I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

by Subtle_candor (holy_roller_novocaine), This_wild_abyss (holy_roller_novocaine)

Summary

Ōtsutsuki Hagoromo gives her an option, she takes it. She'll save them all, even if it kills her.
I've got a plan; I've got an atlas in my hand.

AU-most of the concepts of canon apply, however some do not. The biju are supernatural beings still made of chakra, but are thousands of years old, and usually reside on a different plain of existence unless summoned to the shinobi world. A female Naruto. Time travel, rebirth. A f**ked up timeline. Eventual fem!Naruto/Itachi. Dubious use of grammar and punctuation, however, this chapter is edited thanks to SpiritBird1. And I always found it strange the Kyuubi never gave Naruto a power, I'm going to remedy that.

Disclaimer: yah I'm in college, so I'm pretty broke.

Summary: Ōtsutsuki Hagoromo gives her an option, she takes it. She'll save them all, even if it kills her.

Prologue:

Rebirth...

A concept that is very familiar to him. In his thousands of years of existence, he has had many containers as the nine-tails, but only one as the juubi. At that time, he was one in the same as his siblings. Sharing one consciousness, not being able to tell where he began and where his siblings ended. He shuddered at recalling the experience.

His containers as the Kyuubi had no distinction in his eyes. They were all greedy humans leeching on his power hoping to drain him. Fools! He is an eternal being made of chakra! If and when he perished, he would be renewed full strength to once more wreak havoc. Though he loathed the thought at his loss of self, as the juubi he had found peace in the container that held him.

No one could stand up to the pedestal the Rikudo Sennin stood upon.

Ōtsutsuki Hagoromo gave him and his siblings a rebirth unlike any others they had experienced. From one, they became nine. They were given an identity, a purpose.

He became Kurama.

Yet, upon the Rikudo Sennin's death, Kurama and his siblings ventured out and sought a peaceful existence with humans, only for their efforts to be for naught. Much like in their past, the humans—now shinobi with the teachings of their father—sought out he and his siblings for their own malicious intents.

From there, Kurama's contempt for humans returned full force, and his hatred for humanity escalated as he weighed each meat bag that tried to control him up to the standards of his father.

None rose to the occasion.

Human impossibilities he began to think, perhaps his expectations were too high.

There was one time where he held hope. Uzumaki Mito was a promising candidate; until he tried to
speak with her. Not a word was heard as she shut him out. Terror and hatred is what he felt from her. He should not have been surprised. Her husband was one of the many few that could control him and his siblings; and he had allied himself with the very clan that could take away their willpower.

Fucking Uchiha's…

He'd kill them all and wipe that clan's existence from the world. The moment he was free, there would be a reckoning.

Hope renewed itself once more when he found himself imprisoned in Uzumaki Naruto. For almost a century now, his jinchuuriki were females who hailed from the Uzumaki line, descendants of his father with special chakra that ran through their veins. Slowly, but surely, the girl proved herself, rising to the occasion. Eventually overcoming Kurama's contempt for humanity and once more showing him the wisdom that humanity has. Within Naruto's shadow, many saw her father and Jiraiya, but Kurama saw more.

Naruto's shadow stretches long and far, encompassing the world in the image of the Rikudo Sennin.

And for that, hope remains.

Naruto had told him to "Believe it!" And so he will, that brat has yet to let him down.

Underneath the chains that manifest within the seal of Uzumaki Kushina, Kurama waits and sleeps for the right moment to strike.

October 10th is approaching, and he waits to meet her once again.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

Come again? "….What?"

"Your pregnant, congratulations Uzumaki-san!" The medic repeats. "You're about eight weeks along, and….”

Kushina simply stares blankly at her, the medic-nin's words fading into static. Her thoughts are racing, point A connecting to point B but failing to reach points C and D. A neuron fries and then the meltdown begins. "I-I thought it was that spoiled milk I drank, or those nasty rations!"

"Nope, not a stomach flu," The medic supplies unhelpfully.

"What the hell am I gonna do? How the hell am I going to tell Minato? I'm not ready to be a mother, 'ttebane!"

"Can't help you there," the medic replies flippantly, "but I'm going to prescribe you prenatal vitamins. You'll need to come back for a checkup in a few weeks, so schedule an appointment with the secretary please."

Kushina finally catches on to the medic words, and glares at her, snatching the prescription out of her hand. She stumps out the examination room, slamming the door as she goes. The anger runs out, and soon she begins to walk in a daze, simply going about the motions.

She makes her next appointment, sits and waits for her vitamins to be ready. Through the streets of Konoha she treks, waving absentily to those who greet her. Somehow, someway she finds herself walking into the Uchiha compound's open gates, and then outside the main house. She strolls in, honing in on a familiar chakra signature.
She travels through the open corridors, to the Zen garden, and over the bridge that covers the koi pond.

There, sits her best friend and former teammate, Uchiha Mikoto; recently retired jonnin, former student of the White Fang of Konoha, wife to the Uchiha clan head, and expectant mother five moons along.

She's stuffing her face with dango and assortment of other sweets when Kushina plops herself down next to her on a cushion and lets out a long dramatic sigh. "Koto-chan what the hell am I gonna do?"

Mikoto swallows her current mouthful of sweets and takes the time to say, "With what?" and then stuffs her face again.

"Remember when we were younger and said that if anything important happens to one of us, we would let the other know first 'cause we're best friends, almost sisters without blood and all that stuff?"

A muffled "Hai" is the reply Kushina received, and she takes that as the incentive to continue. "Well yah, I just came from the doctor, and I'm knocked up."

Mikoto spews the sweets she'd been chewing, and coughs and hacks for a moment. She primly turns to Kushina with all her regal bearing, and asks her, "Pardon? Would you mind repeating that?"

"I know!" Kushina cries, "Even you find the prospect of me being a mother impossible. I'm doomed dattebane!"

Mikoto tries to think of a way to resolve this, and finds that it's better to let Kushina wail. Those pregnancy hormones can be a bitch. Besides on the best of days, the Uzumaki is dramatic, and on those days she chooses to ignore her. Mikoto goes back to eating dango.

"What am I gonna tell Minato? Do you think he'll be mad that I'm pregnant? Will he even want to be a dad? Hell, do I want to be a mother?"

When the red head tries to grab a stick of dango, Mikoto slaps her away, and glares at her menacingly.

Kushina whimpers and holds her hands up in defeat.

"Want to know what I think?" The Uchiha asks.

"Of course, why do you think I'm here?"

Obviously you have no idea what you've gotten into, Mikoto thinks dryly. She then says, "I think it's wonderful. Our kids are going to grow up together." she then gets stars in her eyes, and rubs her stomach. "If I have a girl, and you have a boy, maybe they'll get married and we'll really be related!"

Kushina gets starry eyed along with her, and her imagination gets ahead of her. That is, until reality rears its ugly head. "Now's not the best time to have kids."

Mikoto nods in understanding; war is looming on the horizon. When she'd last been in the field, Iwa was becoming more aggressive. They were occupying the villages allied with Konoha and border patrols were encountering one too many skirmishes on the borders of Hi no Kuni. War is eminent and all shinobi would feel the backlash of its affects.

"When will Minato come back from his mission?" Mikoto asks quietly.
"Tonight," Kushina responds miserably.

They're quiet for a moment. It's a contemplative silence until Kushina jumps up and declares, "I'm gonna be a mom! If that asshole has a problem with it there'll be hell to pay! So he better man up if he knows what's good for him 'ttebane!"

She receives a muffled "Yah!" in support from Mikoto, who has clearly gone back to wolfing down sweets.

"I'll see yah later Koto-chan, we'll go shopping for baby stuff next time." the red head says, and leaves whence she came.

On her way out, she encounters her best friend's husband. "Oh, hi Fugaku-san. Bye Fugaku-san."

Fugaku barely has time to respond, and grunts, "Hn" by way of greeting. He turns the corner to find his wife stuffing her face, and sighs.

Wide eyes look up at him, guilt flashes for a moment before fierce defiance replaces it. She gathers her candy packages to her chest, and silently dares him to take them away.

"Mikoto-chan we decided that you would eat healthy for the baby," he says in a placating tone, approaching her as if one would a cornered animal.

"I know." Mikoto snaps. "It's your baby that demands the opposite."

Fugaku sighs again, it's always his baby when they're arguing.

**I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)**

The day is done when he returns, dusk has disappeared and night has encroached, reigning dominant. The streets are quiet except for the occasional drunk; the rooftops are busy as usual with ninja traffic.

He's tired; grit, dirt, and sweat smear his skin in a second layer. He wants a shower; Kushina's home cooking—surviving off of rations for the last three weeks has been utter hell. Most of all, he wants to sleep in his bed.

He does not expect to return to their apartment and find Kushina awake and waiting for him. Looking at him with that soft smile, the same one she had when she first agreed to go on a date with him.

Nor does he expect the news she has to tell him. That he's going to be a father, and if he has a problem with it—

He doesn't hear the rest of the threat; Minato really didn't expect to faint.
A clockwork orange

Chapter by This_wild_abyss (holy_rollernovocaine)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A clockwork orange:

Fatherhood.

What in Shodai's name? .... Fatherhood.

It's something he's contemplated more or less. Shinobi life spans are fickle; some start young and bring children into this treacherous world, and risk leaving their offspring orphaned.

Or look at the ghost of an uncertain future, and wait a few years to prove their prowess as shinobi, and then settle to watch their children grow, and perhaps suffer the horror of witnessing their own child die before them.

Both are likely scenarios.

He can think of a dozen more off the top of his head.

Minato is a worrier.

It's what he does; works himself into a tizzy with a plethora of possibilities, takes them all into consideration, and finds the most likely solution to solve them all at once.

But this...

This is different; it's a child, a baby.

There's no plan, it's all trial and error, maybe some advice from childrearing books, and from friends with kids, but that's about it.

In his and Kushina's case having a child is a slim chance, a responsibility that requires the consideration of the village's safety. Within the nine month gestation cycle, Kushina's seal will become progressively weaker, until upon the birth date, the Kyuubi will have a greater chance of escape.

And so he must plan to prevent that from becoming a reality, this stands at the top of his list.

Minato is also a planner.

Kushina usually hates his constant need for organization, likes to tease him about premature grays, but this is not the time to live in the moment. War is on the horizon, and for that Minato must strategize, if he plans to see his son or daughter grow up.

And so he researches possible seals, acquires the help of his sensei, the guidance of the Hokage, and prepares.

But first things first—marriage, he would do right by his child.
Minato is an orphan, an illegitimate child born from the union between an immigrant kunoichi escaping the civil wars ravaging Mizu no Kuni, and the philandering head of the Senju clan. His mother had died in child birth, his father had not bothered to claim him, along with the long list of bastard children he left in his wake. And Kushina is a remnant of a once great nation torn asunder by war; all her possible relatives are either dead or scattered to the wind.

It would the three of them, their little family.

As an orphan, he always imagined having a family of his own, doing what his parents failed to live up to. And now he will have the opportunity to rear a creation that is both he and Kushina. Watch as he or she takes their first steps in the world, and guide and observe every single stepping stone afterward.

Those thoughts are enough to make Minato tear up.

The wedding is a simple affair. A trip to the Hokage tower to file away paperwork, legalizing it, and a small gathering of close friends.

Now he has to go through the hell of moving.

Life's all about transitioning, but this had been a tedious task. Minato had wanted to live in the district full of newly constructed homes, further from the heartland of Konoha. Kushina would have none of that, and happy wife meant happy life.

They'd settled on one of the older districts of Konoha, that was established around the village's founding, having an eclectic mix of shinobi and civilian residents, not too far from the market quarter, or Konoha's epicenter. Not to mention more expensive; it'd really cut into his savings.

Minato seals away the last of their possessions, and gives a sigh of relief.

"Finally finished?" The toad sage asks.

"Yah, thanks for the help," Minato mutters sarcastically.

"You know I'm always good for moral support," Jiraiya returns glibly.

"Really?" Minato asks dryly.

"Yep," Jiraiya supplies, "I could have been excellent support when Kushina told you she's knocked up. Maybe you wouldn't have fainted."

Minato groans, he is never going to live that down. Particularly with Kushina intent on telling all their close friends about that incident, much to his mortification. He blushes brightly or gives a rude gesture whenever Kushina recounts the event—evil woman.

"I could have sworn I taught you better than that Mina-chan, who knew you were that faint of heart."

The blond shakes his head, and burning face aside, he gives his sensei the one finger salute. Jiraiya laughs in response.

"How is your research coming?"

The companionable atmosphere shifts into somberness, the bad omen returns, hanging over their heads.

"Fine, Kushina's finally letting me look through her archives." Jiraiya gets a familiar gleam in eyes,
one of scholarly interest. Fuinjutsu from Uzi no Kuni is a rarity that deserves to be revealed in. Minato chuckles, "Next time I see you, I'll bring them with me."

"She's kind of pissed that I doubt her," Minato continues and says flippantly, "but she'll be okay. She says if anything were to go wrong during the birth then we'll use the Four Symbols Seal," He hesitates for a moment, and then lets out, "but I've been looking into the Shiki Fujin."

"What!? Are you an idiot?"

Minato winces at the blatant disproval in his sensei's voice. He'd been prepared for that, but certainly not the disappointed expression on Jiraiya's face. "But—"

"No excuses! Minato I know you hold the village in high regard—"

"It's not the village that concerns me!" Minato returns sharply, "I worry for my wife and child. I am a loyal shinobi, but my family is just as, if not more important. I have to protect them and—"

"Minato-sensei," comes to monotone voice, Kakashi appears in all his apathetic glory. "Kushina-nee says and I quote, "Minato get your ass down over to Ichiraku's, or else I'm gonna to eat your ramen."

After delivering his message, Kakashi's looks at them both, and acknowledges the tense atmosphere that has settled between his sensei and Jiraiya-sama. "Oh, have I interrupting something."

His deadpan delivery would have been hilarious any other day, but he has walked right into a situation tangible with tension.

Minato however, sees this as a boon. The blond takes this as his scape goat, there's a lecture coming his way, there's no way in hell he's going to listen to one of Jiraiya's infamous guilt trips, nor be chided like a wayward child. "I'm coming now."

Kakashi nods and leaves how he came, out the window. Minato follows close behind.

Before he can escape via window, the toad sage remarks, "This isn't over; you have to see me tomorrow."

"Yah but that's then and this is now," Minato calls, and then appears in the window again, questioning; "don't you have some helpless women to spy one?"

"Its research damn it!" The super pervert shouts.

The blond chuckles, laughter carrying on the wind.

Despite the coming months worrying him, the ghost of an uncertain future lingering, Minato is excited, he's been told that once a person's baby is placed in his or hers arms, that person won't believe it's possible to love someone so much. That's what Minato can't wait to feel.

Fatherhood will become him.

Time flies as its wont.

Pictures and measurements are taken commemorating each mile stone of the pregnancy. This will probably be the only child she and Minato have. That's fine with Kushina, one is enough, a person who will have the best of them both, a legacy. They decide to leave the baby's gender a mystery, this pregnancy was a surprise, and so the gender should be as well.
Kushina’s mood swings grow steadily worse. Local merchants learn to fear the name Uzumaki, creating a code for when she enters the bazaar, and diving for cover when she feels their prices are too high. When her tantrums reach a melting point, ANBU shiver when they feel her presence, and small children and animals flee.

And it is here the name Akai Chishio no Habanero etches its way into history.

Minato takes missions that will allow him one week's absence at most, and eventually he takes on a gennin team. Kakashi is not happy, but he's willing to give Uchiha Obito, and Nohara Rin the benefit of the doubt… as long as they don't slow him down.

The feud with Iwagakure escalates.

Minato is called into action more often than not. He has no choice in the matter, duty calls and he must heed it.

With a child on the way, the threat of the Kyuubi, Iwa's obvious death wish, and a gennin team, his hands are becoming steadily fuller.

There are good moments though:

Paperwork is the bane of any ninja; paperwork for d-ranked missions has reached the top of his shit list. No wonder Jiraiya-sensei would always forgo it, to spy on the women at the hot springs or visit (harass) his fellow sannin. He would give anything to get out of this.

"Minato come quickly," Kushina shouts from the balcony, "the baby's kicking."

Perfect excuse, the greatest excuse.

The feel of life itself thrumming beneath his fingers is one he shall never forget. From then on he speaks to his child regularly, and sings off key with Kushina laughing or joining him in tone deaf duets.

And:

They're at the ramen shop; Kushina's cravings for noodles reaches an all-time high. The blond doesn't mind, ramen is one of the things that bonded him and Kushina so fervently together.

"I've been thinking of names," Kushina muses aloud.

She receives a muffled sound around the slurping of noodles, she takes that as a yes. Looking down at the fishcakes she states, "I like the name Naruto. I know you mentioned it before, and I shot it down, but its grown on me and sounds so much better than Menma."

Minato chokes and sputters. Kushina seems to have a knack for inciting that response in people.

A month ago Minato and Kushina began accumulating potential names. As expected of ramen addicts, ramen toppings are considered potential names, with Naruto and Menma in the top five of their list. Naruto, courtesy of Minato and his favorite book authored by Jiraiya. Menma, courtesy of Kushina, who at the time of brain storming had been consuming ramen with menma toppings. After much debate they crossed off the food names as potential names, and yet it appears she's had a change of heart.

Minato has come to find one should not argue or fault the logic of a hormonal (crazy) pregnant woman.
Uchiha Itachi announces his arrival on the morning of June 9th.

The founding clan celebrates the birth of their heir with a festival that last well into the night; liquor flows freely, fireworks ignite, and free food is abound. Who says Uchihas can't loosen the sticks up their asses?

The hour of visitation is upon them, Minato declines visiting, believing that family should have access to the child first. Kushina however, disagrees, but when has she ever cared for common courtesies or tradition.

Minato listens in amusement as Kushina declares she's more family to "Koto-chan" than that glory seeking clan of hers. And to add insult to injury, she's bringing along their Hyuuga teammate, undermining his self-serving clan and their rivalry with the Uchiha.

Minato lets her know that if she pisses off the Uchiha and they arrest her for disturbing the peace… again, Minato will bail her out, but he will laugh, and tell all their friends.

Kushina pouts. She has a history of insulting both noble clans, ever since the founding of their team under Hatake Sakumo—may he rest in peace.

Anyhow:

Unlike some newborns, Itachi does not have the look of a naked mole rat. Black hair covers his head sparingly, a rosy hue tints his cheeks, and he watches them each with rapt attention, as they take turns holding him.

"Aren't you precious? Koto-chan he looks just like you!"

"Does he?"

"Yes and thank the Shodai he does."

Whop! "Owwww! Koto-chan what was that for?"

"For being an idiot."

Incoherent grumbling follows that statement. Kushina rubs her head and recovers, going back to cooing over Itachi.

"Aw look at his eyes, he so aware of his surroundings!"

"Fugaku says it's a sign of him being a genius," Mikoto rolls her eyes good-naturedly. A peaceful look warms her features, even with the bags under her eyes.

Kushina snorts, "Course he would think that. Damn Uchiha and their elitist dispositions." Mikoto makes a threatening gesture and Kushina moves away from her. Transitioning to Hizashi's left, she peers down at Itachi cradled in his arms, and proceeds to make ridiculous faces at him.

If the Hyuuga seems uncomfortable with his former teammates fawning over the baby in his arms, he does not show it. Rather there's a soft expression in place of his usual stoic one. Kushina likes to think she had a hand in livening him up, not that he had much of a choice, the Uzamaki simply has that impact on people.

"So Hizashi-kun," the red head begins, telltale signs of mischief in her tone, Hizashi cannot help but shudder. Kushina questions, "How are things going with Futaba-san, have you tried speaking to her,
instead of staring at her until she runs away screaming?"

Hizashi pales, and then flushes, he bites out indignantly, "That was one time and I didn't know any better."

"You were seventeen," Mikoto points out unhelpfully, "And now you're twenty-two, that doesn't speak well for your maturity level."

Kushina snickers behind her hands, "Good one Koto-chan."

Instead of buckling under their assault, Hizashi rises to the occasion, saying smugly, "I'll have you know Futaba-san and I have begun courting and will be going out on our fifth date this Saturday."

There's silence, only broken by the sleeping Itachi's softs inhales and exhales, and the whirls of hospital machines.

"What!?"

"Nani?"

The twin shouts startle poor Itachi awake, who had nodded off only a few minutes before. The babe looks surprised, but his face quickly crumbles and he howls.

The Hyuuga hands him to his mother quickly. Mikoto coos and fusses over him, but keeps a steadfast ear on the conversation taking place.

"Date? Date! How come we haven't heard about any of this before?"

Hizashi begins to sweat bullets, instinctively he looks to Mikoto for an ally, and finds black eyes glinting with evil, staring back him; he knows he's doomed.

Liquid heat falls in a steady trickle down her thighs.

She stills and runs her hand over her swollen middle, the babe moves at her touch.

"You're ready to come into the world, aren't you little one?"

Labor has begun.

Kushina counts them; she breaths deeply as she's been taught and calls for Minato.

It is time.

The moment of reckoning is upon them.

**I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)**

October 10th is here.

Months of preparation lead to this moment; it is Minato who takes on the task of "nesting" for Kushina. Minato is the planner, and Kushina is indecisive. A nursery is prepared; much of the clothing purchased is gender neutral, toys are bought, and the house is baby proofed.

And now it is here, may the Sage of Six Paths look over them.
Kushina is escorted to a secure location a few miles outside Konohagakure, a vast cave, hollowed out stories high and wide, on its edges stalagmites and stalactites rear up and hang ominously.

An ANBU detail secures the area; Minato goes about preparing and executing seals. Jiraiya is on standby, ready to intervene if necessary. A barrier is erected, the medical staff—Sarutobi Biwako, her apprentice, and assistants—are brought in.

She's placed on an altar; candles and ink mixed with blood in kanji surround her.

The coaching begins.

"Kushina-san I need you to push on the count of three," Biwako instructs.

The journey has come to an end, but the arduous task of birth has just begun.

Kushina bites her bottom lip until she draws blood, she shouts, she screams, she makes threats, but she never begs for the pain to end. Minato's presence is ever steady, hands remain on top of the seal, which slowly gapes open into a black yawning abyss. Beneath the surface Minato can feel the Kyuubi's presence, not as toxic as he expected, more excited, as if biding its time for escape.

That shall not come to pass; Minato will make sure of it.

"Minato," Kushina says strained, "You better not faint on me."

Minato lets out a hysterical laugh, "I won't, sweetheart I promise."

"Good then," Biwako comments, "The head is crowning. Kushina push!"

Moments pass, in them eternity seems to prevail, and time comes to a halt. Kushina clenches her fists, sits up and pushes down with all her strength.

A cry rends the air.

It is single handedly the most beautiful sound the Namikazes have ever heard.

Heaving, she lays back and lets out an exhausted laugh. Tears gather in her eyes, she looks to her husband to find a similar expression painting his features.

"It's a girl," Biwako announces, and comes to lay her at Kushina's side.

Trembling hands reach for the babe. Kushina runs gentle fingers through her downy yellow hair, and over her soft cheeks. She blinks back pooling tears and says, "Hello Naruto, I'm your Ka-chan. I'm so happy to finally meet you."

Pale blue eyes peer open, trying through the blurry haze to find the voice that speaks to her.

"Yatta! I'm a father," Minato rubs at his eyes and leans over to drop kisses on Naruto's and Kushina's brow.

"Mina-kun she has your hair and eyes," Kushina remarks as she looks at Naruto reverently, unwrapping the blanket to take in her ten fingers and ten toes.

"Yah, but she looks like her beautiful mother," He returns, and runs his fingers over her hands, Naruto latches onto one of them, and does not let go.

However, the moment of bliss does not last.
Kushina feels a searing pain shoot through her abdomen, nothing like the labor pains. She lets out a cry, breathing sharply as another pierces her, she yells out, "Minato something's wrong. Get Naruto away from me!"

The warning comes too late.

The seal on her belly yawns wider, the black abyss spilling as miasma of chakra comes bubbling forth. She crumbles to the ground, writhing in agony and screams.

"Sensei!" Minato shouts, he hands Naruto to Biwako, and gestures for her to leave. But Biwako and her team of medics become paralyzed by the sudden tumult of killing intent unlike any they have ever felt.

Jiraiya and Mainato struggle to move under the gravity of the chakra as it coalesces at their feet, and fills the air with a thick almost toxic atmosphere.

A red light shoots forward, brightening the ceiling of the cave in brilliant glow, lengthening the shadows of the stalagmites and stalactites; an apparition appears, manifesting into the form of the Kyuubi."Namikaze Minato," comes the growl that raises hackles on the neck, "Uzumaki Kushina." The Kyubi pauses as if he is about to impart some great bit of wisdom, "I find myself in need of new lodgings."

Terror and determination wage war in eyes of violet and eyes of blue. The biju seems to smile at them as he reads the defiance there. And then he throws his head back and cackles gleefully.

The red light disperses and joins the coalescing chakra at their feet, beginning to twirl and swirl into a whirlwind. Its direction becomes obvious as it shoots for the left, where Biwako stands with Naruto in her prone arms.

"Minato," Jiariya calls, "Now is the time."

Minato nods, he knows if they were to seal the Kyuubi back into Kushina, it will result in her death. If they seal the biju into Naruto, she will survive, but have to suffer the burden of being the Kyuubi's vessel. The options are limited, and yet this is what needs to be done.

However, the choice is taken out of his hands.

The red chakra bubbles in a corroding fashion at the earth underneath, spiraling in the form of a twister, tunneling forward. It surges into the opened blanket that surrounds Naruto, and a yawning abyss like Kushina's appears on Naruto's stomach and it steadily closes as the red energy disappears within.

The presence that held them captive abruptly lets them go, leaving them on uneasy limbs that shake like newborn bones.

It is Kushina who is the first to move. She struggles to her feet, incredibly weakened nonetheless she finds the strength to move forward. That is what spurs Minato into action; he takes Naruto from the Sarutobi's trembling arms, and brings her to Kushina's crawling form.

Hastily they remove the blanket from Naruto's body, and she squirms at the temperature change, but does not fuss.

What holds their attention is not the babe per se, rather what's etched onto her belly.

The Hakke no Fūin Shiki.
And somehow Naruto manages to sleep through that entire ruckus.

She knocked on death's door, but death did not answer.

So she killed time, and painted its clock orange.

There was no in between.
She was dead, and then she's alive once again.
Alive, but in a stasis, surrounded warmth and darkness, the feeling of safety and contentment.
That is all she needed at the moment.

However….

Now is the time for remembrance.

If she was spiteful she would say the cycle of hatred within the ninja world started with the Rikudo Senin and his sons, the road to hell is paved with good intentions after all.

At the time when this thought came to surface, she was spiteful and in mourning.

The ancient man's claim of reincarnation made sense, but meant nothing to Naruto who had always carved out her own path.

None the less when she first emerged from limbo, gifted with the chakra of the Rikudo himself, with Sasuke at her side, sharingan eyes morphed into the concentric rings of the Rinnegan. The tides of change seemed to be on their side.

Madara would now know defeat.

And that was the wrong assumption to make.

Throughout their conflict with this maniac, he'd always had hidden trump cards, and who's to say he wouldn't have one after their little power boost?

And he did, and the destruction he left in his wake made the other atrocities he'd committed before pale in comparison:

Hinata and Ino screams still rend her ears.

The crumbled forms of Rock Lee, Shikamaru, and Gaara.

Sakura and Kakashi shocked eyes, and the smell of their burned flesh.

The hand that pierced through Sasuke's chest.

Yet the creation chakra within her was not enough to staunch the bleeding. Death surrounded them all, blanketing them in despair.

"Dobe," Sasuke had whispered, blood gurgled in his throat, spilling forth, running down from his parted lips. "Stop wasting chakra."

She cried, choking on sobs as she yelled, "Teme, shut-up! I'll never give up, I never give up, damn
"I know you don't," He rasped, "but this time you need to. Accept that I'm dying."

"Never! Don't you dare die on me bastard, don't you dare!" Naruto covered the gaping hole, and begged, urged, pled for it to close.

Sasuke raised his hand; the effort seemed to take the rest of his energy as he reached for her forehead and poked it. He smiled, took one last ragged breath, and did not inhale again.

In the distance she could hear Madara's laughter, it's one of victory.

Naruto screamed and the world around her faded to black.

She found herself in Limbo once again, before the floating form of Ōtsutsuki Hagoromo. Naruto stared at him, completely drained. She's tired, oh so tired and simply wanted for this war to come to an end.

"What now?" She questioned, tone jaded, "Is there another prophecy? Another hidden power to be given? What now?"

"No," The sage replied, "there are options."

Naruto said nothing; her usual optimism left her haggard and hollowed.

"You can take Sasuke's eyes and finish what you both could not finish, or you can go back."

"Go back…?" The words sounded foreign on her tongue, but there's a spark of hope, one that's been missing.

"Time travel Naruto. I can send you back and you can make a difference then and save them," The sage clarified.

Kurama appeared, and said, "What have you got to loose brat? Nothing much from what I can tell."

And as crude as it sounded, it's the truth. Naruto thought of all the people she cared for and held dear, all her precious people were dead. And the boy she loved along with them.

Yes, she can admit that she loves Sasuke, it took his death for it to cement itself, but Naruto's always been a bit dense. All those years she chased Sasuke, and claimed it had been for Sakura, well she'd lied.

Her heart had been the one on the line.

She can only hope Sakura will forgive her, but she'd never know until she faced the shinigami herself.

That won't happen, even if she defeated Madara she refused to live a half-life that will follow victory.

And so she decided.

Now she finds herself in a familiar landscape: dampness, pipes, and the telltale smell of ozone. She steps out of the shadows and approaches a familiar cage and finds large red eyes staring down at her.

Naruto grins, "Miss me fuzzball?"
"Brat," Kurama growls, tails moving impatiently against the bars as she approaches.

"We've got to do something about this seal," Naruto responds and pulls the paper off.

The world around is then encased in radiant light.

Chapter End Notes

Slowly, but surely reworking this fic, any differences seen here but not seen on ff.net will be remedied eventually.
Chapter Notes

Yahhhhh, this is not a crossover with avatar.

One thousand and one nights:

Her mindscape is incased in brilliant life, and here Naruto finds her playground. The inner world begins to reflect the creativity she once used to produce her pranks. She’d always wondered why her mind imaged a sewer; surely she could have come up with something more original. With critical input from Kurama, a world comes to life before them.

Brilliant hues twirl and swirl and create a topography in vain of Konoha’s terrain, many trees dot the landscape, great and mighty in their height, disappearing into low laying clouds. The sky changing colors to reflect Naruto’s mood. Streams of rivers undulate in and out of the system of trees. Thickets of brush open to fields of wildflowers.

In the midst of this genesis, Naruto thoughts stray.

For the last nine months she been in a state of stasis, completely unaware of her surroundings, and while she knows that the Rikuo Sennin initiated this second chance, she does not quite know the how. In a rare moment of what seem to be intellectual clarity, Naruto turns to the fox next to her. Features etched in her usual vulpine expression, she asks, "Kurama, how they hell did that old man pull this shit off!!"

Eloquently said, indeed.

Kurama gives her a dry look and even drier reply, "You mean send us back in time?"

"Yah, time travel, I mean I've seen some weird shit and know that there are jutsu that bend space and time, but wouldn't time travel rip a hole right in the space time continuum?"

Kurama stares at her for a moment, Naruto never fails to amaze him. The girl is an idiot, there's no ifs ands or buts about, however, one could never underestimate her. That guise of stupidly often masks a keenness that can be frightening.

"I take it you read up on space/time seals?" Kurama asks.

"Yah, yah, 'attebayo! It was mad interesting, but really confusing, more times than not I had no idea what I was reading!"

Kurama rolls his eyes and does not dignify that statement with an answer. Instead he focuses on her earlier question, and puts seriously thought into his explanation. He looks through centuries of knowledge, through the ancient abyss that is his mind.

"There a few methods the Sage could have used. Considering the possible limits to his influence and power, amongst them is chakra migration. That would mean returning to our
previous bodies, however, we have been sent further back to where I existed in your mother and you were fathomless. Thus with the destruction of the former time line, our former existence from there was placed into this timeline. Yet I could not exist within your mother while I am bound to you...." Here he falls into incoherent grumbling about higher forces being at work, and how he could not wait for the fucking ninja cycle to be over—whatever the hell that means. Kurama continues, "Your chakra and my own have melded together, you were a beacon for my presence so transferred to you. So yes chakra transmigration played a role...."

By now Naruto's eyes have glazed over, the explanation more or less has gone right over her head.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

There is a quandary within the Hokage's office that needs to be resolved.

The ANBU have left under orders to remain close, the seals within the walls have been activated for maximum security to ensure privacy.

A desk usually cluttered with stacks of papers is cleared; a novel sight. And upon it is a babe in a portable bassinet, a frog cap on her head, an orange blanket that surrounds her, and green booties upon her feet.

She sleeps soundly as a newborn's wont, her belly on display for examination.

The seal is examined this way and that, and neither Minato nor Jiraiya can find fault in the design. The seal is a masterpiece, strangely reminiscent of Minato's prototype that would have been used in a worst case scenario.

Sarutobi Hiruzen now examines it, tries to find fault, and fails. His wife had done a physical exam and a brief mental inspection and found nothing out of sorts: no damage from the fox's toxic chakra, or influence on brain activity.

Newborn Namikaze-Uzumaki Naruto is a healthy baby at three kilograms, and forty-three centimeters long.

"I see no anomalies with the seal," The Sandaime concludes, "I declare that jinchuuriki status of Namikaze-Uzumaki Naruto, and the circumstances surrounding her birth to be an S-class secret. If dispersed amongst the masses the penalty will be death."

And so it is decreed.

Fluorescent lights blind her upon wakening, there's a flurry of activity around her. Her vision blurs, she can only make out shapes, and she blinks rapidly to gain clarity. She tries to move, and yet her body is incredibly numb. The sounds around seem distant, like far away noises after an exploding kunai has ignited, and left all within it premises partially deaf.

A brilliant hue of yellow enters her vision; she hears distant words, a name perhaps. She wants to reach out and touch, communicate somehow. She opens her mouth, tries to make a sound and only an inaudible word escapes, "Minato..."

He must respond, but she can't hear him.

Her vision blurs again, and Kushina's world fades to oblivion.
Similar incidents occur over the next few days, with her moments of consciousness becoming more frequent. Until one day she awakens to the sounds of coos and laughter.

This time when she rouses, her sight clears quicker; her hearing does not abandon her. She's exhausted, but finds the strength to look to her left, and the sight there makes her smile. Minato holds Naruto within his arms, making the most ridiculous faces. Naruto watches him with wide eyes, gurgling.

When Kushina opens her mouth, her voice is rusted with disuse, and she laughs, "S-stop traumatizing Naru-chan."

Minato's eyes quickly move to her and his surprised expression morphs into a tender one, "Kushina… you're finally awake." He reaches forward with one hand, clasping it to hers.

"Yep alive and kicking." She smiles, but it's wane. They stare at each other, many emotions and words unspoken flickering between their gazes. Kushina looks away, but does not remove her hand from his, instead she settles her gaze on their child, and she knots her fingers through his.

Quietly she asks, "How long have I been out?"

Minato sighs, "About two weeks. You started waking up five days ago, but you'd fall unconscious soon after."

She watches Naruto for a long moment, and then reaches for her with weak but determined arms. "Give her to me."

"Are you sure?" Minato asks, watching her carefully. Kushina nods quickly in the positive, eager to hold their daughter. "Okay," Minato answers her enthusiasm with a smile.

Naruto is settled into her arms, a warm weight against her currently frail body. As Kushina looks down at her, memorizing her baby's features that remain the same as they did when she first met her, warmth blossoms and blooms within her chest.

Naruto tilts her head and looks up at her mother, hand firmly in her mouth. Kushina touches the downy blonde hair showing the beginnings of untamable spikes. Minato dressed her in a green onesie, navy pants and booties, and at least had the decency to get a bow hair band to identify her as a girl. If not, Naruto would certainly be seen as the opposite of her gender, considering she's Minato's miniature. Aside from that she's adorable.

Kushina did not think it possible to love someone so much.

She says as much to Minato, who laughs in understanding, and says he's utterly charmed by their daughter. Naruto sneezes, and Minato promptly flips out, and it's Kushina's turn to laugh. Minato declares he's going to find her doctor, and see what can be done about Naru-chan's burgeoning "cold."

Apparently parenthood makes a person an idiot.

"You hear that Naruto, that's your Tou-san, he's what we call neurotic, but we still love him," Kushina says in a high pitched voice, and kisses the top of Naruto's head.

Naruto twists her head with jerky movements as her mother's red hair falls over her shoulder. "Hi Naru-chan, I'm your Ka-chan," Kushina introduces herself, "we met not too long ago, but I've been sleeping for a long time, and I've woken up just to see you. I'm going to teach you how to cook, be a kick ass ninja…"
Motherhood.

It's something she's yearned for.

With the destruction of Uzi no Kuni whatever familial ties she had were simply wisps of smoke curling from the debris of her once home. Becoming the jinchuuriki for the Kyuubi lessened the chances of motherhood greatly. And so she focused on her ninja career, and becoming one of the greatest kunoichi to grace the bingo books.

That goal turned out to be for naught.

While she graces the bingo books as a B-ranked threat, and would have steadily reach A-ranked if not for the discovery of her pregnancy.

Naruto is a surprise, and her greatest accomplishment.

Kushina holds her sleeping form within her arms as the doctor tells her she will no longer be able to have children.

The doctor—an ANBU medic that was present during the birth—supplies that the combination of the Kyuubi's extraction from her, and Naruto's birth greatly damaged her reproductive organs. Healing chakra could only reverse so much of the damage corrosive chakra inflicted. She suffered from severe chakra exhaustion, and had it not been for the famed Uzumaki vitality she would not have survived.

Kushina becomes somber at the news.

To bring life into this world, she had lost her ability to create it, and nearly lost her life in the process. She sighs, life as a ninja is all about sacrifice, and so she will have to cherish those moments she was able to create life, feel it beneath her palms as it grew, and carry it into its next stage of fruition.

Kushina would not trade Naruto for anything in the world.

She nods her acceptance and the doctor moves forward. They want to keep her in the hospital for a few more days, to watch her recovery and make sure she doesn't relapse. She takes this delivery with aplomb. Most ninja dread the hospital, but Kushina knows this is a necessary evil—so be it.

The doctor leaves whence he came and Minato returns not with a doctor, but with Mikoto in tow. The surprise is a balm to the blow she's just been dealt.

Kushina feels tears burn at her eyes. And the arm not supporting Naruto reaches out to her best friend. Mikoto moves forward, and returns her embrace, "Aw Shina-chan, it'll be all right."

Over Mikoto's shoulder Kushina's watering violet eyes find Minato. He must have known the news and enlisted the help of her former teammate, knowing Mikoto's presence would help. Kushina mouths, "Thank you, love."

Minato smiles sadly and nods in understanding. He quits the room quietly.

Bored.

Borrrred.

Borrrrrrrreedddd.
Being a baby is boring.

All she does is eat, sleep and poo.

Mix that up and switch them around; that's her behavior in a nutshell.

It's a vicious cycle.

And she cringes at the fact she's dependent on someone else. Naruto loves her parents, loves that she has them, and that she won't be alone. And yet this is so not right… she realizes she was a baby in her other lifetime, but she was not aware enough to be disturbed by it.

And most of all time seems to go by at a snail's pace.

Naruto could take this time to make plans for the future, and she has. Vague albeit, but plans nonetheless. Nobody ever claimed Naruto's a genius; she's a spur of the moment strategist, so when a situation happens she'll be prepared… maybe.

She wonders if she should wake Kurama. When wheedled and prodded extensively the biju could be moved to tell her stories of his life. But not before he insulted her and told her, her puny human mind could not wrap around the many millennia of his existence, and he did not want to traumatize her with his magnificence.

Naruto and Kurama may be on friendly terms; however, that didn't stop making the fox an asshole.

Speaking of the biju….

Behind her Kurama snorts in his sleep, and she startles at the sound.

Damned fox, he's much bigger in size than he had been. She realizes he must have both his yin and yang chakra. Behind him his tails move unconsciously, three dipping into the water and the other's crushing the wild flowers in the field they both reside in.

Or she could explore her newly created mindscape… again.

Naruto decides to wake Kurama, that'll be much more entertaining. She's taken to finding different ways to interrupting his sleep, this time she rears back her foot and kicks his colossal nose.

Kurama flinches and growls, a low menacing sound from deep within his chest. Naruto remains unfazed as crimson eyes snap open and glare a thousand deaths upon her. She leaps away when one of the paws he's resting on rises and takes a swipe at her. "**Brat! Didn't I tell to let me sleep?**"

Naruto shrugs unconcerned, "I'm bored."

"**And? What can I do? Your pathetic human body is useless to us, and right now you're being a nuisance,**" Kurama glowers at her.

"Hey I am not a nuisance! I'm just…" Naruto searches for the right word, "Indisposed."

Kurama stares at her "**…my point exactly.**"

As far as Kurama concerned, until Naruto's body gains fine motor skills they're sitting ducks, and when it comes to planning the future Naruto's kind of hopeless. She'll probably just wing it. They've began to mark out the timeline, discussed the possible changes Naruto's earlier birth has created, but there's not much they can do until Naruto learns a skill other than drooling.
Before he can move and find a new place to sleep, Naruto jumps before him.

"Tell me a story," Naruto pleads, blue eyes wide, hands clasps in front of her.

"No," The biju responds stubbornly. She will not win this battle.

"Pretty please."

"No, hell no."

"I'll scratch behind your ears." Naruto grins slyly when the fox turns his head, and then looks back at her from the corner of his eye. "...Fine."

Naruto leaps upon his head, and Kurama begins with an ominous beginning, "The earth is old, the gods of creation are eternal, and humanity is young. Where one civilization falls, another rises up. There are cycles for human epochs, this cycle—the era of the ninja—is young, but like all cycles will one day come to an end.

"In this cycle chakra exist, but is accessed differently. There are many similarities between the ninja cycle and this cycle.

"Four great Nations existed, based on elements: the water tribe, the fire nation, the air nomads, and the earth kingdom. The people of these nations usually used the element associated with it. They were called benders. As typical with humans they were embroiled in war. One individual was responsible for keeping the balance, the avatar."

"What? Like the chosen one in the Gama-jiji's prophecy?" Naruto questions.

"Hai, they are similar except every generation a new avatar appeared from one of the four elemental nations. My siblings and I were revered as gods. We were spirits that lived on a different plane of existence, and could only be accessed—"

"Ehhhh! So what are you now?"

Kurama growls at the disruption, but becomes docile when Naruto scratches a particular tender spot behind his ear.

"We are eternal. In each cycle our purpose changes," He explains, "In the age of the ninja we are chakra monsters, harbingers with the potential for peace and destruction."

"Ohhhhhhh," Naruto responds, and begins to braid some of the longer strands of Kurama's fur. The fox rolls his eyes.

"As I was saying, we lived on another plane and could only be reached by the avatar. He or she was a spiritual guide, what happened in our world affected the other. The avatar protected the spirit world, along with the physical world. This avatar named Aang was the greatest avatar to live..."

Outside the baby known as Naruto sleeps, vivid dreams of a long lost civilization now dust on the wind.
Brave new world:

Minato and Kushina are idiots.

Like most first time parents, every milestone their child reaches becomes a spectacle.

Except Kushina and Minato take photos of every groundbreaking moment Naruto achieves.

They filled up three photo albums before Naruto was six months old.

It's a tad bit over zealous.

Naruto is a happy baby; she rarely kicks up a fuss, and seems to enjoy the spotlight. Giving gummy smiles when she's captured in the lime light, staring at her father with wide eyes whenever he makes ridiculous faces behind the camera.

Events such as these are recorded:

Kage Bunshin is the greatest child rearing jutsu ever created.

Particularly when dealing with a baby such as Naruto, whose hyperactivity at seven months leaves her parents haggard. They shudder to think how troublesome she will become when she's able to walk; she's already a terror as a crawler.

Duties are assigned to each clone: one does the laundry, another fills out a mission report for those thrice cursed d-ranks in the shared study. And the other feeds Naruto-chan, while the original Minato stands in the safe zone, watching as the battle ensues.

Minato winces as Naruto throws a vegetable concoction, and ducks her next toss of food. His clone is not as lucky when Naruto's next throw lands true.

The upside from this resulting mess is that he can say is that when Naruto learns how to throw a kunai, she'll have one heck of an arm.

Naruto giggles; she like the highchair's table, the kitchen's floor, walls, ceiling, and her father's clone are a mess. Food paints each surface, landing everywhere but her mouth. Minato's clone looks on miserably, "Taichou, this is a hopeless affair."

"Here I thought that one mission in Numa no Kuni was hard, this is ten times worse than any d-ranked mission," Minato laments.

"At least your safe behind the cabinets," his clone replies, and goes back to trying to coax Naruto into taking another spoonful of pureed vegetables.

A flash of a camera comes from the kitchen entry way. Kushina snickers at Minato's predicament; he volunteered to feed Naruto so he's responsible for clean-up duty.

Thank Kami for shadow clones.

But that doesn't mean he appreciates the laughter, Minato glares at her. Kushina holds her hands up
in surrender, a smile playing at her lips, "Okay I'm leaving; you can get back to paternal bonding with Naruto-chan."

The clone's attempts are futile, Naruto turns her head stubbornly and makes a grab for the spoon, no doubt to chuck it at the clone's head. He moves it out of her reach, and she glowers at him. They proceed to have a staring match, blue matching blue. The winner of the battle seems inevitable, that is until Naruto pulls out her favorite trick from her repertoire.

Cherubic features crumble, and cerulean eyes glisten, and Naruto proceeds to open her mouth to let world know of her displeasure.

That is until from behind the relative safety of the cabinets the microwave dings, and the smell of ramen becomes distinct.

Minato comes around the bend, cup ramen in hand, side stepping splattered food, oblivious to his clones and daughter's stare. However, he does catch this:

"Rama."

He pauses, and looks to Naruto with wide eyes. She holds her hands out, fingers grasping towards him or rather the noodles in his hand, "Rama."

"...what?" He asks stupidly.

"Ra-ma," Naruto says and if Minato didn't know better he would have thought she had repeated that word slowly, as one would for a particularly dimwitted individual.

Minato ignores her request and decides to alert his wife of Naruto's newest achievement, "Kushina! I think Naru-chan just said her first!"

There's a crash, followed by some rustling, and Kushina appears once more in the kitchen entryway. Stars in her eyes, the red head literally skips over the spattered food, hands clasped in front of her and asks, "What did she say?"

"Rama," Naruto replies, waving her arms insistently to the cup in her father's hand.

Kushina turns her starry eyed gaze to her daughter, stares at Naruto and then laughs. "I knew it!" Kushina crows, "I knew her first word would be ramen, you owe me 50 ryo, pay up Mina-chan!"

Minato grumbles and reaches for his wallet, but pauses, "Rama doesn't mean she meant ramen."

Red hair comes to life, and swirls about dangerously, "Your damn right she meant ramen, 'ttebane! She gesturing to it, she wants that ramen."

Minato does not balk at her fit of pique, rather he rolls his eyes and reluctantly hands over the money.

Tired of being ignored in the presence of Ramen-sama, Naruto finally does cry. She will not be denied.

Or an occasion such as this:

Naruto is going to walk soon Kushina knows it.

Naruto's been scooting on her bottom, crawling, and hanging on to upright objects for dear life to stand up, while taking sliding steps.
At eleven months she's ready.

Naruto is going to walk soon and Kushina's going to be there to witness it, damn it. It's only fair; Minato got to hear her speak her first word.

She wants to see her little girl take her first brave steps in this new world. Naruto is the only child she will have; every moment needs to be cherished.

And so she watches Naruto with rapt attention every time she gets to her feet, and yet there's only so much stalking… er, observing she can do, especially when today Naruto's has a playdate.

(Which is certainly not an excuse to gossip and get tispy with Mikoto and a few of their friends.)

"Kushina is here, 'ttebane! The party has finally started," Kushina announces as she opens the shoji door with more force than needed. Under one arm she carries Naruto, who clutches a stuffed frog, and the other arm holds two containers of onigiri in an assortment of shapes. "Hello my fellow moms, I come bearing food!"

Cacophonies of greetings respond to her as Kushina strolls down the veranda.

"I hope you brought out the good sake Koto-chan, now that I'm no longer breast feeding, I'm making up for these last few months." She maneuvers Naruto expertly, setting her down and handing her an onigiri shaped in her image.

Mikoto scoffs, "Of course I did, directly imported from Ta no Kuni."

"That's what I'm talking about," Kushina exclaims, and heads for the empty cushion within the group's circle.

Some people would frown at mothers imbibing at their children's play date, these mothers in question would tell them to go to hell. As kunoichi—former, off duty roster, or active—they certainly know how to handle their alcohol intake, considering the nature of some of the missions they undertake.

Multitasking is no problem; their children have nothing on enemy ninja, criminal heads, or mercenaries despite being terrors in their own right.

Under their mothers' watchful gazes the children are left to their own devices.

At sixteen months Itachi walks with hesitant steps that most toddlers experience. He takes full advantage of his mobility, exploring the Zen garden of the Uchiha main house with rapt attention, testing his mother's boundaries when he gets too close the koi fish pond. And he follows the confident strides of his older cousin Shisui, when the boy finds something of greater interest.

Naruto on the other hand is on a blanket with other drooling babies, surrounded by plushies, blocks, and chew toys. Kushina is regaled with village gossip and tries to keep one eye on her, she has the distinct feeling today is the day of reckoning.

And she is quite right.

Looking over her sake cup Kushina chokes, and then gapes.

To her feet Naruto climbs, legs tremble beneath her weight, this new position is strange for there is no object for her to grasp to guide her steps.

Next to her, Shisui's mother slaps her back, and opens her mouth to ask if Kushina is all right, and
then takes in the sight the red head finds so interesting, "Oh, isn't that darling."

Naruto has a look of concentration on her cherubic features as she takes fearless steps forward.

"I know," Kushina responds and barely contains a squeal. Mikoto looks over her shoulder to see what the fuss is about and her curious expression softens.

Naruto takes hesitant steps, and Kushina counts them, claiming each one as a small victory over gravity. The first step, a second step; Naruto wobbles and Kushina holds her arms out as if to catch her, sighing in relief when Naruto does not fall and takes a third step instead.

When she makes it to her sixth step, Kushina grins, Minato is going to be so pissed he missed this. The Uzumaki grabs her weapons pouch, and unseals her camera, she gets up, and walks slowly to Naruto, trying not to distract her from her steady progress.

The eleven month old looks up and grins at her mother as she walks to her on cautious legs. Kushina captures the moment, puts the camera away. She holds her hands out, "Come to Ka-san," and catches her daughter just as she falls.

"Oh my Naru-chan, look at you walking!" Kushina throws her up, and Naruto laughs as she goes up, up, up and then down when she's caught.

The first year of Naruto's life marks the greatest watershed in Minato's and Kushina's lives. They witness the life they created flourish and find themselves in awe over their little wonder.

The day is nearly done, and dusk encroaches. Late rays of light leave the room in a dull glow, outside Konoha still prevails with activity. The day is nearly done but the night is beginning.

At the low table Minato sits, three prong kunai lay before him, and he attaches the seals he's carefully written on fuin paper.

The Hiraishin is perhaps his greatest jutsu, from scrap paper with musings written on space time jutsu, to actual configurations brought to life, and a jutsu like no other brought to fruition.

The Rasengan is a work in progress. He grimaces, but this is complete, this is his genius in fuinjutsu captured.

What prompted him to complete the Hiraishin is his own family, Minato is already an A-ranked ninja in the bingo books. If his family is ever attacked by his enemies, he wants to be prepared. And being able to appear wherever there is a danger to them is a great start.

After he attaches the seals, he begins to sharpen and polish the blades.

His senses flare, and the roaring flame of chakra that is his daughter appears. Naruto approaches the table, a book under one arm, dressed that ridiculous sleeping cap that Jiraiya bought her and her pajamas.

Minato knows Kushina isn't home, volunteering her services as a fuinjutsu master at the hospital, present while high risk operations take place—using stabling, heart monitoring, and medical seals.

So that means Naruto must have dressed herself. That would explain the bright orange pajama set that are absolute eyesores. At twenty-six months Naruto's proven to be quite the independent.
Naruto touches one of the kunai's handle, studies the seal briefly and then loses interest. Choosing to climb onto Minato's lap and present him with the book.

Minato checks the clock, and laughs wryly, "Bed time already?"

"Hai," Naruto replies and holds the book for him to take.

"I completely forgot to check the time," Minato admits sheepishly, taking the book from Naruto. Its title says "Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi." He should have known, Naruto always chooses the book of her namesake.

"s okay Tou-chan," Naruto lisps, "Ka-chan says it's cause you're flaky, but then again Ka-chan has anger problems."

Minato shakes his head in amusement, and then flips open the well-worn novel to where they left off.

Reading takes longer than usual, on every page Naruto traces each kanji and repeats the words after he's read them. Minato pauses and listens as Naruto murmurs, and reads the next sentence without his assistance.

He lets her continue until the page needs to be turned, and then Naruto looks up at him curiously, "Why'd yah stop reading?"

"You were doing fine by yourself," Minato says truthfully.

"Tou-chan," Naruto lisps exasperatedly, "during story time you have to read."

Minato supposes that's sound logic to a two year old, and chuckles in response, "Okay Naruto-chan."

And he continues where she left off.

Outwardly he's calm, and yet internally his thoughts are racing.

Amongst those thoughts, Minato wonders if Kushina knows that Naruto can read.

If not, they need to schedule an appointment with the ANBU that's Naruto's pediatric medic, and have a scan done of her brain to see how it's developing.

In the meantime he would check her seal once she fell asleep. It wouldn't do if the seal presented anomalies now; he prayed the Kyuubi had no influence on Naruto's steadily rising intellect.

Kushina snickers.

Naruto giggles.

Kakashi glares.

Encased within his arms, Naruto tugs at the laconic boy's mask, and he gently swats her hand away. She tries again, and he stops her, and the pattern continues onward.

It's a game Kushina and Naruto derive great amusement from, Kakashi not so much.

Naruto begins to tug at Kakshi's hair while simultaneously trying to pull off his mask, "Off!"
The boy struggles with her and gives Kushina a helpless look, an expression many people give her due to Naruto hyperactive personality. She usually provides no help; it's too hilarious watching people struggle against a baby.

The trek to the hospital is a short one, she dragged Kakashi from training, making sure he's interacts with people other than his ninken, Minato and his teammates. Knowing Kakashi, he'd go months without human interaction as long as he's able to train and take missions. He's an ANBU in the making, and that is a circumstance she and teammates want to avoid.

With his father's seppuku, Hatake Sakumo's students took it upon themselves to look after his scion. Kushina had insisted Kakashi come and live with her and Minato, which made sense with Minato being his sensei, but of course he refused. Even Mikoto and Hizashi offered shelter and guardianship, and Kakashi refused them, preferring the apartment given to him by the Hokage.

Kushina and her teammates still interfere in his life, bringing him breakfast, lunch or dinner, doing his laundry, helping and teaching him how to clean, etcetera. They refused to let Kakashi thinks of his father's sacrifice as a disgrace. The White Fang was one of the greatest shinobi Konoha produced, and Kakashi would be one to.

Kakashi puts Naruto down and takes her hand; their short trip to hospital has now been elongated. Even though there are plenty of people willing to carry Naruto, her daughter values her autonomy and prefers to do things on her own, particularly once she's mastered a skill.

At thirty months her independence continues to grow. That doesn't stop her from taking advantage of her cuteness. She's been able to wheedle sweets from her father's genin more than once.

Kushina may froth at the mouth when they give in to those baby blues, but she's become fond of her husband's students, Naruto more so.

She and Rin have come to the understanding that Naruto will always find some way to destroy the dresses she looks so darling in. The only girly accessory Naruto will allow is a headband or bow to hold back her wild spikes.

Obito has become one of Naruto's favorite people, and a bane to Kushina's and Minato's existence. Once Naruto showed a penchant for pranks, it was downhill from there. It seems their daughter has found a kindred soul in raising hell.

"Okaa-chan," Naruto sing songs, "when we leave the doctor's can we get dango?"

"No Naruto, you had mochi earlier, no more sweets for today," Kushina replies sternly.

Naruto pouts, but jumps back quickly, "...can we get ramen instead then?"

Violet eyes flash as she stares down at her daughter. Minato's miniature levels those puppy eyes at her and Kushina is a goner, it works for her husband and it certainly works for Naruto.

"Fine," She says grudgingly, and then stalks off in defeat.

Kakashi deadpans, "Whipped."

Naruto smiles, "Works every time."

When they arrive at the hospital Kushina's whole disposition changes, a frown paints her features. It had taken four months for Minato to convince Kushina to agree to see the medic. She refused to
believe that Naruto's intelligence had anything to do with the Kyuubi. Any explanation Minato presented was soundly rejected, the strange circumstances surrounding Naruto's birth and the ensuing sealing of the bijuu begged the question of whether or not the fox had influence on Naruto. And Kushina refused to believe so.

Minato's sound logic has yet to stir them wrong, but Krishna's emotionality is a hindrance that is a struggle to overcome.

Fuinjutsu is Kushina’s area of expertise, the seal's origins have roots in Uzu no Kuni, and as arrogant as it may sound, she knows the seal is safe proof.

Kushina sighs to herself as they are escorted to an examination room. She places Naruto on the table and turns to Kakashi, who looks at her wearily when a sly smile graces her face.

"Am I free from child herding duty?" Kakashi asks flatly.

"You would have been, but now you're not," Kushina replies happily, "Mikoto is having you over for dinner, Shisui and Obito will be present."

She cackles gleefully at the look of horror on Kakashi's face, "Minato and Hizashi are out away on missions, and I'm not providing you with an excuse. Have fun."

The silver haired preteen takes an exit through the window, muttering about evil red haired women, and there damned accomplices.

The doctor appears shortly afterward and Kushina prepares herself for the worse.

In Naruto's invalid state—Kurama's words not her own—she and the fox continued to make plans, discuss the possible outcomes of each strategy, and work out the kinks. More than once Naruto lost interest, but her enthusiasm made up for her having the attention span the size of a walnut.

And yet most of these discussions in strategizing ended up getting side tracked by petty arguments. Most over Naruto's stupidity and Kurama's need to throw about insults, however their greatest bone of contention is morality. Kurama may have accepted Naruto for her humanity and now holds her on the same pedestal as the sage of six paths, but that does not mean he sees the rest of humanity in a different light. His standards are still ningen impossibilities, and he has no remorse in killing certain individuals.

"I refuse!" Naruto shouts.

"You are naïve!" Kurama thunders, "Kill or be killed." On a calmer note, he continues, "We came back to save your precious people, if someone gets in the way of that goal they must die. And you know whom I speak of."

Uchiha Obito, Uzumaki Nagato, the list goes on… charisma, unwavering belief, and optimism can only do so much. These people may have been dangerous pawns, but they deserved a chance at making their own choices without the manipulation of Uchiha Madara.

"I can save them, I will!" Naruto replies fervently.

"You must put aside your hero complex, and think rationally. Uchiha Madara," Kurama sneers derisively, "will die, but rest assured he will bring others down with him."
And silence descends with that ominous warning.

Naruto understands Kurama's position, but she still remains conflicted, and yet when the time comes to push the kunai into the jugular, would she?

That answer remains up in the air.
Song of the trees

Chapter by This_wild_abyss (holy_roller_novocaine)

Patience.

An attribute he has in spades.

His container not so much.

Eons upon this earth and Kurama can say he has never met a creature with such a short attention span.

Naruto gripes, moans, and complains about the slow trickle of time. Kurama's temptation to roll his eyes is often tried, and more times than not he finds himself sniping at her.

But Kurama must remember that she is still young by human standards, and perhaps age and time will bring temperance and the wisdom he seldom sees appear in her.

He has been given the chance to see his container age this time around, he'll be damned if this second lot on life is forsaken.

Kurama smiles, a malevolent sight of sharp teeth, ruined by his sudden snort. He's grown quite a soft spot for the moronic girl, and if his siblings heard his thoughts they would die of laughter.

In his long life, Kurama cared not for the affairs of humans. If they sought his power he would eat them—a major cause of indigestion. Or if they happened to contain him and leech off his power, he'd wait for their inevitable deaths and wreak havoc upon their descendants, leaving their legacies ashes on scorched earth.

Naruto is a different case.

His grudging respect for her, and their eventual friendship is what gives the girl leeway in taking liberties with him—from prodding him to help her with training, to long discussions (arguments) about the future strategies, questioning him about his siblings, asking about the rise and falls of civilizations he's lived through, to annoying him generally to no end. If any other ningen dared to tread upon such a path and seek his wisdom as Naruto's has, they would know certain death.

And with the evolution of their dynamic, the connection between them—the seal—has changed, strengthening Kurama's awareness of the outside world. Where once it took Naruto flying into a murderous rage for him to see the day of light, now the biju has the choice of becoming one with Naruto's senses, and seeing and hearing what his container perceives.

And a fool he is not to realize that Naruto's newly founded lease on life has left his jinchurriki happier than she was in her past life time.

Sure their purpose in returning the past is to save those who perished, deter a mad man with delusions of grandeur, and alter the fate of ninja history. (It seems like a lot, but Kurama's encountered stranger things.)

However despite how many friends, allies and redeemed criminals Naruto's met. The absence of her parents has always left a gaping wound covered by smiles. This chance of actually having her parents is something the girl revels in, for orphans grows up faster than others—there is a kernel of
wisdom in understanding the world they reside in, without having guardians as shields.

And this is something Kurama can empathize with. The death of his father left him adrift in the world, even with the task the Rikudo Sennin set out for him and his siblings, the fox had mourned.

His father had been a beacon of hope, and now Naruto stands upon that pedestal.

His fate and many others lay within her hands.

It is a heavy burden to carry, but she does it willingly.

Speaking of the brat, she should appear any moment now.

A rustle of grass in the ever changing landscape, the snapping of branches underfoot, and a jaw-breaking yawn.

Here are the telltale signs.

The fox to opens one eye and glances down at the girl.

Right on time.

He shifts as she sleepily makes her way to him. This time appearing as a toddler dressed in that ridiculous frog cap, pajamas, and clutching a toad plush.

As Naruto's awareness of her world grows, she begins to spend less time in this ever changing mindscape. When she appears to visit (irritate) him, her physical appearance fluctuates from the form of her seventeen year old self, to her current physical appearance of a toddler. He supposes this is her becoming acclimated to her new stint on life. She usually becomes quite aggravated when she appears before him as a toddler, but Kurama delights in it, it's much easier to knock her cheeky self over.

However, right now she's tired and won't complain about her short stature and so Kurama won't give her shit.

Naruto climbs up his paw with a bit of difficulty; the fox makes sure she's mindful of his claws. And then she moves up his arm, settling into the crook of it.

"Pwease tell me a story Kura-chan," She mumbles sleepily.

Kurama growls halfheartedly at the butchering of his name, "And why should I brat?"


Kurama snorts, of course that's sound logic for Naruto, "Fine, I will regal you with my majesty... once again."

This time its Naruto's turn to snort, "Arrogant fox."

Kurama ignores that comment, he'll get her back later. He begins to recount a tale that still leaves him with wonder. "Once I was summoned to another world, an alternate world what have you, where I was a guardian, a spirit within a sword. A sword of a Shinigami, a zanpakutou to retain the balance of this world and those attached to it...."

As Kurama spins his tale, Naruto slowly but surely finds herself within sleep's embrace, Kurama's
Minato treads quietly outside Naruto's room and stretches his senses.

The raging flame that is his daughter's chakra signal, calms as Morpheus' spell claims her. Minato sighs softly and walks away, down the short corridor into the living room where Kushina waits, along with the pink striped elephant in the room.

Kushina sits at the low table, the cup of jasmine tea before her untouched, an anxious expression etched on her lovely features.

At Minato's appearance she pours him a cup, needing something to occupy her hands. "I'm worried Mina-kun."

Minato sighs once more, the telltale signs of Kushina's apprehension enables him to take the direct approach and tackle the elephant in the room.

He raises a brow, "I thought I was supposed to be the neurotic one?"

Kushina glares at him for his attempt at humor, he chuckles in response.

"Seriously Minato, should we push her? She's so young!" Kushina frets.

"We're not going to push her," Minato corrects gently, but firmly, "We're going to aide her, guide her. The doctor has a point, she's not like most toddlers and we shouldn't treat her as such."

The medic nin informed Kushina that the seal's intact, and there were no glitches that could be found. However, the good doctor had done a scan of Naruto's brain, and found that the grey matter in certain areas of her brain have developed at a faster rate than other children her age.

And that announcement alone had relieved the parents.

However, that's not enough to quell Kushina's frazzled nerves. She bristles at the implication that their daughter is abnormal, outside the mold of most toddlers, "So what… we treat her like a small adult! Deprive her of her own childhood; force her to become a ninja—"

"No!" Minato cuts off her tirade impatiently, "I didn't say that. I said we guide her, on our own terms, on whatever path she chooses, and if Naruto chooses to become a ninja then we support her."

Kushina snorts derisively, "You've seen the way Naruto looks at our weapons when we're sharpening and cleaning them. The way she reads that book of yours almost religiously. Naruto's becoming a shinobi bygone conclusion," Kushina takes in a shuddering breath, "and that scares me."

"Kushina," Minato says in placating manner, and takes her hand.

"Naruto's turning out to be a genius, maybe not one that comes once in a lifetime, but a genius nonetheless. You and I both know what happens to prodigal shinobi. Look at Kakashi, for all the guidance you, I, Koto-chan, and Hizashi-kun provide, he's still so fractured," Kushina's eyes shine bright as she lays down her grievances, "All geniuses become so single minded in their goals, even you Mina-chan! I sometimes have to stop and pull you from your new creations, and remind you that you have a life to attend."

Minato does not even look indignant at the accusation, rather accepting, it's the truth after all.
"I fear what will happen to Naruto." Kushina continues softly, "I fear she will lose herself, we will lose her."

Minato remains quiet, a contemplative look gracing his face.

There are stigmas attached to being a genius, particularly in the profession of shinobi. Like all ninja, they are tools to be wielded by their Kage.

And when duty calls, a ninja must heed its beckoning.

And Minato knows that last statement extends to him. With war on the horizon, hell not even on the horizon it'd began the moment Iwagakure dared to occupy one of their allied villages. He will be shipped to the front lines more and more often as the friction between Leaf and Stone becomes more heated. The innovative jutsu he's created will be a boon; (he uses both close and long ranged combat.)

Unlike Nara Shikaku who's ingeniousness is needed behind Konoha's lines. Leaf's foot soldiers are his shoji pieces, creating victorious strategies, but leaving certain death for the expendable.

He takes his wife's hands in both of his and gives her a reassuring squeeze. When he decides to speak it's slowly, choosing each of his words carefully, in smooth even tones.

"When Hatake Retsu died, Sakumo-san had no idea how to raise a child, and when he found out about Kakashi's prodigal status that enabled him to treat him as an adult. Kakashi grew up trying to emulate his father and behave as maturely as he possibly could. We are nothing like that," Minato explains with unshakable confidence, "Naruto has both of her parents, and though we're figuring this out as we go along. We are guiding her as parents should, helping her find her way in this world, and we'll have to support her decisions when she makes them. And yah we might screw up," Minato admits grudgingly, "but we'll make it, we've done pretty well so far."

Kushina nods, not completely assuaged, but willing to let Minato's confidence build back up her own. "How do we go about teaching Naruto?"

Minato shrugs, "We'll figure it out and take it one step at a time."

Kushina snorts and rolls her eyes, "So we're winging it?"

"Yah," Minato says happily.

And so Minato and Kushina go with the tides of change and adapt.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hands)

"...while the smaller matrixes allow for more creativity, these matrixes can encompass elements such as wind, earth, fire, water, and lightening. The outer dimensions stabilize the seal," There's a manic gleam in her eyes, a gleam of absolute passion as she waxes poetic on her chosen field of expertise. "Are you following?"

Naruto stares at her blankly.

Kushina pays her no mind and continues to rant on the merits of being a seal master.

"Fuinjutsu is the best, dattebane! And Naruto you're going to be a bada—ugh, I mean awesome at it. Ready to get started!?"
Minato looks at his daughter's now terrified expression and laughs.

While he's considered a prodigy, his wife is the one with an affinity for fuinjutsu. As a child she'd been indoctrinated into sealing, the training regime in Uz甥 no Kuni began early in age, and later went on to create shinobi with an unparalleled skill in combat fuinjutsu.

They do not wish to duplicate the learning structure the Uzumaki once practiced. Rather they are choosing to implement certain aspects of it, seeking to follow Naruto's doctor's advice.

They'd been advised to start teaching Naruto how to write, this would help with her motor skills. The plan had been to start tutoring Naruto when she turned three; those plans had simply been advanced a few months ahead of time.

"Maybe," Minato suggest, "we should start small. How about we have Naruto practice her kanji?"

Kushina blinks at him, and then shrugs, "Okay, that's fine."

Naruto gives her father a look of relief, and he chuckles quietly.

This is a matter of trial and error, and so far such tactics have worked. They write out what Naruto will practice, show their daughter how to properly hold her brush, and watched in utter adoration as she pokes her tongue out in concentration, carefully copying the kanji, ending up with messy results, but progressing nonetheless.

Of course this moment is documented, forever immortalized on film: a brush held awkwardly in Naruto's small hand, ink droplets on her clothing, smeared on her face, accompanied by a large grin.

Experimentation is needed in teaching techniques, while Naruto displays intellect in understanding directions, and complying without needing further instruction. Her attention also wonders, and she becomes easily frustrated by what she doesn't understand—hence temper tantrums, and the need for time outs.

Of course those do not go over well.

And so Minato and Kushina vary their teaching styles between visual learning and hands on tactics. The latter works more often than not.

Instances such as this:

The study sessions aren't long; they spend three hours in the morning going over certain subjects. Slowly but surely introducing Naruto to a work ethic that doesn't overwhelm her, but begins to teach her discipline that will be necessary when she starts the academy.

The problem is Naruto's interest and focus on one or two subjects does not extend to others.

Kushina's volunteering at the academy and Minato is taking the reins for the day. Unfortunately, it's not often that it happens but when it does, the blond revels in it.

Minato's multi-tasking: watching his daughter who looks like she's going to nod off from sheer boredom, going over a mission report written by Uchiha Obito, making more corrections than he'd like, and going over books retrieved from the library.

Books that parallel each other, advanced history texts matched with illustrated books that are similar in context. Giving Naruto detailed accounts of historical events with images to supplement them.
While her father's attention wavers from her, Naruto takes it upon herself to take her afternoon nap before its scheduled time.

When Minato finally looks up, there's a puddle of drool forming outside the arm that cradles Naruto's head, dangerously close to the book she's laying on top of. Minato sighs and shakes his head.

Obviously he's going about this the wrong way.

Gently he awakens Naruto. "Huh… what?" she mumbles sleepily, looking up at her father, she whines, "Noooo! Tou-chan it's too early to be up."

Minato chuckles, and picks her up, holding her up high, "How about instead of me telling you about our founders, we actually see them?"

Naruto stops rubbing one eye sleepily, and looks at him in confused askance.

Minato puts her down and instructs her to go put on her shoes.

A few minutes later Naruto listens in rapt attention as Minato scales the rocky terrain of the mountain, carrying Naruto in secure arms. As he treks up the side of the Hokage monument, he points to each Hokage and list each of their accomplishments.

When he finishes his lecture, Naruto confides in him solemnly, "'m gonna become Hokage one day."

Minato raises a blond brow, "Really? And why do you want to be the village's leader?"

"I've gotta become the strongest shinobi to protect my precious people," Naruto replies resolutely.

In bemusement Minato stares at her, her eyes have taken on that thousand yard stare that veteran shinobi attain after seeing one to many battle fields.

There's an old soul there, residing his daughter, and this isn't the first time he's seeing it. The wisdom and intelligence she sometimes displays, he once laid the fault at the Kyuubi's feet. Now however, he's aware that it's all his daughter, and he wonders what lingering burdens haunt her from past lives.

"And who are your precious people?" He queries.

Naruto's old soul disappears and she smiles, innocence once more returning to her. "You, Ka-chan, Mikoto-oba, Itachi-chan, 'kashi-chan, Shisui-chan, Ero-sennin—"

"Who!?!" Minato sputters.

Naruto blinks at him owlishly, and explains in a-matter-of-fact tone, "Jiraiya-ji, he likes to perve around, like at the hot springs where he likes to spy."

Minato feels his eye twitch, and mutters, "By the Shodai…"

It appears he and his sensei would be having it out and he'd be informing Kushina what their daughter's god father exposed her to when he decided to spend "quality time" with her.

"Anyways," Naruto continues flippantly, "I've gotta become strong enough to protect you all, ttebayo!"

Minato feels his left eye twitch again, "Dattebayo? Naruto remember to not say that around your mother."
Naruto simply grins at him, "I can't make any promises, but I'll try more." Naruto shudders, "I remember what happened last time I said it around her."

"Well," Minato chuckles and shifts her in his arms, "We don't want a repeat performance of that. But in the meantime while you're growing up, your Oka-san and I will protect you until then. Now it's time for lunch."

"Yatta!" Naruto cries, "Can we have ramen?"

"Nope," Minato announces happily, "We're getting barbecue, every once in a while we need to have variety."

Naruto grumbles, "Ramen has variety…"

After that history lessons are made official field trips to landmarks that represent pinnacle moments in history for Konoha.

Or this:

Academia encompasses the mornings; training and play take up the afternoon, well after lunch time and Naruto's scheduled nap.

This is when Kushina takes the reins.

There's an empty, weed filled greenhouse on the roof of the two story flat they own. The plants that Kushina and Minato keep around their home have slowly but surely made a new home on the roof top above.

Here is where Kushina thrives, and Naruto delights in taking lessons there.

They trek up here and immerse themselves in the sun.

Kushina hesitates in teaching Naruto the Uzumaki fighting style, her chakra coils are still developing, and the fighting techniques rely heavily on chakra output. It's requires brute strength from raw chakra, the Uzumaki were known for their vitality and long lives, and those aspects relied heavily on their special chakra.

The Uzumaki Brute Fist breaks bones, and destroys chakra tenketsu in the chakra pathway system.

Naruto will have large reserves along with the Kyuubi's chakra slowly joining and becoming one with hers. Her daughter will be a powerhouse when she's finally able to use those techniques.

And so in the meantime Kushina teaches Naruto the basic katas.

"Move your arm like this, and place your foot forward." Kushina instructs, gently correcting Naruto's movements.

"Now can you do them all?" Kushina questions.

Naruto nods, a look of upmost concentration on her face as she slides smoothly through each kata. Arm up in defense, leg up to strike, arms crossed to defend, leg slides back, arm segues forward. A chakra blast would have accompanied each outward strike if she'd been on the battle field.

When Naruto finishes, she looks to her mother for approval, and grins brilliantly at Kushina's look of satisfaction.
"Again?"

Naruto quickly shakes her head and Kushina laughs.

"Well done then Naru-chan," Kushina praises, and hands Naruto a thermos of water, "Come along, we'll stop by the dango shop before meeting Koto-chan."

"Yatta!" Naruto cries, and raises her arms in the universal sign that she wants to be picked up.

A quick trek, and a purchase of eight dango sticks later, Naruto clutches her mother's hand, and happily munches away on her sweets. Kushina walks slowly so that Naruto can keep up with her steps as they approach Konoha's east gate.

At the gates opening stands the regal Uchiha Mikoto, the solemn looking Itachi, and Shisui… with a huge grin on his face. That kid has got to be the most un-Uchiha since Obito.

"Koto-chan! I come bearing goods!" Kushina announces.

Naruto dutifully takes the box of dango clutched in her arms, and offers two sticks to each of them. Mikoto and Itachi thank her quietly; Shisui on the other hand makes his presence known.

"Naru-chan! You love me after all; you're my favorite girl in the world!" Shisui exclaims as he finishes off his dango.

"I thought cousin Akemi was your favorite?" Itachi inquires flatly, chewing slowly on his dango, his sweet tooth demands he savor the taste.

"Gahhh! Itachi-chan why do you always do that!?" Shisui whines.

"Do what Shisui-chan?" Itachi questions, a smile gracing his cherubic features.

"All right kiddies, we're off to parts unknown, to explore regions unexplored by any other!" Kushina states dramatically.

"…we're going to learn about plants and identify the ones that will help you on future missions;" Mikoto corrects dryly.

"Koto-chan, don't rain on my parade!" Kushina whines.

Mikoto laughs, and the five of them trek down the stone road.

Konoha's towering trees encompasses them, the whisper of their leaves, a song in their wake as they venture out into the wilds.

As time goes on, they fall into a pattern.

They alternate Naruto's tutoring and training regime. Minato usually takes on the tasks of teaching maths, history and the likes, having more patience to deal with their daughter's fluctuating attention than Kushina. While Kushina prefers outside pursuits, something she and their daughter are kindred in.

Sometimes they teach together, many times its Kushina taking up the reins when Minato is away on missions. Rarer occasions arise when they alternate, this happens when Kushina is requested for a mission for her sealing expertise.
It's once in a blue moon when they're both absent.

**I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)**

This isn't quite how Jiraiya expected to spend his brief reprieve from traveling.

He looks down at the mess of blond spikes diligently writing out what appears to be her name, her mother's and father's and his… Gama-ero-sennin! _Why that little_—

"Are you sure you can handle this?" Kushina questions, interrupting his musings. She runs about the flat gathering supplies and sealing them away for her mission, he swears watching her is enough to give him a headache.

"Sure," Jiraiya replies lazily, "me and the kid will be all right."

"If that's the case then, I'm good to go, but…"

There's a sudden spike of killing intent. Naruto squeaks and drops her brush, Jiraiya shudders and Kushina appears before him. Red hair coiling about ominously, the temperature of the room seems to have dropped ten degrees, and Jiraiya thinks _this has to be a genjutsu, it has to be!_

"If I hear that you've been using my daughter as a ploy to pick up women. I'll make sure you won't be able to produce children yourself, attebane!"

Jiraiya breaks out into a cold sweat, and he wonders how the hell she heard about that. He looks down to find blue eyes staring up at him innocently, and the midget dares to smile at him slyly.

_Evil little shit!_

"Am I understood?"

"Yah," Jiraiya responds wearily.

"Good."

As Kushina picks up Naruto, hugs her tightly and plant a wet kiss on her cheek, Jiraiya thinks these next three days until Minato returns from his mission are going to be a trial.

And then he pales, if Kushina knows about his machinations, surely Minato is aware.

_Oh shit!_
At the park’s entrance he waits.

Sounds of laughter and cries of mischief entice him, beckon him to join the fun, but he staunchly ignores it.

And continues to wait.

Footsteps approach, a practiced silent tread in progress, moving with quick speed. However, that telltale sign is not what gives him a clue, rather it's the chakra signature, one that is always companion to his own.

It's appears Shisui has come to tempt him, to leave his post.

The post Shisui abandoned not long before, to join in the fun and games.

Traitor Shisui may be, but he is family and Itachi is inclined to listen to him.

And so Shisui calls and Itachi harkens.

But, he will still remain unmoved.

"Itachi!" He states excitedly, "Inuzuka Hana brought her Oka-san's ninken. He talks!"

That makes Itachi start and the temptation to move, to join his fellow playmates in mischief of one kind and many others, simmers and bubbles within him.

The Uchiha have ninneko, Itachi has seen them once while accompanying his father on his first trip to Sora-ku. The cats there talked, and had been a curiosity he had not been able to explore to his heart's content.

Here is an opportunity to do so.

Itachi is contemplative and looks to his cousin, finding Shisui's dark eyes alight with an unholy gleam. *He thinks he's got me!*

If anyone knows him well, it is his cousin and best friend.

But he made a promise to wait until she comes to play.

And so he will wait.

Naruto would do the same for him; she inspires that kind of loyalty in people.

"Later, when Naruto comes," Itachi says.

Shisui scuffs the dirt at his feet, and replies, "Suit yourself."

And thus his cousin departs and returns to the melee.

Itachi watches as Shisui absconds, and returns to his watch and waits, looking for familiar shades of red, yellow, blue or orange.
Itachi is... complicated.

He is an old soul with childish tendencies; his mother's teasing tells him he's a hundred years too early to ask the questions he does.

At a few months into his third year of life, Itachi has shown he is a blossoming genius. The world is a place of wonder, and he is very curious about it. He observes all around him, and only participates at the coercion of those that know him best.

And those people are few.

And so he holds these bonds close to his chest, refusing to ever let them wither away into dust, and Naruto just so happens to fall into that category.

Most people would wonder what village lost their idiot when they meet Naruto.

And Itachi agrees to some extent.

For a prodigy she is quite dense, but she's still one of his best friends. With her, he finds himself in more trouble than worth the headaches that usual follow her antics.

And yet he dares not say no, for it is the only fun he has outside of his rigorous training regimen.

Naruto rips down the walls he's slowly constructing, reaching out with insistent hands, demanding he live in the now and be a child. Making it easier to relate to children his own age, and traverse the social landscape without sticking out like a beacon with neon lights.

The least he can do is wait for her to make an appearance before melting into the melee.

Another chakra signature approaches him, this one of great comfort. She stops by him and runs a hand through his soft hair. Itachi naturally squirms away from her touch, and pats down his hair. His mother laughs in response.

They lapse into silence, watching as the undulating crowd passes by, only broken by the distant haggling of the bazaar and the passing crowd, entering and exiting the market district.

After a few moments Itachi speaks.

"She's late," Itachi tells his mother solemnly.

Mikoto raises a brow and smiles, "Give her a few more minutes darling, her godfather's minding her while Kushina and Minato are away on missions; he's not used to her routine."

"Hn," Itachi grunts, and Mikoto suppresses a laugh.

His mother soon wanders away, and leaves him to his devices. Itachi's patience finally begins to wear thin.

And right on time.

A shock of blond and orange appears on the horizon, towering over the crowd as she is carried by a giant with gray hair. Namikaze-Uzumaki Naruto appears on the shoulders of one of the legendary sannin.

…This is a first.
And Itachi honestly is not surprised, Naruto has referred her godfather in passing with many names—pervert, old fart, super pervert, ero-sennin, toad sage—the last one should have given it away.

Well, it matters not who he is, only that he plays to their purpose.

They appear before him, Jiraiya setting down Naruto as she shouts her greeting, "Itachi! What the hell are you doing over here instead of playing over there? Did you seriously wait this entire time for me? What the hell is wrong with you?"

Itachi does not have much to say to that rant, so he says nothing at all.

It appears her companion does:

"Language," The toad sage chides in amusement.

Naruto waves him off, waiting for Itachi to answer her.

"Inuzuka Hana brought her mother's ninken," Itachi replies, "I take it you'll meet her up on that bet."

Naruto grins and he wonders absently if her cheeks hurt by the strength of it.

"Yup!" Naruto says, and then turns to Jiraiya with an expectant look, who in turn gives her an exasperated look.

"Honestly gaki, you drag me to the park, you don't even introduce me to your little friend here, and then make demands of me," Ero-sennin complains.

Naruto's left eye twitches, and she states sarcastically, "Ero-sennin this is Uchiha Itachi, illustrious heir to the Uchiha clan. Itachi this is Jiraiya of the Sannin." She turns to him impatiently, "Now will you do it?"

Jiraiya shrugs his shoulders and grunts, "Eh."

Naruto eyes narrow, and she points an accusing finger at him, shouting, "You promised! If you don't, I'll tell Otou-san you—"

"All right, all right, you win brat," The toad sage says in surrenders, and then proceeds to fly through a series of hand seals that makes Itachi watch on in keen interest.

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu." The hand slams down, a plume of smoke appears, and as the smoke disperses a toad appears.

In height he stands at the sannin's waist, dwarfing Naruto and Itachi, maroon in color, yellow eyed, and dressed in a haori.

"Hi Gamaken!" Naruto greets enthusiastically, "will you play with us today?"

"Though I'm clumsy, I will join you and your friend, Naruto," Gamaken replies.

"Yatta!" Naruto whoops, "Let's go!"

Naruto takes off, and Gamaken leaps after her, but Itachi who stays behind and turns to the sannin bowing, he shows gratitude on both his and Naruto's account, "Thank you Jiraiya-sama."

The toad sage waves him off, walking away, muttering about toddlers being extortionist, and how the hell did he end up getting blackmailed by a brat.
Itachi turns and follows Naruto's path at a more sedate pace, a grin of satisfaction gracing his face. He wonders what Shisui would have to say about a talking toad.

"All right gaki, here's what we've got to work with," Jiraiya announces.

They stand in the kitchen, Jiraiya sorts through the refrigerator while Naruto watches him avidly, producing a few containers that he stacks on the counter.

"Your mother left you a couple of premade meals," Jiraiya holds up two containers and squints at the labels on them. "Chanpurū, miso soup and rice, tempura, motsunabe…” The toad sage continues to list as he pulls out more containers.

Two character bento appear in his hand, both in blinding shades of orange, Naruto reaches for one and Jiraiya hands it to her absently as he continues to rummage through the fridge. "By the Shodai, you would think Kushina's trying to feed the entire village, instead of one midget," The toad sage exclaims.

Naruto makes a sound of indignation around a mouthful.

Jiraiya looks down at her, and raises a brow, "Kid that bento is supposed to be for snack time."

"It's mid-morning snack time, check the time," Naruto replies cheekily, and then proceeds to stab a rice ball in her image, and shoves it into her mouth.

Jiraiya watches her consume her bento horrified fascination, it's almost as bad as watching Minato eat, and he wonders, where does it all go?

"At this rate, we'll be eating out by the time your father returns," Jiraiya comments, once she's finished devouring the onigiri.

Naruto grins at him; there are pieces of rice on her face, it's an endearing picture.

The toad sage shakes his head in amusement.

Moments like these remind her of her training trip with the sage. These moments are bittersweet, and reminds Naruto to live in the moment instead of reflecting on past that will not become prologue.

However, it fails to overcome the grimness of the current times.

This is the fifth time in two months that Jiraiya has been called upon to watch over her.

Minato's away with his gennin team, and is not expected to return for another three days. Kushina's away on a classified mission with the parameters of returning within the next week or so.

The missions' time lines fluctuate with its demands.

Minato and Kushina have been beckoned to come to Konoha's defense, and they have heeded each call without dispute, as any loyal ninja would.

Naruto may not comprehend the obvious, but she is perspective.

She gets people.

The tension beneath the surface when her parents are present is nearly palpable.
Of course Naruto knows it's due to the war effort. She paid some attention to the Academy's history lessons… okay maybe she didn’t.

But she recognizes that tension in her parents, it echoes she and her fellow shinobi at the beginning of the fourth ninja war.

She is not blind to her father's frayed nerves, finger nails bitten to the brim, the tug of blond hair that accompanies stress. Nor the great effort her mother usually displays at keeping an even temper is tested, resulting in outbursts that are thunderous and explosive more often than not.

She wonders how Jiraiya is even being spared from the conflict. Surely his spy network should be reporting to him, giving the information of their victims after being lying liars that lie.

But perhaps Jiraiya's presence here is a boon, Naruto is Konoha's resident jinchuuriki and with both her parents—that are seal masters in their own right—absent, another must take residence in their place.

There is a war taking place, secrets spread out like fire from the grapevine, S-class secrets fall through the cracks from traitorous citizens who believe they know what's best for Konoha and—Naruto halts those thoughts, for they are cynical, but Naruto's optimism can only so far at times, and from the horrors she's seen it's tested enough.

Since her new lease on life she has not been living in a bubble of bliss, sure she revels in having her parents, but reality rears its ugly head all the time:

There are nights when Naruto cannot sleep.

Her dreams are haunted by the waxen faces of her friends and comrades in arms, in various states of death throes.

For solace she usually seeks out Kurama, journeying to the ever changing landscape to become lost in the stories he spins, lulling her to sleep, safe in the thought that his great daunting presence watches over her.

But there are times when that is not enough, her thoughts are engulfed by her parents' plight and the steps she needs to take. The suggestions Kurama has been making with all the subtlety of a raging train.

Naruto has been planning, shaping, molding to tackle the ghost of an uncertain future. But she needs to be focusing on is the present, the precursor for that precarious future.

She knows what needs to be done, but she hesitates.

And that is her undoing.

It takes her mother's encounter with death for it to be cemented.

The call comes at twilight, where dawn has yet to intrude upon night, and thus darkness remains and prevails.

Naruto cannot sleep.

This is not the first nor the last time a bout of insomnia plagues her, this is one of those rare nights where even Kurama's presence cannot hinder the nightmares and welcome in Morpheus.
She's spent most of the night meditating, her time with Fukasaku and Shima having instilled the skill into her; at least she'd be rested for the coming day.

When a muted chakra presence appears, Naruto stills and forgets to breathe, her heart pounds loudly in her ears. She struggles to listen as Jiraiya's chakra roars to life and answers the beckoning.

Minutes pass, in them is eternity, Naruto chakra control is not at its best with her still developing chakra coils, extending chakra to her senses is out of the question.

Even with her senses sharpened due to Kurama’s presence, she struggles to hear their conversation, but what she overhears makes her still once again.

No!

Jiraiya approaches her room; she forces her breathing to deepen to portray that she's been sleeping. He opens her door and gives her a pensive look, "No need to fake sleeping Naru-chan, I know you're awake."

She opens her eyes slowly; blinking away the discomfort as the light from the hall bleeds in.

He stands there for a moment, staring in the distance, choosing his words carefully.

As a writer maybe he can find a way to soften the inevitable blow, Naruto thinks bitterly. She shifts and kicks her covers away, suddenly feeling suffocated by the duvet and sheet.

Jiraiya voices his thoughts, "Kid you probably heard what's happened—I've learned not to underestimate you— but I'll say it anyway, something went wrong on your mother's mission. She's hurt and about to enter surgery. Grab your coat; we're going to the hospital to be there when she wakes up. She's going to want to see your smiling face."

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

Surgery last for four hours.

In the waiting room they reside for those long tedious hours.

Naruto manages to stay awake for two hours before passing out from stress alone, allowing herself the rest she missed from the lack of sleep.

Namikaze-Uzumaki Kushina had been solicited for an ANBU mission for her sealing abilities and bloodline limit. With missions there is always the possibility of death, failure, capture by enemies, et cetera.

So her brush with death should be something to scoff at. She returned to her village with the mission finished, and all the members of her team of alive. And yet it isn't.

Deaths breaths down her neck, a garrote ready to be pulled tight.

The wound inflicted upon Kushina had been grievous; a poison had laced the weapon of choice and worked through her system rapidly. She'd been place in a stasis seal, one of her own making.

Kushina had never quite recovered from the Kyuubi's extraction; she's still healing from it to this day. The Uzumaki vitality keeps her alive by a thread.

But that special chakra works miracles, and hours later she's waking up groggily.
Her vision is filled with spikes of blond hair; a small body lies carefully beside her, a comforting warmth that is familiar. She raises a hand weakly to run her hand through that hair.

Naruto looks up at her mother to find her smiling down at her. Naruto returns it automatically, but it falls quickly as her lower lip trembles and tears fill her vision, she whimpering, "Ka-chan…"

"Oh Naru-chan," Kushina consoles, "Don't cry, my poor baby. Did I scare you? I'm fine now, don't cry."

Kushina holds her in a weak embrace, and Naruto returns it with tight arms, mindful of her mother's bandaged midsection.

Naruto comes to a decision then and there.

She returned to the past to right the wrongs of a would be death dealer upon the ninja world. She'd thought restoring the lives of her parents had been a great stepping stone in the right direction, but she'd thought wrong. Confronted with the mortality of her own mother, Naruto realizes that to carry this burden of protecting so many, she will require constant vigilance.

Naruto cannot do this alone.

"Are you sure this will work?" Naruto asks for the nth time.

Kurama rolls his eyes, and deigns to give a lengthy response instead of a vague one as he had been, "My siblings will be willing to listen. We all share a like mind when it comes to vengeance," here Kurama gives her a blood thirsty grin, "We'll strike down the one who dares betray our father's legacy. However," Kurama lets out an irritated grunt, "It's the jinchurriki we must worry about. Some of the vessels you are not familiar with, two of them are loyal to Iwa, who are currently at odds with Leaf. And yet their loyalties will be to themselves first, you must appeal to them personally. The containers you'll have an easier time persuading those that get along like you and I."

Naruto gives a shaky sigh and nods to herself, "I'm ready then."

Kurama grins in response, all sharp teeth, and full of glee.

They ascend to a place beyond, to a plane the biju call their own, empty and vast, an open landscape of nothing and everything.

Beneath their feet the ground ripples with movements. Naruto hears chatter, yells of indignation, surprised exclamations… a plethora of responses to their surroundings.

Naruto stands behind Kurama's massive arm, cloaked from inquiring looks. She appears as her elder self—she highly doubts a toddler would be taken seriously. She closes her eyes and breathes deeply, she can do this, believe it!

She moves forward with a guileless smile and says, "Oi, my name is Naruto! I called you all here…"
Here be dragons

Chapter by This_wild_abyss (holy_roller_novocaine)

There are times when she needs to escape.

Escape the reality of her new life—being in the presence of her parents, of new individuals who have become her precious people.

(This new existence can be overwhelming.)

Escape Kurama's daunting presence—though she and the biju are a friendly terms, Naruto is ever aware that the tenet in her gut is an infinite being that has lived eons and seen things her mind can only begin to grasp.

Her methods and thought patterns—her humanity—are foreign to him. He sees the direct approach and does not understand why she will not take it. What are a few lives in the grand scheme of things, when the inevitable outcome will grant peace?

That reasoning goes against everything Naruto stands for, but even she cannot save everyone.

And so she blocks them all out and delves into her subconscious. Here she is cloaked in darkness, flouting on her back in water, above her is the night sky painted in ever changing constellations.

The web she has woven.

How intricate it becomes with each step Naruto takes to ensuring a peaceful future.

Contrary to popular belief, Naruto is prone to periods of great contemplation, or rather she has been since the Sage of Six Paths presented her with a fork in the road, and she'd chosen the path never traveled by any other.

Her initial plan upon returning to the past had consisted of saving as many people as possible, now that plan has become convoluted. Simply killing Madara will not be enough, there's so many other variables to take into perspective. And as she changes the past, she can't help but be haunted by the ghost of an uncertain future.

The latest stunt she pulled will perhaps bring about the greatest watershed.

When she'd chosen to seek allies in her fellow human sacrifices and the biju who are hosted by them. It'd been a desperate bid, she didn't think she could be sole savior of a future that involved the lives of many:

This impromptu meeting does not quite start as she planned. But Naruto has always been good with improvisation and her charisma takes her a long way.

"Oi, my name is Naruto! I called you all here... uh, for a meeting yah," Naruto finishes, and rubs the back of her head sheepishly. "I—"

"Eh!? What's this!? Kurama's cavorting with a human!" Chomie says, "How lucky you must be, little ningen!"

"Kurama has gone soft and senile in his old age," Shukaku supplies in glee.
The fox in question lets out a derisive snort, "And I see you're still expressing unwanted opinions."

The two biju continue to bicker, Naruto uses this distraction to do a reconnaissance on her fellow jinchurriki.

From out of nine there are only five that are present, including herself amongst that count. Killer B, Yugito Nii, Roshi and Han.

Killer B will be easy to convince, in this quandary Yugito Nii's interest will lie with herself and B. Their relationship with their tailed beast should also help guarantee their cooperation. However, there is their loyalty to their village, the ninja of Kumo are a proudful lot. Naruto had no idea how Yugito stood in her allegiance to Cloud, B made escaping Kumo into a sport so he would look at this as an adventure to inspire new lyrics.

Han and Roshi are another story altogether.

Iwa is at war with Leaf, in her past life Naruto had heard they we're used as weapons in the war, and yet their very presence did not help alter the war in Iwa's favor. She concludes that their loyalties lie to themselves before their village. She thinks Han will be one of the hardest to convince in her bid to make her fellow jinchurriki into harbingers of peace. Han cares nothing for humanity.

Nonetheless if they're willing, she hopes they will become her eyes and ears on the war front until it comes to an end.

Naruto will leave convincing the biju to Kurama, he is their elder sibling and can provide concrete evidence. How? Naruto has no idea, Kurama stated it was beyond her puny human intellect. If push comes to shove, she'll mention Ōtsutsuki Hagoromo and the words he imparted to her.

Naruto tunes back into the biju's conversation which has gone onto include Gyuki and Son Goku, with Matabi attempting to calmly mediate the quarreling.

"Let us not mention the time you disguised yourself as a human and started a war between two peaceful nations. Or how about the time you disguised yourself as a milkmaid and seduced a whole village. Just admit that you're an attention whore Kurama!" Gyuki snaps.

"Such unbefitting behavior," Son Goku adds unhelpfully.

"I do as I please, you're just jealous of my exploits," Kurama retorts smugly.

Matabi sighs, "Really boys is an argument necessary, every time we meet."

"Yes!" They chorus together.

Naruto decides now is the time to intervene. Sexy no jutsu always helps break the ice.

"Multisexy no jutsu!"

In the midst of puffs of smoke the much more voluptuous form of an adult Naruto appears in all her pin up glory. Clones abound give air kisses, and pose in the most provocative stances.

"Well," Matabi says wryly, "At least Kurama has a host that is a kindred spirit in mischief."

It all sort of snowballs from there.

The general reaction is offense and amusement. Han and Roshi are closet perverts, which seems to be a common trend with powerful ninjas. Yugito Nii is offended by the presence of perverts and
makes her displeasure known loudly and effectively. B is an entirely different species, he asks one of the clones if her boss would ever consider starring in a music video.

"Hey, hey, HEYYY!"

When the commotion comes to abrupt halt, Naruto gives herself a mental pat on the back for adverting the attention onto her. She's always had a loud voice and it comes in handy at the most convenient times.

"So back on subject, yah? The meeting that I mentioned, ring any bells."

Above her Kurama rolls his eyes, could the brat be any more eloquent?

Naruto pauses for a moment, and braces herself for the reactions she's about to receive. "I come from the future."

What follows is a pregnant pause, followed by noises and jeers of disbelief. She ignores them and speaks over them calmly, "I come from a future where the four great shinobi villages fight under one banner, against one common enemy. Kurama can confirm this."

The fox's tails move about lazily and he takes his time answering as expectant eyes look to him. Kurama grins, a menacing sight and says, "She speaks the truth."

"It was a war for all our sakes, one man wished to control our free wills," Naruto says, playing raconteur.

And so she spins a tale of a madman intent on creating a world in his image. The culprit she says with relish, is Uchiha Madara. Hackles rise at the name, guttural growls, and inhuman cries from the biju. Their hosts however, are confused by the name, or in a state of disbelief at the belief of a dead man making a bid for power.

The story continues as she engages them, plays on their humanity or whatever last vestiges of it remains. She implores them, speaks of families lost and protecting them whether they are of blood or choice. Most of all she uses their will to survive. All jinchuuriki well versed in the art of survival, either them or me. This is a matter of either them or Madara, which means survival or oblivion.

She tells them of the Sage of six paths and the vision he had. She tells them of the choice he gave her, to change this bleak future, filled with death and chaos and despair. Where there would be no distinct winner with so many lives lost.

And so Naruto finishes and implores them once more, "All I ask is that you all help me create a future free of this strife. We won't create a perfect world, but we'll make one free of oppressors such as Uchiha Madara. We have the right to make that choice, everyone has the right to make a choice on how they live."

"If you're willing, meet me here in two days' time. For I've got a plan, I've got an atlas in my hand."

It'd been a desperate bid that won allies.

The biju had come to a unanimous agreement and even if their host did not agree they would drag them into the dimension the biju call their own and sit vigil.

In mean time moves had to be made.
Awakening in twilight, Minato tugs on his green flak vest, secures his weapons pouch, drops a kiss on Kushina's brow, and watches in amusement as she slaps him away sleepily, grumbling incoherently. He treads the hall quietly; he stops outside Naruto's door, noticing the light piercing the dark underneath the entrance.

The flame that is his daughter's chakra signature roars with life, its flames dancing, a sure sign Naruto is awake.

Minato pauses, hand on the doorknob, he wonders what evil dares plague the dreams of his little girl, and should he chase them away before he leaves on his mission?

That question does not even need rumination, fatherhood tugs at his heartstrings, and he pushes the door open.

Naruto sits up top her made bed, dressed for the day, reading that favorite book of hers "The Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi."

She looks up at him and grins, "Ohayo, Tou-san!"

Minato quirks a brow at her, "Ohayo Naru-chan, what are you doing up so early?"

"To see you off before you go on your mission Tou-chan," Naruto replies, tone insinuating that it's the most obvious thing in the world. She slips down from her bed, and goes to place the book in the book case.

"Why?" Minato questions, as she stands on her tiptoes to reach the shelf above her.

Naruto looks at her father and approaches him slowly, burying her face in his pant leg, and clenching a fist in the material as she says, voice muffled, "Because…"

The word lingers in deafening silence that follows.

In that one word Minato feels his heartbreak for the implications associated with it. He swallows hard and raises a trembling hand to ruffle her hair; he says in a somewhat steady voice, "All right Naruto, you can come."

He will not deny her that.

Upon returning from his mission with his team, he'd come home to encounter his wife on the mend from fatal wounds and an inconsolable toddler, who had begun to cling to all her precious people with a vice grip.

Naruto has always valued her independence and let her actions show Minato and Kushina that she's perfectly capable of handling things most her age toddlers find incomprehensible.

Now she's displaying levels of attachment that border on desperation.

It's not extreme, rather when she hugs her parents, she holds on for moments longer than usual, or she's prone to crying more than her usual wont and that's rare, for Naruto has always been a happy child.

Minato suspects that her understanding of the world around her must have titled upon it axis when faced with the mortality of her mother. Parents may seem invincible to their children and genius his baby girl may be, she still must hold he and Kushina on the same pedestal, for without fail Minato and Kushina have always returned to her whole and sane after missions.
And so Minato allows her to cling.

Allows her to keep the bonds she has sewn tight within her grasp.

And though she clings, Minato doesn’t realize it’s so much more than that.

Naruto follows Minato through the corridor, to the front entrance where they pull on their sandals. As they exit to the street, Minato stops to pick Naruto up and places her on his shoulders.

And they begin their trek to Kakashi’s apartment. When they arrive Kakashi is ready, if he finds it strange that his sensei brought the little terror from hell he says nothing, and endures her sloppy kiss on his clothed cheek. Nohara Rin’s apartment above her parents’ weapons shop is there next destination, and the girl in question stands outside the premises, ready to leave.

Rin locates Naruto in the flock of matching hair that she share with Minato-sensei, she finds the little girl to be utterly adorable with her cherubic features, hair done up in pig tails—how Kushina managed that is beyond her, the child refuses to hold still, but Naruto can do no wrong in her eyes. "Ohayo Naruto-chan!"

"Ohayo Rin-chan!" Naruto replies happily.

And last on their agenda is the Uchiha district. Obito is allotted the most time; his perpetual tardiness grates on the nerves of Kakashi as they wait outside the opened gates.

"He's not worthy of being a shinobi if he can't bother to be on time," Kakashi mutters, "his tardiness could one day be choice of whether a teammate lives or dies, and whether a mission fails or succeeds."

Before her father can reprimand him, Naruto speaks, voice fervent, "That's bullshit—"

"Language Naruto!" Minato harshly reproaches, and mutters, "I swear I'm going to kill Jiraiya for cursing in front of you."

Naruto continues as if she did not hear him, from her perch on Minato's shoulders she glares down at Kakashi. "That's bullshit! He's your teammate; he wouldn't let you down in a life or death situation. Those who abandon their comrades are dumbasses! Obito's dense but he's got heart, and he wouldn't let you down, just like I know you wouldn't let him, Rin or Tou-san down, would you!?"

Dark grey eyes regard her with an unblinking stare, Naruto does not back down, she has experience in dealing with prodigies with sticks up their asses. Kakashi regards her with new interest, and Naruto knows she will get through to him.

The tension between them is tangible, however, Minato remains thoughtful. He wants to see how this will play out, but Rin attempts to diffuse the tangible tension.

"Ano, maybe we should—"

"No," Kakashi states, his usual flat tone has some inflection in it, some unidentified emotion, "I wouldn't leave any of them behind."

Naruto's answering smile resembles the sun breaking through the clouds, "And that's why Kashi-ni is one of my precious people."

Kakashi looks away, and Minato knows the boy is blushing; any form of familial love makes the boy flustered.
Obito chooses that moment to appear, looking apologetic, "Sorry guys I'm a bit late, there was this ___."

"You're not late," Kakashi interrupts, "you've got five minutes to spare. Keep this up and I'll start thinking there's actually a brain in that head of yours."

Obito takes a moment to catch onto the insult, too busy reveling in the novelty of actually being on time. When he does catch on, he yells his indignation, "Hey!"

"Obito-kun, piggy back ride!" Naruto demands, stopping the ensuing quarrel before it can launch. She impatiently kicks her small legs and pulls at Minato's hair to be let down, and he does with a long suffering sigh.

The Uchiha sputters, but haunches down anyway to let her climb up. He mutters irritably, "I swear you, Shisui and Itachi make it sport to aggravate me."

Naruto simply grins, argument averted.

It's smooth sailing from there, they make it to the gate, Obito lets her down, and Minato scoops her up to smack a wet one on her cheek. Naruto gags, Rin coos, Obito rolls his eyes, and Kakashi talks to the gate sentries.

"You'll be fine making it home by yourself?" Minato fusses.

"Hai, hai," Naruto supplies.

Minato looks at her worriedly and summons Gamaken, he queries, "Can you make sure she makes it home safely?"

"Though I am clumsy I will do my best, I am very fond of Naruto and will protect her," The toad pledges solemnly.

Minato nods his head in satisfaction, while Naruto rolls her eyes in exasperation; her father's protectiveness knows no bounds.

Team Minato begins to head out, Naruto yells farewells, and for them to return quickly, unharmed, and successful in their quest.

She stays until they become mere dots on the horizon, leaning against Gamaken.

Naruto realizes her watch has just begun; this is her duty every time they take a mission, until that moment foreshadowing the watershed comes.

At the end of the week she will report her findings the others, and have nothing pertinent to pertain from the home front.

---

**The Black Sheep**

It's a curious thing to stare one's would be death dealer in the face.

The cliché of seeing one's entire life flicker before his or hers eyes has some merit, one can either focus on all of his or her successes or failures, and wonder must it end this way?

For Uchiha Obito life has consisted of failures as a ninja, and victories as a champion for the small folk—children being bullied, old women carrying loads thrice their weight, et cetera.
Yet these small victories mean little in his chosen vocation. Had he simply remained a civilian he would have found some fulfillment, but his craving for adventure would have been unsated. He needed to merge his two goals; become one of the greatest ninja and continue to help people, so why not reach for the greatest goal of all—strive to become Hokage.

He images his face carved in stone next to the Sandaime. The Yondaime! Youngest Hokage, and the first Uchiha take on the mantle as fire shadow.

However, what chance does he stand against the talents of his former classmates. The budding genjutsu specialist Yuhi Kurenai, the eccentric Maito Gai showing great promise in the realm of taijutsu, a discipline that requires intense training. Or the Hokage's own son, who brings honor to the Sarutobi clan by recovering a rare bloodline limit reminiscent of the Shodaime's Mokuton. (Sarutobi Asuma shows an affinity for the elements fire and wind, that when infused they create Shakuton.)

Even his own teammates threaten to leave him in the dust, with Nohara Rin aspiring to be a great medical nin recalling the likes of Senju Tsunade. While Hatake Kakashi takes great leaps to overturn the sullied reputation that his father left, and also satisfy the legend Hatake Saukumo once was.

Where does he come in? What path does he carve out?

It is not as if he sits back in envy and watches his former classmates better themselves. Obito trains just as much as them, yet his efforts prove fruitless.

He is a talentless hack, having heart can only take him so far. And so relies on his last name as a clutch, the sharingan is a promise of future glory to overcome all of his weaknesses in the shinobi arts.

Boasting will not save him now.

The Iwa nin leers down at Obito, his killing intent is overwhelming, and causes Obito's knees to almost buckle beneath him.

He wants… no needs help, someone please help him!

Minato-sensei is fighting his own battle, his infamous Flying Thunder God technique rendering Iwa's shinobi asunder. Kakashi-bastard is left in charge in his wake, the newly minted jonin creating a path of terror as he wields his father's blade, lighting chirping around the chakra steal.

Even Rin holds her own against opponents with greater strength and skill than she. Using medical nin knowledge that teaches both the arts of healing and murder, exploiting the weaknesses of anatomy as she makes precise incisions, corrupting bone, muscles and arteries with her chakra scalpel that elongates and shortens at her will.

Obito’s adversary strikes, and the onslaught begins. He dodges and parries clumsily, his blows put to the wayside as one would swat a fly. He attempts to execute the fire jutsu taught to him, but he is too slow. Finally a strike lands true, and Obito knows pain, his blows and dodges become sluggish.

Another Iwa nin joins his companion in the battle against the downed shinobi; Obito is now their quarry. Two against one and thus he is cornered.

And so he faces his would be death dealers.

He faces death, and wonders if he will survive this occurrence by the skin of his teeth or finally be ushered into the grasp of the Shinigami.
In the face of the greatest adversaries epiphanies can happen.

Tears have blurred Obito's eyes, hopelessness and despair have become him. But then there's a sudden shift. The world has become clearer, so much more distinct. There's pressure behind his eyes and somehow Obito...knows.

The Sharingan has awakened.

He's at is at the precipice of his life, usurping Hatake as a savior, perhaps for the moment becoming the center of Rin's attention as he shows courage and valor in the face of certain death.

This is Uchiha Obito's crowning moment, the question is will this be his last?

(The future's bright and beholds many paths: Obito's talents lie in the Sharingan, showing abilities that have never been associated with the dojutsu. He has a chance to bring glory to his clan, to his village, the future is bright, but the paths to the future are many. It will be up to him.)

---

**A relic of a bygone era**

*(Madara's interlude)*

There was once a dream.

Dreams seem to be the foundation of every great idea come to fruition.

But yes there was a dream, shared by two boys of opposing clans, in an era of war and strife. A dream to create a safe haven for shinobi, a place where ninja clans may collide and the outcome would not be bloodshed just cooperation. The first ninja village, a stepping stone to a cherished peace unknown to the warring clan era before.

In the end two opposing clans united and that dream become reality, but there are always sacrifices that must be made for the sake of bringing a dream into fruition.

Old hatred still simmered beneath the surface and caused the clans to clash. A brother is lost, a clan abandons their leader, and the world is tilted on axis.

The dream that was once one in the same changes. Senju Hashirama's and Uchiha Madara's paths diverged. The peace that once seemed within grasps reach, became elusive.

Uchiha Madara would be damned if he did not achieve the peace he lost all his brothers for. By his willpower alone he lives.

This world would know peace if it was the last thing he did.
Persuasion

Chapter by This_wild_abyss (holy_roller_novocaine)

Hyuuga Neji enters the world with a mighty cry.

His birth has caused some scandal: his mother is not Hyuuga, he's born on the wrong side of the sheet, and his father insist on giving him the noble Hyuuga name. The Hyuuga elders are quite apoplectic, Hizashi announces that with a satisfied air, and while he has plans of rectifying that sooner or later, Hizashi is passive aggressive at best.

Kushina and Mikoto coo over the sleeping babe, and fawn over Futaba. Hizashi stands beside his lover and son, every inch the proud father.

Naruto ignores her mother's and Mikoto's antics, her attention focused solely on Neji.

Her jaunt to the past made her realize that the bonds she once forged with her friends will cease to exist. That fact alone simply will not do. In the face of adversary Naruto always rises to the occasion. She may not have the same dynamic that she once had with her friends, but she'd be damned if she let them go.

In this life Neji will not simply be a comrade. Her mother considers his father a brother, and thus Neji has entered the fold of her family. Naruto will watch over him, and when she meets the rest of her friends, she'll watch over them to.

(The thought of Sasuke… she shies away from that. When the time comes to deal with that maelstrom she'll get there.)

Beside her Itachi nudges her shoulder, and whispers, "He's waking up."

Neji stirs, his pale eyes flickering open, and Naruto places her finger in one of his clenching hands.

"Hi Neji, I'm Naruto…"

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

This place is a pocket dimension, a gift from their father, the ability to stand outside of time and reality.

This place that is beyond, a plane that the biju call their own, empty and vast, an open landscape full of nothing and everything.

He and Naruto are here for their weekly meet ups with his siblings, or as Naruto calls them, their weekly biju…powwows.

Kurama feels a headache come on at the mere thought.

The brat always finds someway to butcher matters of great importance.

He supposes that's her defense mechanism in dealing with the stress of such matters.

Anyhow.

Naruto alone is test of his nerves, and he dwells within her. However, these annual meetings grate
upon his nerves until they are raw and exposed.

The novelty of seeing his siblings with such frequency has worn off.

The seldom meetings of seeing them once or thrice a millennium, is something he is desperately wishing he could return to.

However, that is a pipe dream, this is a pattern they will continue on for the immediate future.

He lounges lazily behind a sitting Naruto, head propped up upon his arms, his eyes are closed as he ruminates. The only indication that shows he is paying attention to the current proceedings are the minute twitching of his ears.

At the moment Gyuki's ningen speaks, "I met a blonde in combat that looks like you, he was a beast on the field, and left tremors in his wake. Is he related to you?"

There's a pause…

Kurama notices a few things in this moment.

Naruto hesitates to answer. She is a horrible liar, but she has learned the art of omission. While she has shared the woes of the future, and united her fellow jinchurriki in a common cause, she has kept her cards close to her chest.

These annual meeting are not therapeutic sessions. Jinchurriki spend their lives being shunned, and while meeting others like them gives them a sense of camaraderie, they remain secretive and only share what is relevant to the current cause.

Kurama feels sudden disgust at himself, when did he become inclined to understanding meat bags?

Naruto however, is a different story.

Naruto's shadow stands long and wide, encompassing the elemental nations. Her charisma will make people follow her to the ends of the Earth. He and his siblings look to her and see their father.

She has the potential to be the harbinger that heralds in an era of peace that has not been seen in an epoch.

His ears twitch again, Naruto finally answers, "Yah, I have family in the ninja force. Was he accompanied by a team of brats?"

"An Uchiha's eyes spinning death, the son of the white fang using the chirp of lightening, and a medic nin's chakra scalpel severing veins," Killer Bee raps.

Naruto gives an audible exhale of relief.

Any news of Naruto's father is welcomed news. Particularly the living status of his students, in Kurama's opinion the once Uchiha pawn should have died.

Naruto nods, sheepishly rubbing the back of her head, "Yeah, that's them."

There's a shift, a sudden spike of chakra from Goku's human, "You are related to that yellow haired menace that decimated an entire platoon of Iwa's forces."

That statement gathers mass attention.
Even Kurama deigns to open one crimson eye to see how this will play out.

And once more there's a slight hesitation on Naruto's part to answer.

Naturally in a war between two of the great villages, the other ninja villages will come out like predators seeking weaknesses in potential prey. Jinchuriki are considered weapons of mass destruction, meant to be wielded to their greatest potential in war.

In this one there is an agreement of neutrality.

There are greater threats afoot.

Naruto finally answers, with a simple, "Un."

Her fellow container narrows his eyes upon her, and gives a contemplative hum in response. "Since the fall of the Kanabi Bridge there's been talks of surrender. Onoki is a war mongering bastard, but he'll do what he thinks is best for Iwagakure."

Naruto sighs heavily, "If that's the case then we need to talk about the strife taking place Kouu no Kuni, and our next course of action. What to do about Nagato and Amegakure..."

*I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)*

Uchiha Itachi is an introvert.

And with introversion comes the characteristic of shyness.

In the face of his curiosity that shyness disappears.

And yet, overall, he prefers to keep to himself and out of public scrutiny.

When attending those rare formal functions with his parents, more times than not Itachi can be found with his face buried in his mother's skirts. Uchiha Mikoto finds this to be adorable, Uchiha Fugaku however, finds this behavior unbefitting of his heir. At these functions he wants to show off his scion, and gloat about his child's genius and rub it into the other clan head's faces.

Fugaku wants to break this habit of shyness, but finds himself thwarted by his greatest adversary—his very own wife.

Itachi is a mama's boy. This can't really be help. Mikoto handles most of his training and care, is constantly in the presence of that demoness Uzumaki and her blond spawn, who unfortunately happens to be his son's age, and by default is his playmate.

Fugaku is under the suspicion that the two have aspirations of seeing their kids married. He shudders to think of that union.

He counts down the days until Itachi enters the Academy, the boy will be under his influence then. Mikoto is contemplating returning to active duty, she'll be breaking clan traditions, but he highly doubts she cares.

Perhaps he should now push the subject of a second child, he also doubts that will go over well.

Though Mikoto runs his son's life, runs Fugaku's life, runs the household, and essentially the clan—everyone in their family knows who wields the real power. Fugaku is still the clan head, Fugaku-dono! And there comes times when a man must put down his foot and show he really wears the pants in the household—
"No," Mikoto says firmly.

"The boy turned four months ago, you can no longer stall this, this is a rite of passage," Fuagaku pleads… no states his case.

"You took him last year," Mikoto says calmly, efficiently cutting vegetables with a sharp, gleaming knife. "That was his rite of passage."

"This is tradition Mikoto—"

"No," She interrupts him.

"Stop coddling the boy, damn it!"

"I do not coddle Itachi, he is just a child and is treated as such," Mikoto states coldly.

"He is the heir to the Uchiha clan, this is a part of the Uchiha legacy…” Fugaku continues in his tangent, but Mikoto barely hears him, she heard this a dozen times when her father was clan head and harping at her brother, and look at how that turned out.

Uchiha Mikoto had no intention of ever becoming a homemaker, let alone a wife and mother. She was the first born of the previous clan head, and a girl was not prayed for, and a girl cannot not become heir to the Uchiha clan. And so she remained a fallacy in her father's eyes until her brother was born two years later, the long awaited heir.

For the longest time this remained a bone of contention for her. Mikoto sought to overcome and overturn the edict of patriarchy in the Uchiha clan, by becoming the first female heiress. For every challenge and expectation Mikoto's father gave her brother, she performed and exceeded her brother with flying colors. She herself was hailed a prodigy and her accomplishments were lauded by many, but her father. The man seethed and chided Mikoto, spitting upon her feats of success and gave his undivided attention to her brother. Her brother was put upon a pedestal she could not reach, and instead of wallowing in her daddy issues, Mikoto took a step back and looked at the relationship between her brother and father. What she saw made her pity her otouto, her father drove her brother beyond his limits, ending in results that failed to pass their father's expectations. Her otouto's self worth was crushed beneath their father's zeal.

Mikoto seriously asked herself did she really want that.

No, she did not.

And so she made a new goal for herself, since she couldn't become clan heir due to some sexist edict, than she would become the greatest kunoichi the Uchiha clan ever produced, and a role model her brother could look up to. Besides women in the Uchiha clan didn't have that many expectations when becoming ninja. Only that they uphold the clan's reputation, but eventually married and produced more Uchiha babies. What better way than to suck it to them by becoming a badass shinobi, bingo book worthy, and avoiding matrimony and having hell spawn.

(Anyhow she never wanted kids, particularly after her mother's attempt at talking her about the birds and the bees. It'd been Kushina who wanted kids, a whole army of them. Mikoto would settle for spoiling her best friend's kids, and her brother's.)

Her defiant streak was miles wide, and by the time she became a jonin there had been contemplations of disowning her from the clan, but the clan elders ultimately decided to not sully the clan's
reputation, what a scandal it would cause—the clan head's daughter disowned!

In the end her aspirations for bachelorette-hood died a horrible death. Her brother went and got himself killed on an A-ranked mission. Dying in a blaze of fire, which is considered an honorable way to go within the Uchiha clan. However, considering most of them are pyro obsessed, Mikoto holds that in a low opinion.

With her otouto dead and childless, the mantle fell to her, but not in the way she wanted as a child. She was stripped of her shinobi status, and thrust into the unwanted guise of an Uchiha wife, marrying her fourth cousin three times removed, so he could become clan head.

Mikoto suddenly grips the knife, knuckles a glaring white. While she would not give up Itachi for anything in the world, her reasons for becoming a "docile" wife is in memory of her brother, nothing else.

Her arranged marriage has evolved from strangers to a relative fondness for each other. Mikoto's love is reserved solely for her son.

This may be her lot in life, but she will not roll over and become a doormat, she'll be damned if she lets her husband do what her father did to her brother. Itachi is a gentle soul, much like her brother, but possesses her talent, and has so much more potential in him than she did. And she knows Fugaku sees that too, there's no denying that Fugaku's loves their son and would gladly die for him. Love is a fickle emotion, and he will exploit the boy. It is simply the Uchiha way; glory to the clan, honor to the clan, the clan always comes first.

Not while she lives.

And so her irritation mounts as she tunes back into Fugaku's tirade, and she barks out, "No!"

"Onna—"

"Don't you dare onna me!" Mikoto says sharply.

"Onna," Fugaku drawls out, and then grits out, "I am the boy's father and I've decided Itachi will accompany me to Sora-ku."

Mikoto pours the vegetables into the awaiting pot, and turns to Fugaku with a deceptive calm, holding the sharp, gleaming knife casually. That alone makes him gulp.

"Okay Fugaku, he can go to with you," Fugaku nods in self-satisfaction. Mikoto continues, her tone takes on a mocking cadence, "Since I am the boy's mother," Here she slaps the knife against her apron, empathizing each word. "I've decided an entourage will accompany you. A few of our clan's men, some of the military police force, and one or two ANBU, better yet let's make that three. You'll have to put in that request form today for them."

Fugaku begins to sputter, and Mikoto smiles menacingly, and coos, "Itachi is our clan heir, and he deserves the best protection if he's away from his mother. These are my conditions, if they're not met, then Itachi's not going anywhere. Oh and you guys can't leave until December."

Fugaku is finally able to get words out, "But, b-but that's three months from now."

Mikoto grins downright deviously, "I know, but remember trips take months to plan, and Konoha is still on high alert, those ANBU request forms are going to take a few months to process."

Her husband takes a moment to process that, and then gapes at her. Mikto blows a kiss at him,
laughing as she goes back to cooking.

A sudden spike in chakra appears at the kitchen entrance. Hyuuga Hizashi opens the shoji door, encased in his arms is a yawning Itachi. Hizashi explains, "I found him when I came in, he was coming down the stairs."

Mikoto nods, and turns her attention to her son.

Itachi rubs at his eyes, and then blinks rapidly as he tries to rid himself of post nap drowsiness. Hizashi allows Itachi to take the stage; the boy yawns again and says groggily, "Okaa-san is it time for supper yet?"

Mikoto mentally pats herself on the back for not crying out, 'Kawai!' or wanting to pinch his cheeks. Her toddler is just adorable, instead Mikoto draws upon her noble mien, and tells him, "Almost baby, did you have a great nap?"

Itachi nods sleepily, "Aa," and then proceeds to put his head on Hizashi's shoulder, content on being held.

She then addresses Hizashi, who along with her husband exchanged the usual Uchiha and Hyuuga greeting: a glower, a glare, and then noncommittal grunts.

"Hizashi-kun, what brings you by?"

Hizashi takes a fortifying breath, and steals himself for the inevitable backlash, "...Futaba and I are getting married next week."

There's a pregnant pause, Mikoto looks at him wide eyed, Fugaku tilts his head, and Itachi puts his head up to look at the Hyuuga briefly, he blinks slowly and then puts his head down.

"Ehhhhhh!" Mikoto says incredulously, and then she visibly composes herself, "You're getting married next week? Is this going to be a small affair that's casual or formal?"

Hizashi breathes a sigh of relief. He gives thanks for Mikoto's tact, it was a good idea to inform her first. If Kushina had been here, that announcement would have taken a different tone, something like this:

"EHHHHHHH! You're getting married!? Is Futaba-chan pregnant again? Say she's pregnant! Tell me you're having a bastard, and a shot gun wedding to avoid the shame. It'll be just like the story line from the soap opera 'Road to Ninja', where Takashi has an affair with the Shogun's daughter..."

"... Have you told Kushina?" Mikoto continues to pepper him with questions, and delicately she adds, "Is Futaba pregnant again?"

Hizashi winces, "No."

"Oh," Mikoto says almost in disappointment, but she bounces back and grins that devious grin, "So you didn't tell Kushina eh? I've got to be there when that happens."

Hizashi grimaces.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

They're pushing a grueling pace.

Every inch of his body aches and screams at him for some respite.
Kakashi looks ahead at leading form of his teacher.

Minato-sensei is not letting up so he shall not either.

(What keeps him going are thoughts of Kushina-nee's cooking, his warm bed, his family's happy faces, and Kushina-nee's cooking.)

Beside him his teammates keep up, they do not lag behind, they do not let themselves fall behind.

Not once do they falter.

In the midst of battle they rose to the occasion, and now Kakashi can look upon them with respect. Knowing that he can trust Rin and Obito to have his back.

When first approached about the prospect of having teammates, Kakashi protested. He did not want to be held back, and with a dead-last moron and a fangirl as chosen comrades, Kakashi was suitably unimpressed.

And perhaps he was possessive of the Minato's attention, with teammates that attention would be divided. Minato, along with Sakumo's former students practically raised him.

Besides he has a goal.

Kakashi had a mass overhaul to do, Sakumo's death and the legacy he left in tatters fell to Kakashi's shoulders to mend, and make anew.

With a talentless hack declaring him his rival, Kakashi nearly found himself insulted by that alone. Maito Gai presents more a challenge than Obito's fledging attempts at the ninja arts. Perhaps when he manifested the sharingan, Kakashi would deign to give Obitio a spar, but for now Obitio's younger cousins—Itachi and Shisui—provided a larger challenge than him.

Even Kakashi can see the merits of having a medic nin on a team. However, Rin would be useful in combat if she learned to hide her emotions. Her affections made him uncomfortable. She did not know him, and her affections were based on his merits and physical appearance. And thus, he did not know her, and he did not want to know her.

He spurned every clumsy attempt at friendship, doing only what teamwork was required of him to get missions done.

When Rin confessed… that made tensions even more awkward.

Thus, Kakashi rebuked her.

He did not want her love, his family loves him, his parents—when they lived—loved him. What need did he have for her common love? She is not the first one of those vulgar fan girls to confess to him, professing undying love she hopes he will return, and Kakashi's counts the improbability of her not being the last.

Of course this does not go over well.

Obito was there, listening, for if there is even an inkling of suspicion of Rin and Kakashi spending a moment alone together, Obito's hackles rise in jealousy.

When Rin ran off crying, Obito appeared before Kakashi, flying in on a wave of righteous indignation. Here he gave Kakashi a headache as he yelled about why Kakashi's an asshole and an
insensitive prick to other people's feelings, and spouted some other nonsense Kakashi didn't pay attention to. He tried to punch Kakashi but failed, and then took off after Rin.

Kakashi honestly did not understand.

He couldn't reciprocate her feelings; all he felt for Rin was annoyance and a vague sense of gratitude for healing his injuries. If he had accepted her feelings, he'd be living a lie and Obito would hate him. And so he did the right thing and rejected her, giving her probable reason for why he didn't accept her. And Obito still hates him.

He wonders if he should mention that Rin does know about Obito's feelings, and she revels in his affections but also finds them repulsive. For she obviously has her sights set higher.

Then they would both hate him.

They mattered not.

Both were not worth his time.

He knew Minato-sensei was disappointed, he knew his parental figures we're disappointed. Did he care? Yes, would he rectify his aloofness? No, Obito and Rin had to prove themselves; trust and respect is earned, not given.

Kakashi has a fortress surrounding him, insurmountable odds are needed to overcome it.

Facing life and death situations created trust. Obito and Rin had his back when it was unprotected, they threw themselves into his path when danger lurked. How could he not return the favor?

Rin proved to be a phenomenal medic nin, taking her knowledge of healing and creating weapons of death. Obito awakened the sharingan, and wielded it with an accuracy and maneuvers Kakashi had never witnessed before.

It took nearly four years, but he is now more open to the prospects of friendship.

He looks to them both at his side, they both notice his gaze. Obito returns it by sticking out his tongue, Kakashi rolls his eyes in response and Rin giggles.

Ahead of them, Minato looks back and grins at the sight of his students.

With them protecting his blind sides, Kakashi knows he will grow stronger.

Hatake Kakashi can admit he is now in excellent company.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

They are told via toad.

They are told of an impending return.

And though the timing is quite off: in the midst of the night, where the predawn light is four hours away, the residents are quietly ensconced within the embrace of Morpheus; the fluctuation of chakra is what awakens them.

Gamamaru appears in a plume of smoke, carrying news of the battle front. He harkens a tale of returning soldiers to their motherland, of battles fought and won, of families and friends gathering at the western gate in the form of a welcoming party.
When the toad departs he bids them adieu, off to relate his message once more to other privy parties.

In the aftermath of Gamamaru's parting, Kushina flashes into action. She bundles herself, and a half sleep Naruto into sweaters and their ever present sandals at the door. She hauls her sleepy toddler onto her hip and takes to the roofs on this balmy September night.

When she lands, Kushina practically vibrates with excitement. The days have been short, but the nights have been long, and though she has learned to live with loneliness of Minato's absence. And though she thrives in the presence of her daughter, family and friends, the return of her significant other brings her great reprieve.

Her excitement is not contagious.

On the opposite end of the spectrum resides Naruto, she is tense, and an aura of anxiousness surrounds her.

Kushina frowns, "Naruto-chan, are you okay?"

Naruto buries her face in her mother's neck, she nods and clutches her tightly when Kushina tries to pull her away to see Naruto's expression.

"Are you happy about seeing your father?" Kushina questions instead, she rubs Naruto's back in soothing patterns when her daughter nods again.

At the gate's entrance they find familiar faces, and amongst them they wait.

In the predawn light, there are telltale signs of approaching life. As they get closer to Konoha they lower their defenses: chakra signatures rise from suppression, footsteps become audible on the well-treaded road, and conversations rise amongst the returning team.

The flash of yellow on the horizon is a welcome sight.

Naruto greedily takes in the sight of Minato, Kakashi, Obito, and Rin.

She grins.

Around her the small crowd breaks out into cheers, and welcomes them with open arms.

A happy reunion is a forgone conclusion.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in hand)

"Ready Naruto-chan?"

"Hai," she replies happily.

Minato tosses up a piece of blood orange. Naruto catches the slice with her mouth open, and chews on enthusiastically.

She's perched upon her father's shoulders, on one their many weekly grocery trips. Since Minato's return the grocery bill has doubled, however, Kushina is quite content to cook for two bottomless pits.

"Here comes the next one," Minato proclaims, Naruto catches this one as well.

These trips have become a ritual since Minato's return, he's on a month long reprieve from active
duty after sustaining multiple injuries, and only allowing half-assed healing jobs on them. Rin is still quite crossed with her sensei's many rebuffs for her to save her chakra, to heal her teammates and fight the good fight.

At each stand they pick up fresh produce, and eat half of their bounty and seal away the rest.

They are on their way to the next stand when Minato comes to an abrupt stop and looks up.

Naruto follows the motion, along with many other citizens, shinobi, and foreign and native merchants.

Her eyes narrow. There are a precession of shinobi and ambassadors traveling up top the roofs of Konoha. This is certainly for show, as they travel at speeds discernable to the untrained eye.

These shinobi wear the emblem of Iwagakure.

They are here for the treaty and negotiations.

And though they are trekking into enemy territory, they do so only on the whim of the Hokage. For this is a power play, Konoha is still the dominant village, and will remain so even in the face of adversaries. In terms of casualties in Third Shinobi War, for every stone soldier lost, Leaf's ninja force has three left standing.

One shinobi stops dead in his tracks, multiple expressions cross his face: dawning horror, dread, but the most prominent one is fury.

And his eyes are on Minato—the Yellow Flash, the bane of Iwagakure's existence.

Minato tenses, he maneuvers Naruto to his back, adjusting her arms to his neck. Even in civilian clothes he carries a weapons pouch. His hand slips into it, and slips out wielding that familiar three pronged kunai.

If so, the offending ninja seems to become even more enraged by the sight of it.

Before the Iwa nin can leap into action, an ANBU appears at Minato's side. That blank mask makes the nin halt, enforcing the edict that he along with his entourage are here only on the Hokage's good will. The shinobi falls back into place.

Minato's stance relaxes, the ANBU disappears back to his sentry post; Naruto on the other hand clasps her father's neck tighter.

Naruto knows she should take joy in this, take this as a victory.

But she cannot, the road ahead is long and arduous.

**I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)**

It's a Thursday, distant cousin to Monday, kindred spirit to Friday and Saturday.

It's Thursday, their annual drinking day.

And while they meet at the Red Hummingbird for quality sake, Mikoto makes a beeline for the Uzumaki-Namikaze residence, an hour before their scheduled meet up.

Mikoto takes a seat at the breakfast table and bangs her head against table, repeatedly. Across from her Kushina raises an eyebrow and continues to sip at her tea. Their positions are reversed, they must
certainly reside within the twilight zone.

"'Koto-chan, what's wrong?"

"Ughhhhh," comes the non-reply.

"Well that explains everything, 'attebane."

Mikoto looks up, an expression utter despair paints her features. Kushina becomes alarmed.

"I think I'm pregnant," she blurts out, and then buries her head in her hands.

"….Well shit," comes Kushina's eloquent reply.

"I've missed four days of birth control pills," she says, voice muffled.

"…Wow."

"I know, I know. Usually I'm meticulous about such things."

"Have you told Fugaku?" Kushina asks, finally managing an intelligent response.

"No," Mikoto looks back at Kushina, and says frankly, "I'm sorry, I don't want any more children Kushina; you're the one who was supposed to have all the kids. And I was supposed to be the awesome, super cool aunt." Bitterly she laughs, "Fugaku has his heir, but is determined to have his spare. When I use medical jutsu, I can sense that small collation of cells… it would be so easy to sever it."

There are a couple of things Kushina can say to that. She could say that Mikoto is being ungrateful. Kushina would kill for the ability to have more children, or she could say something profound, but instead she says, "Well I guess I'm losing my drinking partner for another nine months, please tell me you don't plan on breast feeding this one? I don't think I can wait that long."

Mikoto stares at her incredulously, and then laughs. She laughs until she begins to cry. Welcoming thin arms embrace her, and she returns it pathetically.

"Koto-chan, you're a great mother," Kushina soothes, "You practically raised me, and you pick up where Minato and I fail with Naruto, and you'll do the same with Neji. So when you think about it, you've been a mother for a long time. So what's one more midget, I'm game for another kid to spoil."

Here the red head grins broadly, and its contagiousness spreads to the distraught Uchiha.

"This one will be Hizashi's god child, you can't have both," Mikoto protest mockingly.

"Well, considering that Minato made a pervert that writes porn Naruto's god father, it was only right you were made her god mother. Someone had to be the responsible one," Kushina muses.

"So you're saying you're more responsible than Hizashi-kun," Mikoto deadpans, "Especially last week when you taught Itachi, Shisui, Hana, and Naruto how to make seal smoke bombs. Itachi and Shisui ignited one in the house, I still can't get that charred smell out of the linens."

"Oi, oi, oi, I'll have you know that's a valuable skill to have, dattabane," Kushina defends. "Besides Itachi appreciates those lessons."

"Itachi is an exeption, you spoil him. He likes anything his god mother gives him. Besides," Mikoto raises a brow and asks, "smoke bombs for three, four and five year olds, really Kushina?"
"Eh, Shisui is entering the Academy soon, and the others will be following. We're already training them, so I don't see the harm, the more skilled they are the less likely they'll get themselves killed," Kushina says somberly.

There's a companionable silence until Mitkoto says, "Speaking of training, I taught Itachi how to make that escape seal."

The seal is a bastardized version of Minato's Hirashin, with a child as the jinchuriki of the Kyubi no Kitsune, and the reputations that she and her husband have as shinobi, Naruto will eventually become a target. Kushina is duty bound to have contingencies upon contingencies for Naruto to remain safe, until she can defend herself against foes of greater strength.

The seal is a time and space manipulation matrix, its basic premise has two focal points: one seal is attached to the person's clothes, the other is attached to a place of safety. The seal attached to the person's clothes must be sparked with chakra and then ripped, once that occurs the seal is triggered and the person is transferred from point A to point B.

It's a feat of ingeniousness, and one that will firmly remain with Kushina and the one's she trust the most.

"In two weeks, Fugaku's taking him on a trip to some of the old Uchiha fortresses, and then Sora-ku. And even though we're supposed to be at peace… you remember the end of the second war, there's was so much unrest...I just want Itachi to be safe," She finishes anxiously.

"If we had our way, we'd keep our kids close to us, and never have them grow up or let go of them," Kushina smiles sadly, "but that's a pipe dream."

"I just have a really bad feeling about this," Mikoto says, and then sighs audibly, "gahhh, I wish I could get drunk tonight."

Kushina looks at her seriously, "A mother's instinct is always right. Take all the precautions you feel are necessary."

At these words, Mikoto unconsciously comes to rest her hands on her flat stomach.

Itachi is being smothered...

By breasts of all things.

While many males would enjoy this as a way to go, Itachi sorely wishes to breathe life still.

"O-okaa-san, y-you're c-choking me," Itachi manages to get out. He endures a few more seconds of the "hug of doom" before he's put down.

His cousins snicker behind their hands. Itachi promptly ignores them, for they had just undergone the same treatment from their own mothers.

What was once a simple trip has evolved into something quite convoluted, and Itachi can pinpoint exactly who is behind such machinations.

His parents have an odd way of showing each other affection, and while he knows they love him, he does not think they love each other, more like they're fond of one another.

But Itachi believes he's twenty years too early to ruminate on relationships, let alone his parents.
Nonetheless, his mother has enjoyed planning this trip and making it as difficult as possible for his father. She even pitched the idea of pushing this trip back three more months, of course Fugaku foamed at the mouth from mere the suggestion.

In the end Mikoto got her wish of having an entourage for her little boy. Their field trip occupants include three of his cousins close to his age range—4 to 7—and their fathers, fulfilling Mikoto's edict of having a few clansmen along for the ride. There's two rookie military police and their senior ranking officer, along two ANBU in disguise—who may or may not be costing the clan coffers a fortune.

Itachi surveys all of this and turns scrutinizing eyes onto his mother, he raises both of his eyebrows. In return she leans down and pinches both of his cheeks. In a chiding tone she says, "Don't look at me like that Itachi-chan. Remember mother is always right, even if it seems as if I'm being over protective."

Itachi glares at her, and then attempts to move away from her. Mikoto holds him still, and moves her hands to his shoulders, her grip tighten, and she looks upon him seriously, "Do remember how to use the seal?"

"Aa," Itachi says, nodding in the positive.

"You'll use it if you need to, correct?"

"Hai, Okaa-san," Itachi nods again in the positive.

"Do you have the camera? Will you remember to take pictures for Kaa-chan?" Itachi nods dutifully to each query.

Mikoto smiles, "Can I hug you again?"

Itachi pauses, and then nods reluctantly, Mikoto sweeps him up into another hug, and plants a loud kiss onto his cheek.

When she puts him down, Itachi is flushing, his cousins are laughing openly at him again, and at their reactions Itachi straightens and bears his mother's affections regally.

Itachi joins his cousins, more than anything he wishes Shisui was joining them. Kagami had opted out, and by default Shisui's mother had revoked his invitation. Regardless, Itachi bears the brunt of cousins' teasing, Itachi after all knows where they sleep; he'll get his revenge later.

Before they abscond the compound, Fugaku pulls his wife aside where he exchanges words of fire, his ire apparent. "We've talked about you coddling Itachi, particularly in public. We have of an image of decorum to uphold…"

"Blah, blah, blah."

"Very mature," he grits out.

Mikoto responds with words of ice, "I know, it amuses me too."

She smiles pleasantly as Fugaku scowls.

"Can we speak like mature adults, just for this moment Mikoto. I know things have been tense between us—" She rolls her eyes, your damn right things have been tense, "When we return in a month's time, I think we should make strides—"
"I'm pregnant. I'll have another to spoil now."

That statement leaves him gaping… once again. Mikoto: 1,001, Fugaku: 50. She kisses his cheek and says, "Have nice trip dear," and then she strides away to join the farewell party.

There are cries of "Bonzai!" as the group leaves the gates of the Uchiha District. They cheer for a safe journey and a few weeks of solitude from the hellions they call their sons.

The curious thing is that the group never does make it to Sora-ku.

**I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)**

It is not his first time out beyond the boundaries of Leaf, and it will certainly not be his last. But Itachi revels in the perceived freedom.

Into the wilds of Hi no Kuni, traversing the landscape of his ancestors.

This excursion overall has been quite educational, and Itachi draws the conclusion that his ancestors were war mongers in the warring clan era, and now they are war mongers loyal to a ninja village.

They are also taught survival skills. Itachi has learned about the native flora of Fire country: what is poisonous, hardy enough to eat, and what vegetation has medicinal purposes from the trips into Konoha's surrounding foliage. Putting those skills to use is a on hands on experience.

He becomes familiar with the rituals that take place on missions. On his father's turn as sentry of the camp, he stays up with him, sharpening kunai. He listens to his father's lulling methodic voice as he details his first mission, and fights the urge to fall asleep against Fugaku's side.

They're on their last leg of the tour, visiting a former fort, and while his cousins have made a race out of who can reach the crumbling top of the stone fixture first, Itachi finds himself more interested in the tunnels below.

His father follows behind his inquisitive son, watching in amusement as he traces the walls unmarred by time.

"I know the Uchiha traded with the Uzumaki when they were not feuding. I wonder what seal was used to keep this from decaying throughout the years," Itachi murmurs quietly to himself.

Here time has left the structure untouched, it is as if they are stepping back in time. Itachi can almost imagine his ancestors walking through these halls in battle armor.

"You are learning fuinjutsu?" The question is posed as a statement.

Itachi answers readily, "Yes, Kushina-oba-san started teaching us. She says that Naruto has already begun learning, and says that we should learn the basics of sealing, so we can at least keep up with her."

"What have you learned so far?"

Itachi answers absently, his attention divided, "Storage scrolls, stasis seals, smoke bombs…." He puts his hand upon the limestone, calling forth chakra to the appendage and watches as the seal matrix ignites to life. It's a fascinating image that unfolds, and Itachi can make neither heads nor tails of it, and he considers asking his god mother about it.

That thought is summarily revoked. He thinks of her fervent speech about fuinjutsu, and the tangents
she goes on that causes his and Shisui's eyes to glaze over, while Naruto nods enthusiastically next to them. Of course Naruto's already been conditioned to enjoy the complex art, Itachi has no idea how Kushina accomplished such a feat, Naruto has the shortest attention span.

His father's stern voice cuts through his musings. "Is that why the house smells of smoke…are you responsible for that Itachi?"

Itachi's eyes widen, his back is to his father, and his hand is still placed upon the stone. He does not tense up, nor does he move or turn around, for that would imply guilt. "No," he answers decisively, "Shisui did."

"Really now?"

Itachi looks at Fugaku, and matches his father's bland countenance, "Yes."

He's not lying…per se. Rather he's lying by omission. For it was Naruto who drew the seal, and Shisui who ignited it, but it was he who wanted to place it in the house. It was an experiment, Itachi prefers realistic demonstrations, he wants to know exactly how a tool will work, being a ninja is his destined occupation, and he will not enter it unprepared. He just did not expect for the results to work so well.

Fugaku pins him with a stink eye, and Itachi nearly blanches, but keeps his gaze. Well until an explosion rocks the foundation of the fortress.

As rubble and debris begins to fall, Itachi finds himself hauled over his father's shoulder, and looking down at the ground as his father sprints down the corridor, his sandaled feet echoing on the stone floors.

"Chichue," Itachi says in a strangely calm voice (but then again he's never been one to panic, even when he's in trouble), "Put me down."

"Your safety is paramount boy, your mother would kill me if I let you get hurt," Fugaku's voice brooks no arguments.

"I will not be a burden, I'll watch your back," Itachi beseeches.

His father laughs grimly, "That's the spirit my boy, but I doubt you are ready to draw first blood."

Itachi knows his father must be thinking of knocking him out, and storing him away in a stasis seal. He wants to avoid that. "At least let me climb onto your back, you'll need both hands."

Fugaku smirks, "So you think."

And his father proves himself correct, for as he segues around the next corridor he encounters an enemy opponent. Itachi has stop mid-motion to look upon the…creature with gawking eyes. The colors black and white are juxtaposition side by side, with eerie golden eyes, cocooned in the shape of a Venus fly trap. The figure is male and appears to be melding through the wall of stone, he leers at them, with his eyes alone.

His father pushes one hand onto Itachi's bottom to get him going, while Fugaku's other hand runs through one-handed seals for a fire jutsu. Fire after all incinerates plants.

The creature melds back into the wall as Fugaku's globes of fire advance upon it.

Fugaku ignores the missed opportunity and continues to head for the surface. Once Itachi is settled
upon his back, he draws his tanto from its halberd, as he does this the creature appears in their path again. Fugaku decides not to engage it in combat, and instead doubles back.

As he withdraws, the creature says a mocking double toned voice, "You can run, but you can't hide, your flesh will be mine."

Itachi shudders at the implication.

Fugaku's steps have become soundless, his chakra repressed. Itachi follows his father's example as best as he can, and pushes his chakra down. Fugaku surges through the halls, takes a few turns, seeming to go deeper as the temperature drops in this labyrinth of tunnels. The creature appears at turns from the ceilings, walls and floor, mocking them.

Someone is breathing loudly, possibly giving their locations away. Itachi realizes it is him and recognizes that he is for once panicking. His father murmurs quiet nonsense to him, and Itachi eventually regains his sanity. He comes to the understanding that his father does not engage it in battle to keep him safe.

Fugaku is still running, with no direction in sight, well to Itachi it appears like this. He comes to an abrupt halt and runs his hand down the sharpened blade of the tanto, drawing blood.

Not ten feet ahead of them, the flytrap appears once more, and says, "You are now both mine."

Fugaku smiles grimly, "Not today."

He slams his bloody hand against the limestone wall and a matrix appears, its dimensions webbing out in an intricate pattern.

The world around them explodes, the hall around them implodes in a series of explosions, but they disappear within the confines of a space manipulation seal.

Bright lights still appear before Itachi's eyes, momentarily blinding him, when they teleport to the outer premises of the fort. The structure has begun to crumble in on itself and the detonations from underground tunnels cause quakes beneath the earth. Chakra infused feet alone keep his father steady.

But that is not what captures their attention.

They have teleported in the midst of a melee of Venus flytraps, or rather the white version of it, minus the green cocoon. Not a melee rather a blood bath and they are at the dead center of it. Many of their comrades seem to have fallen, and the few left continue to fight on. The flytraps pause at their sudden appearance, Fugaku tenses and prepares to engage. Itachi believes that now is the best time to useful, and so he ignites a smoke bomb. A plume of gray smoke appears, leaving embers in its wake, it's the perfect distraction.

After that it is a blur, an exhilarating blur.

Itachi fights an enemy, and draw first blood.

Civilians are not designated to use kunai, but that didn't stop his parents from commissioning kunai for him to use for "practice." Today those kunai are being used for their true purpose.

He stands back to back with his father and holds his own.

Using his small size to his advantage, twisting in and out, stabbing Achilles tendons and femur
arteries. Putting those katas drilled into his muscles memory against his would be death dealers.

He fights the good fight.

But he is an amateur, wet behind the ears. He may be a prodigy, but he is not perfection. When he
slips up, the mistake is fatal.

The incoming blow should kill him, but his father uses the kawarimi no jutsu. The blow tears into his
father shoulder, blood splattering onto Itachi's pale face. Fugaku quickly dispatches the offender, and
haul's Itachi against him in a rough embrace. He holds him tightly, and tells him in a gruff voice, "I'm
proud of you, my son, but now this fight is my own."

Next thing Itachi knows he's airborne, limbs flailing. He is caught in a rough hold, and looks back at
the battlefield stupidly. There's a sharp pain in his corneas, a piercing pain that accompanies the sight
of his father being torn asunder by a crowd of white Venus flytraps, the image remains imprinted on
his mind. He will never forget the sight, the sharingan will never let him forget the warmth of blood,
his father's blood, tangy in smell, wet on his hands and arms and face.

He is drawn out of his thoughts by a terrifying sound.

Someone is screaming, he looks to his left, above his captor's shoulder and finds one of his surviving
cousins with his arms clasped around their captor's neck. His cousin is crying for his brother, father
and mother, but he is not the culprit. Someone is still screaming, blood curdling cries.

He comes to a startling conclusion….

It is him.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.
A few months earlier.

The announcement is made at breakfast.

All are sleepy eyed, conditioned to wake with dawn as the morning kunai parts the sky, except for one member of this family, and there's always that one freak of nature that is chipper in the morning.

Namikaze Minato is that anomaly in this residence.

A blonde haired man, with a bright smile, an honest but sometimes flaky countenance, and a badass ninja all wrapped in one.

He smiles brightly at his little family, delivering with a cheerful, chipper, and decidedly punch worthy tone, "Good morning!"

A grunt and a snore are sent his way in response.

Kushina glares at him as she hunches over the coffee machine, and Minato honestly believes she would even take it with her on missions, if there weren't instant coffee packets, caffeine bars, or the, oh so useful, method of conserving chakra to stay awake.

Naruto, on the other hand, continues to sleep in her booster seat, head hanging precariously on her palm as she drools onto the table. It's kind of adorable. Breakfast is the only thing that will rouse her, and seeing as Kushina has yet to move from her station by the coffee maker, Naruto isn't waking up any time soon.

If Kushina wasn't half dead, she'd take a picture to add to the Naruto-chan shrine, located on the left wall of the living room, arranged according to month and age.

Kushina pours herself a cup of needed coffee, and once she feels human enough, she barks out, "What the hell has you so happy this morning? It certainly wasn't last night, I would have remembered, unless I groped you while sleeping again and things got frisky—"

"Kushina!" Minato whispers harshly, blushing heatedly as he glances furtively at Naruto.

The red head cracks a smile, the morning fog is starting to disperse, "Don't be such a prude, she's passed out, the only thing that'll wake her is a swift kick to the ass, 'attebane."

She raises a brow and leans forward seriously, "I felt you get out of bed earlier, what's going on?"

Minato's blush recedes, but remains as he grins bashfully, "It's gonna happen, Kushina, it's for certain."

Kushina's mouth opens and closes several times before she settles on, "Holy shit, holy shit!" She has mind enough to set her cup down, before she launches herself at Minato. He catches her laughing as she peppers his face with kisses, between them she chants, "By the Sage of Six Paths I knew it! All those meetings, that wily old bastard! I knew he'd pick you! Kiiroi Senko, hero of Konoha, bad ass extraordinaire—"
"Otou-san gonna be Ho—" Comes a groggy shout.

In the midst of their celebration Naruto awakens, not due to the noise, but because her head slid off her palm and hit the table…hard. Neither of her parents had paid much attention, it being a regular occurrence.

"Yep, baby, yep!" Kushina says in agreement.

"Congrats Tou-chan!" Naruto proceeds to jump upon the table and give a thunderous whoop. Kushina doesn't even chide her for roughhousing on the furniture.

It's a happy morning indeed.

It's just another morning in the Uzumaki-Namikaze residence.

**I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)**

*The Present.*

Sarutobi Hiruzen inhales deeply into his pipe. He waves a grizzled hand, a gesture to begin.

"Status report as of January 12, 1023 A.C. (After Chakra): Autopsies of the remaining bodies reveal —"

"No, move ahead, I've read that already, tell me of the missing bodies."

"There was no trace of the culprit, or culprits that engineered the attack. The bodies of the non-Uchiha were found surrounding the rubble of the destroyed fort, rigor mortis had set in and the cause of the deaths was exsanguination, from penetrating wounds. None of the bodies of the missing Uchiha could be found, including three adult males, and two boys. Blood samples have been compared to DNA on file, revealing that the three males were probably killed on site, but no trace of the boys were found...."

He has seven dead shinobi, the culprits for their murders unknown. Amongst them is a dead clan head, his heir, currently in the hospital, heavily sedated due to hysteria and distress, and a clan calling for the blood of the offenders.

What offenders? The investigation has turned up inconclusive, no physical evidence. The mindscape of the surviving ANBU operative had been thoroughly picked apart, and the evidence found there will be part of an ongoing investigation to figure out what had happened, but for now he needed a short term answer....

He wonders if the blame should be put completely on Iwa. Residual anger, and outrage over the attack of a founding clan would fuel the fire. Accusations of theft of a bloodline limit, a breeding program and revenge for the death of loved ones would suffice. Iwagakure is still licking its wounds, razing it to the ground in the same fashion that Uzi no Kuni was destroyed would finally let Onoki know not to rise against his betters.

The Great Elemental Nations would only have four Hidden Villages.

Hiruzen has always liked even numbers.

Those sardonic thoughts are cast aside with a sigh, it would not do to be seen as an old war hawk; best leave that to his old friend Danzo.
The best thing he can do is know; know that *it's almost over.*

He won't have to deal with this shit anymore.

He has to fight the smile that tries to curl his lips. The reign of the Sandiame Hokage is coming to an end, and soon it would be time to usher in a new one.

He looks, and finds Namikaze Minato to his immediate right, young face etched into grim lines.

Already he begins to feel the burden of carrying the will of fire.

This burden however, is taken willingly.

Here his potential, *nay* chosen predecessor stands beside him, for they are in an apprenticeship.

Recently Minato had begun to sit in on meetings such as these, weighing in his opinion and offering solutions, regardless of whether the final decision was up to him.

The slow transition began the moment Minato returned to Konoha, and was recommissioned for active duty, deemed fit to enter combat. Combatting future paper work that is.

The decision had been in the works for years, the choices… the appointment will comes as a surprise to some and surely ignite strongs reactions from others, but overall opinion will not matter, for the Hokage appointment is not an election, and a ninja village is certainly not a democracy.

Nonetheless, Minato's appointment will be lauded: he is a war hero, he has a family, he's young, in his prime, his charisma and personality will draw in the citizens: moths to a living, blazing flame.

His favored choice, his favored student would never draw that type of loyalty, and so he put aside his own aspirations for Orochimaru, and placed Jiraya's prized student upon the pedestal.

Of course, this wouldn't go over well with Orochimaru, but his wants hardly outweigh the needs of the village and Hiruzen will happily hand the hat over to Minato.

No more paperwork for him.

"Minato, what are your thoughts?" The Sandiame gestures that the floor is his.

Minato steps forward and has his say.

**I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)**

Contrary to popular thought—i.e. Kurama, Naruto does not believe she can save everyone.

While she does have a hero complex, no one is completely selfless. True altruism is difficult to come by, but if there was such a person, Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto would be it.

However, Naruto can be as selfish as anyone, her altruism only really extending to her precious people, and if the problems that grieve them, happen to extend to a couple thousand people, or hell the world. Then Naruto will have to save their asses as well, as long as it means her precious people are safe, content, and without harm.

She feels ever helpless sitting beside Itachi's bedside in the hospital while her mother comforts a weeping Mikoto. He has no visible wounds, but just as physical wounds can be crippling, mental injuries, trauma can be just as incapacitating. He will live, he will jump back, children are elastic, but he will be scarred by his father's death.
While their minds are challenged as shinobi, quarterly psych evaluations are mandatory, but are lenient. Life as a ninja is arduous, and the first year as a genin is a test of fortitude. The death of young ninja is quite common. It's a test of survival, and if he or she lives, they live on to serve their village another day.

From what Naruto remembers of Itachi’s past self, beneath the monstrous, calculatingly psychopathic façade that he portrayed, he was a pacifist, who too sought peace within the shinobi world.

She wonders if this incident will be the precursor that leads him to be a pacifist or into the psychopath he played so well.

The culprit behind this incident though... Naruto's features darken, and her fists clench.

A low rumble begins in her subconscious, reverberating into a fierce growl. In her mind Kurama stirs, picking up on a bubbling anger.

'And so he strikes, his original pawn was taken from his reach,' Kurama states.

Naruto grits her teeth, for who else could it be? There are no other players on this great stage, no other puppet masters that would dare to think himself a god amongst men, giving strings to would be victims, for everyone despite their backgrounds are cannon fodder. For the world is Uchiha Madara's stage, and greater forces be damned, he shall have the world put in his image.

But what can she do now?

She is but a babe, and the moves she has made on this great playing field have made an impact, but have also taken blows in retaliation.

She's not omnipotent, she has watchers on the horizon, but there are too many blind spots.

The bijuu without a container—Isobu—would only delve into oncoming conflict once it directly affected him. All the bijuu refuse to involve themselves in ningen affairs, until it directly affects them and their domain. It is a principle that they have all adhered to for many millennia. Isobu comes to the bijuu powwows willingly, for he does not wish to be left in the dark.

Isobu's isolation will not last long. Naruto has no idea how he has gone on unhindered, but Isobu's wariness has been a boon to him, his status as Tetsu no Kuni will not last. Yagura's future status as a jinchuriki is a necessity, for it was there that Madara wreaked great havoc, taking advantage of strife within Mizu no Kuni.

Mizu no Kuni never quite recovered from the destruction of its brother country, Uzi no Kuni. Strife has trickled down from an international war to civil wars amongst the many island nations.

If Yagura could remain out of Madara's great tangling web, there would be hope for Kirigakure to avoid descending into even more chaos. Perhaps once he is brought into the fold, they could even convince him to give the hat to Terumi Mei.

But for now that is wishful thinking. When the time comes, that too shall be dealt with accordingly.

In Saiken's case, it's the matter of Utakata being too young to be brought into this fine frenzy, and while Saiken is taking strides to get to know his young counterpart, hoping to mirror their dynamic in the image of his siblings and their jinchuriki.

Eventually there shall be watchers on the Southern front, but for now it was a work in progress.
Chomei makes progress with young Fu, while Shukaku stands vigil over Gaara in the traumatic aftermath of his birth and mother's death.

In the North she has ready allies, but she herself is a work in progress. Regardless of her foreknowledge, her power is stunted by her age and physical growth. Her child's body cannot handle senjutsu, a merging with Kurama, nor the rasengan or any other jutsu in her repertoire.

Even her most renowned jutsu is stifled. She is perhaps one of the few, if not the shinobi who can utilize Kage Bunshin to its fullest potential, and walk away relatively unscathed.

"There's nothing I can do!"

'For now,' Kurama agrees, 'Time is against us for certain, the future now is an open book. We cannot be certain that the events of the past timeline will come to fruition. The small ripples you have recreated may now transform into tsunamis and maelstroms. Or certain events are written in stone. Even a mighty being such as myself, am mystified by the inner workings of fate."

"I don't believe that bullshit! We create our own path, believe it!"

"Heh," She can almost hear the grin in Kurama's voice, "Then brat you know what you must do. Stop your bitching and whining. Grow stronger, trust your allies, and rest easy in the fact that Uchiha Madara will die. Preferably torn limb from limb."

For once she does not disagree with Kurama's blood thirst, she embraces it.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

His will is as mighty as an empire, and it is through this sheer willpower that he still lives. His body declines, his mind however, remains sharp, focused solely upon a vision, nay a future reality.

Upon upraised dais, he sits on a throne overseeing the activities below. Cloned white zetsus do his bidding.

Laid on four dissecting table are the remains of his clan's descendants. Their eyes are harvested, and then put under a stasis seal. Their remains are of little concern to him, Zetsu will probably devour them.

Beyond them, behind white curtains are two more of his descendants, young children put into a chakra induced coma, their vitals monitored.

Where their comrades are dead fodder, these two have purpose.

For they will be his instruments of fate and destiny. Exacting his will, and bringing his vision into further fruition.

They are young and malleable, their memories shall be replaced and they will be indoctrinated to his resolve.

Each step he takes, each measure he makes is to ensure the definite change of the shinobi world. This latest venture is just another means to an end.

His feels his age more acutely than ever. His body's mere gaunt state is achieved by the insertion of Senju Hashirama's cells, which mirror the highly coveted mokuton. It creates life, and helps enable his aging body. Through the replication process of Zetsu, they are able to mimic this same synthesis
in the Shodaime's cells.

Unlike a certain snake sannin he will not desecrate a tomb until the remains within are nonexistent, he made his extraction once. The respect he had for Hashirama in life continues on, but his one trespass is needed for the greater good.

He thinks perhaps it is time to explore other avenues. His brethren clan is a dead and dying breed, so he must look to its bastard branch. Though the Uzumaki are scattered to the wind, they are much more abundant than their Senju counterparts; sharing the same special chakra from their shared ancestor.

The Uzumaki longevity is still a remembered trait of the denizens of Uzi no Kuni. He would know, for his encounter with one Uzumaki Nagato now bears fruit. He shall have to search for a new specimen to see if that longevity can be extracted and put to use. It is paramount that he continues to thrive.

In the meantime there he must check upon his other machinations.

His influence encompasses the whole of the elemental nations, Uchiha Madara will forever be etched into history, for it is the victors after all that write history.
Chapter Notes

Original reactions to this chapter were negative, so be warned you may not like what you read. This is an aerial perspective.

A child:

He's become accustomed to walking through these sterile halls. That familiarity does not stop his chest from tightening, and his lungs from constricting.

These walls that enclose these corridors at one point felt as if they were enclosing around him, but now they lead to the promise of reprieve.

His escort left him at the hospital entrance, and now he walks to through these halls, to a familiar waiting room. He tells the nurse of his arrival, and takes a seat, stiff back, with hands folded neatly in his lap.

The wait isn't long, but he takes in the usual surroundings, and sees that new children's art dots the walls. It's a sight that reminds him that he is not an anomaly, that there are other children who too have endured traumatic events; and for a moment that realization helps him breathe easier.

There have been disputes over whether or not the Uchiha heir should attend therapy. Rikudo forbid an Uchiha seeking outside help, the clan reputation will be in tethers! It matters not, they did not awaken in the midst of the night screaming for his father, calling for him to come back, wishing he could have done more. These night terrors made his mother overrule the objections and stand indomitable before them.

The office door opens and the mind medic appears—specializing in children psyches, with emphasis in the stage of prepubescent children, particularly those who become genin at a young age. A Dr. Yamanaka Isamu, who uses his clan's techniques to understand the human mind. He is the best of the best, and has been enlisted to help the Uchiha heir. His influence has done wonders, for the first few weeks Itachi was near catatonic. The long term goal is to eventually accept that his father's death, the events surrounding it, and his perceived guilt are not his fault. Twice a week they meet, progress is in the works.

"Itachi-san, welcome!" Dr. Yamanaka says brightly in greeting. He holds the door ajar, Itachi enters and says solemnly in return, "Hello, Dr. Yamanaka."

The door closes behind them, the sign attached to its surface shifts to "in session."

A King:

For a moment he sits behind the wooden desk, and takes in the view of the round office with awed eyes. He feels humbled, he has been singled out amongst the many great shinobi in Konoha's ranks to become the fire shadow.
Minato gives a sardonic laugh, he—unofficially—is the third Senju to take the Hokage mantle. What a great lark!

(It's not his supposed lineage that got him here, its by his own skill and his own merit. He'd been informed dryly by the Sandaime that it's not just his 1,000 man slaughter that had earned him the flee on site warning in the bingo book. It was rather the way he brought hope to the overwhelmed Konoha forces. He had brought the scattered ninja together, and gave them words of encouragement, and reminded them that the will of fire burned through them all. Where Leaf nin were outnumbered three to one, Minato had come along and handed out his strange three prong kunai, and turned the odds upon its head. Afterwards, he'd sheepishly smiled in the shocked silence that followed Iwa's sound defeat. The masses of Leaf went wild and his infamy remained ever since.)

The curious question is how does a clanless orphan become Hokage?

Through sheer determination, a great deal of talent, a dash of genius and a lot pragmatism. Having one of the legendary Sannin as a sensei didn't hurt much either.

(And so it began:

Minato had been a bookish child, with a love for climbing the great trees of the village, and running wild with his fellow counterparts. For all accounts his childhood had been a happy one, if only due to him making it so.

Orphans grow up earlier than children with guardians, they learn life lessons early on, and whether they are better for is entirely up to them.

Minato did what he had to do.

As a child Minato learned early on that the only person he could depend on is his self. Like any orphan he dreamed of getting adopted or having one of his parents appear and take him away from the orphanage. But as he watched children left and right get adopted, and how as he got older the less appealing he became to potential parents. His bright blue eyes and blond hair were not indigenous to Konoha, so perhaps people were deterred by his foreign appearance, he knew not.

Eventually reality reared its ugly head and Minato realized no one was coming to "save" him. And so he had to save himself. At the age of five schooling became mandatory, he and his fellow orphans were presented with options: attend the civilian schools, and eventually go on to take a trade/apprenticeship, or enter the Ninja Academy and prove their mettle against clan heirs/members, and the children of established shinobi.

Like any child he had read the comics—donated to the children's home—telling tales of super heroes, or of ninja saving the princess and her country from the evil overlord.

So of course he went with the later choice. He wanted to make a name for himself, be recognized amongst the villagers and shinobi. The ninja academy held his attention like no book did, the archives available within the Academy and village libraries fascinated him. Minato spent plenty of time with his face buried in a book, but he did not let them encompass his world.

Minato was a smart kid, those books had there uses, and well knowledge is power.

Time went on, and outside of practicing the physical aspects of training to become a ninja, and playing with friends, Minato did odd jobs. He had every intention of gaining autonomy before he graduated from the Academy. Already he had filled out the forms for receiving the monthly stipend provided for orphans that leave the children's home. Taking odd jobs by working under the table
would reinforce the stipend, he wanted a foundation. Once he became a genin, he would become a legal adult and the stipend would stop. He assumed D-ranked missions would not provide enough funds to sustain him, he'd have to wait until his first B-rank mission and from there he would save, and perhaps invest.

His tenth year brought about several changes; his tenth year was a watershed that rocked the foundation of his life.

He met the future love of his life, a plump, pretty girl, with hair the color of fire. He thought he may have found his first crush, he found his cheeks flushing, his palms damp, and his heart stuttering as she stood before the class and was introduced…. Then she opened her mouth, and he wondered what village had lost their idiot.

He graduated as Rookie of the Year, with the words genius and prodigy thrown in with his name. Minato didn't consider himself either, he had above average intelligence, yes understood the ninja arts when demonstrated once or twice. But he considered himself a hard worker, who simply wanted to be acknowledge by his fellow tree huggers. Whether that was accomplished by becoming a splendid ninja, or an infamous shinobi, gracing the bingo books and inspiring fear amongst the masses. It did not matter.

And then he met Jiraiya, and his life took on one hell of a ride. Life kind of tilted on its axis; Jiraiya simply had that effect on people.

Upon their introduction to each other, Minato had his face buried in a book on sealing. He'd hardly paid attention to what his fellow teammates said, he'd played with them both at some point in their time at the Academy. He knew their names, and vaguely remembered some pertinent details about them, but overall they were not as exciting as the level three seals he was unveiling.

The book had promptly been snatched from his hands, and he looked up in surprise to find his new sensei eyeing him in annoyance. He'd flushed in embarrassment.

"Look kid I enjoy fuinjutsu, but now ain't the time and place for it. Show some courtesy to your teammates, hell show some to me, I'm your freaking new sensei; introduce yourself."

Minato rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, "I'm Namikaze Minato, I like learning new ninja techniques, eating ramen, and reading. My dream is to become a great ninja, one acknowledged by the villagers and shinobi alike."

Jiraiya simply raised a brow and queried, "Have you thought about making that the goal of becoming Hokage?"

And then and there the idea had cemented itself. He would become Hokage, it'd been a whimsical ideal at first…but here he is…)

He raises his hands above his head to stretch, and knocks over a stack of paperwork.

His musings come to a momentary standstill.

He looks down at the paperwork on his desk with an expression of vague disgust. And then at the paperwork scattered to the floor.

He then looks at his detailed list of things he must accomplish by the sun down, and runs his hands through his hair wearily. A few weeks in office and one would think he'd be used to this by now.

He gets up and sets about the tedious task of putting these files back into working orders.
On the edge of the desk he catches sight of a new photo, knowing Kushina must have dropped it off. Already on his desk there are a few pictures taken from the Naruto shrine, next to them are photos of his genin team, his sensei and his self, and his and Kushina's wedding picture.

These people he will move heaven and earth for, being in the ultimate position of power in the village helps matters.

(At a young age he developed what Jiraiya fondly/exasperatedly calls his hero complex.

It goes deeper than that.

At the age of 12, he witnessed the death of one of his teammates. In the midst of the chunin exams, his teammate Hiro was struck down. Hiro told them to leave him behind, that he would only slow them down…Minato had carried him until the last sluggish breathe left his body.

Perhaps it was selfish on his part, but he could not leave Hiro to die alone in a foreign land so far from Leaf. As time trickled away for Hiro, Minato spoke of home, of returning there, seeing the sunset up top the Hokage monument, of his teammate's family.

Minato could not help but feel crushing guilt, if only he had double checked, triple checked their medical supplies, perhaps Hiro would have lived.

Thus came an obsession with making lists, and always being prepared for the unexpected.)

His thoughts take a curious turn:

Often times he wonders what his life would have been life if his father had claimed him, or if his mother had lived to raise him.

He wonders what his father would have thought of him, he wonders what his mother would have thought of him. Would they have been proud? Happy that he accomplished a lifelong goal? And then he remembers that it matters not, the philandering clan head had died a few years ago, and his mother had not had the resolve to resist his father's charms, nor live to see the end result of their affair.

Besides he has a parent.

(At the age of ten Jiraiya came along and filled in that missing void.

The man practically raised Minato, and helped shape the character he is today.

Upon gaining his chunin rank, he and his former teammate went their separate ways. Six months in as a chunin the toad sage offered him an apprenticeship, essentially picking up where they left off. And yet with Jiraiya's attention focused solely upon Minato, he flourished.

Fuinjutsu became a realm of infinite possibility, and he exploited it for all it's worth.

And so he traveled the continent with Jiraiya, and learned of the complex spy network the toad sage wielded. Gama-sennin had always contained some wanderlust, even when he trained his genin team, they had spent more time outside the village than in. Minato had no complaints, the world outside Hi no Kini is fascinating. He learned why Jiraiya is considered the greatest of the Sannin, the knowledge, the care, the paternal pride the toad sage imparted on him is something Minato will forever be grateful for.

When Gama-sennin found out about the shift of the Hokage mantle… he'd been quite flummoxed.
A few weeks ago a conversation ensued between them:

Why? He queried, and Minato had been quite confused by his response. Jiraiya could not understand why anyone would give up their relative freedom as ninja to stay inside an office, and deal with the whinging of high ranking officials that represent the population at large.

Minato had simply laughed, and reminded him it was he who suggested Minato become Hokage.

Jiraiya had looked at him incredulously and asked if he had actually taken the suggestion to heart… which apparently he did. From there Gama-sennin went on to lament about where he went wrong, how he thought Minato had inherited his desire to travel, et cetera.

Minato calmly pointed out that wondering the continent and beyond had become an possible endeavor once he settled down and had a family.

Jiraiya had dramatically frowned and told him to stop raining on his parade. And since Minato was useless to him, now he would have to pass on his spy network to Naruto.

Minato evenly pointed out, once more that he'd have to get that pass Kushina first. She had plans for the future and that includes grandchildren, and not everyone wanted a life of a bachelor.

Gama-sennin had then dramatically bemoaned the loss of his legacy, and staunchly defended the bachelorhood life—his love of debauchery included.

The memory of this conversation makes Minato chuckle.

Other matters however, require his attention.

His secretary—the current on duty chunin—calls in and reminds him of his afternoon appointments, and of rescheduling the ones he canceled.

That alone completely burst his good mood.

Minato sighs heavily.

His mood shifts to one of solemnity.

The Hokage hat is a heavy burden.

There is much work to be done.

This first year will mark rest of his reign as a success or failure, but unlike his predecessor he will step down once he leaves his prime, but within that time limit he has much to accomplish.

The inauguration of the Yondaime happened quicker than expected, but the simple fact is this, Sarutobi Hiruzen is weary and Minato is eager.

So why not switch places? Hiruzen will still mentor him, the power will shift, but his predecessor's guidance will remain a boon.

Many problems have to be addressed, and yet it's the solutions to them that's difficult to come by. In the end the ones the benefit the village overall are the ones that shall be chosen.

He looks up at the clock and sees that it's almost two, he hasn't had any lunch. He can imagine Kushina telling him to get his head out of the clouds and stop being so absentminded.
(It's not on purpose, on rare occasions he becomes so caught up in his head that he forgets the world around him. Nonetheless one too many occasions were enough to seal him with the characteristic of flakiness in the eyes of his wife.

He'd forgotten their first date, he'd been so wrapped up in creating a new seal that counters the effects of subtle genjutsu… well, he ended standing her up for nearly four hours.)

And so he summons a shadow clone to start on that thrice cursed paperwork.

He unseals Kushina cooking, she's made his favorite. Minato gives a moan of bliss.

His eyes happen to catch that thrice cursed paperwork again, and decisively he turns in his seat, leaving his clone to start sorting through the bullshit and bring about order.

He sighs.

Kushina always says that gray hair is in his immediate future.

He's definitely going to take advantage of the trade contracts with Ta no Kuni; they have some the best liquor in the elemental nations.

A Matriarch:

Her strides are not as graceful as they once were, ankles swollen, gait more of a waddle, but that does not impede her purposeful strides.

She rest elegant hands upon her extended middle. She's 31 weeks along and this pregnancy is much different than her first, one would think she is pregnant with two babes instead of one. With Itachi she had remained lite, even with the many sweets she had consumed over her gestation period. With Itachi the pregnancy had been easy, she'd had support every which way she turned, she had Fugaku…. Her fists clench as she remembers his awe at first feeling the fluttering of life in her womb.

And while she has the unwavering support of her friends, and her family, it is not the same, this experience feels incomplete.

With this pregnancy, a new era is beginning, one filled with strife within her home district. The district, nay the clan she rules by proxy until her son comes of age to fulfill his role.

As she walks through the district, a frown etches her lips.

There has been a population boom within the Uchiha district. What was once the clan compound is not a small village within the Village of Leaf.

(Twenty years ago when she was a girl of seven this was not so. Many members of the clan resided outside the clan compound, employed as teachers at the ninja academy, at the civilian school of trades, medics at the hospital, store clerks in the merchant districts, et cetera.

Slowly, but surely they all migrated back to the clan compound.

She and Fugaku always encouraged their fellow family members to live outside the clan compound. Her reasons were because she did before her brother went and got himself blasted to kingdom come. Fugaku more so because that meant less family members, less drama and headaches. The bitching a clan head experiences due to bickering clan members over stupid disputes, and asinine complaints
left him with his head buried in Mikoto's lap as she rubbed his aching temples.

Now they sequester themselves into their own little village. A village that breeds loyalty to themselves and not to the one that houses them.

And here she thought the clan is the village and the village is the clan.)

Hmm, how curious.

She is not blind to the seeds of discord that have manifested in the Uchiha clan since Konoha's founding.

It is a combination of alienation and arrogance.

Some high ranking members of Konoha hold the Uchiha in contempt. Senju Tobirama is a figure that comes to mind, Uchiha Kagami had spoken of the Nidaime in respectful tones, but that can be expected if that someone was one's jonin-sensei. Tobirama did not hide his distrust of the Uchiha clan, and as a leader, a shepherd, his sheep were bound to follow his example.

The Uchiha have always put the clan first, the village as an afterthought. She would think that after founding the first ninja village with the Senju, that they would have more pride in the home they endeavored to create.

However, she remembers the Uchiha thrived in the warring clans' era. Their past is remembered in blood, even for a ninja clan their history is a grisly one.

And it appears some of her family members wish for those halcyon days.

But she is not infallible, she has as much clan pride as any other Uchiha, enough that she is blinded.

She let herself thoughtlessly believe her clan would never turn their backs against Konoha. She has Uchiha arrogance, and pride in being a ninja of the greatest of the hidden villages. They are the best for a reason.

However, the Hokage came and ripped the tatami mat from under her feet.

(Two months ago Minato had summoned her before him, fresh in his rule—flint sparked over his back, the well wishes and support of Leaf's denizen uplifting him. As he stood behind his desk, she found nothing of that flighty boy that would sometimes drift in and out of the midst of conversation or become so enraptured by his work, he'd forget the world around. Nor did she see the man that could make Kushina blush until she surpassed the flaming hue of her hair, or the doting father that held a crying Naruto when she scraped her hands and knees after tripping and falling.

No before her stands the leader that inspired the citizens of Konoha, thanking them for a welcoming reception upon his appointment as Hokage. The man that stood before great adversary in the Third Shinobi War, and told the downtrodden ninja of Konoha to not worry, he had it from here, and then proceeded to show them what a one man army was capable of.

Minato's enlightenment did not come in the form of a friend, it came in hardened tones of a leader dealing with potential mutiny. His exacts continue to resonate in her head:

"I've have heard strange tidings that could be mistaken for as treason. Konoha is our home Uchiha-dono…. I will not tolerate betrayal within my own home. Nor will I show any favoritism amongst the clans, or high ranking officials… My hand will be forced and no one will like the consequences they have to suffer.")
She is still quite surprised the shock didn't send her into premature labor. Her blindness in not acknowledging the seeds of discord. Her confidence that the clan would not destroy the legacy of their forefathers had been for naught.

Because apparently they would.

That kind of arrogance will be the undoing of her and her family.

(Minato went on to inform her:

In the aftermath and upheaval of the Kasai fort massacre, the Uchiha clan elders and their supporters think they have the right to demand compensation. They feel as if not enough man power has been extended to find orchestrator behind it. That the matter has been brushed aside in favor of a new topic... so little they know. This perceived slight is enough to fan the flames of discord. To bring about a more ardent discussion of future mutiny. Even if they received what they believe the clan is due would not be enough. They are like greedy children, wanting more and more, and never satisfied by what they receive.

Beneath her very nose the clan had divided into two factions. And if they did not take a course of action now, one of the factions would become a wave submerging all into chaos.

And so an ultimatum presented itself. Minato did not mince words, and in the end they agreed on one solution—kill the flame before it can spread to the wood work--the elders, their alleged supporters, and families.)

It's a ruthless, bloody affair, but necessity to save the majority, a few and their compatriots must die —87 members out of 243.

She thinks perhaps if Fugaku had lived, none of this madness would not have appeared. She can almost delude herself into thinking that with Fugaku's strong convictions, the clan leaders would not have been able to strong arm him. He had held firm in his six years as clan head, his people would have followed his example, every decisions he made held little bias…. Then she remembers that this discontent has always simmered and bubbled beneath the surface. This would have been inevitable and eventually overwhelmed her husband.

And where would she be with no choice but to support her husband, they both would be dragged down with their clan's madness.

The task set out before her gives her a sense of duty. For the last few months, she has been sluggishly wading through a sea of emotions, simply going about the motions: seeing about Itachi's wellbeing, remaining healthy enough to satisfy her doctor for the pregnancy, and leading an apparently fracturing clan.

She's been blind, oh so blind.

The sense of being lost slowly becomes anger, this anger cements her, plants her feet firmly to the earth. She's angry at her clan's audacity; that they would choose to rise up against the very home that shelters them, simply for control, simply for power, but then again as history of the clan shows, the Uchiha are a bloody, greedy lot.

Her fists clench once more, teeth grit and her jaw clenches. She forces herself to calm down, more so than ever she needs to remain calm.

The Naka shrine comes into view, she takes careful steps up it and slides back the wooden door. She proceeds down the main hall, carefully she falls to her knees and moves the seventh tatami mat.
climb down is somewhat steep with her added girth, but a smile graces her face... it appears she interrupted some interesting proceedings.

"Gentlemen, ladies," She announces without preamble, "It appears I am late."

The clan elders look up, all seven have varying expressions only told through the minute telltale twitches of their faces. Amongst them she can read contempt.

She sits upon an empty cushion, the clan head's cushion, Fugaku's position. The significance is not lost on them. She smiles brightly, "What have I missed?"

"You should not have come," One of the two token female elders—Ayaka—tells her, "to traverse the distance from your home to the shrine is a burden in your condition, and so close to your confinement... you must think of the child. A messenger would have brought you news of the proceedings."

One of the male elders—Isao—looks at her in distaste, and then looks pointedly at her stomach as he informs her, "Certain impediments should be avoided, regardless of clan business. We are here to look after clan affairs."

Mikoto gives a bland smile in response, "Inuzuka Tsume is an acquaintance of mine. I admire her dedication she gives to her clan, regardless of certain impediments. I find admiration in her leadership, and have chosen to emulate her effective methods."

Elder Nobu-san sneers, "Do not compare an Uchiha to those dog fuckers. A women's place is within the home, especially when she is with child. The Inuzuka bitch is an anomaly, one who—"

Mikoto tsked, "Such language Nobu-san. We must respect Tsume-dono, she is a notable leader of Konoha. You will respect her as you must respect me."

Nobu scoffs, and says scathingly, "You as Clan head!? That is a great lark, you are nothing but a broodmare, meant to give the clan strong Uchiha sons as every clan head's wife has before. Your purpose does not extend beyond that. Any preconceived notions you have should die here. Certainly you must have learned your place as a child, it appears I will have to re-enlighten you. You have no purpose here. These women though," He gestures to his fellow female elders, "have done their duty to the clan. You will have fulfilled yours once Itachi reaches his majority. In the mean time we will see to the clan affairs. Fugaku may be dead, but we will continue to see about the betterment of Uchiha clan."

Two of his counterparts nod sagaciously or make noises of agreement.

Throughout this tirade Mikoto had continued to smile blandly, once he finishes one of her hands that was demurely folded over her middle rises in a vague gesture.

The lights subtly flicker, the shadows ominously elongate, from its recesses a succession of senbon sing as they cut through air. Their targets hit true, sharp poisoned ends piercing those dreaded pressure points, the touch of death.

As those three collapse upon themselves, Mikoto airily remarks, "I think he's made his point, now onto more pressing matters."

As former shinobi their shell shock does not last long, she's quite surprised they did not move into defensive positions earlier. Perhaps they have gone soft in their old age as veteran shinobi, or they are too shocked in being attacked within their own domain.
Kunai are in their hands, sharingan spinning death, they certainly recognize that a genjustu has been spun around them, it's weaving is subtle, they look for their would be death dealers.

"I would not do that if I were you, suspicious movements will result in lethal force, please sit," Mikoto invites civilly.

A warning set of senbon come from the shadows and land in various locations, all inches from vital pressure points in warning. They decide to take heed to her invitation, but not without protest:

"How dare you! You cannot do this—"

"Stupid girl, you will rue this day—"

"Sure I can, I just did, and I shall do so again if need be," Mikoto replies pleasantly, she steeps her fingers and begins, "Now onto business," She uses Minato's words, "I've heard strange tidings, whispers that could be mistaken as treason. Decrees that you all have suggested and I've overturned have somehow been sanctioned. Such as a school within the district. Why would we need one? Konoha has plenty of schools for the clan's children. Or the gate surrounding the district, why has it become fortified? There are seals reinforcing the stone. What is taking place within the Uchiha clan? Are we becoming autonomous? Are we going to war?"

More than once in her diatribe the elders opened their mouths to refute her claims, and warning senbon are sent their way. However, one or two of them simply look at her wearily. That last question cements the tangible tension.

"Ah, is that guilt I sense? It does not have to be confirmed by any of you. I have birds the whisper to me, and tell me your secrets. You all have grown bold in the months since Fugaku's death. These surreptitious susurrations that speak of future mutiny to the village that houses them, they will not come to pass. Heed my words, all traitors will die."

She raises her hand again and this time the ninja come to light, the elite of the elite, the Uchiha's pride and glory wield gleaming kunai, the metal becomes tainted with red as the elders' throats are slit.

Their blood will not be the first blood she spills of her family. If any of the Uchiha have aspirations of greater grandeur, she will not hesitate to cut them down.

The Uchiha clan will not suffer the shame that will follow a failed mutiny. They are a founding clan of Konoha, their blood helps nourish this land, and it will continue to flourish in the next generations.

She will not allow her sons to live through a civil war.

Mikoto rises from her seat, and speaks to the Uchiha ANBU and jonin, "Burn the bodies. I will not have their corpses and bloodline limit desecrated for experimentation. Inform the Hokage that the traitors have been purged."

Two of the elite ninja shadow her as leaves the shrine, outside she is met with the sight of Uchiha Kagami, he falls into step with her.

Kagami does not let them idle in silence, "It's a beautiful night, is it not?"

Mikoto gives a wry smile in response. Kagami has a weird sense of humor.

(Shisui's father settled down later in life, having fallen in love with a girl more than a decade his junior and had a hellion that contributes she, Kushina, Hizashi, and Minato headaches, along with their own spawn. However, what makes him a person of significance is his new elevation in the clan,
As a veteran shinobi, he's taken the rare route in retirement, instead of seeking a new domain to conquer—politics—he settled for a peaceful existence after dedicating more than twenty years in the shinobi forces, a tool that rose to the occasion every time duty called. But that does not mean his strategic mind has dulled in his years of hiatus. The man is perceptive, his blunt statements always throw people off guard…a fact he finds hilarious.

"Was it taken care of?" Mikoto asked tiredly, she wants to soak her feet, she craves those fresh tomatoes she purchased this morning, but most of all she wants to sleep.

"Hai, the sheep have gone off to slaughter," Kagami informs her.

"Then the Hokage has already been informed," Mikoto concludes wearily. "And Itachi?"

"He's fine, tucked away with Shisui and Naruto, under the watchful eyes of the Red Menace."

Mikoto laughs at that last quip. They continue to walk, a companionable silence falling over them, the main house is the destination. Kagami studies her briefly, and discerns a truth, "You regret your actions, but they were not really your decisions to make, were they?"

It's a rhetorical question, thus she shall not answer. He continues, "I organized the assassinations of their families and allies, and after care of cremation. Yondaime-sama ordered the mission to take place, and you took care of the puppet masters. The blame does not lie on your shoulders, we did what was necessary."

"When did our family become our enemies?" Mikoto's eyesight becomes blurry, she sniffs. "I can't help but wish Fugaku was here, this is a heavy burden to carry." And then she burst into tears.

Beside her Kagami shifts uncomfortably, and pats her back awkwardly. Typical emotionally stunted Uchiha.

Mikoto gives a deprecating laugh, and tries to pull herself together. "I'm sorry, pregnancy hormones, I'm just a mess sometimes. Oh! Look here we are, this is my stop," She stop before the main house and turns to bow to Kagami, he returns it. "Good night Kagami-san."

She has put up a strong front for her son, for the clan dependent upon her, and as a leader dealing with politics. She and Fugaku had spent most of their marriage bickering, putting on a united front in public, while their relationship was actually strained. Of course there was a fondness between them that only extended to their one common factor, the wonder they created called Itachi. In their eyes, perfection had never been achieved until his birth.

Nonetheless, every olive branch Fugaku extended to her was revoked. Fugaku made the effort, she on the other hand carried on like some fucking martyr, using her brother death as an excuse to remain aloof, and her father's rejection of her to spite her husband the position that should have "rightfully" been hers.

What a fool she'd been.

More times than not she has fallen asleep weeping, she grieves and blames the hormones when friends and family asked her why her eyes are red rimmed, and smudged with evidence of Morpheus' neglect.

She falls asleep with a damp pillow clutching her steadily growing stomach. The worst nights were when Itachi climbed into bed beside her, and tried his best to hug her, proclaiming now that father
was gone he would now protect her and his baby brother. Honestly that made her cry harder.

One of her greatest regrets is not attempting to reconcile with Fugaku, not attempting to make their arranged marriage into a love match. The potential was there, she simply spurned him and in reaction to avoid getting hurt, he'd reacted with harsh words—his of fire, hers of ice.

And her biggest regret of all is not realizing how much she actually loved her husband until he was dead, and their son laying in a hospital bed in the aftermath.

The only consolation prize to come out of this is the impending birth of their second son. The last part of Fugaku she will ever have. She will cherish both their sons in his memory.

He lives on in them.

---

A Spy:

He's been in Konoha for two days.

Usually this would not bother him, he'd visit his old haunts, gallivant with friends he seldom sees due to his travels. However, none of these are an option.

(He'd been officially been called back to Konoha via urgent toad summon by his former student…er Hokage. He had assumed the worst. Of course he hurried by to Leaf with speeds that befitted his rank as a sannin. He had returned to Konoha find it neither suffering from a foreign invasion, nor destroyed with the tell tales signs of an escaped biju reigning hell upon his surroundings. He'd spent five minutes gaping at the picturesque scene of a thriving Konoha.

When he had stalked to the Hokage tower, frothing at the mouth, ready to spits words of fire at Minato. Only to find himself restricted from accessing the Hokage's office by the obstinate chunin/secretary. The ANBU on duty ignored him when he tried wrenching the doors open, but failed, and then called chakra to his hand and watched as the seal matrix appeared. It was an intricate if not convoluted piece of work. The dimensions of couse were completely changed, and when he squinted at a section he saw that there's a compulsion jutsu. A bastardized version of the Yamanka clan techniques.

It was really impressive, and when he finished appraising the genius of his former apprentice, his irritation returned.

His intent was to commit harm, this is the first matrix of the seal, he would not be able to bypass it, or the other plethora of safeguards in place. So from outside he yelled a series of obscenities that made the chunin on desk duty blush.

If the little fucker wanted to evade him then so be it, it's only right he crashed at the Uzumaki-Namikaze residence and mooch for all his worth. {Disregarding he has a seldom used apartment.}

When he had arrived, he found Kushina preparing to leave on a mission. Her first one in months, she'd been hesitant, particularly after the events surrounding the mission that left her on bed rest, and her toddler distraught. Minato had given her plenty of leeway, he himself worried about the target on her back. Though not widely known--her status as the wife of the Kiiroi Senko and newly titled Yondaime Hokage--her status as an Uzumaki is enough to put her in danger. But her sealing skills are highly demanded, she has ignored the past requests for her, but this one has beckoned her to come out of her hiatus prematurely.

He had entered the flat to find the household in an atypical state of disarray. Kushina and Naruto in
the midst of the chaos, yelling to and fro across the hall. Apparently Minato could not be counted on to look over Naruto while Kushina was away, and she was currently on her to Hyuuga Hizashi's—he pitied the man for dealing with the hellion that is Naruto.

Once he had made his presence known, it was all downhill from there.

A complete change of plans took place, and somehow he ended up getting roped into watching the little shit. He didn't mind per say, where ever his goddaughter is involved, hilarity and chaos was bound to ensue.)

So now he is…

Two days later only catching brief glimpses of Minato—if he'd ever rued a jutsu being created, it's definitely the Hirashin, the jutsu of evasion.

He finds his presence in the flat superfluous, Naruto is ridiculously independent. Right now he surreptitiously watches as she does her laundry, struggling to reach the dial above the dryer, perhaps he should help, but he rather see what she does. She looks around her, and he knows she must sense his presence nearby, and yet she still proceeds to fly through hand seals, quietly murmuring "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu".

He gapes, he hadn't expected that, particularly from a five year old. But then that logic is soundly rejected, she's the jinchuriki of nine tails, is the progeny of Minato, and wields the special chakra of her mother's lineage. Besides with Naruto its best to expect the unexpected.

Gama-sennin rises from his perch, and calls out to the midget, "Gaki are you ready yet!? The cinema begins in ten."

"Ero-sennin, I'm coming," Naruto looks at the clock, "Hey! The movie doesn't start for another twenty minutes..." Naruto looks back at him with sudden suspicion, "did you seal away the snacks?"

Jiraiya snorts, "You mean the care packages for a small army? Yes, I did."

Naruto squints at him suspiciously, and then declares, "I don't believe you!"

She proceeds to run off to the kitchen to make sure, but is caught before she can reach her destination. Jiraiya hauls her up, and gets a good hold on her wriggling torso. "Oh no you don't, we're leaving now."

Naruto makes a sound of the upmost indignation as he opens the nearby window and climbs through. She tries to bite at the hand holding her, and yet her god father maneuvers her expertly.

"You just want to flirt with the ticket receptionist!" Naruto protests when escape seems futile.

Jiraiya jumps to the next roof top and gives a smirk, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I hope you know you're robbing the cradle, she's barely legal," Naruto taunts.

Gama-sennin sputters, "You are too young to talk that way. I ought to wash your mouth out with soap for speaking of adult affairs..." Here Jiraiya gives a sly smile, "But the most important part of your sentence is 'legal'."

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)
Upon their return Minato sees fit to grace them with his presence. Naruto briefly hugs his leg in greeting, yawning widely as she heads to bed.

Jiraiya is fully prepared to tear him a new one, until he sees the grim expression etched on his face. And so he puts teasing aside and gets down to business, "What's this I hear about countering a rebellion within the Uchiha clan?"

The backlash of the simmering Uchiha rebellion had reached Jiraiya through deplorable channels that heard beyond the propaganda given to the village at large. The public knew this: in the aftermath of clan head Uchiha Fugaku's death there had been outrage, which lead to inner clan conflict that resulted in necessary manslaughter.

Minato grimaces, he believes that the villagers deserve to know what takes place within Konoha, but a veil of deceit is a necessary evil. So he lies but as close to the truth as possible, and omits pertinent details. "I've got it under control sensei."

Which is an understatement.

Minato has as much control as someone in a leadership position can have over public opinion, but what's said behind closed doors is another story. The villagers have mixed views towards the Uchiha clan, and rumors of traitors amongst them.

And Danzo circles over the Uchiha clan like a vulture looking for any sign of weakness in the herd. His spies on the ground, in shadows ready to tear asunder the stragglers.

Eventually he too will be dealt with. Even if he has to personally assassinate the man who attempted to train Kushina into a weapon, and then set his sights upon Naruto. He whispered into the ear of Minato's predecessor who simply indulged him without merit, but with Minato he will find his attempts stonewalled.

Minato's birds whisper and tell him stories of Ne, he gifts them with counterseals, and makes the mute auditory once more.

But as of now, that is neither here nor there.

There are more important matters to attend to.

And so Minato asks a question that leaves Jiraiya poleaxed.

"Are you still in touch with the leaders of Akatsuki?"

---

A Refugee:

The mission parameters gives her the allotted time of three weeks.

She finishes with a week, plenty of time to spare.

She takes a detour in Kaze no Kuni and heads south.

There are great ruins in the dunes of Kaze, many lost to the weathering of sand storms that little by little wear away at once great structures, and returns the stones to the earth where they once belonged. Some she passes by and remembers playing within their decaying midst.

She dodges the migrating flock of giant flying hawks as they canvas the landscape high and low. She stops at sparring oasis that dot the desert sea, occasionally coming across settlements established
around the oasis' perimeters.

It's here that she undergoes a transformation, she has never been able to perform genjutsu, it's a ninja art that alludes her as perfect chakra control alludes those gifted with the Uzumaki clan's large chakra reserves. And so she makes a temporary change. Dies her hair a dull brown and dons glasses that dulls the vibrant hue of her eyes. She seals away the presence of her ninja attire, and dons the clothing of a civilian.

She avoids larger settlements, and by the time she reaches the location of the small shipping town, she has grown to hate the feel of sand in her sandals and the unrelenting heat of Kaze no Kuni.

She takes a ship to one of the many islands of Mizu no Kuni.

In the Southwest quadrant of Mizu, the Aoi Sea gives way to mist and shifting waters. Twirling and swirling this way and that, undulating in maelstroms, difficult to navigate. The layer of mist disappears, giving way to larger whirlpools, above them a storm brews with the claps of thunder and spears of lightning. The stench of ozone lingers here, and grows as the center comes into reach.

In the eye of the storm lies the ruins of a land disseminated by the actions of men given god like powers. The fear of three nations culminated in the destruction of a country. And the skeletons of great structures now wait to be swallowed up by the ocean below. Time will eventually see that come true.

She lands on one of the islands the used to be a central station of trade between the two countries. The population has been majorly reduce due to the loss source of income that came with importing and exporting goods.

She stands at the water's edge and looks to the west, out yonder the storm brews, out yonder is a home she barely knew, and yet still mourned.

Into town she heads, from the local florist she purchases a bouquet of flowers. She heads back to the water's edge, slipping off her sandals to sink her feet into the damp sand.

Eventually she reaches her destination, she walks carefully into the hidden glade amongst the mangroves. There's a multi-layered seal in place here, one that utilizes nature chakra, using it as a source of energy to fuel the subtle illusion that laces the glade.

She does not disable it, rather she manipulates it, allowing herself passage. Within the glade is a memorial monument. The stone is chakra conducting, recognizing her as a descendent of the Uzumaki clan. A source of light glows as she enters the monument.

Amongst what appears to be thousands of names, she searches for two familiar names, when she finds them she trace their name engravings with a touch of reverence.

Before them she places the flowers, she falls gracelessly to her knees and dull ache from when she was a child, throbs with renewed loss. She allows herself to weep with old mourning coloring her tears.

(Uzu no Kuni was a decade or so gone by the time she was born. Survivors scattered to the winds, some of them daring to settle and reside on the outskirts of Mizu, lingering on the boundaries that once made up Whirlpool.

Inconspicuously they lived the life of civilians. Distancing themselves from the ninja arts, for it was those very skills that led to their decimation. Here, her parents dwelled. There was momentary peace… until the civil wars broke out.
And with those bloody battle came the purges. The Sandaime Mizukage called for the extinction of clans with kekkei genkai. Civilians or not, suspected parentage or direct lineages, none of that mattered. The Uzumaki were known for their seals, but also for the special chakra that coursed through their veins, granting them longevity, and in some cases chakra manipulation—i.e. the ability to create shields, or chakra chains.

Fitting this criteria put targets on their backs once more. Their distinctive red hair made them easier targets to distinguish.

Many clans were wiped out, those few Uzumaki that dared to stay close to the familiar, close to their roots died along with them.

But they are a people that does not know when to die, the stubborn ones that survived fought tooth and nail, escaping the madness that descended upon the once peaceful lands of Mizu. They became nomadic.

She was but a babe when she left her home, she does not remember much, but vibrant red hair, crimson and slate eyes, the lulling base of her father singing to her, and the bright laughter of her mother.

Thus her grandmother raised her, in a caravan they traveled with their fellow refugees. She grew up sleeping beneath the stars, upon the open road, traveling the continent and sometimes beyond. She came to know this flimsy peace from her parents' sacrifice of defending her against their death dealers. Her grandmother stole her away and she emerged to this life. As they traveled with their fellow expats, their numbers slowly trickled downward as some individuals settled into the small villages or big cities they journeyed through.

This existence was all that she knew, aside from the stories her Obaasan told her and the training she was given. Until a hawk came, almost like an omen as it soared down, and presented her grandmother with a letter.

Her grandmother's favorite cousin Uzumaki-Senju Mito beckoned them forth to journey to Konoha. And they were off to visit Uzu's once great ally.

Here a water shed took place.

Several events came about that marked the second stage of her life. She became the jinchuriki of the Kyuubi no Kitsune, she met a boy with pretty eyes, pretty hair, and an even prettier smile, and his presence became a constant in her life, one she would be forever thankful for. She donned the hitai-ate of Leaf, met her lifelong friends Hyuuga Hizashi and Uchiha Mikoto—pissed them off, eventually earned their respect, and pulled the sticks out of their noble asses. She found a role model in the lackadaisical Hatake Sakumo—he encouraged his team's hell raising qualities, having watched on in amusement as they caused mayhem.

A tragic moment occurred when she was 13 summers old, her Obaasan passed away. The woman was well into her nineties, and she died smiling.

Thus with the third stage of her life, she comes full circle.)

Eventually the water works dry, and she pulls herself together. She looks about herself and finds there are fresh flowers aside from her own placed upon the memorial. The smoking trails of incense have been lit, she is not the only one who has visited. She follows their example, before leaving to join her family members at the traditional bathhouse and hotel a distant cousin of hers owns.
(It's a memorial tradition held every year since the destruction of Whirlpool. Occasionally she comes, and sees family that she has not seen in years. The last time she ventured here had been two years before she married Minato and had Naruto. The dynamic between she and Minato was still novel, but the devotion they displayed to one another belayed their relationship as long term.

At the time she wanted to share something that's pivotal to her identity with him. In Konoha the presence of Uzu no Kuni manifested itself in the most curious of ways, but she had lived in leaf, became a citizen and donned its head band declaring her willingness to die for its causes. She'd been immersed in Minato's culture for a decade—at time she dared to think that she'd eventually marry Minato and whimsically she looked upon herself as a foreign bride adopting her husband's culture as her own and eventually bearing him children that too would be immersed in it.

And so she invited him along, and immediately regretted it. She left herself open as a target, complete cannon fodder for the individuals who grew up with her, those who babysat her, and who helped raise her. Add in a boyfriend and the scales escalated to childish teasing.)

As Kushina leaves the mangrove glade, the layered seal resets itself, she travels along the sand, lost in thought. Eventually she'll bring Naruto along, though the Leaf is her daughter's home, if Naruto ever expresses interest in Kushina's origins, she'll gladly expose her daughter to her family's insanity.

In the distance her name is called:

"Kushina!"

"Tomato-chan!"

"Hell spawn!"

A vein appears at the nick name, but she smiles nonetheless at the familiar approaching faces.

A God:

A parcel with the Leaf's emblem.

How curious.

Absently he hands the toad the package of mochi he keeps on hand. The young messenger toads prefer snacks over measly gratitude. He keeps a package of mochi on him always, even though he and his teammates seldom use the summoning contract Gama-sennin honored them by allowing them to sign it.

But the parcel is curious.

Very curious.

Usually when their former sensei wishes to catch up, they meet in neutral territory. For they are the leaders of the rebellion group Akatsuki, seeking to overthrow Koukage of Amegakure. But perhaps that should be spoken of in pass tense for Hanzo is now a relic of the past.

Encountering their former sensei happens once or twice a year, and the reunions are always enlightening. However, the last time he'd seen Jiraiya was six months ago, just a short time after Yahiko's funeral procession.

Now as he scans this parcel, his eyebrows rising with every passing word, it appears he will be
seeing seeing Gama-sennin more frequently in the next coming months. But this time on more formal
grounds, and he would be meeting another one of Jiraiya's students… idly, he wonders how the toad
sage must feel about having two former pupils as Kages.

The irony is that Nagato never wanted to wear a shadow's hat. And yet upon his and Konan's
shoulders they carry Yahiko's dream. And for that alone he carries the burden willingly.

His musings come to a halt, there's a tug on his robe, he looks down, and the toad looks up at him
imploringly. He raises both brows, and queries, "More?"

"For the road," The pink and green toad replies.

He sighs long-sufferingly, but he hands over the mochi, "You and your brothers will completely
devour Ame's supply of candy." He pauses on a more serious note, "Tell Jiraiya I'll will think on it."

The toad smiles, "Sayonara Nagato."

"Ja ne, Gamanatsu," He replies.

He looks upon the parcel again, memorizes the contents of it, and then burns it. Still so very curious.
The Leaf seeks an alliance, the surface reasoning from the Yondaime Hokage states as former
students of a Sannin, why should they not seek to become friends? Nagato finds that to be hilarious.

This is political posturing at its finest.

Leaf ninja killed his parents, but one of his great idols is a ninja of Konoha.

Conflict of interest indeed.

He had once found he held all ninja in contempt, all harbingers of violence and hatred were subjects
of his loathing. But what does he do? Go and become the very thing he hates, and now he leads a
village full of killing machines. All tools waiting for him to point in a direction to attack, and they
shall do so without question.

Will he pull that trigger? …No, no, not unless provoked.

One thing Jiraiya did for certain for all his students is cement the dream for peace. Handing them the
tools and teaching them the skills to combat violence with violence. This is an endless cycle of hate,
but Uzumaki Nagato does not look for peace on an international scale. He simply seeks to keep Kou
no Kuni out of the cross fire of the five major ninja villages. Perhaps he can bring peace and
prosperity to his adopted home, and do his parents and ancestors proud—protect his home, where
they failed to protect Uzu no Kuni.

There is much to be done.

Hanzo left Amegakure and Kou no Kuni in such a state of disrepair.

Kou no Kuni is made up of a series of city states. Once they were united under Hanzo's banner, all
city rulers swearing fealty to Amegakure's Kouukage for protection. But with Hanzo's fall at
Nagato's hand, the city-states disintegrated and have fallen back into the traditions before
Amegakure's Kage pressed his rule upon them.

They forge alliances, autonomous to each other, and trade amongst each other to keep a steady
balance of power. Enlisting their ninja village for missions, but never again bowing before the
Kouukage.
But therein lies the problem, missions have not been petitioned with Ame, the city states have been seeking out foreign ninja for tasks that should rightfully go to Kouu's ninja village.

And that must be rectified.

In the wake of Hanzo's defeat, those with knowledge of the Rikuo-sennin look upon his eyes and spread the word. The legend spreads throughout Kouu, rumors of the Sage of Six Paths being reborn once more.

A god walks amongst men.

Konan finds this to be hilarious, if Yahiko were here, he too would find mirth in his friend's plight. Nagato is simply resigned to it, but that does not mean he is not clever enough to take advantage of it.

Now he travels through Kouu no Kuni—he could send Akatsuki members as diplomats amongst the city rulers, but he would not disrespect these wary leaders. He will give the illusion of a god humbling himself, willing to negotiate with mere mortals.

So far it has worked with astounding results.

And now the Leaf wishes to align itself with a burgeoning power, but they are not the only ones. Another potential ally whispers tantalizing visions of peace, and the means of getting there tempt Nagato, but his friend's vision of peace clashes with it.

Nagato will keep his cards close to his chest and see what the others present first.
A few months earlier

She finds it difficult to breathe. She holds out hesitant hands, even as she sits perfectly still, there is a subtle tremor in her forelimbs.

The soft expression on Itachi's face shifts as he looks up at her. Regardless of her close dynamic with him, reading Itachi is challenging, even more so after the death of Itachi's father. His eyelids lower, long lashes veiling his eyes, mouth held in a moue of apathy. The boy has already perfected an inscrutable mask. And yet as he looks down again, a smile seems to not quite tilt the corner of his lips.

Naruto breathe hitches, Itachi seldom smiles anymore. Of course the bundle within his arms would bring an iota happiness to his face. Carefully Itachi transfers the bundle to her arms. The babe within the blanket coos, blinking slowly, he shifts as he placed upon a new perch.

"Hold his head," Itachi murmurs. Naruto moves her limbs accordingly, and the infant's features come closer into view.

Itachi reaches out and takes one of the babe's flailing hands.

Naruto takes a stabilizing breath, "Hi Sasuke, I'm Naruto, it's nice to meet you."

The infant's eyes widen at the sound of her voice. Sasuke coos and tightens the fist he has on his brother's finger.

It's quite curious seeing her best friend as a babe, face smooth and bathed in innocence.

Shall she admit it's taken three, mayhaps four weeks for her to hold Sasuke?

At his birth she'd been present, and in the following weeks plenty of opportunities presented themselves to hold the newborn. Except Naruto declined, she didn't hold Neji until he was two weeks old and that was by proxy. Kushina had held Naruto, and she had held the Hyuuga with her mother's support.

Shall she admit that courage failed her?

It fled in a flurry of movement, leaving her floundering, struggling beneath tides and currents.

Courage took nearly four weeks to harbor. Naruto is not a coward, but neither is she infallible. Here her turmoil appeared, and she toiled away for weeks trying to overcome it. And overcome it she does.

For here she is.

Not moments before, she wondered the halls of the Uchiha main house, and stumbled upon Sasuke's nursery. Beyond the opened door she found Itachi calming a whimpering Sasuke, and the opportunity presented itself.

And thus they come full circle.
Naruto and Sasuke.

Sasuke, Naruto… and Itachi.

How strange.

Beside her Itachi sits, humming a lulling tune. Sasuke yawns, his eyes flutter close, soothed by the sounds of his brother, and eventually sleeps claims him.

_I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)_

_In between_

There's an army of blond idiots.

And at the center is the greatest idiot of them all.

Or rather, there's a small battalion of shadow clones, and at the center is their creator. Naruto boldly takes on all the clones.

"Ready girls?" Calls out the original.

"Yah boss!" "Bring it on!" "I'll kick all your asses, believe it!" "Ready as ever motherfuckers!"

Comes the various exclamations.

"All right, go!" Naruto shouts.

In her past life, her skills in tajutsu left little to be desired, so she improvised until she learned a tajutsu style that channeled senjutsu. While she has the knowledge of using sage mode, her current child's body can't utilize nature chakra without the risk of turning into stone. And so until she can sign the toad summoning contract, and train with the toad elders in the art of senjutsu, or with her father or Jiraiya, she'll improvise.

So when the time does come to learn senjustu again, and she so happens to pick up on senjutsu faster than the average pupil… hmm, that'll just reinforce the so called prodigy label she's been branded with (_insert Kurama snorting in irony_).

Until then, she shall train with the lessons her parents imparted upon her so far.

Having shinobi as parents does give the child a certain advantage over orphaned children, and the offspring of civilians. Once they enter the ninja academy, they lack the rudimentary skills that clan children, and the kids of shinobi have already acquired.

Does Naruto feel bad about this advantage?

Here's two words: Hell and No.

The Uzumaki brute fist is designed with a brawler in mind. Regardless of her gender, Naruto is a brawler for she has the strength to back her, and the chakra necessary for delivering the required crushing blows. The brute fist isn't about finesse and control, it's about strength and chakra output.

This time around her chakra control is much better; her chakra has been harnessed from the moment she began to walk and talk. But Naruto's chakra control isn't completely stellar, so she appreciates that she can cut loose with the brute fist.

It is a dance, there's no other way to quite describe it.
Naruto undulates in and out of her clones, she dives beneath them, launches herself above using the shoulders and heads of her clones as stepping stones. She laughs, it is after all great fun, the adrenaline rushes through her, igniting like fire in her veins. A few clones grow indignant and begin to attack in earnest. She's grabbed, her arms held captive behind her, and a clone appears before her, grinning deviously before landing a devastating blow to her gut her. She lets out a grunt of surprised pain.

Her eyes narrow, she adjust her arms within the vice hold her clones have captured her in, and uses her legs to lurch her body forward. As she launches backwards, she uses that momentum to twist from within their holds. When she lands, earthbound by gravity, she moves in a series of blows. She punches one of the bunshin that held her captive, grabs another in a choke hold. The clone that sucker punched her approaches with a dozen or so bunshin following its lead. Naruto waits until it gets a mere few inches from her and draws her leg back, chakra gathers as her leg contracts, and then disperses like a bullet from a barrel as she lets loose her kick.

The clones diffuse from the impact and backlash of the raw chakra blow.

Naruto is then assaulted by the memories of her clones, making her once again appreciate the sheer destructiveness of this taijutsu style. Where the gentle fist closes tenketsu, the brute fist eviscerates them, causing lethal and permanent damage to the chakra system.

The clone in her stranglehold attempts to escape in her momentary distraction, Narutotightens her arm, and it claws at her limb. She continues to choke the clone until it disperses, and executes an almost seamless Kawarimi to avoid incoming blows and kunai.

Naruto lands in a different area of the melee, the clones notice her, and so she moves quickly, drawing forth a seal that she's been working on.

The ANBU watching her on the premises will report her unadvised use of seals in a simulated battle, and most likely she will get a swift kick to the ass for her trouble. Her parents trust her, but she's their child, a combination of their genes… that's reason enough to worry for her. Seals are dangerous, particularly when messing with experimental elements.

But what's the point of using fuinjutsu when one can't even test what they've created?

She uses Kawarimi again and appears to the south of her battalion of clones. She murmurs, "Fuin."

A small radius ignites, the dimensions and matrixes of the seal searing itself in the ground, the surrounding air becomes an intense heat, and the gravity within the circle intensifies and then pulls the clones abruptly to the earth, creating craters in their wake.

The shadow bunshin around her have come to a standstill, watching the experimental seal in action with rapt attention. Naruto calls a momentary armistice.

As the clones caught in the gravity seal disperse, Naruto once more receives their memories and pulls out a notebook to document their observations. Eventually she wants to expand the seals radius to encompass an entire field or perhaps a city, but the problem is stabilizing an unknown element like gravity.

When she's done she seals away her notes, and calls out, "All right girls, back to business!"

She engages her clones once again in close combat, laughing in glee. When she grows bored with simple taijutsu, interspersed with the brute fist, she decides then to move onto ninjutsu.

Naruto uses kawarimi again and appears on the fringe of the battalion, and proceeds to fly through
seals for the futon jutsu she's recently learned.

She can't after all, afford to be a one trick pony.

Naruto's learned basic ninjutsu; she's known them from both time lines, but in this her parents demand repetition until she can execute these jutsu without hand seals. For their mantra is: "It's the easy jutsu like Kawarimi that can mean the difference between a fatal injury/death, and a chance of escaping/reigning hell on the enemy that has to audacity to try and kill you."

And while she practices their demanding training regimens, she's begun to wheedle rudimentary elemental ninjutsu from her parents. Her mother refuses to teach her until she begins the Academy, her father started to teach her ninjutsu when she'd taken matters into her own hands and learned a few futon jutsu, which ended kind of disastrously … and since taking upon the Hokage mantle he has less time to devote to her education.

Minato feels guilt, for a Kage Bunshin is not the same as being present and spending time with his child.

Naruto has absolutely no qualms about exploiting that guilt, her father spoils her anyway.

And so she take's every iota of knowledge he's willing to pass on, like this time:

Her father's prone to leaving two or five shadow clones to take care of business in the Hokage office. Like the fire shadows before him he has a tendency to go AWOL, escape his ANBU guards and leave the elite ninja in a frenzy when they can't find or sense neither hind nor hair of him.

And so when she fails to find him at the tower, she visits his familiar haunts until she is led to the Nara compound.

She's welcomed in, and gives a polite greeting to Nara Yoshino or the banshee as her son once referred to her as. Mrs. Nara is quite nice, but looks can be deceiving, her mother and Mikoto-obasan are exhibits A and B for instance.

Naruto finds her father on the veranda, engaged in a game of Go with Nara Shikaku, the jonin commander. Minato is only slightly flustered, but appears to be valiantly holding his own against the Nara. While Shikaku looks bored, but there's a calculating gleam in his eyes, showing that the Hokage has a savvy enough mind to give the genius tactician a run for his money.

Beside them, laying spread eagle upon a pillow is the cherubic Shikamaru, passed out with his mouth open wide, dribble slogging down his cheek.

He looks adorable, but Naruto is not here to squeal over another member of the chibified rookie 9.

Naruto gives a polite, "Ohayo."

Shikaku grunts in greeting, never looking up from the board.

Minato looks up and smiles at his daughter, "Ohayo Naruto."

She glares at him in response, and says in a flat voice, "Otou-san, the chunin on desk duty says the ANBU commander is sending out a search party for you."

Minato rubs the back of his head sheepishly, "Oh I forgot to alert them about my location." He releases some of the suppression he has on his chakra, letting it spike, and bring some relief to the hysterical ANBU.
Naruto continues and says, "You also had a meeting 30 minutes ago."

Minato waves a dismissive, "I rescheduled that meeting."

"Yes," Naruto says peevishly, irritated that she has to play messenger for her father's secretary, "the chunin says you've done that three times, and if you do it again, you're going to piss off those officials from the capital."

Minato looks intently at the board, preparing to make a move. He mumbles distractedly, "Political retribution from the Daimyo's court means nothing to me, Konoha is an autonomous—"

Naruto decides the big shuriken are needed for this, "If you keep shirking your duties, I'm going to tell Okaa-san, and then you'll be sorry, 'attebayo!"

Shikaku's lips twitch in amusement, "That's one hell of a way to make you act responsibly. How troublesome, she really has you by the balls, doesn't she?"

Minato ignores him as a full shudder runs through his body, he looks back at Naruto with wary eyes. "There's no need to do anything drastic."

"Wellll," Naruto says leadingly.

Minato's expression becomes sardonic, "What do you want?"

That's an open needed question, Naruto answers honestly, "I want a lot of things: my own ramen stand, new calligraphy brushes, candy, lots of candy—"

Minato makes an impatient noise, "Something small Naruto that can be done now?"

Naruto puts on a brave face, "Teach me the rasengan!?"

Her father's answer is immediate and sharp, "No, not until you graduate the Academy."

Naruto proceeds to pout, and opens her mouth to whine.

Minato looks at her sharply, and Naruto closes her mouth. Eh, she can impress him with her awesomeness later, and then she'll show him the completed Rasenshuriken, that'll really knock him on his ass.

"Fine," she sighs, "please teach me a new futon jutsu, I mastered the one you gave me two weeks ago."

Minato smiles and nods.

He turns back to Shikaku and pins him with a hard stare, "No cheating Shikaku while my back is turned, I've been duped one too many times by you."

Shikaku gives him a sideways glance, "With all due respect Hokage-sama, you lose because you suck. You've sucked at Go since we we're kids, I only play against you because you have enough brain cells to give me some sort of challenge."

Minato sputters, "That's no way to speak to your leader."

Shikaku scoffs, "I wouldn't have nominated you, so troublesome."

Minato sputters again, and then gives the Nara a sly look, "Ohohoho, you want to go there, then let's
go there. How about I tell Yoshino-san about those strippers at your bachelor party."

For once Shikaku show an emotion other than complete boredom. He looks noticeably terrified, he waves his hands in front of him, eyes wide as he shakes his head in the negative. "No need to go to that extreme."

Minato moves away looking smug, he steps into the Nara compound's lush courtyard. He thinks upon the jutsu to teach his daughter, and then he opens his mouth to explain the jutsu he has in mind when Naruto interrupts him.

"And Otou-san can you summon Gamaken?"

"No, you know he now works exclusively with Jiraiya. Stop being persistent Naruto, it's annoying," Minato chides.

"Well can you summon Isamu or Gamanatsu?" Naruto asks undaunted, "Please, pretty please! I need a sparring partner Tou-chan."

Minato gives an exasperated sigh, and pinches the bridge of his nose, "Isamu and Gamanatsu have responsibilities. I'll summon Nonnon or Gamahiro instead."

"Yatta!"

"But you'll be punished for pester me," Minato warns her, he goes on to rebuke his sometimes wayward daughter, "I've told you I would try to train you on the weekends…."

Naruto takes it in stride, she'll suffer whatever consequences to build up her repertoire. 

_In between once more:_

She releases a succession of jutsu, "_Futon: Juuha Shou, Futon: Daitoppa._"

Naruto watches as chaos take place. First crescents of wind sharp enough to cut through solid object, slicing through the first wave of kage bunshins, and then the long range jutsu blast away the rest.

One of her clones whistles in appreciation. Another murmurs, "wow", others have similar reactions.

Naruto herself observes the end result with a critical eye. And then turns to her remaining clones and smiles, "All right girls, ready to go again?"

And so she trains for an inevitable fight that will come sooner or later, but she also lives for the moment. Happy memories are what keep her going.

---

_Now_ 

Grief is wound that never quite heals. It numbs, but remains an insistent ache, it scabs over, but the scar tissue remains. The wound lingers regardless of adhesives, salves, or even medical chakra.

Time however, is a different matter. Time, after all heals all wounds.

(Therapy helps, along with being surrounded by family and friends)

But with friends like these—persistent idiots—Itachi does not even come to comprehend the term brooding.
Itachi is in good company, regardless of how he feels about the methods to their madness.

Anyhow.

The shoji door is minutely ajar, three sets of eyes peer through it, into the room beyond.

Within the room is Itachi, with his face buried in a large medical text. He reads with a magnifying glass in hand, and a reference book and a dictionary beside him. Surrounding him are similar texts, large and cumbersome with microscopic text.

He is within his father's study, a place where he can be found more times than not. It is a place of solace for him.

However, this is dull, and what's taking place right outside its premises is a point of interest. Mischief is in the air, it permeates and captures its victims... unless those "victims" go seeking it, then mischief gladly lends a hand to its revelers.

Those three sets eyes watch Itachi avidly, and he blatantly ignores their presence.

"Shhhh!" Shisui says in a stage whisper, "Naruto you're breathing too loudly."

"Shhh!" Naruto responds, "You're whispering too loudly."

A toad croaks.

Shisui and Naruto turns upon the toad and say at once, "Shhhhh Nonnon!"

From within the study Itachi murmurs pointedly, "You're all too loud."

They ignore him, continuing on as if he did not speak.

Naruto, Shisui and a toad go back to their post one bright blue eye, one obsidian, and one yellow eye staring at their mutual target.

Barely a moment later, Shisui's sighing in an exasperated fashion, "How long do we have to wait? He's not doing anything!"

"Shhhhhhhhh!" Naruto responds, "We have to wait until he shows a weakness."

Naruto's accompanying toad croaks in agreement.

Shisui pulls away from the door and glares at Naruto. Naruto slides down her perch on Nonnon's back and glares right back.

Shisui points an accusing finger at the blond, "He's vulnerable right now! We should take action." He morphs his hand into a fist, and slaps it against his open palm, denoting his fervency.

Naruto points an accusing finger right back at the Uchiha, "The room might be rigged with seals, weapons, and hell... even itching powder. A good ninja is aware of their surroundings and will wait hours to take down their target."

Nonnon looks back and forth as they argue, quite content with the entertainment these teacup humans provide.

Shisui stomps his foot, "We don't have hours! I vote we knock him unconscious, and if that doesn't work we tickle him into submission and then drag him kicking and screaming with us. We need to
get him out of the house so we can see if the prank goes off right."

"Well, we only have two hours or so before the jonin gatherin HQ for their monthly meeting...." Naruto thinks on it—barely for a minute—and then wears her determined face... woe to all. "Yah, knocking him unconscious has merit, what's the harm, let's do it."

A wave of killing intent comes from study they stand outside. It's quite a mighty feat for a six year old killer in training, and it causes to Shisui shiver. Naruto on the other hand continues to smile brilliantly, it's paltry compared to the displeasure she's faced from maniacal opponents.

There's a pregnant pause that follows the burst of sakki, and Itachi grits out, "I can hear you both."

... He's still promptly ignored.

Naruto stands up from her kneel, and asks, "So how do we go about this? Do you know anything about pressure points in the tenketsu?"

Shisui shakes his head, "My Okaa-san won't teach medical ninjutsu 'cause I can't hold still and learn."

"Damn, if we tickle him he'll fight back... maybe we can get Obito to knock him out, do you still have those pictures of that time you caught him kissing your cousin Mayumi?"

Shisui nods in the negative regretfully, takes a large and proceeds to explain the halt in his career in one breathe. "Okaa-san found out I was trying to become an extortionist and katon'd of all my blackmail material in the fireplace. She told me I have to wait until I become a chunin and get an apprenticeship at the Interrogation and Torture Force to extort people."

Naruto tries to imagine Shisui amongst Morino Ibiki and Mitarashi Anko, and fails. If that comes to pass, well at least Shisui has the Sharingan to mind fuck his victims.

"Shit, that option is off the table, we could ask..." Naruto stops abruptly, she closes her eyes and reaches out with her senses, "where the hell is Obito anyway, wasn't he and Yuhi Kurenai supposed to be babysitting us?"

Shisui waves his hand dismissively, "He ditched us to go on a real date, something about making Rin jealous."

Naruto's brow furrows, "Doesn't Yuhi-chan have a thing for Sarutobi Asuma?"

"I don't know," Shisui shrugs, and then a gleam, an unholy gleam enters his eyes, "Ohohoho, then they're both using each other, and then they'll fall for each other, but they'll deny their feelings, and, and, and when Yuhi-chan and Obito break-up they'll finally go out with the people they pined for. And then they'll—"

"Shisui," Naruto interrupts, "have you been watching Road to Ninja and Bonds with Mikoto-obasan again?"

Shisui smiles bashfully, "No with Tou-san, when we're not training or he's not working he says he needs to catch up on his weekly dramas."

"Eh, I like Bonds better, Kaa-san loves The Lost Tower and Tou-san prefers period dramas like Guardians of the Crescent Moon Kingdom."

"Ehhhhhhhh! The Hokage watches dramas!?" Shisui asks with wide, astonished eyes.
Naruto nods vigorously, "Yah, Tou-san doesn't like paperwork so he'll watch his favorite drama or scare the chunin to avoid it."

Shisui looks at Naruto with sly eyes, "Road to Ninja is still the best drama."

Of course Naruto rises to the bait, "No Bonds is the best drama, attebayo!"

Nonon decides now her input is needed and croaks in agreement with Naruto.

"Lies I hear," Shisui sticks his pointer fingers in his ears, "Lies, lies, lies."

"Itachi!" Naruto calls, knowing he's been listening to their conversation. And of course he has, he can't help but hear them. Naruto and Shisui are loud mouths. "What's your favorite drama?"

"….I'm partial to Bonds," comes Itachi's quiet response.

"Ha! I win," Naruto crows.

Shisui pouts in response.

"…You are both idiots."

And Itachi still goes unheeded.

Suddenly a cry rends the air, followed by calls of "Naru, Shi-shi, and Tachi."

Naruto and Shisui look at each other simultaneously, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Shisui throws open the shoji door and sees Itachi rising in response to the cries, "No need to leave your books, Naruto and I will take care of the midgets!"

He closes the door as abruptly as he opened it, and leaves Itachi staring blankly at the place his cousin just stood.

The duo and a toad head up the stairs and find two cherubic miniatures, one is clutching at the baby gate, and the other is climbing it.

"Neji-kun get down, we're going to open the gate, Sasuke-chan stand back." Neji follows Naruto's directions, but Sasuke simply stares at her with wide eyes and raises his arms to be picked up.

The gate opens, Naruto asks Neji if he wants to ride Nonnon down the stairs, Neji eyes the toad wearily and nods in the negative, he approaches the stairs and takes cautious steps down. Naruto walks in front of him to keep him from falling. Shisui picks up an eleven month old Sasuke and follows behind them.

They take a detour to the kitchen to raid the refrigerator for premade snacks. As per usual Naruto has enough food to feed an army. She stuffs sticky rice balls in her mouth, before handing one to Neji and tomato slices to Sasuke.

Shusi sits upon the kitchen counter, a rare sight in Mikoto's kitchen that usually result in a slap via wooden spoon. He announces with aplomb, "Alright kiddies we're going on a field trip!"

Naruto whoops in excitement, Sasuke giggles, and Neji tilts his head curiously.

"But first, first we need juice!"
I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

"Itachi get your ass up!" Naruto throws open the shoji door.

Itachi sighs in a long-suffering manner, and looks up from his text and glares at her.

"We need to witness the fruits of our hell raising, are you in?" Naruto responds, behind her Sasuke sits upon Nonnon, he clutches a sippy cup and gurgles happily.

"…Naruto why is your toad holding my otouto hostage?" Itachi asks calmly instead of answering her ridiculous query.

"Neji and Sasuke helped finger paint the lounge in the Hokage Tower last time, but they didn't get to see their art being appreciated. So this time they're coming with us. We've got to condition the new generation early so they'll take up the cause once we become ninja and terrorize Konoha's citizens in our place," Naruto answers him in a tirade.

Itachi feels the need to slap his forehead, and instead he pinches the bridge of his nose, "Orange splatter isn't art, and bringing toddlers into potentially dangerous situations is out of the question."

"Not even if we stop on the way for dango?"

Itachi looks at her from the corner of his eyes, and says, "…Maybe"

"Yatta!" Naruto whoops, she calls to Shisui whose helping Neji put on his sandals, "Itachi's in, Hana should be at the Uchiha district gate by now."

"Hope she brought a ninken with her, the midgets can ride on the dog, and we'll be able to escape easier," Shisui says back.

Naruto nods, and she then picks up Sasuke, and calls for Itachi's attention, "Here catch!"

She throws the toddler at his older brother, Sasuke laughs as he's airborne. Itachi's eyes widen and he hurries to catch the babe, Sasuke smiles at his older brother when he's caught safely in his arms.

Itachi glares daggers at the blond haired hellion, who simply grins in response. Curtly he asks, "Where his baby bag?"

"Eh? I sealed it away with Neji's," Naruto supplies, for once helpful in her endeavors.

"Fine let's go." Itachi places Sasuke steadily on the floor, his otouto slowly gains his balance and takes hesitant steps as he follows his brother. "Just let me get my and Sasuke's shoes."

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

30 minutes later…

(After a potty break for Neji and a diaper change—Itachi's responsibility, Naruto and Shisui are quite useless—a stop at the sweets shop, and a perch on the largest tree outside Jonin HQ, where four hellions and three midgets—Hana brought Kiba, who is unsurprisingly a happy baby—and igniting of a seal "Fuin". They witness the fruits of their madness.)

The prank is quite simple: Three days ago Naruto, Shisui, Itachi, and Hana had used their fledging ninja skills and broke into Jonin headquarters. Naruto's prior experience in pranks and the shinobi arts barely helped save their asses from tripping up the high security in the building. But they moved
and went about the motions with a military precision that would have made their shinobi parents proud. Anyhow, they rigged the conference room with twenty pounds of flour, and set up a simple configuration of sealing matrixes to trigger it when the time was right.

Naruto 50% sure her father and the jonin commander know of the prank and let it happen just for entertainment's sake.

Itachi highly doubts that this is what Kushina-obasan had in mind when she began to teach them rudimentary fuinjutsu.

Shisui simply likes the promise of chaos.

Hana doesn't like to be left out.

Anyhow back to the present:

Inuzuka Hana is given the honor of igniting the seals, and they watch with glee from their perch outside the Jonin HQ conference room as flour explodes within and clouds the room in a sea of white.

They laugh as the windows are thrown out and ninja herd out, kunai, shuriken, tantos, exploding tags, and all matter of weapons at ready for a perceived threat. A melee of jonin investigate the surrounding area, and before they reach their perch, the hell spawn are already making escape maneuvers.

Neji and Sasuke are placed on top of Hana's ninken with Kiba. The Inuzuka siblings and the midgets take off. Naruto creates three sets of clones to henge into them, to provide a distraction. Nonnon disperses, returning home to Mt. Myoboku with tales to relay to her siblings; the teacup humans always provide mass entertainment.

Leaving two Uchiha's and a Namikaze/Uzumaki hybrid.

Chances are damned high that they'll get caught, but every prank is worth the consequences.

Shisui gives her a thumbs up, "It went off without a hitch!"

Itachi looks beyond their perch with Sharingan enhanced eyes, he blinks the crimson away and says, "While amusing, I'd worry more about being caught."

On their tree limb, a lanky teen appears. Hatake Kakashi looks down at them with bored eyes, surprisingly free of flour residue. "Worry not, you're all going to be caught. And then I'm going to tell your mothers—"

Shisui choosing then to unleash a smoke bomb.

"You'll never catch us, dattebayo!" Naruto cackles madly, and goes about the motions of providing a distraction, "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu! I am the great Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto, the greatest prankster that has ever lived!"

Fifty clones appear, various amounts of them henge themselves as Itachi and Shisui; the clones travel in groups of three. Of course Shisui doesn't let this opportunity slide, and being the vindictive little shit that he is, he kicks Kakashi in the shin. "Thanks for ruining my fun."

Itachi grabs the still cackling Naruto and leaps into a nearby tree. Shisui follows behind them.
In the not too far distance Naruto can hear her mother yell "NARUTO" and she and companions shiver. "Oh shit."

A few kilometers away in the Hokage tower, Minato watches the proceedings from a crystal ball with popcorn in hand, and laughs and laughs.

**I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)**

Time passes, and before she knows it, entering the shinobi academy is upon her.

Of course her first day cannot go without a hitch, the Uzumaki-Namikaze family has to make a spectacle of themselves on the steps of the ninja academy.

It goes accordingly like this:

After photos are taken to contribute to the already colossal collection of pictures, of the Naruto-chan shrine. Waterworks ensue.

Minato rubs at his eyes with the back of a fisted hand and sniffles, "It was just yesterday she was saying her first word."

Kushina's bottom lip trembles, eyes watering, valiantly sniffling to hold off choked sobs, though her voice gives her away, "Oh my baby's growing up."

Naruto stares up at her parents with blurry eyes, "Tou-chan, Kaa-chan I'm going miss you both!"

Of course they will all see each other in a few short hours, however that logic is neither here nor there.

They then proceed to hug each other and cry large streams of tears.

While the Hokage's family proceeds to make spectacles of themselves, others have a more subdued parting.

Inuzuka Hana hugs her mother's leg, while her mother ruffles her hair. She kisses Kiba's cheeks, who bats away at her in protest.

The Uchiha's remain regal—before they left the compound, Itachi had once again found himself smothered by breasts. While his mother fawned over him, he was then covered in drool from a happy Sasuke, who at the time had absolutely no clue what was going on. Mikoto smiles down at her eldest, "Good luck Itachi-chan, neh? You'll have a good day for Okaa-san?"

"Un," Itachi responds in the positive, he turns to Sasuke perched on their mother's hip, "Bye-bye otouto."

"'Tachi's going?" Sasuke questions.

"Aa." Itachi responds.

"I go to!" Sasuke smiles and reaches out for his brother.

Itachi shakes his head, "You have to stay with Okaa-san; I'll be home later."

Sasuke's face crumbles, tears well up, and he reaches for Itachi in earnest, "Nii-san's going, I go too, I go!"
Itachi reaches for him, but Mikoto moves away, keeping firm arms on the squirming toddler, she says, "He'll have to learn to be without his brother. Itachi go ahead to your classroom, this one is going home."

Itachi nods and waves his hand as his mother walks away. Along the way Mikoto stops and pats Naruto upon the head, shaking her own head at their antics.

Sasuke looks over her shoulder, his little face devastated. Itachi blinks away suddenly damp eyes, he smiles at his little brother and Sasuke seems to brighten somewhat and waves a hand back at Itachi. He stops waving once his family has disappeared.

Itachi looks about him and finds other families in various routines of parting, and looks for bright blond hair. He doesn't have to look too far, he finds Hana trying to tug Naruto from the embrace of her parents, and Shisui cackling as he watches on. Naruto wears an expression of bewilderment, but there's an undertone of glee. She always looks for some way to revel in ridiculous situations.

Itachi decides not to intervene and heads within to find his classroom, and save Naruto and Hana seats. Shisui was supposed to show them around the Academy but Itachi highly doubts that'll be happening anytime soon.

His friends are idiots.

There is a memory that has been plaguing him, or rather a discussion that has haunted him for the last few weeks. The impression it has left upon him is a novelty to say in the least:

They are encompassed in the ever changing landscape of Naruto's mind. A domain that is Kurama's as much as hers.

Naruto lays back upon one of Kurama's humungous paws, absently running her fingers through the fur there.

It's a rare moment of solitude, one that inspires curious musings. It's one of those moods that Kurama appreciates, for this is when Naruto's is at her most insightful, and there are limitless possibilities to what she may say.

And in all his many years, that child still manages to surprise him, and this is one such instance.

"Kurama, when this is all over… what will you do?"
Kurama answers flippantly, "I'll be with you until you die Naruto. And since you are Uzumaki and descended from the Sage's second son, you will be long lived. And when you die I shall die and eventually reform once more upon this plain. My siblings and I have a purpose here on this realm until the cycle of ninjas ends."

Naruto tenses at those words, "So there is the chance that even after Madara is defeated, and peace comes, that another may rise up and try to use you and your siblings?"

Kurama sighs, it causes a gust that shakes the surrounding trees to their very foundations, "Peace is fickle Naruto, your legend after you die will echo, and there is a great chance of an era of peace following in your name after Madara is dead. But what is good without evil, as long as good is the light in the dark, evil shall always lurk, and try and taint what is good. And then there are gray areas in between, my siblings and I have the potential for peace and destruction..."

He leaves that statement open ended, and Naruto finishes it for him. "And humans will try to harness that power regardless of their intentions."

Naruto is quiet for a long time, and in that time Kurama takes that time to snooze. She eventually awakens him by calling out his name, and when he responds she queries, "Kurama, is there a place you can return to? In all the stories you've told me of your life, never once have you mentioned a place that is home to you and your siblings?"

He's silent, when they are not snarking at one another, Kurama usually takes a moment to gather his words, as if measuring each definition of ningen words to express himself properly. But in this he will have a difficult time expressing himself.

For there is a place he and his siblings call home. It is complicated and beyond the scope of human understanding, but in these terms he shall endeavor to explain.

"What you must understand Naruto is that our purposes change in each cycle, in this, as you know we are Bijuu, entities made of vast amounts of chakra. The very essence of life. At our very root we are primordial beings, as long as the universe exist, as time and life exist, we will always be. If the cycle could be broken we would no longer be instruments of fate, if we could return home, our will would not touch any realm unless we choose to bless or curse those within. And if my siblings and I had our way, we would not be bothered with anyone besides ourselves."

Naruto had sat up, and given him her absolute attention, during this explanation. And for a moment she looks upon him with eyes that are too wise for a ningen. And he wonders what ancient being lurks within her soul, other than he that resides with her head.

She says, "So there is a place where you and your siblings belong wholly? Is there a way to get you all there?"

Kurama lets out a pained sigh, and he can't quite believe he is admitting this to a human. "It is difficult, it is very difficult. There is a possibility that attempting to create a passage to that dimension may erase the very existence of the ninja cycle." And that is an understatement.

"But there's a way?" Naruto questions, and then looks resolute, a look Kurama almost dreads, she's about to do the impossible. "I'll do it! I'll get you and your siblings home Kurama, the moment Madara's dead we'll find the way, and all will be well, believe it!"

Kurama thinks there's something in his eyes. He growls to overcome his suddenly overwhelmed emotions, "Idiot child, do not promise what you cannot accomplish!"
Naruto looks at Kurama with an expression he can't quite decipher, and it reminds him fiercely of the man he called father in this cycle, a human he will always hold the upmost respect for. "I never make promises I can't keep."

And for the very thought that Naruto would even think, nay even attempt a ningen impossibility, Kurama must bestow his favor onto her. First she offers friendship and companionship and now she offers what Ōtsutsuki Hagoromocould not even achieve… how extraordinary. It appears that humanity is actually full of endless possibilities.

And so Kurama will give Naruto a gift.

The Sage of Six Paths wielded it, it trickled down and showed its greatest potential in the Shodaime Hokage, a child that survived an experiment now wields it for Konoha's ranks, but his skills are but a pale imitation of what it is capable of.

Only for a moment did Naruto wield it in battle, and showed Kurama that she is fully capable of carrying on the legacy.

And so Kurama calls upon forces he seldom uses and brings favor onto Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto.

For what is senjutsu but nature chakra, and what is the suiton and doton release but the mokuton. And together senjutsu and the mokuton are but creation chakra, one with nature.

He wonders how Naruto will feel about having an affinity with not one but three elements.

Kurama snorts in amusement.
If she were to compare her past Academy years to her current one. She would say there is little distinction, but then again there are brilliant segues that give her pause. Occasionally causing her to stop and observe with keen eyes. (Naruto's perception of human behavior is something to balk at. In these rare moments she puts it to use.)

Her beginning years of the Academy are a blur, her first two years are filled with napping in the midst of lessons. Wiping the drool from her mouth when she's called on to answer questions. Leaving her sensei flabbergasted when she answers their questions correctly, and yet being praised for her supposed brilliance—"An absolute credit to her father and mother!" or "I can't expect anything less from Hokage-sama's daughter!"

Despite her status as the Hokage's daughter, Minato has demanded that Naruto be treated the same as her classmates. But favoritism is inevitable, especially amongst those children of clans, aristocracy, businessmen or bureaucrats.

To have once been an observer from the outside in—in her former life as a village pariah and a "clanless" orphan—it gives her morbid fascination to now be on the receiving end of praise. Before she can say that she would have enjoyed the attention, reveled in it as the obnoxious little shit that she was (is). Now however, she finds herself internally cringing at the way she's simpered over by some of her sensei. These are the very soldiers that are the backbone of Konoha, the weapons that are wielded at the Leaf's defense, here they reduce themselves to common idolaters. But perhaps she is being too hard on them, in her past life these very soldiers would scorn her existence; perhaps this is simply human nature in all its fallible glory.

Kurama takes these moments of rumination in stride, but occasionally takes it upon himself to mock her: "Idiot child, it appears you have finally come to the conclusion I made eons ago. All ningen are cannon fodder. Ants at the feet of greater beings such as myself."

Er… Naruto would not go that far.

Anyhow:

The less said about the academy the better. She has former knowledge from what she bothered to learn from her stint in the Academy in her former life, and the knowledge her parents have instilled (which is a lot) in her for the last eight years of her life.

The Academy is not a point of interest. Graduating early and leaving it confines is a gateway to accomplishing greater goals. Attending is simply a means to an end, but being around her friends and family is the only thing that matters for the present.

(The Academy may not be a point of interest for Naruto but for Uchiha Itachi and Inuzuka Hana it is. Like Naruto it is a gateway for them, but for them it offers stepping stones to greater horizons.)

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

"Okaa-san I'm leaving home," Itachi calls as he slips on his shoes.

Mikoto calls out an affirmative sound.
His mother worries for him.

(Even with extensive counseling, sometimes Itachi awakens from the midst of sleeping hyperventilating, black eyes melding into the crimson of the sharingan, spinning death. Phantom images of white and black skin, mocking amber eyes, the carnage of battle and the stench of copper from blood left in its wake.

He awakens from these dreams with clenched fists and his chakra signature fluctuating wildly, harkening his mother from her own slumber to race to his side.

At times he grows weary from sleeping, and so he avoids it and takes to meditating instead. The burgeoning stress lines on his young face attest to this)

His brother craves his attention constantly.

(When Sasuke took his first steps, his path was to Itachi. His chubby hands reaching for Itachi as he laughed in delight, taking clumsy steps while Naruto and Shisui cheered him on. Amongst Sasuke’s first words included "Nii-chan."

Sasuke adores his brother and the feeling is reciprocated.)

He does his best to please them.

The Academy is a place of great interest, but the more he excels there, the more he craves a challenge. When Itachi showed an interest in medical ninjutsu—which is an understatement considering the large medical texts and scrolls he lugs around and reads for fun—strings were pulled to place him in the Iryo-nin program. With clan standing and favoritism from the Hokage, Itachi becomes the youngest person to enter the medic nin program.

In the morning Itachi finds himself ensconced in the Academy where he sits beside a sleeping Naruto, diligently doing his assigned work and prods the blond awake when needed. The afternoons find Itachi trekking to Konoha’s hospital, and attending classes with individuals four to five years his senior.

(He has found his vocation early, and while it is expected he will excel in ninjutsu, genjutsu, taijutsu, and eventually master the sharingan. There is nothing to say he cannot dominate the medical nin field. The greatest Iryo-nin in Konoha is a Senju, the Uchiha clan readily supports their heir if it means he eventually usurps the legendary Senju Tsunade as Konoha’s greatest medic nin.)

The Iryo-program is usual offered to genin at least one year out of the Academy, and with some field experience. While some rudimentary knowledge of medical chakra is encouraged amongst the general shinobi population; Konoha’s hospital offers crash course lectures for shinobi. The Iryo-nin program is a separate entity for those ninja solely interested in iryo ninjutsu, with in depth knowledge of the chakra system, tenketsu, and anatomy physiology. Here they are taught to heal, but in that knowledge there is the power to kill. These techniques are about precision; an incision from a chakra scalpel can end a life as well as save one.

This fascinates Itachi—along with the lot of these in depth techniques being immune to the sharingan’s gaze—this is the challenge Itachi craves.

Itachi’s favorite word is peace.

Since witnessing the death of his father he has become a pacifist, and dreams some day of peace encompassing the ninja world. However, that’s a long term goal, in the meantime he is content with learning to protect those precious to him. Inevitably he will be called to duty and wielded as a
weapon to defend Konoha, but with the many abilities he will acquire in killing he will also have the means to save lives.

He will not be alone in the Iryo-nin courses, eventually Inuzuka Hana will join him; she plans to become a veterinarian for her clan's ninken. But for now he is fawned upon by the kunoichi in his afternoon classes, and is quite content to continue his studies for he will certainly graduate the academy early, but continue in the medic nin program when not training with his future teammates or away on missions.

In between:

She has a difficult choice to make.

(It's not regarding the timeline. Fuck all where that is concerned.

Her whole sojourn back to the past is to save her precious people. Hyuuga Neji just so happens to be next on her list.

But now she has even more incentive:

Is she willing to let a child suffer from an archaic tradition that dates back to Otsutsuki Hamura. A tradition whose purpose has become a twisted semblance of a power structure based on the probability of birth, leaving members of a family downtrodden and a select few wielders of their fates?

Naruto remembers her resolve:

Once upon a time there was a boy who lived happily with his parents, then he was branded, his father was sacrificed without explanation. He defied expectations and overcame his station in life, but he grew up to be jaded, withdrawn and cruel. Once upon a time there was a girl, she lived happily with her parents, then she was kidnapped, her father's head was called for, but his twin took his place and was sacrificed instead. Her mother died, and she suddenly found her crushed beneath expectations, and she grew up to be meek, withdrawn and kind. Once upon a time this boy and girl that grew up in opposite ends of the spectrum of their clan, met in mock battle and nearly fought to the death. Once upon a time this boy and girl united and dreamed of changing the Hyuuga clan.

Once upon a time this man and woman grew up and died young fighting for what they believed in.

Naruto will be damned if she lets Neji and Hinata's sacrifices get taken for granted.

In her former life, Neji was a boy who annoyed her with his prattling on fate and predetermined destinies—(Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto creates her own fucking destiny, believe it!) Then he became a man she respected, and person she was proud to call her friend.

In this lifetime Naruto has yet to meet Hinata, but Neji has become family to her, Hizashi-oji-san is a parental figure to her, a brother to Kushina, and a friend to Minato.

Will she allow Hyuuga Hizashi to die? Will she allow Neji—a child that has become a younger sibling to her—lose his father as Itachi and Sasuke lost theirs? Will she allow the passage of time take place to simply preserve the time line?

She cannot interfere with clan traditions, the family structure in the Hyuuga clan is something only a Hyuuga can change. She will not take that future victory from Neji and Hinata, but perhaps she can be the precursor that helps bring about this change.
This gives her the motivation to prevail."

Changing the time line is not the dilemma.

It's the method of going about it. Does she choose the direct approach or indirect approach?

She learned her lesson when she hesitated, when she thought she alone could carry on the burdens of the so-called "chosen one."

(Intense discussions with Kurama regarding the passage of time and whether history is set in stone have given Naruto some insight to what consequences her decisions will garner. If an event is set in stone then there are many paths that diverge from it, it all depends on the choices made. Neji being branded with the cage-bird seal was inevitable, but the paths that emerge from this event have yet to become concrete.

Hence forth there is a way to thwart Hinata's abduction and Hizashi's death.)

If Naruto takes the direct approach she'll bring unneeded attention to herself. She can just imagine the fallout that would follow if she found a way unravel the caged bird seal. The political repercussions would be dire and she could imagine the paperwork her father would have to endure.

She shudders, no one deserves that.

The indirect approach is more appealing, but requires approaching her fellow jinchuriki. At the next bijuu powwow she'll ask Killer Bee if he's heard about any future alliances between Konoha and Cloud from his brother A, and if he wants to finally meet up. If things go accordingly, Bee will be meeting an eight year old child instead of a young woman.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

If it is a gradual development, Naruto fails to notice it. Blood line limits have a strange way of manifesting, some appear at birth, some through rigorous training, and others through life threatening danger.

In this case rigorous training can be culprit—well at first glance. For Naruto there are many possibilities, one too many to ponder.

(Later when she reflects on it, she's going to be put out it didn't come with a more awesome entrance. Kurama on the other hand will roll his eyes and snort in mockery.)

She supposes this day can be called ordinary. She's on the roof of her family's flat, within the green house. Her father joins her, giving himself a well-deserved break (read: shirking his duties) from the mountains of paper work on his desk, leaving two shadow clones to fulfill his duties in the meantime. It's a rare moment of family tranquility that is seldom seen since Naruto started the Academy, Minato became Hokage and Kushina decided to become a Jonin-sensei. Unfortunately Kushina is not there to commemorate in the shared peace, she's with her genin team freezing their asses off as they escort a merchant to Yuki no Kuni.

Minato and Naruto are harvesting ripe vegetables and planting new flowers that Minato had imported in from Kawa no Kuni. Naruto's currently gathering bell peppers—a vegetable her mother had imported from yonder western lands—and tomatoes; this year's small crop of tomatoes are underdeveloped and struggling to grow. Naruto puts down her basket, drops down to her knees to look beneath the tomato plant's leaves. Searching for a telltale sign red, she finds none, and touches one of the green tomatoes. "Okaa-san can cook with anything, she'll find something to make with
these," Naruto mutters to herself, and as she goes to pull the tomato from its perch she finds it green hue changing to ripe red.

Since her rebirth she has been sensitive to nature chakra, it thrives all around her. But now, within her hand it thrums with life, akin to when the Rikudo Sennin inundated her with creation chakra. Before her eyes the struggling tomato plant grows ripe and healthy, drawing on her chakra to give it the necessary nutrients to thrive. Naruto watches fascinated, by now she has let go of the small fruit. But then her eyes widen in shock as the plant continues to grow, it's vines breaking its pot, the fruit it bears becomes enormous, it's trunk shooting upward, branches stretching outward, straining against the roof of the greenhouse. The glass groans against the bursting vegetation, the roof creaks ominously, and tiny fissures appears in the glass before finally breaking.

Naruto begins to move from the impending danger, only to find herself grabbed by strong arms, she lets out a small grunt upon impact. Her father spirits her away to an adjacent roof top, he sets her down and they watch with keen fascination as the greenhouse roof comes down as the tomato tree shoots upward and seems to come to a growing halt. The tree stands at four meters, leaning precariously off their flat's roof.

Below in the street onlookers gawk and attempt to dodge glass debris, they shout and murmur at the spectacle outside the Hokage's family home.

"Holy shit-ow!" Minato cuffs the back of Naruto's head, she rubs it and gives him an irritated glare.

"Language Naruto," Minato chides absently, and looks upon the wreckage of the green house with calculatingly eyes. Surveying the damage and subsequent tomato tree. He looks back down at her, and raises a brow, "Well isn't this interesting? Your mother is going to so mad that her prize winning flowers were crushed."

That is an understatement of the century.

It appears Naruto has the Mokuton, as extraordinary as it is for a Senju trait to manifest in his daughter, right now Minato can only think of the future headaches this is going to give him.

Naruto on the other hand feels hysterical laughter bubble forth. Sasuke is going to love a giant tomato for snack time.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently this fic has 75 bookmarks but ao3 likes to play dirty. So thank you mysterious readers who bookmarked this fic. Also shout out to those who subscribed and left kudos, you are all totes appreciated.
The turn of the screw

*Four years ago…*

He stands on the wall adjacent to the ground, scorch marks mar the concrete on a path that leads to him.

In one hand the rasengan manifest once more, the other reaches into his weapons pouch and pulls forth several tri-sectioned kunai, the seal of the hiraishin wrapped around their handles. He scatters three of them, and disappears with a blur of yellow.

Gold eyes glint with amusement, anticipating the next coming blow. He deftly dodges the incoming orb of chakra, limbs and body lose as he moves with serpentine grace. The blond disappears whilst he came in a blur of yellow.

Orochimaru chuckles, long tongue unraveling, and from the dark recesses of his mouth snakes slither forth. "Is the old man now sending green boys to handle his battles? Is Jiraiya's golden child now his cannon fodder?"

Minato appears to the left of the sannin, facial expression apathetic as he states in a matter of fact tone, "I'm the Hokage candidate." At that Orochimaru's amusement falters; the bone of contention appearing. "It's my responsibility as the future Hokage to protect Konoha now that the Sandaime is stepping down."

(It's a known fact that Orichimaru is the Sarutobi's Achilles heel, the man is too prone to looking the other way where his prized student is concerned. If he were here to see how far his student has strayed from the path—the betterment of Konoha, instead of Orichimaru's selfish desires i.e. fear of mortality—the Sandaime would falter.

Minato on the other hand will let no such thing happen.)

One of the snakes slinks up Orochimaru's hand and becomes a blade of steel. In response Minato forms another rasengan and appears to Orochimaru's right in a blur of yellow. They engage in close combat, Minato feints as the blade steers close his jugular, he tosses the rasengan to his other hand. The apathy melts from Minato’s face and a sneers cut his features as he says, "A Kage is supposed to protect his village and the people in it."

Taunting the sannin is perhaps not the best course of action. Minato is a brilliant shinobi but even he knows he is dueling with one of the best. Orochimaru's kenjutsu is the stuff of legends, his maneuvers are lightening quick; Orochimaru proceeds to show this upstart why he is so feared.

But Minato is no lad, wet behind the ears.

Minato feels the adrenaline rush through him, he barely dodges the blade, bending backwards, twisting as he flips forward as the sword cuts a path to his abdomen.

(Above the clone and the snake sannin, on the ceiling of the long cavernous corridor Minato uncovers his arm, and an armament of matrixes appear. He bites down on his thumb, slides the blood down the seal. Lightening crackles as the seal's symbols crawl down the skin of his arm and appear in new dimensions and matrixes of the ceiling, scrawled in a long row of symbols.)

"Not prey upon them, turn them into cannon fodder—" The sword pierces his shoulder and Minato's clone disperses in plume of smoke and wind.
Minato's voice echoes as he receives his clone's thoughts and continues its sentence, "—For his own selfish desires."

Orochimaru looks up, "Foolish boy, how dare you preach to me on the merits of leadership." He rears back his hand, and the sword held in it extends and makes a deadly one way course for Minato. Minato summons a clone and then disappears in a flash of gold. The clone takes the blow. Minato reappears where clone disperses.

"Fuin!" He shouts, lightening ignites from the center of each dimension of the row of seals, pillars of concrete erupt from their centers and come crashing below. Minato jumps to the adjacent wall, sandals skidding against the surface as chakra surges to keep him upright. He slams down his palm and yells "fuin"; horizontal pillars emerge.

Before the rubble settles, Orochimaru head appears, body having melded into the solid stone, completely unscathed from the chaos reigned in the cavernous corridor. He laughs, "You'll have to try harder than that Minato-kun!"

Minato's eyes narrow, the blue morphing into yellow….

In the end Minato walks away with a horrible limp, and a mangled arm. But Orochimaru, Minato's mouth twist with sick satisfaction, Orochimaru slithered away in the form of a snake after having two of his bodies mangled with the still experimental rasengan infused with elemental wind chakra. The duel was a stalemate, but it proved a point. Minato's is no green boy, and he damn well earned his flee on sight rank.

Yet, this battle is one the Sandaime will have to finish. The corridor where they dueled has ceased to exist in a small underground labyrinth of labs and cells. It resides a few kilometers from the border of Hi no Kuni, in it the ANBU under Minato charge gather intel and the survivors that have endured experimentation. Amongst the survivors—many are in various states of death and dying—there are individuals who fit the profile of missing people from surrounding villages, and some citizens of Konoha.

(Konoha had turned a blind eye to Orochimaru's research. For as long as it benefitted the village's betterment—i.e. as a super power/dominant ninja village—they were not overly bothered. However, a line had to be drawn, and it was at abducting the village's own people.)

There weren't any children from clans, but Minato expects that would have been the next step, especially with the way Orochimaru watched Uchiha Shisui and Itachi. He'd even casted speculative golden eyes upon Naruto, his gaze reminiscent of Shimura Danzo's beady ones.

This is not something Minato could abide by, but knowing Orochimaru's wily nature, he expects there are many other complexes like this around the elemental nations. Amongst them, there had to be individuals ensconced within them with bloodline limits.

Amongst the intel found in this complex are samples of the Shodaime's cells. Minato's own ancestor's desecrated grave was used as archeological site. He feels hysterical laughter build up at the thought. The Shodaime's cells were infused with sixty infants and toddlers, amongst those sixty only one toddler survived.

Now:

The discovery of Naruto having the mokuton and subsequent prying of unwanted individuals has proven to be the head ache Minato knew it would be, but also a boon for Konoha. Inevitably when
Naruto enters the shinobi force and uses the mokuton on missions, rumors in the elemental nations will circulate. This will only improve Konoha's standing as the strongest ninja village.

However, for now she is still experimenting with her bloodline limit, with insight from himself and Kushina. The Shodaime was a sage and that helped give him mastery over the mokuton, and ultimately, Naruto will have to learn senjutsu to help channel the nature chakra that flows through her via the mokuton. Minato is a toad sage, but teaching her himself will prove to be difficult, he has an idea in mind for when she graduates the Academy.

His thoughts stir towards Naruto's tenant. The Shodaime's mastery over the mokuton had allowed him control over the biju, Minato believes that this will also help Naruto eventually control the Kyubi's chakra.

(Outside sources have become bolder, pressuring him to train his daughter to become a weapon for Konoha, she is after all Konoha's jinchuriki. Those outside sources are lucky to have the privilege of that knowledge, and are lucky Minato does not seriously plot to have them murdered in their sleep. Though their assassinations are kept as back up plans.)

Tenzo Yamato has had progress mastering the mokuton, perhaps he will not mind giving Naruto pointers in the meantime. Minato will have to correspond with the ANBU Commander and see if he can be spared.

Minato looks down at his desk and feels his eye twitch. He rubs his aching temples; so much paperwork. Obviously it was time to take a break (read: shirk his duties), and find Shikaku for a game of Go and a sake bottle.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

"It's true, the circus had flying elephants—"

"Nuh-uh," Kiba taunts.

"Your wrong," Neji says, and points an accusing finger, "there's no such thing as flying elephants."

"Liar!" Kiba guffaws and then blows a raspberry.

"Why would I lie about this!?" Obito defends, fighting a grin.

Sasuke watches them argue back and forth, eyes wide, flickering back and forth as he follows the stream of the conversation.

Oh how the mighty have fallen. Particularly if one is losing an argument with midgets, even it's in jest. Well, one can't fall very far if they were never high up to begin with.

(And yet Obito can finally boast, with the manifestation of his sharingan. He has shown a mastery of the dojutsu that has not been seen the warring clans era. He is etching out a legend for himself. )

"You're a lying liar that lies," Neji says.

Obito snorts, "I dare you to say that three times in a row."

Kiba and Sauke attempt to do this and fail abysmally. Neji on the other hand huffs and turns his nose up. Shikamaru opens one eye and looks at the ridiculous scene unfolding before him, and mutters, "Troublesome."
Beside Obito, Yuhi Kurenai laughs.

(According to Shisui—the omnipotent gossip and elemental tv drama expert—Obito and Kurenai became an official couple once their ploy to make their crushes jealous backfired on them. They developed real feelings for each other, and have been going strong for a year or so now.

Shisui—who has been watching this unfold, thinks it's better than watching tv dramas—says it almost brings tears to his eyes to see true love prevail. That and the betting pool he had going about how long it would take for them to get together. Of course Naruto won—she's a freak of nature when it comes to gambling, but she happily shared her earnings.)

Beyond them in the clearing are Itachi and Hana, sparring. Hana using her newly given ninken—three adorable puppies—and the ferocious style the Inuzuka are known for. Itachi is all graceful movements, etched with frightening speed.

Bored of watching the two spar Shisui approaches Naruto, who has her hands placed on the earth, and she seems to be singing to it… badly.

Kushina has given Naruto plant seeds to carry around, to test her new bloodline limit, to understand how it manifests. Her father has given her scrolls that have records of the jutsu the first Hokage used. Both methods have been somewhat helpful.

"What the heck are you warbling about!?” Shisui asks, "You sound terrible."

Naruto glares at him, "Don't you know anything!? In order for plants to grow you have to talk to them, sing to them."

"Er... I thought you just had to remember to water them,” Shisui says skeptically.

"If it was that easy, then everyone would have a green thumb!” Naruto shouts. Naruto squints, "Shouldn't you be with Kagami-jiji, I thought you were beginning to kenjutsu lessons."

Shisui scuffs the dirt with his shoe, "Yah, but dad's been stuck in meetings all week. Something about alliances… I think one is with Kumo or Ame… probably. I think they're talking about whether they should allow Kumo into Leaf as a show of good will or meet at a neutral location… but we're a hidden village, so exposing our location is always a risk, and the fact that Kumo envies Konoha's surplus of bloodline limits is also a factor to consider."

Naruto tries very hard to control her expression at this revelation, and mostly succeeds. She files part of that information away for later contemplation. And idly she considers the prospect of Shisui joining the interrogation and torture division, or even the intelligence division. His extortionist skills are certainly evolving. For now she addresses another matter, "Does your dad know you've been snooping through his paperwork and eavesdropping on his conversations? And should you be telling me this?"

Shisui shrugs, "Otou-san knows, he says I'm learning for future stealth missions, he says its training, and helps hone the skills I'll use in the intelligence division or I & T division. And I tell you 'cause you're the Hokage's kid, and you're bound to learn this information sooner or later from your dad or mom. Hell you might know more than me, though I doubt it, I've got connections."

"Huh. And what does your mom think of you taking up your favorite pass time again?” Naruto asks with a sly grin.

Sulkily Shisui says, "She doesn't know about that, I use Kushin-oba-san's sealing lessons to hide my stash of blackmail. But she says and I quote 'Mothers always know when their child is misbehaving"
and when she finds out... well you get the picture." Shisui's face scrunches up in confusion, "I think she knows, but is waiting for evidence otherwise. Otou-san says that even more reason to improve my stealth skills."

Naruto fights the urge to laugh, and fails terribly.

Shisui pouts indignation.

These are the scenes Kakashi and his company come upon as they enter the clearing. Or rather Kakashi's companions come upon, Kakashi's head is buried in a familiar orange book.

(It's Obito that gets him started early on the series. What's supposed to be a joke on the Hatake, backfires and becomes Kakashi's number one barrier in ignoring people—Obito, Naruto, Rin, Kurenai, Minato, Kushina… pretty much the population at large.

What freaks Obito out the most is the perverted laugh Kakashi has developed when he reads the novel in public places.)

His companions greet Kurenai, Obito and the midgets that momentarily demand their attention. Eventually they make their way to their destination.

Naruto stops laughing as Kakashi comes to stand before her and Shisui. Kakashi looks up briefly from his book to make pleasantries, he levels a bland stare upon them, and says in greeting, "Hellion, hell spawn."

"Kakashi-nii," says Naruto enthusiastically.

"Baldy," says Shisui petulantly.

"Oi, oi, oi. Brat who says you can insult my boyfriend?" Mitarashi Anko appears over Kakashi shoulder, arms wrapped possessively over his shoulders, legs wrapped around his waist.

Kakashi makes no outward movement to the violation of his person. He appears resigned to it, but Naruto squints hard and she thinks she see amusement flash in his eyes, or is that fondness!? Shisui's eyes gleam, there's gossip fodder in the air, "Anko-chan! When did this development take place!?"

"Last month, but Kakashi-kun wanted to keep our relationship secret, but he's finally agreed to be open about it," Anko states dramatically.

"I don't recall being privy to this," Kakashi says absently, and turns a page to his novel.

Anko slides down from her perch on his back, and clasps her arms around one of his, and presses herself against him. "No need to be shy," Anko purrs.

Kakashi pauses in perusing a paragraph, he looks down at her, then lower at her breasts, then back her face and then back to his book; he turns another page and says, "Hn."

Anko grins in triumph.

Shisui eyes widen as he watches their interaction, no doubt filing it away to add to Leaf's grape vine later. He notices movement to Kakashi's left, a head shaking in exasperation, Shisui eloquently points a finger and says, "Who the heck are you?"

The person in question sputters, Anko turns her head and looks to him and then smirks, answering in
his stead, "That's Tenzo, Kakashi's kohai, he's recently joined us… we're a threesome."

At that pronouncement Shisui's eyes are as wide as saucers, frothing at the mouth, Naruto is cackling loudly, and Anko looks pleased with herself.

Kakashi idly turns another page of his book, "I don't recall that either."

And Tenzo, well Tenzo is beat red, his whole face aflame, he sputters, "Anko-san there are children present! Have some decorum!" On a calmer note he says, "Senpai I'm here for an important matter, introduce me to Namikaze-san please."

"Hm, did you say something?" Kakashi remarks absently, nose still stuck in his novel.

Tenzo wilts in utter dejection, Naruto takes pity on him. She approaches and grins brightly, "Hi Tenzo, I'm Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto, but call me Naruto 'cause my last name is a mouth full. Otou-san says you have the mokuton too?"

Tenzo recovers quickly, and bows formally to her, "Hello Naruto-san, I do have the mokuton. I heard from your father that you may need some pointers on controlling your kekkei genkai."

Naruto gives him a vulpine grin, "Yah, yah, I've tried a couple of the jutsu the Shodaime used but the results are pretty crappy. I'm better at just touching a plant or like sensing the chakra in it and making it do what I want."

Tenzo listens intrigued, "Would you mind demonstrating?"

"Sure, sure, my Okaa-san gave me bamboo seeds to see if I could make a forest."

"Let test that theory then," Tenzo replies.

(Off to the side Kakashi watches their interaction and takes that as his cue to leave, "Well I've done my good deed for the day."

Anko snorts, "You didn't do anything at all."

Perverted laughter is her answer. Kakashi turns on his heel and walks away. Anko shakes her head, and grabs the still frothing Shisui, "Come on kid, let's go harass Obito and Kurenai-chan."

Behind the absconding trio, Naruto plants her hands on the earth and surges chakra into it. Bamboo stalks shoot forth, towering over them in a small dense forest.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

In the end the matter is taken out of her hands.

She is not omnipotent, and there are other forces at work. A major one being her father. Minato has different methods to his madness, some that wildly deviate from the Sandaime Hokage.

The alliance with Kumo is in preliminary talks, and if successful will take place on the border of Hi no Kuni. Konoha is the strongest ninja village, but Minato does not feel the need to boast of it, it simply is, with him at the forefront as Hokage—the yellow flash, a ninja with a flee-on-sight warning. However, one of the main reasons motivating him is his daughter, her relatively unknown status as the jinchuriki of the kyubi and now her status as a mokuton user. A bloodline limit that still instills fear in the shinobi of the late warring clan's era. That alone is bait for Kumo, regardless of the wielder's parental locus. Most of all he'll be damned if another village has a branch of Konoha's
arsenal of ninja.

With this in play, part of the Hyuuga quandary is solved. Nonetheless, the rest of the dilemma is a battle to be fought another day, with the parties it concerns.

The necessity of meeting Bee or Yugito goes right out the window, along with any machinations needed on her end. Naruto is able to breathe a sigh of relief, and yet there is another dilemma plaguing her.

Naruto tugs at Kurama's fur and buries her face in it. She groans, and tugs tighter at his fur. The fox growls menacingly, "Brat if you keep attempting to damage my person, I will hurt you."

Naruto grumbles in response, and proceeds to roll up and down the slopes of Kurama's back, radiating nervous energy.

When she places her face in his fur to scream in frustration, crimson eyes snap open. Kurama proceeds to shake her off him.

She goes flying and then lands in an undignified heap, crushing flowers in her wake.

Naruto turns to face him with a glare, "What the hell was that for!?"

Kurama's tails twitch in annoyance, "Idiot child, I am not an object to vent your frustrations on. Whatever plagues you, find a different way of dealing with it."

Naruto blurts out, "I'm going to tell my parents."

"...What?" Kurama gives her a side glance.

"I'm going to tell my parents, not everything... just something. I feel like I need to confide in them, maybe I'll tell them about you. Yah that is a good compromise," Naruto mutters to herself, "I won't tell them about time traveling... well not yet, or should I not tell them at all. Gahhhhh! I'm confused." She turns pleading blue eyes on Kurama, "What should I do?"

Kurama stares at her blankly, and then gruffly says, "Do as you please Naruto."

"Kurama, you giant furball! You are no help!"

One of his tails lash out and topple her over.

How's that for help.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

It's an atypical Saturday morning, one where every family member is within residence.

Minato sits next to his wife at the kitchen island, leaning his head against her shoulder. Here he watches his recorded dramas on his work tablet. Kushina has five cups of coffee in front of her, four of them are empty. She nurses her fifth as she attempts to wake up for the day. The carafe is placed within arm's reach if the fifth cup does not do the trick.

Kushina does not cook this morning, there are "More than enough leftovers from yesterday to last till lunch, I'll be damned if it goes to waste, 'attebane." Hence forth, Naruto enters the kitchen, she greats her parents, makes a beeline for the refrigerator and ruminages through it. She emerges victorious, with four containers for breakfast.
When she selects what she wants, she puts the containers into the sink, puts her assortment of food onto the kitchen island, and the rest into the microwave. She goes about these motions meticulously, and watches the microwave with rapt attention.

When it beeps she gives an inaudible exhale, grabs her food and sits at the kitchen island adjacent to her parents. The only sounds are the voices of her father's favorite drama, and her mother pouring her seventh cup of coffee.

The first clue that gives her parents warning bells is that Naruto is eating slowly—their baby is anything but subtle, and the fact that she inhales her food like they do, marks her surprising display of table manners as odd behavior. In response to her, Minato glances at her briefly and frowns, but goes back to watching his dramas. Kushina's morning glower becomes more pronounced.

When Naruto uses her chopsticks to play with her food, Minato raises a finger to pause his drama, sitting up from lounging against Kushina. Kushina becomes coherent enough to crassly bark out, "Naruto what the hell is wrong with you?!"

Once again Kushina displays her infamous temper, Minato shakes his head, "What your mother means is that you're behaving oddly, is there anything you'd like to tell us?"

Naruto mumbles something, and a vein appears on Kushina's forehead, "Speak louder!"

Naruto looks at her mother with wide eyes, but honestly after nine years she should know how short fused her mother is before 10 a.m.

Minato glares at his wife, Kushina glowers right back. Minato rolls his eyes and turns to Naruto saying gently, "Would you mind repeating yourself Naruto-chan?"

Naruto has thought of many ways of approaching this, so she does what she does best—wing it.

She gets up from her seat and goes to stand behind where her parents are perched, they turn around and look at her in curiosity—well her father does, Kushina looks aggravated.

Naruto lifts her shirt and channels chakra to the seal on her stomach. Somberly she says, "This kind of seal has to hold back something monstrous, right? Something really powerful and too dangerous to roam…. That makes me a jinchuriki."

Kushina finally deigns to look concerned, her violet eyes gleam with worry and a hand covers her mouth. Minato looks pale, but analyzes her last statement and comes to a startling conclusion, "You knew already that already…. How long have you known?"

"I learned when I started creating my own seals," Naruto spins a half lie, half-truth, "I found the seal on my stomach, then I started experimenting with it and I met the Kyubi."

Kushina gasps, "Oh shit." She fights the urge to grab Naruto and hug her tightly, and then hide her away from all the world's terrors.

Minato looks at Naruto with keen eyes and chooses his next words carefully, "You started creating your seals when you were six or seven…" Minato brow furrows, "But the ANBU that guard you have never felt any the Kyubi's corrosive chakra, how did you meet the Kyubi if you did not access it's chakra?"

Naruto looks at her father sheepishly, "I did it when I escaped their notice, my shadow clones have a lot of chakra, and it's sometimes hard to tell the difference between me and them."
Again not a complete lie, Naruto has done this many times in her second life. It is hilarious to watch the ANBU freak out when they realize Naruto is a shadow clone, and they've potentially lost the Hokage's kid.

Minato pinches the bridge of his nose, "Naruto they are there for your protection. Your mother and I cannot always be there to protect you, until you become a ninja and even after that, it is our duty to see about your wellbeing. Do you understand me?"

"Hai, hai," Naruto replies, quite use to this lecture, knowing her father means well and she appreciates it. However, Naruto is going to cause his over protectiveness to reach its zenith, "Oh yah the Kyubi prefers to be called he."

"Well shit, now she knows the Kyubi identifies as male," Kushina mutters weakly.

"His name is Kurama," Naruto supplies cheerfully, too cheerfully. Her parents are too shocked to notice.

"She knows his fucking name," Kushina whispers harshly to Minato. He waves her away from him.

"You speak to him?" Minato asks in a strained voice.

"Yah, yah, he's rude, and cantankerous, but really helpful when you compliment him. He knows sooooo much, just an endless fountain of information..." If Naruto appears to be having to be taking the innocent child act too far... well she is.

There's an impending headache coming, and hands raise to rub aching temples. The other drops to the floor in a dead faint at the implications of Naruto's statements. Guess whose reactions were which.

Omake:

"Happy Birthday Sasuke!"

Sasuke looks at her confused, "It's not my birthday yet Naru-chan."

"Eh, you should treat every day like it's your birthday," Naruto imparts that small tidbit of philosophy onto the four year old.

Sasuke's mouth parts open in a wide 'o' as he nods. He likens to a disciple being schooled by a village idiot. He says, "I don't think Kaa-chan would like me eating birthday cake every day."

Naruto nods in sympathy, she knows the difficulty of being denied one's heart's desire... Ramensama. Her childhood punishments were torture. "I understand, but here's your present."

She proceeds pull out four tomato seeds and grows them into giant tomatoes before the boy's very eyes. Sasuke swears they're bigger than Shisui-baka's head and almost as tall as Aniki.

He picks up one of them reverently and holds it close. Then he holds it up to the sky, and watches the sun gleam off of it's red surface... it's beautiful. He turns to Naruto with a determined face that's startlingly familiar. "One day," Sasuke declares, "I'm going to marry you Naruto-chan!"

Behind them Shisui snickers, and Itachi tries unsuccessfully to hide a grin.

Naruto rubs the back of her head sheepishly, but inwardly she laughs hysterically at the potential
irony of that statement.

And why does she have the feeling this is going to come back and haunt her.
Kurama is ancient.

He is a being, a concept, and at the root of him he is intangible to human understanding.

The idea of sleep does not apply to him. When he closes his eyes, he is lulled into a deep meditative state, here sometimes memories encompass him, but mostly it is silence.

In the past before his century of captivity, courtesy of the Uzumaki female line, those who would somehow succeed in containing him, would be driven mad from the onslaught of memories he fed their nightmares. He attempted this method with Uzumaki Mito and failed, and attributes this resistance to her being a direct descendent of Otsutsuki Hagoromo. Henceforth, he did not attempt it again with Uzumaki Kushina nor Naruto.

But he digresses, occasionally when he is in these deep states of meditation, he falls into a trance. There he cannot discern whether he is seeing memories of his many pasts or insights to future paths.

Recently the silence that usually engulfs him has been absent, and he has become plagued with memories or visions.

He thinks gifting Naruto the mokuton, and tapping into seldom used abilities may have hand in triggering these so called visions.

And he wonders if he should confide in Naruto what he has seen.

Some events may be etched in stone, but the future is always changing, and many paths deviate from these events.

The possible choices are interesting.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

Humidity is thick in the air, cloying in the lungs, slick with heat on the skin. The clouds hang low in shades of gray, with the ever lingering promise of impromptu rain… all of this is typical of Amegakure.

However, what's novel are the hints of blue breaking up the shades of gray, and the rays of light piercing the clouds, rays that bounce off the reflective surfaces of the gleaming metropolis below.

The sun appearing in Ame is a strange occurrence.

Jiraiya is not superstitious, but his honed instincts have never failed him. This place that is usually a place of solace for him, a place amongst good company, and it beckons him to be weary.
Jiraiya takes that as a sign of bad news coming his way. This is reinforced by the appearance of the Akatsuki throughout the village, an influx of the Kouukage's militia, the red clouds of their cloaks seem present on every street corner.

What becomes even more alarming is the sudden presence of Konan by his side before he enters the heart of the metropolis. Seldom is he given the preference of having an escort when he visits his former students. He does not have free reign in the village, for he is an alien shinobi, but he usually travels incognito throughout Ame. If Konan found him this quickly, then obviously they've been vigilant of his potential presence.

On a rooftop they stop and Jiraiya turns to her, giving a sardonic smile, "Bad news?"

Konan simply nods.

Shit.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)


Shisui scrunches his face, "Weren't the Nidaime's eyes red?"

"Yep," Naruto says.

"Then why did you paint his face green?" Shisui questions.

"Artistic license," Naruto responds simply.

"Hey!" Hana calls, "Are you guys done over there?"

Naruto wipes her brow free of sweat, but ends up smearing paint across her forehead. She turns to her shadow clones and says, "Girls are ya done!?"

"Hai!" "Hell yah!" "All good over here!" comes the various shouts. Her clones begin to disperse.

"You heard them Hana!" Naruto shouts back in confirmation. She turns in Itachi's direction, "Done Itachi?"

"Almost," Itachi says back, he carefully finishes writing, 'Uchiha's rule, Senju's suck… which is why they're almost extinct' across the Shodaime's forehead. (What do you know, Itachi is just as spiteful as every other Uchiha in existence.)

"Okay let's go down and admire our work," Naruto declares, wearing her determined face... woe to all. As soon as she finishes her statement, Itachi dislodges the kunai that helped keep him vertical and free falls.

"Show off," Shisui calls after him, and then follows, laughter echoing in his wake.

"Fucking Uchihas, they're all show offs," Naruto disputes.

"I think that's all shinobi with flashy blood line limits," Hana responds.

"And clansmen with sticks up their asses," Naruto adds.

Hana and Naruto follow in their lead, letting go of the chakra circulating in their feet, and shrieking with laughter as they fall.
Below them Naruto thoroughly abuses her control over nature chakra. Influencing the rapid growth of cells in a nearby tree, lengthening the trunk and boughs, inspiring green leaves and flowers to life. Here they land, in a position that is perfect for admiring their handy work.

"I think we can say the operation is a success," Hana declares proudly.

"It's so beautiful," Shisui says and wipes away an imaginary tear.

Naruto grins and Itachi shakes his head in amusement.

But not everyone appreciates their artist abilities.

Below someone coughs loudly.

All four of them look down.

"Oh shit."

There are six members of the Shinobi Police Force, and behind them are two of the ANBU that usual tail Naruto.

At the sight of them, Naruto points an accusing finger, "Snitches, you were supposed to keep watch!"

They shrug in response.

"Where is your sense of loyalty!?" Naruto yells, feeling the keenest sense of betrayal.

"With the Hokage," One has the gall to answer.

Naruto gives a shocked gasp.

"Never mind that Naruto," Itachi whispers urgently, "We need to run."

"Oh yah."

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.

.
"I wonder why Minato allowed them to be caught this time?" Mikoto queries bemused, and then takes a sip of beer from her glass.

"He'd thought it be funnier if they finally faced the consequences of their actions," Kushina says, rolling her eyes.

"Defacing public property is a crime," Hizashi points out again.

"To have the unmitigated gall to deface the Hokage monument in broad daylight… that's something you have to respect," Mikoto says, nodding to herself.

Kushina snorts, "They make me remember our glory days…. At least they didn't involve the younger kids."

Mikoto laughs, "Sasuke was quite put out that he was left out of the loop."

After a pause, Hizashi grudgingly adds, "So was Neji."

As usual Kushina becomes contemplative when under the influence, "Think on this for a second. Since Itachi, Naruto and Inuzuka Hana are graduating soon, they'll be out of the village more often. Who do you think is going to take up their cause?"

There's silence for a beat, and then Hizashi grabs the sake bottle, and drinks directly from it.

Their reactions are pretty tame, and so is Inuzuka Tsume's, she laughed upon learning of her daughter's latest exploit. Shisui's father was pretty laid back about the incident, his sensei simply shook his head in exasperation, his mother… well that is a different story.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

"Team nine will consist of Inuzuka Hana, Uchiha Itachi, Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto…" (If the chunin announcing team selections seems out of breath after saying the mouth full that is the Naruto's surname…not a comment is made, it's a common occurrence.)

In response to that announcement Hana pumps her arm in excitement and her ninken yip for joy. Itachi quirks a smile, while Naruto… well Naruto snores in response, head perched on her palm as drool trickles down her face, dripping into a pool on her desk. (She does an excellent interpretation of a future Shikamaru.)

Once the announcements are made, the chunin instructor exits the premises, glad to wash his hands of this lot of hell spawn—er genin hopefuls.

Beside Itachi Naruto sleeps on, dead to the world.

This will not do.

Itachi takes it upon himself, as always, to awaken her.

This is a special occasion, so he uses maneuver # 6.

He promptly kicks her seat from under her.

Naruto's head slams against her desk, startling her awake. She gives a surprised shout and then she falls back from the sudden disorientation. She lands in a heap, tangled with the legs of her chair, completely dazed.
Beside her, Itachi briefly glances down, before looking forward. He patiently waits for her to gain her bearings.

(Around them, their classmates wear expressions of interest, waiting to see what Naruto's reaction will be. This isn't the first time this has happened, but it rarely occurs. Yet, the resulting interaction never fails to entertain.)

Naruto pulls herself up into a sitting position, and rubs her forehead where a vivid red mark has imprinted itself. Her expression is downright murderous... well that's a misnomer, disgruntled and somewhat annoyed is more like it, but Itachi likes to be dramatic in his descriptions. She shouts, "What the hell Itachi!? Did you seriously have to drop kick me!? I'm gonna kill you, 'attebayo! Sasuke's gonna have to learn to be an only child—"

Itachi lets her rant and rave, and then cuts her off. Blandly he says, "You, me and Hana, are on the same team."

Naruto's expression of righteous indignation morphs as she blinks in surprise. Then she grins, "Really!?"

Itachi nods, and Hana perks up two rows ahead and says, "Yep yep!"

"Yatta! We've conquered the exam, now it's time to move on to greater horizons," Naruto proclaims theatrically.

(If the peanut gallery at large is disappointed by lack of smoke bombs, flying kunai, flashy seals and ninjutsu that usually correspond with the petty arguments between these two... who cares, they are plebeians in Naruto's grand scheme of raising hell.)

Once Naruto settles back into her chair, she scrunches up her face in confusion, "When is the sensei coming.... Who were we assigned to?"

Itachi opens his mouth to reply, but the answer is revealed as a plume appears, poof! A toad is revealed once the smoke dissipates.

"Hi I'm Gamanatsu, do you have any candy?"

That answers that query.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

They have their first official team meeting, it's in a bar. While that's not appalling, for they are now considered officially adults, thus able to meet the legal drinking requirement. What's appalling is the introduction Jiraiya submits them to, in the midst of a ninja bar, in the presence of their future colleagues.

The Kabuki dance inspires the following reactions:

Itachi looks vaguely constipated.

Hana gapes, "Wow you're a real weirdo."

Expression in a caricature of a fox, Naruto says, "Ero-sennin, you must have lost a bet with Otousan, or did he blackmail into becoming our sensei!?"

Not quite, but rather Minato presented him with an interesting proposition:
Five weeks ago...

(The border of Kawa no Kuni, a tea house located on Saru River.

Judging from Minato's guise, this isn't the first time he's snuck out of Konoha since his reign of Hokage began.

Considering how flamboyant his henge once was—in his apprentice days, the blame can be put upon the influence of Jiraiya—of course he's learned inconspicuousness.

Jiraiya cannot blame him for playing hooky every blue moon (some of his wanderlust must have rubbed off onto Minato). There's a reason he did not take upon the mantle of Kage when goaded, he shudders at the thought of being confined behind a desk. And yet when he expertly cast out his senses, he can feel the suppressed chakra signals of three ANBU… it appears this is not a visit of pleasure, but one of intrigue.

Jiraiya can already feel a head ache coming on.

Across from him, Minato sits henged in nondescript coloring, a stark contrast to the blue of his eyes, and blond of his hair. A minor genjutsu is weaved around them and a seal is activated to keep out would be interlopers.

However, this is not a point of interest, rather it's the large file Minato holds before him.

Minato's eyes gleam an unholy glint; Jiraiya expertly deflects, "I do not like to be handed files, especially files of those variety."

Thus begins the battle of wills.

Minato places the file on the table and slides it across the surface towards him.

Jiraiya gives the file a brief look of disgust, and uses one finger to slide the it away and towards the middle of the table; neutral ground.

Minato sighs a this, "Before you say no, here's food for thought..."

Once Minato has told Jiraiya of his recent revelations involving the interruption of a binge fest of drama episodes, a broken carafe, and the latest in relations between humans and chakra monsters, his usual humor flees. He's left atypically serious—seemingly—but first he has to ask, "So it was Kushina who fainted? Not you?"

Jiraiya rubs his forehead, and says exasperated. "Yes, it was Kushina… is that the only thing you picked up on!"

Jiraiya laughs and says with wide eyes, "What? It's shocking."

Minato groans, "Back on topic. Now you see why I want you to be her instructor. Only you have the means of hindering the potential degradation of the seal when she is not within Leaf or Fire country."

Jiraiya sighs, "All humor aside, I see why you are worried, but Naruto getting along with the Kyuubi is not a novel concept. Though rarely heard of, there are recorded instances of past jinchurriki that have shown that a peaceful existence is possible between host and tenant. My spies in Kaminari no Kuni have spotted and encountered Kumo's jinchurriki. They witnessed the strange dynamic between the host and the Hachibi, they're amiable towards one another. Why not the same for Naruto?"
Minato seems to digest this information, and then parries it, "Amongst those recorded histories I bet there is nothing concrete regarding the Kyuubi."

"Just so," Jiaiya acknowledges.

What they both know is this, it was not until this last century or so that the Kyuubi has been kept under such captivity. And that was with the combined presents of the Ŝenju, Uzumaki and Uchiha—all direct descendants of the Rikudo Sennin.) The Kyuubi was elusive, only appearing to those foolish enough to seek it, amusing itself with their gall.

Even the Uchiha who legend has it, have the ability to control the bijuu, found difficulty in seeking and reigning in this being. The few past hosts of the Kyuubi from the centuries have left only echoes shrouded in legend. Those who seek the power of the nine tails and somehow succeeded were either driven mad, or eventually died along with their legacy.

It's all shrouded in mystery.

Thus Naruto's contact with a being that is known as a bakemono is alarming, especially since she is giving an identify to an intangible being.

"Then there is Naruto's mokuton. If worst comes to worst, she'll be able to combat the Kyuubi, but first she has to learn senjutsu," Minato adds.

"And that's where I come in," Jiraiya finishes.

Minato nods in the positive.

In the wake of this, Jiraiya does the undesirable. He slides the file toward him and opens it. His eyes quickly scan the first page and he raises a brow, "Why not as an apprentice?"

Minato shrugs, "Either or. Though I would prefer her on a team. Naruto becoming a soldier of Konoha does not change the fact that she is still my child. I'd rather she be in good company than on her own right away. Teamwork, after all is the first lesson Leaf shinobi learn as genin."

Jiraiya replies, "It's been over a decade since I've taught a student, let alone three genin."

Minato shrugs again, "You did fine with me and my teammates, and well with Uzumaki Nagato and his comrades. What's to say you won't have the same success again?"

Jiraiya snorts, what a great lark that statement is.

Minato's nonchalant mien changes as he asks, "Speaking of that, how goes the Kouukage and has he once again encountered our common enemy?"

Here is where they really get down to business.)

Jiraiya glares down at her and then declares dramatically, "I'm doing this out of the goodness of my heart. I'm passing on my knowledge to the next generation, after all I am the greatest the Sannin. Feel free to express your gratitude any time."

All three of the genin look at him skeptically.

Jiraiya sighs, "Usually a jonin sensei gives a test before deciding whether or not they will teach a potential genin team. I personally do not have time for that." His demeanor abruptly shifts, and that makes them give him their rapt attention—a commander to his soldiers. "Tomorrow we will meet at
the western gate, if you choose to show up, then you are entering a two-year apprenticeship. I am Konoha's espionage unit, and that means we will travel throughout the continent, and infrequently journey back into Konoha. If that is an issue for you, do not show tomorrow morning.

"You will learn the tricks of my trade, you will learn to survive and navigate the shinobi world. Your areas of strengths will be honed; your areas of weaknesses will be hammered out. And the skills you learn are yours to apply, if not, your death and the blood of your comrades are on your hands," Jiraiya gives each of them a discerning look.

Itachi looks contemplative, Hana has wide, disbelieving eyes, and Naruto remains in the caricature of a fox—inscrutable.

Once they've seemed to digest his words, Jiraiya continues onward and adopts a tone of levity, "Anyhow, I've introduced myself, now continue to trend. I doubt the three of you want to be known as minion one, two and three. Humor me and tell your names, hopes and dream, likes and dislikes, yada, yada, blah, blah…"

Naruto, ever the attention whore, decides to go first, "I'm Uzumaki-Namikaze Naruto, my name is a mouthful, but I'm proud of it! I like ramen, learning new jutsu, creating new seals, and pranks. I dislike the three minutes it takes for ramen to cook, and when Shisui's mom finds out about my world domination plans, and those who do not appreciate the majesty of Ramen-sama."

Itachi turns to her and says in bemusement, "That's oddly specific Naruto."

Naruto grins in response, "And my goal is to protect my precious people by whatever means necessary."

"Any means necessary?" Itachi queries with a small smile.

Naruto nods in quick succession.

"Even fighting through a hoard of giant dragon flies or angry flying squirrels?" He persists.

Naruto pales, and whispers harshly, "I thought we said we would never mention that incident again!"

"Shisui and Hana agreed, I didn't say anything."

"Yep he has a point," Hana pipes up, "You're the one who wanted to play in training ground 48."

"Hana shhhhh! You're going back on your promise… and Itachi…. Gahhhhh! Itachi why do you always do that?!" Naruto asks incredulously.

Itachi looks at her blandly and deadpans, "I have no idea what you are talking about."

Jiraiya shakes his head and wonders what he has gotten himself into.

Thus this is how their first meeting goes, this seems like an auspicious beginning… woe to all the elemental nations.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

Naruto lays back on the top of the stone monument, specifically her father's, an unrealistic sculpture. In the distance yonder the sun appears, barely cresting in the east, cutting through the dark of twilight.

Once more she enters the field as a shinobi of Leaf. A child soldier molded and honed as weapon to
be pointed in the direction of Konoha's enemies.

This is a profession… no a lifestyle she will always choose; she knows no other way of life.

She takes in the sight of Konoha as the dawn breaks. This will be the last time she sees her home village for months to come. It's not novel experience, but leaving Leaf is not one she has had for a decade.

Once she steps foot outside of that gate, reality will shift, she will become a more active player on the field. She will eventually have to reveal herself, but she will continue to maneuver things in her favor and protect the people she cherishes.

Last night's farewell shenanigans have only strengthened that resolve.

(Much like their usual displays, the Uzumaki-Namikaze trio makes a spectacle of themselves.

"Our baby is leaving us behind!" Kushina wails.

Minato rubs his eyes and reminisces, "Just yesterday she was saying her first word, 'ramen'. Where has time gone!? She's grown up so quickly!"

"What are we going to do Mina-chan!?"

"I don't know!"

They both proceed to cry large stream of tears, and hug their daughter.

Naruto sits between them, as always enjoying this brand of insanity, and contributing to it, "Oka-san, Otou-san, I miss you both already!"

In the booth with them is Jiraiya, ignoring their theatrics. Naruto may be his god daughter and now his student, but he's simply here to enjoy the free food.

Kakashi glances at them fleetingly and goes back to reading his book. Obito watches the display with wide eyes and considers adding more fuel to the fire. Rin waves her hands at gawkers, failing terribly at diverting their attention.

The owner of the restaurant is sorely tempted to kick them out due to the ruckus they make, but such a display would stagnate, if not run him out of business. Alienating the Hokage and his family is out of the question.

The restaurant they invaded, boast the best premium beef in Konoha—this is a questionable advertisement, the Akimichi clan can tell a person of several restaurants that have better. Nonetheless, this false advertisement rings true this time. If it comes to light that Minato pulled some strings by lying, threatening and giving false promises to get the best cattle out of Ta no Kuni… well who's to question his authority. Besides, look at that marbling!

Usually ramen is their go to fair, but Naruto passing her Academy exam and becoming a genin calls for something more special than ten bowls of Ichiraku's best.

Anyhow.

Naruto spends her time reveling in the presence of her parents, and her precious people. Even a decade into this new life still makes her cherish the novel concept of her parents.

Family, she decides, and friends are her driving factors.)
Her ruminations are interrupted by Itachi landing silently beside her. He gives a quiet greeting and sits down, taking in the view of Konoha in the predawn light.

The silence between them is companionable.

And surprisingly it is Itachi who breaks the silence, "Hana is not going to take Jiraiya-sensei's offer."

Naruto's brow furrows, "You stopped by the Inuzuka compound?"

"Un, she says she'll join the medical corps instead."

"I'm not surprised, what about you? Didn't you plan on joining?"

Itachi's eyes flicker towards her momentarily before focusing on the sight of Konoha before him, "Hm, I can afterwards, I think there's a lot I can learn from Jiraiya-sensei. I'm not going to pass up this opportunity."

"Mikoto-oba-san must be devastated that you'll be away so long," Naruto teases.

"No more than Kushina-oba-san or Minato-sama," Itachi returns.

"What about Sasuke?" Naruto asks quietly. "Bet he'll miss you like crazy."

Itachi takes a long time to answer, "… my foolish otouto will have learn to be without me, besides he'll have Shisui."

"… He's screwed."

Once more silence encompasses them, this time its melancholic.

Below them Konoha begins come alive, the first signs coming the bazaar as merchants set up their stands with fresh merchandise. At this sign Naruto begins to rise, dusting off her back and pants, pulling on her backpack. Itachi follows her motions and they take to the roof tops.

"We're late," Itachi observes, once they land at the western gate.

Naruto shrugs, "Ero-sennin left last night."

Itachi looks at her in askance.

"After he mooched off of us, and passed out in the guest room, I felt his chakra signature leave a few hours later."

Itachi looks at her in sudden alarm, Naruto shrugs again, "This is how he trains us. He played games like this with me when I was younger. It would have been great if Hana had decided to come, her dogs would have been a lot of help at tracking him."

"This is somewhat unorthodox," Itachi says after a moment, titling his head in curiosity.

"Hey, we're dealing with a man who writes porn as a hobby and is somewhat famous for it," Naruto reminds him. "Let's just hope he doesn't drag us through Kaze no Kuni."

"Un…it's migrating season for the sand manta rays," Itachi thinks aloud.

The image of those giant creatures seen in their academy textbooks stands out starkly to the both of them. Sand manta rays aren't vicious, unless provoked, but traveling through a herd of them is going
to be one hell of a challenge.

"Shit," Naruto exclaims, "that bastard would."

Itachi sighs, resigned.

They step out of Konoha and into the wild.
The narration for this chapter and the next are nonlinear, they both occur six to nine months into their training trip.

Here in a graveyard, creatures a year or millennia old reside, their giant bones protruding from the earth, dwarfing some of the mountains and centuries old trees in their height.

The chakra here is ominous; this is a place that draws in dying creatures. The last of their chakra seeps into the earth, giving the nature chakra here a mixture of life and death.

In the ether Kurama is tense, a growl starts low in his throat and steadily rises, “He is here, I recognize the stench of that dead man anywhere.”

“So this is where it began?” Naruto questions rhetorically.

Here is where the White Zetsu Army is being spawning, here is where she feels the remnants of the Shodaime’s chakra, here is where the miasma that is Uchiha Madara resides.

Naruto’s chakra is clothed in the energy of nature around her, she is henged, she is disguised.

‘Do you think this will work?’

‘I do not see why not. You must take every advantage you can get.’

‘…This is going to hurt.’

‘Probably,’ Kurama replies unrepentantly.

Naruto places her hands on the earth. Her features morph, the markings of senjutsu painting her face. Instead of releasing her own chakra and molding it with the nature chakra, this time she is reversing it, drawing on it—the Shodaime’s chakra.

Her intent is wither away the clones, the source of their power Senju Hirashima’s cells.

She is a direct descendent of the Shodaime on a father’s side, and a distant relation on her mother’s.

When she calls, it beckons forth, answering to a siren’s song.
The Land of Wind was once a great ocean.

A large mass of water, in the dying light where the shadows of the dunes elongate and become ominous shapes, Gaara finds that hard to believe sometimes. However, his favorite hobby proves his doubt otherwise. Chakra pulses and the seas of sand becomes his to manipulate, he digs beneath the layers of earth and searches for the signs of life that once swam in these great depths.

This morning he lugs a great text that he may or may not have stolen from the public library. It’s a reference book, a text that cannot leave the library premises, but Gaara really needs it, and he left a note saying he would have it back in its rightful place by the end of the week.

(‘Or you could simply keep it, it’s not as if anyone besides you is using it.’)

Gaara ponders that statement, but briskly shakes his head, ‘That would be stealing, and Temari says that’s wrong!’

‘And I think it’s fine, you need that book to identify your dead animals. Who you gonna believe!? The flesh bag or me, your best friend?’

Gaara doesn’t even have to think twice about that statement, ‘Temari; every time I listen to you I get in trouble.’

‘Yah, yah, yah, but at least we have fun.’

‘You have fun, I get scolded.’

Shukaku laughs and disappears into the ether.)

The morning kunai has yet to completely cut the sky, and cause the night to bleed into dawn. He’ll have to miss the morning session, but he can attend the Academy for the afternoon session, he doubts anyone will notice. He already told his siblings about his new project so he doesn’t think they’ll rat out his location to Uncle Yashamaru.

For the last couple of weeks, he’s been working on a special venture, one that will be the greatest of his treasures. He has no idea where he’ll store it, maybe he should find a bigger hiding space for his treasures.

When he reaches the stone barricade containing the northern gate. He checks his bag to make sure he brought enough water and rations. The guards do not question nor delay his exit, either because he is the Kazekage’s son or due to the demon lurking within him.

Out into the dunes he goes, heading for Kaze’s bull’s eye, the remnants of a long dead volcano.

Above the barricade of the northern gate, a shadow watches, and readies to follow.

(Subtle changes are wrought due to Naruto’s transmigration to the past. The future is molded, and forged anew in some instances, in others it remains the same:

Gaara is a happy child, well adjusted… to some extent. He is raised by his siblings, a giant “teddy bear” that lives in his head, with the guardianship of his distant uncle, and the looming figure of an estranged father.

He is loved. Temari is fiercely protective of him, and spoils him. Kankuro teases and watches over
him with a fervency that rivals their aneki.

The “giant teddy bear” that dwells within his mind has been with him for as long as he remembers. His earliest memory consists of being lulled to sleep by a horrible singing voice, likening to grinding gears.

He has friends, people who are like him. Who have giant friends that coexist with them. He has an identity as a jinchurriki, a host for a biju, a living sacrifice—the bane and the weapon of a ninja village.

Gaara’s relations with Sunagakure’s villagers vary, from friendly to indifference. Seldom he experiences outright scorn, but fear is something that is commonplace and cannot be avoided no matter how much his siblings try to shield him.

These changes do not extend to his parental locus. His uncle is a figure Gaara and his siblings look towards more than their father. He is an extension of a mother barely remembered, and never known. Yashamaru represents a solace, and in his hands are the guileless trust of three children.

Crueler intentions have been hidden by handsomer and gentler faces. In this instance, Yashamaru is no different, he has looked upon the face of a demon masquerading as a child. Fooling his sister’s elder children, calling him uncle all the while wearing the face of his sister’s child.

Yashamaru withheld his anger, resentment, and madness.

It took six years for him to snap and attempt to kill the demon spawn.

Too bad he has terrible timing.)

The usual four to six hour trek to Kaze’s bullseye is tapered by Gaara’s manipulation of the landscape, as he moves the sand beneath his feet moves. Merging with his biju infused chakra, and manipulates the remnants of nature chakra found amongst the dunes.

The earth around Kaze’s bullseye is curiously blue tinged with green and brown. Just outside it’s parameter is Gaara’s archeological site. Hidden by thickly compacted earth, when he removes the layers of sand, the site remains untouched due to the stasis seals he erected, taught to him by his fellow jinchuriki—Naruto in particular.

Uncovering, and finding the pieces of his latest of greatest discovery has been a work in progress. Gaara has taken to covering the fossilized bones in the golden dust of his blood line limit, and keeping them in stasis in the storage seals.

He’s excited, judging by the reference book, he is very close to piecing together and creating the image shown within its text.

Shukaku has told him stories of how old the earth is, of how after one civilization falls, another is erected in their place, of the creatures that once wondered to earth and of their descendants changing as the eons pass by.

These stories fascinate him and has contributed to his endeavors. His sister suggest he donates his treasures to the cultural center, he thinks one day he might want to share his discoveries. But for now the only person he’ll share with is Kankuro, his brother has taken to puppetry and likes the idea of reanimating long dead creatures.

Upon reaching his destination Gaara places down his supplies, and eagerly places his hands into the sand. Chakra pulses, golden lines appear, showing the parameter of his archeological site.
So immersed in his task he does not notice the sudden approach of a shadow falling over him.

Nor the sudden appearance of a smaller shadow, until a hand is ruffling his hair.

(Here’s something curious, Gaara’s automatic sand defense would activated if Shukaku had sensed danger, instead he sensed the telltale stench of a fox, enveloped curiously by the scent of earth and nature chakra… he is reminded of the Rikudo Sennin.)

Gaara startles, and keels over from his haunch over position. He looks up with wide eyes, and then a grin splits his face.

“Naru-chan!”

Low and behold, there appears one of his favorite amongst the jinchurriki.

He gets to his feet and barrels into her. She bears the sudden weight of a six-year-old child with aplomb. Laughing as he barrages her with questions: “What are you doing here!? How did you find me!? Did Kura-chan help you!? Do you have any ramen!? Why are you so short!? Aren’t you a grown up!?"

Naruto hugs him and then places him down, “Eh, I’m just passing through, and you know that all biju can sense each other. Kurama says he smelled and I quote ‘The stench of a rodent’, and here I am. And yes,” She finishes sagely, “yes I do have ramen, I always do.”

Gaara scrunches up his face, still caught off guard by one detail, “But still aren’t you a grown up, why are so short?”

A vein appears on Naruto’s head, belaying the annoyance she feels on being called out on her short stature. Nevertheless, she smiles and says, “Details kid, details.”

“You’re a kid too,” Gaara smartly points out.

“Details!” Naruto grits out, and then changes the subject, “Now show me what you’ve been working on, you’ve been talking about it nonstop at the biju powwows for the last few weeks, I’m curious.”

Gaara is naturally distracted, a smiles blooms across his young features, and he enthusiastically goes into detail. Naruto watches in awe as he raises the layers of earth and reveals what lies below.

_Yonder…_

Something had slammed into him. He’d barely been able to put up a defense before that same anvil of weight slammed into him again with enough force to make him see black spots.

That something morphed and wrapped about his body, slowly tightening with every movement of his struggling limbs.

Now its choking him. He splutters, heaving, trying to draw in breathes. He’s cognizant enough to realize he’s being dragged, the silts of sand find access to his skin and clothing.

“Gaara told me about you,” A voice says pleasantly. “He really adores you.” The blockade on his throat tighten and his eyes water as he strains to breath. It’s the voice of a child, he thinks hysterically. “How dare you betray his trust.”

The blockade on his throat lightens, he chokes, sucking in the air his lungs were denied. His blurry vision begins to clear, and what appears before him is the visage of a child, blonde hair, blue eyes,
and tan skin. The child smiles, he feels a thrill of fear as she says conversationally, “Hi, I’m Naruto. You’re Yashamaru, Gaara’s uncle. You haven’t change at all, in this lifetime or the last.”

“What the hell—” His sentence is cut off as he chokes.

“Ah, ah, ah. I talk you listen. You still think Gaara is a monster, the demon that killed your sister….” The child says sadly. “He’s an innocent, and by the time I’m done with you I’ll show what a real demon is.” She takes hold of his pale, sweating face, and his blood shot eyes widen in fear. Her childish features have become vulpine… no demonic.

Her red eyes glint with fury.

No one hears his screams as wooden needles pierce his body, plunging spores into his chakra coils, spores that feed off of chakra. His body will become a husk, but his chakra will give birth to newly grown vegetation.

**I’ve got a plan (I’ve got an atlas in my hand)**

At world’s end she stands.

Or rather at the most Southwestern part of the elemental continent. Here is where the continent ends and the great ocean begins and spreads beyond. She knows lands exist outside the elemental nations, from what she has gathered from Kurama’s cryptic and sometimes downright confusing explanations, is that the Earth is an ancient, enormous sphere, that has gone through many changes as the cycles begin anew and end, and it exists in many forms…. that last part of his explanation always leaves her stumped.

Anyhow.

This bustling city’s port belies the context of that. Great ships, small boats, ferries and fishing vessels bare both familiar and strange markings of languages.

There is so much out there, and so little of it that she has seen. She thinks once Madara is buried six feet under, when she is unhindered by the weight of the world, she will travel the elemental nations and beyond. Her last life has been short and her last years were wrought with tension and constant vigilance to keep her precious people alive. Though this one is similar to the last, she plans to live fully and without regret.

“Gaki! Are we going to eat or do we have to watch you act like a tourist!”

She’s pulled out of her musings at that shout.

“Yah, yah, I’m coming Ero-sennin!”

Traveling with Jiraiya is much the same as before, and that alone leaves her with a bittersweet feeling. However, there is novelty to be found. Jiraiya has been a constant presence in this second lot on life. This time around he takes a more much active role as an instructor. He imparts them with knowledge, and then throws them head first into scenarios where their survival skills are tested, analyzing how well they adjust to their surroundings, execute their mission parameters and handle unexpected anomalies.

Nonetheless, more times than not they are left to their own devices.

This time she and Itachi have just finished an assignment and in a moment of magnanimity, Jiraiya has decided to treat them to their success. Itachi and Naruto have no qualms about taking advantage
Later that night, after they have returned from the restaurant and checked into a local ryokan. Naruto takes residence on the rooftop. Her thoughts more than not turn toward the ghost of an uncertain future, but right now she’s at her most contemplative. And upon hearing the metaphorical gears turning in her head, Kurama stirs from the ether. This is when Kurama enjoys her company the most.

It does not take long for her to query him.

‘Kurama, what is your earliest memory?’

Kurama takes a moment to recall, to formulate images into words for human understanding. He looks way, way back, looking into the abyss and finding answers, ‘Colors,’ he begins succinctly, ‘Exploding hues, at their most vivid. And then there was silence. For how long I do not know. Where I existed… there was not concept of time.’

‘Your “home”, it’s another plane of existence, almost like where the biju and jinchuriki meet up.’

‘Yes,’ Kurama replies after a beat, ‘But that is a pocket dimension.’

‘A pocket dimension…’ Naruto repeats quietly.

There is silence, Kurama patiently waits for her to gather her thoughts. Naruto thinks of Obito and when he acted as an instrument for Madara’s will, of how his mangekyo sharingan either created or had access to pocket dimensions. She thinks perhaps there is a way for her to create and harness that… The mangekyo sharingan is a great weakness that the bijuu and jinchuriki are susceptible to. Perhaps there is a way to overcome that. The solace that the Rikudo Sennin created is not safe, particularly since the enemy can control the minds of those that have access to it, and gain entry.

‘I have been thinking of evasive maneuvers, another defense against Madara. Fuinjutsu is capable of awesome feats… if a seal can allow a shinobi to travel for short instance through space and time, seal away chakra monsters into human sacrifices and create a space where the being and host can interact… I think I can create a pocket dimension, a seal with multiple defenses before the dimension is even penetrated.’

Kurama grins, this is the spark of humanity, this is the human he will remember and measure the rest of the filth to. ‘My knowledge is at your disposal.’

Naruto gives a whoop of excitement, ‘Then let’s get started!’

I’ve got a plan (I’ve got an atlas in my hand)

Jiraiya-sensei is everything he expected from a veteran shinobi. He is eccentric and shrewd. His teaching style is questionable and can be downright hazardous, but there is a method to his madness.

Itachi’s genjutsu is improving. Jiraiya-sensei is not an expert in the art of illusions, but has a keen understanding and an imagination that creates ingenious seals, this acumen is applied to genjutsu. Under his tutelage, Itachi creates subtle genjutsu manipulation and is steadily working on a variation of a nightmarish illusion, where the victim is encompassed in darkness and slowly tortured by a doppelganger of himself. Their senses are ensnared and rendered null and void, except for their pain receptors. Considering his knowledge of anatomy and the chakra system… well he won’t go into details.

He thinks he is making his blood thirsty ancestors proud.
Itachi gets the chance to test his jutsu when their sensei decides to try a new training venture. He and Naruto are going to be mercenaries.

Ambitious, he and Naruto go after a B-ranked missing nin. Their target of choice is written up in the Kirigakure bingo book. He defected for petty reasons, but if it wasn’t for the fuss he is kicking up off the coast of Kawa no Kuni then he wouldn’t even register as a blip on their radar. Somehow this missing nin is trying and succeeding in turning himself into some kind of crime lord. Considering the following he has amassed, he must be charismatic. Though it doesn’t matter he’s still a threat, one Naruto and Itachi can make a couple thousand ryo on.

As expected they bite off more they can handle.

By the Shodai.

Initially Naruto had been in it for the money. Gama-chan’s looking a little lean. Nevertheless, considering the way she’s laughing manically as she releases a horde of shadow clones. She appears to be enjoying this far too much.

Following the clones, Naruto throws herself into the frenzy, leaping and landing on some poor wretches’ shoulders, manifesting two wooden cymbals and proceeds to bash in his head, before moving onto her next victim.

An angry mob of D to C ranked missing nin, and would be mercenaries are chasing them.

He sprints faster and reaches for the senbon in his pack, crimson eyes spinning death, Itachi joins her. A zeal settles in, like fire in the veins. He ducks and dodges, strategically aiming senbon at chakra points that will disable and inflict death. He learned very young, when he drew first blood that if one does not attack with the intent to kill, then he too will die.

Yes, they may be in a bit over their heads, and yet it’s too damn exhilarating to care.

He is surrounded by a group of five would be enemies when he begins to place the subtle threads of his newly crafted genjutsu. It’s does not take long for them to become ensnared, nor for their eyes to glaze and their mouths to open in soundless screams.

Yes, he makes his ancestors quite proud.

I’ve got a plan (I’ve got an atlas in my hand)

Itachi’s expression is inscrutable.

Naruto is wearing her determined face.

Jiraiya’s expression is grim.

Who will win this staring contest?

Seconds ticked by, stretching into a minute, an eternity seems to pass in that short time. The contestants can feel their eyes beginning to dry. Naruto grits her teeth, Jiraiya fights the twitch threatening to close his right eye… Itachi remains steadfast.

Naruto gives in first, “Gahhhh! A fly flew into my eye!”

Jiraiya vainly attempts to fight an uphill battle. Expression contorting, mouth pulled into an
exaggerated frown, eyebrows raised to fight the urge to blink. He grinds his teeth, but still ends up blinking.

Itachi blinks owlishly as if coming back to himself. He turns an expectant gaze onto his sensei, one that is mirrored by Naruto’s eager one.

Jiraiya looks at them in complete distrust.

“You lost,” Itachi remarks, “Now you must hold up your end of the bargain.”

“Senjutsu, senjutsu, senjutsu,” Naruto chants.

“Once again, I’m being conned by brats,” Jiraiya mutters, he then throws his hands up in defeat. “Fine,” he says, yet warns ominously, “senjutsu is a double edged sword, if not mastered properly, you could turn to stone.”

Itachi gives him a bland look, while Naruto’s expression is vulpine.

“Fine, I’ll summon the toad masters, but you’re only learning the basics.”

“Ohoooooo!” Naruto cheers.

Itachi smiles in satisfaction.

Senjutsu will allow Naruto to start mastering her blood line limit, but it will bring Itachi’s genjutsu skills to a new level. While weaving illusions that capture the senses, merging the threads with natural chakra will liken to bending reality and make it much more difficult to break out of a genjutsu.

While he does not have much interest in achieving Sage status, Itachi is nothing if not resourceful. Everything he learns, he merges into his existing repertoire and enhances it, for there is always room for improvement.

Besides he thinks being in touch with the chakra that gives life to the earth around him will bring him a sense of peace.

I’ve got a plan (I’ve got an atlas in my hand)

Meditating is a necessary step in channeling nature chakra.

Bedside him Naruto fidgets, sighs, rolls her shoulders, and adjust her lotus position. Itachi smiles briefly, Naruto has the attention span of a walnut.

He is in a state of equilibrium. Meditating has become second nature to him, when his mind medic taught to him to use it as a tool to calm his anxiety.

It has also taught him to channel his emotions. What was once shyness has morphed into an enigmatic façade, but Itachi feels deeply. His reactions simply register on a smaller scale than some people (read: Shisui and Naruto).

Hence forth, it takes a lot to shock him.

When his father was cut down before his eyes, he was traumatized, yes, but that was because he witnessed it. He has come to the conclusion that had his father died in the field as some shinobi are wont to do, he would have expected it. Life as a ninja has a high mortality rate.
When Shisui said he had pictures of how some their Uchiha relatives and their colleagues spend their Thursday nights, crossdressing and attending Konoha’s infamous drag club. He did not bash a lash, rather he blinked and hoped Shisui never got it into his head to show him those photos while he has his sharingan activated. He did not think he could live with the memories.

Neither did he even flinch, when at the age of six, Naruto pushed him into the women’s side of the onsen, where instead of being beaten into a pulp, he was fawned over (read: smothered in kisses, hugged, and cheeks pinched).

Or at the incident where Shisui, Hana and Naruto managed to corrupt their apprentices and convinced them to run naked through the Hokage Tower. (He too had a hand in that, but he will never admit to it.)

Thus when Naruto tells Itachi that she has a secret, one that is considered S-ranked and forbidden to be shared. Itachi simply looked at her in expectation, and waited patiently for her to be speak.

She is the jinchuriki of the Kyubi no Kitsune.

He accepted the confession, even hugged her for this is his best friend, and she carries a heavy burden.

And yet…

Itachi is still reeling from the revelation. He is working through his emotional spectrum from such a confession. Bitterness registers briefly, he wonders how long she’s known she was a vessel, and why she did not think to confide in him sooner. Regret, that he and their friends could not help her if she struggled with this revelation once she found out. Happiness though, is the dominant feeling.

It is humbling that Naruto told him. Aside from her parents and her god father, he is the first of her close circle of friends to know. Naruto is a person he admires greatly, and his admiration rises at the knowledge that she is a jinchuriki. He has read of these living human sacrifices. Created with the intent of taming the biju, wielding their power through the hosts; they are ultimate weapons in the armory of a Kage.

He thinks he can better understand the thousand-yard stare Naruto gets sometimes. He is told he has an old soul, the same can be said for Naruto, in this they are kindred. But where he is introspective, Naruto seems to carry the weight of the world on her shoulders. It’s an expression that is seldom seen from Naruto, but that thousand-yard stare is when Naruto looks her most serious and her most haunted. And Itachi always wonders what memories of a past life haunt her. Now that she shared her secret, he thinks he understands her better.

Beside him Naruto fidgets, and Itachi smiles wider.

I’ve got a plan (I’ve got an atlas in my hand)

Ise is a small village that straddles the border between Hi no Kuni and Tsuchi no Kuni. What was once a great city, a mecca for shinobi and civilian alike in the warring clans’ era, is now a place of ruins due to the perennial battles that took within and around it’s parameters. Now what exist are the surviving descendants of Ise’s founders, a small population that lives amongst the bygone era of relics, here from the ashes a fishing village has risen.

This is where Itachi and Naruto have wondered to in their recent travels.

Jiraiya-sensei has been AWOL for three weeks, only sending a message via toad, two weeks earlier telling Naruto and Itachi to rendezvous with his contact at an onsen several kilometers outside of Ise.
After delivering the contact’s information through their communication channel—toad, one of the
gama triplets—to wherever parts Jiraiya had disappeared to. Itachi and Naruto once more find
themselves left to their own devices.

With supplies running low, gama-chan looking on the lean side, a sensei who made them do his dirty
work, while taking a large percentage of the profits that come from the fruits of their labor, and
tedium of living off the land wearing thin. The two shinobi have learned to sell their “talents”.

Villages such as Ise, usually pool their monies together to hire ninja to resolve a problem for them,
ninja are expensive… very expensive. D-ranked missions taken for granted in Konoha are
accomplished by ordinary people, and while they have survived without the influence of ninja; there
is a definite advantage to having shinobi around.

Itachi is savvy in medical ninjutsu, and a medic nin’s presence is always welcomed in a village clinic.
Itachi exploits this open avenue happily.

Naruto on the other hand does odd jobs, fuinjutsu is such a rare art that the advantages of it are
limitless. Want to water proof you roof permanently? Naruto is the one for the job.

(Using henge seals a medical nin and a seal master walk into a village… this is not a joke.)

They take payment in the whatever form, if it’s food, ryo, rice or camping supplies. Anything given
to them in abundance is sealed away is a stasis seal, it can be bartered away in another village or
town bazaar.

It’s about two weeks into their stay at Ise that Naruto approaches Itachi at the village clinic. She
pushes through a crowd of girls that range from prepubescent to earlier twenties. They stare into the
window and glass door. It appears that even though he is disguised, the Uchiha charm strikes again.
Naruto honestly does not get it… hypocritical as it sounds.

“So it’s been fun here, how do you feel like visiting Awaji island?”

Itachi’s eyebrows raise in slight surprise, “In Mizu no Kuni? You want to gamble.”

“Yah I feel like robbing them blind, are you up for it?”

Itachi shrugs.

----

Apparently Naruto used the sources of Jiraiya’s spy network to find her wayward relative. And here
he thought they were here to gamble, and allow Naruto to test her newest creation of giant
carnivorous plants on a business conglomerate named Gato.

Itachi is anything but impressed.

Naruto tries hard to suppress her burbling happiness.

Across from them Tsunade of the Sannin looks at them in disgruntlement, while her apprentice
Shizune looks flustered, ready to jump in when things take a turn for the worse.

“I won three times today. I should have known that was an omen.”

Itachi remains non-responsive.

Naruto squirms with the need to express herself, her self-restraint does not last. She blurts out,
“We’re family! I wanted to meet you!”

Tsunade squints at them, “Your what? Jiraiya favorite’s brat right? My cousin’s bastard… you’re his grandchild. And this here is an Uchiha, I thought you were all charged with treason and wiped out.” She turns to Shizune and says, "Jiraiya really scraped the bottom of the barrel with this lot."

Both Naruto and Itachi stiffen. Naruto’s expression freezes, the smile on her face becomes strained. Itachi’s eyes widen slightly and he feels a sort of detach fury begin to stir in him.

An argument descends upon their table with Tsunade systematically insulting Konoha, the Yondaime Hokage, the former Sandai Hokage, the will of fire, Leaf’s entire shinobi force, etcetera. While Naruto loudly counters, no doubt telling her to retract all of her statements, attempting to rip asunder whatever views Tsunade has of Konoha. Shizune tries and fails to defuse the escalating argument.

Itachi on the other hand realizes this is a futile notion. Whatever her circumstances are regarding her resentment towards their village of origin, it is something she personally chooses to nurse as a long standing grudge instead of seeking out a mind medic. That’s toxic.

He wonders, regardless of the animosity that existed between their Uchiha and Senju ancestors, they must be rolling over in their metaphorical graves seeing what the Senju has been reduced to. A misanthrope towards all things associated with Leaf, a gambler with a debt the size of the Fire Country, and a whino who drowns her woes in sake. He voices such thoughts.

“I think,” Itachi interjects, and idly picks at the chipping surface of the table. “that Naruto being the scion of the Senju is befitting, at least she inherited the Shodaime’s legacy.”

Naruto and Tsunade pause. Righteous indignation sparks in Naruto eyes, Tsunade looks smug and unmoved, but they both turn to him at this proclamation. Tsunade barks out, “What are you yabbing about kid!?”

“Tsunade-sama,” Itachi says slowly, “I give respect when respect is due. But you have insulted my home, my family, and my clan. Yes, the Uchiha clan committed treason, and those who conspired are dead at the hands of those who realized and know that the clan is the village and the village is the clan. That concept of unity is something I do not think you have come to comprehend. I am happy that the Senju branch of shinobi will die with you, Minato-sama and Naruto renew the glory under a different name.”

Tsunade and Shizune gape at him, Naruto wears an expression bemusement, no doubt contemplating how many times she’s heard him speak this long.

Itachi gets up and bows tersely, “Naruto your attempt at a family reunion does not amuse me. I’ll be at the slot machines when you are finished here.”

As he stalks away, an awkward silence descends upon them, Naruto rubs her neck sheepishly and says, “Whelp Baa-chan, it takes a lot to piss off Itachi and you managed it in spades!”

Tsunade is not amused by her quip.

I’ve got a plan (I’ve got an atlas in my hand)

Recently, she has begun to dream in shades of red.
When these dreams became persistent, she turned to the one being who may have an explanation behind such a phenomenon.

However, Kurama became stubbornly silent when the subject is broached. Or rather he gives a chilling grin, or sneers, "Foolish ningen, what makes you think there is the meaning behind your dreams?"

If that isn’t ambiguous enough, the ever changing landscape of her mind becomes ensconced in fog and gloom, and Kurama disappears into the ether.

(Fucking drama queen.)

These responses make her all the more adamant in understanding these crimson dreams.

She thinks perhaps they are glimpses of past lives, maybe when she was Asura. But then she awakens to catch the dwindling tethers these dreams, and becomes shocked by the amount of carnage they display.

Though sometimes these dreams consist of very familiar people, but their actions, their locations, and their conversations are incomprehensible.

They are two weeks away from Kouu no Kuni when the dreams reach a precipice.

Jiraiya has called them to Amegakure to meet his former students. On the trip there, they make camp for the night and this time when she awakens the epiphany dawns on her.

She wakes up sharply, scratching at her throat. The recesses of the dream cling to her conscious mind. She thrashes in nonexistent water, struggling to break to the surface and take in gulps of air.

A cooling wave washes over her. Her rapid breathes begin to calm, and her eyes flutter open as coherency claims her. In the wake of her crimson dream, cold sweat mares her skin, the self-inflicted scratches and welts on her neck have already begun to close up, her blue eyes are dilated.

Naruto stares off into the middle distance, reeling with the realization of what’s finally dawned upon her.

Itachi stands beside her, raised hands glowing with green chakra, it appears he is the one who calmed her in the throes of a nightmare.

He calls her name until she responds, taking her chin in his palm, checking her eyesight with a glowing palm, and then taking her vitals.

Naruto looks at him with wide eyes.

Once he’s finished checking her vitals, he stares at her and says wearily, “Naruto, this is the third time this has happened this week.”

“I know,” she gasps out, “and I finally know why.”
It's begun.

Isobu is gone.
AN: Go back and read the last chapter. No like seriously, go back and read it. This chapter is nonlinear like the last. And quite ambiguous at times, I take a lot of liberties, if that's an issue stop reading this fic. (This fic was written before the clusterfuck of Kaguya, this fic ignores that.) If you are confused it will be clarified next chapter.

Er.. sorry about the repost, I could have sworn I uploaded the edited version.

A blood curdling scream resonates.

Dissolving into terrified shrieks, incoherent gurgles and then silence.

But below these cries are the sounds of snapping jaws.

He feels bile rise up in his throat, and his heart thunder as he urges his body to move, to get away.

What was supposed to be a reconnaissance mission has turned into the greatest game ever played. A four-man cell is being hunted down in a maze of a compound. Their mission parameters had not given them faulty information, but the targets of the investigation had been similarly hunted down, they just so happened to be the true prize.

The spirit of teamwork is what Konoha instills into their shinobi, but accomplishing the mission is the common goal that drives a team. In this instance, they dared to stick together and then separated and got similar results—gruesome deaths.

His teammates are dead, and he thinks he is the only one left alive. He has created a genjutsu to hide himself, suppressed his chakra as far as he is capable, he holds a kunai in one hand, and readies the other to unleash ninjutsu.

He closes his eyes. He is terrified, utterly terrified.

A being, likening to a plant appears before him, melding from the wall opposite of him. Smeared in blood, black and white in color, his voice echoes with two tones, "Hello."

He clenches his hands into fists.

"I am quite full," One voice says.

"But there's always room for more," the other says in avarice.

"But we will not eat you. Rather we are here for something more valuable."

"What the hell do you want?" He manages to gather some bravado.

"No need to be rude. We simply want your eyes."

And with that ominous statement the being launches itself into action.

Screams ensue not too long after.
In the ever changing landscape of Naruto's mind, scheming is afoot. Naruto creates what may be her greatest seal, utilizing the creativity that intimidated three ninja nations and gave the Uzumaki infamy. Kurama lends his knowledge, and ruminates on bemusing quandaries.

It is curious.

So very curious.

With every cycle, he has a purpose, a role to play and he is restricted within that role. He is an instrument of faith, but it appears that the tethers, those mighty strings that bind him as a puppet are being cut. Within the ninja cycle his role is as a chakra monster, a being with the potential for evoking peace or destruction. When he tapped into seldom used powers to gift Naruto with creation chakra, it was as if the ties that binded him in his role began to snap open and unwind.

He is changing, nay he is steadily gaining what he has lost as he has lived through the eons. He is gaining back the role he once held as an endless, an eternal being. And at the root of this change, this hope is Naruto.

Curiouser and curiouser; as he changes, it appears that his residual powers seek to spark a change in Naruto.

Perhaps it sees her as an extension of himself or sees his imprint of its essence on her and acts upon furthering the favor he has granted her. Maybe just maybe, it is acting upon her inherent potential as Asura's descendent and reincarnation, and proceeding to make her more than what she currently is... His powers have a will of its own, unless he consciously reigns it in. Kurama will allow it to mold her as it sees fit, but will not allow it to fundamentally change her.

She is the being that he will forever hold as humanity's zenith.

An even more curious thought occurs to him. As he evolves, slowly but surely becoming what he once was. He feels a connection that was thought lost, but surprisingly only dormant. He thinks, he hopes...

Perhaps the concept of returning home is not an impossible dream. Perhaps returning to that great plane of existence is now a possibility rooted in reality. And Naruto is the precursor.

"Kurama, hey Kurama! I know you can hear me!"

Annoyed crimson eyes open and look upon the idiot child in question. He inhales and heaves a great breath that sends her tumbling with a cry of indignation.

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

He can't tell if this is to further their studies, or a reward for gaining reputations as mercenaries.

Or simply a way to keep them out of trouble for a month, particularly after they took out an A-ranked
missing nin, two B-ranked and five low-level C ranked shinobi "protecting" a local conglomerate who was killed in the ensuing chaos.

His name was Gatou, and he and Naruto have made a couple of enemies after the shadier sides of Gatou’s business dealing were revealed. Considering the glee Naruto took in effectively summoning her man eating plants. And then petting the slobbering creatures when they finished ripping the man limb from limb. Well it goes without saying that she regrets nothing.

Whatever the reason, Itachi is never one to turn down new knowledge.

He bites his thumb and proceeds to write his name in elegant script. Naruto follows behind, name written in a messy scrawl that resembles chicken scratch. Over her shoulder Itachi studies the name of their predecessors on the massive scroll. He thinks he is the first Uchiha to sign the toad summoning scroll. He unrolls the scroll further… he squints his eyes… there! An Uchiha Biwako, and there further in nearly ineligible, brown and faded script is an Uchiha, though he can't quite make out the given name. It appears his ancestors must have likened to Obito or Shisui, he cannot imagine any sane—by Uchiha standards—Uchiha utilizing toads as partners in battle. And yet here he is… hm.

They've signed the summoning scroll to further their studies in senjutsu and gain entrance to Myoboku.

Naruto has proven to be a prodigy in the sage arts, while Itachi has taken their lessons and applied them to genjutsu, and gain a better understanding of iryo ninjutsu. The elder toads have offered to teach Naruto sage mode and it's taijutsu styte, and Itachi kenjutsu. They're scheduled for a month of training.

Naruto sidles up to Itachi, and queries, "You think we have enough supplies to last a month?"

Itachi takes a moment to answer thinks of impending growth spurts, and the bottomless pit that is Naruto's stomach. "In theory yes," Itachi responds, and then he remarks wryly, "If not we'll have to accept our host's hospitality."

At that Naruto shudders, recalling her time on Mt. Myoboku, training to fight the good fight against Pein. She always thought she had an iron stomach, she knew nothing until she had toad specialized cuisine.

They seldom idle.

Nor do see each other, except to say brief greeting on their way to their individual rooms to pass out for the night.

Training is grueling, training is exhilarating, training is very… unorthodox.

Upon entering Mt. Myoboku, Naruto and Itachi are assigned to their designated sensei and exposed to the culture that pervades the mountain civilization. Fukasaku-sama and Shima-sama hustle Naruto off, arguing over what they will have for dinner, Naruto waves sayonara as she follows them. Itachi is left standing in the dwarfing shadow of a toad carrying a giant sword.

This should be interesting to say in the least.

Itachi is taught kenjutsu—a way of the sword created by the toads of Mt Myoboku, that relies heavily on speed. His sensei is a teal colored toad named Gamahiro, a reputed legend amongst his kind. He is taught amongst a class of aspiring toads in the day. They go through drills, one on one
spars to learn from each other's mistakes. After this class, Itachi has private lessons with Gamahiro to expedite his learning progress. His fellow classmates will have years to refine their craft, Itachi only has a month to grasp the basics and succeed in winning a spar against his sensei.

True to his learning capacity, he thrives and exceeds and thus they spar:

What is a dwarf to a behemoth?

The larger they are, the harder they fall?

The common denominator is chakra.

Gamahiro is one of the largest toads on the mountain, but he manages to spar with a human barely a meter tall.

Air is cut as a giant chakra infused blade strikes down. The seals of the replacement jutsu are completed with one hand, and the stone statue of a failed sage appears and shatters upon impact of the sword. Itachi rises above, wakizashi drawn, it becomes immersed in blue chakra. He raising it above his head and the blade extends at high speed towards its target.

The wooden hilt of Gamahiro's sword swiftly blocks the blow, and Itachi's blade swiftly meets the steal of Gamahiro's.

"Come Itachi-kun, you can do better than this," Gamahiro goads. "Is that sword I've given you to be put to waste!?

Itachi smirks, and shoots to kill.

The battle has just begun.

**I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)**

"What do we do once the moment of reckoning is upon us?" Han queries. Rarely does he speak up, and when he does it's only to voice questions of significant importance. "So far we have only tread cautiously, what contingencies do we have to remain alive against Madara's cohorts."

Naruto sighs deeply, and looks at each of her fellow jinchuriki. "As you all know, if you engage one of them in battle, you will be captured. They will work in teams to subdue you, and once captured, you will die while the biju is extracted."

At that the younger jinchuriki becomes pale—Gaara whimpers and hides his face in Shukaku's massive bulk, Fu looks down solemnly, and Utakata grips her hand tightly. All the Biju growl, quite used to being ill-used by upstarts.

Naruto continues, "The Biju are a necessary part of his plans to fuel his genjutsu and declare war on the elemental nations. Jinchuriki are part of the backbone of a ninja village, we are weapons, and once we are lost, we make our villages vulnerable. We have the choice to fight, and try to protect our precious people and end up losing, effectively putting those we love in danger. Or we can retreat."

That causes a bone of contention, particularly for Son Goku, who bellows, "I will not hide. I am no coward! The mere suggestion brings me shame!"

"Then you are an even greater fool than I believed," Chomie remarks scathingly, "There's is no shame in retreating."
" Eh!" Shukaku snickers, "Says the insect!"

"You have the audacity to mock our sister's incarnation, while you have taken on the form of a raccoon," Kurama mockingly chimes in.

"HEY!" Shukaku yells, "No one asked you asshole."

Kurama tails rise in agitation as he hisses out, "You will lower your voice and speak to your elder sibling with the respect I deserve."

Gyuki lets out a frustrated noise, "You are all idiots."

From there the biju descend into bickering.

Matabi who has remained silent, looks at the amused/helpless/resigned expressions of their humans and decides it's best they get back on topic. "Quiet!" And silence reigns as the seldom raised voice of Matabi slices through the noise.

"Now is not the time for petty quarreling, I quite value my autonomy and it appears Naruto has the means of allowing me to keep that loose sense of freedom. We should here Naruto out, she has yet to stir us wrong." Here her siblings have the good grace to look shame faced. "Why she has brought us together for the sole reason of keeping us all alive and sentient. Now," Matabi announces, "Tell us what machinations you have in store."

Naruto wears her determined face, woe to her foes. "So," she begins, "Where we are now is called a pocket dimension. It's a solace for the biju, but it's not full proof. Madara can control the minds of the biju, so there is the possibility he can gain access to this place. Then I got to thinking what if I created a pocket dimension within this pocket dimension, and then made another plane of existence surrounded by barriers of protection that only we would have access to!"

Oh the woes of fuinjutsu, Naruto has lost a few members of her audience, but they watch captivated as she pulls out a scroll and proceeds to show them a feat of genius.

The boundaries of Mizu no Kuni are ambiguous. The country is made up of a series of islands that are settled between the Aoi sea and the oceans deep. Bordering the eddies that once led to Uzi no Kuni. More island nations are pledging their loyalty to Mizu's daimyo and other's hold a tenuous alliance with the country.

A part of Mizu's shield of protection comes in the form of its autonomous shinobi village, a place that has spent much of its history in constant upheaval, conflicts spilling over to the many island nations.

Secreted away, shrouded in thick plumes of mist lies Kirigakure. Legends surround this place, fueled by the superstitious tales of ignorant outlanders. Some say that the mist cloaking the village are colored puce…. The Bloody Mist. Given the reputation of the shinobi village has gained in causing the civil wars (inspiring the pages of history to drip in blood from the aftermath of the blood-line limit genocide, wiping out entire clans, and helping to destroy an entire ninja village), these superstitions have some merit.

However, to Utakada this place of carnage, ghosts, and blood is simply home.

Mizu is an unforgiving land, Kirigakure is a village that thrives on survival of the fittest. Utakada has been trained through grit, blood, sweat and tears to survive.

His existence and survival is a boon to Kiri.
(He is made a jinchuriki by experiment. Where grown men and women failed, children were next in line as cannon fodder. Ages range widely for their experimental guinea pigs, and a dogged determination drove them to harness the power of a biju. The village had lost the three tails when the last jinchuriki died, they would not lose the sixth.

Utakada is a no name orphan who had lost his parents to the raging wars that plagued Mizu. He is but three when the six tales accepts him as a container. And the experimenters are much obliged when the six tales deigns to stop imploding the potential candidates with acidic bubbles. Recruiting (kidnapping) from local orphanages had become tiresome.

Utakada is a weapon, he learns this young. His sensei is a task master, and one of the legendary swordsmen that managed to remain loyal to Mist. Under his tutelage the training is brutal and fierce, but he survives and eventually thrives.

At the age of eight he meets his fellow jinchuriki, and comes to know comradery. He is not alone in the world, and is very much a part of a unique cohort. Amongst them he finds friends, particularly Fu, the container of Chomie, and Isobu, who's child-like personality suits him well.

When he is able to escape from his training, or not away on missions, he takes to the bubbles Saiken emits and camouflages himself amongst the mists. Not far from Mizu, due southwest, the three tails resides amongst the deep ocean depths. The timid Isobu beckons forth to visit with a friend and sibling.)

This day is no different from any day he has come to visit, though he has not seen Isobu in nearly four weeks. Utakada moves quickly to make up for lost time.

He does not expect to be struck by a sudden sense of emptiness, as if the ties that bind him to his fellow jinchuriki has snapped, and the tethers are now broken wisps. Nor does he expect the sudden urgent yell from the gentle voiced Saiken.

'Take cover child, down!'

Nor does he expect the sudden burst of heat that explodes before him. A chakra enforced bubble is erected, barely saving him from the brunt of the force of the bomb. His face is blistered, his skin burned, and hysterically he thinks of how his sensei would mutilate him if he saw how wet behind ears he appears, to not sense impending danger.

He feels the burns to sluggishly begin to heal, and though dazed, he erects another shield for the dispelled bubbles that have fallen to the explosion.

Another explosion rockets forth, and he braces himself. Somehow beyond the ringing in his ears he is able to discern a shrill laugh. Utakada's senses have gone haywire, multiple explosions go off at once and he struggles to protect himself from the onslaught. From the clouds of smoke, glowing eyes appear, announcing the approach of the unseen adversary.

"What's this Kisame-san!? It appears we've gotten lucky; another piggy has come for the slaughter!? A three tails and now a six tails, whoooooooo!"

"Aren't you a little too excited?"

Shrill laughter comes again.

Utakada stiffens in shock, but Saiken's voice stirs him before it sets in.

'Utakada, child, we must leave,' The biju implores, 'call forth the seal Naruto gave you and I will
"Un." Utakada moves into action with jerky movements, idly he noticing his hands are shaking. Kisame, he knows that name, he knows that voice.

The seal appears, and a brilliant light accompanies it. Another explosion come forth, but Utakada disappears without nary a word.

He is encompassed in warmth and light as he is transported, but Utakada feels nothing but a numbing coldness.

When he lands, his legs give out and he falls upon his hands and knees. His vision is blurred, face wet with tears. Above him Saiken calls out to him, and he hears the sudden raised voices of the others, but he ignores them.

Isobu is gone, his friend is gone.

And… and Kisame-sensei is responsible for it.

He has been betrayed.

Present:

It takes nearly an hour to persuade Itachi that she is fine, and capable of doing her shift of the night's watch. She gives him an ambiguous reason behind her night terrors, mentioning the Kyuubi, and how the fox is a vindictive bastard. Itachi continues to stare at her dubiously, his penetrative gaze always peices through her. Nonetheless when he finally takes his leave, Naruto unleashes a few shadow clones to stand vigil and falls into an uneasy trance.

When she stumbles into the impromptu biju powwow, Utakada is in a tizzy, Fu has him in a protective embrace, Gaara offers him his teddy bear. Killer Bee and Yugito have placed their hands his back, murmuring words of encouragement, while Han and Roshi stand as sentries, grim expressions mirrored by the biju.

At her appearance, Han looks up, taking in her wide eyed and shocked continence at the scene before her. Without preamble he says, "So the reckoning has begun."

Naruto takes a deep breath, and succinctly says, "It has."

She approaches the clustered jinchuriki, gently maneuvering her way to Utakada. She crouches before him and places her hands on his shoulders. He looks at her, and in a small voice, tone bewildered, he says, "Isobu is gone."

"Unfortunately he is, but I swear we'll get him back, believe it!" Naruto states in assurance.

Her resolve falls on deaf ears. Utakada shakes his head briskly.
"Isobu is gone… and Kisame-sensei is responsible for it."

Naruto lets out a sharp breath. In her past lifetime she knew nothing of Utakada's origins, in this lifetime it is much the same. While the lot of them bonded, they still kept much of their cards close to their chest. Which is expected, after all they are jinchuriki—not of the trusting variety—and ninja, a profession that thrives off of secrets. Hoshigaki Kisame is Utakada's sensei… the fucking irony.

Naruto gives a feral grin, "All the more reason to kick ass and get Isobu back."

Utakada gives a tremulous smile back in return.

She stands up and looks up at every one of her comrades, "You all know what must be done, the choice is in your hands. I swear to you all I will get Isobu back."

"We," Kurama corrects with a blood thirsty grin, "will get back Isobu. If there is be a reckoning, it will be by our hands."

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hands)

Uzumaki Nagato is the consummate host. Manners he obviously learned from his parents. The Uzumaki were feared by their enemies, but great friends to their allies. A welcoming people, something that is reflected in Nagato, even though the man in question is somber. These environs remind him very much of Kushina and her family.

However, now is not the time to reflect on such things, the mood is anything but festive.

Curious events are afoot.

"Our mutual friend visited me yesterday."

Ah, the perpetrator behind the slaughter Uchiha Fugaku and his group of travelers. And perhaps the reason for a group of missing nin banding together to form a mercenary group, amongst their number is one Orochimaru of the sannin. A person whose head Minato wants mounted on a spear for acts of treason: grave robbery, mutilation and experimentation and the murder of Konoha citizens.

This person or messenger of a mysterious figure head has led to this secret alliance between the Hokage and Kokuuage. They have a common goal of unraveling who has the audacity to stir up chaos by killing off the head of a major clan, attempting to recruit the leader of a ninja village, and if they blowing wind is correct, has larger ambitions that lie on the horizon in the form of chakra monsters.

This information comes from Jiraiya's vast spy network… they have yet to stir him wrong, and Minato believes there is truth in these speculations.

Even stranger are the recent targeting or rather hunting of Uchiha. The death of a cell of ninja happens, but when a second incident happens, and then a third. There is a problem, that must be prevented before there are more casualties. On all of these teams where Uchiha, and one of these cells consisted of an ANBU team containing two Uchiha. Every member of the teams was gutted, their bodies left in bloody remnants. The only members left relatively unscathed were the Uchiha, left with empty eye sockets.

(Which is one of the reasons he is currently here.)

How curious, Minato thinks. He does not believe in coincidence, which is why he is pulling all Uchiha shinobi from the active duty roster.
He'll be damned if he looses the already scarce few left.

Anyhow:

Nagato continues, "I have been an ultimatum of sorts. I am to comply with the alliance presented to me or else Kouu no Kuni will descend into war."

Jiraiya raises both of his brows, "So will you acquiesce?"

Nagato leans forward, red hair curtaining his concentric purple eyes, the rinnegan—the sight of the legendary doujutsu still fascinates Minato. He takes a moment to respond, "I've weighed the pros and cons of each decision. The Akatsuki and I have worked hard to bring Rain Country into a state of equilibrium, I do not wish to be a puppet for another's whims… who is to say Rain will not become cannon fodder regardless of my compliance? I will not allow Rain to fall into another period of oppression, I will fight for what is important to me."

The silent sentry, seated beside Nagato takes his hand hers, a sign of unwavering support and says resolutely, "We both will. Peace is our dream."

Konan and Nagato both carry on Yahiko's dream.

Their discussion continues onward for some time. Then a shinobi clad in a cloak of red clouds appears next to Nagato. He listens intently and then dismisses the ninja. He turns to his guests, a small smile curling his mouth, "It appears Jiraiya-sensei's new apprentices are here, shall we go welcome them?"

Minato opens his arms in welcome. Naruto runs forward and embraces him tightly, and she buries her face in his flak jacket, inhaling deeply. "Naruto-chan, is everything all right?" Minato asks, concern colpring his voice.

She seems to meditate on her answer, and then says wearily, "I'm fine, just really tired."

Itachi approaches at a more sedate pace, greeting his sensei and the leaders present with the formality that is their due. Minato ruffles his head in greeting, and then gathers him into a group hug with Naruto.

"Have you been well, Itachi-kun?"

Itachi slowly relaxes into the unexpected embrace, "Un, Minato-sama." He pulls away and queries, "If I may ask how are my mother and brother?"

"Ah, you'll be able to see for yourself very soon."

At that statement Naruto and Itachi look at him in askance.

Minato states, "I'm recalling you both back to Konoha."

I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)

Interlude:

The Dew Breaker

A dream deferred.
He once dreamt of a place where ninja could gather, allied to one another without the strife of potential betrayal. A place where shinobi could live in peace and prosperity, here they would no longer face petty skirmishes, loose their children to warring factions, nor inflict fear to gain fealty from civilian farmers for resources. Instead they would offer protection to merchants, farmers and people of trade alike, and they too would exist in harmony with shinobi.

Instead this dream is just that… a dream.

In the guise of peace, ninja villages become a mecca, where strong shinobi pledged their allegiance to become a part of a super power. These great ninja villages wage war and topple over supposed powers and assert their dominance.

Nothing has changed.

This era resembles the warring clans era.

(Hence forth, he must make the change.)

He was once the precursor for the creation of a ninja villages, now he will be the end.

Long has he maneuvered from the shadows, manipulating the pieces of this great shogi board. He has lingered on this plane, through sheer will and grit, his efforts will bear fruit.

The stratagem he has put into play for years is finally reaching its zenith.

His greatest creation Zetsu carries out his will.

He has made promises of power, and delivered in spades. Thus the sheep have flock, avarice in their motives for more power. Amongst his flock are missing shonobi, village leaders, government officials, et cetera. With him they court chaos, in a mutual give and take relationship.

For instance, they do his bidding in the form of a mercenary group, a gathering of elite missing nin, beginning the greatest hunt, their quarry are the bijuu—instruments of destructions.

Each key component begins to fall into place, and if they do not… every rational being has something they desire, he has the means of securing that desire. If they do not take the bribe, then they must die. He will not tolerate belligerence, from those who think to oppose his will.

They will die, they are replaceable.

Uchiha Madara will create utopia.

(He looks upon his withered arms; this husk of a body is deteriorating. Soon though he will be renewed, Orochmaru's brilliance in perfecting the Edo Tensai, shall work to his advantage. Two vessels are at his disposal. And soon he will step forth from out the shadows.)

**I've got a plan (I've got an atlas in my hand)**

Two months later...

It is fascinating to watch idolatry at work.

He making his yearly pilgrimage to the city states of Kouu no Kuni. He's reinforcing alliances, showing that though he has powers they would liken to a god, but he is still one of their own, and wants only to see Kou no Kuni prosper and remain at peace.
He is retiring for the night, Akatsuki and ANBU stand guard over his appointed quarters. Such a guard detail seems like overkill considering the defensive power he has at his grasp, but Konan would not hear otherwise. Speaking of Konan, she too is handling diplomatic matters. She's supposed to join him on the morrow, and from here they will return to Ame.

Something sinister this way comes. Nagato senses it, for it's presence is familiar and unique. For it has no chakra presence, unless it makes itself known to the unsuspecting.

"Time is up," the dual tone voice announces.

Nagato immediately goes on the defensive.

"No need to be so uptight, Nagato-kun. We are simply here to hear your decision."

"You know where I stand," Nagato states calmly. His people, his village, his county are more important than a fool with delusions of grandeur. Nagato may play the role of god, but he is mortal as any man.

From behind the venus flytrap being steps forth a child, nay a soldier, eyes spining red. He remarks, "If that is the case, then you must return what is ours, we're going to need your eyes back Nagato."

The boy gives the signal.

Zetsu strikes.

Next chapter: A brief history of seven killings

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