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**To See Ourselves**

by [Josey (cestus)](http://archiveofourown.org/users/cestus)

**Summary**

When Iruka finds himself the potential victim of blackmail, he sets into motion a series of events that will lead to violence and terror, but ultimately bring him and Kakashi closer together.
"Umino Iruka. You are a difficult man to locate."

Iruka squinted up at the guy (dark hair, blandly attractive face, pale eyes) leaning hipshot against his table, and turned his sake cup slowly between his fingers. "Do I know you?" he asked, and if the words came out a bit slur-y that was okay. It was the weekend and even hard working, under paid, passed over for promotion yet again! academy teachers deserved a chance to let their hair down every now and again.

"Probably not," the guy replied shooting a quick glance around the crowded bar before sliding into the seat opposite.

Iruka pulled his feet back, sitting straighter and, perforce, more attentively. He wasn't sure he liked that. He'd been happily chilling out in one of the few locations that came as close to being safe as anywhere in their unpredictable world, and he'd been enjoying himself, damn it. Now he was feeling put upon, intruded upon, almost hassled, and that made him one very unhappy sensei. "Can I help you?" His tone, clipped and short and so desperately polite that it almost fell over itself in earnestness, sent out the type of warning alarms that, had he been amongst friends, would have sent them scrambling for shelter.

As it was, the guy failed to take the hint. "Maybe it's more a case of me helping you?"

A pick up line? Possibly. A bar was the right place for it and Friday held an almost sacred role in Konoha as single's night, since it gave the new couple an entire two days to either fuck or fuck up. Iruka frowned, dragging his gaze up from sandalled feet to tousled head, taking in the lean lines, clear pale skin and frankly arresting yellowish eyes along the way.

More to the point, if this was a line, did he care? And if you couldn't remember the last time you got laid, wasn't it about time you tried again?

He sighed. It probably wouldn't be worth it. Knowing his luck the guy'd turn out to be some sort of lunatic with a grudge and a mean streak. Either that or the type who took one night's fun as a promise of life long commitment. No, he was better off alone. With his sake for company and his books for amusement, he wanted for naught his right hand couldn't provide!

With a decisive internal nod, Iruka set his face into an expression of polite disinterest and for some reason said, "Is that an offer or a promise?" Ah, so his body was staging a coup. It happened. Though normally only when he'd drunk so much that he'd forgotten that he shouldn't drink any more. Then his mouth had a habit of saying no even when the rest of him wanted to say yes. This time, it seemed, it was the other way around. Heh, perhaps he was that desperate to get laid, after all.

"It could be both." A hand slid across the table, fingers reaching out, and Iruka, now opening to the idea, was looking forward to that first warm touch when a shriek from an adjoining table saw both of them leaping to their feet, reaching for their weapon's pouches. When the sound resolved into nothing more threatening than laughter, Iruka slumped, exchanging a rueful grin with his companion, who shrugged as if to say, 'Shinobi reflexes. What can you do?'

That seemed to break the ice entirely. So later - how much later Iruka couldn't be sure, though if he counted it in cups of sake it was about seven cups, three fascinating conversations, and several rather nice kisses later - when Masa (rich walnut hair, amber eyes and a very nice ass) suggested they take things somewhere a bit more private, Iruka's body and brain struck up a happy alliance and agreed
whole heartedly to the plan. They staggered outside, steps matched in an uneven pace, shoulders colliding with first one corner and then another as they navigated a lurching route from the bar to whatever destination came their way.

And Iruka found himself happy. Not the bone deep contentment of an exam set, sat and graded, but the type of fizzy curiosity that occurred far too rarely in his life these days. Sure, he was looking forward to getting laid, but also to finding out more about Masa (soft strands that tangled round his fingers, full sake-flavoured lips, eyes that caught the light and reflected it back with an added fiery gleam).

The back alley seemed the perfect place to get things started, a halfway house secluded from the road but not as personally revealing as homes and beds. "Here," he said, reversing into the wall and using their linked fingers to tug Masa closer. "This's perfect."

And for a moment it was. As Masa stepped forward, warm possibility burbled through Iruka's body; he felt gleeful, almost breathless. Young and carefree and wanted - desired - again. Then something changed. What, Iruka couldn't say, but the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and cold sobriety sluiced away his slightly intoxicated glow. Five seconds ago, he would have been happily anticipating a kiss when Masa leaned towards him. Now, he didn't know what to expect. In a way the sharp sting of a blade against his neck was a relief. At least it wasn't a kunai to the heart.

"Umino Iruka," Masa whispered in a voice colder than the harshest winter in the Land of Snow. "We've been watching you."
Chapter 2

No one accustomed to everyday activities in Konoha would have been surprised to see a slightly pale Iruka-sensei, laden down with books and scrolls and papers, entering the academy library at ten forty-five on a Saturday morning. It was hardly an uncommon sight, after all. And hopefully those same people would entirely ignore the diminutive blonde kunoichi who left by the same route about five minutes later. The henge was good; Iruka was excellent at the basics, it went hand in hand with being a teacher.

It wasn't however good enough to fool the guards at the Hokage tower. As he stepped through the front door, a large figure materialised in front of him making him jump and yelp in surprise. In his defence, he was horribly, horribly distracted.

"No justu in the tower." How did that manage to sound disapproving with only a mask and a monotone voice to go by?

Iruka dropped the henge so fast it made a whooshing sound. "M-my apologies, ANBU-san," he stuttered, bobbing a small respectful bow as his brain pointed out that he'd better get used to seeing ANBU around if the course of his life took the route it seemed inevitably about to. "It was completely unintentional. It won't happen again." The ANBU was gone by the time he looked up. Iruka glanced around, shivered, and started up the stairs.

The Hokage, of course, was busy. Weekend or not, the Godaime worked when there was work to be done and, since Iruka couldn't demand entrance without explaining why to the aides, he was left kicking his heels outside her door until she could 'squeeze him in.' Finally though, Shizune stuck her head out of the door and gave a brisk nod. Iruka stood up, took a deep breath, and went inside.

"Hokage-sama." He sketched his little bow. Tsunade loathed formality but he couldn't drop the habit entirely. It went against his grain to be so rude.

"Iruka-sensei." The Hokage placed her pen carefully on the table and folded her hands in front of her mouth. Her normally crowded desk was almost clear today. "Everything's all right at the old academy, I trust?"

"Yes, fine." He flicked a glance towards the other desk. Ah, that's where all the paperwork had gone. Teetering piles braced against slumping stacks over spills of half-ravelled scrolls, and just visible above the chaotic mess, several spikes of messy white hair. Hatake Kakashi, having luckily (or unluckily, to hear him tell of it) survived the last war unscathed, had been promoted to unofficial deputy by a Godaime who, according to rumour, 'wasn't going to let the brat get off that easily'. In truth, although still Hokage in the hearts and minds of the shinobi of Konoha, the injuries Tsunade had sustained while going head to head with Uchiha Madara so soon after her near death at the hands of Pein, had taken their toll. Not a voice was raised in protest (except by the victim himself) when Kakashi was manoeuvred, blackmailed or coerced into becoming the heir apparent. The arrangement had become permanent a month ago and, in Iruka's opinion, Tsunade looked all the better for it.

A frown creased Tsunade's brow. "Sensei, what is it you want?"

Iruka flinched at her tone, then straightened. This was it, the path he had laid out for himself, the bed he had made. "I am here to confess, Hokage-sama. As a shinobi of Konoha, I have broken the rules and throw myself upon your mercy."
One elegant eyebrow quirked. "It must be bad. Tell me, Iruka-sensei, before I get Ibiki up here with the manacles, what could you have possibly done that's so bad you felt the need to confess."

Details. Damn it, she wanted details. It was to be expected, Iruka supposed, though a part of him had rather hoped she'd just throw him to T&I and forget about him. Of course his plan for redemption rather relied on her not doing that.

He bowed again, this time much lower, before beginning right at the beginning. "A year ago my application for senior tutor at the new academy was rejected and when I enquired how I could remedy this unfortunate failure, Hisoka-san informed me that, since the pre-genin attending that institution all had special bloodlines and talents, preference was being shown to applicants of tokubetsu jounin rank and above. He suggested that I enter myself in the qualifying exam and offered to find a suitable mentor to address any shortcomings I may have. After due consideration, I accepted his offer and, since traps and seals are my strongest jutsu, I began training with Tekuno-san the following week."

Iruka took a deep breath. Everything had been fine up to that point; he had actually started to believe his ambitions were achievable. Ambitions which, ironically, had nothing to do with becoming a tutor at the new 'elite' academy. The trouble was, appointment to that institution was the most likely route to Senior Head Teacher these days and that was where Iruka's dream lay. Because, as Senior Head Teacher of Konoha, he would have a seat on the village council, could influence educational policy and, most importantly in Iruka's mind, would have the final say on each and every child's graduation. Holding that position, Iruka could ensure that all of them, however talented or connected, had the solid childhood they needed to move on successfully to the next stage of life. No more prodigies pushed forward before their time. No more traumatised misfits slipping through the net. No more Itachis or Sasukes. And maybe no more Mizukis either.

Now that dream was gone. Smashed to pieces under the heels of stupidity and short-sightedness.

Eyes fixed on a spot just over the Hokage's left shoulder, Iruka continued, "As any good teacher would, Tekuno-san set many exercises and problems to hone my abilities. Everything was going well until he began to test me under exam conditions. I..." Iruka's breath caught in utter humiliation. "I failed. Horribly." Colour flushed his cheeks. "Apparently if given time to prepare, my sealing techniques are excellent, however under battlefield conditions I," and here he used Tekuno's own belittling words, "'would put my team mates in danger' and would be, 'better off sticking to what I'm good at and not getting in anyone else's way'."

That had hurt. Sure, Iruka knew he was no genius, but he wasn't a useless shinobi either. In truth, thanks to being shuffled into teaching at a fairly young age, he had never really had a chance to run up against the boundaries of his abilities. In his heart of hearts, he had always believed there was nothing he couldn't do if he studied hard enough for long enough, a belief that he passed on to his students and had seen fulfilled time after time. To discover that he simply was not, and never would be, capable of the kind of quick complex work expected of a fuuinjutsu expert on the battlefield was devastating.

"I refused to believe him. We argued and he finally allowed me to enter the exam anyway, even though he was certain I would fail. During our argument, Tekuno-san let slip that Ebisu-sensei would be the main examiner and it was then that I had the idea." Stupid, stupid idea. Even if it had worked. "The day before the practical element of the exam, I used sexy-no-jutsu to lure Ebisu-sensei out of his office and sent a clone in to search his desk. I found the question papers and was able to copy them before he returned."

"I'm not seeing.-" the Hokage began.
Iruka bowed again and spoke over her. "Please allow me to continue, Hokage-sama." She waved a hand at him, the other covering a poorly concealed smirk. That would be gone soon enough, Iruka thought. "Thanks to this insight, I was able to take and pass the practical element of the exam and gain promotion to tokubetsu jounin." One of the happiest days of his life. The party that night had been attended by half of Konoha, it felt like, and he'd been so proud. Idiot. How stupid he'd been.

"Everyone cheats, Iru-"

"But not everyone gets caught."

He heard the Hokage catch her breath, then, "Who? Tekuno-"

"Would have reported me, yes, Hokage-sama. But it was not Tekuno-san who caught me. Frankly I wish it had been. Demotion would be preferable to what is actually happening."

And here came the crux of it. "Truthfully I still don't know precisely who caught me, nor how. However, when I was passed over for promotion again last week, in favour of a Hyuuga who had never stood in a classroom in her life, I made it known that I thought the system was unfair and biased." At the top of his voice. To anyone who would listen. In retrospect it was a more humiliating and unforgivable episode than his outburst at the chuunin exams all those years ago. "Then yesterday evening I was approached by a shinobi who had heard about my tirade and wondered just how deep my feelings of disaffection ran. I protested my loyalty to Konoha, at which point he cited my misdeeds as evidence of criminal behaviour, and suggested that, in return for some small task, both his silence and an appointment to the new academy could be bought. In short, Hokage-sama, there is a traitor in Konoha and I believe he attempted to recruit me."

The Hokage's smile had become a fiercely unhappy frown. Iruka was just grateful she hadn't thrown the desk at him. "So where is this traitor, Iruka?" she asked slowly. "You know the penalties for trying to blackmail a shinobi as well as I do. Why didn't you bring him in?"

"Because he'd put something in my drink and I passed out before I could, Hokage-sama." Was that a snicker from behind the pile of paperwork? Iruka glared briefly in that direction. "When I came to, it occurred to me that this could be a unique opportunity to infiltrate and collect intelligence."

"Except any traitor worth their salt would be having you watched and running straight to the Hokage just outed you as tattle-tale."

"Except that I came here in disguise, Hatake-san," Iruka snapped in the direction of the pile of paperwork. "I may be a cheat but I'm not stupid."

"No, just foolish enough to get caught."

Iruka clenched his fists and bit back a retort. Having a stand up row with Kakashi would not help the situation, plus the infuriating man was right. He had been foolish enough to get caught. "The fact remains, I disguised myself with a henge before coming to the tower. And thanks to the clone I left in my place, anyone watching will still be under the impression that I am working in the library." He permitted himself a small tight smile in Kakashi's direction.

"Maa, Sensei, any jounin level shinobi can distinguish a clone from the real thing."

He was not going to respond! He wasn't! Iruka gritted his teeth and hissed, "It's a shadow clone. I repeat, I am not stupid and I would appreciate it if-"

"Enough!" The bellow and fists slamming into the table hard enough for the wood to let out an ominous crack, silenced the pair of them. Iruka gulped and turned his attention back to the Hokage,
suspecting Kakashi had done the same – though probably without the nervous swallow. "Iruka, what exactly did this traitor ask you to do?"

"He didn't say, Hokage-sama. Nor did he leave me the means to contact him. I assume they'll come back to me, which is why I came to you as soon as I was able to do so discretely."

She nodded, once slowly, then again quite briskly and Iruka knew her decision had been made. He tried not to hold his breath as he waited for sentence to be passed. "You realise we will have to obtain an accurate picture of this traitor," she pointed out before calling for Shizune, who stuck her head through the door so quickly that Iruka suspected she'd been eavesdropping. "Tell whoever's on call at Intel that I need them to work on someone downstairs," Tsunade said without looking at her, face stony as she continued to stare at Iruka. He flushed and glanced down at the floor, hearing her sigh of disappointment in the silence after Shizune left. "Can I trust you to go down there alone?"

"O-of course, Hokage-sama!" Iruka stammered, lifting his head in surprise. "I have accepted that I'm at fault and promise to do nothing to avoid punishment."

"Good." She picked up her pen and moved some papers around her desk, still frowning. "At least that's settled. Tell Inoichi everything you can remember first and then let him check. He's good enough not to hurt you if you don't fight it."

"Yes, Hokage-sama." Iruka bowed deeply, turned and left, still with the sword of Damocles over his head, but thankful for having survived at all.
Chapter 3

Kakashi watched him go with more than a touch of smug satisfaction. Right from the start he’d thought that Iruka reaching tokujo was fishy. The teacher was a decent chūnin with great basics who put them over well, but he’d never shown the slightest skill in A rank jutsu. And after what Nara Shiro had said about the fiasco with Naruto and the barrier seal, well, that put the lid on it for Kakashi. In his opinion, Iruka should never even have been offered the training. Better off sticking at what he was good at, indeed. Plus he was a mother hen with the kids and that drove Kakashi up the wall.

On the other hand, when word of all this got back to Naruto, the orange menace was bound to go off the deep end. There was going to be shouting and yelling and whining about how Naruto’s precious Iruka-sensei couldn’t possibly have cheated and didn’t they know he was a pure as the driven snow blah blah blah. Most of the shouting would probably happen right there, in the Hokage’s office, and Tsunade would no doubt join in just to add to the decibel level. Kakashi could feel the headache coming on just thinking about it.

"Thoughts?" Tsunade’s irritable snap tore Kakashi’s eyes from the closed door and on to her. She looked stressed again. Damn it, couldn't the bastards back off just long enough for the old hag to heal properly. With luck she might end this débâcle of an appointment if she was feeling better.

Kakashi shrugged, non-committally. "He's an idiot".

"Eloquent. Concise. Not very helpful. Do we need to have that conversation again?"

That would be the one at top volume about how, as hokage, Kakashi would need to explain his decisions, not just arbitrarily make them, and how this ‘road of life’ crap wasn't going to cut it, and how he’d better get his head out of his ass and shape up before Tsunade did unspeakable things to his person. All in the name of Konoha, of course. It was amazing how like a Mizu fishwife Tsunade sounded when she really got going.

Kakashi slouched even further in his seat. "He cheated and now thinks he can get out of it. End of story."

"A little harsh, don't you think? We all cheat; it goes with the territory."

Laying a hand flat across his chest, Kakashi pulled out his most affronted expression. "Hokage-sama, I have never cheated in my life."

"Yeah, right."

"Nor have I ever lied, stolen, nor slit the throat of someone at my Hokage's command."

Tsunade narrowed her eyes. "Hm, what you're saying is, he cheated in a way that could have knock on effects later."

"Without the proper skills, he can't be relied on in the field. Plus he got caught, and that's just stupid."

With a huge sigh, Tsunade kicked off her sandals and leaned back in her chair. "You're right. And I would have thought better of him as well. Oh, Iruka-sensei what are we going to do with you now?"

There wasn't much doubt in Kakashi's mind. "Bust him back to chūnin and put a black mark on his record. SOP." He picked up the next scroll, unrolled the first six inches, blanched at the columns and
columns of numbers and quickly re-rolled it, shoving it to the bottom of the pile. Miracles he could produce immediately, accounting was going to take a bit longer.

Silence reigned. Several hours later, Kakashi had dealt with three letters of a diplomatic nature and one that read like a declaration of war, but since it was from the Kazekage it was probably just Gaara's prickly nature bleeding through. Tsunade still hadn't got back to work. Kakashi glanced over at her; she had one knee tucked up under her chin, her arms wrapped around it, and she was wriggling her toes, staring down at them. She looked all of about twenty five. Oh how appearances could lie in their shinobi world.

"Damn it," she snapped suddenly, throwing her head back and glaring the the ceiling, "there's something about this that stinks."

"Apart from your feet, you mean." Kakashi gave her an innocent look when she turned that ferocious glare on him. "If you mean this 'traitor'," Kakashi didn't use his fingers to punctuate the phrase, his dry tone said it all, "He's probably some annoyed parent who wants to get their kid off detention."

"Except..." Tsunade's voice trailed off, her brows furrowing.

Kakashi ran the story through his brain again, this time ignoring the Iruka factor. If this had been someone else, another shinobi who wasn't Umino Iruka, what would he think? "Except that somehow this guy found out about the cheating, which isn't very likely for a parent," he said finally, positive he was still missing something.

"Hm, and the only way he could have known is if someone saw Iruka doing the sexy-no-jutsu."

"Or witnessed him searching Ebisu's office." Okay now his powers of deduction were starting to perk up. Honestly stick him behind a desk and his genius atrophied within twenty four hours.

"And Ebisu's office is where?"

Kakashi paused, considering. People had gotten shuffled around during the rebuild, so where had Ebisu ended up? Oh! "Between Kurenai and Hisoka-san on the second floor of the new academy."

Tsunade's gaze sharpened. "The new academy. The only building in Konoha where the security rivals this one and Iruka managed to avoid all of it and still get spotted by someone who decides to blackmail him for it three months later. Two questions. One, how did he avoid security? And two, why didn't whoever it was that saw him report him to the authorities?"

There was only one answer. Kakashi was rising to his feet as he spoke. "We have a security breech at the academy."

"Thank you!" Tsunade looked positively gleeful for a second before glaring at him again. "Where the hell are you going?"

Kakashi paused, one hand on the door knob, more than a bit perplexed by the question. It seemed obvious to him. "To find Ibiki and start breaking heads. Someone up there must know what's going on. If we break enough of them, someone's got to talk."

"Honestly, you front line types. This one's going to call for more subtlety than that. Sit down, brat, and take a lesson."

Wrong decision again, apparently. This hokage-ing thing was complicated. Feeling a bit like a puppy who'd had his nose smacked with a rolled up newspaper, Kakashi slouched back to his desk. He
didn't have to wait long. Almost immediately Shizune poked her head into the room. "Inoichi-san is here, Tsunade-sama. Shall I send him in?"

Tsunade waved her hand by way of answer and had her sandals back on by the time the door opened again and Inoichi trotted in. He looked a little tired and not at all optimistic. "You have something for us?" Tsunade asked.

"Not as much as we might have hoped, Hokage-sama. Iruka-sensei co-operated completely and I quickly got a strong image of the man who had approached him. Unfortunately when we enquired further, it turns out that the man – Ueda Masaru to give him his full name by the way – is a civilian who has been stuck in bed for the past fortnight with, of all things, chicken pox. Unless he has a double out there somewhere, the man who spoke to Iruka-sensei was using a henge."

"You didn't bring him in!" Tsunade enquired quickly. Kakashi frowned; that would have been the first thing he would have done.

Inoichi was shaking his head. "Under the circumstances, no, Hokage-sama. I reviewed your conversation with Iruka-sensei and abided by the need for complete discretion."

"Excellent. And?"

A blond ponytail bobbed as Inoichi shrugged. "A preliminary assessment suggests we have a problem at the new academy. However it would seem that the thing is probably in its initial stages and thus presents no immediate threat. Given the lack of concrete leads and the fact that Iruka-sensei does seem truly repentant, I would let him see what else he can dig up."

"Agreed!" Tsunade announced happily, just as Kakashi yelped, "What!" Finding himself the centre of slightly perturbing attention, he added quickly and in a nonchalant tone, "Sending him undercover would be like sticking him in the sea with a bucket of chum around his neck and telling him to catch sharks."

"I thought he was just an fool who deserved everything he got?" Tsunade's eyebrow quirked.

More like an irritating idiot who wouldn't recognise a boundary if it got up and bit him, Kakashi thought, but refused to rise to the bait – as it were. "Demo, Hokage-sama, even a fool deserves not to be thrown away like a used tissue."

"Hm, you might be right." She was narrowing her eyes again. It was the sort of look a tiger gave you just before it ate you. Kakashi stared back at her with an expression that an experienced poker player might have recognised as vaguely rattled. "Still he's our best bet for infiltration. Maybe if he has back-up. Someone to liaise with. To keep an eye on him, that sort of thing."

"An excellent suggestion, Hokage-sama," Inoichi began, "Intel has several-"

"Oh, I have just the person in mind, Inoichi-san." She smiled brightly at him without shifting her gaze from Kakashi. "Thank you for all your hard work today. I'll keep you informed of any developments."

Inoichi, able to recognise a dismissal when it smacked him upside the head, glanced quickly between the two, nodded and left.

"No," Kakashi said the second the door closed behind him. Offence had to be the best defence in this situation. He could not show weakness or she'd have him, ruthless old hag that she was. He stood his ground, on his feet like a man, casual but unshakeable. Hands thrust deep in his pockets. "I'm not doing it."
"You will if I tell you to," Tsunade snapped, rising to her feet and leaning over the desk towards him. "You're not hokage yet, brat!"

Which was absolutely true. Still he wasn't going to give in that easily. "I'll leave."

"Hah! No you won't. You might hate me, but you're too loyal to Konoha to go missing-nin."

Damn it, she was right again. Kakashi racked his brains for another excuse and realised he sat behind it on a daily basis. "Too much paperwork," he said, pointing at his desk.

"I'll do it," she shot back. "Next?"

"Ano..." What else was there – aha! "Someone will notice I'm gone and when they ask what I'm doing, it'll all come out." Take that, you wily bitch!

"Pfft. Shadow clone. Plus no one can tell if you're there or not with the piles of crap on that desk. We could stick a puppet behind it and no one'd be any the wiser."

Shit, shit, shit! Kakashi glared franticly around the room, desperate for an excuse – no, a reason. A reason as to why he couldn't undertake this mission. There had to be something. Anything. Maybe he could fall off the monument or end up in a coma again. Damn, where was Itachi when you needed him.

"Kakashi, why don't you want to be Iruka-sensei's liaison?" Tsunade's voice suddenly turned wheedling. Frankly Kakashi was shocked; he hadn't known she could do wheedling.

He stared at her, mouth firmly closed, utterly still, as she slunk round the corner of the desk and headed towards him. And if a cold sweat broke out down his spine, well that was for him to know and launder out later.

"Is this to do with why there's no Hatake heir?" she continued, getting up close and personal. "I've heard rumours of you batting for the other side." She ran a finger down his chest, staring up at his face with eyes like a eagle's, as amber gold as an autumn sun.

Kakashi held her gaze, unmoving and unmoved; he'd experienced seductions at hands far more skilled than hers. As expected, when she ducked around behind him, the pitch of her voice changed, lowering and becoming more masculine. A standard ruse to test the sexuality of a mark. The best kunoichi could seduce in spite of the preferences of their victim. What he didn't expect was for her voice to change again as she continued to circle him, to become softer, hollow, with a familiar almost hissing edge. "Or do you have other interests now, Kakashi-kun?"

An involuntary shudder of revulsion ran through Kakashi from his head to his toes. Tsunade came to a sudden halt in front of him, head cocked slightly to one side as she studied him. Neither of them spoke for the longest time while Kakashi fought to control his instinctive reactions. Finally she took a step back and said, "It was him, wasn't it. Damn it, I knew we should have kept a closer eye on you kids."

"It wasn't like that," Kakashi forced out. For some reason his voice sounded dry, cracked. He cleared his throat. "He didn't- It wasn't sexual." Not in any way he understood it, at least, and he'd spent years trying to. The man had just liked to watch as he practised. But the feel of those eyes on him... Kakashi flexed his fingers. "And I wasn't the only one. Nor the worst. Try asking..." he trailed off. Anko or Yamato. Of course, she couldn't ask either of them. Just two more ghosts now to visit at the stone. "Anyway, there were others. It just..."

"Fucked you up so badly you can't get it up for anyone?"
Pretty much. Not that Kakashi was going to admit it. He had his Icha Icha, his friends, his village; a romantic relationship was a luxury he could manage without. Many shinobi did. "It's not a problem."

"It is if it stops you taking missions." Tsunade turned and strode back to her desk. Retaking her seat, she steepled her hands in front of her and considered him seriously. "What is it about Iruka?"

What about him? It was almost impossible to explain. Kakashi's world revolved around structure. He was a shinobi of Konoha, a jounin, ex-ANBU, and a member of the Hatake clan. He was also the student of the fourth Hokage and the bearer of one of the last sharingan. These were all roles which Kakashi understood and embraced. He knew where the boundaries to each lay and he respected those boundaries. As a result, a life which could have been chaotic and unmanageable was liveable.

Umino Iruka, on the other hand, had apparently never met a boundary he wasn't prepared to ignore, confront, or just plain demolish if it got in the way of something that was important to him. Though punctiliously polite, he was no respecter of rank, birth or power, and would as happily dress-down a kage as he would one of his own pre-genin if he thought they deserved it. In many ways it was an admirable trait; Kakashi definitely approved of people who spoke true to their beliefs; but it was incredibly disconcerting, especially on the rare occasions Kakashi found it turned upon himself. He usual strategy was to retreat, but when he couldn't, he had a tendency to react in less than helpful ways.

Rather than becoming the immovable rock upon which Iruka could fruitlessly dash his temper, Kakashi ended up poking him. Stoking the fires that already burned so fiercely because - and this was where he began to flounder - because Iruka was so 'there.' He occupied his body and his life with an intensity that was unheard of in the shinobi world. Whereas others valued emotional distance, Iruka cared and loved and fought with passion. There was nothing of the voyeur about him. He was overflowing with genuine concern and energy and kindness. His hands were always warm and even in the depths of winter he smelled like sunshine in the forest. In short, he was Orochimaru's antithesis in every possible way. And that, more than anything else, had the power to absolutely destroy Kakashi.

Helpless to speak any of that aloud, Kakashi shrugged and said simply, "He's not him."

Tsunade gave a small knowing smile. "I see. Still, Iruka remains the best placed shinobi for this job. He is also inexperienced at undercover work. Whoever is there for him has to be discrete, clever and absolutely trustworthy. Kakashi, if this turns out to be a serious problem, I want someone in there who I know is on my side. I trust you, and I trust Iruka. Whatever else you may be, to yourselves or each other, you are both absolutely loyal to this village. And that is what I need on this mission." She paused, her eyes now surprisingly caring as she stared at him across the desk. "I won't order you to do it, Kakashi, but I do need you to. Will you? Please?"

"Hai, Hokage-sama," he replied, because what else could he say.
Chapter 4

After three weeks with nothing but silence from his mysterious blackmailer, Iruka was starting to have doubts. Every night he lay awake replaying the details of that evening, trying to tease out anything he might have missed that would lead them to the traitor. It was unlikely that he be successful; Inoichi was too good at his job to have missed the sort of things Iruka might pick up; but still he had to try. It was either that or admit it was all an elaborate hoax. Though who could have set it up and why was beyond Iruka. Who would benefit, or find amusement, in pulling such a trick on an academy sensei? And why bring his cheating to light if they didn't plan to accuse him publicly or follow through on the threats? It made no sense, unless one assumed that it was done to force Iruka to reveal himself. There were moments when he wondered if Masa had been a projection of his own guilty conscience.

Adding to his joy was the fact that Hatake Kakashi had become an almost permanent fixture in his home.

"Maa, sensei," a familiar baritone rumble came from the living room, "When you met this traitor, did you try Kai? They do say lower ranks can be fooled by a simple genjutsu."

Iruka snarled silently and ground his pestle into the peppercorns that little bit harder. After a rocky start - wherein the jounin almost received a kunai to the head when he appeared unannounced at Iruka's bedroom window – they had managed to negotiate an uneasy truce, which consisted mainly, as far as Iruka could see, of Kakashi being incredibly rude while Iruka smiled through gritted teeth and ignored him.

He thumped the mortar down hard, scattering peppercorns across the countertop. For a second the knock on the door sounded as though it was coming from them and he hesitated, confused for the shortest of moments. Hot breath ghosted across the back of his neck along with the words, "Better answer it, sensei, it might be your traitor," and then Kakashi was gone. In his place sat an enormous white Persian with startlingly blue eyes and fur that seemed intent on taking over the world. It rolled on its side and batted at Iruka's ankles with unsheathed claws as Iruka stepped over it to go and open the door.

"Hisoka-san!" The man on the other side looked terrible. Steel grey hair that was normally carefully combed, stuck out every which way, and his deep blue yukata was stained and rumpled. He was as close to distraught as Iruka had ever seen him, and that included the day after Pein had turned Konoha into giant hole in the ground. Iruka sketched a quick bow and backed up a few steps, gesturing the old man in. "Please, come in and sit down. Would you like tea? Or sake perhaps?"

"Ano, tea would be nice, Iruka-sensei, thank you." Hisoka-san removed his sandals slowly, as though it pained him to move, and his hands showed signs of defensive bruising.

Iruka hovered, resisting the urge to help, but unwilling to abandon him in case he fell. "Are you all right? Did you have an accident? Shall I get a medic?"

Hisoka-san shook his head. "Please, allow an old man to sit before bombarding him with questions. Though, no, I'm in no need of a doctor. Shizune-kun saw to the worst of my injuries before I came here."

Saw to the worst of them? Iruka winced as he escorted the old man to the couch before hurrying to prepare tea. Returning a few minutes later, he wasn't surprised to see Kakashi sprawled on the seat next to Hisoka-san, purring loudly as the old man stroked his head. Considering how stand-offish the
jounin was in his human form, he was an absolute tart of a cat.

Iruka placed the tray carefully on the coffee table, poured Hisoka-san a cup, and then made himself comfortable on the floor. The only other seat in the room was an armchair, currently buried under several piles of grading Iruka had yet to get to. Hisoka-san took the drink gratefully and held it in both hands. They trembled slightly.

"Hisoka-san?" Iruka said quietly after a few minutes of silence. "Can I ask, what happened?"

"Ah, Iruka-sensei, it is always the ones you least expect is it not." He shook his head, eyes sad and haunted. "Tonight Gorou-sensei was arrested on suspicion of being a traitor to Konoha."

"Gorou?" Iruka couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. Of all the potential candidates, he would never have tagged Murakami Gorou as their man. The big bluff tokujo's only vice, as far as Iruka knew, was a slight over-fondness for dango. He was devoted to his wife and child, and had been working at the new academy virtually from its conception.

"Yes," Hisoka-san sounded odd, his voice higher than normal, older, frailer. "Blue-prints, of the academy buildings. She had them on her when they found the body."

Eh? Gorou was definitely male. "Who her?"

"Hina."

Goru's wife. Shit. Their poor daughter. "What happened to your arms?"

"He attacked me, when they came. I wasn't... it wasn't..." The old man's eyes clouded over as his words trailed off. A few moments later, he jerked, almost dropping his tea cup and looked around in confusion. It came as no surprise to Iruka when he frowned at him and said, "Iruka-sensei? What are you doing here?"

"This is my apartment, Hisoka-san. You came to tell me about Gorou-sensei, remember?"

There was a brief pause and then, "Oh, yes, of course. Please excuse me. It's been a most trying evening."

"No trouble, Hisoka-san, I understand." He was also going to send Shizune a message. There was no way the old man should be left on his own tonight; he was in shock. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Actually yes, there is. Gorou-sensei's classes. Would you mind terribly stepping in? I know it's short notice but you were the only one I could think of, you see."

Iruka's blood ran cold. "You want me to teach? Up at the new academy?"

"Yes, at least for now, although I see no reason why it shouldn't become permanent. You were next on the list, after all, and it's so much easier to find substitutes for the old place." Pale eyes ranged around the room, finally coming to rest on Iruka's face. "You will say yes, won't you, Iruka-sensei?"

And Iruka did.
"I don't like it."

Kakashi gazed impassively at the big man behind the desk. Ibiki was glowering at the report like it had personally insulted his sister – who, for the record, stood about a hundred and eighty centimetres in her stockinged feet and was perfectly capable of looking after herself.

"Why don't you like it?" Kakashi asked eventually. He didn't either but saw no reason to give Ibiki a break.

Ibiki shoved the report away and dragged a hand down his face. "Because the whole thing stinks. The Murakamis, Umino, this other traitor – if he exists and isn't just a figment of Umino's over-active imagination." He glared up at Kakashi. "You sure he's not just feeling guilty? It can do really strange things to a man, guilt."

Kakashi raised his brows minutely, neither confirming nor denying anything.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Okay, I've got nothing. I'm not seeing how Gorou could have been Umino's traitor and yet the amount of evidence against him still says he was as guilty as hell."

"What about the wife?"

Ibiki pushed a thin file across the desk. "Murakami Hina. Recently passed the jounin exam – she took a couple of years off to have the kid – apart from that, she's nothing special. No record of anti-Konoha activities, no criminal record. Fuck it, Kakashi, I've got more black marks against me than she had."

"But she did have the blueprints." The picture on the front page showed a pretty woman in a standard jounin uniform with pale yellow hair tied back with a red hitai-ate. The one on the second page showed her face down in a mud puddle with a hole where her guts should have been.

"That she did. And there's only one place she could realistically have got them."

"Gorou." Kakashi flipped the next page and read down her list of kin and contacts. Nothing specific leapt out. He uncovered the sharingan and took a copy anyway.

"Exactly. She had no connections with the academy apart from her husband and the handwriting on the plans looks a hell of lot like his."

"An open and shut case." Closing the file, Kakashi pushed it back over Ibiki. "Inoichi have any luck?"

Ibiki glowered and shook his head. "Not enough left for him to use. Shizune-san tried sticking Gorou back together but it was a no go."

"Hm." There were dead ends everywhere they looked with this case, it seemed. Oft-times literally.

"Then I suppose we'll just have to try another angle." Kakashi reached into his pouch. He was three paragraphs in to Icha Icha: Violence by the time he reached the door. "If you think of anything, let me know," he said and lifted his hand in a casual farewell.
Since Iruka's traitor had promised him a job at the new academy and one had oh-so-conveniently opened up, it was decided that the undercover mission should continue on the off-chance the whole thing with Gorou was an elaborate ploy. This raised the issue of how Kakashi was going to act as Iruka's back-up while the latter was at work. They decided not to try taking cat-Kakashi up to the academy since, as Iruka pointed out, at least one of his classes was bound to have a Hyuuga in it and no transformation was going to survive contact with one of them. Kakashi concurred and suggested that Urushi went in his stead. That way, he argued, if anything happened to Iruka, Urushi could go get help. Iruka argued that he wasn't some damsel in distress who needed a dog to look out him, to which Kakashi replied that no, Iruka-sensei certainly wasn't a damsel, although that long hair could make things confusing and maybe now was the time to think about cutting it, or just embracing the inevitable and buying a dress. After that, things kind of degenerated.

Which was why Iruka was starting his first day on the job with a summoning scroll already primed with Kakashi's blood and a bruised toe that throbbed along with every step that he took. His only comfort was that, by the end of their fight, Kakashi had been deaf for an hour and was still periodically working a finger into his ear and saying "What?" and "Pardon?" when people spoke to him.

"That man," he muttered as he limped into the main building. "Will be the death of me, I swear it."

Like everywhere else in Konoha these days, the new academy smelt faintly of wood and fresh paint, though, Iruka suspected, that would soon be overlaid by sweaty socks and boiled fish just like the old place. It was airy, pleasant. Although not huge, there were plans to extend when the population picked up again, the building felt spacious yet friendly. Posters tacked up outside the classrooms were as colourful as the ones at the old academy, just more complex and detailed, pertaining to chakra manipulation and relationships, strategy and battlefield tactics, and the histories of all the villages not just Konohagakure.

The corridors were lined with shelves rather than lockers, each sealed with its own painfully neat hand-written tag that Iruka would bet only released with its creator's chakra. A C rank jutsu to keep outdoor shoes safe. That really summed the place up. Children graduating from this school would not be expected to remain genin for long. Iruka could only hope they would have the training to back it up.

"Iruka-sensei!"

He turned, walking backwards a few steps at the sound of his name, then stopped to wait when he saw who it was. "Ohayo, Kurenai-sensei, how are you? And how is little Aiko-chan?" He greeted the small girl with a chuck under the chin that made her hide her face in her mother's shoulder.

Kurenai laughed and hugged her. "Fine, thank you." She sobered. "I would say it's good to see you but considering the circumstances..."

"I know," Iruka replied. "Hisoka-san came to see me last night."

"Oh my, how is he? I heard he was hurt in the scuffle and there's been no sign of him this morning."

"He's okay. Shizune-san was with them apparently and took care of him. He was really shaken up though. I walked him home and I wouldn't be surprised if he takes a few days off." Iruka sighed, glancing up the quiet corridor to where Hisoka-san had said Gorou-sensei's homeroom lay. "How
much have the kids been told?"

"Officially? Nothing. But make no mistake, these children are bright. They know how to listen and how to see underneath the underneath. I'd be surprised if most of them don't know all there is to know already."

"Hm, you're probably right." Nerves began fluttering in Iruka's belly. Could he do this? Sure they were kids and he was good at kids, but still... Despite their young age, some of them would be able to take him apart like a stuffed toy.

"Looking a bit green there, Iruka-kun," Kurenai whispered in his ear, making him jump. "Worried they're going to have you for breakfast?"

"A ha ha!" he laughed a bit self-deprecatingly. "I'm sure I'll make it through to at least lunchtime."

Kurenai smiled widely at him. "You'll be fine. And if you survive, come and eat with me. Second floor, far right corridor."

"I will, thank you, Kurenei-sensei." Iruka dipped her a little bow, waited until she moved off, and continued on his way. Perfect. Mission infiltration complete. Now all he needed was some intelligence.
The kids turned out to be far less intimidating than Iruka had feared. In fact most of them had been in his classes before and had only been fast-tracked at the start of this academic year.

Also, as the morning progressed, he found himself increasingly impressed with the set-up. It wasn't a matter of facilities - after all even the old place was newly built and Konoha wasn't the type of village to give to one school and withhold from another. It was more a matter of focus. Much of his old job had revolved around drumming the basics into children who found it hard to grasp what a chakra system was, let alone how it could be manipulated. Because of their bloodline abilities or their families, these kids already knew. They lived with it on a daily basis and it had constituted a large part of their lives before they entered the academy. They were also, by and large, accustomed to a far stricter work regimen.

By lunch, Iruka felt he had a decent grasp on their disparate personalities and problems - from the Inuzuka puppy with teething issues, through yet another Nara who couldn't be bothered, to Chikako-chan, the silent Aburame girl who frankly gave Iruka the willies. The kids themselves seemed to settle well under his tutelage. With only twelve in the class he could really offer them sustained and personalised attention. No mention was made of Gorou-sensei, which was telling in itself. Iruka was pretty sure that the sudden disappearance of a much loved teacher from the old academy would have had the kids badgering him with questions for hours.

He packed them off to lunch with a sense of hopeful satisfaction and pottered across to Kuranei's office. Her door was ajar and he poked his head in to find her rooting around in a large colourful bag while Aiko, who was liberally daubed with something orange and gummy, hiccuped her displeasure from her baby seat.

"Need a hand?" he asked.

Kurenai glanced up briefly, looking frazzled. "Oh Iruka, please. Can you get me some water. I swear I put the wipes in here this morning but I can't find them anywhere and she hates being dirty."

"No problem." When no directions were forthcoming, he added, "Ano, the staff room?"

She looked surprised. "You haven't had orientation yet? No, I suppose you wouldn't have. Eh, maybe you could stay with Aiko while I run there quickly?"

"Sure." Iruka squatted down to be on a level with the baby. "And what have you got in your hair, little lady," he cooed. Aiko's face screwed up, preparatory to what promised to be a truly impressive yell. "Now, now, none of that." He poked her gently on the nose and said, "Bing!" The little girl went cross-eyed and her wail died unborn. He did it again and this time she giggled, grabbing for his finger. In no time at all, they had a good game of peekaboo going and Aiko was squealing louder than Tonton, her arms and legs waving in excitement.

"You're still very good with the little ones, I see, Iruka-sensei."
Recognising the voice, Iruka sprang to his feet. Sarutobi Yuuna was beautiful in that timeless way most upper-class women managed to achieve. Her skin was clear and smooth, her black hair drawn back in a flattering pleat, and she wore a pale brown kimono decorated with cream butterflies. Tucked into the front of her rust-coloured obi was a Leaf hitai-ate.


"Healing slowly. Tsunade-hime tells me full recovery will take many months, however." She looked sad which made Iruka feel rotten. He'd meant to drop by and see his old student after the incident at the chuunin exams, but what with everything else going on in his life he hadn't got around to it.

"Please pass on my best wishes to him. He carries his grandfather's determination to succeed against all the odds, so I am sure he'll be fine."

She inclined her head fractionally. "We can pray. But what of you, Iruka-sensei. I assume this is your first day at our wonderful new academy."

He smiled, looking around happily. "It is, and I have to admit to being impressed with the place. I foresee quite the generation of geniuses coming out of here in the next few years."

"Indeed." A cloud seemed to pass over her face. "Though there are those who would see them graduated earlier as a result."

Iruka frowned. "I thought the idea was to give them extra training, not force them through the system faster?"

"That was the original programme and one I will fight hard to adhere to, despite the dissenters."

"Good. I'd hate to see these kids being ruined when they have such potential. I wish people could see how vital it is for even the brightest among them to have a decent childhood. It's essential if you want to end up with well-balanced adults." He thought briefly of the jounin currently haunting his home during his off hours. According to records, Kakashi had been graduated from the academy at age five and had passed the chuunin exam at six. Really, it should hardly come as a surprise that the man had the social graces of a retarded monkey.

Yuuna-sama was smiling openly at him now. "In that respect you and I have always agreed, Iruka-sensei. Perhaps with you teaching here, we can protect the future of Konoha's most precious children."

Such a familiar conversation. Myriad were the parent-teacher conferences between Yuuna-sama and himself which had led to that exact same subject. "Anything you need me to do to further that agenda, all you have to do is ask."

"I shall bear that in mind – Ah, Kurenai-chan, there you are."

Kurenai sidled into the office, a steaming bowl of water and a towel in her hands. She bobbed her head at Yuuna, before kneeling down to start tidying up Aiko. "Onee-sama. I'm sorry she isn't ready. I forgot the baby-wipes this morning and-"

"Don't bother to apologise, my dear. I know how hard it is when a mother must work as well as take care of her child. So difficult for you, I'm sure."

As the atmosphere in the office chilled, Iruka wished for a moment that he could melt into the wall. Apparently the relationship between Kurenai and her child's aunt was not a good one, which was
strange considering they were both lovely people in their own right. Families could be very complicated, he decided.

Ten minutes later, with Aiko and Yuuna-sama gone, and he and Kurenai eating lunch, he asked, "She doesn't approve of you coming back to work?"

Kurenai shook her head, pressed the back of her hand against her mouth as she chewed and swallowed, and then said, "Not in the slightest. As far as she's concerned, I should stay at home at least until Aiko is ready to start at the kindergarten. Which is fine for her, she has the Sarutobi fortune to fall back on. Asuma was a lovely guy but he didn't leave much behind to help support us."

"I'm sure he didn't mean to-" Iruka began, more than a bit embarrassed by her outburst.

Kurenai waved a hand. "Ignore me. I just get so frustrated. I'm a trained kunoichi; I don't need to rely on hand-outs if I can work. Not that I would have it any other way. Aiko's my darling and I love her to bits, but coming back to the job I trained for is such a relief"

"And Yuuna-sama?"

"Is child-minding for me three days a week, so I suppose I shouldn't complain. She really can be stuffy, though."

"She was married to the Sarutobi heir for fifteen years, what do you expect?" Iruka popped a rice ball in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. He wasn't an expert on Konoha's lineages but he had a vague grasp on some of them. "And wasn't her mother related to the Shodai?"

"Hm, a cousin, I think. Though that's not saying much." Kurenai leaned forward, a mischievous expression on her face. "If half of the rumours I've heard about him and his brother are true, most of Konoha has Senju blood in their veins."

They sagged together, sniggering loudly at the supposed misbehaviour of Konoha's noble founders. And Iruka found himself relaxing. Perhaps there was nothing to worry about after all.
Iruka checked his watch, cursed quietly and hurried out of the front door. His foot had no sooner hit the mat than Kakashi appeared in front of him, standing upside down on the underside of the walkway roof.

"Yo!" Kakashi said by way of greeting, then added somewhat redundantly, "You're going out."

Iruka narrowed his eyes. "No, I'm in the bath - Of course I'm going out! Now please move, Kakashi-san, so I can lock my door."

He didn't, of course, that would have been the polite thing to do and Iruka despaired of Kakashi ever doing anything so mundane as being polite. "Where are you going?" he was asked instead.

It was getting late. If Iruka didn't go now the store would be closed and he wouldn't be able to stop for groceries on the way home. "To visit someone. Who that person is, is none of your business."

Suddenly Kakashi was the right way up and right in his face, radiating righteous irritation. Iruka instinctively took a step back, and when Kakashi followed, he took another. A third found him plastered against the wall with Kakashi so close he could feel the jounin's body heat. They stared at each other, virtually nose to nose, for a long moment before Kakashi said, "Scroll?"

"Eh?" Iruka was finding it hard to think. This close Kakashi smelled of sharp-edged metal and salt underlain with a musky scent that made Iruka's head spin. He could see the depths of colour in his uncovered eye; swirls of deep brown layered with a grey so dark it could be black. And the intensity - it was like looking into a thunderstorm and finding it staring back at you.

Then the clouds lifted, the eye curved into its usual happy arch. "The summoning scroll, sensei, for when you get into trouble."

Iruka fumbled in his jacket pocket and tugged it out wordlessly. Kakashi took it, unrolled it, bit his own thumb hard enough to make it bleed and wiped a fresh sample across the summoning seal. Then he re-rolled the scroll, tucked it back in Iruka's pocket, gave it a little pat and vanished in a swirl of leaves. Iruka stood there staring into the space he'd occupied, trying to drag his brain back from whatever fox-hole it had hidden itself in. After a moment or two, he puffed out a word his students would have been shocked to hear him use, spun on his heel and headed for the stairs.

Three minutes later he reappeared, red-faced and panting, locked his front door, then vanished again at a dead sprint.

* * *

The Sarutobi compound was on the edge of town, about half as far from the new academy as Iruka's house. It was also relatively new, having been rebuilt after the kyuuubi attack. Back then, Sarutobi Hiroshi had been clan patriarch - Sandaime having formally eschewed clan loyalties when he retook the mantle of Hokage. The newly married Sarutobi heir had built for a clan in ascendency, his hopes for a large family reflected in the size of the new compound. With seven different buildings set around three courtyards, it was solid and functional, though lacking much of the graciousness of the older Hyuuga and Uchiha estates. It was also achingly empty. The last time Iruka had visited had been not long before Sandaime was killed and the place had felt like a graveyard even then. Hiroshi-sama had been dead several years and Asuma-san had retreated to an apartment in town, leaving just Yuuna-sama, Hiroshi's widow, Konohamaru, his single child, plus few family servants as the only
Iruka closed the heavy gate behind him and made his way up the stone pathway to the main house. The sun was long down and the night getting chill. He jogged the last couple of steps and knocked quietly. The door slid back to reveal a small figure knelt on the other side. It was covered from head to toe in grey robes.

Taken aback slightly – this looked like neither of the house servants he remembered - Iruka stammered, "I-I'm sorry. I was hoping to visit with Yuuna-sama. O-or Konohamaru-kun if the lady is too busy?" The figure dipped its head, then rose gracefully and began to walk deeper into the house. Taking it as tacit permission to follow, Iruka quickly replaced his sandals with house-slippers, and hurried after... her, he rather thought, going by the way she walked. Tiny, delicate steps, which hardly showed the tips of her toes under the hem of her cloak. And what a strange garment that was; with its deep cowl hood and long flowing sleeves, not a scrap of skin was visible.

They crossed the hallway where the woman...girl... knelt down, slid another door open and then waited with her head bowed for Iruka to enter. Ahead of him was a large washitsu room with traditional shoji screens and tatami mats on the floor. It was sparsely furnished with only a blanket-covered kotetsu, an antique black and gold lacquer butsudan and a free-standing screen painted with cherry blossoms, which was placed towards the far end presumably to offer some level of privacy from casual visitors. Feeling desperately self-conscious, Iruka shucked his slippers then stepped through the door, hearing it slide closed behind him. Again he followed the girl, this time to the other side of the screen.

And there was Yuuna-sama, sitting seiza at the side of a futon upon which lay the frighteningly still form of her son, Konohamaru. The boy looked truly awful; his skin paper-pale, his cheeks sunken, his eyes dark-ringed. Iruka had heard that the jutsu which had caught him was a nasty one, but he'd never dreamed it was this bad.

"Don't let it scare you, Iruka-sensei," came Yuuna-sama's quiet calm voice. "It may look terrible but he rests quite peacefully."

"What- what was it?" The question popped out of its own volition and he felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment.

"A child's prank gone terribly wrong. I don't remember the name of the specific justu-"

"Yang Release: Great Hungering Maw," the cloaked girl interjected. Her voice was nothing like Iruka expected it to be. Given the graceful way she moved, it should have been soft and cultured, and instead it was brash and edged. It was like bending to smell an exquisite lotus blossom and having frog croak at you.

The tiniest of frowns appeared between Yuuna-sama's brows. "Yes, thank you, Kaori-chan, you may go." Not another word was spoken until Kaori had left the room, then Yuuna-sama turned back to Iruka and continued as though she had never been interrupted. "However in effect it was similar to the Akimichi ability to convert their body mass into chakra. The Kumo boy who used the technique had stolen it from his father and it's thought that he had no idea it would do such damage. It killed him, his team mates and his jounin-sensei before it reached Konohamaru. We can only be grateful that it failed before it took him also." Her hand drifted out to rest on the covers next to Konohamaru's; their fingers barely touched. She was looking in his direction but Iruka got the impression she seeing something else entirely. "He is the only one I have left, you know. The last of the Sarutobi. Who would have thought we would lose them all so soon."

It was terrible to watch such a wonderful woman suffer and know there was nothing you could do.
"I'm so sorry," Iruka said in little more than a whisper. "I had no idea..."

"Nor should you have had," Yuuna-sama said, somewhat more forcefully. "As Tsunade-hime said, the potential for conflict to erupt between ourselves and Kumogakure would have been huge. Not only that but it would have been very bad for morale for news of this to get out. It was the first chunin exams since the war and it was vitally important that everything went well."

"Hmph, the best way of ensuring that would be not to enter kids without the proper training to start with."

Her eyes flashed. "Oh my dear Iruka-sensei, I do wish more of Konoha shared your attitude. Just yesterday I had Netsuto-san complaining that his daughter wasn't available full-time for missions yet. Little Tsubame is six years old for goodness sake and frankly I don't care if she can already summon an adult eagle, she is not equipped to deal with conditions in the field!"

Beside them, Konohamaru shifted uneasily at the sound of raised voices. His mother flushed a little and ducked her head, patting his cheek and tugging the covers up around him more tightly. Then she gestured to Iruka and they both trod quietly back to the kotetsu. "I just wish there was something we could do. They must be allowed to mature properly or we will lose yet another generation to mishaps and foolishness. Did you hear we lost Daichi-kun and Hibari-chan six weeks ago? In all that's nearly twenty-five percent of that class already and they've only been graduated for two years." Tears glistened in the corners of her eyes.

"Half the trouble is the kids themselves," Iruka said, taking a seat opposite Yuuna-sama. "I remember Konohamaru going off the deep-end when I told him he wouldn't be allowed to graduate until he was at least twelve. His uncle Asuma became a genin at nine and he was determined he could do the same."

"I know. I even suggested to Tsunade-hime that we artificially suppress their chakra, to make them think they're not as powerful as they are. Goodness knows some of them have it to burn."

"What did she say?" It sounded like a great idea to Iruka. Half the problem with the kekkei genkai kids was them being able to do more than their childish bodies could be trained to handle.

"That the parents would never agree and that she could never formally condone doing it behind their backs." Yuuna-sama sighed. "Personally I think she was just dodging the issue."

Iruka's back straightened as she spoke, his heart doing a quick double beat of excitement. "Are you absolutely positive that's what she said?" he asked in a surprisingly level tone for a man whose hands were trembling.

"Completely." Yuuna-sama smiled at him. "It may have been some years since I was on active duty but village politics keeps me on my toes."

"Eh..." This was likely the most foolish thing he'd done since creeping into Ebisu-sensei's office that day. He asked anyway. "Can I ask, how were you going to do it?"

Yuuna-sama frowned slightly. "Oh it was nothing too complicated. Just a simple medicinal compound that's often used for patients recovering from severe chakra exhaustion. I believe it was developed by Nara Shikamu to treat Kakashi-kun after he was gifted the sharingan. It was touch and go for the poor boy at one point and it was absolutely vital that he be prevented from using every scrap of chakra he generated."

Iruka could imagine. "So it's completely safe."
"Entirely."

"And how is it administered?"

"As a powder diluted in water. Or fruit juice which was how I was planning-" She paused, her eyes
narrowing slightly. "Iruka-sensei, surely you are not suggesting what I think you are?"

He shrugged helplessly. 'Hokage-sama said it herself; she could never formally condone doing it'.
If we do it for her and don't tell anyone, then the parents have no choice but to accept their kids aren't
ready to graduate yet, the kids get to stay at the academy until they're trained enough not to get
blown up by the first pretty jutsu they come across, and Hokage-sama has plausible deniability. It's a
win-win-win scenario."

Yuuna-sama stared at him, her normally pale face tinged with rose. "But the compound will have to
stolen from the hospital. It will all have to be done in absolute secrecy. What if we're caught?"

"We'll just have to make sure we won't be." Iruka grinned bravely. His own future was wrecked
anyway. After this mission was over and the truth about him cheating got out, he was finished as a
teacher at either academy. He'd just need to make damned sure not a scrap of blame fell on Yunna-
sama. "It'll be just like the old days, sneaking into places and nicking things."

Her laugh was like a silver bell brightening up the evening. "You were such a terror back then. Half
the time Otosan didn't know whether to scold you or promote you."

"Really?" He smiled with genuine pride. "Yuuna-sama, thank you. You have just made my night."
It was a shinobi moon; a waxing crescent set against a clear star-strewn sky, creating the perfect mix of thin light and deep shadow. It was the sort of night that made Kakashi long for the mindless complexities of a mission, the heat and stab of a good fight. Instead he shifted carefully, balancing on end of the branch with his feet tucked under him as he peered down into the new academy compound. So far nothing had moved. Not that he'd expected it to. In many ways watching this place was grasping at straws. If there was a traitor, the likelihood was he was way too smart to go skulking around in the middle of the night.

Beside him a shadow moved, resolving into the shape of a small squat dog. "Boss," it said, by way of greeting. "What'cha looking at?"

"It might be a black cat in a coal shed," Kakashi replied. "Did you do as I asked?"

"Sure." Pakkun gave him a slightly sideways look and muttered something about cats and coal and congenital insanity. Kakashi ignored him. "First stop was Yuuna-san's over in the Sarutobi compound. He stayed there for about an hour and a half, presumably visiting with Naruto-Two, then he went to Ichiraku – had miso ramen with pork - and on to the twenty-four hour grocery. Purchases there included three cabbages, a newspaper and a jar of bean paste - I recommend not inviting yourself to dinner tomorrow. Then he went home and graded papers for two hours. All in all, a riveting night out." Pakkun humphed and sat down. "Not sure how he lives with all the excitement, myself."

Kakashi hummed his agreement and kept his eyes on the academy. "Thanks, Pakkun. You can go." Pakkun singularly failed to vanish in a puff of smoke. Kakashi sighed quietly and cut a glance in his direction. "What?"

"You all right, boss? I mean, getting me to follow the school teacher around all evening seems a bit excessive even for you."

"It's work, nothing more."

Another sideways look; for a dog, Pakkun was exceedingly good at them. "Yeah, sure. Which is why Urushi is under orders to be battle-ready in case the sensei summons him." A pregnant silence stretched between them. Kakashi ignored it. He was really good at ignoring things he didn't want to deal with. Finally Pakkun humphed, stood up and shook himself vigorously. "Remind me if I ever run into that man's ghost that I owe him a case of fleas," he commented, then raised his paw in salute. "Don't do anything stupid, eh, and that includes letting him ruin the rest of your life."

Kakashi sat and just breathed after Pakkun had gone, letting the night wash over him. Memories tickled the corners of his mind and he brushed them away, not willing to become preoccupied. It was easier to forget, to become the blank slate upon which his Hokage's commands could be written. To become the perfect shinobi with no emotion and no entanglements to distract from the mission.

He might have stayed that way until sunrise had a subtle movement below not caught his attention. He leaned forward, no more than the shadow of a branch swaying in the breeze. A figure was hurrying up the main path. Dressed in shinobi blacks but minus a flak jacket of any colour, he was familiar enough for Kakashi to recognise him. Ebisu. What the hell was he doing at the academy in the early hours of the morning?

Kakashi dropped silently from the tree and shadowed the tokujo through the main gates and round to
a small side door. With a click no louder than a twig falling onto gravel, the door opened and Ebisu slipped inside, closing it behind him. Kakashi waited - three heartbeats, four - listening to footsteps retreating up the corridor - five, six, seven - then he eased the door open and followed his quarry into the building.

Once inside, he tugged his mask down and sniffed the air. A plethora of scents bombarded him, but Ebisu's was unmistakable; the man's cologne would expose him in ten seconds or less in the field. He ghosted along the corridor, aware of achingly empty space to the right and left of him. Classrooms and dojo, each unique in the way they reflected sound and scent and light. Stairs lay ahead of him and that was the way the trail led. Kakashi took to the wall, pushing the tiniest amount chakra into his feet so he could scale the stairwell and bypass the steps themselves. Such spaces carried echoes better than hallways, even the quietest of footsteps could be heard on a stair.

Up to the next level and now the scent was stronger. Ebisu could not be so far ahead. The second floor, Kakashi thought, wasn't that where his office was? Could this be as simple as the man having forgotten something? His question was answered by the sound of a muffled groan coming from a room not three doors down.

Surprised that the nameplate read Yuuhi-sensei, Kakashi eased the door ajar. It creaked loudly. He froze, every sense stretched to the maximum, expecting attack or worse at any second. He needn't have bothered. Ebisu was leaning on Kurenai's desk with his back to the door and he was absolutely oblivious to anything going on around him. In fact Kakashi could probably have tap-danced naked through the room behind him and he still wouldn't have noticed. Not if the rhythmic motions of his right hand and the slap-slap sounds of skin on skin meant what Kakashi knew they did.

Disgusting bastard! Kakashi's sense of honour told him to storm in there and accuse Ebisu of – of what? Being a closet pervert? Everyone knew he was one of them. Of colleague abuse? Well, maybe, but he wasn't actually hurting Kurenai or putting her in danger, just making a mess on her desk which Kakashi assumed he would clean up. Added to which Kakashi was supposed to be keeping a low profile. If he followed his offended sense of propriety and made a scene then by morning everyone would know that Kakashi no Sharingan was watching the new academy and bang went their undercover mission. No, despite his desire to punch Ebisu through the nearest window for being a sicko creep, he was going to have to swallow his anger and back-off.

Nostrils flaring in barely controlled rage and revulsion, Kakashi pulled the door closed and made his way silently out of the building. As he went, he made himself a promise; once this mission was over he was going to bounce Ebisu all the way to Suna and back, and then he was going to make him buy Kurenai a brand new desk.
"Inuzuka Shoichi! If I have to tell you again, you will be in detention for the rest of the week!"

The boy dropped the paper kunai he'd been about to throw at the girls in the front row and had the grace to look embarrassed. "Sorry, Iruka-sensei."

Iruka sighed silently. Shoichi-kun wasn't a bad child, he just had an excess of energy like the rest of his clan. "I presume you've finished the exercise?" The kid nodded and held it up. "Bring it here then. I'll give you another to do until the others have finished."

"Can I have another one too, please, sensei?" Ken-kun asked as Shoichi trotted past him down to the front of the class. The rest of the students glanced up but quickly returned to their papers, determined to do their absolute best.

And there was where the difference lay. If this were the old academy, the entire class would be in an uproar by now. The few difficult kids having disrupted the ones who were easily distracted and between them they'd make life hell for those who were actually trying to work. The frustrating part about it was, often those difficult kids were among the very brightest. Bored out of their minds by having to do the same exercise again and again, they'd play up just to have something to do. Here, with a much lower teacher to student ratio, that problem could be addressed. It still wasn't easy; even the brightest child would often play dumb if they found a subject boring or would rather stare out of the window all day. Speaking of which....

With unerring accuracy, Iruka flicked a piece of chalk across the classroom. It pinged off the window and hit Ayumu-kun smack between the eyes. "Ouch!" he yelled rubbing his face. "What did you do that for? I was working, honest."

Iruka glared at him, unmoved by the protest. "You know the rules. If you're awake enough to catch the chalk, we'll call it work. If you're not, then it's day dreaming."

The Nara boy muttered under his breath, but turned his paper over and started writing. A sprinkling of giggles burst out in front row and Iruka turned his attention to the girls producing them. "Hanako-chan, Tsubame-chan, do you have something to contribute?"

Wide-eyed, they shook their heads. "No, Iruka-sensei." Iruka didn't believe a word of it. Tsubame in particular was a active member of the peanut gallery and wasn't beyond instigating conflict so she could cheer one side on against the other. There were times when Iruka wondered if the girl didn't have too much in common with her family's bird summons, particularly when he caught her in the playground watching with undisguised glee as two boys fought in front of her. Hanako was a little better but easily lead, a fault she would have to be broken of before she graduated.

He handed extra work-sheets to Shouichi and Ken, and then pulled out another as Chikako appeared silently behind the pair and held out hers. "Thank you," he said as he took it off her. She didn't answer; she never did. Her written work was amongst the best in the class, as were her practicals; if he could just get her to communicate with other humans, she would make an excellent shinobi.

"How many sheets would you like?" he asked her in an obvious attempt to get her to say something.

She cocked her head to one side, watching him through her glasses, her eyes almost invisible behind the dark lenses. A kikaichu wandered out from behind her ear, waved its antennae at him, and vanished into her hair. Iruka ruthlessly suppressed a shudder. Her mouth quirked up slightly and she
held up two fingers. Iruka nodded and handed them over, accepting his defeat graciously. Despite the lack of verbal communication, they were coming to know each other quite well, he and Chikako.

With the kids settled again, he took the opportunity to go and prepare their mid-morning break. In the week since he and Yuuna-sama had concocted their plan, he had managed to sneak into the hospital twice and get his hands on several jars of the chakra suppressing medicine. Today was the first day he was going to administer it to the kids. They had decided to medicate all three classes, since it would be too obvious if just one started to fall behind. Thus Iruka needed to get down to the staffroom first and dose the bottle of fruit juice concentrate they used to prepare all the kid's drinks.

He took a last quick look around to check no-one was on the verge of finishing, then slipped out of the room and made his way down to the staffroom. As he'd hoped, it was empty. He opened the fridge, got out the glass bottle, cracked the seal on the top and removed the lid. It was an easy matter to take the small jar from his pocket, unscrew the top, and tip a measure of the powder into the juice. Then he replaced both lids, returned the medicine to his pocket, and gave the bottle of juice a good shake.

"Ohayo, Iruka-sensei."

Iruka jumped, not too guiltily he hoped. "Ohayo, Hisoka-san. I'm glad to see you back. How are you feeling now?" The old man certainly looked much better. His colour was high and he was back to his normal painstakingly neat appearance.

"Fine, fine, thank you. And how are you getting on? Settling in well, I hope? Children not too much for you."

"Not at all," Iruka laughed. "They're good kids." He held up the bottle. "I'm just making drinks for them. Shall I do some for your class?"

"If you wouldn't mind, my boy." Hisoka-san eased himself into a chair with a heavy sigh. "Ah, that smells good," he said as Iruka started serving. "Pour one for me as well, would you?"

Iruka's hand froze, the bottle poised over the jug. He hadn't actually considered the possibility that the teachers might drink the juice. And what about Kurenai with little Aiko? Did she give the baby the same juice as she gave her students? What sort of effect would the medicine have on a baby's undeveloped chakra system. Was there any chance it could stunt it permanently?

He couldn't take the risk and there was only one solution. He allowed his fingers to slide on the cold glass. The bottle tumbled from his hand and crashed to the floor.

"Ack!" Hisoka-san yelled as broken glass and juice concentrate sprayed everywhere, including up his trousers.

"So sorry! So sorry!" It was a horrible mess of epic proportions and Iruka could not have been happier. He scurried around collecting cloths and brushes, scooping and mopping and tidying, and all the while he was shaking with relief that he'd actually come to his senses before he had done something so remarkably stupid.

At the end of the school day, he packed up his bag and headed straight for the Sarutobi compound. Kaori-san again opened the door and they re-enacted their scene of doors and sandals, except this time Yuuna-sama was sitting at the kotetsu when Iruka arrived. She took one look at who it was and dismissed Kaori, urging Iruka to sit, sit, sit and tell her how it had gone.

"It was terrible, Yuuna-sama," he said as he put his bag down and dug around in it for the jar of
medicine he'd taken with him. The others were back at the house. He'd have to dispose of them somehow, or maybe Yuuna-sama could hide them. "I'd dosed the juice and was about to put it out when Hisoka-san asked for some and it was then that it hit me." He put the jar on the table and rubbed his fingers across his scar as he sat. "How could we possibly know what effect this substance will have on each child? One of my little ones is an Aburame, her kikaichu feed on her chakra. If it was suppressed, would they starve? What about Hyuuga Hideyoshi? His Byakagun is incredibly sensitive to chakra flow. And the Inuzuka link with their ninken. Without enough chakra, would the bond break?"

Yuuna-sama was looking at him with horror on her face. "You didn't do it?" she said.

"No, no. I realised how unwise it would be and thought it better to get many more answers before we went through with the plan-"

The slap came out of the blue, ringing across his face and making his eyes water. If it had been anyone but Sarutobi Yuuna who had raised her hand against him, they would have found a kunai to their throat. As it was he sat in mute disbelief, staring at the ugly rage plastered on her beautiful face.

"How could you not do it!" she was screaming at him. "They are meeting in a month. A month. And then the decision will be made and by then it will be too late, too late, too la-ate!" With a terrible moan she slumped forwards, her arms flung wide across the floor, her kimono spread around her.

Iruka leapt to his feet and backed away, shocked by her sudden transformation from lady to lunatic. The shoji door swept back and Kaori rushed in, dropping to her knees next to her mistress and reaching out for her, pulling her gently into her lap and cradling her as one would a child. Once Yuuna-sama was comfortable, she glared up at Iruka. Crimson eyes set in a sharp pale face accused him from behind heavy framed glasses.

"Get the hell out," she yelled, "and don't bother coming back." As Iruka turned to flee, he heard her crooning, "Hush, hush, okasan. Everything's fine, everything's gonna be fine."

He staggered out of the front door and out on to the street. He was halfway home when he realised he had left his bag and the jar behind. Well, he certainly wasn't going back for them. At least not until Yuuna-sama had had a chance to calm down, or hopefully to go out. Or maybe he could persuade someone to retrieve his bag for him. Kakashi-san might, though that would preclude the chances of getting the bottle back. Oh, who was he kidding, the entire thing was a non-starter. It was just a good job there were no student papers in the bag and that he had such an excellent memory. There was nothing he'd lost tonight that he couldn't replicate. Better to write it all off to a near miss and get back to normality.
Chapter 11

Kakashi had been waiting for about an hour when Iruka finally arrived home. He watched out of sight until the teacher had unlocked his door, then dropped to the mat behind him with a lazily drawled, "Yo." Predictably Iruka leapt about a foot in the air, turned bright red and started cursing him out... Except today he didn't. Yes, he leapt and started cursing, but he turned white not red and there was a significant gap before the shouting started. Almost as if he had been genuinely scared.

Tuning out the tirade – which never varied and focussed primarily on Kakashi's appalling lack of manners and questions about which of ninken had been responsible for dragging him up anyway – Kakashi studied Iruka more closely. Pinched lips, eyes darker than normal. Kakashi sniffed subtly and yes, the sour scent of fear sweat clung about him, as well as the smell of fruit juice for some reason. "What happened?" he demanded.

At the question, Iruka's lecture stuttered to a halt and he started looking distinctly shifty. Honestly how anyone could have thought the man decent jounin material was beyond Kakashi. He'd been in the field with him a few times and it had little to recommend it. "Nothing," Iruka said, gaze tellingly elusive as he opened his door and went inside. Kakashi followed him, ignoring the attempt to close it in his face and the sarcastic, "Oh please, won't you come in, Kakashi-san."

There was something else about the teacher too. Kakashi narrowed his eyes, staring at the man as he slipped off his sandals and strode through the living room into the kitchen and started banging around. "Your bag, where is it?" he called after him a moment later when he realised what it was that was missing.

"None of your damned business," Iruka snapped in reply and really that was it. Kakashi had had a long pointless week staking out the academy every night; nothing about this situation felt or smelled right, and now a cheating chuunin was telling him that events that could be crucial to the case were none of his business. It took quite a lot to make Kakashi lose his temper; Iruka had just managed it.

Between one eye-blink and the next he was across the room, and had Iruka pinned against the kitchen door by his shoulder. He leaned forward until their faces were next to each other and said slowly and distinctly into a shell-like ear, "I will ask again; what happened to your bag? You will answer or I will hang you off the roof by your toes, do you understand me, shinobi."

Iruka nodded and at this distance Kakashi could see the way his Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed. Could taste his breath as exhaled. Could see the beads of sweat forming in his hairline, his pulse thudding under his skin. Kakashi's grasp eased, becoming more a caress than a grip, one finger straying past the edge of Iruka's collar to where soft skin lay naked and defenceless. The tip brushed across it and then, before he knew what he was doing, he was leaning closer, tongue snaking out to lick a stripe up that vulnerable length of neck, tasting salt-sweat and sunshine through his mask.

Iruka jumped, his arms coming up to shove Kakashi away, a shocked expression on his face. Kakashi drooped into a deliberate slouch, daring Iruka to make something of it. As he'd hoped, Iruka just looked confused, rubbed a hand across his neck then looked at the palm as though wondering if he'd imagined the whole thing or not.

"Bag," Kakashi demanded again, "Or did you drop it in the river on the way home?"

Iruka's jaw tightened. "I left it somewhere. I'll get it back tomorrow."
This was going to be like pulling teeth, Kakashi could tell. There might be screaming and blood at some point in the near future. "Where somewhere."

Obviously loath to resort to the 'none of your business' that had elicited such a bad reaction before, Iruka hemmed and hawed. More evidence, if Kakashi had needed it, that the man was not cut out to be a shinobi of any note. If the boot had been on the other foot, Kakashi would have lied by now, and he would have done it so flawlessly that no one would have doubted his story for a moment.

"Was it at Sarutobi Yuuna's house," he asked finally, taking a not-so-wild guess. Iruka had been there at least three times in the past week.

The colour drained from Iruka's face. "How did you know that?" he demanded.

"A little fish told me," Kakashi said, as close to rolling his eyes as made no difference. "What happened to rattle you so much?"

A blush of truly astounding proportions immediately replaced Iruka's pallor.

Kakashi raised his eyebrows. That he had not expected. "Yuuna-san, eh? I didn't think she still had it in her. She's got to be going on forty by now, surely."

"What? No! No, it wasn't like that... I wouldn't... she wouldn't..." The protests died away leaving just the red cheeks and the panicked expression. Which then cleared a little as Iruka stood up straighter. He seemed to come to some sort of decision, which Kakashi hoped included telling him the truth. "Actually it was all my fault, I... I may have made a slightly improper suggestion and Yuuna-sama had me thrown out."

Ignoring the twist of some small emotion in his gut, Kakashi smirked. "Obviously I've got you all wrong, Iruka-sensei. All this time I thought you loved children when it was actually their mothers you were chasing. My mistake. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a butterfly to catch and I need to build it a nest."

With that, he channelled the chakra for a Body Flicker and headed flat out for the new academy, his mind churning over the facts as he ran, blind and deaf to the night around him. Iruka and Yuuna-san. Iruka propositioning Yuuna-san. As unlikely as it sounded, his explanation did account for all the evidence; the fear, the nerves, the sudden abandonment of his bag.

Which meant that, even if Kakashi didn't appreciate being kept in the dark, Iruka had been right; it really wasn't any of Kakashi's business. So why did it hurt so much?

*

Iruka stood in his kitchen and shook. Bile rose hot in the back of his throat and, though he fought to swallow it down, finally he had to lunge for the sink where he heaved and spat and choked until tears began to work their way loose. He'd lied to Kakashi-san. He'd lied about Yuuna-sama, Sandaime's daughter-in-law. He'd suggested that they'd.... that she.... Was he insane? Perhaps he was. It would certainly explain a lot.

The horror of the past fortnight - no, the past year – came suddenly and violently home to roost. He'd thought he'd faced it before when he'd gone to the Hokage. He was wrong. That had been a mere exercise in enlightened self-interest, a plan concocted at top speed in order to save his own skin. Now he looked at it all again, seeing it in the greater context. Understanding it as part of a larger pattern of failure and foolish pride. Starting with his ill-conceived notion to ask Hisoka-san why he'd been turned down for promotion. Why couldn't he have been content with his lot? Why did he
always have to aim higher than he could ever possibly reach. He should have known, he should have remembered. He was nothing. Insignificant.

He was the child who refused to stay where it was safe, the one whose parents died protecting him. The chuunin who Sandaime had to reassign to save others from his weakness, the hapless teacher who had to be rescued again and again when he leapt in with no thought for rules and protocol. And to think he had dared imagine that he could reach for more. To be more. Fool. Idiot.

And now this. If he hadn't done enough to destroy his own life, in his arrogance he'd now put the very children he'd sworn to protect and guide in danger.

He thought back to that moment in the staffroom when he'd been holding the drugged juice. If Hisoka-san hadn't come in when he did, if he hadn't asked for a drink for himself, where would Iruka be this evening? At the hospital maybe, trying to save the lives of his students? Or more likely at the jail, rightfully accused of having killed them. His legs failed him. He slid down the cabinet to the floor, his mind's eye seeing rows of small bodies wrapped for burial, their parents standing over them weeping. Yes, children may die as genin, but at least as genin they would have had a chance. And a choice. What he had tried to do today was nothing short of attempted murder.

He should go and confess. Take the jars of medicine, place them on the Hokage's desk and throw himself upon her mercy. No doubt he would be dismissed and disgraced, but that was all he had to look forward to anyway once this mission was over.

Iruka raised his head, some atom of self-preservation forcing him out of the well of self-pity he was drowning in.

The mission. There was still the mission. If he could find the traitor, if he could prove that he hadn't been imagining things or making things up, then perhaps he could still gain some kind of redemption. It wouldn't save his career; Iruka now understood that that was beyond saving and always had been; but it might be enough to salvage some honour, enough to allow him to look in the mirror and not hate who he'd become to the point of self-destruction.

His legs shook as he dragged himself up, but he managed it somehow. The sun had set at some point while he'd been on the floor and the apartment was dark, full of unfamiliar shapes and shadows. He stumbled his way to the bathroom, shedding clothes that stank of sickness and fear and failure. His fingers, thick and unresponsive, fumbled for the light switch and then the shower. The water was warm; he wrenched at the dial and stepped under the spray, his skin turning pink immediately in the sudden heat. Again his legs failed, this time as hope battled despair for his soul. He slid down the tile and sat, arms covering his head as the water went from scalding to tepid to icy cold.

Only then did he move, now with a slight sense purpose, with a little more poise. He had made his decision. He would find the traitor and bring him down, even if he died in the attempt, and in the meantime he would strive to be the very best teacher he could for those kids and maybe, just maybe, those two things would be enough to justify not telling the Hokage what he had come so close to doing.
"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow..."

Iruka gave the boy a sceptical look. "If it hurts then you have to make sure to get out of the way faster. Really, Dashi-kun, I was under the impression you could do a substitution jutsu in your sleep? Wasn't that what you were boasting to Masaki-kun the other day?"

The kid pouted; it was adorable. "It's Tadashi-kun not Dashi. Dashi's for babies. Plus, my dad says my name's important, so you hafta to say all of it."

"I'm sorry, perhaps I thought I was treating a baby since you're making such a fuss." Despite being tempted, Iruka didn't laugh. It was one of the first lessons he'd learned about teaching kids; you shouldn't laugh at them. Kids took themselves so seriously and demanded you did the same in return for their respect and affection. Iruka had always followed this rule and found that it paid off most of the time. It was difficult though when you had a small boy at your knee, pouting and squirming like a two year old, yet insisting he wasn't a baby. The lisp didn't help much either.

The rest of the class had gathered around, watching intently as Iruka quickly bandaged Tadashi's arm and shoulder. The cuts from the shuriken were shallow and would heal quickly, one of the great advantages of having an active chakra system. And being from a family who specialised in poisons, both internal and external, Rokusho Tadashi had a very active chakra system.

"Iruka-sensei, can we have lunch now?" Tsubame-chan demanded. Her best friend, Hanako, nodded her agreement vigorously sending her bright orange hair flying everywhere. Behind her Osamu flapped irritably as hair got in his face and scowled even harder than usual.

The other kids jumped on the bandwagon with a chorus of, "Yes, please, sensei," and "I'm hungry," and "Me too!" ringing out across the training field. Iruka adjusted the bandage one final time then stood up. "Lunch, eh?" He squinted up at the sun, which was doing a good impression of midsummer despite the cherry blossom still being on the trees. The kids had been working hard for several hours, they deserved a break. "I suppose it's about the right time."

He turned to his class, clasped his hands in front of him, and regarded them seriously. They stared back, reflecting his mood like a dozen little mirrors. "I'll tell you what, I'll go inside and collect your lunches, if you all promise to gather and sort the shuriken we used during practice, okay?"

"Hai, sensei," they chimed in harmony and immediately scattered like good mini-nins to start clearing up.

All except Osamu-kun, who stood there, arms folded, glaring in a way that reminded Iruka of Sasuke back when he was little. It was tempting to tell him his face would stick like that if the wind changed. But knowing this self-proclaimed genius, he would probably just explain in great detail how his sensei was mistaken and why the wind couldn't possibly effect his face in any way whatsoever. If they could pry the stick out of the kid's ass, that intellect would be a real asset to the village one day.

Not one to be intimidated, either by brains or by glaring, Iruka stared back. Finally Osamu dropped his gaze and scuffed a toe into the grass. "How do you want them sorted, sensei?" he asked with grudging politeness.

"According to weight and flight speed, please, Osamu-kun. And thank you for taking the time to ask; that was very thoughtful of you."
A tentative smile ghosted across the boy's face. Iruka welcomed it with a broad one of his own and watched as Osamu scampered off to join the rest of the kids.

In the past fortnight he'd thrown himself into teaching, leaving only enough in reserve to watch for the traitor. And watch he had, staying late at the academy and going in early in the hopes of finding someone doing something suspicious. The only people he ever saw were the other teachers, and those only intermittently and mostly from a distance as he arrived or left. All the other staff - the janitor, the secretary, the medi-nin who doubled as a counsellor - went home at the usual time and didn't come back until morning. Iruka was starting to think he would never find him. Or that he really didn't exist. Could Kakashi-san be right when he teased Iruka, saying the traitor was all a figment of his imagination? Had he made the man up so he would have an excuse to assuage his guilty conscience? Iruka didn't know what to think any more.

He wasn't the only teacher in the staffroom when he arrived. Hiromi-sensei was already there, sitting by herself marking papers, and Kurenai-sensei was chatting with Ebisu-sensei by the coffee pot. Iruka excused himself and eased past them to pour himself a mug of coffee; there was no point in hurrying, it would take the kids a few minutes to find all the shuriken.

"It's more a lack of concentration than sleepiness," Kurenai was saying, obviously continuing a conversation she'd been having with Ebisu. "For example yesterday, during dissipation practice, two of my students failed to break the genjutsu. Eventually I had to drop it myself in order to free them and they've been doing that exercise for months."

"It's the heat. Boiled all their brains. The Yamashiro boy set fire to his team mate's hair this morning."

It was like the summer term come early, Iruka mused. Kids and the sun were never a good combination when teaching was involved. Still he couldn't resist having a dig at Ebisu. "You sure it wasn't on purpose?" he put in with a smirk. "Isn't he paired with Mitarashi Kuri? If she's anything like her big sister was, I'd have been tempted to set fire to her."

That earned him a nostril flare from Ebisu, who apparently considered himself above such mortal concerns as humour. "If you're not prepared to seriously contribute to the conversation, Iruka-sensei..." he began.

Iruka dipped an apologetic bow at him. "Sorry, I am taking it seriously, really. I just find it hard to believe that it comes as a surprise if kids want to be out playing when the sun's shining, that's all." He thought about his own class, their earnest faces sweat-gleamed and enthusiastic in the heat even as their little bodies wilted. It was the age problem all over again. "Maybe we should just go easy on them for a few days until they adjust. After all, they're still very young."

Neither of the other sensei spoke, just looked away uncomfortably. Iruka sighed and took his coffee with him to gather the kids' bentos. He forgot sometimes that his indulgent attitude was not widely held, even amongst those he considered friends or colleagues. No, he thought, just the lunatics. He shuddered silently at the memory of Yuuna-sama, her face stretched in a rictus of rage as she lashed out at him. Poor woman. He hoped she was all right. Surely Kaori would have called someone if she needed help. Perhaps he should go and check this evening. Just to be sure.

Lunches in arms, he made his way back out to the practice field to find his class sitting in a circle under the big oak tree, using its thick trunk as shade in lieu of leaves not yet fully emerged. In the centre of the circle were numerous shuriken separated into piles, the kids held more and were actively discussing where they belonged. Iruka smiled as he walked over to them. They were great kids, they really were; he was going to miss them horribly when he had to leave.
"Ano, was there someone out here who wanted food," he called

The shuriken were cast to the ground amid shrieks of "Me, sensei," and Mine, mine!" and a much amused Iruka played grandfather Santa, handing the bento's out to their rightful owners, before joining the children to eat.

It came as something of a surprise when Yasu-kun came and sat close beside him, knees up under his chin and arms wrapped tightly around them. Although the boy wasn't the youngest in the class, he was one of the most needy. Though unlike Shouichi-kun, who was disruptive, and Osamu-kun, who just acted as though he was better than everyone else, Yasu-kun was very withdrawn. To start with Iruka had been concerned, especially after he discovered the boy was recently orphaned, but after a few weeks of watching, he decided he was simply painfully shy. Yasu-kun would answer questions in class if they were put to him directly, which put him a few points ahead of Chikako, but when he spoke he tended to blush and occasionally stammer a little which appeared to make him reluctant to speak more. He also seemed self-conscious about the pair of scars that ran from his right eyebrow to midway down his cheek. Deep and years old, they looked like scratches from some weapon or maybe an animal.

Whatever the background story, Iruka had made it his priority to get the kid to relax and maybe open up a bit. And apparently Yasu-kun didn't resent him for it, which was good.

Before opening his own lunch, Iruka made a bit of a performance of peering around into everyone else's; it served the dual purpose of letting him check they all had something decent to eat and also amused the kids no end when he made faces of dislike or appreciation depending on what they'd brought. Unlike the others, Yasu-kun's lunch was a pre-packaged bento of the type supplied by Konoha's main orphanage and contained nori and rice with a tiny portion of umeboshi tucked in one corner. It looked so familiar that Iruka could almost taste it.

He nudged Yasu-kun with his elbow and said quietly, "I remember I ate those noriben for so many years, I thought I'd turn into one."

The kid turned wide brown eyes on him. For a second his gaze dropped down to his lunch and then returned to Iruka. It took a moment but the penny finally dropped. "Did you lose your chichi too?" he whispered.

"And my okasan," Iruka replied. As he continued speaking, he raised his voice a little so the other children could hear. "But you know something, a really wise old man told me about something that made the pain of losing them easier to bear. He told me about the Will of Fire." He glanced around. He had all their attentions now. "We people of Konoha all have the Will of Fire, deep inside all of us. It's the desire to protect the village and everyone inside of it because the village and its people are precious to us. And because we have that Will, that desire, it brings us all together. It makes all of Konoha our family."

"Family?" Yasu-kun asked softly.

"Yes, Yasu-kun. You and I and Shouichi-kun and Tsubame-chan and everyone else in the class. Everyone in Konoha. Remember that, especially when you think about your otosan and it hurts so much here," he touched a finger to the boy's chest, "that you think you will break open and spill the pain out all over the ground. Remember, everyone in Konoha is your family. They're all there to look out for you and protect you and to love you. You aren't alone."

The kids were a little subdued after that, eating their lunches and chatting quietly amongst themselves. The twins, Ken and Emi, took themselves off and began practising the katas that underpinned their kenjutsu skills. Hanako and Tsubame began making daisy chains, and Hideyoshi
actually fell asleep, his head tipped back against the trunk of the tree. Iruka sat and enjoyed their company. Some adults, he knew, couldn't understand why he liked teaching. Normally he brushed off their comments with a, "Oh, I'm just a masochist really," or "It pays the bills, you know." But the truth was, he liked being around kids. He found them relaxing. They were, in general, so honest and direct, especially when compared to the adults in Konoha, most of whom couldn't even draw a straight line let alone have a straightforward chat.

He thought about Kakashi-san, about the times they'd sat together in Iruka's living room and singularly failed to have a conversation. Not for want of trying, at least on Iruka's part. But it seemed that everything he said had a double meaning for Kakashi. Every word was dissected and analysed and sent back to him reinterpreted until nothing he said was worth saying any more. Had Kakashi learned that from his father? The great White Fang of Konoha was something of an enigma even now. The dishonour of his final mission and the tragedy of his death overshadowed all other knowledge about him to the point that it was impossible to know how much of Kakashi's odd personality he'd inherited and how much had come from being thrown into an adult world at such a young age.

And then there was his sensei. Namikaze Minato, the youngest hokage in Konoha history and Naruto's father. Iruka found it hard to believe that Kakashi got his oddness from him. He hadn't known the Yondaime, had only been a child when he'd risen to power, but anyone who had input, even if it was only genetics, into someone as frighteningly open as Naruto, couldn't possibly have been too obtuse. Plus his teacher had been Jiraiya-sama and really there was a man who let it all hang out. Literally, on a few memorable occasions.

So it was either the father or graduating at five and becoming a chunin at six that had done it. Iruka thought about himself at that age. If he remembered correctly, he'd been more interested in kicking a football around than learning to throw a kunai. What would it have been like to go out with a genin team, to fight, to kill maybe? How old had Kakashi been when he took his first life? What had he been like back then? Had he always worn the mask? Was he really as handsome as Ayame-chan said? And had he actually licked him that day or was that just another figment of Iruka's imagination?

The sound of the children's conversation burbled quietly into the background and the sun beamed down, warming the grass and air to a pleasantly comfortable temperature. Lost in thoughts and memories, Iruka drifted off, his eyelids sliding closed. Within moments he was fast asleep.

…

Something tickled his nose.

Iruka snorted and wiped at it. That was better.

Ack! It was doing it again.

This time he rubbed at his face and the tickle eased. Then just as he was dropping down into peaceful darkness, it happened for the third time, but this time there was more of it. Tickling all over his body like millions and millions of tiny feet. Or bugs. Thousands of tiny bugs...

Iruka shot to his feet with a very un-shinobi-like squeak. As he'd feared, his arms and legs were crawling and he could feel them under his shirt, down his pants. Crap, they were even down his underwear!

"Chikako!" he screeched, standing bolt-upright with his arms held stiffly out to his sides because if he relaxed even for a second he was going to start squashing and if he started, he didn't think he was going to be able to stop. "Call them off, please. I'm awake now, thank you." Nothing, except more
feet and more itching. Iruka risked a glance around. It looked like most of the kids had fallen asleep, even Chikako, and he could see the trails of dark insect bodies leading away from her towards each of the others. Okay, this was more than a child's prank. This was something very wrong.

Worry for the children immediately pushed all other concerns from Iruka's mind. Rushing from one to the next, he quickly checked their vital signs. All of them were breathing but all of them were very deeply asleep. The last one he checked was Chikako. Her pulse was fast and thready, which was bad, very bad. As he leaned over her, she stirred and her mouth opened. Several bugs spilled from the corner and Iruka shuddered, reminded again that the things were still all over him. Still he couldn't worry about that now.

"Chikako-chan," he called. "Wake up, sweetheart, your kikaichu are out."

Her eyelids fluttered and her throat worked. A whining sound emanated from her nose. And then she spoke, though it was in a voice the likes of which Iruka had never heard before, and really hoped he'd never hear again.

"Hungry." It buzzed like a corpse on a hot day, like an anthill that had been kicked, like the angry roar of a hornet's nest knocked from a tree.

"Oh shit!" Iruka leapt up and backed away, conscious now of the steady drain of chakra from his own system. It hadn't weakened him yet, but it was only a matter of time. He needed help, and he needed it fast.

"Going somewhere, sensei?"

Iruka spun round, already dropping into a crouch, kunai out and ready to deploy. "Kaori-san?"

The woman looked much as she had the last time Iruka had seen her, except now the hood of her cloak was down revealing hair the same crimson colour as her eyes. And she wasn't alone. Standing behind her were two unfamiliar shinobi. One was slight with white hair and purple eyes. The most remarkable things about him were his teeth, which bore more than a passing resemblance to a shark's, and the absolutely enormous sword he carried slung over one shoulder. How the hell he supported the weight without falling over was beyond Iruka. The other was bigger and more solid looking, with orange hair only a shade lighter than Hanako's. He had a peaceful smile on his face and was watching several small birds that appeared to be dancing around his head.

"Eh," Iruka said, straightening up. "You startled me. Kaori-san, please could you help me. Chikako is having some difficulties with her kikkaichu and I'm concerned that it might be serious. Perhaps you or one of your friends could go for help?" He kept his voice level, his body language relaxed and non-threatening. Something about this felt desperately off but so far none of them had made an aggressive move.

"Kikkaichu, you say." Kaori peered round him. "Those those bug things that live inside them?" She curled her lip in an obvious expression of distaste. "Yuck. That's revolting. How can they do that to their kids?"

Iruka bristled. He'd thought the same thing himself many times but now was not the time. "I'll happily debate that with you, Kaori-san, later. When the children have had help."

The lean, white haired shinobi reached out and poked Kaori in the shoulder. "Oi, Karin. Who's he calling Kaori?"

She snarled, "Me, you idiot, now shut up," before returning her attention to Iruka. "Inside would be a
better place for this, don't you think, sensei?" Without waiting for Iruka's agreement she gestured to the children. "Jugo, grab an armful or two. Suigetsu, put that monstrosity down for a second and give him a hand."

"Why can't you do it?" the white haired one - Suigetsu - argued.

"Because I'm going to be doing this."

Iruka didn't even see it coming. The chakra scalpels slammed into first one shoulder and then the other, cutting through flesh and flak jacket alike. He bit back a scream and dropped to his knees, his arms flopping uselessly to his sides, the tendons severed.

His traitor. Right under his nose all this time. He'd finally found her, and he was absolutely helpless.
"Hokage-sama! Hokage-sama!" The door of the office burst open and Yamanaka Santa barrelled in, flushed and breathing heavily. "Hokage-sama, there's something going on up at the new academy. No one can get in or out."

Kakashi was already on his feet and halfway to the window. This time Tsunade was right on his heels. "Meet you there," he called as he leapt, channelling chakra for a Body Flicker. Across town, a very surprised crow let out a loud squawk as the nest it was building was suddenly mown down by a ninja running flat out. Kakashi sprinted the few yards from the big oak to the main doors and screeched to a halt, chest touching the arm Genma had stuck out to prevent him going any further. Genma gave him a cool look, switched his senbon from one side of his mouth to the other and said, "What took you so long?"

Kakashi ignored him. He found it the best option when dealing with Genma's smart attitude. "What do we know?" he demanded instead.

Genma opened his mouth to answer, only to be interrupted by a massive metallic crashing sound from near the front gates. A moment later Tsunade's dulcet tones came roaring up the slope. "Who the hell moved the fucking trash cans?"

The two shinobi exchanged a voluble glance. Their hokage had their greatest respect and loyalty but on occasion one was forcibly reminded of her rather... unique personality. A moment later she staggered up next to them, brushing what looked - and smelled - like the remains of yesterday's lunch from her clothes.

"Well?" she snapped, glaring the pair of them as though daring them to comment.

Kakashi gestured to Genma who took up the tale. "It's a barrier technique. At a guess I'd say it was related to five seals, eight gates but we've got people working on it to be sure. No one knows who put it there or how long it's been in place. Mori-san was able to enter and exit the building an hour ago but since no one's tried in the intervening period, we can't be certain exactly when it went up. Intelligence reports a rush of odd chakra about twenty minutes ago from around this location which they chalked up to kids being kids."

"Could they identify the chakra?" Kakashi interjected. Beside him Tsunade closed her mouth with a snap and glared at them both petulantly.

"Only that it wasn't alien. Which frankly could mean anything."

"But most likely means that Iruka's traitor has finally shown his hand." The Hokage pumped her arm. "Yosh! I was starting to think we'd have to pry him out with a crowbar."

Genma looked surprised and more than a bit disgruntled. "Traitor, hokage-sama? There was a traitor and you didn't tell your bodyguards?"

"Pshaw." She waved away his concern. "He wasn't targeting me, so it wasn't your problem. How do we get in?"

"Right now, we don't." Genma gave her a baleful glare and then shrugged. "If it is like Fuen's jutsu, the only way to stop the technique is to kill whoever used it. And if they're inside..." He didn't need to finish the statement. The three of them turned to stare up at the academy building, just visible through a greenish purple aura.
"Shit," Tsunade cursed under her breath.

Kakashi, on the other hand, was thinking fast. He flipped through the seals for his summoning jutsu, bit his thumb and slammed his hand on the ground, all the while thinking Uuhei, Uuhei. The ninken arrived and while the puff of chakra smoke was still clearing, Kakashi snapped, "Reverse summons. Any price. Now."

Never one to argue, Uuhei yelped, "Hai," and vanished again.

"What the hell?" Tsunade asked. Then she folded her arms across her truly monumental chest and glowered at Kakashi, her foot tapping a rapid tattoo on the ground. "Explain yourself, brat."

"It's quite simple, Hokage-sama. If this jutsu is like the one from before, it blocks out passage through all normal routes. However what it can't stop is summons."

"Which would be great if anyone in there had a summoning contract."

Kakashi smirked. "They do. Sort of."

Tsunade raised her eyebrows at him. He could see her thinking, the quicksilver workings of her mind. "You gave Iruka one of your scrolls."

"Primed and ready," Kakashi replied with a dip of his head. "And with a reverse summons in effect-"

"You can piggyback onto the summon when a ninken responds," Tsunade finished for him."Getting you inside the building and in a position to take out the traitor." She pursed her lips and stared at him through narrowed suspicious eyes. "It'll do, I suppose. You know you've left yourself wide open by saying any price."

Kakashi shrugged. He knew, but he didn't care. He could pay that later. Right now he needed to be in that building.

"It'd still be easier if we knew who the traitor was."

"Hokage-sama!" The ANBU appeared from nowhere, dropping straight onto one knee in front of Tsunade. "There has been an event at the Sarutobi compound. Yuuna-sama and Konohamaru-kun were both assaulted, the guards are dead, and the prisoner is gone."

"Fuck!" Tsunade snarled through her teeth and spun around to stare at the building again. "It's got to be her... Would explain the chakra..."

"Her who?" Kakashi interjected before joining the dots for himself. "You were holding Karin at Yuuna-san's?" How many times had Iruka gone to visit? Had he known? Was he part of the plot? And if it was Karin in there, did she have others with her. How many traitors was he going to face?

"After the accident, she was Konohamaru's only hope. Her regenerative ability could restore him physically when nothing else would. And when he kept needing it, it seemed easier to let her stay at the house." Tsunade sighed, a sound full of regret. "She seemed to be coming round, making Konoha her home, finding family. She and Yuuna-san-"

Kakashi felt a strong tug on his chakra. "I'm being summoned," he warned. As he started to dissipate, he heard the Hokage yell, "Just get that freaking barrier down, Hatake! Stat!"

Konoha vanished and in its place came rock walls dimly lit with patches of flickering orange
firelight. The air was thick with the scents of warm furry bodies. Kakashi immediately hunkered down. Dogs, even the ones of Shikondo, didn't take kindly to being loomed over and he had no desire to start a status fight.

"Hey, boss," a rough voice came out of the shadows. "I hope this isn't one of your tricks. Shikon won't like being cheated again."

"No trick, Urushi. It's an emergency. Please convey my respects to-"

"It will not be necessary to convey anything," a smoother, more cultured voice interjected from behind Kakashi's left shoulder. "After the last time, I thought it wise to come and greet you myself."

Kakashi spun on his heels, kunai out even though he recognised the voice. The Great Dog Sage had not changed since the last time Kakashi was here. He still looked like an oversized pekingese dressed in a crimson silk kimono. The long hair on his head was tied up by a golden bow and nestled within that was the sennin orb; the source of Shikondo power. He was perched on the head of a massive black dog, the brother to Bull, which was where the problem had arisen on Kakashi's previous visit. There's nothing like conning someone out of their chief bodyguard to get them mad at you.

"Inukira-sennin." Kakashi bowed respectfully, still not dropping his guard.

"Kakashi-kun," Inukira-sennin replied, equally warily. "The little one said you would pay any price. Was this true?"

"It is. Though I'll need time. I'm waiting for-" the tug came again. This time less forcefully. Kakashi closed his eyes and reached for the source. There! As he touched it, the summon came again. He reopened his eyes just in time to see Shikon cave vanish. Hoo boy, Inukira-sennin was going to be really pissed with him this time.
About the only good thing to be said about the situation was that the kids had finally woken up. Removed from the draining effects of the kikaichu, they all regained consciousness within minutes, even Chikako, though she was groggy and sleepy, and had significantly fewer bugs than before. Apparently unleashing a high powered jutsu like a chakra scalpel around hungry kikaichu was akin to waving a steak under a dog’s nose. Iruka had only been able to sit and snigger as the creatures had swarmed Karin, gorging themselves until washed to a watery grave by Suigetsu.

But that was then and this was now. Iruka glanced around the tiny storage room into which he and the kids had been crammed and counted heads for umpteenth time. Twelve, still. He had all of them. And they were all safe, for the time being anyway.

Hanako clambered into his lap, growling at Ayumu when he had the audacity to complain about her foot in his head. "Iruka-sensei," she said as she snuggled against him. He would love to have cuddled her back, but he still couldn't move his arms. "Hey, Hana-chan," he said. "You doing okay?"

"I'm fine, Iruka-sensei, but you're not. And I can fix you good so sit still now and lemme take a look."

"Eh... what now?" Iruka said, eyes widening as Hanako tugged at his flak jacket, easing it back off his shoulder and down his arm. "It's not like sewing up a doll, you know."

"I know that, silly." She gave him one of those looks that only females could manage, kind of indulgence and disgust all rolled into one. "Okasan taught me how to fix Bubu and I'm gonna fix you."

"Who's Bubu."

"Puppy," Tsubame chimed in. "He broked his leg and Hana-chan's haha made her sit and learn how the bones and stuff all went together so she could fix him up."

"Your mum's a medic?" Iruka asked.

Hana shook her head. "Vet-y-ra-naren," she said. "That's like a medi-nin but for animals."

A medi-nin for animals. A vet. He was about to have his severed tendons fixed by the six year old daughter of a veterinarian. Could things get any worse?

"Did she tell you about his chakra system?" Hyuuga Hideyoshi asked as he too pushed his way closer to Iruka. "Those blades might have cut through his chakra pathways. If you start fixing things and don't fix those too, he might never be able to do seals again."

Hanako's eyes widened and then began to fill with tears. "Okasan didn't tell me about fixing chakra, Iruka-sensei. I don't wanna hurt you."

I don't want you to hurt me either, Iruka thought. He forbore from saying it aloud though. Hana-chan was upset enough. "It's okay," he said reassuringly. "I'm sure the medics will fix me when the rescuers arrive."

"There isn't any rescuers." This end of the storage cupboard was getting crowded. Thankfully Shouichi made his contribution from his place by the door. "I've been listening and I don't think
anyone'll be coming for us."

Around him the other children tensed up and Iruka could tell they were only one piece of bad news away from panicking. "I'm sure that's not right, Shouichi-kun. We're right in the middle of the village. Someone will come and defeat the bad guys."

"Not if they can't get in they won't and that Karin keeps talking about a barrier jutsu."

So that was how they'd managed it. Damn, that put an entirely new complexion on things. As a teacher, Iruka's first consideration was the welfare of the children in his care, and if that meant sitting tight as a hostage until the cavalry arrived, that was what he did. But if there wasn't to be any cavalry...

"Yoshi-kun, can you use your Byakugan to check my chakra pathways and guide Hana-chan while she heals me?" Iruka asked. Without his arms, he was useless. Ergo he would have to take the chance and let Hana-chan try. If only there was someone else responsible around who could help look after the others while the kid's worked.

With three of them helping, Iruka managed to slide out of his flak jacket completely. It got handed away over the top of several small heads. "Be careful with that," Iruka called out. "There's important things in the-" Damn! "Give it back! Quick, pass it back, I need... there's something in the pocket."

It arrived with a heavy thump across his legs and he looked at it helplessly. Beside him Hideyoshi-kun grunted and said, "Which pocket, sensei?"

"Inside front left," Iruka replied. Over his heart. "There's a false pocket sewn into the lining. In there, there should be a scroll." If they hadn't taken it when they searched him. He closed his eyes and muttered a small plea to anyone who might be listening. Please don't let them have taken it. Please.

"This one?"

Iruka cracked open his eyelids and squinted at the scroll. "Yes!" he grinned, exultant. "That's the one. Now, you'll have to help me. I need to put my hand-"

"Sensei," Hideyoshi said quietly. "If the chakra pathways in your arms are severed, you won't be able to use a summoning scroll."

Hope rushed out of Iruka with a whoosh of defeat. Of course he wouldn't be able to. "Can you check, Yoshi-kun?" he asked.

The Hyuuga boy nodded, formed that 'not quite snake' hand seal and said, "Byakagun!" Immediately the veins around his white eyes bulged and his pupils appeared, milky and pale. He stared at Iruka for a few moments, focussing his attention on the areas Karin had attacked with her chakra blades. With a shake of his head, he released the doujutsu. "I'm sorry, sensei. There's too much damage. If I help Hana-chan, you should be able to move them but I don't think you'll be able to channel enough chakra for the scroll."

"I didn't even know you had a summons, sensei," Shouichi said. "What sort of animal is it?"

"Is it a bird, sensei?" Tsubame asked. "Birds are wonderful. They can fly up so high and tell you everything they can see on the ground and they can travel huge long distances and they hardly ever-"

"It's not my summons," Iruka interjected, knowing for a fact that Tsubame-chan could go on all day about her beloved birds. "It belongs to Kakashi-san. He lent it to me."
"Pshh, that's silly. Summons only work if you've got a contract."

"Not if there's some of the contractor's blood on the scroll. If you have one of those, anyone can perform the summon."

They all sat and looked at each other for a long long moment. Then Tsubame licked her lips and said, "Iruka-sensei, if anyone can perform the summon, then why can't I do it?"

"That," Iruka replied, "is a very good question. And do you know something, I can't think of a single reason why you can't."

With a squeal of excited happiness, the little girl grabbed up the summoning scroll and began shoving the other children out of her way. Once she had a small space of cleared floor and she looked up at Iruka and said, "Will this be big enough? What sort of animal does Kashi-san summon?"

"Kakashi-san," Iruka corrected, "summons dogs."

"Cool." Shouichi predictably approved. "Dogs are the best."

"If this works, I'll be inclined to agree with you," Iruka said. "Okay, Tsubame-chan, are you ready?"

"Hai, sensei," she said and put her tiny hand firmly on the unravelled scroll. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" Her face screwed up into a frown, her tongue stuck out and she started turning a bit red. Finally she sat back with a puff. "Not got enough chakra," she said. "I can feel the puppy but it can't get enough power."

That was strange. Hadn't Yuuna-sama said that Tsubame could summon an adult eagle. Surely one of those would take more chakra than one of Kakashi's ninken? Of course she had just been tapped by Chikako's kikaichu, but still, children recovered their reserves exceedingly quickly.

Unless they'd been drugged with something that suppressed their chakra!

A million and one clues dropped into place like a series of keys turning in their locks. Kurenai's students being unable to dissipate the genjutsu, Ebisu's losing control of a fire release. His own students seeming lack of concentration. Chikako's kikaichu running amok. Even Hideyoshi falling asleep under the tree, undoubtedly after he'd used the byakugan to hunt down stray shuriken. It all made sense. And combined with Karin being from the very house where the plot had been concocted, there was no doubt at all in Iruka's mind that all the kids in the academy had been dosed.

Had that been part of the plan all along? To use the medicine to make them easier to kidnap?

"We could all do it together," Osamu suggested, from the corner where he'd been squashed. "If Tsubame-chan touches the scroll and everyone else touches her and pushes her chakra at her-"

"You'll overload her pathways and kill her," Hideyoshi cut in. "It doesn't work like that. It's not a purely mechanical model. Without someone to control and direct the chakra it won't work."

"Can you do that?" Iruka asked.

Hideyoshi shook his head. "I can see the way it flows but I can't control it, not like that."

"I-I-I," an almost inaudible stammer came from down by Shouichi.

Iruka craned his neck to see Yasu with his hands splayed over his brilliantly scarlet face. "Yasu-kun?
Do you think you can control it?" As a budding genjutsu expert, it was just possible he might.

"I-I-I think maybe, sensei," he whispered. "My jutsus can change the way people's chakra flows so if Yoshi-kun can help me get it into Tsubame-chan, I-I think we could do it. Together."

Like a family, Iruka thought, pride in his little gaggle of mini-nins blossoming in his chest. "Right, well, nothing ventured, nothing gained, I suppose. Can you all gather round Yasu-kun and then Yoshi-kun if you stand there and put one hand on him and the other, yes, that's good." Iruka gave them a critical look. Yasu was surrounded by everyone except Yoshi and Tsubame, with the former acting as a conduit between Yasu and the latter. "Okay, if everyone's ready, let's go!"

This time when Tsubame placed her hand on the summoning scroll, she hardly had to concentrate at all. A second later there was a puff of smoke and a figure appeared in front of them. A figure that was entirely the wrong size and shape to be a dog.
Chapter 15

Kakashi arrived ready to fight. He had chakra in his hand and chidori in his mind, and the last thing he expected was kids. Lots of kids. All jammed together in a very small space. Registering the look of shock his appearance had elicited on some of the small faces, Kakashi relaxed his stance and finger waved in as non-threatening a way as possible. The last thing he wanted was to be surrounded by screaming ankle-biters. Some of them waved back but most stared straight past him. He turned to look in that direction, only to find Iruka sitting on the floor behind him, mouth open and staring. He waved again and said, "Yo!"

"Kakashi-san?" It took a moment – yet another reason why he'd made a lousy field shinobi – but eventually Iruka seemed to collect himself. "Kakashi-san, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, just a spot of breaking and entering," Kakashi replied, easing himself to his feet. He actually took up less space like that, though he did tower over the kids. He also towered over Iruka, who was basically sitting at Kakashi's feet with his head tipped back and his mouth open. Kakashi squatted down again. "Want to give me the highlights of what's been happening?"

A blush immediately coloured Iruka's face. "Oh, yes, of course, my apologies, taichou. We've been confined to this room for over an hour so our intelligence is limited, however as far as I know there are thirty two children and five adults being held. The children range in age from five to eleven years. The adults are all of tokujo rank or above and consist of myself, Kurenai-sensei, Hiromi-sensei, Ebisu-sensei and Hisoka-san. The assailants are three in number; two males, Suigetsu - who employs water release jutsu, and Juugo, plus one female called Karin who uses chakra blades."

That was new. "She any good with them?" Last time they'd crossed paths Karin had most definitely been the back seat driver of the group.

Iruka shrugged and it was only then that Kakashi realised he hadn't moved his arms. He narrowed his eyes, shoved his hitai-ate up to uncover his sharingan, and took a good look. From shoulders to fingers, Iruka's arms were invisible. His chakra pathways had been severed. "How the hell did you summon me like that?" he asked.

"I didn't." Iruka nodded to the rest of the room. "They did."

Kakashi looked around him, turning slowly, seeing the kids as individuals for the first time. He'd been quick to dismiss them at first, preferring to rely on the only other adult present, even if it was a cheating chuunin, but a combination of Iruka's injury and the fact that the kids had managed a C rank jutsu between them, put everything in a new light. If these were to be his troops, he needed to assess them.

"Hey," he said. "Want to tell me how you did it?"

"It wasn't that difficult," the Hyuuga boy said, "We just had to work together. Yasu-kun controlled the chakra flow, I did the channelling and Tsubame-chan did the summon. Easy."

Except kids of their age shouldn't have been able to work together like that. Hell, he'd had genin aged kids who couldn't work together that well.

"It might have been easy, Hideyoshi-kun," Iruka said, "But, I for one, am very impressed. That was excellent teamwork."

It was hard to disagree. And the praise did wonders for the kids. They all glowed under Iruka's
words, their backs straightening and their fear receding. Damn it, if there was a tokujo category for teaching, Iruka would get that promotion easily.

"What else can you do?"

Apparently a wide range of things. There were several taijutsu practitioners, twins who did kenjutsu but they’d need to get their swords from the classroom before they’d be much help. One kid who the others all agreed packed one hell of a punch with earth jutsu, a fledgeling medi-nin, and the genjutsu user, who had been the one to control the chakra for the summon so he had to be pretty good. They also had a decent selection from the noble clans, and one kid who glared at him from under drawn down brows and said, "It's not that easy."

"Always used to be," Kakashi argued. "Tell you what, let's start with your chakra affinity."

"Wind," the kid snapped snippishly.

"Right, so-" Kakashi began, only to be cut-off mid sentence.

"And water."

Two elemental affinities at what age? Kakashi gave the boy a sceptical look. "And what's your name?"

"Aoki Osamu." The scowl, if anything, deepened."You won't recognise it. All my family's civilian."

Which went a huge way to explain why the kid had a chip on his shoulder the size of the hokage mountain.

"Okay, say I believe you," Kakashi said, which he wasn't certain he did but he had to be sure before he started trying to get anyone out of anywhere. "What can you do with this wind and water affinity?"

Before he had a chance to think twice, the boy was forming seals. With his sharingan still uncovered, Kakashi could see exactly where this was going. He reached out and clamped his fingers over the top of the kid's. "Since when did we have stray Snow shinobi setting up camp in Konoha?"

"I told you my family are civilian!" the kid yelled, stamping his foot. "They don't do any of this stuff, they don't know any of this stuff. I taught it to myself and when no one would believe me I went and showed the Hokage."

Kakashi raised a sceptical brow at Iruka.

"It's true. He stuck Hokage-sama to her chair in the mission room. I was there when he did it. Once she'd managed to calm her ANBU down, she offered him a place at the academy straight away. It seemed like the safest option."

Ice release. In Konoha. Even if he never reached Haku's standards, this small boy could be the first of an exceedingly important bloodline. In fact, Kakashi would lay money that there wasn't a student here who wasn't absolutely priceless in terms of genetics. And that, he could almost guarantee, had to be the reason behind this odd kidnapping attempt.

"You, Inuzuka-kun, what have they been saying?"

The kid glanced quickly at Iruka, who nodded his permission – he'd have to break them of that fast –
and said, "They were talking about the barrier jutsu outside but now they're talking about something else. I think they're in the dojo 'cos their voices are all echo-y and they keep saying that something isn't right and that someone else needs to fix it at their end."

"Are they saying who that someone else is?" Kakashi asked.

"Dunno, they only said his name once. It sounded like Sasuke."

Kakashi let out a huge silent sigh just as Iruka said, "Uchiha Sasuke?"

"The one and the same, probably. Karin, Suigetsu and Juugo are all part of Taka, the team Sasuke put together when he was hunting Killer B."

Iruka's face drained of colour. "They're all..."

"S class criminals, ex-members of Akatsuki, stark-staring bonkers. Or all of the above. True, however they are also still stuck in the middle of Konoha with no way to get out. Back-up is waiting outside, all we have to do is let them in, and the way to do that is to eliminate whoever was responsible for putting up the barrier jutsu. Probably Karin."

"All we have to do," Iruka said in a mocking tone, his gaze hard and glaring at his knees. "Two of us against the three of them, and me with no arms. What are we going to be able to do against shinobi as powerful as that?"

The kids were all staring at him and Kakashi saw a couple of lips wobble. O-oh. "Not just two of us, Iruka-sensei. Look, all your soldiers are ready to help out too." Look man, look and see what you're doing to them. They need you to stay positive. Without that they'll become tiny children again and we don't have time for that right now.

Iruka glanced up, his face still dark and empty, until he registered the children's distraught expressions and then a wide confident smile broke across his face. "Oh, silly me. I'd forgotten all about our crack-troops. Of course we have nothing to worry about."

Most of the children looked reassured. The Hyuuga, the Nara and the Ice Release kid just looked cynical. Well, you couldn't win them all. So long as they kept their opinions to themselves, everything would be fine.

"I tell you what." Iruka was still speaking. Kakashi decided to let him. "Yoshi-kun and Hana-chan, do you think you could try healing my arms again? We never really got a chance to try and even if I can't channel chakra, it'd be really great to be able to give you guys a hug."

Kakashi was pretty sure that rolling your eyes was an intrinsic part of the Hyuuga doujutsu, at least for the boys. Hinata seemed too nice to be that rude. This Hyuuga had no such reservations apparently. Still he stepped up at Iruka's suggestion and with the little red haired girl, set about working out how to fix his sensei. It took a bit of people reorganisation to make enough space for them to work and Kakashi briefly found himself sitting at right angles to Iruka with their legs overlapping as the kids filled in the corners of the small room. It was disconcerting to be so close, to feel Iruka, warm and alive, beneath him. It made him think of other things, things he shouldn't be thinking, especially not in a room full of kids. Kakashi tugged his knees up to his chin and thought small thoughts.

Iruka seemed not to notice any misbehaviour. He was listening to Hanako and Yoshi and discussing muscle construction and something called contractile tissue and how nerves worked and things that frankly Kakashi wished he'd could forget. In an attempt to distract himself, from Iruka and biology,
he got chatting to the other kids and soon discovered that Tsubame could summon many kinds of birds and that Ginshumaru, the ninken, could dance if you sang the right song and that Aburame Chikako wouldn't say a damned word but still managed to be as sarcastic as hell.

All the while they were talking, Kakashi racked his brains for some way he could take out three S class shinobi with just himself, an armless chuunin and bunch of pre-genin. Strangely nothing he'd come up with so far looked like working.

"Kakashi-san," Iruka said a little while later. "Tell me about them. The shinobi out there. Tell me who they are."

Kakashi glanced over at him, at the two kids poking and prodding at his shoulders and the lines of strain on his face. The man needed a distraction. He could do that. And it wouldn't harm to run back over what he knew about Taka either.

"The one with white hair is Hozuki Suigetsu. He's.... Did Naruto ever tell you about Zabuza, the missing-nin from Mist we ran into up in Wave Country?"

Iruka nodded and gritted his teeth as little Hanako's hands began to glow green. "You killed him, so Naruto-kun said."

"Eventually. He was originally one of the Seven Ninja Swordsman of the Mist, a crack squad of Kiri shinobi who do most of their top level missions. Suigetsu's brother was one of them and he was all set to follow when he disappeared. Rumour has it he was captured by Orochimaru, which makes sense. The Hozuki's have got some pretty interesting kekki genkai."

"Really?" Hideyoshi's head came up, his expression fascinated. "What can they do?"

Kakashi shrugged. "According to the Bingo Book, they're almost unkillable. They can turn into liquid form to avoid weapons and supersize parts of themselves like the Akimichis can. Plus they carry those huge swords around. It makes them difficult to fight head to head." Which meant he was going to be very difficult for anyone but Kakashi to take out.

"Not for you though, surely, Kakashi-san," Iruka said. "Your affinity is the perfect foil for his water based jutsu."

Before Kakashi could answer, nine hands flew up in the air, each straining for the ceiling and waving to be noticed. Iruka looked a bit bemused by the display of classroom behaviour but nodded towards the tall dark haired boy who did earth jutsu. "Misaki-kun?"

"Kakashi-san either has earth or lightening affinity, sensei," he answered proudly.

"Well done. Yes, Kakashi-san's chakra affinity is actually lightening. Can anyone tell me which affinity he should avoid fighting?"

"Wind," Osamu put in and the glare that he shot Kakashi's way suggested he'd better not try it any time soon.

"Excellent. Well we should let Kakashi-san continue with the lesson. I'm sure we'll all learn something from what he has to tell us."

Suddenly finding himself the centre of attention, Kakashi shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat. "Right, yes, erm... That's Suigetsu. The other guy, Juugo, is a bit more difficult. He seems to be able to change his body like..." This was not going to be comfortable. "Like Mizuki, only it doesn't do him the same kind of damage and he's much much stronger."
Iruka was looking pale again. Kakashi couldn't decide how much of that was his arms and how much was the information Kakashi was passing on. "But he looked so normal. I know appearances can be deceptive and that as shinobi we are trained to look underneath the underneath but some things... There were birds riding in his hair and singing to him."

"Birds, sensei?" Tsubame's face lit up with excitement. "Can I see the birds? Maybe I can show him my birds. Do you think he'd like that, sensei? Do you?"

"I... I..."

"I think that'd be a great idea," Kakashi interjected. He thought he might be having the beginnings of a plan. "How are the arms doing?"

Hanako glanced up and smiled. "Almost finished, Kashi-san. Keep distracting Iruka-sensei for us."

Kakashi raised his eyebrows and gave Iruka a questioning look. Iruka shrugged and was immediately scolded for daring to move. Kakashi moved on to Karin. "Last but not least," he said. "The most interesting thing about Karin is not her chakra scalpels." Where had she learned that technique, he wondered? From Kabuto? He'd never seemed the sharing type. "She's a high level sensor, which basically means she'll be able to see us coming, know how many of us there are, what we are, and quite possibly if we put clean underwear on this morning." The small Nara boy blushed. Kakashi magnanimously didn't mention it. "Which means that we're not going to be able to go wandering around trying to rescue the others. That would definitely get us noticed.

"It also means that they're not watching us because if they were she could tell I was in here and that you were fixing Iruka-sensei's arms. In other words, they don't think you're a threat. Which is going to turn out to be a really big mistake on their part."

Iruka was staring at him with a thoughtful expression on his face. "You have a plan. More to the point, you have a plan and you know I'm going to hate it." A particularly strong flare of healing chakra burst across his shoulder. He tensed up all over and Kakashi found he was tensing with him, recalling that odd burning-squirm of flesh healing at top speed. Then it was over.

Hanako sat back, her hands shaking from the effort. Iruka reached for her awkwardly, and tugged her into an one armed hug. "Thank you, Hana-chan," he whispered into her hair. He did the same on the other side. "And you, Yoshi-kun."

The Hyuuga boy blushed a little though he tolerated the embrace. "Not a problem, sensei. We even managed to fix some of your chakra pathways so you should be able to channel some so long as you're careful. If there's time later, we can have another go."

"Even some is better than nothing," Iruka grinned at the pair of them.

"Which is a good thing since I don't think we're going to be able to wait for later." He did have a plan. It wasn't a good plan but it was something and that was better than the nothing he'd had before. And anyway, Naruto got away with having crappy plans all the time, so why shouldn't Kakashi for a change.

"Okay, so let me hear the full horror of it," Iruka was saying.

"It's actually pretty simple, and it goes like this..."
The plan sucked. The plan sucked so badly it was going down on Iruka's list of truly sucky plans.

Squatting in the corner of the hallway ceiling outside the main dojo, Iruka breathed deeply and evenly, trying to stay calm and keep his chakra contained as he waited for the signal. It came in the form of a bird winging its way up the corridor and into the dojo. A moment later Juugo appeared, calling back over his shoulder about how he wanted to check this out. Iruka pressed himself into the corner, willing himself to invisibility. He needn't have worried. As Kakashi had promised, Juugo only had eyes for the bird that danced ahead of him. He turned the corner and the music started, a happy cheerful song about a children's game and a dancing dog. Ginshumaru would be up now, prancing on his back legs and whirling round and round, his tongue hanging out in a doggie grin, while more birds joined the first, spinning in distracting circles around Juugo's head.

The creep of the genjutsu was so subtle as to be undetectable. There was no doubt that Yasu was extremely talented. Juugo should now be trapped inside an illusion that took him out into the internal courtyard of the school building where a patch of shade and several birds waited to soothe and entertain him.

And now it Iruka's turn.

Dropping swiftly to the floor, he ploughed in through the main doors of the dojo and launched himself across the room at Karin, yelling incoherently. In that split second, when everyone's attention was on him, Kakashi would launch his attack. Iruka had no time to watch, he was too busy ducking Karin's hands as she went for him with the chakra scalpels again, but he could hear it. The deafening twitter of the chidori and the whoosh whoosh of water and sword. Then the door opened again and this time it was Ken and Emi who came barrelling in. With Karin distracted, they'd had the time to get their swords and she didn't stand a chance against them both together.

They moved like courting dragonflies. Fast and darting, in and out, blades flashing. Karin tried to defend herself but she was being pushed back further and further, out of the other door and into the corridor, away from Juugo and away from Suigetsu. The rest of the kids shot past them, pouring down the hallways towards the other classrooms and storerooms, forcing doors and breaking locks. It was working. It was really really working.

A lucky blow sneaked through Karin's defences, opening a crimson gash across her arm and, on the other side of the building, someone screamed. It was high and horrible and worse than an animal in a trap. Iruka froze. Ebisu-sensei sprinted past him and Iruka had less than a second to register that the man was without his sunglasses and that his wrists were sliced to ribbons before he was gone. The sound came again, this time followed by a bellow of rage, and Iruka took off up the corridor in pursuit of Ebisu. He skidded round the corner and what he found came as close to insanity as the night the kyuubi had crushed Konoha. He'd known that certain shinobi could become monstrous. He'd come face to face with one of Pein's bodies. He'd never realised that anything 'human' could look that grotesque.

Hanging from the ceiling at the far end of the corridor was what he presumed to be Juugo. It was massive, much much larger than Mizuki had become, with eight legs like a spider's and bony growths extruding from all over its grey slimed body. Its face had split, mouth a raw open maw lined with jagged shards of teeth, and tucked beneath its belly it held the bodies of three children; Yasu, Tsubame and Shouichi. Little Ginshumaru was caught under a foot and claws thrust cruelly through his belly, and it was him that was screaming. At the near end of the corridor, not far from where Iruka had stopped, was Ebisu, his hands flying through seals. As Iruka watched, another Ebisu
appeared and then another. Shadow clones. What could he hope to do with shadow clones? More
seals and then suddenly fire exploded up the corridor, huge gouts of flame shooting from Ebisu's
mouth towards Juugo. The monster tossed aside his prey and started down towards Ebisu, picking up
speed as he came. Ebisu-sensei went to meet him, yelling as he charged, "Help the others! I'll stop
him!".

The shadow clones had managed to catch all the kids and the pup before being destroyed by the
flames and had tossed them towards Iruka. Frantically he caught them as best he could with arms still
stiff and uncooperative. They were warm, still breathing, still alive. He felt like weeping. But there
wasn't time. Gathering them to him, he barrelled back into the dojo where he found one wall
destroyed and Kakashi battling Suigetsu through the adjacent classroom.

There was water everywhere, pools and pools of it. Iruka dodged through them, heading for the
other doors. Through them and on towards the main entrance. Ahead of him, Ken and Emi along
with Tadashi, still had Karin on the run, the kunoichi moved with terrifying speed as she retreated
back down the corridor. Behind her, the front doors suddenly exploded upwards, rock shooting up
from beneath the floor, obliterating the final hurdle between them and success. They couldn't hope to
kill Karin themselves, but they could force her to kill herself.

Less than a foot from the now visible barrier, she stopped retreating, presumably sensing the danger
from the jutsu. They'd planned for this. Little Ayumu-kun stepped forward, his hands flickering
through seals and there! Karin froze, trapped by her own shadow. Slowly she turned, took one
shuffling step and then another. One more and she would be against the barrier and it would destroy
her even as it failed. Iruka felt like cheering. They'd done it. Teachers and kids against S class
criminals and they'd come out on top.

The final step. The barrier flared and a metal chair clattered to the floor. "Kawarimi!" Iruka
bellowed, spinning around to see where she'd gone. Back towards the dojo he saw Kurenai-sensei.
"This way!" she yelled. "She went this way!"

Without another thought, Iruka sprinted after her, conscious of the kids following along behind.
Three in his arms, nine behind. Twelve little ducklings. He still had them all. Still had them safe. He
skidded into the dojo, promptly lost his footing on the wet floor and slid, slamming head-first into the
far wall. For the longest moment he couldn't move, nothing made sense, the world was distant noise
and spinning lights and then, "Sensei! Sensei!" Hands were tugging at his clothes, smacking his face.
He opened his eyes to see....

A tidal wave. No, a water dragon. And Kurenai – Karin! A henge. Damn it, he should have realised.
And Juugo, ten feet away and closing fast, a ravenous expression on his face. Iruka did the only
thing he could think of. Shoving the kids behind him, he slammed both palms to the floor and yelled,
"Sealed Encampment Barrier," ramming as much chakra into the technique as he could. Fire flooded
down his arms as chakra was forced down half-healed pathways. The flesh around them took the
brunt of the damage, burning away under the deluge. He forced himself to continue, knowing every
scrap might make a difference between failure and success. The double seal snapped into existence
and the barrier sprang into place, a blue-white shimmering dome between them and the outside
world.

And none to soon. Juugo smacked into the outside of it, sending Iruka scrabbling back across the
floor in surprise. A moment later the water dragon punched into the other side, the noise of it
deafening as it smashed apart, battering down walls and send wood and metal flying, and all around
him children were yelling and screaming, terrified beyond any semblance of courage. He reached for
them, oblivious to the pain in his arms as they threw themselves at him, clinging desperately to the
one straw of sanity in a world gone mad. He hunkered down over them as water swirled and roared
and Juugo battered on the barrier, his massive fists more like hammers than hands, thundering down again and again and again.

"It's all right, it's all right," Iruka crooned, patting and stroking and touching what he could find in the way of small backs and heads. "We're safe, safe. It's okay."

"S-Safe?" Emi-chan's snotty face lifted from his chest and she peered up at him and then beyond him to the barrier. She flinched as a particularly blood curdling yell was followed by a loud thump, and then her eyes cleared. "A barrier jutsu," she whispered. "There's another barrier jutsu." Her gaze shifted to Iruka. "You saved us."

Beneath him, the children were starting to stir. The barrier was still being attacked but, Iruka thought, first things first. "Is everyone okay?" he asked, moving away slightly to give the kids the space to sit up and wipe their faces. It wasn't as tight a squeeze as the store room had been but the dome wasn't huge, about twelve feet in diameter and not quite tall enough in the centre for Iruka to stand up.

"Hai, sensei," came the shaky chorus of replies. Shouchi, Tsubame and Yasu had all woken up, Iruka was glad to see, though Shouichi looked green and was prodding unhappily at a lump the size of goose egg on his forehead. Ginshumaru whimpered piteously from the inside of the boy's jacket where Iruka had shoved him in the panic.

"Excellent. Now then, who wants to tell me -" He never got to finish the question.

"Hey, sensei." Karin was standing there, pointing at the barrier, a snarl of anger on her face. "What the hell is that, eh?! You think you can keep us out with some kind of cheap protection jutsu?"

If that was all that it was, then no. The original had been designed to protect a team of three genin and their jounin-sensei if caught in treacherous weather. Iruka had taken the common camping jutsu and combined it with the seal he'd used to try and confine Naruto-kun. By using the seal twice to reinforce the barrier from the inside and the out, he transformed it from a simple chakra tent into an apparently powerful barrier jutsu. Until today it was purely experimental, had never existed before in anything but theoretical form, and had been the only thing he could think of that might save their lives.

Movement on far side of the room caught Iruka's eye and then the body of Hisoka-san thumped into the barrier, slid down and left a smeared trail of blood and matter in its wake. His head had been split open like an egg, and his belly gaped empty. Iruka quickly put himself between the children and the grisly sight.

It was Suigetsu who'd thrown the body. Grinning smugly at Iruka, he strutted over to stand by Karin, his massive sword still slung over his shoulder. "Hey, shithead teacher," he yelled. "Unless you wanna end up like him, drop the fucking barrier."

"Ya don't have to shout," Karin snapped. "I already tried. Sound can get through."

"Huh." Suigetsu's eyes narrowed. "Where's Tayuya when you need her."

"Dead," Juugo growled, then stood upright, the extra legs and bones all retracting into his body, his skin returning to its normal tone and texture. "Twice."

Suigetsu hummed regretfully. "She was a vicious cow but damn that whistle of hers'd be useful round about now."

Iruka watched the three of them warily, not quite trusting that he and the kids were safe. Not only that but there were people missing. Ebisu-sensei, for one. Hiromi-sensei and Kurenai-sensei and the
children who'd been with them. And most importantly, Kakashi. Suigetsu looked battered around but was obviously very much alive. On the other hand, Kakashi's body wasn't with Hisoka-san's so the chances were good that he was alive as well.

Relief rushed through Iruka like a warm tide. If Kakashi-san was alive then there was still hope.

Unfortunately with relaxation came awareness that his body was not happy with him. His arms felt as though he'd been lifting weights for twenty four hours and had forgotten to take a soldier pill. Stiff and sore and tender and aching, they hung from his shoulders like two heavy throbbing lumps. He flexed his fingers. He could still move his arms, which was an improvement on last time, but he wasn't going to be doing anything clever for a good long while.

Something heavy slammed against the dojo door, setting it rattling on its hinges. Juugo grimaced. "I really wish he'd stop. You'd think shattering all four limbs would drop enough of a hint."

Iruka winced. And he thought he was badly hurt. Was it Ebisu-sensei, he wondered?

"That's Konoha nin for you," Karin was saying. "Never know when to stop. You could try taking a 'leaf' outta their book. Hah!" Her laugh was loud and piercing.

"I'll go kill him if you like," Suigetsu volunteered. "I wouldn't mind. It's good practice." He swung his sword and the air sang as it passed.

Iruka held his breath, fearing for his colleague, until Karin barked, "Jeez, you water brained idiot, how many times do you have to be told. We're trying to take them alive."

"Which isn't much good if you can't get that fucking jutsu to work!"

"It will work. I just need time to get enough chakra back. Stop your stupid whining!"

Oh, dissent in the ranks. Could there be something here he could work with? A small hand slipped into Iruka's and he looked down to see Hanako-chan, eyes huge, her cheeks tear-stained. Her gaze seemed fixed on Hisoka-san's body. "If there's anything we can do, sensei," she said quietly. "You just have to say. We're all ready."

He glanced back to see the kids hunkered down in a semi-circle, obviously waiting for instruction. The panic from earlier was gone. He was so proud of them. "Nothing at the moment, Hana-chan," he said, bending down a little so as to keep his voice quiet. "But I'll bear it in mind. Thank you for telling me."

She nodded and drifted back to the others. Iruka turned his attention outward once more. The three members of Taka were still arguing, or at least Suigetsu and Karin were. Juugo was watching them like a dog would watch a ball, his head turning from one to the other.

And behind him, just visible through the hole where a wall used to be, was Kakashi. The second Iruka spotted him, he vanished, which had to mean he had allowed himself to be seen on purpose. Why would he do that? Because he wanted Iruka to know he was there. Because... because he wanted to attack and needed a distraction!

"Hey, hey!" Iruka yelled. "You three. I'll drop this barrier but I want a few guarantees first."

"Sensei!" one of the kids squeaked. "Don't let them in!"

He waved a hand clumsily behind him and they subsided into silence once again.
"Sure," Karin said, sauntering forwards away from the others. "We can do guarantees. What do you want?"

Iruka shifted his gaze from Karin to Suigetsu to Juugo and back again. He needed to have all their attentions on him and it was the only way he could manage it. "I want you to promise that the kids won't get hurt."

They shared a glance. Then Juugo shrugged. "We weren't planning on hurting them anyway."

"Much," Suigetsu put in with a twisted smirk. And at that second, when all three sets of eyes were trained on Iruka and the kids, Kakashi struck. On some level Iruka had always known Kakashi was an assassin - he was ex-ANBU, it went with the territory – but he'd never really thought about it. Now he didn't have time to. Lightening flashed in front of his eyes, the screaming of a thousand birds filled the air and then the barrier jutsu outside the school failed. As Iruka blinked the blue spots from his eyes, he saw the world in a series of stills. Karin crumpled in a heap against the barrier. Juugo halfway through a transformation. Suigetsu swinging his sword. He also saw Kakashi. Saw his eyes. Saw the acceptance of death in them.

"NO!" he bellowed, throwing himself against the barrier. "No, you bastard, you can't die! Fight! Fight!" It was stupid really. Kakashi was fighting, or at least running. With incredible speed, he flickered between his two attackers, dodging fists like sledgehammers and a sword like a guillotine. What was left of the dojo was getting well and truly trashed. Suddenly the final standing wall smashed inwards and Tsunade was there, fist clenched, power thrumming off her in a visible aura. Juugo bellowed and charged, transforming again as he went, gaining bulk and limbs, his arms becoming axes the size of doors.

Through it all, Iruka almost missed Karin stir. Pressed against the barrier, she started to claw at it, scraping herself upright. Blood dripped from her mouth. Her chest was a mess. Iruka could see bone through blackened skin and muscle, and yet she still lived. Still breathed, still moved. Her hands. Making seals. A jutsu. Iruka had no idea what it was going to be, but he was sure it wouldn't be good.

"Kakashi!" he yelled, banging on the barrier with the flat of his hand. "Kakashi! NOW!"

The copy nin looked over. Iruka saw his eyes widen and then he was leaping through the air towards them. He was going to land on the top of the dome but why? A vast surge of chakra, massive and directed, rushed from Karin, leaping from point to point around the room. Another barrier jutsu? No. It came again, more and more and more and then whomph! Between one heartbeat and the next the dojo vanished.
He couldn't believe it when he saw the hand seals. He'd only been a kid when Minato had decided that his bodyguards, Genma and Raido, needed to learn his Flying Thunder God technique. Strictly speaking Kakashi wasn't supposed to be there but since they must have known he was outside the Hokage tower and hadn't sent him away, Kakashi had stayed anyway, pressed to the wall and listening avidly. Those were among the few seals he'd glimpsed through the window.

Suddenly the entire attack made sense. Stuck behind the barrier they'd erected, Taka had seemed like rats in a trap. And they were, except that they were rats in a trap who were busy digging their way out. And they were planning on taking the cheese with them.

His feet hit the top of the dome just as Karin activated the jutsu. The world swirled around them and Kakashi dropped to his knees with a cry, his hand pressed over his sharingan, as agony lanced through his head. The chakra was insane. Everything and nothing at the same time, bending light and matter and reality. And his eye had tried to see it all. Tried and failed. He could feel blood on his hand, sticky and wet-warm. It dripped through his fingers and his eye screamed, like someone was stabbing it with a thousand needles. Drilling into his skull, a million threads of agony.

Then sound exploded around him. Voices yelling. Juugo, Suigetsu.

"Karin! Ka-ri-n!"
"Fuck, she's dying!"
"Help her!"
"I can't! She's not sealed!"
"Fuck! Fuck!"

And a banging below him. Thump, thump. Thump, thump, thump. Another voice, quieter, and calling his name. "Kakashi-san, are you all right? Kakashi?"

With a groan he rolled onto his back, only then realising that he'd collapsed face down over the top of the dome. Not fainted, just for the record. He blinked up at the ceiling. Which he saw with only his normal vision. His hand flew to his face and he puffed out a huff of relief. His hitai-ate was down; he hadn't destroyed the sharingan. He'd wondered for a moment there. It had certainly hurt enough.

"Kakashi?"

Iruka! Kakashi rolled over again and peered down into the dome. Iruka was hunkered down below him, hands on his knees, surrounded by worried looking kids. When he saw Kakashi was okay, he grinned broadly and the little ankle-biters all jumped around and cheered, waving their hands in the air. Kakashi had to grin back. It had probably been a stupid risk leaping after them like that but he couldn't bear the thought of letting them be taken without him.

"Everyone okay?" he asked.

"We're fine," Iruka replied. "You're bleeding." He gestured to Kakashi's face.

Kakashi touched his fingers to his hitai-ate. "I always wondered why sensei wouldn't teach me his
technique. Apparently the sharingan doesn't like it. He must have known."

"So did Orochimaru, which is why I sent the others to go and fetch the prize."

Kakashi rolled to his feet, chidori already lighting his hand as he turned to face the speaker. "Sasuke. I wondered when you were going to show up." He was back to wearing hakama and a plain white shirt. Did that mean that he'd dropped the whole 'my clan, right or wrong' kick he'd had going? Kakashi hoped so. There were only so many raving mad men bent on vengeance you could deal with in a lifetime and Kakashi was starting to feel like he paid his dues.

The last time they'd encountered each other had been at the end of the war when Naruto managed to destroy Madara, ironically as it turned out, with Sasuke's help. The subsequent fight between the two old team mates had been aborted when Tobi put his Eye of the Moon plan into action prematurely and blew himself and a goodly amount of Shimo off the map. There had been no sign of Sasuke since then and some had dared suggest he'd been killed in the explosion. Naruto hadn't thought so, but then he was Naruto. He probably wouldn't believe Sasuke was dead if you produced his cold and mouldering corpse. On the other hand, considering recent history, Kakashi conceded that he probably wouldn't believe it then either. Corpses had an unnerving tendency to get up and walk.

Behind Sasuke, and bathed in an eerie pale green light, loomed a vast dais containing a carved stone seat that bore all the hallmarks of a throne. The rest of the room faded away into patchy shadow, punctuated only by the occasional pillar ghosting out of the darkness. It was massive, empty, and stank of snake. One of Orochimaru's old hideouts. Juugo was just visible, hunched and inattentive over Karin's body. Suigetsu emerged from the shadows, sword levelled, ready to fight.

Sasuke wandered a few steps closer. "Always the hero, Kakashi."

"Comrades don't let other comrades down. You know that."

"Hn, but what if they have to choose between comrades?"

Kakashi's gaze slid momentarily from Sasuke to the children and their sensei in the dome below him. At the moment, they were safe. Whatever that barrier was that Iruka had put up, it was solid. Which meant the only one here who was vulnerable was him. And if he was caught then Iruka would have to choose between... shit. Didn't really think that one through, did we. Still, he didn't have to be alone in this. He slammed his blood covered hand to the top of the dome, only at the last moment thinking that Iruka's technique had better hold up.

"Kuchiyose no jutsu!"

The ninken bamphed into existence around him, already crouched and growling, hackles up. Thankfully the barrier didn't even fluctuate. It was pretty impressive work. And done on the fly as well. Perhaps Iruka could have passed the tokujo exam without cheating after all.

Pakkun arrived between Kakashi's feet. He squinted down at Sasuke and sighed a heavy doggie sigh. "I thought we'd seen the last of this one, boss."

"Apparently not. I want you to have a good look around, see if you can work out where we are." Kakashi paused for a second, thinking it through. "Take Uuhei with you. If I'm captured or killed, get back to Konoha as quickly as possible. Tell them everything you managed to pick up. Whatever happens don't get involved in any fighting."

"Sure thing, boss." Pakkun and Uuhei slipped down the back of the dome and slunk off into the shadows.
Which left just the other six. They were on Sasuke's home ground, he was outnumbered and out-gunned on just about every level. He shoved up the corner of his hitai-ate, winced and tugged it back down. And he had maybe one shot with the sharingan, if he was lucky.

"Now what, boss?" Urushi whined out the corner of his mouth.

"Now," Kakashi decided, "we attack. Fang Passing Fang: Hatake Style!"

He leapt, his chakra melding with Urushi's, feeling the others do the same around him. It was exhilarating, the rush of power and speed as they wove their bodies together, flying through the air. Lightening sparked, arcing from one pair to the next and then they made contact.

It had been years since he'd fallen back on his family's fighting jutsus in real combat. Sure, he trained; he owed it to the ninken to keep them fresh; but when it came to actually using them in the field, there was always another technique - the neat earth release he'd copied last week from that Iwa nin, or the latest water jutsu the Mist hunters had used when they thought he wasn't watching. Turning to his own style felt wrong, as though he was letting Obito down by not exploiting his gift to the maximum.

Now, though, it was the right move. Sasuke had never seen him fight this way, which was an immediate advantage. Plus Hatake jutsus relied mainly on earth and lightening natures, both anathema to Suigetsu's water affinity and strong enough against fire.

Suigetsu dodged the first attack, and the second. The third sent him flying and when all the ninken came together in a co-ordinated strike, Suigetsu splattered, presumably expecting to have the chance to reconstitute himself elsewhere after they'd passed by. Kakashi had been expecting it, relying on it. He needed a weapon.

"Ninken Style: Earth Mover." The ground beneath Suigetsu's watery body erupted as the ninken drilled into the stone floor. What was left of Suigetsu went with them, dragged in their wake. It probably wouldn't destroy him entirely, but Kakashi reckoned it'd take even the second coming of the demon a while to pull himself together from a mud pit twenty feet below ground.

Kubikiri bouchou came to his hand as to an old friend, which in some ways they were. They had certainly worked well putting down the Seven Swordsman during the war together. Kakashi tightened his grip on the massive hilt and flooded white chakra down through the blade. White Fang was reborn – all be it with a sword that put his father's old tanto well into the shade. He jammed it into the disturbed ground and sent a hefty discharge of lightening through it. And stay there, he thought.

Then he went after Sasuke, who retaliated with his own chidori katana. Head to head they clashed, swords colliding as they flickered between pillars, coming together again and again, only to spring apart, the better to find a more advantageous angle. Without the sharingan, Kakashi quickly found himself on the back foot. Sasuke was too fast for him to track, too unpredictable. If he managed to get clear, he would summon Sasunoo and then Kakashi would be finished. It was time to pull out the big Hatake guns.

Unleashing a water dragon in Sasuke's face, Kakashi flickered deep into the shadows on the far side of the room and began making hand seals. Tiger, ox, snake, dragon... on and on they went. Thirty-five seals for a jutsu that hadn't been used in anger for going on twenty years. Kakashi could only hope the ninken remembered how to handle it.

"Nature Transformation: Elemental Hounds." The ground shook and a moment later the six ninken burst forth, but not in the form they'd originally held. Each now embodied one elemental affinity.
Earth, fire, water, wind. Bull, his massive shoulders rock armoured, his density quadrupled to make him more flying boulder than dog. Akina and Guruko, inferno clad and breathing flame. Ghostly Shiba, a creature of pure wind, voice raised in a howl that gouged at the nerves and left them flayed. Urushi and Bisuke, part-shark, part-dragon, and moving together with all the force of a tsunami. Only lightening was missing and Kakashi joined them, releasing his own White Lightening Wolf into the pack.

And the hunt was on again. Through and around the pillars, and now Kakashi could keep up. Harried from all sides by foes who would not back-down, Sasuke had fewer options, less choices. Blades clashed, sparks flew. Lightening flashed and arced, sizzling from floor to ceiling and leaving great gashes of heat blackened stone in its wake. All of which was noisy and satisfying but it wasn't going to take Sasuke out of the picture and if Kakashi wanted to survive this, he was going to have to win. Decisively. And time was limited. The Elemental Hounds technique was excellent but it burned through chakra like wildfire and his summons would be 'hors de combat' for several days afterwards.

Since his chances were going to be slim, his strategy would have to be perfect. A simple pack hold would never work with Sasuke, neither would chidori. Maybe it was time to get back to basics. "Bunshin no jutsu." His clone dropped into the shadows, searching for the perfect spot. It had to look like absolutely nothing. There, between two pillars where the light was slightly occluded, that was where he would set his trap.

A moment later and his clone sent out a signal howl; come to me. Kakashi and the ninken changed tactics just enough to start shepherding Sasuke in the clone's direction. It waited, silent deadly, for the footfall, the fatal touch of sandal on stone. There! Sasuke landed and a chakra-charged fist burst through the floor, grabbed him by the ankle and yanked, down and down into the sand trap. Down far enough to cover his eyes, to prevent him using Amaterasu.

Kakashi slammed to a halt against a nearby pillar and threw himself at the patch of ground. The trap had worked but he wasn't finished yet. Palm flat on the surface of the sand, he channelled chakra, flooding it into the trap and then, "Sand Binding Coffin!" The sand hardened under his touch and his clone dispersed, returning to him its final memory of crushing darkness and suffocation.

Now he could relax. At least for a minute or two. Then he could go and tell Iruka to drop the barrier and they could get the kids out of here. Kakashi settled back on his heels and puffed out an exhausted breath, tugging his mask down for a moment to get some more air. Damn that had been fast and furious. In some ways, fights without S level jutsu were harder, though perhaps less likely to wipe you out of existence by accident. Facing the massed ranks of the revived jinchuuriki was never going to make Kakashi's list of favourite pastimes. Though he suspected Gai had loved it.

"Need to go, boss," Shiba whined from beside him. He looked almost translucent with fatigue.

"Yeah, go. Thank you, all of you." Kakashi looked around at his other ninken. "I was worried you might have forgotten that one."

Urushi opened his watery mouth into a big doggie grin. "No way. That's a good Hatake jutsu. Don't forget stuff like that."

Kakashi nodded, smiling back at them and they dismissed themselves. Then he hopped to his feet and wandered back to Iruka and the kids. He was less than half a dozen steps from the dome when he heard a footfall behind him. He spun, crouching, thinking it might be Juugo, and fell into scarlet and black.
Chapter 18

Sasuke-kun had grown so much! Iruka had almost not recognised him when he first walked in. He was tall and muscular and beautiful in the same way that mountain peaks and glaciers are beautiful; cold and remote and without mercy. The sad little boy Iruka remembered from the academy was entirely gone. It made a pang of regret settle in Iruka’s gut. Naruto-kun and Sakura-chan, Kiba-kun and Ino-chan, they all retained parts of the tearaway kids they had been all those years ago, and were the better for it, Iruka thought. It gave them depths in their young adulthood. Looking at Sasuke, he had the feeling that if he carved into that ice-pale flesh he would find it the same all the way through. Dead and inscribed with vengeance.

The fight was expected, especially after Kakashi summoned the ninken. That Suigetsu went down so fast was very surprising, though maybe events at the academy had been exertion enough to weaken him. Sasuke had not even attempted to interfere. He'd been more interested in Juugo, who, while Kakashi was busy burying Suigetsu, lifted Karin's body and stalked away into the shadows without even a backward glance. Iruka got the impression that Sasuke had somehow burnt a few bridges there that weren't going to be easily rebuilt. It worried him though, that Juugo was so confident in Kakashi’s defeat that he would walk away and leave Sasuke alone.

Much of the subsequent battle between Kakashi and Sasuke took place out of his line of sight, or moving too fast to really catch. He saw lightening discharge, fireballs bloom and water crash between pillars. The children gathered next to him and ooh-ed and aah-ed at the performance. It was amazing the effect knowing they were completely safe had on a child’s appreciation of violence.

And then he saw the dogs. He was familiar with Kakashi-san's ninen. Pakkun of course, but the others as well, from around the village or down at the training grounds. He knew that Kakashi sometimes kept them around for company, or so he assumed, for what other reason could there be for a heap of them to be sunbathing around him while he sat reading on a log. He knew Bisuke loved having his belly rubbed and that Bull was just a great big softy.

He’d probably think twice before making a fuss of them now.

It was, in short, spectacular. In his limited field career, Iruka had witnessed a fair number of jutsus and he didn’t think he’d ever come across one so intrinsically cool. The kids, of course, were full of questions and he found himself hunkering down and pointing out each of the ninken to explain how they embodied the very elements of their ninja world. It was like having a teaching aid come to life. Why had he never even heard of this jutsu before? If Kakashi-san had used it during any fight Naruto had witnessed, Iruka was absolutely certain he would have heard about it. If only in terms of Naruto complaining that he couldn't get his toads to do that.

When Sasuke vanished into the pit, Iruka found he was applauding along with the kids, until he started thinking about it. Sasuke had been Naruto’s team mate. The boy who’s approval meant everything to him. The one who he'd almost killed himself trying to save over the past few years. How could Iruka be happy? The answer was simple. Because with Juugo gone and the other three dead, Iruka could take his kids home. And Sasuke may have been his student once but he’d done things since he left Konoha that exempted him forever from Iruka's protection, if not from Naruto's affection.

Thus he was waiting with a smile on his face and the release command on his lips as Kakashi made his way back to them. Thus he was in the perfect position to see the flash of movement, watch Kakashi turn, to see the massive sword drop from his nerveless fingers, and see Kakashi start to collapse.
"No," Iruka whispered, as Sasuke stepped into the light, Kakashi cradled in his arms. He'd seen Sasuke trapped. This had to be an illusion. A genjutsu. He put his hands together in a dissipation. "Kai!" Nothing happened. But it did remind him of something else vitally important.

"Class!" he called out, trying to sound as calm as he could. "Into the centre, right now! I want you all sitting facing each other with your hands over your eyes. Whatever happens do NOT look at the man outside the barrier. His eyes are extremely dangerous."

"Uchiha," Yasu whispered. "The sharingan eye is the best at genjutsu ever."

"That's right," Iruka replied, watching Sasuke's feet walk towards the dome. "Well done, Yasu-kun."

"I'm glad to see you still take your teaching duties seriously, Iruka-sensei." With everything that had happened, it seemed perverse that he said Iruka's name exactly the same way as he used to in class.

Iruka swallowed nervously. When he'd faced Pein, he'd really not known what or who it was and so hadn't really had enough time to be suitably terrified. Right now he knew exactly what was standing outside the dome. "What do you want, Sasuke-kun?"

"Kun? Really? I don't merit a san yet, Iruka?"

The little dip of a bow Iruka gave him was pure instinct. "San is a term of respect between equals, Sasuke-kun, and so far I have seen nothing to make me respect you."

"Hn, well said. Though somehow I doubt you would have said it if that barrier wasn't there. I suppose there's no point in asking you to drop it?"

Iruka inclined his head again silently.

"In that case, you can have this." Kakashi fell into view, hit the floor and rolled laxly the couple of feet into the side of the dome. His eyes were closed, he was ashen pale and the end of his nose was just visible where his mask had slipped down. Iruka lurched forward as though to catch him, stopping when he realised the pointlessness of the attempt.

Sasuke spoke again. "When he wakes up, tell him I'll be back in a couple of hours for another round, unless you change your mind about dropping the barrier." The feet turned away. Iruka was about to start breathing again when there was another broadside. "Before you refuse out of hand, you might want to start thinking what you're going to do about food and water. And other necessities."

This time, he did leave. Iruka hunkered down and listened to his footsteps recede into the distance. His hands were shaking and he felt cold. Shocky. Idiot! he berated himself. Pull yourself together, man, you're supposed to be a shinobi.

"Iruka-sensei, can we look now?"

"Ah..." Iruka havered. On the one hand he'd rather the children didn't see Kakashi-san like this, but on the other, they were probably going to look anyway, so he'd be better off trying to turn it into a teaching situation. Though quite how escaped him for the moment.

"Iruka-sensei?"

"Just... Just wait a moment!" Iruka clenched his jaw and yanked hard on his ponytail. Shouting wouldn't help. Nor would lashing out at the kids because he was terrified. He tried a few deep breaths trying to put his thoughts in order. Then he caught sight of Kakashi and all his hard won calm evaporated.
"But, sensei, I really need to go." That was Tsubame-chan and it sounded urgent.

Other necessities. Twelve under twelves in a twelve by twelve space with no toilet. Iruka sighed, cradled his head in his hands and felt like crying. It was entirely possible he had reinvented hell.

By the time he had organised a makeshift toilet and encouraged all the children to take turns using it, most of Iruka's shock had worn off. There's nothing like practicalities to focus the mind. Then he had to hold Shouichi-kun's hand while Hana-chan healed Ginshumaru, followed by Shouichi holding his hand while Hana and Yoshi-kun had another go at his arms and scolded him for ripping open some of their patching. Suitably chastised, he gathered them all around him and they had a quick question and answer session with Iruka doing his best to address any issues that the kids hadn't understood. There were actually fairly few and the biggest issue – what had happened to Kakashi-san that made him fall over like that – went miraculously unasked. Finally, since it had to be getting late, and the kids had had a very stressful day, he organised them into neat rows and called it nap time. They settled down with no argument.

Exhausted himself by this point, Iruka tottered over to where Kakashi lay only to see a glazed grey eye staring up at him.

Iruka dropped to his knees, fingers pressing to the dome at the level of Kakashi's chest. "Are you all right?" he asked quietly.

The vaguely disoriented look cleared a little and a second or two later Kakashi nodded. Then he croaked, "You? Kids?"

"We're fine," Iruka replied, with a barked laugh at how ridiculous it was for Kakashi-san to be asking how he was when he looked like death warmed over. "Genjutsu?" He thought it was but if there was some other kind of injury... well, he couldn't do a thing to help, but he'd want to know.

Kakashi was nodding slowly. He looked so tired, as though he'd been out on a week long mission with no sleep.

"Bad one?"

That elicited a wince and Iruka knew enough to stop asking questions at that point. Instead he gave Kakashi a chatty run down on what he'd been up to; Masaki digging a shallow toilet pit – and wasn't it a good thing the barrier didn't kick in for a good two feet below ground. Persuading Osamu that freezing the contents was the best option, followed by bribing him to actually do it with the promise of an introduction to Naruto when they got home. The puppy. The questions the kids had asked, though he steered clear of the details of the fight. As he talked, more and more colour returned to Kakashi's face and eventually he even managed to move his hand far enough to tug his mask back up.

Finally Iruka ran out of conversation and silence descended between them. As he watched, Kakashi's eye drifted shut and he seemed to drop off to sleep. Then his whole body jerked and it flew open again. Twice more that happened until Iruka said, "We can talk some more if it would help."

"Might," Kakashi said, then he asked. "What happened to Juugo?"

Iruka told him.

"So Karin is dead. I'm surprised she managed to survive long enough to do the jutsu since I stuck a chidori right through her chest." With a grunt of effort, he rolled onto his back. "I guess those Uzimaki's are tough even without tailed beasts inside them."
"Uzimaki?"

"Hm, apparently she was picked up by Orochimaru sometime after Whirlpool was destroyed. I think that's why Tsunade kept her on a loose leash. She kept hoping she'd come round and join Konoha, find family."

"Like Naruto-kun," Iruka said a little hollowly.

Kakashi barked out a sharp laugh. "Yeah. I wonder if Sasuke knew he had the female version of Naruto on his new team?"

"Did Naruto know?" That he had clan in Konoha? That there was even an Uzumaki clan left?

"I doubt it. Why tell him? She was Akatsuki and he's the jinchurikki, they'd never have allowed them to get to know each other. Too dangerous."

Which was probably true and Iruka understood the need for secrecy, he really did, but this was Naruto-kun and the boy deserved any comfort that could be offered in the way of friends and family.

"So that was why she was staying with Yuuna-sama?"

"Partly. She was originally sent there to heal Konohamaru. I don't know if you noticed the scars on her arms. She's got this odd healing ability if her chakra's ingested through a bite. That's why Sasuke kept her around, I think. Well, that and the fact that she can sense someone coming from miles away."

Which would have made her the perfect person to spy on Konoha. Had she ever gone with Yuunasa to the academy, Iruka wondered? Had she been the one to notice his shadow clone riffling through Ebisu's office? And if Yuuna-sama's state of mind was as unstable as it appeared, had she been swayed into using her acquaintance with Iruka to drug the children? If so, Iruka's refusal to go through with the plan must have been a set back.

"I'm starting to wonder if Sasuke was the one behind Gouru's treason," Kakashi was saying. "With the sharingan he could have copied the man's handwriting with ease. The only thing I don't understand is where he could have got the blue prints and what they had to gain by setting you up at the academy. Unless -" Kakashi turned an amused eye on him. "You're not in on it, are you?"

Iruka stared at him mutely. He should tell him, confess all. The blue-prints came from Sarutobi Yuuna, the last adult member of the Sarutobi clan of Kônôhagakure. She was suborned by Akatsuki and has turned traitor. They conspired to kidnap the children and I stole the drugs which allowed them to do it. The fact that he'd done it unknowingly might save him a traitor's death but that was all the mercy he'd expect. But how exactly would confessing help their situation? All it would achieve was the destruction of what little trust Kakashi-san had in him and they couldn't afford for that to happen. It wasn't as though Iruka was planning on doing anything else treasonous.

So instead he said "Sasuke-kun told me to inform you that he would be back in a couple of hours for another round." He hurried on, terrified Kakashi would go back to the previous subject. "Kakashi-san, I don't know if I can sit here and watch him torture you to death."

Kakashi's expression hardened. "If it's a choice between that and dropping the barrier, you'd better well sit there." He grunted. "Anyway, next time he won't catch me so easily. It's a bastard of a genjutsu but I can avoid it if I have to."

"Can you really." That cool voice came from the shadows and a moment later Sasuke wandered into the light. "Well then, now's your chance to do it."
At the first sight of trouble, Kakashi was on his feet, his hand sputtering into silver-white life. His hitai-ate was up and the sharingan whirled.

Sasuke snarled at him. "Do you really think that's going to help? You are pathetic. A one-eyed freak. Leaf should have submitted to my father's wishes and had that removed, forcibly if necessary."

"It was a gift, freely given."

"No! Leaf wanted a sharingan they could control."

Kakashi shrugged. "They had one, with Itachi."

Sasuke's cry was incoherent as he attacked. Which, Iruka hoped, had been Kakashi's plan all along, otherwise goading a boy with family issues by poking at his family probably wasn't the wisest move. The katana whirled and Kakashi retaliated, chidori spitting and screaming. They engaged, sprang apart, engaged again. Iruka watched, hands pressed to the inside of the dome as behind him the children stirred at the noise.

He might have missed it, if he wasn't accustomed to teaching exactly how to avoid incoming blows. When the blade swung the next time, Kakashi deliberately dodged too slowly. Sasuke must have seen the same thing. The sword stopped less than an inch from Kakashi's neck, spun and the hilt of the katana came round to hit Kakashi smack in the nose. Had Kakashi been fit, the blow would have been the equivalent of a mosquito bite. He wasn't. He was still shaking off the effects of what Iruka suspected was an extremely nasty genjutsu. He staggered back, blinking and blinded for a crucial moment. Sasuke grabbed at him by the hair, clamped a hand around his chin and activated his sharigan. Kakashi dropped with the same alacrity as the first time.

Iruka thumped his fist on the dome in impotent frustration. Behind him one of the kids whimpered. He clenched his teeth and kept his eyes on the ground as Sasuke came and dropped Kakashi on the ground next to him. "Do we have to do this again?"

Head bowed, Iruka kept his silence.

"In that case, I'll see you all in another few hours."

Once he was gone, the children crept forwards, the smaller ones fitting themselves under Iruka's arms and clinging desperately. Iruka buried his nose in Tsubame's nest of unruly blonde hair, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, willing himself to find the strength from somewhere. Eventually he said, "Who can tell me one of the most effective strategies for getting a prisoner to break."

What followed was the kind of detailed discussion of torture and interrogation strategies that Iruka usually reserved for his final year students. Pain inflicted on the prisoner themselves was an easy concept for them to grasp. What child hadn't been subject to a malicious tickle attack or been held down and given a Chinese burn by an older sibling. Suffering inflicted at one remove was more difficult. Iruka had to take it to concrete examples; parents, friends, pets; for the kids to understand what he meant. By the time he finished talking, his mouth was dry and his throat was getting sore. Still, he knew he was getting through when Hana-chan burst into tears and wailed, "But that's mean, Iruka-sensei!"

Off to one side, Yoshi-kun grunted and said, "A true shinobi doesn't show emotions."

"Rule twenty-five. Thank you, Yoshi-kun," Iruka said with a nod. "And this is the exact type of situation that rule was designed for. Sasuke is trying to make me take down the barrier by hurting Kakashi-san." Hana clutched at his jacket more tightly. He stroked her back. "He might also try to
make friends with us or say that nothing will happen if we come out. He's lying. Also we have no food and water in here. We're all going to get very hungry and thirsty."

"Hungry now," Ayumu-kun grumbled rubbing at his belly.

Iruka could only be grateful the Akimichis hadn't had a kid in the new academy. Their calorie needs would bring this to crisis point far sooner. "I know you are. Everyone is and as we all get hungrier it will get easier and easier to think that what Sasuke is saying is the truth and that I'm just being unfair not letting you out. It's very important that you don't let him influence you like that."

"I won't, Iruka-sensei," Tadashi-kun stated, his jaw all stuck out in aggressive bravado. "That man's a traitor and my chichi says that all traitors are scum and deserve to die."

That would be because his own brother turned traitor, Iruka thought, and your father has spent half his life trying to live it down. And really that type of dogmatic attitude was not one he generally wanted to encourage. Right now, though, it would prove useful. "Well, they certainly shouldn't be listened to or believed."

"Because he's a traitor."

"He is. Now, I know that Hokage-sama will send someone to rescue us." He had to believe that, otherwise letting Kakashi suffer was pointless. "All we have to do is stick to the rules until then. That will be our mission."

"Rule number four," a croak came from outside. "A shinobi always puts the mission first."

"Kakashi-san!" Iruka shed the children, who peeled off him like autumn leaves, reluctant to let go but unable to stay. As far as Iruka was concerned, if they used physical distance to protect themselves emotionally then that was okay. He was going to have enough on his plate in the coming days without having to deal with children traumatised by watching a new friend die.

"How long?" Kakashi asked when Iruka came close.

Iruka thought back through conversation and heartbeats. "Less than an hour. Not as long as last time."

"Hmm." Kakashi's gaze drifted again, turning inward. He looked truly awful this time. His skin corpse-grey and lines had carved themselves into the skin around his visible eye. He was shivering. As Iruka watched, he came back with a jerk and a gasp. "Damn it!"

"Do you want me to talk to you again?"

Kakashi blinked slowly. "No supplies."

Logistics. He could talk logistics. "No, which is going to start being a problem soon-"

"Shoulda packed some."

A niggle of irritation prickled Iruka's nerves. "I'm sorry, but there wasn't an opportunity. Next time I get kidnapped by a bunch of S class lunatics, I'll be sure to grab survival rations for an unknown number of people."

Kakashi smirked and, though it obviously cost him some effort, tucked a hand up under his head. He was lying on his side and that simple action turned him from victim to chatty neighbour.
Iruka glared at him, lured in by the pose. "You did that on purpose. Just to get a rise."

"Poking you... is fun."

The blush that flooded Iruka's face threatened to make his head spin. Was that innuendo? Was Kakashi-san flirting with him? He knew danger sometimes made people horny, hell he'd had enough mission sex himself to know the truth of that, but flirting with him now, in the face of certain torture and almost certain death. It seemed a bit obtuse.

"Iruka...?" The question, whatever it was, lingered unasked on Kakashi's lips. They stared at each other through the dome and, for Iruka, it was like seeing this man for the first time. Not physically. He'd always known Kakashi was attractive, or at least probably was under the excessively modest clothing he wore. It was the personality that was new. The few times they'd spoken before all this blew up, Kakashi-san had been all business. He hadn't been cruel or rude – except during their run-in before the chuunin exams, and even Iruka would now admit that he'd been in the wrong there. In fact Kakashi had sometimes been extremely helpful. It was just that he was all shinobi. All surface and no depth. He reflected everything. There was no looking underneath his underneath because he didn't appear to have one. No chink ever appeared in that perfect ninja armour.

Compared to Iruka, whose armour was so full of holes it was virtually non-existent, Kakashi-san had seemed like the personification of an ANBU mask. Even the Icha Icha added to the effect. It deflected attention away from him as a man. He became a cypher; the pervert, the copy-nin, the heir apparent. Not a person at all. A figure whose body may be lusted after but whose soul, whose self, was forever beyond reach.

Discovering this phantom might be a person, and one who might find Iruka something other than an annoying cheating failure of a shinobi, reduced Iruka to furious crimson blushes. In a feat of self-control that he doubted he could duplicate, Iruka dragged his eyes away from Kakashi-san's face and fished desperately around for a change of a subject.

"That jutsu," he blurted, knowing he was breaking a thousand unwritten rules by asking. "I've never seen it before. What was it?"
Chapter 19

Kakashi sighed, rolled over on his back and crossed his arms under his head. He felt weaker than a newborn pup and about as courageous. But Iruka deserved something. It couldn't be pleasant having to watch as Sasuke took him down again and again. And apparently annoying him wasn't going to work for any length of time. "It's a Hatake jutsu. My father taught it to me before he left for his final mission."

"I didn't know your family had any jutsus, just the white chakra."

Kakashi shrugged. "Sandaiime didn't know I knew it. He assumed they all died with my father and I let him think that." They almost had. If Inukira-sennin hadn't insisted that Kakashi review what he knew before renewing the summoning contract in his own name, they might have gone forever. He'd hated the Dog Sage for that. It was a point in his life when he hadn't wanted anything that reminded him of his father and his disgrace. If he hadn't needed his ninken so badly he would have walked away. "Then I got the sharingan and they seemed irrelevant." Or ungrateful. Something. Looking back, Kakashi wasn't sure of his own motivations.

"Oh." Silence fell between them and then Iruka said, "When we get back to Konoha, would you demonstrate it for the academy – not the hand seals, obviously," he laughed a short uncomfortable laugh and rubbed at his scar, blushing again. "It's just the dogs, they'd be such a wonderful teaching tool. If you framed the lesson correctly it would bring together several different subject areas from the first year syllabus alone."

A teaching tool. Here Iruka was, in mortal danger, probably destined to die of starvation and thirst along with his twelve charges, and what he wanted to talk about was teaching aids and lesson plans. Having been a jounin-sensei himself, if not a very good one, Kakashi knew that the first instinct of most shinobi in a dangerous situation was to focus on the problem to the exclusion of all else. Iruka saw everything in terms of how he could use it to impart a lesson. Not an attitude you wanted in the field necessarily, but one that was absolutely vital for the next generation of Konoha ninjas.

Kakashi decided on the spot that if they did survive this he was going to demand that a new category of tokujo was created. The ability to teach, at least the way Iruka approached it, was enough of a specialization in itself to merit one, Kakashi was sure.

"I'll think about it," he said, non-committally. He'd probably wander along to the academy one day and let Iruka play show and tell with the ninken, any more than that was a no-no. It didn't do to volunteer for things in Kakashi's experience.

Silence fell between them again and Kakashi found his mind wandering. Sasuke's voice echoed in his head, mocking and smug when Kakashi had called him out for copying his brother's genjutsu and told him that all he had to do was survive since it would send Sasuke blind if he used it again.

"I'm not you," he'd gloated. "This isn't some cheap copy. This is Itachi's Tsukuyomi, part of his eyes that are now my eyes. The Eternal Mangekyou Sharingan." He'd bent closer and driven the blade hard through Kakashi's gut. "I can use this as many times as I need."

"Uh!" Kakashi jerked awake with a grunt, his heart racing in his chest. For a second he wasn't sure where he was and his body shook with remembered pain. Then Iruka's voice said, "Kakashi-san, are you all right?"

"Yeah, um..." Kakashi racked his brain for a conversation starter. "You got a girlfriend?" And where
had that come from? Icha Icha Paradise: page 230, paragraph 5, his memory helpfully supplied. There were definite disadvantages to reading with his sharingan open.

"Oh, erm... No, not at the moment." The blush was back, from hairline to collar and probably below, though Kakashi wasn't thinking about that. It was different from the way he'd blushed when asking about the jutsu. This was much more personal.

"Boyfriend?" Kakashi continued, following the script Icha Icha had inscribed on his memory.

The blush intensified and Iruka shook his head.

The next line stuck in his teeth. He forced it out anyway, trying to sound casual. "You want to go out some time?" And wow that really was some blush, Kakashi noted with a level of amusement,

A nod, and also a grin. No, a snicker, followed by a chuckle.

Kakashi folded his arms across his chest and tried to look put upon. "See if I ask you out again if all you're going to do is laugh at me."

"I'm sorry," Iruka managed through what was now fully fledged guffaws. It was so loud it was attracting the attention of the kids. Kakashi glared at them over Iruka's shoulder and they gathered together in a little gossipy huddle. "It's- it's just that here we are, about to die and you- you chose right now to ask me out!"

Which was true. The chances of them actually making it back to Konoha were small, so inevitably were the chances of them making the date. Was that why he'd chosen now to ask? Because he didn't have to worry about it actually happening?

"Anyone would think you ha-have commitment issues!"

Iruka grinned at him, bright-eyed and flushed from laughing and Kakashi thought, if I have, then I'm an idiot because only an idiot would hesitate in committing to you.

It was the last time they laughed for a while. Sasuke returned soon afterwards, bringing Juugo with him and, rather than the Tsukuyomi, they used a knife. When they abandoned their efforts, they left Kakashi shirtless and bleeding, hog-tied with wire, and jammed against the outside of the dome. Kakashi watched in silence as Iruka did his best to comfort the children even as tears spilled down his cheeks.

In his more lucid moments, Kakashi realised that Sasuke had to be getting desperate. Staying here would never have been part of the original plan since the first place anyone in Konoha was going to look for Taka was Orochimaru's old haunts. They must have been planning to move on as soon as the children arrived until Iruka had neatly foiled them. Now they could either stay, with the risk of getting caught increasing by the hour, or they could leave without their prize. Kakashi was bearing the brunt of their frustration and indecision. They would undoubtedly kill him before they left, but before they decided to leave, they couldn't actually kill him.

This was brought home rather forcefully when Juugo pointed out that Kakashi had to be getting dehydrated, what with all the bleeding he was doing. The next thing Kakashi knew, he was being force-fed water from a canteen. They even fed him, if you could call ground up rat bars mixed into a paste food. Kakashi had a feeling that Iruka would. And not just him. All the dome's inhabitants had taken to watching avidly when Kakashi got fed and watered. It made him feel awful, as he mentioned to Iruka when he woke from yet another go round with the tsukuyomi. Those were the times he was given sustenance. Privately Kakashi thought it was because he was less likely to puke
from that than from blades and brands.

Iruka was a gentleman about all of it. He brushed off Kakashi's apologies, never mentioned his occasional failures of stoicism, didn't stare at his face, or anything else, when they took his mask and his pants one day and left him naked in front of the children. Through it all, Iruka held it together, held the kids together, and by doing so, held Kakashi together. His unwavering presence on the other side of the barrier was what Kakashi used to stay anchored to reality. It was Iruka's voice that dragged him back from the clinging remnants of the genjutsu, and Iruka's silent unflinching witness that allowed him to face the knives without breaking.

If Kakashi had ever doubted that Iruka was not field material, he regretted it now. He couldn't think of anyone he would rather have at his back.
Chapter 20

The kids might be ninjas and thus more resilient than your average civilian child, but hunger and thirst were still becoming a serious issue. They weren't sleeping properly, and unlike the first few days when they had amused themselves by playing games and exercising, now they sat around listlessly, not even talking. Iruka couldn't blame them. He didn't want to talk either. His lips were dry and cracked, and his throat was sore. When he forced himself to speak for Kakashi's sake, his voice was hoarse and croaky.

Sasuke had really hit on a good form of torture giving Kakashi food and drink alongside making him bleed and weep. Iruka couldn't decide for sure whether he mightn't rather be out there in Kakashi's place. At least Kakashi got to wet his mouth from time to time. Sasuke had even left a canteen of water and an unwrapped ration bar in full view next to the dome. The temptation to just drop the barrier and grab it was overwhelming.

That morning things took a turn for the worse. Iruka had woken to a blazing row going on between Shouichi and Osamu about whether ninken should be sacrificed for the greater good. The other kids had taken sides, with the smaller girls reduced to dry racking sobs at the idea of eating the puppy. What they needed was a way of getting supplies through the barrier because if rescue didn't arrive soon, all they were going to find were bodies. Possibly half-eaten ones if Osamu-kun got his way.

Sitting with his back to the dome waiting for Kakashi to wake up from the latest genjutsu, Iruka methodically worked through the seal and jutsu combination he'd designed trying to find some way of incorporating supplies or allowing their importation without creating a flaw that could be exploited by the enemy. He had realised, a little belatedly, that his perfect protection was not perfect at all. They were like fireflies sealed in a thoughtless child's jar, simultaneously safe and doomed.

Could a summons be built into the structure somehow? Iruka closed his eyes and rested his head on his knees, imagining the seal. Could an extra layer be built in? He thought about the summoning scroll Kakashi had given him, the one that now, frustratingly enough, was back in Kakashi's flak jacket. If he had that, he could summon one of the ninken and instruct them to bring supplies. Or more to the point he could get Tsubame to summon them.

Tsubame. Summon.

Iruka opened his eyes, stared at his knees for a second and groaned. He was so so stupid. Really. He should be demoted to pre-genin for missing this one. Then he called out, "Tsubame-chan. How many birds you can summon?"

An hour later when Kakashi stirred, Iruka was able to reassure him that they were all fine and, for once, actually mean it. "It's light rations," he told him. "Fruit and seeds only, the baskets are too small for anything bulky, but it's food. I thought we were going to have to go without water until Ayumu-kun, of all people, came up with the idea of using moss. Apparently the Yamanakas use it to keep their flowers wet so he thought it might work for us. It took a bit of trial and error but the birds made some new moss-lined baskets eventually. They only hold about a sake cup's worth of water but it's enough to keep us alive."

He bit his lip and stared through the barrier. Kakashi's normal eye was open but unfocussed and he didn't seem to be listening. "Kakashi?" he whispered, pressing his fingertips to the barrier. Kakashi's lips moved though no sound emerged. Iruka thought he might have been saying his name, though that was probably just wishful thinking on his part. He'd been grateful for Kakashi's playful offer of a date, though in retrospect he could see it for what it was. A way of lightening the mood and creating
a distraction for a comrade in distress. When they got home he'd be sure to thank Kakashi properly for his consideration.

If they got home.

"Iruka-sensei, what's that?"

Iruka dragged his attention away from Kakashi and looked over to where Ken-kun was pointing. Over near the dais a puddle was forming. Iruka frowned and knee walked over to the other side of the dome – that was another thing he needed to change about the design. The roof needed to be higher. What was fine for a tent did not work over an extended period of time.

The wet patch was growing, spilling out from under the carved stone chair. As Iruka watched, it gained definition and began to rise into the air. He realised with suddenly dawning horror what, or who, it was.

"Suigetsu!"

Sure enough the ex-Mist nin coalesced out of the water. He looked odd, contaminated. His skin was covered in mottled black markings like rot or mould. His hair was clumpy and he was half-bald. None of him looked properly formed, his legs not even separated and still merged with the puddle on the floor. His eyes went incandescent with raging insanity when they caught sight of Kakashi. A grin that revealed greenish gums and missing teeth spread across his face and he screeched, "I'm fucking having you!" His crippled fingers forced their way through seals and the puddles around him sprang into the air forming themselves into multiple long needles all aimed at Kakashi, who lay bound and helpless on the ground.

Iruka threw himself at the barrier bellowing, "No!" as loudly as he possibly could. It wouldn't stop the attack but it might alert Sasuke, and though death at Sasuke's hands was probable, those water senbon were a certainty. Behind him the kids were yelling as well and thumping on the dome as though sound alone could stop the inevitable.

There was a moment's stillness then with a cry of triumph, Suigetsu finished, threw his hands, palm flat, out in front of him, and screamed, "Thousand Needles of Death, you shithead bastard!"

They shot across the room as though launched from an hwach'a. A flicker flashed through the air and there was Sasuke, the needles thudding into his body rather than Kakashi's. But not all of them. He'd been fast, but not fast enough. Many of the needles had got through, clusters striking at Kakashi's neck, chest and belly. Iruka couldn't look, nor could he look away. It was true horror. Kakashi had hardly moved when the water senbon hit, still trapped in the lingering remains of the genjutsu. He had died like a butchered animal, hog-tied and unconscious, without having the chance to fight back.

Suigetsu didn't fair much better. When Sasuke saw what he'd done, his face set like stone. With a single gesture he sent a spear of lightening across the room. It slammed into Suigetsu's chest and he dangled there, mouth open, panting in obvious agony. "What the hell?" he managed.

"You killed him," Sasuke replied.

"For fucking sure, I did. I've been stuck in that slime pit of a floor for fucking days. One of his dogs pissed in me! I wanna wake the fucker up and kill him all over again!"

The lightening spear split into five separate parts and began to slice through Suigetsu's torso. He threw his head back and screamed. Sasuke watched, unmoved until Suigetsu dropped in pieces to the floor. Then he stalked over to Kakashi's body, touched two fingers briefly to his neck and stood up
with a grimace.

"Iruka-sensei, I am asking for the final time. Please drop the barrier and let me have the children. If you do not comply I will be forced to destroy the barrier and possibly all of you in the process. I will not be defeated in this."

Iruka shook his head, keeping his eyes on the floor, his mind firmly on the mission. "You know my answer, Sasuke-kun. I am a shinobi of Konohagakure. I will not let my comrades down."

"So be it."

Flames burst to life above Iruka's head. He ducked, wondering for a moment what Sasuke could possible be playing at; fire wouldn't destroy this barrier. Then he saw the colour of the flames.

"Amaterasu," Sasuke intoned. "The fire that can never be extinguished. It will burn through anything, even a seal. When it does, your barrier will fail and the fire will consume you."

Iruka stared at the flames stupidly. He'd heard of Amaterasu, in hushed whispers and as part of legend. The Raikage had lost his left arm to it, so it was said. He'd sliced it off himself rather than let the flames spread to the rest of his body.

He was going to die.

More to the point, he and the kids were going to die. If it was just himself, he might let it happen. Frankly he was exhausted, fed up with fighting and had little to go home to. His career was finished and with it, his life. For him, dying would be easier. But not the kids. He couldn't let the kids die. They stood around him, staring at the roof of the dome, most as uncomprehending as he had been. Hideyoshi-kun looked scared which probably meant he knew what it was and what it could do.

Iruka thought through his options. He couldn't put the fire out. He couldn't stop it from burning through the barrier. He could, possibly, create another barrier inside the first but that would simply burn as well. Once the seal was destroyed, the barrier would fall and the fire would drop onto him and the kids.

The Raikage had cut off his own arm. That suggested there was time. If he could cover the kids with his own body, if he could make himself the highest point, then Amaterasu would take him, giving the children time to escape. Okay, they'd be escaping straight into Sasuke's hands but that put them back into the realm of possible death versus probable.

"Sasuke-kun," he said. "Why do you want these kids so badly? At first I thought it was as hostages. Now, I'm not so sure."

A sigh came from Sasuke's direction. Iruka glanced up far enough to see his chest, not daring to look further. "Do you know my brother's greatest dream?" Iruka shook his head. "Peace. It seems an odd dream for a shinobi but that was all he wanted. Everything, his entire life, was a search for the end to conflict. When he helped me destroy Madara, he asked me for a parting gift. He would not try and dissuade me from destroying Konoha, my soul desired that too much, but, he said, no man should have only destruction as his dream. He should also aspire to create. He asked me then to build a new village, one populated by those who hold no love of violence. A refuge from the shinobi world defended by warriors strong enough to dissuade the mightiest of enemies.

"Iruka-sensei. Your children will not be harmed. They are as precious to me as they are to you. With them I can start a new Hidden Village, one that embraces the peace my brother longed for."

The tragedy of it was, he couldn't see why what he had done was so wrong. Iruka felt like weeping.
Such a noble cause brought low by total emotional nescience. "These children have families, Sasuke-kun. Families who will miss them if you don't let them go home." Hana-chan clung to his arm and buried her head in his shoulder.

"I know this! Don't talk to me as if I don't know!" Sasuke snapped. "Their families value them. They will become excellent shinobi one day and bring more power to Konoha. Of course they miss them."

"No! And if that is all you think it is then you are missing the point." Forgetting who he was speaking to in his annoyance, Iruka glared at the boy who he knew had sat through this lecture a hundred times. Well, he was going to sit through it again and this time Iruka was going to bang it into his thick skull. "Konoha is not built on value or power. Without love to bind us, we would be nothing but disparate clans brought together by the need to survive.

"Nothing that transient can last. It will turn on itself, consume itself. Each clan will feel it should be the most powerful, that it should control the village. Only love allows us to see beyond power to the people underneath. Love lets us value the person for who they are, not what they are and what they can do for us. It is the keystone. If you try to build a village without love, it will fail. And if you try to use stolen lives as your foundation, it will sink without trace.

"Sasuke-kun, you have stolen these children from families who love them." He spoke the last two words slowly, trying to share the importance of what he was saying.

For a moment he thought he'd got through, then a movement caught Sasuke's attention and he spun towards it. Kakashi was levering himself to his feet, the wire that had bound him lay in pieces on the ground, a puff of smoke the only evidence of a departing summons.

"You should listen to him, Sasuke," Kakashi coughed. He was frighteningly pale, and as skinny as a lathe without his clothes. His hair looked like something that had died and come back to haunt him, clinging to the side of his face and down his neck. Blood reddened his lips and dripped down his chin onto his chest that was covered in open wounds. And Iruka had never seen anything so beautiful in his life. "I know about Itachi. I know what Konoha did and I know you don't believe that anything good can come out of that village but I promise you it will never happen again."

"Again!" Sasuke's face twisted. "What should I care for again! Will remorse bring back my brother and my parents? Will regret return my clan to me? You have no idea what I lost, what the Leaf took from me. I destroyed Danzo and I will destroy the rest of it. I will slaughter every living being within it's walls. And I will create a new village on its bones."

It was hopeless. The boy was obviously beyond being reasoned with, but Iruka had to try one more time. "Sasuke, please, listen-"
Chapter 21

A deafening crack sounded above them. Iruka and Sasuke both looked up and Kakashi struck. The chidori was pathetic, hardly more than fist sized but it did what it was supposed to. Instinctively Sasuke leapt, away from him and away from the burning dome. Kakashi pursued him and a second later, the ceiling caved in. Knowing the plan in advance helped; Pakkun was nothing if not timely. Kakashi had enough warning to slam an earth wall over himself. Sasuke wasn't so lucky. When Kakashi's wall came down, the place where Sasuke had been standing was feet deep in rock and stone and earth.

From behind him Kakashi heard the familiar sounds of Konoha's front-line shinobi in the field. The quick exchange of sitreps, the clang of equipment, the tread of feet. Tsunade must have sent a small army. He kept his back to them. Someone had to watch for Sasuke, he told himself, though he knew it stemmed mainly from not wanting them to see him this way. It wasn't the nakedness or the injuries, nor really the lack of mask though that was more uncomfortable than having his bits swinging in the wind. It was the wetness on his cheeks and the burning in his eyes. Rule twenty-five, he thought to himself. Rule twenty-five. Keep it in check.

A familiar chakra presence stepped up behind him. The reassuring weight of a flak jacket settled over his shoulders, and a pair of pants, a mask and hitai-ate were pressed into his hand. Not a word was said. Kakashi covered himself gratefully. Gai was possibly the best friend any man could have.

"It's failing!" Shizune's voice. Kakashi swung round. The dome – so small, so vulnerable there in the bright daylight – now burned ferociously and all around it crept the black flames, now consuming the detritus that had fallen when they'd brought down the roof. Amaterasu was spreading. Through the flames, Kakashi could see Iruka and the kids, hunkered down in the centre of the dome, Iruka arching over them as though the meagre protection of his body could save them from the fire.

"Five, four..." Shizune started her countdown, fingers forming the seal of confrontation as she focussed on the dome. "Two, one!"

If failed in total silence. Between eye blinks, the barrier simply ceased to be. Flames tumbled inward, straight onto the children, but Gai was faster. His cloak covered everything Iruka's body didn't, flaring and burning as the fire caught. He swung it off and tossed it away onto one of the already smouldering heaps of rubble. Iruka was stripping off his flak jacket seemingly unaware that the flames were in his hair, crawling up the end of his pony tail. Gai leaned over to him and sliced it clean off, directing the burning strands away from anything they might touch.

Kakashi stood and watched it all in a kind of dazed numbness, completely unable to do a thing to help. He felt like a piece of glass spun so fine that the smallest breath of wind would splinter him into nothingness. It was probably the remains of the genjutsu. Or blood loss. Shock, maybe. Chakra exhaustion, dehydration.

The earth pile beside him gave an ominous groan and shifted. As Kakashi watched, a massive construct made entirely from glowing violet chakra emerged, its massive form shouldering aside the stone and shedding small rocks and mud; Susanoo. The boy encased within had lost all semblance of sanity. His smile was wide and manic. His eyes were entirely sharingan with not a scrap of white remaining. From a distance it would look eerily similar to the Rinnegan. Kakashi shuddered. He'd died once to that and didn't plan on having it happen again.

If he was lucky, he could hit Sasuke with a Kamui before he'd even registered Kakashi was still there. He lifted his hitai-ate and opened the sharingan. His knees buckled, dropping him to hands and
knees. Susanoo turned towards him, bow raised, a black flaming arrow already cocked. Damn it! All he'd succeeded in doing was attracting Sasuke's attention. Kakashi stared down the barrel of death and knew he was doomed. From this distance, evasion or rescue both were equally impossible.

"Die, Konoha!" Sasuke screeched and the arrow flew. At the last second Kakashi closed his eye, unwilling to have that hellish vision his final sight of life. Instead he imagined Iruka, his blush and the way he laughed and the way he burned when he got angry and the passion he had for everything and for everyone. If Obito had lived, he and Iruka would have got on like the proverbial burning house.

The arrow thudded into something - and it wasn't him. Hands grabbed his shoulders and when Kakashi opened his eye, it was to look straight into Naruto's agonised face. The arrow pierced his chest from back to front, black fire already eating into his torso around the massive wound. They stared at each other, Kakashi speechless, Naruto panting loudly. This was not the way it was supposed to be. The older generation died for the younger, not the other way around. Naruto should not be sacrificing himself for Kakashi.

Then, "ARRRGHHH!!" Naruto's arms flexed, he picked Kakashi bodily off the ground and threw him. As Kakashi flew he saw Naruto vanish in a puff of chakra smoke. Shadow clone. Of course it was a shadow clone.

He landed with a thump against a pile of stone and lay winded as the real Naruto stepped out of the shadows, Karuma's chakra flaming to gold around him. He was blinding, like the sun itself had taken on human form. Sasuke shrieked something that Naruto answered with quiet calm. Then someone stepped into Kakashi's eye-line.

"Kakashi-sensei," Shino said, "you must come with me. That is because in four more seconds Amaterasu will reach the space where we are standing and begin to consume us."

"Say no more," Kakashi replied and carefully took the offered hand. As Shino dragged him to his feet, he saw that Naruto and Sasuke had already engaged and were bringing down more of the roof as they exchanged blows. Kakashi turned away and grabbed onto Shino's shoulders. It was Naruto's fight now. Truly, it always had been. He'd denied himself the right when he'd failed Sasuke the first time.

With Kakashi clinging to his back, Shino flickered to the only place in the room not immediately threatened by the flames, the centre of the space where the dome had been. Gai was still there, as was Iruka, though they were down to only three kids. Since Kakashi doubted Iruka would have let them burn, they must have done something with them.

The answer came soon enough. Gai picked up a happily squealing child – the Nara, Kakashi thought - yelled, "Dynamic exit!" and launched the kid into the air. Far above them Gamabunta sat at the edge of the hole and, as the boy came into range, his tongue flicked out, plucked him gently from the air, and placed him down carefully next to his classmates already safely in the daylight.

The other two children followed and then Gai turned to Kakashi. "My Eternal Rival?" he asked, holding out his hands like a groom offering a leg up onto a horse.

Kakashi looked at him askance. "Thanks, but no. I'll make my own way out," he said.

"How? Climb the walls? With the amount of chakra you've got left, you'll be lucky to stand up on your own." Iruka's hair-tie was gone along with his pony-tail and his new short cut fell unevenly around his face in a way that made him look younger and as sexy as hell, especially when he was glaring at Kakashi in that heated way.
"I'll get out the same way as you, sensei," Kakashi quipped back.

A truly remarkable grin spread across Iruka's face. "In that case..." The evil little shit turned to Gai and said, "Kakashi-san has graciously allowed me to go first, Gai-sensei. Please make sure he follows promptly."

"Upon my honor, Iruka-sensei," Gai replied with a bow, his knowing gaze darting to Kakashi's for a second before he offered Iruka his hands. Iruka put his foot between them, placed his hands on Gai's shoulders, took a breath and then nodded. Gai launched him into the air. Kakashi watched him sail high and higher, and then Gamabunta had him. And he was safe.

Kakashi felt his knees give out again. He sank to the floor hearing Gai yelling and Shino's calm replies. Then everything went black.
Chapter 22

"...I, of course, take full responsibility. Yuuna-sama is obviously not at all well. Considering the circumstances, I will remove my personal property from the academy as soon as Shizune-san discharges me and present myself to Ibiki for interrogation."

"No."

"..."

"You won't do anything. The political fall-out from this would be a disaster, therefore nothing happened. If nothing happened, there is nothing to resign for and nothing to prosecute. Or anything to speak of. Do I make myself clear."

Silence, then. "Hai, Hokage-sama."

"Good. You can open your eyes now, brat. I'm leaving."

Footsteps. Kakashi waited until they'd passed out of earshot before opening his eyes. Iruka was standing by the bed, still staring at the door. Apart from being a bit skinnier and more drawn than usual, he seemed fine. Someone had trimmed his impromptu hair cut so it was even on both sides and the result was even sexier than before. Right now though, he looked kind of shell-shocked.

After a moment he seemed to pull himself together, shook his head in what could be disbelief and sat down. Kakashi waved at him. Iruka immediately bounced back to his feet with a concerned smile. "Oh, my apologies, I didn't realise you were awake." He then performed a very obviously rehearsed little bow and said, "Anno, Kakashi-san, I hope I'm not intruding, but I wanted to offer my thanks for all your help during recent events, and to tell you that I understand that any offers were made purely in the spirit of camaraderie and that no expectations remain on my part." He stood there staring at the blanket looking like someone had just handed him ten million ryo and told him he couldn't spend it.

Kakashi decided he wasn't touching that lot with a ten foot pole. He tried to change the subject, discovered his vocal chords had gone on strike and gestured hopefully at the jug next to the bed. Iruka immediately sprang to his aid and, after being helped to sit up and take a few sips water, Kakashi tried again. "How's Naruto?"

Iruka smiled, though Kakashi could tell his heart wasn't in it. "He lost Sasuke out towards the Ame border and Hokage-sama made him come home. He's disappointed though he is declaring to any who will listen that Sasuke is still redeemable and he will absolutely and definitely bring him home next time."

"Hm." Typically Naruto, though maybe he wasn't wrong. Homicidal plots aside, something about Sasuke seemed to have changed. "The kids?"

"All fine, just tired, dehydrated and hungry. Shizune-san says she'll discharge them tomorrow."

"And you?"

"I'm fine also, thank you for asking."

The conversation was stilted and awkward. Iruka had reverted to formality and Kakashi again felt like he was picking his way through a minefield of meanings every time he spoke. It was almost enough to make him wish they were back at Taka's mercy. At least then they'd seemed to
Maybe he should deal with at least one of the elephants in the room. "Iruka," he said just as Iruka said, "Kakashi-san." In the round of apologies that followed, Kakashi managed to persuade Iruka to go first.

"I'm sorry for asking such a personal question, Kakashi-san, but, was it hard graduating at five years old?"

"I passed the exam," Kakashi shrugged, wondering what Iruka was driving at. "It wasn't a difficult one."

"That's not what I mean. You were so young. To be thrown into an adult world at that age, it must have been hard."

Ah, that was it. "You want to know if it did me some kind of lasting psychological damage."

Iruka blushed and looked down, rubbing at his scar with his fingertips. "I-I suppose so, yes."

"Hmm. Honestly, no. I don't think either graduating or becoming a chuunin early did me any great harm." When Iruka opened his mouth to speak, Kakashi cut him off. "Which is not to say it wasn't problematic. I take it you're worried about your students?"

Iruka nodded. "There's so much pressure on them to graduate as soon as possible."

"Even if they graduated tomorrow, they'd be fine, I promise you."

"How can you say that, they're just children!" And the passion was back. Iruka straightened in his chair and his dark eyes flashed with feeling. Kakashi could only celebrate etiquette's timely departure.

"Because they have something I didn't."

"Pshaw! If you're going to say something about a good teacher-" Iruka was already brushing off what he thought Kakashi was going to say. It was amusing, in an infuriating way.

Kakashi interrupted him. "No. I had excellent instructors, both in the academy and after I graduated. And I certainly couldn't have asked for a better one than Minato-sensei."

Iruka looked mortified. "I didn't mean to imply the Yondaime-"

Kakashi was having none of it. "It wasn't teachers I lacked, it was peers. When I graduated from the academy the closest genin to me in age was Namiashi Raido and he was ten. Most of the others were twelve years old or more. The pre-genin were all scared of me and none of the genin wanted to be seen with a 'baby'. Like I said, your kids will be fine. They have each other."

Iruka was staring at him like he had grown an extra head and his eyes looked a touch shiny. Kakashi regarded him warily, a trifle concerned he might burst into tears there and then. "It wasn't that bad, honestly. Just a bit lonely."

"I never thought," Iruka said, still staring. After a moment, he shook his head, looking away. "It never occurred to me it might be a lack of friends. I thought maybe your father but-"

Kakashi shrugged. "Dad tried to help before... But he was Konoha's White Fang. He was off on missions and when he wasn't he had duties in the village. Afterwards he hadn't even been able to
help himself. Kakashi found it easier to remember his father before that final mission. After it, he was less than a ghost of his former self. "And, to be fair, I wasn't an easy kid. I was more interested in learning a new taijutsu move than I was in kicking a ball around. It made me lousy friendship material for the other kids. Except Gai. He did his best but well..."

A smile spread over Iruka's face. "I bet you were cute," he said and leaned forward closer to Kakashi. "I bet you took yourself so seriously."

"Oh hell, yes. Why do you think Tsunade still calls me a brat?" Kakashi smirked, remembering the merry dance he'd led her when they'd all been younger. "She'd baby sit me sometimes if Dad was busy. I remember once-" A vast yawn broke in to what he was about to say. Iruka immediately looked worried.

"You should rest. You've got a lot of healing left to do even with Hokage-sama seeing to you herself."

"She did?" Then a thought occurred to him. "Iruka, what was it she said didn't happen?"

"Um." Iruka averted his eyes and the flush was back. "I don't think I'm allowed to talk about it."

"Not even with me?" Not that it mattered. He'd find out when he made Hokage anyway.

"Not with anyone. Now lie down." Iruka pulled up the covers, holding them clear for Kakashi to get comfortable.

Kakashi was not being swayed so easily. He folded his arms and ignored Iruka's encouraging bedding flaps. "Does that mean you still have the cheating problem hanging over you?" Because if he did, Kakashi wanted to deal with it as soon as possible. Iruka absolutely deserved that promotion.

Iruka's face cleared into a broad smile. "No actually. She decided that my field abilities have been adequately proven so the whole thing's been dropped. I can still teach."

"So the old hag let you off."

"Kakashi-san!" Iruka scolded. "Please try and set an example to others."

Making a point of looking around, Kakashi said, "Not seeing anyone here except us. In fact, you could join me in here if you wanted." He tagged a leer on the end of the comment and patted the bed, just to see Iruka blush. Ah, yes, there it went.

"Kakashi-san!" He sounded scandalised but he looked pleased. Well, embarrassed and pleased.

Kakashi decided to behave. "You get to stay a tokujo?"

"Pff, I don't care about that. It was never the rank I wanted, just the chance to advance on the policy making side."

"Oh, now it's all coming out. You're just a power mad teacher with delusions of grandeur, admit it."

"It's true! You've found my deep and dark secret," Iruka laughed.

They stared at each other, grinning and happy and relaxed. Kakashi couldn't remember a time when he'd felt so comfortable with someone. "Iruka," he began and then the words dried up again, damn it.

This time though, Iruka spoke for him, "I was thinking maybe having dinner together would be fun." The tops of his cheeks coloured just a little, but his eyes were glowing. He was so warm and alive. "I
think it only fair to warn you, though," he continued. "I have issues."

Kakashi's lips twitched. "Really?"

"Oh yes. Many, many issues."

"You cheat," Kakashi suggested.

"I do. But only on exams. I never cheat on people."

"That's good." And terrifying. Not cheating meant commitment. Was he ready for commitment?

"And you know half the trick of dealing with issues is admitting you have them in the first place," Iruka continued.

That was an unsubtle hint if ever Kakashi had heard one. Iruka had a damn good point though. If they were going to try for something between them, Kakashi owed him something. Iruka flapped the bedding again and this time Kakashi cooperated, snuggling down under the covers and thinking about what Pakkun had said, and about possibilities and maybe even a future. Iruka fussed with the water jug and the glass for a moment then turned to go. It was now or never.

"I might have a few issues too," Kakashi blurted, wondering if he was about to make a huge mistake. "I'm not good... at letting people close. But I don't want to let that... let him... ruin the rest of my life."

The look Iruka gave him as he walked back to the bedside went beyond understanding. "Then I think these two issue-laden, lonely-hearted men should try and forge something worthwhile," he said.

Kakashi felt something loosen in his chest. Maybe he could have this after all. "You think we can?"

"I do. If we both give it our best shot, I really think we can."

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