink. When I turn to throw away the empty carton, Naruto is standing by the trash bag, cackling as he tosses his “enemies” into it.

“...What.”

Naruto glances up at me, his eyes gleaming. “Captured enemies have to go to the holding cells!”

“Uh,” I blink at him. “Just don’t—break anything, okay?”

“Okay!”

And he turns back to individually tossing each piece of trash into the bag. I don’t even know how we accumulated so much trash. Unless Naruto’s been hoarding trash all over the apartment....

While he’s doing that, I collect all the other loose things on the floor. Clothes, papers, books, a few toys. We actually own more things than I originally thought we did. I wonder how much Yamori—er, Raidou—spent on us? Does he... expect something back?

Is he trying to gain our loyalty (at the same time I’m trying to gain his)? Or maybe he’s attached to us, wants us to be happy. Or something. I don’t know. I can’t figure him out.
I feel like I’ve regressed. Wasn’t I willing to trust him for a while there? So why am I so hesitant now? The only difference is now I know who he is under the mask.

...Is that it? Is it because I know who he is? That he’s human—and I need to stop thinking about it! So what if I don’t trust him? So what if he’s trying to play us? There’s nothing I can do about it. And anyway, do I really think he’ll harm us? (Yes.) I mean, he’s changed our diapers a few times!

And like it or not, he’s going to be a permanent fixture in our lives, at least indefinitely. Even if I don’t trust him, Naruto does, and he won’t give Raidou up without a fight. A fight I’m not sure I’ll win.

So I need to drop it. For now. There are other things I need to focus on. Like training.

How safe is it for little kids like us to train? Do these people even care about child safety issues? God, how many problems would have just never happened if there was better childcare in this ‘verse? Certainly wouldn’t be so many psychopaths and sociopaths running around.

I don’t even know the first thing about training. What can we do besides running? I don’t know any martial arts, so taijutsu’s out. Don’t know anything about weapons, so bukijutsu is a no-go, too. Maybe I can ask Raidou for training?

I mean, he did teach us a little about chakra. Which. I haven’t tried doing anything external with it since I messed up so badly. But I have been feeling it out every night while trying to fall asleep. It helps a lot. And sometimes I can even convince Naruto to meditate with me. We haven’t had any incidents with him accidentally tapping into Kurama’s chakra, either.

Still not sure how that happened. My main theories are that either Kurama’s a big fat troll or Naruto just unconsciously tapped into the larger well of chakra.

(If only Naruto was older if only I could trust him if only I could tell someone consult someone so many questions not enough answers.)

Eventually, we move on to doing the laundry. This place didn’t come with a washer and dryer (do they even have them in this ‘verse? They should, right? I mean, I’ve seen vending machines!), so we have to do it by hand.
After filling the bathtub up with water and soap, Naruto and I drag and drop the futon into it. Then I let Naruto have at it. While he enthusiastically stomps all over it, I take the basket of dirty clothes and the bucket full of water and start scrubbing.

We need more clothes. We only have a few sets and already they’re showing wear and tear. So far, we’ve been sharing our clothes since we’re the same size and whoever’s been buying our clothes is either a cheapskate or under the impression that I’m a boy. Not that I’m really complaining (about the clothes, not the being mistaken as a boy part—I’m a girl, thank you very much) since it’s easier to run around in a pair of shorts than a skirt and I will never ever wear pink. Never. (And I’m still horrified whenever I remember that I went through a pink faze as a little kid.)

“Nee-san!” Naruto suddenly shouts.

I look up at him, distractedly—only to get a face full of soapy water. I gasp, spluttering, quickly closing my eyes to make sure nothing gets into them, as Naruto bursts into laughter. Gritting my teeth, I reach blindly for the shirt I was washing and throw it with all my might in the direction of the laughter.

Naruto cuts off with a yelp. I grab the hem of my shirt—the only part not wet—to wipe my face so that I can see him. When I get a glance of him, I can’t help but start laughing. Somehow, I hit his face. He scrambles to pull off the shirt that wrapped around his face, wetly sticking to him. When he finally gets it off, he glowers at me.

I stick my tongue out at him. “That’s what you get. Now get back to work!”

“Aye, sir!” he salutes, face schooled.

We share eye contact for a moment, then burst into laughter.

After doing the laundry and hanging it up in the living room (using some of the tripwire, though we probably shouldn’t. At least we’re not using the ninja wire, though. That stuff would just cut right through the clothes), we wash up and change clothes, since what we’re wearing is wet.

“Hey, Naruto?”

“Yeah?” he responds, his voice muffled from the shirt over his head. For a moment, I watch him
struggle to pull the shirt down before reaching over to help him.

Once his head is visible again, I continue. “How much money do we have?” Because we really do need to buy more clothes. And some needle and thread. I may not be the best at sewing, but I can at least mend tears.

When Naruto’s silence stretches too long, I glance at him in curiosity. His face is scrunched up in concentration as he silently mouths words. Is he... counting?

“How much money do we have?” I prod him. He bites his lip and looks away. Alarmed, I step closer to him. “Naruto, how much money do we have?”

He resolutely keeps his gaze off of me as he stiffly walks toward the dresser. I watch intently as he opens the second drawer, feels around, and then pulls out something. He approaches me warily and thrusts out his fist.

“Gama-chan’s hungry,” he mutters.

When he unclenches his fist, I get a good look at what he’s holding. Like he said, the frog-shaped coin purse looks emaciated. I snatch it out of his hand and look inside it. My fears are realized.

No.

How’d we spend so much!? I thought we’d been keeping track of our spending—I’d been keeping track. Then I remember, all those candy wrappers. Has Naruto been buying things behind my back? How?

I take in a deep breath, ready to shout at Naruto, except when I get a good look at him, he looks so fucking guilty. Like he knows it’s his fault. Like he—he—ugh! Exhale slowly, calm down. He’s only a kid.

But.

How are we going to survive the rest of the month? There’s no way we can afford to buy anything
aside from the minimum amount of ingredients for food. We’re going to have to cut back. Except. Naruto eats a lot.

I bite my lip in indecision. I can eat less, eat slower, too. Since eating slower makes you fuller, right? And I don’t need afterschool snacks. I can steal some stuff, but I’ll have to be really careful. And don’t steal anything in sight of shinobi.

A sigh escapes me.

“...Sorry, nee-chan,” Naruto mumbles.

When I look up at him, his face is tilted down, his shoulders hunched over, and his hands in tightly clenched fists. He blinks furiously. I almost do a double take. Is he blinking back tears?

Shit.

Biting my lip, I reach out and ruffle his hair. He peers up at me doubtfully. “Just—don’t spend our money like this, okay? Tell me if you really want something.” When he doesn’t respond, my hand on his head clamps down a little. “Okay?”

Naruto yelps. “Okay! Okay!”

“Good,” I say with a nod. Then I pat his head twice before holding out the coin purse for him to take back. He hesitates a moment, but eventually takes it and sticks it in his pants. Then I turn and leave the room. “C’mon, let’s go.”

At first, I don’t hear anything. And then his footsteps follow me. I take a moment to pull out the tripwire tucked into my backpack (never know when I’ll need it). By the time I’m standing back up, Naruto’s by the couch.

“Where are we going?”

I flash a grin at him and hold the roll of wire up as answer. He takes a bit, blinking slowly at me then the wire, before his face lights up and he grins to match me.
By the time we get to the marketplace, it’s time for the evening rush. Housewives abound, sprinkled with a few shinobi here and there. We’re not the only children, though most of them are tethered in some way by their parent. Everyone’s too busy to pay us much attention. Naruto and I grip each other’s hands to make sure we don’t get separated.

“How ‘bout there?” Naruto asks as he points toward a narrow alley between two stalls.

I eyeball it dubiously. It looks a little too small for us. I say as much. Naruto grumbles, but continues looking. I glance around for a hiding spot, too. We need someplace that’s hopefully small enough that adults won’t be able to easily follow us, definitely doesn’t lead into a dead end, with an area on the opposite side of the street that we can tie the tripwire to.

The criteria’s surprisingly hard to fulfill. It’d be easier if we go for a normal-sized alley, but then it’d be easier for us to get caught, and I don’t want to face the consequences for that. But at this rate we won’t find a good place. Plus, I’m getting impatient.

So I point to the closest alley, which is unfortunately big enough to fit an adult, too, but whatever. “That’s good enough, yeah?”

Naruto eyes it for a moment before shrugging. “Eh.”

My sentiments exactly.

Across the alley is a vegetable vendor selling something that looks like eggplants. What he’s selling isn’t important, though. It’s his sturdy-looking stall that is. The stall that’s tall enough to hide us as we tie the wire to one of the stall’s legs. Naruto and I scurry over to it, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible, which really isn’t possible at all, considering the wide, mischievous grin splitting Naruto’s face. Not that I blame him. I’m having trouble biting back my smile, too. Doing something like this makes me feel surprisingly giddy.
I wonder if we’ll actually be able to trip anyone.

Naruto stands guard as I squat down to tie one end of the wire to the stall’s leg. I try to be quick, since we don’t want to get caught, but it takes longer than I thought it would. A full minute passes before I’ve wrapped what I think is enough wire. Standing up, I tap Naruto’s arm to signal that I’m ready. He grins at me widely as he grabs my hand, the one holding the roll of wire, as we slowly make our way back to the alley across the street.

We have to go slowly as I let the wire pool out to make sure we don’t accidentally pull it taut or stumble into anyone. I can feel Naruto’s impatience as he tries to walk faster, but I make sure to keep a slow, steady pace.

And god, we must look super suspicious.

However, I resist the urge to look around, knowing that doing so will just make us look even more suspicious. We finally reach the alley, Naruto letting go of my hand to run the last few steps.

He turns back toward me and pumps his fist in the air. “First!”

“Not a competition, Naruto,” I say while rolling my eyes at him.

He just sticks his tongue out at me. I think about pulling on his tongue in retaliation, but before I can do anything, his tongue retracts. Then he thrusts out his right hand and wiggles his fingers at me in impatience.

I deliberately slow down, taking the slowest, smallest steps I can. I can see Naruto’s impatience grow as he huffs at me and roll his eyes, then clench his fist and stomp his foot.

“Nee-san!”

Biting back a grin, I take one large step to finally reach him and bestow the roll of wire to him with a flourish. “Your wire, sir.”

“What?” Naruto asks, his face scrunching up in confusion.
For a moment, I’m confused, too. And then I realize that I’d spoken in English and have to bite back a curse.

“Nothing, nothing.”

“If you say so,” he responds with a suspicious glance.

But he’s quickly distracted by the excitement of getting to pull the wire. Who knew he was such a sadistic bastard?

Oh, wait.

Right.

I wait, full of gleeful excitement, as Naruto gazes out at the expanse of people. I can see the vegetable vendor glancing at us distrustfully and have to resist the urge to smile at him wickedly in response. *Yeah, we did something to your stall. No, you’re not gonna like what we’re about to do.*

Or maybe he will. Who knows?

Naruto makes a noise of excitement, making me tear my gaze away from the vendor toward what he’s looking at. Approaching the wire trap is a dark, unruly-haired man in a flak jacket, his head held high, walking fast-paced. A chuunin? Or jounin. Except, instead of the Uzushio spiral on his shoulder, there’s a four pointed star. With a... fan?

*Oh shit.*

“Naruto, don’t—!”

But my warning is too late. Naruto gives the wire a vicious tug just as the Uchiha policeman takes another step forward. One foot clears the wire. Someone yelps and the sound of a body falling reaches my ears, but I’m too focused on the Uchiha to really care. The Uchiha glances to his other
side, but as he does so, his ankle hits the wire and—

He falls in the least graceful tumble ever, letting out a high-pitched squeak as he thrusts his hands out the catch himself, only his hands slip and he hits his chin on the ground, making it bounce high. His chin hits the ground again and he lays there, stunned.

A heavy silence falls around us—around the downed Uchiha. Everyone’s stopped moving, gaping at the policeman. The vegetable vendor looks like he’s going to faint.

A strange noise involuntarily escapes me, a half-sob, half-laugh. Next to me, Naruto bursts out laughing. He points at the Uchiha with one hand, the other grabbing his stomach as he doubles over.

“He—he! Did you see, nee-san!”

Too late, I wrap a hand around his mouth to silence him. “Naruto, shut up!” And shit, I shouldn’t have said his name, either. Naruto squirms under my grip, not understanding the severity of this situation.

When I look back up, everyone’s staring at us. Even the Uchiha. Oh fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. As the Uchiha stumbles to his feet, his whole front covered in dirt and blood dribbling down his busted chin, I smack the roll of wire out of Naruto’s hand and tug him into the alley.

“Run!” I shout.

Confusion, then horror, washes over Naruto’s face. “Craaaap!”

“Wait! Come back!”

Naruto and I book it, as quick as our short legs can carry us, through the alley and into another, and then another, all the while the sound of furious running follows us. My breath comes out in short gasps, my heart trying to beat its way out of my chest, as we run from the Uchiha.

Shit shit shit this was a bad fucking idea! God, what gave Naruto the bright idea to trip a fucking ninja! When we get back, I’m gonna lecture him for so fucking long he’s gonna—gonna—I don’t
know what! Fuck!

...Wait.

I can no longer hear anyone chasing us. Actually, I can’t hear anyone following me. Taking a risk, I glance behind me.

I don’t—I don’t see Naruto. No, maybe he’s behind that corner. Yeah. I quickly backtrack, panting, searching frantically for my brother.

“Naruto?”

No answer. The people around me barely glance at me.

“Naruto?” I call again.

Once more, there is no answer. Panic wells up in me, but I valiantly push it down, cupping my mouth to shout again.

“Naruto!”

Oh god. Oh god, no. Why isn’t he responding? Why isn’t he here?

“Naruto!”

No! Oh god this can’t be happening. This can’t be it can’t!

_Naruto!_ Where’s Naruto? Where is he? Where am _I_? Where alone why am I alone he’s supposed to be here with me near me where is here where is he where no no nononono no oh god oh god come back please don’t leave me don’t leave me alone Naruto where are you please come back please I can’t can’t can’t please not alone Comfort where’s Comfort where are you where—“Nee-san!”—can’t see can’t breathe can’t move can’t can’t—“Nee-san!”—where are you where where am I here where who is who am—
Hands grab my shoulder, jar me. Breathing shallow, quick, body shuddering. Tears sting my eyes. A voice, saying something, can’t understand. Not English.

Blue eyes, blonde hair. Little boy. Who?

“Nee-san!”

Japanese. Older sister. Who? Me? Not older, younger. Younger sister. (Four years younger the baby the girl the one who went to college the second disappointment the failure the one who—)

“Nee-san, what’s wrong?” blue eyes tear up, voice wavers.

No.

No no no.

I am.

Older.

Older sister. I am nee-san. I am, to him. Him? Who?

Naruto.

“Naruto.” My voice cracks, wheezes. Comes out so quietly I can barely hear it. I clear my throat. Try again. “Naruto.”

“Yeah?” he responds, and god is that such a relief.
He’s here. He’s here with me. I’m not alone. I have Naruto, and with him is Kurama, his chakra brightly burning, comforting in its presence. And god, why didn’t I think about sensing him!? I could have found him instead of—instead of—

I’m so pathetic. So fucking pathetic. I’m relying on a four-year-old to emotionally stabilize me! God, I fucking broke down when I couldn’t find him. I’m so, so fucking pathetic. Why am I even alive? Why am I even here if I can’t even function without Naruto around?

What use am I?

Is this all just some fucking cosmic joke? Is some kind of god or deity or whatever transcendental fucking being is up there (if there is anything up there) just laughing at me? At all of us?

Why?

Why why why why—

Arms wrap around me, warm. Shaking. Naruto’s body shakes as he comforts me, comforts himself.

So fucking pathetic, worrying a little boy like this.

I wrap my arms around him, blink back tears, tell myself I need to be strong. Be a fucking rock, you failure. Naruto needs you.

“Sorry.”

Naruto takes a shuddering breath. I can tell he’s readying himself to respond, but before he can say anything, a voice cuts through. A man clears his throat. I startle badly, jerking Naruto behind me, and almost growl at the person. Except. Dark unruly hair, flak jacket, dirt on his cloths, blood flecking it, coming from his chin.

Oh fuck.
The man rubs the back of his neck, frowning down at us. He looks contemplative.

Actually....

I flick my gaze between him and Naruto. Naruto, who looks sheepish. Did Naruto get caught? Did this policeman catch Naruto and bring him here? I don’t know if I should feel ashamed or thankful. I can’t settle on anything, but I think I’m glowering at him. I don’t know. I do it so often, it’s probably a reflex by now.

He lets out a sigh, his arm dropping to his side, before slowly approaching us. His hand reaches out toward us and I flinch back without meaning to. He stops, pulling back his hand to hang uselessly in the air. I watch carefully as he slowly retracts his hand and crouches before us.

“You’re... Naruto and Renge, right?” he asks.

“What’s it to you?” Naruto responds rudely, and god I’ve been too much of an influence on this kid. Not that I would have responded differently (and that’s the problem). But then, when I look at him, he’s grinning.

The Uchiha gives out a small huff, his lips twitching upward before he smiles at us widely, to the point his eyes crinkle shut. I can’t help but stare at him in shock.

Is he really an Uchiha? I know the emblem on his sleeves means he’s part of the Military Police, but he’s... he’s nothing like what I know Uchiha to be like. He’s smiling at us! Uchiha don’t smile. They frown, and grunt, and smirk. They certainly don’t smile widely. At least not to a non-Uchiha.

“Now I know you were just having fun, but you shouldn’t do things like that, alright?” he says, ignoring Naruto’s rude question. “What if someone got seriously hurt?”

As he speaks, blood continues to drip from his chin. I’m distracted by it, missing what he says next. Letting out a groan at myself, I reach into my pocket and pull out a handkerchief and thrust it at him, probably cutting him off mid-sentence.
Both he and Naruto stare at me in surprise.

What? It’s not like the handkerchief’s mine (like I would carry something like that around—it belongs to that one chick, the one who gave it to Naruto for his forehead) and the blood is really distracting, okay!?

“For your chin.” I wave the ‘kerchief at the man, impatiently waiting for him to take it. I can feel my cheeks heating up. If he doesn’t take it soon, it’ll be fucking embarrassing for me. The one time I do something nice for a stranger, and they don’t accept it? Yeah, thanks.

Luckily (for both of us. Who know what I’d do if he didn’t), the man takes the ‘kerchief and presses it against his chin. He winces minutely.

“Haha, thanks, shounen,” he smiles again, this time so widely he flashes his teeth. (1)

First, I’m blinded by his teeth, then I’m blind-sided by his words.

What.

Boy. Boy? Boy?

He did not—he did not just call me boy! What the fuck. What the fucking fuck! He was standing right there when Naruto called me “nee-san!” He knows I’m a girl, he has to! He—he—arg!

“I’m a girl,” I grit through my teeth. Behind me, Naruto lets out a giggle. My elbow digs into his side in reflex.

“Oh,” he makes a face of surprise, and that face has to be fake, it fucking has to be. “I’m sorry, little miss. My mistake.” Then he smiles again.

He has to be fucking with me. He has to be!

Growling, I take Naruto’s hand and start pulling him away. If I don’t, I’ll do something I’ll regret
(though it would be so worth it). “C’mon.”

I don’t look back as the man calls after us.

“Don’t go using tripwire on people again, okay! Especially civilians. Otherwise I’ll have to haul you two into the station!”

Resisting the urge to flip him off, because fuck him, I walk away from him as fast as I can without actually running, because I’m not running away from him, god damn it!

“Bye ojisan!” Naruto shouts. (2)

When I glance at him from the corner of my eye, I see he’s waving furiously behind us. “Naruto!” I hiss at him.

“What?” he asks innocently, looking at me with wide eyes. Guh. I quickly look away. “I like him. He’s nice!”

Nice? Nice? You call that nice? He was taunting me! He called me a fucking boy! But I can’t say that without sounding petty, so I just huff and continue pulling Naruto along.

Naruto laughs (at me, the bastard).

When we get back to the apartment, Raidou’s waiting for us. He’s sitting on the couch, looking at us with raised eyebrows.

I stop in shock, wondering how the fuck he got in, before realizing he probably has a spare key. Or, well, he’s a ninja. He could have easily broken in. Fucking shinobi. This is not fucking cool.
I glower at him, kicking my shoes off and letting them fly haphazardly. “What?”

Naruto barely gets his shoes off before he flies toward Raidou, landing on the couch next to the man.

“Hey, Raidou! Guess what?”

Raidou shakes his head at me, turning to give Naruto his undivided attention. I watch warily as I cave in to my own impulses and track down my shoes to put them back properly.

“What?” Raidou asks, giving Naruto a half-smile.

“So nee-san and I met a policeman! He was nice! But he called nee-san a boy. Oh! And we tripped him!” Naruto bounces on the couch, waiting not-so-patiently for Raidou’s response.

Wow, Naruto. Great storytelling skills. I inch closer to them as we wait for Raidou’s response, except he doesn’t give one. He just seems kinda frozen.

_Did_ he freeze? He’s silent, unmoving, face stuck in that half-smile. Then, he suddenly makes the same dying noise he made in the Hokage’s Office. He covers his face with one hand, his shoulders shaking. Naruto leans away from Raidou, eying the man warily.

“What,” he states more than asks.

...Is he laughing? Please let him be laughing instead of upset or something. God, I don’t even know what to do with a crying kid, let alone a crying adult!

No. He definitely has to be laughing. Just in case, I nudge Naruto over, who scooches without protest, to sit between him and the shaking man.

“Raidou?” I ask hesitantly.
My hand reaches out to touch his arm, but I quickly pull it back. What if he’s upset as in angry? What if he—

Raidou lets out a snort. I exchange a wide-eyed look with Naruto as the man hunches his shoulders and takes deep breaths. Naruto points at me, then Raidou, then clasps his hands together. I shake my head furiously and motion for him to do it instead. Naruto insists, pushing me toward Raidou. I continue shaking my head, pushing Naruto, except I push a little too hard and Naruto tumbles off the couch with a yelp.

“...Oops.”

Raidou looks up at the noise, his lips pressed together tightly, to see me peering over the couch at Naruto laid out on his back on the floor, glowering at me. He lets out another snort, then dissolves into laughter.

Naruto and I exchange another wide-eyed look.

What. The. Fuck.

It’s my turn to lean away from Raidou as he laughs for a full minute. Okay, what the hell? It’s not that funny. What’s wrong with this guy?

Eventually, his laughter settles down. By then, Naruto’s sat back up and I’ve joined him on the floor to play a round of War (and was I pleasantly surprised when I found a deck of poker cards on sale).

He clears his throat. “Sorry.”

I level him with my most unimpressed expression yet. Naruto looks at him in concern.

“What’s wrong?” Naruto asks.

Raidou shakes his head, smiling sardonically. “It’s nothing.”
“It’s obviously not, since you just broke down laughing,” I interject.

Raidou and I have a very short staring contest interrupted by Naruto bodily thrusting himself between our gazes. “Are you sick?”

“No,” Raidou’s quick to respond, but Naruto isn’t satisfied. His eyebrows are furrowed as he frowns at the older man. I elbow Naruto and widen my eyes at him, which he matches in a moment, and we both turn our wide eyes onto Raidou. He caves instantly. “I had a stressful day.”

He doesn’t elaborate, though. Which. Fair enough. Naruto looks like he wants to ask more, so I elbow him, making him grunt.

“What’s for food?” I ask instead.

Because, seriously. Why should I have to make food when Raidou can? And I seriously doubt he’s going to poison us.

He won’t.

Right? Right.

The truth is—the truth isn’t so much that I love Naruto but that I want to protect him. No, I want him to need me. It is true, that I love him, but it’s only part of the truth.

I’m not that altruistic. I’m a selfish person by nature, I always was and always will be. And the truth? The truth is that I just don’t want to be alone.

(Please god don’t leave me alone I don’t want to be alone please please don’t leave me please I
I don’t need a bunch of friends or loving parents or a lover or anything like that. I just need someone to like me, who will stay by me and never ever leave me. Because. Because I can’t stand the loneliness. I can’t. We don’t even have to talk or do anything. Just someone to stay by me.

Because (god I can’t) rabbits die of loneliness, you know? And in this case I’m the fucking rabbit. And I’m a coward. I don’t have the courage to put myself out there, to try and make meaningful, lasting friendships, only for them to be thrown in my face or die or—or I don’t know. But I just can’t.

And Naruto. The Naruto I read about, the one who grew up to be a great hero, he made so many impossible friends. He beat people up and he yelled at them and they became friends (and how is that even possible? Is it a guy thing?) and they stayed friends even after years of not seeing each other. How is that possible? I don’t understand. But that’s what I want, that lasting friendship.

No. I want more than that. I want someone who will never leave me, never forget about me, who will love me despite the person I am.

And Naruto was handed to me on a silver platter. My twin brother. Even though I can never tell him the truth, the whole truth, even though I’ll always be holding something back from him. Whether it’s to protect him or protect myself, I’ll never be able to be completely open with him.

And god I’m a horrible person.

But I need Naruto. More than he’s ever needed me, more than he’ll ever need me, I need him.

I’ve come to the conclusion that Raidou’s explanation on chakra is incomplete.
Well. Of course it is. He only talked to us about checking to see if it’s unlocked. Which. Maybe mine wasn’t. Which would explain why I injured myself so badly.

(What’s to say he didn’t lie? What if he tricked us? But I’d felt my chakra and Naruto accessed his—accessed Kurama’s. If could have been a test, though. He could have been testing Naruto’s seal. But he didn’t do anything about it.

Or did he?)

And it’s taken me this long to muster up the courage to try again, because I really don’t want to repeat the experience. But in the meantime I’ve been thinking about it, and I’ve managed to remember some things from Before.

Chakra is made up of spiritual and physical energies (also known as yin and yang energies, respectively), which are molded together, and flow through your body like blood. Spiritual energy relies on the mind while physical energy relies on the body.

Theoretically, I probably have more spiritual energy than physical. The problem with this is that there needs to be a balance between the two energies. So I have to focus on drawing together and molding the same amount of both energies, because otherwise the spiritual energy will overwhelm the physical and whatever ninjutsu I’m trying to use will not work.

Though doesn’t account for genjutsu and tai-ninjutsu.

Genjutsu relies more on spiritual energy, since it uses your and your enemy’s imaginations to fool their mind. It doesn’t do anything physically, only mentally. Not to say genjutsu isn’t lethal. If you mess with the mind enough, you can probably get someone to have a seizure, to believe enough that they’re hurt for their body to hurt themselves, and even to stop their heart.

Probably.

Tai-ninjutsu relies on physical energy, since you’re enhancing your own body. With enough control, you can punch a rock to dust, like Tsunade, and lift things that are three times your weight. I’m not sure if tree and water walking falls into this category, but I would think so, since you’re reinforcing your feet (or your shoes, more accurately).
The problem with all this is that it’s conjecture at best. I have no proof. And the Academy doesn’t teach chakra control for years yet. I don’t even know if the Library has scrolls on chakra control.

But this is all I have.

And using this as a basis, I’m guessing my ratio of spiritual to physical is roughly 1.5:1. There’d probably be a higher discrepancy if this body wasn’t so suited for physical activities and Naruto wasn’t so inclined to run around. I get much more exercise done now than I ever have Before. But that’s not the problem.

The problem is—and I’m only guessing on this—I have a lot of chakra, being of Uzumaki descent. More than most my age, probably, though nowhere near what Naruto has, what with his access to Kurama’s chakra. But the more chakra you have, the harder it is to control. The less control you have, the more chakra you waste. The more you waste, the quicker you become tired.

It’s....

If you look at this like (very skewed) game mechanics, you need experience points to level up. Experience points are gained my raising your stamina. You raise your stamina by gaining physical and mental (in this case, spiritual) points. Physical points are gained by doing physically straining activities like running and sparring, while mental points are gained by doing mentally straining activities like learning and repeating jutsu (such as the leaf sticking exercise).

But the amount you need to gain to level up becomes steeper as you level. So that you may only need 5 experience points for each level until you reach level 5, and then 10 points for each until level 10, and then 15 points for each until level 15, and so on and so forth.

And the difficulty to gain a physical or mental point depends on what you’re more suited to.

So for someone like Naruto, it would be easier to gain physical points and harder to gain mental points. And while he gains more and more physical points, because he’s more likely to do physically straining activities, he won’t level up without gaining mental points. Which is why he would repeatedly practice jutsu, like Kage Bunshin or Rasengan, which would gain him mental points, and thus allow him to level up.

Of course this is only on the stamina/chakra front.
You can also gain experience points from other things, like bukijutsu or fuuinjutsu.

But this is also effected by chakra control. The worse your chakra control, the more it negatively effects your stamina.

Say Experience point = (stamina / chakra control) + bukijutsu + fuuinjutsu. And (physical points + mental points = stamina) * chakra control.

Or: exp = (st / cc) + bk + fu. (pp + mp = st) * cc

Say Naruto’s cc is 1 (out of 5), his pp is 3, and his mp is 1.5.

So (3 + 1.5 = st) * 1, making 4.5 = st.

Naruto’s stamina is 4.5.

Now say Naruto’s bk is 1.5 and his fu is 0.

So exp = (4.5 / 1) + 1.5 + 0, making exp = 6.

And say you need 5 exp to level up, Naruto would go from level 1 to 2.

But the more important equation is: success rate = (stamina / chakra control) x level.

So success rate = (4.5 / 1) x 2, which makes success rate = 9.

And all this thinking makes my head hurt, which is why I have a few pages of notes on this. Of course this doesn’t quantify even half of the things a ninja can learn, like genjutsu, taijutsu, iryō-ninjutsu, and poisons, among other things. But those can be added onto the exp equation.

But none of this actually matters, because like I said, it’s conjecture. But I’m definitely going to ask
Raidou for more training when I see him, *because he never kept his fucking word.*

And he’s not going to get out of it the next time I see him. He’s not.

And now that I’ve broken my brain thinking this up, I need to go do something else. Like bother Naruto, since he likes bothering me so much. Not that I *dislike* him bothering me (and wow, way to sound like a tsundere).

---

I just realized I haven’t thought up how to get revenge on Lunch-face. It’s been a couple of days since the incident and I haven’t seen her since. Not that I went out of my way to look for her. We’re not in the same class, that much I know, but we do share the same lunch. Unless she’s been avoiding me, I should have seen her at some point.

I did see Lefty and Righty, though. Righty tends to glower at us whenever she sees us. So I wave cheerfully at her in response. Lefty just kinda nervously skitters around us. Her nervousness makes *me* nervous (which makes Naruto nervous), so I tend to avoid her. Lefty and Righty have been avoiding each other, too.

They’re not what’s important, though. Lunch-face is. That bitch hasn’t shown her face around us, but that doesn’t mean I forgot what she did. And yeah, Naruto got to kick her ass, kinda, but *I* didn’t. I need to... to do something.

First, I need to collect as much information on her as I can. If I remember correctly, her name is Michiko. Her friend’s name is... Kaoru? Her teacher is female, and there are only so many female teachers at the Academy, so that should narrow down my field of search. I can’t just go around asking about her, though.

Which is why I need to break into the Faculty Office.

I say “break in,” but it’s not like they lock the place up until the last teacher leaves. Unfortunately, some of the teachers actually eat in there (like they can’t be bothered to leave when they can eat off
campus? Well, I guess some people prefer packed lunches—saves money, at the least), so lunch time is out, and skipping class to break in will make it obvious that I’m the culprit, so that’s a no go, too. Which means I’ll have to do it after class but before the Academy is locked up.

Which means I’ll need an accomplice.

Considering the only “trustworthy” person available is Naruto, I ask him. Not like I have much of a choice, since we’re almost always together and he’d probably find it weird if I told him to go home without me.

“Okay,” is Naruto’s response when I ask him.

I don’t know why I’m surprised. He doesn’t like Lunch-face, and it’s not like he’s got someone to tell him that what we’re going to do is wrong (technically he does, but that person’s me, who’s asking him to do the rule breaking, so...).

So I bite back my disbelief and tell him my plan.

“Most of the teachers leave after school or are teaching another class, but there is usually a teacher in the Office. I need you to set up something to lure out anyone inside the Office long enough for me to get Lunch-face’s file. Say, five to ten minutes?”

“Okay, but what?” asks Naruto. He bounces on his toes in excitement. “What should I do?”

“Um,” I start, then pause. What can he do? I’m not exactly sure. But.... “I’ll leave it to you.”

Naruto beams at me. “Great! I have a idea!”

“An idea,” I automatically correct, making my twin scowl at me. I roll my eyes back.

Then I leave the bathroom stall we were hiding in (what? Where else were we supposed to hide? This was the only “private” place I could find inside the Academy on such short notice) and poke my head out of the bathroom to see if the coast is clear. Naruto copies my actions, dramatically throwing his head side to side to check both ways. Thankfully, no one is around.
Once we’re outside the bathroom, I turn back toward Naruto. “How long do you think you’ll need?”

Naruto scrunches his face and crosses his arms in contemplation. Though, I don’t know if he’s just being dramatic or actually needs to think about it.

“Eh,” he grunts. “Give me five minutes.” Then he grins wickedly at me (or as wickedly as a four year old can, which is... surprisingly well) and dashes off.

“Wait—!” I shout after him, but it’s futile.

Ugh, the least he could’ve done was tell me what he’s going to do.

Well.

Do I really want to know? This is Naruto I’m talking about. The boy who creates (will create?) the Sexy Jutsu or whatever it’s called. The renowned prankster.

...Though I haven’t actually seen him pull a prank before. Will he start in the future? Or is that something I inadvertently changed? I actually wouldn’t mind if he started pranking people, as long as he doesn’t prank me, since it can be considered a form of training. Hmm, maybe he can become a trapping specialist.

And—I really shouldn’t be standing around here. I should be heading toward the Faculty Office. Once I reach the first floor, I search for an empty classroom near my goal. Leaving the door open just the slightest bit, I listen carefully.

Silence, at first. Then I pick up noises. Distantly, I can hear the sound of a voice droning on. Low pitched, male. Probably one of the teachers in a classroom further down the hall. There’s nothing else for half a minute, then—a loud bang.

Someone shouts, words garbled. A loud, familiar laughter rings out, followed by the sound of running. Naruto blurs past the classroom I’m hiding in, shouting taunts behind him.
“Haha! I can’t believe you fell for that! Stu-pid!”

“Get back here!” a male teacher growls as he charges after Naruto, his feet harshly pounding the ground. I don’t get a good look at him, but what I do see of him seems pink-ish. Like he’s covered in pink glitter or something.

...Is he?


“I don’t know,” another voice responds. Female, older.

A pause, then: “What is that?” the female asks. There’s the sound of the door opening further and then footsteps. “Is that... itching powder?” she sounds incredulous.

More footsteps, coming closer to me. My heart tries to leap out of my throat, but I swallow it down, biting my lip to stop any sounds from escaping me.

“Uh, do you think...?”

“We should probably check it out. Just in case.” the female sounds determined. Yes! Go go go!

“Well, if you’re sure,” the male responds, hesitant. They start walking, heading closer and closer to me. My breathing quickens. I have to cover my mouth with my shirt to stifle my breathing. Shit. Shit shit shit. “Man, what a pain. I was almost done marking up today’s tests.”

“Don’t complain. I still have half of mine to do and the math homework I assigned. You won’t believe some of the answers I get.”

“Yeah, bet I can easily top any of yours. This one kid....”

I wait until their voices are faint echoes, my heart pounding in my throat, before slipping out of
hiding. There’s pink powder on the floor (where did Naruto get this?) leading a trail from a classroom nearby to down the hallway toward my right. I don’t linger—there’s not enough time for me to waste—before making my way toward the open door of the Faculty Office. Just to be safe, I crouch low and stick my head in to make sure no one’s inside.

It’s empty.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, I quickly enter. I ignore my thundering heartbeat as I take in a quick survey of the place. The office is bigger than I thought it would be. I didn’t realize there were so many teachers at the Academy. But I don’t have time to be making such revelations. Standing on the tip of my toes, I look closely around the room.

There—at the other end of the office. The Records Room. Luckily I’m short enough that the desks cover me, so that if anyone looks through the window, they won’t be able to see me. Except there are isles. I try to keep my pace steady and unhurried, though, in case someone does look in and see me. I don’t want to look suspicious. Not like I don’t already, being in here unsupervised. As soon as I reach the door, I try the handle. I really hope it’s not—

Damn it.

It’s locked. I really hoped it wasn’t, but I guess I should have expected it. Maybe there’s a key nearby.

Actually, there’s a bunch of keys hanging up on the wall I’d just passed. Except they’re freaking labeled in kanji. Great! I waste a precious minute looking for the stupid key before I finally find it. My hands are shaking and I’m jittery from nerves, making unlocking the door unnecessarily hard. It takes me two tries before I actually get the key in the lock, and then I freaking turn it the wrong way.

Way to fucking go.

Finally, I enter the Records Room, leaving the door open a crack. And promptly realize how much of a stupid endeavor this was because how the fuck am I supposed to search through all this?

There are rows upon rows full of not filing cabinets, but fucking hand-bound books. I bite back a groan of frustration and flip through the nearest book. It’s full of entries for students from five years ago. At least three pages are dedicated to each student. But it’s irrelevant, so I put it back.
I’m on my fourth book when I realize something I should have realized earlier, and god am I so fucking stupid. Because this is the Records Room, for previous classes. Not current ones.

Cursing myself, I put the book back and try to make sure everything’s back in its original place. Then I leave the room, locking it behind me, and place the key back on its appropriate hook. And stare blankly at the teachers’ desks.

I know I don’t have much time left, so I can’t search each desk individually. I’ll have to narrow down the amount. Okay. Which one looks like it belongs to a woman?

Five desks have tissue boxes on them, three have lotion bottles. Most of them are pretty messy, with stacks of paper and grading books strewn about. God, which one is hers?

What do I remember about her?

Um. Strict? Her hair was dark, short, bangs cut slanted. She was on the shorter side, so her seat would be raised higher. She’d smelled slightly of some type of perfume (my nose wrinkles at the memory).

There! That chair is raised higher, and there’s a bottle of scented lotion on her desk (her “perfume”). The papers and books stacked on her desk are neat, orderly. There are a bunch of sticky notes on the book at the top of one stack. I scan them, but they’re not related to my search, except one that says “Check on Michiko,” but it says nothing more, so I disregard it.

I flip through the book with the sticky notes, see it’s her grading book, and set it aside. The next one, lessons plans, quickly joins it. The third one gives me pause. I can’t read it. Coded? But I don’t have much time left, so I move on to the next.

Jackpot! A hand-bound book full of student files. I quickly take note of what class she’s in, Year 2 Class B. Luckily, the book is separated by gender, so I quickly flip through the female student entries. I find Lefty pretty quickly, note her name—Aikawa Kyoko—before moving on. Finally, I land on Lunch-face.

Tanaka Michiko. Ha! Now I know where you live. I pick up the nearest pen and write her address onto my arm. Time for some fucking payback. But before I close the book, a note at the bottom of the page catches my eye.
Suspended.

Oh. No wonder I haven’t seen her around. Suspended. Serves her right. But why was she suspended and not her friends? And why—

The sound of footsteps startle me out of thought. Panicking, I place the books back into order and head toward the door. But no, that’s where the footsteps are coming from. Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck.

As I start to hear voices echoing through the hall, I run toward the closest open window and throw myself out. I land painfully on my hands and knees, scraping them harshly against the dirt, and almost start cursing aloud. But I quickly bite back even my whimper of pain and scramble to my feet, keeping myself low to the ground. I look around to make sure no one’s nearby and lock on to a pair of startled brown eyes. Lefty’s startled brown eyes.

Shit.

“Wha—”

But I don’t wait for her to finish talking, instead booking it. I’m breathing rapidly, my whole body shaking, jittering from nerves, when I finally make it to the street I told Naruto to wait for me at.

When I reach him, he’s leaning against a wall, a bored look on his face. People are staring at him oddly. I stop to stare at him oddly, when I get a good look at him. The front of his otherwise brown shirt is covered pink. The pink dust? The itching powder!

“Naruto!” I shout, rushing toward him.

Naruto glances at me, his face splitting into a wide grin. “Nee-san! How’d it go?”

“Never mind that,” I wave my hand as if to physically push aside the topic. “Are you okay?”

I reach out to knock some of the powder off of him, but he quickly steps away.
“Ah!” he shouts. “What are you doing! Don’t touch that!”

“What do you mean, don’t touch it? You’re covered in it!”

“No,” he shakes his head vigorously, making some of the powder puff off of him. His eyes widen before he closes his eyes and clamps his mouth shut.

Oh crap. What do I do? Take the shirt off him? No, that’ll get the powder all over him. Shit.

“How did you even get it on you?” I ask, irritation evident in my voice. Naruto’s eyebrows furrow as he responds, except he doesn’t open his mouth so everything he says is muffled gibberish. I roll my eyes and grab his hand. “Never mind. Just, follow me. I’ll get us home. And then you’ll take a shower, okay?”

“Mm-mm-mmm-mm!”

(I realize, belatedly, I might have gotten away with asking Raidou about Lunch-face.)

Chapter End Notes

1 boy
2 mister

Someone asked about Renge’s notes that lists Raidou being from Kakashi’s generation. To clarify, Raidou is canonically 5 years older than Kakashi. The main reason Renge associates Raidou with Kakashi’s generation is that Raidou is Genma’s friend and Genma was on a genin team with Gai and Ebisu, and Gai is the same age as Kakashi. Also, Kakashi might have known Raidou at the least because Kakashi (at the time, part of Anbu) was assigned by Minato to guard Kushina. And since Kakashi graduated from the Academy at 5, there is the possibility that they graduated at the same time.
Doesn't really matter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I don’t track down where Lunch-face—er, Tanaka Michiko—lives as soon as I can. I don’t want to be too hasty. First, I need to actually think about what I’m going to do (because seriously, what the fuck am I going to do?) and gather the supplies. And it would look really suspicious if I just skulked around her house. I’ll have to sneak out at night, especially if I don’t want Naruto to follow me.

Don’t get me wrong. He’s a great kid, but sometimes he’s just too loud. This is a stealth operation. Maybe in a year or two he’ll grow out of that phase all children seem to go through where they think they’re being quiet, but actually they’re being super loud. I’m still having trouble sneaking around.

So no revenge yet. Next week, though....

In the meantime, there’s someone else I have to deal with.

Lefty. Aikawa Kyoko.

First of all, what the hell was she doing there? If she was there because of an extra class, what was she doing walking around outside? I’d timed things so that the classes would still be ongoing when I left, so it would have been in the middle of whatever class Lefty was attending.

Except she’d been alone.

Was she in the class Naruto disrupted? I hadn’t thought about it, but the class was probably cancelled since the teacher would have been in no condition to continue teaching.

Whatever the case is, I need to question her today, since today’s Friday. If I miss her, I won’t have another chance until Monday, and who knows who she’ll go blabbing to in the meanwhile.
If she hasn’t already blabbed.

I don’t bother tracking her down in the morning, since it’d be super weird if I suddenly knew what class she was in, and I can’t “accidentally” run into her since our classes aren’t even on the same floor. Instead, I take Naruto’s usual seat by the window, ignoring his grumbling, and keep an eye on the entrance. I know it might be useless, since there’s the possibility she arrived before us, but I do it anyway.

Naruto leans his back against me, using me as a prop as he throws his legs across the rest of the bench. Glancing at him, I watch as he pulls out a textbook (which baffles me for a moment) closely followed by a pencil and some paper. He inches his legs up, bending his knees, and places the textbook against his legs, then puts the paper on top. Then he starts doodling.

Ah.

Mystery solved, I turn my attention back outside. As time passes too slowly for me, our classroom starts to fill up. The seats around us stay empty as the pests jockey for the seats furthest from us. Naruto and I resolutely ignore them.

Eventually, my vigilance pays off. Lefty’s figure comes skittering into the courtyard. Her little pigtails bounce with each step, her grip tight around the straps of her backpack, she rushes toward the Academy building. Wow, is she late. Class is about to start.

I turn my attention away from her, satisfied in the knowledge that she’s here.

Satisfaction quickly turns to frustration when I can’t find her in the first ten minutes of our lunch break. It was hard enough convincing Naruto to eat without me, and now I can’t even find her? I even found Righty! Who’d already found a new group of hell spawns to run around with.

Which, actually. If Right and Lefty aren’t friends anymore, does that mean Lefty doesn’t have friends (and wow, okay, that makes me a little sympathetic. Just a little)? Maybe I’ve been looking in all the wrong places.

Where would someone without friends eat? She’s not in the courtyard, and the older students tend to monopolize the roof.... Maybe her classroom?
Are you even allowed to eat in the classrooms? With the way all the kids book it as soon as lunch starts, you’d think it’s illegal to stay inside during lunch.

Well, it won’t hurt to try. So I head toward her classroom, which for some reason is located on the first floor. I don’t get how this system works. I don’t get how this building works.

Case in point, I get lost on my way and I have to backtrack. By the time I get there, I’m seriously irritated. God, she better be there. If not, I’ve been wasting all this time for nothing!

Luckily (for both of us), when I look through the open doorway, she’s sitting by her lonesome, staring down at her half-eaten lunch. As I make my way into the room, I get a whiff of her food. Man, that smells fucking good. And, ugh, I’m so fucking hungry.

My stomach grumbles its agreement.

Lefty jumps at the sound, whipping her head up to stare wide-eyed at me. My eyes immediately dart away as my face flushes (not in embarrassment, okay? I’m not embarrassed—I’m not).

“Oh! Re-Renge-san!” she stutters.

I grimace, forcing myself to look at her. Then pause. Oh crap, what’s her name again?

“Aaaah—Aikawa!” I accidentally shout her name. But at least I remembered it?

Unfortunately, I startle Lefty—Aikawa—again, making her jump in her seat. Her chopsticks drop from her slackened grip, clattering onto the desk. She gives her lunch a forlorn look before looking back up at me, this time in confusion.

“Kyoko,” she says.

“What?” I’m slightly taken aback.

She purses her lips and raises her eyes to meet mine (and I’m suddenly struck by the realization that
she hasn’t been looking into my eyes until now). “My name is Kyoko.”

“Uh. Okay?” I’m confused. Why is she correcting me? I know it’s considered rude for someone to call you by your first name without permission, so why is she giving me permission? We’re not friends, and I doubt we’ll ever be, so what’s she playing at? But I have more important things to focus on. “Did you tell anyone about yesterday? Kyoko. San.” Belatedly, I add her name, then an honorific.

Aikawa looks confused again, her gaze drifting slowly away from mine.

“Yesterday?” she mumbles. Then her eyes widen and shoot back up to almost meet mine. “Oh! Um. N-no? Was I supposed to?”

“No!” I shout, startling her again. She lets out a little squeak. And geez does this girl startle way too easily. She’s making me feel jumpy. I clear my throat and try again. “No. You better not tell anyone you saw me yesterday, or I’ll make you regret it.”

I lean forward and glare at her, trying my best to be intimidating. I’m not sure it’s working. (And that threat. Seriously. Wow, much intimidate.) Aikawa doesn’t look cowed in the slightest. She rears back with a startled expression that quickly morphs into... a pout?

Why is she pouting?

Just to be safe, I lean away from her.

“There’s no one I can tell anyway,” she mumbles. She tucks her chin and clasps her hands together tightly in front of her chest. “Kaoru-chan won’t talk to me anymore and Michiko....”

Oh crap, no. What are you doing? Why are you doing this to me? Now I’m feeling… sympathetic.

I know what it’s like, not having anyone you can talk to. It’s painful. And so, so lonely. It’s something I wouldn’t wish on anyone, no matter how jealous I got of others (nobody to talk to nobody to lean on alone always alone cold the ringing silence).
Groaning in annoyance, I plop down on top of the desk in front of Aikawa, once again startling her. And seriously, how does she expect to become a shinobi if she startles so easily? Ignoring her for now, I swing my backpack off my back and place it next to my legs. Then I rummage through it and pull out my lunch. I’d made my own variation of onigiri (with salt, sesame oil, and sesame seeds mixed into the rice) paired with dongurangdeng (Korean vegetable and meat patties) and egg rolls. Naruto got more than me, with fillings in his onigiri that I opted out off. Frankly, most fillings are gross. Unless it’s kimchi. I’d say yes to kimchi.

Once I set my lunch on my lap, I finally meet Aikawa’s curious gaze. “No one should have to eat alone if they don’t want to.” Painfully, my mind strays to Naruto, who I left to eat on his lonesome. I shake the thought off and continue talking. “And you’re better off without those two, anyway.”

Done speaking, I focus on my food. I don’t look up when Aikawa starts talking. Instead, I plop an egg roll into my mouth. Erk, too salty. I quickly take a bit of onigiri to drown out the saltiness.

“Oh, uh. Thank you?”

I don’t respond right away, taking a moment to finish chewing and then swallow. “Damn straight. Now eat your food.”

When I glance over at her, Aikawa is smiling broadly down at her food. Damn it. It’s only this once, you hear? I’m not doing this for you again!

But hopefully this’ll at least endear me to her enough that she really won’t go blabbing.

So we sit there, awkwardly eating together. I take a peek at her lunch and have to bite back the urge to sigh dramatically. As good as her food smells, her main dish is pork. Pork! It’s not as bad as fish, but still....

Aikawa catches me eyeing her lunch and tilts it toward me in invitation. I awkwardly decline. No thank you. Though the rolled eggs look good, I am not taking food from someone I barely know.

You know, maybe I should have left her to eat alone.... This is just too awkward. I have nothing to say to her and I doubt she has anything to say to me. Mostly, I can’t help but keep wondering how Naruto’s doing.
I’m actually half afraid he’s getting into some kind of trouble. Hopefully, he’s not getting into any fights.

...I scarf my food down as quickly as I can, pack up my lunch box, grab my backpack, and start rushing out of the classroom.

“This was nice and all, but I gotta go!”

The weekend passes us by quicker than I thought it would. Naruto somehow convinced me (it was those eyes of his. He knows my weakness!) to let us try out the shuriken we’d scavenged previously. Needless to say, it ended horribly.

Both of our aim was abysmal but, sadly enough, Naruto was better than me. Only by a margin, though! Instead of completely missing the tree we were aiming at, like me, Naruto managed to nick it a few times.

We were probably doing the whole thing incorrectly. From our posture to our grip, we had absolutely no clue what we were doing. It’s another thing to add to my growing list of things to ask Raidou to teach us. I think I might ask him for some training soon. All this horrible self-training is getting ridiculous.

But despite our horrible results, we had fun.

Come Monday morning, I feel like the weekend ended all too soon. Classes are as boring as usual. Still no sign of Lunch-face, whose name I’ve already forgotten. Luckily, I wrote down her name and address in the pocketbook I went out and bought with Naruto last week. (Over half the entries in it are written in English because of their sensitive nature.) Righty is with her new gaggle of friends, though I did see her throw a few glances at Aikawa. Who seems to have found herself a new friend.

I watch her with half an eye from my perch next to Naruto on a bigger and sturdier tree. It takes longer to get up and down the tree, but I’m getting better at it.
Aside from that, nothing noteworthy happens on Monday or Tuesday. Wednesday throws me for a loop.

Naruto “accidentally” kicks me awake, like usual (it has to be on purpose, with how often he does it). I stay in bed for a few minutes, blinking groggily as I listen to the loud sounds of Naruto brushing his teeth and washing his face. My eyes close and I almost drift back to sleep, only to be startled awake when something heavy lands on me.

“Off!” I shout, flailing uselessly.

“No!” Naruto shouts as he clings to me. He gives me a wide, cheeky grin. “Not until you wake up!”

Pushing his face away from me, I respond through gritted teeth. “I’m up, damn it!”

Naruto just keeps grinning at me. Fed up, I take a swing at him, only for him to jump away from me. He sticks his tongue out at me as I sit up and untangle myself from the blanket. I growl at him, picking up the pillow next to me and throwing it at him. Naruto yelps in surprise, but he’s too late to dodge it. The pillow hits his stomach, making him stumble and hunch over.

Finally untangled from the blanket, I dodge Naruto’s hunched form and rush into the bathroom. Five minutes later, as I make my way to the kitchen, I give the calendar a cursory glance—and pause.

“Naruto.”

Naruto pops his head out from the living room area, giving me a cautious look. “Yeah?”

I point to the calendar, my hand shaking from how tightly I’m clenching my fist, at a date printed in red. Today’s date. My expression must be especially fierce, because Naruto starts to cower back.

“Today’s a holiday,” I grit out through clenched teeth. Actually, today is the beginning of a three day (five if you count the weekend) holiday. Greenery Day, of all things, being today and Children’s Day being on Friday, with another holiday in between for convenience or whatever. (1)
“Oh,” he says. Then he looks at me sheepishly, widening his eyes to give me a pleading look paired with his stupidly cute nightcap, and damn him. Because it fucking works. “Oops?”

And then he ruins the effect of his eyes by opening his mouth. Ugh. Oscillating between forgiving him and thinking up a suitable punishment, I decide it’s too much trouble and just focus on making breakfast. It’s too early for this shit.

Probably sensing my mood, Naruto is thankfully silent through breakfast (after I make him ditch the nightcap). He still protests as usual when I give him the dishes to wash. I just roll my eyes at him and make my way over to the couch.

I’m contemplating taking a nap, when there’s a knock on the door.

“I’ll get it!” Naruto shouts in his attempt to not have to do the dishes.

“No you don’t!” I point threateningly at Naruto as I haul myself off the couch with a groan. He grumbles but slinks back toward the sink, his gloved hands dripping water onto the floor.

There’s only one person it can be, and quite frankly I don’t get why he bothers knocking. I’m pretty certain Raidou has a copy of the key to our apartment. It’s either that, or he really did break it last time. Which, seriously, fucking ninja and their stupid ninja skills.

In case it isn’t Raidou, though, I really wish I was tall enough to look through the peephole. But since I’m not tall enough, I open the door without undoing the latch, though it won’t do much against a shinobi.

Sure enough, Raidou peers down at me through the gap, his lips quirked upwards the slightest bit. I flash him a small smile before closing the door and unlatching it for him. Then I drag the chair to the side.

“It’s unlocked!” I call out to him.

When Raidou closes the door behind him, he frowns at me. I frown back. What? What’s wrong?
What if someone was pretending to be me?” he asks, and oh, that’s a fucking really good question.

Because I hadn’t thought of that.

Why didn’t I think of that? There’s a really big possibility of it happening! Someone could henge into Raidou and I wouldn’t be even know. Wouldn’t even think to suspect.

What the hell? When did I start letting my guard down (again)? Why didn’t I think of this sooner? All those years implicitly trusting that the person I was interacting was, in fact, the same person. That Yamori was always Yamori, and not someone else pretending to him.

God damn it. Way to feed my paranoia.

Raidou sighs deeply and reaches a hand out to pet my head. I have to forcibly stop myself from flinching away. The thundering sound of hurried footsteps approaches us.

“Raidou-niisan!” Naruto the whirlwind shouts as he suddenly barrels into Raidou’s side.

The man doesn’t even budge, though he does let out a little grunt. Then he raises one eyebrow at me, mouthing the word “niisan.” I just grin up at him.

Naruto has decided that Raidou will forevermore be referred to as “Raidou-niisan,” even though Raidou’s old enough to be considered an uncle or something. I don’t know. Goes to show how much Naruto likes him, though.

Raidou shakes his head and pushes us away from him to give us a once over. “You two need to get changed. The Hokage wishes to see you.”

What? Why would the Hokage—oh, right. We agreed to visit once a month, didn’t we? Ugh, and there’s probably no way to get out of it, especially since Raidou came to fetch us. Well played, old man.

“Right now?” Naruto asks.
When Raidou nods, he beams and rushes into our room to get changed. Why’s he so excited? Oh. God damn it!

“Naruto, go finish the dishes first!” I give Raidou an irritated look before following after Naruto.

When I get to our room, he already has his shirt half pulled over his head. He says something, but his words are muffled by his shirt. Rolling my eyes, I tug the shirt off of him.

“No clue what you said, but seriously. Go finish the dishes,” I say with a scowl.

Naruto scowls back at me. I pull a shirt out of the dresser and toss it at him before he can start complaining.

“Fine, fine,” he grumbles.

He leaves after he changes his pants, too. I dither for a moment, wondering if I should dress up. Not that there’s much variety in our clothes. Actually... God damn it, no wonder that stupid Uchiha called me a boy. Naruto and I share clothes, meaning all of it’s boy clothing. I probably do look a bit boyish. I mean, don’t get me wrong, there’s nothing wrong with that. But I’m a girl. I have my own pride as a girl.

...Maybe next time I’ll buy some girl clothes. Nothing in pink though. Definitely not.

Mind made up, I dress in some of our shabbier clothes and exit to find Raidou helping Naruto finish up the dishes. Well, whatever. As long as they get done. Naruto sees me looking over at them and sticks his tongue out at me. I just roll my eyes at him.

A minute later, Naruto hops down from his chair, thrusts his hands into the air, and shouts, “Finished!”

Raidou chuckles, reaching over to ruffle Naruto’s hair, making the boy beam up at him. I can’t help but smile at the sight, though at the same time, I have to fight back a frown. Naruto is really attached to Raidou, isn’t he? And I hate that I can’t deny that I am, too. He really is good to us.
Which makes my feelings about him even more conflicting. But it isn’t something I should dwell on right now. It’s something I’m really working on not to dwell on. And we’ve got a Hokage to visit.

“Ready?”

Raidou’s voice snaps me out of my thoughts, bringing me back to the present. I look up to see Naruto impatiently holding his hand out for me to grip. I slip my hand into his and squeeze.

“Ready,” I respond resolutely.

Unfortunately, I forgot about Raidou’s preferred way of travelling. Jumping. I know it’s something I’ll have to get used to, but it doesn’t mean it’ll be an easy process. The whole journey to the Hokage’s Office, I grip Raidou’s shirt tightly and hide my face in his shoulder. I can hear Naruto whooping in excitement on Raidou’s other side. It feels worse than last time.

We don’t land soon enough.

“Hate. You,” I groan as I kneel on the ground. The glorious, unmoving ground.

“That was so much fun!” Naruto shouts, and I’ve never hated him as much as I hate him right now.

How can he like that? It’s... it’s—ugh, I think I’m going to puke. I lean over and place a hand over my mouth, praying to whatever deity might exist that I don’t spew. A large, warm hand starts rubbing circles on my back.

“I’m sorry,” Raidou murmurs.

I groan back, halfheartedly waving his apology away. There’s no way he would have known. Well. Maybe he could have, being a trained shinobi and all. But, blegh.

Suddenly, Naruto swoops in and grabs my hand, dragging me back up. “C’mon nee-san, let’s go go go!”
Never mind, I hate him even more now. Glaring balefully at my twin, I consider flipping him off before deciding it’s not worth it with Raidou here as a witness. Instead, I let him drag my deadweight forward into the building, Raidou following us with a chuckle.

The front desk reception glances up from her desk at us and blanches, but takes one look at Raidou behind us and looks back down. Curious, I glance back at Raidou to see what made her react that way, but Raidou looks normal to me.

Hmm.

I squint at him. Though he’s not looking at me, he probably sees me out of the corner of his eye, because his lips twitch upward fractionally. I turn back to face forward and decide to give Naruto a break by walking on my own.

When we get to the top floor, the Hokage’s receptionist waves us through without a word. Huh. Guess the Hokage isn’t busy? Either that, or he set some time aside for us to make sure no one would interrupt us.

Like last time, Raidou knocks, then immediately opens the door. The Hokage’s Office looks different from last time. Where once it was bare of any excess furniture, there are now two couches perpendicular to the Hokage’s desk with a table in between.

The Hokage glances up from whatever he was looking at, grinning around an unlit pipe.

“Oh, Naruto, Renge. Welcome.”

“Jiiji!” Naruto shouts, bounding over to make himself comfortable on one of the couches.

I bite my lip to resist the urge to laugh. I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to Naruto calling the Hokage “jiiji.” But why is Naruto so excited? I know our last meeting with the Hokage ended on a slightly positive note, but that’s thanks to Naruto, not because of anything the Hokage did.

Taking a seat next to Naruto, I decide what the hell, and greet the Hokage. “Yo, jiiji.”
If Naruto’s going to be disrespectful to the Hokage, hell yeah I’m going to take advantage of it. Raidou makes that dying noise from his position next to the door. I can’t help but frown at him. Why’s he all the way over there, still?

“Hokage-sama,” Raidou says respectfully, giving his leader a bow.

The Hokage nods toward Raidou. “Raidou-kun. You’re dismissed.”

What?

No! He can’t leave us here alone with—with the Hokage! No! Don’t leave us! (Don’t leave me don’t always alone no one here—no No Naruto there’s Naruto and Kurama I’m not alone I’m not!)

But I don’t say anything. I don’t show my trepidation; I swallow my unease as Raidou gives us one last smile before leaving. Naruto pouts at his retreating figure, but quickly recovers and turns back toward the Hokage. But he grips my hand tightly. I squeeze back.

The Hokage puts down his pipe and rises from his seat to slowly make his way to the couch across from us. He lets out a groan as he sits down, eliciting a giggle from Naruto.

“I’m getting old,” the Hokage says with a sardonic smile. “How have the two of you been since we last talked?”

“Good!” Naruto replies. “Oh, but the Academy’s suuuper boring!”

The Hokage raises his eyebrows in the perfect picture of surprise, except it’s a little exaggerated, a smile on his lips. “Is that so?”

“Yeah! Raidou and nee-san taught me most of the stuff we’re supposed to be learning! And the teacher’s so mean! He’s always calling on me and nee-san, and sometimes he gets angry when we get the answer right. I don’t like him.”
“Hmm,” the Hokage makes an encouraging noise, but the look in his eyes isn’t as friendly as it was before Naruto mentioned our teacher. Then he suddenly switches his attention from Naruto to me. “And you, Renge?”

“Er,” I shrugged. “Same as Naruto. And, well....”

I trail off, letting my gaze slip to the side. Staring into the Hokage’s eyes is more intimidating than I thought it would be. Sure, he looks like a grandfatherly old man, but he’s the freaking Hokage. The Professor, or the God of Shinobi, or whatever they call him. I can’t tell if he’s analyzing us or if he has his guard down because we’re just kids. I don’t know if I should be conscious of my every action and reaction or not.

It’s nerve-wracking.

The Hokage crinkles his eyes as he smiles encouragingly. “What is it? You can tell me.”

No, I really can’t. I can’t tell you anything important. But I can try and use you. Use your “weak spot” for us, for the children of Minato and Kushina.

I bite my lip and fidget with the frayed bottom of my shirt, glancing at him from the corner of my eyes.

“Um. It’s just.... We’re running out of money.”

“It’s not our fault!” Naruto suddenly chimes in, and thank god, because it draws the Hokage’s attention away from me.

I don’t relax, though, because I’m still in his periphery vision. Instead, I whip my head around to stare and Naruto in faux shock.

“Naruto!” I hiss.

“It’s not!” he insists. “Everyone’s so mean to us! It’s unfair! Why do we have to be charged more than everyone else! And all the foods bad, too!”
I whip my head back toward the Hokage, adopting a pleading look. “It’s not that bad. It’s just... with rent and everything....” My voice tapers at the look in the Hokage’s eyes.

His eyes look dead, cold. *(Cold so cold chilling everything snow even during spring blankets during summer freezing hands freezing fingers.)* Deadly. I flinch away, huddling closer to Naruto.

“Rent?” he asks, and even his voice is cold.

“Yeah!” Naruto responds, nodding vigorously, and how is he not affected by the Hokage? How can he act so normally? Doesn’t he realize how dangerous the Hokage is? How dangerous a game we’re playing with him? Except Naruto doesn’t know, because I didn’t tell him. And this isn’t a game. “We got a note about when rent is due. Right, nee-san?”

Somehow, I manage to stutter out a response. “R-right.”

I don’t get it. Why’s he reacting like this?

And then the Hokage’s gaze turns faraway, like he’s lost in thought. I give a little exhale, relieved to once again have his attention off of me. He gives a little hum and his hand reaches up—only to grip nothing. His mouth forms a little “o” before his lips press together tightly and he lowers his hand.

He makes eye contact with both of us, gaze steady. “Don’t worry about it. In fact, I have next month’s allowance right here.”

The Hokage reaches into his robes and extracts a money envelope. He places it on the table and pushes it toward us, giving us a small smile. I nudge Naruto, signaling him to take the envelope. He does, tearing into it enthusiastically before I can stop him. He looks at the bills in his hand, giving out a little “ooh,” before pulling out his frog coin purse to stuff them inside.

Naruto’s actions manage to elicit a chuckle from the Hokage. I look at Naruto and he looks at me, sharing eye contact, before he both turn toward the Hokage and grin.

“Thank you!” we chorus.
“You’re very welcome,” he responds with an amused glint in his eyes. “Now, tell me more about how you’ve been.”

I let Naruto carry the rest of the conversation, too emotionally drained to do more than chime in every now and then. Besides, I don’t trust myself enough to be able to continue to successfully trick the Hokage. The more I talk around him, the more I’ll end up revealing.

And I don’t want him to figure out just how much I dislike him.

We spend roughly an hour taking to the Hokage (or, more precisely, an hour of Naruto talking at the Hokage) before Raidou returns to take us back. I’m so relieved to see him that I follow Naruto as he runs over to Raidou and latches onto his leg.

“Raidou-nii!” Naruto shouts.

Oh thank god he came back! I don’t know if I could have survived much more of this. And we’ll have to do this once a month? I sincerely hope all our other meetings go differently.

Raidou pats our heads with a small smile before exchanging glances with the Hokage. No clue what that’s about. I turn back toward the Hokage to say bye, but he starts talking before I can.

“One last thing,” he says, then pauses dramatically to stare into my eyes. I have to resist the urge to jerk back and hide. “Renge, why haven’t you been attending the kunoichi classes?”

Uh, what?

“What? What kunoichi classes?”

I mean, I think I remember hearing about them from the manga.... But they’re seriously a thing? That I have to attend? I’m (physically) four, for crying out loud!

Naruto looks just as confused as I sound, as he glances from me to the Hokage, desperately wanting
to know what we’re talking about, but not yet willing to interrupt us. The Hokage stares into my eyes for a moment longer before finally breaking eye contact to sigh.

“I see,” he murmurs, but I don’t see, so what the hell? “Raidou, please deal with this.”

Deal with what? Is it really such a big deal that I—oh, son of a bitch! Our stupid fucking asshole teacher was supposed to tell me about the kunoichi classes, wasn’t he? What the fucking hell! Is he trying to screw me over? He is, isn’t he? Oh, I am going to—what? What can I do?

Well, I can always sic Naruto on him.

Hm.

As I contemplate this, Raidou nods to the Hokage and Naruto shouts his goodbye. I mimic him absentmindedly, latching onto his hands. Once we’re in the hallway, I look up to Raidou.

“What kunoichi classes?”

Because, yeah, attending will probably be hell, but there’s no way I’m going to let that fucker win. I am going to fucking—well, not ace, but—pass those stupid classes!

In a vengeful mood, I decide that tonight is the night I’ll get revenge on Lunch-face. Naruto still has a stash of itching powder (which, I still have no fucking clue where or when he got it) that I easily filch. Sorry bro, but it’s going to good use.

Then, I have to wait for Naruto to fall asleep. Like usual, he protests going to sleep, but as soon as he lays down, gripping me tightly, he’s out for the count. It takes a while for me to weasel out of his grip, but once I do, I sneak slowly out of the room. I have to be careful where I step because parts of the floor creaks and I can never remember where the creaky parts are, so I more shuffle forward than
I made sure to spill some juice on me earlier so that I could change into some darker clothes. Hopefully I’ll blend in with the darkness. I’m almost at the door when a sudden noise from behind startles me.

“Nee-san?”

Shit.

When I look behind me, Naruto is standing at our room door, rubbing one of his eyes. He lets out a yawn and blinks tiredly at me.

“Naruto, go back to bed,” I try to say calmly, but something in my voice must give me away, because Naruto starts frowning.

“Where are you going?” he asks. He starts walking toward me.

Damn it.

I bite my lip and turn around to fully face him. “Outside. For some air.”

Naruto looks confused for a moment, then he starts squinting at me suspiciously.

“No you’re not,” he says confidently, and what the hell. Why can he read me so easily? “Where are you going? Take me with you!”

He takes a few steps closer and grabs my hand in a firm grip before I can even think of how to react. Damn damn damn damn. God damn it, Naruto! Why are you doing this to me?

There’s no way I’ll be able to shake him off. So I give in. “Alright, but you have to be quiet, okay?”
“Okay!” he nods vigorously, flashing me a bright smile. “So, where are we going?”

I hold up the container of itching powder. “We’re going to Lunch-face’s house.”

The smile that lights up his face is pure evil. I can’t help but grin back, because actually, this is kinda exciting. My partner-in-crime. Though....

“First, you should get changed.”

I look pointedly at his pajamas and the frog cap on his head. Naruto yelps and rushes off to get changed.

Now’s my chance to go off on my own, but I won’t. I can’t. If I do something like that to Naruto… will he ever trust me again? I know I would be really fucking pissed off if someone did that to me (it’s happened before they left me alone always alone stop leaving me please I don’t want to be alone). So I wait not-so-patiently for Naruto to return.

Once he does, practically vibrating in excitement, we leave.

“You have to be quiet, okay?” I warn him.

“Okay!” he shouts in responds. I quickly shush him. He shushes me back, grinning widely.

...Maybe this really is a bad idea. Taking Naruto, I mean. But he’s just so excited.... Ugh, we’re going to have to work on his sneaking skills.

At the entrance of the apartment complex, I motion Naruto to stay back so that I can take a look. I don’t see anyone around. With the coast clear, I take a hold of Naruto’s hand and start leading the way. Naruto looks around in obvious excitement. I don’t blame him. We’ve never been outside this late. And now we are, without adult supervision.

It’s quiet.
Eerily quiet. Shouldn’t there be noises? I mean, as much as this place is called a village, this is a city! Where’s the night crowd? Where are the drunks, stumbling around? Or the people with night jobs? Or—

Suddenly, someone’s standing in front of us. I jump back, startled, pulling Naruto with me. My heart beating furiously, I warily eye the person. Anbu uniform and mask.

Anbu? Fucking Anbu? What the fuck!

...Or, what if he isn’t an Anbu? What if he’s Root? Or an imposter or—

“You two need to go back,” the Anbu says, and whoa that’s a woman, not a man. Whoops.

“Aww, but why?” Naruto whines, giving the masked woman his best pout.

The Anbu doesn’t budge from her position blocking us. “It’s late. You shouldn’t be out.”

Naruto grumbles some more at her, but I’m too busy thinking to pay attention. So, she’s really an Anbu member? Our guard? Now that Raidou’s no longer guarding us (or is he?) But she still might be a Root member, sent to keep an eye on us. I mean, Danzou’s liable to be interested in the jinchuuriki. And isn’t he known for kidnapping children?

Whatever or whoever she is, we’ll have to abort. No way I’m going to mess with her. She’s an unknown. Maybe if it was Raidou—oh, who am I kidding? Raidou would have personally carried us back, not using the stairs.

I tug on Naruto’s hand. “C’mon, let’s go back.”

“Whaaat? But what about—”

“Later,” I cut him off.

I don’t give him more time to complain, dragging him back to the apartment, though that doesn’t stop
him. At least he realizes he shouldn’t mention what we were going to do. As we leave, I keep a wary eye on the Anbu lady, though it makes for some really awkward walking. She follows us until we enter the complex.

Shit.

This really changes things. I’ll have to find a better way to do things. Or I’ll have to learn to sense people. I mean, I can sense Naruto (Kurama), so that’s a start, right? Shouldn’t be too hard to learn.... Except if that were true, more people would be sensors, wouldn’t they?

...Maybe we’ll eventually lose our guard. Shouldn’t they have more important things to do than guard us? (Because guarding the jinchuuriki isn’t important? Real smart, Su—Renge.)

I think I should have paid more attention in math, or maybe we haven’t gone over this yet, because I just realized they use the metric system here.

God damn it.

I was not ready for this realization when I suggested we keep track of our height (because I need to make sure I grow taller than five feet—or whatever the hell that converts to—this time, damn it). You know, as a way to distract myself after my halfheartedly concocted plans went down the drain.

Naruto rushed off to grab the ruler while I chose a spot on the wall to mark on. I decided on the small stretch of wall between the kitchen/living room (there has to be a shorter name for it) and the bathroom, near the calendar. But when Naruto handed me the ruler and I got a good look at it, I started having a mini freak-out.

I don’t know the metric system at all! It’s probably not even called the metric system here. Now how am I supposed to know when I hit five feet?
“Nee-san, what’s wrong?”

I glance at Naruto to see he’s peering at me worriedly, and god does that make me feel worse, knowing that I keep worrying him. So I paste on a smile and respond.

“Nothing,” I say. Then I push him lightly toward the wall. “C’mon, stand up straight so that I can mark your height.”

Naruto beams at me, straightening his back. “I bet I’m super tall!”

He starts to puff up his chest, and he rises on his toes a bit. I tap his leg with the ruler and give him a stern look, making him flatten his feet with a pout.

“Nah, you’re just a munchkin,” I taunt him with a grin. It’s the truth, what with us being little kids, but it’s still annoying being short.

Naruto sticks his tongue out at me. I resist the urge to grab it, instead placing the ruler over his head. He immediately straightens up again. I carefully mark his height on the wall.

As soon as I step away from him, he opens his mouth and delivers his retort. “Well, even if I’m a munchkin, I bet I’m still taller than you!”

He snatches the ruler and pencil out of my hands as I gape at him. Why that little...! We’re both munchkins; it shouldn’t matter. Still doesn’t stop me from getting riled up. I fucking hate being short.

I kick his shin in retaliation (the short person’s retaliation to everything), before standing against the wall. This time I stick my tongue out at him as he yelps.

“Wanna bet?” I ask. He glares at me, rubbing at his shin. I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Geez, dramatic much? I didn’t kick him that hard. “The shorter person has to make dinner.”

He rolls his eyes at me. “You’re just saying that because you don’t want to cook! But it means you’ll still be making dinner tonight.”
I growl at him, but he just sticks his tongue out at me, then places the ruler on top of my head. I straighten up as much as I can and keep still. Once he marks the wall, we both step away to get a good look at it.

What the hell.

No, that can’t be right. His mark is higher than mine. Not even a centimeter higher, but higher still! Why? Why must I always be the shortest person! This, this can’t be right!

“You cheated!” I blurt out in frustration.

Naruto looks at me in shock, then shakes his head furiously. “Nuh uh!”

I just stomp my foot like the little kid I look like, my cheeks puffing up in indignation.

“There’s no way you’re taller than me! What the hell!”

When I look at Naruto again, he’s grinning cheekily at me. Then he sticks his tongue out and taunts me. “Bleeelah—” I quickly reach out and grab his tongue. “—Aow! Leth gwo!”

I wait a few seconds before letting go. Naruto makes a sour face at me, which I can’t help but stick my tongue out at. He starts grinning and takes a swipe at me tongue, but I quickly dart away. Yeah, like I didn’t see that coming.

“Haha! You can’t get—ow!”

...In my backward run, I didn’t see the couch. From my spot draped over the arm of the couch, I can hear Naruto laughing.

Chapter End Notes
I’m basing this off of Golden Week, shortening it to three days off (five including the weekend) and moving Greenery Day to replace the Constitution Memorial Day. For some reason, I keep imagining the first generation Yamanakas, Naras, and Akimichis banded together to pitch Greenery Day to the Shodaime, who was all for it.

Sorry the chapter’s shorter than usual. I had to cut out part of the chapter or it would have gotten too long (and also take longer to write).

Also, feel free to leave suggestions for *Whispers in the Wind*, because all the interlude ideas I have right now are all super spoiler-ish. If it’s usable and I like it enough, I’ll go ahead and write it.

Fair warning, I’m going to push back my posting schedule to **one chapter every two weeks**. I can no longer keep up with my one chapter a week posting schedule now that I’ve used up all my prewritten material (which wasn’t much, but did make a difference). Sorry!
Pulled my trigger

The break was all too short, and now we’re back to—ugh—classes. Which means the start of kunoichi classes for me. Which is twice a week.

Yay.

Of course, I’m a month behind so I’ll have to catch up. Which I want to say will be easy, but who knows. I literally have no clue what we’ll be “learning” in this class, except probably about flowers. (That’s how Sakura and Ino bonded in the manga, right? Something about flowers and bullies?) I mean, sure, yeah, flowers can be interesting. Sometimes. But to be graded on it? No thanks.

Not that I have much of a choice. Apparently, attendance is mandatory for all girls. Which is just fucking bullshit. I don’t see any ninja class for guys only. And not only do guys not have to take any sort of equivalent class, kunoichi classes are after school. Which cuts into free time and extra class time.

It’s annoying, time consuming, sexist, and just not fucking fair. Which is why I’m dragging Naruto to it. Not that he realizes that’s where we’re headed. I try my best to act nonchalant as I lead Naruto toward the meeting spot at the back of the Academy, nodding along as Naruto chatters at me.

(“Suspiciously”—because it really isn’t suspicious when you pretty much know the reason why—our teacher is taking a leave of absence.)

Naruto stops talking abruptly when he sees the group of girls we’re approaching. His footsteps become uncertain, but I don’t slow down, dragging him behind me.

“Nee-san?” he asks hesitantly.

“Hm?”
He stops walking, bringing me to a halt, too. His hand spasms in mine as I glance at him. Naruto looks warily from the gaggle of girls to me, then back again.

“Nee-san, what are we—oh no. No no no no no!”

Coming to a sudden realization, Naruto tries to jerk his hand out of mine. I clamp down on his hand and give him a wide smile as I try to drag him forward. He digs his feet in and pulls in the opposite direction.

“Yes. If I have to go through this, so do you!” I grit out through clenched teeth, pulling with all my might, and oh my god why is he so heavy!

But he doesn’t budge, his face scrunched up in concentration. “No!” he shouts resolutely.

Alarminly, he starts dragging me toward him. In my panic, I let go of his hand and watch in horror (biting back laughter) as Naruto yelps and goes tumbling. It’s silent for a second, and then—

“Oh shi—ssssugar plums!” I shout, biting back a curse at the last second, as I run over to check on him. “Are you okay?”

Naruto squints up at me from his position on the floor, pouting. Sheepishly grinning down at him, I hold out my hand for him to take. He swats at it and picks himself up, still pouting.

“What the hell?” he grumps. He crosses his arms and glowers at me, or at least he tries to. It’s kinda ruined by his puffed up cheeks.

“Sorry,” I apologize again, reaching over to dust off his clothes. “Didn’t really think you’d go, well, like that.”

“Hmph!” he sticks his nose up in the air. But he still lets me dust him off. I have to bite back a grin.

“Are you two quite done?” a voice suddenly breaks in.
As Naruto drops his arms to stare uncertainly behind me, I whirl around the face the voice. A young woman with long, curly black hair, and glasses obscuring her eyes stands in front of us, her arms crossed. Behind her, the gaggle of girls whisper and giggle at each other. My eyes focus on the hitai-ate on her forehead. Oh crap. Is this the kunoichi class teacher? Wow, way to make a first impression.

Not that it really matters. Not that I care.

“Yes ma’am,” I respond belatedly.

She gives a noncommittal hum as she eyes me (or at least, I assume that’s what she does—it’s hard to tell through her oddly eye-obscuring glasses). “Renge, I presume? And this must be your... brother?”

The way she says that makes my hackles rise. I tense without meaning to, stepping protectively in front of Naruto.

“Yes,” I bite out, reaching behind me to give Naruto’s hand a squeeze.

“Class is starting, if he would be so kind as to leave.” She stares pointedly at Naruto for a moment before turning away to address the group of girls standing behind her. “Come along, girls.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they chorus, a few of them giggling at the end.

I give Naruto’s hand another squeeze and glance back at him with a frown to catch his forlorn expression. “Sorry,” I apologize again, and just how many times am I going to apologize to him? But there’s not much I can do, so I dart in to give him a brief hug. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Okay,” he mumbles into my shoulder, hugging back tightly.

Then I pull away to run after the class that’s walking off, turning back to wave once at Naruto. When I turn forward again, I have to bite my lip to resist the urge to go back to him. He just looks so sad. I don’t want to have to leave him, either, especially after how the teacher acted, but I don’t have much choice. Besides, it’ll only be an hour. How much trouble can he get into in an hour?
Once I catch up with the group, I walk more near them than with them. Aside from Naruto, I don’t really interact with anyone my physical age. Generally, I can’t stand children. They’re loud and messy, and kinda mean spirited. Mostly because they don’t realize or know better. But that knowledge doesn’t make interacting with them tolerable.

And in some ways, little girls can be worse than boys. No, both genders of little kids are bad. It’s just that as a girl, I’m more likely to interact with girls than boys, since we’re at the age where everyone of the opposite gender has “cooties.”

Blegh.

We stop walking once we reach a—you guessed it—flower field. Oh great. Flowers.

Seriously? *This* is what I’m going to waste my time on? I mean, it’d be one thing if we were being taught about which ones are edible or poisonous, and how to prepare them, but that’s *probably* not what we’re going to learn. Especially considering the age range of this class. Some of the girls I recognize from my class, some from lunch.

The teacher positions herself in front of us before talking. “Since we covered the flowers native to Konoha last time, today’s assignment is to identify and gather them. Afterward, we’ll review their meanings and uses. You have half an hour starting now.”

Immediately the girls start breaking off into little groups to start their search. I dither for a moment, unsure of what to do. I don’t know *any* flowers, let alone flowers native to *Konoha*. I mean, what? What the hell do flowers native to Konoha even look like? Leafy? Green? I don’t know.

Resisting the urge to grip my head in frustration, I’m stopped by a familiar voice calling out to me.

“Renge-san?”

“*Kyoko-chan!*” another voice whisper-shouts, probably to the girl calling out to me.

I look toward the voice, already suspecting who it is, and just as I thought, it’s Aikawa. What the hell. I have to resist the urge to make a disgruntled face at her, because seriously, what the hell. I
thought I was done with her. She didn’t seem like she was going to blab, and she’d made friends, noted by the two girls standing a bit away, casting furtive glances toward us, so I thought I wouldn’t have to pay her much attention. And now she’s talking to me. Why?

Schooling my face into a facsimile of a smile, I greet her. “Hey, Aikawa.”

She gives a little frown at that, then brings her hands in front of her and starts fiddling with her fingers. “It’s Kyoko,” she insists, but when I don’t say anything, she gives a little harrumph and drops her hands. “Is this your first kunoichi class?”

What a stupid question. Of course it is. Which should be easy for her to deduce, considering this is the first time she’s seen me attending. So why is she asking? Small talk? Feeling a bit annoyed at her wasting my time when I have no fucking clue how I’m supposed to complete our assigned task, my answer comes out a bit curt.

“Yeah.”

“Ah, um,” Aikawa stutters, bringing her hands back up to fiddle with them. “W-would you like to work together? Since this is your first class.”

And because I don’t know what we’re looking for, goes unsaid.

Frankly, I’m surprised by her offer. Then suspicious. Why is she offering? She gets nothing out of it while I benefit greatly. And then the way her friends are observing us so nervously.... Are they nervous for Aikawa because she’s talking to me or because of something else? Because they’re plotting something?

But—they’re only children. What could they possibly be plotting? Besides, Aikawa was there with Lunch-face and Righty. She knows the punishment Lunch-face got for messing with me and Naruto —

And then my thoughts are derailed, because she knows about Lunch-face. She knows when Lunch-face’s suspension will be over. Probably. I can use her to get revenge on Lunch-face.

Resisting the urge to smile wickedly, I reply, “That’d be great. I have no clue what we’re looking for.”
“Great!” she shouts, smiling at me. Then she gives a little jolt, her hands flying up to her mouth. “Oh! Hold on!”

Aikawa gives me a small smile before running off to her two friends. They exchange a few words before Aikawa makes her way back, her friends walking off with a few backward glances. I have to resist the urge to bare my teeth at them. I don’t want to scare Aikawa’s friends into making sure we don’t interact. Even if I can’t get on her good side enough to have her spill info on Lunch-face, I need to at least make sure she harbors no ill will toward me or Naruto. Don’t want her to tell anyone she saw me jumping out of the window of the teacher’s office. There’s never a “good” reason to be seen doing something like that.

As soon as Aikawa reaches me, she smiles again. “Okay! Come on, this is what we’re looking for!”

And then she starts listing flowers and their characteristics, most of which I promptly forget. It’s hard to get excited about what we’re doing, but Aikawa looks genuinely interested. She even mentions which ones are edible. Which. Why you would want to eat flowers boggles my mind. The closest I’ve gotten to eating a flower is sucking on a honeysuckle, but that was during my really stupid phase (which actually covers half my life, but I’m pretty sure most kids are just dumb before puberty—at least, I like to think so, because I used to be seriously stupid, as in really lacking in the common sense department and not very good at memorization, which sucks because that’s pretty much what school learning’s about). Too bad she doesn’t know things like whether they’re poisonous or not. If only I could find some that can paralyze someone or give them stomach troubles or something… then I’d use it on Lunch-face. Or our teacher—Naruto and mine, not Aikawa and mine. Or even that other teacher. The one who almost slapped Naruto.

Despite my lackluster participation, we eventually gather what Aikawa deems is enough flowers. By then, Aikawa’s finished her lecture on Konoha-native flowers and we’ve lapsed into a bit of an awkward silence. Which is just. . . I really don’t know what to do about this girl. Don’t know why she’s associating with me. What she wants. And I don’t want to give her anything more than I have to. But I have to give her something because otherwise she’ll leave with not-so-good feelings about me and that’s what I want to avoid. For now, at least.

Not that I know what to say. How the hell do you interact with kids, anyway? Aside from Naruto—he’s a special case. I don’t think he’s realized yet that we don’t have to spend so much time together, that he can break away from me. And it would be so so easy for him to… If only everyone else didn’t treat him with disdain (and for one horrible, sick moment, I’m glad they do. Because it means he won’t leave me. That he needs me. Because I need him).

“So, what else does this class cover, besides flowers,” I interrupt my thoughts by speaking.
Aikawa looks up from the flower crown (or at least that’s what I think it is) she’s been working on for the last few minutes, startled at my sudden question. She drops the flower crown without meaning to, quickly stooping over to pick it back up. Then she fiddles with it, keeping her eyes down.

“Um, s-so far we learned about plant life in Konoha. But next week we’re going to start learning about how to be a lady!” Here, she claps her hands together, looking at me with—I swear to god—sparkling eyes.

Dear god. I need to readjust my assessment of this girl. She isn’t just excited about flowers, she’s excited about this class. She must be a real girly girl. (As if the pink flower dress and the frilly ribbons in her hair weren’t evidence enough.)

Wow. Um. Abort?

No, wait. This makes her invaluable. If there’s someone I can cheat/mooch off of for this class, here is the one person who might be willing. I won’t have to creep on people to try and figure out what the fuck we’re doing. Here is my... golden egg? Is that the correct phrase? I’ve never been all that good with phrases or analogies.

Aaaand I should probably respond.

“That’s... nice.” Aikawa giggles at my disgruntled face. I sniff faux-haughtily. “Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up.”

She pauses long enough to gasp out an apology. “S-sorry!” I just wave her off. At least she’s not being all super meek right now. She laughs a little more before finally calming down. Then she peers at me curiously. “You don’t like this class?”

“Well,” I dither, scrunching up my nose in contemplation. Truth, semi-truth, or lie? “Not really. I’m not all that interested in... girly things. I mean, I guess it’s important to be able to blend in as a civilian, but a lady? And isn’t it unfair that the boys don’t have to go through something like this? I’d rather learn how to beat someone up.”

“I guess...,” she responds, unsure, thoughtful. She clasps her hands together and looks down again. “It’s just... I’m not really good at all the... um, the other stuff. I’m weak, and not very fast, and—and I get scared easily.... But I’m good at this! I help my mom out a lot and she’s been teaching me things
because she says it’s important for a girl to learn how to be a lady and—um....” Aikawa flushes a deep red as she trails off.

Whoa, way to bare yourself. And while I’m kinda curious about the end of her sentence, I’m also not because I can guess and that’s something you shouldn’t be telling your—how old is Aikawa? Seven? Eight?—little girl.

We lapse into a semi-awkward silence again before I give in and break it. I have to remember, friendly relations. Besides, Aikawa’s not all that bad.... A three out of ten on the annoying scale? Anyway, she’ll have her uses.

“Everyone’s got something they’re good at and something they’re bad at. At least you found what you’re good at. But—” Why are you aiming to become a ninja if you’re not good at the physical portion? Excelling in the kunoichi classes isn’t a good thing unless you want to specialize in infiltration or seduction. Luckily, I cut myself off before I bungle things up and ask such a rude question. Aikawa peers at me curiously, waiting for me to continue talking. “Well, at least one of us is good at this. I’m half afraid I’m going to fail this class. And I have so much to catch up on, too.”

“I can help you!” Aikawa shouts enthusiastically, her eyes shining with dedication, her hands clenching into fists. I can’t help but look at her in shock because, wow, I was not expecting that. I mean, I thought maybe she’ll offer, or that she’d be amenable to at least help a little during class, but to be so enthusiastic?

What’s the catch? There’s gotta be one. Nobody’s that nice, especially to me or Naruto. Not without a reason. Even Raidou, who was probably only nice to us at first because he knew our parents and because it’s his job. Though I’m eighty percent certain he’s attached to us now. We’ve grown on him, like fungus.

And Aikawa? What’s her deal? Certainly, it can’t be because anyone encouraged her to be my friend. Not unless it’s part of some plot similar to mine, or worse, which may be a bit too complicated for a child to concoct. So... what? Maybe it’s one of those feel-good things. Make her feel better about herself.

This is something she’s good at. Helping out someone is a form of self-gloating. But whatever the case is, I can’t afford to turn down her help.

“Er, okay. Thanks.”
That’s as far as we get before the teacher calls the time and we have to gather in front of her. I don’t get to talk to Aikawa for the rest of the class—not that I really want to—or afterward, when her friends quickly collect her and dart off to wherever, though Aikawa calls out a farewell. Her friends cast dubious looks toward me, which I manfully ignore, as they cart her off.

Briefly, I wonder if I’m supposed to receive anything from the teacher—papers or a book or even a syllabus—but by the time I look away from Aikawa, she’s already gone. No use lingering. Heaving a sigh, I quickly depart.

I reach the front of our apartment complex at the same time as Naruto. Which. Confuses me.

“Hey, nee-san!” Naruto greets enthusiastically, grinning widely at me.

I give a short wave, eyeing him dubiously. “...Where were you?”

“What do you really want to know?” he asks, leaning forward dramatically, then rocking back on his feet.

“Er, on second thought, no.”

Because with the way he’s acting? I really don’t want to know. Plausible deniability and all that. Besides, he’s way too excited at the thought of telling me. I think I’d rather have the satisfaction of not giving him the satisfaction.

And sure enough, he pouts. “Aww, you’re no fun!”

“Yeah, yeah,” I roll my eyes as I drag him up the stairs by his hand.

Suddenly, his pout morphs into a wicked grin. He lets go of my hand to throw his arm around my shoulder and he leans in.

“So, how was your kunoichi class?”
“Ugh,” I groan. “Don’t even ask.”

"How much trouble can he get into in an hour?"

A lot, apparently.

My second kunoichi class, being a joint meeting between my class and another, runs later than expected. With so many girls gathered together, chittering and already sharing gossip (which, really, what’s there to gossip about at such a young age? So and so pulled so and so’s hair, making her cry?), the teacher—and I really wish I knew her name, so that I can call her something other than “the teacher” or “teacher #2” or “that female teacher, the one with the frizzy hair”—had more trouble than usual keeping an eye on us all. Which is why some girls tried to cause trouble.

Not that they got very far, I can’t help but think triumphantly. Can’t believe I got some use out of the itching powder I’ve been holding on to in hopes of encountering Lunch-face. Aikawa managed to look disapproving even through her laughter. Though, I won’t be able to use it again for a while, lest I bring more suspicion onto me. The teacher is already keeping a close eye on me, though I can only guess as to why (my age, my relation to Naruto, on the Hokage’s orders, or for some entirely different reason).

Doesn’t really matter though, since there’s nothing I can do about it. So I shake the thought out of my head and speed up my pace as I run toward the apartment. I can feel Naruto loitering near what I think is the entrance, probably waiting for me.

That boy can be so impatient sometimes. (Look who’s talking.)

Maybe he’s just bored. Half of me is curious about what he does when I’m not around, but the other half really doesn’t want to know because I still don’t know when and how he got the itching powder. Or the glue he’d used on our teacher’s desk, which our teacher somehow avoided touching with his hands, instead resting his clothed elbows on it. Naruto and I had trouble acting innocent, but thankfully he took to heart my warnings about getting caught.
You know, I’ve never given serious thought about why I can sense Naruto—Kurama, I mean. Because it’s Kurama I’m sensing, not Naruto. Sure, a bijuu’s chakra is probably really distinct, but it’s not like I can sense anyone else to compare it to. Maybe I’m just really in tune with it? I was in the womb of a jinchuuriki (and that’s not something I really want to contemplate). And wasn’t that where Kurama was sealed? In Kushina’s stomach? Or at least I assume that her seal was in the same place as Naruto’s. Plus, I’ve spent the last four years constantly by Naruto’s side.

But then, shouldn’t I be able to sense Naruto? Or maybe I can sense him, but it’s overwhelmed by Kurama’s chakra. Or maybe it’s that plus that I’m in tune with Kurama’s chakra, making it easier for me to sense it. Or something. I don’t know.

Maybe I’ll be able to research this later. After I summon up the courage to ask Raidou for more lessons on chakra.

I’m interrupted from my musings when I sense Naruto approaching me. Curious, I start to speed up. Maybe he’s actually out to do something? Is there anything we need to buy today?

I’m almost at his location when he suddenly stops moving. At first, I don’t think much of it. Until Kurama’s chakra suddenly spikes suddenly. Distantly, I hear a familiar voice crying out in pain.

Naruto!

Heedless of anyone standing in my way, I barrel through the afternoon crowd toward my brother. My heart jumps into my throat when I hear Naruto shouting.

“Stop! Stop!”

There’s a crowd of people ahead, standing in a wide circle. I push my way through, elbowing people and stomping on their feet, growling at anyone who doesn’t move quickly enough.

“Get out of my way!” I bark. Someone tries to grab my arm, but I quickly shake them off. It takes too long for me to finally reach the front, and when I do, I stop in shock. There, in the center, is Naruto curled into a ball, his arms around his head to protect it. Above him, a man shouts at him, kicking at him again and again and again—

“—Disgusting monster! Why are you alive?”
Why. Why? Why are you doing this to him to us why stop it stop you motherfucker why where are the Anbu aren’t they supposed to protect us protect him die I’ll kill you I’ll kill you I’ll—

“—Kill you!”

I don’t think, don’t see or hear or feel. Vision full of Naruto beaten and bruised, I throw myself at the (motherfucker I’ll kill him die die die) man. I tackle his legs, knock him over. Don’t give him time to recover. My fists and feet, too small, too weak, pound at everything in its reach. Stomp, kick, punch, punch, kick, kick, kick kickkick. I’ll kill you I’ll kill you kill motherfucker die! Soft, hard, flesh, hair, face, groin. It hurts. It hurts hurts hurts but it Naruto hurts more Naruto’s hurt he’s hurt this asshole this motherfucker hurt him—!

I’m hurled backward, and I tumble, scraping my legs, my palms, my elbows. Strike the ground, bounce, head hits the floor and I bite my tongue. Copper fills my mouth as I lay, gasping.

Pain piercing through my scalp, someone grips my hair and pulls. The asshole, back on his feet, holds me up by my hair. I shriek and he slaps me, yells and shakes me but I can’t hear. Can’t make out his voice over the sound of my heartbeat pounding in my ears. I reach up, scratch at his hands, kick out but he’s too far away.

“Let go! Let go let go I’ll kill you let go!”

Crying behind me, a familiar voice. Someone latches onto my back, tries to prop me up, but too weak, too small. Naruto. Naruto Naruto Naruto this bastard hurt you I’ll kill him I’ll kill him I’ll kill—

“Stop it! Let her go!” Naruto shouts, behind me, near, but it sounds so distant, muffled.

And it’s not enough, it’ll never be enough. He just laughs and shakes me, shakes us both, growls. Says something, but I can’t hear. And I scratch at his hands and scratch and shriek and shout.

“I’ll kill you let go let go!”

My throat hurts my scalp hurts my ears ring tears stream down my face but it’ll be okay. It’ll be okay
as long as I can kill him. I just need to kill him just fucking kill—

A hand is suddenly squeezing the man’s arm, squeezing so tightly white blooms under fingertips and the man’s grip on me loosens and I drop, but Naruto’s holding me so I don’t. I slowly land on my feet and I try to throw myself back at him but Naruto won’t let go he won’t fucking let go and I almost throw my elbow into his face but it’s Naruto so I don’t I won’t even though that fucking asshole is right there where—


Defeated, exhausted, I slump in Naruto’s grip and flick my gaze toward the person who interrupted. A man with shoulder length straight black hair, with his hand still clamped tight on the fucking asshole’s arm, stands in front of us. His eyebrows are furrowed over small eyes as he whispers furiously at the asshole. The Military Police insignia stands out on the arm of his uniform.

An Uchiha.

I tense at the knowledge. Just because he stopped the man, doesn’t mean things are over.

“—publicly assault a child.”

I catch the tail end of his sentence, but the rest is drowned out by Naruto.

“Nee-san,” he mumbles as he pushes his head into my shoulder. He goes from holding me to hugging me, his grip tight. Painfully tight. I can start to feel the aches and the pains, the bruises and scrapes. It fucking hurts but I don’t care. I don’t care because it’s Naruto.

Naruto. Naruto Naruto oh god is he okay!? Is he hurt bad? Should he be standing?

Panicking, I push away from him and turn to get a good look at him. I suck in a deep breath from shock. His left eye is swollen shut, there’s blood coming from his nose and mouth, and some from a cut on his forehead. There are dusty footprints covering most of his clothes on one side, the same side he’s now gripping tightly. His elbows and his knees look scraped and bruises are starting to bloom one side of his body. To top it all off, there are tear tracks on his face, with new tears forming in the corner of his eyes.
I want to (kill that bastard that motherfucker how dare he how dare he lay a single fucking hand on my brother I’ll kill him eviscerate him cut him into tiny little pieces no one will ever be able to find him paint his blood on the fucking walls as a warning) comfort Naruto but I don’t know how, don’t know if there’s a safe place to touch on him that won’t hurt, that doesn’t ache.

Without wanting it to, the fucker’s voice carries over, aggravating me, making me anxious. I try not to pay attention to him. I don’t pay attention to him, because if I do, I’ll try to kill him again.

“Naruto,” I gasp out, and god do I sound pathetic. So fucking pathetic. Can’t even protect my own brother. And where are they people who are supposed to protect him? Where are the Anbu? Where?

I bring my hands up abortively, unsure if I should hold him or not, and let out a groan. Despite the amount of times I’ve seen him hurt, I’ll never get used to the sight. I don’t want to get used to it. Shouldn’t have to. Yet, here we are. Once again.

I don’t care if it’s illegal for Academy students to carry weapons, from now on I’m keeping a kunai on me at all times.

Reading my indecision, Naruto wraps his free arm around me instead. His hold on me is loose, but his grip on my shirt is tight. I follow his example and grip his shirt tightly. As he starts to tremble, I gently rest my chin on his shoulder—

And wish I didn’t.

There are still people surrounding us. Just standing there, whispering, gossiping; watching. While Naruto was getting beat up, while that motherfucker had me hanging by my hair, while we were screaming and shouting, these fucking assholes just stood there and did nothing. Did someone actually go out of their way to alert the Uchiha policeman about what’s going on, or did he just stumble upon the scene? Did these fuckers just stand her and watch as a little kid was assaulted by a fucking grown man?

Was it entertaining?

I can feel my lips forming a snarl when a familiar figure catches my eye. A girl—teenager?—with long honey-brown hair shoulders her way through the crowd, her bright teal sundress popping out from the sea of plain colors. Large green eyes reflects the horror written across her face when she
gets a good look at us.

For a moment, I can’t remember why she looks familiar. I frown at her long enough for her to realize I’m looking at her. Which, unfortunately, she takes as permission to approach us.

“Naruto-kun! Renge-chan!” she calls out.

Naruto’s grip on me loosens as he turns around at the sound of his name. At first, he frowns at the girl before his face lights up in recognition, then flushes—probably in embarrassment.

“Hisano-nee-san,” he mumbles in greeting.

What? “Neesan?” How does Naruto know this chick? As I unconsciously glower at the girl, I watch as her expression turns disapproving for a moment, causing Naruto to become sheepish, before becoming sympathetic.

Inexplicably, I feel like punching someone again.

What the hell. Who is she? Why does she seem familiar? And why is Naruto so familiar with her? I watch warily as the girl, Hisano, kneels in front of us. Then she fishes a handkerchief out from a clutch hanging from her shoulder and reaches out to wipe at Naruto’s face.

As I’m about to slap her hand away, I’m struck by the familiarity of this scene. Is she—the neighbor girl?

Oh my god Naruto, when did you get friendly with the neighbor girl? First name basis, too! What the fuck.

Struck by disbelief, I’m too slow to stop “Hisano-nee-san.” I can only stand and watch as she gently wipes his face, inexplicably both enraged and jealous, and also ashamed of myself. God, that should be my job. I’m the one who should be cleaning him off with a handkerchief (never mind that I don’t carry one), who should be soothing and consoling him. This... this chick is doing more to calm Naruto than I did. I—
Naruto’s relying on someone else... and I’m jealous. He should be relying on me. (I should be able to rely on him.) Why isn’t he relying on me? (Why can’t I rely on him?) Aren’t I good enough? (Why isn’t there anyone I can rely on?) Am I not enough? (Why isn’t anyone here for me?) Am I not needed? Does he not need me anymore? (Why must I be the strong one? The protector?) Am I useless?

(someone)

help

me)

My grip on Naruto loosens, but he doesn’t notice. He’s focused on the sensation of having his face wiped gently. His eyes are shut, but his face is flushed.

“Ya okay?” the girl asks.

No. No he isn’t okay. Obviously. But I don’t say anything. Only watch as Naruto’s face turns even redder as he squints at the girl and nods.

“Yeah!” he shouts. “This is nothing! A strong ninja can take a beating or two!”

He straightens up and puffs up his chest, only to curl inward with a wince, clutching at his side again. Alarmed, I pull his shirt up to prod at his side. Naruto yelps and whines at me, but I barely pay attention as I check to make sure he doesn’t have a broken ribcage. Not that I’m sure I’ll know if he does. Eventually I prod a spot that makes him yelp in pain.

“How does this feel?” I ask as I feel around. It doesn’t feel broken. Maybe bruised?

Naruto scowls at me and speaks through gritted teeth, “It hurts.”

Well. With that attitude, it’s probably not broken. I roll my eyes as I drop his shirt. He’s just petulant I’m embarrassing him in front of the “pretty lady.”
I want to say that it’s suspicious that she ran into us here, I really do. Especially considering this is our second time bumping into her when Naruto’s injured. But we’re really close to our apartment, so I can’t. And she really does live in the same complex as us—I’ve seen her a few times. Unless, that is, she’s been snooping around the place. But for a whole month?

There’s still the question of how she and Naruto became “close.”

Before I can interrogate her, however, a shadow falls over us. When I turn around, the Uchiha policeman looks down at us with an expression that I interpret as consternation. Or maybe it’s frustration. I don’t know. Behind him, the asshole is being detained by another Uchiha policeman, this one a much older man past his prime. He has graying hair and squinted eyes with wrinkles around his eyes and mouth.

I can’t help but chastise myself for not noticing his arrival. Like an idiot, I let myself get distracted. We’re not safe yet. Obviously, being out in the open gives us no safety, and there’s no one around that we can trust to keep us safe. Seriously, where the fuck are the fucking Anbu? Isn’t it their job to keep Naruto safe?

I thought we had at least one Anbu guard? Is that only a night thing? Or... what? Did our guard deliberately do nothing as Naruto was attacked?

“You two are coming with us to headquarters,” the Uchiha states in a cool voice that’s at odds with his expression.

“What for?” I’m quick to ask. I know it’s to take our statements, but the way the guy’s acting puts me on edge. Maybe it’s just an Uchiha thing (aside from that guy—that weird Uchiha), or maybe he just doesn’t like us, but he is radiating contempt. Frankly, I don’t want him anywhere near Naruto.

“Listen—” he growls, glaring down at me, but cuts himself off. His eyes flicker briefly toward Hisano as he grits his teeth. “We need to take your statements.”

Naruto frowns up at him, probably not understanding what he means. I don’t blame him. If I hadn’t gotten my hands on a dictionary, I wouldn’t have known what he meant. Even then, it’s a guess at best. For all I know, he might have said something completely different.

I mold my face into a look of confusion. “Our what?”
“Just—come with us.”

His frustration is written clearly across his face—so much for Uchiha stoicism—and he looks one step away from hitting us, so I don’t badger him. Even though I want to, because wow what an asshole. I’d ask how he got this job, but he’s an Uchiha.

...Which actually leads to the question of how competent these guys actually are, if they’re so unpleasant. I wonder how many crimes go unreported because people don’t want to deal with the Uchiha or don’t trust them to do their job properly? I know the general attitude toward the Uchiha is cool. (You can tell, because half the crowd around us can’t decide who to glare at: us or the Uchiha.)

Suddenly, Hisano stands up. “I’m comin’ too,” she says, simpering. “To give my witness statement.”

She lays a hand on Naruto and my shoulder. I try not to tense under her touch, and it’s really hard to resist the urge to smack her hand away, but even though I don’t trust her, I’ll feel better if she comes with. They’re less likely to do anything to us with a witness around.

“A credible source,” the Uchiha sneers at her, but concedes.

And what does that mean?

Hisano smiles sharply at the Uchiha as he walks toward the other Uchiha, probably his partner (do they partner up? I know that’s what police did Before, but these are shinobi...). They exchange a few words, the older Uchiha glancing in our direction, before they start walking. The crowd parts easily for them, watching with wide-eyed interest as our assailant is dragged forward with very loud protests.

“It’s their fault! Those demons! They killed my wife! They—”

“Be quiet,” the older Uchiha orders as he tugs forward on the fucker’s handcuffs, making him stumble. Serves him right.

As soon as their backs are turned to us, I shrug Hisano’s hand off my shoulder and grip Naruto’s hand. Even though I don’t want her walking behind us, more than that, I don’t want our backs
completely unguarded. So I suck it up and start following the Uchiha, though I keep some distance between us.

The journey to the police station is long and arduous, and unnecessarily painful. I really hope they have a medic-nin on hand, though I doubt it, because as quickly as Naruto heals, he still needs medical attention. What if something did break and it heals improperly? And I know I definitely need healing. I wish we could go to the hospital instead of the station. No, I wish we could go back to the apartment. I just want to curl up in bed and not come out for week. (And then plot that fucker’s demise.)

I just feel so so tired. My whole body aches. I can’t decide if I want to cry or punch someone, but that isn’t unusual. I’m leaning toward punching someone.

Whenever I imagined going to the police station, it definitely didn’t happen like this. I always thought I would just… visit. Out of curiosity. Or maybe we’d get taken in for something minor. Like petty theft. Or destruction of property. Or defamation.

Definitely not beaten and bruised.

Not as the victim to be mocked or not taken seriously. Because somehow I doubt things would be going in our favor if there weren’t so many witnesses.

Around us, people stop to point and stare. Whispering follows us. Naruto’s grip on my hand tightens as he starts walking closer to me. I take a quick glance behind us to see Hisano walking not far behind us with a fierce glare on her face. Despite all the noise following us, we’re quiet, except for the motherfucker’s insistence on being loud in spite of the Uchiha quieting him.

“—going on?”

“What did they—”

“—just disappear like—”

“—demons.”
My foot catches on something and I stumble, almost falling over before someone—I glimpse the worried face of Hisano—catches my arm, dragging a hiss of pain out of me. God, I hurt.

“Shouldn’t the kids go to the hospital?” Hisano asks the two policemen, but they don’t respond.

I’m not sure if they didn’t hear her or if they’re just ignoring her. We continue walking, though Hisano walks closer to us, probably in case I trip again. If we weren’t in public, I have the feeling Naruto would be attached to me like a limpet. I don’t blame him. I’d do the same.

It feels like it takes hours to trudge our way to the police station, but we finally make it. Overhead, the sky is starting to turn pink. The building looks like it’s made mostly from stone with two sets of double doors on either side of a booth protruding at the front of the building. The booth’s center window is open, with a bored looking teenage Uchiha sitting behind it. His bored look quickly disappears when he catches sight of us.

“Yashiro-sempai! Inabi-sempai!” he shouts as he jumps out of his seat.

The fucker starts shouting and struggling again in one last effort, but I willfully ignore him. Unlike Naruto, who flinches into me at whatever the fucker’s saying.

“Ignore him,” I advise Naruto, but I don’t think he listens to my advice, because he keeps flinching. And I know, easier said than done. At least I have practice from all the years learning to tune out my dad (though, unfortunately, it never worked for anything shown on TV, no matter how awful the content). Don’t think covering his ears will help much, either.

“Tekka,” the older Uchiha nods in acknowledgement.

No other words are exchanged as he holds open the door, leaving the younger Uchiha to drag the asshole inside. I wait until they’ve cleared the area before I lead Naruto inside, skirting around the man holding the door open.

I used to watch a lot of police procedural TV shows. Castle, Criminal Minds, Rizzoli & Isles, Major Crimes and its predecessor.... Normally, I’d be excited or at least curious about the inner workings of an actual police station (and also really freaking nervous, because there’s never a positive reason to visit a police station). But now, I can’t bring myself to care. I just want to leave as soon as I can. More than anything, I just want to be comforted. Instead, I’ll have to comfort Naruto.
Instead, we’re seated by the front desk and then are promptly ignored. No questions, no healing, no anything. The two Uchiha are quick to ditch us, making off with the still protesting fucker. I make sure to get one last look at him to try and memorize how he looks.

The front lobby is less busy than I thought it would be, considering it’s the only police station in a city this big (Hidden “Village” is definitely a misnomer, though it probably did start off as a village). Two policemen sit behind the front desk talking to a half-hysterical woman wailing about her missing son. People intermittently exit one door and enter another, heading toward different sections of the building. Across from us, a man comforts his daughter crying about her missing pet.

Naruto slumps against me in his seat, exhausted. My grip on his hand tightens. On his other side, Hisano sits with her back straight, her fists clenched on her lap, glaring at the people around us. I would be, too, except I just don’t have the energy to do anything but sit here. I’m physically exhausted, but my mind won’t rest.

I wonder why Hisano is helping us. Why that man attacked Naruto. Why was no one guarding Naruto? Or if he was being guarded, why didn’t they do anything? Why are we here instead of the hospital? Can’t they take our statement there? Or do they just not care enough to let us get our wounds treated?

If they come out with the excuse that they need to “properly document our injuries,” I’m gonna call bullshit. Because they’re waiting way too long. By the time someone does, most of Naruto’s injuries will be healed. Or is that what they’re aiming for? To make Naruto look less injured than he is?

More than anything, I really wish Raidou was here.

Tears sting at my eyes. I close them before any can leak out, willing them to go away. Unintentionally, I catch part of a conversation between two people walking by.

“More missing children?” a male whispers.

Another man sighs. “I don’t know why you’re so surprised. It’s been happening for years now.”

“Yeah, but,” the first man says, then hesitates. “It makes me worry for my son. He’s in the age range....”
“I know two children no one would miss. Why can’t they be taken instead?”

I tense. What the hell? Is that fucker talking about us?

“Oh! If it isn’t the little miss and her brother!” A familiar voice suddenly calls out, startling me so badly I accidentally jostle Naruto off of my shoulder.

My eyes snap open and immediately search for the owner of the voice. An Uchiha policeman man with dark unruly hair shoulders past two men, waving enthusiastically at us.

Oh dear god. What the hell. First the neighbor girl and now him?

Naruto looks around wildly before he spots the man. He perks up as soon as he recognizes him. Annoyance flashes across my face before it settles into a glare.

“Ojisan!” Naruto shouts. He starts to get up from his seat, but I stop him before he can, earning a pout from him. “Nee-san!” he whines.

I ignore him for a moment, intent on the Uchiha. “What do you want?”

The Uchiha grins widely, the laugh lines on his face becoming prominent, with a flash of his teeth. Luckily, we’re indoors so it doesn’t blind me this time. I’m still tempted to shield my eyes. He stops in front of us, looming over us, and god does that make me want to punch him.

“Now, now. Is that any way to talk to your elder?” he asks with a laugh. But before I can respond, his eyes flick over to Hisano and a look of surprise crosses his face. “Oh? And who is this young lady?”

“None of your business,” I grit out, but I’m ignored as Naruto talks over me.

“That’s Hisano-nee-san! She lives next door, but not next door. Um....”

“I live three door down,” Hisano interjects, giving the policeman a winsome smile, giving her
dipping her head demurely in greeting. “Fujimaki Hisano.”

The Uchiha gives a shallow bow in return. “Uchiha Meikyou, at your service. So what brings you three here?”

I probably shouldn’t tell him off, no matter how much I want to, because he’s the first person to actually “assist” us. I have to bite my lip to resist the urge, instead letting Naruto talk.

“We’re here to give our state—our statement—um,” Naruto pauses, looking at me imploringly.

“Statement.”

“Yeah! That!” Naruto nods.

“What for?” Meikyou asks. As he takes a better look at us, his smile disappears from his face.

I don’t blame him. We probably look like a mess. I feel like a mess. Naruto flushes, shrinking into himself and looking down to hide his face. In contrast, I look directly into the Uchiha’s eyes.


Hisano whips her head toward me so fast I’m afraid it’ll fall off. She gives a little snort, glancing at Meikyou out of the corner of her eye. Meikyou doesn’t react, though his eyes narrow a bit.

“I see,” he says, never looking away from me. “Do you know why?” My eyes flick over toward Naruto in response. Meikyou follows my gaze, his eyes softening as he kneels to try and catch Naruto’s eyes. “Naruto?”

Naruto finally looks up, a stubborn look in his eyes as he juts his chin out. “He said mean things! He said... he said that nee-san and I are monsters. But we’re not! We’re not!” He repeats himself, looking up at the policeman earnestly. “Nee-san said that anyone who calls us a monster is a monster. So I said that he’s the monster! And then... and then he hit me, so I hit him back.”
I... I don’t know if I should laugh or cry or what. Is this my fault? Is this because I said that to him? Because I’m the type of person to hit someone back when they hit me, and Naruto emulates me to an extent? Am I really that much of a bad influence?

No.

It isn’t my fault. It’s that asshole’s fault. It’s all the people who insist we’re monster—that Naruto’s a monster even though he’s just a little kid. Even though he’s an orphan boy who just wants people to love him and accept him.

(And instead, he got me.)

The worst part... the really worst part? Is that I can’t scold him because it sounds like something I might do. Because he really is emulating me in some ways.

“I saw some of it,” Hisano chimes in. “I was passin’ by when Renge charged the guy. But a child against a grown man? Luckily, a policeman broke them up. But we’ve been here for a while an’ no one’s talked to us.”

“Oh?” Meikyou gives a little hum. For a moment, his eyes flash red as he takes a good long look at me and Naruto, making me jolt.

The Sharingan?

But before I can ask him, he pulls out a notebook and a pencil. He writes something down and then tears the page out. He folds it and snags the arm of the first person to walk by, another Uchiha policeman. “Take this to the Hokage.”

“But—” the man tries to protest, but Meikyou cuts him off.


The man grumbles, his eyes flicking over to us disdainfully. I resist the urge to sneer at him, instead watching as he takes the note with a sniff and walks off.
“Only because it’s you, Meikyou-senpai.”

Meikyou gives the retreating man’s back a small smile before taking the only available seat, which is next to Hisano. He holds up his pencil and notepad. “Please, tell me more.”

We each give him our versions of the events. Naruto’s a bit vague, though not entirely on purpose, limited by his vocabulary. I try to be as concise as I can, though I mention not going to the hospital and that one policeman’s insistence that we come here. Hisano’s retelling covers what happened after I appeared. She also mentions how we’ve received no medical treatment and reiterates that we’ve been here a while without anyone talking to us. Meikyou notes everything we say, giving encouraging nods and hums whenever we falter.

“All right, that’s everything,” he states as he stores his notepad away. “You’re free to go.”


“Ya sure?” she asks. She casts a concerned look over me and Naruto, making me unconsciously bristle. I know I shouldn’t, that she’s concerned for us—and she does seem genuine—but I just don’t like being looked at. Not like that.

“Yes,” Meikyou nods his head. His mouth, set in a straight line, purses in displeasure. It’s so odd seeing him so serious. I know first impressions can’t be trusted, but he seems like such a jovial person that his serious mien shouldn’t suit him. Yet it does. “I’ll fill out the paperwork, plus a file of complaint. You shouldn’t have been made to wait for so long. Especially without medical attention.” He notices me looking intently at him and gives me a small smile. “I sent a message to the Hokage, so your guardian should be here soon.”

Our guardian? Oh. Raidou.

Oh thank god.

The immediate relief at finding out that Raidou’s on his way startles me. But then, is it really so surprising? I rely on him a lot (more than I should) and he’s been there for us for years. Plus, he’s the only adult figure in our lives. Of course I’ll be relieved to cede responsibility to him. He’ll take of us—at the least, it’s his job.
“We’ll be okay, neesan!” Naruto says, but when I look at him, I see he’s not talking to me, but Hisano.

“If you’re sure...,” Hisano says, glancing hesitantly toward the both of us.

Yes, we’re sure. Now go.

Naruto echoes my thoughts, except in a completely different tone of voice. She still looks hesitant as she leaves, turning down Meikyou’s offer to walk her out. Once she’s gone, the Uchiha settles back in his seat and gives us a smile. It’s oddly comforting to see him smile again, which kinda pisses me off. I don’t say anything though, instead watching in annoyance as Naruto smiles back.

“Oh, right!” Meikyou suddenly exclaims. He starts digging through his pockets until he finds what he’s searching for. He pulls out whatever it is and holds it out to me. “Here. Thank you for last time.”

It takes me a moment to recognize what it is, but when I do, I can’t help but turn red. “Ah!”

“Ah?” Naruto imitates me, craning his head to get a look at it.

I snatch the handkerchief out of Meikyou’s hand and quickly pocket it. Thank god he didn’t pull it out earlier. If Hisano had seen it... Would she have recognized her own handkerchief?

Crap. I’ll have to remember to give this back to her. Unless she forgot about it?

“What?” Naruto asks. “What is it?” He leans over to try and paw at my pocket. I get up to dodge him, resolutely ignoring my body screaming at me in protest.

“Nothing! It’s nothing.” I shout. “And stop moving so much. You’re injured, remember?”

Naruto pouts at me. “But it doesn’t really hurt anymore! See!”
And he prods at his side before I can stop him. I lurch toward him, only to stop jerkily when he doesn’t even flinch. Two hours ago, he had to hold that side to make sure he didn’t accidentally jostle it, and now poking it doesn’t even hurt? Why do I continuously underestimate his speed of healing? But I’m still worried that it might not have healed properly. And....

“Stop that,” I slap his hand away, pointedly looking in Meikyou’s direction. The Uchiha, realizing I’m looking at him, turns his curious gaze away from Naruto to flash his teeth at me in a wide smile. I instinctively cover my eyes.

That’s the scene Raidou arrives to.

“Naruto! Renge!” he shouts as he rushes toward us.

“Raidou-nii!” Naruto shouts in joy.

He jumps out of his seat and throws himself at Raidou, hugging his legs enthusiastically. Raidou folds in over him, enveloping him in a hug. He looks over to me, and I can see the worry in his eyes, the relief to see us whole and standing. I stand there, uselessly, biting my lip. I’m glad he’s here. I really am. But....

“Go on,” Meikyou says, giving my back a little push.

I glare at him even as I comply. How dare he tell me what to do? And I’m not doing it just because he told me to! I was going to join them even before he said anything, damn it.

...Ah, whatever. Who cares?

Raidou raises his arm for me to snuggle in next to Naruto, engulfing the both of us. It’s warm and nice and more comforting than I thought it would be. I can feel tears forming in my eyes and damn it, why? Why?

Why do I keep doubting this guy? Why can’t I trust him fully? He deserves it. A part of me already unconsciously trusts him, takes comfort in his presence. Relies on him.
Eventually we separate, Raidou standing fully and turning toward Meikyou. He gives the Uchiha a nod (of acknowledgement?).

“Meikyou-san.”

“Raidou-kun! It’s been a while,” Meikyou greets him warmly, though his expression quickly turns serious. “Unfortunate that we meet like this. I apologize on the behalf of my clansmen that it took so long to alert you of the situation. I’ll be dealing with them personally.” Here, he gives a bow. Some of the people around us stop to stare at him in shock.

It takes a moment, Raidou staring evenly at the back of Meikyou’s head, before he responds. “Apology accepted.” The Uchiha straightens at the acknowledgement. He gives a sharp look to everyone gawking (or as close to gawking as Uchiha get, which really isn’t close at all) at him, making them return to what they were doing previously. “What exactly happened?”

As Meikyou recounts an incident report of what happened, I lean into Raidou’s side. I’m so tired and I ache, and I just want to go back to the apartment and sleep. Raidou’s hand, so warm and large, starts carding through my hair. It relaxes me, makes my eyes flutter shut. I zone out the sounds around me, choosing to trust Raidou to protect us.

Eventually, a familiar weight presses up against me, Naruto taking a hold of my hand. “Nee-san?” he murmurs.

“Hm?” I respond without opening my eyes.

“I want to go home.”

“Yeah,” I agree, blinking my eyes open to stare up at the off-white ceiling. “Me too.”

Except I haven’t considered anywhere to be home for years before I was reborn here.

Home... home isn’t a place, it’s a feeling. A person. A sense of comfort, of “this is where I want to be. This is where I feel comfortable.” And the closest thing to that, for me, is Naruto.
And that’s sad.

The rest of the day’s a bit hazy. After Raidou and Meikyou finish talking, Raidou takes us (carries us) to the hospital where we’re given a check-up. No serious injuries, so no healing, but we do get bandaged up. Unsurprisingly, me more than Naruto. By that time, most of his wounds have healed. My palms, elbows, and knees are all wrapped up, with some bandages around my head, too. I probably look like a half-wrapped zombie. A nurse, distantly polite at best with Raidou standing nearby, tells me that I can take the bandage off of my cheek.

Afterward, we head back to the apartment, where Raidou sends us to get cleaned up while he makes us dinner. All we really have to do is change our clothes and wash our hands, since the nurses had to clean off our dust-caked forms to check us over (no iryou-nin for us). A bit mortifying, but I ached too much to care. I still ache.

I just want this day to be over. And I’m definitely not looking forward to going to school tomorrow. Maybe we’ll just skip.

As I’m contemplating this, Naruto suddenly speaks up. “Nee-san?”

“Yeah?” I respond, looking at him through the mirror as I wash my hands, except he’s not looking at me. He’s looking down at his feet. Shutting the water off, I turn around to get a good look at him. He’s fidgeting his feet and biting on his lip. “Naruto?”

“I’m sorry!” he blurts out. He looks up, and there are tears in his eyes. Shit. “About today. It’s my fault. I’m so sorry!”

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck.
Panicking, I wrap my arms around him, forgetting that my hands are wet. He doesn’t seem to mind as he buries his head into my shoulder. His hands curl into fists on the back of my shirt.

“No,” I deny, shaking my head furiously. “No. It’s not your fault! Okay? I would have done the same thing!” Crap, not supposed to admit that. But it’s the truth.

“I know,” he mumbles. Then lets out a little giggle. “So violent.”

I give a sniff and thrust my nose into the air. “Of course.” Hesitate. “But... run if the opponent’s too strong, okay? It’s a tactical retreat, not running away.”

I pull away to look into his eyes, make sure he realizes how serious I am. Because sometimes you have to run away. Sometimes it’s braver to run away. He takes a moment, but eventually he seems to understand.

“Okay!” he nods before breaking out a smile.

I can’t help but smile back. “Alright, let’s go eat. Gotta savor food not made by me.”

“Yeah,” he easily agrees, already leaving the bathroom before I can finish speaking.

“Hey! You’re not supposed to agree! You’re supposed to say how much you like my cooking!” I yell after him.

“But that’s a big fat lie!” he calls back.

Huffing a laugh, I follow him. Closest thing to home, indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Aikawa, no! Why do you keep butting into this story!? Man, she’s supposed to be a bit
character that only appears once or twice, but now look at her. She’s edging her way into becoming Renge’s “friend.” And my first reaction to that realization was “kill it!” which is just horrible and goes to show what kind of writer I am.... Not that I’m going to cave into that impulse. (Or will I?)

And the reappearance of the Uchiha! Who is not Shisui, sorry. But Shisui will eventually appear! Also, why is it so hard to introduce canon characters?
Now I've gone

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When I wake up, I’m too tired to get out of bed. My body’s sore, my palms and knees still sting, and the back of my head aches. I didn’t get much sleep, either. Not only did Old Lady and that asshole (I’ll fucking kill them) plague my dreams, Naruto also had a restless night. I think he might have cried at one point.

So instead of getting up to go to school, like I should, I just go back to sleep.

I’m woken up who knows how long later by Naruto frantically shaking me.

“Nee-san! Nee-san, we’re late!”

Groaning, I swat his hand away and roll over. “Go back to sleep.”

“But what about class?” He shakes me again. I blindly flail around until I grab a part of him (with much smacking involved) and pull him down, eliciting a yelp from him.

“Skipping,” I declare, rolling over and wrapping an arm around him. “Now sleep.”

I’m not sure what he says back—if he says anything. As soon as I finish talking, I’m asleep again.

When I finally crawl out of bed, it’s past noon. I’m groggy and still tired, but at least I feel a bit better. I sit up, yawning, only to get a whiff of something good. Curious, I turn to wake Naruto up, only to see he’s not there.

Did he... make something?

Alarmed at the thought, I bolt out of our room and into the kitchen.
“Nee-san!” Naruto greets me enthusiastically from his seat at the table, waving a spoon at me. In front of him is a bowl of miso soup, a plate of fried rice, and some side dishes. Definitely not food he could make on his own. Greeting finished, he quickly turns his attention back to his food.

Then...?

There’s the sound of running water. I slowly glance around Naruto, and sure enough, Raidou’s at the sink. Raidou looks over his shoulder at me, his eyebrows furrowed, and wow, are his eyebrows almost always furrowed. I wonder if we cause him a lot of stress, or if he just tends to look like that.

He twitches his lips upward in a miniscule smile in greeting. “You’re finally awake.”

“Um, yeah,” I respond as I stumble into the seat across from Naruto. There’s food already laid out for me. I pick up the spoon set out for me and poke at the fried rice. *Mm.* Smells good. Wish there’s egg drop soup (the Korean version, of course) instead of miso. “What are you doing here?”

Raidou stops washing the dishes to face me fully. He wipes his hands on a hand towel, letting his eyes drift away from me, before responding, smiling sardonically.

“Can’t I check up on you two because I’m worried? And don’t worry, I informed the Academy about your absence.”

I flush in embarrassment. “Oh. Right. Thanks.”

He shakes his head at me and comes over to tap my head. I flinch at the movement without meaning to. He frowns, his eyebrows furrowing again. I think about apologizing, but before I can, he places his hand heavily on my head and ruffles my hair. I take a moment to relish the feeling.

“Eat.”

“Alright, alright,” I grumble, swatting his hand away. He gives me a small smile before making his way toward Naruto, taking the seat next to him.
I tuck into the meal half-heartedly. I know I should be savoring it. I mean, two meals right after the other that I didn't cook? But I just don’t feel that hungry. My stomach churns at me. I keep thinking about yesterday. And then the dreams... nightmares... Still, I know I need to eat, so I force myself.

I only get a few bites before Naruto finishes.

“Gochisousama!” he exclaims, grinning over at Raidou. (1) Raidou flicks a smile back, reaching over to ruffle his hair. Naruto leans into it. His face softens, relaxes, in an open show of trust and affection. It gives me pause. But then he suddenly straightens up, turning imploring eyes onto Raidou. “Ne, ne. Raidou-niisan! Teach us more! About chakra! And fighting! I want to get stronger!”

I set my spoon down to look pleadingly at Raidou, too. Naruto stole the words right out of my mouth. I was going to ask Raidou after I ate to teach us some taijutsu and more about chakra. So far I’ve had no progress on either front because I don’t know enough about either subject to try anything. I can’t even look up anything about taijutsu or chakra in books because I still have trouble reading. I’m going to go crazy from not being able to read more than just children’s books, but right now I need to get stronger first.

And Raidou’s really the only person we can ask.

I thought book knowledge should come first. I thought we’d have more time to get stronger. I didn’t think anyone would assault either of us like that, and that we wouldn’t be protected by Anbu or something. Speaking of....

“We have to protect ourselves since no one else will.”

We both stare at him beseeingly for a while, Naruto leaning forward eagerly, his eyes full of determination. I can feel my eyebrows dipping lower the more time passes. Raidou’s eyebrows furrow again as he carefully observes us. Assesses us.

I wish I can know what he’s thinking, what he thinks of us. We’re not exactly normal kids, for various reasons, and we don’t exactly have a normal relationship with him, either. Raidou is our guard and guardian, but not our caretaker. Yet, he takes care of us. Cares for us, even.

But is it within his mission parameters—because ultimately we’re his mission—to teach us? If it isn’t, will he do it anyway? And what will it say about him if he does?
Again, without really meaning to, I’m testing him. I want to know what kind of person he is. What makes him tick. Because I want to trust him. I want to rely on him. Even more than I already am.

I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.

Finally, he caves.

“Alright,” he sighs. But as Naruto’s face brightens and my shoulders loosen (and when did they get tense, anyway?), he gives us a stern look. “Only because you need to know how to protect yourselves.” He stares at us evenly, making sure we understand the severity of his words. “It’s dangerous right now. After everything that’s been happening the last few years.... You have to be careful.”

Everything that’s been happening? What does he mean? I can feel my eyebrows furrowing as I slip into thought. What happened aside from the Kyuubi Attack?

Before that was the Third Shinobi War, and then.... What? What else happened? Oh! Orochimaru defected, right? I’m not sure when that happened, though. I think that always confused me when I read the manga because of timing issues. A bit like how Kakashi’s past contradicted itself.

Agh! The manga was convoluted with a bunch of plot holes, so I really shouldn’t think about it. Besides, I don’t know how much of it is really applicable. Or accurate.

So I need to think about what I know, what I’ve heard and learned while living here.

Aside from general hostility toward the Uchiha because of suspicions about their involvement with the Kyuubi Attack, there shouldn’t be anything going on, right? What else is there?

—missing children?

—happening for years now—
“Because of the missing children?” I blurt out.

“What?” Naruto asks, his expression furrowing in confusion.

I glance at him from the corner of my eyes, frowning. “Remember, yesterday? Some of the policemen at the station mentioned it.”

Naruto just looks even more confused. He glances from me to Raidou. “Did they?”

Wasn’t he paying attention? Well, I guess I can’t blame him. He was probably too worn out to pay attention to anything that didn’t have anything to do with him.

Ignoring Naruto, I turn toward Raidou for confirmation. “So? Am I right?”

Sighing, Raidou rubs the back of his neck and looks up at the ceiling. He mumbles something I can’t hear, though Naruto might have caught some of it, judging by the way his eyebrows slant down. Eventually, Raidou looks back at me. He gives a curt nod.

“You’re right,” he says, and for a moment I feel elated for getting it right. But that quickly turns to confusion, because I shouldn’t be right.

I mean, even with Danzou snatching up children, there shouldn’t be so many missing to the point of people noticing. He’s been doing it for years—and that’s a scary thought, because there’s the possibility it could have happened to me or Naruto, since we’re the children of a jinchuuriki and Naruto’s the current jinchuuriki. Possibly, Danzou could have convinced the Council that it would be a good idea for one or both of us to “apprentice” under him, like he has with so many clan children. I’m pretty sure people volunteer they’re children to him because it’s such an honor to be taught by the Great Danzou-sama, Councilman, War Hawk, criminal mastermind. Because what he does? It’s criminal. Brainwashing all those children, making them his tools of war…. It’s sickening.

As much as the Elemental Nations disgust me for condoning children soldiers (and isn’t it sad that most people don’t see what’s wrong with that), Danzou is ten times worse.
But then, if it isn’t Danzou, who else could it be?

Heedless of my thoughts, Raidou continues talking. He stares down at the table, a look of consternation flashing across his face. “Since a few years ago, a large amount of children have gone missing. Some of them have families, but most of them are orphans. Unfortunately, we have no clues as to why the children are disappearing or who may be taking them. So you two must be extra careful.”

When he finishes, he brings his head back up, his expression heavy. He takes a moment to stare into Naruto’s eyes, then mine. As soon as my eyes meet his, I want to look away. I can’t stand the pressure, the firmness, behind his eyes. He wants to convey his sincerity, the importance of us listening to his warning.

He’s worried about us—genuinely worried—and wants us to be careful.

But I don’t know if I can listen to him.

Part of me balks at it, slightly offended. As if I wasn’t going to be careful if he didn’t tell me to. Another part wants to shy away because I’m *not* going to be careful, because being careful will only get me so far in this dangerous world (because half of those missing children are probably dead, and I don’t know how I feel about that—about the fact that I’m not one of them, that I avoided that fate, that *Naruto* avoided that fate). Because I can’t hold back, because a part of myself is already holding me back.

Because.... Because I’m a coward.

And like a coward, I avert my eyes. I can peripherally see Naruto’s eyebrows furrow as he squints his eyes in thought. The silence turns awkward, for me, as I stare at the corner of the table. I don’t know what to do, what to say. Is Raidou even waiting for me to say something? For Naruto to?

A thought pops up, and I voice it to escape the awkwardness. “But if it’s so dangerous, why aren’t we being guarded?”

I flick my eyes back up to Raidou. He’s sitting with his hands folded on top of the table, staring down at them. When I ask my question, his eyes rise up to meet mine. I resist the urge to look away, silently challenging him. It’s a question that’s been bugging me since yesterday. Without meaning to, I’d let my guard down because I thought we were being guarded. I thought Raidou or someone else
was guarding us. But they weren’t. They aren’t. Raidou had confirmed this when he agreed to teach us.

And I don’t get why. Don’t they want to protect their precious jinchuuriki? Or, since apparently we’re “monsters” (and why am I included in that, anyway), protect the civilians from us.

“And why do you think you would be guarded?” Raidou’s answer throws me off guard.

Crap.

That’s right. There’s no reason for me to think we’d be guarded. I shouldn’t know that Naruto’s the jinchuuriki or that we’re the previous Hokage’s children. I should view us as two ordinary orphans.

Except that’s not right.

Not with the way people treat us, not with how the Hokage’s interested in us. Or how Raidou’s been assigned to us. None of that would make sense for two “ordinary” orphans. (And what, exactly, does Naruto think of all this, anyway? Shouldn’t he be the most suspicious of our circumstances?)

Naruto answers for me. “There’s that lady from that one night! She was dressed like you used to, as Yamori. And you used to guard us, right?”

That’s right. There’s that Anbu chick. Except, if no one’s guarding us, what was she doing? She shouldn’t have been there. Or maybe someone else assigned her to us, like Danzou.

...Aaaand that’s a creepy thought. Way to give myself the chills. I quickly shake the thought off, telling myself not to jump to conclusions.

“And the Hokage’s interested in us,” I chime in, because yeah, that detail’s hella suspicious. The Hokage isn’t interested in all children, not like he is with us. (And wow does that sound really creepy, too.) “Plus, there’s you.”

I jab a finger at him, leaning forward slightly without really meaning to. Across from me, Naruto nods enthusiastically. Raidou shakes his head, frowning at us. He has to crane his head a bit to look
at Naruto, but it doesn’t lessen the effect. Neither of us back down, though.

Eventually Raidou slumps a bit and gives out an almost imperceptible sigh. “As you two are now Academy students, the Council has deemed you capable of protecting yourselves.”

The Council? Not the Hokage? And why does the Council have a say in that? No. Wait. I guess that makes sense. They probably think it’s a waste of resources to have people guarding us 24/7 now that we’re “capable” of protecting ourselves—which also means that we were being guarded. Especially since they have more important things to focus on, like the missing children.

(Though, that still leaves the question of what that Anbu chick was doing that night.)

What a load of crock.

I bet this is Danzou’s convoluted way of testing to see if we’re interesting enough for him to keep an eye on us, or something. A test to see if we can protect ourselves from civilians, since he’s only interested in the strong. And useful.

Of course, this is all assuming he’s actually interested in us.

...Ha.

Like he isn’t. Our pedigree alone assures his interest. Last of the Uzumaki, scion of the previous, much vaunted genius Hokage and his wife the jinchuuriki. And—damn it why didn’t I realize this sooner, because the way I’ve been going? Not very subtle. I mean, I haven’t been going around all, “hey guys, I ain’t actually a kid. This is my second life! Isn’t that cool” or anything. But I haven’t been hiding the fact that I’m smarter than the average kid. And I don’t much act like a kid, most of the time.

...I probably resemble some of the prodigies of this world. Smart, messed up, and disdainful. Yeah, I bet I fit right in.

Except I’m not really a genius. Just, not a kid. I have the capacity to understand the severity of certain situations, to understand or deduce the meaning behind things that children might not even think to question.
Which is why I try so hard to be cheerful for Naruto, to cheer him up when he’s down, because I can’t brush things off like he can. Can’t bounce back like he does. And I need him to be cheerful, need him to be happy, because one of us has to be.

A child’s world is small. It tends to include their family, their friends, and their school, but only peripherally. A child’s world ultimately revolves around themselves. An adult realizes that there’s more to the world, that they’re insignificant. That they’re a small ant trooping on.

I know this—I knew this. It’s why I tried to hide from the world. Tried to bury my head under the sand and ignore everything else. And now I’m here, an adult in a child’s body. An adult, who still sometimes thinks of herself as a teenager, who never quite matured to match her physical age (though I never looked my physical age, either). Must be genetic.

By the time I come out of my thoughts, Raidou and Naruto have cleared the table and are in the middle of talking about something over a game of War. They’ve switched seats, having settled onto the floor in front of the couch.

...I’m disconcerted by my propensity to zone out. Guess bad habits really do die hard.

“Who’s winning?” I ask, only half curious, as I make my way over to them. I slump into the seat closest to Naruto, nudging him over a bit with my foot, making him grump at me.

“I am!” Naruto answers enthusiastically. I’m not surprised. He has oddly good luck when it comes to card games.

“I send Raidou a smirk as he glowers down at his cards. “It can’t be helped,” he mumbles. “I’ve never played this game before. Where’d you learn this?”

“You’re just a sore loser,” Naruto sticks his tongue out as he grins smugly. “Nee-san taught me.”
“Oh?” Raidou raises an eyebrow as he glances at me.

I roll my eyes. “I only know, like, three card games.” Which isn’t necessarily true, but I can’t remember most of the rules of the other card games, so I don’t count them. I know War, Blackjack, and Egyptian Ratscrew. Then there’s Spit and Speed, but I get the rules for the two mixed up too often. But that’s not important. “So, when are you going to train us?”

Naruto none-too-gently puts his cards down, earning a glare from me, and leans forward enthusiastically. “We should start now!”

Raidou’s lips twitch upward infinitesimally as he sets aside his own cards.

“I need to think up a schedule, first,” he says. Naruto’s face scrunches up as he gears up to say something, but Raidou raises a hand, cutting him off before he can start. “Since you two are aiming to become shinobi, I will give you the courtesy of giving you proper training. However, we won’t be able to meet up more than twice a week, so much of your training will have to be done on your own. Thus, the schedule. Understood?”

Naruto nods eagerly. I mumble a “yes, sir.” A second passes before Naruto starts to whine.

“But why can’t you teach us now? Like some more about chakra!” he begs as he bodily throws himself to latch onto Raidou’s arm. I commend Raidou for not simply moving away at the same time I berate myself for using “like” often enough that Naruto’s using it, too.

And I agree with Naruto, too. Because I’m kinda impatient to learn more about ninja magic. I mean, chakra. I may not be a genius like Kakashi or Itachi, but I’m not a four year old, either. I can handle more. Maybe.

But Raidou just frowns at Naruto. His eyes flick downward and then back up so fast I almost miss it.

I don’t get why he’s so hesitant. It shouldn’t be too dangerous with him supervising. Definitely better than if we tried on our own. I can attest to that. With him here, even if something goes wrong, he can get us proper medical attention. So why—oh. Right. Kurama.
I bite my lip, unsure. But what the hell, I’ll do it.

“If it’s about last time,” I start, making sure to catch Raidou’s eyes. Naruto tilts his head back to look at me upside down. “Well, Naruto used the warm thing in his stomach instead of his own chakra, right? That’s why things were... weird.”

“What?” Naruto rears back, letting go of Raidou’s arm to face me. “What do you mean, weird? And what warm thing in my stomach?” His hands hover over his stomach unsurely as he tentatively pokes at it.

Raidou reaches down to stop him, making Naruto glare at him, except Raidou isn’t looking at Naruto. He’s looking at me. For a moment, we sit there. Me looking at Naruto looking at Raidou looking at me.

I pretend to blithely ignore the tension. “Can’t you feel it?” I ask Naruto instead. He turns toward me, his face scrunched up in confusion. I point toward his stomach, begging my hand to stay steady. “In there. Ever since I can remember, you’ve had something big and warm.” Without consciously realizing, I close my eyes as I feel for it. The familiar feel of it relaxes me. Makes me sway. My hand, limp, falls down to my side. “Comforting.” I blink my eyes open to catch Naruto’s eyes. “It helps me find you.”

Naruto looks down at his stomach, unsure. He decides against poking his stomach again like I’m sure he wants to, probably because Raidou’s still gripping one of his hands. I resist the urge to check the older man’s reaction, instead keeping my focus on Naruto.

He looks up at me with wide eyes. “How? Where?”

“Um,” I tilt my head in thought. That’s a hard question to answer without giving everything away. Plus, it’s better if I can’t explain it. So I shake my head. “I don’t know. I guess it’s like your chakra, maybe? Because usually it’s just in your stomach, but that one time you tried to use your chakra, you used it instead, remember?”

“Not really?” Naruto tilts his head, too. He crosses his arms and leans back in thought. It takes a moment, but he eventually straightens as realization flashes across his face. “Oh! I remember! It was really warm, too!”

And then he closes his eyes and scrunches his face up.
Uh.

What...? Oh, shit. Is he trying to use it!? Alarmed, I jerk forward to stop him. But Raidou’s ahead of me. He pulls on the hand he’s still holding, tugging Naruto sideways into him. Naruto gives a startled yelp, his eyes flying open in shock.

He stares up at Raidou accusingly as he rights himself. “Raidou-nii!” But he falters at the expression on Raidou’s face.

“You can’t use it, Naruto,” he says. His voice is hard, firmer than it’s ever been. It’s—it freezes me, stops me from moving to get Naruto away from him. “Do you understand?”

“But—”

“Do you?” Raidou cuts him off. I bite my tongue, tense, unable to do anything, say anything.

Naruto nods quickly. “Yes!” But as Raidou lets go of Naruto’s hand and starts to look away, Naruto speaks up again. “But why not?”

Raidou sighs, running a hand down his face. He suddenly looks so tired, so stressed. The scarred skin on his face puckers as he frowns down at the floor. He flicks a glance up at me, startling me, before returning his attention to Naruto.

“It’s dangerous,” he says. “Bad things will happen.”

Naruto’s face scrunches up in confusion. “Like what?”

Raidou’s eyes flick over toward me again, deliberately bringing Naruto’s attention to me. I frown at him, confused. He brings his hand toward me slowly, making me tense. I watch warily as his hand draws nearer and nearer until his pointer finger brushes the bandage over my right cheek.

Oh.
Leaning away from his touch, I swallow uneasily. Right. I got so caught up in finally getting some answers, in actually being able to learn something useful, that I forgot. Forgot that no matter how useful Kurama may be, how much I rely on his warmth and presence to comfort me (and it’s still a funny thought, that), that most people despises him. Despises us because of him.

Stupid.

Stupid stupid stupid.

How could I forget? How could I, for even one moment, forget everything that’s happened to us so far because of Kurama? No, because of stupid people. Because it isn’t Kurama’s fault. He was used. And yeah, he’s probably not broken up about killing all those people, but he’s... he’s....

Damn it, he’s Comfort. And that’s all I can think of him as, despite everything.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I fold in on myself, allowing myself one moment of weakness. I count to ten before straightening, steeling myself. Naruto looks half ready to climb onto the couch to comfort me. Raidou looks hesitant, his hand curled up against his chest.

“Why, though?” I ask, because it’s a question that needs asking. I know the answer. I know it all too well. But Naruto doesn’t. And I shouldn’t. “What’s so different about it?”

So what will Raidou’s response be?

Raidou’s hand drops back into his lap while his other hand reaches up to rub at the back of his neck. He’s hesitant. He doesn’t want to answer, or doesn’t know how to. Not without breaking the taboo. His gaze lingers on Naruto who is obviously curious despite being upset. Raidou’s eyes close for a moment as he takes a deep breath.

When he opens his eyes, he stares straight at Naruto. “You have two types of chakra: your normal one and a special type. But the special type is dangerous and hard to control. Before you were born, a lot of people were harmed by someone else with the same type of chakra. It’s... why some people don’t like you.”
Really?

That’s what he’s going with?

Well, I guess he’s not entirely lying. Except he totally is. But he’s... spinning the truth? Twisting it to make it more palatable without blatantly breaking the taboo? I wonder if this is an excuse the Hokage thought up, or something Raidou had to think up just now because the Hokage didn’t even bother thinking up one. Because children totally aren’t curious. At all. Riiiiight.

And it... it kinda makes sense? I mean, technically Kurama is a chakra construct, right? A “special” type of chakra, indeed. (And oh man, why does my brain have to conjure an image of him talking like... like an okama, of all things!!?) (2) Kurama is dangerous and his chakra is hard to control, if what I remember from Before is to be believed.

But god. I wish—I wish he would just tell us the truth. Even though I know he can’t. Even though I know it probably isn’t the best idea to tell a little kid that he’s got a “monster” sealed in his stomach. Even though Naruto has a right to know, that we both have a right to know. Since we’re so effected by it.

But.

But at least he’s given us an explanation. Even if it isn’t the truth. It’s better than not telling us anything. It’s better than letting Naruto continue to live thinking that people hate us—hate him—for no apparent reason.

Yet.

How much will it hurt Naruto... when he learns the truth? When he learns that Raidou lied. That Raidou lied because the Hokage forbade anyone from talking about it. That the Hokage chose to keep us in the dark. Will Naruto understand why? Will he realize the Hokage, however misguided, was just trying to protect us? (Ineffective, protects the village but not us. We suffer because the village suffered, Naruto suffers without knowing why. All to protect the village.)

But is he really trying to protect us?

Doesn’t the village come first, for him? It did for Minato.
Raidou’s voice breaks me from my thoughts. “Renge, when did you learn sensing?”

“What?” I look up at him, my eyebrows furrowing. At first, I don’t know what he’s talking about. But as Naruto leans into my space to peer at me curiously, I realize what he means. “Oh! You mean like how I can sense Naruto? That kind of sensing?” I pause to give Raidou a faux confused glance. He nods. “Um... when you first taught us how to feel our chakra, I think. Right?” I ask Naruto.

He leans away and scrunches his face up. “How would I know? I didn’t know you could ‘feel’ me!”

No.

That’s... that’s just wrong.

“Sense, Naruto. I sense you.” I correct him with a grimace. When Raidou starts to say something, I quickly amend my statement. “But I don’t know how to sense anyone else. Only Naruto’s ‘special’ chakra.” Raidou closes his mouth, letting out a thoughtful hum. I peer at him curiously. “Can’t you? Sense it, I mean.”

“Oooh, can you?” Naruto leans forward enthusiastically.

Raidou leans away, putting out a hand to gently push away Naruto’s face, smooshing it. His hand covers most of Naruto’s face. Naruto mumbles something, but it’s indecipherable. I wait for him to move back, but he keeps leaning forward, so I reach over, snag the back of his shirt, and pull him backward. He leans his head back, gasping.

“I idiot.” I roll my eyes.

Naruto sticks his tongue out in response.

Raidou waits until Naruto settles back down before he starts talking again. He immediately launches into a completely unexpected lecture.
“There are 361 tenketsu points in the body. Tenketsu points are where chakra is released. They’re located all over your body, including your forehead—” He picks up one of the cards from the deck and sticks it to his forehead, then moves his hands away. Naruto starts clapping in appreciation, prompting me to follow. It’s actually a bit impressive to see it in person versus on page. “—your hands—” He places each palm, one at a time, on the deck, and brings his hands up, fingers splayed, to show a card stuck to each hand. “—and even your feet.”

He stands up and walks over to the nearest wall.

Oh my god. Is he—?

Raidou places one foot on the wall, and then the other, and starts to walk up it. And up and up, until he’s reached the ceiling. I can’t help but gape at him. He looks down at us, and smirks. Then he suddenly drops. I let out a high-pitched shriek as he falls, quickly backing away. I bump into Naruto, making us stumble. But instead of falling flat on his face, Raidou flips right-side up and lands on his feet without a sound.

I stare at him, slack-jawed, unable to speak. That... that fucking ninja! Scaring the crap out of me! What the fuck, man! No cool!

Emitting a high-pitched noise of frustration, I stomp over and slam my fists into his side. He lets out a startled grunt.

“Never! Do! That! Again!” I wail. “Stupid, stupid ninja!”

Jesus fucking Christ! I almost had a heart attack! I mean, seriously! It’s one thing to know he’s a gravity-defying ninja, but it’s another thing entirely to see it. I—I just—maybe I’m not cut out for this shinobi stuff.

Above me, Raidou sends a helpless look toward Naruto. Except Naruto, eyes sparkling, is no help to him.

“So cool!” Naruto rushes over to latch onto Raidou’s leg. “Ne, ne! Teach me how to do that!”

He takes a moment to push us away before responding. “It will take years of practice before you can do something like that.”
“But—”

“Years, Naruto,” Raidou insists, giving my brother a gimlet-eyed stare. The blonde slumps over in disappointment. “Fine,” he grumps. Then he turns to give me a not-so-discreet conspiratorial look. I share an unimpressed glance with Raidou.

But I can’t help but wonder if it really does take years of practice. I mean, I know that in the manga, Team Seven didn’t start learning tree walking until they were in Wave, but then like I said, that was in the manga. Also, their teacher was Kakashi, who is like... the shittiest teacher ever. Okay, maybe not the shittiest, but pretty high up there on the incompetent teacher list.

I mean, did he actually teach them anything aside from tree walking? If he did, they certainly never showed it in the manga.

Disregarding Team Seven, I have no clue how long it took anyone else to get to the point where they can attempt tree walking. I wonder if it’s a matter of amount of chakra or chakra control that takes years before you’re able to do it. Probably chakra control.

So it’s probably a matter of children usually not being mature enough or disciplined enough to gain the necessary chakra control. Which means it might not take me the years it would normally take someone. Granted, I am getting a head start. Though the clan children might have actually already started by my physical age.

“I should talk to the Hokage about allowing someone to examine your chakra before you try to use it.” Raidou’s comment to Naruto makes panic surge through me.

No!

“But why?” Naruto whines.

I try to act calm, bringing my hands forward to clasp them together to try to hide their shaking, and plead. “Please. It’ll be fine! Naruto’s smarter than he looks.”
“Hey!”

Ignoring Naruto’s shout, I continue.

“And he’s practiced feeling his chakra without the same thing happening as that time! Right?” I turn to Naruto, urging him to agree.

Naruto pouts at me, but nods. “Yeah!”

Raidou startles at the information, staring at us incredulously. But his expression slowly turns thoughtful, his eyebrows once again furrowing. I elbow Naruto without looking away from the man. Naruto lets out a whine, rubbing at his side, but also turns pleading eyes onto Raidou.

“...Fine.” Raidou caves. “If Naruto can access his chakra instead of the... ‘special’ one—” Here, his expression turns wry. “—then I won’t bring in a specialist.”

I turn to Naruto, smiling widely in relief, and raise my hand. Naruto slaps it enthusiastically, practically vibrating in excitement.

“Yes!” He cheers with his arms raised.

“Less paperwork for me,” Raidou mumbles sotto voce.

But I’m too relieved to comment.

Then, I’m confused. Why was I so panicked? Why didn’t I want anyone to examine Naruto’s chakra? I... I don’t know. Does it really matter if someone does? Sure, it would take longer for us to actually start learning chakra control if we had to wait for a specialist, but how much longer would it take? Certainly not long enough to panic over. So why...?

What was I afraid of?
Still lost in thought, I’m barely aware of Raidou nudging me aside. He places himself between me and Naruto as Naruto closes his eyes in concentration. I close my eyes, too.

Immediately, I can feel Kurama’s chakra where Naruto is standing. It blazes brightly; a comforting warmth. While it’s important that Kurama’s chakra stays in one place, it isn’t what I want to focus on. But it’s a starting point.

I’ve never been able to sense anything aside from Kurama’s chakra. Even Raidou, who is standing right next to me, doesn’t ping on my radar. I can’t feel his chakra at all. Then again, I’m not exactly focusing on it.

Using Kurama as a point of reference, I try to sense Naruto’s chakra. It shouldn’t be that hard. It’s right there, literally surrounding Kurama’s. And yet.

I can’t feel it.

I can’t feel anything except god damned Kurama.

Frustrated, I blink my eyes open. Naruto’s grinning mug fills my vision.

“—an do it!” he crows.

“I can see that.” Raidou pats Naruto’s head, one corner of his lips twitching upward. He glances up, making eye contact with me, and motions me forward.

I walk up to Naruto and nudge him with my shoulder. “Aren’t you happy you listened to me?”

Naruto jerks away, affronted. “I would have practiced even if you didn’t tell me!” At my unimpressed look, he falters, glancing away. “Maybe. Just a little.”

He sticks his tongue out at me, but quickly retracts it when I start to reach for it. Clicking my tongue in disappointment, I return my attention back toward Raidou. He is thoroughly amused by our antiques.
“All right,” he brings us back to task. “The next step is try and release your chakra. If you can’t... things will progress very differently.” His lips curve into a sardonic smile.

Eugh.

“Very differently.” Wonder what *that’s* supposed to mean.

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I listen carefully as Raidou runs us through the steps to try and get a sheet of paper to stick to our hands. I’m a bit confused as to why he’s making us do that. Isn’t it supposed to be hard? Or maybe it’s hard to release chakra from everywhere else except for your hands? And that’s why shinobi use hand signs?

But for some reason I want to say the forehead’s the easiest place.... Is that from the manga? Or fan fiction? (Man, am I really regretting reading all those fanfics. I’m having trouble separating things from the manga, fanfics, and my headcanon from reality.) Ugh, I don’t *know*. It’s so frustrating being so *stupid*. Not knowing things.

“Why our hands?” I can’t help but ask.

Raidou hands Naruto a sheet of paper as he responds. “It’s the easiest place to release chakra. Now, try to collect only a small amount of chakra. Too much can be disastrous.”

I watch curiously for a moment as Naruto squints down at his hand, frowning. As I accept the piece of paper Raidou holds out for me, I wonder if I should try sensing Naruto’s chakra again. See if I can sense it now that he’s actively trying to use it.

Why isn’t Raidou just sensing all of this, anyway?

Wait a minute.... Did he ever answer my question about sensing Kurama’s chakra? Did he… did he dodge the question? Son of a bitch!

Ha! He probably can’t sense chakra, that’s why.
Oh.

Well....

I quickly turn my attention inward to try and direct my chakra toward my hand. Carefully, I coax a little toward my palm, making sure I don’t go overboard like last time. A tingling sensation follows the path of the chakra, making my skin prickle. Though there’s no physical reaction, I can feel the energy pooling into my palm. I splay out my hand, upright, and gently place the sheet of paper on it.

Except the paper is slightly repulsed, hovering a fraction before falling back down, only to be pushed upward again. I can feel my eyebrows crawling up my forehead. Huh. Too much chakra? It takes a moment, but I lessen the amount of chakra and flip my hand over. Disappointingly, the sheet of paper floats down. I grab it before it can reach the floor and try again.

It takes a few tries, with me adding and subtracting chakra, until I finally get it to stick. By then I’m sweating, my teeth gritted in frustration. I experimentally wave my hand a few times and watch in fascination as the paper sticks to my hand.

That’s... that’s some crazy shit. I mean, I’m actually doing ninja magic! Granted, I’m only sticking a sheet of paper to my hand, but still.

I look up, grinning widely, to show Naruto my results. To gloat, really. Except Naruto’s staring upward, watching as he repeatedly blasts a wrinkled sheet of paper into the air. By his feet is the torn remains of what was probably his previous few sheets of papers. I glance at Raidou, ready to roll my eyes in exasperation, but freeze. He’s smiling wryly at Naruto.

“Got it!” I throw my hand forward and wave it in Naruto’s face.

Naruto yelps, jumping backward. His concentration broken, the sheet of paper falls to the ground. He grumbles at me as he bends over to pick it up. But when he catches a glimpse of my hand, his expression quickly brightens.

“What, how’d you do it?!?” He reaches out to grab my hand, but I whip my hand away before he can, accidentally allowing the paper to fly off. I click my tongue at him in annoyance. He widens his eyes and brings his hands together, accidentally balling up the paper in his hand. “Tell me, please.”
Quickly jerking my head away, I stare up at the ceiling to avoid his gaze. God damn that kid. Why do his eyes have to be so effective! Critical fucking hit.

“You’re probably using too much chakra. Try to use less. Much much less.”

Naruto beams at me before returning his attention to the exercise, sheepishly straightening out the sheet of paper. This time I do roll my eyes at Raidou. His responding smile is a bit strained. My eyebrows furrow at the sight. What’s wrong with him?

I pick up the sheet of paper and resolutely stick it to my hand again. Then I amble over to Raidou, flopping onto the seat next to him on the couch.

“What’s wrong?” I prod at him.

Gently pushing my finger away, Raidou’s eyebrows furrow. At this rate, they might become permanently furrowed. “It’s nothing.” He hesitates. I wait patiently for him to continue, leaning against the armrest. “I didn’t think you two would get so far so quickly.”

My eyebrows crease to match his expression.

Huh.

I didn’t realize that was considered fast. Makes sense, though. Sometimes it’s hard for me to remember that I’m physically four, and that most four year olds wouldn’t realize how to do something so quickly. Or already know the basic idea behind tree walking (that is, too much chakra repulses, not enough doesn’t do anything, and just the right amount makes you stick—which always confuses me, because why don’t more people use these facts while fighting? And does that make chakra elastic? Or sticky?) and chakra control.

I suppose it is odd. He probably only expected us to maybe repulse or shred or explode the paper or something, or maybe even get it to stick for like a fraction of a second. With that thought, I let go of my hold over the chakra in my hand and tip the paper off my hand, watching it slowly flutter down.
“Well, maybe you’re just a good teacher,” I say flippantly.

Raidou smiles sardonically. “Maybe.”

In front of us, Naruto makes an incoherent noise of frustration.

“Deep breaths, baby bro, deep breaths.” I call out faux-encouragingly.

Naruto flips me the bird without looking over, eliciting a high-pitched noise from Raidou. I crane my neck to glance at the older man, except he’s buried his head in his hands, so I can’t see his face. I’m distracted by Naruto making a noise of triumph.

“Ha!” He jumps up and down, waving his hand. Half the sheet of paper sticks to his hand, except as he moves, it starts to slip off. Panicking, Naruto stops moving, but his concentration is broken, and the paper slips off. “Aww.”

I clap slowly. “Good job.”

Naruto pouts. He stomps over to us and throws himself into the seat between me and Raidou, elbowing me in the process, the ass. It was probably on purpose. I let out a grunt of pain and retaliate by planting my elbow into his side. Before we can get into a mini-war, Raidou quickly stops us.

With his elbow on his leg, he props his head up with his hand. “I see my very mature students are ready for instructions.”

Naruto and I immediately straighten, though I can see a pout on Naruto’s face. I have to fight a smirk from forming.

“Yes, sir,” I intone instead.

Raidou grimaces. “Before we continue, I will have to think up a schedule. Until then, do not practice unsupervised. Understood?”
“Aye, sir!” Naruto and I salute him.

Raidou grimaces again, sighing. He stands from his seat and makes his way across the room toward the door, stepping around the scattered bits of torn paper. Naruto lurches out of his seat.

“Wait! You’re leaving?”

Glancing back at us over his shoulder, Raidou doesn’t stop walking. “I have a meeting soon. I’ll come back in a few days with a schedule.”

“Bring some books on chakra!” I call after him, because if I’m going to learn from him, might as well get him to clarify a few things, too. Plus, then I won’t have to go to the library myself.

“Get them yourself.” He automatically shoots me down.

I click my tongue in annoyance, giving a half-hearted goodbye along with Naruto before he closes the door. I wait a beat before nudging Naruto.

“What?” he grumbles at me, making a face.

I just point at the mess on the floor. “You know you have to clean that up, right?”


“Well, it’s your mess.” I give him an unimpressed look.

Then I leave the room before he can somehow rope me into helping him. I want to try some more chakra exercises without interruptions.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for the meal

Japanese term for a transvestite or homosexual. Usually portrayed in manga/anime as a bit drag queen-ish.

Oh my god I am so sorry this is late! I just... I got into Yowamushi Pedal and then things got busy and then I got stuck.... But it’s here! Like a day/two days late (ugh, stupid time differences). Also, does anyone know a good explanation for chakra? Because I don’t know if my understanding of chakra is complete or even correct and that is really going to effect this story. But, uh, if it’s “wrong,” this is fan fiction, so.... Sorry it’s a bit shorter than usual.

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