To make a tragedy, you break something beautiful and frame the pieces. To make a victory, you break something mighty and rebuild it piece by piece. To make a life, you glue the pieces together and hope for the best. Kurama's still getting the hang of this 'human' thing, but given that he’s 30 years back in time with catastrophes to prevent and a blond brat to save, he’ll have to figure things out on the fly. Luckily, living with Naruto's been good for his ability to improvise, if nothing else.
As with most questionable things I do, this was inspired by my brother, who wanted to know how *backslide* would have gone if the time-traveling Kurama was actually Kurama. Absolutely no one will be surprised to hear that it promptly exploded.

That said, this is not a simple rewrite of *backslide* with the names switched up (I'm not SMeyer, thanks). Since I now have at least a vague grasp of how to plan, it has *actual plot*, unlike the previous fic, and will hopefully be more action and slightly less pure fluff.

Weekly updates will be on Wednesdays. Brace yourselves, lovelies. This’ll likely be a long one.
Fire and ash and screaming, a wave of malevolent chakra grasping and tearing and—

Naruto surges forward, Kurama rising to the surface, and black-twisted violet explodes before them, shattering the ground and tearing a vast crater in front of the approaching army.

“Go!” Naruto shouts, halfway distorted with Kurama's own growl, and they’ve been working in harmony for so long that Kurama can't tell whether it’s truly both of them acting with one mind or they’re just familiar enough with each other that it doesn’t matter.

Behind them, an earthen wall sinks back down, and Kurama can hear Sakura shouting orders to retreat and regroup. He doesn’t spare a glance around to see how many shinobi in the scouting party survived the first attack, though; all of his attention is on the twisted forms staggering upright around the edges of the bijūdama's devastation.

*Got enough chakra for another one of those?* Naruto asks, dropping into a ready crouch. Clones shimmer into existence around him, a mere handful—even Naruto’s energy reserves aren’t boundless, and they’ve pushed the limits far too many times in the past five years.

Kurama scoffs, half in wounded pride and half in answering challenge. *Hell yeah. Let’s fry these bastards. They interrupted my nap.*

Naruto laughs at him, wild and reckless, and channels his chakra. Kurama feels the blond’s inner world bleed and shift, and opens his eyes in the bloody twilight of the physical world, earth firm beneath his paws.

“Come on then, old man,” Naruto mocks lightly. “You need all the beauty rest you can get.”

Kurama huffs, offended. “‘Least I can't hide a baby in the bags under my eyes, unlike *some* people,” he retorts, but crouches down, calling up his own power and exhaling it in a twister of fire. In the tornado’s wake he lunges, not giving the enemy any time to recover, and Naruto charges with him, Sage chakra flaring like a loosed tempest. A breath, a blaze of power bright enough to blind, and their mingled attack detonates like a sun exploding, sweeping out across the mountaintop and leaving nothing but ashes behind.

The shaky edge of inexorable fatigue isn’t something Kurama was ever familiar with before a few years ago, but by now he knows it well. It sinks its claws into him, pulls him down and makes him stagger as he comes to a halt. Beside him, Naruto is a little better—they’ve learned not to leave the others without at least one defender strong enough to halt Kaguya—but he still reaches up to lean against Kurama's leg, chest heaving as he pants for breath.

“Thanks, Kurama,” he manages, patting orange fur lightly. “Go back to your nap. I’ll wake you up if anything happens.”

There’s no arguing with the brat, especially when Kurama feels like he’s very close to falling right over. He doesn’t, because then Naruto would just laugh himself sick, and as much as everyone needs
a laugh or two at times like these, Kurama's not going to let it be at his expense. He grumbles, pretty much just for show, but lets his physical form fade away.

When he opens his eyes again, he’s in a darkened clearing, a campfire flickering in the center, and even though there's no wise Sage, no familiar bijuu gathered around him, it feels enough like home that Kurama can close his eyes again without worry, curling up against the trunk of a vast oak and settling himself comfortably. A slow breath, easing down from the tension of battle, and then there’s a touch to his side, a gentle murmur that’s less words than it is safety, contentment, trust.

_I'm here, don’t worry_, Naruto's chakra-sense whispers around him, and Kurama breathes out and lets himself slide into darkness.

---

A creeping sense of change brings with it the first stirrings of awareness. Slowly, Kurama rises from the depths of an exhausted sleep, reluctantly opening his eyes and shifting his tails away from where they cover his face. He expects the strange double vision that is his overlapping sense of Naruto's world outside and his own surroundings of forest and firelight.

What he gets instead is darkness.

There is no noise. There is no light. There's not even the faintest hint of anything around him, and for the first time in a very long while Kurama feels a trickle of apprehension worm up his spine. He rises to his feet, but doesn’t quite dare a step into the nothingness surrounding him.

“Naruto?” he tries instead. “Naruto, what the hell?”

No answer. Somehow Kurama can’t bring himself to feel surprised.

He calls for his chakra and crimson cuts through the darkness, sweeping around him and then rising in a tightening spiral as he reaches for the outside world. There’s no sense of hatred near them, no malice, nothing but the deep undercurrent of grief that he’s grown accustomed to over the last year. He stretches, reaches, chakra rising like a cloak, and—

A feeling very much like having a door slammed right in his face.

Kurama recoils with a yelp, somewhere between alarmed and affronted. The little brat just _blocked_ him, shut him out completely, the way he hasn’t in a good twenty years. Knowing Naruto, that either means the brat is dying or nothing’s wrong and he’s just being stupid and secretive.

Honestly, Kurama isn’t sure which he’d rather it was.

Because he’s nothing if not stubborn, Kurama braces himself, digs his claws into the ground, and tries again. This time the lash of power is closer to a windstorm than a testing gust, and he can feel _something_ shake in the distance, as though it’s about to give.

Instead of a closing door, this time he gets a swat with a newspaper.

“Stop it, Kurama!” Naruto snaps, shimmering into existence between his front feet. “I'm trying to concentrate!”

“That’s why it’s called _concentration_, brat; stop _letting_ yourself get distracted,” he retorts automatically, before his eyes narrow sharply. Something’s different with the man; something’s
changed, even though it can’t have been more than a few hours since Kurama saw him last.

If he didn’t know better, Kurama might even call the look hiding behind Naruto's normal enthusiasm…well. Desolation is just about the only word that comes to mind.

“Wait a minute,” he growls. “Just what is it you’re trying to do? Did Kaguya—?”

Naruto dismisses that with a wave of one hand. “Everything’s fine, so stop worrying. It'll just be another minute or two. But keep your chakra to yourself, got it?”

Without so much as another word, he vanishes again, and Kurama snarls impotently, glaring at the spot where he’d been standing. “Little brat,” he huffs, but does as asked, pulling his chakra back in around him. His surroundings are a bit lighter, if still featureless—a frightening thought, if Naruto can’t even spare the trickle of chakra to make his headspace look the way it normally does—but beyond it, Kurama can sense the very faintest touch of other.

Sakura, he decides after a moment of carefully study. That’s her, but amplified to the brilliance of a star gone nova, which can only mean she’s using her Strength of a Hundred Seal. The power is calm, though, so it’s clearly not a fight, and there’d be no reason to make Kurama sit out if it was. But still—Sakura has been saving that power for years, hoarding it for some desperate situation they won’t escape any other way. People have died so that the survivors can maintain this last, desperate ace.

Between that and Naruto’s sudden, complete lack of extra power right now, it’s more than just suspicious.

Still, Kurama trusts Naruto more than he ever has another soul. He’d even doubt the Sage of Six Paths before he would Naruto. If Naruto says to wait, he’ll wait, even if it makes him twitchy with nervous tension. Only an idiot wouldn’t be nervous, with Sakura and Naruto so clearly working on something together.

Just one missing now, Kurama thinks a little grimly, sinking down on his haunches and wrapping his tails around himself. Just one, but he’s not coming back any time soon. Kurama has no fondness for any Uchiha, but even he can mourn what Sasuke's loss means for Naruto personally. Even he can feel the sheer depth of pain that Naruto hides behind a smile. It is, he thinks, probably very similar to what drove Obito mad the first time, though Naruto doesn’t have a Sharingan to push him further down the road to insanity.

Sasuke isn’t the only loss, of course, isn’t the only death to push Naruto closer and closer to the edge of despair, even if he’ll never allow himself to go over. Too many, these last five years, all of them Naruto's precious people, all of them lost as Kaguya stretches her malevolent influence across the Elemental Countries. Like a tide she’s swept away all before her, and now only a scattered handful of shinobi are left, trying to halt the flood.

Kurama is stubborn to the point of being pigheaded, but even he sometimes can't understand just why they all keep fighting.

Except…it’s Naruto. It’s Naruto rallying them, pushing them on, keeping their spirits up and their thoughts on victory. And in the face of that, who would ever be able to give up halfway through?

The tight tension-sharp ache of nervousness drives him back to his feet, sends him pacing ten long strides forward, then back again, senses trained on the outside world. He can't quite make anything out, can’t see or feel the way he normally would, but there’s enough chakra building that even shut away and more than half blinded he can't miss it. Naruto and Sakura are doing something, and that
alone would be enough to make him twitchy. Between Sakura’s seal invoked and all of Naruto’s power—

Kurama wonders a little viciously if this is it, if this is the blow that will end the war. It would be just Naruto’s style, coming with no warning and entirely out of left field, overwhelming even Kaguya in her insanity and leaving everyone gaping at their sudden victory.

But—

Why leave Kurama out of it, if that’s the case? Naruto isn’t so much as touching the bijuu’s chakra right now, even though they’ve long since combined their reserves. In fact, the extent to which he’s not touching Kurama’s chakra means that Sakura, with her more comprehensive grasp of chakra control, likely has some hand in helping him separate the two.

Even now, with the world crumbling away beneath their feet, Kurama is still one of the most powerful forces in existence. The other bijuu are gone, recaptured and eaten alive to satisfy Kaguya’s madness, and Kurama is the last one left. Both his Yin and Yang halves have been reunited, and he’s proven time and again that he’s more than able to withstand the goddess long enough to let their companions get to safety. There’s absolutely no reason, if this is a victory blow, to leave him out of things. In fact, doing so reaches a level of stupidity he’d thought Naruto had left behind with his twelve-year-old self.

If it’s not a final shot at destroying Kaguya, though, what could it possibly—

The world blurs.

Kurama yelps without meaning to, claws scrambling madly for purchase as everything around twists, shifts, and contorts, as if he’s caught in some sort of darkened kaleidoscope. There’s a gut-wrenching pull, like a vacuum opening up right in front of him and dragging him in, and for the life of him Kurama can’t even begin to resist. Even as he goes sliding forward, the edges of his self blurring and shifting, he shapes his chakra into a vast lifeline and grabs desperately for his jinchuuriki.

This time there’s no door, no swat to the nose. Things shudder and shake as Naruto reaches back, catching the metaphorical hand in one of his own, but—

Something’s wrong.

Naruto burns like a volcano at the very worst of times, no matter what. He’s strong and vivid and so very much present that sometimes it’s hard for Kurama to see anything else at all. Right now, however, it’s…different. Horrifyingly, Kurama is reminded of Obito’s final death, a strong figure crumbling away to ash without so much as a glancing touch.

“Naruto,” he manages, and then again, sharper: “Naruto! What is this? Stop it!”

For one brief moment, all he can see is Naruto, standing in front of him—not tiny, the way Kurama usually sees him, but exactly eye-level. He’s smiling, but there’s heartbreak behind it as he stretches out a hand. Still smiling, always smiling, and the look in his eyes is love and apology and that impossible, boundless faith that first shocked Kurama out of his seething hatred and made him think.

“Sorry, Kurama,” he says, and his voice is warm. “But this was the only way, and you wouldn’t have agreed if you’d known.”

“Agreed to what?” Kurama cries, struggling against the pull still dragging him backwards. “Naruto, what did you do?”
“We’re going to fix things,” he says, blue eyes burning, and his fingers brush Kurama's cheek. There’s no sense of fur, no fox’s snout, and Kurama goes still, too shocked to fight. He slides back another foot before he can regain control of himself. Naruto takes a step to match him, and reaches out to grab Kurama by the shoulder. The drag of darkness eases, and on instinct Kurama reaches up, curling his fingers around Naruto's wrist in return.

A human hand, he notices with bewilderment. Long fingers with familiar scars, dark brown skin a sharp contrast to Naruto's deep tan. Claws, still, but far smaller, more like sharpened fingernails than his normal talons.

“What?” he whispers, dazed and panicky all at once. “Naruto—”

“Sorry,” Naruto repeats, and like everything he says, he truly means it. “Sorry, Kurama, but we couldn’t think of another way. Kaguya’s winning. We can’t let her.”

“We can beat her,” Kurama tries, because he’s heard Naruto say it enough times that it’s rote by now. “We can. She’s mad, and we’re protecting everyone, so there’s no way—”

Naruto's hand on his shoulder tightens, and for a moment grief bleeds into the blue of his eyes. “But we haven’t,” he says, and his voice doesn’t quite break, but somehow Kurama would feel better if it did. Never, ever has Naruto allowed himself to grieve, not for his personal loss. Kurama's never really had anyone to lose, beyond the Sage and this man in front of him, but he doubts that such a thing is healthy. “Kurama, there’s no one left to save.”

Kurama goes still the pieces falling together with a horrible shiver of foreboding. Oh. Oh. Naruto's expression earlier, the look in his eyes now, the way his smile is faltering around the edges and held by nothing but dogged will—

“The camp,” Kurama says, just above a whisper. “They're—?”

The last of the shinobi, the last few people left alive. The camp he and Naruto had left when they received Sakura's distress call, knowing that her small team of scouts wouldn’t be able to hold Kaguya’s forces back for more than a few minutes at best. They’d run to reach her in time, leaving the people they’d gathered hidden safely away in a deep cave with plenty of exits. Because Sakura's messenger had told them how many they had faced, on the mountaintop. Told them how many, and Kaguya only has so many twisted undead soldiers scavenged from the corpses of those dear. Only a few hundred, and with all of them accounted for—

“She must have made more,” Naruto says, and his smile fades away, replaced with exhausted resignation. “There weren’t—no one made it out. And three of Sakura's scouts died, so…”

He doesn’t finish, but he doesn’t need to. Nine shinobi remaining, plus Sakura and Naruto. Eleven left, out of the thousands that once populated the world.

It’s clear enough that with this final blow, Kaguya has won.

“And this?” Kurama asks. “What is this supposed to be, then?”

The devastations is wiped clean from Naruto's expression, replaced with the implacable determination Kurama is so familiar with. Blue eyes turn to steel, and his smile is the one that makes Kurama impossibly, unwaveringly certain that there's no way things could end without some sort of victory.

“This?” Naruto laughs, so very much the trickster that it makes Kurama smile too. “This is you saving the world, Kurama!”
A seal blooms beneath their feet, like a flower’s petals unfurling in the dawn. Lines both familiar and foreign, massive in their complexity, traced with power that makes the very air vibrate. Bits and pieces Kurama can recognize—the basis is the Hiraishin, he thinks, but it’s been expanded, amplified. The Hiraishin puts all of its emphasis on movement across space, even though there’s a component to deal with time, while this—

Space has been written out, and time is the only thing left.

“No,” he says, knee-jerk reaction to Naruto’s insanity. “Are you crazy? This won't work! No human could survive—”

Oh no.

Naruto just smiles at him, even as Kurama redoubles his struggles, unfamiliar human hand locking around Naruto's wrist as he tries to wrench himself forward. “Sorry,” he says again. “I'm sorry, Kurama.”

“You're going to be!” Kurama snarls, throwing himself forward with all the force he can muster. His free hand locks in Naruto's shirtfront, but the fabric tears, and he cries out in dismay. “No! Don’t do this, please. Naruto, we’ll find another way! The seal—with enough adjustments—”

Naruto shakes his head. “Sakura and I have been working on this for a long time,” he says. “We wanted to send all of the bijuu back, because there’s no way to survive the trip unless you’re a construct made completely of chakra. Human minds can't handle the strain. But now you're the only bijuu, and—and Sasuke's gone, so we don’t even have as much power as we were planning on.” Grief rises again, but Kurama can see him push it down and keep smiling. “You’re our last chance, Kurama—everyone’s last chance. So you’ll do it, right? You’ll go back and save all of us?”

It’s blackmail, pure and simple, playing on the emotions that Naruto gave Kurama to begin with. He pauses, staring into Naruto's eyes, and can't see anything except faith and conviction and a burning, searing hope the likes of which he hasn’t encountered in far too long.

“Naruto—” he says, and can’t manage another word.

“You can do it, Kurama,” Naruto tells him, stepping closer. He doesn’t hesitate, but throws his arms around Kurama and hugs him, impossibly tight. It feels different than the casual or fond hugs Naruto has given him before, more like he’s being fully wrapped in comfort and reassurance and love, and Kurama returns the gesture without thinking, burying his face in bright blond hair. Against his ear, he can hear Naruto whisper, “You’ve always been a hero, Kurama. Now everyone will be able to see it. I’ll miss you, but you need to do this.”

“Like you’re giving me a choice,” Kurama manages, and his voice breaks. He pulls back just enough to meet Naruto's eyes, and says, “You were my first friend, Naruto. I couldn’t give a damn about most of the world, but—for you. I'll save you. You have my word, you manipulative little brat.”

For a moment, Naruto looks about to argue. Then he huffs and reaches up, rapping his knuckles against the side of Kurama’s head. “You’re my precious people,” he reminds Kurama, “so you’d better save them too, bastard fox, got it?”

Kurama laughs before he can help it, and Naruto grins back, and they both pretend that their faces are dry instead of wet with tears. A pause, and then Naruto lunges forward again, wrapping Kurama up in another tight hug that steals the breath from his lungs and leaves his heart aching. Then he loosens his grip, steps back, and Kurama forces himself to untwist his claws from orange fabric and let him go.
“Bye, Kurama,” Naruto manages, raising one hand in a halfhearted wave. “Kick some ass for me, okay?” A hint of a smirk, and he adds, “And look in a mirror as soon as you can, got it?”

Kurama doesn’t even want to know. He just shakes his head, turning to stare at the twisting darkness behind him, and answers, careful not to let his voice shake, “See you soon, kid.”

He gets a laugh for that, warm and startled, and he’s smiling when he lets himself be dragged headfirst towards an impossibly long fall.

And then—

Behind him, there's a flicker of power, a vast surge of cruel chakra, and a scream. Kurama jerks around, lunges back before he can stop himself, and the world blurs into the sharpness of reality. He sees Kaguya, looming and deadly, Sakura collapsed and lifeless before her, Naruto pale and shaking but standing firm. He raises his hands, but all of his power is wrapped up with Kurama, being sucked away into the seal painted across his skin, and there's nothing left.

Black chakra rods stab through flesh, bright blood splattering across the grass, and Kurama screams, grief and fury and red-edged rage overwhelming him to block out the pain.

One last glimpse of a familiar body falling, empty-eyed, and then everything is lost to darkness.
II: Harbinger

Holy cheeseballs, people. That was quite the response to the first chapter. Y’all are fantastic. I'm updating a day early because I'm already double-booked for tomorrow and it’s better than a day late, right?

As a warning, this is going to be very, very angsty for the first half, and there's going to be a lot of bad decisions and not dealing or dealing poorly with feelings/grief/loss. Things will get better, though, promise.

He crashes to earth in a surge of dust and shattered stone, appearing out of the darkness with a thunder-crack of impact and a burst of chakra like a detonation. Half an instant of light is his only warning, and Kurama throws up his own chakra automatically, cushioning his fall as much as possible. It still burns, hurts like skin scraped raw as he hits the snowy ground hard enough to leave a crater behind.

For a long moment, the only sound is the gentle rain of stone clattering down around him, and the slow, groaning creak of a tree overbalancing and then falling with a crash. Kurama stays where he is for another moment, shocked by the sudden reassertion of reality, and then slowly pushes himself up.

He’s shaking, he realizes distantly. Trembling, puny human form shivering with what he distractedly thinks might be shock. He can't pay attention to that, though, because the only thing before his eyes is crimson spilling over green, a head of blond hair bouncing carelessly against the dirt as Kaguya just—dropped Naruto.

Dropped him like garbage. Like trash.

Maybe his shaking isn’t all shock, actually.

Kurama takes a breath and lets it out, and it gusts in a cloud of white around him. It’s only then that he recognizes the cold for what it is—sharp, far sharper than he’s ever felt before, especially against the wetness on his chest. He presses one hand over it and feels a twinge, but doesn’t look down, already knowing what he’ll see.

Blood. Blood on an orange shirt, a cluster of small holes stabbed through the fabric, because this is Naruto's body, Naruto's form, and—

*Human minds can't handle the strain,* Naruto had said. His skull had bounced off hard-packed earth with a sound like a ripe fruit carelessly dropped, bounced once before Kurama had lost his senses to the darkness, but he knows there wasn’t enough chakra left for Naruto to let him manifest. Not a scrap to spare, so Naruto had locked Kurama into his own body and used that as a vessel, propelling
them back in time even as he died.

If there was any chance of him surviving the wounds Kaguya inflected, he spent it all to send Kurama here.

Grief tears at Kurama's chest, aches like an open wound. He presses one clawed, earth-brown hand over it, rakes his nails over smooth skin instead of fur, and snarls. It sits wrong in his throat, not nearly deep enough, without the edge of power he should be able to give it. It’s a human sound, for all that he can still feel every inch of a bijuu’s chakra wrapped up inside of him.

“Damn you,” he whispers, tipping forward. His hands strike torn earth, and long nails dig furrows there as he tries to wrestle himself back under control. Another flash of that smile, that last laugh ringing in his ears and he screams again, anguished and furious. His breath clouds white, like smoke, like ash—like the ash that will be all that’s left when Kurama finishes grinding Kaguya into nothingness for what she did.

He bows his head, hair falling around his face—red, as red as blood, instead of the blond he hoped to see. Not even that much of Naruto left to him, and he snarls again, slamming a fist into the ground because he can’t drive it into Naruto's damned self-sacrificing face. “Damn you!” he shouts, and it echoes eerily over the snow-covered mountaintop, ringing with grief. “Damn you! Not like this!”

Any way but this: Kurama alone, lost, decades out of time without anyone to rely on, trapped in the body of the human he loved above all others, with a promise to save everyone on his shoulders and a goddess stretching out her mad, grasping hands, ready to devour the world. Kurama is the most powerful of the bijuu, ancient and aged and impossibly strong, but he can’t be any more than that. He’s never been a hero, no matter what Naruto might have wanted to think. Never a hero, never good without Naruto to push him forward, urge him on. And he’s fought for years at Naruto's side, helped him and saved lives and protected as many as he possibly could, but it was because of Naruto.

A sudden though, and it sends threads of horror twisting down Kurama's spine: what if Naruto isn’t even alive yet? What if he’s so far back that Naruto hasn’t been born, and he’ll have to spend years, maybe even decades waiting for that spark of light to come into being, waiting for his first friend to be anything close to what he once was?

What if Naruto is never what he once was?

What if changing Naruto so completely is the only way to save him?

Kurama isn’t a fool; people are shaped by their experiences, by every little thing in their pasts. The Naruto who grew up with parents and friends, the son of the Yondaime Hokage, would be nothing like the Naruto Kurama knew. Change one event, and that Naruto ceases to exist.

It’s entirely selfish, but Kurama doesn’t want that to happen. He wants his Naruto, the boy with the bright blue eyes who laughs in the face of death, who never gives up and never gives in and will do anything, anything for those he loves. Any other version of Naruto will be different, wrong, and Kurama thinks that he’ll hate that person, that pretender, because his version was the greatest possible, and there’s no other that can match him.

The anger is a simmer now, locked away and buried. He breathes out, long and slow, and then gets his feet under himself and rises carefully. Being bipedal is something familiar, but the balance is different now, off. He has to stand upright instead of bent forward, and his range of sight is strange, narrowed. The cold wind raises goosebumps on his skin and prickles over his cheeks, making him uncomfortable when before he wouldn’t even have noticed, and he wraps his arms around himself
for the bare bit of warmth it provides.

The bloodstains on his shirt—on *Naruto*’s shirt—are already freezing, but he tries not to think about it.

Physically, he thinks he hasn’t moved far from where he was in the future. This is still Earth Country, in the mountains near the border. At the edge of his range of vision, if he squints through the snow that’s starting to fall, he can make out the looming shape of the peak where Sakura was attacked. But that was the height of summer, with all the snow melted, and this feels like true winter, fierce and biting.

There’s no use calling out, because no one will answer; they chose this place to hide because it was always empty. Not even the Iwa nin like to come here, if Kurama really has traveled far enough back that Iwagakure exists once more. Instead, he scales the edge of the crater, pauses to get his bearings, and then heads southeast.

Three steps in and a flare of familiar chakra halts him in his tracks.

Kurama whips around towards the west, eyes scanning the sheer drop-off a few yards ahead of him and then dropping to study the forest of rocky outcroppings below. A moment, and then it comes again, superheated chakra melting the surrounding snow in a surge of vapor before the steam is whirled away by the wind.

The flood of renewed rage takes Kurama by surprise.

Corrosive red chakra flares. He’s moving before the decision is even consciously reached, clawed feet digging into snow as he leaps forward in five long bounds, launching himself off the edge of the mountain and skidding down the side. The cold burns his bare skin, but Kurama’s thoughts are filled with bloody red fury, and he dodges stands of snowy pines without pause, heading for where terror and power are mingling. The air is already getting warmer, and under his feet the snow shifts to slush, then bare earth.

One final leap and Kurama alights on an outcropping of boulders, as warm as if they’ve been baking in the sun, and looks down.

Between the close-set arms of the mountain, a man in red and black armor is facing down a man in a familiar black cloak decorated with clouds. Kokuō’s chakra is roiling, angry and frightened even as his jinchuuriki channels it into creating more steam, but Kurama barely pauses to notice his fellow bijuu. Lips pulling back from blunted human teeth, he snarls fiercely and leaps from his perch, landing squarely between the Akatsuki member and the Iwa shinobi.

One glance and he remembers the man, remembers that he nearly killed Naruto once before, and Kurama growls, “Kakuzu.”

Pupilless green eyes flicker over him, then away, dismissive and bored. “I don’t know you, so you’ve got no bounty,” the man says indifferently. “Get lost. I’m busy.”

Kurama laughs, rough enough that it tears at his throat, *hurts*, but he ignores the stinging ache. “Where’s your partner?” he jeers, and sees Kokuō’s jinchuuriki twitch nervously. “Hiding in the bushes? You Akatsuki dogs wouldn’t know how to fight honorably if your lives depended on it, would you?”

That gets him another glance, sharper this time, and Kakuzu shifts his attention fully to Kurama. His eyes narrow warily, and he demands, “How do you know that name?”
Giving the man a smirk that’s more malice than anything, Kurama takes a step closer, then starts circling, and is vindictively satisfied when Kakuzu turns to follow him, ignoring Kokuō. “What, Akatsuki? How about Pein, or Nagato? Maybe you’d be interested in how I know it’s Uchiha Madara pulling your strings. Hmm, bet you didn’t know that.”

Judging by the faint widening of those wary eyes, Kakuzu didn’t. Well, Kurama hardly plans to let him escape and make use of that knowledge. His heart is thudding in his ears, making it hard to think beyond getting his claws into Kakuzu and just tearing, but it’s enough to know that no matter how “immortal” Akatsuki’s treasurer is, he won’t be leaving this place alive.

Kakuzu might be good at planning, good at tricking his opponents, might use his age to his advantage, but Kurama is older still, and angry.

One of Kaguya’s puppets is standing in front of him, and if he can't take his revenge on the goddess right now, her pawn will at least make for a convenient distraction.

“Where’s your partner?” he asks again. “I might as well leave my little brother to deal with him while I put you down like the mad dog you are.”

Kakuzu shifts, settling into a stance Kurama saw through Naruto’s eyes a long time ago. “Dead,” he says carelessly. “The fool gambled away three of my bounties, so I killed him.”

Not Hidan, then. That’s a decent mark for judging how far in the past he is, and Kurama lets his smirk deepen a little. “Well then, I guess there’s no helping it. Kokuō will just have to sit this one out.”

Two confused looks, for that, but the chakra around the jinchuuriki flickers, and Kurama lets his unfurl in answer, rising like a tide around him. It burns in the grey darkness like a shroud of red, and Kurama laughs cruelly when Kakuzu takes a quick step back.

“I could,” he says lazily, circling Kakuzu like the bounty hunter is prey, “just kill you once, really thoroughly, and be done with it. But I think that sounds boring, don’t you?”

He shouldn’t play with his food. Naruto’s chided him more than once for talking too much when he gets his enemy’s attention on him—and, ha, pots and kettles there—but Kurama doesn’t care. He’s a fox, first and foremost—if he wants to toy with an opponent before he kills them, he’s catlike enough to justify it. Foxes are closer to feline than canine, after all, even if they’re far superior to both.

Still, it seems Kakuzu’s patience, at least, is at its end. He twists his fingers into the snake seal, making his skin darken and harden, and then moves forward in a fast lunge. Kurama digs his toes into the bare earth and dodges, sliding under the first strike and coming up with a hard kick. Usually he’d use a tail, slam the bounty hunter into the side of the mountain and then roast him, but this form is weaker. His claws scrape but don’t penetrate, and his kick barely slows Kakuzu down. With a curse, Kurama leaps back, then up, flipping over in midair and coming down on Kakuzu’s back. He rakes his fingers across the man’s cloak, tearing the fabric, and grabs for a mask only to have Kakuzu hurl him off with a furious cry.

Kurama’s laughing again when he disentangles himself from the cedar he landed in and drops to the ground. “Touchy, touchy,” he mocks, and the rage is a bright-edged, knife-sharp bubble in his gut. “What, I’m not allowed to play with those?”

Kakuzu growls, then steps back. He shrugs off his tattered cloak and turns, and Kurama watches with barely-contained anticipation as the four masks rip themselves free of his body. He drops into a crouch, scraping his claws over stone, and lets his chakra build. It’s probably stupid, throwing
himself headlong at Kakuzu like this, but—

But Naruto is dead, and Kurama feels rather like he’ll never care about anything again.

The masks move towards him, somewhere between a lumber and a stalk, and Kurama tenses, evaluating his options. The Fire and Wind masks are the most dangerous, since they can attack together, so he needs to take one of them out first. Or…

Well. Both would work.

With a low, rumbling laugh, Kurama throws himself forward, right at the Wind mask. The creature falters, thin wings flaring, but before it can so much as start its attack Kurama lashes out with one clawed hand. From this close, the shockwave is devastating, tearing through the construct as if it’s made of rice paper, and Kurama leaps right through the shards as they fall, aiming for Kakuzu.

With a curse, the bounty hunter darts back, even as the thick grey threads of his Earth Grudge Fear slide out of his body and stab forward. “It’s only fitting that I take your heart to replace the one you’ve destroyed!” he snarls. “Die!”

“Hah!” Kurama slips to the side, then whirls before Kakuzu can catch him and breathes out a gout of flame. The threads twitch away, and Kurama uses the opening to go low, rolling underneath them and coming up with his claws bared, aiming for a gut wound.

His nails catch on stony skin and scrape without leaving a mark. Kurama growls, even as Kakuzu strikes at his throat, and slides around the blow. With this little warning, summoning another shockwave is difficult, but he tries regardless, swiping downward right as Kakuzu turns to face him. It’s comparatively weak, and Kakuzu manages to bring his threads up in time to block, but it still hurries him back into the stone outcropping with a cry that’s mixed anger and pain.

A sudden shriek of steam exploding makes Kurama spin, distracted, and he has to duck as the shards of the Fire mask go flying. Kökō’s jinchuuriki doesn’t look at him, but keeps moving, whirling towards the Lightning mask with another steam-enhanced kick. Kurama snorts at the showy move, but mirrors the jinchuuriki and aims for the Earth mask. This time, he has enough warning to summon the precise ratios of positive black chakra and negative white chakra, then set it spinning in his hand.

It’s easy. So easy. How many times has he seen and felt Naruto do this, over the years? How many times did they combine attacks, Rasengan and bijūdama tearing through enemy ranks? (How painful is it, to think that it will never happen again?)

The bijūdama detonates the moment it strikes, and even without the size it would have in Kurama’s old form it’s still enough to tear straight through the Earth mask and then continue on, clipping Kakuzu before he can fully avoid it and tearing through the trees and stone behind him. The bounty hunter curses, then lashes out, and Kurama doesn’t even try to dodge. He slashes down again, nothing more than claws this time, and Kurama laughs as they cut through the strange, rubbery flesh of Kakuzu’s reaching threads. No more Earth Spear to harden his skin—Kakuzu can use it without the Earth mask, but hardly enough to count. Hardly at all, when he’s facing a bijuu and a determined jinchuuriki.

The smell of ozone is his only warning.

It sears and burns and hurts, and Kurama screams, tumbling to the side. He lands hard on his front, shoulder one hot-bright mass of pain, and hears the jinchuuriki call out but can’t answer. There's
another cry, the sound of the Lightning mask shattering, and then the man advancing on Kakuzu, but Kurama can't focus on anything but the pain. It's already fading, starting to heal, but he can't remember ever feeling pain like that before. Not through Naruto, not on his own—it's only very, very rarely that something has managed to hurt him, and the sheer unexpectedness of the pain is almost as staggering as the hurt itself.

Even as the skin knits itself back up beneath his fingers, the raw ache easing, Kurama slumps forward. It was a glancing blow—the mask’s False Darkness just managed to clip him, not strike him fully, but Kurama has a new respect for Naruto taking Sasuke's Chidori through the heart and surviving.

Weighted footsteps, heavy and loud, make him look up. The armored man is approaching, steam fading from the device on his back, and he crouches down beside Kurama. “He got away. Are you all right?” he asks carefully.

“Fine,” Kurama huffs, dropping his hand to show the new, unmarred skin as he sinks back on his heels. It would be best to go after Kakuzu now, before he can get any hearts to replace those they destroyed, but Kurama can sense the bounty hunter moving rapidly towards the east, already at the edge of his range and about to disappear. Between that and the faint tremors of singed nerves, Kurama doubts he’ll be able to catch the man before he can vanish.

Damn it, he thinks, claws slicing through the fabric of his pants as he curls his hands into fists. Damn it all to hell. That was my chance.

A lost chance, now, and worse yet Akatsuki will know that someone has learned their secrets. Kurama wants to think that Kakuzu won't tell them, but that’s stupidly optimistic. Far more likely he’ll keep a few bits of information to himself, but tell them the rest, and that means they’ll be prepared for someone hunting them. Fuck.

He shouldn’t have jumped into the fight. It was stupid and reckless and dumb, and…

Naruto would have done it. To save Kokuō, Naruto would have sacrificed the advantage of surprise in a heartbeat, and not mourned the loss. Here and now, Kurama supposes he can't do any less.

With a sigh, he rakes one hand through his hair, pushing it out of his face, and then rolls his eyes. “Tell your bijuu to stop thrashing,” he orders sharply. “He’s gonna give me a headache.”

The man stiffens, but doesn’t flinch away despite the wary look he gives Kurama. “You know a lot of things you shouldn’t,” he allows after a moment. “Who are you?”

There’s a pause as the jinchuuriki apparently processes this, and then he inclines his head. “I’m Han, formerly of Iwagakure. Thank you for your help. I'm not sure I could have survived him alone.”
Kurama pauses, reluctantly looking up at the tall man, and then sighs. He closes his eyes and rubs at his brow in irritation, because it’s complete madness, sheer stupidity, but he keeps looking up into pale brown eyes and resenting them for not being blue. Resenting Han’s polite, careful speech because it’s not a cheerful and exuberant flood, interspersed with a bright believe it. This isn’t his jinchuuriki, could never be, and petty as it is he’s more than willing to hate the man for it.

Naruto's loss hurts more sharply than his physical wound, and Kurama already knows it won't heal half as easily.

Judging by the way it hurts right now, it might never heal at all.

“Akatsuki lead to my best friend’s death,” he says, and the words feel raw in his throat, burn like acid on his tongue as he speaks them. “If you know any of the other jinchuuriki, pass the word on. They're being hunted, and the bastards won't stop until they’ve captured every last jinchuuriki and ripped the bijuu right out of them.”

Han stills, studying Kurama for a moment, and then nods. “I’ll tell Roushi,” he offers quietly. “I believe he’s met several of the others, so he can let them know. Thank you, Kurama.”

“It’s not like we managed to kill the bastard anyway,” Kurama dismisses, rising to his feet. Several nerves spasm painfully, making his arm jerk as he grits his teeth, but the feeling subsides a moment later. “You’d have figured it out without me.”

Except…he wouldn’t have. Kokuō was one of the first bijuu captured, if not the first. In intervening when he did, it’s likely Kurama has already changed history, changed the past. It’s too distant, too small a change to have effected Naruto already, but suddenly the only thought in Kurama's head is to go and find the boy and see for himself, to make sure. He can’t—he won’t let his Naruto be destroyed, not by his own actions and not by anyone else’s. He’ll die first, and burn the world down with him.

Decided, Kurama straightens. Konoha is several days’ travel southeast, so he might as well start now. “Good luck,” he says, offering Han and Kokuō a careless wave as he turns towards the forest of stone spires.

“Wait!” Han calls, and when Kurama looks back with an impatient frown, the man is drawing out a sealing scroll. “An extra uniform,” he explains, catching Kurama’s slightly wary glance. “I carry spares, and you don’t seem to have any supplies. It’s a long walk to anywhere like that.”

Kurama gives the man’s armor a skeptical glance. “Thanks, but I’m not a fan of clanking when I walk,” he says dryly.

Han blinks at him for a moment, clearly startled, and then chuckles. “Oh, no,” he offers reassuringly, unsealing a small pack and flipping the top open. A moment later, he tosses a few folded pieces of cloth to Kurama, who catches them automatically. “Take them with my thanks,” he murmurs.

Pride makes Kurama want to argue. The chill of the wind and the sting of the snow under his bare feet convinces him otherwise. “Thanks,” he says gruffly, tucking them under his arms. “Don’t—don’t get caught.”

Han inclines his head formally. “Your…little brother will be safe,” he promises, the words clearly leaving a strange taste in his mouth, and Kurama laughs roughly.

“He’d better,” he says, then turns away again. “And, Kokuō—if there's anything redeemable about him, don’t let it go to waste. A good jinchuuriki’s hard to find, and hard to keep.”
Without waiting for a response, he takes three long, bounding steps and leaps up, alighting on the branch of a pine. It quivers and shakes, not as sturdy as the Fire Country trees Kurama—through Naruto—is used to, but he keeps his balance on the swaying bough long enough to leap to the next, and then the one beyond that. In moments, he’s moving southward quickly, aiming for the closest break in the stone forest.

Going to Konoha is stupid, especially when he should be chasing Kakuzu. It’s Naruto levels of stupid, shoving blindly through all logic and reason just because someone precious is far away, just because they might be in need of him. But Kurama couldn’t care any less if he tried. All he wants is his jinchuuriki back, his best friend returned to him. And if he can’t have that, then he just wants to see Naruto, to prove to himself that the boy is alive, existing.

The blood on his shirt is frozen, cold against his skin. Even so, Kurama presses his hand over it, this macabre reminder of Naruto’s last sacrifice, and forces his numbed limbs to move faster.

All he wants is Naruto, and Kaguya herself isn’t going to stop him from getting to the boy.
III: Succor

Chapter Summary

So much angst here, I apologize, but I needed at least one breakdown to happen. This will be the last chapter that’s purely grief. Um, probably.

And now there are chapter titles, because not having them was bugging me.

[succor / ˈsəkər/, assistance and support in times of hardship and distress. Middle English via Old French from medieval Latin succursus, from Latin succurrere ‘run to the help of,’ from sub- ‘from below’ + currere ‘run.’.]

Traveling as a human is stupid.

Likely Kurama should already be used to the tedium of having to walk everywhere when a single stride covers a yard, if that, but the thing about spending a good chunk of his existence in another’s body is that it means he could tune out whenever things weren’t interesting. A lot of his time was spent sleeping. Or, before Naruto got to him, seething. Plotting and planning, recovering, drowsing, remembering the Sage’s final words—things like that.

None of it has prepared him for the fact that he now moves at the equivalent of a slug-crawl when compared to a bijuu’s usual strides.

It’s disconcerting, too, to see actual people everywhere. Well, not everywhere, because it’s clearly winter, and most people are smart enough to stay indoors when faced with Earth Country’s snow and Fire Country’s biting cold, but there are still more of them than Kurama is used to. Kaguya never cared about collateral damage, and civilians were wiped out quickly. She couldn’t use them the way she could shinobi corpses—no chakra systems, or systems that were severely underdeveloped, Sakura had theorized once—but she hadn’t wanted to chance those capable of molding her chakra being born somewhere along the line.

It’s strange enough to see movement on the roads that Kurama gives plenty of odd looks, in addition to those being directed at him. Those he ignores for the most part; it’s easy enough to put down to the fact that Han is a huge man, easily the largest of the jinchuuriki, and Kurama feels rather like he’s swimming in the borrowed uniform. It probably looks like he mugged a giant for his clothes or something. It’s annoying, but so is practically everything about this situation.

He thinks of Naruto again, of what Naruto would say or do in this position. He’d probably be laughing, bright and amused, walking along with his arms crossed behind his head and no plan to speak of, but every assurance that things would work out. Kurama can almost see Naruto out of the corner of his eye, walking beside him, and has to shake his head sharply to banish the vision.

His Naruto is dead. The little boy he’s going to see isn’t anything close to his Naruto yet, and while Kurama will make every effort to be sure he becomes that person eventually, there are no guarantees.
To honor his Naruto's last wishes, there's every chance Kurama will have to destroy all likelihood of the man coming to be. Because he’s here to stop Kaguya, and to do that he needs to cut off all her ways of coming back. Zetsu needs to die, to disappear, and that means Kurama will likely have to take the rest of Akatsuki out as well.

It’s not exactly a hardship, given their aims and what they did the first time around. A threat to the jinchuuriki is a threat to Naruto, and Kurama's hardly about to let that stand.

Anger simmers just below the surface of his aggravation, a touch of rage twisted up with the iron control Kurama learned over decades of imprisonment. There's no jailor this time, no redheaded woman clinging to his chains, no blond boy determined never to hurt anyone with Kurama's power, but still. Kurama looks human. He’s not the vast harbinger of disaster anymore—that’s the creature still sealed and seething in Naruto's soul. Kurama as he is now can't afford to let his anger out, not until he’s fully used to being human.

Kakuzu defeated him. If Han hadn’t been fighting as well, it’s possible Kurama would have died there in the snow, rendering Naruto's sacrifice absolutely meaningless. He doesn’t know this body’s healing capabilities, and doesn’t want to test them. The wounds from Kaguya’s chakra control rods vanished, but how much of that was Naruto's body and how much was it the seal? Does Kurama’s chakra make any difference, even, when Naruto's system is so used to having both it and an Uzumaki's resilience?

The Uzumaki part is gone now. There's no trace of Naruto's chakra remaining, and Kurama has looked, searched every last cell of this new-familiar body looking for even a hint of the former occupant. It might as well be an empty vessel, though, a jar with every last ounce of its contents emptied out, wiped clean and left for Kurama alone.

Damn the brat for being so good at seals, anyway. Why, why couldn’t he have turned that to finding a way for both of them to come back? Why couldn’t their positions have been reversed? Kurama knows the limits of him empathy, his abilities, and Naruto had none. Naruto would have saved everyone, brought every last enemy crashing down to stand alone in victory. With or without Kurama, he’s always been a hero.

Kurama is a natural disaster trapped in physical form and little else.

He remembers, again, the scene just before Naruto hurled them back in time: blood and darkness and matte-black metal, Sakura’s body crumpled like a dropped doll. Remembers Naruto falling, the dull, flat sound as his body hit the earth, too late to stop the seal from working even as the light slid out of his eyes. Tries not to think about the mad rush of chakra, the snap of reality twisting and breaking around him as whatever specks of Naruto were left inside him burned away, the human soul too fragile for such a shift.

What does it mean for Kurama, that he survived intact?

Kurama knows he’s not a demon, no matter what the fools living now would term him; he knows little of evil—little of good, either, of course, because he’s a creature of malice and hatred, but what he is comes from the humans themselves. He is what the Sage made him, and if the humans want to call him evil, so be it. He’s simply a reflection of their darkness, but Naruto has shown him time and again that being so doesn’t mean he can't reflect their light as well. This world might mean little to him, all its souls passing by like ants, but Naruto was never like that. And for Naruto, he’ll save them.

That it means he’ll be able to take his revenge as well is simply a nice bonus, for all that Kurama relishes that fact.
The temperature is dropping rapidly as night falls, and Kurama grimaces, casting a glance up at the
deep grey clouds sliding across the horizon. Snow is rare in Fire Country, as long as one stays out of
the mountains, but with Kurama's truly magnificent luck it seems he’s just in time for a storm. He has
no money, so finding an inn is out of the question, and as generous as Han was providing him with
un-ripped clothes, they're hardly thick enough to keep him warm in a blizzard. Given that he’s
passing through farmland right now, there aren’t even any nice caves to hole up in. It’s either sleep in
the bushes at the edge of the road or break into someone’s house, and Kurama doesn’t want to deal
with all the possible problems that could come with the latter.

Still, there are lights ahead of him, a small, tight cluster of them, and Kurama decides he might as
well check the inn regardless, if there is one. As much as it irks his pride, the innkeeper may be
willing to take pity on him, or let him do manual labor to make up for a night’s stay. A little indignity
is worth not freezing to death, Kurama decides reluctantly.

Besides, his feet are still bare. He’s starting to lose the feeling in his toes, and as inexperienced as he
is in listening to a human body’s warning signs, he knows that can't be a good one.

At least moving is coming more easily now, Kurama thinks a touch sourly as he makes it to the
outskirts of the tiny town. Getting into a fight was good for that at least, even if Kakuzu did almost
fry him in the end. It’s not like it’s the first time he’s been in control of Naruto's body, either, but…
the emptiness is unnerving. For more than a hundred years, Kurama has shared a form with a human,
kept to the back of their thoughts whenever he couldn’t fight his way to the front, and being without
the submerging hum is like gravity suddenly shifting so that things fall sideways rather than down. It
knocks him off balance, and he finds himself so aware of the lack of noise that it’s very close to
maddening.

Naruto was always doing, even when he wasn’t in control. Always thinking, always feeling, and
now there's just—nothing.

The inn isn’t hard to find, at least, and Kurama forces himself from his thoughts, lifting his eyes to
study the sign. There’s no notice that those who can't pay will be thrown out, so Kurama supposes
that’s a step in the right direction, though he doesn’t have much hope of the owner being
accommodating. Maybe he’s been jaded by his own experiences, and Naruto's as a child, but he’s
seen a whole lot of the worst humanity has to offer, and most of the good has been inspired by
Naruto alone.

In all likelihood, it's simply the world they live in. Hard to keep a positive outlook when you're little
more than a mercenary for hire. Even Naruto could be pragmatic about it, to a degree; shinobi are
shinobi, and people buying their services keeps the villages running. There's only so much room for
ideology, and while Naruto managed to walk that line in the years he was Hokage, Kurama can't
imagine many other people would be able to.

Sighing softly, Kurama rakes a hand through his hair to get it out of his face, then approaches the
inn. The interior is brightly lit, and as he pushes open the door he can see a small bar and dining area
off to the side. The smell of food makes his stomach rumble disconcertingly, and Kurama grimaces,
pressing a hand over it. These reactions are...weird. He’s still not used to having them, no matter
how long he’s spent as someone’s ghostly passenger; having them happen to him firsthand is a lot
different than distantly knowing they’re occurring.

His entrance gets him a few sharp, wary looks, but otherwise nothing, and that’s weird too. Kurama
is still used to those who don’t know him through Naruto running screaming at the sight of him, and
for all that he’s now a normal human size—slightly below average, even, thanks to the brat never
quite managing to outgrow his shrimp phase—the lack of reaction to his presence just feels strange.
Shaking it off, Kurama glances around to get his bearings, then heads for the small desk at the bottom of the stairs. The older woman working there glances up as he approaches, looks back down, and then does a double-take. One brow arches skeptically, but she puts her pen down and asks politely, “Can I help you?”

Kurama hates this. The damned brat would be so much better at everything, he thinks, and it stings enough to make him twitch. Taking a breath, he forces himself not to growl the way he wants to and instead answers, “Yeah. Any chance you’d be willing to trade a night’s stay and a meal for some work?”

The wariness changes to a considering expression, and the woman looks him over. “We have firewood that needs cutting and moving,” she says after a moment. “My son would do it, but he was injured by bandits on the southern road.”

Kurama tries not to grimace. From Nine-Tailed Demon Fox, Scourge of Humanity’s Darkest Places, to woodcutter. Gyūki would laugh himself sick. Not to mention Shukaku would actually die laughing. “How ‘bout I take care of those bandits instead?” he suggests, smiling. Not his fault if the expression has a few too many teeth in it.

That gets him another look, even sharper this time. “You’re a shinobi?” the woman asks, clearly searching for a hitai-ate.

It makes things both easier and harder that Kurama doesn’t have Naruto’s, either the old one with Konoha’s symbol or the Alliance one shinobi started defaulting to once Kaguya wiped out the first few villages. Either would raise questions, but they would answer them, too. As it is, both of them were lost years ago, so Kurama simply nods and says, “Unaffiliated.”

“I probably should have guessed, the way you look,” the innkeeper says shrewdly. “If I have your word you’ll hunt them down tomorrow, you can stay. Room 5 is empty, and it comes with dinner.”

It takes effort not to bristle a little at the remark, and it reminds Kurama of Naruto’s parting comment that he should look in a mirror, which between the ache of grief and the bite of irritation just puts him in a foul mood all around. “Fine. Good,” he manages. “I’ll go after them as soon as I wake up.”

A fight sounds like a good idea anyway, and he’d likely have gone after them whether she agreed to the trade or not. Bandits generally set up camp, so Kurama could have slept there after he killed them. Still, a warm meal beats scavenged scraps or stolen rations, and this way he’s assured of a soft bed. There have been too few of those, the last five years. For the sake of all of Naruto’s complaining about the lack, if nothing else, Kurama will take advantage.

“We have a deal,” she agrees, and passes over a key. “Again, Room 5. I’ll have one of the girls bring your dinner, if you want to find a seat.”

Awkwardly, Kurama nods his thanks, then turns to look for an open table. There’s one in the corner, tucked back against the wall, and he heads for it with some relief, instinct telling him to find somewhere dark and stay there. He’s hurting, even if his physical wounds are already gone, and there’s enough of a real fox in him to want to hide until the pain is gone, even if the more rational part of his brain knows it won’t work.

He remembers Naruto’s grief, after Kaguya killed Sasuke. It ebbed, sometimes, but it never fully eased, and even though Naruto was a best friend rather than a lover to Kurama, he doesn’t expect his own pain to be any different.

Some things heal with time. Loss scabs over, but never seems to go away.
The nightmares come as a surprise.

Kurama gasps awake some time before dawn, sweat-soaked and shaking again, this time with the image of Naruto's slack, empty face before him, twisted with the corrupted grey lines that always marked Kaguya's controlled corpses. There's nothing else, no danger, no threat, but that alone is enough to make Kurama hunch forward, fisting his hands in his hair and ignoring the prickle of claws too close to his scalp. He takes a breath, lets it out in a rough, shaky cry, and clamps his eyes shut, fighting to hang on to that last smile Naruto gave him rather than that horrible creation of his subconscious.

It's not real. He knows that, logically, because what he saw was this body falling, and since Kurama is wearing it right now there's no way Kaguya in that time could have animated it like some macabre puppet.

But Kurama heard it, the sound of Naruto's body striking the ground, dropped, discarded, meaningless without the real Naruto inside it. And now Kurama will have to live with the reminder every day, every time his heart beats, every time he moves. Because this is Naruto's body, but Kurama's stolen it, taken it over. Maybe he wanted this once, but not for twenty years at least. He's the pretender here, the fake, and he hates himself as he never, ever has before. Always, always his loathing has turned outwards, been directed at others, but now—

Now he might as well have killed Naruto himself. For all that this wasn’t his choice, he might as well have cut the jinchuuriki’s throat with his own hand.

A sound tears out of him, rough and choking and as sharp as knives, and Kurama's body shakes with the force of it. Another, and then again, and there are tears on his cheeks and Kurama can't understand how, but he's crying. Crying for the loss of the first person since the Sage to bring light to his world, crying for the loss of his best friend, his partner, the one creature in all of creation who looked upon his soul and loved him regardless.

Naruto is gone, and Kurama is all that’s left.

It hurts. The world feels empty and gaping and so terribly open, as if it’s about to fall away beneath his feet and leave him spinning out into nothingness. The anger filled him up, before, the anger and the petty bits of irritation, but in the spill of cold moonlight falling through the window, all of that has been burned away. Grief rises in its place, too much for his tiny human body to contain, and Kurama feels like it should wash him away, drown him completely. But instead it builds and builds and there's no release, no deliverance. Just—grief. Just sorrow.

Just loss, and the burning, twisting knowledge seared right into the heart of him that nothing will ever be the same again.

For so long, they fought. For survival, for revenge, for protection of those left. There was always a thread of hope, though, that someday, somehow, they would get their world back. Naruto had so very much to do with that, pushed them all forward towards that vision of peace and home and family when they won. Only with that last, final strike did they lose it, and even then Naruto still clung to his hope that Kurama would make it back, would fix things and let everyone be happy.

But here and now, Kurama has none of that. His world will never, ever be what it was, and from now until this body crumbles away, he’s going to have to live with this unfamiliar grief, these human
emotions, and remember every second of every day just what it is he lost.

“Damn you,” he whispers around the edges of a sob, pressing his forehead against his raised knees and wrapping his arms around his head. “Damn you!”

But it doesn’t have the edge of anger to it that it did just hours before. There's only the ache, and even though Kurama knows himself well enough to realize the fury isn’t gone forever, he hates this. Hates this weakness, hates the fact that he can't ride the hard edges the way he always did his malice and anger. Hates that he wishes he could have been the one to make the sacrifice instead of Naruto, because he shouldn’t. For anyone else he wouldn’t even dream of it, but a world without Naruto isn’t one he wants to live in.

There’s nothing romantic about the sentiment. Nothing of lust or desire or anything like that. But Naruto was his, was the first human to earn his name, to earn the free use of his power, to earn his trust and his friendship and his love. Naruto was the one person in existence for whom he would have done absolutely anything, and to be without that is like severing half his soul and trying to move on without it.

“Enough,” he tells himself, tells this small, weak body, but it doesn’t work. If anything the tears come faster, hot and uncontrollable, and Kurama lashes out in frustration and pain, slashing futilely at the air. “Enough!” he cries, but it breaks partway through, and he can't bring himself to say it again.

Surely he can't cry forever. Surely there's an end to this somewhere.

It’s still hours until dawn, but Kurama can't stay here any longer, inactive, mired in unfamiliar emotion. He felt, as a bijuu, but…not like this. Not to these intensities, not with such pain. It’s new and he loathes it, the shakiness of his limbs and the hollow emptiness in his chest, the dry sting of his eyes and the raw rasp of his throat. So vulnerable, with so many weaknesses, so many places where even a hard touch can kill.

But he doesn’t hate humans blindly, not anymore. Maybe Naruto is the best of them, but through him Kurama has come to know others—lost now, maybe, but he called them friends once, would have fought to his last breath to protect them. Their weaknesses give them strengths he’s never quite been able to understand, and he wonders if, like this, he’ll someday learn.

Restlessness and the ache of the unfamiliar silence drives him up and out, still pulling the sash of his borrowed robe closed. The inn is deserted but echoing with snores, and the buzz of the noise against his ears makes Kurama grimace. Shinobi don't snore, as a rule, and he’s not used to the sound. It’s enough that he’s surprised he remained asleep as long as he did, and he’s quite happy to get away from it now as he moves quickly down the hall.

The innkeeper from the night before is just turning on the lights as he enters the main room, and she gives him a look of faint surprise. “You're up early, shinobi,” she says, even as she turns away. “Meaning to get an early start?”

“Best to hit them while they're still half-asleep,” Kurama says gruffly, eager to leave. The presence of other humans itches at him, like fur rubbed the wrong way. He doesn’t want to look at them and remember the reason he’s here, the reason Naruto is dead. Because Naruto died for them, even if they’ll never know it. And maybe that’s actually part of the reason—they don’t know, can't know, will never be able to look at any version of Naruto and understand the lengths to which he’d go to save them. Kurama resents them for it, because he won't allow himself to envy them their ignorance.

Naruto is worth more than that.
For a long moment, the woman makes no acknowledgement. Then, slowly, she turns, and studies him with an unreadable expression. “You have no weapon,” she points out.

Kurama shrugs, half-lifting one hand so the pointed tips of his nails catch the light. “Don’t need them,” he counters, and takes a step towards the door. “The southern road, you said?”

This time, the woman lets him go and doesn’t call him back. “Yes,” she agrees, and then, when Kurama is almost out the door, “Good luck.”

He doesn’t answer, pulling the door shut behind him. There's a thick layer of snow on the ground, a chill wind sending ice crystals dancing up through the air, and Kurama wishes futilely for paws and fur to withstand the cold. Still, he made a promise, and he’ll keep it, so he grits his teeth and steps forward, ignoring the snow’s bite. A breath, careful and steadying and slow, and he opens his senses as he starts south, seeking any feelings of malice or hatred.

There are some here and there, scattered bits from dreams or one or two people, but nothing beyond the ordinary. The malice it takes to prey on fellow humans is something deeper, more sinister, so Kurama keeps walking, passing out of the town and into a small wood. The shadows cast by the three-quarter moon are long and dark, but not oppressive to a bijuu’s eyes, and he moves easily, silently through the darkness. Stealth, at least, comes easily after five years of hit-and-run fighting against a goddess, and Kurama is confident that he won't be seen unless he wants to be.

Naruto would like this, he thinks, and the faint bitterness of the painful thought is undercut with the stirrings of anger once more. Helping people, trading services, defeating enemies—it should be Naruto here, not Kurama. Not Kurama, who keeps his word because that was Naruto's way, who does good because any less would leave Naruto disappointed in him. Not Kurama, who is reeling from this first true loss of someone close to him.

His fellow bijuu were…regrets, because he couldn’t save them, but the anger always overwhelmed the sorrow. Not so now, like this, because the absence of Naruto hurts worse than anything else he can imagine.

But he can drown it out, he thinks. He hopes. Fighting Kakuzu left no room for anything else, only action and reaction and bubbling, bright-edged fury at this little reminder of Kaguya.

Fury is better than grief. Anger is better than sorrow. Kurama can endure the former; he has no experience surviving the latter.

He takes a breath and lets it out in a white gust, then closes his eyes, coming to a halt. Up ahead is a knot of malevolence and petty cruelty, exactly what Kurama once spent centuries hunting. At the edge of his hearing, there are people stirring and talking, sharp bits of an argument, and Kurama smiles thinly.

“Found you,” he murmurs, and ghosts forward, keeping crouched low to the ground. Firelight flickers through the trees, muted and shielded, but it’s enough to see by. Kurama presses himself into the shadows of a gnarled oak and makes to slip around it to get a good look at the camp, but—

Someone’s already there.

Kurama blinks, caught entirely off guard, and the shinobi in the painted mask blinks back.
IV: Scintilla

Chapter Notes

As I said before, this isn’t going to be a straight rewrite of backslide, but there will be similarities—my brother and I used certain fixed points around which to shape the differences. They won’t be exactly the same, of course, but they’ll still be present.

…aaand talking about fixed points now makes me want to write a Doctor Who/Naruto crossover. Fuck.

(Also, I am 100% super terrible at replying to comments. However, if you have any random questions for me, or even if you just want to yell at me about headcanons or drop off prompts [both of which I am always open to], I'm blackkatmagic on Tumblr and love when people come geek out about Naruto/life in general with me. \o)

[scintilla / sinˈɪlə/, a tiny trace or spark of a specified quality or feeling. From figurative use of Latin scintilla “particle of fire, spark, glittering speck, atom,” probably from proto-Indo-European ski-nto-, from root skai- "to shine, to gleam"]

Kurama's first instinct is to throw himself forward, claws leading, and rip the intruder open from stem to stern. His second is to dive for safety and set the forest on fire to cover his escape.

His third, in contrast, is to twitch with tension, but otherwise stay where he is, because that lichen-like shock of grey hair is very, very familiar.

Thankfully, the masked nin—ANBU, clearly—doesn’t make any hostile moves either. He eyes Kurama, who eyes him right back, and neither of them move.

Very carefully and slowly, Kurama takes a half-step away and then lifts his hands, palms facing out, to show they're empty of weapons. Honestly, it’s an idiotic gesture, probably propagated by civilians —there’s never been a single shinobi anywhere who stopped being a threat just because they weren’t holding a weapon. Still, the meaning behind it is clear, and Kurama really doesn’t want to start a fight with this particular ninja. Not because he thinks he’ll lose—he’s the Kyuubi no Kitsune, and after Kakuzu he’ll be damned if he’ll let himself lose to anyone ever again—but because if they do get in a fight, it will be to the death.

Living in Kaguya’s war-torn world means Kurama's very familiar with hoarding power. However, that’s hardly the same thing as holding back. All it’s taught him is how to win with as few blows possible, and he can't risk that here. Not with the changes to the timeline—and to Naruto himself—that would doubtless occur.

If it comes down to it, he’ll abort the mission and go chop the stupid firewood. He’s not about to risk his Naruto never coming into being because of this man’s death.

Then the man’s head tips, birdlike and curious, and he lifts gloved hands. Rapid-fire hand signs flicker in the firelight, and Kurama squints at him dubiously. He might have shared head-space with Naruto for almost forty years—and, as Hokage, Naruto had to learn ANBU signs—but like fuck he
knows what the collection of gibberish means.

A sharp gesture, clearly impatient, and then the ANBU repeats the signs more slowly. Now that he can actually see the damn things, Kurama can catch a few he remembers—that’s ‘captive’, definitely, and that’s either ‘rescue’ or ‘contain’—or possibly ‘dinner’, Kurama’s pretty sketchy on that particular sequence—and…maybe six?

Ah, fuck it.

Kurama rolls his eyes, waves to get the man’s attention, and then jerks his thumb at the camp. He holds up eight fingers, for the eight bandits grouped around the fire or sleeping off to the side, then points at himself, at them again, and then drags a finger across his throat in a gesture that can't be mistaken.

For a long moment, the ANBU stares flatly at him. Then he sighs softly and nods in agreement. Good enough.

Giving him a toothy smile, Kurama digs his claws into the tree trunk and leaps upward, silently pulling himself onto a wide limb. From there it’s easy enough to inch his way along the branch and out over the edge of the camp, and one look tells him just what the ANBU was trying to say.

There’s a girl. Young, small, delicate-looking, her hair up in buns and tears on her cheeks. Her dress is better quality than anything he’s seen in a long time, and she looks too scared to be a shinobi. Civilian, then, and likely noble—probably a hostage of some sort. Kurama grimaces faintly to himself, because that just made everything more complicated, but…it’s salvageable. Probably.

A quick glance shows that more than half of the rough-looking men are bedded down, either asleep or on the verge of it, with only three sitting awake around the fire. There’s one on either side of the girl, but Kurama thinks he can work around that. Quickly, he shrugs out of the voluminous kimono shirt Han provided, re-knots the sash around his waist, and looks for his temporary ally.

From the shadows near the base of the tree, the ANBU looks back, mask tipped questioningly. With an effort, Kurama dredges up a few of the very, very long forgotten hand signs—which he honestly never paid any attention to, mostly because it was Sasuke teaching Naruto, and things had quickly devolved into sex—and signs carefully and awkwardly, *I retrieve. Cover?*

A nod, sharp and quick, and the man crouches down, letting his body block the light as he draws his tantō so that no one will notice its glint. Seeing that he’s ready, Kurama takes a breath, gathers himself, and leaps.

Black cloth drops right over the little girl’s startled face, covering her completely even as Kurama lands on the man at her right. A shove puts the bandit on the ground, and a sharp twist breaks his neck before Kurama launches himself at the other guard, claws first. At the same moment, the ANBU explodes out of the shadows, appearing between three bandits as they scramble to their feet, but Kurama doesn’t pause to watch. He tears out the guard’s throat in a splatter of blood, ducks the swing of the third’s long knife, and then gathers his chakra and swipes down hard.

From this distance, with a bijuu shockwave set against a normal human? Kurama hears bones snapping as the bandit and the man behind him both go flying.

Fighting hasn’t been this easy in a long time. Kaguya’s undead soldiers, pulled up like grisly puppets by their chakra networks and drawing power directly from the goddess herself, were never this easy to put down, and they always tended to get back up unless burned to ashes. But these are humans,
civilian men who can't even mold chakra, and Kurama feels almost ridiculous pitting his strength against them. It's one thing for the Kyuubi to wipe out whole towns full of humanity’s darkest members, but eight of them, with assistance?

It almost makes up for his stupidity against Kakuzu yesterday.

The last of the ANBU’s three opponents is just falling as Kurama straightens, the girl safely behind him. The last bandit is trapped between them, wild-eyed and pale, clutching a dulled sword. With a low laugh, Kurama takes a menacing step forward and man’s eyes automatically dart to him. Too late he realizes the consequences of the action; his head snaps up, horror blooming, but at the same instant a tantō drives right through his back. For a long moment there’s silence, and then with a short, choking gasp he crumples bonelessly.

Kurama’s seen enough death; he doesn’t linger to watch this one.

Leaving the ANBU to deal with the bodies, Kurama turns to where the bound little girl is still sitting, covered by his shirt. The fight was quiet, but for her sake he hopes she passed out rather than listening to it. The kid can't be more than four, if that, and Kurama remembers the orphans Kaguya’s forces left behind. He’s dealt with enough traumatized kids for one lifetime, thanks.

Futilely, Kurama wipes his gory left hand on a clump of grass, then gives it up as hopeless and simply tucks it a little behind him. With his clean hand he reaches out and pulls the dark cloth off the girl’s head, and when wide, terrified eyes snap to him immediately he gives her the gentlest smile he can muster.

What would the brat do? he thinks a little desperately. Damn it, how would Naruto handle this? Think!

“Hey,” he says softly. “You’re okay now. They’re never going to be able to scare you again. You’re safe.”

No matter how many other duties Naruto and Sasuke had, they always made a point of it to spend time with the orphaned children. Every day they were in camp or traveling, they helped care for the kids, played or taught or simply talked to them, and Kurama can't help but remember those pale, tired, grief-stricken faces right now. There's not really any use comparing kidnapping to seeing your entire world shattering around, because they're horrible in different ways, but they're both terrible. They're both things no child should ever have to face.

Kurama is…fond of kids, for the most part. He likes them well enough, for being tiny larval-stage humans, but he’s never really had to interact with them beyond just watching Naruto do it. Once or twice, before things got really bad and they had to conserve strength wherever possible, Naruto had let Kurama manifest a time or two so the brats could use him as a jungle gym. It had been well beneath his dignity, but even so Kurama had never complained. They were wary of him, for the first few minutes, but after Naruto had scaled his side and perched proudly between his ears, laughing his idiotic head off, they’d been more than willing to take advantage. Having humans accept him so easily, overcome their fear so quickly—that part Kurama had…enjoyed.

This—helping the girl—is something Naruto would have strongly approved of, even if he would have been saddened by Kurama's slaughter of the bandits. Kurama doesn’t particularly care about the latter—he’s still a bijuu, after all, still a creation of chakra that feeds off malice and hatred—but for Naruto, he’ll try to keep her spirits up.

The terror in her face isn’t quite disappearing, although it’s easing a little. She blinks, sending more tears cascading down her cheeks, but she’s stopped whimpering. Kurama gives her another smile,
trying to make it encouraging rather than scary, and reaches out slowly.

“I'm going to get that gag off, if you're okay with me touching you,” he soothes. “Once that’s gone you might feel a bit better.” Lifting his hand, he twists it to show her his nails, and says, “I don’t want to cut you, but these are pretty sharp so try not to wiggle. It okay for me to take that off?”

A pause, and then the girl nods emphatically, making muffled noises. Kurama chuckles a little, reaching out, and she goes determinedly still. “Here goes,” he warns her, then tips her head slightly to the side, slides a claw up under the rough twine, and presses carefully. It takes a moment, and a bit more pressure than he’d like, but with one or two cautious sawing motions the threads part. Kurama unwinds them from her head, then helps her get the wad of cloth out of her mouth.

While she’s busy spitting out stray threads and making disgusted faces, Kurama cuts through the ropes binding her hands and legs, and, remembering the few times Naruto got tied up, carefully starts to rub the chafed areas to get the blood flowing again. The girl hisses a little, and Kurama winces.

“Sorry, sorry, but we don’t want your fingers falling off, right?” he murmurs, glancing up, and finds that wide blue eyes are fixed on his face.

His heart shudders and stumbles in his chest, even though they aren’t quite the right shade of blue.

One little hand comes up, reaching out, and Kurama warily holds still as the girl snags a handful of his hair. She pulls the locks towards her, studying them intently, and then looks up to tell Kurama very seriously, “It’s like my favorite red crayon.”

Kurama looks down, too, and supposes that of all the things she could have compared it to—blood, fire, anger, death—that’s probably the nicest he’s going to get. “Thanks,” he offers with a small smile. “Your hair’s very pretty too.” Not blonde, and he’s glad of it—he doesn’t think he could handle the combination again so soon, no matter how different she is from his jinchuuriki. Brown is good. Brown is safe right now. “Did you get hurt anywhere?”

Almost instantly her eyes fill with tears again, and with a muffled whimper she throws herself forward. Kurama just barely manages to swallow a yelp as she collides with his chest, rocking him back on his heels. Tiny shoulders shake with what is clearly the beginnings of a sob, and Kurama feels panic building.

“Hey,” he tries, soft and as comforting as he can manage. “Hey there, what’s this about? I know you were scared, but you're okay now. The bad men are dead, they can't hurt you ever again.” That gets him a sniffle, and with absolutely no idea what else to do, Kurama wraps his arm around the girl and shifts back to sit in the dirt, pulling her more securely into his lap.

Oh Sage, why me? he thinks, entirely, unbecomingly agitated, and tries to drown out the avalanche of alarm with the quiet shushing noises he’s heard Naruto make when in this situation. And babbling. That always seemed to work for Naruto. “Shh, shh, everything’s okay. You’re fine, you’ve been saved—just like a princess, huh? A beautiful princess with big blue eyes, bet you’ve got dozens of boys in love with you back home, you’ll definitely have any boy you look at tripping over his own feet. Never seen a braver princess, your dad must be so proud of you.”

The muffled sobbing is tapering off, replaced by quiet hiccups that manage to sound completely forlorn. “I wanna see my daddy,” she manages, barely understandable between the mucus and the way her face is smashed against Kurama's bare chest. “I wanna see my daddy, but they wouldn’t let me!”

Kurama casts a near-desperate glance at the ANBU who is—like a damned coward—keeping a
good ten feet between them at all times, even as he warily checks the perimeter. The man seems to feel his look, because he glances back and answers the questioning jerk of Kurama's head with a single sign that’s thankfully recognizable.

_Alive._

Thank fuck.

“You're going to see him really soon, princess,” Kurama assures her, and is unspeakably relieved when she pulls away enough to look up at him. Except, damn, those wide, watering eyes might as well qualify as a lethal weapon, and it takes effort not to flinch back. Instead, he strokes his clean hand over her hair and gives her what is hopefully more smile than grimace. “I promise, he’s waiting for you, and he misses you a lot. Look! He even hired a big, strong ANBU to find you and get you back from those bast—ah, bad men.”

The girl shifts just enough to stare dubiously at the ANBU, who holds his ground and stares right back, brightly painted mask eerie in the flickering firelight. The man takes a step forward, as if to join them, and the girl squeaks in fear, ducking back down into Kurama's hold.

Oh no. Kurama's getting a bad feeling about this.

“Hey, hey,” he soothes, shooting the ANBU a nasty, pointed look over his shoulder before going back to trying to coax the girl-shaped leech off of him. “None of that, now. He’s one of the good guys, and he’s going to take you back to your dad. That’s what you want, right?”

Not only does the girl refuse to budge, her small arms come up to wrap around Kurama's neck, clinging so tightly he suspects he'll need a pry bar to get her off. “He’s scary!” she protests. “Like an oni!”

And…there's that sniffle again. Oh no.

Conceivably, Kurama could wrench her off, shove her at the ANBU, and go back to making tracks for Konoha as quickly as humanly possible. He’s tempted to try it, if only because all his past interactions with children have had a time limit, and he has no clue how to interact with them for longer than a few hours.

But…

Naruto wouldn’t do that. And though he’d be unhappy about Kurama killing—which Kurama always tried to tone down for his sake, at least where basic humans were concerned, though he’s never really seen the point of sparing those who feel truly wicked—he’d be _furious_ if Kurama abandoned a child.

Even now, the thought of Naruto angry with him is enough to make Kurama wince.

He casts a look at the grey-haired ANBU, who tips his head questioningly in response. Rolling his eyes, Kurama gestures at the girl, then at himself, and then points at the man and waves a hand in the direction of Konoha.

The ANBU hesitates, body language wary and cautious, and then slowly nods his head.

“Shh,” Kurama urges the girl again, resigning himself to his fate. “He’s not an oni, I promise, but if it makes you feel better I’ll come too. We’ll bring you back to your dad together. That way there’s no chance of anything else happening. Now, what’s your name, princess?”
The hands curled around his shoulders unclench a little, even though she’s still gripping tightly, and she whispers, “I’m Naho.”

“Your dad’s bright purpose, huh?” Kurama teases gently. “That’s a pretty name for a pretty girl. I’m Kurama, Naho. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Thank you for saving me, Kurama,” Naho whispers. “I was really, really scared.”

Despite himself, Kurama remembers a little blond boy in the woods, calling on his power for the first time to save a teacher. Remembers a haze of terror and resolve, the drive to protect even if it cost him his life. A sob catches in his own throat, and he bows his head, pressing his cheek to Naho’s dirty hair. “That’s okay,” he whispers back. “You were really brave anyway. I’m glad I could save you.”

It’s true. He hadn’t expected it to be, but it is. This isn’t attacking Kakuzu in a haze of crimson fury and the choking need for revenge. This is just…a little bit of good. One life made brighter, and even if she’s not quite one of Naruto’s precious people, he knows Naruto wouldn’t mind this pause in his mission. Not when it helped rescue a little girl.

An icy wind slides through the forest, rustling the treetops and making Kurama shiver. He eases back a little, stroking Naho’s hair comfortably, and clears his throat. “Think you can let me get my shirt back on?” he asks, patting her head. “If I’m going to Konoha with you, I don’t want to scare people.”

“It’s about a day and a half on foot,” the ANBU says unexpectedly, making Naho flinch as he crouches down next to them. A sharp grey eye studies the girl, then flicks up to Kurama’s face. More quietly, he says, “I can put her to sleep and take her myself. It would make things easier.”

Unconsciously, Kurama’s arm tightens around the little girl, and he bares his teeth before he can stop it. “Keep your damned jutsus to yourself,” he growls. “She’s just a kid, and she’s fine. I’ll carry her. There’s no need for that shit.”

The man snorts softly, even as Naho glances up at him with bright-eyed curiosity and says, “My daddy told me those are bad words.”

“Yeah, well, it was a bad suggestion,” Kurama huffs, reaching for his shirt. The tacky blood on his fingers smears a little, and he grimaces as he stands. That’ll teach him to go for the throat with his bare hands. Thankfully, there’s plenty of snow, and he settles Naho by the gnarled roots of a tree while he scrubs his skin clean. The ANBU follows, hovering like a shadow and making wary sweeps of their surroundings.

Giving the man a roll of his eyes, Kurama shakes excess water from his hand, then reaches for his top. “Cool it,” he orders. “No one with ill intentions is within a mile of us. We’ll be fine.” He shrugs the fabric on, and maybe it isn’t as warm as it could be, but the heavy cloth is still a relief against the bite of the wind. Quietly enough that the girl won’t hear, he asks, “Her parents are in Konoha, right?”

“She hired me,” the ANBU answers. “He was there when I left.”

Satisfied, Kurama nods and rises to his feet. “Are you cold, Naho?” he asks, figuring that she’s not. Her robes look pretty warm, and she’s got a shawl over her shoulders, but if she is he has no compunctions raiding the bandits’ supplies; it’s not like they’re going to be using the stuff, after all.

“I’m okay.” The girl smiles at him, still a little wary but mostly just sweet. “Are we going to see my daddy now?”

“We are,” Kurama assures her, crouching down to pick her up. She comes readily, and there are still
tear-tracks on her face, there's still a faint tremble in her voice, but she looks like a stubborn little thing, and despite the trauma Kurama is willing to bet she’ll be fine. Little kids are amazingly resilient. With a smile in return, he scoops her up, propping her on his hip, and turns to raise an expectant brow at his companion.

The ANBU looks at him, looks at the girl, and steps back. “I'll set up a perimeter,” he mutters, and is gone in a blur.

“Coward,” Kurama huffs, but when Naho glances at him he just shakes his head. “It’s nothing, princess. Some people are just silly.”

She gives him another faintly tremulous smile, then says, “If I'm a princess, does that mean you're my knight?”

Naruto would be laughing his ass off right now, Kurama thinks with a sigh, and it hurts, like a crippling blow. But it’s bearable, if gutting. “I could be,” he answers, glancing at the sun that’s just starting to rise and then turning south. “But I think I’d rather be a monster.”

He can’t quite tell if that statement’s a lie; this is Naruto's body, and as much as he’d prefer Naruto to still be the one in it, if that’s out of the question Kurama would rather it be in his own possession—and the irony of that statement makes him want to laugh bitterly—than Kaguya’s.

Naho wrinkles her nose. “Don’t monsters eat princesses?” she asks skeptically.

“Well, normally, but you're a special princess,” Kurama counters, tapping her lightly on the tip of the nose. “You’ve got powerful monster-taming abilities to make me your friend. ‘Sides, I think the ANBU over there would be a lot better at the whole knight thing than I would.”

There’s a sound suspiciously like the ANBU missing a branch and having to lunge for another, and Kurama hides a smirk.

The girl looks equally doubtful. “Really?”

Kurama really, really shouldn’t. He doesn’t want to get dragged into T & I the moment they set foot in the village after all. But…well. Kitsune, and all that. “Sure!” he says, just managing to smother the pure wickedness in his voice. “ANBU are strong and brave, right? And I best Sir ANBU over there has a dark, tragic past he’s trying to atone for—that’s how most knights are, right? He’s probably really handsome under that mask, too.”

“I still like you better, Kurama,” Naho declares after a moment of thought, apparently not convinced. “You can be a monster if you want to, as long as you're still my friend.”

Blue eyes just aren’t fair, Kurama thinks with an internal sigh, and pats Naho’s head. “No worries,” he tells her gently. “I’ll be your friend for as long as you need me.”

Satisfied, Naho puts her head down on his shoulder, one arm curled around his neck. The thumb on her other hand is inching towards her mouth, but Kurama isn’t going to say anything; he’s hardly going to deny her what small bits of comfort she can find. Gently rubbing her back, he makes for a small break in the trees and then towards the road beyond the woods.

Originally, he’d been planning to sneak into Konoha, find Naruto to make sure that some version of his jinchuriki was still alive and well, and then hightail it back out to hunt down Akatsuki. Still, as far as sneaking into a ninja village goes, walking through the front gate with an ANBU at his side will doubtless simplify things. Even if it puts him in the spotlight, Kurama’s confident that he can slip a watcher if he needs to. He won’t do anything to hurt Konoha—after all, there's never been a place
Naruto loved more—but he won't let them hold him, either. He’s got his mission, the one Naruto died for, and he’ll never waver from it.

With deadly silence, the ANBU leaps from the trees to land in the road beside him, then straightens easily and falls into step. Kurama gives him a sideways glance only to find that he’s getting the same in return, and has to look away again. Without the adrenaline, without the fight, it’s easy to remember just who this man is, what he meant to Naruto. Dead—long dead—but still a pain that was second only to Sasuke's.

“So,” he says gruffly, glancing down at Naho for want of a better place to aim his eyes. “What should I call you?”

Names have power. Names have meaning. Kurama knows it better than anyone; before, he only ever gave his name to one person, and only Naruto used it. Sasuke, Sakura, and the rest simply called him the Kyuubi, and Kurama preferred it that way. His name is his own, given to him by the Sage of Six Paths himself, and even now Kurama will never give it lightly. The rules are a bit different for humans, but…Kurama thinks this man would agree with him.

There's a long, long pause, and Kurama looks up again, half to check that the ANBU is still there. He is, gaze turned away, shoulders stiff and back straight. There's blood on his gloves, though he doesn’t seem to have noticed. Or maybe he has—Kurama's not good at catching things like that, especially when he himself doesn’t particularly care about the deaths they caused. Humans, and poor ones at that, and Naruto would yell and hit him for it but Kurama will never mourn them.

Then the man shifts, just a little, and his head lifts. One grey eye, sharp and steady, and the other…Kurama feels his hackles rise at the sight of red and black, and has to strangle back the low, furious growl that wants to rumble out. The Sharingan, and that Sharingan in particular, is never going to hold good memories for him.

A quick tip of the ANBU’s head to check their surroundings, a glance at Naho—mostly asleep already—and then he says very quietly, “I'm Hound.”

Kurama inclines his head, but doesn’t otherwise react. He already knew, after all, but he’s not about to use a name he hasn’t been given. A moment, a sudden thought, and then his mouth quirks up in a small, faintly wistful smile. Another bad idea, but…well. They always seemed to work out pretty well for Naruto.

Not looking at the man, he offers, “Uzumaki Kurama,” and pretends he doesn’t hear Hound’s breath catch.

Well. It’s something, at least.

*Something to hold on to,* Kurama thinks, burying his nose in Naho’s hair and just…missing. Missing Naruto.

*Soon,* he promises himself, and…it will be. Even if it’s just a glimpse, just a moment, that’s all he needs. Proof that Naruto, even if he’s not quite his Naruto yet, is still alive. Then he can move forward. Then he can keep walking, and he tells himself he won't look back.
Oh Kakashi, you slippery, introspective motherfucker, I forgot how much I utterly loathed writing you.

(Also, as is my usual, this fic freaking crawls until chapter seven, and I apologize for that. However, starting in chapter eight it takes a very sharp left turn and then snowballs into something that is six parts crack, four parts comedy, and about eight parts road trip from hell, so there’s at least that to look forward to.)

[propinquity /ˈprəpiŋkwɪti/ , the state of being close to someone or something: proximity. Late Middle English; from the Old French propinquité, via Latin propinquus ‘near’ from prope ‘near to’.]

Traveling as a human is still stupid and boring, but at least this time Kurama has something to occupy his attention.

“How’s it this red? Did you paint it?”

Seated on Kurama’s shoulder, one of his arms hooked over her legs to hold her in place, Naho pats at his hair, combing through the strands like she’s looking for the real color hidden underneath. Kurama rolls his eyes a little where she can’t see it, but answer as patiently as he’s able, “No. It’s just like that.”

He does wonder, a little morbidly, why he doesn’t simply look like Naruto, even though he’s grateful for it. Just knowing this is Naruto’s body is bad enough. It would be an even worse hell, having to see his lost jinchuuriki staring back at him every time he looked in a mirror. Granted, he hasn’t even done that much yet, regardless of it being Naruto’s last suggestion, and despite the having the opportunity at the inn.

It will feel final, Kurama thinks sadly. As grateful as he is, looking in a mirror will show him without a doubt that he’s the sole occupant of this form, that there’s little to nothing of Naruto left to it. The basic shape, maybe, and the blood Kurama has claimed with his assumed last name, but...everything else will be Kurama, and if the color of his skin and his hair is anything to go by, he’ll look very little like his lost friend.

Hound is watching them out of the corner of his eye, porcelain mask still concealing his face but body language wary. The fact that he’s walking next to them again is an improvement, though; he’d taken to the trees again the moment Naho woke up from her nap and started wanting to interact again. Kurama ignores the man as best he can, although he’s uncomfortably aware that this is indeed one of Naruto’s precious people, more or less. Maybe not quite, maybe not yet, but...the framework is there. Surely Naruto would want him to help, despite Kurama only having the vaguest idea how.

After all, this isn’t Naruto’s beloved perverted teacher, porn book fixed firmly in front of his face, ready with a disarming, deceptive smile the moment anyone tries to take him seriously. This is ANBU’s Hound, alert but silent, with a weight of old, half-faded bleakness around him that sets
Kurama's teeth on edge.

He doesn’t remember all that much of Hound’s history beyond the parts where it intersected with Naruto's. A bit about ANBU, a passing recollection that the brat’s other sensei, Yamato, once served under him, mention made of Itachi once doing the same. There's little else he can use to judge where he is in the time period, and it would definitely be suspicious to randomly ask how long ago the Kyuubi attack happened—especially, Kurama thinks dourly, if it hasn’t happened yet.

Kakuzu’s appearance was a clue, and at least means he’s back sometime before Naruto's first Chuunin Exams. Hidan was a new member of Akatsuki when they started seriously hunting the bijuu, and if he isn’t there the organization is probably still gathering power. Maybe finding Han was a coincidence, or maybe they were starting with what they considered the weakest, least protected jinchuuriki, since Han’s known more for his steam-enhanced taijutsu than any flashy ninjutsu, and most of the others are wary or locked away. Still not a concrete marker where the timeline is concerned, and Kurama's getting frustrated guessing. If—

“Hey, hey!” Naho chirps, yanking just a little too hard on Kurama's hair and making him swallow a yelp. “Are you a daddy too, Kurama?”

What the hell? Kurama eyes the girl on his shoulder incredulously, but in the face of her wide-eyed enthusiasm can’t quite muster the cutting retort he’d otherwise use. With a sigh, he rolls his eyes and says flatly, “No.”

Her expression crumples a little, and with a wild surge of terror at the thought of more tears, Kurama blurts out, “But I have siblings.”

Naho’s expression brightens like he flipped a switch—more than quickly enough to send a trickle of suspicion sneaking through Kurama's mind, though it’s rapidly forgotten when she says, “You do? Oh! How many? I've always wanted a little sister.”

Kurama hesitates, considering, but…what the hell. It’s not like the bijuu are widely known by their true names, rather than their tails. Still, probably best to avoid mention of Shukaku—the damned tanuki has a bad habit of introducing himself, or boasting about himself by name in the middle of his rampages, and though it’s unlikely Hound will make the connection, Kurama would rather not risk being ripped out of this body and sealed into another.

If that would even work. He’s a little curious, but definitely not enough to test it.

“Well, I’d give you mine,” Kurama answers dryly, “but I don’t have a sister. I've got eight brothers instead.” He’s wondered about that before, too, because as far as he knows gender is a voluntary choice for the bijuu, but most of them use masculine pronouns or male names. Chômei is really the only one he’d peg as female, or maybe neither, but given how the Nanabi talks he’s not going to make that call until he asks. For now, he’ll stick with the default.

“Eight?” Naho sounds awed.

Kurama gives her a quick smile, ducking a little to keep her from whacking her head on a branch. The forests have been getting thicker as they move towards Konoha, and they've been walking through trees for at least two hours now. “Yeah. I'm the oldest.” By, like, twelve seconds, but it counts, and Shukaku can just go suck on a lemon. “They're all really silly, even though they’re powerful. Matatabi likes to run up and down mountains for fun, and Saiken’s always blowing bubbles.” Well, his jinchuuriki is, but Kurama knows the Rokubi; Saiken is just as fond of them as his host. Besides, a little embellishment never hurt anyone, and it’s not as if Naho is ever going to meet the other bijuu.
Naho giggles, finally abandoning Kurama's hair to reach up and snatch at pretty leaves. “I bet you live in a biiiig house,” she says, stretching her arms out wide. “You’d need eight bedrooms, and a big kitchen, and a big table, and…” She trails off, face scrunching a little as she clearly tries to think of everything.

Kurama can't fight a faint, mostly sad smile, though he doesn’t let her see it. The last time he saw all of his fellow bijuu in one place, they were preparing to defeat Kaguya for the first time. After that, by the time they realized she’d managed to leave traces of herself scattered around the world and then come back through them, Chōmei and Isobu had both been devoured. Kokuō had gone into hiding, though it hadn’t helped him in the long run, and all the rest had tried to stand together and fight, but had been lured out and overwhelmed instead. The only ones Kurama ever saw after that were Shukaku and Gyūki, mostly because their jinchuuriki joined Naruto in spearheading the resistance. The Ichibi and Hachibi had also joined them, if briefly, but…

Kaguya had gotten to them in the end. She got to everyone in the end.

“Do they live in Konoha, too?” Naho asks, bending down to peer at his face, and Kurama tries to wipe away all the melancholy that’s gathered.

“No,” he manages after a second of struggle. “They live far, far away. I don’t think I’m going to be able to see them again for a while.”

Hound casts him a sharp look that shades toward considering, and Kurama ignores it. He doesn’t want to think about what he’s giving away, or what assumptions the ANBU might be making. It’s none of his business. Besides, if he thinks too much about it, the lump in his throat—stupid, stupid, because it’s not like he was ever close to the other bijuu, or friends with them, or, or anything even though the ones he knew are as dead as creatures of chakra can be—that lump will choke off his breath, and that’s definitely an ignoble way to die.

There's a pause, and then small arms wrap around the top of his head as Naho hugs the only part of him that’s within easy reach. “I'm sorry, Kurama,” she says, and she sounds sad. For him. Even though she was the one who just got kidnapped by bandits and held hostage for who knows how long. “I'm sure they miss you lots and lots. You're a really good big brother.”

He’s not. He wouldn’t even count himself a good friend, but she can hardly know that. “Thanks, princess,” he murmurs, and pats her knee gently. “I'm sure you'll be a great sister if you ever get the chance.”

She smiles at that, entirely pleased, and starts chattering about dolls and dress-up and all the things she could do with a sister, and for the sake of his own sanity Kurama tunes most of it out, though he tries to make interested noises at the appropriate times. Hound, he notices sourly, is edging away again, as if he’s about to make for the branches and hide, but Kurama is on to him, the coward.

The knowledge of how bad he seems to be with kids is tempered by the memory of Naruto's genin team, and Kurama has to stifle a snicker. If ever a man deserved to get saddled with Uzumaki Naruto, Uchiha Sasuke, and Haruno Sakura all at the same time, it’s him. And Kurama means that in every conceivable way.

(It’s slightly possible he still carries a grudge for that Thousand Years of Pain incident, but Kurama is definitely not telling.)
Kakashi has been ANBU for six years already. He’s seen plenty of killers and even more desperate souls. There have been traitors and heroes and normal people struggling under the weight of their burdens, and with an effort he’s learned to read them all. The past leaves a mark, and Kakashi knows that better than anyone.

It takes a certain kind of past, too, to make someone like himself, to create a man who can be a murderer in one instant and a friend in the next, with barely a heartbeat in between. There has to be darkness, pain—the kind of pain that you can turn on other people as easily as you can turn it on yourself, that you can swing like a sword even as you bleed crimson. An edge of viciousness, a touch of self-loathing, traces of *this is all I'm good for so I might as well* as you watch the light fade from your victim’s eyes.

Burdens like that can be tempered, turned into a weapon to do what’s right, but it’s so terribly easy for them to fester. And when you lance the sore, the only thing it weeps is death.

Or maybe that’s just him projecting.

Still, he saw Kurama tear out a man’s throat with his bare hands, then coo nonsense at a little girl with gore all over his skin. Kakashi is a shinobi, has been one all this life, but that was…an impressive shift in priorities.

Though perhaps it wasn’t. After all, the men were dead before Kurama allowed himself to be anything but a killer, and Kakashi knows that mindset intimately. Were he not on a mission, he might have done the same. The work was finished, the girl was rescued, and it was all right to go back to being human instead of a weapon. Box up the monster, wipe off the blood, paste on a smile and no one will ever know anything’s happened.

Kurama isn’t dressed like a shinobi, but that switch alone tells Kakashi that he is one, without a doubt.

There’s a squeal, a cheerful shriek, and it takes effort for Kakashi not to grab for his tantō. The other man casts him a glance that’s probably meant to be amused, but doesn’t quite manage it thanks to the lines that pull tight around his eyes—lines that say he knows exactly why Kakashi reacted as he did, and would join him if he had an ounce less pride. Even so, he tosses the little girl up in the air again, then catches her and says, “Doing okay, Naho?”

“Yep!” the girl laughs. “Do it again, Kurama!”

Technically, he shouldn’t be here. Kakashi should have killed him the moment they came face-to-face, or at the very least knocked him out. He should have put the girl to sleep, then taken her and headed for Konoha as fast as he could, because this is a mission. There’s no allowance for delays, especially when they take the form of mysterious strangers appearing out of nowhere. For all Kakashi knows, Kurama could be one of the bandits, or an enemy operative sent to capture the girl. But—

That first glimpse of him at the edge of the camp, wide startled eyes and then clear exasperation, didn’t seem like the reaction of an enemy. Add to that the fact that he didn’t understand basic shinobi signs, but caught the handful of Konoha ANBU code Kakashi threw in as a test, and then his strange ability to call up waves of force without so much as a hand sign, and it makes for a confusing picture.

Kakashi hasn’t forgotten Tenzō. Hasn’t forgotten Root, and Danzo’s desire for shinobi with unique bloodlines. And if that wasn’t some sort of kekkei genkai, Kakashi will eat his left sandal. After all, not only did he activate it without hand signs, but the redhead has *claws*. Small ones that look like...
fingernails, but even so. Kakashi saw them rip straight through unprotected flesh, and he’s not about to underestimate them. Even though Kurama isn’t carrying so much as a kunai, he’s got the chakra reserves and agility to justify it.

The little girl is talking again, but Kakashi doesn’t bother to listen; after all, that’s one of the reasons he allowed Kurama to come along. Let the redhead deal with the child. Even if he turns out to be an enemy, Kakashi is confident that he can handle the man, and even if he can’t, he’s certain he’ll be able to hold him off long enough to grab the girl and get away. Besides, listening to her chatter reminds Kakashi of Naruto, and the fact that it’s been weeks since he was in the village long enough to take even a passing glance at his sensei’s son. He doesn’t mind the missions, but…he misses being on Naruto’s guard.

“Are you a shinobi like Sir ANBU?” the girl asks, loudly enough to catch his attention, and he gives the pair a sideways glance. Naho has migrated to Kurama’s hip again, looking very pleased and very curious, and the other man has his eyes fixed forward, apparently pretending that he hasn’t got a four-year-old clinging to him like he’s her new favorite stuffed toy. Kakashi hides an amused snort, though judging by the faintly sour glance Kurama sends him he didn’t hide it well enough.

“Not really,” Kurama answers, and reaches up to tap his bare forehead. “No hitai-ate, because I’m not working for any of the villages. That’s how you can tell if a shinobi is your friend or not, princess.”

Unallied, then. It’s strange, because even given just the handful of skills Kakashi has seen, Kurama would make a skilled jounin anywhere he wished to go. Some villages, especially the smaller ones, are always looking for fresh blood, and there’s a certain level of prestige to the job. Yet more scraps of uncertainty to join all the others, and Kakashi frowns, casting another glance at his unexpected companion.

He remembers Kurama’s reaction when the girl admitted to being scared, remembers the grief that showed for half a heartbeat before he shoved it away. Grief like that—Kakashi understands it all too well. Desolation, sorrow, aimless fury—my world ended, that expression says. I understand your fear. My world ended and I’m the only one left.

Though maybe that’s him projecting, too.

“Like the leaf!” the girl chirps, drawing an exaggerated swirl in the air. “The shinobi that came to get me had leaves on their headbands.”

Kurama blinks at her, brows lifting faintly in surprise, and then glances up at Kakashi questioningly. Kakashi ignores the look; if Kurama is an enemy, he’ll already know the girl’s circumstances. If he isn’t, there’s no need to tell him.

Mouth tightening with clear aggravation, Kurama drops his eyes back to his passenger and manages a faint smile. Kakashi wonders if the girl can see how awkward it is, if that’s the reason she’s asking distracting questions and rambling. It wouldn’t be a surprise, given her mother’s identity. Geisha are brilliant at that kind of thing.

“Yeah,” Kurama allows, boosting her up a little higher on his side. (Kakashi estimates just how long he’s been carrying her without a break and adds above-average strength to the growing list of his abilities.) “A leaf means Konohagakure. They’re the ones your dad hired, so you can trust them. There are a lot of good people in Konoha.”

That’s a very broad statement for an unaffiliated shinobi to make. Kakashi lifts a curious brow, half-wishing he could ditch the mask, pull out his Icha Icha, and use that to cover his sideways glances.
ANBU masks are hell on the peripheral vision, and he’s definitely wary of this stranger. Wary and interested, because bits keep showing through, between his skills and his knowledge and his name, and surely any cover story worth using wouldn’t leave quite that many questions behind.

From there, the logical belief would be that it’s not a cover, but Kakashi has been a shinobi too long to simply let himself believe that.

The name alone is…jarring. Kakashi isn’t certain that his heart has entirely recovered yet from hearing it fall so unexpectedly from the man’s lips. This man especially, he thinks, casting Kurama another sideways glance. Because, the blood red hair aside, Kakashi would mistake him for a Kumo native—he has the same dark skin, although the deep red eyes are more usual. It’s not like villages have never intermarried, but…

There aren’t supposed to be many Uzumaki left to intermarr with. Uzushiogakure is twenty-five years destroyed now, and thanks to scavengers has been almost completely stripped of all traces of what it was. The ruins are mostly rubble and bones, and the village’s few remaining people are scattered. Uzushio was always a small village, hardly a fraction of Konoha’s size, and the Uzumaki clan made up the bulk of its shinobi. When the village fell, so did they. Maybe one or two survived, lost in other countries, but to meet one is entirely unexpected.

Too convenient, as well, given who Kakashi is and who trained him. Given that, had things turned out differently, he might as well be an older brother to the Kyuubi jinchuuriki. Given who lives in the village they’re headed for.

Kurama’s indignation when he suggested knocking the girl out was genuine. Kakashi could see it on his face, read it in his eyes as clear as day. The redhead isn’t practiced hiding his emotions, or he just doesn’t care to; like with Kushina, everything he feels is reflected on his face, and Kakashi is skilled enough at reading people to know that it isn’t faked. It’s too awkward, too quick a reaction. The truth behind it is painfully obvious. And…maybe it isn’t a front, but it’s certainly an odd coincidence. Kakashi has long since stopped believing in coincidences.

So. Kurama’s knowledge of Konoha’s specific ANBU code, his presence here on Kakashi’s mission, his odd ability—those all say Root. Or Danzo, at the very least.

On the other hand, his hair, his emotional nature, and his chakra reserves say stray Uzumaki. To be honest, that fits better than the Root theory; Danzo takes care to stamp every bit of sentimentality out of his operatives, and Kurama’s reaction to the girl has been nothing but sentimentality.

It’s…possible that Kurama is exactly who he says he is, even if it’s not exactly likely—after all, he looks at least ten years older than Kakashi, or maybe a little more. That would put him at around Minato’s age, and ten when Uzushio fell. Given the friendship between Uzushio and Konoha it’s conceivable that he learned ANBU signs there. It would also fit the claim that he’s not exactly a shinobi—the loss of his village meaning he was never promoted—and his claim that Konoha is full of good people.

Surely only an ally would say something like that.

And…

They live far, far away. I don’t think I’m going to be able to see them again for a while.

Kakashi knows loss when he hears it, and that was clear. A whole family, nine brothers, dead or so thoroughly scattered that there’s little hope of reuniting—that certainly sounds like the aftermath of
Uzushio's destruction.

Of course, this is all speculation. Kakashi could be wildly off the mark and leading himself further astray with every conclusion. It makes sense, though, and while it doesn’t quite quell Kakashi’s suspicion…

Well. It gives him an excuse for dragging the man along with him that the Sandaime will buy, beyond “But—small crying child, ew!”

Sixty-forty odds, Kakashi thinks, somewhere between morbid and reluctantly amused, that Sarutobi accepts it without booting him out the window. If, of course, Kurama doesn’t turn out to actually be an enemy and try to slit his throat sometime in the night.

“You said Konoha was about a day and a half?” Kurama asks suddenly, making Kakashi glance over. The girl is sacked out on his shoulder again, drooling a little, with one small hand fist ed in black cloth. Ostensibly Kakashi should find the image cute; as it is, he’s just glad she isn’t drooling on him.

“About,” he confirms after a moment. They’ve been walking the entire day, but given the child it’s an easy, practically boring pace. On his own, Kakashi could have been in the village hours ago.

Kurama huffs a little, mutters something that sounds close to “Like pulling goddamn teeth,” and then raises his voice to add, “You good to keep walking?”

Kakashi calculates the distance. If they don’t make camp—which, honestly, sits better with him than leaving himself vulnerable to an unknown shinobi for hours at a stretch—they can make it back to Konoha by midnight or a little after. Inconvenient timing, but Kakashi doesn’t think the Sandaime will be too put out to be dragged out of bed then. He was the one to assign Kakashi this mission, and make it an A-rank despite the lack of real danger. Though, Kakashi supposes, that’s more or less required when Fire Country’s Daimyo asks you to take care of something personally.

“Sure,” he agrees easily, then stiffens as an unpleasant thought occurs to him and casts Kurama a wary sideways glance.

Apparently able to read his trepidation clearly despite the mask, Kurama blows out a short, aggrieved sigh, rolls his eyes, and says with exasperation, “Get that look off your face, Hound. I’m good to carry her, so you can stop looking like you’re about to wet your pants at the thought of us trading.”

“Maa,” Kakashi protests, a little of the ANBU composure he tries to keep finally slipping in the face of this grave offense. “I’m concerned about her comfort. She looks so much happier with you, that’s all.”

“I’m sure,” Kurama says dryly, entirely skeptical, but doesn’t attempt to call him on it. Instead, he simply shifts Naho a little higher on his shoulder and picks up his pace. There’s another faint mutter, more incomprehensible than the last one, and Kakashi glances at him curiously despite the fact that Kurama doesn’t seem inclined to clarify.

“…You like children, then,” Kakashi finally offers, a poor attempt to break the silence but all he can really think of.

It earns him another soft snort, and Kurama looks away. “No,” he says flatly. “They all turn into snot-nosed whiners eventually. But…she’s been through a lot. Figure I can put up with her clinging to me for a bit, if that can make it better.”

Kind, Kakashi thinks without meaning to, turning his own gaze to the path ahead. That’s…probably
a mark in the not-Root column, then. He remembers Kushina’s kindness was much the same way, given offhand and with much indignation when anyone called her on it, but always there nevertheless.

Maybe Kurama really is an Uzumaki. Maybe he really is who he says.

Kakashi thinks of Naruto, lonely outcast in a village that should love him, and feels a faint tremor of foreboding slip down his spine. If that’s Kurama's aim, if getting close to Naruto is his goal, if he wants that just to have influence over the Kyuubi jinchuuriki—

Kakashi will gut him without hesitation or regret. Naruto might never know who Kakashi is, might never understand what they could have been, but he’s Minato and Kushina’s son. He’s family.

Kakashi will be dead and buried before he ever abandons his family again.
Kurama's first sight of Konoha in years isn’t the triumphant reclamation of a haunted ruin that Naruto always envisioned. It isn’t even the clandestine mission far behind enemy lines to finally bury the dead that his jinchuuriki wanted. Instead, it’s two hours after midnight, and Kurama's feet are sore and cold. Naho is asleep on his shoulder, bundled up in her wrap but leaving a wet patch of drool on his shirt. He’s cranky, temper short but directionless, and just the knowledge that Naruto is somewhere nearby—practically close enough to touch—has every square centimeter of his skin itching with the urge to find the little blond brat.

Hound in ANBU means that Naruto is alive. In the pale light of the moon, Kurama can just make out the four faces on the mountain, but though he’s not very good at telling humans’ ages, he doesn’t think Hound is just fourteen. So that means the Yondaime is dead, and Naruto is already a jinchuuriki.

His Naruto didn’t fling him back quite far enough to prevent everything—that probably would have taken Sasuke's chakra as well—but despite losing the chance to stop Obito's accident, or even just kill Madara when he was a child and take care of Zetsu before he could twist the knowledge in the Uchiha Shrine, Kurama can't be anything but pleased. Doing this in a time when Naruto didn’t exist, saving a world that wasn’t Naruto's and possibly never would be—he doesn’t know how well he’d be able to do something like that.

The gates gleam silver in the darkness, painted by the moon. Closed after dark, and Kurama glances at them a little warily, shifting Naho higher on his shoulder. Shinobi villages don’t stop working after nightfall, but people tend to be warier, and Kurama is an unknown. He doesn’t have a past, an identity, not so much as a single person able to vouch for him. (Well, Killer B might, knowing him, but he’s obnoxious and Kurama would prefer to keep half a country between them whenever possible.) If they let him in…

Then again, Kurama thinks a little wryly, glancing sidelong at his companion, maybe he’s not the most suspicious thing the ANBU has ever dragged home with him. The man certainly seemed eccentric enough when he was training Team 7.

As if hearing the thought, Hound casts him a sideways glance and says, “You can use chakra, right?”

Kurama only just manages not to splutter. He is an eons-old construct of power and might, shaped by the Sage of Six Paths himself. Use chakra? He is chakra. And if this skinny, scrawny, breakable human thinks that he can—

“Yes,” he gets out through gritted teeth, when it becomes obvious that Hound either doesn’t notice or is ignoring his indignation. “Yes, I can fucking use chakra, thank you.”

Hound hums, as though he’s not convinced, and that’s it, future teacher or not, Kurama is going to murder him. He’s going to string him up by his heels and—

Because he’s a rude, inconsiderate bastard, Hound leaps up and forward before Kurama can take his
revenge. He lands on the top of the wall, then tips over and out of sight, and Kurama gives an aggravated huff. Shoving his hair out of his eyes again, he makes sure Naho is steady, then crouches, shoves the barest trickle of chakra towards his feet, and leaps. The wall passes below him, easily cleared, and Kurama touches down lightly in the street, barely stirring the dust. It’s a textbook-perfect landing.

Of course, Hound isn’t even looking at him. He’s half a block away, walking quickly, and as he turns the corner he glances back to give Kurama an impatient jerk of his head.

Dead man. That is a dead man right there, and Kurama will be more than happy to remind him of that fact.

With a low growl—not nearly as intimidating as it should be, and that still ticks Kurama off, because Naruto played around with his appearance easily enough; would it have been so damn hard to give him the vocal cords he was used to as well?—Kurama stalks after the ANBU, reminding himself that no matter his irritation, no matter how much he wants to shove Naho at the other man and run to where Naruto is, he has to be patient.

Patience is something Kurama knows. He’s been trapped inside human bodies for over a hundred years now, and a good portion of it was spent waiting for one of them to use too much of his chakra and let him out. Of course, it never happened, and then Naruto appeared and turned everything on its head, but the waiting still took place. Kurama knows how to bide his time, even when it’s as important as this.

“You know,” he says a little sourly as he catches up with the grey-haired ANBU, “she’s fast asleep. I’m sure you won’t get hives if you just carry her wherever you need to go.”

Hound glances at him sideways, and even though it doesn’t look like he took a step away, there’s suddenly more room between them than there was a moment ago. “Mm,” he hums noncommittally, then tips his head in the direction they’re heading. “The lights are on in the Hokage's office. Only a few more minutes and you’ll be free.”

Kurama rolls his eyes. “So? I don’t particularly want to see your Hokage, and if I'm going to find somewhere to sleep that’s not the ground or a tree, I should go before the inns close.”

That gets him another sideways look, sharper than he’d like. If Hound gets too suspicious, it will make getting to Naruto, even just to look at him, far harder than it needs to be. Still, all Hound says is a lazy, “You don’t want recognition for your actions?”

“What actions?” Kurama asks grumpily. “The innkeeper in the town said she’d let me stay the night if I took care of the bandits, so I did. I somehow doubt that you needed the help, even if you are an asshole who’d knock out a terrified little brat, so I pretty much muscled my way into your mission.”

There’s a pause, and when Kurama warily glances up, Hound is watching him much more blatantly. “Eight to one,” the ANBU points out after a moment. “Those are heavy odds.”

“You're ANBU,” Kurama counters, confused as to why they're even arguing about this. If that’s even what they're doing. “If stacked odds were a problem, you wouldn’t be. Now are you going to take her or not?”

“No,” Hound says calmly. “We’re here, and I don’t want to wake her. You might as well keep carrying her.” Then, casual as anything, he subtly quickens his steps and strides right into the Administration Building.
Fuck, Kurama thinks tiredly, staring after Hound as he pauses on the threshold. He…really doesn’t want to do this. Really. Going to the Hokage's office, having to stand in front of that desk, with the familiar view of Konoha at night beyond it—

No. That’s supposed to be Naruto’s chair, his desk, his window. That’s supposed to be Naruto in those robes, that stupid hat. And anyone else—they might as well be an imposter, a fake. No matter how much Naruto loved Sarutobi, the man isn’t Kurama’s Hokage. He isn’t Naruto. He just—isn’t. And no matter how easily Kurama gave himself away to Kokūō, he’s not about to broadcast the news to anyone else. Kokūō would have recognized him by his chakra if nothing else, because the Gobi knew him when he wasn’t completely consumed with rage and hatred. But the people of Konoha have never seen him another way, and Kurama doesn’t want to risk them finding out.

Resenting the Sandaime for his identity, being rude to the man called the God of Shinobi just because he’s not the one Kurama wants to see—that’s probably a good way to get their suspicions fixed squarely on him. And Kurama knows himself; it’ll be damned hard not to be rude, given the twisting, roiling knot of emotion in his chest.

Still, it’s not like there's really much choice. If anyone can get him tossed out of Konoha on his ear, it’s the Hokage, and getting in after that without alerting the Barrier Squads will take more work than Kurama would like. He’s got power, definitely, but it’s similar to Naruto's. Finesse isn’t something that comes easily to him, and to slip in undetected…

Well. Even Obito didn’t manage it, when he met with Itachi before the Massacre, and he was trained by the sneaky bastard Madara. In comparison, Kurama might as well be a hurricane trying to pass itself off as a zephyr.

With a huff that’s nearly a groan, Kurama follows Hound, slipping through the darkened lower levels and up the stairs. There are more ANBU around him—he can feel their chakra, even though they’re probably trying to hide—but he ignores them in favor of tracking Hound’s voice, then Sarutobi’s. The office door is open when he reaches it, and Kurama steels himself, touches Naho’s back to ground himself a little, and then steps through.

Sharp, dark eyes land on him instantly as the Sandaime gracefully rises to his feet. The robes and hat are gone, something Kurama is grateful for, but it doesn’t do much to make Sarutobi look any less dangerous. Maybe a civilian would write him off as an old man, but Kurama can feel the vast, perfectly controlled chakra coiled beneath his skin, just waiting to be used. This is the man who walks firmly in the grey of a shinobi’s world, who survived three wars. Kurama will never see him as anything less than the serious threat he is.

“Hokage-sama,” he says quietly, bowing as much as he can without waking Naho.

The Sandaime smiles faintly, eyes crinkling. It’s a warm expression, natural more than calculated, and that’s one of the things that makes Sarutobi so dangerous. Every move he makes, he means. His conviction is a terrifying thing. “I hear that you are Uzumaki Kurama,” he says warmly. “You're a long way from home, then.”

Kurama stiffens a little, and has to force himself not to take a step back. For half a second, all he can see is Naruto falling, a dark sky with Kaguya looming before them, blood on the ground and the smell of rot in the air. That was home, Naruto was his home, and now—

“I have no home,” Kurama growls, low and sharp. He carefully tugs Naho’s arms from around his neck, settles her in the chair before the Hokage's desk, and then takes a step back. When he glances up, Sarutobi is watching him with something unreadable on his face, and Kurama has to grit his teeth for fear of snarling at the man again. Once he has his mouth under control, he takes a breath and
says, “Mission complete, right? Then if you don’t need me for anything else, I have to find a place to sleep.”

One last jerky bow—and that’s getting old fast, no matter how he knows that if he wants to blend in with the humans he has to follow their customs—and he turns on his heel, marching out of the room without waiting to be dismissed. It’s idiotic, showing such clear disdain, but…

But this place is getting to him. All of Konoha, the formerly dead faces once again appearing everywhere, buildings that Kurama saw collapsing into rubble steady and strong once more. There are only a handful of people on the streets, but they're mostly shinobi, and that makes it even worse.

At one time, Naruto knew every last one of his shinobi by name. He knew their faces, their files, the stories that the official records left out. They loved him, and he loved them. He died for them, and they’ll never know it. Whatever version of Naruto that exists is going to have to fight to get them to acknowledge him. He’s going to have to struggle and strain and bleed, just so they’ll stop calling him a monster, just so they’ll see the hero instead of the jinchuuriki, and Kurama hates them for it. Hates every last one, from Naruto’s future teammates to the oldest civilian, and…

Naruto wouldn’t want that. Naruto loves Konoha, loves its people no matter how they hate him. The little bits of resentment festering in his soul are so much less than they would be in anyone else. Kurama had to dig, the first time, in order to find them. It was hard, and in any other person that resentment would have consumed them years earlier. But Naruto was, is, special, and never let other people’s impressions rule him.

Kurama needs to leave. He needs to see that Naruto is alive, prove it to himself, and then he needs to go. Akatsuki is aware that someone is hunting them, so he has to move quickly if he wants to catch them off guard. There's no time to waste; the sooner Akatsuki is gone, the sooner Kurama can deal with the Gedō Mazō—preferably by smashing it into tiny little bits and scattering the dust to the winds.

His fists clench, and he has to push down the chakra that wants to rise, reacting to a threat that isn’t present. Maybe—maybe he should take out the Statue first. That would neatly negate the problem of Akatsuki catching the bijuu. Without somewhere to seal them, it will be useless to capture them. And there wouldn’t be a vessel for the Juubi, even if they did manage to resurrect it.

Kurama likes this plan. He likes it even more because it means he gets to bring his full power to bear, and break something really thoroughly.

In this, at least, he’ll need to be subtle. Barging into the Akatsuki base flat-out is a bad idea, and while Kurama isn’t entirely opposed to those, he is opposed to getting ripped out of his body and stuffed into a demonic statue. Again. So he’ll have to make his move when the base is empty, or at least mostly unoccupied. Which means he’ll have to rig some sort of distraction, but what on earth would be important enough to get all nine Akatsuki members out—

A hand on his shoulder, sudden and startling. On instinct, half of it Naruto’s well-remembered reflex and the other half driven by the memory of grey-veined hands dragging shinobi down to their deaths, Kurama spins, lashing out with claws. They scrape across porcelain, leaving long gouges before Kurama wrenches back, heart pounding in his throat.

“Don’t do that!” he snarls. “Do you want to lose that empty head of yours?”

He can’t quite see the ANBU’s expression, but he gets the feeling that there's a brow arched in his direction. “Oops,” Hound says blandly, raising a hand to finger the long score-marks in his mask. Then he shrugs faintly and tosses Kurama the envelope he’s carrying.
Automatically, Kurama catches it, feeling the heft. It’s thick—full of paper, by the weight, and with a faint frown Kurama opens it. Ryō, and a lot of them.

“If you were trading bandit extermination for a room, I'm assuming you're low on funds,” Hound says, calm and the next best thing to lazy. “That’s half of the mission pay. The Hokage agreed that you earned it with your assistance.”

The flashfire surge of fury takes Kurama by surprise, and he clenches a hand around the envelope. “I don’t need your pity,” he growls, and the only reason he doesn’t throw it straight back in Hound’s face is because he knows the ANBU would dodge it. “I don’t need anyone’s pity! I've survived on my own, I can—”

“It’s not pity,” Hound cuts him off, still calm. “You were my comrade for this mission, and you took care of the girl. It’s what’s owed to you for that, and I have more than enough money. Splitting the pay is nothing to me, but it will help you get a room and a meal. Accept it.” A tip of his head, faint in the moonlight, and then Hound leaps up onto the rooftops and is gone.

Kurama can't move, frozen in the street with the man’s words ringing in his ears. You were my comrade, he said. You were my comrade, so much like Naruto's words to him on the battlefield. So much like that first acknowledgement of him as something more than a mindless, malicious beast. So much like the words he’s held dear for decades now.

You're not the monster fox anymore. You're one of my teammates from Konoha, Kurama.

Naruto's first use of his name, and the memory of it makes Kurama's eyes burn, makes him press a hand over his face and concentrate on breathing. Comrades, and he hadn’t thought he’d ever be called that again, because—because this is a mission, alone in what might as well be a foreign, hostile land, and Kurama can allow nothing to distract him, stall him. There's absolutely nothing that will stop him from rooting out Akatsuki and destroying all of Kaguya’s paths back to existence, but —

It’s…nice. Nice to hear, nice to know that, even for a few hours, he was what he used to be, a part of something larger. A partner, even if it wasn’t to Naruto.

It will never happen again, of course, but Kurama can still appreciate that it did.

Enough, he tells himself, and this time it works. He shakes off the thoughts, tucks the memory of Naruto's words and bright-edged conviction back down inside himself, and turns away. It’s tempting to leave now, head for the Akatsuki base in the Mountains’ Graveyard, but he doesn’t have a plan yet, doesn’t even have the vaguest idea of one. One night to rest his feet, safe in a shinobi village and a warm bed, won't hurt.

Tomorrow he’ll find Naruto, even if all he can manage is passing him on the street. Tomorrow he’ll make sure that his jinchuuriki is all right, and then he’ll go.

He tells himself yet again that once he does, he won't look back.

“Well,” the Sandaime says a little wryly, “if someone went looking for an actor who could play an Uzumaki, they certainly found their money’s worth in Kurama.”

Kakashi doesn’t look at his Hokage, eyes on the four long scratches decorating the mask in his
hands, but he nods in agreement. That was Kushina’s reaction, almost exactly, the one time Minato tried to split his mission pay with her. Of course, she’d also beaten him over the head with her sheathed tantō and kicked him in the ass so hard that he flew face-first into a mud puddle, and Kakashi is relieved that Kurama's temper doesn’t quite seem to match hers, even if the rest of their actions are eerily similar.

“You think he’s an actor?” he asks, finally glancing up.

Sarutobi’s mouth tightens a little and he sighs, turning away towards the window. “I don’t know,” he says after a moment. “It could be a very clever trap, given who else bears the Uzumaki name, but… there is grief in that man, Kakashi, and I don’t think it’s the type that could be faked.”

Kakashi thinks of Kurama's voice when he talked about his brothers, thinks about the small, sad smile he gave when he spoke his name. Remembers the moments of inattention on the road, touched with grimness, the way he looked at Konoha when it came into view. Uncertainty, wariness, resentment, longing, grief—all of it played over his face, then was firmly stuffed away and ignored.

That’s a reaction Kakashi is intimately familiar with.

“Uzushio fell a long time ago,” is what he finally says.

Sarutobi hums, not quite agreement, but acknowledgement of a factual statement. “It did. However, Kurama couldn’t have been more than twelve at the time, and losses suffered as a child are…hard to overcome.” He gives Kakashi half a glance before turning away, and Kakashi grimaces, knowing that was pointedly aimed at him. Entirely true, but…a little more blatant than the Hokage would normally allow himself to be. Then again, seeing a ghost is always unsettling. Even if it is just a ghost of a bloodline thought lost.

Carefully, Kakashi sets his mask down on the desk between them, making sure the claw-marks are completely visible, and offers, “What he used against the bandits—I’ve never seen an ability like that. It was like a shockwave. Not gravity, just…force. Enough to break bones.”

“As far as I’m aware, there were no kekkei genkai unique to the Uzumaki,” Sarutobi allows after a moment of thought. “But then, Kurama hardly looks to be pure Uzumaki. Something from his other parent, perhaps? Given the state of our relations with Kumo, we can hardly expect a full accounting of their bloodlines.” He touches the surface of the mask lightly, then glances up. “Since you’ve already seen him fight, I want you to follow him, either as Hound or as yourself. Whoever he is, there are too many questions, and I don’t want to be caught off guard.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama,” Kakashi murmurs, dipping into a brief bow and then stepping away. A shunshin carries him down to the street, and he pauses in the moonlight, casting a glance around the sleeping village.

Kurama had faltered, when Kakashi called him a comrade. His eyes had gone wide, his breathing stuttered, and he’d frozen as though Kakashi had stabbed him. Except that getting stabbed likely wouldn’t have made him so much as blink, and Kakashi’s words had practically cut his legs out from under him. It was the reaction of a man alone, a man with nothing and no expectations of that state ever changing.

Kakashi knows that intimately, too, from the first lightless days after Rin’s suicide, and then again after Minato's death. It speaks of a loss that gutted, that nearly killed. A loss that would have been kinder were it actually fatal, because what it leaves behind—a husk, a doll, a creature of grief and anger and aching, tearing loneliness—is worse than any sort of death could ever be.
His suspicions haven’t abated in the slightest. Kurama is still one half-step above enemy, and only kept there by the genuineness of his response to Naho. One wrong twitch and Kakashi won’t hesitate to kill him, to remove him as a threat to the village and Naruto.

However, that doesn’t mean he can’t understand the man’s grief. He understands it all too well.

With a tired breath, Kakashi summons Bisuke—one of his ninken who can be counted on to actually manage subtlety, unlike the majority of them—and sends him after the redhead, with orders to report when the man wakes. For his part, Kakashi heads towards his tiny apartment, more than ready to sleep. The mission was hardly strenuous, but an entire day walking next to a man who could possibly attack him at any moment—or attempt to kidnap the Daimyo’s illegitimate daughter and only current heir—has left him tense, and eager for a few hours of mindlessness.

Despite the draw of unconsciousness, however, he finds his feet carrying him right past his building, through the darkened training ground with its three familiar posts, and finally coming to a stop before an achingly familiar shape.

It’s too dark to read the names carved on the Memorial Stone, but even so, Kakashi’s eyes unerringly fall on the correct lines, and he tucks his hands into the pockets of his flak jacket as he says his silent hellos.

Obito.

Rin.

Minato.

Kushina.

Six years now, since those last two names were added. Six years since Kakashi lost the closest thing he had to family since his father’s suicide. Six years since he threw himself headlong into ANBU, never quite expecting to survive. He’s a genius, though, no matter how little good it’s done him, and part of his genius is the ability to adapt. He’s lasted, even if he didn’t expect to.

And now, looking back, he regrets it. Not his survival, but the decision as a whole. It’s been years, and he’s come to term with the Sandaime’s actions, Minato’s, Kushina’s. He understands, too, that Minato's choice was the necessary one where the village was concerned, and while he’ll always miss his sensei, he’s proud of him, too.

The only one he really hates is himself.

Six years ago he buried himself in ANBU, half slow suicide and half a quest for forgetfulness, and it’s only now that he’s finally surfacing. Only now that he can see how his retreat has effected the one person he never wanted to hurt.

Naruto has grown up alone, outcast, reviled. The only kindness he’s ever experienced has come from the Sandaime, his Academy teacher, and the owner of Ichiraku. Kakashi himself has done nothing, and though he loves the boy, he can hardly bear to look at him sometimes. He’s so much like his parents, and it…hurts.

*How selfish,* Kakashi thinks a little wryly, but really, when in his life hasn’t he been selfish? Always protecting himself, always retreating, always holding himself apart until it’s just a little too late. With his father, with Obito, with Rin—maybe, if he’d just tried harder, he could have saved all of them.

Now he’ll never know.
And still his cowardice is keeping him from being anything to Naruto, even a distant friend. He could, if he wanted to; it’s been long enough that a solitary ANBU befriend a lonely orphan won’t raise too many brows, and Kakashi is already considered eccentric even among shinobi. Minato’s enemies are no longer quite so interested in getting their revenge on anyone connected to the Yondaime, and the Sandaime has managed to keep Naruto’s existence quiet until now, so very few people know Minato spawned. Kakashi could walk up to Naruto, buy him ramen, and gain a friend, and no one would look twice at it.

He already knows he won’t.

It’s cruel, craven, selfish. It’s terrible and awful and despicable, but he won’t. Maybe someday. Maybe then.

But not today, not tomorrow. Kakashi is mired, stuck. Understanding and forgiveness don’t do away with the hurt, and not even the thought of Naruto in need of a friend, of support, is enough to drag Kakashi forward.
Maybe it’s the familiarity of Konoha, the well-remembered hum of chakra from hundreds of shinobi all gathered together and more or less at peace, but Kurama sleeps far more deeply and for far longer than he intends to. When he finally opens his eyes, there’s sunlight slanting through the window, and the bustle of people is clear even from beyond the glass.

Dreams are a fading tremor in his composure, bits of grief and horror already sliding away, and Kurama lets out a heavy breath, pushing his hair out of his face with one slightly shaky hand as he sits up. He’s spent a good portion of his last hundred years of existence sleeping so far—being locked up in a human’s body is anything but riveting—but if this keeps happening, he thinks he might swear off on it all together. At least when he’s awake, he can distract himself. His unconscious mind isn’t so forgiving.

Hard on the heels of that thought comes another, and this one is thankfully far more heartening. Naruto is somewhere out in Konoha, a child with sun-bright hair and sky-blue eyes and a smile warmer than anything. Honestly, Kurama doesn’t even need to be the target of that smile; all he wants is to know that it’s real, it exists. Maybe it can never quite be his again, but—

He doesn’t want to consider that. His determination is holding, steady in the face of his Naruto’s last smile, his last request, but…too much and he might falter. Too many reminders and he thinks he’ll just…break.

How can humans be so weak when he knows they can also be incredibly strong?

But…Kurama can’t help a faint smile as he buries his face in his upraised knees. They can be strong. So strong. It was Naruto who taught him that, powering through every obstacle set before him with determination and willpower alone. Despite Naruto’s parentage, despite his birth, he still had to pull himself up from nothing, from a mire of discrimination and hatred, and where anyone else would have been overwhelmed with darkness, Naruto emerged entirely untouched. With a true understanding of the darker sides of humanity, a unique sensitivity to others’ troubles, but…untainted.

Kurama himself is so dark that he all but drips malice, because that’s who and what he is. Naruto was the one to show him that he could be more. And he will be. In this he’ll play the hero like Naruto wanted, though he suspects it will be closer to Itachi’s version than Naruto’s own. He’s not cut out to be a center-stage hero, not really. Pride and arrogance and power can only carry him so far, and while Kurama has those in spades, he’s lacking the other crucial bits. Like compassion, and selflessness, and the ability to love so freely.

He loves Naruto. Loved the Sage. No one else has ever quite managed to make the cut.

But he does love Naruto. And today—today he’ll finally see proof that the boy is still alive.

That thought brings a lightness with it, a surge of determined happiness that Kurama hasn’t felt in a very, very long time. It propels him out of bed without hesitation, even when the sunlight would otherwise tempt him to simply bask in it for a few hours. He isn’t hoping for much—a glimpse, a
glance, maybe the chance to catch sight of Naruto's smile if he’s really lucky—but...anything will be better than the nothingness that haunts him right now. Better than the lack that’s eating away at his gut like a particularly vicious acid.

Naruto was his first friend. The Sage was a father, but...Naruto won himself a place in Kurama’s regard, wanted to, worked for it and didn’t give up until Kurama had acknowledged him. For so long Kurama was the creature that everyone feared, a monster and a natural disaster and a mindless beast to chain up and lock away, but...Naruto learned. Learned and realized and set him free, and maybe a large part of Kurama's love can be linked to gratitude, but he doesn’t care. He loves Naruto, and so he’ll save him.

His stomach is growling again, but Kurama ignores it, slipping out of the inn and into the throng of people. The sun is high above him, more than halfway across the sky, and the realization that he slept for so long is a little unnerving. Almost twelve hours, if he had to guess, and while it’s hardly a sleep of years the way he sometimes rested as a bijuu, it’s a long time. Time he could have spent near Naruto.

The crowd is pushy, heading every direction, so Kurama keeps to the edges and picks his way around carts and little knots of stationary civilians. Several shinobi in the midst of things eye him carefully as they pass, but Kurama ignores them, letting his senses stretch. There's an overwhelming hum of chakra to Konoha, one he’d honestly forgotten. He can't remember the last time he felt so many shinobi in one place—years, three of them at least, he thinks, and it’s disconcerting now.

Still, Naruto's chakra is unique, bright and strong no matter how old he happens to be, and intimately familiar. Kurama reaches out, spreads his senses over the village even as he walks, and concentrates.

There. There, like the sudden flicker of a bonfire lit, flames climbing towards the sky and stray sparks leaping heavenward, and Kurama's jinchuuriki finally comes into focus.

Young. He’s young, so young, the blaze of his chakra undiluted and barely touched, but Kurama comes to a halt at the edge of the street and closes his eyes regardless. Because just feeling it, just sensing it, is like emerging from darkness and turning his face to the summer sun. Because that’s Naruto, so vivid and alive, and the mere touch of his chakra drives away the memory of a familiar body falling.

One touch, and all Kurama can think is alive.

Damn it all, but you're alive. You're here.

His eyes are hot again, and there's a curious itchy ache in his chest, right near his heart. Kurama wraps his arms around himself, fingers and sharp nails digging into his elbows as he grips them, but the little bit of pain means nothing.

Naruto is alive. He’s halfway across the village, surrounded by equally familiar chakra signals, and though he’s young, he’s not that young. Six years old, Kurama would guess, if his memory isn’t failing him. Just starting the Academy, just learning to use his chakra—

The Academy.

Suddenly, Kurama wants to curse.

There aren’t any children on the street. Kurama hadn’t really marked it before, because he’s so unused to there being any people on the street, but...he can't see or hear a single child above a certain age. The cluster of chakra signals around Naruto is tightly packed, closely grouped, and that
can mean only one thing.

Damn it. He’d forgotten that Naruto has classes. And, despite his frequent skipping, Naruto did actually—does actually end up in class more often than not. After all, Iruka is a terror, and one of the few people Naruto respects enough to obey.

With a low groan, Kurama drags a hand though his hair and leans back against the corner of the building behind him, sighing irritably when red strands simply tumble back over his eyes. This…is not part of his plan. It’s only about an hour after noon, and that means he still has at least two hours to wait until Naruto is released. He could just head to the Academy and try to peer through the windows to see his jinchuuriki, but he’s fairly certain the Hokage would take that the wrong way. Not to mention he’d feeling like a fucking creeper loitering around the school to catch a glimpse of a six-year-old boy.

So. He’s got several hours to kill, even though the urge to see Naruto is like an itch beneath his skin. Hours left in a village that holds only ghosts brought back to life through Naruto’s sacrifice, with nothing to do and a restlessness growing inside him that would, in other circumstances, lead to him uprooting trees and breaking boulders just to burn off some frustration.

Actually, that’s not such a bad idea.

Well. It kind of is—he’s trying to keep a low profile, and wrecking one of Konoha’s training grounds isn’t the best way to go about it—but Kurama's finding it hard to care at the moment. Decided, he turns—

And nearly crashes into the man standing right behind him.

Kurama leaps back with a yelp, pulse suddenly rabbiting in his veins and his heart in his throat. His shoulder slams painfully into the corner of the building, and the sudden lack of anything solid behind him almost puts him on his ass. At the last moment, though, he manages to get his feet under him, and staggers to a stop.

“Don’t fucking do that!” he snarls. “You moss-haired bastard, are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

One grey eye blinks innocently at him, almost hidden by the orange book held open in front of the man’s face. “Maa, maa, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hound protests, sounding faintly wounded. He’s dressed like a normal jounin again, clearly off ANBU duty, but his appearance here can’t be a coincidence.

“That lichen creeping into your brain, too?” Kurama huffs, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at the other man. “If you keep sneaking up on me, Hou—"

“Hatake,” he cuts in smoothly. “Hatake Kakashi.”

Right. ANBU and their secret identities. Kurama can’t help rolling his eyes; if they really want to keep their identities from other people, they should probably start wearing hoods or crap like that. Especially when their hairstyles are as unsubtle as Kakashi’s. “Hatake,” he allows grumpily. “Keep sneaking up on me and I won’t be responsible for whatever holes get punched in you.”

“Sorry, have we met before?” Kakashi asks guilelessly.

Kurama stares flatly at him for a long moment, then growls, turns on his heel, and plunges back into the crowd. He doesn’t have much hope of losing the jounin, but, well. Points for trying, right? And if he keeps standing there, he’ll likely attempt to put a fist through the man’s face. As entertaining as
that would be, it definitely wouldn’t keep him in the Hokage's good graces, questionable as those are right now.

Before he can even consider the possibility of his escape being successful, a shoulder brushes his, and easy as you please, Kakashi falls into step beside him. The book is gone, but he’s got his hands tucked into his pockets and his eye is crinkled, as if he’s smiling lazily. He casts a sideways glance at Kurama, either not noticing or not caring that he’s being pointedly ignored, and says, “You know, some people might consider that rude. I gave you my name. Aren’t you going to give me yours in return?”

Kurama gives him another growl, but, knowing how stubborn the bastard can be, manages to unclench his jaw enough to get out, “Uzumaki Kurama.”

A passing shinobi who’s vaguely familiar—an Inuzuka, given the pair of nin-dogs trailing after her—gives him a sharp look, but Kurama doubts she heard him over the sound of the crowd. Her dogs are giving him suspicious looks, too, and he bares his teeth at them. The dogs recoil and the woman bristles, but before she can approach a hand closes around Kurama's elbow.

“It’s the blood,” Kakashi says, almost cheerfully. “If you don’t want everyone with a good nose jumping away from you, you might want to change.”

Kurama blinks at him, caught off guard, and then remembers the not-quite-neat way he’d dispatched several of the bandits. Han’s robe is probably splattered with blood, but he hasn’t cared enough to notice. Fur doesn’t have these kinds of problems, after all—lick it and it’s clean, or brush it if it’s really bad, and then you’re good. Clothes seem...inconvenient, what with how -washing them takes so much time and effort.

Well, that’s one way to kill time, Kurama supposes.

“There a river?” he asks gruffly. “I can—”

“Maybe you should just buy another set,” Kakashi proposes, cheerfully steamrolling over his question as he steers Kurama down a side-street. “And possibly shoes.”

Despite how cold his feet have been getting, Kurama gives Kakashi a skeptical look. He’s about as much a part of nature as any tree, and he does just fine as he is. He can't see that strapping flimsy bits of wood and fabric to his feet will improve much. In return, Kakashi just gives him another smile.

With an aggravated sigh, Kurama gives in for the moment. He supposes it will be nice not to drown in his clothes, and given the number of shinobi with sensitive noses in Konoha—foremost among which is his current escort—it’s probably best not to waltz around smelling like dried blood unless he’s trying to make a statement.

Kakashi seems to notice the sudden lack of protest, because he lets go of Kurama's arm to simply walk next to him again. “I was under the impression that moss was green,” he says, directing them towards a small shop.

Kurama blinks, caught off guard. “What?” he demands, baffled. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You compared my hair to moss,” Kakashi reminds him, and despite the statement his tone is still upbeat. “Moss is green.”

“Ever seen an old oak?” Kurama counters waspishly. “That silvery moss that hangs down? That’s what your hair looks like.” As soon as they're through the door, he pulls away from the other man
and heads for the nearest stack of folded uniforms. Most of them are Konoha's standard deep blue, but for all that Kurama's an ally, he's not a Konoha shinobi. He bypasses the blue, reaching instead for plain shades of brown. Better for blending in than black, after all, especially if he's heading northeast. The forests thin out through Lightning Country, and there are a lot of mountains between him and the Mountains' Graveyard. Dirt-color can only help.

In the end, he gets several of each, because knowing his opponents he’s practically guaranteed to lose whatever he wears into a fight. Between that and a haori made of heavier cloth, it uses up a good chunk of the ryō he has left, and Kurama frowns down at the much thinner envelope. Damn. Humans and their inconvenient currency. This would be a lot easier if he could just take what he needed.

But Naruto would smack him over the head for thinking like that, Kurama knows, and he pockets the remainder with a sigh. At least with warmer clothes, he won't have to worry about getting lodging, and he’s perfectly happy hunting his own food if he needs to. The more he can avoid humans on his mission, the better. After all, who knows what the Akatsuki’s response will be when Kakuzu reports in. Maybe they’ll turn to hunting him instead.

It takes effort not to bare his teeth in a dangerous grin. Honestly, Kurama wouldn’t be entirely opposed. That would make his job a lot easier.

Ignoring the way Kakashi is positioned pointedly beside the shoe rack, Kurama mutters a quick thank you to the man behind the counter and heads for the door, bag slung over his shoulder. He'll have to find some ink and scrolls to seal it all away—there's no way he’s going to burden himself down with a pack, not when he knows from experience how easy it is for such things to get left behind.

A quick check of the sun proves that barely an hour has passed, and Kurama restrains a frustrated snarl, reaching out automatically. Naruto's chakra is still blazing, but there's an edge to it that Kurama knows to be frustration, and he's moving. Sparring, probably, Kurama thinks, pausing on the street corner and closing his eyes. He can't tell who Naruto is fighting against, since the chakra signatures are so tightly packed, but frustration means it’s someone better. It also means that Kurama wants nothing more than to swoop in and kick the little brat’s ass on Naruto's behalf, although he knows that Naruto wouldn’t take kindly to it. Still. Still, it would mean seeing Naruto, speaking to Naruto, and that’s more than enough to make the thought tempting.

He wants to go to Naruto right now. Wants more than anything to just sweep in, snatch him up, and carry him away. But that would be too much interference. Kurama knows how this works. Each action is tiny, meaningless little bits of happenstance, like pebbles sliding down the side of a mountain range. But pebbles turn to stones, stones turn to rocks, rocks turn to boulders, and a single careless step can start an avalanche that will change the face of the entire range. He can't risk that, not when Naruto is the one at stake.

"You look like you're packing for somewhere cold," Kakashi points out, jolting Kurama from his thoughts as the jounin meanders up beside him. "Planning a trip?"

The man does have the ability to be subtle; Kurama's even seen him use it. That, however, was decidedly not subtle at all, and he gives Kakashi another doubtful glance. When he just gets a crinkle-eyed smile again, he grunts and looks away. The temptation to knock the man on his ass is nearly overwhelming; he’s not entirely sure how Naruto ever resisted, especially given he spent a solid year training with him. Kurama would have committed homicide within the first week.

"Not like I’ll always be able to find a town with a convenient bandit problem," he counters. "Might as well be prepared to sleep outside most of the time."
Kakashi hums, _Icha Icha_ book making a reappearance as he causally flips it open and buries his face in the pages. “I’m surprised a shinobi got caught without money or extra clothes,” he says idly. “Bad luck.”

“Bad planning, more like,” Kurama mutters before he can force himself to shut up. Catching the sharp look Kakashi gives him, though it’s almost entirely hidden, he sighs and clarifies, “I got angry and jumped into a fight. Bastard nearly fried me, and I woke up with nothing.” It’s true, if a little out of order.

That doesn’t make the sharpness go away, but the book comes up a little higher to hide Kakashi’s expression fully. “Must have been strong.”

Strong enough to give Kakashi himself pause, the first time around, but Kurama can hardly say that. It leaves a sour taste in his mouth anyway, remembering the fight with Kakuzu. Kurama's spent the last five years fighting Kaguya herself; one of her little mindless minions should be nothing. But, in a new body with new limits, still completely off balance from Naruto's murder and his own trip through time, he’d been stupid. Stupid and reckless and nearly cost them all their victory. Nearly wasted Naruto's sacrifice, and the very idea of it makes Kurama feel faintly sick.

The stupid and reckless parts probably aren’t going to change—Kurama's prone to the latter, and with Naruto in mind he keeps resorting to the former—but he won't let the chance that Naruto died to create be squandered so easily. Next time he faces the Akatsuki members, he’s not going to let them win.

“Yeah,” he agrees gruffly. “Decently strong. But it won't save the bastard next time I see him.”

Kakashi’s gaze lingers on him, thoughtful and considering, but Kurama ignores it. He starts walking again, letting his feet carry him forward blindly without any destination in mind, and pays no heed to Kakashi following him. The problem of the Akatsuki is still at the forefront of his mind, despite Kakashi's interruption yesterday, and he needs to come up with a way to get them out of their base so he can go crush the Gedō Mazō into really ugly gravel. It’s not like he can duck in, shout “Jinchuuriki over there!” and have them stampede out. It will, unfortunately, take planning and cunning and subtlety, and while Kurama’s decent at all of those, he doesn’t want to be. He’d much rather just wade in and start tearing out throats.

Still, if Hidan isn’t there yet—and likely won’t be for a while, given that he can't be more than thirteen right now—that means he won’t have to deal with the zealot. And there aren’t _that_ many missing-nin on the Akatsuki’s level, so if he moves quickly enough, he won't have to deal with Kakuzu’s newest partner, either. Pein and Konan, Kisame, Kakuzu, Sasori, Zetsu, and possibly Obito—that’s who he’s up against. Orochimaru too, he remembers with a faint grimace, because…

Well. That’s an interesting thought.

Itachi isn’t a part of Akatsuki yet, the same way Deidara and Hidan aren’t. And while Kurama has less than zero fondness for most Uchiha—with the possible exception of Sasuke, and even there Kurama would claim some sort of Stockholm Syndrome or bleed-through of Naruto's feelings before he’d admit to any sort of genuine affection—if he can spin it so that the Uchiha Massacre never happens, it will remove an extremely powerful member from the Akatsuki, and Kurama's very much in favor of that. Itachi might have always been on their side, but without the Massacre—

Without the Massacre, Sasuke might never have the same relationship with Naruto.

_Fuck_, Kurama thinks, scowling down at the ground. _There's no way to win this, is there?_
But…maybe it can work. Maybe. Even without Sasuke as a blindly-driven avenger and stuck-up little shit, surely it will still work. Naruto will still be Naruto, even if he doesn’t have his rivalry with Sasuke.

(Kurama's pretty fucking terrible at lying to himself, he’s coming to realize.)

Huffing out an aggravated breath, Kurama halts and looks around, faintly surprised to find that it’s darker than he had expected, the shadows longer. He’s moved out of the village proper, too, and the road is hard-packed earth under his feet. The Academy building looms in front of him, the last few students and parents just departing. A few give him smiles, a few give him wary looks, but Kurama doesn’t even notice.

His gaze is caught on a small figure with bright blond hair, seated on a swing off to the side.

_Naruto_, he thinks, and just that sears through every nerve ending like Kakuzu’s lightning, but a thousand times more pleasant. Full of hope, relief, joy, gratitude, because that’s _Naruto_ sitting right there, barely a hundred feet from him. Naruto’s chakra, bonfire bright, Naruto with…

Naruto with his shoulders hunched, his head bowed. Naruto, who all but reeks of grief and loneliness and pain, with the faintest thread of anger and resentment buried almost too deep for Kurama to sense. There’s no smile on his face, just blank unhappiness, and it feels so wrong that it makes Kurama’s skin crawl.

He’d forgotten this, he thinks, a little horrified, but mostly stunned. He’d forgotten, overlooked, dismissed what he knew of Naruto’s childhood. Because he hadn’t wanted to see it, hadn’t wanted to remember that Naruto, for all his cheer and determination, wasn’t always happy. Those smiles that Kurama loves so much, the real, meaningful ones—those only started happening regularly when Naruto gained his precious people. Right now, Naruto doesn’t even really have Iruka—the man is still hovering at the edges, not quite a friend yet. There’s only the Hokage whenever he can spare a moment. None of the other children will acknowledge Naruto, not with their parents’ prejudice, and…

Naruto has nothing to smile about. He doesn’t even have a reason to pretend he’s happy, because no one will look past the mask. And that—

That _aches_. It hurts almost as much as Naruto’s death, because this is a _slow_ death, for all that Naruto will recover. It’s just…a decay. A sickness leeching Naruto of joy, and that’s so wrong that Kurama can’t stand it.

In an instant, everything shifts.

Fuck not changing anything. Fuck not letting _Naruto_ change. Fuck keeping things as they were—obviously that didn’t work the first time around, so why should Kurama keep clinging to it? Let this be the stone that starts the avalanche; Kurama couldn’t care less.

His Naruto is dead, sacrificed to save those he loved, and Kurama will never get him back. It was stupid and blind and base foolishness to believe he would. But the very core of his Naruto, Naruto’s heart and soul and unbreakable will, still exists. It’s thirty paces in front of Kurama, grieving and lonely, and Kurama won’t let that continue.

It was one thing to let Naruto suffer through an unhappy childhood when Kurama couldn’t do anything to help, and wouldn’t have wanted to even if he could have. It’s another entirely to stand by and watch while Naruto is in pain, and there’s nothing at all in Kurama that’s capable of doing that.
He wouldn’t get his Naruto back even if he kept the timeline exactly as it was. He can see that now. But surely he owes it to the boy, to the man, to give him even a small bit of joy. Surely, if he can bring even the smallest spark of light to Naruto’s life right now, changing the past will be worth it.

He takes a step forward, hardly even noticing Kakashi’s stiffening posture beside him. One step and another, another, another, until he’s standing right in front of the swing. Slowly, the blond head lifts, and Kurama is gutted by the sight of blue eyes, a dozen shades darker than they should be. Dark with unhappiness, with sadness, and Kurama hates it.

Taking a breath, he drops to one knee in front of the boy and says quietly, “What’s your name, kid?”

Naruto blinks at him for a moment before his eyes widen faintly, and he leans back. There’s wariness in his gaze, even as he offers a bright and entirely fake smile and answers, “I’m Uzumaki Naruto, the next Hokage!”

It’s so utterly, achingly familiar that Kurama can’t help but smile, and that smile just widens when Naruto’s own face lights up. How few genuine smiles must he get, that Kurama’s unpracticed one makes him so happy? Chuckling softly, he reaches out and lightly ruffles Naruto’s spiky hair. It feels impossibly soft against his fingers, and in a heartbeat Kurama’s eyes are hot again. Something wet slips down his cheek, but he ignores it and laughs, soft and rough.

“Another Uzumaki, huh? I thought so,” he tells Naruto. “You’ve got your mom’s chakra. I can feel it.”

Shock suffuses Naruto’s face, wondering and disbelieving in equal measure. His mouth opens, works, but nothing comes out. He closes it, swallows, and tries again, and this time manages to squeak, “You—you knew my mom?”

Unable to resist for even one more second, Kurama reaches out, wraps his arms around Naruto, and drags him right off the swing. Pulls him into his lap, against his chest, and curls around him as much as he can, burying his face in blond hair and trying not to break down completely. “Yeah,” he whispers to the boy, shocked stiff in his arms. “I knew her when she was a little girl. She was—I’m your uncle. I’m Uzumaki Kurama. We’re—we’re family, and I promise, Naruto, I’m never going to leave you alone again.”

Slowly, carefully, so very tentatively, small arms lift and slide around his neck. When nothing happens, when Kurama’s only reactions is to clutch him tighter, Naruto returns the hug, and it’s as awkward as if he’s never done it before. That’s fine, Kurama thinks. He’ll have plenty of time to show him in the future.

Five seconds. Five seconds of Naruto’s arms tightening around him, five seconds for Kurama to feel as if finally, finally, he’s come home. Five seconds for hope of a better future to blossom, painful and fragile, in his chest.

Then a strong hang snatches the back of his shirt and tears him away.
Chapter Notes

You will probably hate me for this, but I swear, I have a plan! I even have an outline, which is pretty much unheard of, so just…yay plot twist?

In all honesty, Kurama should have expected it. He knows where he stands, knows how shinobi villages work, knows that there's no way the Hokage would be all right with a complete stranger getting so close to Konoha's only jinchuuriki.

Even so, the second Kurama feels Naruto ripped from his arms, every reasonable bit of his brain simply shuts down. He flies through the air with the force of the wrench, landing several yards away on all fours, and fury burns through him. There's only anger, only the white-hot pulse of desperation like a sun going nova in his soul.

_They're taking him away from me_, he thinks, and nothing else.

In a blur, he moves. Kakashi is no longer anything but an impediment, an enemy, standing between Kurama and Naruto. He barely notices the kunai in the jounin’s hand, barely feels the crackle of chakra exploding out to meet his own. Anger is a fiery shroud pulled across his eyes, a mask that leaves only targets. Baring his teeth, he slashes down, and Kakashi only just manages to knock him aside with a sharp kick.

“How DARE you?” Kurama roars, even as he lands and staggers a step. Whirling, he takes a menacing stride towards the man, crouched and ready with a wide-eyed Naruto behind him. “What the _fuck_ do you think you're doing? He's my _family_!”

Blue eyes flicker from Kakashi back to Kurama, wary but worried. Kurama stares at him, desperation knotting up his guts, and takes another step.

“Stay back,” Kakashi warns sharply. “You have no proof of anything. The Hokage isn’t about to allow a complete stranger—”

Restraint snapping, Kurama snarls and throws himself forward, claws slashing downward and just skimming cloth as Kakashi leaps to the side. He’s fast, and it’s frustrating. Kurama lunges again, this time with a hard kick, but it doesn’t connect. A dodge, another, and Kakashi leaps back again, but this time Kurama doesn’t follow. It’s a distraction, a diversion, and he won't fall for it. Instead, he lunges for Naruto, planning to snatch him up and run, but there's a blur. Kakashi appears directly in front of him, fist already swinging, and Kurama yelps as he goes reeling back from a haymaker to the jaw.

“Stranger?” he echoes contemptuously when he gets his feet under him, and there's a cut on the
inside of his cheek leaking blood. He spits it out, looking up to glare at the Copy-Nin. “That little boy is the most precious thing to me in the entire world. If you try to keep me from him, Hatake, I’ll have no problem burning this entire filthy village to the ground.”

Exaggeration, if only because Naruto loves this place so much, but Kurama isn’t about to tell him that. Like this, balanced on the edge of overwhelming fury, his chakra surging and building like a volcano, Kurama honestly isn’t sure what he would do to keep Naruto with him.

There’s no possible way he can leave Naruto. He won’t.


From further back down the road, there’s a flash of tan and blue, and a dog with a Konoha hitai-ate around its neck bolts out of cover and away. Kurama curses, because that means he has minutes at best before the Hokage arrives, before the Hokage takes Naruto away, and desperation wars with fury as he glances between Kakashi and Naruto.

It doesn’t help that Naruto stares back at him, confused but not running, and there’s an edge of hope to blue eyes that makes Kurama ache right down to his bones.

“Move,” Kurama warns, because this is one of Naruto’s precious people, or will be, and he can’t do any less. It won’t stop him from acting, if he’s forced, but he can spare the breath for a warning. “Hatake, move, and I won’t kill you now. Just—he’s Kushina’s son. He’s family. Please.”

Kakashi’s expression doesn’t waver. He shifts, flipping the kunai around in his grip and centering his weight, and then reaches up. The slanted hitai-ate is pushed straight again, revealing spinning red and black, and a growl bubbles up in the back of Kurama’s throat. Skin crawling faintly, he steps back, but that Sharingan eye follows him. The thought of it recording his every movement, dissecting his chakra, memorizing all of his tells, hiding the potential to completely strip him of his will—Kurama hates it. Hates that eye and what it stands for, hates the man who originally owned it and all the grief he caused.

Taking Obito down is definitely going to be a pleasure.

“Last chance, Hatake,” he growls, and glances past the man again to look at Naruto, trying to tell him silently that everything’s all right.

There’s a blur of speed and motion, and Kurama only just manages to wrench his attention back to Kakashi in time to leap aside, ducking under a slicing overhand swing of that kunai. He kicks out in return, aiming the ball of his foot directly at Kakashi’s gut, but isn’t surprised when it misses. Kakashi twists around it, free hand slashing out, and Kurama knocks it aside, drops to avoid another slash from the weapon, and then leaps straight up. He gathers up chakra even as he twists in the air, landing lightly in front of Naruto, and then slashes out towards his opponent, aiming downwards as carefully as he can.

The shockwave ripples outward, striking the ground and tearing a deep trench as it flings earth and stone into the air, but Kakashi is too fast to catch like that. He throws himself up and over, and though it makes Kurama snarl he gives ground, retreating from Naruto and leading Kakashi away from the boy.

“You should surrender,” Kakashi says coolly, even as his fingers flicker through the signs for a water jutsu. “Naruto is a citizen of Konohagakure. I’m not about to let you threaten him.”

The dragon of water is exactly what Kurama expects of Kakashi—powerful, flashy, and nothing
more than a distraction to cover the real attack. He snarls, fury twisting through him, and doesn’t
bother with signs as he grabs for his chakra and opens his mouth. A twister of fire streams out to
meet the attack, and both jutsus explode as they collide. With a hissing shriek, steam fills the air,
whirling out to cover both of them, but Kurama’s ears are just as good as Kakashi’s nose. He can
hear the faintest scuff of a foot on the grass as the jounin charges, and twists away from a stabbing
lunge.

“Surrender?” he taunts, ducking the following kick and slipping out of the path of a lash of fire.
“Never! Naruto is the only reason I’m still alive, you bastard, and if you want me to give up on him
you’ll have to see me dead and buried first!”

Earth explodes up underneath him, and Kurama swears viciously, just barely managing to get his feet
under him enough to leap over the grasping hands that reach for him. A hard slash downward and a
brief shockwave dispels the clone, but the distraction is enough for Kakashi to close in. The kunai
stabs forward, aimed at the center of mass, and Kurama is too close to dodge it fully. He tries
regardless, wrenches back and twists hard, but he’s only just landed and not quite steady on his feet.
The short blade tears deep into the meat of his right bicep, scrapes bone, and is yanked away.
Kurama traps a scream behind his teeth, only a muffled cry of pain escaping, but it throws him off
balance enough that Kakashi’s next kick connects hard with his gut and sends him reeling back.

He doesn’t want to kill Kakashi—he can't even imagine how the future will go without him there—but
this is Naruto at stake. If he loses, they’re going to lock him up, hide him away, and he’ll never see
Naruto again even if he manages to escape. The agony of that thought claws at him, and he imagines
the future stretching out before him, completely devoid of his jinchuuriki’s presence. Imagines
Kaguya rising unhindered, Naruto dead as a sacrifice to her madness, with him unable to change
anything.

It can’t be allowed. It can't be tolerated, and if Kurama has to put Kakashi in the hospital to buy
enough time to get both himself and Naruto away, he’ll do it.

With a snarl that’s equal parts rage, pain, and desperation, Kurama lets himself fall to gain distance,
then rolls to his feet as Kakashi follows. The steam is dissipating quickly, bringing their battlefield
back into view, and Kurama can feel more chakra signatures approaching. The Hokage's backup, no
doubt, and it makes him hiss in aggravation. His arm aches with a fiery pain, and Kurama can hardly
move it, but for all the skin he’s wearing, he’s not a human. He’s not even really a shinobi, and he
certainly doesn’t have their limits. He needs to end this quickly, and for that he can't show restraint.

Finding the correct balance of negative and positive chakra is as simple as breathing, and just as
familiar. Kurama summons the orbs into the air around him, small pinpoints of glittering light, and
doesn’t bother compressing them down into their usual form. A flick of his hand and the miniature
bijūdama whirl out like foxfire, leaving bright afterimages behind, and streak towards Kakashi with
deadly intent.

Mismatched eyes widen, and Kakashi throws himself back, just managing to avoid the first one as it
strikes the ground and detonates like an exploding tag multiplied tenfold. The earth shakes as the rest
follow, filling the air with chips of stone and debris, but Kurama doesn’t wait. He lunges after the
jounin, mouth filling with raw chakra, and exhaled another surge of flame that roars across the
ground like a burning tide. Kunai and shuriken blur out of the haze, but Kurama takes a twisting leap
over them, bounces off the ground, and drives a kick into Kakashi’s side as hard as he can. The
jounin goes flying, slamming into the tree where Naruto had been sitting, and with a victorious cry
Kurama lunges after him, claws out.

Before he can reach the man, Kakashi plants his feet and brings his hand up. Chakra surges like a
geyser, then steadies, and the sound of a thousand birds fills the smoky air.

Apparently Kakashi’s done holding back as well.

This time when Kurama summons his bijūdama, he doesn’t hesitate. The balanced chakra swirls and compresses, spinning madly in his palm, and Kurama brings his hand lashing forward, ready to release it and end this fight. With a sudden burst of speed, Kakashi mirrors him, Raikiri bright and deadly in one hand.

Then a small voice cries, “No!” and before Kurama can even blink there’s a tiny, fragile body planted squarely between them, arms outstretched as if to hold them back.

Sheer, mind-numbing terror gives Kurama the deceptive speed of his bijuu form, able to match even Naruto in Sage Mode. With a cry that tears at his throat, he flicks the bijūdama away and changes his lunge into a grab, dragging Naruto around behind him even as he turns to give Kakashi his back. Half a second too late, Kakashi comprehends what’s happening and makes a desperate attempt to pull away, but for all his genius and reflexes, there’s no time, no possibility of aborting the strike or doing anything more than diverting it slightly.

On his own, Kurama could dodge it. He’s fast enough, adrenaline humming and heart pounding, but —

But Naruto is right there, and Kurama can’t grab him quickly enough. He can’t move, because if he does Naruto will be right in Kakashi’s path, and not for anything will Kurama let harm come to this boy.

Kurama has a fraction of a heartbeat to brace himself before lightning tears through his chest, Kakashi’s kunai punching a hole right through him. The smell of charred meat rises, and agony greys Kurama’s vision, but even as he staggers, coughing up blood, he doesn’t allow himself to falter. He’s already healing, can feel bone and muscle knitting together, and forces himself to move. Kakashi is sluggish with horror, both eyes wide and shocked, and Kurama mercilessly takes advantage. One fist snaps out, striking Kakashi’s jaw squarely, and the Copy-Nin goes flying back again, spine slamming into the tree’s trunk and skull bouncing off the wood with a loud *crack*.

In the same movement, Kurama twists, ignoring the spots of darkness that dance across his eyes, and snatches Naruto up in his arms. The little boy yelps, clearly startled, but Kurama can’t comfort him yet. Before Kakashi can recover he turns and flees, each step jolting his wound, but Naruto clutched tightly to him. Behind them there’s a shout, but the world is already starting to blur past with their speed, and Kurama isn’t about to stop.

They reach the wall in a moment, and Kurama clears it with a long bound, lands, and immediately hurlts himself into the surrounding forest. His Naruto once knew every inch of these woods, and that Kurama has managed to remember clearly. Even with Konoha nin in pursuit, even injured, Kurama knows he can outrun and outmaneuver them here.

There’s blood soaking his new shirt, sticky and clammy against his skin, and his breath rasps in his throat, each one hurting like there’s a knife in his lungs. Small hands clutch at his collar, his hair, even as a face presses into the curve of his neck, and Kurama grips Naruto to him with his uninjured arm, holds him tight to his uninjured side, and runs as fast as he can force himself to.

It’s only when they’re miles from Konoha, in the dimness of a deeply shadowed grove, that Kurama finally allows himself to stagger to a stop. His muscles are trembling, though he can’t tell if it’s from adrenaline or exertion. Either way, he drops to his knees with a groan of relief, carefully easing Naruto to the ground in front of him. Vaguely he realizes that his head is spinning, but he can’t focus
on that. Instead, he looks at the boy in front of him, who has tear-tracks on his cheeks and wide eyes.

“Are you okay?” he demands, as gently as he’s able. “Naruto, are you okay? Did we hurt you?”

Blue eyes turn up to him, and Kurama can read both confusion and wonder in them. Naruto pauses, then smiles, and it makes Kurama's breath catch painfully, makes his heart trip over itself as it beats.

“I'm fine!” he insists. “Don’t worry about me!”

That’s it. That’s Naruto's smile, his real one. And regardless of whether this Naruto knows him or not, he’s giving it to Kurama anyway.

With a choked sob, Kurama drags Naruto forward into a hug, pulling the boy tight against his chest and burying his face in blond hair. “Naruto,” he whispers. “Naruto, Naruto. Oh, thank the Sage. I was so scared.”

There’s a hesitation, and then arms twine around his neck, gripping tightly. “I'm okay,” Naruto repeats. “Sorry, Oji-san. I just wanted you guys to stop fighting. I'm sorry I scared you.”

“I wouldn’t have hurt him,” Kurama promises, and it’s only slightly untrue. “I just—I didn’t want them to take you away from me. I finally found you, Naruto, I can't give you up again.”

Small hands—so small, so breakable when Kurama is used to his old juggernaut of a jinchuuriki—tug lightly on his hair, and Kurama reluctantly pulls back to look Naruto in the eyes. There's a mulish set to his features, and once he’s sure he has Kurama's attention, Naruto declares fiercely, “I was worried about you! You're really my uncle, right?”

Of course. He doesn’t know Kakashi yet—at best, the jounin is a stranger on the street. Given Kurama’s declaration of shared blood, it makes sense for an orphan boy who’s never known his family to be drawn to that.

Even so, despite all the logical explanations, Kurama feels warmth flood through him like sunlight, and he smiles. Reaching up, he smooths a hand over Naruto's flyaway hair, even worse from the wind of their flight, and then leans in to press a kiss to his forehead. “Thank you, Naruto,” he says quietly. “I'm sorry I grabbed you and ran like that. I wasn’t thinking.”

Another bad decision, and even more than facing Kakuzu unprepared this one was unspeakably stupid. He just made himself a fugitive from Konoha, one every shinobi in the village will be eager to capture. After all, the jinchuuriki are powerful weapons, and Kurama just made off with one. Beyond that, he was moving entirely on desperation and instinct. There was little reason behind the fight, and with the terrified fury finally ebbing, Kurama can see that. But…

But how could he have chosen differently? They were going to take Naruto away from him. Kakashi tried, and Kurama wasn’t willing to suffer a separation like that, even in the name of his goals. Because Naruto was sad, hurting, and the loneliness in him echoed Kurama's. There was no way Kurama could have stayed there, watched Kakashi pull Naruto away, and not reacted badly.

It feels overwhelming now, the scope of this change. Naruto is meant to be in Konoha, learning and growing—suffering, because Kurama will never again allow himself to forget that much—making friends and connections. And now Kurama has taken him away from that, away from the safety of the village when he may shortly end up with the entire Akatsuki organization on his tail. Taken him into danger, into a situation where Kurama has no food, no home, and a rapidly decreasing amount of money.
His eyes burn. There was no good decision there, no way to win. Maybe, if he’d managed to restrain himself in the beginning, things might have been fine, but there was absolutely no chance of Kurama not reacting to Naruto's loneliness. He’d carve his own heart out before he left Naruto to that pain.

“Sorry,” he whispers, his voice ragged, and presses his cheek to Naruto's palm. “Thank you. Yes, I'm your uncle. I'm your family.”

Naruto beams, leaning forward and hugging him, for the first time of his own volition. “Occhan!” he says enthusiastically. “Can I call you that?”

Despite himself, Kurama laughs. Laughs even as tears slip down his cheeks, because this is *Naruto*, because Naruto already likes him, and he answers, “Anything you want, Naruto. Anything.”

He’s never spoken truer words.

Even with Konoha after them, even on the run and entirely unprepared for it, Kurama has Naruto again. And for that, to keep Naruto beside him for the rest of time, Kurama will do absolutely anything and not regret it for a moment.

Kakashi’s fairly sure he has a concussion—there's a certain dizzying sort of pain that he’s far too familiar with, and his vision keeps greying out around the edges when he moves too fast. That’s a large part of the reason he’s only just extricating himself from a dent in the tree trunk when the Hokage sweeps in, face set in grim lines and an ANBU contingent around him.

“Kakashi?” he asks sharply, and the tightly-contained lash of his chakra is enough to make even Kakashi shiver.

“Hokage-sama,” he answers as steadily as he's able, even as one of the ANBU slips forward to press a green-glowing hand against his skull. The ache recedes, and he breathes out a silent sigh of relief. “Uzumaki is gone, and he took Naruto. I attempted to stop him, but…failed.”

The word leaves a bitter taste on his tongue. Failed, the same way he failed to save Obito, save Rin. The same way he failed to keep his promise to Minato and make sure his son stayed safe. He was…not quite relaxed around Kurama, but his guard slipped. Seeing him with Naho, seeing him in the street last night—he’d thought he understood the Uzumaki, thought he had seen enough to judge.

Apparently he failed at that, too.

Politely constrained fury darkens the Sandaime’s eyes, even as he folds his hands behind his back. “I see,” he says after a long moment. “Were you able to discover his motivations, by any chance?”

Kakashi has never seen wonder of the type that was on Kurama's face when Naruto first came into view. He remembers, too, the way gruff, aloof Kurama openly wept when he finally spoke to the boy. There’s no way to fake that kind of emotion, and even though Kakashi knows intellectually that he should be suspicious, of that at least he can't be. It’s been a long time since he’s seen such genuine feeling, and it’s unmistakable.

“He claimed to be Naruto's uncle,” he finally offers. “I…don’t think he planned to see Naruto, or even knew he was here. He said—he recognized Naruto because of his chakra’s similarities to Kushina’s. And he didn’t get violent until I attempted to separate him from Naruto.”
Sarutobi doesn’t ask if he believes it—Kakashi would say outright if he didn’t. Instead, he sighs softly, rubbing a hand over his brow. “And the fight?”

“He’s dangerous,” Kakashi answers promptly, though Sarutobi can likely guess as much just looking at the destruction around them. “He doesn’t need hand signs to use very strong Katon jutsus, and he has—” Kakashi winces, stumbling over what he wants to say, but at the Hokage's sharp glance reluctantly finishes, “It’s…it looks like Minato's Rasengan, only black and purple rather than imbued with wind chakra. And he can adjust the size, as well as summon multiple spheres.” Another hesitation, and then Kakashi adds, “He was trying very hard not to kill me. And when Naruto stepped between us, he chose to take my Raikiri to the back rather than put Naruto in danger.”

Grimness slides into thoughtful consideration, and the Hokage nods carefully. “I would believe that Kurama has been otherwise very much alone. Perhaps seeing a relative was enough to unbalance him.” He tips his head faintly, glancing up at Kakashi. “I don’t recall Kushina ever mentioning a brother, but we were not overly close. Did you ever hear anything?”

Kakashi shrugs, hiding a wince when the massive bruise developing up and down his spine twinges. “Her father disappeared when she was a toddler,” he offers. “Up and left. Given Uzushio's location, it’s possible he ended up in Lightning Country and had another kid. Kurama said that he had eight brothers, not a sister, but that could be because they were half-siblings rather than full. Or he’s just distantly related, but didn’t want to confuse Naruto.”

“It might even be possible that Kurama made his way to Uzushio before it fell, and started his career as a shinobi there,” Sarutobi agrees. “It would explain his knowledge of ANBU code and the fact that he and Kushina apparently met. Perhaps she never knew, and the village was lost before he could tell her.” He sighs, folds his hands in front of him, and shakes his head faintly. “But enough guesswork. Until we have more information, Uzumaki Kurama is a dangerous enemy holding one of our most valuable assets hostage. Kakashi, I'm assigning you the track and capture mission. Take Itachi, Shisui, and Tenzō, find Naruto, and bring him back. If it’s possible, take Kurama prisoner. If not, you are authorized to use lethal force. I want Naruto brought home at any cost.”

“Yes, sir,” Kakashi answers simply, dipping into a quick bow, and the Hokage inclines his head and sweeps away.

Straightening slowly, Kakashi drags in a shaky breath, holds it for a count of three, and then releases it. The mission settles into his mind, and Kakashi forces himself to push aside all thoughts of Kurama with Naho, Kurama's face when Kakashi called him a comrade, Kurama's expression of sheer, aching joy as he wrapped Naruto in a hug.

Box up the monster, wipe off the blood, paste on a smile and no one will ever know anything’s happened.

Do it in reverse, and the monster is suddenly all that’s left.

All that remains is the mission, and that part Kakashi isn’t going to let himself fail. Not this time. Not again.
IX: Bellicose

[bellicose /ˈbelɪkəs,/ demonstrating aggression and willingness to fight. Late Middle English from Latin bellicosus, from bellicus ‘warlike,’ from bellum ‘war.’]

Despite what recent actions might make one assume, Kurama's not an idiot. He’s very, very much not an idiot, and actually considers himself quite clever. He might even go so far as to say very intelligent, should he be asked. The blame for his most recent lapses can be laid firmly at Naruto's door, and Kurama doesn’t plan to allow himself many more.

Given all of this, Kurama is fully aware that he can't take a six-year-old jinchuuriki Akatsuki-hunting with him.

Even beyond the danger, there's the simple logistics of it—Kurama has no food, no clothes beyond those he’s wearing, no one in all the world to turn to. There's only him, only Naruto, all his bridges back to Konoha most thoroughly burned by now. He only has himself to rely on, because Naruto's only six and can't yet help him, can hardly even use chakra right now and most certainly can't be expected to take care of himself while Kurama hunts down those who want to kill him.

The smart thing to do would be to take him back to Konoha, or even just leave the boy where he is —there's no chance that the Hokage hasn't sent out pursuers, after all—and let him grow up in peace while Kurama finishes his mission. Then, maybe, he can bargain his way back into the village and be a part of Naruto's life.

This is another one of those stupid decisions Kurama's going to make.

He can't let Naruto go, not if there's a chance he’ll never get to see him again. And he can't, not now that he’s set himself up as family. Naruto is his, and he’s Naruto's. Konoha hasn’t managed to get its collective head out of its collective ass yet, so the kid stays with him. Period. Kurama's not about to let him grow up in misery when there's anything at all he can do to prevent it.

Still. That stupidity doesn't extend to dragging a practically defenseless six-year-old to the Mountains’ Graveyard with him, right into the waiting arms of seven people who’d kill him the moment they got the chance. He’s not about to let Konoha have him, either, so just about his only choice is to find somewhere safe to stash Naruto for the time being. Somewhere he can be happy, and if Kurama had thought about it he’d have grabbed Sasuke and Sakura on his way out too. After all, kidnapping a clan head’s son and the daughter of two well-respected chuunin could hardly make things worse than they already are, having made off with a pint-sized jinchuuriki, and Kurama is aware of just how much those two will come to mean to Naruto. He’s determined that that, at least, isn’t going to change, no matter what he has to do to ensure it.

One brat instead of three is a hell of a lot easier to haul around, though, for which Kurama is definitely grateful.

With a sigh, he tugs the heavy haori up a little, covering Naruto more completely. It's not nearly as cold as the Earth Country border, but there's still a bone-deep bite to the air once you stop moving. Kurama's feeling it right now; he dropped the bag with his new clothes back in Konoha—all but the haori, and he’s now blessing whatever foresight made him pull it on. Him being cold is fine, but he’s not about to make Naruto suffer through the same thing.
Kurama's fairly certain there's a bit of a buffer between them and any hunters; he’s fast, after all, and when he left he was fleeing blindly, a fox’s instinct to get away from the enemy driving him in a zigzagging line. There's at least enough time to let Naruto sleep for a bit, since the kid seemed bone-tired. Not that Kurama blames him—it’s not every day you get kidnapped by family that appears out of nowhere.

With a low, heavy breath, he sinks to the ground next to Naruto, stretching his legs out in front of him and trying to ease some of the tension from his shoulders. Han’s heavily abused shirt now has a charred, ragged-edged hole punched through it, as well as a new saturation of blood soaking it, but Kurama manages to pull and tuck the oversized edges enough that it’s mostly invisible. Now the only thing left to focus on is the future.

This, at least, should be familiar. Kurama has spent the better part of the last century plotting and planning, curled up in a human soul and waiting for the future to bring his freedom. But there was an edge of certainty to that, a knowledge that nothing would change even if he failed. Right now, if he fails, he’ll lose Naruto, and that’s not acceptable.

Still, Naruto smiled at him. Naruto likes him, and even if the boy doesn’t love him yet, Kurama knows his jinchuuriki. He’s precious to Naruto just for having claimed a connection, and love will follow shortly. Naruto's big heart has always been his best feature.

It will hurt to separate from the boy, even temporarily, and the mere thought of it is like needles digging under Kurama's skin, prying up whatever composure he’s managed by the roots. Better to separate for a short time, though, than have Naruto stolen from him forever, either by Akatsuki or Konoha. And this way Kurama will know that Naruto is safe, well out of any enemy’s grasp.

Which just leaves the problem of where to put him.

With a groan, Kurama rakes his fingers through his hair, slumping forward over his bent knees and trying to think. He doesn’t know anyone in this world, so far out of his own time. There's no one to turn to, no one to rely on. The only people he's met are Kakashi, Sarutobi, and…

Han and Kokuō.

Kurama's first instinct is to seize on the idea and run with it, but…it’s not that great, actually. After all, Kakuzu was hunting Kokuō, or came across him by chance, and either way, that means the bijuu is now firmly in Akatsuki's crosshairs. Kurama is inclined to trust Han, especially since Kokuō was actually working with him to drive Kakuzu off, and he knows that Kokuō is shy and quiet but steady, but leaving Naruto with them would be almost the same as dragging him along to the Mountains’ Graveyard.

Still, the idea sparks another, and Kurama immediately thinks of one of his Naruto's best friends, tall and slender and as red-haired as any Uzumaki, for all that he doesn’t know of any blood connections. Gaara is, admittedly, the same age as Naruto right now, but…well, maybe Kurama can beat some sense into Shukaku. The damned tanuki has been calling himself Gaara's mother, it’s about time he lived up to that claim. And Naruto adored Gaara in his time, loved him like a brother and one of his first real friends. Kurama's not about to steal that from the kid, even if it means massive changes to the timeline.

Well, the first time around didn’t work out so well. Might as well upend everything for a second try, right?

So. It will take a bit of doing, and probably some skull-denting, but for all that Shukaku is a pissy, prissy bastard, he’s still Kurama's brother. And Kurama knows that Shukaku mourned when Gaara
died, in his own bloody way. He’d grown reckless afterwards, plunging into fights he should have kept back from, and that was how Kaguya caught him. A bad reaction to Gaara’s death, Kurama thinks, and after these last few days dealing with Naruto’s death he won’t be convinced otherwise—

A short distance away, the bushes rustle.

Kurama’s head snaps up automatically, his ears straining. There’s no sense of human chakra, though, only natural, and he frowns, rising to his feet. The rustling continues, more like thrashing now, quiet and desperate, and with one last, quick glance at Naruto, who’s sleeping calmly, Kurama slips soundlessly towards the source of the noise. Around a tree, down a short hill, the undergrowth is waving. It’s a bramble, long thorns clear even in the darkening twilight gloom, and Kurama can just make out a flash of scarlet fur between the branches.

Well, that’s all right, then.

“Hey,” Kurama says softly, crouching down beside the quivering bramble. “Looks like you’ve gotten yourself into a bit of a mess, kid. Mind if I help you out there?”

There’s a pause, careful and considering, and the small red fox twists to look at him, slit-pupilled amber eyes sharp and wary. Kurama raises an expectant brow, but doesn’t otherwise move, and after a long moment the fox gives a yip of nearly desperate agreement. With a soft snort, Kurama pushes his hands through the tightly-woven branches, wincing as sharp thorns dig long furrows in his skin, but doesn’t hesitate. There are more thorns dug deep into the fox’s thick undercoat, knitted into the fur so thoroughly that even Kurama, with the advantage of opposable thumbs, has a hard time working them out.

“Still working on that second tail, huh?” Kurama asks over the sound of the fox’s small grumbles of discomfort, trying to distract it. “You should head to Mount Inari if you want it to go quicker. I’ve heard there’s better hunting there, too.”

The fox barks at him reprovingly, apparently offended by the idea of taking such a shortcut, and Kurama rolls his eyes in response. “Yeah, yeah, what do I know, right? I’m just the Kyuubi no Kitsune, haven’t got a clue about any of this fox stuff.” He snaps the last branch, carefully working it out of the fox’s fur, and then withdraws his hands. There’s blood covering the backs of them, all the way up past his wrists, but the scratches are shallow and already healing. “There you go. Try it now.”

In a blur of scarlet, the fox wriggles out of the bush and into the open, shaking itself briskly. It turns, regarding Kurama carefully, and then slips over to him. A long tongue flicks out, taking a quick lick of the blood on his fingers before it barks again.

“You’re welcome,” Kurama answers, because he knows a thank you when he hears one. “Be a little more careful next time, all right?”

The fox yips, turning to present its back in clear offer, and Kurama can’t help giving a soft huff of laughter. “You’re sure?” he asks pointedly. “I don’t know, kid, you might not survive having a human touch you. Well, more or less a human. But why risk it?”

This time the fox doesn’t answer, just gives him an impatient look, and Kurama shakes his head but obediently reaches out, smoothing his hand over thick fur. “Wish you had that second tail,” he says a little wistfully. “I could really use someone to vent to right now. But… I’m glad I could help. Don’t let anyone catch you getting into trouble, okay?”

It gives a guttural chatter, clearly amused with the order, and then turns and vanishes with a flick of
its white-tipped tail. Kurama watches it go before he pushes back to his feet. There's still no sense of approaching chakra, so he doesn't rush as he heads up to the small campsite, though he doesn't dawdle, either. Naruto is still asleep, and though Kurama would like to let him sleep right through the night, he doesn't dare. Kakashi will probably be the one sent out after them, and he's a tracker. Kurama needs to put even more distance between them if he's going to have a hope of throwing him off the scent long enough to make it to Suna.

It feels good to have a goal, though. Naruto was never much of one for plans, and honestly Kurama can't say that he is, either, but this whole thing is so slapdash and desperate that it feels like finally grounding himself, to settle on a path.

“Come on, Naruto,” he murmurs softly, sliding his hands underneath the boy’s shoulders and knees. “You don’t have to get up right now, just let me pick you up. We need to get going.”

“Occhan?” Naruto asks sleepily but he doesn't resist when Kurama settles him against his shoulder again. One arm loops around his neck, making Kurama's breath catch at the simple sweetness of it, and a moment later a head of messy yellow hair is tucked underneath his chin. “Can we get ramen for dinner?”

Fuck. Food is going to be a problem. Kurama hasn’t eaten since the inn, and his stomach feels uncomfortably hollowed out. Tanzaku-Gai is too close to Konoha for them to risk doubling back, so Kurama is just going to have to hope he can catch something, or find a house. He still has money, so maybe a farmer will be will to part with his lunch.

“I’ll try, kid,” he says helplessly. “Sorry. We won't make it to Suna for another couple of days, but I’ll—I’ll try to find a town somewhere and get you ramen.”

There's a pause as Naruto seems to come a little more awake, and he tips his head to look up at Kurama through one sky-blue eye. “Suna?” he asks interestedly. Then he hesitates, and asks, “We aren’t gonna go back to Konoha?”

“I—if I take you back, they won't let me see you again,” Kurama says, and oh Sage, phrased like that it sounds so fucking selfish. “Do you—?” He steels himself, takes a breath, and forces himself to think of Naruto, not his own needs. Even as he does so, though, he curls a hand in Naruto's bright hair, strokes over the small back, and aches. “Do you want to go back? If you think you’ll be happier there, I can take you.”

Naruto pulls back to look at him fully, and he looks far too serious for a six-year-old. In mimicry of Kurama's own movements, he reaches out and twists his fingers into blood-red hair, holding tightly. “Will you come with me?” he asks solemnly.

Kurama feels a little like he wants to cry again. “I can't,” he says, and that’s helpless too. “I—I promised my best friend I'd do something for him, and I have to finish it. If I go back to Konoha, they’ll treat me like an enemy and lock me up, and I promised.”

Naruto, as ever, understands the value of a promise. He looks torn for a moment before the stubbornness sets in again, and he offers, “If I tell Hokage-jiji that you're not a bad guy, will you come back? He'll believe me, I know it!”

The implication is all too clear. There's a fist around Kurama's heart, tight and getting tighter, but it isn’t hard to realize what he has to do. No, the hard part is actually forcing himself to follow through.

“Sorry,” he whispers, arms tightening involuntarily. “Sorry, Naruto, I’ll take you back. Maybe—maybe the Sandaime will listen. You’ll probably be better off there.”
Fuck, but it aches. How had he ever thought he could steal a glance at Naruto and then go on his way without a care? Not even half a day with Naruto returned to him, and already Kurama feels like he’s losing him all over again just contemplating letting him go. It’s a little like dying, knowing that Naruto would rather be in Konoha than with him, even though Kurama is fully aware that Naruto has no reason to stay.

Another moment of silence, and then Naruto says, “But don’t you want to go back, Occhan?” with confusion clear in his voice.

What?

“What?” Kurama asks, pulling back to look at the boy.

Naruto is frowning at him. “But you look so sad,” he says, touching Kurama's cheek gently. “Occhan, aren’t you sad about leaving the village? Isn’t that why you wanna go back?”

There’s a flicker of nearly-extinguished hope in Kurama's chest. “No,” he answers quickly. “No, Naruto, you're my home, not the village. I don’t care about them as long as you're happy. I want you to stay with me, I swear. That’s all I want.”

“Then I’ll stay,” Naruto says cheerfully, as though it’s as simple as that. “Hokage-jiji will be sad, but we can send him a letter and ask if he’ll tell everyone you're not a bad guy, and I can become an awesome ninja and when we go back they’ll have to make me Hokage. Then I’ll make it a law that you're allowed to stay and no one will care!”

Whether he’s six, sixteen, or thirty-six, Naruto's logic always sounds exactly the same. Kurama laughs before he can help it, and leans in to kiss Naruto squarely on the forehead. A moment later the giddy joy is too much, and he spins Naruto around in his arms, still laughing. Naruto laughs too, bright and delighted, and it’s so very much everything that Kurama has missed.

“Thanks,” he says. “Thanks, Naruto. Come on, let’s go find you some—

Chakra. A flare of it, a tight little knot filled not so much with malevolence as it is determination, though there's a thread of undeniable hatred in there too. Familiar chakra, and Kurama curses, spinning on his heel. He leaps upward, into the branches of the tree above them, and sets Naruto at the highest sturdy branch he can get to.

“Stay here, and be as quiet as you can,” he warns. “Let’s see how good you are at ninja stealth, okay?”

Naruto's eyes are a little bit wide, but he nods agreeably all the same, making a motion like he’s zipping his mouth shut. Kurama gives him a relieved smile, ruffles his hair, and then uses the tip of one claw to scratch a seal onto the trunk below him. It pulses once, then fades to a pale glow that will hopefully be missed, and Kurama throws himself back towards the ground. His extends his senses, but Naruto is completely hidden, from the sound of his breathing to the feel of his chakra, and though Kurama wishes he had the time to be more thorough, that will have to do. If he can distract the trackers, it will be enough.

It has to be.

Even as he veers east and breaks into a run, he casts his attention back, trying to judge the size of the group. It’s hard, because only Kakashi is truly angry—all the others are some flavor of determined, and emotions like that slide from Kurama's grasp before he can really touch them. Still, they're almost close enough for him to sense normally, and he’s fairly certain there are four of them.
He’s even more certain that three of the four are all too familiar.

Kakashi, of course, is easy to mark, and Kurama hadn’t really expected anything else. Obviously the jounin was going to pursue him—that’s simple logic. But right behind him is a familiar trickle of power that registers like the biting-sharp scent of new sap rising to Kurama’s nose, and that’s a bad sign. Naruto’s second sensei, the baby Mokuton user, which would be bad enough on its own, but one step behind him is the mirrors-and-smoke feel of one particular brat whose presence really means Kurama is screwed. And as if that’s not enough, there’s the itch of another, unfamiliar Uchiha right behind Itachi.

Really. Mokuton and not one but two (and a half) Sharingan all at once—if Kurama had to design his worst day ever, it would probably go something like this.

This would all be so much easier if he could just turn into a twenty-story fox and sit on them.

The group is moving quickly, obviously having spotted his chakra, and Kurama gives a low growl of frustration and redoubles his pace, leaping fallen trees and ducking low branches as he races towards the rushing rumble of a river in the distance. He’s too late to throw them off his scent by crossing it, but with any luck (not that Kurama honestly expects to have much) he can knock them into it with a hurricane or something.

Whatever. He’s still working on a plan, but it’ll come to him.

He’s out of time, though. Just as he breaks through the last stretch of trees and into the open ground before the river, a wall of wood shoots up in front of him and forces Kurama to leap aside before he brains himself. Even as he lands, fire roars towards him, vast enough to swallow him whole. There’s no time to dodge, no chance to avoid it, and so Kurama doesn’t try. He plants his feet and lets his chakra surge, because fire is his element. There’s always the chance that it can hurt him, but like this? Prepared and braced, with sufficient warning?

Kurama is a god of fire and wind, of devastation, and even being trapped in a fragile mortal body can’t take that away from him entirely.

He steals the flames before they can even touch him, wraps himself in their light and heat and laughs as his hunters leap from the trees to confront him. The fire roars, leaping and crackling, and Kurama lets it swirl away, lets his chakra devour and consume it like fuel. Their eyes are wary and startled, and Kurama grins, bloody-bright and showing teeth.

“Come for a rematch, Hatake?” he mocks. “How cute. And you even brought friends this time. But face me again and I warn you, I’m not going to hold back.”

“I could swear I won last time,” Kakashi says mildly, and it’s almost impressive how well he manages to hide the anger seething inside of him. “Where’s Naruto, Uzumaki? If that’s even your name.”

“I didn’t lie to you,” Kurama snaps, bristling. “Naruto is mine, my blood, mine to care for! I won’t let him grow up an outcast just because you’re terrified if the Kyuubi! I love him more than anything in the world, and I’m not about to let him suffer!”

Kakashi’s shoulders draw into a slightly tenser line. “So you do know,” he says softly.

Kurama snorts. “That he’s a jinchuuriki? I know better than anyone. You blind fools will never understand even the smallest portion of what it means to be a jinchuuriki, but I do. And I’ll make sure Naruto does too. You want to punish him for it? Cast him out? Fine. But I’ll teach Naruto just
what it really means to wield the power of a bijuu.”

Kakashi must give some sort of signal he doesn’t see, because half a heartbeat later the ground explodes underneath him, spears of wood and grasping roots trying to knot around his limbs. Kurama swears viciously, leaping clear and whirling to slash one hand downward. Waves of force smash into the reaching branches, shattering them into sawdust, and Kurama flips in the air, coming down right in front of Itachi and lashing out with a scything kick. The Uchiha ducks, darting away, but Kurama doesn’t attempt to follow. He vaults a trio of kunai, touches down in front of the unfamiliar Uchiha, and rises with an uppercut leading. The boy is too surprised to dodge and goes flying, and Kurama slips around another ball of flames and casts his own right back.

Four against one isn’t something he’d have had trouble with in his bijuu form, but as a human? The odds suck balls.

Thankfully, Kurama knows a way to fix that.

Balancing and compressing chakra for a bijūdama is simple. This—this is beyond that. It’s like breathing, or blinking, entirely involuntary and unthinking. Fingers up, chakra flaring, and a shadow clone mirrors Kurama as he leaps back towards the river.

It’s tempting to go for Naruto’s usual overkill and summon a thousand of the things, but Kurama doesn’t quite dare. He’s not sure how his chakra will react with the clones, given that he’s a bijuu, and beyond that he’s a manifestation of anger and malice—he doesn’t want evil, mindless little versions of the Kyuubi running around. While that would definitely distract his hunters, it probably wouldn’t be good in the long run.

The clone splits off, heading for Itachi, and Kurama wishes it luck as he spins to avoid Kakashi’s kunai. The blade just manages to skim his hair before Kurama lunges forward, knocking Kakashi’s arm wide with an elbow and then driving a knee into his side. Even as Kakashi chokes and staggers, more roots burst from the ground, reaching for Kurama’s limbs. He snarls and tears his way free, then throws himself towards the Mokuton user, who has his hands raised in a seal and an expression of grim concentration on his face. When he sees Kurama coming, dark eyes narrow further, and the hand-seal shifts. Another wooden wall bursts up, this time curving into a dome around him. Kurama’s claws tear gouges in it, nowhere deep enough to even begin doing real damage, but he doesn’t have time to try again. Kakashi is on his heels, kunai out and slashing.

“Damn you!” Kurama hisses, sliding under the blow. He comes up with a weak shockwave, still not aiming to kill, and feels a rush of pure frustration when Kakashi disappears into the ground, swallowed up by his own earth jutsu. At the same moment, a thick beam of wood shoots right at his gut, catching him hard in the stomach. Kurama loses all of his breath in an explosive rush as he’s lifted right off his feet, ribs creaking threateningly, and goes flying back into the trunk of a tree.

Beneath him, the earth erupts, and Kakashi grabs his ankle, yanking down. Kurama automatically kicks him in the face, earning a loud yelp, and then lunges for the Mokuton user again. The man spins away from his claws, leg lashing out, but Kurama ducks the high kick and slams bodily into him, one hand fisting in his uniform. A snarl, a surge of effort, and Kurama hurls the man directly into the unfamiliar Uchiha, right as the boy is calling up a fireball.

“Tenzō!” Kakashi shouts, and a moment later a dragon of fire slams into the ground where Kurama had been standing. Kurama whirs past it, bringing his claws to bear, and almost succeeds in slicing Kakashi across the face. The Copy-Nin dodges at the last second, managing to avoid all but a shallow scrap across his chin, and Kurama lashes out with a snarl.

“Naruto is mine!” he roars. “Stop trying to take him away!”
Wind screams past him, sharp-edged like blades and fueled by rage and chakra in equal measure. It knocks Kakashi right off his feet, dispels Kurama's clone in a puff of smoke, and sends the two Uchiha staggering. It’s a small opening, but it’s an opening nevertheless, and if Kurama can move fast enough, maybe set a fire behind him, he’ll have enough time to get to Naruto and then hightail it for the Suna border.

He turns to run, but before he can take more than a single step branches like steel cables catch him. They twist around his limbs, his torso, catch him in their choking grasp and drag him down to his knees even as he screams in rage, claws slashing ineffectually at thin air before they're immobilized.

“Shisui,” Kakashi orders, a whip-crack of sound in the hurricane’s wake as he staggers to his feet.

“Captain,” the Uchiha acknowledges, stepping into Kurama's line of vision. His dark eyes spin to red, shifting into a kaleidoscope of ebony and crimson, and Kurama knows all too well what that means. He snarls a denial, struggles redoubling as creepers lock his head into place, but he’s well and truly trapped. The only thing he can see is that hated dojutsu, already striping away his will in a surge of bone-deep horror.

Just those eyes, red and black and rising to swallow him in a tide of fear and loathing.

Kurama meets them helplessly, hatefully, and can only think, Sage, not again.
X: Nepenthe

Chapter Notes

It’s, er, still Wednesday somewhere? I think?? Sorry, there was a minor emergency that required all of my cognitive function to deal with, and I forgot that I failed to post this in the rush. Mea culpa!

[nepenthe /nəˈpɛnθi/, a drug described in Homer’s Odyssey as banishing grief or trouble from a person’s mind; anything that brings welcome forgetfulness. From Latin nēpenthes “herb for soothing”, from Greek nēpenth, “sorrowless.”]

If there’s one thing Kurama hates above all others, it’s helplessness. It’s having his will stolen and twisted and having another’s will forced on him. Madara did it twice, Kaguya tried it, Obito managed it. That would be the reason for his loathing of the Sharingan, because he fears it. He fears it more than anything, that a single moment of eye contact can strip away everything that makes him Kurama and turn him into a mindless weapon.

“If you do this,” he hisses, “I’ll rip you apart and eat your corpses, you fucking bastards.”

At the edge of his line of vision, Kakashi shifts. “You won’t,” he says flatly, and at the same moment Shisui’s chakra crests. Kurama tries to look away, slam his eyes shut, but he already knows it’s too late, can feel himself falling—

There’s a sharp pop, a puff of smoke, and something small and white drops out of midair to land right on Shisui’s head. He yelps, leaping back, and three fluffy tails swing down to slap him in the face. Another cry and he lashes out, sweeping a kunai over his head, but the creature leaps clear with a neat flip, bounces off Itachi’s face as he heads for his clansman and sends him reeling, and lands lightly on the ground.

“Which one?” it shouts, darting around the Uchihas’ attempts to grab it, and that’s definitely a female voice. “Which one is it?”

From the bushes there’s a sharp, eerie screech, and a small scarlet shape bursts out and bolts across the battleground. It slams bodily into Kakashi’s leg even as he tries to dodge, and sharp white teeth flash. Kakashi yelps in pain and overbalances, and the little red fox abandons its victim to throw itself at Kurama. It grabs a vine in its teeth and wrenches hard, but Kurama sees movement and shouts a warning as more roots sprout.

Smoke whirls, chakra flares, and the white vixen disappears. In her place is a girl who looks no older than fourteen, with long white hair and three tails peeking from under her red kimono. She claps her hands together, and orbs of multicolored fire whirl into being around her. A flick of her fingers sends them spinning out, aiming for the Konoha shinobi, and in the confusion that follows she leaps forward, alighting next to Kurama and the red fox.

“Kyuubi-sama?” she asks, already ripping at the roots binding him. “What on earth did you do to get yourself trapped in that body?”
“Long story,” Kurama says gruffly, but relief leaves him shaky and almost breathless as he helps to free himself. He catches a flash of lightning from the corner of his eye and swears, lunging forward and scooping the kitsune and fox both up into his arms as he jumps clear. It impacts behind him, scorching the Mokuton user’s trap and leaving a deep crater, but Kakashi doesn’t pause, driving forward with a kunai leading.

Really, Kurama is getting tired of this. He snarls, boosting the fox up onto his shoulders and tucking the vixen under his arm like a sack of rice as he strikes, and this time he doesn’t hold back. The shockwave tears across the earth, flattening trees and cracking rock, forcing Kakashi to tumble away. In his place Tenzō tries to lunge forward, but the vixen makes a sound of triumph and brings her hands together again. There’s another pop, and a leaf goes tumbling off her head as she shifts again, flowing out of Kurama's grip like smoke. This time it’s back to a fox, but large—much, much larger than the tiny form she appeared with. As big as a pony, she plants her feet, opens her mouth, and spits a bolt of lightning right at the jounin.

There’s no time to see the result. Kurama spins, catching the hilt of the tantō descending at his skull, and snarls at the Uchiha who tried to take his will. He slams a foot towards the boy’s gut, but the blow doesn’t land. There’s a faint shimmer, a flicker of speed that’s almost too much for even Kurama to follow, and he has to knock the red fox clear, then throw himself forward and down into a roll to avoid the blade aimed at his back. He twists back to his feet just in time for a kick to knock his legs out from under him again, and he snarls. As Itachi strikes out at him, Sharingan bright with power, Kurama summons fire in a wave, and forces the boy to dodge it.

Staggering upright, Kurama locks eyes with Kakashi, who’s approaching at a run. He bares his teeth, brings his claws up, and ignores the red fox when it claws its way back up to his shoulders and curls defensively around his neck.

“Why?” Kurama demands. “Why all of this? Naruto doesn’t even know you! You’ve never been there for him before!”

Kakashi’s poker face is too good to tell if the barb landed, but he slows, circling Kurama warily. “That’s not what this is about,” he says. “Naruto belongs in Konoha. You have no right to take him away.”

“I have every right!” Kurama snarls. “You bastard, I know who trained you! Naruto might as well be family to you, but he doesn’t so much as know your name. Justify that!”

Kurama is used to anger, hate. They’ve been his companions as long as he can remember, and he knows all too well how to use them. He grabs for them now, for power, for balance. Positive and negative chakra spin at his fingertips, condensing down into five marble-sized balls of purple-black light, and Kurama lets them go. They whirl out, and Kakashi’s eyes widen. He shouts a warning, throwing himself back towards the river, but Kurama can’t see if he makes it. When the bijūdama impact, it shakes the very earth and fills the battleground with choking smoke.

“Okay up there?” Kurama asks, putting a hand up to touch his passenger, and the small fox yips quietly. A moment later the smoke parts and a shining white shape slips through. The vixen bounds over to them, then drops into a crouch.

“Get on, Kyuubi-sama,” she orders. “I cast a few illusions, but it won’t distract them for long.”

Kurama doesn’t hesitate to vault onto her back, twisting his fingers into her long ruff as she leaps forward, long legs eating up the ground as she races into the forest. “Naruto,” he manages, and when the red fox’s claws scrape at his neck he pulls the creature down into his lap. “I have to get back to Naruto, he’s alone—”
“I’ll take you to him,” the vixen promises, pausing in a small dip. “Which way?”

The red fox barks, scrambling off her back, and races up the hill. Kurama glances around and is startled to recognize it as the same spot where he helped the fox earlier. He slips off the vixen’s back as well, touching her shoulder in gratitude.

“Here,” he says. “I—thank you. You saved me.”

“Occhan?” a voice calls, and Kurama spins, instantly sidetracked.

“Naruto!” he shouts back, and a small body bursts out of the bushes and slams into him. Kurama lets out a breath of pure relief and wraps his arms around the boy, clutching him close. “Naruto. You’re okay?”

“Fine,” Naruto says, and looks up. His eyes catch on the white vixen and go wide with wonder. “Occhan, what is that?”

“Oi, don’t you mean who?” the vixen protests, and the red fox bolts back under her paws with a yipping laugh.

Kurama laughs as well, too shaky and glad to do much else. “Thank you,” he tells her again, lifting Naruto into his arms. “I don’t know how to repay you.” Then he crouches down, holding out a hand to the red fox, and adds with a smile, “And thank you as well. That was very, very clever and tricky of you. I bet you’ll be earning that second tail in no time.”

The fox gives a rumbling purr and twists under his hand like a cat, then licks his fingers and slips away, vanishing back into the undergrowth.

“He wanted to repay you,” the vixen says, a smile in her voice as she crouches beside him. “And when he told me the greatest of our kind was nearby, I had to see for myself.”

“Not what you expected, huh?” Kurama asks wryly, rising to his feet again. “Thank you for the help, but I should go. Those four won’t be distracted for long.”

The vixen snorts softly. “Don’t be a fool,” she says, tone arch. “I can take you anywhere you want to go, Kyuubi-sama, and do it much faster than that silly human body.”

This is true. Kurama hesitates, but he doesn’t really have any other choices. With Konoha’s best tracker on his tail, his options are shrinking by the second. Casting a glance at Naruto, he arches a brow, and asks, “Up for it, kid?”

Naruto looks awed. “We’re gonna ride a fox?” he demands, and beams widely. “Yeah!”

With a laugh, the vixen turns to present her back. “All right, then. Glad to have your approval, kit. Where to, Kyuubi-sama?”

“Call me Kurama,” Kurama offers, settling himself behind her shoulders with Naruto in front of him. “You’re likely to give someone a heart attack otherwise. And I was headed for Suna.”

That gets him another laugh, wicked and tricky, as she rises to her full height. “I'm Fuji,” she offers. “And Suna it is. Can we stop for oden on the way?”

“Ramen!” is Naruto’s input. “Can we get ramen too, Occhan?”

Kurama chuckles, kisses sun-bright hair, and answers, “Yeah. Meal’s on me. Thanks, Fuji.”
White ears flick back, then up, and the vixen leaps forward into a run, all sleek muscle and inhuman speed. “I’ve always wanted to meet you, Kurama-sama,” she calls back, “so believe me, the honor is mine.”

Kurama wonders a little wryly how to tell her that she’s more or less met two of him in the space of a few minutes, but decides to save that conversation for a later date.

“I have this nagging suspicion that that didn’t go anywhere close to how we planned it,” Shisui says as he fights his way free of Tenzō’s desperately erected shield, because he’s a sarcastic asshole who thinks he’s funny.

“Someone hit him for me,” a mud-coated Tenzō requests, dragging himself out of the river’s shallows, which a very clever genjutsu made him think was solid ground. “And make it hurt, please.”

Obligingly, Itachi reaches out and smacks the back of his best friend’s head. Shisui yelps and ducks away, looking wounded, and protests, “Hey, easy! You didn’t have twenty pounds of fox just land on your skull!”

Itachi, who has four muddy paw-prints smeared across his face, narrows his eyes and glares.

“Technically not your skull,” Shisui reminds him, grinning.

For all their sakes, Kakashi sweeps his feet out from under him and dumps the elder Uchiha on his ass. Given Shisui’s speed and reflexes, it’s likely that he allows it to happen, but either way it’s still vaguely satisfying. Turning his attention away, Kakashi looks over his dirty, slightly battered team and resists the urge to sigh. The riverbank around them is a complete disaster, more a collection of craters than anything, and the dust and smoke in the air is only just now clearing.

“All right?” he asks Tenzō, who took the brunt of the attack while shielding the rest of them.

Tenzō nods agreeably, in the process of wringing out his flak jacket. “Marvelous. Thank you for asking, senpai.” Something that may or may not be a small fish flops out of a pocket and falls to the ground, and he gives Kakashi a pointed smile and chuckles it back into the river.

Really. Kakashi is surrounded by comedians.

To be honest, though, he isn’t feeling all that enthusiastic himself. Given that his one-on-one fight against Kurama ended with the Uzumaki taking a Raikiri to the chest, he’d expected a four-on-one fight to go a little more smoothly, or at least not disastrously. Tenzō, Shisui, and Itachi are all ANBU, after all, and the four of them are fairly well-versed in working as a team. They should have been able to overwhelm Kurama easily, but—

_Naruto doesn’t even know you! You’ve never been there for him before!_

It is maybe just slightly possible that Kurama’s words affected him rather more than he would care to admit.

The problem, Kakashi thinks, is Kurama’s _certainty_. He is so utterly convinced that Naruto is better off with him, and Kakashi has been on Naruto’s guard enough to know just what the boy’s life is like. There’s always the possibility that, if Kurama really is telling the truth about who he is, Naruto...
really is better off elsewhere.

It doesn’t matter, Kakashi tells himself. This is a mission from the Sandaime Hokage. This is his duty. Naruto belongs in Konoha, in Minato's village, and not in the clutches of a completely unknown man who clearly knows far too much about jinchuuriki. He could be planning to use Naruto as a weapon, or to brainwash him, or just to hurt him, and that’s not a risk Kakashi can take.

It doesn’t matter, he tells himself, and tries to believe it.

“Uzumaki seemed oddly wary of your Mokuton,” Itachi says to Tenzō, startling Kakashi out of his thoughts. When he glances over, the boy offers a small shrug. “He went out of his way to avoid Tenzō and keep him at a distance. I thought it was interesting.”

That’s true, and Kakashi had hardly noticed.

There’s a brief pause as they all consider this, and then Shisui hums thoughtfully, stretching his legs out in front of him and wrapping an arm around his knees. “Are we sure,” he asks carefully, “that all the other jinchuuriki are accounted for?”

Kakashi lets that rather awful thought sink in for a moment and grimaces. They’re really, really not. Jinchuuriki are weapons, after all—villages don’t tend to announce when they acquire them, and they’re always jealously guarded. Iwa has more than one, Konoha suspects that Kumo does as well, and Suna has admitted to having the Ichibi, but beyond that it’s anyone’s guess.

“Uzushio never had a bijuu, though,” he points out, crouching down beside Shisui. Kurama is gaining a lead, but he’s barefoot, tired, and cold, still recovering from Kakashi’s Raikiri, with a six-year-old who can’t move nearly as fast; Kakashi is confident they can make up the distance. “Suna might have only told us because they had to, but Uzushio was an ally. They wouldn’t have lied.”

Tenzō huffs softly. “Are we so sure that this man was telling the truth?” he counters. “He could be anyone. Nothing guarantees that he’s really an Uzumaki.”

“He wasn’t lying.”

In faint surprise, Kakashi glances over at Itachi. The eleven-year-old meets his stare evenly, tipping one shoulder in a faint shrug, but says nothing else.

“‘Tachi?” Shisui prompts looking curious as well, and his cousin glances at him for a second before nodding in agreement.

“When he spoke of family, he wasn’t lying,” Itachi clarifies. “He was angry, but there were no micro-expressions indicating falsehood. As far as Kurama believed, he was telling the truth. Naruto really is his family.”

Tenzō sighs faintly, but doesn’t argue with the Sharingan’s ability to pick up on such things. “Then he is an Uzumaki,” he concludes. “Which brings us back to whether or not he’s a jinchuuriki.”

“I think we can safely assume he is,” Kakashi says slowly, remembering Kurama’s words about teaching Naruto to use the strength of a bijuu, and how they could never understand a jinchuuriki as well as he could. “Those abilities of his have to come from somewhere. Given his looks, maybe he’s one of Kumo’s jinchuuriki gone rogue? It would explain some things, and they’d hardly broadcast losing one of the tailed beasts.”

It makes more sense than Kakashi would like it to. An Uzumaki man, the father of Konoha’s second jinchuuriki but with no real ties to either Konoha or Uzushio, would be a valuable commodity in
Kumo. If Kurama had escaped, made his way back to Uzushio before it fell, it would also make sense for him not to have told anyone what he was.

It’s a lot of speculation, but the pieces are adding up.

“You mean we’re going to have to fight a damned jinchuuriki?” Shisui demands, sounding distinctly unhappy. “Fuck me.”

“We already have,” Itachi reminds him, at the same moment as Tenzō answers, “Not even if you paid me.”

There’s a moment of silence as the three team members stare at each other. Kakashi puts his head in his hands and regrets every single one of his life choices with even more fervor than normal.

“I was referring to the fight we just finished,” Itachi says carefully, ignoring the crimson spreading across his cheeks as he pointedly looks away.

Tenzō snorts out a soft laugh, rising to his feet and shrugging on his soggy flak jacket. “Well, I was referring to screwing Shisui,” he clarifies helpfully.

“That’s fine, everyone knows you're hung up on the captain anyways,” Shisui shoots back, and really, Kakashi would like to be anywhere else at the moment. “Always going senpai, senpai—I'm embarrassed for you, Tenzō.”

Technically, the expression Tenzō offers him is a smile, but it’s weird and darkly creepy and makes even Itachi wince faintly. “I've decided. You can sleep outside when we stop for the night.”

“What?! Come on, Tenzō—”

“Which we haven’t yet,” Kakashi cuts in, relieved to have found a place to end this conversation. “Get up, and let’s get moving. Uzumaki can't be too far ahead, and I want him caught as soon as possible.”

Of course, because everyone in this squad was handpicked to test his patience, that’s not the end of things. Still, Shisui and Tenzō have long since found just what volume they can bicker at without giving themselves away, and it’s low enough that Kakashi can pretend not to hear as he takes the lead.

Surprisingly, Itachi falls into step with him as he scouts the edges of the trees. There’s a precise sort of blankness to his face, and his voice is tightly quiet as he asks, “Are we going to kill Uzumaki?”

Kakashi pauses, glancing up at the boy. He doesn’t say anything, but the faint lift of one brow is enough to make Itachi look away again. “Doing anything for family—I think I can understand it,” he explains, picking each word with care. “And…Naruto is my brother’s age, and if we do have to…”

He doesn’t have to say that losing the very first person to claim family ties to him, especially in a violent, gruesome way, will scar Naruto for life, maybe even start a seed of resentment against the village rooting in his heart, but he knows he doesn’t need to. Kakashi has had all these thoughts already, and they twist themselves up in knots in his brain every time he tries to push them away.

Taking a breath, Kakashi says quietly, carefully, “I would…prefer not to. But the Hokage's orders are clear. If Shisui can manage to use his Kotoamatsukami, we’ll have no trouble, but I don’t think Kurama will come quietly otherwise.”

That’s another thing he doesn’t want to think of, the expression on Kurama's face when Shisui
caught his gaze. It was more than fear at being beaten, because that was *terror*, stark and bone-deep. But Shisui's Mangekyo isn’t well-known, especially outside Konoha, so it wasn’t of that. Some people fear the Sharingan in general, but…that much?

It’s a piece that doesn’t fit, a curiosity, a mystery.

Kakashi has never liked mysteries.

Twelve solid hours from Konoha, on the border where Wire Country meets River Country, the forests thin practically to nothingness, and there are several small villages—more a couple of buildings grouped around the road than actual towns—interspersed with farmland. Fuji, who seems to have a sense for oden that’s equal to Naruto's ramen intuition, carries them right to the edge of one such village before letting them down. It’s mid-morning, with several people visible in the distance, but their strange little group hasn’t been noticed yet. Probably for the best, Kurama thinks a little wryly, helping Naruto slide to the ground.

“Okay, Naruto?” he asks, crouching down beside the little boy, who’s still blinking sleep from his eyes.

The cheerful grin he gets in response is so familiar that it aches. “Can we get ramen now, Occhan?” he asks enthusiastically, latching on to Kurama's open hand.

Kurama can't help but chuckle, giving the small hand a gentle squeeze. “Sure, kit,” he answers, and maybe he never would have called his Naruto that—he always defaulted to ‘brat’, because that’s what Naruto forever was—but here and now, it fits. This Naruto is like a fox kit, wide eyes and bright smiles with a trickster’s grin hidden beneath, small and cute but with a predilection for mischief.

Just seeing him lets the hurt in Kurama's chest scab over, quiets the roiling grief that he’s been fighting for days now.

“I *never* get real ramen for breakfast!” Naruto cheers enthusiastically, dragging at Kurama's arm to urge him towards the village. “Let’s go, let’s go!”

Fuji laughs, bounding after them. She snatches a stray leaf off the ground, tosses it up, and lets it fall to land right on top of her head. As it does, there's a puff of smoke, and a moment later she latches on to Kurama's free hand in her white-haired little girl form. “Oden!” she agrees with equal enthusiasm. “This is one of the best noodle stalls I've ever been to! It’s so good!”

With a snort, Kurama bids the remaining ryō he has farewell. Not like he'll ever find something better to spend it on than making Naruto happy, though. “Yeah, yeah,” he huffs, trying to sound grumpy even though he’s smiling. “I could use a meal, too. No more than ten bowls apiece, though, got it? I'm not made of money here.”

Naruto's eyes get very, very wide. “Really?” he demands, staring up at Kurama as though he had just handed Naruto the Hokage's hat, no strings attached. “I can have *ten*? Hokage-ji ji only ever lets me get *two*.”

“I'm not your Hokage-ji ji,” Kurama reminds him. “If you want ramen, we’ll get you ramen. Besides, it'll make up for not having dinner last night, right? Eat all you want.”
Naruto beams. “Thanks, Occhan!” He hesitates faintly, but then asks, “Did you really know my mom? What was her name?”

The reminder that Naruto knows absolutely nothing about his past, doesn’t know his father or mother or anything about his clan, is enough to make Kurama set his jaw and force him to shove down a fiery lash of pure anger. “Yeah,” he says when he finally manages to get his temper under control. “I knew her, probably better than anyone else. Her name was Kushina, and she loved ramen just as much as you do.”

And really, damn the Hokage. Damn Kakashi, Uchiha Mikoto, Nara Shikaku—everyone and anyone who ever knew Minato or Kushina, who ever counted them as a friend. If they had a single decent bone in their bodies, they’d have done something to make Naruto’s life less of the hell it has been for the past six years.

The boy is silent as Fuji pulls them both into the noodle stand and gives the cook their orders—ramen for Naruto, kitsune oden for herself and Kurama—and he’s looking down, so Kurama can’t read his expression. He tries not to worry as he boosts the boy up to sit on a stool, but he can’t help it. There’s nothing in the world he wants less than to make Naruto sad.

But when Naruto finally looks up, he’s…smiling. Just a little, small and grateful, but it warms Kurama's chest. “She…did? Just as much?”

“Just as much,” Kurama returns, and can't resist ruffling the kid’s hair again. “You’ve got your mom’s temperament to go along with her chakra. She was a lot like you are—even wanted to be Hokage.”

The light that fills Naruto's face is pure joy, and he laughs, leaning across the gap between their stools and wrapping his arms around Kurama's elbow. “Yeah,” he says, all determination and enthusiasm. “I'm gonna fulfill my mom’s dream, too! I'm gonna be Hokage for both of us!”

Kurama debates telling him that his father actually managed to gain the hat, but decides not to just yet. Honestly, Kurama never liked Minato all that much—probably because the bastard was the one to seal him just when he’d gotten free, but likely also because he had to listen to a smitten teenage girl rambling about Minato's amazing everything for years on end—and Naruto is more like Kushina anyway. She’s the better one to focus on.

“I’m sure she’d be incredibly proud,” he tells Naruto, giving the cook an absent wave of thanks as their bowls are set in front of them. “She always wanted a strong son, and I know she loved you more than anything.”

Naruto contemplates this as he empties his bowl, and Kurama leaves him to it, picking apart his aburaage before he eats it. The food settles his empty stomach, and Kurama hadn’t realized quite how hungry he was until he finds himself staring at uncovered porcelain. He orders more for all of them, since Fuji is almost done with her oden as well, and is just about to ask Naruto whether he likes his when the boy suddenly says, “I always thought my parents must have been really bad people, because everybody hates me and calls me a monster all the time.”

It takes effort not to let his claws dig gouges into the counter. Kurama takes a slow, careful breath, all too aware of the cook’s attention on them as he works, and answers sharply, “Never believe them, Naruto. Everyone in Konoha is a fucking moron if they can’t see just how amazing you are. I will never regret taking you away from them, even if they kill me for it. You deserve to be happy, kit, and I know someday you’ll prove all of them wrong. I’ve never met anyone less like a monster.”

Naruto's face screws up like he’s about to cry, and he rubs furiously at his eyes. “They weren’t bad
“Guys?” he asks, almost desperately.

“No,” Kurama answers to hesitation, reaching out to pull the boy into his lap. “Your mom was a jounin who laughed all the time and liked to play pranks. They called her one of the most beautiful kunoichi in the village, and she could make chains of golden chakra to fight with. Your dad was a jounin too, and a genius, even if your mom always beat him with a sword. They both loved Konoha, and gave their lives so that you had a chance at surviving. They loved you, Naruto, and so do I.”

Naruto leans into the hug desperately, arms tight around Kurama's neck, and Kurama presses his cheek against Naruto's hair, pretending he can't hear the choking sobs against his shoulder. Last time, when Naruto learned about his parents, he’d already made a place and a name for himself. He knew he wasn’t a monster, knew just why the villagers had always hated him. But right now he has none of that certainty, none of the assurance that he’s more than the whispers. Only his own determination, and for all that Naruto's will has always been incredible, he’s a six-year-old without a single friend. If Kurama can ease that sorrow, of course he’s going to.

“You really do, Occhan?” Naruto asks thickly. “You love me?”

Kurama smiles and kisses the top of his head. “More than anything,” he confirms. “And nothing will ever change that, I promise.”

With a smile that all but banishes the tears on his cheeks, Naruto sniffs and gives Kurama one last hug before he slides back to his stool. “I love you too, Occhan,” he says firmly. “Can you tell me more about my mom and dad?”

“On the road,” Kurama agrees readily. “Eat your ramen, Naruto. We’ve got a ways to go before we reach Suna. Besides, Fuji looks hungry. If you're not careful, she might steal it for herself.”

“Definitely,” Fuji chimes in from Kurama's other side, slurping up the last of her noodles. “Ramen’s not as good as oden, but I like it anyway.”

Naruto gapes at her, looking almost horrified. “Ramen’s the best!” he protests. “Oden’s okay, but—but ramen!”

“But kitsune oden has aburaage,” Fuji counters, just as horrified. “Nothing’s better than aburaage!”

Kurama laughs, drops a hand on each of their heads, and lightly shoves them back towards their meals. “Shut up, brats,” he says, and can't quite hide the fond humor in his tone. “Just—shut up and eat.”

Fuji pulls one lower eyelid down and sticks her tongue out at him, and Naruto cries, “You're a mean, grumpy old man, Occhan!” but they're both grinning, too, and Kurama can't help but count it as a win.
XI: Specious

[specious /ˈspɛʃəs/ , superficially plausible but actually wrong; misleading in appearance. From Late Middle English specious “beautiful”, from Latin speciosus “fair”, from Latin species “appearance, form, beauty”.]

“So what’s in Suna?” Fuji asks, leaping across a narrow creek and landing lightly enough that she doesn’t even jar her passengers. “You seem pretty desperate to get there, Kurama-sama.”

“Hokage-jiji says it’s another ninja village,” Naruto chimes in helpfully. “Are we gonna be ninjas there?”

Kurama rolls his eyes at the two of them, but keeps his gaze on the horizon, where the rolling yellow dunes of Wind Country are slowly coming into focus. Already the grass beneath them, the last sign of River Country’s lushness, is patchy and dry, and the air is warmer. It’s a relief from the chill of northern Fire Country, but Kurama’s a little wary of it regardless. They have water, if only a few bottles bought with his rapidly dwindling funds, and enough food for a few days, but the desert is wide, and Suna is well-protected just by its distance from anywhere else.

“A friend,” he answers after a moment. “Hopefully. There’s—one of the others should be there, and if I’m lucky he can watch Naruto while I finish keeping my promise.”

“The Ichibi?” Fuji sounds surprised. “I thought he…wasn’t well.”

“He’s bat-shit insane,” Kurama agrees without hesitation, “but a lot of that’s the seal they slapped on him. If I can fix it, he should be fine.”

“Seal? On your friend?” Naruto sounds confused. “Is it punishment because he did something bad?”

Kurama pauses, debating, but…he’s not going to lie to Naruto. He might not tell him the full truth, but he won’t keep everything to himself. “Can we stop for a second, Fuji?” he asks quietly. “This might take some explanation.”

“Oh, Kurama-sama.” The white fox slows, then comes to a stop beside a stand of dusty-brown rocks. She crouches down, letting them slide off her back, puffs back into her tiny form, and promptly flops down on her side, stretching out on the sandy earth. “Mmph. I was getting ready to take a break anyway.”

“Sorry, Fuji,” Kurama offers, tugging gently on one pointed ear. She’s the sole reason they’ve managed to outpace and lose their pursuers—Fuji only has three tails, but she’s fast and can hold a transformation for a long time. It’s not entirely impossible that Kakashi will manage to pick up their trail, but it’s fairly unlikely since he has no idea of Kurama’s intended destination. After all, he never even mentioned Suna in the Copy-Nin’s presence, and it’s a long shot as it is.

He’s well aware that Shukaku is not actually mother material in the least, and that Gaara doesn’t exactly have a life of luxury even if he hasn’t already been psychologically traumatized, killed his uncle, and gone nuts. But it’s still safer for Naruto than parading him right under Akatsuki’s collective nose, and if Gaara’s uncle is still alive—well. Maybe that’s another tragedy Kurama can head off at the pass. His Naruto would want him to save Gaara the pain of that incident if possible, after all.
If Yashamaru is already dead, things are going to be a little more complicated, but even so, Kurama thinks he can swing it. Naruto is fairly self-sufficient, and Gaara is living separately from his father. The kid’s older siblings are too scared of him to do more than hover on the outskirts of his life, so if Naruto keeps his head down—something he’s had practice doing, in Konoha—everything should be just fine.

(Maybe that’s too optimistic, but Kurama honestly can’t think of any other options that will let him see Naruto again before the kid is old and grey. Bringing him back to Konoha is definitely out of the question, and no innocent child should ever be exposed to Killer B except as a world-is-ending-we’re-all-screwed sort of last resort. Since Kurama doesn’t have a clue where any of the more levelheaded bijuu are at the moment, Gaara and Shukaku will have to do.)

“Occhan?” Naruto asks, tugging at his sleeve. “Occhan, are you okay?”

Kurama smiles, sinking down to sit in front of the boy with his legs crossed under him. “I’m fine,” he says reassuringly. “But... you know how I told you about your parents, and the village not hating you because of them? Do you... do you want to know the real reason?”

Wide blue eyes stare up at him, traced with equal parts trepidation and resignation. “Are you gonna hate me too?” he asks, expression heartbreakingly solemn.

“Never, kit,” Kurama swears, ruffling his hair. “I already told you that, didn’t I? And besides, I already know why, and I just think they're stupid.”

The wariness slides into determination and Naruto nods, looking set. “I wanna know,” he says firmly.

No matter his age, Naruto will always forge blindly ahead no matter what. It makes Kurama smile a little, and he leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees as Naruto drops to sit across from him. “Well, I already told you about your mom. But what I didn’t say is that she was the Kyuubi jinchuuriki. Do you know what that means?” When Naruto shakes his head, Kurama sighs and drags a hand through his hair. “It means she had such powerful chakra that she was chosen as a container for one of the tailed beasts—the Kyuubi no Kitsune.”

Horror and devastation creeps in around the edges of Naruto's expression, and he tenses like he’s about to run. “The—the demon fox?” he manages, but his voice wobbles. “The one that attacked the village?”

“Yeah,” Kurama says gently. “Your mom was the Kyuubi’s host, and when she gave birth to you, the seal weakened and the Kyuubi escaped. Then someone took control of the fox, and turned him on the village. Your mom and dad defeated him and sealed him into you in order to save Konoha. That makes you a jinchuuriki just like Kushina was, but a lot of idiots don’t understand that being a jinchuuriki means you’re not actually the Kyuubi, just his container, so they get scared.”

“But I'm not, right?” Naruto demands. “I'm not the Kyuubi, right? I'm not a monster!”

Gently, Kurama raps his knuckles against Naruto's skull. “Of course you're not,” he scoffs. “And I would know. I used to be just like you, kit, and I can tell the Kyuubi is asleep inside you, but he’s not you.”

Fuji, silent until now, makes a noise of startled understanding. “Another nine-tailed fox?” she demands, rolling partly upright. “I thought there was only one.”

Kurama ignores her, keeping his eyes on Naruto. The boy is staring back at him, looking torn. Then,
slowly, the confusion shifts into determination again, and he squares his shoulders. “My mom was the same as me?” he asks, and when Kurama nods, he smiles bravely. “Then I'm gonna be just as amazing as she was! I'm gonna be Hokage and a jinchuuriki and I'll prove to everybody that I'm not a monster!”

The rush of relief is heady, and Kurama smiles, kissing Naruto's forehead soundly. “Good. That’s a good goal. Now, any more questions?”

Naruto's face scrunches up for a second, and then he asks, “Can I learn to turn into a fox like Fuji can?”

For half a heartbeat, Kurama thinks about explaining the intricacies of the tailed beasts and their various forms, up to and including a jinchuuriki’s ability to let the bijuu inside them manifest, but at the last moment decides that that’s a conversation that can wait for a later time. As it is, he just chuckles and shakes his head. “Sorry, Naruto, but Fuji’s a fox summons, not a human. She’s a fox who can look like a human sometimes instead of the other way around.”

“Yeah,” Fuji chimes in cheerfully, apparently over her surprise. “There’s a bunch of us who live on Mount Inari, and every time a fox lives long enough to get more than one tail, they can become a summons if they want! But nobody has signed our contract in a long time, which makes it boring, so I sneaked out to go explore.”

If Kurama needed a reminder—beyond the fact that she has just three tails—that Fuji might generously be considered a teenager in the lifespan of a kitsune, it’s that. However, given that he’s hardly one to talk about responsibility and thinking things through, he rolls his eyes and lets it go. “Ever wanted to make a clone?” he suggests, because there’s absolutely no reason not to. “That much I can teach you.”

Naruto’s face screws up in consternation. “I don’t know,” he says dubiously. “Iruka-sensei showed us how to do a clone and I’m really bad at it.”

“That’s stupid,” Kurama counters without hesitation. “You’re a jinchuuriki—of course you can’t do the Academy standard clone. With as much raw chakra as you have, you need something a little more impressive. Like the Multiple Shadow Clone Jutsu, which I know you’ll be good at.”

If Naruto's eyes get any wider, they're going to fall out of his head. He stares at Kurama for a moment before his gaze goes watery, and he throws himself at Kurama. Small hands tangle in his hair, and then Naruto beams up at him, nova-bright. “Thanks, Occhan!” he says happily. “I promise I'm gonna make you proud of me!”

“I already am,” Kurama laughs, helpless to be anything but painfully honest. “Naruto, I am. Just being yourself is all I ever need to see you do. That’s my promise. And I always keep my word, kit.”

“Just like me!” Naruto looks entirely enthused by this idea. “We have the same nindo!”

“That we do.” Kurama heaves himself to his feet, then reaches down, offering Naruto his hand. “Come on, Naruto. Let’s go see if there's a hill around here that we can scout from while Fuji takes a break. We might be able to see Wind Country, if we’ve come as far as I think we have.”

Naruto grabs his fingers, small hand barely able to close around Kurama's, and chirps, “Sure, Occhan!” as Kurama hauls him up. On a whim, Kurama catches him around the waist and heaves him up further, swinging the little boy up onto his shoulders. With a theatrical grunt, he grips the kid’s ankles, holding him in place, and feels hands twist into his hair.
“Easy on the goods,” he teases. “You’ve got quite the grip there for a six-year-old.”

With a laugh that’s close to delighted, Naruto lists forward, wrapping his arms around Kurama’s neck as much as he can. “You’re hair’s so red,” he says. “It looks like it’s gonna be hot, but it isn’t.”

Kurama snorts, because that’s just the sort of whimsy he expects from his jinchuuriki, and hides his smile by looking away. “Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard it all before,” he grunts. “It’s pretty close to your mom’s color, though hers was a lot longer.”

“I don’t look like her?” Naruto asks, sounding disappointed.

Before he can help it, Kurama laughs. “Sure you do,” he reassures the boy. “You look a whole hell of a lot like your mom, kit, and you act like her, too—all you got of your dad was his coloring, far as I can tell.” Hearing the soft sound of concern, he adds, “It’s a good thing, believe me. He was smart, but unless lives were on the line he was the ditsiest scatterbrain I ever saw—‘specially when your mom was in sight.”

When Kurama tilts his head back to check how this is going over—not that he’s worried, because he’s pretty sure that any sort of knowledge of his parents will make Naruto happy—Naruto looks somewhere between overwhelmed and overjoyed and very, very sad. Deciding that the conversation’s taking a turn he doesn’t like, Kurama bounces the kid and makes him yelp delightedly, then offers slyly, “One time, right after they started dating, your dad asked your mom out to dinner. But when he was halfway to their meeting place, he realized that he hadn’t gotten her any flowers, so he grabbed a bunch from the first training ground he came from. What he didn’t realize was that the Aburame Clan had been breeding a new type of bug, and it loved those flowers.”

When he pauses for effect, Naruto wriggles impatiently. “So?” he demands. “What happened? What did he do?”

“How’d he do?” Kurama repeats, grinning, as he heads up a fairly steep slope. “Well, he walks right past the Aburame Clan lands, happy as a clam and so proud of himself. Your mom’s waiting under some trees, all dressed up, and suddenly this huge cloud of black bees comes pouring out the gates and swarms after him. ‘Course, your dad’s a lovesick moron, so he only has eyes for Kushina, and she’s pointing behind him and trying to warn him but he just thinks she’s waving. He waves back, and then the first one bites him. He turns to see what got him and screams, just like a little girl.”

Kurama laughs at the memory, and grins up at Naruto when he hears the kid laughing too. “Yeah. At that point Kushina has stopped trying to save him and is laughing so hard she can barely breathe, and your dad goes flying past her with a vast swarm of bugs after him, and because he doesn’t realize that they're after the flowers, and he doesn’t want to drop them when they're a present for Kushina, he lets them chase him all around Konoha for hours. Your mom was pretty impressed. By his determination and his stupidity.”

Naruto is snickering, and he crosses his arms on top of Kurama’s head and drops his chin on top of them. “Did she prank him a lot?” he asks cheerfully. “He sounds like he’d be really fun to prank.”

“All the time,” Kurama promises. “She’d pull the greatest tricks, and then when he turned around to accuse her—because she always laughed, not that I blame her—she’d just give him this innocent, hurt, big-eyed look—” With a pout, Naruto pulls it, and it’s so much like Kushina’s that Kurama snorts. “Yeah, that one exactly. She’d pull that and he’d fall over himself to apologize for doubting her, and then they’d do it all over again.”

“She sounds like the coolest shinobi ever,” Naruto says, clearly awed. There’s a pause, and then, “You said she could make weapons from her chakra?”
“Her Chakra Chains,” Kurama confirms. “They were strong enough to hold the Kyuubi back until your dad could seal it—he was better with seals than Kushina, because your mom liked sharp, shiny stuff too much.”

Naruto beams. “Can you teach me that, too, Occhan?” he asks excitedly. “I wanna learn to be just like Kaa-chan!”

There are, quite honestly, far worse people to aspire to emulate. Kurama nods. “Sure, kit. You're gonna be better at the big stuff than the little stuff, so I think you'll manage pretty quickly.” At the top of the rise, he stops, staring out at where the land opens up before them. Just a short distance ahead, sand peeks through the scrubby grass, getting more prolific with every meter. On the horizon the dunes start, long and sloping, only interrupted by the sharp jut of rock formations protruding from the earth like shattered bones.

“There,” he murmurs. “That's Wind Country. Lots of heat and wind—our affinities. We’ll get across just fine, Naruto.”

The small chin presses a little more firmly against his skull. “Is your friend gonna like me?” Naruto asks wistfully.

“Shukaku doesn’t like anyone,” Kurama huffs, torn between amusement and aggravation at the mere memory of the pissy tanuki. “But he’ll take care of you if he knows what’s good for him. And besides, he’s got a kid with him right now, just about your age—Gaara. I think you’ll like him. You two have a lot in common.”

The thought of a friend seems to lighten Naruto’s mood slightly, but a moment latter he frowns again. “I'm gonna miss you, Kurama-nii,” he complains, and Kurama blinks at the shift in names, but doesn’t comment. He’d rather be a big brother than an old uncle, anyways.

“I’ll miss you too, kit,” he says a little gruffly, and looks away. “But it won't be for more than a month, I promise you that. All I have to do is break something and throw a wrench into this one group’s plans, and then we’ll be good for a couple years at least. It’ll give me plenty of time to come up with a better idea on how to deal with them.”

“Okay.” Naruto's apparently decided to be cheerful again, and the force of it is nearly tangible. “Now can you teach me that cool clone jutsu, Kurama-nii?”

Kurama huffs. “Now’s not exactly the—” He stops. Reconsiders. “Actually, you're right. Now is the best time. We’re going to lay a few false trails, kit, and you're going to help me.”

Naruto laughs like a fox with a trick up his sleeve, and Kurama grins right back, swinging him down and then dropping to the ground to start the impromptu lesson. He knows every inch of Naruto’s chakra reserves intimately, at any age. Maybe Iruka never managed to teach him how to make a clone, but for Kurama? This is cake.

“…Hmm,” Kakashi hums warily, crouched in the sparse grasses that mark the border with Wind Country.

It is, perhaps, just slightly telling that Tenzō twitches like he’s looking for the best cover to dive behind. “‘Hmm’?” he echoes. “Senpai, why do I get the feeling that that’s not a good noise?”
“What exactly are you implying, Tenzō?” Kakashi asks mildly, pinning the other man with a raised brow.

With a low groan, the Mokuton user raises his hands. “That you're the best tracker in Konoha and shouldn’t be sounding like you just took the wrong turn to Tanzaku-Gai,” he defends. “We’re right next to hostile territory, I’d prefer to know exactly where we’re going.”

“Technically Suna is allied territory,” Itachi points out, crouching down a few feet from Kakashi to study the tracks as well. This is why Itachi is Kakashi's favorite. Also, he’s a very subtle smartass when he’s a smartass at all, which is whole leagues better than either of the other two, who are never anything less than utterly blatant about their insubordination.

Shisui scoffs, shaking a rock out of his sandal. “Technically, the only reason why there aren’t Suna shinobi trying to slit our throats in our sleep is because they're too poor to afford a war right now,” he counters. “Kinda like Kiri—they’d kill us if they could, but that would mean they’d have to stop killing their own shinobi first, and that’s not going to happen for another decade at least.”

“Weren’t you impressed by that one Kiri shinobi you failed to kill?” Tenzō asks, sounding vaguely amused.

With a huff of laughter, Shisui drops into a crouch, stretching out his shoulders. “That slippery guy with the stolen Byakugan? Yeah, he was pretty impressive, but Ao is old guard. Like, Nidaime Mizukage kind of old guard mindset. He’s the type to keep his mouth shut and follow anyone who can make Kiri strong. A lot of Water Country shinobi are like that. It’s one of the reasons it’s been so hard for Kiri to change—power is the currency there.”

Sounding aggravated and mildly pained, Itachi sighs, rubbing at his temples. “You know Mother and Father think you’re an imbecile most of the time?” he growls at his relative. “Why don’t you ever talk like that around them?”

Being Shisui, he just laughs at Itachi's expression and rocks back on his heels. “Because it’s fun watching them try to figure out how I graduated at the top of my Academy class like this,” he says cheerfully. “And it’s really amusing to watch their faces when someone promotes me and they just smile like they know why, but they're actually so confused.”

It’s possible that Itachi whimpers.

For the sake of the boy’s dignity, Kakashi pretends not to hear it. “Anyway,” he says pointedly, and is mildly surprised when they all stop bickering to listen to him. It’s a minor miracle, honestly. “The scent doubles over itself here, and then separates. One set heads towards Ame, and the other heads deeper into River Country.”

“A false trail,” Tenzō concludes. “But which one?”

Kakashi considers, but…Kurama’s not in the best situation right now. He’s just moving, trying to put distance between them, to give himself a buffer that will keep him safe, and that means there’s a fifty-fifty chance that he’s running on instinct or blind panic as opposed to calculated reasoning. Kakashi can account for reasoning, can figure out how most people think. Blind panic is a whole hell of a lot harder to predict.

The scents and tracks are perfect copies. Chakra lingers around both sets, just the faintest trace visible to his Sharingan and fading quickly. Each set has the prints of a man’s bare feet, a child’s shoes, and a small fox’s paws. They're over a day old, which is annoying, but Kakashi thinks he can close the gap quickly now that the trail is clear again. Well, mostly.
“I don’t know,” he admits, rising to his feet and dusting off his hands. “They’re perfect copies, and we don’t have the time to run one to ground if it turns out to be fake. We’ll split up.” For a wistful moment, he thinks of assigning Tenzō and Shisui to one team and taking Itachi for himself—the kid may be eleven, but he’s smart, capable, professional, and above all easy to work with. However, having Tenzō and Shisui in close proximity for extended periods of time is just asking for one of them to end up buried in a shallow grave somewhere, so he dismisses that thought with a resigned sigh and says, “Shisui, you’re with me. We’ll head north. Itachi, Tenzō, take the south-bound tracks. I’ll send one of my ninken with you so you don’t go off-course.”

That way, at least, there’s one shinobi in each party capable of subduing Kurama if they do run into him. After all, Kurama was wary of Tenzō’s Mokuton, and nearly had a heart attack at the sight of Shisui’s Mangekyō. Hopefully, splitting them up will double the team’s chances for success, rather than cutting it in half.

Tenzō makes a soft sound of assent, though his expression is grim as he reaches up to adjust his happuri faceguard—Kakashi's seen it enough times to recognize it as a nervous tic. “If we lose the trail, should we turn around and try to reach you, or head for Konoha?” he asks.

“Head for us,” Kakashi answers after a moment of contemplation. “It will probably be too late to help with the capture, but I don’t think Kurama is going to come quietly, not after the last fight. Hauling him back to the village will probably be just as hard as catching him.”

Even Itachi grimaces faintly at that. “Good luck,” the boy says quietly, clearly under the (understandable) impression that they're all going to need it.

“Yeah,” Kakashi sighs, and turns north. “Be careful, Shisui?”

Shisui gives his cousin a quick, one-armed hug, nods to Tenzō, and flickers over to Kakashi's side. “Ready when you are, Captain,” he offers, all brazen cheer and knife-sharp resolve hidden behind dark eyes.

Kakashi just sighs. This is going to be a long trip.

(They don’t see it, but once all sense of their chakra has faded, another set of tracks shimmers out of nothingness. One set of fox’s paws, large and weighted down, heading towards the setting sun.)
XII: Vicissitude

{vicissitude /vɪˈsɪsdə, t(y)ood/ , a change of circumstance in life or fortune. From Latin vicissitudo “alteration”, or from Latin vicissim “by turns”, from Latin vic- “turn, change.”}

Despite being probably the weakest of the five great shinobi villages, Sunagakure makes a damn impressive sight, that’s for sure.

“Woah.” Naruto sounds awe-struck, too. “Kurama-nii, why’d they build their village like that?”

Kurama’s not entirely certain when he became the resident history professor, but since there’s no one else to answer except Fuji, who treats villages as being convenient concentrations of oden but otherwise just cute little human peculiarities, he sighs and answers, “Because it’s a good defense, kit. The cliffs can keep out an invading army, and they’ve got terraces on the outside so that Suna shinobi can stand there and attack without being in too much danger. See that narrow crack in the cliff? That’s the only way for most people to get in, so the Suna shinobi know exactly who’s in their village all the time. Like Konoha’s walls and gates.”

“But you can get around the gates really easily,” Naruto points out, seemingly confused by this lapse of logic, and of course he would know that at six and a bit of change. Kurama was mostly asleep for Naruto’s adventures outside the walls, but he remembers enough.

“Yeah,” he agrees, amused. “And we’re gonna do the same here. If that bastard and his Freak Squad manage to track us here, I don’t want them finding you just by asking at the gate.”

“Freak Squad? Who’re they?” Naruto leans back to look up at him, blue eyes curious. “Are those the shinobi Hokage-jiji sent after you? From the forest?”

Fuji huffs, shaking out her tails, and then leaps nimbly down the side of the sand dune, towards the start of the rocky ground edging Suna’s cliffs. “Don’t worry about it, Naru-chan,” she says cheerfully. “My illusions will cover our tracks for a while, and Kurama-sama is too fast and smart for anyone to catch.”

She seems to be forgetting just how it is they met, but Kurama isn’t about to remind her. That bit of humiliation will molder unrecalled until the end of time, if he has any say in it. “Right,” he agrees instead. Squinting up at the setting sun, he adds, “Fuji, can you head around the west side and then let us down? We can go over the cliffs where the sun will be in the guards’ eyes. Keeps us from having to wait for nightfall.”

“I hope you don’t think you’re getting rid of me that easily, Kurama-sama,” she huffs, even as she drifts left, leaping large cracks in the ground and veering around outcroppings of stone. “This is the most fun I’ve had in decades, so I’m definitely coming with you.”

“I hope you don’t think you’re getting rid of me that easily, Kurama-sama,” she huffs, even as she drifts left, leaping large cracks in the ground and veering around outcroppings of stone. “This is the most fun I’ve had in decades, so I’m definitely coming with you.”

“Yay!” Naruto cheers, leaning forward to bury his face in her white fur. “Can you be my Fuji-nee?”

“I don’t see why not,” the vixen says loftily, though Kurama can read both pleasure and embarrassment in the twitch of her tails and the flick of her ears. “If you really have the Kyuubi inside of you, that makes us almost kin anyway. All foxes look up to the Kyuubi, after all—having nine tails makes you practically a god.”

Personally, Kurama doesn’t quite see the appeal in being a pack mule and running for miles on end,
but he supposes that it’s probably a bit more exciting than hunting mice and birds all day. “You’ll have to stay small,” he warns her, though he reaches out to give her shoulder a gentle stroke in thanks. “And nearby, if possible. If things go south, I want to be able to leave in a hurry.”

“I’m sure whatever you plan to do will turn out perfectly, Kurama-sama,” Fuji says stubbornly. “And even if it doesn’t, I’ll help however I can.”

“Me too!” Naruto chimes in. He lets go of Fuji to make the seal for the shadow clones and grins like a conquering hero. “I can be an army!”

This is…not exactly what Kurama intended, teaching him that, but it’s Naruto. The matter was bound to come up eventually, and Kurama already knows exactly how much good it will do to argue with him—namely, none at all.

“Let’s save that for a last resort, huh?” he counters, painfully amused, and wraps an arm around the little boy’s waist to keep him from overbalancing. “Fuji, here’s good.”

The vixen skids to a stop and crouches to let them slide off. As soon as their feet are steady, she shakes herself, then lets go of her transformation. A much more normal-sized fox bounces out of the smoke, and Kurama leans down so she can leap up onto his shoulders. She curls around his neck, peeking out from under the fringe of his hair, and yips cheerfully, “Ready to go, Kurama-sama!”

Kurama chuckles, then scoops Naruto up and slings the boy over his back. “Arms and legs around me if you can, kit,” he orders. “We’re going to have to go fast for a bit.”

There are six terraces leading up, each one a good two meters wide. The setting sun is behind him, eye-searing red and gold spreading out across the horizon, and Kurama can’t sense any overt hostility from the path up. The only chakra signatures he can feel are heading away along the curve of the cliff face, and he really hopes it stays that way.

Surely, surely he’s due to have something go right by now. He’s in Naruto’s body; surely his luck can’t be all bad.

Small arms curl around his neck, careful of Fuji, legs wrapping around his waist, and Kurama can’t fight a smile as he reaches up to touch Naruto’s hands in silent reassurance. Well. Definitely not all bad, though parts could use improving.

“Ready?” he asks, and gets two sounds of confirmation. Taking a breath, he channels just a trickle of chakra, not enough to be noticed but enough to give him some power, and leaps, bouncing up the first three terraces. No one shouts, there are no alarms, not even any traps, and Kurama lets himself breathe out. He dodges left, tracing his way a little further west, and then clears the next two levels in quick succession.

Still nothing. It would almost be ridiculous, except the tempo of Kurama’s heartbeat says it really isn’t. He pauses again, checking for chakra, but as luck would have it there’s what feels like a civilian district below. There are a few scattered chakra signatures, but it seems like this is one of Suna’s poorer areas. Shinobi aren’t generally ones to be poor—if they’re that bad at their jobs, they tend to just be dead—so those who do live here are scattered, the exception rather than the rule.

It’s a stroke of fortune that Kurama is more than willing to take.

With all the speed he can muster, he leaps forward, clearing the last terrace and hurling himself right over the lip of the cliff. There’s another road carved out of the rock about halfway down, and Kurama throws himself across it in a blur, one hand on Naruto’s back, his other hanging on to Fuji,
and then flips over the side and down into thick shadows. In the alley someone startles, dropping something, but Kurama doesn’t stick around to see if they’ll raise an alarm; he bolts into the deep gloom of the surrounding buildings, with the wall looming overhead, and lets the darkness swallow him.

“Everybody okay back there?” he asks as soon as they're a safe distance from curious ears, tucked back behind what smells like a restaurant. Kurama eyes the handful of neatly stacked bins sitting outside the back door for a moment, then drops to one knee and lets Naruto slide down.

“Can we do that again?” Naruto sounds breathless, and he’s grinning widely when he grabs Kurama’s hand. “Kurama-nii, that was so cool!”

Despite himself, Kurama chuckles, and reaches out to ruffle the messy blond hair. “Glad you approve, kit. Fuji, you good playing a fur ruff?”

From where her head is resting daintily on her paws, draped across his shoulders, Fuji makes a vaguely offended sound, and her three tails tickle his arm as they flick. “I’m very happy where I am, Kurama-sama,” she says disdainfully. “Though the view would be better if you were taller.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Kurama grumbles, and tries his best to scowl at Naruto when the kid breaks into giggles. “Hey, knock it off. We’re related, remember? This is probably as tall as you’re going to get, too.”

Naruto grins up at him, grabbing for his hand. “I like you like this, Kurama-nii,” he says magnanimously. “You don’t need to be taller.”

It does Kurama’s self-esteem as a fearsome former bijuu no favors, but he melts a little under that. “Thanks, kit,” he says, and his voice is gruff because he won't allow himself to become choked up, not right now. “Want to walk, or should I carry you?”

“I'll walk!” Naruto bounces with barely-contained enthusiasm. “Where’re we going now Kurama-nii?”

Kurama pauses, stretching out his senses as subtly as he can, and concentrates. Shukaku’s energy is everywhere, scattered thick across the village and through the sandstone of the buildings, because he’s always been a greedy, grasping bastard. Still, the original is easy enough to find—Gaara is angry at something, and buildings are suffering for it. Shukaku is too close to the surface for Kurama's comfort, lashing against the seals holding him, and while they're not about to break, they're...fragile. Far too much so for Kurama's peace of mind.

Still, Kurama supposes, it’s a good enough opportunity. He needs to slap a few modifiers onto Shukaku’s seal to filter out whatever crazy he can—the stuff caused by being improperly bound for so long, at least. Shukaku’s natural crazy he unfortunately can’t fix.

“Sorry, change of plans. We need to move fast again,” he says, boosting Naruto up onto his back once more and taking off at a run as soon as the boy’s got a secure grip. “That kid I mentioned needs some help, so we’re going to do that first.”

Across the village, something explodes. Dust fills the air in a wide cloud, erupting upward, and very distantly Kurama can pick out the smell of blood on the hot wind. So Gaara's already started going nuts; that’s fine. Naruto will bring him out of it soon enough, and it’s probably a recent change, so he’s not mired in it yet. The only issue here is dealing with Shukaku, and Kurama doesn’t think he’ll have too much of a problem with that.
It’s easy to tell when they’re getting close, because everyone is running the opposite direction, even the shinobi. Kurama wants to scoff and call them all cowards, but just sets his teeth and sticks to the edges of the retreating crowd, trying not to be noticed. A few people cast him glances, but most are too occupied with getting to safety to make note of someone moving at shinobi speeds in the shadows.

Up ahead, the streets empty out completely, and Shukaku’s murderous chakra gets heavier. Kurama pauses, glancing around, and then leaps up the side of a flat-topped apartment building. “Stay here,” he tells Naruto. “Fuji, keep an eye on him. I have to go beat some sense into the idiot’s thick head, and I don’t want either of you getting caught in the crossfire.”

The vixen yips softly, hopping down and going to wind around Naruto’s legs. Before Kurama can move, though, Naruto catches his hand again, and asks warily, “You’re gonna come back, right, Kurama-nii?”

“’Course I am, kit,” Kurama promises, leaning down to press a kiss to his bright hair. “You’re the most important thing in the world to me. I will always come back to you.”

That gets him a smile as bright as the sun. “Good luck, Kurama-nii! I know you can win!”

Kurama chuckles, rising to his feet. Shukaku roars, clearly about to break free entirely, and it makes him turn, leaping down into the epicenter of the destruction. He takes a breath and lets go, his chakra rising in a corrosive, blood-red surge to meet the Ichibi’s, and then shouts, “Oi, Shukaku! What’s got your panties in a bunch this time, you tetchy little bastard?”

Within the dust and rubble, something stills, then stirs. Kurama flicks a hand out, and wind whips past him, just enough to dispel the cover. What was once probably a nice square is now little more than a wreckage of shattered stones and debris, clothes and other things scattered through it. In the center, the area around him seething with animated sand, stands Gaara, no more than Naruto’s age, with dead eyes and sand coating his body. Even as Kurama watches, more slides over him, and it’s easy to recognize the beginnings of his transformation into a human-sized version of Shukaku.

“You,” Gaara says, and it’s layered with Shukaku’s deeper voice. “Don’t call my name like you know me, you puny little human. I am—”

“Yeah, yeah. The great and terrible Ichibi, possessing the fewest tails of any of the tailed beasts but somehow still so high and mighty.” Kurama scoffs, crossing his arms over his chest and narrowing his eyes. “Look at you. Do you really think this is what the Sage meant our power for, you idiot? You’re corrupting a child, and you’re even doing that badly. For all the times he gives in, how many times does he resist you? How many time has little Gaara here shown just how much stronger than you he is?”

Shukaku howls with rage, lashing out, but Kurama sees it coming and hurls himself to the side, then shoves chakra towards his feet and flips up and over, landing on Shukaku’s far side even as Shukaku spins towards the spot Kurama used to be. With a snarl of victory, Kurama lunges forward, chakra gathering in his palm, and slaps a hand against Shukaku’s sand. Fire blooms beneath his touch, roaring out, and the heavy coating of earth crackles as it hardens. Shukaku screams, whipping around, but Kurama’s already gone, landing lightly behind his shoulder.

“I’ll kill you!” Shukaku screams. “Your blood will soak my sand, because no one can surpass my— aargh!”

Another wave of fire falls away, and Kurama smirks. He drops into a crouch, flexing his clawed hands against the sandy earth, and taunts, “How about a test, then, little brother? My speed and fire
against your sand and automatic defense. The winner gets that little boy you're torturing. Sound fair?” Seeing that the tanuki is about to start screaming again, he adds with all the casualness he can manage, “Oh, wait, never mind. You always were too scared to bet against me, Shukaku. I guess a few centuries hasn’t changed anything, huh?”

There’s a long moment of silence, and then Shukaku hisses like a teakettle releasing steam. “Kurama,” he growls. “I heard the humans locked you away as well. You managed to consume that little creature’s soul entirely and take their body? I’m impressed.”

The memory of his Naruto falling, empty-eyed and devoid of life, hits Kurama so hard and suddenly that for a moment he can't even breathe. His entire chest seizes as pain lances through him, and he snarls automatically. His chakra redoubles, lashing furiously against Shukaku’s, and Kurama throws himself forward. Edged with power, his long nails score deep into hardened sand, and he blurs away before Shukaku can even turn to catch him. Another hit, scoring deep into one of the tanuki’s arms, another to the back of his head, another, another, another—

The perfect balance of chakra, caught in the palm of his hand and spinning like a hurricane. Negative and positive, dark and light, caught up together in a violet-edged snarl of power and intent, but weaker than ever before, not nearly enough to kill. “It was a gift!” Kurama screams above Shukaku’s roar of frustration. “A sacrifice, for me! I can't help you understand right now, you self-obsessed bastard, but someday I will make you!”

He doesn’t let the bijūdama go, but leaps forward, aiming straight for Shukaku’s chest. It won’t hurt Gaara, not at half-power like this, but—

An impact like a detonation, and it’s like being caught in the heart of a sandstorm. Sand explodes outward, stinging and biting, and Kurama throws up an arm to shield his face. There’s a ripple of chakra as the pressure vanishes entirely, Shukaku retreating with a last wounded roar as a small form becomes visible through the cloud.

Red hair glows in the light of sunset as Gaara wavers, and Kurama automatically steps forward to catch him. The small, fragile body tumbles into his arms, and Kurama lifts him, murmuring mindlessly soothing nonsense as he tucks the kid’s head under his chin. Chakra pools in his free hand, and he presses it to the back of Gaara's neck, etching the seal into his skin as gently as he’s able. Gaara makes a soft sound of surprise and faint pain, and Kurama strokes his hair, whispering, “Sorry, sorry, is that better? Can you hear him anymore?”

There’s a long, careful pause, and then Gaara looks up. Wide aquamarine eyes stare at him for a second, and then Gaara breathes, “Mother?”

“He ain’t your mother, kid,” Kurama says dryly. “It’s a good thing, believe me.” He reaches up, touching the kanji that’s only just started to scar over on Gaara’s forehead, and adds, “Your real mother loved you. She poured all of her love into your sand right before she died—why do you think your automatic defense is so strong?”

Gaara’s breath catches and he drops his eyes. “You shouldn’t… Don’t touch me,” he says, trying for anger, but it wobbles as it comes out. “I’ll—I’ll kill—”

“You won’t.” Kurama hesitates, then ruffles his hair. “Besides, I can handle Shukaku, kid. Leave my stupid little brother to me. You’ve got more important things to worry about. Like friends.”

“I have no friends,” Gaara says, and that at least comes out sharp, with an edge of fury that means the pain still hasn’t healed. “No one loves me, and I don’t want them to. I’ll live only for myself. Mother understands—”
“Not your mother,” Kurama repeats, rolling his eyes. “Damned tanuki, always making things harder than they have to be.” When the six-year-old starts to jerk in his arms, sand hissing threateningly around them, he just shifts the boy to his hip, then leaps up to the top of a collapsed wall, and from there jumps back to the rooftop where he left Naruto.

“Kurama-nii!” Naruto shouts the instant they touch down. He rushes forward, throwing himself at Kurama as the redhead crouches down, and accidentally catches Gaara in the enthusiastic hug as well. “Kurama-nii, that was amazing! You’ve gotta be the best shinobi ever! Can you teach me to be as awesome as you? Can you? Please?”

“No one’s as awesome as me, kit,” Kurama laughs, setting Gaara down and raising a brow when he skitters backwards, away from Naruto’s bright grin. “But I think you might manage to get close someday. With a lot of training and a bit of luck.” He waves a hand between the two boys. “Naruto, Gaara. Gaara, Naruto. You’re both jinchuuriki.”

Naruto’s entire expression lights up, and he reaches forward to catch Gaara’s hand. Gaara flinches, the scattered sand around their feet whirling closer, but Naruto just beams. “Let’s be friends!” he proposes. “I’ve never had a friend besides Hokage-ji before, but I’ve always wanted one!”

For a long minute, Gaara looks like he can’t decide whether to kill them all, turn and run, or throw himself at Naruto and not let go. He stares at the blond for a moment, then shifts his gaze to Kurama, who gives him a small, crooked smile.

“You’ll be fine, Gaara,” he says softly. “I tweaked the seal holding Shukaku back. It’ll take a lot more than just you getting angry or scared for him to escape now, so you don’t have to worry about hurting anyone.”

Blue-green eyes go very wide, and Gaara looks down at where Naruto is still clutching his hand. “I—I always wanted a friend, too,” he admits, just barely above a whisper. “You’ll be my friend?”

“Yeah!” Naruto agrees, all but vibrating with excitement. He turns, bouncing in place, and crows, “Kurama-nii! Kurama-nii, look! I got my first friend!”

Kurama laughs, reaching out to ruffle two spiky heads. “Yeah, kit, I can see that.” And…it’s a trace of a good memory, of Gaara and Naruto standing side by side, Kage and shinobi and still best friends, and he just—it’s good. So good. With a soft laugh that nearly catches in his throat, Kurama leans forward and pulls the two pint-sized terrors into his arms, hugging them both tightly. They go stiff and startled, but Naruto hugs back the moment he recovers. Gaara is a little slower, but carefully, tentatively, his arms curl around Kurama’s shoulder and hang on.

“Why were you so angry, Gaara?” Naruto asks curiously, pulling back, and Gaara tenses again. He doesn’t move, just buries his face in Kurama’s shoulder a little more firmly.

“My father tried to have me killed,” he says. “He sent an assassin after me, and he didn’t hurt me but I was just so mad and—and—”

“It hurt,” Kurama finishes for him. He rubs Gaara’s back lightly, thinking of the seal he just placed on the kid. The Armor of Sand should be enough to keep him safe, even with Shukaku pushed down, but…what if it’s not? The Kazekage is a bastard, and what if he sends other assassins? It’s…not the best situation.

“Why don’t you come with us?” Naruto asks, blue eyes intent. “Gaara, we’re going to cool places! Kurama-nii already took us to River Country and all across Wind Country, and I’m sure it’s okay for you to come. Right, Kurama-nii?”
Kurama supposes trusting Shukaku to look after two little kids was always a bit of a long shot to begin with. Besides, what’s to lose? Leaving Gaara behind will just upset Naruto, and if the kid dies because of something Kurama did to him—well. He’s never loved Gaara the way that he loved Naruto, but the redhead was always…tolerable. A friend, even when he was no longer a jinchuuriki. And Shukaku was fond of him. That’s reason enough to take care of this emotionally fragile, miniaturized version.

“Sure,” he agrees, and doesn’t let himself sigh. “Fuji, you good to carry one more?”

From where she’s been perched on a low stone wall, watching the reunion, Fuji huffs. “Of course, Kurama-sama,” she says. “It’s not like he’s all that heavy.”

Kurama sinks back on his heels, checking Gaara’s face. “Do you want to come with us, kid?” he asks gently. “You don’t have to, and I don’t want to force you into anything. We’re traveling, trying to find somewhere safe, so it’s a bit…hectic.”

For a long moment, Gaara stares at him. Then that assessing gaze shifts to Naruto and holds on entreating blue, and Gaara swallows. “Yes,” he says in a very small voice. “Yes. I want to go with you. You’re…”

“Friends,” Kurama finishes for him, still gentle. “Okay, let’s get you home so you can grab your stuff while I find us some supplies.”

“Maybe you can even get shoes, Kurama-nii!” Naruto offers cheerfully.

Kurama scoffs. “Those things are fucking uncomfortable. I’ll keep my feet on the ground like they’re meant to be, thanks. Come on. Gaara, you got a preference? I can carry you on my back or normally. I think Fuji still has dibs on my shoulders.”

That gets him another wide-eyed look. “You’re…going to carry me?” he asks.

Oh, damn Suna to the fiery pits of the deepest level of hell. Damn Konoha too, while he’s at it. Little kids shouldn’t act like they’ve been offered the world on a platter for something so normal. It takes effort, but Kurama stomps on his rage and opens his arms. “Yeah,” he says. “C’mere, squirt. Naruto, make like a monkey, would you?”

Naruto cheers and throws himself onto Kurama’s back, scrambling up and wrapping his legs around him. An instant later, Fuji flows into place like a particularly furry scarf, and Kurama raises a brow at the only holdout. Gaara looks between him and his outstretched arms, then offers a very faint, wary smile and steps forward. He grabs Kurama’s shoulders as Kurama lifts him, clinging tightly, and Kurama shifts to resettle the weight.

“All right, which way?” he asks.

Gaara points to a street several blocks from the Kazekage’s building. “The one without lights on,” he says, and then tucks his face into the curve of Kurama’s throat. Kurama chuckles and strokes his hair, then ruffles Naruto’s and leaps lightly across the narrow street, heading for the indicated house. He’ll let the kid grab what he wants, maybe ask him to lend Naruto some clothes, and see what he can scrounge from the kitchen for supplies. By then it should be dark enough for them to make it over the cliffs unseen.

Maybe Suna was a bit of a dead end, but at least it got the Freak Squad off their tails. And besides, now that Kurama takes a moment to consider it, Matatabi has always been a hell of a lot more motherly than Shukaku, and is generally pretty reasonable too. Maybe Kurama doesn’t know exactly
where Matatabi and the Nibi’s host are right now, but surely they can’t be that hard to find.

On his back, Naruto laughs, bright and happy, and out of the corner of his eye, Kurama can just barely see Gaara smiling back, still tentative but already gaining confidence. Kurama smiles too, entirely despite himself.

Whatever. It’ll all work out.
There **WILL NOT** be an update next week. Since I'm going on vacation with my brothers, I'm going to miss the 2/3 update, though I'll resume as usual on the 9th. Sorry! :)

*simulacrum /, simyəˈ lækəm /, an image or representation of someone or something; an unsatisfactory imitation or substitute. From Latin simulare “copy, represent”, from similis “like”.*

In an unforeseen stroke of good luck, a sandstorm sweeps across northeastern Wind Country shortly before midnight, completely erasing all signs of their presence. Kurama feels the wind change in enough time for them to find shelter, so they bunk down for the night in a deep cave carved into a cliff, likely just for that purpose, whose mouth points away from the source of the storm. It’s dry and roomy enough for a fairly small man, a smaller fox, and two tiny six-year-olds, even after Kurama starts a fire to ward off the worst of the night’s chill.

It’s little surprise that Gaara immediately goes to sit several meters from the mouth of the cave, just out of range of the wind, with wide eyes fixed on the storm outside. Little surprise, too, that Naruto drifts over to sit with him as soon as he’s eaten, and over the roar of the sand Kurama can just hear Gaara recounting facts about sandstorms in a tone that is, for him, of acute excitement. Slumped back against the rough wall, Kurama chuckles, not quite able to tear his eyes away from the red and gold heads bent together in the flickering firelight.

Fur shifts under his fingers as Fuji leaves the scraps of her meal and flows into his lap, curling up tightly and dropping her head on his knee. Kurama rubs lightly behind her ear and she gives a brief, gargling purr to encourage him to continue. Amber eyes fall shut, and she stretches lightly before settling down once more.

“All of this is for the boy, isn’t it?” she asks, too softly for Gaara or Naruto to overhear.

Kurama sighs softly, tipping his head back against the stone and closing his own eyes. “It is,” he agrees. “Everything.”

There’s a brief pause, and then she murmurs, “I was surprised that there were two nine-tailed kitsune, but…that’s not quite true, is it, Kurama-sama?”

Since there’s no real reason to deny it, Kurama just shrugs, giving the tip of one pointed ear a light tug. “I told you it was complicated. There’s only supposed to be one, but I’m an extra.”

Fuji hums an acknowledgement, clearly turning this over in her mind. “I think…I’m glad that I met you first, rather than the other,” she says slowly. “While you were fighting the Ichibi, Naru-chan got worried, and I felt Kyuubi-sama stir for a moment. He was…very angry. Very hateful. You’re—better.”

“Not too long ago, I finally found a reason to change,” Kurama says, opening his eyes again to look
at Naruto. The boy is laughing, and even Gaara is smiling faintly. It makes Kurama chuckle softly. “The other Kyuubi will find a reason, too. Just need to give him the opportunity. The man who left me this body showed me that no matter how long you’ve held on to hate and anger, there’s a better way.” He glances down at the little fox in his lap, and gives her ear another light tug. “Is there someone looking for you right now, Fuji? Are you going to get in trouble for running off like you did?”

She huffs disgustedly, slapping a paw over her face in what is either longsuffering dismay or embarrassment, and moans, “My brother is probably looking, or he will soon. He doesn’t like me going off on my own, and he’s got five tails so he thinks he knows everything.” One eye slits open, and her expression turns wholly smug. “He won’t believe that I got to meet the Kyuubi. He’s going to be so jealous he’ll turn green all over.”

Kurama laughs, smoothing a hand down her back and over her tails. “Well, you’re the only reason we’ve managed to make it this far without a lot more trouble, so I’m more than happy to have you stick around, but if you need to go back that’s fine too. I don’t want you getting in any more trouble for my sake.”

Fuji snaps her teeth sharply, clearly showing her opinion of that idea. “I said that you couldn’t get rid of me that easily, Kurama-sama,” she reminds him. “I’ll stay for as long as I think you need me, and even if I do leave then, you can always summon me. You’re a nine-tailed fox, no matter what form you’re stuck in, and you don’t have many allies. Of course I’m going to help.”

Naruto’s the one who so easily wins people’s loyalty. Kurama breathes out a shaky breath, unused to such simple and unwavering support, and scoops Fuji up in his arms, burying his face in long white fur. “Thanks,” he manages, and it comes out muffled. “Thanks, Fuji. If you ever need anything…”

Sharp ears prick up, and Fuji wiggles excitedly as he settles her back in his lap. “A star ball! Like those pretty purple ones you use, Kurama-sama! Do you think you could make me a star ball out of one of those?”

It’s probably unwise to give a bijūdama, even miniaturized and held behind seals in glass, to the kitsune equivalent of a thirteen-year-old. Still, Kurama wasn’t exaggerating when he said she’s the only reason they’ve managed to come this far. Without her, he’d likely be trapped like a dragonfly in amber, whisked back to Konoha’s T & I Division with Naruto forever out of reach. And Kurama is fairly decent at seals, given his time within Mito and then Kushina; he can probably work something out. Holding that much power might even give Fuji another tail, which seems like a decent enough trade-off for her help.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he promises, and she gives a happy yip.

“Do you have an idea where to go next, Kurama-sama?” she asks, settling back down with her head on her paws, one sharp eye on the boys. “Should we cut back into the place with all the rivers, or keep traveling in the desert?”

Kurama considers, absently stroking her fur. They headed almost directly north from Suna, hoping to throw off any trackers. Gaara had insisted it would be several days before he was missed, even with Shukaku’s little scene, so Kurama isn’t too worried about pursuit from that direction. The clones he, Fuji, and Naruto created have enough chakra to draw the Freak Squad a few days off course, either deep into southern River Country or doubling back into Fire Country near Ame’s border depending on which one they followed, so there’s also little risk of them catching the scent again.

Without the threat of immediate pursuit, Kurama's life is a whole lot easier. He’s not entirely certain where Matatabi is, beyond knowing that the Nibi’s host is from Kumo, but somewhere in Lightning...
Country seems like a safe bet. If he remembers correctly, the girl is someone Killer B looked up to as a strong kunoichi, despite her being younger, so she’s probably training. Which means she could be anywhere around Kumo, or elsewhere if she’s the hardcore type. Kurama's range for sensing the other bijuu is pretty decent, but he’ll still have to be fairly close to pinpoint her. Unless…

“We’ll cross over near the middle of Wind Country’s border with Ame,” he says slowly, picturing the maps he saw so often through Naruto's eyes. “Then we can head north through Grass and cut east across Waterfall, which should keep us far enough away from Konoha. We’ll have to go the long way, cut through Sound, Hot Springs, and Frost Country before we get to Lightning Country, but I don’t want to risk any Konoha nin picking up our trail. Up for it?”

“Sounds like fun,” is Fuji’s verdict. “I've only ever seen the area around Mount Inari, and some of the place full of rivers, but my brother says they’re all different.”

Kurama saw far too much of the countries for comfort, once the shinobi villages started falling and Kaguya advanced. The survivors couldn’t stay in one place for more than a handful of days without Kaguya’s troops finding them, so right up until the end they spent most of their time on the run. Different groups went different directions, since it was too dangerous for everyone to travel together, but Naruto, Sakura, and Sasuke were the main leaders, and moved between the groups constantly. Just remembering those years is enough to bring Kurama’s hackles up, for the feeling of being hunted to overwhelm him. During that time he got used to being prey, rather than the predator, and the knowledge still manages to set his teeth on edge. He hates it.

Breathing out slowly, he forces himself to focus on the present, rather than a future that he won't allow to come into being. “Yeah,” he agrees roughly. “They are. Ame’s always wet, Grass is pretty much completely flat and generally green, Frost is cold, Lightning is full of mountains. They're pretty enough, but I prefer the forests.”

“Trees are good.” Fuji flicks her tails, ears twitching, and then glances up at him. “Are we looking for another one of your brothers?”

“Might be a sister,” Kurama says judiciously. Matatabi’s always gotten along best with female hosts, after all, and has always struck Kurama as pretty feminine, in a reserved-old-lady kind of way. “But yeah, hopefully the Nibi is somewhere near Kumo. Matatabi isn’t blindly crazy like Shukaku, and generally gets along with whatever host Kumo provides. I don’t think the current host is too bad, but we’ll see. Worst comes to worst, Saiken’s probably still in Kiri. They haven’t got a great track record when it comes to jinchuuriki, but since the slug’s host will skip out eventually, he’s probably not going to turn over a bunch of kids to the Mizukage.”

Amber eyes flicker back to him, then narrow faintly. “And you don’t trust me to watch them, Kurama-sama?”

Kurama snorts. “I’d trust you with them in a heartbeat, Fuji, but they're six, and I don’t know how long it’s going to take me to keep my promise. Might be a week, might be a month. Kids need care, and just in case I get hurt or captured, I want them somewhere that isn’t the middle of the wilderness. Besides, you’re a kid, too. I'm not going to dump that on you.”

Fuji sniffs, clearly a little miffed, but doesn’t protest. “All right,” she agrees, if rather reluctantly. “If you say so, Kurama-sama.”

“I do.” Kurama taps her on the nose with a smile. “I'm going to try and see if I can't get in contact with Matatabi. Keep an eye on the brats, okay? And wake me up if you sense anything at all.”

The vixen yips her agreement, sliding out of his lap and bounding over to the two kids. She throws
herself across their legs, making Gaara startle and Naruto laugh delightedly. Kurama can't quite hear what she says, but it's clearly a demand for pats, since both boys start stroking her fur. Gaara looks astonished, Naruto awed, but they're both happy, and Kurama allows himself a small smile as he settles back against the wall, resting his hands on his knees.

As a bijuu fully aligned with his jinchuuriki, accessing the shared mental world of the tailed beasts used to be as simple as willing it to happen. Kurama isn't entirely sure that, as he is now, he'll be able to touch it, but it's his best bet of finding Matatabi, especially if Nibi and host are, like Killer B and Gyūki, able to cooperate. He closes his eyes and takes a breath, centering himself and picturing a world he hasn't reached for in a very long time. Featureless brown stone beneath him, light filtering in from nowhere and everywhere, with darkness pressing at the edges. A moment of will, of want, and the air changes, the thick dust of the sandstorm vanishing into clean, sharp-edged newness, traced with the green of growing things.

Well. That's different.

Slowly, not wanting to jar himself out of the trance, Kurama opens his eyes and is immediately met by green and brown. There's a campfire, a clearing so well-remembered it makes his heart ache, with ancient trees capable of dwarfing even his bijuu form leaning in around the edges. One step removed from this reality, he can feel Shukaku, pointedly ignoring him, and another presence that's so familiar it feels like looking in a mirror. The Kyuubi is asleep, though, deeply asleep in a way that speaks of seals and plots and biding his time, and Kurama very carefully doesn't poke at him. That's a conversation for another day.

Several mental steps further on, he gets an impression of rapid wingbeats, bright laughter, and the thrill of flight—Chōmei, without a doubt. There's a feel of quick coolness to his right, but muted, and close to it the ephemeral glimpse of a bubble drifting skyward, Isobu and Saiken easy to recognize. To Kurama's left is fire and steam, peaceful and at rest, side by side with the heat of molten rock and a touch of rage. Kokuō and Son Goku, Kurama thinks, and moves on. He reaches out, searching, and—

There. The bite of cold fire, traced with a ghostly edge of death undone, and Kurama touches the border of his sibling's mind, a gentle nudge to bring Matatabi's attention to him. The cat stirs, curious but sleepy, and reaches back, and Kurama greets Matatabi with the impression of a rush of wind and fire. The Nibi will be expecting hate and fury all twisted up and tangled with Kurama's usual elements, but right now, at peace, with Naruto so close by, Kurama can't summon them. Moreover, he doesn't want to.

Light shimmers, ghostly blue shot through with black, and the two-tailed cat steps out of the darkness of the trees, odd-colored eyes sweeping over the clearing.

“This is new,” Matatabi says, studying him curiously. “Since when were you artistic, Kurama? Or nostalgic—or human, for that matter? I might be your sister, but I'll admit, I barely recognize you right now.”

Well, that answers that question. Kurama gives Matatabi a smile, trying to ignore the differences in their sizes like this—it's vastly annoying to be so much smaller than even the Nibi. “A lot has happened, Matatabi, and I don't always feel like I have to hate anymore. Got a minute? I'd like to talk.”

She sinks down onto her belly next to the fire, wrapping her two tails around herself, and tilts her head, eyes going distant. “Yes, I can talk. The kitten is asleep right now. Just don't make me angry; she's had a hard day, and I don't want to disturb her.”
“I’ll try my best,” Kurama agrees, a little wry, because he’s never been the best at keeping his own temper, let alone helping someone else keep theirs. “You like this one, then?”

Matatabi smiles, just a little. “Well, there have been worse,” she says lightly, and Kurama closes his eyes against a pang of hurt, remembering saying almost the exact same thing about his old host many times. Naruto had always laughed, teasing him about being a grumpy old man, but his eyes had been warm. Kurama knows he understood what the fox only rarely voiced—Naruto’s always been good like that.

Right now, with six-year-old Naruto beside him, happy and smiling, the pain is muted and distant, easily pushed down. But the loss is still there, no matter how much Kurama tries to focus on other things, and he suspects it always will be. He saw Naruto die, after all. That’s not something he can ever fully recover from.

“Good,” he says roughly, and it’s impossibly hard to get the word out. “Good. I’m…glad for you, Matatabi.”

When he opens his eyes again, Matatabi is watching him, concern clear on her face. “Kurama,” she says gently, “are you all right? That body—I know you can appear however you want here, but…”

Kurama swallows, shoving down the instinctive urge to snap. He doesn’t deal well with feeling vulnerable, but there’s not really another word that can apply right now. “It’s a long story,” he says halfheartedly, and gets a pointedly expectant look from the cat. Rolling his eyes, he sighs and mutters grumpily, “Fine, witch. I’m from a future where everyone is dead, but my jinchuuriki sacrificed himself to send me back in time, so I got landed with this body. Now I’ve got two pint-sized jinchuuriki to look after, including my asshole-ish past self and that crazy bastard Shukaku, a promise to save the world that I have to keep, and a bunch of Sharingan-users on my tail, with a Mokuton user thrown in just for fun. Can you help me or not?”

There’s a long, long pause as Matatabi digests that, perfectly still. Then she snorts and gives a coughing laugh. “Only you, Kurama,” she says, shaking her head. “I see you’re just as prickly as ever, hatred or no. It’s quite the story, and…unnervingly plausible, given your current condition.”

“I am not prickly!” Kurama snaps, bristling, then realizes he just made her point for her and huffs in offense, crossing his arms and glaring. Matatabi just laughs at him again, sitting up.

“What do you need from me?” she asks. “Unfortunately, my help is limited by Yugito’s abilities at the moment, but I’ll do what I can.”

Kurama breathes out a sigh that’s pure relief and rakes a hand through his hair. “Thanks, Matatabi,” he says sincerely. “You’re a lifesaver. I’ve got two six-year-olds with me that I can’t take into battle or leave on their own, and I need someone to watch them for a month or so. Think you and your host can handle it?”

Matatabi hesitates, eyes narrowing a little, and her tails flick with minor agitation. “…Maybe,” she concludes after a moment. “I’ll speak with her about it. Head our direction regardless; you’ll be harder to catch when you’re moving, and you need whatever advantage you can get right now.”

“Yeah,” Kurama sighs, raking a hand through his hair and wincing when he isn’t quite careful enough with his claws. “But I couldn’t leave either of the kids where they were. Most humans are never going to understand jinchuuriki, and they’re bastards to them no matter their age. Hurting kids like that—it makes me angry, Matatabi. I’m good at angry, but this is a kind I don’t want to feel.”

When he looks up, there’s an odd expression on Matatabi’s face, somewhere between pleased and
calculating, but it vanishes before he can read it further. She dips her head, glancing over her shoulder into the darkness she emerged from, and then rises to her feet. “We’re in the mountains directly west of the village,” she says. “But if we move, I’ll find you and let you know. Fair winds and fast travels, Kurama. I look forward to seeing you in person again after so long.”

“Same to you, Matatabi,” Kurama answers, unable to fight a faint smile. “And thanks. I owe you one.”

“We’ll see.” With that helpfully cryptic comment, Matatabi bounds back into the shadows, and her presence vanishes like a rush of wind dispersing, fading back into a shimmer of sensation and nothing more.

Kurama scowls after her, not able to ignore the insistent jab of suspicion that he just got tricked. A kitsune’s sense for that kind of thing is usually pretty strong, and right now his is saying that he just got set up for something big.

“Damn it. You’re a fucking witch, Matatabi, and when I find out what you’re planning, I’m going to skin you,” Kurama threatens, but the cat doesn’t even deign to listen to him. She’s already dropped back to sleep, and all Kurama can get from her is a faint flicker of smug satisfaction.

“Oh gods, I am never going to be dry ever again,” Shisui complains, throwing himself onto a wide branch the moment Kakashi calls a halt. He grimaces at their (admittedly very wet) surroundings as he digs a ration bar out of his hip pouch. That gets a scowl too, because Shisui is only subtle when he wants to be, before he tears off the wrapper and takes an unhappy bite.

Honestly, Kakashi isn’t feeling much more enthusiastic. They’re still in River Country, but this close to Ame’s border it rains more often than not, and what is thick forest further south has become a massive, choking jungle that they have to fight their way through. Every piece of clothing Kakashi is wearing is soggy, and his feet started squishing in his sandals about half an hour after they broke camp this morning. It could be worse, but it sure as hell could be a lot better, too.

With a faint grimace of his own, Kakashi takes a seat and leans back against the bole of the tree, fishing his rations out and starting in on them, despite the completely unappetizing taste and texture. Tenzō once gloomily compared both to moldy cardboard, and Kakashi can’t entirely say that he’s wrong.

“The tracks are still clear,” he says, in a halfhearted attempt to keep their spirits up. “And they’re starting to waver. Kurama can’t keep this pace for long. We just have to outlast him and we’ll run him to ground.”

Shisui keeps his eyes on his hands, breaking small pieces of the ration bar off as he eats them. At Kakashi’s words, he makes a quiet sound of assent, but his expression is contemplative. After several moments, he glances up, and asks quietly, “Are we all just ignoring the fact that it was foxes who saved Uzumaki?”

Well, they were. But for all that Shisui likes to act the fool, he’s very much not, and Kakashi should have expected him to bring up the matter eventually. Even more than Itachi, Shisui is brilliant at connecting pieces and getting to the heart of things.

With a soft sigh, Kakashi puts his food down and meets the Uchiha’s gaze. “The Yondaime’s seal
won't break. It isn't breaking,” he says simply. “If it was something big enough that it required his life in payment, Minato-sensei would have made sure that no one else ever had to pay the same price.”

Shisui considers this for a moment before he nods. “I'll believe that. But in that case, Uzumaki having fox summons is pretty interesting.”

“Except that they weren't summons,” Kakashi counters, because he's thought about this a lot as well. “A summoning jutsu takes either blood or contact with the ground, even when done with a tattoo. Kurama's hands were bound, so he couldn't have summoned them. The white fox appeared above your head, and the red one in the bushes—a summoning can't do that, either. Besides, Kurama was just as surprised to see them as we were. He wasn't expecting a rescue.”

“I've never heard of a summons coming to find someone without being called,” Shisui agrees. “That was definitely odd. But then, Uzumaki's weird as it is, right? I mean, all those things he can do can be written off as a jinchuriki’s abilities, but…just him in general. He doesn't wear shoes or use weapons, he’s got the shortest fuse I've seen outside of Mikoto on her monthlies, and his hair looks like he took a rusty knife to it in the dark—which is a shame, because if he tried a little harder he could be pretty hot.”

It's all true, if faintly amusing laid out like that. Shinobi tend to be peculiar by nature—it's a coping mechanism, Kakashi is well aware of that—and Kurama seems no different. All the idiosyncrasies can be dismissed as a whole, but taken piece by piece…

“I think,” Kakashi says slowly, “that he feels like he's completely alone in the world. He doesn't care what he looks like, or what he acts like, because failing might kill him, but it might not, and that's enough of a chance for him to risk it. He’s…caught up in everything, and can't see that the path he’s on might have alternatives, because he feels there's no other way to move forward. Taking Naruto—it was an impulse, but now that he’s done it he’s not going to give the boy up, because he can't. This is—this is how he’s grieving, and we're all caught in the crossfire.”

Shisui's black eyes are far too sharp and clever as he studies Kakashi, crossing his legs under him on the branch. “That's a long time to grieve,” he says mildly, and Kakashi is abruptly unsure just who they're talking about. “But…from what you said about your fight with him in the village, and then the one we had in the forest—he seemed a little more in control the second time. He didn’t completely lose it, even if he was angry. Maybe he’s getting better, now that he’s seen he’s not alone.” He meets Kakashi's stare, and adds, still mild as milk, “You know, some people don’t let go, even when the world tells them they should. It doesn’t mean they’re broken; it just means they hold on a bit harder than most.”

This is edging dangerously close to being a talk about feelings, and Kakashi can already feel the hives threatening. He eyes Shisui sidelong as he swallows the last of his bar, and remarks warily, “I hope you're not implying that we should leave our village’s jinchuriki with an unknown and hostile shinobi just because it might be a good form of therapy for him, Shisui.”

Shisui rolls his eyes, flicking a handful of crumbs into the surrounding forest. “You know exactly what I'm implying, Captain,” he retorts. “I won't play dumb if you won't. We have to catch Uzumaki, but that doesn’t also mean that nothing can change. I've been with you on Naruto's guard, and I've seen how you look at him. This might be a good excuse to connect with him, don't you think?”

“You mean after having to kill or forcibly subdue the first person who’s ever been kind to him beyond the Hokage?” Kakashi drawls, unimpressed. “Yes, that’s a great first impression to build a relationship on.”
Sighing, Shisui holds his hands up in clear surrender. “Whatever, I'm just a lowly ANBU recruit and fifteen, what the hell do I know?” His eyes flicker red, and when he raises his head the black tomoe in his eyes have shifted into four-point pinwheels, spinning lazily. It’s a deliberate and entirely unsubtle point, because he knows very well that Kakashi also has a Mangekyo Sharingan, and is therefore aware of exactly what has to happen to get one. Shisui understands loss, and though Kakashi has never asked for details of just how he got his eyes, he doesn’t need to. Rin's death is a memory that won't ever fade.

Still, if Shisui isn’t verbally pointing it out, Kakashi feels no need to acknowledge he ever made a point at all. He pastes on a smile just to annoy the teenager and lets the conversation drop like a ton of bricks. Unfortunately, Shisui is made of stronger stuff than most, and just snorts. He crumples the wrapper up and stuffs it into his pouch, then rises to his feet to stretch.

Deciding he’s also more than ready to get moving, Kakashi pulls himself up and turns to keep following Kurama's trail, half a second before the sky opens up again. It feels like getting a bucket of lukewarm water repeatedly emptied over his head, and Kakashi sighs in aggravation, shoving his sodden hair out of his eyes. Beside him, Shisui is cursing under his breath in a way that is both impressively creative and a clear precursor to violence, and if they don’t catch up with Kurama soon Kakashi isn’t entirely sure he won't join the kid in his rampage. This has not been his most successful mission ever.

And—

A flicker, like chakra wavering and then steadying again. Kakashi's head snaps up as he spins left, and he orders, “Shisui!”

Sharingan eyes still bright with power, Shisui disappears in a burst of speed, hurling himself through the trees. Kakashi can only catch a faint afterimage, but he doesn’t need more; Kurama's presence is both close and clear, and he heads for it at his fastest run, tearing straight through vines and branches. Subtlety won't do them any good right now, not against someone as powerful as Kurama, who’s doubtless aware that they're coming.

But when he bursts out of the jungle and staggers to a halt on the edge of the cliff, Shisui is just standing in front of the redhead, not moving. Kakashi leaps up to his side, already reaching for his chakra, but Kurama isn’t making any move to attack. He’s just watching them, Naruto clinging to his shoulders and the little white fox curled around his neck, and his crimson eyes are mocking.

“Uzumaki,” Shisui says warily, “is this you giving up?”

Kurama smirks, just barely showing a flash of one sharp canine. “Not hardly,” he chuckles, and waves a hand. Perched on his hip, Naruto gives them a wide, bright grin and—

Vanishes in a puff of smoke.

_Fucking damn it_, Kakashi thinks, with all the venom he can muster. He takes a shaky breath to get himself under control, all too aware of Kurama's sharp eyes on him, and then says with tightly-contained rage, “I take it the real you is somewhere in southern River Country, then.”

The redhead laughs at them, even as the fox disappears as well. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” he taunts. Then his gaze hardens, and he steps forward, right into Kakashi's space. “Tell me,” he says, voice low, “Why are you following? I'm his family, his blood. I love him. I'll swear it on anything you want me to. So why can't I raise my nephew, rather than a village that hates him?” He shifts his attention to Shisui, and his eyes narrow faintly, lip curling again. “You should understand, Uchiha. Family and love is everything, right?”
“The village is more important,” Shisui counters sharply, and the resolve is clear on his angular face. “Naruto is a jinchuuriki, and maybe I can't understand everything that means, but it makes him valuable. Every country in the world will want him, and do anything to get him. Surely even you can see that he’d be better off in Konoha. If you come peacefully, I'm sure we can work something out. You don’t have to be separated from him.” A faint, wry smile crosses his face. “I wouldn’t ask you to abandon your family, and I don’t think the Sandaime would, either.”

Surprise flickers across Kurama's features, oddly similar to Kushina's face. Kakashi can see the relation in the shape of their eyes, the slant of their jaws, even the color of their hair. Long lashes clumped by rain sweep down as he looks away, towards the east, and then reaches up to rake a hand through his soaked hair. If he’s trying to get it out of his face, he fails; the choppy chin-length strands immediately tumble back into his eyes, though he doesn’t seem to notice.

“You don’t trust me,” he says after a moment, and it’s edged with a frustrated growl. “Whatever, I've never given you a reason to. But once I'm in Konoha, you're not going to let me out, and I refuse to be trapped anywhere, ever again. I've got things to do and people to save, and I'm not about to let you lock me up and steal my purpose. So either fuck off and quit chasing me, or come back with a better offer.” He makes a hand-sign that is definitely not a jutsu and just as definitely offensive, then disappears with a pop and a whirl of smoke, leaving them standing on an empty cliff.

“Fuck me,” Shisui groans, pressing his hands over his face.

Kakashi looks out at the vast expanse of River Country they just crossed, which they will very soon have to cross again, and sighs, rubbing at his temples. “I think he just did,” he says wryly. “Both of us, even.”

Well. It’s the truth, but at least it makes his partner laugh.
XIV: Dolorifuge

[dolorifuge / dələˈrɒrəˌfjuːj/ , a thing that banishes or mitigates grief, a thing that drives away pain. From Latin dolor “anguish, misery”, and Latin -fuge “expelling or dispelling either a specified thing or in a specified way”, derived from fūgare, “to expel, put to flight.”]

There's a small, weathered inn several hours from Ame's border, tucked in between the rocky flatlands and a few marshy stands of trees. Stopping isn't the best idea—that would be avoiding all signs of humanity, sticking to the woods, and hauling ass across the Elemental Countries to get to Kumo. However, there's been no sign of pursuit from either Suna or Konoha, the sandstorm did an incredible job of covering their tracks, and Fuji is getting tired in a way that a few stolen hours of sleep won't help. On top of that, Naruto and Gaara are both starting to look a little grimy, and Kurama knows that he's no better than the boys.

Some faint flicker of caution has Kurama cutting off a square of his own blanket before they can enter the building, and tying it over Naruto's bright hair. Then he sits back on his heels and regards the two boys closely. He can probably get away with claiming relation to Gaara, despite the difference in their skin colors, and since Naruto is about the same age, it's easy enough to write him off as either another relative or a friend.

“Stick close, okay?” he reminds them, offering his hands. Fuji is curled around his neck again, eyes heavy and tails drooping, and Kurama knows that the second she hits the futon she's going to be out for the night, even though the sun is still up. “Gaara, think you can call me Kurama-nii while we’re in here?”

Aquamarine eyes go wide. Gaara bites his lip and looks down, then sneaks a glance at Naruto without answering.

Apparently understanding the implied question, Naruto beams. “It’s all right, Gaara!” he says reassuringly. “He can be your Kurama-nii too!”

In for a kunai, in for the whole damn weapons store, apparently. Kurama stifles a sigh and waves his hands impatiently. “Yeah, yeah. Come on, brats, I want a bath more than I want to breathe right now. Here’s hoping they need a bunch of wood chopped.”

“Are you gonna be a woodcutter and a shinobi, Kurama-nii?” Naruto asks interestingly, taking his hand without hesitation. Gaara steals another glance at him before he carefully does the same, and Kurama offers both of them a smile as he rises to his feet.

“Why not?” he huffs, squeezing their fingers gently. “It’ll be worth it to stay the night.” And if any of the other bijuu try to make something of it, he’ll pound their faces in, so who cares?

The bottom floor of the inn is completely empty when they step in, only the innkeeper—as grim and weathered as her inn—seated behind the main desk. Sharp eyes immediately snap up, flickering across Kurama's tattered clothes and down to his bare feet, and then narrow sharply.

“Fifty ryō for you for one night, and twenty apiece for the boys,” she says flatly. “Money upfront.”

Never has Kurama realized more clearly just how far the Elemental Nations came under Naruto's generation. Right now, Ame is still only seven years come from the Third Shinobi War, and while it didn’t offer nearly the devastation of the Second, it was still a war. There's no room for kindness
here, not yet. Not with that in their pasts.

“Will you trade for work?” Kurama asks, trying not to sound too gruff. “I can chop wood, or take care of—”

“Money upfront,” the woman repeats, unbending. “I can’t afford any charity cases. If you don’t have the funds, move on.”

All too aware of Naruto and Gaara, tense and silent and half-hidden behind him even as they grip his fingers tightly, Kurama tries again. “Look, I’m sorry, but just one night. There’s a storm coming. Anything you want done, I’ll do it.”

The innkeeper glances at Naruto and Gaara for a long moment, but her lips press into a tight line and she shakes her head. “I have no need of work. If that’s all you have to say—”

“Put it on my bill,” an unexpected voice orders, deep and sharp, and Kurama startles, jerking around. There’s a man in the doorway of the inn, just stripping off his haori. Short, a good head shorter than Kurama, with dark red hair and a beard that comes to a point. He’s lacking the armor and crown-like headpiece Kurama last saw him with, but he’s still familiar. More to the point, so is the hot, heavy chakra thrumming through him, tasting of molten rock and vast, potent pride, thick enough to choke on.

Brown eyes flicker across Kurama’s face, then down to the little boys pressed close to him, and Son Goku’s jinchuuriki offers a small, crooked smile. Glancing past them, he looks back at the innkeeper and says again, “I’ll pay. Add their room to my bill. I wouldn’t wish a storm like that on anyone, let alone two kids.”

It takes effort for Kurama to swallow his own pride, because of all his siblings Son has always been one of the hardest to deal with. Still, the man is right; outside there’s a wind picking up, and the clouds have been getting darker and lower all day. This is for Naruto’s comfort, his safety, and because of that Kurama manages to incline his head to the redheaded man. “Thanks,” he says, and it comes out rough. “I…owe you one.”

Unlike with Matatabi, there’s no cryptic, unnerving sidestep. The man simply nods, waving Kurama forward as he goes to snag the keys from the innkeeper. “Kurama. You just missed Han,” he says. “He left a few hours ago to find Killer Bee on Turtle Island.”

“Killer Bee?” Naruto whispers very loudly from behind Kurama’s leg, tugging on his pants. “Kurama-nii, Kurama-nii, who’s that?”

Son’s host studies the boy for a moment, then crouches down so he’s closer to eye level, though he doesn’t approach. “Be happy you don’t know,” he says a little dryly. “But he’s like us. Has a bijuu trapped inside him. For a given value of trapped, I guess.”

Naruto and Gaara exchange wide-eyed looks, and Naruto blurts, “You’re a jinchuuriki too?”

Son’s host studies the boy for a moment, then crouches down so he’s closer to eye level, though he doesn’t approach. “Be happy you don’t know,” he says a little dryly. “But he’s like us. Has a bijuu trapped inside him. For a given value of trapped, I guess.”

Naruto and Gaara exchange wide-eyed looks, and Naruto blurts, “You’re a jinchuuriki too?”

The older man nods, looking faintly awkward. “That I am. I’m Rōshi, and I’ve got the Yonbi living in my head. What about you two?”

Gaara slides back a little, tucking himself further behind Kurama, and Naruto glances at him, expression shifting from interest to wariness. “Kurama-nii?” he whisper-shouts again, and really, Kurama has to teach him subtlety, if it’s at all possible.

Knowing Naruto, it’s probably not.
A quick glance at the desk shows the innkeeper has retreated elsewhere, so Kurama nods, ruffling blond hair and then crimson. “It’s fine. Rōshi is a friend. Tell him whatever you want.”

“I’ve got the Kyuubi in me,” Naruto says immediately. “And Gaara’s got the Shukaku.”

Rōshi blinks, taken aback, and glances at Gaara, then up at Kurama in what is clearly a request for translation.

“The Ichibi,” Kurama clarifies, reluctantly amused. He looks down at the six-year-old redhead, who looks solemnly back at him and then tentatively raises his arms. Kurama chuckles and scoops the boy up, propping him on his hip, and Gaara drops his head onto Kurama's shoulder, half-hiding his face.

“Me too, Kurama-nii!” Naruto insists, reaching up as well. With a snort, Kurama snags him by the back of his shirt, hauling him into his arms even as he tries not to unbalance Fuji.

“If you want to talk, can we do it after I get these two into a bath?” he asks Rōshi. “It’s getting hard to tell dirt from skin—for all of us, I think.”

Rōshi’s lips quirk, and he straightens. “This way,” he says, heading down the hall to the right. “Your room’s only a few doors down from the bath, and right next to mine. I think she’s trying to make sure the dangerous-looking people stick to one area.”

From the looks the woman was giving them, Kurama would believe it. He snorts softly, then says, “Fuji, hop down and find a bed. If you fall asleep there you’re going to slip off and crack your skull.”

“I will not,” the fox answers, making Rōshi jump slightly as she lifts her head. Kurama can’t quite see her face from this angle, but he knows with absolute certainty that she’s smirking. “Besides, Kurama-sama, it’s not as though a fall from this puny height would hurt in the least.”

“Fuck off, Fuji. Go sleep,” Kurama snaps, bristling, and she huffs, flicks her tails smugly, and leaps to the ground.

One amber-eyed glare at Rōshi has him hurrying to unlock the closest door for her, and Fuji offers him a prim, “Thank you, sir,” as she trots inside.

Brows raised, Rōshi glances from the disappearing tail-tips to Kurama, who rolls his eyes and crouches down, setting the boys on their feet. “Bathroom’s there,” he says firmly, pointing to another door standing ajar. “You two can manage a bath by yourselves?”

“We can,” Gaara says quickly, grabbing for Naruto's hand.

“Yeah!” Naruto agrees brightly. “Sakura-chan says she an’ her friend take baths together sometimes ’cause they’re friends, so we can do it too! Gaara's a better friend than mean Ino.”

The name is a twinge—one more of Naruto's precious people, who died to buy them time to get a group of children to safety. Sakura had been heartbroken afterwards, inconsolable, and little hurt Naruto more than loss and grief.

Still, the childish words make Kurama smile, and he gently tweaks Naruto's nose. “Yeah, you're pretty good friends all right,” he confirms. “Go on, scram. Wash everything.”

Naruto gives him a beaming grin that promises chaos, then bolts, towing Gaara along behind him. The bathroom door slams closed as they vanish, and Kurama rises back to his feet, shaking his head. Somehow, he suspects that this won't end with the bathroom in anywhere close to pristine condition,
but, well. After their reception he can't say he's all that inclined to be accommodating.

Once the sound of running water and muffled voices is loud enough to prove that the boys are thoroughly preoccupied, Rōshi jerks his head, gesturing Kurama into the door a few feet down the hall. “We can talk in mine,” he says, and heads for it without waiting for an answer. Kurama snorts, mutters an insult as to Son’s intelligence, and follows.

“Han passed on the message?” he asks as soon as they're seated around the low table.

“Hm?” Rōshi looks up from his bags, bottle of sake in one hand and an ochoko and a teacup in the other. “You mean that someone besides our villages is hunting us? Yeah. That weird bastard with the masks on his back—is he the standard, or are there others to worry about?”

“You know that stuff isn’t going to get either one of us drunk, right?” Kurama asks critically, eyeing the bottle as Rōshi pours them each a measure of alcohol.

The jinchuuriki rolls his eyes. “You sound just like Han,” he complains. “We’re not drinking to get drunk, we’re drinking for the taste, so shut up and enjoy it.”

“Whatever,” Kurama huffs, but accepts the cup Rōshi pushes towards him and takes a wary sip. It doesn’t burn too badly going down, clearly of better quality that what Kiba used to force on Naruto, but the flavor doesn’t do all that much for Kurama, either. He drinks it, since Rōshi is doing the same, but it wouldn’t be his first choice if he were alone. “Akatsuki’s a mixed bag, but they’re all nuts. The main one to watch out for is a guy in a mask—he’s got a Sharingan eye that can control the bijuu, and it works on jinchuuriki too. One of ‘em has the Rinnegan eyes, as well. Konoha’s favorite traitor, Orochimaru, one of Suna’s rejects, a girl who’s way too fond of paper, and Hoshigaki Kisame, the walking shark—given that that’s the basic lineup, you're best avoiding them at all costs, even if it means going back to Iwa.”

Rōshi snorts derisively. “I’m not going back,” he says stubbornly. “Han and I split up so it would be harder to track us. He’ll cut through Fire Country, and I’ll head after him once he’s got a decent lead. Bee’s still got ties to his village—he can get word out to the others who aren’t missing-nin.” A thoughtful expression flickers over his face, and he asks, “That why you grabbed the kids? Because they're vulnerable?”

Kurama scoffs, looking away. “Not quite. Until someone in one of those shitholes learns how to take decent goddamn care of a six-year-old, they're sticking with me. Naruto’s family, anyway. I'm not leaving him.”

With a quiet hum, Rōshi drains his teacup and pours himself more sake. “The Yonbi’s been screeching at me since he heard about you,” he says, almost casually. “As soon as Han said your name, and that you called the Gobi ‘brother’, he started having a conniption. Care to tell me what that’s about?”

“Not really,” Kurama answers warily. One dark red brow arches disbelievingly, and he sighs, scrubbing a hand through his knotted hair. “It’s…complicated,” he finally manages. “And I'm not getting into it right now. But I’m…related. Kokuō and Son both guessed, but Son’s an arrogant, uppity bastard and I'm not surprised that he’s throwing a tantrum about it.”

Rōshi’s chakra flares wildly and he jerks, flickers of heat making the air around him swim like a heat mirage. Kurama just smirks, taking another sip, and points out, “Bet you could get him to stop screaming if you called him by name.”

Eyes narrowing, Rōshi gives him a glare. “I'm not—”
“That soft, yeah, yeah,” Kurama huffs. “It’s not about being soft, idiot. It’s about respect. Son’s the source of most of your power. Without him, you’d be crippled at best, or probably just dead. Pay him back and use his damned name.”

“I will not!” Rōshi growls. He sits back on his heels and glares. “You act like it’s some kind of honor, like I wanted this! Yes, he gives me power, but what do I get in return? I’m ostracized, hunted —”

“And you,” Kurama drawls pointedly, giving him a smug, sharp-edged smirk, “are acting like you’re the only one with no choice in the matter. Son Goku sure as hell didn’t ask to end up trapped in your soul, and you never asked for him to be there. Get along just for that, if nothing else, and count your blessings. Son’s an egotistical son of a bitch, but at least he’s not blanket crazy. Shukaku’s been trapped and twisted by his seals for so long that there’s not much left of what he used to be. Before I tweaked the seal, Gaara couldn’t even sleep for fear of him taking control and slaughtering all of Suna.”

There’s a long, tense moment of silence, and then Rōshi nods, just once. He looks away, tapping one finger against his cup, and clears his throat. “Where are you taking them?”

Accepting the change of subject, because he’s not a complete asshole—and also because he’s made his point—Kurama shrugs. “There’s something I need to destroy at the Akatsuki base northwest of Kumo, and I’m not about to take two baby jinchuuriki with me. Matatabi might be able to babysit, though, so I’ll work my way around. Unless you…?”

Rōshi leans back, raising his hands as though to fend Kurama off. “No! No, I’m terrible with kids, and besides, I want to stick close to Han. He’s an idiot about a lot of things. Like women. If they send that paper-girl after him he’ll be blushing too hard to fight back.”

They must make quite a pair when they’re traveling together, Kurama thinks with amusement, because Han is easily seven feet tall, while Rōshi doesn’t even top out at five. He snorts a little at the image, even though he’s slightly disappointed that they’re really going to have to haul themselves all the way to Kumo regardless. Still, he doesn’t want to deal with Bee, not when Matatabi is an option, so it’s not entirely the disappointment it could be.

“Don’t try to fight Akatsuki if you do run into them,” is what he says, though. “Just run. They’ve been training for years just to hunt the jinchuuriki, and no matter how strong you are, you’re not going to stand a chance.”

Rōshi stares at him for a long moment, sharp eyes studying Kurama’s expression. Kurama looks back, letting him see just how serious he is. Akatsuki is powerful; hell, Kurama can’t think of another group that could have managed even half of what they did in his timeline. Obito is a mad bastard, but he’s a terrifyingly clever one.

And then Rōshi says very softly, “Who’d you lose to them?”

Kurama’s breath catches sharply in his throat and he wrenches his gaze away, staring down at his cup because it’s the only safe thing he can think to focus on. Already his body is tensing, shoulders coming up and heart starting to pound, but he forces himself back under control, fighting away the surge of runrunrunrun that’s coursing through his veins.

“A friend,” he manages after a long moment, and the words come out just a bare decibel above a growl. “My best friend.”

There’s a pause as Rōshi regards him; Kurama can practically feel the man’s gaze boring into the top
of his head. Then Rōshi sighs quietly, reaching for the sake. He fills his cup to the very top, downs it in three long swallows, and says, “All right. I’ll run, and I’ll make sure whoever I meet knows to do the same. Bee might take some convincing, but if he mentions it to his brother A will be more than happy to make sure he does it.”

The promise is enough that Kurama nods. He pushes his own cup aside and rises to his feet. “I should check on Fuji,” he mutters. “You sticking around for the night?”

Rōshi inclines his head, and his expression is grimly sad as he watches Kurama retreat towards the door. “I’ll leave at dawn. I don’t want Han getting too far ahead of me.”

“Night, then,” Kurama manages, then closes the door and stalks towards his own room. There's still laughter and voices coming from the bathroom, so he doesn’t pause, just steps into the darkened room and immediately heads for the window. Rain is lashing at the glass, a hard, steady drumming, but Kurama throws it open regardless, leaning out to let the icy drops pelt his skin.

_Best friend_, he thinks, and it’s somewhere between bitter and broken. He sees it again, Naruto falling with only emptiness in his blue eyes, blood staining his shirt even as the seal on his skin blazed with light. Sees again that final smile, feels that final hug, his nose in sun-bright hair and strong arms wrapped around him.

_You’ve always been a hero, Kurama. Now everyone will be able to see it._

Naruto had whispered it to him, steady and certain, entirely unwavering. He’d had faith in Kurama, more than anyone, and was the first to ever see him as a friend. Kurama stares at his hand, remembers tanned fingers entwined with his darker ones, the firm grip Naruto kept on his wrist as they faced each other. He can’t quite stop the shattered, shaken sound that tears itself from his throat, can’t fight the way his eyes are burning, and he hunches forward over the sill, leaning out into the rain.

_Damn it all to hell and back. He just—he misses his Naruto so much._

It’s not as though the six-year-old version is a poor substitute. He’s _not_, because he’s Naruto, and that’s all that matters. But there's no way for him to be what Kurama's Naruto was, no way for him to understand Kurama as fully as the man who pulled an angry, hateful bijuu up out of the darkness and gave him a reason to care.

(He pretends that the wetness streaking his cheeks is just the rain, but it’s painfully hot, and the raindrops are cold. How pathetic, that he can't even lie to himself.)

The door opens, startling him enough that he spins, claws coming up. Before he can do anything, though, Naruto makes a loud sound of distress and cries, “Kurama-nii! Are you hurt? Are you okay?”

On instinct, Kurama catches the small body that slams into his legs, grunting as he’s knocked back a step. Thin, short arms wrap around his thighs as the boy presses close, and—Kurama looks down at the top of his blond head, remembers that last, warm hug just before his world ended, and chokes on the edges of a sob. He drops to his knees, grabbing Naruto and dragging the boy against him, hugging him as tightly as he dares.

“I miss him,” he whispers. “I miss him so much, Naruto, and I’m so _tired_ of being sad. You're here, I found you, so I shouldn’t feel like this anymore, but I just—I can’t stop it.”

“It’s okay, Kurama-nii,” Naruto says softly, worried but stubborn. “Even if you’re sad, it’s okay. Me
an’ Gaara are here, and we love you, an’ you're our big brother. I'm really happy you're here, Kurama-nii, no matter what, so being sad is always okay. We love you anyway.”

It’s such a Naruto way to comfort him that Kurama laughs, wet and rough and muffled against Naruto's small shoulder. He squeezes the boy just a little bit tighter, careful with his claws, and breathes, “Thank you. Thank you, Naruto. I promise, I won't leave you. I'm never going to leave you, no matter what happens.”

Naruto doesn’t say anything, just wraps his arms around Kurama and holds on, but really, that’s all Kurama needs. He buries his face in blond hair, breathing through the waves of grief that try to drag him down, and swears on everything that’s ever been sacred that he’ll never let go.
As a heads-up, there might be a brief hiatus happening in the near future—I’ve been promoted, which is fantastic, but also kind of terrible. I was happy being a peon, boo. Anyway, it won’t be longer than two weeks, and if I can manage to juggle everything well enough it won’t happen at all, but it’s looking likely at the moment. Many apologies. I’ll leave a note in the chapter header if it does become necessary. :(

[anamnesis /a-ˌnäm-nəs/ , the recollection or remembrance of the past; reminiscence. Via New Latin from Greek anamimnēskein “to recall”, from mimnēskein “to call to mind”.]

Kurama steps out of the shower with a sigh, catching his towel from the hook on the wall and dragging it over his head. He feels wrung out, hollowed, but…maybe it’s not entirely in a bad way.

The memory of his Naruto is foremost in his mind, but with Naruto the child so close by, asleep on the futon he’s sharing with Gaara and dreaming peacefully, it’s easier to recall the final smile Naruto gave him, Naruto’s faith and fiery determination, rather than his death. He still hates Kaguya with everything in him, hates the goddess more than he’s ever hated anyone or anything in his long life, but Kurama could never hate Naruto.

Resenting his Naruto for sending him here, for trapping him in this body, for dying without even letting Kurama try to save him, has never sat all that comfortably with him, either.

Scrubbing the towel over his dripping hair, Kurama takes two steps across the small, entirely soaked bathroom—Naruto and Gaara apparently decided to have a splash fight, and Kurama would be annoyed, but he remembers his Naruto coaxing Gaara into doing the same, both of them twenty years old and Kages and still absolute brats. There are puddles underfoot, and the air is filled with steam, making it as humid as a jungle.

That thought draws his attention to the memories of his clone, who faced Kakashi and Shisui just before it disappeared. Perhaps it’s to be expected that those two caught up first, while the other clone is still leading Itachi and Tenzō on a spiraling chase through southern River Country. Kakashi is a terrifyingly good tracker, after all, and while Shisui is an unknown beyond the fact that he has a Sharingan, Kurama’s happy to assume he’s a talented bastard as well. Sarutobi wasn’t pulling any punches when he picked this team.

He doesn’t for a moment believe Shisui’s words about finding a solution if he returns to Konoha. However, it was easy to see in that moment that Shisui believed them, and for an Uchiha to have that much faith in his village, six years after the Kyuubi’s attack, means something.

Distantly, Kurama can recall the knowledge that Itachi had a friend who helped set him on his path, whose death gave him the Mangekyo and who was all but killed by Danzō. He never really tried to remember the name—what did he care about one long-dead Uchiha, after all?—but now…now he can’t help but suspect that it was Shisui. Naruto always called that particular spark of devotion and implacable stubbornness the Will of Fire, and Kurama supposes that that’s what he saw in Shisui’s
eyes when he faced him.

*If you come peacefully, I'm sure we can work something out. You don’t have to be separated from him. I wouldn’t ask you to abandon your family, and I don’t think the Sandaime would, either.*

What are the odds that the Sandaime sent the two Uchiha who are practically responsible for the massacre after him? Kurama can't decide whether he's amused or annoyed about it. If he weren't quite as cynical, he might even put it down to fate. But part of some grand plan or not, it does give Kurama a chance he’s not likely to come across again.

He doesn’t have time to make another clone and send it after Shisui and Kakashi. Besides, they’d be even more suspicious, since they already saw the one they were chasing disappear. But…well. It’s simple enough to tug on his connection to the other clone and just…change its orders ever so slightly.

Kurama chuckles, low and amused, as he withdraws his chakra. He gets to help save one of Naruto's precious people a lot of grief *and* mess with an Uchiha at the same time. There are perks to everything, it seems. Adding in the fact that this is a particularly annoying Uchiha just makes it sweeter—Kurama still remembers all too well Naruto's brief fight with Itachi, and having to suffer the indignity of getting a crow stuffed down his throat. Manifestation of chakra or not, some things just shouldn’t happen, and getting assaulted with a bird is one of them.

Naruto would laugh at him, Kurama thinks suddenly, hands pausing on the towel. The thought is bittersweet, but strangely good. Naruto would laugh at him for all these petty little grudges, for all the tricks Kurama has played. He would *love* the fact that Kurama snatched Gaara right from under Suna’s nose, and that he’s used clones the way Naruto always did. That he’s planning all these little bits of unnecessary embarrassment for his pursuers, and making friends with the other jinchuuriki. It might not be quite what Naruto himself would have done, if he had managed to come back in time, but…Kurama can't help but feel that the man would definitely approve.

It feels like warmth unfurling inside of him. Like sunlight coaxing plants to bloom. Just a little spark of brightness unfolding in his chest, creeping out through his veins until Kurama can feel himself smiling. There's no jaded curve to it, nothing held back, just…happiness. A small dart of joy that grows larger with each passing day, with every smile this child Naruto gives him. With every hug, with every step taken, with every change Kurama makes to himself, to Naruto, to the world as a whole. Small changes, small bits, but they're snowballing forward, and that’s enough.

Kurama's world died once already. He will never, ever allow it to happen again.

Kurama takes a breath, slings the towel around his shoulders, and leans forward over the small sink to swipe a hand across the fogged surface of the mirror.

*Bye, Kurama. Kick some ass for me, okay? And look in a mirror as soon as you can, got it?*

Naruto had been smirking, when he said that. Sly and amused and full of mirth, and Kurama holds on to that image now. He takes a breath, squares his shoulders, and meets his own gaze in the silvered glass.

Dark red eyes, not sky-blue, but they're the same shape as Naruto's. A straight nose, stubborn jaw, high cheekbones—he looks like Kushina, almost, and without Minato's coloring to distract the eye the resemblance is easy to see. It’s Naruto's face with hardly any changes, and Kurama feels his chest ache with gratitude for that small fact. He reaches out, claws clicking against the glass, and traces the shape, almost able to see Naruto in it. There are no whisker marks, none of the laugh lines and crows' feet that Naruto was sporting at the end, but…like overlapping images, Kurama can see the
ghost of Naruto within his own face, and it’s far more of a comfort than he had thought it could be.

The hair is just ridiculous, though, and nothing will convince Kurama otherwise.

It makes him chuckle softly as he touches the choppy strands, because he remembers that fight. Naruto had been growing his hair out, through laziness in regards to cutting it more than anything else, and it had been a good foot past his shoulders when they’d been called to distract Kaguya’s forces so their companions could get away. One of her undead soldiers had grabbed his ponytail and refused to let go, giving all the rest of them a chance to dogpile him, and Naruto had screamed and flailed and been unable to get away until Sakura dove into the fray after him. She’d knocked the animated corpses back, then sawed Naruto’s ponytail off with a kunai and a distinct lack of pity for his plight. Kurama had been laughing too hard to help incinerate the soldiers, and Naruto had sulked for days, not even allowing Sakura to neaten up the ragged cuts she had made.

Carding his fingers through the crimson strands, Kurama gives in and laughs at the memory, feeling warm down to his bones. He wraps the towel around his waist, then heads for the hall, stepping out into the chilly air. There’s still a light on in Rōshi’s room, and he knocks briskly on the door. There’s a pause, then faint footsteps, and a moment later Rōshi is blinking at him, one eyebrow lifting.

“If this is a proposition, or some way of paying off the room,” he says suspiciously, eyeing Kurama’s lack of clothing, “I’m flattered, but I need to get an early start.”

Kurama scoffs and rolls his eyes. “Fuck you,” he huffs. “I just wanted to borrow a damned kunai.”

If anything, the eyebrow lifts higher, and the other comes up to join it. “You don’t have one of your own?” Rōshi asks, faintly incredulous.

Holding up one hand, Kurama wiggles his fingers, showing off the sharp points of his nails. “I’ve never needed them. But it’s kind of hard to cut hair with these.”

Rōshi snorts, turning away from the door and waving Kurama to follow him. “Yeah, it’s about time you did something about that,” he says, amused. “You look like someone set a mop on fire.”

Kurama would take offense, except that the haircut was hardly his idea. “My friend’s doing,” he explains. “He was an idiot.” It’s too hard to hide the thread of fondness in his tone, so Kurama doesn’t even try.

It gets him a sharp glance from the other redhead, but after a moment Rōshi’s expression shifts into a faint smile, and he turns his attention back to his pack with a soft snort. “Well, I’m sure he wouldn’t blame you for neatening that up, no matter how much you miss him. Here.” A whole weapons pouch comes flying at Kurama’s face, and he catches it automatically. “My spare. You’re probably going to need it more than I do, though, so take it.”

A little surprised, Kurama weighs the pouch in his hand. Muscle memory from Mito, Kushina, and Naruto as well means that he knows how to use them, but he honestly hasn’t thought of using a weapon beyond his own body before. He’s never had to, after all. This…this might be an edge, though, if he needs to escape from the Freak Squad again.

“Thanks,” he says gruffly, looking down to fiddle with the tie holding it closed. “Another thing I owe you for.”

Rōshi snorts. “Let’s call it a thank you for the warning.” He dismisses the matter with a one-shouldered shrug. “Or for helping Han, if you want. He’s a fool, but he’s a friend too. I’d rather this Akatsuki didn’t kill him before I have the chance to do it.”
They're definitely friends. Kurama laughs before he can help it, all too familiar with the sentiment, and nods in agreement. “All right. Thanks anyway. I appreciate it.”

“You're looking out for all the jinchuuriki,” Rōshi reminds him. “Least we can do is make things a bit easier on you in return. I’d offer you a change of clothes as well, but I don’t think mine would fit you.”

Given that Rōshi is a good twenty centimeters shorter than him, for all that he’s a fair bit broader, Kurama doesn’t doubt it. “This is enough,” he says, waving that away. “Thanks. Let me know when you're leaving?”

Rōshi nods, smiling faintly. “I will. Good night, Kurama.”

“Good night, Rōshi,” Kurama returns, stepping back.

He has a hand on the door when Rōshi says quietly, “I nearly killed my best friend, the first time I lost my temper with her. That’s why I left Iwa. Maybe it’s not quite like seeing her die, but she was so scared of me afterwards that is was still the same as losing her completely. Not that I blame her, but…loss always hurts, and it always will. To make up for it, I learned to control my power.”

He doesn’t say this is your way of making up for it, but he doesn’t need to. They can both hear the words regardless.

Kurama’s not sure if Rōshi thinks he’s a jinchuuriki as well, and assumes Kurama's friend got caught in Akatsuki’s crossfire, or if he’s just good enough at reading people to see the guilt that’s all wrapped up with Kurama's grief. Regardless, it doesn’t matter. Kurama clears his throat, eyes on the wood in front of him, and gives a jerky nod. “I'm going to tear Akatsuki apart until there's nothing left but ashes,” he says gruffly. “If you want to help, keep your head down, and warn the others to do the same.”

Rōshi makes a quiet sound that’s part amusement, part assent, and Kurama doesn’t wait for him to say anything else, stepping out into the hall and quietly closing the door behind him. He pauses, taking a breath, and then closes his hand a little more tightly around the pouch of kunai. They clink together under his grip, and he forces himself to move, padding back into the bathroom and dropping them on the counter. He pulls one out, studying the well-maintained edge for a moment, and then glances at his reflection in the mirror again.

It’s not exactly Naruto’s face that stares back at him, but it’s similar enough that Kurama smiles a bit, and lifts the kunai. The first ragged edge of crimson hair falls away under the gentle press of the blade, fluttering down to the counter, and Kurama takes a breath.

This is the body Naruto left for him. This is the task Naruto wanted him to complete. He’s doing it in a way Naruto would have liked, in a way that would have made him laugh, and that’s enough. It makes Kurama smile, remembering Naruto's request, remembering the little blond boy sleeping just a few doors down, wrapped up with his new friend and entirely at peace, and he laughs a little to himself. Maybe it’s not enough to heal the hurt entirely, but the warmth inside him is almost enough to rival the ache, and that’s a damned good start.

With steady hands, Kurama slices through the next choppy edge of crimson hair, and it doesn’t feel like losing his connection to his past. It feels like a step forward, an advance, and Kurama thinks if he were here, his Naruto would be the one urging him on.
They break free of the jungle just as the sun starts to set, and Kakashi can honestly say he’s never been quite so glad to leave a place behind.

Kurama’s trick itches at him, nags like a scabbing wound. He should have noticed, should have guessed. If he’d been thinking more clearly, if he’d been able to see through the anger and worry and grief caused by Naruto’s kidnapping, maybe he would have taken a moment longer, looked underneath the underneath the way he always urges his teammates, and noticed the misdirection for what it was.

There’s little doubt that the Kurama Tenzō and Itachi are chasing is a fake as well. The clone looked far too pleased with Kakashi’s question for it to be anything else. Two clones to lead them astray, and they’re well behind Kurama now, with little idea of where he’s headed.

Kakashi really wants to hurt something. Possibly himself, but definitely Kurama as well.

Since night is rapidly closing in, he comes to a halt with a heavy sigh, dropping down to sit on a sandy bit of ground. They’re near the Wind Country border, since it’s slightly easier to navigate with the lack of vegetation, and Kakashi knows that Tenzō and Itachi will be returning this way as soon as they realize they’re chasing a fake. Once they meet, Kakashi isn’t sure what they’ll do, since Kurama has several days’ head start on them now. That’s enough to put him almost anywhere in the western Elemental Countries. Hell, he could even be back in Konoha for all Kakashi knows, and it’s frustrating enough to make Kakashi want to put his fist through something solid.

“We’re stopping, then?” Shisui asks, sinking down next to him. He lets out a tired breath, dragging his fingers through his flyaway hair. “You’re so kind, Captain.”

Kakashi doesn’t roll his eyes, but it’s a near thing. “Just for a few hours. We’ll keep going once the moon is up. I want to find the others as soon as possible.”

Shisui opens his mouth to answer—probably with something insubordinate and faintly mocking, knowing him—but then freezes. In the same instant, Kakashi leaps back to his feet, the sense of rapidly approaching chakra enough to put his hackles up. It’s no one familiar, definitely not another Konoha shinobi, but there’s an edge of aggression to it that says this is hardly a friendly encounter. He reaches for his tantō automatically, aware of Shisui doing the same as the Uchiha flashes to his feet and spins to put their backs together.

A moment later, six shapes come blurring over the rise and surround them in a rush. Kakashi bristles, tempted to lift his hitai-ate so he can even the odds a little, but he restrains himself. The uniforms are familiar, as is the face of the man in front of him.

“Baki,” Kakashi says warily, eyeing the Kazekage’s main guard, and one of Suna’s top jounin. “You’re a long way from home.”

Baki watches him in return, visible eye narrowed above the red tattoos on his cheek. “Hatake. I could say the same. What’s Konoha’s best tracker doing in River Country?”

“Tracking,” Kakashi answers, cheerfully bland. He’s not about to tell a Suna shinobi that Konoha had its jinchuuriki swiped—Suna’s only an ally because they have no other choice—but this is a chance he can’t afford to pass up. Suna keeps a close eye on the desert, and if Kurama headed west, they’ll likely know. “We’re looking for a shinobi who’s wanted for questioning in Konoha. Have you seen him? Red hair, short, kind of grumpy? I think he’s still barefoot, too.”
Because Kakashi's watching, he catches the faint widening of Baki's eye, the flicker of surprise that crosses the jounin's face before he can hide it. There's a long moment of silence and then Baki glances over at the woman beside him. A silent conversation passes between them, and Kakashi can feel Shisui tensing at his back, ready for an attack. He doesn't think Baki will give that kind of order, though, and he's starting to get a sneaking suspicion just what it is this squad is looking for.

“Dark skin?” Baki asks finally, glancing back to meet Kakashi's gaze squarely. “No hitai-ate or visible weapons, accompanied by a three-tailed white fox as tall at the shoulder as a man’s elbow?”

Well, the giant fox is a surprise, and not entirely a pleasant one. No wonder Kurama is so far ahead of them if he’s got that shape-shifting not-a-summons for transportation. Kakashi grimaces, releasing his hold on his tantō and shifting out of a ready stance. “Uzumaki Kurama,” he agrees unhappily. “He escaped Konoha a few days ago, and we've been looking for him since. He’s in Suna?”

“No anymore,” Baki says dryly, waving his squad back. “Guards caught a glimpse of them escaping over the wall two days ago, but a sandstorm delayed us in giving chase. Uzumaki kidnapped the Kazekage’s youngest son on his way out, and we were dispatched to find him and recover the boy.”

There's a certain sinking sensation in Kakashi's stomach, and he trades wary glances with Shisui. They're well aware that Suna holds the Ichibi, even if they're not entirely certain who its container is. Given that jinchuuriki are usually chosen from among a Kage’s close family in order to ensure their loyalty, Kakashi thinks he can guess why Kurama snatched the boy. He’s not about to tell Baki about Naruto being taken as well, since the man will likely make the same connection Kakashi just did, but the situation is...worrying. The fact that Kurama is collecting jinchuuriki can't lead to anything good.

The Countries need jinchuuriki to keep the balance of power as it is. Remove them and every country is going to start pointing fingers and making accusations, and the world can't afford another all-out war, not so soon after the last.

“We ended up follow a clone through northern River Country,” Kakashi allows, “but we lost his trail there. The other half of my team went south, and we're trying to catch up with them now.”

Baki accepts the information with a tip of his chin. “Scouts found tracks headed northeast out of the village, but couldn’t follow them before the storm broke. We’ve got teams searching up and down the border now, but I haven’t heard anything yet. Have you faced Uzumaki?”

Kakashi inclines his head. “He’s strong,” he says, then hesitates. After a moment of inner debate, he adds, “We suspect he’s a jinchuuriki.”

After all, if Suna does manage to find him before Kakashi's team can, they’ll need every advantage to actually capture him. And once they do, refusing to return Naruto, a citizen of Konoha, might as well be an act of war. Even though Naruto is a container, he’s too young to be an asset, and Konoha is stronger than Suna even without a jinchuuriki. They can afford a war to get Naruto back; Suna can't. Laying at least some of their cards on the table is worth the risk of sharing knowledge.

At that, Baki blanches, and several of his shinobi pale as well. Muttering a low curse, Baki rubs a hand over his face and nods sharply. “Thank you,” he says grimly. “We weren’t aware. I knew he was powerful, but...”

Kakashi gives him a crooked smile, understanding. It’s one thing to face off against a powerful shinobi. It’s another entirely to go head-to-head with a shinobi capable of calling on the vast power of a bijuu. There's a reason most jinchuuriki who leave their villages are pretty much never taken back; there's simply no one capable of it.
“Should we ask to join forces?” Shisui asks, voice low enough that only Kakashi’s ears pick it up. He pauses, considering, and glances back at his partner. Shisui meets his gaze with a faint smile and a tip of one shoulder, and Kakashi turns the matter over in his mind. Their villages are technically allies, so he might as well make the offer. If nothing else, it would be good to have access to Suna’s resources, and if they do manage to find Kurama, returning the Kazekage’s son will only help strengthen ties.

“Can we offer our assistance?” he asks Baki. “Once we rejoin the rest of our squad, we can try to pick up the trail along the border. My nin-dogs know his scent; they might have more luck than us.”

If the offer surprises Baki, he doesn’t show it. Instead, he mulls it over for a moment, then nods sharply. “Accepted,” he says shortly. “We’ll be heading north from here, checking the border. You’ll be able to find us?”

“We will,” Kakashi confirms. “Good hunting, Baki.”

Baki laughs, rough and surprised. “Same to you, Hatake. See you in a few days.”

Kakashi offers him a wry salute, and Baki returns it, then waves his squad away. They head back over the rise, towards the north, and disappear into the darkening twilight. Once all trace of their chakra has disappeared, Kakashi finally lets the tension ease out of his shoulders and slumps with a muttered curse, pressing a hand over his face.

Kurama is collecting jinchuuriki. There is absolutely no way this is going to end well for any of the countries involved.

Behind him, Shisui blows out a heavy breath, sinking down to sit on his heels. “Wow,” he says admiringly. “We are so utterly screwed.”

Kakashi thinks about denying it, but given the circumstances, Shisui might actually be understating things. Honestly, Kakashi can’t think of a better way to spark another world war than to go around stealing jinchuuriki. It’s already a sticking point for most of the countries that a lot of them become missing-nin. To have a stranger with uncertain aims and unknown ties start scooping them up is just asking for trouble.

“I’ll send a message to the Hokage,” he says at length. “He can decide whether to alert the other Kages or not. We need to find Tenzō and Itachi as soon as possible. Kurama already has a solid lead on us.”

“So no resting, then,” Shisui says with a tired sigh, but he rises to his feet and gives Kakashi a crooked smile. “Lead on, Captain. I’ve got your back.”

At least, Kakashi thinks a little wryly, he’s not going to have to deliver the message to Sarutobi in person. Call him a coward, but he’d rather be well out of range when the Sandaime hears about this.
Itachi watches the waxing moon drift above the treeline, seated cross-legged on a boulder at the edge of their small camp. His feet hurt, and weariness pulls sharply at his mind, but he has first watch and won't allow himself to close his eyes.

Kakashi's nin-dog is the only reason they’ve managed to follow Kurama this far; he’s led them on a twisting, spiraling path that crosses over itself as often as it goes straight, and Itachi is practically dizzy from all the backtracking they’ve had to do. It’s aggravating, but they're hardly any distance from where they started, and because of that Itachi suspects that they're following a clone. Surely the real Kurama would be trying to put as much distance between them as possible.

Still, the small chance that they're on the trail of the real Kurama is enough to keep them moving; they can't afford to let him slip through their fingers if he’s not a copy. The Sandaime is trusting them to get Naruto back, and their village needs its jinchuuriki.

Strangling a faint sigh, Itachi closes his eyes, momentarily trusting his other senses to pick up an enemy’s approach. The only sounds are those typical of a forest at night, though, with the faint added snores of Kakashi's dog Bisuke. None of it is sufficient to distract Itachi from his thoughts, and he keeps finding himself drawn back to the image of Kurama in the grip of Tenzō’s vines, trapped and terrified.

It doesn’t sit right with Itachi, what they're doing. He knows very well that it's for the good of the village, that there's no way Konoha can leave their jinchuuriki with an unknown, hostile shinobi. But...when Kurama spoke of family, there was only sincerity in his face. He loves Naruto, cares for him so deeply that it’s almost unnerving, and even though he knows he shouldn’t, Itachi respects that. Were their positions reversed, were Sasuke in Naruto's place and Itachi in Kurama's, he might even do the same. No child should grow up without a family, without someone to love them, and Naruto has. If Kurama is willing to make himself an enemy of one of the most powerful villages just to see the boy happy, well. Itachi has to admire him for it, no matter how close to treason the thought may be.

He’ll do his duty, just as he always does, but he hates it. Hates the resignation that edges the surrender, hates that he’s tearing a little boy from his only family, hates that there's nothing else he can do. That there's nothing else he will do, because his loyalty to Konoha comes first, and always will.

He thinks of Sasuke, because he can't help himself. Remembers the flicker of disappointment in dark eyes when Itachi told him he’d be missing yet another training session because of a mission. Small
shoulders slumped and Sasuke looked away for a long moment, and it had burned like shame in
Itachi’s gut.

He’s the pride of the Uchiha Clan, the youngest ANBU member ever, beating even Hound’s
fearsome record, but—but never, not once has anyone ever asked Itachi what he wants. There’s no
room for personal desires when he’s the clan head’s son, no space for selfishness when he’s the
Uchihas’ hope for escaping the stigma of the rest of the village. People blame them for the Kyuubi
attack, for not assisting when every other shinobi in Konoha put their lives on the line, and Itachi is
their hope for showing everyone that the Uchiha are loyal, are devoted. Shisui too, to a lesser extent,
but Itachi was being serious when he accused Shisui of playing the fool. Shisui's genius is easy to
dismiss or overlook in the face of his playful manner; Itachi, with his seriousness and solemnity and
lack of humor, is rarely seen as anything more than his genius.

Somewhere in the darkness, leaves rustle, and Itachi's eyes snap open. It’s too isolated to be a breeze,
too deliberate to be anything but a taunt. He holds himself perfectly still, staring out into the forest,
and Sharingan eyes just manage to catch a flicker of movement, shadow shifting against the trunk of
a tree. Perfectly silent, Itachi slips from his seat, one hand finding the hilt of his tantō. For a moment
he debates whether he should wake Tenzō, but…something inside of him whispers that it’s not the
right choice.

Kurama never aimed to kill, when he fought them. He only ever wanted to escape.

Itachi doesn’t want this to turn into a fight. He doesn’t want to kill this man whose only crime is
wanting to keep his family nearby. There is nothing in him that’s capable of punishing Kurama for
something he himself would do, so he takes a breath, steels himself, and steps into the heavy
shadows around their camp. Maybe, if he gives Kurama a chance, makes him an offer—

“Overconfidence like that is liable to get you killed, Uchiha,” a low voice growls, barely a handful of
yards ahead of him.

Itachi comes to a halt, hands loose and relaxed at his sides, posture carefully nonthreatening. “Not by
you,” he counters.

There’s a long moment of silence, and then the shadows stir. Moonlight catches on crimson hair, just
a flash of silvery color in the gloom, and Kurama steps around the trunk of a wide old tree, fingers
dragging absently over the bark. He studies Itachi for a second before he snorts, one side of his
mouth curling into something that’s not quite a smile, but not quite a sneer, either. “No,” he agrees.
“No tonight, at least.”

“Is Naruto safe?” Itachi asks, and he means it to come out as a sharp demand, but instead it’s just…
expectant. As though he already knows the answer, and is only asking because he should. And
maybe that’s actually the case, now that he considers it. After all, he knows with bone-deep certainty
that Kurama won’t hurt the boy in any way. He took Kakashi’s Raikiri to the back just to prevent
such a thing from happening.

“He is.” Kurama crosses his arms over his chest, sharp eyes narrowing. He takes a step, then another,
and Itachi turns to keep him in sight as the redhead circles him like a predator. He may trust Kurama
with those the man considers family, but that’s hardly the same as trusting him in general. “I’m not
here to talk about Naruto, though. I’m here to talk about you, Uchiha Itachi.”

That’s…unexpected. Maybe he should have woken Tenzō after all.

“Why?” Itachi asks, keeping his voice even. “It will gain you nothing.”
The words get him a snort. “No Uchiha will ever give me anything more than grief,” Kurama scoffs. “Maybe pain and suffering, if it’s a good day. No, kid, I don’t want to have anything to do with your psychotic little family. And if this were just about me, I’d be more than happy to see every last one of you wiped off the map.”

The words are chilling, enough to make Itachi swallow, as much as he tries to keep his composure. He’s met more than enough people who dislike the Uchiha as a whole, but the venom in Kurama’s voice speaks of something that’s more than prejudice; this is personal. “But it’s not just about you,” he ventures cautiously, extrapolating the man’s words. “There’s…something else.”

“There always is,” Kurama agrees darkly, coming to a stop directly in front of Itachi. He doesn’t turn to face him, doesn’t meet his eyes, but lifts his gaze to the nearly-full moon and takes a clear breath. “Do you know why the Uchiha didn’t help when the Kyuubi no Kitsune attacked?”

Of all the many questions Itachi expected, that one didn’t even make the list. He blinks, caught entirely off guard, and shifts back ever so slightly. “I assume it was the Clan’s decision to keep our shinobi out of the beast’s path,” he says warily, because he’s thought of it before—asked his father once, even, but Fugaku had brushed him off with tight-lipped anger and told him not to ask again.

Kurama laughs, low and rough and without an ounce of amusement. “Fuck, you're blind. No, kid, that’s not what happened. Shimura Danzō convinced the Sandaime that the Uchiha’d do better protecting the civilians, and then he spread rumors that they controlled the Kyuubi and brought it down on the village. Made it all the easier for him to get you packed off to a secluded little corner of the village where he could keep his eye on you. ’Cause the Uchiha are dangerous, but you're also powerful, and he wants that power for himself.”

A shiver traces its way down Itachi’s spine, but he stands fast. “Given that Uchiha Madara was able to control the Kyuubi with his Mangekyo, it’s not…an unfounded accusation,” he manages, though the words stick in his throat.

With another rough chuckle, Kurama drops his gaze from the sky, and this time he holds Itachi’s eyes without wavering. “Sage, you're fucked up,” he says, expression shifting into something that’s caught halfway between pity and disgust. “What would you do for your family, Uchiha Itachi? If you had to choose between killing your entire clan and keeping peace in the village, what would you pick?”

Somehow it doesn’t feel like Kurama is speaking in hypotheticals.

Unsettled and no longer able to hide it, Itachi takes a step back. “What?” he asks, and it catches hard in his throat.

Kurama stares at him, and the expression in his eyes is full of wildness, a feral sort of intensity that hollows out Itachi’s chest and leaves him shaken. “Think about it,” the redhead says, and his tone is deceptively mild, like a river with the deadly current hidden deep below the calm surface. “Take a good long look at how you call yourself a pacifist before you answer. There's never only two paths, brat. Never only left or right to pick from. You're supposed to be a shinobi, aren’t you? That's what looking underneath the underneath’s all about. If you can't even do that much, you're not a genius. You're just a murderer giving himself airs.”

With a loud pop and a whirl of smoke, the clone vanishes, leaving Itachi standing alone in the moonlight, unsteady, uncertain, and just a little bit scared. Not of Kurama, not of anything lurking in the darkness, but…

When Kurama asked his question, Itachi’s first, automatic response wasn’t the one he had thought it
They leave the inn just as the first hint of light is spreading across the eastern sky, Naruto and Gaara on Fuji’s back with Kurama and Rōshi walking alongside. The boys are sleepy enough that Kurama’s keeping a close eye on them, wary of any sudden falls, but Fuji looks well-rested and is all but vibrating with energy.

When Kurama looks back at the horizon, Rōshi is watching him steadily, expression faintly concerned. Kurama arches a brow at him, and the man sighs a little and asks, “You’ll be okay?” He glances south, as if following Han’s path with his eyes, and his mouth tightens faintly. “I could…”

“We’ll be fine,” Kurama says dismissively. “Quit worrying. Besides, with Fuji we’ll move faster alone. You’ve got your own promise to keep.”

Rōshi doesn’t look entirely happy about it, but he inclines his head. “All right. Just—move fast. The rest of us aren’t being actively hunted right now, but you are. Eyes open. Two kids isn’t a lot of backup, even if they are jinchuuriki.”

As if Kurama would ever let Naruto get caught in the crossfire. He scoffs and looks away, because it’s an unpleasant thing to dwell on. He’s not entirely sure what he’ll do if the Freak Squad catches up again, or if some stroke of particularly bad luck has them crossing paths with another Akatsuki member, but he knows there’s no way in hell he’ll put either of the boys at risk. Better for Fuji to take them and run than put have them put in danger. He’s not about to ask her to return to Mount Inari, not when she ran away and will likely get in trouble the moment she goes back, but if there are no other options, he’s selfish enough that he’ll request it.

“I could say the same to you,” he points out. “Kakuzu dropped the ball when he messed up capturing Kokuō. Akatsuki might decide to move up their timeline and really start tracking you down. If you’re alone when they find you…”

“I’ll run,” Rōshi promises. “The—” He falters, then snorts. “Son Goku won’t like it, but he can suck on an egg. I’m not about to give up my freedom for something like his pride.”

Well, that’s progress Kurama hadn’t expected. He chuckles, then braces a hand on Fuji’s back. “Good, Fuji?” he asks.

“Ready when you are, Kurama-sama,” she agrees cheerfully, crouching slightly. “I’d feel better if you were holding the kits in place. They’re not entirely conscious yet.”

With a snort, Kurama vaults onto her back, leaning forward to brace Naruto and Gaara between his arms as he winds his fingers in her long fur. The fox straightens, flicking her tails, and he looks at Rōshi again, tipping his head in silent goodbye. “Keep your head down,” he warns again.

Rōshi huffs a brief laugh, raising a hand as he steps back. “The same to you, Kurama,” he says. “It was an honor to meet you. I’ll look forward to seeing you again.”

To his surprise, Kurama finds that the same applies to him. He…wouldn’t mind seeing Rōshi in the future. He’s never particularly thought that about any other human—not counting Naruto, who’s in a category of his own—and he realizes now that it’s not quite as offensive a thought as he might have
expected.

Fuji saves him before he has to give voice to any of those thoughts, though. She flicks her tails and shakes herself slightly, and Kurama can feel lean muscles bunching. “See you, Rōshi,” is all he has time to say before she’s leaping forward, low and swift, long legs eating up the ground.

He could look behind them, watch Rōshi leave. Could check one last time on this human he’s managed to make a connection to, but he doesn’t. There’s no time for sentiment, not right now. Maybe they’ll meet again in the future, but at the moment, Ame is opening up before them, bright and clean in the aftermath of the storm, and if they keep this pace they might even make it to Taki before sundown.

Knowing that, Kurama keeps his eyes on the horizon and doesn’t look back.

The first day Naruto doesn’t show up for class, Iruka is mildly frustrated. The boy puts no effort into anything except his pranks, and while it’s nice not to have to worry about thumbtacks on his chair or balloons filled with itching powder for one day, Iruka is a teacher. It’s his duty to give Naruto an education, and Naruto skipping class makes that very hard indeed.

The second day Naruto doesn’t show up for class, Iruka starts to get angry. And when the boy is gone the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that, it just gets worse. Iruka likes Naruto, even though he’d accepted this job with the certainty that it would only ever hover on the borders of bearableness. Naruto was the demon fox, after all, Naruto was the reason his parents were dead, Naruto was the reason for his loneliness—

Except Naruto isn’t the demon fox. Naruto isn’t even remotely similar to the monster who killed his parents, and Iruka can’t help the kinship he feels with Naruto, who’s so achingly, endlessly lonely. He’d planned—well. He’d planned to invite the boy for ramen sometime in the next few weeks, and was just getting his courage up. But now Naruto is skipping, probably working on some new trick, and Iruka hasn’t seen him in almost a week.

It’s easier to get angry than to worry, so immediately after he dismisses his class, Iruka gathers up all of his irritation and heads for the closest thing to a parental figure Naruto has.

“Come in,” the Sandaime calls when Iruka knocks lightly on the door, and Iruka can’t help a faintly worried frown. He hasn’t heard Sarutobi sound that tired in a very long time, and even though he’s just a chuunin schoolteacher, Iruka is fairly close to the man, who was friends with his parents.

“Hokage-sama,” he says with concern, stepping into the office and closing the door carefully behind him. “Is everything all right?”

Sarutobi smiles wearily at him, turning away from the window with his hands folded behind his back. “Ah, Iruka. Yes, everything is fine, it’s simply been a long day. What can I do for you?”

For a moment Iruka debates making an excuse and slipping away rather than laying more on Sarutobi’s plate, but…it’s Naruto. Naruto who has been absent for almost a week already, and Iruka isn’t about to let him get away with it any longer.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Hokage-sama,” he says apologetically, “but it’s about Naruto. He hasn’t been in class, and I was hoping you could have a word with him.”
Usually, when the subject of Naruto comes up in any fashion, Sarutobi smiles. He’s fond of the boy, that much is very clear, and it always eases something in Iruka’s chest to see it. This time, however, the lines in Sarutobi’s face only deepen, something like anger sliding through his dark eyes. Before he can say anything, though, there’s a sharp rap on the office door, and Iruka startles, leaping out of the way. Sarutobi beckons him closer, even as he gives his permission for the visitor to enter, and Iruka slips off to the side, a little mystified by the fact that the Hokage wants him to stay even though he has a meeting.

The man who steps into the office looks just as tired as Sarutobi, and just as determined to hide it. Uchiha Fugaku inclines his head to the Hokage, lets his eyes flicker over Iruka, and then moves aside for the man behind him to enter as well. Nara Shikaku offers the same greetings, though he gives Iruka a faint smile, too.


The two jounin trade glances, then do as they’re told. Fugaku takes one more look at Iruka, who’s pressed himself up against the wall unobtrusively, and then turns back to the Sandaime. “Hokage-sama. Is this about my son?”

“It concerns the mission he and Shisui are currently on, yes,” Sarutobi confirms, settling into his own chair. “I am aware that I have yet to provide you with the appropriate paperwork, as Uchiha Clan Head, but this is an exceedingly delicate matter, and until now I haven’t wanted to trust anything in writing.”

Even for a shinobi village, that level of paranoia is very high, and Iruka can’t fight a tense curl of unease in his gut. Judging by the faint narrowing of Fugaku’s eyes, he recognizes that fact as well.

“Which would be why I’m here.” Shikaku leans forward a little, resting his elbows in his knees and watching the Hokage with a lazy expression. “What’s happening that is so big you’re worried about international repercussions?”

The unease deepens into outright worry, and Iruka subtly braces himself against the wall. He was just a student during the last war, nowhere near brilliant enough to graduate early, but…he remembers that it was like all too well. If this is something important enough to hide even from the Clan Heads, if this could be the start of another war—

“It concerns,” Sarutobi says carefully, “Uzumaki Naruto.”

Iruka takes a step forward before he can stop himself. “Naruto?” he demands, and winces when the two Clan Heads turn to stare at him. Swallowing, he curls his fingers into fists, straightens his shoulders, and asks more politely, “Is—is this why Naruto hasn’t been in class for the last week?”

If anything, Sarutobi just looks more tired. “It is. Eight days ago, ANBU Hound returned from a mission to retrieve the Daimyo’s illegitimate daughter with a shinobi who had assisted him. The man called himself Uzumaki Kurama, a wandering shinobi with no affiliations, and though Hound and I were suspicious, we were not as wary as we should have been. Despite the fact that I assigned Kakashi to shadow him, Kurama defeated Kakashi, took Naruto, and escaped the village. Kakashi, Tenzō, Shisui, and Itachi have been tracking him.”

Kidnapped. Naruto has been kidnapped. Feeling sick, Iruka steps back, shoulders thumping against the wall and head spinning faintly. Naruto is the prisoner of an unknown shinobi who managed to defeat one of the strongest jounin in the village. He’s been angry and frustrated and annoyed with the boy, and Naruto is in danger.
There’s a long moment of silence, and then Fugaku looks up. “You are certain this is an appropriate response?” he asks carefully. “Given the shared name—”

Sarutobi simply shakes his head. “In any other situation, I might withhold judgement,” he admits. “However, Naruto is also Konoha’s jinchuuriki, and beyond that, the news I received in Kakashi’s most recent report is very worrying.” He shifts the papers on his desk, drawing out a fairly battered scroll, and lays it between them. “Kakashi and Shisui encountered a Suna squad on the border of River Country and Wind Country. They claimed that a shinobi matching Kurama’s description had kidnapped the Kazekage’s youngest son, and Kakashi suspects that the boy is in fact the host of the Ichibi. In addition, given the abilities Kurama has displayed, the suspicion of Kurama also being a jinchuuriki has been raised.”

Shukaku looks a little pale under his tan, though his expression is still calculating. “So there’s an unknown Uzumaki jinchuuriki running around the Elemental Nations and kidnapping his fellow jinchuuriki, starting with the most vulnerable ones. That’s definitely not a recipe for disaster. Do we know what bijuu he holds?”

“We haven’t even confirmed that he is a jinchuuriki,” Sarutobi admits. “There is evidence, but we could also be wrong. However, the abduction of two human containers cannot be a coincidence, and it puts Konoha in a delicate situation. Shikaku, you are my strategist, and Fugaku, you are a deft hand at politics, as well as Clan Head to Itachi and Shisui. Tensions are high between the countries, and I want nothing less than another war. Should we bring this up, Konoha will likely bear the brunt of the blame, given Kurama’s clan and that we were the first hit, but if Kurama is truly targeting the jinchuuriki, the other nations should be warned.”

Faint surprise flickers over Fugaku’s face before it’s ruthlessly crushed, and he looks down to contemplate his laced fingers. “I am honored that you have placed two Uchiha on such an important mission,” he says slowly, picking each word with care. “And such trust in myself, as well. However my Clan may assist you, Hokage-sama, we will do so.”

“Troublesome,” Shikaku mutters, rubbing the bridge of his nose, and then nods. “The same, Hokage-sama. What do you need?”

“Your opinions on the courses of action we might take,” Sarutobi says immediately. “Any thoughts you have on the matter would be appreciated.”

This isn’t a conversation that Iruka feels he should be present for, but his feet won’t move. He can’t leave. This is about Naruto, and even if Iruka hasn’t managed to offer the boy his friendship yet, he feels responsible. Naruto doesn’t have parents or guardians, but as his teacher Iruka is the next best thing. As the Hokage’s occasional assistant, it’s not inconceivable that he would be a part of such a discussion. Taking a breath, he folds his arms around himself and doesn’t move.

The two Clan Heads exchange long glances, and then Shikaku sinks back in his chair. “Even if Kurama hit Konoha first, his only clear affiliation is to Uzushio,” he says, considering. “Admitting he kidnapped the boy weakens us, but also evens the field. We’d be going out of our way to warn the other countries, and that gives us a leg up. With that, and everyone’s attention focused on protecting their jinchuuriki, Konoha shouldn’t have to worry about attacks.”

“This shinobi targeted the strongest village first,” Fugaku agrees, “and the weakest second. He clearly has no fear of reprisal. Perhaps the other nations will blame us for failing to stop him, but the threat he represents is too great to focus on accusations for long. He is disrupting a balance of power that has lasted since the Shodaime’s reign. Without the jinchuuriki, or with the jinchuuriki in the hands of an unknown power, the countries will be vulnerable. Even with just two in Kurama’s hands, that makes him dangerous, especially if one is the Kyuubi.”
Talking about Naruto like he’s a weapon, an asset, makes Iruka’s skin crawl. He pictures Naruto scared and upset, a prisoner because of his power, ripped away from everything he’s ever known, and wants to cry. Thinks of another little boy in the same position, and is practically ready to go hunt down this Uzumaki Kurama himself if he has to. “Kakashi will catch him,” he says almost desperately. “Right? He’s—he’s the best, and so are Itachi and Shisui and Tenzō. There's no way this man can get away from all four of them.”

Shikaku hums softly. “It will certainly make it harder,” he acknowledges. “Hatake’s a better tracker than even the Inuzuka. And if Kurama went from here to Suna, he’ll have to head back across either Ame or Fire Country to reach the next country with jinchuuriki. If he’s being rushed, he might make mistakes.”

“If he’s a jinchuuriki himself, it might not matter,” Fugaku counters. “Hokage-sama, we should warn both Iwa and Taki. They hold several tailed beasts between them, and Kurama is likely going to target them next.”

Sarutobi takes a breath, holds it, and then breathes out slowly. “I agree,” he murmurs. “I’ll draft a letter to the Tsuchikage and Taki’s headman tonight. Fugaku, your assistance with that would be much appreciated. Shikaku, ready several tracking teams—at least one Inuzuka in each squad, though I leave the other positions up to you.”

“I will provide a list of the Uchiha most capable at tracking,” Fugaku offers. “The Sharingan might not hold back a bijuu at our current levels, but locating their chakra should be simple enough.”

“Between the Sharingan, the Byakugan, and the Inuzuka and their nin dogs, we’ll have a definite advantage to offer the other nations.” Shikaku rises to his feet, looking thoughtful. “That will make the news easier to swallow. Hokage-sama.” With a polite nod, he turns and leaves, his usual amble replaced by what is nearly a stride.

“Hokage-sama,” Fugaku echoes, also standing. He hesitates for a moment, gaze flickering to Iruka, and then says coolly, “I can't imagine this will be a popular decision, including my clan, but I thank you for it all the same.”

Sarutobi smiles slightly, but though there's humor to it, there's also an edge of cunning that makes it very clear just why the man has made it past sixty, even when the average lifespan of an active shinobi is only forty. “The Uchiha are a valuable part of Konoha, and historically the village’s greatest allies,” he demurs. “Despite recent sentiments, my views have not changed. Perhaps it’s past time I make that clear.”

There’s an entire conversation happening here that Iruka has no idea about, and he honestly doesn’t care to learn. Clan politics are simultaneously frightening, boring, and far too intricate for him. Still, it’s easy to see the faint flicker of...something on Fugaku’s face as he bows, then turns and sweeps away. The door falls shut behind him with a soft click, and Sarutobi sighs wearily, rubbing his hands over his face.

“Thank you, Iruka,” he says eventually. “Fugaku tends to hold his tongue better with an unfamiliar audience. I'm grateful for your presence.”

Iruka has never been gladder of the fact that he’s a simple teacher, rather than a politician or a powerful shinobi. “I'm happy to have been a help, Hokage-sama.” He hesitates, then asks a little desperately, “Do you—do you think Naruto is okay? Kurama won't hurt him, will he?”

“From what Kakashi has reported, Kurama is rather desperate not to,” Sarutobi assures him. “He is, as far as we can gather, Naruto's uncle, his mother's half-brother. Kurama called him family, so I
doubt he would intentionally harm the boy."

It’s a relief, if only a little. Iruka curls his arms around himself again, thinking of Naruto's wicked smile, his laughter, his all-too-familiar loneliness. Now, with Naruto gone, Iruka desperately regrets not having made the offer to take him for ramen, regrets the fact that he’s held himself at a distance. Maybe—maybe if he’d done something differently, Kurama wouldn’t have had the opportunity to snatch Naruto. Maybe then Naruto would be safe and sound in Konoha, and all of this would be someone else’s problem.

He closes his eyes, takes a careful breath, and prays fervently that Naruto will come home safe.
“We need to double our pace,” Kakashi says practically the instant Tenzō and Itachi come to a halt beside them. “Kurama is hours ahead of us at the least; let’s close the gap.”

“I have never appreciated soldier pills so much in my life,” is Shisui’s cheerful contribution as he slings an arm over Itachi’s shoulders. Itachi gives him a weary look, but says nothing as he turns back to Kakashi and simply nods.

Tenzō hums and adds a judicious, “Well, it’s not as if Itachi and I covered a lot of ground when the clone was leading us in circles. Once we pick up the trail it shouldn’t be too hard to make up the distance.”

Every minute counts, so Kakashi waves them into motion, headed north. It’s a little after midnight, but the moon is almost full and shinobi eyes are trained for work in the dark. With any luck, Kurama has been stopping for the night, since he’s saddled with two kids, and that will give them the time they need to catch up to him.

“The Suna patrols might have found something by now,” he offers, because even for four ANBU this is going to be a grueling pace. Letting Kurama escape is out of the question, though, and they’ve already spent too much time chasing ghosts. They need to find Naruto, or Kakashi is never going to be able to look at himself in a mirror again. There should be some kind of limit to how many people he can fail, but if there is, he apparently hasn’t hit it yet.

That’s a rather terrifying thought.

With a flicker of speed, Shisui blurs into existence beside him, leaving the other two well behind him. Automatically, Kakashi shoots him a glare, but the teenager just rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, save my chakra for the marathon. But this is important. It’s about Itachi.”

Kakashi gives Shisui a long look, then casually twists his head a little to catch a glimpse of the other Uchiha. Itachi is at the back of the line, which isn’t precisely uncommon, but he’s also a shade paler than normal, and his eyes are blank where they’re fixed on what’s ahead of him.

“He’s…quiet,” Kakashi finally allows.

“He’s shaken,” Shisui corrects, mouth pulling into a tight, unhappy line. “I know my cousin, Captain. That’s not just him clamming up—something happened.”

According to Itachi, he confronted the Kurama clone, but before anything could happen it had vanished. Remembering the slightly gleeful way Kurama’s other clone rubbed the misdirection in his and Shisui’s faces, Kakashi is willing to believe that more happened than Itachi is entirely happy to reveal.

“There’s something Kurama said?” he offers.

Shisui huffs, because it’s hard to sigh when they’re practically running flat-out. “Yeah, maybe. Just—we should keep an eye on him, Captain. He can get lost in his head if he thinks too much, and that’s
not good for anyone. Itachi's head is kind of a scary place.”

Kakashi became ANBU at fourteen, and he knows just how broken he is. To become an ANBU at ten—there's absolutely no doubt that Itachi is suffering from at least a little bit of battle horror, no matter how good a shinobi he is, or how much of a genius he is. With that in mind, he inclines his head, and says quietly, “Warn Tenzō, too. This team is going back to Konoha in one piece or not at all. I'm not about to let anyone break on my watch.”

“I know, Captain.” Shisui gives him a small, grateful smile. “Why do you think I told you?” He salutes, then slows, dropping back to run at Tenzō's side. Kakashi keeps a portion of his attention on the youngest member of their squad, but Itachi doesn’t even seem to notice the interplay, which is a bad sign.

No matter what his aims are, Kurama is a dangerous shinobi. If they go into an encounter with him distracted and divided, someone is going to get hurt, and Kakashi isn’t optimistic enough to think that it will be Kurama.

Fuji’s path takes them across the narrowest part of Ame, skirting the Hidden Village in its rocky valley and dodging a handful of shinobi patrols. Kurama isn’t certain whether Nagato is already the leader here or if it’s still Hanzō, but better safe than sorry.

Honestly, they would be equally screwed regardless of who it was, if Ame’s leader did catch them. One on one, Kurama is fairly certain he can take either of them, but Hanzō defeated all three of the Sannin, and Nagato-as-Pein doesn’t fight one-on-one. Better to just avoid all traces of civilization in that case. They have enough food left from raiding Gaara's cupboards in Suna to see them through a few more days of travel, and Kurama has nebulous plans to go hunting when they stop for the night.

He considers, briefly, sending more clones out to hide their path, but he doubts Kakashi will fall for the same trick twice. The next best option is to increase their speed, but Fuji's already running her paws raw for them, and Kurama isn’t about to ask her for more. If he could shift into his bijuu form, this would all be so easy—Kumo would feel like barely any distance at all—but there’s little chance of that. And in all honesty, if shifting forms meant abandoning Naruto's body, Kurama isn’t entirely sure he would.

It’s a bitter, macabre reminder, but it’s still a piece of Naruto, even altered and changed to fit Kurama, and he’s not about to throw that away.

“Kurama-nii, Kurama-nii!”

The cheery voice and the small hand tugging on his sleeve draw Kurama out of his thoughts, and he looks down to find blue eyes staring up at him, Naruto's neck craned around in a way that looks painful.

“Yeah, kit?” he asks, a little surprised. Gaara and Naruto have spent the last three hours playing I Spy, more than happy to ignore Kurama's quietness.

“Look!” Naruto orders, pointing ahead of them. “It's a sea!”

Kurama blinks, then glances in the direction of Naruto's gaze and can't fight a smile. “Not quite a sea,” he says with a chuckle. “That's Kusa. It's grass you're seeing, not water.”
He can see the similarity, though, especially since Naruto has never seen an actual ocean before. They're descending a hill with Grass Country spread out before them, and in the afternoon sun the dark grass shines blue-green. Wind ripples the stalks in long, low waves that run from the edge of the grassland all the way to the horizon. It's a stark change from the rocky terrain of Ame or the forests of Konoha, and Kurama raises his head, breathing in the smell of sun-warmed wet earth and growing things. It's still winter here, but like in Ame the bite of it is mellowed, turned to heavy rains rather than the cold of snow.

“I want to roll around in it,” Fuji says a little wistfully, bouncing across an outcropping of rock and landing deftly on a stable patch of stone. She holds there, ears pricked up and nose twitching, and then sighs mournfully. “I want to, but mud.”

Kurama can't help but laugh, because if he's learned one thing traveling with the vixen, it's that she's just as fussy as a cat where her pretty white coat is concerned. “Yeah, that'd put a damper on things,” he agrees. “I bet the rivers are all snow-melt, too. Maybe later in the year you can come back.”

“But I want to roll in the grass now,” Fuji complains. Even so, she leaps down, launches herself off a small ledge, and lands as light as a feather on the edge of the grassland. “Straight across, Kurama-sama?”

Kurama checks the position of the sun, then shakes his head. “Northeast. Let’s miss the Fire Country border. I don’t know if they’ll have shinobi patrolling, but I assume so. Better to avoid them.”

“You could take ‘em, Kurama-nii!” Naruto says, cheerfully confident. “Me and Gaara would help you!”

“We would,” Gaara insists, solemn but determined. He casts a worried glance at Kurama, then at Naruto, and says more softly, “I can hurt people. It makes them stay away. I’ll do it if you want me to, Kurama-nii.”

There is definitely, absolutely nothing going soft and squishy in Kurama's chest. And if he finds it hard to swallow for a moment, that’s just allergies. Something has to be blooming somewhere, after all, and he’s simply reacting to it. Clearing his throat, he reaches up to ruffle Gaara's hair as gently as he’s able. “No, kid. Don’t do that for me. If you find something you’re willing to kill to protect, that’s fine. Do anything you can to hang on to it. But only if you want to, got it?”

For a long moment, wide aquamarine eyes hold his, and then Gaara fists one tiny hand in Naruto's shirt and says firmly, “I do. You're what I want to protect. And Naruto, too.”

“Me too!” Naruto insists, very, very serious, but still smiling brightly. “Kurama-nii, you're our precious person! Hokage-jiji says we always have to protect our precious people! It’s part of the Will of Fire!”

There's no way for Kurama to win this argument, and honestly, he’s not sure he wants to. With a soft chuckle, he tightens one arm around the boys, giving them a light hug. “All right, all right, I get it. My little warriors. Okay, Fuji, you good?”

The vixen huffs like the question is offensive. “Of course I am. It’s all flat, Kurama-sama—this isn’t exactly going to be hard.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Because he’s an equal opportunity jerk, Kurama leans forward and musses up the fur between her pointed ears. “Get going, brat. And make sure you tell me if you need a break, got it?”

“Of course I will, Kurama-sama,” Fuji answers, sounding distinctly like she’s humoring him.
“Northeast it is. Everyone hang on.”

Beneath them, muscles bunch, and in a surge of lean strength Fuji leaps forward, long legs eating up the ground. Her head is low, ears perked attentively, and Kurama keeps his eyes on the horizon, scanning the grassland for any hint of human presence. The nice thing about Kusa being mostly flat is that they’ll see trouble coming from a long way off.

Rather than returning to I Spy—which, granted, would be incredibly boring given the surroundings—Gaara attempts to teach Naruto a word game, with debatable success. Naruto forgets about half the rules and makes up new ones as he feels like it, but Gaara doesn’t seem to mind. Kurama keeps an eye on them in case of fraying tempers and possible tantrums—always more dangerous with two baby jinchuuriki, even given Gaara's repaired seal and Naruto’s strong one—but they both seem happy enough.

Since he doesn’t need to distract them, Kurama is free to turn his attention to what’s ahead of them—namely, whatever trick Matatabi thinks she’s going to play on him. Kurama will reluctantly admit that she’s rather cunning, even if she’s not a fox, and he’s wary of whatever it is she’s planning. He can't think what it could be, but…

But in all likelihood he’ll end up going along with it, since he needs her to watch the kids more than he cares about any sort of dignity. The witch probably knows it, too—he wouldn’t have even considered asking her otherwise, and she’s familiar enough with his pride to realize that.

What he can't figure out is what she wants, though. Not release from her host, since she apparently likes the woman, and Kurama can't imagine anything else that would appeal to a sentient construct of chakra. They're not exactly greedy creatures, any of them, and they have no use for human trappings. Practically any information Matatabi wants, she can get herself—the bijuu might need a partnership with their jinchuuriki to fully access their mental world, but they can still communicate through it without that, even if it takes a bit of effort. And beyond those options, Kurama is coming up blank as far as ideas go.

Well. He supposes he’ll figure it out soon enough, if they can manage to keep this pace. Lightning Country is about two and a half days from here, maybe three if anything slows them down, and then it’ll be another day to find Matatabi and her host. And then…

Kurama's fingers curl in Fuji's ruff, and it takes effort not to growl. Four days at the most and he’ll be able to start turning the tables on Akatsuki. Less than a week and he can start making headway on the mission Naruto sent him back to accomplish. It’s going to be sweet to destroy the Gedō Mazō, to take that much away from Kaguya. To start in on destroying her plans, reducing everything she’s set her hopes on to dust and ash. Kurama has no sympathy for the goddess; he’d happily carve her face to ribbons if she were standing in front of him, and then pull her heart still beating from her chest and feed it to her. She killed Naruto, destroyed everything precious to him. Naruto might have had mercy, felt understanding for the mad creature she’s become, but Kurama never, ever will.

The fury those thoughts invoke is a living thing. Kurama takes a deep breath and shakes it away, dragging his attention back to their surroundings. The only sign of their progress is the amount of grassland stretching out behind them and the slow creep of the sun overhead, and if Kurama doesn’t pay attention, it almost feels like they're not moving at all. He lets his mind go blank as Fuji runs, trying not to let himself dwell on dark thoughts, no matter how easy it is.

(Harder, he thinks with a faint smile, when red hair feathers over his cheeks, and brings to mind a familiar face in the mirror. It still hurts, Naruto's death, but it’s a lot more bearable now. Simpler for him to face, with the realization that Naruto would approve.)
A river parts the grass ahead of them, wide and slow-moving, with a handful of low shrubs to line the banks and a few scattered stands of trees. Kurama watches them approach, considering calling a break here so they can have an hour or so to eat. They're not likely to find a nicer spot, and it will give them an opportunity to refill their water bottles—

The sharp, ozone-hot crackle of electricity is his only warning.

Faster than he’s moved since Naruto stepped in front of Kakashi’s Raikiri, Kurama throws himself forward over Fuji’s head, already calling up his chakra. He’s not over skilled with Doton jutsus, always defaults to his affinities of wind and fire, but long practice with Kushina’s favored Doton and Suiton feeds into muscle memory. A single hand-sign in the air, a hand on the earth as he touches down, and chakra flares. A wall of stone bursts from the ground to intercept the bolt of lightning even as Fuji skids sideways, only just managing not to slam into the barrier.

“Go!” Kurama snaps. “Fuji, take them and run!”

The vixen doesn’t bother arguing. Even as the stone falls away, she spins, bolting east at a pace that’s easily double her normal. Naruto shouts something desperate and fierce, but Kurama doesn’t have time to listen. He leaps forward with his claws bared, lashing out and down. The shockwave ripples out, slamming into the ground with enough force to make the attacker stagger, and Kurama takes ruthless advantage of the opening. He spins around another surge of lightning, then leaps. Power collects, spinning in a blur of black and purple, and Kurama slams the orb down hard. Chips of mask go flying, and he flips over and lands in a crouch, eyes fixed on the man before him.

“Kakuzu,” he growls, rising to his feet. “Didn’t I kick your ass once already?”

Akatsuki’s treasurer bares his teeth in parody of a smile. “And here I thought I had killed you. Imagine my surprise to find that Konoha just put a massive bounty on your head. Isn’t that convenient? Now I get to kill you for destroying my masks, and I even get paid for it.”

Kurama scoffs. He can’t sense any of Kakuzu’s other masks, so the bounty hunter likely only had time to make one. That’s fine by him—he’s not about to draw this out with Naruto and Gaara nearby. “As if a weak-ass bitch like you could take me down,” he mocks. “Without those masks of yours, you’re just as mortal as anyone else.” Baring his teeth in a dangerous grin, he cracks his knuckles, then flexes his fingers and readies his claws. “Oh, this is going to be fun.”

Pale green eyes narrow, and Kakuzu brings his hands up. “Fuck you,” he growls. “I’m going to slaughter you and use your heart to make a new construct. What do you think? Fire? Wind?”

“How about you just stop talking!” Kurama calls up his chakra in a blood-red surge, lashing out. The shockwave follows the path of his blow, but Kakuzu dodges, spinning to the left. His thick grey threads shoot forward, and Kurama has to leap back and away. He doesn’t let it slow him down, but shifts forward instantly, rolling underneath another thread and coming up with a high, twisting jump. This time he uses wind, sharp as blades and wide enough to cover their battleground completely, and Kakuzu shouts in anger as the Earth Grudge Fear threads fall away, cleanly cut. A moment later he’s right in front of Kurama, more threads gathering, and Kurama knows that if he stays where he is he’ll be overwhelmed.

Ducking back and away, Kurama slides around three threads as they stab forward, throws himself under another hard slash, and comes to his feet just behind Kakuzu’s shoulder. The bounty hunter spins, fingers twisting into the signs for a Doton jutsu, but Kurama hurls himself forward, slamming a hard kick into the man’s spine. Kakuzu goes flying forward, crashing heavily into the ground and rolling several times before he staggers back to his feet, expression pissed.
“I’ll kill you!” he hisses. “Your heart is mine!”

Kurama laughs mockingly, stepping back and moving in a wide circle. “Sorry, but you're not quite my type,” he retorts. “I don’t tend to go for the crazies.”

Kakuzu snarls wordlessly, lunging for him again. The thick threads of his kinjutsu echo his limbs as he strikes at Kurama’s head, but Kurama has more than enough time to gather his feet under him and jump, twisting through the threads and landing in a crouch, then immediately lashing out with one foot to drive it into the side of Kakuzu’s knee. The missing-nin bellows in pain as he goes down, and Kurama wastes no time slamming another shockwave down on top of him.

Blood splatters and bone crunches, and Kurama laughs in vicious victory, dancing away from flailing limbs.

“You're a thousand years too early to hunt me, asshole,” he taunts. “You're better off trying your luck with a lesser god. What, did Akatsuki get sick of all your failures and send you out to die? I've heard that twice can be counted as a pattern. First Taki, and now—”

“Shut up!” Kakuzu stagger back upright again, fury clear on his face. “Leader wants to meet you, little bitch. He wants to know how you learned about us, and when he finds out he's going to make you scream. If I don’t kill you now, he’ll do it eventually, but you're going to suffer first.”

Well, that’s not exactly good news. Kurama has to fight not to grimace, because he’s confident in his power, but Pein is not someone he wants to face without preparation. “So killing me now is out of the goodness of your heart? I'm touched.”

Kakuzu laughs at him. “I just want your bounty and your heart, asshole. I couldn’t care less how you die. But those two things—those are mine.”

Great. A possessive obsessed maniac with murder on the brain. Kurama meets the nicest people.

“Not happening,” he says flatly, flexing his fingers. “Run back home to your masters, mutt, and keep jumping through their hoops. You're starting to bore me.”

Eerie eyes narrow, and for a long moment Kakuzu studies him. “You're different,” he says suspiciously. “You’ve changed since last time. Got a new trick up your sleeve, bastard?”

Something shifts behind Kakuzu, and Kurama doesn’t fight the wide grin that bares sharp teeth. “Oh, you could say that.” He lunges forward, claws outstretched, and Kakuzu shifts, ready to meet him, threads rising.

But before he can, Kakuzu trips, expression turning startled, and instinctively lashes out at a tendril of sand curled tight around his ankle. In the same moment, an orange blur leaps out of the grass, and Naruto shrieks a war cry. It’s echoed by a dozen other throats as more copies pour out from behind the shrubs, leaping onto Kakuzu and dragging his limbs down with the force of sheer numbers. Kakuzu’s eyes go wide, but Kurama is already too close to stop, and he slams his palm into the bounty hunter’s abdomen. Power surges, positive and negative in careful balance, and Kakuzu screams. Clones pop one after the other as his Earth Grudge Fear strikes out, but blood is pouring from the gaping wound in his stomach and the movements are clumsy, convulsive. There's power in them, but it’s desperate, undirected.

Somewhere behind them is another shout, unfortunately familiar. Kurama curses, snatches the original Naruto off the ground where he was thrown, and leaps backwards out of range.

“Fuji!” he shouts, and her pale shape rises from the tall grass like a wraith, immediately bounding to
his side. Gaara is beside her, clearly having dismounted so they could sneak back and surprise
Kakuzu, and Kurama wastes no time grabbing him by the collar and tossing him onto the fox’s back.
He leaps on as well, Naruto still tucked under one arm, and twists to bring one hand slashing down.
Chakra flares, fire sparks, and with a shrieking howl wind screams across the prairie.

The handful of sparks become a sheet of flame, tall and broad and blisteringly hot, and Kurama
doesn’t wait around for the Freak Squad to react. It gnaws viciously at him, leaving Kakuzu behind
when victory is so close, but he can’t risk capture. Not now, not with an end in sight.

This time, when he shouts at Fuji to run, she does him one better. Foxfire flares, curling
incandescently around her paws, and she leaps straight up into the air. It catches like she has wings
on her feet, and with a long, lithe bound she’s flying, soaring through the sky without anything to
slow her headlong rush.

Kurama twists his fingers in white fur, prays that she’s strong enough to keep it going until they’ve
put space between themselves and their pursuers, and doesn’t allow himself to look back as the
section of burning grassland falls away behind them.
XVIII: Effulgent

Chapter Notes

NO UPDATE NEXT TUESDAY. I’ve been working 14-hour days trying to keep up with everything, and it’s getting a little overwhelming. A week’s break should hopefully get me back on track with this story. Sorry!

[effulgent /ɪˈfʊlɡənt/, shining brightly, radiant; emanating joy or goodness. From Latin effulgent- “shining brightly” from the verb effulgere, from ex- “out” + fulgere “to shine”.]

“Fuck,” Shisui growls, watching the white speck that is Kurama’s not-a-summons—apparently able to fly, which Kakashi finds patently unfair—vanish against the horizon. “How the hell can it do that?”

“Not easily, I would suspect,” Kakashi says, and it takes more effort than it should to keep his voice even. “If this is the first time she’s done it, I assume it’s a last resort.” Which unfortunately doesn’t change the fact that Kurama, Naruto, and the Kazekage’s son are now well out of reach. Feeling distinctly irritated, he turns his attention to the shinobi Kurama was fighting, still hunched over on the other side of the river. “You—” he starts.

Before he can get so much as another word out, the man snarls, “Konoha dogs! You’re responsible for my prey escaping!”

“I think I take offense,” Baki says, eye narrowing. “Who are you? Why are you after him?”

But the man just growls, then leaps forward and dives into the river, letting the deceptively swift current sweep him away. Kakashi and Tenzō both lunge to grab him, but a burst of wormlike grey threads stab straight at them, forcing them to jump away before they get close. A moment later the man is gone, all but out of sight, and Kakashi rolls back to his feet with anger curling fire-hot in his gut.

“I think,” he says with careful mildness, testing the words as he speaks them, “that I’m starting to lose my patience.”

Tenzō casts him a wary sideways look and deliberately edges out of the line of fire.

“We’ve come this far,” Itachi says quietly—practically the only thing he’s said since their teams met up along the border. Kakashi used to the Uchiha’s reticence, but this is strange even for him, and Shisui obviously thinks so as well, if his frequent worried glances are anything to go by.

“It’s not like we’re going to give up,” Shisui reminds his cousin, leaping lightly across the river. Scorched grass crunches under his feet, and he crouches down to inspect a shard of what looks like porcelain where it’s half-buried in the ground. “Almost looks like an ANBU mask,” he comments, holding it up for Kakashi’s inspection as the older man joins him. “Can Shiba tell if it’s Kurama’s or the other man’s?”

Kakashi glances over at his ninken just as Baki grabs the big dog, hauling him off the ground and
jumping to their side of the stream. When he catches sight of Kakashi’s raised brow, Baki just snorts and says, “I hate the smell of wet dog. Well? Anything?”

“Shiba?” Kakashi asks mildly, crouching down next to the white dog.

“It’s the swimmer’s, Boss,” Shiba says after a quick sniff, wrinkling his nose and giving a pointed sneeze. “He smells like something dead.”

“Separate and track them both?” Tenzō suggests, scanning the ground for any more pieces. He comes up with a handful, enough to show that it clearly was some sort of mask before it was destroyed.

Kakashi trades glances with Baki, then shakes his head. “No, separating didn’t work out so well for us last time. We’ll keep going. Kurama will have to land somewhere, especially if it’s a particularly draining technique, and their heading was clear. They’re going towards Taki.”

“Home of another jinchuuriki,” Itachi points out. “Is there a way to warn them?”

Shisui snorts, rising to his feet and dusting off his fingers. “If we’re lucky, the Hokage’s already sent messages to all the villages. We should concentrate on actually catching Kurama. We’ve already closed the gap. Even with this, he won’t be too far ahead of us.”

Kakashi hopes the younger man is right. They can’t afford to lose the trail now. “Are you good to keep going, Shiba?” he asks. “I can dismiss you and call one of the others.”

Shiba looks offended, his dark mohawk of hair bristling faintly. “I’m your best tracker, Boss!” he protests. “You’re gonna kick me off the case now?”

“Ma, ma.” Kakashi raises his hands in surrender. “Just a suggestion. Let’s go, then. We’re losing ground.”

“Which we wouldn’t be,” Tenzō says pointedly, “if someone had kept their mouth shut and not screamed like a little girl.”

Shisui scoffs loudly. “Oh, because you tripping me and almost making me land on my face is my fault.”

“I did not trip you,” Tenzō counters, smiling. Kind of. Kakashi still isn’t entirely certain how he gets his face to do that, but whatever it is, it’s definitely creepy. “If I had, Shisui, you would know.”

“You’re a lying liar who lies, and you totally did! There were roots! I saw them!”

“Yes, Shisui, plants have roots. Good observation. Very insightful. No wonder you’re a jounin.”

“You’re mistaken.” Tenzō’s smile gets creepier, something Kakashi hadn’t really thought was possible. “I wouldn’t sabotage a mission just to torture you. We’re comrades.”

“And with friends like you, I’m safer among my enemies!”

“I hear paranoia is a symptom of psychosis. Maybe you should go back to the village mad get your head seen to. Being that empty all the time can’t be good for it.”

Kakashi puts his head in his hands and sighs, trying in vain to shut out their voices. He wishes desperately for selective deafness—not the first time he’s done so when stuck on a team with those
two, and he’s certain it won’t be the last, either.

“Well,” Baki says dryly. “How long have they been married?”

That…that is a horrifying thought. Kakashi grimaces and asks (possibly rather plaintively), “Must you plant those images in my head?”

The Suna nin snorts, but obligingly changes the subject. “We should get going. My team is several hours behind us already, and we don’t have time to wait for them. We need to catch up as soon as possible.”

Kakashi definitely isn’t about to slow down enough for them to join up. His team can move at the necessary speeds, but dragging anyone else along would just hinder them. Baki, who insisted on joining them at the border, at least can keep up with their pace; anyone weaker would be entirely out of luck.

“Shiba,” he orders mildly, and the nin-dog immediately puts his nose to the ground and heads after Kurama’s group at a loping run. Kakashi follows with Baki on his left. Tenzō and Shisui trail after them even as they argue, and an unnervingly silent Itachi brings up the rear.

There are trees passing beneath them by the time Fuji starts to falter, and Kurama doesn’t know or care if they’re Fire Country or not. Naruto is clinging to his back, Gaara is clinging to his front, and both boys are pale and worried. The Freak Squad is behind them, but likely not for long, and Kurama can’t help the twist of panic low in his gut.

He’s not prepared for this, doesn’t have a solid plan beyond run and don’t get caught. Fighting would be easy, but there’s a new face in the party to go along with the two and a half Sharingan users and the baby Mokuton user. Kurama’s odds of escaping without seriously hurting someone—and he doesn’t want to, has never wanted to, even at his angriest—are diminishing by the hour.

Desperate for a distraction from his increasingly dark thoughts, Kurama catches the first flicker of Fuji’s foxfire just as they pass over the wide, lazy curve of a river. She wobbles and they drop several feet at once, making Gaara start and Naruto yelp. Kurama grabs them both, drags them more tightly against him and says, “Fuji?”

Another wobble, this time almost enough to unseat them, and the vixen only just manages to recover before they plummet into the water. “Sorry, Kurama-sama,” she manages on a breath. “I think—I think this is all I can do.”

The foxfire around her paws flickers, then vanishes like a candle flame snuffed out. There’s a gut-lurching moment of freefall, a sharp pop, and Kurama suddenly has his arms full of baby jinchuuriki and tiny teenage fox summons. He has just enough time to think Shit, very vehemently, before they’re plummeting, the surface of the river rising to meet them.

Kurama hits it feet-first, and the sudden shock of cold is enough to drive the air from his lungs like a fist to the stomach. Gaara flails desperately, and Naruto almost lets go, but Kurama hooks one arm around both of them, ducks flailing limbs, and kicks for the surface. Fuji is doing the same, but her motions are weak, exhausted, and Kurama grabs her as he passes. One more strong push and his head breaks the surface, and he sucks in a breath as he strikes out for the bank.

Thankfully the water is slow-moving, and the bank isn’t too steeply inclined. Kurama staggers
through the shallows, grunting at the even colder bite of icy air, and up onto the grass. He flops
down there, trying not to shiver too noticeably, and asks, “Everyone okay?”

Naruto's teeth are chattering, and Gaara's lips are blue. Fuji is unconscious, looking a third of her
usual size with her fur completely soaked, and Kurama can't quite feel his fingers. The boys
exchange glances, and then Naruto offers a brave smile. “We're o-o-okay, Kurama-nii!”

It’s very obviously a lie. Kurama stares at them for a long moment, then curses and drags a hand
through his sopping hair, which is leaking icy trails of water down his neck and shoulders. “Right,”
he says grimly. Gaara sneezes, squeaky like a mouse with a cold, and then looks deeply offended to
have made such a sound. Naruto laughs delightedly, but he’s shaking so hard that it comes out
warped.

Sage fucking damn it, Kurama thinks wearily. They don’t have time for this. There's no knowing
how far east they managed to get, or how fast the Freak Squad will manage to catch up. But—there's
no way they can keep going like this, wet and freezing and on the verge of hypothermia. It’s winter,
and night will be falling soon. They boys are already in a bad way; if Kurama doesn’t do something,
they’ll freeze to death.

A little helplessly, Kurama casts a glance around them. There are trees a short distance away, not
quite a forest, but decent for cover. They butt right up against the rise of a hill, its sides steep and
wooded, and that at least is a good sigh. Maybe Kurama can pull together something like a shelter for
the night, though it won't help with their trackers. Still, it’s at least the start of a plan, and if Kurama
has to, he’ll fight Kakashi and his pet uchiha. He’s not going back to konoha, not when there's an
end to all of this in sight.

“Come on,” he says, pushing to his feet. “Let’s go start a fire and get warm.” He scoops Fuji's limp
form up in his arms, checking her breathing, and is relieved when he finds it deep and steady. She’s
exhausted, on the verge of chakra exhaustion, but she'll be fine with a little rest.

A small hand fists in the sopping hem of his haori, and Naruto presses close. “Is Fuji-nee okay?” he
asks solemnly, and on Kurama's other side Gaara nods, serious eyes fixed on the little fox.

Kurama smiles at them, ruffling blond hair, then red. “Yeah, brats, she’s going to be just fine. All she
needs is some sleep. Let’s go get warm, yeah?”

“Maybe we can share that person’s fire,” Naruto suggests cheerfully, pointing in the opposite
direction of the hill, and Kurama stiffens, spinning around. There is indeed a fire in the distance,
through another stand of trees. It’s a large one, without a lot of smoke, and Kurama's willing to bet
that someone experienced built it. Maybe a shinobi. Probably an enemy, given the way his luck is
going today.

Still, it’s a fire. It’s close enough that even if Kurama lights one of his own, whoever built it will see,
so they might as well dive in head-first.

“Right,” he says on a sigh. “Let’s check. You're good to walk, kits?”

Gaara nods solemnly, then twists his fingers into Kurama's sleeve and says quietly, “I don’t think I
like swimming, Kurama-nii. Do we have to do it again?”

Right. This is the moment when Kurama remembers that Gaara is from a desert and has likely never
been dunked in water before outside of a bath, let alone an icy river somewhere near the Taki border
in the middle of winter. This day is just off to a truly fantastic start.
“No,” he says as comforting as he’s able. “No, Gaara, we don’t have to go swimming anymore. Not until summer, and you might not mind it then.”

Naruto stays right next to his leg as he heads for the flicker of light in the distance. “I went swimming once,” he says cheerfully. “But it was on Sasuke’s birthday when he threw me into the river, so it was pretty warm. The water felt good, and it didn’t hurt. Will we get to swim like that? I think you’d like it, Gaara! It was lots of fun!”

Gaara eyes him skeptically, but says nothing.

With a soft snort, Kurama nudges the boy to the side, around a large rock that’s just the right height to trip him. “Later, kit,” he reminds Naruto, then judges their distance from the fire ahead and adds, “Wait here. I’ll check it out. Stay quiet, okay?”

“Sure, Kurama-nii!” Naruto happily accepts Fuji, cradling her in his arms, and Gaara shifts closer to him, transferring his grip from Kurama’s sleeve to Naruto’s.

Kurama gives them each another hair-ruffle, murmurs, “I’ll be right back,” and—

A scream. A child’s scream, high and terrified. Kurama jerks around, eyes fixed on the source, the fire, and hesitates. Instinct says to go, to help, but instinct also says to stay with Naruto, with Gaara, because they’re vulnerable, targets—

“Go, Kurama-nii!” Naruto urges, and that’s enough. Kurama bolts, chakra already rising in a flickering surge of bloody-red, and he dodges around a stand of trees, leaps an outcropping of mossy stones, and lands squarely in the center of a small clearing, the fire crackling on his left.

In an instant, he takes in the situation—two shinobi dressed in dark colors, a green-haired girl held between them, overturned bags, blood on the woman’s face, the man favoring his leg, a wide bruise decorating the girl’s cheek.

And around them, sharp and strong, is the scent of fear. Around them is a surge of familiar chakra, bright and light like beating wings, with a shimmer that no other bijuu’s power has.

Chōmei, Kurama recognizes in a rush, and doesn’t hesitate. With a roar he throws himself forward, right at the pair of jounin, and sharp claws tear into the man’s throat. He goes down with a gurgling cry, even as Kurama spins. The woman has more time to react, and she hurls the girl to the side, then brings up a kunai and stabs forward. Kurama twists around the blow, dodges a hard kick, and flips over her head. She spins, trying to follow, and while the blow that should have taken out her spine misses, Kurama’s claws slice through the arm of her uniform and then through skin, and blood splatters across the ground.

It doesn’t slow the woman. She hops back, bringing her hands together, and the earth shakes. Kurama leaps headlong over the pit that suddenly opens right in front of him, kicks off a spear of stone that tries to skewer him, and tackles the woman bodily. She goes down with a cry, but manages to get a foot in his gut and launch him off of her, and Kurama has to twist in the air. He comes down on one hand, flips back to his feet, and catches the kunai that comes flying at him. A bare instant later the woman follows, but Kurama ducks her second kunai, dodges a knife-hand blow to the back of the neck, and twists, driving his stolen kunai forward.

Fouled by his feet, trapped by her own attempt to hit him, the woman has nowhere to dodge, and the blade takes her in the heart.

There’s a long moment of silence, broken only by the crackle of the fire, and then Kurama takes a
breath and straightens, stepping away. The woman’s corpse drops, almost on top of her partner’s, and Kurama gives them a brief glance before he turns to the little girl. She’s probably no more than eight, small and skinny in a way that’s all too familiar, and the livid bruise on her cheek makes Kurama wish he had taken longer killing her attackers.

“Hey,” he says gently, watching her sit up and warily inch away from him. He crouches down, but doesn’t move closer, and asks, “You okay, kid?”

She takes a breath, eyes flickering to the two bodies, and then squares her shoulders and looks up stubbornly. “I’m okay. They didn’t hit me that hard.”

Kurama might believe her, but now that he has time to look he can see the second bruise spreading across her stomach, stark against the bare skin, and the ring of bruises around each of her wrists where hands gripped too tight. “They shouldn’t have hit you at all,” he says sharply, and it comes out low enough to be counted as a growl.

The girl jerks, orange-gold eyes snapping up to his face, and makes a wordless sound. “But—!” she protests, and then stops short, looking down again. “You don’t know me,” she points out, and it’s quiet, but there’s an edge of fire to the words. “I could be dangerous, and you just killed them for no reason.”

Sage save him from damaged children and the fucked-up asshole bastards who made them that way. Kurama draws in a slow breath, fighting to keep his temper under control, and says quietly, “Even if I didn’t know you, it’s still not right for them to hit a kid, especially when there’s two of them and one of you, and you weigh maybe seventy pounds soaking wet. But you’re wrong about one thing, kid; I do know you. I know what you are, and what’s inside you. It doesn’t make you a monster. It’s not a reason for people to hurt you.”

She stares at him for a long moment, wide-eyed and silent, and then something rustles. She jerks around, on her feet in an instant and already reaching for one of the dropped kunai, but Kurama holds up a hand to stop her. “Easy,” he murmurs. “They’re with me, and you’ve got a lot in common.” Raising his voice, he adds, “Naruto, Gaara. It’s fine, you can come out now.”

Almost before he’s finished speaking, a blond head pops out of the bushes, and a moment later Naruto wriggles his way through, still carrying Fuji, with Gaara hanging on to him. “Aww,” he says, taking in the clearing. “I thought we could rescue you again, Kurama-nii.”

Kurama rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, brat. No need to play hero on my account. We’re all good here. Naruto, Gaara, I want you to meet someone.”

“Hi!” Naruto says immediately, beaming widely at the girl, who looks entirely pole-axed to see such an expression directed at her. “You’re really cute! I'm Naruto!”

“Gaara,” the redhead adds, almost inaudibly. He’s eyeing the new jinchuuriki warily, and his grip on Naruto's shirt is so tight that his knuckles have gone white. He studies her for a long moment, then glances up at Kurama and asks quietly, “Is she like us?”

Naruto's head snaps around, and he suddenly looks like he’s all but vibrating with enthusiasm.

With a soft chuckle, Kurama drops a hand on Gaara's head. “Yeah, squirt, she’s one too. She’s got Chōmei, the Nanabi.” Shifting his attention to the girl, who has gone pale, he tries for a reassuring smile. “I told you that you guys have a lot in common.”

The girl takes a shaky breath. “You're…like me?” she demands.
“Yeah!” Naruto grins, flashing a victory sign. “I’m Uzumaki Naruto, the Kyuubi jinchuuriki, an’ I’m gonna be the next Hokage, believe it!”

She giggles, then briefly looks surprised, as if she hadn’t meant to. “I’m…Fū,” she says. “Fū of Takigakure.” Turning to Kurama, she bows deeply, then looks up, and this time she’s wearing a smile. “Thank you for saving me. They were going to take me back to Taki and lock me up, because I keep running away.”

Kurama lightly touches the bruise on her face, unable to fight a frown. “Well, if that’s the kind of treatment you get there, I sure as hell don’t blame you. Got somewhere to go, kid?”

“I don’t need it,” Fū says stubbornly. “Everything will work out. I just have to keep moving and avoid people.”

That sounds unnervingly familiar. Kurama studies her for a moment, feeling the well-remembered buzz of Chōmei’s chakra against his skin. The beetle is wary, slightly agitated but keeping a distance for now, not trying to overwhelm Fū, and that earns the Nanabi some brownie points.

Still, even older than Naruto and Gaara, even with Chōmei as a fairly respectful passenger rather than an ass like Shukaku, even with Fū being nominally none of his concern and nothing to do with his current mission—

Even with all of that, Kurama can't leave a little girl alone in the woods. Not when people are after her, no matter how convinced she is of her own strength.

He’s turning into a goddamned sucker, Kurama thinks sourly. His Naruto would be laughing his ass off right now.

“It just so happens,” he says, and can't quite manage to make it offhand, “that we’ve got pretty much the same plan. But I’ve found it’s easier to get away when you’re running to something. Want to tag along? I’m dragging these two to see another jinchuuriki, up near Kumo. Should throw Taki off your tail, if nothing else.”

For a long moment, Fū eyes him, then turns to regard Naruto and Gaara. They look like a sorry group, Kurama knows, bedraggled and wet and dirty, suffering from the bone-deep weariness of too many days with too few breaks. Kurama can see the refusal in her face, the stubborn insistence to go it alone. But then she hesitates. She glances back at Kurama, then at the bodies, and then at Gaara and Naruto. “I—why?” she demands, and that spark of fire Kurama heard once before is in her eyes. “I don’t care if you know what I am, you don’t know me!”

“But I’d like to,” Kurama tells her softly, and her breath catches. He reaches out automatically, settling a hand on her pale green hair. “Everyone needs a friend, kid. No one can ever make it entirely on their own. The kindest man I’ve ever met taught me that, and I’m not about to forget it. Everyone needs someone to lean on, even if you only ever use the help once. That’s still one time when you need someone to stand with you, and that’s what friends are for. I can’t promise anything, but…we could be your friends. If you wanted.”

(Naruto. All he can think of in that moment is Naruto, his Naruto, the one who was everything to him. That man, that boy, that hero—he’d say something like this. And even if Kurama can only ever be a poor imitation, even if he can never live up to the man that Naruto became, that he always was, maybe it’s still enough to change a little girl’s life for the better.)

Fū chews on her lower lip, orange-gold eyes steady as she sizes him up. “You mean it,” she says, almost disbelieving. “You wanna be my friend?”
“Us too!” Naruto insists, bouncing on his toes and grinning. “Kurama-nii likes saving people and making friends, and so do we!”

“I don’t give half a damn about most people,” Kurama corrects with a roll of his eyes. “But you three are jinchuuriki. There aren’t a lot of people who can save you when you get in real trouble. I figure I might as well keep you out of it as best I can and save myself some work.”

“That’s why you saved me?” Fū asks curiously. “Because I’m a jinchuuriki?”

Kurama shrugs. “More or less. I would have taken care of those goons even if you weren’t, but I’m happier that you are. All the best people I’ve met have been jinchuuriki, and you’re not doing much to break that streak, kid.”

The silence stretches for another long second, and then Fū tips up her chin and squares her shoulders. She meets Kurama’s eyes evenly, and says, “Then I’m—I’m glad I’m a jinchuuriki, if that’s the reason you wanted to save me. And if you’re going somewhere, I’ll come too!”

Joy—another brat to watch. Kurama heaves a disgruntled sigh, but—maybe he’s smiling. Just a little, and only possibly. Over Naruto’s happy cheer, he says, “Great. Welcome to the team, hope you don’t mind hoofing it for a bit. We should head out in case those two weren’t alone.”

Fū makes a face. “I hate lighting fires in the caves,” she says, clearly dissatisfied with the thought. “It’s always so smoky and the bats get all upset.”

Kurama pauses. Blinks. “Caves?”

Fū blinks right back at him. “The caves,” she repeats. “They’re for when Taki gets invaded, so we can get shinobi to the border faster. Most people just go above-ground, but they’re the reason I always get away. My grandpa’s the Headman and showed them to me. Weren’t you gonna use them? It’s easier.”

The gods look after drunks, idiots, and wayward time-traveling bijuu, Kurama thinks, the rush of relief almost buckling his knees. “Kid,” he says fervently, “you are absolutely goddamned amazing. Caves just became my new favorite place. Naruto, Gaara, up.”

Naruto grabs his hand, Gaara still attached to his sleeve. “I like caves too,” he agrees easily. “Is there gonna be another dirt storm? That last one was fun!”

“Sandstorm,” Gaara corrects, and he’s still watching Fū a little warily, but he also doesn’t move away when she slips past him. “I…don’t think there will be.”

“There isn’t anything like that here,” Fū agrees, and isn’t the least bit shy about grabbing Kurama’s free hand and latching on. She gives him a pointed tug. “Come on, this way. The mouth opens over here. I can’t close it, ‘cause I don’t know any Doton jutsus yet, but we might be able to hide it.”

Kurama snorts. “I can hide it,” he volunteers. “Sealing it should keep them off our trail completely. You’re a smart one, kid.”

Fū beams at him, twisting her fingers through his and gripping tightly. “No one’s ever said that about me before,” she confesses.

“Kurama-nii’s like that,” Naruto agrees sagely. “He’s always super nice, and he gives hugs, and he tell stories, and he let me have eight bowls of ramen when we stopped for noodles, and—”

“And he carries us, sometimes,” Gaara puts in quietly, ducking his head a little. “It’s…nice.”
“Shut up,” Kurama huffs, feeling heat rising in his cheeks. “You're all brats, and I’d eat you if you had a little more meat on your bones. I'm just being nice so I can fatten you up, got it?”

Fū giggles and skips a step, swinging their hands. On his other side, Naruto presses close, all but tripping him up, and Gaara's small hand finds the hem of his haori again, tugging lightly. Kurama looks down at the three little larval-stage humans he seems to have adopted, thinks of the sheer magnitude of mocking this would earn him from his Naruto, and quietly despairs.

(But maybe, just maybe, he’s smiling again.)
XIX: Quisquous

Chapter Notes

Canonically, the country between Taki and Rice Paddy Country, where the Akatsuki base is located, is never named. However, there are several countries named that are never given a specified location, so I picked one from the list and pasted it on. The irony of Madara/Zetsu/Kaguya building a hideout in Moon Country also appealed to me.

(I'm updating [most of] a day early because starting tomorrow the rest of my week becomes insane and it was either now or not at all. Sorry for any confusion!)

[quisquous /kwis , k(w)əs/, difficult to deal with or settle; perplexing; (of a person) of dubious character. Origin uncertain; possibly from classical Latin quisquis “whoever” with subsequent alteration of the ending after adjectives in –ous.]

“I'm starting to sense a pattern here,” Tenzō says unhappily, leaning down to test the heat coming off the smothered fire. He rocks back on his heels, and adds, “This is an hour old, maybe a little more.”

Kakashi makes a vague sound of acknowledgement as he and Baki turn over the pair of corpses left crumpled around the camp. The one in front of him is a woman, and the cause of death is easy to see —there’s a kunai in her heart, driven up from underneath the breastbone. Kakashi doesn’t have to look at the remnants of a Doton jutsu or the scuff-marks on the ground to realize just what happened here. This was clearly a fight, and one this kunoichi had little chance of winning.

Baki’s quiet noise of disgust pulls Kakashi’s attention to him, and the Suna nin nods at the body he’s studying. “Took out his throat. Not a blade, I think, but…”

“Claws,” Kakashi finishes for him, remembering the bandits when he and Kurama first met. And—maybe it’s stupid, but it’s almost a shock to remember just how easily Kurama killed those men, how easily he must have killed these two. Kakashi won’t quite go so far as to say that Kurama’s avoided killing them all the time they’ve been on his tail, but…he hasn’t been trying as hard as he likely could have. The one time they managed to confront him, he was more focused on getting away than anything.

Baki raises a pointed eyebrow.

“Little ones,” Kakashi clarifies, waving a hand. “Like fingernails, but sharper. I’ve seen Kurama use them before. It was definitely him.”

With twin thumps, Itachi and Shisui land in the clearing, and a moment later Shiba wriggles his way out of the undergrowth. “We couldn’t find anything,” Shisui announces. “They dragged themselves out of the river, came here, and then the trail goes cold.”

“These are Taki shinobi,” is Itachi's quiet input. “Do you think he took something from them?”

“Something to get him into the village?” Tenzō suggests. “They still have their hitai-ate, though.”
Baki shakes his head. “Taki is small enough that a gate guard would know pretty much everyone on sight. If Uzumaki really is aiming to grab Taki’s jinchuuriki, he’d have to sneak in. Killing a patrol isn’t exactly the best way to maintain your cover, though.”

“If they are a patrol,” Shisui counters. “There’s only two of them. They’re packed for speed, not a long trip, and their water bottles are inconveniently small if they’re going to be some place removed from water. Even in Taki, that’s most places a patrol would take you.”

Kakashi blinks at Shisui, long and slow. This would be the brain that got Shisui promoted so quickly, the one he rarely shows under the carefree smile. It kind of makes Kakashi want to punch him, after spending the last week listening to him and Tenzō bicker like idiot children.

Judging by the narrowing of Itachi’s eyes, the eleven-year-old feels the same. He sighs through his nose, giving his cousin a longsuffering look, and crouches beside the body of the man. “Teeth,” is his contribution, pointing at the shinobi’s leg. “Here. Too big to belong to a six-year-old, and too small for an adult. They were attacked by someone else as well.”

“Or someone else fought back,” Tenzō murmurs, kneeling beside his teammate and beginning to inspect the body for more signs. “There are nail-marks up and down his arms. Kurama’s claws wouldn’t have done that.”

So Kurama rescued someone, likely another child, though older than Naruto and Gaara. Kakashi stares into the darkness of the trees, feeling a distinct unease curl in his gut. He’s never heard mention of how old Taki’s jinchuuriki is, or even which beast they hold. There’s no reason to think chances would align enough for Kurama to accidentally stumble over another jinchuuriki, unless…

What if they had plans to meet? Kakashi has little idea what Kurama was doing before he appeared out of nowhere to help rescue the Daimyo’s daughter. If Taki’s jinchuuriki was old enough to make their own decision, and Kurama contacted them, the unknown jinchuuriki could have arranged for Kurama to find them and take them away. The idea feels uncomfortably likely, given the facts Kakashi has managed to scrape together about the wayward Uzumaki.

You blind fools will never understand even the smallest portion of what it means to be a jinchuuriki, but I do. And I’ll make sure Naruto does too. You want to punish him for it? Cast him out? Fine. But I’ll teach Naruto just what it really means to wield the power of a bijuu.

If this is some sort of—of jinchuuriki revolution, the countries need to be warned. Before anything else, before they even take another step, they need a plan to take word to Kiri, Iwa, Taki, and Kumo, because Kurama is dangerous. It’s tradition for hosts to be picked from the Kage’s close family so that they’ll be loyal, but…Kakashi has seen firsthand how much hate jinchuuriki garner. It would be hard for anyone’s loyalty to hold up in the face of that. Couple it with a man who clearly knows what it means to be a jinchuuriki, promising freedom and power, with two or even three containers already under his thrall—

This is a recipe for another war, and no matter the logical outcome of nine jinchuuriki against all of the Elemental Countries, Kakashi feels unhappily pessimistic about the nations’ chances. He’s seen what the Kyuubi was able to do to Konoha in a handful of minutes, after all, and none of the other villages have an impossibly stubborn Uzumaki kunoichi, a newborn Uzumaki child, or a fuinjutsu master on Minato’s level to save them.

“I think,” he says slowly, “that our first priority should be warning Taki, and then Iwa.”

Baki shoots him a sharp look, sinking back on his heels. “You think this has something to do with Taki’s jinchuuriki,” he says, assessing.
Kakashi meets his stare without wavering. “I think we can't afford to assume anything less,” he counters. “I know exactly what one bijuu can do to a village. Kurama already has two, maybe three. If he gets any more on his side…”

The pieces are visibly coming together in Baki’s mind, and he grimaces, dragging a hand over his face. “Right,” he says grimly, looking around the small camp. “Good spot for an ambush, if these two were waiting for the jinchuuriki to lower their guard. But they wouldn’t have expected Uzumaki.”

“No one ever expects an Uzumaki,” Kakashi says dryly, making the other man snort.

“Got a sealing scroll?” Baki asks. “The least I can do is take the bodies with me, if I'm legging it for Taki.”

Kakashi honestly hadn’t expected him to volunteer for the task, but given Konoha's history with Taki, it’s likely for the best. He pulls an empty scroll out of his belt pouch and hands it over, then asks, “Iwa?”

Baki grimaces. “Suna and Iwa have too much history for me to go waltzing up to their gates and not expect to get a hostile mountain dumped on my head. No, I’ll ask Taki to send someone. You’ll aim for Kumo?”

“At this point, we’re better off tracking Kurama.” Kakashi tips one shoulder in a faint shrug. “The Hokage's message will reach Kumo before we can, and he’ll be able to get word to Kiri as well. With enough shinobi on alert, there shouldn’t be a way for Kurama to steal any more jinchuuriki.”

With a snort, Baki rises to his feet. “Here’s hoping. Now get a move on. Uzumaki's got an hour’s head start, and knowing him, he’ll take advantage of it. There are only so many passes into Kumo. Figure out which he’s heading for, get there before him, and cut him off.” Something flickers over his face only to be ruthlessly crushed, and he turns away, busying himself with the scroll. “Get the kid back. Gaara doesn’t need more reasons to hate humanity.”

Well. The Suna nin has a heart after all. Kakashi would smile, but…all he can think of is Naruto in the same situation, and that takes all the humor out of his realization. Instead, he hums a vague acknowledgement, tips his head at his team, and warns, “Head on a swivel.”

“Way I was born,” Baki retorts, waving him off. “Same to you, Hatake.”

Kakashi waves back, then leaps for the trees. Itachi is a beat behind him, Tenzō and Shisui bringing up the rear, and Kakashi again says a wistful goodbye to all thoughts of rest and easy paces. There's no time. No matter Kurama's intentions, he’s on a mission that could throw the entire shinobi world into war, and there’s no way Kakashi is going to have that on his head.

After two days of dark tunnels, unable to catch even the faintest hint of a breeze or any stray shaft of sunlight, Kurama is honestly ready to climb the walls if it will get him even a little closer to the open sky. He’s grateful for the detour, and for the way that Fū clearly knows these passages so well, but he’s not a creature meant to stay underground for long stretches of time. It’s bad enough that Kurama is fairly certain he’d pick another hundred years in a human host before he picked a month below the earth.

“Only a few more minutes and then we’ll be near the Moon Country border,” Fū says cheerfully,
though she doesn’t look behind her. Naruto is on her back, fast asleep, but she’s not struggling to carry him yet so Kurama hasn’t tried to take the boy. He’s carrying both Gaara and Fuji anyway—the latter also deeply asleep, the former drifting towards that state. Fuji has woken up a few times, but she’s still exhausted, and the boys are as well.

Because he can, Kurama shifts his hold on Gaara and reaches out to ruffle Fū’s hair, smiling at the grin it earns him. She’s a bright, happy girl, and even if bringing her along was spur of the moment, Kurama doesn’t regret it. Not only for her knowledge of the tunnels, either.

“You okay?” he asks. “That’s a lot of deadweight you're dragging around.”

Fū glances over her shoulder, where Naruto’s face is pressed right up against the scroll she’s carrying. She just looks for a long moment, then smiles and says, “That’s all right. I can go a little further. He’s really cute when he’s asleep.”

Kurama snorts sharply. “Yeah, I guess he is. More than when he’s awake, at least.” On his shoulder, Gaara makes a sound that’s vaguely a protest, and with a roll of his eyes, Kurama allows, “Yeah, yeah, he’s still cute no matter what. Go to sleep, squirt.”

Muffling a giggle with one hand, Fū offers, “There's a place to camp right outside the tunnel exit. I think it’s nighttime, too—are we going to stop?”

Kurama debates for a moment, but…it’s probably safe. If Fū is right and no one knows about these tunnels but Taki shinobi, and high-ranking ones at that, Kakashi and his Freak Squad will be taking the long way around Taki’s forests and rivers. Maybe they’ll catch up, but even if they outpace Kurama’s little gaggle of children, they likely won't be able to predict exactly where Kurama is headed.

Besides that, he could use a spare hour or so to get in contact with Matatabi again. It’s probably not fair to dump another child on her without warning, especially when she agreed to take Naruto and Gaara without a fuss.

“Yeah,” he confirms after a moment. “We can spare a few hours. I want to get some water and food into Fuji, and meditate for a bit. You three could do with some uninterrupted sleep, I’m sure.”

“This isn’t too bad,” Fū says, determinedly cheerful. “Grandfather’s training is a lot worse. I always feel like I'm going to die afterwards. This is just walking.”

Kurama can’t quite suppress the low, angry growl that worms its way up from his chest. Fū is ten years old, not the eight he first thought—small for her age, on the edge of too thin, with calluses and sores and scars that even Chōmei couldn’t entirely erase. They’ve been traveling for two days now, and Fū has spent a large portion of that time carrying one of the boys, who can't weigh all that much less than she does. She’s never complained, never faltered, and…

He hates it. Hates what it means for Fū’s past, for what she’s gone through. Hates the way those deep bruises are hardly noticeable to her. She’s a child, but no one has ever given her the opportunity to be one. Because she’s a jinchuuriki, a weapon, she’s been training for as long as she can remember, pushed to be better and stronger and less human. For all that Kurama thinks Sarutobi went about things the wrong way where Naruto was concerned, at least the old man never treated Naruto like a weapon. Not the way other villages treat their jinchuuriki.

Humans are so goddamned blind, and it’s lucky for this world that Kurama knows things can get better. If he didn’t, if the version of him that came back was the one from before he’d formed even a vague attachment to Naruto’s precious people—well. Kurama isn’t entirely certain how many of the
countries with jinchuuriki would still be standing.

“You're tough as nails, sweetheart,” he says gruffly, not looking at her. “I think you could teach most
shinobi a thing or two about being strong.”

Fū is quiet for a long moment, but she slows her steps a little, dropping back to walk right beside
him. And if she’s leaning into his side a little, Kurama isn’t about to call attention to it. Not unless she
wants him to.

“I think—I think I hate everyone in my village,” she confesses in a small voice, keeping her eyes
fixed ahead of them. “They all glare at me and whisper all the time, and it doesn’t matter what I do,
they're just—always angry. They always hate me. It's like—like I'm always standing far away, while
they're all standing together, and sometimes I just get so angry at all of them.”

Kurama takes a breath, then lets it out slowly, trying to contain his temper. There's no one to get
angry at down here, no good way to release it outside of wanton destruction that’s more likely to
bring the tunnel down on their heads than do anything productive. “I'm...probably not the best
person to talk to about anger issues, sweetheart,” he manages, and it takes effort to keep his voice
even. “There's a hell of a lot of hate in me, and there has been for a long time. But I'd say you're
absolutely justified, if that's how you feel. No one should ever tell you that you have to love
someone who hurts you, even if it’s just mentally. You're the only one who can decide to forgive
them for it. And if you never want to? If you always want to carry that grudge, and hold them at a
distance the way they did to you? That’s entirely your choice.”

The tense, tight line of Fū’s shoulders relaxes just a little, slumping into something more natural. “I
thought adults were supposed to tell us that peace was the best thing, and that you should forgive
people, and that they were just being stupid and ignorant and it wasn’t their fault,” she says almost
accusingly, though there's relief in her orange-gold eyes. “That’s what Mom always said.”

Kurama snorts, reaching out with his free hand to lightly ruffle her hair again. “Maybe,” he admits.
“But I'm pretty terrible at being human, kid. The only advice I can give is what I know, and it’s
probably not majority approved, sorry.”

Fū takes a careful breath, then looks up to flash him a smile. “That's okay!” she says brightly,
hoisting Naruto a little higher up on her back. “I think I like your advice a lot better than all the rest I
got. If that makes me a terrible human too, I don’t really mind. We can be bad at it together!”

That…wasn’t quite what Kurama was getting at, but he supposes it’s close enough. Chuckling, he
shifts Gaara into his other arm, then nods in front of them. “That my imagination, or is there actually
sunlight up ahead?”

Fū blinks, lifting her head, and then laughs. “We made it! Come on, I'm hungry!” She takes off for
the crack in the stone, leaping lightly across the roughly hewn floor and then right out the gap.
Kurama follows a little more slowly, turning sideways to slip through the narrow opening. It’s clearly
late afternoon, the sun low on the horizon and the moon already rising above the treetops, and
Kurama takes a long moment just to breathe in the smell of something besides bare stone and dirt.
Moving air is a blessing he’ll never again disregard. Even being trapped in that terrible sewer in his
Naruto's mind wasn’t as bad as being stuck underground.

From even a few steps away, the entrance to the tunnels looks like nothing more than rough stone,
and Kurama makes note of its exact location in case he’s ever passing back this way and desperate
enough to use it as a getaway. He doesn’t expect to be, but—well. Naruto taught him a lot about
expecting the unexpected.
At the edge of the treeline, Fū is crouched down, busily building a ring of stones for a small fire. Caution makes Kurama hesitate, but at length he decides that they’ll be fine lingering for a few hours. They’re getting pretty far north, after all, and it’s still winter. The air has bite once the sun goes down, and Kurama isn’t about to let the kids suffer through a night without any warmth. They’ve got blankets, but those can really only do so much.

Carefully, he sets Gaara down next to Naruto, then carefully lifts Fuji from where she’s been curled around his neck and sets the vixen in Naruto’s lap. She shifts a little, one amber eye slitting open, and grumbles softly. Kurama steps away, deciding to leave her to either wake up or slip back into sleep on her own, and makes a circuit around the edges of their little camp, collecting dry sticks and stretching out his senses. There’s no one else around them, though, not that he can feel by way of chakra or malice, and he allows a little bit of tension to ease from his spine at the realization. His range is decent, so as long as he keeps an eye out they should have enough warning to hightail it if someone gets too close.

By the time he makes it back, Fū has the fire going, and is seated cross-legged on the ground in front of it, watching Fuji with bright-eyed enthusiasm. The fox is sitting up, truly awake for the first time since they landed in the river, and though her fur is still a little dull she otherwise looks recovered.

“Fuji,” Kurama says, dropping the wood off to the side and sinking down next to her. “You're up. Feeling okay?”

Fuji gives a bright yip and pounces on his lap, curling up and wrapping her three tails around herself. “I'm fine, Kurama-sama. I take it we got away? I'm sorry I wasn't able to take us further—”

Kurama cuts her off, tapping a finger on her pointy nose. “Hey, shut up. You were fantastic, Fuji, and you got us to safety even though it could have killed you. And it’s thanks to you that we were in the right place to rescue Fū, so none of that blaming yourself shit, okay?”

Pointed ears fold back, and a long tongue flashes out to lick Kurama's knuckles. “All right,” Fuji allows, a touch grudgingly. “I'm glad we got away, Kurama-sama.”

“Thanks to you,” Kurama repeats, smoothing a hand over her soft fur. “Now. How are you really feeling?”

“A little tired, but I'm all right,” she admits. “I can keep watch if you need to rest, Kurama-sama.”

Sleep sounds tempting, but it can wait. “Not yet. I need to get in touch with Matatabi again, though. Can you keep an eye on things while I'm out? Fū will help; she’s had a lot of training already.”

Fuji's ears perk up, and she pokes her head over Kurama's knee to take a look at Fū. In an instant she’s gone, flowing out of Kurama’s lap and darting around the fire and hopping into Fū’s lap instead. “Oh, you've picked up a girl!” she says cheerfully. “How cute! I'm Fuji.”


Fuji preens a little. “I am, and of course you can. Right behind the ears is good, and down my back.” Fū’s fingers immediately find the right spot, and Fuji half-closes her eyes in bliss, a gargling purr rumbling up from her throat.

Kurama chuckles, settling back a little. “Keep watch,” he reminds them, and gets a flick of Fuji's tails in response. Deciding that’s as much as the vixen is capable of right now, Kurama closes his eyes, rests his hands on his knees, and reaches for the shared mental realm of the bijuu.
It’s…not the same as last time, he realizes, even before he opens his eyes. No campfire, no vast forest of monolithic trees. Instead the roar of a waterfall fills the air, cascading down from high cliffs in a narrow torrent. There’s an island in the center of the resulting lake, just a small patch of grassy ground, and around the edges of the pool the trees press close. The air is wet and warm, the sun at its height, but—

The Falls of Truth. Kurama takes a breath, rising to his feet, and tries not to dwell on the memories that pervade this place. Naruto, all of it Naruto—that’s all he can see and sense. The battle between Naruto and his darker half, the first time Naruto fully took his chakra, where Naruto learned his past. It’s all here, in the lake before him and the temple behind the falls. And of all the places for his subconscious to manifest, this is likely one of the most painful, because this is where everything started to change. This is where Kurama lost all hope of anything ever being different, but where it began to shift regardless.

For an endlessly long moment, Kurama stares out over the rippling water of the lake, halfway expecting to see Naruto step out of the temple and smile at him. But there’s nothing beyond the thunder of the water, the spray of mist drifting away. Only silence, painfully empty, and Kurama drags in a shaky breath and swipes a hand over his eyes.

A flicker behind him, an impression of rapid wingbeats, bright laughter, and the thrill of flight all caught up in physical form. Kurama turns, claws half-raised and ready, only to see a familiar shape drop from the sky and settle on the bank, six wings folding away. Chōmei’s head tips curiously as the beetle shifts back to sit on the grass and says, “Kurama. I thought that was you I felt the other day, but…you’ve changed.”

“Chōmei,” Kurama returns, trying to banish the emotion from his face and voice, even though he knows he doesn’t quite manage it. This isn’t exactly a place that promotes emotional equanimity for him. “A lot can happen in a hundred years.”

Chōmei squints at him for a long moment, wings flickering out and fluttering briefly, gossamer-bright, before they fold away again. “I suppose,” the beetle allows. “But you’ve spent a long time not changing, haven’t you? Why now?”

“Extenuating circumstances,” Kurama says succinctly, crossing his arms defensively over his chest and trying not to fidget. “Was there something you wanted, Chōmei, or is this just a social call?”

“Can’t a bijuu talk to her brother?” Chōmei complains, and apparently Kurama was massively wrong about only having brothers. Not that he’s about to protest. Another flicker of wings—embarrassment, Kurama thinks, though it’s been a very long time since he had to read Chōmei’s body language—and she says, “You…saved my host.”

Well. Not the conversation Kurama was expecting to have, but not one he’ll complain about. “I did. She probably could have saved herself, but since I was there, I figured I might as well. Though I noticed you weren’t trying to take control, Chōmei. Feeling polite all of a sudden?”

Her wings flare up and out, and the beetle bristles. “I’m always polite!” Chōmei protests. “I'm Lucky Seven Chōmei, and anyone would be fortunate to have me as their bijuu! Those fools in Taki can't see it, but Fū has never been ashamed of what she is!”

Kurama can imagine that she hasn’t. Fū is a strong, stubborn girl, as bright and happy as Naruto with a seething edge of darkness that reminds him of Gaara's aching fury more than anything. It would be a potent combination in a regular shinobi, let alone a jinchuuriki. With a faint sigh, he holds his hands up, a vague attempt at placating her, and answers, “Hey, cool it, that wasn’t a criticism. Just—observation, okay? I just got done dealing with Shukaku being a greedy, malicious bastard and trying
to drive his host insane. Forgive me for not being overly optimistic about all of this.”

“We’re not all Shukaku,” Chōmei reminds him with an amused snort. “Though I’ll admit, I might have a few screws loose, too, if I was trapped in a crazy priest for years on end.”

Rolling his eyes, Kurama gives her that one. Between the seal, his natural crazy, and his previous hosts, Shukaku didn’t have the best chances of coming out of this mess sane. “Right,” he allows. “Still a bastard, though.” He ignores Chōmei’s laughter, and adds, “I’ll take care of Fū, as much as I can, but I need to get all three of the brats to Matatabi. Heard anything from her?”

Chōmei hums, settling back again, and then shrugs her wings in a flicker of iridescent color. “Not yet, but none of us speak much anymore. You know how it is, Kurama. We’ve been apart for a very long time now—you can hardly expect us to be best friends after the way we separated.”

Kurama ignores the pointed look being aimed his direction. After the way the Fourth Shinobi World War played out, he knows for a fact that he’s the strongest of the bijuu—he faced down most of them combined at one point or another, after all—and if the others don’t like being reminded of that fact, well, it sucks to be them. “Maybe not friends, but we’re all still connected. Now buzz off, the squirt is fine and I’m not about to drop her back off with Taki. So get out of my face and let me find Matatabi.”

With a clatter of beetle-wings and a sharp humph, Chōmei launches herself from the ground, pausing to hover over Kurama’s head. “I don’t care if you’re older, Kurama, one of these days you’ll have to stop being a prickly jerk or I’ll sit on you!”

“I’m not prickly!” Kurama snarls. “Go perch on a flower, you overgrown bumblebee!”

Chōmei gives an angry, rattling buzz. “Thanks for saving Fū, you bastard!”

“You’re welcome, witch!” Kurama snaps back, and glares as Chōmei turns, pointedly flickers her barbed tail, and soars away.

Sage, he hates his siblings sometimes. Most of the time. In general.

Kurama thinks about how he’s setting himself up to interact with all of them at one point or another, and groans as he drags a hand through his hair.

Goddamn, does his Naruto owe him big time for this saving the world crap.
Despite all of Kurama's plans, Matatabi is nowhere to be found.

It’s frustrating, but more than that, it’s worrying. Kurama wanders their shared mental world (even though he really doesn’t want to run into any more of his siblings), searching for any trace of cold fire and death undone. There's nothing, though—just emptiness where the cat’s presence should be.

Vaguely unsettled, Kurama leaps out over the water to settle on the little island Naruto once used, though he pointedly stays facing away from the Falls of Truth. There's no part of him that wants to meet his darker self, because he knows exactly who—and what—that creature will be. Cold, malicious, calculating, wanting nothing more than to see Naruto’s blood painting his hands and the world set alight for his pleasure alone.

Even now, Kurama's not a pleasant person. For that matter, he’s hardly even a person. Naruto reached down into him, changed him, made him better, but there are still pieces Naruto could never get to. It’s not that Kurama regrets them, but…maybe he wonders, just a little, what he’d be like if he had been able to save Naruto, if Kaguya had never stretched out her mad, grasping hands and torn the entire world from them.

Still, he’s not here to dwell. There's no point thinking about it, because Kurama's already changed things here irrevocably, and there's no way he’s going to stop now. Steeling himself, he closes his eyes and stretches out his senses, trying to find Matatabi.

Nothing. Just…blankness, like something’s been torn out and left a hole behind.

“Fuck,” Kurama whispers, dragging his hands through his hair and fisting them on the red strands, yanking sharply. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, this is not good. Sage, Matatabi, where the hell are you?”

A simple lack of answer would mean that either Matatabi was pissed and ignoring him or busy. A lack of presence, well. Kurama really doesn’t want to think what that means. He has to, though, can't not, and the only image currently coming to mind is Gaara, the older Gaara, laid out in that cave like a damned human sacrifice, unmoving, unbreathing. And—what if this is his fault? What if Matatabi’s host—the host she likes, the host she’s fond of, and Sage, it’s making him think of his Naruto even more than he usually does—what if the girl was snatched by Akatsuki? Kakuzu was trying to collect Kokuō, after all. There's no way to say if they’ve decided to step up their timetable for gathering the bijuu.

If they have, the Nibi seems like a reasonable one to start with, given that the Ichibi’s host is currently sacked out and drooling on Naruto’s shoulder.

“Fuck,” Kurama mutters again. If it is Akatsuki, if they’ve gotten to Matatabi, that’s possibly the worst situation possible, barring another escape by Kaguya. It means all the jinchuuriki and bijuu are in danger, even more than they were before.

This was always a possibility, after Kurama interrupted Kakuzu’s fight with Han. But Kurama honestly hadn’t thought it was likely. For being a psychotic bastard, Obito is terrifyingly controlled, and he’s better at long-term planning than almost anyone Kurama has met. As it stands now, Kurama
can’t imagine that he has anywhere even close to enough White Zetsu clones to stage another war, and he won’t be able to stabilize them without Tenzō’s Mokuton anyway.

So why grab Matatabi, if that’s the case? Why put things in motion if there’s no way to reach the goal yet? Unless Kurama is missing things, which is possible. He’s not a mad Uchiha with delusions of godhood and world peace through mass hypnotism. And, Sage, but Madara must be a smooth bastard to sell a plan as fucked-up as that, even to a traumatized kid with seals all over his heart and the vision of his only friend’s death on permanent technicolor repeat in his head.

Still, regardless of flaws in the possible plan and a distinct lack of being able to think like a crazy Uchiha bastard, Kurama has to assume that it was Akatsuki who took Matatabi. Which means it’s more than likely her host is dead and she’s stuck inside that damned statue. If it turns out that something else is the cause of her going missing, Kurama will be pleasantly surprised, but for the moment he has to believe it was the absolute worst case scenario. It’s safer for everyone that way.

So. That leaves him with a choice. Keep heading north, hoping that Matatabi isn’t actually sealed in the Gedō Mazō or that she appears in their shared world again, on the off chance that she’s actually fine, or change direction.

Which direction can he reasonably go, though? He’s got not one but three brats to look after, even if Fū seems mostly self-sufficient, and a sudden lack of any possible babysitters to take care of them while he goes and throws himself headlong at the Akatsuki. The Freak Squad is still on their tails, as is Kakuzu, though Kurama’s less worried about him. With a bit of control, Kurama can take him out. The two and a half Sharingan users and the baby Mokuton user, though—they present a bigger problem.

And that, honestly, does not say a hell of a lot about Kurama’s chances against all of Akatsuki, even in their current reduced numbers.

He has a plan, though—sneak in, destroy the Gedō Mazō, fuck up Kaguya’s plans to come back, and then sneak out again. He can pick the Akatsuki members off one at a time once there’s no threat of them going through with the Eye of the Moon plan. Maybe even in pairs, if he has to. That won’t take too much effort, especially when he has no compunctions about killing them, unlike the Freak Squad.

It’s a good plan, overall. Simple, straightforward, not to likely to make him get his ass kicked. Except…if Kakuzu has told them everything about him, about all the things he knows, it’s likely Obito will be skulking around the base, just on the off chance that Kurama ends up there. And that—that won’t be good for anyone involved. Without the Juubi’s powers, Obito will be a hell of a lot simpler to take down, but he’s still an overpowered bastard with a particularly tricky Mangekyo and almost twenty years of plotting in the shadows. He won’t be an easy opponent, even if Kurama’s not trying to save him from himself the way Kakashi and Naruto were.

Growling softly, Kurama shoves himself to his feet and takes a long bound back to the shore of the pool. He hates this. Why can’t people just follow the neat lines that were all laid out for them before Kurama got back here? He’s terrible at predicting what people are going to do, because appearances aside, he’s not human. He’s a bijuu, a construction of chakra and malice that was dragged kicking and screaming out of the Shinju’s form. No matter what Naruto was trying to do, shoving him into this damned body—

No. No, he doesn’t mean that, because he knows exactly what Naruto sacrificed to bring him back, and he will never take that for granted. He knows what the stakes are, what he’s risking every time he sets a foot wrong. The fate of the world on his shoulders and all that, and it’s an uneasy burden at the best of times for an ancient bijuu still reeling from the traumatic death of his first and only friend,
still trying to pick his steps in a world where he’s not a monster of mortal nightmare.

End of the world aside, Naruto is depending on him. Both Narutos, his lost jinchuuriki and the little boy without a family, clinging to the first bit of kindness he’s been shown. Gaara and Fū need him too, as startling and unnerving as that thought is. He’s taken them on, taken responsibility for them, and he’s not about to leave them stranded in the middle of the wilderness. So no matter what, this is a problem he has to solve.

Fine, then. Options.

Option 1: head for Kumo anyway, because Bee might be a freak to outstrip the entire Freak Squad, but he’s still a decent human being, no matter how much Kurama sometimes wants to tear out his tongue and shove it down his throat. Pros are possibly finding out what happened to Matatabi and her kunoichi. Cons are having the whole trip possibly be for nothing if Bee’s off on one of his journeys, and the fact that A is a power-grabber of epic proportions. There won’t be much of a chance of getting the kids away if A realizes who they are, and he’s too good a shinobi, with too many connections regardless of the state of his politics, for him to miss something like that.

Option 2: change course. Come up with somewhere else to stash the kids. Maybe one of his other siblings, though honestly that list is rapidly decreasing in length. Matatabi, Shukaku, the present Kyuubi, Chōmei, and Son are all out of the question. Isobu, because the Sanbi is squarely under Obito’s thumb right now. Kokuō too, by virtue of being both out of reach and previously targeted. That leaves Gyūki, but Option 1’s not the best, and…well. Saiken, pretty much.

Shit, that’s a short list, Kurama thinks despairingly.

Still, it could be worse. Saiken’s weird and unnervingly cheerful all the time—and if Kurama didn’t know better he’d say the slug was permanently high—but in the brief time Naruto knew him, Utakata always seemed levelheaded and fairly sensible. Of course, he’s currently ten years younger than he was when Naruto met him, which puts him at…fifteen, maybe. Hopefully. Possibly sixteen, if Kurama’s really lucky. And while shinobi—and especially jinchuuriki—aren’t exactly allowed to cling to childhood, that’s still pretty young. It also has the added disadvantage of leaving Utakata still a dubiously loyal member of Kirigakure, because as far as Kurama remembers the Rokubi’s host didn’t pack up and leave until he was eighteen. Which brings Kurama right back around to the fact that Kiri might as well be Obito’s puppet state at the moment.

There is, possibly, an Option 3. Kurama can head them all in Kiri’s direction, but also keep checking back in the bijuu’s shared mental world to see if Matatabi miraculously manages to answer. If not, he’ll be close enough to Kiri to track down Saiken. If she does, he won’t have gotten too far from Lightning Country’s border, and changing course to Kumo won’t be difficult. Of course, this means cutting right along the Fire Country border and then down through Hot Springs Country, which Konoha shinobi like to frequent, but it’s still better than staying in one place and waiting for Taki, Suna, Konoha, or the Akatsuki to catch up.

And damn it all, but Kurama really needs to stop pissing off whole shinobi villages and ridiculously powerful criminal organizations. This is getting annoying.

At the moment, Option 3 is just about the only viable course he can take. The kids need to get somewhere safe, and Kurama really needs to deal with Akatsuki, especially if they’ve already started grabbing jinchuuriki.

Apparently they’re headed for Kiri, then.

With a sigh, Kurama slips out of the mental world, coming back to himself to find that there’s a crick
in his neck and a weight on his lap. He blinks, looking down, and can't fight a sudden smile at the sight of a blond head resting against his chest, a red head on his thigh, and a green head nestled against his shoulder. All three of the kids have relocated themselves and their blankets, apparently deciding that Kurama is the best pillow available, and they're all fast asleep on top of him.

A soft yipping laugh makes him look up, and his eyes land on Fuji, who’s watching him with a distinct fox-grin, tongue lolling and ears pricked up. “So cute,” she teases lightly. “Your kits are all so cuddly.”

Kurama might be annoyed, but…he’s pretty sure that these three have never in their lives gotten to be cuddly before. Maybe Fū, since she mentioned a mother earlier, but she also used past tense when referring to her. Safer to assume that even if she has been treated as a kid, it was a long time in the past.

“Fuck off,” he tells the vixen, though it’s hardly biting at all. “They’re tired, that’s all.”

Fuji snorts softly, but lets the matter drop. “Good news from your sister?”

With a grimace, Kurama drags a hand through his hair. “My sister’s missing,” he says shortly. “Change of plans. We’re going to have to head towards Hot Springs Country, take a boat from the tip and make for Water Country. Something’s happening, and I don’t like it.”

Fuji’s ears tip back, flattening against her skull, and she rises, coming to press up against his free leg. “I wish I had more tails,” she huffs, sounding faintly miserable. “Then I could fly us there in no time. I could try—”

“Not without killing yourself,” Kurama cuts her off. He scratches gently behind her ear, trying to comfort her. “Fuji, we’ve gotten us this far pretty much through your efforts alone. If you hadn’t jumped in when you did, and then stuck around, we wouldn’t have made it out of Fire Country.” Tapping her nose, he reminds her, “I still owe you that star ball, too.”

With a disgruntled huff, Fuji flops down alongside his leg, resting her chin on her paws. “I want to be older,” she complains. “If Momiji were around—”

From the shadows cast by the shifting firelight, there's a long, low growl, and something stirs. In an instant Kurama is on his feet, spilling children every which way, with a growl of his own rumbling through his chest, claws curled and ready even as his chakra rises like a flare. At his side, Fuji twists, flipping a leaf onto her head and instantly growing, rising to her feet the size of a small pony instead of a little fox.

“Right,” an unfamiliar voice rumbles, and out of the darkness stalks a much bigger fox, fur a deep silvery blue-grey instead of Fuji’s snowy white, with five tails and blue eyes and teeth bared in an angry snarl. “Go ahead, Fuji. Finish that sentence.”

“I don’t like this at all,” Rōshi says grimly, surveying the interior of Bee’s house. It looks a little like a whirlwind hit, or maybe the aftermath of an attack, but since they're on Turtle Island, surrounded by one of the strongest barriers Kumo’s ever managed to come up with, Rōshi has to assume that it wasn’t foul play. Bee must have left in a hurry, though, and that’s definitely not a good sign where the state of things is concerned.

Han makes a soft sound of agreement, shuffling through a pile of scrolls on the main table. “The
Raikage must have called him back very suddenly,” he confirms. “And if Bee actually went, if must have been for a reason that he thought was important, too.”

Since there’s not much that can make Bee worried outside of failing to come up with new raps, the sinking feeling in Rōshi’s stomach just gets worse. He rubs a hand over his beard, all too aware of the tension of the bijuu inside of him, who is distinctly unhappy with all of this, and can’t help but think of Kurama. The man is out there alone with just a fox summons and a pair of six-year-olds to help him, no matter how devoted they happen to be. He’s grieving and hunted and lacking money and weapons and even decent clothes, and no matter how urgent it felt to head off after Han, Rōshi is rather regretting his choice right about now. He should have stayed with Kurama, helped him get to Kumo. If he’s been captured by A—

“Stop fretting,” Han says with faint amusement, glancing up from his search. “You're about to give me ulcers.”

Just for that, Rōshi kicks him as hard as he can manage in the shin. It is, unfortunately, just about the only place Rōshi can reach without jumping, because Han is an oversized idiot who didn’t have the sense to realize he should have stopped growing once he passed six feet. Rōshi is willing to admit that he’s fairly short, especially for a man, but Han is just ridiculous.

It’s gratifying to see Han yelp and go stumbling backward, and Rōshi crosses his arms over his chest, satisfied with that reaction. “I’ll stop fretting when you decide to take this seriously,” he retorts sharply. “Bee is gone. If someone took him forcibly, the barrier would be down and the animals would be in an uproar, so we don’t have to worry about that. But if A called him back to Kumo and he went, it probably has something to do with Kurama. If there’s any chance that we can help him, we should take it.”

Even with the armor that covers the bottom of Han’s face, Rōshi can tell he’s frowning. “We shouldn’t jump to conclusions,” he says calmly, though his tone is faintly warning. “Rōshi, we know nothing about Kurama. He saved my life, but he could be anyone.”

Rōshi frowns right back at him. “I don’t care,” he says flatly. “Son and Kokuō both agree he’s related to them, and I don’t give a damn if he’s a jinchuuriki, a bijuu, or the fucking Sage of Six Paths reborn. You didn’t see him with those kids, Han. I remember what it’s like to be a child with a monster in your head and the whole world set to hate you. Do you? Because he rescued those boys, he saved them and he loves them, and that’s not someone I’m going to let die, even if I have to burn every Hidden Village to the ground to make sure of it.”

Han holds his gaze for a long moment before he looks away. “I remember,” he says softly, tucking his right hand into his haori. “It was…very lonely.”

Since Han is a good ten years older than Rōshi, they rarely crossed paths growing up, but Iwa isn’t a soft place. If Han’s childhood was anything like his—and all signs indicate that it was, even though it’s one of the subjects they both avoid—that’s the understatement of the century.

“There are nine of us,” Rōshi says, trying to keep his temper in check. “Nine of us against a whole world that would spit on us sooner than look at us. A helped Bee, but he couldn’t give a damn about the rest of us unless we swear ourselves to Kumo. Already Kurama’s done more for us than anyone. He warned us about Akatsuki, saved you, helped me face Son, saved those kids—I don’t care who he is. Han. He’s one of us, he’s helping, even though no one else in all of existence cares about a handful of human containers beyond their potential as weapons. For that alone I’d save him.”

Another long stretch of silence, but Rōshi knows his friend and lets it linger unbroken. Han is thinking hard, weighing all the options—that’s what he does. Rōshi is the impulsive, headstrong one;
Han plans and hesitates and tries to keep out of danger as best he can. It’s usually an amusing
dichotomy, given their appearances, but right now Rōshi can’t find it anything but grating.

Finally, Han sighs, shifting his weight back slightly. He pulls his kasa off, tucking the hat under his
arm, and rubs a hand over his shorn hair. “I hope you have a plan,” he says a little wearily. “You’re
my best friend, Rōshi, but I have no intention of dying alongside you if you’re going to throw
yourself headfirst at all the major villages.”

Rōshi harrumphs in indignation. “I’m not an idiot,” he reminds the big man sourly, even though he
doesn’t have more than the bare beginnings of a plan. “We need to find out where Kurama went,
first of all. I know he was heading for Kumo, but I have no idea if he made it there or got attacked
along the way.”

“The Raikage knows our faces,” Han points out. “And he knows what we are, thanks to Bee. We
can’t risk heading straight there.”

“Kurama mentioned that Konoha was after him,” Rōshi counters, even as the pieces fall together in
his head. “And I’m absolutely certain that A hasn’t passed on what he knows about us to the village
he considers his greatest enemy. There are sure to be patrols along Konoha’s border. Pass ourselves
off as bounty hunters after the price on Kurama’s head and they’ll tell us what we need to know.”

“That…might work,” Han says carefully, and Rōshi magnanimously ignores the distinct note of
doubt in his voice. “But Kumo also wouldn’t share news of his capture, if they do have him.”

That’s true. Rōshi considers the matter for a moment. “But Kurama’s wandering around with
Konoha’s jinchuuriki, and Suna’s. A’s an arrogant bastard, but even he won’t risk a war with Suna
and Konoha by trying to keep their hosts.”

Han concedes this with a nod and another faint sigh. “All right. Let’s head south and find a border
town. The odds of a Konoha patrol stopping to resupply are good, and it will be easier to find them
there than track them through the wilderness.”

“I knew you’d see the light,” Rōshi says, entirely satisfied. “Let’s go. This place is a goddamned zoo
without Bee here to keep the wildlife in check.”

“I’m surprised you want to leave, seeing how you fit right in. Height aside,” Han says dryly, and
Rōshi promptly flips him off.

“Asshole,” he accuses, and storms out the door, entirely uncaring of the way it almost smacks Han in
the face as the big man follows.

Hiruzen sits back in the shadows of the Mission Assignment office, pipe tapping absently against his
lips, and watches Shikaku assign shinobi to their tracking teams. Some of Konoha’s best are in the
room, standing in groups or pairs or already in teams. Even Tsume, Fugaku, and Hiashi have turned
up for the occasion, talking quietly near the doorway.

There are ten teams, thirty of the very best trackers Konoha can offer paired with ten of Suna’s best,
and Hiruzen is grimly uncertain whether it will make any difference at all. He knows better than most
just how dangerous a jinchuuriki can be, after all, and even beyond that, Uzumaki Kurama is an
unknown. They can only speculate about his plans and motivations, and there’s always the chance
that they’re incredibly wrong. Hiruzen is good at reading people, but his only encounter with Kurama
lasted less than five minutes. Even he can't be expected to divine a man’s character in that amount of time.

Even so, it feels like a personal failing, not having seen that Kurama was dangerous, on edge. That he was the kind of man who could steal not one child, but two, and drag them off into the wilderness. Hiruzen hasn’t survived this long as a Kage without learning how to lay blame on those actually responsible, rather than keeping it all for himself, but this is Naruto. This is Minato’s son, Hiruzen’s honorary grandson. There's no applying logic when family is at risk.

“How many villages have accepted so far?” the man beside him asks in a low voice, dark eyes flickering over the assembled shinobi.

Hiruzen doesn’t look at the Yondaime Kazekage, because he doesn’t need to see the deep lines of worry and grim resignation that match his own etched into the other Kage’s face. The man had arrived this morning with a full contingent of shinobi armed for war, though thankfully not a war against Konoha. Despite the strained relations between their villages, they're still nominally allies, and the Kazekage had proposed adding some of his own trackers to the teams Hiruzen planned to send out. It’s a gesture that Hiruzen even now finds surprising, though perhaps he shouldn’t. The Kazekage is still a father, even if he’s one who was forced to choose between the life of his child and the safety of his village.

“Taki and Iwa,” he answers. “Though they don’t hold any bijuu themselves, Yu and Ame have given us permission to enter their lands, as has Rice Paddy Country and Wave Country. Tani as well, though we’re fairly certain Kurama is moving east, not west. I’ve yet to hear back from Kumo, though I hope A will be sensible, given that his brother is one of the jinchuuriki at risk.”

The Kazekage grunts in acknowledgement, looking far older than his actual years. He drags a hand over his spiky auburn hair, mouth pulling into a tight line. “No more word on which jinchuuriki this bastard has managed to grab?”

Hiruzen shakes his head, taking a long drag on his pipe and then breathing out a gusty cloud of smoke. “Iwa is hedging. I assume that means they either can’t locate their jinchuuriki right now, or they haven’t been able to in a while. It wouldn’t be the first time hosts abandoned their village. Taki is under the impression that their container ran away, as she seems to do frequently, and that it has nothing to do with Kurama, but I find it rather hard to believe in such coincidental timing.”

That earns him a grimly amused snort. “No village wants to admit that they’ve misplaced a tailed beast. I agree with you, though. This bastard knew exactly what he was doing when he took my son. He never hesitated. And I find it suspicious that he’s taking the youngest jinchuuriki first. They’re more malleable, more prone to believing whatever lies he’s spinning for them.”

Deliberately, Hiruzen doesn’t mention that those lies, whatever they might be, would be a lot less believable if the jinchuuriki were treated with basic human decency. After all, his house is very much made of glass in this matter, and he’s not about to start throwing stones. No matter how he’s tried to be close to Naruto, he’s Hokage. He barely has time for his son, his daughter, and his grandson, let alone any other family. For over forty years now Hiruzen has been putting the welfare of Konoha above the wellbeing of any one person in it, even when that one happens to be a boy he loves dearly.

Instead, he simply sighs, and casts his eyes to where a fiercely grinning Tsume is lounging next to a stiff and quietly offended Fugaku. The Inuzuka and Uchiha Clan Heads aren’t exactly the closest of friends, but since no one’s throwing punches, he’s going to assume things are going better than they usually do. Thankfully, Shibi is currently on the other side of the room, dealing with Shikaku; the Aburame Clan Head might look aloof and withdrawn, but he has a tendency to be very protective of Tsume, despite the fact that she most certainly doesn’t need it. It tends to be especially noticeable
where Fugaku is concerned, because Fugaku has certain notions about kunoichi and propriety, and Tsume has made a sport of flaunting such things wherever possible.

Sometimes Hiruzen feels more like an exasperated schoolteacher than the leader of the most powerful Hidden Village. He wonders, with a faint quirk of his lips, if the Kazekage ever feels the same way.

He’s not really in the mood to be amused right now, though. Things are rapidly spiraling out of control, and he greatly dislikes the fact that Iwa can’t seem to locate their jinchuuriki. It makes Hiruzen wonder if Konoha wasn’t actually Kurama’s first stop. After all, Naruto and Gaara were both young enough that Kurama was more or less forced to come and collect them. The other jinchuuriki were more than capable of moving on their own, and if they had left Iwa already, there would be no one to notice. Hiruzen doesn’t even know their faces or anything about their abilities, and that’s a dangerous situation to be in if they're potentially hostile.

This whole matter is a headache and a half, even without the added joy of having to coordinate with all of the other villages. The mere thought of the politics that will be involved has Hiruzen contemplating whether there’s any way at all he can trick Jiraiya into returning and taking the hat; heaven knows Hiruzen doesn’t want it.

“It’s going to be a hell of a long week,” the Kazekage says wearily, as if reading Hiruzen’s mind. More likely is the fact that those kinds of thoughts are inescapable for men in their position.

“Then let’s do our best to make it as short a manhunt as possible,” Hiruzen agrees, and puts his pipe aside as he rises to his feet. That’s enough of a break, no matter how his battered old bones complain. There are matters to be attended to, messages to deliver, teams to dispatch. Hiruzen is old, but he’s not dead yet, and he’s lived through three very long wars. He’s bound and determined to see that there won’t be a fourth.
Chapter Notes

Several people have mentioned that this story is getting unpleasant to read because of all the tension, and I'm very sorry for that. It's a tense situation, though, and I don’t have a way to make it all lighthearted without losing every bit of plot I've constructed. If it’s really unlikeable, all I can say is there are other stories out there that might be more to your taste. Apologies, but I can promise a happy ending if that helps.

[assuage /ə, swāj/, to make an unpleasant feeling less intense; to relieve; to satisfy, as an appetite or hunger. Middle English, from old French assouagier, based on Latin ad- “to” + suavis “sweet”.

“Momiji!” Fuji yelps, scrambling around to plant herself in front of Kurama, even as small hands latch onto the back of Kurama's shirt. “Momiji, stop! I'm fine, I know you're angry I ran away but he’s—”

The silver fox growls warningly. “Don’t cover for the humans, they kidnapped you—”

“Off of Mount Inari?” Fuji demands, somewhere between incredulous, exasperated, and frantic. “Momiji, you’ve got nothing but fur between your ears! Kurama-sama is a nine-tailed fox! Of course I was going to go with him!”

There's a moment of absolute silence, and Momiji says suspiciously, “Nine-tailed…?”

Fuji huffs, sitting down with a thump and leveling a scathing glare at the fox that can only be her brother. “You think I’d stick with anyone else without a contract?” she asks witheringly, though there's still a thread of nervous tension in her body. “Kurama-sama needed help, and Elder Yuri is always talking about duties and how the nine-tailed fox was the one to give us chakra in the first place, so we should repay our debts to him, and he gave me oden, Momiji—”

With a long, drawn-out groan, Momiji deflates entirely, flopping down on his belly and crossing his paws over his snout to hide his eyes. “Hell, Fuji. I don’t know what I'm more surprised about, the fact that you actually listened to those lectures or that you conned our god into feeding you. You're such a brat.”

Seeing the way Fuji is puffing up, Kurama decides that it’s time to step in before this devolves into full-out sibling bickering. He gently detaches the hands from his haori, then steps forward, though he’s careful to keep all three kids behind him. “It wasn’t a con,” he says firmly. “Fuji saved me from getting brainwashed or mind-wiped, and I didn’t have any better way to repay her. I still don’t. She’s the only reason we’ve made it this far, and I'm in her debt.”

One paw shifts enough for Kurama to see Momiji’s black-masked face, and the silver fox stares at him for a long moment. He studies Kurama carefully, then sits up again, his five white-tipped tails curling around his feet. “You're really—?”

There's a simple way to answer, though Kurama's not sure how Naruto's passenger will react to the
show. Still, he’s going to have to deal with his past self waking up at some point, and now isn’t the worst time for it to happen. Naruto could use a trump card, just in case something happens to Kurama, and once the Kyuubi has had some sense smacked into him, he’ll serve admirably.

With that in mind, Kurama takes a breath, thinks of Kaguya, and summons his chakra, letting it rise like a fiery tide around him. It tints the air scarlet, covers everything with a wash of power that lingers at the back of the throat like the metallic taste of blood. There's a sense of wind and fire to it, malice and rage and an ancient, suppressed fury that’s unmistakable.

“Yeah,” Kurama says, opening his eyes and meeting Momiji’s pale blue gaze. “I really am.”

“Kurama-nii?” Naruto asks curiously, and Kurama instantly choking off his chakra, turning and dropping to one knee. There's the faintest flicker of foreign chakra in Naruto's system, not enough to speak of the Kyuubi awake, but…he’s stirring. The flare of power was like a nudge, bringing him from the depths of sleep to the beginning of an awakening.

“Sorry, kit. I know that was a lot of chakra,” Kurama says gently, smoothing a hand over his messy hair. He glances over his shoulder to where Momiji is still watching, sharp eyes flickering between Naruto and Kurama with something like confusion, and tips one shoulder in a half-shrug, a silent promise to explain later. It probably won't be as easy as explaining to Fuji was, but he owes it to both foxes. Fuji's been avoiding her family by helping him, after all.

“Are you really a nine-tailed fox, Kurama?” Fū asks interestedly, sliding forward to stare at Momiji with wide-eyed wonder.

“It’s…complicated,” Kurama says a little helplessly. He doesn’t particularly want to explain, but he will if he’s pushed. Not everything, because that’s too much for any kid to deal with, but there's enough he can give them that it will stand in for a full explanation. “Don’t worry about it, sweetheart.”

“I won’t.” It’s Gaara, surprisingly, who says it. He shifts forward, fingers finding Kurama's sleeve and his wide, blue-green eyes solemn. With a glance at Naruto, and then another at Fū, he says, “You're not scary, Kurama-nii. Moth—Shukaku says the Kyuubi is mean and scary. You're not.”

Shukaku says, huh? Kurama tucks that thought away to hold over the Ichibi’s head later, and reaches over to ruffle wild red hair with a smile. “Thanks, squirt. You're not scary, either.”

From the way Gaara lights up at this, you’d think Kurama just gave him the world on a platter. It makes irritation at Suna flare, sharp and hot as a volcano on the edge of erupting, but Kurama shoves the anger back down and doesn’t let it show. The bastards don’t know what they're missing, treating Gaara like a monster. The kid is…not entirely terrible.

(Kurama can almost hear his Naruto laughing at him. Idiot.)

“Yeah!” the six-year-old Naruto chimes in, throwing himself forward and latching onto Kurama's arm. “You're still the same, Kurama-nii, so nothing’s changed!!”

It’s—fine, Kurama thinks, swallowing past the lump in his throat. Whatever. It’s not like it would have been the end of the world if Naruto thought he was strange, or a monster, or was even just wary at the idea of nine-tailed fox that looked like a human. He doesn’t care, wouldn’t care either way, but —

He presses a kiss to Naruto's forehead and wraps an arm around him in return. “Thanks, kit,” he murmurs, and glances back to see that Momiji is still watching. The fox has lost the edge of angry
suspicion, expression more curious than anything else. Fuji’s eyes are on them, too, her ears perked up and face full of mirth. Kurama gives her a smile. “Thanks for everything, Fuji. I still owe you that star ball, so hit me up next time you’re around—”

“What?!” Fuji yelps, bolting to her feet. “I'm not leaving, Kurama-sama, you still need me!”

Kurama blinks, caught off guard. He glances over at Momiji, whose expression has shifted to considering, and then reminds the vixen, “Fuji, you’re already going to be in trouble.”

“So?” she asks stubbornly, undeterred. “I’m going to be in trouble whether I go back now or later, so it might as well be later. And if Momiji thinks he can drag me back, I’ll—I’ll fight him!”

“You’d lose,” Momiji says dryly, rising to his feet and stepping past his sister. He body-checks her out of his way, making her snarl in aggravation, but ignores his sibling’s irritation and instead faces Kurama squarely. “You really need Fuji’s help?” he asks, tone assessing and pale eyes thoughtful.

A little wary, Kurama nods. “We’re headed for Kiri, and there are people after us. I can make it on foot, but if there’s any way to get there faster, it will save us a lot of grief. Besides, Fuji’s smart, and she’s brave. She’s already gotten us out of more than one scrape that we probably wouldn’t have managed without her.”

“Well, then you’ll do even better with two foxes helping,” Momiji says with certainty. “I've got five tails, and I'm better with chakra than most of the summons twice my age. Flying is my specialty. Since you’ve been taking care of my brat of a sister, let me repay you by getting you to Kiri.”

That—that is absolutely the very last thing Kurama expected, and he blinks in surprise, rocking back on his heels. “I—really? But don’t you have to get back to Mount Inari? And—there are four of us.”

Even as he says it, though, relief is uncoiling inside of him, taking the place of the sick-tight knot of nervous tension that’s been present since Fū joined them. Fuji can carry three, after all, when two of those three are tiny and light, but any more than that is asking too much of her. To have a solution to that, to have a way to get to Water Country in a quarter of the time it would take walking—that solves so many problems that just for a second Kurama finds it hard to breathe from the release of tension. Sage, if Momiji is serious—

The reynard gives an eerie, yipping laugh, ears pricking. “Kurama-sama, you're a nine-tailed fox. Of course I’ll help. Fuji’s a brat, but she’s right about that much. And if I'm here, the elders won't mind that Fuji is, too. I can feed her chakra, and we’ll fly the four of you to Kiri.”

Sage, but this might actually work out. Kurama breathes out, a little shaky with relief, and says with complete sincerity, “Thank you. Thank you, Momiji.”

With an answering laugh, Fuji leaps up, jumping over Momiji’s back, rolling happily, and then bouncing back to her feet. “You're the best, Momiji! I take back everything I said about you being a nasty, boring know-it-all!”

“Hey!” Momiji snaps, bristling. “When exactly were you saying that, brat?” He pounces on her, wrestling her to the ground, and in an instant they’re a snarling, snapping ball of silver and white fur, bared teeth, and sibling indignation.

Well, Kurama thinks with a mix of exasperation and amusement, as Naruto cheers and Fū laughs and even Gaara smiles a little. At least the trip will never get boring.
As it turns out, Momiji wasn’t bragging when he mentioned his talent with chakra, though Kurama—well-acquainted with vulpine exaggeration and pride—had half-expected him to be doing just that. With Fuji riding the tail-end of his chakra, Fū and Gaara happily perched on her back, they manage to cross all of Rice Paddy Country and most of Hot Springs Country before the lack of reliable light drives them back to earth.

With the waning moon above them, Momiji touches down lightly, the foxfire around his paws flickering out of existence. Fuji’s landing is slightly less graceful, but she’s practically vibrating with excitement as she crouches to let her passengers off.

“That was so much fun!” Fū enthuses, helping Gaara slide down and supporting the sleepy boy when he wavers. It’s almost midnight, and even though Fū seems just fine, the younger members of their ragtag band are almost unconscious. “Thank you, Fuji!”

“You're very welcome,” Fuji says, almost smug, and then shifts back to her regular small form and leaps up to curls around the girl’s neck.

Momiji snorts, muttering something about glory thieves and credit-stealers under his breath, but doesn’t move as Kurama dismounts, carrying Naruto. The bigger fox looks a little tired himself, but he follows gamely as Kurama starts laying out bedrolls for the boys. Fū has her own pack, and she pulls a tightly-rolled blanket out of it, seemingly content to curl up in that with Fuji sprawled out next to her.

“You gonna sleep, Kurama-nii?” Naruto asks blearily, tugging on Kurama’s sleeve as Kurama settles him on the blanket.

“Not yet, kit,” Kurama says, gently scuffing a hand through blond hair. “I’ll keep watch for a bit. Go to sleep, okay? We’ve got another long day tomorrow.”

Naruto mumbles something vaguely agreeable, closing his eyes and burrowing under the covers. It’s cold, but Hot Springs Country is at least a bit warmer than most places this far north, thanks to being so close to the ocean, and since they’re camping at the foot of a steeply sloping hill, there isn’t enough of a wind to make it frigid. Kurama could probably get away with starting a fire for added warmth, but he’ll take any excuse not to; the close call with both Kakuzu and the Freak Squad is still foremost in his mind.

Still, they’re far enough away from any signs of life that Kurama feels safe enough leaving a clone to stand watch while he heads up the hill. To his surprise, Momiji follows, though he stays silent as they pick their way around outcroppings of bare stone and a few scattered stands of trees.

The moon is waning, a little less than half-full by now, and around it the stars are clear and bright. It’s a nice change from the heavy cloud-cover of Ame, or the intermittent clear skies of Waterfall, and at the crest of the hill Kurama pauses, turning his face up to the sky. At his side, Momiji does the same, standing close enough that Kurama can feel the warmth of his fur pressed up against his side. The easy quiet lingers for a long moment before the fox says, “They're very fond of you. The children and my sister both.”

Kurama huffs out a breath that’s a little too bitter to be a laugh, sinking down to sit cross-legged on the grass. “Those kids haven’t exactly had a lot of people they could be fond of,” he points out. “And Fuji’s sweet. It’s hard not to like her, even when she isn’t saving my ass.”

Momiji chuckles, dropping to sprawl out and resting his angular head on Kurama’s knee. “She’s
okay,” is his assessment. “Are we up here for a reason, or just to look at the stars?”

Dragging a hand through his hair, Kurama shoots one more glance at the moon before settling back, resting his hands in his lap. “My sister’s missing. I really want to believe that she’s not dead, or sealed, and the only way to find out is to keep checking for her in our mental world. You’ll keep an eye out while I do?”

The silver fox makes a noise of assent. “Of course, Kurama-sama. I can’t smell anyone nearby, though.”

“Neither can I,” Kurama agrees. “But just—stay sharp, okay?” Taking a breath, he closes his eyes and reaches out. They’re near the border of Frost Country, just about the closest they can get to Kumo without leaving Hot Springs Country, and Kurama vaguely hopes that proximity will make some kind of difference. If nothing else, maybe one of the other bijuu will be able to remember the last time Matatabi was present. It’s safest to assume that she’s been captured by Akatsuki, stripped from her host and stuffed into that damned statue, but—

Kurama doesn’t want to acknowledge it. He wants to cling to the small chance that there’s some other kind of explanation besides the worst case scenario. It’s distinctly possible that Naruto rubbed off on him more than he’d like to think.

The murky, almost metallic scent of stagnant water and damp stone fills his nose with a rush, and Kurama grimaces, already knowing what he’ll see even as he opens his eyes. Darkness surrounds him, lit only by guttering torches on the walls, and he’s standing in ankle-deep water. There are bars in front of him, all too familiar, but the door of the cage stands open, the seal torn right down the center. Beyond the bars, where there was once a blank stone wall—and, Sage, how many years did Kurama spend staring at it, until he knew every slight variation of color or texture by heart?—there are instead nine openings cut into the rock, each wide and tall enough for even Kurama in his bijuu form to pass through.

Well. That’s clear enough, isn’t it?

Kurama wades through the murky water, thankfully feeling only stone under his bare feet, and pauses for a moment in front of the doors, testing. Each one carries a familiar taste of chakra, from the mirror-image sense of rage and fire on the far left to Shukaku’s blood-wet sand on the far right. Isobu’s power is muted, buried, and Kurama doesn’t want to think about what that means for his sibling caught so firmly by Obito’s damned eyes, but Saiken’s chakra is clean and clear, as bright and bubbly as ever. For a moment Kurama debates the sixth passage, thinks of trying to find Saiken and warning him that they’re coming, but…

There. Like a murmur in a room full of loud voices, there’s just a trace of familiar chakra. Cold but burning, as eerie as a ghost beneath the full moon, and Kurama jerks around, bolting for the second tunnel without a second thought. He slips on the slick stone, only just managing to stay upright, catches himself on the smooth wall and hurls himself around the corner, and—

There’s a loud yelp in a voice besides his own, a confused flurry of motion, and a sharp jerk on the back of his haori. Kurama blinks his eyes open in the real world to find himself on the very edge of the hill where the ground drops away, poised to leap. Momiji is holding him back, teeth clamped on the hem of his haori and feet planted.

“Oh,” Kurama says dumbly, and then, when that familiar sense of chakra whirls past him like an errant breeze again, “Oh. Momiji, knock it off, I’m fine, but I have to go.”

Carefully, Momiji extracts his teeth from thick cloth and says dubiously, “You’re going to leave three
“I'm not leaving,” Kurama says in annoyance. “Don’t you feel that? The Nibi is down there!”

There's every chance that it’s a trap. Every chance that this is Akatsuki, or Kumo’s forces, or anyone else who could be using Matatabi to lure him out. But there's also a slim chance that it’s not, and Kurama owes it to his sister in all her aggravating, cunning glory to at least check.

Momiji pauses for a long moment, then huffs and crouches down. He shrinks dramatically as he does so, sliding from the size of a horse to the size of a regular fox, and then promptly hurls himself right into Kurama's arms. “I'm coming with you,” he insists. “If you get into trouble on my watch, Fuji will never let me hear the end of it.”

“Fine, but can we go now?” Kurama asks, annoyed, even as he shifts the reynard onto his shoulders. Clawed paws clutch at his shoulder, tightly enough that Kurama isn’t worried about Momiji falling, and he takes that as an answer. Three long bounds carry him over the edge of the hill and down, towards the thickly forested ground at its base. Kurama can't sense any malice within his range, not even the usual flickers of irritation that would accompany most humans trekking through the woods at midnight, and he can't take that as anything but a good sign. The Akatsuki members are almost permanently aggravated, after all, and even the more even-tempered ones have an undercurrent of rage to them. When he’s looking, there's no way that Kurama could miss them.

Matatabi’s chakra urges him onward, around the edge of the hill and deeper into the forest. There's enough undergrowth to make moving hard, but the branches above aren’t quite sturdy enough to carry his weight, so Kurama grits his teeth and pushes through, trying not to make too much noise.

“Matatabi, you smug witch,” he hisses, voice low enough that only jinchuuriki ears should pick it up. “Where the hell are you?”

From up ahead, where moonlight glitters off the surface of a small, rush-choked pond, there's a small sound that’s quickly bitten off. Kurama stiffens, going still as he listens, and Momiji’s ears brush his jaw as the fox lifts his head and does the same.

“That was pain,” Momiji murmurs.

It was, and unease twists through Kurama's stomach, making him grimace. It takes a lot to hurt a jinchuuriki, and even more to hurt a bijuu. If something has managed it…

He takes a breath and slips through the last of the brush, minding his steps to keep them soundless even in the thick undergrowth. The trees spread out around the edge of the pond, making a tiny clearing, and on the far side of it, something moves. Shadows shift as the figure slides between trunks, then pauses, and Kurama realizes that whatever happens next, he’s going to have to make the first move. Whoever that is over there, they're not planning to come out until Kurama shows himself.

It’s stupid. It’s incredibly stupid, but—

But this is Matatabi, the least objectionable of all of Kurama's siblings, and that’s definitely her chakra trickling out into the midnight air. Whether it means she’s escaped with her host, or by herself, or is being used as bait by someone, Kurama can't leave her if she needs his help.

Damn it. His Naruto has a lot to answer for, making him this soft.

“Matatabi?” Kurama asks, stepping out into the faint moonlight. “That you, you damn cat?”

There's a long, long pause, and then the figure in the darkness moves again. It slips forward, out of
the shadows, and the starlight catches on pale blond hair matted with blood and drying mud, on a battered hitai-ate marked with Kumo’s symbol. Small hands lose their grip on the smooth bark of a tree as the figure tumbles forward, and Kurama leaps forward without even having to think, clearing the pond in a single bound and catching the young girl as she falls.

“Yugito,” he says, somewhere between astonished and unspeakably relieved. And…she’s young, so much younger than when he saw her as one of Obito’s Rinnegan puppets, battered and scraped with her hair falling loose and tangled around her face, but it’s unmistakably her. Matatabi’s chakra covers her like a ragged cloak, dissipating as if it’s fog before a stiff breeze, but despite the exhaustion and the fact that Yugito is healing at almost a normal rate rather than like the jinchuuriki she is, Matatabi is still curled up inside her soul. Akatsuki hasn’t gotten ahold of either of them yet.

“Kurama?” Yugito rasps, barely audible. Dark eyes flicker from Kurama’s face to the fox around his neck, and she sighs in wordless relief. “Matatabi said…you’d be shorter. Like Rōshi.”

“Matatabi’s a lying old witch,” Kurama huffs, hooking an arm around Yugito’s shoulders and helping her sit up. “What the hell are you doing so far from Kumo, kid?” Damn it, but she can’t be much more than thirteen, and while that’s a far sight better than being six, it’s also not as old as Kurama had expected. Definitely not as old as he was hoping for when he planned to leave the kids with his lying little sneak of a sister.

“Mm.” Yugito makes an effort to focus, pushing herself a little more upright in his hold and promptly hissing in pain, pressing a hand to her ribs. “Matatabi told me to find you. We were attacked while we were training, and—and my teachers were killed. She took over, but we couldn’t win, so we ran. She said you were our best chance of surviving.”

Which would explain why Kurama couldn’t find Matatabi earlier, if she had exhausted her chakra and was trying to conserve it. But to make Matatabi use that much of her strength, it had to have been Akatsuki that went after her. Kurama fights down the growl that tries to bubble up in his chest and asks, “You remember who jumped you, kitten?”

The nickname gets him a startled glance, but Yugito doesn’t pause to think as she answers, “There were seven of them, six with the same eyes and a woman with blue hair. They said my power would help them save the world.”

“Rule it, more like,” Kurama mutters, raking a hand through his hair. Fuck. Pein and Konan, then, which means Akatsuki really has started collecting the bijuu. Not that they’ll have an easy time finding any but Saiken and Isobu, at this point. If Yugito was attacked, Bee is either on Turtle Island, safe behind the wards for at least a little while, or being kept close to the Raikage. Akatsuki won’t risk attacking a village as strong as Kumo just yet; with so many gaps in their ranks they simply don’t have the power. A is a formidable opponent, and when he’s working with Bee, who’s fully allied with his bijuu, even the Six Paths of Pein won’t stand much of a chance. Matatabi had mentioned something about Yugito training in the mountains, and given the proximity to Akatsuki’s base, that’s probably why they tried to grab her first.

Well. It’s a good thing Kurama still has Kiri as a back-up plan. It also has the added advantage of being just about the last place Obito will expect them to turn up, since it’s practically under his nose. And by the time he thinks to look there, Kurama will be in position to thoroughly distract him by smashing the Gedō Mazō.

Since there’s only one thing to do now, Kurama shifts back onto his heels, then slides his free arm under Yugito’s knees and rises fully to his feet, picking her up as carefully as he’s able. “Come on,” he says gruffly. “We’ve got a camp on the other side of the hill. I’m not good at medical jutsus, but we’ve got some bandages and I can at least transfer some of my chakra to you. That should help
Matatabi get back on her feet.”

Those small, tanned hands jerk up, curling into the edge of his haori, and Yugito looks down. The tips of her ears are slightly flushed, and Kurama can all but feel her embarrassment, edged with a slight hint of shame. “Thank you,” she forces out.

Kurama doesn’t look at her. “Nothing to be embarrassed about,” he huffs, heading back into the forest. “Matatabi and I are family. You’re her family, more or less, so you might as well be mine, right? And this is what family does.”

The death-grip on his haori eases just a little, and the flush fades. Dark eyes study him carefully for a moment before Yugito nods sharply. There are lines of exhaustion in her face, cuts and scrapes everywhere, bruises like painful shadows on her bare arms and the curve of her jaw, but her poise is coming back. Some of the tightness eases from her shoulders, sliding away, and she gives in to her weariness enough to let her head rest against Kurama’s shoulder. Momiji noses her hair, and she smiles, if only slightly.

“I don’t remember my family,” she admits softly.


This time, her smile is much easier to see. “I…I think I like that idea.”
XXII: Temerarious

Chapter Notes

Many, many people have asked about the Kakashi/Kurama aspect and when/if it will come into play. I want to answer so badly, you have no idea, but I can’t manage without giving away a fairly significant portion of the plot, which I’m reluctant to do. It will happen, and it won’t just be a their-eyes-meet-and-there’s-potential-THE END. This fic is looking to be a bit more massive than I originally intended, because when I was reworking my outline my hand slipped and accidentally added another two arcs, so if nothing else there’s going to be time to resolve things. Whoops.

[temerarious /, temˈərərēərəs/, recklessly; rashly or presumptuously daring. Mid-16th century English, from Latin temerarius from temere “rashly” + -ous.]

For all of about three seconds, Kurama worries about Naruto's possible reactions to the newest addition to their little troupe. And, really, they need some kind of name or something, now that there are seven of them. The Bureau of Accidental Jinchuuriki Acquisitions, maybe—that sounds nice and formal and not at all like Kurama doesn’t have a single fucking clue what he’s doing here.

After those three seconds, though, Kurama screws his head back on straight, remembers that this is Naruto he’s talking about, and decides to operate on the assumption that Naruto will be goddamned overjoyed to find out there’s another human container tagging along with them. While it doesn’t get him any closer to knowing what he’s doing, it’s at least a pretty decent start.

From where she’s curled into a tiny little ball under his haori, Yugito makes a quiet, contented noise and tugs the covering garment halfway up over her face.

Smothering a soft chuckle, Kurama carefully sets another scavenged log on the fire, trying not to let too many sparks jump free. The risk of discovery is worth the comfort right now, for him and Yugito both. She’s tired, a good bit more battered than he likes, and hasn’t strayed further than a few feet from his side since they got back to the camp, but Kurama can already feel her chakra reserves restoring themselves. Matatabi may be the second-weakest of the bijuu, but she’s still a bijuu. Just holding still is letting her start gathering nature chakra again, and with a day or two of rest, Kurama is confident that both Matatabi and Yugito will be back to full strength.

“Another girl.” Fuji keeps her voice low where she’s curled in his lap, but she sounds pleased nevertheless. “And she’s cute, too. Do we get to keep her, Kurama-sama?”

Kurama blows out an aggrieved breath, shoving wayward strands of hair back behind his ears. “Like I have a choice,” he grouses. “Matatabi’s a catty witch. She knew I wouldn’t be able to say no.”

Curled across Kurama's shoulders, head resting neatly on his black paws, Momiji opens one blue eye and scoffs softly. “Right,” he says, mild as milk. “That’s why you ended up with not one jinchuuriki child, but four. Because you were manipulated into dragging them along.”

“Shut the hell up, furball,” Kurama growls, though he also pitches his voice low. “There were
extenuating circumstances.”

“Four times over,” Fuji adds innocently, and gives a fox-grin when Kurama glares at her. “Oh, stop it, Kurama-sama. You knew exactly what you were doing, taking them in.”

Well, Kurama's glad someone believes that, because he sure as hell doesn’t. This all started as a way to find somewhere safe for Naruto to hang out; the fact that it’s snowballed into a cross-continental chase that probably has him on every major village’s shit-list is still a little hard to wrap his head around at times. But, whatever. This is all Kakashi's fault. If he hadn’t made an ass of himself trying to pull Kurama away from Naruto, they’d all still be happy as clams in their rightful places.

Except...

Except Gaara would still be miserable, treated like a monster. Fū would be trying to run away, only to be dragged back kicking and screaming. Yugito—

Kurama doesn’t want to think about what would have happened to Yugito.

“How fast do you think we can make it to Kiri?” he asks, turning his attention back to the fire as a log shifts and falls in a spray of sparks.

Momiji hums thoughtfully, swishing his tails. “It will be a little slower now that there's one more, not that she weighs much, but we should make it to the border of this country by a little after noon as long as we get a decent start tomorrow. If I remember correctly, there's a chain of islands off the coast. Our fastest route would be along their path, near where the ruined ninja village is.”

In that area, there can only be one village he means. Kurama saw Uzushiogakure a few times through Mito's eyes, though only on brief visits. By the time he’d been settled enough in his prison to stop raging constantly, Hashirama had been dead, and duty had tied Mito to Konoha. He’s never seen the ruins—his Naruto had no interest, even when he knew where his clan came from, and it had been too open to seek refuge from Kaguya there. Apparently he’s going to get his chance now, though.

“Uzushio,” he says, because Kushina and Mito's ancestral home deserves to be named at the very least. “Yeah, that should be a good waypoint. There's another island northeast of it, and then a long haul straight across the sea to Water Country. We should wait until morning to try that stretch—it’s a fair distance, and there's usually enough fog to make it treacherous.”

“I've never been that far east,” Momiji admits. “Just to the edges of the closer islands. Some of the other five-tailed foxes have gone all the way there, but I liked the north better than all the wet.”

Well, there goes hoping Momiji magically knows a way past Water Country’s borders—or, optimistically, the walls of Kiri itself. Still, the mere fact that they don’t have to rent a boat in Whirlpool Country and try to sneak in through a port makes Kurama's life about three hundred times easier. He’s not about to start getting picky.

“No worries. I've been there twice, even if they were official visits and I never got to see a lot of the village. Shouldn't be too hard for me to locate Saiken, though—he’s always been pretty easygoing, might even be convinced to come out and meet us.” Kurama glances over at Naruto, then lets his gaze slide an inch right to settle on crimson hair, then green, and finally blonde. Utakata will be able to take care of them, with Saiken’s help. He took care of Hotaru pretty damn well after he became a missing-nin, after all, and Kurama has faith that being good with kids has at least a little to do with personality. The man’s the son of the Sandaime Mizukage, too; if he doesn’t know a good hiding spot for four prepubescent jinchuuriki near Kiri, no one will.
“Maybe you should sleep, Kurama-sama,” Fuji suggests gently, sliding out of his lap and shaking herself briskly. “I’ll keep watch for a while. You and Momiji should rest.”

“Thanks, Fuji,” Kurama says after a moment’s hesitation, because he really is tired. On top of that there’s a whole new set of things to worry about, because their food is running out and the fact that it’s winter will make for slim hunting, if Kurama wants to go that route. The very last of the mission pay from Konoha might be able to buy the seven of them a meal, but Kurama will save that until he has no other choice. Something else might turn up tomorrow, though—their luck hasn’t been entirely terrible these last few days.

Maybe they can make it to Kiri in time. Kurama really fucking hopes so.

By the time they drag themselves into one of the tiny border towns between Fire Country and Rice Paddy Country, Kakashi is one hundred and seventy-five percent convinced that he must have been a genocidal axe murderer his past life. One who ate kittens for breakfast. And babies for lunch. And probably rounded out his dinner with the blood of virgins and the spleens of his enemies, because anything less would not leave Kakashi subjected to this.

“The Nidaime totally could have kicked the Shodaime’s ass! He just held back because they were brothers!” Shisui insists fervently.

Tenzō scoffs loudly. “I refuse to believe the extent of your idiocy. Senju Hashirama was called the God of Shinobi for a reason. There’s no way he would have lost to Tobirama.”

Shisui makes a sound like he’s contemplating homicide. (Kakashi knows the feeling.) “Yeah, whatever. Tobirama invented more jutsus and seals than anyone in recorded history, before the founding of the villages or after. He totally would wipe the floor with a one-trick pony like Hashirama.”

At that, Tenzō squawks, flails, and nearly falls off the branch. “One-trick pony?! He’s the Shodaime! And besides, shouldn’t you be rooting for him? Tobirama hated the Uchiha!”

“Bad press,” Shisui dismisses with a lazy wave. “Did you know there were rumors about him and his aide, Uchiha Kagami? Clan gossip says Kagami is why Tobirama never married. I think that’s a pretty big check in the ‘doesn’t hate Uchihas’ column.”

“We are not discussing the Hokages’ hypothetical love lives,” Tenzō retorts a little tartly. “We’re—”

“Going to shut up now, because Itachi and I have been listening to this conversation for the last four hours,” Kakashi interrupts, just slightly desperate. And before that it was an in-depth discussion on which of Konoha’s jounin has the best ass. For the record, Kakashi’s name came up fourteen times, and he feels a little violated. Porn is one thing; this is another entirely. At least his beloved Icha Icha doesn’t give assessments and assign marks based on curvature and perkiness.

Whoever he killed in his past lives to deserve this, Kakashi is truly, deeply sorry.

“Thank you, Captain,” Itachi says with utmost sincerity. He looks a little wild around the eyes himself, not that Kakashi blames him in the slightest.

Shisui makes a noise that sounds distinctly like “Losers,” and then says in a more normal tone, “The village is just around the next hill. Separate and approach from different angles?”
Kakashi weighs the options. If they separate, that’s double the chances of finding Kurama, but they’ll be at reduced strength if they do manage to stumble over him. On the other hand, sticking together gives them more power, but also makes them a hell of a lot more noticeable.

“Separate,” Itachi suggests quietly. “We can meet in the center of the village. I don’t think Uzumaki is here, and we’ll be able to pick up a trail faster if we’re apart.”

Assuming he even stopped here, Kakashi thinks a touch pessimistically. It’s just about the last place to resupply before entering Hot Springs Country, which is sparsely populated outside of its Hidden Village, so Kakashi has to presume he did. After all, Kakashi has seen Naruto eat; an appetite like that can’t be easy to feed.

Kurama is rather memorable. If he passed through, they’ll find out soon enough. If he happens to still be here, whoever encounters him first can at least stall him long enough for the others to notice, so the risk isn’t as great as it could be.

“Separate,” Kakashi agrees. “Shisui, circle around and take the east; Tenzō, the south. Itachi, keep going and approach from the west. I’ll take the north.”

There’s a blur of motion on three parts, and Kakashi heads left, keeping a sharp eye on the shadows in the woods. It’s early morning, and there’s always the chance that Kurama decided to camp somewhere. If they could find him breaking camp, maybe talk to him—

What Kurama's doing is stupid. He’s got practically every village on his tail or braced for his arrival, is weighed down with at least two and possibly three kids, and he’s not able to move fast enough to keep ahead of Kakashi's team indefinitely. Maybe Kakashi can make him see reason. Maybe they can get through this without another war starting.

Kakashi doesn’t want to be responsible, even peripherally, for a fourth world war. That’s not a legacy he wants to attach to the Hatake name. His father’s memory deserves better.

The village is small and a little worn, a traveler’s rest-stop more than anything built for tourists or wealthy merchants. Shaking off his dark thoughts, Kakashi slips in through a narrow avenues lined with weathered houses and makes for the main street. There's one inn that he can see, sandwiched between a small grocery store and a weapons shop, with—

There's a flash of red hair, the cadence of a voice raised in aggravation, and Kakashi darts into the shadows and goes still, hardly daring to breathe.

“—can't believe you talked me into staying in that rat-trap,” the man says, voice muffled to the point where Kakashi can't tell if it's Kurama or not. “We'd have been better off sleeping next to the river.”

“I like beds with actual mattresses,” another man defends calmly.

“So do I, but not when they're liable to give me the plague,” the first retorts, and surely there can't be that many short, grumpy redheads running around north of Fire Country. “Next time I get to pick—” He stops short, hesitates for a moment, and then growls, “I know you're there. Come out and face me.”

Damn it. There's not even time to pull a henge. Taking a breath, Kakashi slips out of the shaded overhang and steps into the street, coming face to face with—

Not Kurama, he thinks with a sinking feeling. Not unless Kurama's changed his facial structure, shrunk a few inches, and managed to grow an elaborate beard since they last saw him a few days ago. The redhead’s companion is also unfamiliar, a massive man taller than anyone Kakashi's met.
before, and dressed in intricate armor.

“Sorry,” Kakashi says with a cheerful wave. “Mistook you for someone else.”

The two men trade glances. Arching a brow, the redhead tips his chin at Kakashi, then gives his friend a meaningful stare. The big man hesitates, but nods, and the redhead turns back. “No worries,” he says, wary but polite. “You’re from Konoha. Up on bounties?”

Bounty hunters, then. No wonder the shorter man’s instincts are so good; shinobi in that line of work tend to make a lot of enemies. “There should be a full accounting at the nearest bounty station,” Kakashi answers. “I’ve—”

“We’re looking for one in particular,” the short man interrupts, and Kakashi can feel his hackles start to rise. He’s fairly well-known, especially in Fire Country, and this close to the border his reputation is certain to precede him. For this man not to acknowledge that, he’s either stupid, unaware, or unconcerned. Stupid bounty hunters don’t live long, and the inattentive ones are too poor for fancy armor, so the last option is the most likely, and Kakashi doesn’t care for it. Not many people outclass him where sheer ability is concerned, and for this man to be so certain that he does is far from comforting. Especially given that Kakashi doesn’t know his face.

“Oh?” he asks, just managing to keep his voice mild. “Anyone I can help you find?”

“It’s a Konoha bounty,” the armored man puts in, giving his friend a pointed look that makes the redhead huff and cross his arms over his chest. “An unaffiliated shinobi, red hair, possibly from Kumo. Have you heard any news?”

There’s only one person they can be talking about. Kakashi kind of wants to turn around and bang his head against the wall a few times, just from sheer aggravation. “My squad is in pursuit,” he says after a moment’s pause, and is a little startled by the sudden hostility in the redhead’s expression as dark eyes narrow sharply. “Have you found any leads? You’ll be compensated—”

“Rōshi, don’t—” the big man starts, sounding close to desperate.

Fiery red chakra erupts like a volcano, filling the street with a sudden and almost blinding surge of power that knocks Kakashi back on his heels. He doesn’t quite go reeling, but if he had an ounce less experience, he knows that chakra like that would leave him on his knees.

“Shut up, Han,” the redhead barks, even as the power condenses, folding around him like a white-hot cloak. It shimmers with a heat-haze, and Kakashi leaps out of the way on instinct.

There’s a steaming crater in the place where his feet just stood, scorched and melted, and Kakashi curses to himself, darting back further out of range. Ridiculous chakra levels plus impossible ability equals only one thing.

“You’re a jinchuuriki,” he says grimly, landing lightly and reaching up to push his hitai-ate out of his face. “From…Kiri?”

Rōshi snorts, pulling a long, curved kunai from his weapons pouch. “Not hardly. I parted ways with my village a long time ago. But if you’re hunting Kurama, I’ll put an end to it right now. That man has more of my loyalty than Iwa ever did.”

Fuck, Kakashi thinks. Of all the people to run into right now. But if they’re looking for Kurama as well, that means this jinchuuriki at least hasn’t managed to join up with him yet. It also means that even the human containers Kurama hasn’t encountered are trying to aid him, though, and that’s bad news all around.
“Uzumaki Kurama is kidnapping children,” Kakashi says, with the vague hope that Rōshi will listen to reason. “He’s setting the Hidden Villages at each other’s throats. It can’t continue, or—”

Rōshi laughs, bitter and entirely unamused. “Or what? The villages will lose their greatest weapons? Face reality, Copy-Nin. They’ve already lost us. The minute they stopped treating us like humans, the instant they decided we weren’t even worth basic decency, that’s when the villages lost us. Kurama’s a hero. He’s saving those kids from a lifetime of misery and an agonizing death. He’s saving all of us from that.”

Kakashi narrows his eyes faintly, confused by the words. An agonizing death? Jinchuuriki are the next best thing to indestructible. In fact, the only one who died from being a jinchuuriki that Kakashi can think of is Kushina, and there were extenuating circumstances there.

“Captain!” someone shouts, and Kakashi reacts automatically, twisting to the side and coming up with three kunai that he sends arcing towards Rōshi as a distraction. The jinchuuriki snorts, simply flicking a hand, and a wave of lava flies from his fingertips to catch the weapons.

It’s incredibly disconcerting to see molten metal rain to the ground, hissing as it lands.

In the same moment, though, the earth trembles, and a surge of roots and branches leap for the jinchuuriki and his companion. Rōshi curses, spinning to take the ones in front of him with a lava-enhanced kick, but that leaves the other man—Han, Rōshi called him—vulnerable. Kakashi sees the opening and moves, as fast as he’s able. Tantō in hand, he leaps to the side, then lunges, aiming to capture. From the corner of his eye he can see Itachi mirror him, having guessed his plan, and it’s a desperate one, but it will have to do. Any sort of leverage to end this fight quickly—

There’s a hiss like escaping steam, a movement that’s far too swift for any man that big, wearing that much armor, and suddenly Kakashi’s side is one massive ache as he goes flying into Itachi’s path. His Sharingan had caught the movement, but too late. Kakashi was expecting big to mean slow, and that’s very clearly not the case.

A flicker of familiar chakra passes them, the glancing touch of a hand slowing their flight enough for Kakashi and Itachi to both twist and hit the side of a building feet-first instead of head-first. Shisui doesn’t wait, though, throwing himself at Rōshi even as his fingers come up in a well-remembered sign. The fireball that leaves his lips is huge and blinding, and under its cover Shisui goes for his ninja wire, hurling it in a curving loop meant to trap an enemy completely.

More molten metal splatters the ground, and Shisui spares just enough breath to protest, “Oh, come on,” before he has to concentrate on dodging the balls of lava Rōshi spits at him.

“As much as it pains me,” Itachi says, drawing his own tantō, “I think I must agree with Shisui.”

Kakashi’s getting that feeling, too. He eyes the man who kicked him, a distinct and familiar sinking feeling in his gut as he meets pale brown eyes. “Let me guess,” he says dryly. “Also a jinchuuriki?”

Han inclines his head. “Kurama saved my life when we were complete strangers,” he answers. “If nothing else, I owe it to him to stop you here, and save him the trouble of doing it himself.”

Against Kurama alone, Kakashi would put decent odds on his team winning. They already managed once, after all, before the fox not-a-summons saved him. Against two older, obviously experienced jinchuuriki who are clearly devoted to the idea of helping Kurama, and just as clearly used to fighting together? Kakashi’s fairly certain their odds of simple survival are slim, let alone their odds of victory.

As if to emphasize this thought, Tenzō attempts to drop from the roofs to take Rōshi by surprise and
only just manages not to lose his entire head to another burst of lava.

Very quickly, while both men are distracted by Shisui and Tenzō’s admittedly impressive teamwork, Kakashi runs through his mental index of jutsus. Rōshi and his lava alone is enough of a problem, but Han’s steam is fire and water mixed. It’s nothing a Raikiri can cut through, and Kakashi just a handful of days ago saw Kurama take a full-power Raikiri to the chest and then promptly turn around and start a marathon run across the Elemental Countries. He’s not overly hopeful that it will do any better against this jinchuuriki. Copying their movements also won’t do any good, since jinchuuriki abilities aren’t exactly something he can mimic.

Still, he’s hardly about to stand around and let them kill his entire team. Taking a breath, he sheathes his tantō, flicks Itachi an ANBU hand-sign, and then brings his hands together. The earth beneath him surges like water, and Kakashi sinks beneath it in a rush. There’s no chance of aiming wrong, not with the bonfire of chakra so close to guide him, and Kakashi uses just a touch of strength to send himself shooting forward, hoping Itachi get the message. Then it’s too late for thinking of anything else, because the two jinchuuriki are right above him, and Kakashi rockets up, fingers shaping another sign even as he bursts out of the ground.

Instantly, four of Itachi’s clones scatter into a cloud of ink-black crows, and Kakashi, positioned squarely between Rōshi and Han, brings his hands together with a ringing clap. Behind him, he can sense Shisui moving, faster than even the Sharingan can match, to grab a harried Tenzō and haul him bodily behind the cover of a wall. Then the jutsu activates, and the force of the wind exploding from Kakashi’s hands sends both jinchuuriki flying.

There’s no need for orders. Kakashi leaps for the rooftops, and a moment later Itachi bounds after him. In a flash of green chakra, Shisui appears next to them, snatches his cousin, and disappears. A heartbeat later he’s back again, hooking an arm around Kakashi’s waist and hauling him forward so fast the world turns to a wrenching blur. They hit the ground hard and Shisui loses his grip, tumbling once before he manages to roll back to his feet. Kakashi manages to stay upright, though only barely, and catches himself on the trunk of a tree.

The village is so distant Kakashi can hardly see it now, though the massive plume of smoke rising above it makes the location obvious. Kakashi winces a little, because that was a lot of collateral damage for a very short fight. He’s fairly certain they’re never going to be welcome in that town again.

“Oh fucking fuck,” Shisui breathes, slumping back against another tree and sliding down to sit at its base. “Did we just start a fight with not one, but two jinchuuriki?”

“Technically, I think Rōshi started it,” Kakashi points out, feeling the need to defend himself. It’s not like he knew they were jinchuuriki going into it, or he might have beaten a strategic retreat a little earlier. Or just—not stuck around. Then he thinks about what the Hokage is going to say once he learns that two more jinchuuriki have deserted their villages and allied themselves with Kurama, and is distinctly grateful that there’s a good extent of Fire Country between them.

“If we give him the chance he’ll probably finish it, too,” Tenzō points out, looking back in the direction of the village. He’s missing his left eyebrow, and half of his face is red in a way that speaks more of first degree burns than it does embarrassment at practically getting stomped by two jinchuuriki who weren’t even trying.

“Moving on would be a good idea, I think,” Itachi agrees. He glances up, to where a flock of crows is circling lazily, and adds, “They’re not following us yet, but that doesn’t mean they won’t.”

“Especially if they’re looking for Kurama.” And Kakashi would very much like it if they didn’t catch
up with him any time in the near future. Dealing with a couple of baby jinchuuriki is one thing, and Kakashi is mildly confident about their chances there, even if one of them happens to hold the Kyuubi no Kitsune. Three full-grown and ludicrously powerful jinchuuriki without a reason to hold back?

If he’s facing something like that, Kakashi wants a damned army backing him up.

Han is wearing his I’m-disappointed-in-you-but-somewhat-not-surprised face. It’s one that Rōshi is intimately familiar with, so he’s more than happy to ignore it. Inside of him, Son is grumbling about the Copy-Nin’s escape denting his pride, but that’s par for the course now that they're actually talking. And, yes, Rōshi admits they probably could have taken the man and his team, but he’s not exactly a pinpoint fighter. The rest of the town would have ended up as collateral, and enough people already hate Rōshi just for existing. He’d rather keep the numbers down whenever possible.

At length, Han seems to resign himself to the fact that Rōshi is unaffected by his displeasure and sighs, folding his arms over his chest. “I thought you wanted to find Kurama's trail, not pick a fight.”

“We did!” Rōshi defends. “I can multitask, thank you.” When Han continues to be epically unimpressed, Rōshi huffs, rolls his eyes, and says, “Now we know that he hasn’t gotten caught yet, and that’s good enough for me. If Bee’s back in Kumo, odds are Kurama skipped over it rather than stopping, and if he’s looking for jinchuuriki, there’s only one other place he can go.”

Han does not look comforted by this leap of logic. “Kiri isn’t exactly welcoming,” he points out.

“And Kurama’s not exactly a model guest,” Rōshi counters. “Come on, we need to get to the coast.”

“We’re going to take a boat across the ocean to the Bloody Mist, which is currently controlled by a mad jinchuuriki and houses an unknown second jinchuuriki,” Han says dubiously, but he follows when Rōshi turns northeast and marches out of the village. “I can think of a lot of ways this could end badly, Rōshi.”

Rōshi waves an impatient hand, not entirely certain what the problem is. “Oh, give it a rest. We’ve got nine tails and four brains between us, how hard could this be? There's a little fishing village near the Frost Country border, and the headman there owes me a favor. We’ll commandeer a boat and sail straight across. Maybe we’ll even beat Kurama there.”

Either way, whether they have to skulk around Kirigakure and wait or get there after the other man, Rōshi will feel a hell of a lot better once he’s got eyes on Kurama. Rōshi’s awkwardness with kids aside, Kurama’s between a rock and a hard place, and Rōshi’s more than willing to hunker down next to him and make a stand.

The jinchuuriki get few enough champions as it is, and whether Kurama's actions turn the world on its head or not, Rōshi’s in for the long haul. And, despite Han’s protests, Rōshi knows the big man will be right there next to him. Maybe they’re not family by blood, but Rōshi likes to think they’re something better. Real family never gives you a choice. The family you make for yourself is another matter entirely.
Things have escalated to the point that Hiruzen now cringes reflexively every time Kakashi sends him a report. This time is no different, even if the report happens to come with one of Itachi’s crows instead of one of Kakashi’s ninken.

As soon as the bird has deposited its message and swooped back out the window, Hiruzen sits back in his chair, eyeing the scroll warily. Across the office, at a slightly battered additional desk dragged in for his use, the Kazekage looks up.

“Something wrong?” he asks suspiciously.

“More than likely? Yes,” Hiruzen sighs, raising a hand to rub at the forming headache even as he reaches for the message. Deciding it’s best to get things over with, he opens it quickly and unrolls it, studying the words.

Ah, yes. That’s a familiar headache—he’s taken to fondly referring to it as “Kurama”.

“Kakashi’s pursuit team encountered two more jinchuuriki,” he tells Rasa grimly. “Apparently loyal to Kurama’s cause, as they were willing to start a fight in order to keep the team from following him.”

Rasa blows out a short, sharp breath and leans back in his chair, shoving a stack of paperwork aside and crossing his arms over his chest. “Two?” he asks. “Hmph. What do you want to bet that your team just found those jinchuuriki Iwa’s been unforthcoming about?”

“Unlike my former student,” Hiruzen says dryly, “I’m not in the habit of taking sucker bets. I believe you’re right. Perhaps now Iwa will begin to take us more seriously. Ōnoki is a hardheaded fool, but even he can be made to see reason eventually.”

“It’s all the rocks they bounce their skulls off during training.” The Kazekage sounds reluctantly amused. “I’ve never met more stubborn shinobi than the ones from Iwa.”

You’ve never come across an Uzumaki, Hiruzen almost counters, but stops himself at the last moment. Given the circumstances, it’s probably not the most tactful thing he could say.

“That makes…four jinchuuriki, at least,” Rasa says thoughtfully, making Hiruzen glance up at him again. The Kazekage has his chair tipped back, his eyes on the wall but focused beyond it. “Five, if Uzumaki really is one. Six, if Taki’s jinchuuriki isn’t sulking in the woods somewhere like they seem to think she is. And if he’s even managed to convince the older ones to side with him, I’d expect he’s already converted Gaara and the other boy.”

Hiruzen wonders about that. It’s only a suspicion, but he finds it likely that Iwa’s two jinchuuriki are missing-nin, or the next best thing. He hasn’t heard even vague mention of them in years, which is rather telling. Iwa isn’t shy about otherwise flaunting its strength, and they were notably absent in the Third Shinobi War. Perhaps Ōnoki kept them back because Kushina rarely made an appearance on the battlefield—Hiruzen hadn’t wanted to provoke Iwa into mobilizing against her personally—
but... Ōnoki isn’t a subtle man. If he’d had the power, he likely would have used it. So it stands to reason that this Han and Rōshi had already made themselves absent back then.

“Those who have suffered longest are often the easiest converts,” he reminds Rasa, rerolling Kakashi’s scroll. “Especially if Kurama is offering them something they’ve wanted for a long time.”

With a suddenness that’s almost jerky, especially compared to his usual forthright grace, Rasa shoves to his feet, sending his chair sliding back to crash into the wall. He doesn’t even glance back as he stalks up to the window, where he pauses, bracing one hand on the glass as he looks out over Konoha’s streets. “And just what is it he’s offered them, Hiruzen?” he demands. “What could he have offered that would have made five jinchuuriki turn their backs on the world that created them, that revered them?”

“Revered? I would rather say feared,” Hiruzen says evenly, leaning back in his seat and reaching for his pipe to give his hands something to do. “Rasa, I know very well the state of Suna’s relationship with its jinchuuriki.” Your relationship with your son, he doesn’t say, because that’s also a little too tactless to utter right now. “Do you really imagine that any other village is different? Perhaps it’s less overt elsewhere, but jinchuuriki are feared for their capabilities, for the fact that there are the closest things to gods this world has encountered trapped inside of them. Only Bee is different that I've seen, and he’s worked his entire life to be seen as nonthreatening.”

Because he’s looking for it, he can see the flicker of grief that crosses Rasa’s face, deep and painful and instantly shut away. For all his many faults, Rasa loved his wife, loves his village, and Hiruzen is absolutely certain that Rasa loves his youngest son as well. But he’s a Kage before he’s a father, something Hiruzen knows all too well, and the Ichibi’s seal is loose, cracking. It wasn’t meant to be this way, Hiruzen is sure, but it is. Gaara is a monster instead of a weapon, and as Kazekage Rasa can do little more than work to contain and control him, even if containing him means ending his life.

Rasa is paying for his choices, for his mistakes. A very small part of Hiruzen wonders if Minato would have faced the same choices, had he used a weaker seal and survived his battle with the Kyuubi.

“Is that all this is?” Rasa asks, low and intent. “Really? You think Uzumaki has done all of this because he’s a kind person, because he doesn’t want to see the other jinchuuriki suffering? I know you can be a fool, Hiruzen, but don’t be a naïve one. There has to be some other motivation.”

He’s correct, and Hiruzen inclines his head, allowing for the point. “Yes, but I've yet to see any concrete evidence of it. We haven’t even been able to predict his path.”

Rasa hums low in his throat, not looking away from the blue horizon. “Does he have ties? Bonds? Do you know anything about his past?”

It takes several moments of shuffling through the piles on his desk, but Hiruzen finally finds the scroll with Kakashi's first report, right after the recovery of the Daimyo’s daughter. With it is another report, this one from a team Hiruzen sent to track Kurama's movements before he reached Konoha. Because he knows every word of both, he passes them over to Rasa without hesitation. This isn’t a time or situation where any of them can afford to keep secrets.

“He came from the north,” Hiruzen says, sitting back again to light his pipe. “A squad tracked his movements to a town near the border, where he stayed for the night. The innkeeper was unforthcoming, but one of her regular patrons recognized his description. Before that, there’s no record of him anywhere that we’ve been able to find. Then again, I can’t really say I expected anything less.”
Rasa’s eyes flicker up from the scrolls for a moment, and he raises one brow slightly. “You think…” he starts, and then stops, frowning in consternation.

Sarutobi can read the rest of that question in his face. It’s not exactly a leap of logic, honestly, given what they know. “That he’s been in Uzushio since it fell? It’s a distinct possibility.”

“But Uzushio didn’t have a jinchuuriki,” Rasa counters, shifting that frown to Hiruzen. “If they had, they wouldn’t have been wiped out by Kiri.”

Hiruzen hums, and lets himself play devil’s advocate just for the twitch it puts in Rasa’s expression. “Kiri has a respectable population, and a decent force. They’re also several times the size Uzushio was.”

With a scoff, Rasa drops the reports on the desk and crosses his arms over his chest. “Kiri also has an overabundance of bloodthirsty bastards who are more interested in killing each other than taking their warmongering to another country. If Uzushio had been hit by anything but a surprise attack, by anyone but the Sandaime Mizukage and the Seven Swordsmen, they’d have sent Kiri running. As it is, there was no jinchuuriki there. There was no saving Uzushio. Your logic is flawed.”

“Is it?” Hiruzen asks mildly. “These are our suppositions: Uzumaki Kurama is Uzumaki Kushina’s younger half-brother by the same father, literally bred to be a jinchuuriki, likely by Kumo. One of nine brothers, if his stories are to be believed. I would assume he grew up hearing of his home, the wonders of Uzushio, and the first chance he got to escape, he ran there, early enough that he encountered his half-sister but never told her of his identity or the beast he carried within him. Kushina left to take on the Kyuubi, and barely a month later Uzushio fell. Perhaps Kurama was not in the village; perhaps he was. Either way, a young boy was left in the shattered remains of the only home he’d ever known, his family dead or out of reach. All he had was his home, broken as it was, and the bijuu inside of him.”

There’s a long minute of silence. Rasa is staring at him, thoughts flickering quickly across his face, though he doesn’t voice them.

Hiruzen sighs softly, taking a drag on his pipe. “Kurama is grieving, even now,” he says. “It was as plain as day, when I met him. If the grief is still so fresh, twenty-five years after Uzushio’s fall, he has to have kept its memory close to him somehow. All of Uzushio’s remaining shinobi scattered afterwards, what few of them were left. But…what if Kurama didn’t?”

“That’s a long time to live alone,” Rasa agrees after another moment, voice faintly rough.

“Not alone.” Hiruzen gives him a humorless smile. “That’s the point, isn’t it? Twenty-five years listening to the bijuu in his head, believing that, had he had a little more power, a little more control, he could have saved his home—well. This is only speculation, of course.”

“Speculation that makes an unfortunate amount of sense.” Rasa leans against the edge of the desk, weariness briefly overcoming propriety, and rubs a hand over his eyes. Neither of them have gotten more than a few hours of sleep in the past few days, and the hours are starting to drag like lead weights. “He’s—saving them. At least in his own mind.”

“He went for the youngest first, from what we can tell,” Hiruzen agrees. “Forgive the implication, but any other child treated the same way as Gaara and Naruto would be considered the worst kind of abuse. So he took them. It’s likely he has a plan as to what he’ll do with them when he’s collected all eight of the others—he’s too smart not to—but we’ve no way of knowing what it is.”

“Revenge,” Rasa suggests, mouth pulling into an unhappy line. “For the ‘oppression’, or however he
wants to phrase it.”

Maybe. Kurama certainly seemed prone to anger, but…if his temper is anything like Kushina’s, it’s the type of anger that fades quickly. Though really, at this point Hiruzen will believe practically anything where Kurama is concerned. That one man, even a jinchuuriki, could cause so very many problems is…improbable.

Before he can say as much, though, there’s a sharp, urgent rap—not on the door of the office, but on the window, and both Kage turn quickly. Hiruzen blinks in surprise, pulling his pipe away from his mouth at the sight of Hagane Kotetsu clinging to the sill, looking serious. The boy is a joker, lighthearted and prone to laughter, but he takes authority seriously. For him to skip the main door in favor of the window, something must have happened.

“Kotetsu?” Hiruzen asks, throwing open the window and allowing the chuunin to eel his way through the narrow gap. “I thought you were on gate duty this morning.”

The boy, who frequently runs messages for him, belatedly bows to both men and then blurts, “The Raikage is at the gates, sir!”

Hiruzen stares at him for a long moment, then closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Of course he is,” he mutters, and then raises his voice again. “With shinobi?”

“A pair of bodyguards and his brother,” Kotetsu reports.

It only takes a second to calculate distances and times involved. There’s little chance that A was able to get his message before he departed, unless he recently learned the Flying Thunder God technique, and Hiruzen hopes for all their sakes that he hasn’t. Therefore, this can’t be about the warning Hiruzen sent about Kurama, but he can’t think of a single other thing that would motivate A to come so deep into enemy territory with his brother, Kumo’s most well-known jinchuuriki.

“More things wrong, undoubtedly.” Rasa’s voice is wry. Hiruzen snorts. Maybe he and the Kazekage are only reluctant allies, bound by treaties and defeats and circumstance, but when he glances at the auburn-haired man their eyes meet in a moment of perfect shared understanding.

“Who did you leave at the gate, then?” he asks Kotetsu, tapping out his pipe with only a flicker of regret. “I assume you didn’t simply abandon your post?”

“Of course not, Hokage-sama!” Kotetsu looks offended by the very idea. “Genma was waiting for his team anyway, so he said he’d keep an eye on things.”

Hiruzen bolts to his feet fast enough that his bones protest and he accidentally knocks his chair over. “You left Genma?” he echoes disbelievingly, hurrying around the side of his desk. He doesn’t bother berating Kotetsu, but heads for the door with a more haste than he’s used since he first heard that Kakashi and Kurama were fighting over Naruto.

A moment later, Rasa appears on his left, keeping pace with him. “This Genma's a hothead?” he asks with faint amusement.

It would be easier for everyone if he were. Instead, Genma is the type of coolheaded that lets him think every action through, work out all the angles, and then still do things that are reckless enough to give Hiruzen even more grey hairs. Hiruzen blames Kushina's influence; Genma might have been Minato's bodyguard, but the boy practically worshipped Kushina as his patron goddess.

“No,” he answers as they hit the street, and just manages to catch a flash of his current bodyguard’s worried expression, despite how he’s trying to stay unseen. Raidou knows better than anyone why
Genma shouldn’t be left alone around A. “I’m afraid Kumo nin were responsible for the deaths of his mother and older sister, the last of his family. I don’t doubt that A can survive almost anything, but Genma is…determined, when he needs to be.”

Rasa winces, clearly familiar with such grudges—understandable, given the state of Kumo’s relations with Suna. Then again, Kumo doesn’t really have peaceable relations with any of the other villages. A is a paranoid bastard at the best of times.

Thankfully, the gate is just around the next corner, and Hiruzen slows to a brisk walk, tugging his robes back into place. There’s no sound of destruction from up ahead, though that means little—Genma is one of ANBU’s best assassins for a reason, and it’s not because he’s flashy. Still, Hiruzen takes it as a good sign, and rounds the corner with the majority of his composure intact.

It’s…not quite as bad as he was expecting. Genma is lounging back against the side of the gatehouse, senbon between his teeth, expression lazy and amused. A is eyeing him suspiciously from just outside the gate, and the Raikage’s bodyguards are visibly tense. Hiruzen, who knows Genma well, can see the edge of threat in his posture, the way his fingers are lingering just a bit too close to the senbon dipped in his trademark and very nasty poison, the spark of fury well-hidden in hazel eyes. Still, he hasn’t made a move yet, and that’s a decent start.

“Kotetsu,” he says quietly, and the boy, who followed them from his office, obediently slips up beside him. “Go find Gai. Tell him Genma needs him.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama,” Kotetsu says quickly, then bows and disappears in a whirl of leaves. Hiruzen allows a bit of tension to bleed from his shoulders; Chōza might have trained a team of absolute maniacs, but Gai, Ebisu, and Genma are admirably close, and Genma and Gai have a stronger bond than many shinobi. If anyone can help the tokujo calm down, it’s Konoha’s Green Beast.

“Well, this is unexpected,” he says, allowing his voice to carry. Five sets of eyes immediately snap to him, and Hiruzen doesn’t allow himself to glare at the flicker of disappointment that crosses Genma’s face. A is the priority right now, though Hiruzen will definitely be having a talk with his erstwhile bodyguard later. “A, to what does Konoha owe the pleasure of your presence?”

A’s eyes narrow, and he studies Hiruzen for a moment before shifting his gaze to Rasa. “It was both of you that did this?” he asks, not quite hostile enough to make it a threat, but more than enough to have Genma tugging the senbon from his mouth and straightening abruptly. The two kunoichi accompanying A shift forward automatically, hands reaching for their weapons, and Raidou slides out of the shadows to stand a pace behind Hiruzen, one hand on the hilt of his poisoned sword.

That’s quite enough of that, Hiruzen decides with a faint sigh. “Genma,” he says, gentle but firm. “I thought your team had left already.”

Genma doesn’t take his eyes off the Kumo nin, though he does step away and roll his shoulders, sliding back into the deceptively lazy slouch he favors when in front of a threat. “Sorry, Hokage-sama,” he answers. “One of Hana’s dogs had a limp, so she wanted to check him over before we left. I said it was fine. Hoheto took our new friend from Suna to get some extra medical supplies, since she said she’s a decent medic-nin.”

Genma also has the ability to say something in such a way that it could be either an insult or completely serious, and the listener is left wondering. Catching how Rasa is eyeing the tokujo, Hiruzen allows himself a brief, hard look at the assassin, who gives him a cheerfully innocent smile in return, and then says, “All right. You’re assigned to the northeast, yes?” When Genma nods, he continues, “Change course and head for Uzushiogakure. Scour the ruins for signs of Kurama living there, and check with any inhabitants to see if he was there previously or recently returned. I’ll be
sending the same orders to Kakashi's squad."

Genma doesn’t ask questions, just inclines his head, then turns at the sound of Gai calling his name. Hiruzen waves him away before he can ask to be dismissed, and the tokujo bows, steps back, and gives A one last long, cool glance before he heads for his friend.

Hiruzen absolutely hates his job, some days. Most days.

“Both of us, indeed.” He answers A’s earlier statement with a polite smile. “I take it this isn’t a friendly visit, A?”

A glares at him, folding his brawny arms over his chest in a way that would be a threat to anyone not considered the third God of Shinobi. Hiruzen is faintly amused; he’s old, yes, but if this upstart boy half his age thinks to intimidate him, he’ll have to do far more than loom a little. It makes him wish he’d grabbed his pipe, because it’s hard to look less concerned than he does when he’s absently smoking it, and little gets his point across better.

After a moment of attempting to stare him down, A finally huffs and says sharply, “We already know you hold the Kyuubi jinchuuriki, but what other jinchuuriki are you hiding, Sarutobi?”

One brow rising, Hiruzen looks up at the big man, then glances at Rasa. The Kazekage looks back, equally startled, then inclines his head, ceding control of the conversation to him. Hiruzen stifles another sigh, and answers, “None, but may I ask what gave you the impression that we were?”

A gives him a distinctly dirty look and jerks a thumb at his brother, who looks bored and disinterested in the posturing. “Bee’s been talking with the Hachibi, and an unfamiliar bijuu recently showed up in the mind-space they all share. The Hachibi hasn’t caught a glimpse of him yet, but he says the host’s chakra is definitely Uzumaki, and you’ve got the only ones I know of. Since your new jinchuuriki just killed two of our best jounin and nabbed a little girl, I thought I’d give you the chance to hand her over before this devolves into a fourth war.”

Very, very alarmed now, Hiruzen takes a step back. “Another?” he demands, and feels Rasa catch his elbow when the ground wavers beneath his feet. Maybe his doctor wasn’t exaggerating when she warned him about straining his heart. “You’re certain there’s a tenth bijuu?”

Calculation flickers rapidly across A’s face, then slides into grimness. “It’s not one of yours,” he concludes, arms falling from his chest to brace on the wide belt he wears. He doesn’t look happy with the conclusion.

“We thought he was one of yours,” Rasa says, bitterly amused. “He certainly looked like a Kumo nin when he was kidnapping my son from the center of Suna.”

“And Uzumaki Kushina’s son from our streets,” Hiruzen adds, lightly brushing off Rasa’s hand. He’s grateful to the newfound solidarity between their villages, but he’s hardly a helpless old man, regardless of shocks rendered. “We’ve come to believe there’s a pattern.”

A clearly doesn’t need it spelled out for him. “Jinchuuriki,” he says grimly. “He’s stealing jinchuuriki, and you thought he was one of my shinobi?”

“Perhaps not directly affiliated,” Hiruzen allows, though his thoughts are still mostly occupied with the idea that there aren’t nine tailed beasts, but ten. This…has the potential to be very bad indeed. “Though we mostly have speculations regarding his past at this point. Something your father did, maybe? Uzumaki Kurama looks to at least share blood with a Kumo nin somewhere in his past.”

With a deep frown, A looks over at Bee, then blows out a heavy breath. “Maybe,” he allows
grudgingly. “My father was a good man, and a strong Kage. That doesn’t mean he didn’t keep secrets.”

Kurama would be a hell of a secret to keep, Hiruzen thinks wryly. Though perhaps less of one if he fled to Uzushio as a child. Or maybe it wasn’t the Raikage’s project at all—if Orochimaru and Danzō’s actions have taught Hiruzen anything, it’s that a Kage can never entirely control their village, no matter how they wish to.

“We should speak somewhere more private,” Rasa says quietly, tilting his head back in the direction of the Administration Building. Hiruzen would be annoyed by the presumption, but the thought of Danzō reminds him that not all the ears potentially nearby are guaranteed to be loyal.

“A good idea,” he agrees, and inclines his head to A. “Welcome to Konoha, A.”

A flicker of reluctant amusement rises in A’s eyes before it’s tamped down, and he snorts as he steps through the gates.

“This place is kind of neat,” Bee says, following close behind, and Hiruzen is all too familiar with that kind of I-dare-you-to-stop-me cheer. He braces himself for anything. “Too bad the whole village smells like—urk!”

“Shut up!” A hisses at his brother, currently in a headlock as if he isn’t one of the most powerful shinobi alive—as if both of them aren’t. “I told you to stop rapping! One more word and it’s the Iron Claw for you!”

Why, Hiruzen wonders, a little despondently. Why must the best shinobi always have such colorful personalities? At least Hiruzen’s fondness for tastefully erotic literature is both subtle and easily hidden. Unfortunately, he’s come to see that he’s a definite minority where his quirks are concerned.

Yugito isn’t entirely certain what she was expecting when Matatabi told her to find a wayward bijuu trapped in human form. More…inhumanity, perhaps. Anger, fury, destruction. A creature of rage and fire and inhuman hunger, tearing his way across the Elemental Countries without allowing anything to get in his way.

What she’s found instead is a man, tired and tense, with lines around his eyes that are from equal parts good humor and weariness. His hair is like a beacon, brilliantly red, and his eyes are three shades darker, warm like coals in the heart of a fire on a cold night. Between his ragged, unpatched clothing and his bare feet, he looks like the deceptively wise beggar from a story, giving lessons to the emperor, rather than a construct of chakra given life and intelligence.

“Up, up,” he urges as Yugito watches, crouched down next to one of the other small bodies she missed last night. “Come on, kit, it’s morning and we’ve got a long day ahead of us. If you don’t get up now I’m going to chuck you in the pond.”

There’s a sleepy grumble, a wordless protest, but the little blond boy sits up, rubbing at his eyes. Kurama chuckles softly, ruffling his hair like Yugito has seen parents do to their children before, and drops a handful of granola bars into his lap. Then he moves on to the redhead curled up next to the blond, whose eyes are already open even if he doesn’t look entirely happy about it, and one dark hand combs gently through spiky crimson hair.

“All right, Gaara?” Kurama asks, and gets a nod as the boy sits up. More granola bars change hands,
and Gaara immediately tears one open, nibbling at it tiredly.

He’s…gentle, Yugito thinks, pulling his haori a little more tightly around herself and staying silent. That’s something else she hadn’t expected at all. Gentle in a way she’d never really encountered before. Her teachers are brutal, and their methods are harsh. Kumo is a little friendlier to its jinchuuriki than any other country, she knows, but that doesn’t mean it’s nice, living there. Yugito has been training since she was two years old, and she’s never felt human. Bee is kind, and he’s fond of her, but he’s also permanently busy, either shadowing the Raikage or training on his own. And A—he believes that jinchuuriki have no right to anything, not even their own decisions. They’re tools for the good of the village first and foremost.

Yugito has been raised to believe that, to know it and hold it dear, to use it to grow stronger. But…Matatabi is a constant presence inside of her, with a will of her own, and sometimes Yugito can’t help but look at her and think, *But this isn’t what I want. Won’t I ever get a choice?*

“Morning already, Kurama-nii?” the last body asks, shedding blankets as it sits up to reveal a girl only a little younger than Yugito, with pretty leaf-green hair and eyes like a sunset before a storm. Those eyes slip past Kurama, instantly alighting on Yugito, and her entire face lights up. “Oh! Are you another jinchuuriki?”

That gets her even more attention, the two little boys jerking out of their sleep-hazes to blink at her in surprise, and Yugito swallows down her nervousness, the faint flicker of *what if they don’t like me what if I can’t be one of them even here,* then squares her shoulders and nods. “I’m Nii Yugito, and my bijuu is Matatabi, the Nibi. Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m Uzumaki Naruto!” the blond boy answers enthusiastically. “An’ I’ve got the Kyuubi in my head!”

“Fū, formerly of Takigakure,” the girl offers with a smile. “My bijuu is Chōmei, the Nanabi. I’m glad you’re here! It’s so cool to meet the others.”

The redheaded boy glances between his two friends, aquamarine eyes wide and faintly cautious, and then looks at Kurama. When Kurama just rolls his eyes and scuffs a hand through his hair again, the boy flushes, ducks his head, and says quietly, “I’m Gaara no Sabaku. With Shukaku. The Ichibi.”

“Now that we all know everyone’s got a name, let me borrow your hairbrush for a second, Fū,” Kurama says, rising from his crouch. That tone is probably meant to sound annoyed, but there’s amusement in his eyes, and warmth on his face. Yugito can’t bring herself to even begin to feel offended.

“Are you actually gonna brush your hair?” Fū asks interestedly. “I can help!”

“It’s not for me, brat,” Kurama returns, exasperated. He takes the brush she passes him, then sits down in front of the dying fire and beckons Yugito closer. “C’mere, kitten. Let’s see what we can do to get you looking less like a murder scene.”

For a moment, Yugito thinks about protesting that she’s more than capable of doing it herself, that she’s always brushed her hair before and never had anyone to help her, but—

But she’s never had anyone offer to help, and surely it will be okay to accept that sort of kindness, just this once.

Silently, she slides over, settling in front of Kurama’s crossed legs and turning her back to him. There’s a pause, and then fingers slip through her hair, pulling it back over her shoulders. The feeling
of it hanging free is unfamiliar; as long as she can remember Yugito has kept it tied back, out of her
way. That’s simply how a shinobi wears it, and she’s never once been anything but a shinobi.

Out of the corner of her eye, Yugito can see clever fingers tipped with sharp claws picking
determinedly at a knot, and…she doesn’t know how to feel about that. The simplest way to deal with
all the mud and blood matted into her hair would be to cut it off, or just yank the brush through.
That’s what she would do, what she had planned on in a vague way when she could push down the
fear and desperation enough to focus on silly, inconsequential things like hair. But Kurama is taking
the time to work each mat apart, to free each strand before he gently slides the brush through it, and
that’s also unfamiliar. Alarmingly so.

*Matatabi?* she asks, because that’s who she always asks, and has ever since they first came to an
understanding.

Deep within her mind, there’s a soft chuckle, a warm touch like the brush of fur against her cheek.
*Don’t let the grumpiness fool you. Kurama has a soft heart under all the bluster. He used to hide it
better, but I think he’s stopped trying now.*

Yugito is…glad. She pulls the haori a little more closely around her, not for the warmth so much as
the scent of fire and sky-clean wind caught in the fabric, and closes her eyes against the gentle tugs
of the brush through her long hair.

“When you want me to leave it lose, kitten?” Kurama asks, and Matatabi is the only one who’s ever
called her that, but…she doesn’t mind it, coming from this man. “I can braid it if you want. Think I
remember how to do that, at least.”

For a moment, Yugito debates letting it fall free, but…she’s still a shinobi, even if she’s currently
abandoned her village. She could have run to Kumo, after all—it was far closer to the Valley of
Clouds and Lightning than Kurama was—but Matatabi had spoken of others like her, children like
her, and—she hadn’t been able to resist. A poor choice, probably, and likely the wrong one, her
teachers would say.

Her teachers are dead, though, slaughtered without hesitation or mercy when the shinobi with the
purple eyes came for her. Yugito wasn’t fond of them, could even say she hated them, but she hardly
wanted them dead.

Matatabi said that people were hunting the jinchuuriki, hunting Kurama and the children he had
saved from loneliness, unhappiness, abuse. And Yugito had looked towards Kumogakure, had
hesitated even with that fearsome chakra seething behind her, and…turned away. Because there was
a chance, if she went to Kurama, that he could save her. There was a chance that she could save *him,*
or at the very least help him. Yugito isn’t fooling herself when she thinks she’s a talented kunoichi;
after all, she’s never had a chance to be anything else.

Finding Kurama was her *own* decision, the first she’s ever really made. And if being a good shinobi
will help him, she’ll keep doing it. But this time, instead of it being for someone else, it will be for
*her.* Because she wants to. Because she *chooses* to.

She likes that idea, the same way she liked Kurama’s words about family.

(She doesn’t know her family, not really. She’s A’s cousin, but it’s a distant relation at best,
unacknowledged beyond making her eligible to be a jinchuuriki. Matatabi is more of a mother to her
than the woman she’s seen pictures of but never met. And—the other children here call Kurama
*Kurama-nii,* like he’s their brother. Yugito has seen how A and Bee are together, and she thinks she
might want that, too.)
“Braid it,” she says, quiet but firm. “It gets in my way otherwise.”

Those claw-tipped fingers brush her cheek, gentle despite the danger inherent in their edges. “It’s pretty,” Kurama says as he gathers the strands up in his hands. “Like sunlight on sand.”

Yugito ducks down a little, hiding the flush on her cheeks in Kurama's haori. No one’s ever said that about her hair before. No one’s ever said that about her before.

Maybe it really was the wrong choice, finding Kurama instead of returning to Kumo. Still, Yugito finds that she doesn’t regret it at all.
It’s possible Kurama may have been a little hasty in choosing to come to Uzushio.

Fuji rubs up against his ankles as he steps forward, grimly staring over the expanse of rubble and ruins that was once a thriving Hidden Village. Small, maybe, populated mainly by Uzumaki and the handful of nearby fisherman’s sons and daughters who dreamed of something bigger, but—

By all rights Kurama should have little attachment to this place. It was the home of two of his jailors, seen during visits the handful of times Mito was able to bring herself to leave Konoha. Kushina left before its destruction, if only barely, and afterwards she never wanted to go back.

Kurama’s finding he’s not all too keen on the idea either.

It looks like Kusa, the first village to fall to Kaguya. Not exactly the same, maybe—Uzushio was built with coast stone heavy enough to withstand the sea, rising in terraces up into the hills, colorful and chaotic and very much a mirror of its inhabitants. Kusa was more barren, more serious, touched with a blatant edge of defiance in the face of Kaguya’s approach that they suffered for when they fell.

(They’d thought that, with shinobi having held her off once, they’d be able to do it again. They didn’t realize that even the boys who’d defeated her before weren’t enough to manage it a second time. Not without the miracles that had given them their victory the first time.)

Another brush of fur against the skin of his ankle, three tails flickering against his knee, and Fuji asks softly, “Kurama-sama?”

There are bones here, mixed in and among the stone and decaying wood. There weren’t bones in Kusa, because Kaguya took as many bodies as she could to animate like sick, decaying puppets, and burned the rest. Kurama steps forward, bare feet just slightly unsteady as the rubble shifts, and can’t quite remember walking all the way out here. He’s alone when he looks up, all but for Fuji—the children are back closer to where they landed, Fū with her hands on Gaara’s shoulders as she stands warily behind him, eyes searching the surrounding hills. Yugito is crouched down in front of Naruto, murmuring rapid words that don’t quite make it to Kurama’s ears, and he wonders if she knows anything about the Uzumaki clan. It should be him explaining all of this to Naruto, except—

It looks like Kusa when Kaguya was through with it, tumbled houses and shattered walls and the bones of a civilization mixed with the rubble. Kurama picks his way past leg bones half-buried in the dirt, a shattered skull beneath the stones of fallen archway. It doesn’t look looted—hardly looks touched, for that matter. No one came to bury the dead, and Kurama is startled by how furious he feels at the thought. Whirlpool Country is a tiny place, but some people must have survived. Uzushiogakure was hardly the only village on the island, and that no one bothered, no one cared enough—

Fur brushes his cheeks as Fuji leaps onto his shoulders, slides around his neck. She licks his cheek, gently nips his ear, and Kurama startles. He misses his next step, stumbles, only just manages to get a
hand up in time to steady Fuji as he goes down, landing hard on his knees.

Kaguya, he thinks, and it’s like times are blurring in his head, like now has suddenly become then and Uzushio has changed to Kusa, to Iwa, to Kumo, to Suna. There’s not enough evidence to make his mind believe that he’s not seeing Kaguya’s handiwork, that Uzushio fell long before her plots reached their conclusion. And mixed in with the ruined village is Naruto, falling, dying, breaking, blood on a shirt and one last smile for Kurama on his lips. It hurts, aches so badly that for a moment Kurama can’t even breathe.

Then footsteps clatter against skidding stone, hasty and incautious. A familiar voice cries “Kurama-nii!” and a bare second later a small body slams into his chest. Kurama startles, claws coming up in a sharp slash, but small, callused hands catch them gently, one on each side. Another body presses against his back, short arms attempting to wrap around his chest.

“Kurama-nii?” Naruto asks again, and—he’s not dead. He’s not the victim of Kaguya’s madness and greed. Not this time. He’s here and safe and alive, and Kurama chokes on a sound that’s very much like a sob. There are still hands holding his wrists, Fū and Yugito pressing in from the sides and already familiar with a shinobi’s instincts in the midst of pain, and Kurama doesn’t try to pull away. He slumps forward instead, shoulders rounding, dropping his head on top of Naruto’s bright hair and pressing back into Gaara’s determined hold.

“I’m here, kit,” he murmurs, and pretends he can’t feel his eyes burning. “I—shit, I’m sorry, I’m here and I’m not going anywhere, promise.”

“You can go anywhere you want to,” Naruto tells him stubbornly. “But me and Gaara an’ Fū an’ Yugito are coming too!”

That startles a laugh out of him, rough and surprised. “What the hell did I do to land myself with all four of you?” he asks, but the complaint doesn’t even pretend at carrying bite, and Naruto just grins.

“You became our Kurama-nii,” he informs Kurama cheerfully. “An’ you don’t get to take it back ever.”

Throat tight, Kurama gently tugs his hands away from the girls, then hooks his fingers around their waists and drags them down into a hug, wrapping his arms around as much of the three of them as he can. “C’mere, squirt,” he orders, groping blindly behind him. “You’re not getting out of this either.”

“I don’t want to get out of it,” Gaara tells him solemnly, letting himself be grabbed and dragged into the embrace, and he leans into Kurama’s shoulder like it’s exactly where he wants to be.

Lower down, half-squished by a giggling Fū and a flushed Yugito, Naruto makes a sound of wordless complaint and wrinkles upward, planting his feet on Kurama’s thighs and getting enough height to wrap his arms around Kurama’s head. “Yeah!” he agrees. “I don’t want that either! You give the best hugs, Kurama-nii!”

If he does, it’s only because he remembers the one Naruto gave him right before the end, all warmth and certainty and kindness, as hot as sunlight after a long winter and shot through with the certainty that Kurama would save them all. He laughs again and it’s easier this time, freer, because while he’s still mourning his Naruto, it’s a hell of a lot harder with that sun-bright smile three inches from his face.

“Well, you four aren’t doing all that badly yourselves,” he answers, squeezing a little more tightly.

Fū huffs softly, resting her head on his free shoulder and reaching up to stroke Fuji’s fur. “If we were
better, we wouldn’t have let you get sad in the first place,” she counters. “I'm sorry, Kurama-nii.”

“We'll pay better attention next time,” Yugito agrees, offering the younger girl a quick flash of a smile before she turns serious eyes on Kurama. “I'm sorry, too, Kurama. I—didn’t think, but you're an Uzumaki, too, kind of.”

“More or less,” Kurama agrees, because he might as well be, by virtue of the body he unintentionally hijacked. Besides, he knows his Naruto—nominally Clan Head since Kushina's death, since Nagato wasn’t exactly an appropriate candidate—well enough to be certain that the idiot would have eagerly jumped on the idea, and not let up until Kurama agreed. “And you guys have nothing to apologize for. I just—wasn’t expecting there to still be bodies here. It…threw me, for a second.”

“People say the ruins are haunted by those who died in the attack,” a matter-of-fact voice offers, and in a flash Kurama is on his feet, snarling, claws up and ready as he puts himself squarely in front of the children. Fuji yelps as she goes flying from his shoulders, but gamely turns her fall into a flip and lands as a fox the size of a pony, teeth bared and a growl rumbling in her chest. On Kurama's other side, Momiji flows past his leg, mirroring his sister with deadly silence, all five of his tails fanned out and very obvious.

Clearly slightly startled, the weathered-looking older woman before them takes a step back, raising her hands. “Peace,” she says. “I'm just a fisherwoman, not a ninja. There's a school of blue fish between two of the whirlpools, and I was looking for the best way to get to them when I heard you.”

Still wary, but willing to accept her story for the moment, Kurama inclines his head and lowers his hands, shifting back on his heels. “I thought the ghost stories came after the bodies were buried,” he says, glancing at the stark-white bones visible around them.

Her mouth quirks slightly, halfway between a smile and a grimace. “Usually,” she allows. “But usually the dead aren’t Uzumaki. Legend has it that it was the ghosts that rose even as the bodies fell who chased the Kiri nin out.”

It’s…a good story, and it’s clearly kept the looters away. Kurama takes another look, spotting flashes of steel from dropped weapons. A few feet away from them, there's another glint of metal, duller but still enough to catch his eye. Kurama steps over to it, leaving the foxes to guard Naruto and the rest, and crouches down. The bits of fabric clinging to it dissolve in his hand, fallen victim to the sea air and the years that have passed, but the hitai-ate is still a familiar weight in his palm.

He remembers his first night in this time, wishing he still had either of Naruto’s old hitai-ate, Konoha or Alliance both equally well-remembered. And this—this isn’t anything Naruto would have claimed, but…Mito wore one, once upon a time. Kushina earned hers when she accepted her mission to become the Kyuubi jinchuuriki, even if she later earned another in Konoha. Maybe Kurama isn’t actually an Uzumaki, but he has the blood, the hair, the temper. He feared and admired both Mito and Kushina, and he wonders now, with the benefit of exposure to Naruto, whether he could have loved them too, just as fiercely as he does his third jinchuuriki. Probably. After all, Naruto was always so much like Kushina, and Mito was a force of nature to rival Kurama himself. He likes that kind of thing in a human.

He closes his hand around the hitai-ate, brushing his thumb over the familiar spiral, and checks the backing. It should take no work at all to replace the cloth, and…maybe he’ll wear it. Or just keep it, if that never appeals. There are worse mementos to hold on to, and worse ways to honor his first and second jinchuuriki. They led him to Naruto, after all, and he’ll always be grateful for that.

Straightening, he tucks the metal plate inside his shirt, snug against his skin, and turns to find the fisherwoman watching him, her expression considering. Dark eyes linger on his red hair, then slide
down to study Naruto, ignoring the boy's warily aggressive expression, and then Gaara with his
crimson hair. She hums softly to herself, then says, “You're Uzumaki, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Kurama says, because it’s an easy enough exaggeration. “Uzumaki Kurama, and this is
Naruto, Fū, Gaara, and Yugito.” Coloring-wise, he supposes they all could be related, with a bit of
suspension of disbelief. Naruto looks like Kushina, like a lot of Uzumaki, and Gaara's hair is red
enough to pass. Fū’s skin is only a little lighter than his own, and a little darker than Naruto's, and
Yugito is blonde enough to be related to Naruto. It’s at least not completely inconceivable, and the
woman suggested it herself. She’ll be all too happy to believe it, since it was her idea in the first
place.

The woman nods, satisfied, and offers, “I'm Takeda Anzu, headwoman of the village of the eastern
point of the island. You’ve been gone for a while, Uzumaki.”

“Kurama,” he corrects, because he may have claimed the name and the relation, but he’s not about to
overuse it here of all places. Maybe souls don’t linger, but…they could. Kurama's had too many
experiences with people waiting for loved ones between worlds; he’s not about to test the patience of
an entire city full of the dead. “I was busy.”

Her gaze flickers to the children again, and she smiles a little. “I can see that.”

Before Kurama can even start to bristle, a small hand twists into the hem of his haori, and Naruto
whispers fearfully, “Kurama-nii, Kurama-nii, there are ghosts here? We're gonna get killed and eaten
and haunted!”

Oh yeah. Naruto's ridiculous thing about ghosts. Kurama smothers a smile, reaching down to pick
the boy up and hoist him onto his hip. “Yeah, yeah, you'll be fine. I promised to protect you, didn’t
I? That includes from ghosts just as much as living idiots.” He assesses their little group, trying to
judge; Momiji and Fuji will need at least a few hours to recover from the flight here, and by that time
it will be dark, so they might as well find somewhere to hunker down overnight. He really doesn’t
want to come on Kiri in broad daylight. Even coming in under the cover of darkness will be tricky
enough.

“My sons should have dinner ready shortly,” Anzu offers unexpectedly, making Kurama blink at
her. She smiles, just a little, and despite the lines it puts in her sun-browned face it’s a kind
expression. “I’ve always wondered if any Uzumaki survived, and whether they’d return if they did.
Consider it my thanks for settling a long-standing bet with myself, if nothing else.”

Food sounds amazing, Kurama thinks, and tries not to remember when he last had a full hot meal.
Before he arrived, Naruto and the rest of the survivors had been living on carefully rationed stores
that they had no way to replace, always just enough to keep them alive but no more. This body is
used to a lack of food, but that doesn’t mean Kurama has to like it.

“Thank you,” he says, trying not to wince as Naruto's stomach roars. “I don’t—I'm out of money—”

Anzu actually chuckles at that. “Feeding four growing brats, I’ll bet you are,” she answers with
humor. “And this island is peaceful, so there won't be much call for shinobi work here. If you’d like,
though, I can take you to the Daimyō’s house tomorrow—his older brother was married to Uzushio's
headwoman, and I'm sure he’ll have some sort of solution. Uzushio earned our gratitude, pushing
Kiri back like they did. If they hadn’t, we’d be an extension of the Bloody Mist, and only a fool
wouldn’t know who to thank for the fact that we aren’t.”

Kurama's fingers curl into Naruto's shirt, and he breathes carefully to control the roiling of his chakra.
Whatever Kiri was looking for that made them invade, made them slaughter an entire city, Kurama
hopes they found it. And choked on it, preferably. “Thanks,” he says again, and wonders if it really is feasible. The daimyō are political powers, definitely, but for a country like Whirlpool, with a handful of people and a brisk trade in salted fish? The man won't exactly have a lot of sway. Still, if Kurama can convince him to keep it a secret—and the Uzumaki name might be enough to do so—it might work. It would be a far sight better than forging on blindly with no resources.

There's a tug on the hem of his shirt, and Kurama looks down to see Gaara staring up at him, eyes wide and not quite demanding enough to be entreating, but certainly hopeful. With a low and mostly theatrical groan, Kurama crouches down and scoops the boy up in his free arm, boosting him up onto his hip. “Anyone else?” he asks grumpily, eyeing the girls.

Yugito instantly flushes, shaking her head quickly, but Fū laughs with reckless abandon, ducks around behind Kurama, and leaps onto his back like a monkey. She hooks her knees around his sides, just above where he’s holding Gaara and Naruto, and leans over his shoulder, looping her arms around his neck. “Thanks, Kurama-nii!” she says brightly.

“I'm going to drown you,” Kurama grouches, though he doesn’t even try to sound like he means it. These kids have had enough people threaten to do them harm.

“No you're not,” Fuji says sweetly, sliding up next to him and leaning heavily into his side. “If you didn’t do it the first seventeen times you said it, you're not going to do it now.”

“I could!” Kurama protests, not liking where this conversation is going.

Momiji snorts, leaning into his other side to balance out his sister. “No you couldn’t,” he answers dryly.

“I'll turn all of you into stew,” Kurama tells them. “All of you. It’ll be stringy, and tough, but it will be what all of you deserve.”

“I love you, Kurama-nii,” Naruto says cheerfully, and gives him a loud, slightly clumsy kiss on the cheek. Never one to be outdone, Gaara mimics him on the other side, and Fū, laughing brightly, leans in to do the same. “Gross,” Kurama mutters, but he waves his left elbow at Yugito until she slips her hand around his arm, and then turns to look at their unexpected host.

Anzu is still watching silently, but her face is creased in a warm, fond smile, and when she sees that she has Kurama's attention she tips her head towards the curve of the shore. “This way,” she says, and when she turns and starts walking Kurama falls into step with her.

“Don’t you need to check on your fish?” he asks after a moment.

The woman hums. “They're trapped by the whirlpools until the current shifts. I should have at least a week, unless a storm blows in before then. From the look of you, I assume you won't be staying anywhere near that long.”

She’s perceptive. Kurama isn’t certain whether it’s just from experience, or if he looks that worn-down and desperate. “No, we can't. One night should be fine, but—we’re popular for all the wrong reasons.”

Thankfully, Anzu accepts that with a tip of her head. “People’s reasons for wanting Uzushio gone were always more about wanting the Uzumaki Clan gone,” she says a little sadly. “I've traveled up and down the coast for years, but I've never seen another one. Not that I could recognize, at least. Not until you.”

“Kushina went to Konoha. There's at least that.” Kurama shifts Naruto a little, not looking at
anything beyond the rolling blue-grey of the ocean. “I—Naruto. He’s her son.”

“And a fine job Konoha is doing taking care of him. The same way they took care of her,” Anzu answers tartly, and then, catching the surprise that Kurama can’t quite hide, she sighs and deflates a little. “Forgive me. Uzushio and Konoha were allies—friends—going back to the time when there was just the Senju and the Uzumaki. But they didn’t come. My aunt was a shinobi, and she died on the walls before they fell. Konoha never came, even after the news of the village’s destruction reached them. I hold a grudge, and I don’t care to hide it.”

She must have been…fifteen, probably, or a little older when it happened, Kurama judges. Children take the loss of those close to them hard. Saying sorry won't do anything, won't help ease what’s clearly still an ache, so Kurama simply nods. “Nothing to forgive,” he says, and his voice emerges rough. “I—thank you. For all of this. For not assuming we were enemies.”

“I’m not a shinobi,” she reminds him, but her eyes say she knows very well what he means. “Even if you were, all I could do was beat you with a fishing rod.”

It might as well be you're welcome and my pleasure, for all that it remains unvoiced.

“Leave those rags,” Anzu says briskly. “I'm going to burn them. They're not even fit for scrubbing floors.”

“Excuse me?” Kurama hisses, one hand on his shirt. He keeps his voice low, because Naruto, Gaara, and Fū are still asleep, sprawled out across the main room, but makes sure to inject as much indignation as he can into the words.

The expression Anzu favors him with is entirely unimpressed. “My late husband’s clothes will fit you,” she informs him. “Wear them instead of that. I'm surprised you haven’t caught something deadly and contagious off of it at this point.”

“I've been traveling,” Kurama protests. “And I spent most of my money on food and lodging. There wasn’t exactly a lot left for anything else.”

Thankfully, there's nothing even remotely similar to pity in Anzu's expression, just understanding humor. “And now you don’t have to spend anything. Take the clothes. Kei certainly isn’t going to be wearing them anymore, and they're just gathering dust here. Wear these, and I'll pack the rest.”

This isn’t an argument Kurama is going to win, so he swallows the pride that makes him want to protest, takes the pile of fabric she hands him, and says, “I…appreciate it.”

Anzu smiles slightly. “I raised two boys and a hellion daughter, Kurama. A little help always makes things easier. Change, and when you're ready I'll take you to see the Daimyō.”

Out the door of the small, slightly crooked house, Kurama can see the sun just starting to break the horizon. He gives it an assessing glance, judging how much long they're going to have before the Freak Squad or Kakuzu turns up, and then starts pulling on the clean kimono shirt and loose pants. They're nothing fancy, worn but serviceable and lovingly mended in several places, but they're far warmer than the ragged remainders of Han’s old clothes, and fit a lot better.

“Don’t you need an appointment to see the Daimyō?” he asks as the fisherwoman turns away, ladling up a bowl of the same thick rice porridge she served him for breakfast. It's the kind of stuff
Naruto used to complain about Sasuke forcing him to eat the few times he actually got sick, but Kurama is never going to take it for granted again. Hot food of any kind is a blessing.

Anzu snorts. “The daimyō of other countries, maybe. But Takauji puts his pants on one leg at a time, just like the rest of us. He’s to be respected, certainly, but he doesn’t have enough people to make us stand on ceremony all the time. We’ve too much to do. I would recommend you leave the children here, though—we may have to wait if he’s busy.”

Kurama stiffens automatically, not liking that idea at all. Even so, before he can manage to open his mouth, Yugito offers, “Matatabi says she’ll watch us.”

Ignoring Anzu’s flicker of confusion, Kurama turns to the blonde, who accepts her bowl of porridge with a thankful murmur. “Oh, so now she can watch you brats,” he huffs, and if it’s slightly sour he thinks he’s entitled. “Useless witch of a cat.”

Yugito levels a rebuking look at him. “Matatabi says you're a grumpy old bastard with no sense of humor, but she likes the rest of us. She’ll keep watch.”

Well, that’s what Kurama was originally hoping for when he made tracks for Kumo, so he supposes he can't really complain. Much. Still, he levels a dark look at his sister, hoping she’ll see it through Yugito’s eyes, and growls, “She’d better. Stay safe, okay, kitten?”

Yugito blushes a little, ducking her head, but after a moment she looks up again and meets his eyes. “I’ll keep them safe,” she promises, and the determination turns her eyes to steel. “I swear I will.”

These broken children are definitely going to be the death of him. Kurama sighs, crouching down in front of her so he can meet her eyes squarely. “Keep yourself safe too,” he reminds her, reaching out to tug gently on her re-braided hair. “I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to any one of you. I've lost enough people. You get in trouble, look for an opening and run. Find me. Got it?”

Mute, Yugito nods, and Kurama gives her a smile, leaning in to kiss her forehead before he stands. “Ready to go?” he asks Anzu.

“Whenever you are,” she agrees, giving Yugito a smile of her own. “It’s about an hour walking, so we likely won't be back before noon.”

“Yeah, no. We’re not walking,” Kurama informs her flatly, the idea of leaving the kids for so long sticking in his craw, and sticks his head out the door. Fuji and Momiji are sprawled across the porch, ripping into a pile of fish with enthusiasm, and Kurama clears his throat to get their attention. When they both look up, he asks, “Think one of you can haul us over to the village where the daimyō lives?”

“I can,” Momiji offers immediately, rising to his feet. Fuji steals his half-eaten fish right out from between his paws, and he gives her an aggravated growl. “Annoying little sisters can stay and watch the skulk. Don’t get into trouble, okay?”

Fuji flips her tails at him, but her mouth is so full that she can't quite manage an answer.

“Well, this’ll certainly be a story to tell at the bar,” Anzu says with amusement. “Not that anyone will believe me.”

“Humans,” Momiji scoffs, and Kurama rolls his eyes, vaulting onto the reynard’s back.

“Right. Because they're all terrible, even when they give you all the food you can stuff your face with.” He raises a challenging brow at Anzu, who’s hovering warily a few feet back, and her
expression firms. She swings on behind him, wrapping an arm around his waist, and as soon as she’s seated Momiji takes three long, bounding strides and launches himself into the air.
Far from the vision of regal authority Kurama expects, Whirlpool Country’s daimyō is a small, thin, almost frumpy man, glasses sitting crookedly on his nose. When Anzu tells the lone guard why they’re there, the lord immediately has them shown to his office, and the moment they walk in Kurama knows he’s never going to able to divorce his impression of the man from the image of accounting books stacked intimidatingly high.

“Takeda,” he says as the guard lets them in, and rises from his chair to nod politely at them both. “This is rare.” Then careful brown eyes flicker over Kurama, lingering on his hair, his eyes, and he smiles. “And an Uzumaki, even rarer. By way of Kumo?”

Kurama shrugs awkwardly, tucking his hands into the wide sleeves of his shirt. “Haven’t exactly had a place to call home in a while,” he mutters, and looks away when he sees Takauji’s gaze slip into something dangerously close to pity.

“He’s got people after him,” Anzu says bluntly. “And he’s out of money, with four Uzumaki kids to look after. I was hoping you’d have a solution.”

Kurama winces. He’s terrible with people, and even he wouldn’t have phrased it like that.

The daimyō simply favors her with a faintly aggrieved look, then glances back at Kurama. “That’s true? Should we expect trouble, then?”

Thinking of Kakashi and his pet Mokuton user, Kurama grimaces. “We’re leaving today,” he says instead of answering, and then, because there’s a pinched look of concern growing on the man’s face, he adds, “They won’t aim for collateral damage, if that’s what you’re worried about. They just want me. Us.”

Takauji studies him for a long moment, then sinks back into his chair. “A lot of people want Uzumaki blood,” he says, waving them towards the unoccupied chairs across the desk. “And I mean that in every applicable way. Your clan is very powerful—Kurama, wasn’t it?—and people fear your capabilities almost as much as they want to possess them.” He hesitates, looking torn, and then admits, “As much as I wish it were otherwise, Whirlpool can’t offer you the kind of sanctuary you need. We’re a small nation, and none of us are fighters. Not anymore.”

Anzu makes a noise of quiet offense. “Beg your pardon,” she says unhesitatingly, “but we’re all fighters here. We’re just not trained soldiers, or shinobi.”

“Headwoman Takeda.” It sounds like a familiar refrain. “Your fish are certainly biting today, aren’t they?”

With a grin that shows teeth, Anzu crosses her arms over her chest. “He’s Uzumaki,” she says pointedly. “I remember what we owe. Do you?”

Indignation flickers over narrow features, but before a brawl can break out—Anzu would definitely win it, Kurama thinks with amusement, even if the daimyō does look surprisingly scrappy—Kurama
raises his hands and protests, “Please, I just—if I don’t have to trade work for lodging anymore, that’s enough for me. I’m not—it’s not for me, or I wouldn’t be asking. But the kids have already had it hard enough. I just want to keep them fed.”

That gets him a flash of surprise, and Takauji leans back, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Of course,” he says, as if it was never even open to debate. “My sister-in-law spent the majority of her time in Uzushio, since she was headwoman here, but a good portion of Uzushio’s earnings from its last years of operations are in our vault. By right of inheritance, and as the new Uzumaki Clan Head, it legally falls to you.”

Clan Head? Kurama opens his mouth in a knee-jerk protest, ready to inform the daimyō that Kushina’s son has more of a right to it than he does, when he remembers that I’m a time-traveling bijuu possessing the body of the last Clan Head and not actually an Uzumaki isn’t exactly an excuse they’re going to accept without a lot of other explanations. He bites his tongue, forces himself to nod, and gets out, “Just until the kid is old enough. It’s—it’s not a position I want to hang on to.”

“How familiar,” Takauji says, and though the tone is dry it’s also fond. “My brother used to say that the Uzumaki could rule the world if they weren’t so easily distracted.”

Kurama contemplates protesting that, too, but…Mito. Nagato. Even Karin, who was damned scary and a little too much like Kushina in a fight for comfort. He doesn’t argue.

Apparently reading something of his thoughts on his face, Takauji chuckles. “Exactly,” he says, then levels a steady stare at Anzu and adds, “I have no intention of denying you either your history or your inheritance. Whirlpool is the birthplace of the Uzumaki Clan, and we will never refuse them. I just wanted you to understand that, although we would fight to the last man—”

Anzu clears her throat.

“—or woman,” the daimyō doesn’t even falter, “for the sake of protecting you, it would be futile in the long run, especially against shinobi. The days of Whirlpool’s Hidden Village are long over, and I have a feeling they’ll never come again.”

“I wasn’t expecting anything else,” Kurama admits, and he truly wasn’t. Whirlpool was always going to be a temporary stop for them. Uzushio is gone, and although restoring it would be satisfying, there’s no one left to populate it, hardly enough Uzumaki left to count on one hand, let alone fill a village. No, Uzushio is gone, a casualty of fear and warmongering and Kiri’s bloodlust, and Kurama knows it isn’t coming back. He has ties elsewhere, and they’re not the kind he can escape. Not the kind he wants to escape. “And…still. Thank you.”

Takauji smiles at him. “I’m hardly a lord at all,” he says. “I’ve spent as much time on a fishing boat as every other person in this town, and I don’t have a lot of high-flung ideas about my own importance. Certainly not enough to keep you from what’s rightfully yours.” There’s a quiet knock on the door, and he rises to open it, admitting the guard from the gate. She’s carrying a small bag, stuffed full, and bows politely to Kurama before she offers it to him.

Money isn’t something Kurama has ever cared for, not until he needed it or risked letting Naruto and the others go hungry. Right now, though, he can feel relief unspooling in his chest, a twist of breathless gratitude directed at fate in general, and Anzu and the daimyō in particular, that leaves him almost dizzy. He takes the bag, bowing stiffly in return, and tries not to think of how much easier everything will be. They’re still running, but…lodging in bad weather, hot food, good clothes—it’s all in reach now.

Hitting Kiri might just turn out to be a good idea after all. Sage knows this part is already turning out
better than the majority of Kurama's previous decisions.

“I just had her pack what you can easily carry, but any time you need additional funds, send word. I'm sorry we can't do more,” Takauji says, and there's true regret in his voice.

Abruptly, ridiculously, Kurama wants to laugh. He remembers Sarutobi's coolly assessing gaze, the second innkeeper's hostility. Han helped, Rōshi helped, but—they're jinchūriki. They're in nearly the same boat. It's different when the helps comes from just...people. Regular people, with no real stake in Kurama's future, or the kids' futures. Normal people, helping because they can, because they think they should, and—

These are the people Naruto always wanted to save. The good, steady, solid ones, like Old Man Teuchi and Ayame and Iruka. Little things, but Kurama can see now that they're enough to make the world shift.

“You've done more,” Kurama says, intent, completely honest, “than everyone else I've met in a long time, combined. Thank you.”

Takauji holds his eyes, steady and strong, and nods. “Keep those children safe,” he says quietly. “They're the future. They deserve the best one possible.”

Kurama thinks of darkness, of Kaguya’s reanimated soldiers staggering across a devastated countryside. Thinks of eleven shinobi left alive, and no civilians, and the last desperate seed of hope in Naruto’s eyes. “They’ll get it,” he answers, and the words are rough but he’s never meant anything more. “No matter what, I’ll see to it.”

“I can tell that you will.” The daimyō smiles, inclining his shoulders in a bow. “I wish you all the safety and good fortune in the world, Kurama. Safe travels, wherever the wind may take you.”

There was—an old blessing. Mito used to say it to the sailors who brought her to the island, on her rare visits before everything ended. Kurama dredges through his memory, trying to come up with the appropriate phrase. “Fair winds and following seas,” he says finally, and is fairly certain it’s correct. Mito usually added a phrase about may all of the fish be stupid and swim right into your nets, but he assumes that’s probably less appropriate to say to the daimyō.

Delight crosses Takauji’s face, but before he can answer, there’s a frantic knock on the door, and it flies open without waiting for acknowledgement. A young girl in rough clothes stumbles in, dipping into a quick bow, and says, “Sir! A ship with Konoha shinobi just landed! A team with tracking dogs!”

Fuck.

Grim-faced, Takauji brushes down his robes, then says, “Momo, please inform the shinobi that I would like to speak with them, and then stall them as long as you can on the way here. Kurama, Asuka will show you out the back way. Your...fox?”

In answer, there's a scrabbling of claws on wood, and Momiji trots around the corner. “The air smells like dog now,” he complains, and slides over to press against Kurama’s leg. “We’re going?”

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“We’re going,” Kurama confirms, twisting his fingers into Momiji’s long ruff. Momiji doesn’t know what Kakashi and his group smell like, so Kurama doesn’t bother asking if it’s them. In all likelihood it is, though Kurama would sure as hell like to know how they caught up so fast. At least they landed here, and not on the other side of the island, where the kids are pretty much unprotected. Panic flickers, but Kurama stamps it down, turning to nod a farewell to the daimyō. “Thank you,” he
repeats, because no matter how many times he says it, it won't be enough.

“Go, Kurama,” Anzu says, not leaving Takauji time to answer. She grabs his elbow and propels him towards the door, where the guard is waiting. “I’ll make my own way back. Collect your brats, and get to safety.”

“You—” Kurama pauses, feeling helpless and torn. “I can't just—”

“Leave me?” Anzu gives him a smile, sharp and fierce. “I'm an old woman, Kurama. Nothing scares me anymore. I told you before I've a grudge I have no intention of hiding, and a grandmother yelling at fools in the street might give you a head start.”

Of course she plans to stall the Konoha team by shouting at them. Maybe the Uzumaki weren’t crazy to start with, and it’s actually something the water here. “Be careful,” Kurama tells her, even though he already knows she’s not going to listen, and hopes that the Freak Squad is feeling patient today. “I —this is all because of you. That we can go on. Thanks. Really.”

She laughs at him and pinches his cheek. “Go, Uzumaki. We’ll meet again.”

They will, Kurama promises himself fiercely, nodding and turning to follow the guard. She leads him down a few short halls, then out into a dry garden, and through a weathered gate set into the high wall. Kurama slips through it, then immediately vaults onto Momiji’s back and nods his thanks to her.

“Good luck,” the guard offers with a sly smile. “Keep low at first or they’ll see you, but there’s a river gorge just south of the town that will be faster than flying around the hills, and blocks the line of sight.” Without waiting for a reply, she pulls the gate shut again, and Kurama can hear her steps hurrying away.

“Huh.” Momiji sounds thoughtful, even as foxfire flickers around his paws, lifting them into the air. “Maybe you're right. Humans can be pretty decent, can't they?”

“So I'm finding,” Kurama answers gruffly, and tries not to think what these people are risking, helping the way they are. Technically Whirlpool is its own nation, but in reality, it’s so small that any form of retribution from the other countries would be entirely devastating. And that’s not even accounting for the risks they're taking personally.

Kakashi won't kill a civilian, he tells himself, and manages to believe it. At least the image of Anzu bellowing at the Copy-Nin and companions gets a smirk from him. He’d probably pay actual money, now that he has it, just to see that.

“Think the kits are all right?” Momiji asks, ignoring the looks they're garnering as they sweep down a street and out of the town. The gorge rises on their left while the road cuts right around the foot of the tall hills, and Momiji ignores the worn track to climb higher, letting the stone walls block them from view.

They have to be. “I don’t see smoke,” Kurama points out, and though he was aiming for dryly amused it comes out terse, nervous tension twisting his stomach into knots. It’s one thing to have the Freak Squad close in when the kids are close by, in range. Right now they're alone, and while Yugito and Fū both have some training, and Naruto at least knows how to make shadow clones, but they don’t have a way to run if they're cornered. Fuji can't fly without help, and she won't get far running while weighed down with four bodies.

Rather than answering, Momiji redoubles his pace, soaring forward with enough speed that Kurama
leans low against his neck to keep his eyes from stinging in the wind. The mouth of the gorge looms around them, then falls away behind them, and a moment later the outskirts of Anzu’s small village are rapidly approaching. Her house is on the far side, down a wide, quiet lane and settled on a cliff overlooking the sea, and the relief when it comes into view is so immense Kurama almost feels faint.

But there’s a man in a flak jacket standing in the center of the street, looking up at the house.

A snarl of pure fury tears its way out of Kurama’s throat, and Momiji dives like a comet, leaving a trail of foxfire behind him. They touch down hard, the reynard’s paws skidding sideways in a clatter of gravel, and Kurama leaps from his back to land in a crouch, claws bared.

The man doesn’t take so much as a step back. Meeting Kurama's eyes with a calm, steady stare, he tucks his hands into his pockets and says in a lazy drawl, “Hey.”

It’s the sight of his hitai-ate, worn like a bandana and tied on backwards so that the plate doesn’t show, that sparks a memory, and Kurama freezes. He casts a suspicious, hostile glance at the tokubetsu jounin, feels fur against his leg, and risks a glance back towards the house. Yugito is hovering in the doorway, eyes wide and face pale but otherwise unhurt, and Fū is crowded close behind her, equally unharmed. Kurama can't make out anything in the shadows beyond them, but he knows bone-deep that Yugito wouldn’t just be standing there if anything had happened to the boys. He nods to her, and she casts him a quick, brave smile in return, fingers tightening hard around the edge of the door.

Now that the panic is dying down, though, the confusion is setting in. He turns back to the tokujo, all too familiar, but this isn’t the man who died for Naruto, who stepped in the way of one of Kaguya’s blows as they were escaping Konoha the final time. He’s not that person yet, and while the memory is enough to make Kurama slightly more ready to listen, he’s not about to let his guard down.

“Yeah?” he asks warily. “What the fuck do you want?”

“To ask you a question,” Genma says readily, easily, and tips his head a little, studying Kurama with sharp hazel eyes. “You willing to answer me honestly?”

That’s really not what Kurama was expecting. He blinks, then steps back, lowering his hands. “Yeah,” he agrees, and means it.

Apparently reading that in his face, Genma smiles and clicks his senbon against his teeth. It looks like a cute little oral-fixation quirk, but Kurama’s seen him spit it with enough force to knock a kunai out of the air. Genma isn’t exactly a threat, not really, and definitely not in a head-on fight, but he’s an assassin, one of the best. It won’t be a head-on fight.

“You’ve been doing a lot of running,” he says mildly. “You’ve got the countries in an uproar, and everyone’s throwing around theories. What I want to know’s a little different.” He pauses, considering, and then asks, “Do you have any plans to bring Naruto back to Konoha?”

That’s…really, really not what Kurama was expecting. He stares dumbly at the man for a long beat, then answers with complete truthfulness, “I never wanted to take Naruto away from Konoha. It’s his village, and he belongs there. Of course we’ll come back.”

Instantly, the tension Kurama had hardly even noticed in Genma's posture eases. He grins, lazy and warm, and reaches up to pull the senbon from his mouth and flip it across his knuckles. “I thought so,” he says, satisfied, and waves to the kids in doorway with a friendly smile.

Konoha nin are all insane. Kurama eyes him dubiously, then asks, “That’s all?”
Genma shrugs. “I’ve got a pretty solid sense about people, and there was a lot of time to think on the way here. Met up with Kakashi a few minutes ago to give him a message from the Kage, and he mentioned that they went up against you, but you never tried to kill them.” A soft huff of laughter, and he sinks down on someone’s stairs, draping his arms over his knees. “The Hokage’s got a lot of theories about you, Uzumaki, but I think most of them are missing the obvious. Kakashi, too. You love that kid. You wouldn’t have taken him away otherwise. They were going to separate you, and you’d do anything to keep that from happening.”

There’s a knot in Kurama’s throat, something tight and painful, and he turns automatically to look at the house again. Bright blond hair glows in the sunlight as Naruto eels through the gap between Yugito’s body and the door, and when he catches sight of the street he shouts, “Kurama-nii!” in gleeful joy and hurls himself forward.

Kurama doesn’t try to stop him, just drops to one knee and lets the kid throw himself at him, then scoops him up and rises to his feet. When he turns, Genma’s smile has softened, and he looks… wistful.

“Kakashi’s nearby?” Kurama asks gruffly, shifting Naruto to his hip—on the far side from Genma, because there’s trusting and then there’s stupid, and he didn’t get that much from his Naruto—and then something Genma said registers. “Wait a second—Kage? As in plural?”

With a soft snort, Genma tips his chin in confirmation. “I told you you’ve got ‘em in an uproar.”

“There’s in an uproar and then there’s in cahoots,” Kurama mutters. *Fuck.* As if it wasn’t bad enough when they all wanted to kill him separately. Now they’ve joined forces to do it. “And you didn’t answer my question. Kakashi?”

A flash of perfect innocence, hiding a grin that’s nearly sly. “Yeah, he’s here. Our boats crossed paths, so I walked over to meet up with him. He and his squad landed a little north of the ruins and went to check them out. I said I’d talk to the villagers here. You’ve probably got twenty, maybe thirty minutes before he notices I’m not on my way back.” Reaching into his vest, he pulls out a rolled scroll and tosses it over. “There. The search grid our tracking teams are using, though once I tell ‘em my copy’s missing they’ll probably change it up a bit.”

Treason is a serious charge for a shinobi, and there’s only one punishment. Kurama stares down at the scroll for a long moment, then looks back up to meet hazel eyes a little helplessly, even as he tucks it into his sash. “Why?” he asks. “Why the hell would you do this? I don’t even know you.”

Wistfulness slides sideways into sorrow, and Genma’s smile turns crooked. “Yeah,” he agrees lightly, “you don’t. But if you’re the kid’s uncle, you were Kushina’s brother, and I loved her like an older sister. After Minato died…well. Kakashi wasn’t the only one who lost everything that night, and all of his bodyguards were encouraged to keep their distance from Naruto afterwards.”

Naruto is watching the man with a squinty-eyed look of assessment, which in a flash shifts into realization. “You!” he says with a tone like triumph. “You’re the ANBU with the tiger mask! You gave me shoulder-rides that one time!”

Genma looks utterly delighted that he remembers, and grins. “Yeah, that was me. Pretty clever, managing to swipe Sarutobi-sama’s favorite books like that. Couldn’t let you get caught just because you couldn’t get to the roofs on your own.”

Naruto beams, because of course he does. “I’m awesome,” he agrees proudly. “I’m gonna be the next Hokage, believe it!”
Genma chuckles. “Good,” he approves. “I knew your parents, and they’d both be rooting for you, Naruto. Try your hardest, okay?”

“Okay.” Naruto wriggles a little. “Kurama-nii, are you coming back now? Fū was tellin’ ghost stories! They’re super-scary.”

“In a minute,” Kurama tells him, ruffling spiky hair. “Go tell the rest of the brats to get their bags. We need to leave. Momiji, go with him.”

“Sure, Kurama-nii!” As soon as Kurama puts him on the ground, Naruto waves enthusiastically to Genma, calls, “See you later, Tiger-san!” and then races for the house, the five-tailed fox trotting at his side.

Genma watches him go, still wistful, and then sighs softly, shifting his attention back to Kurama. “You need to hurry,” he says seriously. “The Hokage, Raikage, and Kazekage are all after you, and as soon as the idiots in Taki get their heads out of their asses they’ll be chasing you, too. There are two other jinchuuriki looking for you as well—picked a fight with Kakashi when they were trying to keep him off your tail—but I don’t know where they are right now.”

There’s no one it could be but Han and Rōshi, and while Kurama has a hard time picturing Han picking a fight with anyone at all, he can definitely imagine Rōshi doing it. With any luck—and after today, Kurama isn’t entirely convinced that his is all bad—they’ve already figured out that Kiri is just about the only other option he has.

“Thank you,” he says, holding Genma’s gaze with an unexpected surge of gratitude. “I—this is…not what I expected.”

Genma just tips one shoulder in a shrug. “You’re a lot like Kushina was,” he says simply. “I couldn’t save her, and I couldn’t save Minato. Couldn’t be there for their kid, either. You I can help, and if you’re really planning on bringing Naruto back later, there’s no reason for me to feel guilty about it.” He glances north, eyes narrowing, and then says abruptly, “Hit me. Hard. Better yet, knock me out and then get going.”

Kurama looks, too; familiar chakra, approaching at a fast clip, with three other chakra signatures he’s also growing familiar with close behind. “Freak Squad incoming,” he mutters, making Genma crack a laugh. “You’re sure?” he asks seriously. “I’m strong.”

“It has to look good,” Genma counters, tossing his senbon into the dirt. “Do it.”

There’s no time to waste with arguing. Kurama leaps forward, swinging with what he hopes isn’t too much strength, and tries not to remember the version of this man who was Commander of the Hokage Guard Platoon, fond and warm and fiercely protective of Naruto, right up until the moment he died for him.

There’s a crack of skin on skin as the blow connects with the back of the tokujo’s head and Genma drops into Kurama’s arms, face going slack. At the same moment there’s a shout, almost fierce enough to be a snarl, and Kakashi cries, “Genma!”

Crap.

For half a second, Kurama debates just grabbing the tokujo and leaving with him. That’s more trouble than any of them need, though, and he shakes himself, glancing a touch over the assassin’s pulse as he lets Genma fall the rest of the way to the ground. Strong, steady—he’s not in danger of anything more than a headache.
The same, unfortunately, can't be said for Kurama.

He leaps back in a rush, dodging a flurry of kunai, and then throws himself to the ground as a fire jutsu crackles over his head. Roots erupt, grabbing for him, and Kurama curses and slashes through them as he rolls to his feet. A tantō sweeps down at his head, aiming to decapitate, but Kurama ducks in close, grabs Itachi by the throat, and tosses him right into the other Uchiha. The older boy aborts his next jutsu in a whirl of movement, catching Itachi and then spinning, and chakra flickers as he blurs out of sight.

In the same instant, a wooden wall bursts out of the ground, curving up and over Kurama's head like a dome. He leaps over it, aiming for Kakashi as the Copy-Nin prepares another charge, but before he can even clear the barrier the second Uchiha flickers into being in front of him. His hands come up, eyes spinning, and—

Kurama breathes out a blaze, as strong as a wildfire and too close to dodge, and the boy yelps. He goes tumbling to the side, barely managing to catch himself on his hands and knees, and Itachi whirls in to cover him, Sharingan like bloody pinwheels. Ducking away from a slash with a kunai, Kurama comes up with a roundhouse kick that Itachi dodges, fluid and fast, but not fast enough. Foot down, body braced, and Kurama turns hard, sliding under Kakashi's tantō and bringing one hand down.

The shockwave ripples out, tearing a crater into the street and hurling Itachi to the side. The wooden wall shatters even as it turns to reaching branches, and Kurama leaps high, comes down on the other side of the Mokuton user as he prepares another jutsu, and kicks his legs out from under him. Another jump carries him away as Kakashi lunges, and he lands lightly, knees bent, one hand on the ground. It turns into a handspring, high and quick, as Itachi makes for him again. There's blood on the kid's face, a head wound bleeding heavily, but he doesn't even seem to notice. Ninja wire flashes in the sun, bright and deadly, curving around to tangle Kurama's limbs and cut into his skin.

Kurama catches it, lazy and taunting, his hand coated with the wind chakra that comes so easily to him. “Nice try, mini-murderer,” he taunts, grinning, then breathes out hard. Fire sparks, catches, blazes down the wire towards the Uchiha. At the same time, hearing the frantic chirping of a thousand birds behind him, he spins, that same hand coming up and catching Kakashi's wrist in an immovable grip.

There's a sudden stillness, a stalemate. Kurama stares challengingly into one grey eye, teeth slightly bared, breath coming just a little harder than normal. The claws of his left hand curl slightly, resting right over Kakashi's heart. “Want to keep going?” he asks, and gives Kakashi a vicious grin. “I'm just getting started.”

Fury crackles in that flat stare, trying too hard to be unaffected. “Where is he?” Kakashi asks, low and just edging into a growl. There's fury vibrating under his skin, something just this side of true hatred, and it pricks across Kurama’s skin. He breathes it in, feels something as old as he is stir inside of him, set aside all the years of his friendship with Naruto. After all, Naruto never needed malice, never touched it.

Kakashi is well acquainted with it, even if he's more used to turning it on himself than anyone else.

“Around,” Kurama answers flippantly, and when every muscle in Kakashi's body coils tension-tight in preparation for a lunge he curls his claws warningly, pressing right through the heavy fabric of Kakashi's flak jacket and scraping skin. “Don't,” he warns, pitching his voice to carry to the other three as well. The second Uchiha—Shisui, he's pretty certain he heard Itachi say—looks the particular flavor of determined recklessness that means he's probably about to do something stupid.

From the edge of the street, there's a soft groan, a twitch. Kakashi jerks his gaze towards Genma's
sprawled form, lightning chakra dispersing with a rush like static electricity in his distraction, and Kurama takes the opening. He spins, ducks under the blow Kakashi automatically throws at the motion, and comes up with another roundhouse kick to catch Kakashi in the ribs. The Copy-Nin goes flying, and Kurama bolts the opposite way, towards the edge of the cliff visible beyond the houses. A long, hard leap carries him out into open air, and with a surge of iridescent foxfire Momiji swoops in to catch him neatly.

“Fucking love you,” Kurama gets out, breathless from the landing, and curls his arms around Naruto and Gaara. Packs bump his leg, hastily lashed to the fox’s sides, and he touches his own, feeling the reassuring weight of it.

They’re going to be fine.

With an eerie, yipping laugh, Momiji turns in a tight circle, then pushes up, rising like a stray cloud with Fuji on his right. From her back, Fū offers the startled faces of the Freak Squad a cheerful wave, and Yugito muffles a giggle behind one hand.

“Head back towards Kumo, and then once we’re out of sight turn east,” Kurama orders, keeping his voice low enough that only Momiji and the two little boys can hear him. “If you’re good to fly for a while, we should make Kiri before nightfall.”

“Your wish is my command, Kurama-sama,” Momiji agrees easily, then flicks his tails, twists into a lazy spiral, and starts to climb. Just as the air starts to thin noticeably, he banks right and picks up speed, Fuji determinedly keeping pace.

“Oh, ow,” Genma says as Kakashi helps him sit up. He presses one hand against his skull, eyes tightly closed, and winces. “Did I pick a fight with a mountain?”

“A jinchuuriki,” Kakashi corrects, allowing himself to relax just slightly at the sound of his friend’s good humor. Not that it means much; Genma will be lighthearted when the world’s ending around him, and nothing can convince Kakashi otherwise. But he’s not dead, the way Kakashi had thought when he first saw him fall, and that’s enough. “I think it’s the next best thing.”

“Apparently.” Genma wobbles slightly, and Kakashi curls an arm around his back, trying not to let his worry show. He’s felt how hard Kurama can hit, after all, and regardless of how skilled Genma is, he’s baseline human. Kakashi knows all too well how fragile that makes him.

“You should have called for backup,” he says, trying not to let it sound too reprimanding.

Genma flips a hand, very clearly waving that off. “Bad timing,” he explains. “Uzumaki got here just as I did. We surprised each other, I think.”

“Any helpful monologues about where he’s headed next?” Tenzō asks, crouching next to them with his own helping of worry on his face. Sometimes Kakashi forgets that Genma and Tenzō have both been ANBU as long as he has, technically. Longer if Root counts, in Tenzō’s case, and Kakashi is all too certain it does. They’ve served on the same teams a lot.

“Not much.” Genma shrugs, eyes still closed, and feels out the lump on the back of his head with a faint grimace. “Lots of stuff about us never taking Naruto, and giving the boy a good home with people who love him. Sounded pretty convinced he was right.”
That’s the problem with the most dangerous type of zealot, Kakashi knows. They’re utterly convinced of their own truth—enough so, often, that they can convince other people as well. The memory of Kurama’s fierce defense of Naruto both of the pervious times the cornered him is clear, and Kakashi…well. He’s not allowed to believe things like that. He has a mission, he has Minato’s son to recover, and that’s all he needs to know.

“Let’s get you back to your team,” he says instead of answering. “Do you have a medic with you?”

“Inuzuka Hana,” Genma confirms with a fond smile. He has an amusing habit of taking younger shinobi under his wing, and it’s very clear to Kakashi that’s what’s happening here. “She’s one of the best I’ve worked with. That Suna kunoichi is supposed to be one, too, but I haven’t seen her in action yet.” He glances over Kakashi’s team, at Tenzō’s burned face, Itachi’s gushing head wound, and Shisui’s blisters and faint limp. “Apparently I’m about to, though.”

Shisui makes a face at him, because obviously he’s a mature jounin ANBU member. “Oh, stuff it. At least I didn’t faint after getting whacked on the head.”

Tenzō would rise to the challenge and pick a fight. Genma just rolls his eyes, then winces when the expression aggravates what’s definitely a concussion. “Help me up,” he orders Kakashi, thumping him gently on the bicep, and Kakashi obligingly hauls him to his feet. He keeps an arm around the tokujo’s waist, though. He has few enough friends as it is; there’s no need to risk one of them tripping and falling headfirst over a cliff.

Itachi falls into step beside them as their sorry group heads for the road. There's a wadded-up piece of cloth held to his temple that looks suspiciously like a chunk of Shisui’s sleeve. He doesn’t look at Kakashi, but asks quietly, “Where do we go now?”

It’s a tossup, really. Kurama didn’t exactly give them any clues to where he was planning to go in the fight, and the direction he headed was almost definitely a false trail to throw them off. From here, he could retreat to one of the many uninhabited islands in the surrounding sea, or just head back to the mainland.

“I don’t know,” Kakashi says grimly, keeping his eyes on the horizon, and wishes it didn’t feel quite so much like failure.
XXVI: Exaction

Chapter Notes

It’s looking very likely that **THERE WILL NOT BE AN UPDATE NEXT TUESDAY**. I’m going to be traveling for work, and the chances that I’ll have enough downtime to post are slim. It might happen, but it probably won’t. Many apologies, but RL has to come first.

*exaction /ig ‘ zakSHən/, the action of demanding and obtaining something from someone, especially a payment or service. From late Middle English via Latin exactio(n-) from exigere “ascertain, perfect, enforce”.*

Kirigakure lies in a long, narrow valley between the mountains and the sea, wreathed in a thick fog that muffles sound and blocks the light, and edged with heavy rain. The grey, cylindrical buildings are scattered around the Mizukage’s tower, half-covered with trees and greenery, and while Kurama supposes it’s a neat effect, it’s also…eerie. Like the land is pushing back, trying to reclaim the space where the village sits, and the buildings are slowly being subsumed.

On one of the craggy cliffs overlooking the village, Kurama stares down at the streets and fields, trying to sense any familiar chakra. He could flare his own, try to call Saiken’s attention to him that way, but Saiken isn’t the only bijuu down there. Kurama doesn’t know how often Obito shows up to play puppeteer with Yagura’s brain, but he assumes it has to be fairly frequently if he’s going to keep control of a creature as strong as Isobu. Better not to attract his attention just yet.

“Kurama-nii?” Naruto asks, seated back against the bulk of the mountain and munching happily on some of the cookies Anzu had slipped into their bags. Gaara is beside him, eyeing the excess of water warily as it clatters down beyond the overhanging rock. He lasted through Ame’s steady drizzle, but Kiri’s type of downpour is something else entirely for a boy who’s only seen rain a handful of times in his life.

“Kurama-nii?” Naruto asks, turning away from the dimness of the village below. The rain is confined to the mountains for now, the clouds breaking open on the peaks, and he wants to get them into the dryness of the village as soon as it lightens a bit. Might as well, now that they can afford it. All of them could use a bath.

With a beaming smile, Naruto holds out one of his cookies. “Here! I saved you one! It’s sweet and yummy, you should try it!”

It’s instinct, by now, to lean in and kiss his messy hair in thanks. “Well, if you say I should, I definitely will. Thanks, Naruto.”

“Of course, Kurama-nii!” Cheerfully, he goes back to his snack, adding, “You guys should eat yours too!”

“Maybe later,” Fū says, perched on the very edge of the rock with her feet hanging down. Her face is raised to the sky, and she’s smiling even though she’s getting wet. “Yugito, Yugito! This is fun!”
Yugito looks at the drenching rain and wrinkles her nose a little. “I'm all right back here. It’s…really wet.”

She's definitely one of Matatabi’s. Kurama swallows a snort, then sinks down to sit with his legs crossed under him. “I'm going to try and get in touch with Saiken. If anybody falls off the mountain, they’d better figure out how to fly on the way down, got it?”

“Oh,” Momiji adds dryly, “I could just catch them.”

Kurama rolls his eyes and determinedly doesn’t smile. “I'm trying to teach life lessons about responsibility and self-sufficiency here and you're ruining it,” he complains. “You're just as much of a brat as Fuji, I don’t know how I was ever fooled into thinking you weren’t.”

“I'm not a brat!” Fuji protests, jerking her head up from where she’s sprawled across Yugito’s lap. “And you're a grumpy old jerk. Who’d want to learn from you?”

“Oh, stuff a sock in it,” Kurama growls. “What happened to me being a god among foxes, huh? Brat.”

If Fuji were in her human form, she’d stick her tongue out at him. As it is, she chatters, high and sharp and annoyed, and then pointedly flicks her tails over her face. Kurama harrumphs right back at her, folding his arms over his chest, but before he can retort Fū says brightly, “Oh, hey, the rain’s stopping! Can we go now, Kurama-nii? I've never been to one of the big shinobi villages before!”

For a moment, Kurama wavers, debating it with himself. He hasn’t gotten any answers as to whether Obito is in the village, or even whether Saiken and his host are, but…Obito's chakra is fairly familiar. Except for a lingering residue that Kurama assumes is Yagura, he can't sense it below them. He can't sense Obito's malice, either, and if there's one thing that will give the Uchiha away, it’s that. Kurama's been alive for a long time, but out of all the people he’s met, Obito as he is now is one of the angriest and most hateful. There's not much of a chance Kurama would miss his presence.

“All right,” he agrees at length, and adds over Fū and Naruto's cheers, “But! This place isn’t like Whirlpool, got it? You stick with me and don’t run off, or I’ll have Momiji sit on you.”

Fuji opens her mouth, expression delighted, and Momiji growls warningly and snaps his teeth at her. “One word about my weight, little sister, and I'll throw you off this cliff.”

The vixen deflates with a sigh. “You don’t know that that’s what I was going to say,” she mutters mutinously.

“Yes,” Momiji informs her dryly. “I really, really do.”

“Okay, okay,” Kurama cuts in long-sufferingly, before they can devolve into further bickering. “Can either of you cast an illusion strong enough to get us over the walls without a bunch of bloodthirsty shinobi noticing? Make people look past us, that kind of thing?”

“Fuji's better with illusions,” Momiji admits, rising to his feet and shaking the mist from his silver-tipped coat. “Mine have a tendency to break at…er, inopportune moments.”

Fuji gives him a smug fox-grin. “Of course I can,” she says haughtily. “It’s easy.”

“Yes,” Momiji retorts. “Just like flying.” He catches her glare and grins back, tongue lolling.
Kurama sighs. “Let’s just—go,” he says. “Before I’m tempted to throw both of you off this cliff and figure out how to get down by ourselves.”

With a yipping laugh, Fuji rises, and with a whirl of smoke crouches in front of Yugito in her large form. “I’m ready when you are, Kurama-sama,” she says. “Naruto, do you want to ride with me today?”

“Sure, Fuji-nee!” Face and clothes dusted liberally with crumbs, he leaps to his feet and bolts for her, leaping onto her back like a baby monkey. Yugito follows more sedately, collecting both of their packs and slinging them over her shoulders, then climbing onto the vixen’s back.

“Guess that leaves you with me, squirt,” Kurama tells Gaara, giving him a smile as he rises. “You okay with that?”

“I like you a lot, Kurama-nii,” Gaara informs him solemnly, reaching out, and Kurama chuckles and picks him up, settling him on Momiji’s back.

“Yeah, yeah, I like you too.” On a whim, he kisses Gaara’s forehead the way he does Naruto’s, and has to laugh at the look of wonder that crosses the kid’s features—it’s either laugh or head straight back to Suna to start ripping off heads. Ruffling Gaara’s crimson hair, he turns to look at the last member of their little troupe. “Sweetheart? I’ll ask Chōmei to teach you how to grow wings later. Come on. It’s almost sunset.”

“Wings?” Fū bolts to her feet so fast she’s nearly a blur of motion, and throws herself at him bodily. “I can grow wings?”

“That overgrown bumblebee had better be good for something, if you’re stuck with her,” Kurama grousches, peeling her off his leg and hoisting her up behind Gaara. Chōmei’s chakra flickers with annoyance, but if she’s eavesdropping, what she overhears is her own fault. “Fuji, ready? Their guards might not be looking up, but that’s not a chance I want to take.”

Fuji crouches slightly, expression going intent, and foxfire ripples through the air around them like an aurora. Flickers of color blaze into existence, then fade away, and she flicks her tails. It doesn’t quite feel like a genjutsu settling around them, but…similar. One step to the left, maybe. Kurama breathes it in, because it’s familiar; he was never one to shape chakra this way, but he remembers how the foxes he first taught took to it, and this is one of the things they came up with.

“Neatly done,” he says, and pretends not to see the way Fuji puffs up proudly as he vaults onto Momiji’s back. “All right, out and down. Fuji, let me know if anything’s about to break, got it?”

“Of course, Kurama-sama.” With a light leap, she bounds past Momiji and hurls herself off the cliff.

Her brother follows with a warning snarl, setting more foxfire dancing under her feet just before she starts to fall. “Watch it!” he warns. “I’m not that quick, Fuji.”

The vixen ignores him like a queen, turning a wide loop that makes Naruto laugh as she descends. “We look like a patch of fog,” she tells Kurama proudly. “I figured no one would notice that around here.”

Probably not, Kurama admits, eyes on the village as it comes closer. There are a handful of people on the busier streets, and more clustered near the Mizukage’s tower. East of it is quieter, clearly a slightly lower-class business district, and in the gathering darkness he can only pick out a few shinobi.

“There,” he says, pointing to a patch of dripping forest that might be either a training ground or a
“Head for that part. Looks like there’s an inn the next street over.”

“We get to sleep at an inn?” Fū sounds incredibly enthusiastic. “I’ve never been in one before, Kurama-nii. Are they nice?”

“They’re all different, sweetheart.” Kurama remembers the inn his first night back, the woman who gave him a room and a meal in return for clearing out some bandits. It’s hard not to compare her to the sour woman in Ame, unwilling to bend, though Kurama knows there are a hell of a lot of differences between central Ame and northern Fire Country. Hopefully, actual money will sweeten this innkeeper’s mood; Kurama is familiar civilian prejudice against shinobi with bloodlines in Kiri, and between himself and his claws, Naruto with his whisker markings, and Gaara’s tanuki eyes, they don’t have much of a chance as passing as anything else.

“I like inns,” is Fuji’s verdict as she drops through the thick treetops and alights on a branch, balancing neatly with her three tails fanned out. “The beds are soft.”

Kurama huffs as Momiji follows her down, then passes her, heading for the ground. “Like I said, they’re all—”

Movement. Just a flash of light off swift metal seen out of the corner of his eye, but it’s enough. With no time to call up his chakra, Kurama hooks an arm around Fū and Gaara and throws himself off of Momiji’s back, shouting, “Down!”

The fox drops instantly to his belly, and the flight of kunai just skims the tips of his tails as he jerks them down. Kurama rolls off the two kids and comes up in a rush of movement, catching the next kunai as it flies at his face. Instinct makes him hurl it back—Mito and Kushina and Naruto were all so accustomed to the weapons they could use them half-asleep or half-dead with blood loss, and their bodies were Kurama’s too. He remembers, knows the slight twist of the wrist that lets the kunai fly true, and—

A gloved hand flashes up, catching the kunai in a blur of impressive speed, and spins it casually around one finger. “Quick,” the man approves, a half-mocking rumble with an undertone of cautious interest. “I don’t think I know you, Red. And I’ve got a decent memory for faces.”

Kurama’s nerves are still humming with tension, not quite abated by the sight of the huge and all too familiar sword on the man’s back. “Yeah,” he says warily, taking a step forward to put himself directly in front of Gaara and Fū. “That’d be because we’ve never met.”

There’s a rustle of leaves, a scrape, a thump. Yugito lands lightly beside him, half-crouched, with Matatabi’s chakra just beginning to flicker around her. Her nails haven’t quite grown into claws yet, but she’s not all that far off from letting them. “Kurama-nii?” she asks, and that tone is tight and tense and dangerous.

Kurama takes one more look at their unexpected companion and makes a split-second decision, stepping back and dropping out of a ready stance. “Easy, kitten. Should have expected something like that, dropping into a training ground.” Which this apparently is, given the jutsu and weapon scars studding the trunks around them. He should have known better than to expect something like a park within Kiri’s walls.

Yugito doesn’t look overly comforted by this, not that he really expected her to be. She’s a shinobi, after all—Kumo made damned certain she wasn’t anything else. She regards the man unhappily, and Kurama turns to look as well, already knowing what he’ll see.

Sword strapped in place, tall and wide and carrying a scent of old blood. Kiri uniform, ripped and
slightly stained. Unmarked hitai-ate, worn with what might be pride but is probably closer to stubborn threat. Bandages worn as a mask, careful eyes, short and messy brown hair. Kurama knows him, and not just through Naruto's eyes—this is one of his first clear memories after the night Obito controlled him, the first time since that night that he rose to the surface, looked and saw and scented blood and lightning on the air. Remembers, because this man looked at him, saw him and was one of the first to do so since October tenth so many years before.

Momochi Zabuza grins back at them, assessing gaze taking in Yugito, then flickering to Gaara where he’s tucked behind a bristling Fū, passing over Fū herself, and then darting up to linger on Naruto, still relatively safe on Fuji's back even if Kurama can feel his chakra rising in preparation for defense. But Zabuza doesn’t make so much as a threatening gesture. With a snort, he simply crosses his arms over his chest and drawls, “How cute. A mother and her ducklings, out for a walk.”

Kurama snarls, and in a blur of motion launches himself at the other man, sweeps his feet out from under him, and slams him into the ground, claws pressed tight against his throat. And, Sage, Kakashi would have seen that coming. The Zabuza from the bridge would have seen it. Even Kakashi’s team would have good odds for noticing what he was going to do. This Zabuza isn’t weak—Kurama can feel his chakra, the strength that makes him the Demon of the Hidden Mist—but he’s…untried. His edges haven’t been fully sharped yet.

Well, Kurama supposes. He’d have to be. He’s still in the village, after all.

A distance away, quiet footsteps approach, and Kurama holds Zabuza’s bristling gaze as they do, silently warning him to keep his mouth shut. Another second, and a soft voice says, “Zabuza? I brought the—” A gasp, a clatter as something drops, and a fierce hiss of, “Let him go!”

The chakra feels like a cold wind against Kurama’s spine, and he doesn’t need to look to know who it is. Instead, he just raises a mocking brow at Zabuza, and gets a snarl in return. With a low laugh, he slides off the taller man, darting back out of range of retaliation, and says, “Glass houses, shark-face.”

“Fuck you,” Zabuza spits, twisting back to his feet, but he holds out a hand to block the oncoming blizzard in miniaturized human form. “Knock it off, Haku. Ameyuri’ll have my balls if you destroy her favorite training ground.”

The little boy can't be any older than Fū, tiny in a way that Kurama takes a moment to adjust to, but the cold glare he's sending Kurama is enough to show that he won't hesitate to attack if he thinks it's required. Even so, he subsides obediently, murmuring, “Yes, Zabuza.” He keeps his eyes fixed on Yugito, clearly aware of who he'll be facing if this does dissolve into a fight.

Honestly, Kurama doesn’t think it will. Zabuza’s frame is loose, not quite relaxed, but not on edge, either. He doesn’t have any more kunai in hand, and he hasn’t reached for his sword. Kurama could be vastly overestimating his ease, but...he doesn’t think so. The Zabuza he met on the bridge was full of anger, fury at too many things to name. This one is milder. There's still a seed of rage, but it’s all bound up and tangled with determination and something that’s not quite selflessness, but maybe the next best thing. And, even at his worst, Zabuza has never tasted of outright malice. There was never an edge of pettiness to his hate. Everything he felt had a cause. Everything he did was for a reason.

For a long moment, Zabuza studies Kurama, then relaxes, shifting his weight off the balls of his feet. It’s as close to let’s be friends as two wary shinobi can get. “Got a name, Red?”

“Yeah, and it’s not Red,” Kurama retorts, baring his teeth. It might pass for a smile. Maybe.
Zabuza snorts softly. “Momochi Zabuza,” he says, watching Kurama’s face intently. “Of the Seven Swordsmen. If we haven’t met, I'm assuming you're not from Kiri. Got a reason to be dropping out of trees?”

“Kurama,” Kurama answers briefly, because Yugito already called him that. He pointedly doesn’t offer a last name; there’s no reason to make it easier for Zabuza to connect the dots, if the Kage have managed to get a warning to Kiri already. Luckily, he’s already thought of a passable excuse for their presence in the village. “I’ve heard that Harusame is one of the greatest fuinjutsu masters still alive. I wanted to talk to him.”

The interest in Zabuza’s gaze sharpens. “You're a seal master?”

“I’m decent.” It’s true enough; he remembers most of what Mito and Kushina knew, and what Naruto learned. After all, when he was trapped it was a possible way to win his freedom, if he could find a weakness in the seals. Beyond that, Harusame is Utakata’s master right now. Find the old man, and Kurama will more than likely find the jinchuuriki.

“We should spar, whenever he lets out of that dusty old library he calls his house,” is Zabuza’s immediate verdict, and Kurama’s fairly certain he doesn’t imagine the swift, exasperated glance Haku throws at his guardian.

That’s—that’s a terrible idea. Really, really terrible, because Zabuza is the type to taunt his opponents, and Kurama is all too aware of his own short fuse. When one wrong word could out him as having a bijuu’s power, it’s probably best to avoid situations like that.

Still. It might be fun.

Very firmly, Kurama squashes that little thought and waves a dismissive hand. “Yeah, not gonna happen. ‘Sides, I think the kitten might be a better match for you.” He tips his head at Yugito, who very much looks like she will be obliging if Zabuza ever wants to get his face clawed off.

Zabuza eyes the thirteen-year-old, raises one short brow, and levels an assessing stare at Kurama. “She’s not your daughter.”

“And he’s not your son,” Kurama counters, flicking a glance at Haku.

Instead of taking offense, Zabuza just shrugs. “Useful,” is his only explanation, but from the way it makes Haku light up, he might as well have called the boy his own flesh and blood. “You’re the same, yeah?”

Perhaps predictably, though, it makes both Fū and Yugito bristle. “He’s not!” Fū protests fiercely. “Kurama-nii took us away from the people who wanted to make us be weapons, and useful, and—”

“We are people,” Yugito adds, quieter but just as sharp. “Kurama-nii lets us be people, even when no one else will.”

Gaara nods emphatically, hands fisted in the back of Fū’s skirt as he glares at the two Kiri nin, and there's a loud, “Kurama-nii is awesome!” from above that’s Naruto's contribution to the conversation.

“Shut up,” Kurama says gruffly. There is definitely nothing going soft and goopy in his chest, because he is definitely not touched by the defense, or these four ridiculous children. “All of you, just—stop.”

Naruto laughs at him, and Fū giggles. Gaara smiles a little, while Yugito gives him a sideways look that says very clearly Try harder if you want me to believe you mean that.
They’re all **brats**.

Zabuza chuckles, shifting his weight forward slightly and dropping his arms from his chest. It’s enough of a warning that Kurama goes still, but before he can do anything more than tense, Zabuza says mockingly, “Such adorable little monsters. I bet if you told the rest of the villages that you knew how to tame jinchuuriki, they’d give you whatever you wanted on a silver platter.”

**Fuck.** Kurama coils, ready to launch himself at the other man again, but Zabuza raises a hand to stop him.

“Hold it, Uzumaki,” he says sharply, and the killer from the bridge bleeds into his features. Still not entirely present, still not quite as sharp and dagger-edged as Kurama remembers, but that undercurrent of rage is there, cut through with satisfaction. “You attack, I raise the alarm, and then you’ll never get close to Utakata. I assume he’s the one you're after?”

Apparently the Kage **did** manage to get a message to Kiri, or Yagura learned about him some other way. Kurama calculates the odds of killing both Zabuza and Haku before one of them can alert the village and decides they’re too low to risk it. He eases back, trying not to growl, and inclines his head. “Well, I **was.**”

Zabuza tips one shoulder in a shrug, dismissing that even as he starts to grin beneath the bandages. “Far be it from me to stop you, Red. But if I’m going to keep quiet about you and the pipsqueaks, I want something in return.”

Of course he does. And, knowing what Kurama does about this man’s future… “You want me to help you kill the Mizukage,” he concludes, and is satisfied to see Zabuza’s eyes widen.

“How the fuck do you know that?” Zabuza demands as the smugness eases out of his posture, replaced with hostility. At his side, Haku goes tense as well.

Another teeth-bared almost-grin and Kurama crosses his arms again, watching them carefully. “Call it intuition. I assume this is you kicking off a civil war?”

“I prefer to call it a revolution.” Zabuza eyes him right back. “So what’s your choice, Uzumaki? The rest of the shinobi here know about you, too, before you get any bright ideas. One step outside this training ground looking like you do now and there won't be a single place left to hide.”

Which would be fine, except Kurama can't ask Fuji to keep up an illusion that long, and it won't work if they're ever separated. He glances back at the four kids, eyes landing on Naruto last of all. The little blond is clinging to Fuji's ruff, eyes wide and worried.

Haku and Zabuza died in front of him once before, and Kurama knows better than anyone just how it affected him. He’s not about to put Naruto through that again. And besides, he’s always known that Yagura is a problem that needs to be dealt with. This is just…a slightly more expedient method.

“They don’t get involved,” he says succinctly, tipping his head at the children. “If you don’t agree with that, I’ll kill you, even if it blows my cover.”

There's a brief pause, startled and still, and then Zabuza laughs. “Didn’t want ‘em to,” he promises, and there's something like relief in his voice. “I've got a house on the edge of the village. Haku can keep an eye on them while we work. You get to convince Utakata to give us a hand, since you’ve got such a way with jinchuuriki.” Sharp eyes study his clawed hands. “Is that because you're one yourself?”

“You don’t get answers from me,” Kurama growls, not so much as attempting to keep his voice
even. “You're blackmailing me, Momochi. If I didn’t have a reason to go along with you, you’d be eating that sword by now.”

Zabuza just laughs, rough and sinister. “You're the one who landed in the middle of my workout,” he retorts. “What kind of shinobi would I be if I didn’t take an opportunity that all but threw itself into my lap?”

He doesn’t need to rub it in; Kurama’s already cursing his terrible luck enough for both of them. “Fuji,” he says instead, a little more sharply than he intends to. “Another illusion, just over you, Momiji, and the kids. I’ll use a henge.”

“Of course, Kurama-sama.” Fuji eyes Zabuza with a healthy dose of dislike, but concentrates again. This time, Kurama can see all six of them fade out of existence with barely a ripple of chakra, and he takes a breath, trying not to let Naruto's sudden absence unnerve him. He’s still there, and if Kurama listens closely enough, he can hear the soft thump of Fuji leaping down from the tree, the rustle of Fū and Yugito talking in bare whispers as they get Gaara up onto Momiji’s back again, and then negotiate Fū climbing up behind him and Yugito returning to her perch on Fuji.

Kurama takes it in, breathes deep, and says quietly, “Fuji. Sound and smell too. Lock it all down, there's a girl. Once we’re alone you can let up again.”

Everything vanishes in a flicker of foxfire, and Kurama forces himself to turn away. He breathes out, concentrates, and feels his own chakra shift as the henge covers him. *Naruto’s* kind of henge, strong and deceptive, able to fool even a goddess, if only for a moment. He grabs the first thing he can think of to give it shape, and—

Pink hair in a short bob, steady green eyes, a woman’s body. Strength of a Hundred Seal on her forehead, because it wouldn’t be Sakura without it, not the way he knows her, and he doubts anyone else will recognize it. He does, though, knows this body as seen from the outside, *has* seen it in just about every situation he can imagine, and he’s not about to let it slip.

He opens his eyes, wearing Sakura’s form over Naruto’s body, and almost laughs at the bitter humor in all of this.

“This way,” Zabuza says, and then thankfully keeps his mouth shut, leading Kurama out of the training ground.

Obito isn’t in the village, Kurama knows. He isn’t here, isn’t nearby, but—with that eye of his, distance means nothing. Kurama is going to knock Yagura out, strip off Obito’s control, and he has no doubt that Obito will feel it. Maybe he won't attack Kiri, an entire village poised on the edge of a civil war and ready for anything, but…

What if he does?
Chapter Notes

Canon is particularly light on information regarding Kiri, and the timelines are all wonky given how old characters are and what they're said to have done. I've attempted to draw connections between events and what we do know happened, but things are probably a little skewed, and I think this qualifies as wild guessing rather than anything close to canon. Still, hopefully it makes sense. If it doesn’t, yell at me and I'll come back and fix it.

Mainly, my timeline fix is this: the graduation massacre tradition began under the Sandaime Mizukage (unnamed, whom I headcanon as Utakata's father), not Yagura. That at least makes Zabuza plausible. There are others as well, but that one isn’t mentioned in-story yet.

[imber / ihmˈbər/, rain, a storm, or a storm cloud (most frequently used in poetry). From early Latin imbris via Proto-Indo-European *nb rís “rain-cloud”].

The stares itch at Kurama's skin, make him twitchy and tense and ready to throw a punch at the next person whose eyes linger a little too long. It helps nothing at all that Naruto and the other children are back at Zabuza’s amusingly quaint little house on the outer edge of the village, under Yugito and Haku's watchful eye, or that Kurama's only ally in this entire damned place is the blackmailing bastard walking on his left.

“Easy there, Red,” Zabuza offers, sounding irritatingly amused. “It isn’t you they're staring at.”

Lie, Kurama thinks with a huff. Though he’s willing to admit that Zabuza is the reason they're staring. “You’d think they’d never seen you with a girl before,” he mutters sourly, though he does a quick check to be sure the henge is holding. Sakura's form is easy to maintain, but this entire damned situation is too precarious for Kurama's liking.

Zabuza snorts. “Hardly. I'm a known malcontent, and the Mizukage’s called me out before for stirring up unrest. You're an unknown foreign nin without a hitai-ate—'course they’d worry.”

And be justified doing it, Kurama thinks, and that's sour too. He’s very glad the kids are as far out of danger as is possible right now, because he has a feeling they're about to open themselves up to a whole host more of the stuff.

“Great,” he complains, though he keeps his voice down, and tries not to eye one of the older jounin on the street corner like he’s sizing him up for a grave. “You couldn’t be subtle about trying to overthrow the main military power running your village? No fucking wonder you need my help.”

Zabuza’s eyes narrow, and he throws Kurama a scathing look. “Fuck off. Yagura’s had his chance to change. He doesn’t get another.”

This man’s sense of honor is a complete mystery, and Kurama can't be bothered with the headache
that is trying to wrap his mind around it. It's no wonder his Naruto looked up to the Kiri nin, but hell. Kurama would appreciate it if he'd grow a little consistency. First the graduation massacre, then taking in an orphan, a plot to overthrow the Mizukage, and dying so he could kill Gato and asking to lie beside the body of his dead apprentice as his last request. Either he’s a power-hungry psycho with infrequent attacks of conscience or he’s secretly a good man trying to survive in a bloodthirsty village where power rules.

Because Kurama's life is never easy, he has a sneaking suspicion that it’s the latter. It would be nice, just once, if the bad guy in any given situation could actually be a bad guy.

Well, besides Kaguya. She could have all the tragic backstory and remorse in the world and Kurama would still want to tear her heart out and make her eat it.

A flicker of familiar chakra draws Kurama from his thoughts, and he looks up just in time to see a very familiar woman fall into step on Zabuza’s other side. She casts him a curious look from under a heavy fall of auburn hair, then puts a deliberate sway in her steps and purrs, “Momochi, I don’t think you’ve ever introduced me to your pretty friend.”

Zabuza grimaces, clearly visible with his bandages pulled down to hang around his neck, and growls, “Leave me alone, Terumī.”

“I am not going to die alone!” Mei snaps, slapping him hard in the back of the head. Then she smiles, sweet and terrifying, and leans in to hiss, “Insult me again and I’ll kill you.”

She’s definitely the Terumī Mei Kurama remembers, and he has to chuckle, inclining his head to the one-time Mizukage. Her presence here—especially connected with Zabuza—is a surprise, though Kurama likely should have expected it. The desire to change Kiri that drove her to lead a revolution and become Mizukage couldn’t have been a sudden thing.

“Whatever,” Zabuza says grumpily, though he pointedly steps around to Kurama's other side, putting him between the two Kiri nin. “Everyone waiting?”

“Only because you're slow,” she retorts, then offers Kurama a smile. “Nice to meet you. I'm Terumī Mei. You must be new. Did Momochi pick you up in a gutter somewhere, too?”

“Oh, fuck you!” Zabuza spits, grabbing for a kunai. “I did not—”

Mei meets him with a kunai of her own, disarms him with a twist of her weapon, and smiles like it's her birthday. “You didn’t what? Pick up your kid in a gutter? Adopt an orphan? Show the whole world your big, squishy center?”

The glare Zabuza fixes her with is hot enough to warp solid metal. “You're lucky you're a year older than I am,” he growls. “If you were my age, I would have taken pleasure in killing you during the Academy exam.”

With a soft snort, Mei crosses her arms over her chest and gives him her best unimpressed look. “You would have tried, Momochi. Be grateful I wasn’t, or you’d be a charred heap of bones and a bad attitude and nothing else.”

Kurama would probably get more done if he left right now and went to go knock Isobu out of his trance by himself. He sighs, lifting his face skyward, and wonders if this is how Sakura felt when Sasuke and Naruto were having one of their frequent spats. “Right. If you're the faces of the revolution, no wonder Kiri is screwed.”

“She hasn’t got a damned thing to do with it,” Zabuza says, faintly testy.
“Bullshit,” Mei counters sweetly. She glances at Kurama and offers a slightly resigned smile. “Yagura is dangerous. We might as well work together to take him down, even if our views differ, and then figure out who takes his seat once he’s gone.”

And…that makes sense, given what Kurama remembers happening in the previous timeline. Zabuza faced Yagura alone, probably in a bid to take the hat for himself, and was defeated. If no one could prove Mei was involved, she would have been watched, but not otherwise punished, which would leave her free to start another revolution a decade later.

A distinct grunt makes Zabuza’s opinion on that idea clear, but he doesn’t answer. Instead, he grabs Kurama’s shoulder and pushes him to the right, towards a round, weathered building almost completely covered by moss and twisted trees with trailing branches. “In here,” he orders. “Terumī, seal the door.”

“Because that’s not suspicious at all,” Kurama mutters, snatching Zabuza’s hand and peeling it off of him. “Paws to yourself, shark-face. I'm more than happy to break it if you leave it where it is.”

“Oh, feisty,” a new voice mocks, and Kurama glances away from the swordsman, eyes darting over to the two strangers on the far side the large room. One woman, one man, both with swords of their own carried openly. He doesn’t need to be a genius to figure this one out. Two more of Kiri's Seven Swordsmen being on the side of the revolution is a surprise, though—he hadn’t thought Zabuza were so widely supported among the powerful shinobi. Likely Zabuza took the fall while all the rest kept their names clear, he thinks, though he recalls Chōjūrō mentioning that several of this generation of the Seven Swordsmen died young and under mysterious circumstances. Also likely is that Obito had a hand in that—he wouldn’t want opposition to his puppet Mizukage.

“Shut it, Ameyuri,” Zabuza grunts. He jerks his head towards one of the couches, then orders, “Sit. This is everyone important.”

“I thought we weren’t going to bring anyone else in on this level,” the man says, crossing his arms over his chest. White hair, lanky build, purple eyes, Hiramekarei at his waist—Kurama is willing to bet good money that this is Suigetsu’s older brother, Mangetsu.

Mei raises her hands, dropping down onto one of the chairs in an elegant sprawl. “He was already on his way here with her when I caught up to him.”

The last, a small woman with dark red hair, crosses her arms over her chest and grins playfully. “Not that I object to another girl around here, but an explanation would be nice, Zabuza.”

This seems as good a time as any to drop the henge. Kurama raises a brow at Zabuza, who grimaces but nods, and then lets it slide away.

There’s a second of startled silence as three pairs of eyes go wide, and then Ringo Ameyuri laughs, pushing to her feet. She circles Kurama, steps swift and light and nearly silent, and stops in front of him, leaning in to study his face with a grin. “Uzumaki Kurama. Now this is a surprise. Aren’t you a little short to be the scourge of the Hidden Villages, pushing us ever closer to another world war?”

“I—what?” Kurama asks, caught off guard and entirely bewildered. He blinks, casts her an assessing glance, and decides she doesn’t look crazy. Not any more than Zabuza or Mangetsu, at least. “Like hell I'm starting a war!”

That earns him another laugh, but before Ameyuri can answer, Mei snorts. “You're lucky you're from Uzushio,” she says dryly. “Anywhere else, even if you were a missing-nin, and Konoha, Kumo, Iwa, and Suna would already have razed your village to the ground. They don’t take kindly
to people stealing their jinchuuriki, you know.”

“I didn’t steal them,” Kurama protests, glaring at her, and he didn’t. He didn’t even kidnap them, honestly—they came with him willingly. The closest word he can think of is… “I rescued them. If the villages are going to turn children into jinchuuriki they should treat them like goddamned children, not monsters. Not weapons.”

Mei looks at him, looks at Zabuza, and then raises one incredulous brow. “I can’t decide if you’re soul mates or mortal enemies in the making,” she says with amusement, then waves a hand, dismissing the sentiment. “Whatever. Momochi, are you thinking this is the solution to our Utakata problem, or our Yagura-is-going-to-destroy-us-in-a-fair-fight problem?”

“It can’t be both?” Zabuza drops down in one of the chairs, stretching his legs out in front of him. “I’m not certain how all of this jinchuuriki shit works, but—Red, you can take Yagura, right?”

Probably. Kurama doubts that Obito is adding to Isobu’s power—is probably even taking away from it, because a weak bijuu is still a bijuu, and Yagura doesn’t exactly need a lot of help to be stronger than most of his shinobi. Beyond that, Isobu has three tails. Kurama will manage.

“I’m not going to let you kill him,” he says flatly, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at the four Kiri nin. “Yagura’s about as much of a victim here as all of you.”

Mangetsu frowns, tilting his head a little, while Ameyuri and Zabuza exchange incredulous glances. Only Mei doesn’t look surprised. Her mouth tightens, eyes narrowing, and Kurama has seen that expression on Sasuke and Sakura’s face enough times to recognize why-the-hell-did-I-have-to-be-right when he sees it.

“You knew.”

Mei doesn’t deny it, even though it nets her three startled and faintly betrayed glances from her coconspirators. “I had hoped I was wrong. Before he became Mizukage, Yagura was…different. Kinder. We both wanted to see Kiri move beyond its reputation as the Bloody Mist. Now he’s just adding to that. It could be that the power went to his head, but the Yagura I knew was always too… kind.”

This one right now isn’t kind at all, and Kurama’s more than ready to lay that at Obito’s door, too. He’s a vicious, petty bastard, and Kurama is absolutely certain that turning Kiri into one massive competitive bloodbath is his revenge for their shinobi killing Rin. Granted, Kiri didn’t need a lot of help to get there, but Obito definitely pushed them down the path. And, as much as Kurama wants to stay under the radar, especially where mad, dangerous Uchiha bastards are concerned, this…this could be a huge blow to him. Mentally, if nothing else, because Kiri is practically his twisted pet project right now.

Kurama remembers Naruto’s fight with Obito the first time. When Obito got angry, when he got confused, Naruto was able to get through to him, to negate the madness. And there’s nothing in the entire world that will get Obito angry and confused like Rin. So use her somehow, maybe make a connection to Madara being responsible for her death. That might just be enough. And if it’s not…

Well. Kurama will deal with that, if he has to, and pray to the Sage and whatever gods might be listening that Obito’s eye won’t work on him when he’s wearing Naruto’s body.

“Where’s Utakata?” he asks abruptly, turning to Zabuza. “I’ll talk him and Saiken into helping you, so they can deal with the small fries. I’ll take care of Yagura.”
“What, now?” Mangetsu demands incredulously. “We’ve been preparing for years, you can’t just—”

“Then you’ll be thoroughly prepared.” Kurama bares his teeth at the man, half smile and half threat. “I have fucking things to do, and I’m only helping because it helps the jinchuuriki and their bijuu. If you’ve got a problem with that, I’ll gladly pack up my brats and leave.”

“Stop,” Ameyuri says sharply, stepping between them and raising her hands. She glances at Mei, who nods, and then offers, “We’re flexible, so it could work. I’ll alert our forces among the jounin. Mangetsu, notify the chuunin. Dawn tomorrow?”

“Fine,” Zabuza grunts. He rises to his feet, rolls his neck to crack it, and says, “Terumī, you coming?”

“With a gracious invitation like that, how could I resist?” Mei flows to her feet, flicking a hand at Kurama. “Put that henge back on, if you can get it right a second time. We don’t want to attract more attention that we already do.”

Kurama snorts, but does as she says. Sakura’s form is still easy to get right, and he flexes her fingers, remembering all the many times her hands saved Naruto or Sasuke or uncountable others. He’s not a healer, doesn’t think he could manage it even if he tried with a life on the line, and maybe that makes it more impressive than it is, but he’s going to stick with awe of her as a solid reaction.

It makes him miss Konoha, as he follows Zabuza and Mei outside into the misty greyness. Not the Konoha that he left just a week and a half ago, but *Naruto’s* Konoha, with Sasuke and Sakura and Naruto walking side-by-side down the street. With familiar faces, old friends, the village itself battered and a little rough but whole. Maybe Konoha isn’t the best place, and maybe the people there have never made all the right decisions, but it’s the closest thing Kurama has ever known to a home.

He’ll figure it out. When all of this is done, he’ll see what it would take for them to go back.

A sudden, furious scream makes Kurama jerk his head up, weight shifting onto the balls of his feet and hands coming up, but there’s nothing. He glances around them, then catches Mei’s exasperated expression and raises a questioning brow. “Something up?” he asks, faintly suspicious.

Mei rolls her eyes. “Some asshole has been peeping on the women’s baths, but no one can catch him,” she says disgustedly. “I’m just waiting for him to try while Ameyuri’s in there. She’s got a temper, and she’ll laugh as she eviscerates him.”

Kurama pauses in the middle of the street, eyes narrowing as suspicion niggles its way through his brain. Still, it’s not likely. Perverts are hardly unique to Konoha, and besides, it couldn’t be. It couldn’t be.

Could it?

Before he can decide one way or another, Zabuza says, “There, up ahead. Follow that path towards the sea cliffs. Utakata does his katas by the rocks. Should be easy for you to find him.”

Now that he’s paying attention, Kurama can feel the bubbly brightness of Saiken’s chakra, a press of iridescence with an edge that burns like acid. He takes a breath, breathes it in, and feels a flicker in the slug’s chakra in return as Saiken notices him. Without pausing, he leaps past his companions, darting down the path between overgrown houses and then deeper into an actual forest. The track curves, edging around the trees, and when Kurama rounds the bend it’s to a whirl of sea-breeze and the smell of salt-choked water. The road runs straight along the low cliffs, the seaward side of it tumbling down in a cascade of massive rocks to meet the churning water, and a few hundred yards
down there's a small figure standing on one of the boulders.

Kurama wastes no time. He covers the distance quickly, then leaps lightly up land on the rock across from the slim, dark-haired teenager. It’s not safe, not smart, but he lets his chakra rise in answer to Saiken’s, heavy-hot red and edged with the bite of a deadly wind. The boy’s amber eyes widen, but he doesn’t take a step back, instead pressing a hand to his chest and holding his ground. Meeting his gaze, Kurama lets the henge fall again, and says quietly, “The slug might already have told you, but my name’s Kurama.”

There’s a brief, careful pause, and then the boy inclines his head. “He mentioned you,” he says, equally soft. “I’m Utakata. Is it true you're rescuing the jinchuuriki from the villages?”

“If they want to be rescued,” Kurama allows, studying the faint lines in Utakata's face, the paleness that speaks of exhaustion. “I have to say, I didn’t think you’d listen if the Rokubi was talking to you.”

That earns him a faint smile, but it’s enough to bring humor back into Utakata's face. “He comes to me sometimes while I’m meditating and trying to clear my head. Master Harusame says it’s because I don’t try hard enough to shut him out, but…” A shrug, swift and almost embarrassed. “He’s never tried to take control, and he likes my bubble jutsus a lot.”

They're exactly the sort of thing that Saiken would be enthusiastic about, that’s for sure. Kurama snorts softly, shifting back on his heels. “The old man’s just full of bad ideas. The slug’s a pushover, and I bet he’d give you all the power you could use if you just asked nicely for it.”

“I've gotten that impression.” Still smiling a little, Utakata drops to sit on the rocks, folding his legs under him. “He wants to speak to you. Is that all right?”

As much as Kurama wants to avoid the bijuu’s shared world, on the off chance that Bee is looking for him, he’s also a little too wary of Harusame coming along any minute and freaking out, then moving up his timetable for being an absolute moron and trying to rip the bijuu out of Utakata. “I’ll go meet him,” he offers instead, mirroring Utakata’s pose and resting his hands on his knees. “And after that, I've got a couple of people I want you to meet.”

Interest wars with caution on Utakata's face. “The other jinchuuriki? Saiken said one of them was close to my age.”

Yugito will be overjoyed to have another fully-trained ninja around, Kurama thinks with amusement. “Yeah. They're nearby. It’ll do them good to have someone a little older around.”

“But they have you already.” Utakata hesitates, then says, so softly it’s barely a breath, “I—why are you helping them?”

And, of course, there's always a moment where the well-adjusted child slides away to show just how screwed up being a human sacrifice makes a kid. Kurama sighs a little, raking claws through his hair, and then answers bluntly. “Why not? Someone should. I can, so there’s no reason it shouldn’t be me. Besides, one of you guys is family, and the rest might as well be. One person against a whole world won't do a whole hell of a lot, but nine jinchuuriki standing together? There’s a reason the villages try to keep you secret and separate, kid. They haven’t got a chance in hell if the nine of you try to change things together. I'm just…showing you a way.”

Instead of answering, Utakata flicks him an unreadable look, then closes his eyes. Kurama rolls his—damaged child, Sage defend him—and does the same. One breath, another, and—
A forest, when he opens his eyes. Not the familiar one where the Sage created the nine of them, but...smaller. More recently familiar. It’s where Naruto first touched his powers, where Mizuki tried to kill Iruka and Naruto saved him. Kurama smiles a little to himself, looking over the scarred tree and the bare ground around it, because this was the first time since the night of Naruto’s birth that he really stirred. Before that, he’d been too tired, too wounded by half of his chakra being stripped away, and he’d slept for twelve years. But that—that was the nudge that woke him, a faint pull as Naruto drew his chakra away, and he’d opened his eyes and stretched, reached—

Another Uzumaki, he’d thought derisively. A boy this time, loud and dumb and lonely. Easily corrupted with enough power.

Kurama has never been so glad to be wrong.

“Kurama! You’re tiny! What happened, did a human catch you? Matatabi and Chōmei and Shukaku won’t tell me anything!”

“Saiken,” Kurama answers with amusement, rising to his feet and turning to look up at the slug. “I like your host. He seems pretty level-headed.”

Saiken burbles happily. “He’s cute, isn’t he? And he’s got such pretty jutsus, hardly needs my help at all. When his father sealed me into him, I thought it would be terrible, terrible, but I don’t think I mind as much as I thought I would.”

Kurama takes a moment to parse that, because even Naruto at his most energetic doesn’t talk quite that fast, but then he snorts and shakes his head, trying not to smile. He’s easily annoyed by his other siblings, even at their best, but Saiken is hard to get angry at, and even harder to stay angry at. He’s just—cheerful. Happy.

“Good,” he finally settles on. “I’m glad for you. Have you heard what’s going on?”

Eye-stalks swaying, Saiken shakes his head. “Matatabi is still tired, so I didn’t bother her, and Son is ignoring me. Gyūki doesn’t know what’s happening, either, and the others won’t let me catch up to them.”

Well, that’s likely to be expected. They’re not friends, the nine of them, even if Kurama remembers them being that way in his time. “People are after us,” he explains. “They call themselves Akatsuki, and the Sage’s mother is controlling them so she can take back the world’s chakra. She needs us to awaken the Juubi, though, so she’s having her damned pawns collect us. I’m trying to get the younger ones somewhere safe so I can break the Juubi’s vessel and at least stall her a little.”

There’s a long moment as Saiken digests this, and then he deflates a little with a sound like a sigh. “They’ll kill the hosts, getting us out of them,” he says mournfully. “The Sage was a good person, why can’t his mother be as well? Do you want my help? Can Utakata and I take care of the children for you, or is it too dangerous here? Do you want us to take them somewhere hidden?”

And that’s one massive problem solved, just like that. Kurama breathes out a shaky breath of relief, pressing a hand over his face, and retracts every even mildly offensive thing he’s ever said about Saiken. The slug is a damned miracle. “Thank you. Thank you, Saiken. Yes, if you and Utakata would be willing to watch them somewhere safe, I would gladly leave them with you. But first I need to ask Utakata for his help with something else. Do you mind?”

Saiken burbles at him, somewhere between amused and fond. “Go, go, Kurama. You were always so active. I’m glad to see that hasn’t changed. Let me know if I can help. That’s what little brothers are for!”
“Best little brother in the world,” Kurama agrees with a smile, and steps back towards reality, opening his eyes to see Utakata watching him. There’s wariness in his expression, though Kurama is fairly certain it’s not directed at him.

“Sorry,” he offers, a little gruffly. “Not pleasant stuff.”

Utakata hesitates, but shakes his head. “I’d rather know,” he says firmly. “What did you need my help with?”

Kurama glances back down the path, towards where Mei and Zabuza are doubtless still waiting, and sighs. “There’s a revolution about to kick off. The main players want to know if you’ll help them overthrow Yagura.”

Amber eyes flicker, then fall shut, and Utakata takes three even breaths. When he looks up again, there’s no trace of emotion in his face beyond cool distance. “Yagura killed my father,” he says without inflection. “He was never a good one, but he was still the only parent I ever knew. The only reason I was allowed to live was because of Saiken.” Inhale, exhale, and— “Tell me what to do. If you’re helping, I’ll help too.”

“How disappointing.”

The dull but sharp-edged voice startles Kurama back to his feet even as Utakata flinches, and he spins, cursing himself for being so distracted he let multiple people sneak up on him. Not just a handful, but at least twenty, all jounin, and at the front—

“Yagura,” Kurama growls, and darts a look to where a grim-faced Zabuza and a serene Mei are being held tightly by their fellow Kiri nin. “Let them go.”

Yagura gives him a derisive glance, but doesn’t answer. Instead he turns his attention on Utakata, who’s just rising, pale but steady. “You were allowed to survive because your worth to the village outweighed the potential problems that the Sandaike Mizukage’s son might cause, Utakata. I see now that that was a mistake that must be corrected. Will you come to face your punishment freely, traitor?”

Slowly, deliberately, Utakata slides a hand into one of his weapons pouches and draws out his pipe. “I’ve done nothing wrong,” he says firmly. “You can’t punish me for talking to someone.”

It’s instinct that has Kurama stepping sideways, putting himself squarely between the kid and Yagura. “Pick on someone your own size, brat,” he says flatly, trying to gauge the distance between himself and the group. The pouch full of kunai that Rōshi gave him is thankfully at his waist, and he eyes the array of Kiri nin, assessing. There’s no way he can take out all of them, but if he can drop the ones holding Mei and Zabuza—

Yagura regards them with empty, eerie eyes, and Kurama wonders with a shiver of fury and horror how no one else can see the void where something should be. “Konoha and Suna warned us that you might attempt to threaten us within our very walls. It won’t work, Uzumaki Kurama. I suggest you surrender the jinchuuriki and turn yourself over to our justice.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Kurama growls, baring his claws and sinking down to balance his weight on the balls of his feet. “How about you go fuck yourself instead?”

Yagura’s mouth tightens faintly, and there’s the faintest spark of something in his gaze. “Very well. I’ll deal with you myself.” He pulls the long hook-ended staff from his back, sweeping it up and around, and Kurama braces himself, trying to figure out how the hell he’s going to manage this. One
spark of personality isn’t enough, but if Kurama can get more…

Fine. Great. Fantastic. He’ll make the crazy Obito-controlled jinchuuriki with complete control over his bijuu lose his temper. That might make him sloppy enough for Kurama to break the genjutsu. Either that or get him killed. Fifty-fifty chance.

Well, maybe forty-sixty.

“Isobu, you damned idiot,” Kurama growls, leaping down from the rock and landing lightly on the road. He lets his chakra flare, a heavy, corrosive miasma of red and black and concentrated malice, and sees several of the jounin sway under the force of it. “Wake the hell up already, or I’m gonna beat you bloody.”

There’s no answer from the turtle, not that Kurama really expected one. Instead, Yagura’s staff comes swinging at his head, hard and fast, and Kurama has to drop and roll to avoid it. He comes to his feet right within Yagura’s guard, and takes pleasure in the surprise that flashes over the deceptively young face as he drives a fist right at it. “Wake up!”

Chakra ripples and flares, covering Yagura like a red-and-black cloak, and he catches Kurama’s fist in one hand. “Stop saying that,” he hisses, low and deadly, and a tail whips around to slam into Kurama’s side, knocking every last bit of air from his lungs and lifting him right off his feet. He hits the ground hard on his back, then throws himself out of the way of a lash of water shaped like a dragon. It explodes as it hits the ground, but the drops hang in the air, then whirl back towards Yagura as he twists. No hand-signs, no pause to craft a jutsu, just a wave of water hurtling at Kurama with deadly force, and Kurama doesn’t know if he can meet it in time.
XXVIII: Metanoia

[metanoia /'metəˌnoiə/, a change of mind and a change of heart, resulting in a positive transformation in the way one lives their life. It connotes the beginning of healing. From Greek metanoein “change one’s mind”]

Jiraiya hums thoughtfully, his new manuscript and his next report to Sarutobi both balanced on his lap. There's a risk doing it this way—more than once the Sandaime has gotten a sneak peek at the next Icha Icha book while Jiraiya's editor is left scratching his head over the coded assessment of Akatsuki’s most recent movements—but Jiraiya is an artist and can't deny the inspiration when it strikes. And that one nubile vixen in the bathhouse, with the black hair and the massive—

He giggles to himself, sniffling to ward off any imminent nosebleeds, and jots down a few more lines of his next masterpiece.

Technically, Kiri doesn’t have much to do with Konoha, Orochimaru, or Akatsuki, but Jiraiya has been catching weird rumors from this village for years, and when Orochimaru was sighted a few miles from the edge of the village, he figured it was finally time to check it out. One henge as an absentminded farmer later, he’s beginning to see that Kiri is just one massive mess, worse than Suna or Kumo have ever managed to be. The civilians are on edge, and the shinobi are worse—one wrong move is enough to get weapons drawn on both sides.

And there are sides, that much Jiraiya can say without hesitation. They're even obvious. No one is trying very hard to hide their discontent, and they're sticking to their own groups. It puts Jiraiya in definite mind of a powder keg with a bare inch left on the fuse; one spark, one breath of wind, and the entire thing is going to go up like fireworks.

Or like a bomb. That’s a distinct possibility, too.

Jiraiya has been here for three weeks now, entirely out of contact with Konoha because he can't risk revealing his chakra and getting noticed. Foreign shinobi are never exactly welcomed, not in any of the villages, but here in Kiri it’s particularly bad. They're avoided, whispered about, eyed with all the wariness of possible serial killers. Twice now Jiraiya has seen it, and it makes him glad he didn’t try to enter the village as himself. He probably wouldn’t have made it very far, being who he is.

Tapping his pen against the page on his knee, Jiraiya sighs softly and tugs at a strand of white hair that’s falling loose. He doesn’t quite know where to go from here; he hasn’t seen any evidence of Orochimaru’s presence, or any of Akatsuki’s supposed other members—not that he’d be able to pick them out of a lineup even if they were here, given that he only has a vague idea of who they are—and given the current tensions, he doesn’t want to get caught as a Konoha nin in the middle of what might as well be enemy territory. Still, the risk that Orochimaru is up to something in the village is a little too great for Jiraiya to accept; the Snake is dangerous, and Jiraiya knows that better than anyone.

Damned if he does, damned if he doesn’t, Jiraiya thinks a little wryly, and rolls his report up to stow it in his weapons pouch. If that's the case, he might as well just—

That’s about when the screaming starts.

Jiraiya's head snaps up, and the Icha Icha manuscript gets stuffed away as well, even as he jerks to
his feet. That particular terrified cadence means civilian, and while civilians screaming in the middle of the Bloody Mist is hardly a new thing, the sheer number of screaming villagers means this isn’t just two shinobi deciding to brawl it out in the streets. Jiraiya steps back, closer to the twisted, gnarled trunk of the willow he’s been using as a hiding place, and it’s hard for a man with his size and coloring to fade into the shadows, far harder than it ever was for his teammates when he had teammates, but years of experience make it simpler. He thinks small, unobtrusive thoughts as he slips out, keeping close to the treeline, and checks the street.

There’s chaos. The villagers are fleeing, running in the panicked way that means they’re leaving monsters behind them, and Jiraiya knows that’s a bad sign. Civilians in shinobi villages can take most things in stride, and this kind of reaction means something massive and distinctly deadly is happening.

Moving in the opposite direction of the civilians, going at a dead run, is a kunoichi Jiraiya has seen several times in the past few days, though sadly never in the bathhouse. She leaps knots of villagers, a hand on one of the twin swords at her waist, and shouts, “Mangetsu!”

“Here!” a man calls back, darting out of the shadows between two round-capped buildings and joining her in the rapidly-emptying street.

The kunoichi lands next to him, looking somewhere between pissed and the flavor of playful that a cat would before a wounded mouse, and says, “We need to move. Yagura’s mobilizing forces and trying to root us out.”

“What, like, move?” Mangetsu demands. “We can’t just go blindly, Ameyuri. What happened to dawn? Zabuza and Mei—”

Ameyuri shakes her head, mouth tightening, and draws her swords. That’s enough to spark the recognition in Jiraiya’s brain—Ringo Ameyuri, the first kunoichi to make it into the Seven Swordsmen. And that means her companion is the newest Swordsman, Hōzuki Mangetsu, supposedly able to wield all of Kiri’s famous blades. A dangerous pair, without a doubt, and given their topic of discussion…

“One of the jounin spotted the Yondaime headed towards the cliffs.” Her expression is grim. “We have to assume they’ve been taken or engaged already.”

Mangetsu’s expression flickers between worry, incredulity, and uncertainty. “With Kurama there? Weren’t they going to introduce him to Utakata?”

Jiraiya frowns. That’s a new name, even though he’s made himself familiar with the vast majority of Kiri’s high-ranking shinobi in the past few weeks. He recognizes Utakata’s name, of course—he’d be a failure as a spy if he missed Kiri’s second jinchuuriki—but the first name isn’t one he knows. And, given the tone Mangetsu just used, that is a failing. The implied how could anyone beat them if Kurama is there makes Jiraiya a little queasy; if he missed a fighter that powerful, what else could he have missed?

Ameyuri just tips one shoulder in a careless shrug. “We don’t have time for this,” she says. “Yagura is distracted. This is our best chance of seizing the Administration Center and eliminating his supporters while they’re without backup. Round up your chūnin and anyone who might be swayed to our side. I’ll find the jounin. Push for the village center, all right?”

“This is going to end badly,” is Mangetsu’s assessment, but he turns and hurries back into the maze of streets, and Ameyuri heads the opposite direction. A shinobi just rounding the corner sees her and shouts, but half a heartbeat later she’s on him in a spinning blur of lightning-edged swords, and when
she darts away there's a corpse left lying in the dirt.

Jiraiya takes a slow breath, then lets it out. He doesn’t have all the pieces yet, but—this is definitely a revolution happening right now. Whether it’s going to be a successful one or not remains to be seen, but given that Jiraiya is a well-known foreign nin with direct ties to Konoha's Sandaime and a reputation as one of the strongest shinobi alive, he can't afford to keep too close an eye on things. Getting spotted would give Kiri an iron-clad reason to go to war with Konoha, regardless of which side wins, and Jiraiya isn’t about to take that chance. He takes a breath, shifts even further back into the shadowy edges of the fog, and decides to wait until there's a definite outcome to report.

This is probably going to be the most exciting news that’s passed Sarutobi's desk in a long time. Jiraiya just hopes he doesn’t give his old teacher a heart attack or something.

Yagura’s attack shifts, changes, becomes a vast mouth with teeth and hunger, and Kurama moves. He gathers himself and leaps, harder and faster than he’s moved since he left his own time behind, and comes down behind the jinchuuriki as Yagura’s attack hits only empty air. Half a second to call up his chakra and then Kurama slashes down. Force ripples around the blow, heavy like gravity, and even with one tail manifested Yagura can’t turn fast enough to meet it. He goes flying, slamming into the rocks that line the seaward side of the road, and Kurama growls in victory and follows.

In the same moment, there's a sudden surge of heat, and the shinobi holding Mei scream. She dives down, rolls, and comes back to her feet, already pulling more lava into the air around her. In contrast, Zabuza is gone, faded back into the mist even as his captors fall with their throats slit, and Mei laughs. Her lava flows out like a deadly wave, aiming for more of Yagura’s shinobi, and a massive sword flashes down on the far side of the group, sending more of them scattering with fearful cries.

Satisfied that they're not about to die, Kurama turns his full attention back to his own fight, spinning sideways around another lash of water and then going high, more force gathering around his fingertips. Claws aren’t useful here, and getting close enough to use them will do more harm than good, but he can't risk a bijūdama, even small. At full strength Isobu could stop it, or at least avoid it, but Kurama doesn’t know that he is at full strength. What if Obito has bound him somehow, or is leeching from him? Naruto liked Yagura, for the brief moment they met in the bijuu’s shared mental world, and regretted not being able to save him. For that reason alone Kurama isn’t about to kill him.

Still, that leaves Kurama a little light on techniques. He slashes down again, but Yagura dodges, a sweep of his hook-ended staff calling up another whirl of seawater that he flings directly at Kurama’s head. Kurama ducks under it, steps around the jab of the staff, and calls up a scything arc of razor-edged wind. It screams down like a storm, but Yagura turns even as his chakra shroud ripples and condenses, darkening to a red so deep it’s almost black. The Fuuton jutsu impacts, but doesn’t do more than glance off the sudden emergence of Yagura’s Version Two form, and Kurama curses.

“How’s it feel to be a damned puppet, Yagura?” he taunts, sidestepping another lance of water. A burst of fire dissipates the next before it can hit him, and he leaps back, luring the Mizukage further away from Mei and Zabuza. He doesn’t want to find out the hard way that Yagura is willing to take hostages. They're not his friends, not hardly, but—they're allies, and his Naruto would have given anything to protect them for that reason alone. Kurama might not be Naruto, not in any way that matters, but he can at least respect his jinchuuuriki’s convictions. Especially when it will make his own fight easier.

“I am no one’s puppet,” Yagura answers icily, but he’s following, Isobu’s three tails sweeping out to
crumble rock. In a blur of speed he darts around Kurama, aiming a blow at his back, but Kurama rolls underneath the tail and keeps retreating, aiming for a small area of open ground further down the path. He risks a brief glance back, checking on his allies, and—

Utakata is where Kurama left him, but he’s sitting cross-legged on the rocks again, eyes closed, hands on his knees. Saiken’s chakra ripples and curls around him like waves, and Kurama frowns, because that’s stupid. Why is the kid, already a jounin and supposedly a trained shinobi, leaving himself vulnerable like that? Especially with a good dozen of Yagura’s shinobi still trying to subdue Zabuza and Mei. It’s just—

Not something he can contemplate right now, Kurama realizes, as one of Yagura’s tails nearly takes his head off. He leaps over the second one, ducks the third, and spins back to his feet in a cocoon of fire that slides off Isobu’s chakra like water off oiled canvas.

“Not a puppet?” Kurama asks, and has to laugh, rough and derisive. “Says the puppet who can’t even see his own strings. You’re killing people, ruling over a sea of blood, and you don’t even know why. You’re being used, Yagura. Akatsuki has one hand on your neck but you don’t even see it. Are you stupid, or just that arrogant, little boy?”

“I am not a child!” Yagura snarls, and this time the whip-like lash of water catches Kurama in the side, flinging him across the ground. He hits the rocks hard, feeling ribs crack, but doesn’t have time to assess. Yagura is already on him again, corrosive chakra boiling with fury, and Kurama dodges in time to escape all but a single long cut down his shoulder. He rolls back to his feet, ducks a second blow, and sends a wave of force back. It hits, but not hard enough, and Kurama curses as he retreats again.

“You sure look like one to me. I feel like I should go looking for your babysitter,” he taunts, and leaps high, twisting over the tail that slams into the ground where he was standing and coming down on Yagura’s left. Another shockwave makes Yagura spin, only to catch a face-full of fire with another razor-edged wind behind it, and the jinchuuriki roars. He shakes it off, like a bull enraged by a stinging fly, and that’s really not a metaphor to increase Kurama’s confidence. He ducks in, trying for another punch even after the way his last attempt ended, and only manages a glancing scrape of knuckles across blistering chakra as Yagura whips his head to the side.

But something flickers in Yagura’s eyes as the barb strikes home, and the fury that covers him like a haze flickers, increases. Just for a moment there’s clarity on his face, even in the midst of his anger, and with a hiss he lashes out with all three tails and his staff at once.

“I am NOT a CHILD!”

Okay, that’s a definite button, Kurama thinks, and drops down, slamming a hand into the earth. It surges up, but Kurama knows a simple Doton jutsu won’t even slow Yagura down, and dodges while the jinchuuriki’s sight is obscured. He slides behind a stand of boulders, needing the moment to figure out just how the hell he’s going to get through to the brat, and—

Yagura stumbles. His steps falter, the chakra shroud flickers, and for an instant all Kurama can feel is Saiken’s bubbly, acid-sharp power rising like waves around them.

Oh. Oh. Utakata is a damned genius. He must have gotten Saiken to pull him into the bijuu’s shared mental world, where they can attack the chains of the genjutsu holding Isobu directly. Given enough time, they might be able to bring the turtle back to himself.

Of course, that means Kurama has to distract Yagura in this world, so that there’s no chance of him following and confronting the teenager. Kurama isn’t certain that Yagura can even access that plane,
but better not to risk it. Utakata's only a kid, and although Kurama suspects that Saiken will do whatever he can to keep his jinchuuriki safe, they can't afford to take that chance.

With that in mind, Kurama slides out from behind the rocks while Yagura's back is turned, then summons up another wave of force and lets it crash over their battleground. Without a chakra shroud to catch it, it knocks Yagura right off his feet, sending his tumbling. He catches himself before he can go over the edge of the cliff, but immediately rises, pulling a massive surge of water up from the ocean as he does. He spins on Kurama, teeth bared and eyes almost wild, and the reflexive breath Kurama takes is water down like a drowning wave.

There's no avoiding this one, no getting away, no time to retaliate; all Kurama can do is brace himself before the miniature tsunami drops down on his skull. There's a burst of pain, an explosion of darkness behind his eyes, and the reflexive breath Kurama takes is water without any air at all.

The darkness spreads, swallowing him whole, and for an endless moment it's all Kurama knows.

“Hey,” a gentle voice says, as familiar as Kurama's own heartbeat. “Hey, bastard fox, that’s enough playing dead. Open your eyes. Beauty sleep’s not going to help that much ugliness, believe it!”

Kurama's breath stutters in his throat, even as his hand flies up, catching the fingers that glance over his cheek. They're *tangible*, callused and warm and so impossibly familiar, and he opens his eyes. Gold greets him, gold and blue and sun-tanned brown, with three pale whisker-marks like faded scars and a smile as bright as the sun.

"Naruto," he chokes, and then can't get so much as another sound out.

Naruto—*his* Naruto, well into his thirties and worn around the edges, but still so bright, still so brave and steady—smiles at him, eyes warm, and twists his hand in Kurama's grasp to close his fingers around Kurama's hand. “Hey, Kurama,” he says fondly, as though they're meeting after a few days apart, as if Naruto isn’t *dead* and Kurama isn’t stranded in a time period thirty years removed from his own.

Kurama sits up, unable to take his eyes off his jinchuuriki, and drags in a breath that shakes. “You’re *dead*,” he manages. “I saw—Kaguya killed you and then—”

Faint sadness slides in behind Naruto's smile, edging it with regret, and he sits back on his heels. “Yeah,” he says quietly. “I figured it would end like that. I'm sorry for making you sad, Kurama. That was never what I wanted.”

A sound gets caught in Kurama's throat, halfway between a laugh and a sob, and he doesn’t resist the impulse to throw himself forward, wrapping his arms around his jinchuuriki the way he’s only ever done once before. “You *idiot*, Naruto! That doesn’t *matter*, you *died!*”

“And you made it back in time,” Naruto counters, laughing a little as he rocks back to land hard on his ass, Kurama halfway sprawled in his lap. Without hesitation, he wraps Kurama up in a tight hug, holding him close, and says, “If you're using enough chakra to strain the seal, though, something’s happening. Are you okay?”

Entirely reluctant to so much as lift his head from Naruto’s shoulder, Kurama grunts unhappily. “Fucking *Obito.*” Then he pauses, eyes narrowing, and growls, “You *sealed* my *chakra*?”
That makes Naruto laugh again, and he ruffles Kurama's hair. “Uh, kind of?” he admits sheepishly, and when Kurama snarls at him adds, “Just a little! It didn’t keep you from using it, it just meant that if you wanted to use all of it you had to reach for it, and you’d come here.” He smiles, expression bright and eyes happy. “I wanted to be with you, Kurama, even just as a chakra impression. I wanted to see you become the hero I know you are.”

Kurama can't help but laugh, finally forcing himself to pull back a little so that he’s kneeling in front of Naruto. “You’re the only one,” he says, and it comes out far closer to fond than he intends. “Sage, Naruto, I missed you. I’ve missed you so much.”

Another sad smile and Naruto reaches out, curling his fingers around the back of Kurama's skull and pulling him in to rest their foreheads together. “Sorry, Kurama,” he says again. “I didn’t mean to leave you all alone.”

Taking a shaky breath, Kurama closes his eyes briefly, then opens them again, unwilling to miss even a second of this encounter. “I’ll survive,” he says roughly. “The other you—the younger you, he’s with me. He likes me.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Naruto laughs, and his fingers tighten just a little as his expression turns serious. “If you use your full power, everyone nearby will feel it,” he warns. “They’ll know you’re something more than a regular shinobi.”

Since they already do, that’s hardly a loss. Kurama gives Naruto a crooked smile and says mockingly, “Worried about subtlety? Where’s Naruto, and who the hell are you?”

Naruto just laughs, grin stretching bright and happy across his face. “Okay, okay, bastard fox, no need to get snippy. I was just warning you.” Blue eyes fall closed for a moment, then open again, and he pulls Kurama forward into another hug. “Be careful, you big, mean jerk. I can't watch your back like I used to, so you’d better watch it twice as hard, okay?”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Kurama complains, even though his eyes feel hot and his throat is tight again as he curls his arms around Naruto's waist. “I—am I ever going to see you again?”

“Who knows?” Naruto asks cheerfully, and the white world around them brightens like a solar flare before Kurama can even open his mouth to curse at him for it. There's a sharp crack somewhere distant, the echo of a seal breaking, and chakra rushes in like a warm, buoyant wave, sweeping him up and carrying him away from that familiar presence.

Bye, Kurama. I love you, and I'm so proud of you, something whispers into his ear, and Kurama smiles even through the wash of grief, finally letting go.

“Bye, Naruto,” he breathes, and opens his eyes.

“Well, fuck,” Rōshi says, halfway up the cliff that will let them sneak into Kiri unnoticed—Han’s idea, of course. He stares upward, watching as a good portion of the sea is pulled right into the air as part of what is clearly a devastatingly large water jutsu. There's enough chakra on the path to make it seem like a small war is going on, and three of those chakra signatures are definitely bijuu, or at least jinchuuriki.

“Keep climbing,” Han tells him firmly, stripped of his armor to make the trek easier and very unhappy about it. “We can deal with it when we're on solid ground.”
Well, at least they found Kurama, Rōshi thinks with as much optimism as he can muster, channeling a little more chakra into his hands and feet and redoubling his pace. He only hopes the crew of the boat they commandeered was able to get out of range before shinobi started sucking up the seawater. There's no time to even glance back to check, and Rōshi doesn’t bother trying, throwing himself up the steeply angled rock.

He’s already calling up Son’s chakra as he hits the lip the cliff, and he hurtes over with lava curling around him, slamming feet-first into a shinobi in Kiri's uniform. The man goes down, and the very pretty auburn-haired woman he was about to stab in the back whirls around in surprise. Rōshi doesn’t pause, slingling himself around her and smashing a ball of molten rock into the face of another man. The smell of scorched flesh fills the air, and Han, just vaulting over the edge of the cliff, gives him a must-you-always-resort-to-overkill look.

With the ease of practice, Rōshi ignores it, ducking a kunai aimed at his eye and kicking the attacking kunoichi in the stomach. Another surge of lava—not his own, to his great surprise—finishes her off, and he turns a startled look on the auburn-haired woman, who smiles viciously at him before hurling herself to a shinobi trying to lunge at the jinchuuriki seated off to the side. The kid doesn’t move, but the would-be attacker goes down screaming.

“Okay. Her I like,” Rōshi tells Han cheerfully.

Han gives him a long-suffering look, then drops the sack holding his armor and starts pulling it on. “Kurama,” he reminds Rōshi pointedly.

“Oh there,” the only shinobi fighting on the woman’s side says, pausing next to them with the blade of his massive sword dripping blood. Rōshi had forgotten just what Kiri was like, as a culture. The lack of restraint is actually rather freeing, though, looking at it as a jinchuuriki who causes collateral damage more often than not. The man points down the rocky road, to where that water Rōshi watched rise is coming down, and he just manages to catch a glimpse of dark skin and red hair before the wave crashes over the two fighters.

“Kurama!” he shouts, heart in his throat, and leaps for the pair with Son rising inside of him. The ape roars with fury, deafening even if it isn’t truly audible, and Rōshi isn’t any more composed. The Suiton jutsu is pulling back, but that much pressure, that much weight, with killing chakra behind it and a jinchuuriki’s power augmenting it—

Something sparks. There's a flicker of red so dark it’s almost black, then another, and then like a wildfire catching an ancient, malicious power burns the water away, not even leaving steam behind. In the midst of that angry, hateful chakra, a figure stirs, and Kurama pushes to his feet. He staggers once, then steadies, shaking his head, and…laughs.

He laughs, and it’s wild and dangerous enough to stop Rōshi in his tracks.

“Goddamn,” Kurama says, twisting to stretch almost idly. He bares his teeth in a bloody grin, directed at the small figure standing tense and wary across from him, and chuckles lowly. “I'd forgotten what it feels like to really let loose. Care to help me remember, kid?”

The other jinchuuriki’s expression flickers, then firms. “I'm not a child,” he growls, and it has the sound of a familiar mantra.

Kurama hums thoughtfully, then shifts his weight forward onto the balls of his feet. “Great,” he says with easy, deadly amusement. “Then I don’t have to care when I beat your ass into the ground.”

Chakra ripples around him, hot like the heart of a fire with the cutting edge of a hurricane hidden
behind the heat. Kurama doesn’t even seem to move, but in half the space of a blink he’s behind the Mizukage, and a kick slams into the jinchuuriki’s spine. Yagura stumbles forward even as his three tails whip backwards, aiming to crush, but Kurama catches them casually, easily, and laughs again.

“Cute,” he mocks. “But you’re forgetting something, Yagura.” His grip tightens, and with a surge and a jerk he turns, throwing Yagura bodily away from him. The jinchuuriki crashes into the trees on the far side of the path, tearing through them as his chakra flares to lessen the impact.

Kurama steps after him, casual except for the predator lurking in his eyes. “I’m so far out of your league, kid, that you might as well just give up. You're never going to be able to touch me as you are now, tied to that madman. Get up. Fight for yourself. Fight like you actually mean it. *Fight me, Yagura!*”

Yagura scrambles to his feet, eyes wide and suddenly wary, and takes a step forward. He lashes out again, tails and chakra slamming forward, but Kurama dodges like they’re hardly moving at all and punches Yagura squarely in the face. There’s a sharp crack of breaking bone, and Yagura reels back with a cry, expression astonished above the wash of blood from a broken nose. And—Rōshi’s honestly pretty surprised, too, given that he hadn’t thought a simple punch could make it through a jinchuuriki’s chakra shroud.

Then again, it’s not a surprise that Kurama’s something entirely new in the framework of their world. Rōshi realized that much a while ago.

Fire roars, a sudden snap-crack as the inferno strikes with all the force of a hammer, evaporating the weak shield of water Yagura desperately summons to block it. The younger man looks dazed, almost dizzy as he staggers back another few feet, trying to put space between himself and Kurama, and he shakes his head hard as if attempting to throw off a mental fog. “You—what?” he demands harshly, then visibly grits his teeth and opens his eyes. “You're a traitor,” he growls. “Nothing you say means anything! I’ll stop you here, and take those jinchuuriki you snatched to make Kiri strong!”

Rōshi winces. He’s only been around Kurama for less than a full day, and even he can tell that threatening the kids Kurama collected is a bad, bad idea.

And, on cue, Kurama bares his teeth, an inhuman snarl tearing out of his throat. “They're *mine*!” he roars, and chakra swirls around him like a hurricane and is then pulled in, condensing in one hand. Positive and negative shift, balancing precisely, and spin into a whirl of black-streaked violet. The moment it steadies, Kurama hurls himself forward, too fast to see, and slams into Yagura with the force of a storm. The orb of chakra in his hand impacts the Sanbi’s chakra shroud, and with a sound like splintering glass it gives way, shattering around Yagura. With a cry he staggers back, and Kurama spins, another kick hurling Yagura back across the road. The Mizukage slams into a rock, skull snapping back with a crack, and then slumps in boneless unconsciousness.

Like a sudden tide, cool chakra curls around him, rising and then receding, and Rōshi feels Son shift in sudden recognition. *Isobu*, the ape says to him. *I felt him before, but it was…muted. Different. I hadn’t realized it until now.*

“Rōshi.” There’s surprise in Kurama’s voice as he steps out of the clearing his fight created, and Rōshi turns to find the other redhead looking at him with confusion. “What are you doing here?”

That, at least, is easy enough to answer. Rōshi jerks a thumb back towards his friend, who’s helping contain the last of the attacking Kiri shinobi, and says, “Han and I met up on Turtle Island, meant to pass a message to Bee, but he’d been called back to Kumo. We decided to find you, see if you needed our help. Seems like you’ve got it handled, though.”
Kurama smiles a little, oddly easy despite the painfully corrosive chakra that’s just starting to fade. “I'm okay now,” he agrees, and the words have a weight to them, meaning that Rōshi isn’t privy to. “Someone just reminded me what I'm fighting for.” He casts a glance at Yagura’s crumpled form, expression not quite sympathetic even if there's definitely understanding there. “A puppet wouldn’t understand that.”

A genjutsu, Rōshi realizes with a flicker of unease, remembering Kurama's warning about a masked man with an eye that could control jinchuuriki. People with strong enough wills can sometimes break genjutsus, given the right motivation, but if they can't manage by themselves, pain does a pretty good job of it, too. And being overwhelmed by Kurama's chakra, uncontained and roiling with hot-sharp determination buried rage, was probably more than painful enough to do the trick, even if that blow to the head didn’t.

Shaking his head in mixed disbelief and wonder—because really, mind-controlled bijuu and mysterious redheads rescuing them, what is his life now—Rōshi joins Kurama at the other jinchuuriki’s side, even as the dark-haired teenager and the swordsman head down the road to join them. “Think that freed him?” he asks judiciously, running an assessing eye over the man. Over the Mizukage, and damn it, but that buts a whole new spin on things, doesn’t it? Controlling a Kage is like conquering a village, after all, and in a place like Kiri, a sudden personality change might spark a few concerns, but not many people would be brave enough to actually voice them.

“I think so.” It’s the teenager who answers, hovering a few feet back but looking steady enough. “Saiken says the Sharingan’s hold has been broken.”

“The Sharingan?” the swordsman demands, hand tightening on the hilt of his weapon. “There was a fucking Uchiha controlling him? Red—”

“Rogue Uchiha,” Kurama corrects, rocking back on his heels. He glances over at the teenager. “Utakata, you good?”

Utakata nods. “Saiken took the brunt of the fight while I restrained Isobu. I’ll be fine with a little rest.”

“Good.” A shift from the body in front of them pulls Kurama's attention back, and he narrows his eyes, tension bleeding into his frame. Rōshi tenses too, Son close to the surface and ready to strike if he needs to, but he doesn’t move yet.

“Red?” the swordsman asks, faintly wary, just as Yagura’s eyes flicker open.
XXIX: Requital

Chapter Notes

Uh, surprise? This is my attempt to make up for some of the (many) updates I’ve missed due to work or vacation. I don’t know how many more of these I’ll be able to get up in between regular Tuesday updates, but hopefully a few.

Also, because some people are confused: Yagura is not a child. He just looks that way. He’s an adult, I promise. Canon says so.

[requital / riˈkwɪtl/; something given in return, compensation, or retaliation. From 16th Century English, from re- “back” + obsolete quite “quit”.

“Ow,” is the first thing Yagura says, immediately followed by, “That bastard with the eye! I’m going to wring his neck!”

“Okay,” Kurama concludes wryly, settling back on his heels. “He’s fine. Everybody back, quit hovering.”

Yagura pushes himself away from the rocks with a grimace, sitting up a little unsteadily and pressing a hand to the back of his skull. “Thank you,” he tells Kurama briskly. “I appreciate it more than you can know, getting me out from under that man’s thumb.”

Memories of Madara and bloody-red eyes make Kurama’s smile slip sideways, turn it crooked and a little pained. Obito did it, too, the night of Naruto’s birth. “Believe me, I understand. The Sharingan sucks ass. Glad you’re back with us, though.”

That earns Kurama a quick look from several of the surrounding shinobi, Rōshi and Utakata foremost. “Kurama?” Rōshi asks sharply, expression pulling into a deep frown as he crosses his arms over his chest.

Kurama waves it away. It’s the past twice over now, and he’s not about to bring it up. The ease from seeing Naruto, from managing something like a goodbye untainted by death and falling bodies, is like a pool of calm at Kurama’s center, curled up in the midst of the full force of his chakra. He hadn’t even realized it was absent until Naruto returned it, but it’s like reuniting his Yin and Yang halves all over again.

He’s whole, more than just physically now.

The sharp snap of heeled sandals on stone announces Mei’s rapid approach, with the faint clank of Han following behind her. “Yagura,” she says sharply, and there’s temper like a brewing storm in her voice. “You little worm, I should punch you for everything you’ve put us through these last few years!”

Zabuza takes one look at her face and slides around to stand on the far side of Kurama, well out of range.
Yagura simply glares back at her as he drags himself to his feet. He plants himself in front of Mei, who has over a foot on him in height and probably weighs as much as two of him. “Terumī. Don’t think I didn’t know about you coveting my seat, witch. You can’t have it. I’m the Yondaime Mizukage!”

“Then you should actually do your job!” Mei props her hands on her hips and meets him stare for angry stare. “It’s all gone to hell while you were busy being brainwashed, so fix it.”

“I will!”

“Good!”

“Fine!”

Kurama isn’t quite sure what happens next, but there’s a brief scuffle that somehow ends with Mei hugging Yagura as if her life depends on it, stooped low to get her arms around him, and Yagura enduring it with a roll of his eyes and a fairly awkward pat on the back. There’s a faint glassiness to his eyes that gives him away, though, and his voice is slightly rough when he says, “Stop leaking on me, Terumī. I’m the Mizukage, it’s demeaning.”

“Shut up,” Mei tells him promptly. “This is probably the closest you’re ever going to get to a woman, so pipe down and enjoy it, shrimp.”

Yagura makes a face and wiggles out of her hold with as much dignity as he can muster. Kurama assumes they’re not supposed to see the way he brushes impatiently at his eyes. “If you even count, harpy,” he retorts. “Still trying to trap a husband, I see.”

Mei smacks him in the back of the head without hesitation. “I’m at a perfectly eligible marrying age!”

That’s certainly not a relationship Kurama saw coming. With a low, entirely amused snort, he rises to his feet as well, leaving them to their bickering as he steps back to Rōshi’s side. The jinchuuriki arches a brow at him, then says mildly, “That was an impressive lightshow. You know, I bet that Copy-Nin would be a lot more careful about chasing after you if you showed him something like that.”

Kurama blinks, making the connection, and can’t fight a chuckle. “You ran into Hatake, I take it?”

From Kurama’s other side, Han huffs softly. “Ran into? You mean picked a fight with.”

Rōshi looks unrepentant. “Figured the least we could do for you and those two brats was slow him down. Not sure if it worked, but since we didn’t pass any jounin-shaped craters on our way here, I’ll assume it did.”

The look on Kakashi’s face when he realized he was facing off against not one but two jinchuuriki must have been fantastic, Kurama thinks a bit wistfully. Too bad he hadn’t known when he met the Freak Squad in Whirlpool Country; he’d have gleefully rubbed Kakashi’s face in it if he had. “We’ve run into them twice, but we managed to get away both times. We’re all fine.”

“Of course you are.” Roushi sounds insulted by the mere implication that they might be otherwise. “It takes a hell of a lot more than a scrawny scarecrow of a jounin to take a jinchuuriki down.”

Han sighs. “Rōshi, I really don’t think you’re in any position to be calling people scrawny.”

With a harrumph, Rōshi folds his arms across his chest. “I’m the furthest thing from scrawny, you walking haystack—”
“Red.”

“It’s Kurama,” Kurama says with some annoyance. “Even you can manage three syllables, shark-face.”

Zabuza just grins at him, Kubikiribōchō slung casually over his shoulder. “Let’s leave the lovebirds to it,” he says, jerking a thumb at Yagura and Mei, who are halfway down the path back to the village and still arguing. “They’ll clean up the mess that’s going on. I’m gonna find the kid.”

Since there’s only one kid Zabuza could be referring to, and Kurama’s kids are currently with him, Kurama nods in agreement, falling into step with the swordsman. Utakata slips up to walk on his other side, but doesn’t say anything even when Kurama glances at him, and he accepts that with a shrug. It’ll be good for Utakata to meet the rest of the brats, anyway, and he might feel a little safer around so many others like him.

“Not going to try and stab Yagura in the back and take the hat?” he asks Zabuza, faintly curious. The point of the revolution was to try and usurp the Mizukage’s position, after all.”

Zabuza simply snorts. “I think Mei would boil me alive,” he says without even a flicker of hostility, and a good amount of amusement. “She and Yagura have been friends since they were kids. ‘Sides, if our Mizukage’s not batshit insane anymore, I got what I wanted. That’s good enough.”

Kurama’s psychopath theory is looking less and less likely with every passing minute. He bids it a rather wistful farewell, wondering if there are any villains out there without tragic backstories and understandable motivations. Seeing as Naruto couldn’t turn around without tripping over a sympathetic enemy, he supposes not.

“Whatever,” he dismisses. “Going to drop the damn blackmail now?”

That gets him a grin, full of sharp teeth and—

Oh.

Kurama recognizes that look, actually. He has very awkward memories of seeing it on Sasuke's face just before Naruto ended up flat on his back or pressed up against the nearest hard surface.

“I don’t know,” Zabuza says casually, though his grin isn’t going away. “You gonna let me buy you a drink without resorting to it?”

It takes effort to keep his steps steady. Obviously, Kurama’s never had to deal with anything even close to this before. He used to be a construct of chakra, with all the lack of everything that implies. He’s seen it, of course, even halfway experienced it through the eyes of his hosts—and, Sage, Hashirama courting—no, attempting to court Mito was probably enough to scar him for life all by itself—but it’s never been even close to the realm of his wants.

*I have no fucking clue*, Kurama wants to say, but can’t quite bring himself to. It’s—vulnerability, maybe, and even with the memory of his Naruto's unshadowed smile so close, Kurama’s still not big on leaving holes like that in his defenses. He casts a sideways look at Zabuza, assessing just for the hell of it, and lets his eyes linger.

Attraction, at least, is something he’s definitely felt secondhand, since Uzumaki are absolutely not shy about their sexualities or sexual urges. He thinks he can feel a shadow of it in himself, looking at Zabuza’s angular face, the dark eyes watching him. More appreciation than anything, maybe, but it’s…interesting.
Kurama’s been human for almost three weeks now, after over a hundred years watching how humans work from the outside—or, more precisely, the inside—and he hasn’t had the chance to think about it before, but all the curious things that Naruto and Kushina and Mito did, he can understand them firsthand now. All he has to do is…poke around a little.

Foxes are curious by nature, and Kurama's no exception there.

“If you’re trying to get me drunk,” he says gruffly, trying to hide the twin sparks of wariness and interest, “I'll warn you now, you're going to need nine or ten bars’ worth of booze.”

Zabuza chuckles, low and pleased. “Your virtue’s safe with me, princess. I'm fine with it if you don’t want to put out on the first date.”

“Fuck you, shark-face,” Kurama shoots back, though the bickering does make him feel slightly steadier. “I just don’t know if you’re worth it yet.”

“Please stop flirting, it’s kind of terrifying,” Rōshi puts in from where he’s trailing after them with Han, and Kurama casts a dirty look over his shoulder. The shorter redhead raises his hands defensively, but subsides with a smirk.

“Better than watching you drool over that lady’s lava release,” Han points out mildly, tipping his hat down to hide his smile. It would work better if he didn’t have at least a foot and a half on even Zabuza.

Rōshi bristles, turning and kicking Han hard in the shin. Over a flurry of verbal abuse, Utakata takes a step closer and says quietly, “We should ask Yagura to meet us after things have been settled in the village. I don’t think he’s encountered any of the other jinchuuriki besides me.”

The sharpness in his amber eyes says that isn’t the only reason, and Kurama can easily make the leap, even if the kid is avoiding mention of it in front of Zabuza. Yagura’s had the closest encounter with Obito in this time, and might be able to recall something that they can use. Since Kurama's more or less in the dark about the Uchiha's actions right now, beyond him being that shadow leader of Akatsuki and not having decided to infiltrate his own organization as Tobi yet, it’s a good idea.

“You're a smart kid,” he says, and means it wholeheartedly. “Thanks for helping in the fight, too. That was damn clever of you.”

Utakata ducks his head a little, but there's a faint, pleased smile on his lips. “I didn’t want to get in your way, since we’ve never fought together before, but I thought I could help. I'm glad it worked.”

“Gave him plenty of time to pull that hat trick out of his ass,” Zabuza says, eyeing Kurama again. This time it’s less lustful and more as if he’s measuring Kurama for a coffin. “We should have that spar some time, Red.”

Kurama snorts derisively. “Yeah, no. I’d be picking you out of my teeth in ten seconds flat, sword-freak. If you even lasted that long. But I think Yugito is still up for kicking your ass, if you're hard-up for sparring partners.”

“Scared?” Zabuza taunts. “Can't beat an opponent unless they’ve been brainwashed for decades?”

“Fuck off. The only thing scary about you is that you seem to think the piranha teeth look is attractive.”

“I haven’t had any complaints. Want to try it and see for yourself, Red?”
“What did I *just* say about the flirting?” Rōshi complains, and ducks obligingly when Kurama takes a swing at him. Kurama's claws skim the tips of his hair and he huffs is disgruntled disappointment, pulling back.

“I don’t know,” he challenges. “Want to try saying it again? Louder, this time?”

“Rōshi hardly needs *encouragement* to be loud.” Han sidesteps another kick—aimed at his kneecaps this time—and raises his head, looking down the road to where it curves around a stand of trees. “Incoming, Kurama.”

Mobile watchtower, Kurama thinks in amusement, turning back to watch the path. His ears catch familiar footsteps, flying flat-out over the dirt, and a moment later Naruto barrels around the turn. For an instant Kurama is prepared for anything, from homesick tears to Obito in hot pursuit, but then he realizes Naruto is beaming and laughing, running with his arms outstretched. With a chuckle, he pushes past Zabuza, stepping to the front, and crouches down just in time for the little boy to slam bodily into him. He grunts and rocks back on his heels, but manages to redirect momentum as he rises, hauling Naruto up with him. He hugs him tightly, burying his face in familiar blond hair, and can't fight a smile of his own.

He’s said goodbye to his Naruto. This is the one that needs him now.

“Hey there, kit,” he murmurs. “Miss me?”

“Kurama-nii!” Naruto pulls back to give him a wide grin. “You're okay! There was a big explosion and lots of chakra and Yugito-nee got really worried for a bit but you're okay now!”

Kurama chuckles, scuffing a hand through his wild hair. “Not a scratch on me,” he confirms. “You were good for Yugito and Haku?”

“Of course!” Naruto says like it’s a forgone conclusion and not a vague hope Kurama had clung to. “Gaara an’ me helped Haku make lunch, and Fū washed the clothes and then Yugito-nee helped her hang them up.”

“That’s a lot you guys got done,” Kurama approves, tweaking the tip of his nose. He half-turns so that Naruto can see his companions. “Remember Rōshi, from the inn in Ame?”

Naruto waves cheerfully. “Hi! I remember! You're the guy with the pointy beard, like Hokage-jiji’s but bigger!”

Rōshi touches his beard a little self-consciously, but manages a smile in return. “Hello again, Naruto.”

Han snorts quietly, moving forward, and bends down to put himself at eye-level with Naruto. “Hello, Naruto,” he echoes. “I'm Han, jinchuuriki of Kokuō, the Gobi. Kurama saved my life, and I'm in his debt, so if you ever need anything, just ask it of me.”

Staring up at him with slightly wide eyes, Naruto nods, apparently overwhelmed by Han's excessive height. Han chuckles a little, straightening and tipping his hat back. His eyes flicker past Kurama, back down the road, and Kurama turns automatically to see Gaara approaching at a much more reserved pace. He eyes the strangers warily as he nears, and skirts Zabuza as much as he can before he latches on to the edge of Kurama's shirt.

“You're not hurt, Kurama-nii?” he asks solemnly, staring up at him with wide aquamarine eyes.

“Not at all, squirt,” Kurama answers gently, dropping to one knee. He holds out his free arm, and
without needing any more of an invitation, Gaara winds his arms around Kurama's neck and holds tightly as he’s picked up. Kurama settles them carefully, a six-year-old on each hip, and pointedly ignores the way Zabuza is smirking at him. “What are you two doing out here by yourselves? Did you sneak out while Yugito wasn’t looking?”

“Oh!” Naruto wriggles in sudden, utter excitement. “Kurama-nii, Kurama-nii, guess what? We caught a geezer!”

Kurama has a very bad feeling about this.

Gaara nods in agreement. “Fū said we could come and tell you,” he reports.

“She said only if you were around the corner,” Naruto complains. “But that’s stupid. You’re right here and it’s fine.”

“It’s not stupid,” Kurama corrects automatically, starting down the path again without waiting for the others to catch up. If Naruto means what Kurama thinks he does…oh boy. “She just wants to keep you safe. Tell me about this geezer.”

“He’s a geezer,” is Naruto’s helpful clarification. “He saw me an’ Fuji-nee playing on the porch an’ said I should come with him back to Konoha ‘cause it wasn’t safe out here. Then Yugito-nee came out and she grew big claws and tried to scare him off, but he made himself an even bigger pile of spikes and poked her! So we all jumped him and beat him up, ‘cause Yugito-nee is awesome and teaches me how to throw shuriken really well and anyone who hurts her is really mean!”

Gaara nods silently, affirming that this is definitely what happened, and buries his face in Kurama’s collar. After a long moment, he says very quietly, “I protected them, Kurama-nii. I found something I wanted to protect and I didn’t let that man hurt it. Like I promised.”

Kurama remembers him saying that, just as they entered Kusa. It feels like so long ago, even if it was only a handful of days. The memory is clear, though—Gaara had made up his mind that he would do anything he needed to in order to keep those precious to him safe, and now he’s proved it.

“You really are my ferocious warriors, huh?” Kurama asks fondly, pushing open the gate in the low fence with his hip. It squeaks as it swings open, and he lets it fall shut behind him with a heavy thud.

“Yep!” Naruto agrees brightly, and waves when Fū appears around the corner of the house. “Hi, Fū! We found Kurama-nii!”

“I thought I told you to wait for him at the corner,” Fū says, looking faintly frazzled, though she offers Kurama a swift smile. “Welcome back, Kurama-nii. Did Naruto tell you?”

“You really are my ferocious warriors, huh?” Kurama asks fondly, pushing open the gate in the low fence with his hip. It squeaks as it swings open, and he lets it fall shut behind him with a heavy thud.

“Yep!” Naruto agrees brightly, and waves when Fū appears around the corner of the house. “Hi, Fū! We found Kurama-nii!”

“I thought I told you to wait for him at the corner,” Fū says, looking faintly frazzled, though she offers Kurama a swift smile. “Welcome back, Kurama-nii. Did Naruto tell you?”

“About the geezer you caught? He started to.” Kurama bends down to set the boys on their feet, then steps past them, keeping himself between them and the chakra signature he can feel in the back yard. “Is Yugito all right?”

“I’m fine, Kurama-nii.” The girl slips around the edge of the porch, and when Fū shoots her a look adds, “Haku, Momiji, and Fuji are watching him. It should be okay to leave for a second.”

Despite the reassurance, Fū’s mouth turns down, and she heads back around the corner at a swift trot.

Kurama takes advantage of the pause to look Yugito over. There’s a stained bandage sloppily wrapped around one bicep, and her face bears the rapidly-healing imprint of scratches that were probably closer to deep gouges before Matatabi started on them. Fury kindles like a fire in his gut,
but he tamps it down, locks it away, and crouches in front of the girl.

“You're okay, kitten?” he asks, holding her gaze.

Yugito meets his eyes squarely, expression firm. “It’s just scratches, Kurama-nii. The bandage is only because Naruto thought it needed one.”

That definitely sounds like something a six-year-old Naruto would insist on. Unable to find any trace of lingering pain in her face, Kurama accepts Yugito’s words and pushes back to his feet. “All right. Let’s go see this asshole you managed to hook. If we decide to skin him you get first dibs.”

The squeaking gate swings open again, admitting Zabuza with his sword still slung over one shoulder, and he catches Kurama’s gaze, tipping his chin at the woods that surround the house. Kurama nods in return, taking that to mean that Utakata, Rōshi, and Han are checking to make sure no one else is going to sneak up on them, and lets the swordsman catch up before he follows Yugito’s path towards the back of the building.

One step around the edge of the house and it honestly takes every ounce of Kurama’s self-control not to burst into laughter.

Konoha’s fabled spymaster, the feared and fearsome Toad Sannin Jiraiya, is sprawled out on his back in the center of the grass. From his toes to his navel he’s covered in a thick layer of ice, and from navel to chin he’s completely cocooned in hardened sand. There’s enough of Chōmei’s glittery Scale Powder scattered around the area to make Kurama suspect Fū blinded him repeatedly, and a bruise around his eye that perfectly matches the shape of Naruto’s fist is just starting to turn purple. Yugito’s shuriken and kunai are spread in tight clusters across the ground, and odds are good that Jiraiya’s sporting scratches from her claws somewhere under the ice and sand.

At Kurama’s side, Zabuza gives a low, impressed whistle and slides Kubikiribōchō down, planting it in the ground and leaning casually on it. “Well, Red, got to hand it to you, your kids don’t fuck around. Nice, Haku.”

Sitting on the porch, wary eyes still trained on the spymaster, Haku flushes happily.

Kurama gives in and chuckles, stroking Yugito’s hair gently as he shifts around her, and offering a proud smile when she glances at him. She smiles back, clearly pleased, and Kurama looks at the other three jinchuuriki in turn. “Good work,” he says, and doesn’t even try to keep the amusement out of his voice as he leans over the thoroughly trapped Jiraiya. “Hello, Toad Sage. Fancy meeting you here.”

“Funny,” Jiraiya says, narrowing his eyes. “I don’t remember seeing you around. How’d you trick Naruto into playing along with you kidnapping him?”

Abruptly losing his humor, Kurama scowls. “I’m Uzumaki Kurama,” he growls, and sees dark eyes go wide as the family name registers. “No tricks, asshole, I promise. But I figured if his godfather wasn’t going to step up and take a little fucking care of him, his uncle might as well.”

“Kushina didn’t have a brother,” Jiraiya says, low and threatening. “I would have known.”

Kurama snorts, stepping back. “Would you? Hell of a lot of rubble to dig through, just to get to Uzushio’s genealogies.”

Jiraiya scoffs. “And the Kazekage’s kid? The granddaughter of Taki’s headman? Kumo’s second jinchuuriki? I suppose you’re all magically related?”
He could deny the implied accusation, but Kurama's really, truly not in the mood to deal with a bastard who'd try to hurt a kid. Who did hurt a kid. Yugito might be a kickass kunoichi, but Jiraiya is roughly four times her age. He should fucking know better. "Yeah, no, them I kidnapped. And they're pretty damned happy about it, too."

"We are," Fū agrees, crouching down on Jiraiya's other side with a threateningly cheerful smile. She waves brightly when his eyes land on her. "Hi, geezer! Kurama-nii's my actual favorite person in the whole world, so every time you're mean to him I'm going to kick you, okay? Somewhere painful."

Jiraiya blanches, then nods quickly. A rustle in the bushes has his eyes snapping left, and warily tracking over Rōshi and Han as they wade out of the tangled undergrowth and draping branches, Utakata a silent shadow behind them.

"Clear," Rōshi grunts, then crosses his arms over his chest and stares grimly down at the Toad Sage. "So, are we cutting pieces off? Feeding him to the foxes?"

"I could do with a bite," Momiji says judiciously, uncurling himself from one of the porch beams and leaping lightly down to the deck. He pads over, sniffing delicately, and adds, "I mean, I usually like the younger, more tender stuff, but old, tough, and stringy will do in a pinch."

"I—stringy?" Jiraiya's face goes through several contortions, as though he wants to protest but can't figure out whether it's a bad idea or not.

Kurama snorts. "Sorry, Momiji, I think I've got a better idea. I’ll find you some fish to make up for it, okay?" When he looks down again, Jiraiya is watching him warily. With a smirk, Kurama raises his hands. "It’s not torture. We’re not actually animals. Well, some of us. How about a trade instead?"

And— it’s a bad idea. Then again, Kurama's had a lot of bad ideas over the last few weeks, but they've all turned out okay eventually. This one's not all that different, and if it all goes well, it'll fix a hell of a lot of what went wrong.

"A trade," Jiraiya repeats dubiously. "If you think I'm just going to hand over Naruto—"

"You don’t have a damn thing to do with Naruto right now," Kurama growls, and it rumbles in his chest, just a little too deep for human vocal cords. Jiraiya's eyes narrow, but Kurama doesn’t give him time to ask his question. "No. You're looking for Akatsuki. I know their names, their faces, their powers, and where they're hiding out. I know their leader, and who’s actually controlling them, and what their master plan is. All their dirty little secrets, their weaknesses, their motivations. And I’ll tell you. All I want in return is for you to call off Konoha. If I can stay with Naruto, I’ll bring him back to the village myself, but I stay with him or everything’s off."

Shock is written plainly over Jiraiya's face, shock and a little bit of awe, mixed in with confusion and disbelief in equal measures. "You—why?" he demands.

Kurama gives him a bitter smile, and it doesn’t come quite as easily as it once did, as it did even yesterday, but it’s still simple enough to summon it up. All he has to think about is Kaguya, is Naruto, is blood on summer grass and the end of everything. "Because Akatsuki’s leader took everything from me. I survived. My best friend didn’t. And I want to destroy her for that."

Jiraiya hesitates. He looks at Kurama narrowly, glances over to where Naruto is tucked safely behind a grim-faced Yugito. A long minute of silence, and then he finally says, "Swear you’ll take him back to Konoha. Swear to me."

"I swear on the Sage of Six Paths, and on the name I was given," Kurama says immediately. "That’s
not an oath I'm willing to break.”

“It had better not be.” Jiraiya wriggles a little, and when his prison doesn’t so much as budge he gives up with a sigh. “I swear on Mount Myōboku, I’ll talk to Sarutobi. I can't do anything about the other villages, though, if you took their jinchuuriki. You're on your own with that one.”

Rōshi huffs loudly at that. “Right. Like any village in existence can tell nine jinchuuriki what to do when they're all together.”

With a hum of quiet agreement, Han props his shoulder against a sturdy sapling, leaning carefully. The tree bows under the combined weight of the big man and his even heavier armor. “I would very much like to see them try.”

“People are jerks,” is Fū’s verdict. “Me and Gaara and Naruto and Yugito are all sticking with Kurama-nii. Nobody can make us leave him. He’s our Kurama-nii.”

With a quiet chuckle, Kurama ruffles her hair. “Yeah, yeah, sweetheart. Up. Haku, Gaara, care to let him go?”

From his perch on the steps, Haku turns to look at Zabuza, who shrugs carelessly. The boy inclines his head, then waves a hand, and the ice slides away.

“Gaara?” Kurama asks, turning to look for the little boy, and almost trips over him. The messy red head presses against his thigh, and shakes stubbornly. Kurama stares down at him for a moment, then sighs and crouches down, putting himself at eye-level. “Gaara. He’s not going to hurt us. But even if he does, I trust you. You're strong enough to stop him. You're strong enough to stop anyone who’s going to hurt what you love. I believe that. Don’t you?”

There's a long pause, and Gaara's hold on his pant-leg tightens. Then, slowly, he looks up, and says, “I can do it, if I have to.”

“I know you can.” Kurama leans forward and presses a light kiss to his forehead, right next to the kanji he carved into his own skin. “And we’ll help, too. All of us. You know that, right?”

This time the nod comes more quickly. There's a hiss of sand sliding back into the ground, and then Jiraiya sits up slowly, wary eyes flickering between the nine people and two foxes in the yard. He makes no move to rise, but looks past Kurama to Naruto and tries for a smile. “Hey, kiddo. Quite the punch you’ve got there.”

Naruto gives him a mulish glare and sticks his tongue out. Zabuza laughs with a definite mocking edge, leaning on his sword like a casual threat. Kurama just sighs, because no way in hell did he think this was going to be easy, but...well. He didn’t think that it would leave him the only reasonable adult on their side of the room.

“Fantastic,” he mutters, and almost thinks that he can hear his Naruto laughing. Of course the bastard would get a kick out of Kurama going head-to-head with his godfather.

_The things I do for you_, Kurama thinks, and only kind of means it.
Chapter Notes

For everyone wanting Kakashi to come back, I meant to jump back to him this chapter, but Jiraiya sort of ran away with me, so it’ll be next chapter, I promise.

probita\'s quality of having strong moral principles; honesty, goodness, and decency. Late Middle English, from Latin probitas, from probus “good.”

The kids are wary of him.

It’s to be expected, Jiraiya tells himself. They attacked, he defended, and the girl got hurt. The facts, the justification—they don’t change anything. He hurt the girl who might as well be Naruto’s older sister, by the looks of things, and that’s not going to endear him to them any time soon.

He’ll admit it’s a little mind-bending, though, to see eight of the nine jinchuuriki—including the bloodthirsty and murderous Yondaime Mizukage, who is apparently no longer either bloodthirsty or murderous—scattered around the backyard of a small house in Kiri. Only Bee is missing, but his absence doesn’t seem to be putting much of a damper on things. Rōshi of the Lava Release, long since thought to have abandoned humanity completely, is laughing with the auburn-haired beauty from Kiri and ignoring the way Yagura is scowling at both of them, expression offended. A few paces away, Han, the Jinchuuriki of the Steam, has stripped off his armor and is letting the little green-haired girl perch on one of his broad shoulders as she chatters at him. Jiraiya honestly can’t think of anything but a fairy alighting on a friendly giant, and it’s a disconcertingly cute image.

Taking a sip of the sake their swordsman host provided—rough, strong, and definitely not something to be underestimated—Jiraiya lets his gaze slide unobtrusively over the rest of the gathering. The girl he injured is working her way through a plate of fish, quiet but at ease, with both of the fox summons curled up at her feet. Utakata and Momochi’s apprentice are keeping Naruto entertained with a game of tree-climbing near the yard’s edges, and Jiraiya has to admit he’s fairly impressed with how much control Naruto is already showing, especially given that the kid just started attending the Academy this year. Then again, given the number of shadow clones he made when he was tackling Jiraiya to the ground, tree climbing is probably the least of what he can do.

He lingers there for a moment, watching the boy who doesn’t know him, the godson who’s never really met him, and…it hurts. Easy enough to put it out of mind when he’s miles from the village, submerged in women and alcohol and whispers that might catch the Sandaime’s attention. Easy to forget about Naruto completely when he’s on Orochimaru’s trail, gathering up the clues his wayward former friend has left behind like breadcrumbs.

Harder now, looking at the last living remnant of the man he loved like a son, like the hope for a better world, and realizing that in all the time he’s spent observing him on his rare stops in Konoha, he’s never heard the boy laugh like this before.

It’s just…unfair, he thinks a little grimly, swirling the liquor around his cup and watching it catch the light of the setting sun. Naruto should be laughing like that with Minato, with Kushina. They loved
him so much, even before he was born, were so excited at the prospect of finally having a family. Two orphans, both with lonely childhoods and burdens they shouldn’t have had to bear, and what would they think of Jiraiya, knowing he abandoned his godson with the thin excuse that he had a duty to fulfil?

Nothing good, he’s sure.

Thoughts of Kushina leave him no escape from the puzzle that is the man who claims to be her brother, and Jiraiya glances at where the redhead is sitting on the porch steps, a cup of tea at his elbow and Zabuza beside him. The Kazekage’s son is perched on his lap, one small hand fisted in the front of Kurama's shirt, and seems perfectly content just to sit there while the adults talk. One of Kurama's arms is curled around him, absent in a way that speaks of perfect comfort with the situation, and there’s no way it’s an act. Not a chance. Jiraiya's a damned good actor himself, and he can tell. Kurama really loves all of the kids he picked up, and that just makes him even more of a mystery.

As far as Jiraiya knows, Kushina was an only child. Then again, she never talked about her family much in general—disappeared dad, dead mother, no extended family left after Uzushio's fall—so… it’s possible. Likely, even, Jiraiya admits, covertly observing Kurama's face. Naruto got Minato's coloring and his mother’s bone structure; without the blond hair to distract the eye, Kurama's resemblance to him is almost eerie, as is his likeness to Kushina herself. In temperament, too, from what Jiraiya's seen—he’s surprised the man hasn’t punched him for hurting the blonde girl yet.

That had been one hell of a surprise, Jiraiya thinks wryly, stepping out of the woods in the ass-end of Kiri to find Naruto rolling around on the grass with a couple of foxes. Jiraiya had been escaping an increasingly bloody rebellion—he hadn’t stopped to consider any options beyond getting Naruto safely away from what had to be a kidnapping. The blonde girl hadn’t taken kindly to it, and she’d caught Jiraiya off guard. He’d reacted on instinct, covering himself in spikes, and heard her cry out. Right after, he’d been jumped by four little hellions out for blood, and while a lot of their win was down to shock and not wanting to injure his godson, Jiraiya's willing to give credit where it’s due. They're good, and in a few years they're all going to be terrifying.

He’s not going to insult the girl by offering another apology; last time he tried, she’d cut him off with a sharp, “I'm a shinobi”, and Jiraiya takes that to mean she'd rather accept the loss, move on, and make sure it doesn’t happen again.

Naruto, though. Naruto's holding a grudge, and Jiraiya doesn’t blame him. If some asshole had hurt Tsunade while they were on a team, he wouldn’t forget about it, either. That the blonde in question is his surrogate sister and not his hopeless crush only makes things worse.

He takes another look at Naruto, hanging upside down from a branch by his knees with a smiling Utakata looking up at him—clearly encouraging, clearly friendly—and sets his sake down to rub his hands over his face with a muttered curse. Hell, Sarutobi is going to pop a vein. The civilians of Konoha are self-righteous, self-centered, petty assholes, and the shinobi have forgotten, to a man, just who Naruto is and where he came from. So many of them knew Minato or Kushina or both, counted them as friends, and now…nothing. Not a thought spared for making Naruto's existence easier. Not a mitigating word to their children, not a kind gesture, not a friendly smile as they pass him in the streets. Damn it, but Naruto's closest friend in Konoha is the ramen cook.

In light of that, is it really surprising that Naruto has latched on to the first person to show him love with such fervor? He adores Kurama, just as the other children do—maybe even more, because there's a connection between them that's deeper than with the other kids. Kurama looks for Naruto first, always, and Jiraiya doesn’t want to put stock in such a handily convenient backstory, but…it
adds credence to Kurama’s story. Between that and the unmistakable Uzumaki looks, there’s not much room for Jiraiya to doubt any of it.

And then, just to further the mystery, there’s the fact that Kurama says we when he’s referring to the jinchuuriki as a group, even though that makes ten jinchuuriki and there should only be nine. From what Jiraiya has managed to gather, he fought Yagura in his Version Two form, and not only beat him but didn’t even break a sweat doing it. There’s been mention of a shattered genjutsu, Akatsuki as the culprit behind it, and…

That, of course, would be the other thing Jiraiya is avoiding thinking about. Akatsuki and its seven members, among whom are two of his former students who he’s long thought dead. Nagato, it would seem, is not the Child of Prophecy that Jiraiya thought, or if he was, he isn’t any longer. Twisted, changed, shattered beyond all recognition, to the point where he’s animated Yahiko’s corpse as one of his six Paths and is trying to conquer the world. And Konan, following as she always does, devoted to the memory of the man she loved and the dream they shared, even if it’s in pieces.

Compared to that, Orochimaru’s presence in the group is hardly a blow at all, though Jiraiya thinks he’s probably a terrible fit. Orochimaru was never one for teamwork, after all, even when they were a team. He’s also self-motivated, and all too self-aware. At some point, he’s going to put himself above the goals of the group, and from what Kurama has said, that’s not going to go over well. Even now, Jiraiya can’t help but hope he escapes in one piece; a murderous bastard he may be, but he’s still Jiraiya’s first and greatest friend.

Kurama has a plan to face Akatsuki, though he hasn’t said outright what it is yet. Since he’s an Uzumaki, Jiraiya assumes it’s going to be stupidly reckless, will probably contain at least one full-frontal assault, and will have very slim chances of everyone involved coming out of it with all of their limbs intact. He remembers some of Kushina’s plans during the war, and maybe Minato was too besotted to notice that his girlfriend was utterly insane, but Jiraiya sure as hell wasn’t.

The quiet burble of sake being poured into his abandoned glass makes Jiraiya lift his head, and he blinks in faint confusion as Kurama settles on the grass beside his stump. The Kazekage’s son is over by Naruto, as is Taki’s jinchuuriki, who has scaled the tree and is cartwheeling along a narrow branch. Utakata looks a little like he wants to flail and demand she be careful, though he’s otherwise holding on to his composure, keeping beneath the redheaded kid as he steps cautiously out on the branch to join Naruto.

“You have more bad news for me?” Jiraiya asks a little suspiciously, though he can’t help the wry note in his voice. It’s a hell of a shift in his world-view, after all. The enemy he’s been chasing might as well be one of his own creation; he’s responsible for Nagato’s ideals, after all, and his control over the Rinnegan. Without those, Akatsuki wouldn’t even exist right now.

Kurama snorts, setting the sake bottle out of the way and picking up his own cup—still full of tea, and if Jiraiya hadn’t seen Zabuza and Rōshi downing this same sake like water, he might be suspicious. As it is, he’s willing to work off the assumption that Kurama just doesn’t like to drink, for whatever reason. It’s the least he can do, if Kurama is really who he says he is. He’s failed Naruto enough; no need to drive him any further away by alienating his guardian with accusations of poisoning.

“You want more?” Kurama asks, gruffly amused as he stretches his legs out in front of him. “Sorry. I think I hit all the high points already.”

Jiraiya huffs a quiet laugh, surprised at the redhead’s humor, even though he likely shouldn’t be. If anyone understands the implications of the news about Akatsuki, it’s him.
Because Akatsuki’s leader took everything from me. I survived. My best friend didn’t. And I want to destroy her for that.

In the face of that, being able to laugh at a bad joke shows more strength than Jiraiya would have expected of him. And that doesn’t even account for his kindness with the children. Jiraiya has met his fair share of revenge-driven psychopaths; as much as Jiraiya wants to paint Kurama with the same brush, though, he just…doesn’t fit the bill.

“Think you’ll be able to convince Sarutobi?” Kurama asks suddenly. When Jiraiya glances down at him, his eyes are fixed on Naruto with the sort of steady devotion someone else might turn towards their life’s greatest work, or the center of their universe. “To let me stay with Naruto in the village, I mean.”

*That phrasing*, Jiraiya thinks, and that’s wry, too. He knows very well what will happen if Sarutobi says no: Kurama will take Naruto, take whichever of the brats wants to stay with him (all of them, older ones included, from what Jiraiya has seen), and happily remove himself from the world at large. He doesn’t need Konoha, and for all that Naruto wants to be Hokage—and isn’t *that* a kick in the teeth, hearing those words from a kid who looks like the perfect blending of both his parents and shares their dream—he doesn’t have any solid ties to Konoha that can’t be worn away by time and distance. Remove Naruto from the village completely and he’ll eventually turn all of that fierce loyalty to Kurama and his fellow jinchuuriki instead.

For that reason alone Jiraiya thinks Sarutobi will say yes. He’s a kind old man, never one for conflicts when they can be avoided, but he’s also the God of Shinobi who led Konoha through two wars and has kept them the strongest of the Hidden Villages for almost forty years. He’s more than capable of smiling fondly and acting like a grandfather and still thinking of people in terms of assets to the village. That’s very largely the reason Jiraiya has never particularly wanted the hat; he couldn’t bring himself to think that way. Minato could, and he knows Tsunade can—analytical, careful, *for the good of the greatest number*, with morals and sentiments set aside, but Jiraiya is too much heart and not enough brain. He’d scare himself, if he tried to be like that.

(Orochimaru would have been the opposite, he thinks, more brain than heart. They always needed each other to balance out into one functional person, and despite everything Jiraiya still feels a flicker of warmth in his chest at the memory of his oldest friend, cautious and assessing but still following the path of dreams that the whole world said were impossible. He wonders now, with a small, wry smile, just how much of himself Orochimaru still devotes to those dreams. Too much? Or has it always been not enough?)

“Yeah,” he says, feeling Kurama’s dark red eyes on him. Like Kushina’s with the blue leech out, leaving them deep crimson instead of bruise-purple. He takes a long gulp of sake to give himself a reason for the hoarse note in his voice, and adds, “I sent him a letter already, with one of my summons. Gamakichi will head back as soon as Sarutobi writes a reply.” *And stops cursing long enough to give him directions*, he thinks, but keeps that part to himself. The Sandaime might *act* like a mild-tempered geezer most of the time, but he’s got his buttons. Naruto is one of them. Orochimaru—and by extension Akatsuki—is another. For that matter, so is anything that could lead to war—it’s one of the reasons the Hyuuga Incident ended the way it did. This situation manages to hit all three in one go, which would be fairly impressive if the thing at risk of exploding wasn’t Sarutobi’s head.

Kurama doesn’t show any visible signs of relief. He simply nods, taking another sip of his tea, and turns his gaze back to where the Taki jinchuuriki is showing Naruto how to do a handspring. Of course, because she’s a vicious little thing—Jiraiya's pretty sure he’s going to be seeing spots until he *dies*, given the way she kept blinding him when he surprised them, and if he never has a kid it’ll be because of that truly debilitating kick to the groin she pulled off while he was reeling helplessly—the
handspring is less of a handspring and more a scything kick aimed at the face of an invisible opponent, with a neat little twist and a perfect landing afterward.

Judging by the fond smile on Kurama’s face, he sees the attack for what it is, too, and thinks it’s cute. Somehow, Jiraiya’s not surprised.

“What are their names?” he asks on a whim, because he’s never taken the time to notice names in his travels—it was enough to know faces, and to recognize that they were jinchuuriki, so their actual names escaped him in favor of titles and allegiances. He’s been listening all night, but Kurama has pet names for all of them, and all the rest are too busy laughing and shouting and being rambunctious little hellions for him to make anything out.

Kurama makes a sound that is definitely a snicker, and which Jiraiya is just as definitely going to ignore. “What, they didn’t stop to introduce themselves before they kicked your ass?” he mocks, grinning. It’s got a few too many teeth in it to be entirely harmless, but Jiraiya decides to take it in the spirit that it’s intended and flips the redhead off. Kurama laughs outright at that, and waves a hand at where the kids are now all doing scything kicks as they launch themselves into the air. If this sort of learning curve is a jinchuuriki thing, the Elemental Countries are screwed if they ever decide to go after Kurama. Forget what the man himself can do; four superpowered children who soak up knowledge like sponges will be more than enough to level any village feeling stupid enough to take a swing at their adopted mother.

“Sabaku no Gaara,” Kurama says fondly, and when the pint-sized redhead glances over at them suspiciously—at Jiraiya suspiciously—Kurama just waves a hand, silently assuring him it’s fine. “His father slapped an incomplete seal on him when he sealed Shukaku, thought it would make him a better weapon.” His mouth twists in derision. “It backfired, and the Kazekage’s spent the last six years trying to kill him to minimize the collateral. Never mind that it’s his own fucking fault Shukaku’s even crazier than before, and that he had a back door right into Gaara’s head.”

A tip of Kurama's head drags Jiraiya's slightly horrified attention away from the little boy’s faint, happy smile as he follows behind Naruto, and directs it towards the little blonde girl Jiraiya hurt. The Taki jinchuuriki has ahold of her hands, and is laughing as she pulls the older girl to her feet. “Nii Yugito, from Kumo. They took her away from her family when she was two years old so they could seal Matatabi into her, and never let her go back. She’s been training since she could walk, and those assholes treated her like a miniature weapon, not a kid. Calling them brutal is too fucking kind. She’s never been allowed to decide anything, because even if Kumo’s not as bad as some places, A still thinks jinchuuriki are weapons that owe their allegiance to the village that created them.” Clawed fingers tighten on porcelain, and Kurama smiles mirthlessly. “Sage forbid the villages do anything to actually earn that loyalty, though.”

Jiraiya has a sinking feeling that there's going to be a pattern to these stories.

One sharp red eye studies him, and Kurama snorts, then looks away. “I’ll assume you know about Yagura and Utakata, and that you’ve heard of Rōshi and Han before,” he says, and when Jiraiya nods he barrels on before the other man can speak. “Fū’s run away from Taki more times than she can count. They kept dragging her back, even though she’s treated like a monster instead of the Headman’s granddaughter, and didn’t give a damn why she wanted to get away from those bastards in the first place. When I caught up to her, two Taki jounin were trying to subdue her. They’d hit her, and grabbed her so hard she had bruises. She’s ten.”

It takes effort not to ask what Kurama had done to those shinobi while he was rescuing Fū. Jiraiya's fairly certain he already knows, and honestly can't say he would have done anything differently. He takes a breath, takes another swig of his drink, and then says quietly, “It’s a bad situation all around.”
Fury sparks behind crimson eyes, and Kurama growls. The sound vibrates in his chest, rumbles up through his throat, and the air around them suddenly feels twice as thick and heavy, hot like standing too close to a fire. Kurama shoves to his feet, all lethal, animalistic grace and deadly rage, and snarls, “All around?! Because it’s so goddamn hard for the fucking villages to treat jinchuuriki like human beings? Because Sage forbid they actually give a damn about the children that they sacrificed! You want to know how to make a monster, Toad Sage? You take a child and you tell them, every day that they’re alive, that they don’t deserve to be treated well! You whisper about them, and you treat them like they’re dangerous, and you tell them that they’ll have to earn what every single other child is born knowing. Tell them long enough that they’re a monster and it’s your own fucking fault that they eventually snap!”

With a sharp-edged snarl, Kurama turns on his heel and marches over to where the kids are watching, wide-eyed. He throws himself to the ground in their midst, and instantly has Naruto draped over his shoulders. Gaara and Fū crawl into his lap, not even seeming to notice the corrosive red chakra blanketing him, and Yugito presses herself into his side. Utakata drifts over as well, settling himself within arm’s reach, and after a moment Yagura extracts himself from the auburn-haired woman’s hold and wanders over to lean against a nearby tree.

A soft chuckle comes from behind Jiraiya, but he doesn’t look up as Zabuza steals the abandoned sake bottle and adds another measure to his cup. “Impressive. Didn’t think anyone could make Red lose his temper like that, but it only took you six words. Good job.” The swordsman’s mouth is curled into a knife-edged smile, just showing the edge of filed teeth, but there’s something that’s a step away from violence in his eyes as they fall on Kurama, on the way Rōshi too moves closer to sit on the grass beside him. Kurama tips his head and says something that makes the other redhead laugh and Yagura snort, and Zabuza’s expression shifts sideways into something that hovers between appreciation and blatant want.

Jiraiya’s pretty damn good at recognizing the beginnings of an infatuation—he’s put it in every single book he’s written since The Tale of the Gutsy Ninja, after all—and maybe Zabuza’s not quite there yet, but he’s definitely heading in that direction. It would be amusing if it weren’t also slightly horrifying.

Still, he’s also right, and Jiraiya breathes out a sigh, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “Yeah,” he agrees wryly. “I got that impression, thanks.”

Zabuza snorts, then holds up the sake, offering it to Han as the big man approaches. “No, thank you,” Han says politely, leaning against the fence. It creaks dangerously, and he shifts his weight away from it with a faint wince. “A jinchuuriki’s metabolism is too fast for us to get drunk unless we have roughly a lake’s worth of alcohol to down in the space of a few minutes. I’d rather keep to something else, if I’m just drinking for taste.”

The lack of effect doesn’t seem to have hindered Rōshi at all, if the six bottles Jiraiya has watched him put away mean anything. It does explain Kurama's avoidance, though, if he really is a jinchuuriki the way Jiraiya suspects. That little speech didn’t do much to change his mind, either. Instead of asking, though, he just lifts his cup to Han in salute and drains it. “More for me, then.”

Han looks faintly long-suffering, as though he’s heard that exact line in response before. With a faint shake of his head, he turns pale brown eyes on Jiraiya, and says, “You should be careful what you imply about the jinchuuriki, Toad Sage. You’re not in company that will make many allowances for ignorance.”

With anyone else, Jiraiya might bristle at the warning. As it is, he simply nods, accepting the rebuke. He can learn, even if it takes him a try or two. Or three.
It earns him a faint smile, more wryness than actual humor. Han turns his face away, to where
Naruto and Fū are turning Kurama into a human jungle gym, and his smile gains depth and warmth.
“I’ve often wondered,” he says, absent and more an afterthought than anything, “just how it is our
villages see us. We’re their creations, after all, made by their hands without any thought to our wants,
but even so they insist on seeing us as monsters straining at our chains, ready to break loose at any
moment and destroy them. So they fear us, and treat us poorly, and our resentment grows. Then their
fear increases, and the whispers become more vicious, and we hate them more. An endless spiral, but
one that they started. One that they created, the same way they created us.”

“It’s the same with all shinobi,” Zabuza offers, and his grin is all razor-edged teeth. “Maybe more
with jinchuuriki, but just look around. Civilians are terrified of us. Hell, we’re terrified of ourselves.
We’re their monsters, so they try to kill us while we’re helpless. They try to weed us out, whittle our
numbers down, and when we do it they call us monsters. Makes sense that shinobi’d have their own
monsters to hate, doesn’t it?”

The Demon of the Hidden Mist, they call Zabuza. Jiraiya has heard other villages whisper about him,
a monster, a cautionary tale. Killed his entire graduating class just because he could. But how much
was because of that, and how much of it was to prove a point? There was never any logic behind
Kiri’s bloody graduation ritual—it was madness, from a logistical point of view. And it took the
death of almost an entire generation before those in power realized that, and hurriedly swept it under
the rug. Zabuza’s doing, and Jiraiya has never thought of him as anything but a bloodthirsty monster
before this moment, which rather proves his point, doesn’t it?

Han hums thoughtfully, inclining his head to accept the point. “An interesting thought. We are all
necessary monsters, it seems.”

Zabuza grunts, sounding bored with all of the philosophy, and rises to his feet. “Not that this isn’t
fascinating, but if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a pretty firecracker to talk into a goodnight kiss.”
Tipping his sake in salute, he heads for Kurama, who’s laughing at Naruto rolling around with the
white fox summons.

With a deep chuckle, Han shakes his head. “I hope he realizes he’s just as likely to lose his head as
get a kiss.”

“I think that’s part of the appeal for him,” Jiraiya counters wryly. He refills his cup again, deciding he
needs the fortification if he’s going to make it through the rest of the night. There's only so many
times he can get his world-view turned sideways in a single day before he starts longing for a good
binging session, after all.

And he hasn’t even heard from Sarutobi yet. That’s likely to require a bottle all on its own to get
through. He’s definitely not looking forward to it.
XXXI: Ingravesco

Chapter Notes

WARNING for a non-explicit panic attack, just in case.

Another surprise update, because my train was an hour late and I had time to finish this chapter. So, hectic day, but update! Yeah, I'm going to focus on the happy part, namely that reverse is now officially the longest thing I've ever written…and it's only halfway done. :'

[ingravesco / in ' grə v escō /, I become heavier; I become burdensome; I become worse; I worsen. Latin, third conjugation, defective.]

When the message from Jiraiya arrives, Hiruzen very nearly sets it aside in favor of the towering stack of reports from the tracking teams scattered across all the major countries and several of the minor ones. Jiraiya is well-removed from the entire situation, after all, with only sporadic updates to keep Hiruzen appraised of his wanderings in Orochimaru’s wake. Hiruzen hasn’t made an attempt to tell him of Naruto’s abduction, mostly because he already has every able-bodied shinobi in three countries looking; the addition of one more, even as powerful as the Toad Sage, isn’t likely to make much of a difference.

Except, of course, for the fact that Jiraiya wouldn’t sent a report with a summons unless it was information worth knowing, and Gamakichi’s expression is far less put-upon that it usually is when he’s called to carry messages, which means Jiraiya was able to impress upon him the importance of this delivery. With that in mind, Hiruzen forces himself to straighten up from his previous hunch over sloppily-written reports, and takes the scroll from the toad with as dignified a “Thank you,” as he can manage while his back is screaming in protest.

“No problem,” Gamakichi says, and then hunkers down to wait.

Hiruzen's fingers freeze on the cord tying the scroll, and he feels his stomach sink. If Jiraiya is expecting a reply…

Oh no.

Taking a breath to steel himself, Hiruzen forces himself to ignore both A and Rasa, who have taken up residence in opposite corners of his office with their own piles of reports. They're staring at him, clearly aware that this is some kind of news, but Hiruzen doesn’t spare them another thought, quickly unrolling the scroll and scanning the words there.

It takes all of his considerable will not to hurl the report at the wall and dive for the sake. Gods damn it. Hiruzen is too old for this amount of bullshit.

Because he is a wise, experienced Hokage, he doesn’t bang his head on the desk the way he wants to. He carefully sets the report aside, snatches up his pipe, and lights it aggressively, trying very hard not to set himself on fire in the process. That’s just about all this day needs to cap it off.
And it’s only mid-morning. Damn it all.

“…Hiruzen?” Rasa asks cautiously, setting his pen aside.

Hiruzen sucks in a deep lungful of tarry smoke, tries not to think about how Biwako always yelled at him for smoking too much, and breathes it out. He does it again, then once more, and finally feels reasonably certain he’s not just going to start shouting. He breathes out, and then says as evenly as he’s able, “It seems Kurama is currently in Kiri, not Kumo.”

A crosses his arms over his chest, scowling. “Kiri? So we’ll send an apprehension team there and—”

Hiruzen holds up a hand to stop him, and is rather gratified when he actually pauses. “It would also seem,” he continues, “that Kiri has undergone a partial revolution. Kurama assisted, and has earned himself the goodwill of the Mizukage, who claims to have been freed from a very strong genjutsu. His shinobi are widely accepting of this claim, and of Kurama in general, as Yagura has granted him shelter. Along with all six of the jinchuuriki accompanying him.”

There’s absolute, perfect silence as Rasa’s brows slide towards his hairline and A loses about three shades of color from his face. His brawny arms drop loosely to his sides and he stands abruptly, pushing away from the desk with a clatter. Without pausing, he turns on his heel, bellows, “Bee!” at the top of his lungs, and all but dives for the doorway.

Hiruzen trades glances with Rasa, then tucks his pipe between his teeth and rises as well, falling into step with the Kazekage as he hurries through the open door and down the stairs, trailing the sound of heavy footsteps and A’s furious calls for his brother.

The inn that has bravely volunteered to host the Kumo delegation is barely a block from the Administration Building, so they make good time. Even so, by the time they reach it, the kunoichi who was supposed to be watching Bee is almost in tears, and A is roaring like a gored bull, shaking a small brown notebook like it’s his brother’s neck.

“I’ll strangle him!” the Raikage snarls. “That little bastard left! He’s going to—to—” He flips to the last page in the book, growls, and mimics, “Hey, bro, gotta go, got more beasts to meet, and Gyuuki says it should be neat.”

Rasa coughs to hide what is definitely not a laugh, but Hiruzen feels himself go cold. He spins on his heel, calling, “Raidou, Iwashi!” In a blur, the two guards are in front of him, and Hiruzen snaps out, “Raidou, fetch Hiashi. Iwashi, find Tsune and Shibi. I have an emergency tracking mission for them, so tell them to report to me immediately. Then locate the highest-ranked ANBU squad on the duty roster and tell them to report as well. Go!”

There’s a hurricane of leaves and wind, and both guards vanish, heading in opposite directions with impressive speed. Hiruzen just hopes it will enough.

With that in mind, he rounds on the Kumo kunoichi and demands, “How long ago did Bee leave?”

The woman swallows, quailing slightly under the force of his tightly-leashed chakra, but answers instantly, “It can’t have been more than fifteen minutes ago. He said he was going to the bathroom, and since he’d shown no signs of wanting to leave, I assumed it was safe to let him out of my sight for that long.”

“Sarutobi?” A asks suspiciously.

Hiruzen rubs the bridge of his nose, trying not to let his headache overwhelm him. “You didn’t stay to listen to the remainder of my news,” he says, and keeps his tone mild through sheer force of will.
Panicking won't do anyone any good right now. “My student Jiraiya has been tracking a mercenary organization with suspicious aims over the last six years. Kurama insists that it was this organization, Akatsuki, that attacked Nii Yugito in Kumo, and that she fled to Kurama on the advice of her bijuu. According to him, Akatsuki is currently based just east of Lightning Country, and they're hunting the bijuu for the purpose of conquering the world. Any jinchuuriki on their own is vulnerable.”

The rearranging of priorities in Rasa’s head is all but visible. He sinks into one of the room’s unoccupied chairs, looking a little dazed, and says, “That’s why he took them? The jinchuuriki? He was—he was protecting them? But if being in the middle of a shinobi village wasn’t protection enough…”

Even A looks grim at the implications. “The kids were vulnerable, since they're still learning. Uzumaki took them for that reason. Bee would have been fine if he stayed, and had a village to back him up, but on his own…I’m going to kill that little rat for up and bolting!”

There's a brisk knock on the door, an annoyed, “Oh, get on with it, Hyuuga,” and a loud thump. The door flies open, and Tsume all but strong-arms her genin teammate through, Shibi following close behind. Hiashi looks mildly annoyed, but also mostly resigned as he dips into a brief bow to the three Kage. “Hokage-sama, you—”

“Got a job for us old farts?” Tsume interrupts, and looks thrilled to do so. She’s always taken great pleasure in browbeating Hiashi, even if it’s just in a roundabout way. Pressed against her side, Kuromaru gives a woofing laugh, his single remaining ear folding back as he drops to sit, tongue lolling out in a fierce canine grin.

Hiashi shoots her a flat, longsuffering look, but instead of attempting to argue he simply looks back at Hiruzen expectantly. Shibi doesn’t even bother trying to interject; he simply shoulders his gourd a little more firmly, steps up beside his teammates, and waits patiently.

“The Raikage’s brother is missing,” Hiruzen says, and watches Tsume’s eyes narrow, considering. There’s a shift in the shadows behind her, and he raises a hand in silent acknowledgement. “We have reason to believe he could become a target traveling on his own. You’re to find his as quickly as possible. Eagle’s squad will follow as backup.”

The cloaked ANBU slips forward and offers Tsume a salute. She grins in return, then whistle sharply. “Kuromaru, you know what to do. Shibi?”

The nin-dog immediately puts his nose to the ground, sniffing around the edges of the room. From the gourd Shibi carries, a steady stream of kikaichū slide out, buzzing faintly, and the Aburame Clan Head hums. Stepping back and out of their way, Hiashi crosses his arms over his chest, expression grim as he watches his partners search for traces.

“Watch for powerful shinobi, moving quickly,” Hiruzen warns him softly, not about to let three of his Clan Heads get taken by surprise, even if there isn’t time for a full briefing. He wouldn’t send them, but they're undoubtedly the best tracking team Konoha has with Kakashi's squad out of the village. Even then, he might be hard-pressed to say which team was better. “The Akatsuki organization that is after Bee recruits only S-rank missing-nin. I trust your abilities, but do not be overconfident.”

“I shall strive to be the voice of reason, Hokage-sama,” Hiashi says, though in a tone that says he hasn’t much hope of succeeding. Catching the concern that flickers over Hiruzen's face, he cracks enough to allow a faint smile, a definite rarity since Hizashi’s death, and assures him, “We’ll return as quickly as we’re able to.”
At the same moment, Tsume cries victoriously, “Got it!” and heads for the door at a deceptively easy loping run, following Kuromaru. Shibi is on her left, and in a blur of motion Hiashi darts after them, falling into place at her right with his Byakugan activated. Behind them, four cloaked and masked ANBU slide out of view, and at a gesture from A his two guards also follow, moving quickly.

Hiruzen watches them go, feeling grimly resigned to the happenings of the next few hours. He hopes that the team will catch Bee, but he’s not sure what will happen if they don’t. At this point, Bee making it to Kiri and Kurama has somehow become one of the best case scenarios. If he doesn’t…

A drags a hand over his white hair, then sits down heavily on the bed. His eyes remain on the doorway, as though if he looks hard enough he’ll be able to watch the team find his brother, but he asks, “There any more to that letter?”

Hiruzen takes a long pull at his pipe, breathes out a perfect ring of smoke, and says, “According to Jiraiya, Kurama professes a desire to return to Konoha with Naruto. As far as Jiraiya can gather, the rest of the younger jinchuuriki intend to accompany him. Possibly the older ones as well.”

Rasa’s eyes narrow. “You’ll be courting war if you allow it,” he says, and when Hiruzen casts him a sharp look he raises his hands. “Not from Suna. We are allies. But Taki? Iwa? And Kumo doesn’t have the best history of maintaining diplomatic ties.”

The thinly veiled accusation makes A growl, rising back to his feet to tower over the two shorter Kage. “Are you implying something, Kazekage?”

“Do you treat fact as an allegation now, Raikage?” Rasa retorts. “You’ve made no friends in the other countries over the years. Surely this can’t come as a surprise to you. After all you’ve done in the name of power-grabbing and manipulation—”

A barks out a mirthless laugh. “This coming from a man who sits there and makes nice with an ally while plotting behind his back? At least Kumo is strong, and not crumbling away like your pathetic little village!”

Rasa flushes with anger, rising to his feet as well. Dark rings appear around his eyes, and the air around him shimmers faintly as his Gold Dust answers the sudden agitated surge of his chakra. “Suna is an honorable ally! We’ve done nothing but offer our assistance in this matter, while a shinobi with clear ties to Kumo is the one—”

“Kidnapped one of our jinchuuriki! You can’t turn this on me—”

“Takin’ my son! Your jinchuuriki joined him of her own free will! This—this terrorist organization is operating right over your border, and we’re expected to accept that you know nothing about it?”

“Kumo has nothing to do with this Akatsuki shit! We’re not—”

“That underhanded? That desperate for power? Because your actions say otherwise—”

Hiruzen closes his eyes, takes a breath, and opens them. Almost seventy years of carefully honed chakra crashes over the room, as strong and steady and immovable as a veritable mountain, and he takes great pleasure in seeing both of the other Kage actually stagger under the unexpected force of it.

“That’s enough,” he says, quiet but whip-crack sharp, and slowly straightens, regarding both of the younger men coolly. “You are not children, you are Kage. There are more important issues at hand than petty grudges and old rivalries. We have seven S-rank criminals who aim to overturn the world in the name of peace, and are going to use the bijuu to do it. We have at least six, and likely eight
jinchuuriki who have formed an attachment to an unknown tenth jinchuuriki that likely overrules whatever loyalty they have or once had to their villages."

Another breath, and A and Rasa are both staring at him, but at least they’ve stopped shouting. Hiruzen meets each of their gazes in turn, holding them with all the seriousness this damned disaster of a situation deserves. “At this moment Uzumaki Kurama might as well be the most powerful man in the world. He is more than capable of leveling entire nations on a whim. So we are going to listen to his demands, agree with whatever he wishes if it will bring him even slightly closer to the Hidden Villages rather than off haring through the wilderness, and whether he wishes to settle in Konoha or godsforsaken Tea Country we will smile, accept it, and do our best to keep from throwing our villages headlong into a war we truly cannot afford right now.”

There’s a long, long minute of silence. The markings around Rasa’s eyes fade, and he crosses his arms, takes a sharp breath through his nose, and inclines his head in silent agreement.

A stares at him for a moment longer, eyes narrowed, and then huffs and sits back down. “God of Shinobi,” he says, and it’s almost wry. Almost respectful. “Guess you didn’t pull that title out of a cereal box after all.”

Hiruzen doesn’t deign to grace that with a response. Were he ten years younger, though, A would learn the hard way just why so many shinobi used to fear him more than anyone since Tobirama himself. “This has gone on long enough, and exploded far beyond the boundaries of the individual villages. There’s only one reasonable response.”

Rasa makes a face he should be very much too dignified for. “A Summit?” he asks, mostly resigned. “You know we’ll have to include the heads of most of the smaller villages as well, don’t you?”

Even A looks less than pleased at that. “Taki’s headman is a damned pain in the ass,” he complains.

Really, Hiruzen is surrounded by children. “Then you’d best prepare yourselves in whatever way will see you through the trial of this meeting,” he says, unbending. “If the world is in danger, the world at large should be aware of the situation, and help to find a solution. May I assume I have your backing in calling a Summit?”

There’s another pause as Rasa and A trade glances, and then the Raikage nods. “Fine,” he says gruffly. “But if Hisen makes a nuisance of himself, I reserve the right to drop-kick him all the way back to Taki.”

All of Hiruzen’s restraint goes towards not rolling his eyes. He taps his pipe against the edge of the table beside him, coaxing the embers back to life, and takes another pull at it. The burn of the tobacco isn’t quite enough to soothe his nerves, but it’s a start.

He wishes, just for a moment, and with equal parts desperation and futility, that Asuma was in the village. His son might never come to see eye-to-eye with him, but he has a level head, a dependable strength. Hiruzen is an old man, too old for these games of politics and his attempts to keep up with a younger generation of shinobi as the world moves inexorably forward. His daughter is distracted with Konohamaru, just barely two, and his wife is six years dead, killed by the Kyuubi in its rampage. Asuma was the one steady, predictable point in his universe, but even that is gone now. Hiruzen is proud of him, joining the Twelve Guardian Ninja, but he misses him as well. “Come,” he says, and tries to keep the weariness out of his voice. “We have letters to draft and messages to send. They will not write themselves.”

And I have a reply to give Gamakichi, he thinks but doesn’t say aloud. The mere thought of the
jinchuuriki relocating to Konoha is going to be enough to put every hackle at the Summit up, but Hiruzen sees no alternative. One jinchuuriki, dependent on a village, is easy enough to handle. Seven of them, possibly even nine, with loyalties only to each other and the man who rescued them?

Hiruzen can't think of a single way in all of existence to tell them something so much as resembling no and have it be anything other than laughable.

Kakashi doesn’t make much of an attempt at subtlety as he leans against the edge of the harbormaster’s building, watching a cheerful crew unload the day’s haul of fish. Genma is in the midst of them, dragging nets with a will and an excess of good humor, even when they jeer at him for being so new to it. Always one to take such things in the spirit they're intended, Genma just laughs it off, letting them order him around and push him out of the way.

There’s no sign of the concussion that kept him bedbound for two days, despite his protests, but Kakashi isn’t about to take chances. Genma’s a tokujo, not a full jounin, and Kurama hits hard. Hana said there were no complications when she checked him over, but she’s still a chuunin, no matter how skilled, and young. Kakashi would rather trust his own eyes when it comes to things like this.

Waving off a round of offers to head to the closest bar with the crew, Genma leaps lightly onto the dock and tugs his salt-stiff shirt off, then pulls his hitai-ate out of his pants pocket and ties it on again. When he sees Kakashi waiting, he grins, even if it’s slightly wry, and heads towards him with a light step.

“You're going to give yourself wrinkles,” he says as soon as he’s close enough to be heard. “Hana cleared me and everything, Mom, I promise.”

Kakashi snorts, but falls into step with the other man as he heads back towards the inn they’ve been staying at. “Hana cleared you for light work, Shiranui. I was there. Somehow, I don’t think she’d include this.”

“What Hana doesn’t know won't hurt me,” Genma counters easily. “There wasn’t that much to do, anyway. They just liked having fresh meat to pick on.” Something catches his eye, and he turns to offer a friendly wave to an older woman, who gives Kakashi a truly evil look, but smiles fondly when her gaze shifts over to Genma.

It’s not that Kakashi is jealous of Genma’s ability to win over the local populace; he’s not. It’s just… he’s maybe slightly used to being the cool, intriguing, unapproachable one, who most of the girls and a good portion of the boys go gooey-eyed over almost instantly. He’s not really used to this much burning hostility when he hasn’t done anything to earn it.

Apparently sensing his not-at-all-jealous-or-assessing stare, Genma glances over and gives him a lazy, carefree grin. “You’re looking a little green there, Hatake. Do I have to tell Gai you got your feelings hurt because Whirlpool Country thought I was cooler than you?”

“I don’t have feelings,” Kakashi denies promptly, tugging his Icha Icha book from his pocket and flipping it open in front of his nose. “I especially don’t have them where Gai is concerned.”

Genma laughs, easy and free, and flips something at Kakashi’s head. “Don’t be bitter, Kakashi. Just because your boyfriend sometimes crashes on my couch doesn’t mean he doesn’t love you too.”

Even as he raises a hand to snatch the thing out of the air, Kakashi eyes him warily, taking a step to
the side so he won't have to face the possibility of catching any of Genma's obvious crazy. “I'm not dating Gai. That's a vicious, horrifying, unfounded rumor, and I'm ashamed on your behalf that you'd listen to such obvious gossip, Genma.” He glances at what Genma threw at him, and blinks at the sight of an old kunai, edges worn dull by time, but with the markings of a faded seal on the grip. Arching a brow at his friend, he flips it over, grimacing a little when the wet rust smears on his gloves.

“Momo collects them,” Genma explains with a shrug. At Kakashi's uncomprehending stare, he rolls his eyes a little. “Cute little fisher-girl, about fourteen, with her hair up in two buns? Niece of the daimyō? Likes to wear red?”

Kakashi just shrugs, and okay, maybe this is why Genma's popular; Kakashi's been a little too busy brooding over their complete failure at catching Kurama before he disappeared to parts unknown to make any sort of connection with the villagers. Not that he thinks it would help, because they all seem to hate him, while Genma is their new darling.

Deciding that he definitely doesn’t care, Kakashi looks down at the old kunai—the old *Uzushio* kunai—again, brushing his thumb over the engraving. He's not a master with seals, but he's decent enough, and this looks like an amplification seal. He saw Kushina use them a lot during the war; a little bit of fire or lightning or other chakra nature goes in, and when the seal is triggered a whole hell of a lot comes out.

“Want it back?” he asks, even though he doesn’t particularly want to give it up, not when it might as well be a piece of Kushina. Not quite as greedily kept as a piece of Minato, maybe, but still precious all the same.

As if reading that on his face, Genma just shakes his head. “No thanks. Momo gave me a whole handful when she realized I was interested. Said they turn up all the time in some of the old training grounds.”

Silently, Kakashi tucks it away in his weapons pouch, deciding to polish and sharpen it later. Might as well not let a perfectly good kunai go to waste, he thinks, and ignores the fact that he's going to carry it without ever even attempting to use it.

A firm hand grips his elbow, steering him off the main street and towards a bend in the road, where a small stream curves in a lazy loop, a stand of trees on its bank. They're nothing like Fire Country trees, stunted and bent by the sea-wind, but they're enough for at least the illusion of privacy as long as no one’s shouting. Genma pushes him across the stream, then into the center of the grove before he lets go, and when Kakashi turns to give his best was-there-possibly-something-you-wanted expression, complete with shades of who-me and I'm-bulshitting-you-and-we-both-know-it-but-I-dare-you-to-call-me-on-it, Genma just crosses his arms and stares him down.

“Sit,” he orders, even and mild, and he should really look ridiculous standing there half-naked, his saltwater-drenched hair drying at odd angles underneath his bandana, and with the beginnings of a sunburn on his nose. Kakashi takes one look at him, remembers how the fearsome and almost universally feared Raidou turns into a perfectly obedient husband where Genma is concerned, and thinks he finally understands why. There's utterly immovable steel in Genma's hazel eyes, and the threat of the two dozen unique and incredibly nasty poisons in the senbon his hand is hovering just a little too close to for comfort.

Kakashi sits.

Genma gives him a winning smile, leaning lazily back against a crooked tree. “Awesome,” he approves. “Now you're gonna tell me just what's had you wandering around with your head up your
ass for the past two days, because I love Tenzō to death, but he’s got you on too much of a pedestal
to say anything, and Shisui and Itachi don’t know you well enough to notice. But I’ve noticed,
because you're my friend, and Gai will be sad if you get yourself killed because you're too busy
drowning in guilt to see an attack coming.”

Kakashi doesn’t quite wince, but it’s a close thing. Genma isn’t one of ANBU’s best assassins for
nothing; he’s terrifyingly observant, no matter how much of it he hides behind a lazy slouch and a
crooked smile. “Is there something I should know about you and Gai?” he asks in what he already
knows is a fruitless attempt to deflect. “Because I'm friends with Raidou, too, and if you're stepping
out on him with Gai of all people—”

“There's nothing wrong with Gai,” Genma says mildly, and when Kakashi shoots him a look that
speaks volumes, he rolls his eyes and concedes, “There's nothing serious wrong with Gai. He’s
just…unique. And we’re not sleeping together, but if you're trying to change the subject, I've got
some very interesting stories to share about this one vacation in Port City with Gai and Aoba—”

Kakashi gags a little at the thought, and quickly raises his hands in surrender. “No, no, I'll talk. No
wonder Ibiki likes you so much.”

Genma just grins, clearly taking it as a compliment. “So. I assume this is about Kurama?”

Unable to avoid the direct question, Kakashi blows out a breath and leans back, closing his eye.
“Mm. There wasn’t a lot of time to think when we were tracking him, but now...I'm trying to fit the
pieces together, but they're not falling into place the way they should.” He can feel Genma's steady
gaze on him, not judging, not pushing, simply waiting, and somehow that makes it easier to say, “He
had a lot of opportunities to kill us. He didn’t.”

Four ANBU against one unaffiliated shinobi shouldn’t be anything close to evenly matched, after all,
but they were. From their last fight here in Whirlpool Kakashi can see just how much Kurama was
holding back the previous time they faced each other. On top of that, there's Rōshi’s words about
saving the jinchuuriki from death, and the fact that all four children, in the brief moment Kakashi saw
them, looked all too happy to be snatched away from their lives.

Naruto he could understand, possibly. Kurama is family, after all, and Naruto is an orphan. But the
others? There's no way they're related, and the two older ones, the girls, were definitely trained as
shinobi. Odds are good they'd be able to pick up on it if Kurama was just manipulating them.

Add to that the fact that Kakashi's been turning Kurama's escape from Konoha over in his head,
unable to let it rest, and... “It's my fault this started. Kurama reached out to Naruto, and I... overreacted.” The guilt is heavy, like the memory of Obito, of Rin. Like the knowledge that he’s
failed both Minato and Kushina a thousand times over, letting their son grow up without any care or
warmth. But Kakashi just—can't. Can't care, can't let himself feel, can't be anything but Hound or
he’s going to break. He came so close, in the aftermath, almost let Danzō convince him to kill
Sarutobi just because Sarutobi wasn’t Minato, because he let Minato die, and—

He remembers his father, remembers the blood, the horror, the strong man he loved so much curled
on the floor, so much smaller in death. So much weaker. The last think Kakashi ever said to him was
in anger, in accusation, and isn’t it funny how much Obito's death mirrors that? Disdain, anger,
accusation, and then—just. Gone. Dead. Pushed to it by Kakashi, who wasn’t strong enough, wasn’t
smart enough, simply wasn’t enough in any way that mattered.

If something like that happens again, Kakashi isn’t going to be able to drag himself upright. He’s
done it four times already, after his father, after Obito, after Rin, after Minato and Kushina. ANBU
keeps him on his feet and moving, gives him a way to work, a way to atone even as it adds more
blood to his crimson-stained hands. But—Kakashi knows he’s fragile. Like flawed glass, one hard strike will crack him into a thousand unrecognizable pieces, and this time there will be no reassembling them.

Kakashi is bad luck, a curse on all those he loves. If he loses Naruto, loses the last remnant of a life that was at the very least bearable, he’s going to self-destruct. And if it’s by his own doing, if it’s his fault—

“Hey,” Genma says softly, and Kakashi slowly opens his eye to find the tokujo crouched right in front of him. His eyes are sympathetic, but not pitying, and Kakashi is wretchedly grateful. He already gets enough pity from everyone he knows. He doesn’t think he could bear more of it.

Callused fingers touch his face, and Genma cups his cheek, not overbearing, just…close. Present. Kakashi’s breath hitches in his chest, and he hadn’t realized how hard it was to breathe before, but it’s easing now, leveling out. That dark, welling panic is receding, sliding away under the warmth and sharp-deadly herbal scent of Genma’s skin.

The older man smiles at him, crooked and wry, and sinks back on his heels. “So?” he asks, and that’s mild too, but in the way of a river’s waters right before the falls, guiding him forward, urging him on without ever truly pushing. “Sometimes I think you hear it too much, but…you’re a genius, Kakashi, smarter than the rest of our Academy class combined. So think like the brilliant shinobi you are, and look underneath the underneath. What can you see?”

Even now, work is the best distraction. Kakashi’s brain latches on to the pieces he’s gathered and hoarded, every stray word from Kurama and those who have met him. He closes his eye again, adding them up, twisting and turning them, trying to see from new angles without his preconceptions getting in the way. And…

There’s something else to all this. More than a man on the run, more than kidnapped jinchuuriki. Something is pushing Kurama, driving him forward—something that even Rōshi considered a threat. He said it outright, and Kakashi let it get lost in a haze of blind duty as he chased Kurama onwards.

Kurama’s a hero. He’s saving those kids from a lifetime of misery and an agonizing death. He’s saving all of us from that.

What’s dangerous enough to threaten a fully trained, adult jinchuuriki who can take on a squad of ANBU without blinking?

Nothing good, Kakashi thinks grimly, and raise his head to look at Genma again. The man is watching him patiently, hazel eyes steady, and Kakashi offers him a wry smile. “I’m starting to think Raidou’s claim that you’re secretly an evil genius might have more credibility than I assumed.”

Genma laughs at that, pushing to his feet and offering Kakashi a hand up. Since it’s his fault Kakashi is sitting in the dirt in the first place, Kakashi takes it and allows Genma to pull him upright.

“Who, me?” the tokujo asks guilelessly, and then pauses, studying Kakashi closely. “Good?”

Not yet, Kakashi doesn’t answer, though he almost feels like he could. He just offers Genma a bland smile, and says, “I think I need to talk to my team.”
XXXII: Osculant

Chapter Notes

This fic has so much gorgeous fan art, which I am incredibly grateful for—if you want to check it out (which I highly encourage) you can check the reverse tag on my Tumblr, which is blackkatmagic.

Updating early because I might not get a chance tomorrow, and I figure early is better than late. Sorry for any confusion!

[oːskələnt/, pertaining to a close embrace or a long kiss; loosely adhering or joined; embracing; intermediate in characteristics between two similar or related taxonomic groups. From Latin osculat- ‘kissed,’ from the verb osculari, from osculum ‘little mouth or kiss’/]

Their second night in Kiri settles in under a sudden downpour of warm rain, heavy enough to drench to the bone in seconds. Kurama stands by the wide window in the main room, watching the forest that surrounds the house tremble and shudder under the onslaught, even as leaves and branches reach upward for more. Moss collects water, then releases it in thick streams as it reaches saturation, and the air smells of green things and wet earth and gentle darkness.

The children are in bed, all exhausted from a day of training disguised as play. Yugito is good at making things seem fun, and Kurama's glad she was willing to help, or his patience might have run out a lot earlier than it did. Naruto has a predictably short attention span, and maybe it’s one of the things he was purposefully forgetting, or maybe it’s just that the first time he slept through most of Naruto's early childhood, but it’s a pain.

Still, Kurama thinks with a faint smirk. He can't wait to see some of the faces in Konoha when Naruto answers an attack not with Minato's Rasengan, but with Kushina's Chakra Chains.

It’s a strange relief, being here in Kiri, and one Kurama hadn’t expected. He’s been running since the moment he landed in this time, flat-out and as fast as he can, always with a goal just out of reach. And the overarching goals are still looming, waiting, but for the first time in almost a month Kurama has nowhere to go and nowhere he should be. He’s in between things, anticipating word from Konoha, Jiraiya's decision about Akatsuki. He could leave, head towards Moon Country and the Akatsuki base, but Jiraiya wants more information. Wants to help, which Kurama likely should have expected, but didn’t.

As it stands, training the kids—or more aptly training Naruto and Gaara, since Fū and Yugito only need practice and are otherwise appropriately terrifying—is the only thing Kurama needs to do, and the knowledge is at once freeing and…strange.

For the first time, he has a chance to think without the world crashing down on top of him. Space to consider, even if only vaguely, a future where he isn’t a fugitive on the run from every single one of the Kage. And…he thinks today might have been a decent marker of that. Not quiet, not peaceful, because Naruto and Fū are both hellions and Rōshi doesn’t help, and trying to teach small children incredibly destructive jutsus is just asking for collateral damage, but—it was good. Happy.
Kurama closes his eyes on the rainy world, and pictures Naruto. His Naruto, warm and kind and worn around the edges, but all the brighter for it. Smiling, because when wasn’t he, with his hand on Kurama's shoulder and an arm around his back, pulling him back to his feet. For Kurama, here and now, it’s easy to smile in the face of that. Maybe there's a flicker of grief to go along with the image, but even more there's contentment, joy. It’s amazing, the difference a decent goodbye and a few weeks to come to terms with things can make. He’s always going to miss Naruto, the man who was his first friend, but Naruto made him stronger, made him kinder. Made him better, and Kurama can accept that, embrace it, and move forward using what Naruto gave him.

“Now there’s a pretty picture,” Zabuza says from behind him, and Kurama opens his eyes and turns, raising a brow at the smirking man. Zabuza shakes his head a little, stepping up beside him, and his eyes linger on Kurama's face. “Or should I say you're a pretty picture.”

Naruto always got annoyed and embarrassed in equal measure when Sasuke called him pretty, because he thought it was a word for a girl no matter how many times Sakura tried to beat the notion out of him. Kurama just snorts—he’s only male because he chose to be, because that’s what fits when he looks at himself, and in the face of that words like pretty aren’t enough to raise a stink over.

“How’s Haku's back?” he asks, not able to hide a grin.

Thankfully, Zabuza isn’t able to, either, or just doesn’t want to. “Well, he’s not going to volunteer as a target again any time soon, but for being dogpiled by almost a hundred clones, he’s fine. I think your blond brat is fixing to become his slave for a week in compensation, though.”

That sounds very much like something Naruto would do. Kurama chuckles, brushing his hair back from his face, and watches Zabuza’s eyes follow the motion. Interesting. He lets his hand linger, smoothing the red strands into place, and then slides it down, letting the wide sleeve of his shirt drop back to cover his skin.

It’s curious, how fascinating it is to invoke a reaction just with movement. Just with presence, and to be able to make Zabuza’s eyes darken, his pupils dilating, when Kurama turns his head and smirks at him. Kurama has seen it all, witnessed it with Mito and Kushina and Naruto, with those around them, but first-hand is different. This is his heart kicking up a notch, his breathing becoming a little deeper. This is a faint flush of heat beneath his skin, a pricking awareness and the undeniable knowledge of something shared when his eyes meet Zabuza’s.

Zabuza lets out a low sound, almost like a hiss, and steps forward. One roughly callused hand cups Kurama's cheek, thumb dragging across his cheekbone, and Kurama inhales sharply as the heat, the awareness redoubles. Zabuza smells like the rain on dry earth, edged with metal and the scent of old blood from Kubikiribōchō. Maybe a human would dislike it, but to Kurama it smells like power and fury and the prelude to a storm, and he can’t help but lean closer, breathing it in with a low, rumbling growl.

“Fuck,” Zabuza says with utmost sincerity. “You're definitely going to kill me, firecracker.”

The nickname isn’t quite enough to kill what's between them, but Kurama still pulls back slightly, leveling a glare at Zabuza's grin. “What?”

“Well, you didn’t like Red,” Zabuza defends himself, though his grin doesn’t abate in the slightest.

“And firecracker is supposed to be better?”

“Fireworks always were my favorite part of winter.” Zabuza laughs at the look on Kurama’s face and leans in again, his free hand coming up with carefully telegraphed intent to settle on Kurama's waist,
and Kurama lets him. Takes a step forward, leans in, because he’s not simply following Zabuza’s lead in this. He reaches up, touches short, soft black hair falling in messy spikes, and slides his hand around to cup the back of Zabuza’s head.

There’s clear intent in Zabuza’s eyes as he ducks his head, shifting closer until they’re almost entirely aligned, chests brushing when they breathe. “Does that sake I passed out last night count as buying you a drink?” he asks, low and amused. There’s an edge of sharpened teeth in his smile, and if Kurama weren’t a predator himself he might not appreciate it as much as he does.

“Does it look like I care?” Kurama retorts, and it startles a laugh out of the other man, rough around the edges but with a thread of warmth in it as well.

“You're something else, Kurama,” Zabuza says, and for just a moment his eyes are serious as his fingers curl tighter on Kurama's hip. “Fuck, you let loose against Yagura and it was the sexiest thing I've ever seen. All that power, and a pretty, deadly redhead right in the middle of it, ready to kill.”

To the rest of the world, Zabuza’s taste is probably slightly questionable. Kurama just snorts. “You really want that spar, don’t you, shark-face?”

Zabuza grins unrepentantly. “Fuck yes. Can’t promise it wouldn’t end with us fucking on the training ground, though.” He pauses for a second, eyes studying Kurama's face again, and then leans down across the handful of inches that separate them. Kurama remembers this, mostly from repeated exposure even if he wasn’t actually the one doing it, and doesn’t fumble as Zabuza presses their mouths together, soft and coaxing.

It’s easy to answer, to meet him evenly. Sharp teeth scrape his lip, followed by a soft tongue, and firm lips move over his, drawing Kurama forward. It’s a building touch of heat, a trickle of want that grows bigger, brighter with every pass. Remembering to breathe is hard, wanting to is even harder, and a few scattered breaths are all Kurama can manage as Zabuza’s hand shifts from his hip to glide up the line of his spine. He arches into the touch like a cat, a sound of appreciation slipping out without thought, and Zabuza makes a noise of amusement.

That’s enough of that, Kurama decides, and steps forward, nudging the other man back. Zabuza goes, but stubbornly doesn’t stop the kiss, not that Kurama is complaining. He opens his mouth, letting it deepen, and in the moment Zabuza is distracted gives him one hard push. Zabuza yelps, staggering back, and the backs of his knees hit the edge of the couch, making him fall. He sits down hard on the cushions, pulling Kurama down with him, and Kurama is laughing when he lands in the swordsman’s lap.

“Didn’t think you’d mind a change of location,” he says, grinning, and Zabuza grins back.

“Not in the least,” he promises, tracing his fingers up Kurama's bent legs from ankle to thigh, then curling his fingers over the muscle and squeezing lightly.

Kurama likes kissing, he decides judiciously, and leans in to take another one, even though Zabuza seems distracted by his legs. Zabuza gives it readily, open-mouthed and messy, and uses his grip to pull Kurama a little higher on his thighs. It’s easy to feel that he’s half-hard, which is just as interesting as the little hungry noises Zabuza keeps making into his mouth, and Kurama wants. It’s not a type he’s used to, not something he’s ever felt for himself before, but it’s still avarice with a hot, grasping edge, curiosity underpinned by something that’s very nearly I can wreck you without any of the bloody connotations Kurama is familiar with. Maybe it’s not quite selfless, but it’s meant to be shared, and he wants to. He wants to a lot.

“You up for a good time, Kurama?” Zabuza asks, and it’s low and rough like velvet scraping the
wrong way over Kurama's skin, making him shiver.

“I think I could be convinced,” Kurama answers, and like this he’s the one who has to lean down, one hand on Zabuza’s shoulder to brace himself, the other sliding down Zabuza’s chest, tracing the contours of muscles he’s only ever seen close-up on Sasuke, which is not a thought he wants to be having right now. Better to focus on Zabuza under him, even if the man is unfortunately still wearing a shirt. Apparently this version, unlike the one Naruto faced on the bridge, does actually believe in them. Kurama wouldn’t have thought to protest this fact until just now, but it’s becoming apparent that it’s very much an injustice.

Zabuza breaks the kiss to murmur, “I’ve got a perfectly good bed about twenty feet away. You good to relocate?”

Kurama doesn’t see why he wouldn’t be. He pulls back a little, raising a brow at Zabuza, and the swordsman clearly sees the implied question. He chuckles, squeezing Kurama's thigh again and letting his hand drift higher, skimming over the inseam of his pants. “You don’t strike me as the one-night type, princess. Just making sure.”

“Fuck you,” Kurama answers, because that’s always a good response to go with. “I'm just—curious. You're interesting.”

“And so your answer is to get me in bed?” But Zabuza just sounds amused. When Kurama growls, he laughs, leaning up to kiss him again. That at least is mollifying, and Kurama allows it. “Hey, I feel the same. You're dangerous and sexy, might as well take advantage. So long as you know this isn’t going further. Wouldn’t want to step on your feelings, princess.”

“Fuck you, piranha-breath.” Kurama pulls back to bare his teeth at him. It’s definitely not a smile, though Zabuza’s eyes go dark and intent at the expression anyway.

“Not my thing,” Zabuza counters, and both hands come up to grip Kurama's hips, pulling him in. He arches up, rubbing them together, and Kurama can't fight the moan that bubbles up in his chest. “Rather finish like this, dirty up all that soft skin as we get each other off.”

Kurama fights to keep his eyes from closing against a renewed flood of want, and lets himself fall forward, catching himself on Zabuza’s shoulders and pressing his mouth to the pale skin of his throat in a line of greedy, open-mouthed kisses. “You said something about a bed?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Zabuza sucks in a breath, then hooks one arm under Kurama's thighs, grunts, “Hang on,” and shoves to his feet, taking Kurama with him.

Muscles used to swinging his massive sword bunch and shift, and Kurama wants to taste them. He’d rather not get dropped, though, so he hooks his arms around Zabuza’s neck, curls a leg around his waist, and asks mockingly, “What? No caveman grunting as you drag me back to your bed? I’m disappointed.”

“Not for long, you won’t be,” Zabuza retorts, kicking the door to his bedroom closed behind him. Kurama, remembering a vast number of times when Naruto and Sasuke were interrupted mid-deed, manages to lean over and flick the lock before Zabuza crosses the room and dumps him gracelessly on the mattress.

“Smooth,” he complains as he bounces.

Zabuza huffs, even though his grin hasn’t faded, and strips off his shirt. “Quit whining and get your pants off.”
It’s so ridiculous that Kurama has to laugh. And when Zabuza drops down on top of him, he’s laughing too, which somehow makes everything that follows that much better.

“A pardon?” Shisui splutters, waving the Hokage's scroll in disbelief. “He up and steals jinchuuriki from every major village and they're giving him a pardon?”

“In light of previously undiscovered information,” Kakashi reads, taking the scroll back, and he can’t say he’s over pleased about it, either. For that matter, he kind of wants to break something. However, the message is signed by not just one Kage, but three, and there’s not much room to argue with that. He skims the rest of the message, carefully filing away the notice to be on the lookout for Killer Bee, and skips down to their amended orders. “We’re to head for Kiri to rendezvous with the Sannin Jiraiya, and give Kurama his invitation to return to Konoha. The Hokage mentions a hostile terrorist group and a high level of danger.”

“How unusual,” Tenzō comments, as dry as dust. “Danger? On an ANBU mission? I never signed up for this.”

Shisui laughs, then—of course—presses the back of his hand to his forehead and pretends to swoon. “Oh no, danger! Tenzō, save me, I'm overcome!”

Tenzō starts to catch him as he collapses dramatically, then pulls up short at the last moment and lets Shisui hit the floor like a sack of bricks as he turns to Kakashi and asks, faintly incredulous, “The Hokage does remember that we’ve been trying to capture Kurama, doesn’t he? Are we really the best ones to deliver a message?”

From where he’s lying in a heap, Shisui opens his eyes and glares at the Mokuton user. “Fucking hate you, you little bastard.”

With all the impressive maturity of his seventeen years, Tenzō rolls his eyes so hard they're in danger of falling out of his head, and points out, “I'm only an inch shorter than you are.”

“Yes, but you're very small and petty on the inside,” Shisui retorts, “and everyone knows that it’s what’s inside that counts.”

From where he’s perched on the windowsill, Itachi shakes his head a little, looking longsuffering, and cuts in before the bickering can devolve any further. “A merchant ship from an island off the coast of Water Country docked yesterday. They should be able to give us passage.” When Kakashi raises a brow at him, he smiles faintly. “People here don’t like them. They were complaining to Genma.”

Ah yes, village-tamer Genma. Kakashi still stubbornly refuses to wonder why the people of Whirlpool Country like Genma so much better than him. He doesn’t care. “Good. Tenzō, make arrangements. Itachi, notify Genma’s squad. Shisui, see if you can restock supplies.”

“Why does he get to talk to the captain?” Shisui complains, because of course he does. “I'm a people person!”

Kakashi trades glances with Itachi, sharing a moment of perfect understanding in their aggravation. Itachi rubs the bridge of his nose, carefully picking through his words, and then says, “Shisui, you can be…intimidating.”
Tenzō coughs to hide a laugh. “I would have said that you're an overbearingly friendly assassin with a tendency to make people run screaming, but apparently your cousin is nicer than I am.”

“Like that’s a surprise,” Shisui retorts, climbing to his feet. “Just wait, jerk. I'm going to buy you nothing but oily food. Oil-packed fish, oil soup, oily water—”

Tenzō turns faintly green. “You are not, or I—I’ll dye all of your flak jackets pink.”

“Pink is a very fetching color. I think it goes well with my eyes.”

“Then I'll tell your mother about that time in Tani, with the—”

Shisui blanches and throws his hands up in surrender. “No, no, no! We’re not telling anyone about that, you little snitch! You promised!”

The arch of one very unimpressed brow clearly conveys Tenzō’s opinion of that accusation. “We’re shinobi. Underhanded tactics are more than just acceptable, they're encouraged. If you don’t want me to have blackmail material, don’t do things that I can blackmail you with.”

Kakashi kind of wants to know what happened, but then again, he also really, really doesn’t. Deciding it’s time to step in, he pointedly clears his throat, and when three pairs of eyes snap to him automatically, he asks mildly, “Do I need to repeat myself? I could have sworn I gave you your orders already.”

Shisui vanishes in a whirl of wind, and Itachi promptly slides out the window, Tenzō following him in a blur of long brown hair and distinct chagrin. Kakashi wouldn’t say he’s relieved to see them go, but. Well. He’s a little relieved to see them go. They’ve been in close quarters for two weeks now, and while that has nothing on some ANBU missions, it’s still trying. Not Itachi, because Itachi is a good, sweet, polite child, for all that he’s also kind of scary and a little creepy. But Tenzō and Shisui, when combined, make Kakashi long for the institution of gags as corporal punishment.

He sighs and drags a hand through his hair, then glances back down at the Hokage's message. The section on Akatsuki stands out, and he reads it again, trying to gather as much as he can from Sarutobi's brief mention. A group in pursuit of the jinchuuriki, comprised of S-rank missing-nin, can’t be a good thing. It’s almost enough to make Kakashi's head hurt, because Kurama just became an tentative ally, but now instead of having to worry about him snatching Naruto, there's another enemy out there, and they're not just one grumpy shinobi with a strange reluctance to kill Konoha nin.

In light of his pardon, though, that part is at least easier to understand. If Kurama wants to return to Konoha, as this would imply, he certainly wouldn’t do anything to make it harder. And—

This. This is the threat that worried Rōshi, that manages to be deadly even to jinchuuriki. This is Kurama’s drive, what kept him running after Kakashi's actions drove him out of Konoha. Maybe, if Kakashi hadn’t reacted—overreacted—Kurama would have left Naruto, gone to warn the other jinchuuriki without taking them along with him. But Kakashi showed him that regular shinobi couldn’t be trusted, that there was no allowance in them for anything beyond threat. So Kurama had taken Naruto, under the belief that he could protect him better, and all of this can be laid at Kakashi's feet. His fault, like most things. He has to breathe through the guilt, the sudden roil in his stomach, and he hates that it makes such sense.

Bringing Kurama and Naruto back to Konoha—maybe that can fix part of it, but it won't help him atone for the rest of his actions.

Of course, if there's one thing Kakashi is practiced at, it’s atonement. He’ll just…have to try.
“Captain?” a quiet voice asks, and Kakashi looks up to find Itachi in the doorway, looking faintly wary. He musters up a smile, eye crinkling, and is glad his mask and hitai-ate cover the tells that would reveal it as a lie.

“Yes?”

Itachi pads forward, steps utterly silent, and then hesitates. He looks towards the window, out over the quiet night-dark streets, and says softly, “If I…wanted to leave ANBU, would you support my dismissal?”

Kakashi blinks in surprise, and takes another look at the eleven-year-old. He’s nervous, wary—Kakashi can see it in the tenseness of his posture, the tight line of his shoulders. And it’s no wonder, given the subject; Itachi is the pride of his clan, its genius heir. He’s the youngest ANBU captain and a prodigy in every way.

Except that of all the shinobi in Konoha, Kakashi knows intimately how Itachi must be feeling, pushed so hard from the time he was a small child, always expected to do better than everyone else by virtue of a genius that never extends quite far enough. There’s too much for intelligence alone to cover in their positions, too many shades of emotion and motive and humanity for a talent at jutsus and an eye for tactics to account for.

Genius shinobi, Kakashi has come to realize, is just about the furthest thing from perfect human as is logically possible.

“Of course,” he says, meeting Itachi’s wary gaze, and watches relief bloom in dark eyes. “If you want, I’ll recommend you be removed from ANBU and evaluated in-village after this mission.”

Itachi turns his face away, hiding his expression. “My father will protest.”

“Your father hasn’t been an active shinobi since the end of the Third Shinobi War,” Kakashi counters. “And the villages are at peace right now. There’s no need for so many high-ranking shinobi in combat positions. And given your service record already, you’ve earned an in-village posting. I don’t think the Hokage will argue, or Shikaku, and they’re the only ones whose votes matter.”

Itachi doesn’t argue, even though it’s clear he doesn’t quite believe it will work out so easily. Kakashi has his doubts as well, even if he won’t voice them, but he also realizes that a recommendation to remove someone from the active duty roster, coming from him, will carry more weight with the Hokage than most. When Kakashi of all people says he sees danger of a burnout, Sarutobi tends to listen.

“Thank you,” the boy says instead, and Kakashi hums, accepting the gratitude without forcing himself to touch on messy emotions by responding verbally.

“You found Genma's squad?” he asks.

Clearly just as grateful for the change of subject, Itachi nods. “They’re leaving now to meet up with the closest tracking teams in Wave, and then they’ll head back towards Konoha. Genma said to wish you good luck.”

That’s no surprise, given Genma’s personality, but it still makes Kakashi smile a bit. He glances around their room, assesses the neatly packed bags, and decides to leave everything as it is. Depending on when the ship to Kiri departs, they might be pulling out in a hurry. “I’ll settle our bill with the innkeeper so we’re ready to leave. Clear the room?”

Apparently very familiar with Shisui’s habit of leaving kunai in odd places, Itachi rolls his eyes a little
and starts checking under futons and behind pillows. Kakashi snorts when he finds the first one, pinning the edge of a sheet to the floorboards, and starts trying to pry it up without further damaging the wood. He leaves the boy to it, picking up his wallet and heading out the door.

At least the frantic edge to their journey is gone, he thinks, sidestepping a couple coming up the stairs. That will make everything easier, hopefully. The hard part is going to be keeping Kurama from gutting them on sight, or just taking his jinchuuriki and running again.

Maybe they can arrange for a fruit basket. Or a card. Someone has to make a greeting card for this kind of situation, right? Something like *I'm sorry for chasing you across seven countries and trying to brainwash you, let's be friends now that I don't think you're trying to take over the world with human weapons.*

Yeah, no. That’s…not going to work. Kakashi rubs at his visible eye with something close to despair, and tries not to think of all the myriad ways this little jaunt could end very, very badly.
Kurama wakes up more slowly and more comfortably than he has since bolting from Konoha with Naruto in his arms. He’s sprawled out on the thick mattress, warm and well-rested, with a pleasant drowsy lassitude that’s seeped all the way down to his bones. A heavy arm is draped across his back, fingers curled lightly against his side, and he smiles a little to himself, shifting and stretching lazily. Sunlight is slanting in through the bedroom window, unusual for Kiri but gloriously warm, and if he listens he can hear Naruto and Fū laughing beyond the door.

He feels unexpectedly good. It’s not just the sex—though that was very interesting, and Kurama can see why Naruto and Sasuke did it so much. It’s also the release of tension, the lack of urge to pack up and run before the hunters get to him. Even if they do come, eight out nine jinchuuriki know him, know Naruto. Naruto has connections with others like him. There’s little risk of him becoming that depressed, lonely, unhappy child again. Yugito, Rōshi, Han, Utakata, even Yagura—they’ll all prevent it. Just knowing that makes everything that came before worthwhile.

Without bothering to be subtle about it, Kurama picks up Zabuza’s arm and drops it to the side, then rolls over and swings his legs out of bed. Zabuza grumbles audibly, snagging a pillow and pulling it over his head in clear protest of getting up, and Kurama snorts. “Lazy layabout,” he challenges.

“’S not what you said last night,” the swordsman counters, unmoving. “Bring me coffee.”

“Fuck no. Get it yourself.” Kurama dodges the swat of his hand with a low laugh, stooping to find the clothes they’d tossed to the side. Since his pack is still in the room he’s been sharing with the kids, he pulls them on, drags a hand through his hair to get the worst of the tangles out, and slips out the door.

“Morning, Kurama-nii!” Naruto says brightly from where he’s sprawled on his stomach, drawing colorful pictures on what looks like seal paper. Fū is sitting next to him, clearly supervising. “Did you switch rooms?”

“Just for last night,” Kurama tells him, crouching down to ruffle his hair and offering Fū a smile. “Sleep well, kit?”

“Yeah! Yugito-nii told us a story about a princess with really long hair. Everybody kept climbing it, though, and I said I would punch them for it. She got mad at me, but Gaara liked it so she got better.”
For all of Yugito’s sensibility, she’s secretly very much a fan of fairy tales and princesses. Kurama chuckles, rising to his feet. “I’m sure she was just annoyed. Don’t worry about it.”

Naruto beams at him. “I’m not! She said tonight she’d tell us a more exciting story if we didn’t like princesses and stuff.”

Hopefully Yugito will remember that most of her audience is under ten, and therefore not quite up to hearing about bloody historical battles. “Sounds good,” is all Kurama says, though. He tugs lightly on a lock of Fū’s green hair, then heads for the bathroom to take a quick shower and get some fresh clothes.

Ten minutes later, when he wanders into the kitchen, it’s to find Yagura and Mei arguing at the table, talking right over the top of an aggravated Jiraiya, Han lurking near the doorway with his head ducked down to keep from hitting the ceiling, and Rōshi folding omelets. Utakata is filling bowls with rice, Fuji planted hopefully between his feet and Momiji lying on the floor two inches behind his heels.

“Begging’s terrible for your image,” Kurama tells the foxes, amused. “You don’t look like fearsome fox summons, you look like hungry rats.”

Fuji sniffs pointedly, not deigning to respond, but her brother lets out a yipping laugh and rises, shrinking as he goes. He leaps up, claws catching on Kurama’s tunic, and Kurama boosts him the rest of the way onto his shoulder. The silver fox curls around his neck, draping his tails over Kurama’s shoulder, and wrinkles his nose. “You smell like swordsman,” he complains.

“I showered,” Kurama retorts. He glances at Rōshi and Utakata, but Utakata just smiles and offers him a cup of tea.

“Why don’t you sit down?” the boy asks. “We’re almost done here.”

Hardly about to turn down hot food that’s been prepared for him, without having to hunt it himself, Kurama removes himself from the kitchen, heading for the table. Mei and Yagura are getting louder, but mostly just insulting each other now, so he can’t tell what sparked the argument. He’s just about to ask Jiraiya, since from the look on his face he’s been present for the whole thing, when he rounds the corner of the table and pulls up short, staring at the creature sitting on the chair cushion.

A pug, short and squat, with a blue vest and a Konoha hitai-ate. Lazy eyes flicker to Kurama, then widen sharply, just as Kurama’s narrow.

“Oh, hey!” Jiraiya says cheerfully, clearly happy for a distraction from the two bickering Kiri nin. “I actually found us some reliable backup for when we head for the Mountains’ Graveyard. I’ve known Hatake since he was a brat, and if he picked the squad—”

“Fuck you, no,” Kurama says promptly, and feels Momiji shift on his shoulder, the prick of sharp claws digging in in preparation. “Really, no. I’m not letting the damned Freak Squad within ten miles of Naruto. Try again.”

Jiraiya’s face does something weird, though Kurama doesn’t care enough to identify that expression. “Freak Squad,” he repeats, sounding dubious.

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Kurama crosses his arms over his chest, glaring at Pakkun. “Yes, the Freak Squad. They’ve been on my goddamned tail since I grabbed Naruto from Konoha, and they’re a pain in the ass. I am not working with two and a half Uchiha and a baby Mokuton user.”

“My point exactly,” Yagura snaps, though it’s directed at Mei rather than Jiraiya. “Kiri just got out of
an Uchiha’s grasp. I’m not inviting another one in.”

“You can't leave them camped outside the gate, you infantile brat!” Mei snaps back. “Kiri is already in a precarious enough position thanks to all the backlash against our bloodlines and you going insane for the last six years. Konoha is the strongest Hidden Village! You can't insult them like that!”

“There are currently nine jinchuuriki in Kiri, so reassess! We’re holding all the power at the moment, you old maid harpy!”

“And if you even threaten to use it the state of our international relations will never recover! Pissing off every other country at the same time is not a good idea, even for a prepubescent little jerkwad like you!”

So that’s what the argument was about.

“Can you stop shouting?” Kurama snaps, and it’s only partially accidental when his control wavers, the full force of his chakra crashing over them for just an instant. It shuts them both up immediately, though, so Kurama counts it as a win. He glowers at the two, then turns back to Pakkun, who doesn’t look nearly as impressed as he should. “You. What the hell does Kakashi think he’s doing coming here?”

Pakkun arches his brows in a gesture he must have picked up from his summoner. “Boss thinks he’s doing what the Hokage ordered him to. He’s got a message for you from the three Kages currently in Konoha. You're gonna want to read it.”

With a high-pitched snarl, Momiji launches himself from Kurama’s shoulders, landing on the edge of the table and peering over to bare his pointy teeth at the pug. “Kurama-sama has better things to do than listen to you,” he snarls. “Or your bastard of a summoner.”

Rolling his eyes, Kurama sets his tea down and scoops the fox up, cradling him in his arms as a low, continuous growl rumbles through the reynard and his five tails bristle angrily. He turns his glare on Jiraiya, and snaps, “Kakashi attacked me when I tried to hug Naruto. I’m not inclined to give him a chance to drag the kid back to Konoha against his will.”

Jiraiya raises his hand in a placating gesture. “Look, if the Hokage sent him with a message, it’s important. And if we’re going to throw ourselves headlong at Akatsuki the way I know you’re planning, we’re going to need all the backup we can get. Kakashi is one of Konoha’s best. Give him a chance.”

Kurama really doesn’t feel inclined to, since three of the last four times they’ve been within a hundred yards of each other they’ve come to blows. And the remaining time doesn’t even count, since Fuji was in the middle of getting them the hell away from their pursuers. But—

He’s forgotten, he supposes, that Kakashi has a claim on Naruto too. That he does now, and will in the future, and that he’s one of the precious people that his Naruto sent him back to save. Without Kakashi, the first time around, Naruto might never have been a shinobi—certainly wouldn’t have been the same kind of shinobi.

If he wants to take the logical angle, too, there's always the fact that as far as backup goes, he could do a hell of a lot worse than the Freak Squad, given Akatsuki’s current members. Itachi is more than capable of facing Orochimaru, Tenzō will probably do decently against Kisame, Shisui is a wildcard but probably strong in his own right, and Kakashi is just about the best person to face Obito, since they share an eye. Pein will, of course, be a pain in the ass, pun fully intended, but with Jiraiya around maybe they can manage to beat some sense into him. That leaves Sasori and Kakuzu, and
Kurama feels fairly confident in his chances, even fighting both of them together. Now that his chakra is completely his own again, it won't be anything he can't handle.

“Fine,” he says shortly, and doesn’t look at Jiraiya. He keeps his eyes on Momiji as he scratches behind the reynard’s ears, earning a gravel-rough purr for his efforts. “But I'm meeting them at the gate, and if they even think about causing trouble, I'm kicking them out on their asses faster than you can say gone.”

“I'll come with you,” Yagura agrees immediately, rising to his feet and snatching up his staff. “Mei, you can…sit on Momochi, I don’t care.”

“On that note,” Mei says with a lioness’s smile, rounding on Kurama. “You should be aware that I'm judging you for your taste, Uzumaki. Also, is he as good in bed as Ameyuri says he is?”

“I never fucking slept with Ameyuri,” Zabuza grunts, leaning around Kurama to steal his cooling tea. “If she says otherwise, she’s lying.”

Mei sighs dramatically. “I'll get a straight answer one of these days, Momochi.”

“Not by asking Kurama you won’t.” He smirks at Kurama, who raises an unimpressed eyebrow in return. “Something happening, firecracker?”

“Keep calling me that and the only thing that’s happening is you getting your face introduced to my foot,” Kurama retorts. “Copy-Nin Kakashi is at the gates. Yagura and I were going to go let him in.”

Interest sparks in Zabuza’s eyes, a hell of a lot more violent than the kind he showed last night. “Konoha's Copy-Nin? Always wanted to see how I’d do against that Sharingan of his. Want some company?”

“Not particularly,” Yagura says, eyeing him. “Are you going to pick a fight?”

“Me?” Zabuza gives him a bullshit grin, showing off his filed teeth. “Never. I'll be an angel, Mizukage-sama.”

Yagura’s expression says he doesn’t buy it for a moment, but he still inclines his head. “Very well. Pakkun, was it? Which gate are they waiting at?”

“Eastern tip of the city, Mizukage-sama,” the pug says, more or less politely, and leaps down to follow them as they head for the door. Kurama lets the other two men slide past him, then detours into the main room.

“I'm going out for a sec, kit,” he says, crouching down next to Naruto again. “You good to stay here with everyone else?”

Naruto pauses, halfway through a drawing of what is probably meant to be Fū with butterfly wings, and looks up, expression shifting to faint worry. “You're gonna be okay, Kurama-nii?”

“Yeah.” Kurama smiles at him. “I just have to meet someone really quickly, but I'll be back as soon as I can.”

“I'll keep an eye on him, Kurama-nii!” Fū offers cheerfully. “Yugito said she was going to wake Gaara up, too, so we can all play together again, right, Naru-chan?”

“Right!” Naruto cheers. “If you come back before we’re done, you can be on my team, Kurama-nii!”
Kurama chuckles and leans in, kissing his forehead briefly before he rises to his feet. “Well, with a promise like that, I’ll have to, won’t I?”

Both kids wave, and Kurama waves back, then heads for where Zabuza is leaning against the door.

“Shame the brats have you by the short and curlies,” the swordsman says idly, though his grin is anything but. “You might be more interesting if they didn’t.”

“Right,” Kurama says, completely unimpressed. “And the reason you’re hovering here totally isn’t because Haku just walked into the kitchen. You tell him goodbye like a good mother bear?”

“Fuck you,” Zabuza spits, one hand snapping towards his sword. Kurama grins back, showing teeth, and—

“If you two are done posturing about which one is the better mother,” Yagura says, clearly annoyed, “we have a team of shinobi to meet.”

Zabuza gives him a short, sharp glare, then turns on his heel and stalks past. “Watch yourself,” he growls. “That hat still looks tempting.”

If anything, Yagura’s expression gets even less impressed as he turns to follow the swordsman. “I invite you to try, Momochi. You didn’t have a chance against me when I was brainwashed and only able to access a fraction of Isobu’s power; you haven’t a hope as I am now.”

Zabuza mutters something that might be “we’ll see about that”, but he hardly says it loud enough to count. The only reason Kurama catches it is because he has fox ears.

“He’s not overly smart, is he?” Momiji mutters, wriggling out of Kurama’s arms and climbing up onto his shoulder again.

Kurama snorts. “Has a tendency to think with his damned sword, from what I’ve seen.”

That earns him happy chatter from the reynard. “Pun intended?”

“Pun definitely intended.” Grinning, Kurama picks up his pace a little, falling into step with Yagura as they head out of the forest and into the village proper. He glances down at the jinchuuriki for a moment, then asks cautiously, “There going to be problems with you letting all of us stay here?”

Yagura hums, inclining his head to a group of shinobi as they bow. “The best thing about being both a Kage and a jinchuuriki is that no one is certain which position supersedes the other,” he says, and there’s a hint of humor in his voice and the curve of his lips. “In this case, I’ll let them assume it’s my ties as a jinchuuriki that are making me host you, and if they raise a fuss, I’ll throw a fit and wreck whatever room we’re in.”

Kurama supposes that a jinchuuriki losing their temper is something the rest of the world tries to avoid whenever possible, and thinking of the other Kage’s potential reaction makes him laugh. “That’s one method of getting your way,” he says. “I think I approve.”

“I’m glad.” Yagura is smiling, just a little. “Especially since Mei keeps telling me to be careful. She doesn’t understand. Only a jinchuuriki would.”

Kurama can’t argue with that, not really. Even “monsters” like Zabuza can’t quite understand the constant fear and hatred directed at a human container and the bijuu inside of them, or the abuse they suffer in the name of strengthening their village. For all that he endured, Naruto was actually one of the lucky ones.
It’s going to be different now, though. Kurama won’t let any of them go back to the way things were, even if he has to wreck a village or two to see to it. And once they see just how willing he is to do that, he thinks the Kages will get the picture quickly enough. It can only be for their own benefit, after all.

Kakashi isn’t a man who feels fear in the face of anything but losing those dear to him. He can count the number of times something besides loss has truly scared him on one hand and have fingers left over. And this—

Well. This isn’t exactly adding to that, which probably proves a couple of Genma’s more pointed accusations about elite jounin idiocy correct.

Still, even knowing what he does, it’s hard for Kakashi to look at the short, grumpy redhead stalking through Kiri’s gates and feel anything but vague amusement, edged with a faint pang of nostalgia for when Kushina wore that particular look. It usually ended with Minato getting beaten over the head, sometimes with him just flat-out getting his ass kicked, and Kakashi always got a healthy amount of glee out of it. Here and now it doesn’t feel all that different, which is a little disconcerting, even with the addition of an even shorter boy carrying a hook-ended staff and the tall, looming figure of one of the Seven Swordsmen, blade slung over his shoulder.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Pakkun mutters, trotting up to him and sitting down at his feet. “Message delivered, Boss.”

“Thanks,” Kakashi says, giving him a crinkle-eyed smile, though he keeps Kurama in his peripheral vision just in case the redhead starts swinging. “That’s all I needed, Pakkun.”

The pug huffs, but vanishes in a puff of smoke, and Kakashi turns his attention to Kurama. Surprisingly, the man is hanging back, and the blond boy is approaching at a brisk pace. It’s only when Kakashi gets a good look at the stitch-like scar on his left cheek and his pale purple eyes that he recognizes the Mizukage, and forces himself to bow politely. Damn it, but if Kurama has Yagura as an ally, and Kiri is currently entertaining nine jinchuuriki including their Kage, it’s no wonder the others coughed up a pardon so quickly.

“Hatake Kakashi,” Yagura says, cool and assessing. “What business do you have in Kirigakure?”

Political posturing is Kakashi’s least favorite thing ever. Still, he forces his tone to politeness and slowly withdraws the Hokage’s message from his flak jacket pocket. “Mizukage-sama, the Hokage, Kazekage, and Raikage sent a request that you attend an upcoming Kage Summit that’s to be hosted in Konoha. I was also asked to rendezvous with the Sannin Jiraiya and give Uzumaki Kurama a pardon for all actions taken. The Hokage invites him to return to Konoha if he wishes to, along with any who might want to accompany him.”

Grey-blond brows rise sharply, and Yagura turns, casting a speaking look at Kurama. Kurama blinks back, uncrossing his arms from his chest, and takes a step forward. “Already?” he asks. “They pardoned me? No more chasing us across the damned country?”

Kakashi tips one shoulder in a shrug. “I’d assume that’s why they sent us to deliver the message,” he says mildly. “Proof of goodwill. Will you accept?”

Kurama shoots him a scathing look as he all but snatches the scroll from Kakashi’s fingertips. A
quick scan of the words makes him grin, showing that bare edge of sharp teeth, and then he rerolls it.
“Perfect,” he says with some satisfaction. “Going to be an asshole again when I try to hug my nephew, Hatake?”

It takes effort not to wince, though Kakashi supposes he deserved that. Because of that, he meets Kurama's angry red gaze as evenly as he's able, and says, “I misunderstood. I'm sorry.”

One blink, then another, and the anger abates, muffled behind surprise. Looking away, Kurama reaches up to touch the silver fox perched on his shoulder, and says gruffly, “Understandable. But next time you try to take Naruto from me, I'll feed you your intestines, got it?”

Compared to the threat he made to eat them back when Kakashi's squad first captured him, that’s a marked improvement as far as levels of violence go, so Kakashi takes it as the peace offering it’s probably (maybe) intended to be. “Of course,” he says, and doesn’t waver in the face of Kurama's clear suspicion.

Yagura clears his throat, and when Kakashi turns to look at him, he says, “I'm going to have to ask that the Uchiha in your party keep their Sharingan deactivated while in Kiri. I assume yours is in a constant state of activation, since it’s not natural?”

Kakashi tries his best not to stiffen, and ignores the way Shisui, Tenzō, and Itachi are trading glances behind him. For a moment all he can see is Kiri nin closing in under a full moon, Rin with a ghastly smile and his hand through her chest, the first moment of his Mangekyo activating as she died. He clenches his hands into fists and forces himself not to look down; even if he sees blood on them, like he knows he will, there isn’t anything he can do about it right now. It’s hardly something new for him, either. He should be used to it by now.

“You’re correct,” he manages to get out, though the words feel like they’re strangling him. “If those are your conditions for entering, Mizukage-sama, my team will follow them as long as there’s no direct threat to their safety.”

“Agreed, then.” Yagura turns on his heel, waving one of the guards closer. “Secure rooms for the Konoha delegation, preferably close to where the Sannin Jiraiya is staying. Then locate Ao, and tell him to arrange a guard to accompany me to the Summit. I would prefer to have at least one of the Swordsmen with me.”

The kunoichi salutes, then vanishes in a whirl of mist, leaving her partner to eye Kakashi's squad warily as they approach. Kakashi does his best to look nonthreatening, short of pulling out his Icha Icha. He can just imagine the Hokage's reaction to him doing so in front of another Kage, and while Sarutobi is generally accommodating of his habits, that would be pushing things a little too far.

It’s a definite regret, though; Kakashi is practically suffering withdrawals right now.

A sharp, “Leave it, shark-face,” brings Kakashi’s attention back to his surroundings, and he glances over to see Kurama has waylaid the swordsman and is giving him a narrow look. “I seem to recall you used the term ‘angel’ barely ten minutes ago. Ready to prove yourself a liar?”


Then he leers. At Kurama.

Kakashi is very confused right now.

“You also said if we sparred we’d end up fucking on the training ground,” Kurama says flatly, and Tenzō makes a quiet sound like he’s dying. “It’s not happening, Zabuza. Curiosity satisfied.”
"I wasn’t good enough to tempt you into another time?” Zabuza grins at him. “Better let me try again and see if I can do better the second time around.”

“No flirting,” Yagura cuts in, sounding aggrieved. “The other night was bad enough. If I want violent soppiness, I’ll talk to Mei. Kurama, do you intend to go after Akatsuki before or after you return to Konoha?”

Distracted, Kurama turns away, leaving Kakashi to eye Zabuza a little disbelievingly. Because that’s Momochi Zabuza, Demon of the Hidden Mist, and Kurama can’t have been in Kiri more than a handful of days. Just how fast does he move?

Still, it’s a question to ask later. He keeps most of his attention on Kurama as the redhead answers, “Before. The approach is easier from here. I’ll take a ship to Frost Country, then another to Moon Country, and head straight for the Mountains’ Graveyard. With any luck they won’t see me coming.”

“Us,” Yagura corrects, and then, catching the expression that flickers over Kurama’s face, adds, “Not me, I’m the Mizukage and have a village on the edge of civil war to rebuild. But that’s why the Toad Sage is bringing these four in, isn’t it? And somehow I don’t see Rōshi or Han allowing you to leave them behind.”

Kurama’s expression turns mulish, and he stalks after Yagura as the Mizukage heads back into the village. “No fucking way am I taking jinchuuriki to face down Akatsuki. How stupid do you think I am? I’m not piranha-breath over there.”

“Hey,” Zabuza protests, though he sounds closer to amused than insulted.

Kurama waves a dismissive hand at him. “Oh, shut up. Your sword’s more reasonable than you are, and that’s a bad sign.”

“You weren’t complaining about my sword last night.”

“Keep bringing that up and you won’t have one at all. Either of them.”

Kakashi resists the urge to look heavenward.

Allies. Yeah. This partnership is going to go splendidly. He’s so excited. So.

Gods, is it too early to retire? Maybe Itachi has the right idea.
XXXIV: Deprehend

Chapter Notes

It’s short again, and I’m sorry, but typing on my phone is a massive pain. Hopefully I get my computer back tomorrow, so things should get easier after that. :)

[deprehend /dəˈpɛrənd/, to catch; to take unaware or by surprise; to seize, as a person committing an unlawful act; to catch; to apprehend; to detect; to discover; to find out.. From Latin deprehendere, from de- +prehendere ‘to lay hold of, seize.’]

Kakashi can remember the Naruto from Konoha, the lonely little boy who tried too hard to be happy and only counted the Hokage as a friend. He can remember the Naruto from Whirlpool, grinning at him from the back of a flying fox.

What he can't remember is this: Naruto laughing freely, running across the wet grass with two other children, arms outstretched. Can't remember happiness, or such pure joy, or that free smile with no shadows in his eyes. Minato's eyes, in the sun—warm and blue and so full of life and wonder. Kushina, too, hidden away in the angle of his grin, the merry mischief on his face.

It feels like a blow to the chest, like a kunai driven into his gut. Kakashi comes to a sharp stop, one hand catching the edge of the gate to steady him, and can't do anything but stare.

Kurama pushes past him with a huff, but doesn’t pause. “I'm back, kit,” he calls. “Did you brats catch another geezer?”

“Just the same one,” Nii Yugito says, a cat-pleased smile on her face as she rounds the corner of the building and comes to a halt.

Hot on her heels, Naruto comes flying back into sight, looking fit to burst with glee. “Kurama-nii, Kurama-nii! Can you play with us now?”

Kakashi expects Kurama to wave him off, to offer a “the adults need to talk” excuse. Instead, Kurama crouches down, letting Naruto barrel right into him, and scoops the boy off his feet, tossing him over his shoulder like a sack of rice. “I guess I could,” he says, pretending reluctance, though Kakashi can see how he’s fighting a smile—and losing. “Ooph!” Something small and red collides with his leg, and he grabs the tiny creature by the back of its shirt and hauls it up, settling it on his hip. Another small child, Kakashi is horrified to see, and takes a prudent step back lest he be called on to babysit or—or hold one or something.

Kurama doesn’t even glance at him. “Hey, Gaara,” he says, warm and a good bit softer than the voice he used with Naruto. “Staying out of trouble?

The Kazekage’s brat—the one Baki called dangerous and unstable and prone to violent outbursts—gives Kurama a sweet, shy smile and curls his arms around the man’s neck, laying his head on Kurama’s shoulder. “We played tag. It was fun,” he says, muffled and barely translatable.

“Yeah!” Naruto chimes in, happily hanging upside down. “Rōshi got distracted by Fū’s glittery stuff
and a branch knocked him down, and then Han started laughing at him, and they decided to wrestle! Well, Rōshi decided to wrestle. Han was laughing so hard he didn’t seem to notice.”

So the two oldest jinchuuriki really did make it here, as the Kage thought. Kakashi would be surprised, except that’s just how his luck seems to go. All he can really hope for is that Rōshi won’t want to continue their fight, or hold on to any grudges. He doesn’t have the mental fortitude to deal with more than one jinchuuriki at a time out for his blood, and Kurama is dangerous enough on his own.

“And the house is still standing? Color me astonished.” Kurama tickles Naruto’s bare feet, making the boy giggle and squirm, and then hitches him up a little higher and heads for the backyard.

“Astonished? What color is that?” Naruto sounds confused, and he’s trying to crane his head around to look at his uncle. Either he hasn’t noticed Kakashi and his team yet or he just doesn’t care, and Kakashi isn’t sure which option stings more. He has no right to Naruto’s attention, not really, but… he looks an awful lot like all the best parts of Minato and Kushina. So terrifyingly much like all the things Kakashi has allowed to slip from between his fingers and shatter on the ground.

“It’s just a silly saying, Naru-chan,” another voice chimes in, and a fourth child—this one with green hair—leaps lightly off the roof, lands, and immediately launches herself at Kurama’s back, just managing not to completely squish Naruto. Kurama grunts theatrically, staggering forward, and Yugito grabs the arm that’s supporting Gaara like she’s going to keep him on his feet. Something wicked sparks in Kurama’s grin, making Yugito’s eyes widen, and with an exaggerated cry he tips over. Kakashi can recognize a controlled fall when he sees one, but the kids hanging off of the redhead all shriek in gleeful terror as Kurama topples to the ground and rolls to pin all four of them with his weight.

“Kurama-nii!” the green-haired girl complains loudly, trying to wiggle out from under his right shoulder.

“No fair!” Naruto agrees, voice muffled by the curve of Kurama’s back. “You’re heavy!”

(Kakashi notes that of all of them, Gaara looks the least troubled. Then again, he’s tucked under Kurama’s left arm, still in pretty much the same position with his arms around Kurama’s neck, and it seems like he’d be more than happy to stay there.

Yeah, Kakashi is thinking Baki may have missed one or two things about the kid’s personality.)

“Are you calling me fat?” Kurama shoots back, letting a little more of his weight rest on them to a chorus of exaggerated groans. “Are you, brats?”

Closing the gate behind their group, Zabuza laughs. “I can say with certainty you’re not,” he says, clearly amused, and takes a few faux-casual steps forward. “But if you want help pinning them down —”

Yugito squeaks and twists harder, apparently not a fan of this idea. As she staggers to her feet, she gives Zabuza a look that borders on actual evil, says to Kurama, “The geezer’s probably trying to yell for you, Kurama-nii. You should come rescue him again,” and stalks back around the side of the house.

Kurama rolls his eyes, accepting the hand Zabuza offers and letting the swordsman tug him to his feet. He sidesteps Zabuza’s cheerful grope of his ass, sweeps the other man’s feet out from under him, and scoops up the two six-year-olds as Zabuza yelps and goes down. “You know, anyone else would think you were joking,” he calls after Yugito as the green-haired girl scrambles onto his back.
“Matatabi says you should know better by now,” the blonde calls back, and Kakashi can hear something like muffled swearing under the words.

“Yeah, yeah.” Kurama hitches Gaara up, boosts Naruto over his shoulder again, and follows, muttering about cats under his breath.

“…Well,” Shisui says at length, sliding up to stand at Kakashi’s elbow. “I think we can strike off ‘manipulating them to earn their loyalty’ from the list of Kurama’s misdeeds. I wouldn’t even let Sasuke climb all over me like that.”

“Sasuke would be more likely to go for a groin-shot,” Itachi reminds him pointedly. “And you would be more likely to pull his hair.” His eyes are…softer, though, somehow. Touched with something Kakashi can’t quite place. He wonders if this spark has anything to do with Itachi’s desire to leave ANBU, but doesn’t ask.

“Sasuke’s a brat,” Shisui complains, and Kakashi can’t believe he doesn’t choke on the hypocrisy of that statement.

Apparently, neither can Tenzō, because he coughs pointedly. When Shisui glares at him, he just gives a creepy, bland smile in return, and says, “What was that, Shisui? I couldn’t hear you over the sound of your childishness.”

Shisui sticks his tongue out at him and flips him off, and Tenzō beams back, giving him ghoul-eyes that send a shiver down even Kakashi’s spine.

It is, Kakashi thinks, a rather neat summary of the entirety of their interactions.

“Children. Don’t make the captain send you to your rooms,” the elven-year-old in the group says mildly, and Kakashi kind of wants to put his face in his hands. His team, why.

Zabuza, of course, laughs at them as he pushes to his feet. “You siblings, or are you just fucking?” he asks, and snickers at the twin horrified looks that suddenly snap in his direction. “Hey, hey, I’m not judging. Some people get off on that. Like Mei and—”

“If you finish that sentence, I will tell Ameyuri that you implied kunoichi are naturally weaker. Or Mei,” Yagura says from behind them, as mild as a summer sky, and Zabuza instantly snaps his mouth shut. It makes Kakashi think of Anko’s reaction to that statement, and he winces. If Mei or Ameyuri’s reaction is anything similar, he understands completely.

“Don’t say shit like that,” Zabuza growls, picking up his sword and slinging it over his shoulder again. “Terumī could be—”

Yagura rolls his eyes. “If she hasn’t left,” he says dismissively, “she’s probably wherever Rōshi is, throwing herself at the poor man.”

“I am not!” The main door flies open, and an auburn-haired woman in a blue dress stalks down the steps. “Keep your slander to yourself, shrimp. And Ao is here, if you can tear yourself away from your new hero long enough to meet with him.”

“I’m not hero-worshipping Kurama, you harpy!” Yagura retorts, eyes narrowing.

Mei looks like he just handed her a gift. “I never mentioned Kurama, did I?” she asks gleefully. “Funny that your mind should jump right to him, Yagura.”
“I hope you get left at the altar,” Yagura hisses, “and die all alone with ten cats.”

The kunoichi screeches in fury, lunging like she’s going to strangle him, and Kakashi rapidly decides it’s time to relocate. He ducks flailing limbs and double-times it after Kurama. Zabuza, who apparently has the same idea, keeps pace.

“Fucking swear I miss him being brainwashed,” the swordsman mutters, casting a wary eye behind them. “I could handle Terumī being sad and resigned about killing her best friend. This shit is what’s terrible.”

Kakashi can’t say he disagrees. Though, now that he thinks about it—and he would kindly like his brain to stop, actually—there are definitely parallels between Mei and Yagura’s interactions and Tenzō and Shisui’s, no matter how much he wishes he could un-see them. Still, friendship. They’re good friends. He doesn’t care unless they get in an actual fight and seriously disrupt the team.

Kakashi’s head may be firmly in the sand, but that’s okay. He likes it there.

Just around the corner, the muffled swearing Kakashi’s been hearing resolves itself into less-muffled swearing, coming from a white-wrapped bundle that’s roughly the size and shape of the Toad Sage. Kurama is beside the wriggling prisoner, crouched down with the four kids around him and a dark-haired teenager next to him, and he looks amused. Kakashi doesn’t really want to know, but he drifts in that direction anyway, because the only other option is the porch.

Han and Rōshi are sitting on the porch. And they’re watching him. Like hawks.

“—going to do, string him up somewhere?” Kurama is asking when he gets close enough to hear, and where Kakashi has heard most parental figures in this kind of situation sound aggrieved or annoyed, Kurama sounds faintly proud and very much like he’s swallowing laughter. “Zabuza’s not going to approve. Doesn’t fit his décor.”

“You mean Haku won't approve,” Yugito corrects, and there's a stubborn tilt to her chin.

“Do we have to let him go?” the green-haired girl—Taki’s jinchuuriki, Kakashi is sure, and he remembers the bite marks on the dead jounin they found with a healthy amount of respect for her scrappiness—chimes in. “He hurt Yugito!”

“And he tried to apologize for it.” Yugito says it like it’s the worst thing that could happen in the aftermath.

“Kitten, sweetheart, he probably thought it was the right thing—”

“I’m a kunoichi!” the blonde girl snaps, and then looks horrified that she did. She ducks her head, hands fisting at her sides, and adds in a much quieter tone, “Kurama-nii, I’m a kunoichi, and I almost lost a fair fight between us. I don’t want him to say sorry for that. But he keeps trying and he won't stop.”

With a faint sigh, Kurama hooks an arm around Yugito’s shoulders and pulls her into a hug. “I know, kitten,” he says, warm and faintly amused. “Have you tried telling him that?”

Yugito rolls her eyes at him, but shakes her head and steps back, and Kurama lets her go. She looks at the Taki girl, who is apparently her partner in crime in this matter, and gets a carefree smile that has an edge of teeth to it as an answer.

“Fine,” she allows. “We’ll let him out. Gaara-chan, can you stop coating the wraps with your sand?”
The little redheaded boy, still clinging to Kurama's shirt, nods seriously and turns his attention on the wriggling bundle. Almost-invisible particles slide off, pooling on the ground, and all at once the cloth tears. Jiraiya rips his way through the bindings with murder in his expression, but when his gaze settles on Kurama he pulls up short.

“Your little brats”—he starts.

Kurama ignores him completely. “Your control’s gotten a lot better,” he tells Gaara. “Good job.”

Gaara buries his face in Kurama's side, hiding his pleased flush, and mumbles something that might be a thank you. Kurama just chuckles and ruffles his hair, then looks at Naruto, who’s crouching next to him. “You helped too?” he asks.

“Yep!” Naruto says cheerfully. “Yugito-ne said I could be the distraction, so I made a big bunch of chains and made the geezer think they were gonna grab him, but then Fū hit him with her sparkly stuff and Yugito-ne wrapped him up! We’re the best team ever!”

“You definitely are,” Kurama agrees, tweaking his nose, but—

Kakashi can hardly hear him over the sound of his heartbeat.

Chakra chains? Like Kushina's Adamantine Chains? He’d known they were an Uzumaki Clan secret, and only possible for those with the largest reserves of chakra, but…he hadn’t quite made the connection, he supposes. Hadn’t looked at Kurama and thought Uzumaki and had it mean all the things he should. But now, standing with Naruto, knowing that jutsu well enough to teach it—

Kakashi looks at Kurama and for the first time, he really sees Kushina's brother. It’s there in his face, the curve of his cheek, the shape of his eyes, the angle of his grin. Naruto shares it too, now that he can compare them side by side. Here and now, he can say with absolute certainty that there's no way that they're unrelated.

Oh, he thinks, and doesn’t quite know where to go from there.

“Kurama!” Yagura calls, and the redhead glances up. Kakashi looks back towards the porch, where the Mizukage has joined Rōshi and Han, and—

“You!” the blue-haired man with an eyepatch cries, pointing at Shisui. “You!”

Kakashi raises a brow at his subordinate. Shisui looks absolutely blank for about seven seconds, and then his eyes widen. “The old guy! With the Byakugan!”

“I'm not old!” the jounin barks. “What do you think you're doing in Kiri? If you're going to control our Mizukage again—!”


Pulling himself up, he turns and bows to the Yondaime. “My apologies, Mizukage-sama, but the last time I encountered him he laid a genjutsu on two of my team and would have killed us if we didn’t retreat. And knowing what we do about the man who controlled you, having an Uchiha here—”

Kakashi's brain jumps from that to the Hokage's mention in his letter of Yagura being freed from a genjutsu, and from there to his request that the Uchiha keep their Sharingan deactivated. And—

It makes a horrifying amount of sense, given what the Sharingan is supposed to be able to do to bijuu. But it also doesn’t, because the last time an Uchiha was declared a missing-nin was Madara.
“Ao, that’s enough,” Yagura says evenly. “Close your mouth. Kurama, can we discuss your plans for a moment?”

Kurama looks at the kids gathered around him and sighs. “Sure,” he calls back, then pushes to his feet. Gaara lets go of him with clear reluctance, immediately moving back to Naruto’s side, and the Taki girl pouts a little.

“I thought you were going to play with us,” she protests, though it’s halfhearted at best.

“In a few minutes,” Kurama promises. “Just need to hash out a few details. Kakashi, you’ll probably want to listen in. Your team, too.”

Kakashi can’t help but wonder how much of that is true, and how much is to keep them away from Naruto and safely under Kurama’s eye. He’s not going to protest, though, because Jiraiya is nodding and pulling himself to his feet.

“About time you got here,” the Toad Sage says. “I’ve been keeping these brats entertained for an hour now, and we’ve got more important things to deal with.”

“These brats have kicked your ass twice now,” Kurama retorts. He waits for Kakashi and his team to follow Jiraiya towards the house before bringing up the rear. “You’re just afraid they’ll bruise your ego to the point it can’t recover.”

“My ego can recover from anything,” Jiraiya says with pride. “Speaking of which, that lovely redhead…”

“Is going to learn you’re the one who’s been spying on the bathhouses if you make so much as a pass at her. I hear she reacts like Tsunade,” Kurama finishes for him, baring his teeth in what might be a grin. Then he pauses, glancing back at the silent teenager still standing with the other children.

The boy just smiles. “Go ahead,” he urges. “Saiken and I have agreed that it’s best we stay here with the younger jinchuuriki while you go after Akatsuki. I may as well stay with them now, too.”

“The fact that Saiken is sensible is a gift from the Sage,” Kurama says dryly. “You definitely got lucky there, Utakata.”

There’s a pause as the boy’s eyes lose focus, and then he smiles and answers, “Saiken says you’re his favorite, so he’s happy to help.”

“Well, he’s my favorite, too.” Kurama waves a hand as he turns back, narrowing his eyes faintly when he catches Kakashi watching. Kakashi promptly offers up his best bullshit smile and waves cheerfully.

“Coming, Kurama?” he asks brightly.

The redhead rolls his eyes, but as he makes to pass Kakashi, his steps falter. He takes a breath, looks away, and then says gruffly, “You overreacted. So did I. I just—couldn’t let you take him from me.”

Then, as if that’s all the emotionality he can stand for the day, he books it towards the porch. Kakashi stares after him, caught completely off-guard, and tries to reconcile the bitter, angry man he first met, always on a hair-trigger and grieving so clearly that it leached into everything he did, with this man, who apologizes sincerely and laughs with the kids he’s picked up and is able to make jokes that aren’t barbed on both sides.

Oh, he thinks again, but can’t manage anything else. Because the Kurama he met on his mission was
a broken, shattered thing, shards just barely held together by willpower and stubbornness. To see him come so far in a few short weeks, to see him healed, and not just superficially—

It’s not that it means anything, really, because Kakashi is fine, and he’s told everyone who has ever asked exactly that. But it’s interesting, intellectually, to see someone who’s lost everything build something new in its place.

Kakashi takes a breath, wishes he hadn’t buried his Icha Icha at the bottom of his weapons pouch, or that he could somehow get to his ANBU mask, and follows Kurama inside.

This road trip isn’t turning out quite the way Bee expected.

With a roar of pure fury, the woman who was previously after him, but now only seems to want to help, throws herself at the blue-haired woman who has him wrapped up in paper that won't tear. The blue-haired woman dodges, ducks the massive black dog that comes flying in from the other side, and retreats in a hurry from a swarm of rattling insects that land on Bee’s paper cocoon and start draining the chakra from it.

“Got it, Shibi?” the Konoha kunoichi shouts, grinning like this is the most fun she’s ever had.

“Affirmative,” the hooded shinobi off to the side says. He doesn’t go after his partner as she launches herself into the surrounding forest, following the other kunoichi. Instead, he turns his attention to Bee, calling his insects back into the gourd on his back and reaching out to rip off the first layer of paper. From deeper into the woods, there’s a dog’s deep snarl, a woman’s angry shout, and the heavy thunder of a tree falling. Shibi glances that way, but still doesn’t move.

“Thanks for the save, man,” Bee manages as soon as his mouth is uncovered. “Not cool to be caught when you're on the lam.”

The other shinobi is unmoved by the brilliance of his rap. “The Hokage and Raikage sent my team to retrieve you. It would be best if you returned to Konoha with us immediately.”

“No can do!” Bee protests. “Got a jinchuuriki reunion to get to, yahoo!”

“There is an organization of S-rank missing-nin after you,” another man, sliding out of the shadows. He has one arm clutched to his chest, clearly broken, and is walking with a limp. The hooded shinobi immediately abandons Bee, hurrying over to loop an arm around the long-haired man’s waist. The newcomer accepts it gratefully, leaning heavily on his partner, and asks, “Tsume?”

In the distance, another tree falls with a booming crash, and the hooded man says dryly, “Guess.”

The other shinobi snorts and looks up at Bee. His eyes are eerily pale, almost colorless, and Bee realizes with a start that he’s a Hyuuga. “You will come back with us,” the Hyuuga says, flat and certain. “I may hate your brother with every fiber of my being, but I won't fail a mission appointed by the Hokage himself.”

“You don’t gotta hate A, he might talk tough but he’s a sunshiney ray,” Bee tries, and yes, it’s a slight exaggeration, but that’s what artistic license is for.

The hooded shinobi winces, and the Hyuuga’s mouth thins into an angry line. “He is responsible for the death of my twin,” he snaps. “He had my daughter kidnapped and my brother killed, all for our
eyes. I have every right to hate him. Shibi, we need to move. Eagle’s squad is down to two members.”

Of all the Hyuuga to send after him…Bee silently curses his brother’s luck—because it’s certainly not his—and reaches for his own partner. Gyūki answers readily, feeding him chakra until it falls over him like a shroud, and he twists his body, loosening up. “You go deal with the paper chick, me an’ Gyūki have six other asses to kick.”

The Hyuuga snarls something that really doesn’t suit a Clan Head, or at least not the ones Bee has met, but when he takes a step towards Bee the other Konoha shinobi pulls him back. “We can't run, Hiashi,” Shibi says firmly. “They will chase us, and we will lose what advantage we have.”

Hiashi takes a breath, closes his eyes, and then opens them again. “They all have exactly the same chakra signature,” he tells Bee. “I assume there's some way for them to share line of sight, given the way they move. Be careful. They killed three ANBU in a handful of minutes, and they seem entirely prepared to face a jinchuuriki.”

“Thanks to you, we got it now,” Bee says, offering him a salute. “We’ll beat ’em up and take a bow.”

The Hyuuga nods, grits his teeth, and pulls himself upright. “We’ll come for you as soon as Tsume’s opponent is dealt with. Hold them off until then.” Without waiting for an answer, he steps away from Shibi, still limping faintly, and hurries into the trees. Shibi gives Bee one last nod before he follows swiftly.

There’s movement in the darkness behind him, and Bee turns sharply to face the man standing beside the wide trunk. Orange hair, heavy piercings, ringed purple eyes—it’s the man who first attacked him out of nowhere.

“Got a name other than ‘fool'? Attacking Bee-sama’s just not cool!” Bee says accusingly.

The man doesn’t move beyond a faint tip of his head. “I'm going to create a new world,” he says, and his gaze doesn’t waver from Bee’s. “And for that, I need you. Or rather, the tailed beast inside of you.”

One man here means the other five have to be close by. Bee hopes they didn’t go after the Konoha team, but judging by the fact that the attacker is here and the ANBU team is nowhere to be found, the odds of them leaving bystanders alive isn’t good. And, given the way Yugito’s teachers were killed, almost like an afterthought… “You're the ones that attacked little Yugito,” Bee realizes. “That’s just not cool, yo.”

The man remains unmoved. “The Nibi escaped me, but it doesn’t matter. I’ll be taking you.”

There's a click, a hiss, and Bee spins just in time to see three rockets come flying from the trees, headed straight for him. He ducks to the side, leaps back and away, and they strike the ground where he was standing, exploding with a thunderous boom and filling the air with smoke and rubble. Bee lands further back, bracing himself, and feeds even more of Gyūki’s chakra into the cloak. He’s completely confident in his own powers, but six against one isn’t exactly good odds, even for a jinchuuriki.

The smoke whirls, shifts, and parts. The five strange shinobi step through, perfectly in sync, and Bee remembers Hiashi’s warning about shared sight. He steps back, then sets his feet and holds his ground. The pale, transparent chakra surrounding him bleeds red-black, covering him completely, and the first man—he smiles.
“Ah,” he says, and walks forward, taking his place with the other five. “Now that’s the power we seek.” A tip of his head, a flick of his hand, and he orders, “Go.”

They move as one, swift and eerily silent, and Bee only has time to bring up his fists before the first one is closing in.
“Damn,” Tsume says breathlessly, slumped over against Kuromaru. The nin-dog is breathing heavily, sides heaving, and Tsume presses a hand against her own ribs, wincing a little at the thick tackiness of blood. Her uniform is in tatters from the origami weapons the other kunoichi used, but at least she’s standing, if only mostly under her own power.

The same can’t be said for Hiashi, unfortunately. Between the broken arm and the ankle that’s probably fractured, he’s on the ground, looking grim even as he struggles to rise. Shibi isn’t in any hurry to help him, busy trussing up their opponent with as much ninja wire as the three of them have on them. Judging by the reproving looks he’s shooting both her and Hiashi, he doesn’t approve of them still being even close to on their feet.

Not that they have a choice, Tsume knows. The sound of the fight off to the left is still loud and frantic, a constant reminder that their mission isn’t even approaching finished yet.

Another choked sound of pain escapes her idiot teammate, and Tsume’s temper snaps. “Damn it, Hyuuga! Sit the hell down, fix your fucking ankle if you haven’t forgotten every bit of medical ninjutsu you used to know, and then try being a stubborn bastard!”

Hiashi glares at her, face unnaturally pale with pain, but sinks back down to the ground. “We’re running out of time,” he gets out through clenched teeth.

“Yeah, well, we’ll have more of it if you can actually stand,” Tsume fires back, then knots her fingers in Kuromaru’s thick fur and pushes herself upright. She watches narrowly as Hiashi mutters something unpleasant under his breath, but slides a green-glowing hand over his arm, and nods in satisfaction as the visible lines of pain in his face start to ease. The idiot might feel as if he’s wasting chakra better spent on his Byakugan, but he’s good enough at taijutsu even after years of lazing around as Clan Head that he’s more useful moving.

She takes a step, testing, and is pleased when it doesn’t wobble. First step in getting back into the fight is to actually get to the fight, and she’s got a decent chance now. “Shibi? Can we leave her?”

Not that they really have a choice. The three of them are too battered to drag the enemy kunoichi along right now, so they’ll have to head out either way.

“.GREEN answer succinctly, one of the things she loves him for. “Between her closed tenketsu points, blood loss, and the kikaichü currently feeding off her, she will not get far even if she wakes.”

Tsume’s missed working as a team the last few years. She grins, fierce and wild, and knows her teeth are red with blood but also that these two men, of all those in the village, will never care. “Good. Stay with Hiashi in case there are more of them where she came from. I’ll go after the jinchuuriki.”

“Don’t be foolish!” Hiashi snaps, looking like he wants to jump to his feet and grab her. “Take Shibi with you, I’ll be fine. I can see—”

“Not if you’re concentrating on something else,” Tsume cuts in sharply. “I’m the distraction, you’re the main attack, so get back on your damn feet and focus on figuring out how to take those six bastards down!” Tactics aren’t her strong suit, but Hiashi lives and breathes subtlety, and no one but
a Nara can beat Shibi when it comes to strategy. Between the two of them, they won't let her get killed, and someone has to stall the rest of the attackers long enough to come up with something. “I've got Kuromaru. We'll make do until you're back on your feet. So stop arguing and start planning!”

“Very well,” Shibi says shortly, stepping away from the captured kunoichi and crouching at Hiashi’s side. He looks at the other man for a moment, and even with his eyes and most of his face hidden, Hiashi apparently understands his intention. There’s a brief pause before the Hyuuga inclines his head, and a moment later his Byakugan activates.

Tsume opens her mouth to protest—because if he’s watching his surroundings instead of his already crappy healing, he’s definitely not going to be walking any time soon—and Hiashi cuts her off with a sharp sound. “Go, Tsume. I’ll watch for any patterns in their movements. This is not negotiable.”

That tone says it really, really isn’t. “Look at you, re-growing that spine. Thought those harpy elders of yours stole it,” Tsume says, viciously amused, and laughs when he glares at her. It’s been a hell of a long time since she saw him in his jounin uniform instead of his fancy robes, and longer since she saw that spark of life and fury in his eyes. Not since Hizashi died, she thinks, and even if they lose this fight she’ll be grateful for that at least.

Lifting a hand in absent farewell, she lets go of Kuromaru, dares her legs to buckle and her head to spin, and when she manages to stay on her feet decides that’s good enough. She takes off running, a touch of chakra letting her keep pace with Kuromaru as he bounds ahead, and they both aim for the ruckus that says Killer Bee’s still fighting.

A single leap out of the trees and into the battleground leaves them in the midst of utter chaos.

A towering gate like a face with teeth stands off to one side, guarded by a big man. Another, made of metal and undaunted by the partially transformed jinchuuriki in the center of the ring, fires a barrage of rockets, then spins out of the way of a stabbing tentacle. In his place, the man who spoke when the group first appears steps in, and the octopus-like tentacle crashes heavily to the ground. At the same moment, the only woman snaps out a summoning, and a massive lizard rises behind her, then disappears. Camouflage, Tsume realizes, because she can still smell the thing. But the jinchuuriki clearly can’t, because he doesn’t seem to notice it sliding around behind him.

That’s enough of an opening, Tsume decides. She jerks a pair of kunai with flashbang tags from her weapons pouch and hurls herself forward, Kuromaru perfectly in step. With a roar, she hurls them, and the detonation shakes the battlefield. Light bursts, painfully searing, but Tsume keeps her eyes shut tight. She hasn’t needed her eyes to fight in years, not when her nose and ears are more than good enough.

In an instant she has the location of the man with the rockets, still blinded by the flash. A high leap, a surge of chakra in her own body and mirrored in the familiar form beside her, and Tsume launches into the Fang Passing Fang technique. She and Kuromaru slam into the redheaded man, tearing through metal and flesh before they leap away again to land off to the side. A twist, a flip over the lunge of the lone woman, and she lands on all fours, then spins and jumps. Kuromaru catches her, just as he always does, and she uses his wide back as a springboard to hurl herself headlong at the first man as the light fades.

She almost makes it. The tag goes dark, and Tsume opens her eyes to find the man with the Ame hitai-ate braced in front of her, hand outstretched.

It feels like falling off a mountain and landing flat on her back, like gravity has suddenly doubled or condensed. Tsume cries out as she slams into the ground, hard enough to knock every bit of air from
her lungs as her voice cuts off with a hollow gasp. Her fingers claw at the dirt, trying to get enough leverage for her to rise, but she can't. The pressure is too much, too steady—

With a snarl like a furious bear, Kuromaru leaps for the bastard’s throat. The redhead dodges as if he’s got eyes in the back of his head, but the weight on Tsume’s chest vanishes. She doesn’t give them time to recover, but immediately rolls to all fours and launches herself at one of the other men. He dodges as well, slips out of the path of her attack and the three kunai she hurls when he turns his back, and a moment later jumps away from the lash of a tentacle.

“All these clowns got shared line of sight—throw another tag, an’ make it bright!” the jinchuuriki shouts, blocking what looks like a reflected jutsu with one power-cloaked arm.

Well, that’s simple enough to understand. Shared line of sight won’t do much good if they can’t see at all. With a vicious grin, Tsume grabs for another flash bomb, then shouts, “Kuromaru!”

Her partner leaps back from where he’s harrying the Ame shinobi at the same moment as the tag leaves her hand. There’s a brush of fur, a rush of movement as one of the enemy lunges, but the burst of brilliance covers it. Tsume throws herself sideways, then forward, and under the cover of the light hears a familiar hum. She laughs even as she twists into another Fang Passing Fang, feeling Kuromaru mirror her, and this time she aims for the long-haired redhead who’s held himself back. He’s next to the corpse of the first one she killed, about to pick his fallen teammate up, but Tsume hits him before he can. There’s no scream, even though she feels flesh tear beneath the force of the blow, blood splattering her clothes, and—

Something strikes her hard, that condensed gravity slamming her back into the trunk of a tree and then right through it, and she hits the ground so hard that blackness swims behind her eyes. Killer Bee shouts, but she doesn’t bother trying to make the words out, too busy trying to relearn how to breathe.

A shadow falls over her, and a deep, cold voice says, “Interference will not be tolerated.”

“Fuck you, asshole,” Tsume growls, glaring up at him as she tries to pull herself to her knees. Kuromaru is doing the same, but his foreleg keeps buckling under him, and Tsume doesn’t feel all that hot herself.

“Those will be your last words,” the man says, infuriatingly emotionless, and raises his hand. Tsume braces herself as best she can for another crushing wave, and—

A swarm of inky black drops over the Ame shinobi like a thick, moving veil. He tries to leap back, to move, but his movements have suddenly become slow, jerking. A hand finds Tsume’s elbow and hauls her to her feet, and she does her best not to simply collapse on Shibi’s shoulder.

“Could fucking kiss you, Shibi,” she manages, dizzy with relief.

Shibi flushes faintly under the cover of his hood, the way he always does, and she can’t help but laugh as two more of the redheaded attackers go flying, swept off their feet by Bee. “There’s a summons in the trees!” she shouts to him. “Watch your back!”

“Forty-five degrees to your left,” Hiashi warns, getting an arm under Kuromaru’s broad barrel and hauling the nin-dog to his feet as well. Tsume would coo—because look at that, the pretty jerk really does care, stick up his ass and all—but she’s too busy trying to catch her breath. “It’s reaching for you, move!”

Something shimmers, jerks, lists. The chameleon wavers into view, large black shapes attached to its
curled body that are rapidly growing. Tsume hasn’t seen Shibi use his kidaichū since the Third War, had even thought he didn’t host them anymore given the dangers, but she’s never been so glad to see a handful of bugs in her life.

“Plan?” she demands, trying to take a step away from her human crutch. It’s a futile effort, because her knees immediately buckle, and her vision swims so suddenly that she almost crashes to the ground again. Hiashi catches her on one side, Shibi on the other, and they haul her back up to mostly upright, but unless either one of them is hiding an entire case of soldier pills, she’s not going anywhere anytime soon.

“We’re working on it,” Hiashi snaps. “Had we not had to come rescue you from your own recklessness—”

The mouth-like door that’s been standing forgotten gapes open, and the woman hurls the bodies of her two fallen teammates in. “Fuck,” Tsume says, because she doesn’t need Hiashi’s eyes to see that that’s a bad thing. Before she can make it so much as a step, though, Hiashi and Shibi haul her back, leaping out of the way of a burst of smoke and chakra. A massive dog with multiple heads snarls, snapping its teeth after them, only to crash into a wall of stone Hiashi calls up with a shout.

The fact that he’s resorting to elemental techniques instead of his much-vaunted and ever-fussy Gentle Fist style tells Tsume just how screwed they really are.

“Shibi, we could really use a few more of those kidaichū right about now,” she snaps as the summons growls, shaking chips of stone out of its fur, and advances on them again.

“We’re lucky I had those four,” Shibi says bluntly. “Had I not been tending to them when the Hokage called, I wouldn’t have been carrying any.”

It’s Hiashi who curses at that, not her, though Tsume would definitely like to. She hears a creak of metal, smells a rush of smoke, and jerks her head around in time to see the mouth-gate gape open again. The two formerly dead shinobi step out of it, perfectly unharmed, and she snarls, “Oh, that’s just not fucking fair!”

Hiashi doesn’t look thrilled, either. “Some sort of resurrection technique? Splendid. And odds are they’ll defend that gate at all costs.”

Shibi hurls himself sideways, bowling both of them right off their feet, and directs their graceless tumble behind a large tree as a massive bird with a drill-like beak crashes down where they were just a moment ago. It stabs at them, ready to swallow them whole, but even as the beak descends Hiashi leaps to his feet and whirls out in front of them, his Eight Trigrams Revolving Heaven sending the creature crashing to the side.

A deep bellow of pain snaps Tsume’s attention back to the jinchuuriki they’re supposed to be retrieving, and she staggers to her feet, even though she has to lean heavily on the tree to get there. “They’re distracting us!” she spits. “Hiashi, Shibi, I’ll—”

“Because you playing distraction worked so well before,” Hiashi scoffs, but the lines of his face are deep with worry. “If we can’t get to the main battlefield because of these summons, they’ll be free to concentrate their attacks on Killer Bee.”

“Eagle’s squad is dead,” Shibi says quietly. “And the Raikage’s guards. Retreat?”

It sticks in Tsume’s craw, even just the thought of surrendering like that. “No,” she says fiercely, and Kuromaru growls his agreement, staggering over to brace himself against her hip. She wavers for a
moment, then steadies, and glances down at her partner. He stares back, single eye equally

determined, and Tsume feels her lips pull back from her teeth in an expression that’s equal parts snarl

and grin. “Fuck no. Konoha shinobi don’t run. Not while there’s still a chance of winning.”

Shibi and Hiashi trade brief glances, and then Shibi nods. Hiashi inclines his head, calls up another

Doton jutsu to intercept the bird summons’s next strike, and orders, “Go! We’ll cover you.”

Tsume laughs, swinging a leg over Kuromaru’s back and pulling herself astride the massive nin-dog.

“Let’s go make friends, boy!” she cheers, grabbing another handful of flash bombs. She tosses them
to Shibi even as his kikaichū rise to surround him, and orders, “Show ’em who they should really be

afraid of, bug boy!”

Shibi flushes again, and she can tell he’s rolling his eyes behind his sunglasses, but he simply nods.

Tsume claps him on the shoulder, bites down on the handle of a kunai, and fans three more out in
each hand. A heel against his flank has Kuromaru spinning, and he snarls as he bolts straight for the
dog summons. There’s a heavy limp in each stride, and it would be enough to throw off Tsume’s aim
even if her vision wasn’t wavering, but this target is too big to miss. She bellows a war cry and hurls
her kunai with all the force she can muster, then flashes through hand seals and sends a wave of fire
after the blades. It’s wide-spread and weak, not enough to do more than set the leaves to smoking,
but it still makes the summons jerk back to protect its eyes.

With a shout, Tsume grabs Kuromaru’s ruff, and the nin-dog leaps through the vanishing wall of

flame, skidding sideways under the swipe of massive jaws. Behind them, Shibi bolts for the main
battle, faster than she’s seen him move in a long time, and Tsume launches an exploding tag at the
summons before it can notice or move to intercept. The explosion makes it stagger, even though it
doesn’t fall, and Tsume growls in aggravation as Kuromaru spins around for another pass. She
wishes, just for a moment, that she had a pack like Hana to harry the monster and distract it, but she
shuts the thought away as soon as it occurs. If wishes were kunai, she wouldn’t even need to visit the
weapons store.

Humans are at a disadvantage against summons, unless they’ve got summons of their own, and those
kinds of contracts don’t exactly grow on trees. They’re a legacy, and one the Inuzuka have always
turned up their noses at. They’ve already got their nin-dog partners, after all; what do they need with
any others?

Tsume’s kind of starting to regret that attitude now.

She tries another jutsu, Katon again, as Kuromaru swerves under the beast’s belly. It tries to grab
them, and Tsume slams the wall of fire directly into its face. It lurches, and Tsume leaps hard,
channeling just about the last of her energy into one more Fang Passing Fang as Kuromaru does the
same. They blow the damned thing right off its oversized paws, send it crashing back into the trees to
topple them, and—

A chakra signature goes out.

“No!” Tsume snarls, whirling, and nearly collapses herself. Kuromaru catches her just in time, shaky
but standing, and she uses him to brace herself as she claws upright again. “No, no, no, you fucking

assholes”—

The massive snake-tailed chameleon, re-summoned and now entirely untouched by Shibi’s
technique, rises above the trees, barbed tongue wrapped tightly around the limp form of the
Raikage’s brother, his body pierced through with black chakra rods. His bijuu form has vanished,
and his face is slack, eyes closed. Tsume can’t even tell if he’s breathing.
“We have what we came for,” the redhead with the hitai-ate says, still utterly emotionless. It’s like he’s dead, Tsume thinks viciously, even as her strength gives out and she collapses to her knees. The wound in her side is bleeding less heavily than before, but she’s been a shinobi long enough to know that’s not a good sign. She’s lost too much blood, and her chakra reserves are already almost gone. *Shouldn’t have gone all-out against the paper bitch,* she thinks, head swimming, and her fist clenches in Kuromaru’s fur.

She didn’t have a choice. The woman would have killed her if she hadn’t.

Behind them, the dog summons vanishes in a whirl of smoke, and she hears hurried footsteps. Hiashi grabs her, hauling her up onto his back and locking an arm beneath her thighs. She traps a cry behind gritted teeth as pain lances through her, but a moment later Shibi is beside them, ashen-faced and staggering a little. They leap together, Kuromaru right behind them, and the trees blur before Tsume’s eyes. She grimaces, but slaps at her weapons pouch, pulling out her last handful of flash bombs.

“On three,” she says grimly.

“One,” Hiashi murmurs immediately, casting a glance over his shoulder.

“Two,” Shibi adds, and urges them left.

“Three!” Tsume snarls, and throws them with all the force she can muster. The bombs scatter in a wide arc, and detonate like a supernova. At the same moment, Hiashi changes direction, redoubling their pace, and leaps for the trees. A hurried Doton jutsu swallows their footsteps as they take to the branches, Kuromaru outpacing them from below. Tsume would worry, but he knows how not to leave a trail. And besides, there’s darkness eating away at the edges of her vision, swallowing her sight, and pain like acid burning up her side.

“Hiashi,” she manages, pressing her forehead to his shoulder.

He lets out a low, harsh breath. “Another mile, Tsume,” he promises. “You're too pigheaded to give up before then.”

She laughs, even though it hurts. “Of course I am. *Fuck.* Why am I always the one who ends up bleeding?”

“You are a frontline fighter, while the majority of the time we are support,” Shibi says, as literal and practical as ever. “If you did not enjoy playing distraction quite so much…”

“Can't let you two have all the fun,” Tsume chuckles, then winces and presses a hand to her side. “Oh, ow, ow, ow.”

“Learn to dodge,” Hiashi says, and Tsume knows it’s supposed to sound unsympathetic, but he just manages worried.

“Mmph.” Tsume waves her blood-coated hand at him. “I *did.* She was aiming for my kidneys.”

“Learn to dodge *better.*”

“Oh, fuck you, pretty boy, at least I can take a hit!”

“It’s no wonder you ran you lover off, with a temper like yours—ow! Tsume, stop moving, you're *injured.*”
The flare of pain from kneeing him in the ribs is *totally* worth it.

Kurama is just opening his mouth to call Jiraiya an utter idiot for even thinking that subtlety will get them into the Akatsuki base when something inside of him lurches. He staggers, grabbing onto the edge of the table, and has less than a second to brace himself before there's a sensation like a vast hand grabbing his chakra. He's *dragged* down into darkness, deep and drowning-thick, and for one terrible moment all he can think of is the Sharingan, control, the theft of everything that is him—

The fall slows, eases. Light sparks far below, and Kurama drifts down towards it, blind panic easing as he realizes that he recognizes this scene. A fire with trees around it, a clearing in a vast wood where he first came to be, and he lands lightly off to the side, crouching on the soft, bare earth for a moment to get his bearings. There's only one other presence here, incredibly familiar, and he straightens slowly, eyes on his younger brother.

“Gyūki,” he says evenly, crossing his arms over his chest. “That was a hell of a greeting. What the fuck do you want?”

The ushi-oni chuckles tiredly. “It really is you,” he says, something like amazement in his voice as he drags himself closer, looking down at Kurama with interested eyes. “I kept thinking I was making a mistake, but—you're in a human body. How did you manage that?”

Kurama bares his teeth at Gyūki, because the words still spark a twinge in his chest. “Not entirely by choice. Gyūki, *what do you want*?”

“No greetings for a sibling you haven’t seen in centuries?” Gyūki asks, but his eyes are serious. He hesitates for a moment, and then says, “I need your help.”

Fuck. Kurama has a bad feeling about this.

“If you want me to get you out of that idiot Kumo stuffed you into—” he starts, somewhere between aggressive and wary, because if this is about what he thinks it is, things have just headed downhill like an avalanche, and getting them back under control will be practically impossible.

Gyūki growls low in his throat. “Bee is my jinchuuriki,” he warns. “Watch your mouth, Kurama.” Another hesitation, and then he sighs, inclining his head. “But yes, this is about Bee.”

Bee is *supposed* to be safe in Kumo, but Kurama remembers all too well his penchant for running off on his own. Three guesses what happened, and the first two don’t count. “Akatsuki,” he growls, letting his arms fall to his sides and curling his hands into fists. His claws dig into his palms, but not enough for him to care. “Akatsuki grabbed him. *Fuck*.”

“You know about them.” Gyūki studies him for a moment. “Six redheads with purple eyes, each with a different ability.”

“The Six Paths of Pein,” Kurama confirms, and jerks around to pace a short strip between the fire and the trees. “Sage, he was supposed to stay in Kumo!”

“And you couldn’t *tell me this*?” Gyūki snaps. “He was coming to meet you and the others!”

Kurama can't think. There's too much, clouded with panic and edged with bitter fury. Akatsuki has Bee, which means that they're taking him somewhere to extract Gyūki. He’s the first bijuu they’ve...
managed to capture, so there's a possibility they need to take him back to the Gedō Mazō itself to extract and seal him. If that’s right…

There’s a chance to save him. A small one, maybe, but it’s still a chance. Naruto loved Bee like a brother last time. He’s one of Naruto’s precious people. There’s no way Kurama can let him die.

He spins on his heel, raking his hair out of his face, and demands, “Can you tell what's happening to him right now?”

Gyūki grumbles at his tone, but turns his head for a moment as if listening. After a beat, he says, “They have him contained with chakra rods, but they're moving, if slowly.”

Right, because Pein is Nagato, and Nagato is paralyzed, reliant on his walker. That’s another advantage they have, and if Kurama can just get to the Gedō Mazō in time, everything might work out.

“Tell me if anything changes. Tell me immediately,” he orders, then hurls himself out of their mental world and into the midst of chaos.

Everyone is shouting. Yagura, Rōshi, and Han all seem to be on the same side, standing in front of Kurama, who’s on his knees. On the other side of the table, Jiraiya is shouting right back, and Kakashi is standing off to the side, watching the confrontation with careful assessment. When Kurama shifts, his gaze snaps over and down, watching as Kurama shoves to his feet.

It’s easy to decide to leave the others to their bickering. Kurama turns on his heel and stalks towards his room, snatching up his bag and the one set of clothes he’d managed to unpack. He stuffs them back in, then spins, and almost runs into Kakashi standing in the doorway.

Kakashi takes one look at his face and says, “Something’s gone wrong.”

It’s not a question, so Kurama doesn’t bother answering. “Get your team,” he says succinctly. “Our timetable just got a hell of a lot tighter. Akatsuki’s moving.”
XXXVI: Absconditus

Chapter Notes

LIFE, MAN. Okay, chapter, sorry for the delay (of only a few hours, so personally I don’t think I’m doing so badly?), thank you for your patience if you had it. :)

ALSO: NO UPDATE NEXT TUESDAY. I have to travel for work again, and likely won't have time. Sorry!

[absconditus /əbˈskɑːndɪtəs/, hidden; entirely concealed from sight. From Latin, perfect passive participle of abscondō.]

“Please tell me there's at least some semblance of a plan,” Kakashi says, and his voice is mild, but Kurama can hear the tension underlying it.

He offers a sharp snort, not looking up from packing away the pile of rations and protein bars Zabuza is mounding on the table between them. “Sure. Get to Moon Country, attack the base to distract everyone inside, then slip in, find the Gedō Mazō, and break it so it can't be used or repaired.”

“I like it,” Zabuza offers with a cheerfully malicious grin. “Get in a hit for me, okay, Red?”

“Back to that?” Kurama asks sourly, accepting another canteen and giving the swordsman a narrow look. When Zabuza’s grin doesn’t falter, simply gains more teeth, he rolls his eyes and adds, “If we can make it before Pein gets back, we won't have to face his Paths, or Konan. The main ones to worry about will be Kisame, Orochimaru, and Tobi, but we should be able to manage.”

From where he’s standing braced in the doorway, arms folded over his chest, Jiraiya makes a quiet sound. “You mean Nagato?”

Kurama huffs. “He’s Pein right now, old man. If you don’t keep that in mind he’s going to crush your skull.” Again, he almost says, but stops himself just in time. That one little word will open up way too many questions he doesn’t have the time or energy for right now.

Rōshi doesn’t appear to be paying attention to the conversation, eyes on Kurama's task as he refills packs and quickly sets them aside. “You’ve got enough for all of us in there, right?” he asks, tone daring Kurama to answer with anything but a confirmation.

Fuck. This isn’t a fight Kurama wants to have right now, though it looks like he’s not going to get much of a choice. He ties the last flap closed, then straightens, and ignores the way Zabuza’s expression brightens at the prospect of a scuffle. Asshole. “You and Han aren’t coming. None of the jinchuuriki are.”

“You're going,” Han counters, and when Kurama turns to glare at him he raises his hands in surrender. “An observation.”

Kurama growls, low and warning. “You can take your observation and stick it up your—”
“Well! That got very hostile very fast,” Shisui says cheerfully, though his posture is deceptively easy and his dark eyes are flickering between the four jinchuuriki warily. “Personally, I kind of want the walking weapons of mass destruction with us if we’re going to be facing down seven S-rank missing nin? Just a thought. And no offense intended, I swear. Please don’t eat me.”

Tenzō rolls his eyes and mutters something that sounds suspiciously like, “Your mother always says your mouth is going to get you killed, idiot.”

Kakashi very clearly pretends not to hear either of them.

From where he’s leaning against the edge of the counter, Yagura snorts. “Kurama is right,” he says, and when Mei, standing at his elbow, opens her mouth to make a comment, he narrows his eyes at her and adds pointedly, “It’s logical. This Akatsuki has specialized in containing and extracting bijuu. The reason you’re going is to rescue a jinchuuriki. Kurama’s presence is required because he has the most knowledge of the members and their hideout, and he understands the mechanics behind the extraction process. The rest of us would be liabilities—if Akatsuki managed to detain us, we would become hostages at best, or more bodies in need of rescue.”

“Thank you,” Kurama says pointedly, though Rōshi looks like he’s about to break something—possibly Yagura’s head. “Look, I’m fucking overjoyed that you want to stick your necks out for Bee, but this is not the time. They’ve already got Gyūki—”

“For you,” Rōshi snaps, folding his arms over his chest. Kurama blinks, caught off guard, and looks at the shorter man, who glares right back at him. “Damn it, Kurama, Bee’s decent enough, but he’s a Kumo nin first and foremost. He’s never tried to help the rest of us. You’ve never done anything else. If you’re going somewhere dangerous, I’m coming.”

“We’re coming,” Han corrects, and at the sight of whatever expression is taking over Kurama’s face—it feels somewhere between incredulous, furious, and embarrassed—he smiles just a little. “Kurama. When Kakuzu almost caught me, I was by myself. Your presence saved me. If we go together, none of us will have to fight alone.”

“And I can keep the village safe,” Yagura adds, watching the other two jinchuuriki thoughtfully. “The children will have the Seven Swordsmen as their guards, and Utakata will remain with them at all times. Han and Rōshi’s absence won’t put them in danger.”

His last convincing argument thoroughly countered, Kurama closes his mouth and scowls. This is—this isn’t how it’s supposed to go. Naruto is the one who inspires loyalty, who pulls people in and gives them a reason to fight. Kurama is a beast of malice and wrath, trapped in a fragile mortal body with little idea how to actually be mortal, and—and this shouldn’t be happening. He’s trying to keep them out of danger; why can't they see that?

But one glance at Rōshi’s stubborn expression, and Han’s implacable one, and Kurama knows that this isn’t an argument he’s going to win. Damn it.

“Fine,” he says shortly, then rounds on Zabuza with his best glare. “You keep Naruto and the rest of them safe, or I’ll gut you slowly with a fishhook.”

Zabuza stares at him for a long moment, expression almost startlingly unreadable, and then snorts. He takes a step forward, catches Kurama's chin between his fingers, and tilts his head up for a long, careful kiss. Kurama leans into it, partially despite himself, but Zabuza doesn’t deepen it, and Kurama doesn’t try, either. Their only points of contact are their mouths and the very tips of Zabuza’s fingers against his skin, dry and callused. Zabuza’s tongue touches his, twines, and then retreats. He gentles it even further, easing back, drifting apart, and Kurama's breath catches short and
hot in his throat as they pull apart entirely.

It feels like a goodbye.

“Watch yourself, Kurama,” Zabuza says seriously, and doesn’t add anything else to make light of things, to turn the phrase into a joke.

Kurama lets out a breath that shakes a little. He’s not good at farewells, he’s finding out. “You too, Zabuza.”

That gets him a smile, at least, sharp-edged but sincere. “Now that you know who’s in your posse, go tell those kids of yours that they’re stuck with us for a bit. Me an’ Haku’ll keep an eye on them.”

A handful of days ago, Kurama wouldn’t have been able to take him at his word. He would have hesitated, doubted, tried to work around it until only jinchuuriki were involved. But if nothing else, Kurama thinks that Zabuza won’t outright betray them. Won’t betray him, and in the shinobi world that has to count for something.

Maybe it’s strange that of all the humans he’s met, he’s putting his trust in Zabuza, but Zabuza has his own code of honor, and it’s one Kurama can understand. That’s enough for now.

He doesn’t say thank you, because Zabuza isn’t the type to appreciate it. Instead, he just offers a gruff, silent nod and steps away, heading for the back door. The sound of the kids playing is clear, happy and bright, and Kurama lingers for a moment before he pushes outside, just listening. Naruto is loudest, followed by Fū, and he can make out Gaara’s quiet giggle, as if he’s still wary of making too much noise.

Kurama never planned to snatch them all out of their lives, never intended for any of this to happen, but...he’s definitely glad he did. None of them deserved to stay where they were, and taking them away is just about the best thing Kurama could have done. Even if it wasn’t in his original plan, that was more like a guideline anyway, and besides. He thinks his Naruto would fully approve of what he’s done so far.

Unlike this Naruto now, who likely won’t have much approval at all after Kurama tells him he’s leaving.

With that cheerful thought in mind, Kurama steels himself and pushes the door open, stepping out onto the porch and then hopping down onto the grass. A green-haired blur flies past him, followed by a blond blur, and he reaches out and snatches Naruto right off the ground. The little boy squeals gleefully, latching onto his shoulder, and demands, “Are you gonna play with us now, Kurama-nii?”

He’d promised to do that, hadn’t he? Kurama winces, guilt curling in his stomach. He remembers from the first time around just how many promises people have broken to Naruto, and he doesn’t want to be added to that list. But there's no choice at the moment. Bee doesn’t have a lot of time left, and every minute they delay is a minute closer to the Mountains’ Graveyard Pein gets with him.

“Sorry, kit,” he says regretfully, dropping to sit with his legs crossed. “Something’s come up.”

Naruto promptly wriggles down into his lap, and Gaara sits down beside his knee, looking up at him with wide, solemn aquamarine eyes. A shared look with Naruto, laughter dying away, and the little redhead asks, “Kurama-nii? Are we leaving again?”

Fū sits down across from them with a light thump, dragging Yugito along with her. Her smile is bright and happy, but her eyes are watchful, assessing more than wary. “We haven’t unpacked much,” she volunteers cheerfully. “Yugito and I will help pack everything, so we call all be ready in
a minute or two!”

Kurama looks between them, gauging, and then down at Naruto. Blue eyes stare back at him, and he sighs and drops his head to rest his cheek on spiky hair. Fuck. He doesn’t want to leave them here. He sure as hell doesn’t want to take them, but—if only there was some kind of happy medium.

“Not this time, brats,” he says, and his voice comes out rougher than he intends. Gaara leans into him, and he can’t fight a smile, reaching out to ruffle bright red hair. “Remember that mission I told you about? The one I have to do alone? That’s happening right now. The last jinchūriki is in danger, and I need to go save him.”

“Like you saved us?” Naruto asks, and smiles. “You can do it, Kurama-nii! You’re the best! You can save everyone!”

Just for an instant, Kurama can’t move, drowning in blood and bodies falling and the empty thud of Naruto's corpse hitting the earth at Kaguya’s feet. His grip tightens on Naruto convulsively, and he has to breathe carefully to keep it from coming out as a sob. “Maybe this time,” he says, just barely able to get it out through the heaviness in his throat. “Not before, but—now, maybe.”

“You will,” Gaara tells him, absolutely unwavering in his faith. Then he pauses, starting to frown. Before he can say anything, though, it’s Naruto who asks, “You’re gonna come back, right, Kurama-nii? We don’t have to stay here forever, do we?”

Kurama glances down, and—hell. He’s wearing that smile again, the one from Konoha that doesn’t even come close to reaching his eyes no matter how bright it looks. With a huff he wraps his arms around Naruto, clutches him almost painfully tight to his chest, and for a moment all he can think of is being back in the woods right after he’d fled the village, Naruto on his lap and looking up at him, worried about him. Thinks about seeing his first real smile, rather than that fake, forced one. Even with everything that came after, that was the moment he started healing, he thinks. That was it. “I don’t even want to leave in the first place,” he promises, looking up and catching orange-gold eyes, then aquamarine, then black. He holds each gaze in turn, trying to show them just how sincere he is. “I swear, I’m going to finish as fast as possible and then haul my ass back here so fast all of Kiri and Kumo will be able to see the dust clouds. So you guys will stay here and stay safe for me, right?”

“Utakata and I will protect them,” Yugito says seriously, twisting her fingers together in her lap. She casts half a glance behind her, where Utakata is standing just far enough away to give them the illusion of privacy, and he inclines his head in silent agreement.

“Is somebody going to help you, Kurama-nii?” Naruto demands, tugging on the front of his shirt. “Shinobi have partners and teams, right? Who’s gonna be your team?”

It’s so much a Naruto thing to worry about that Kurama can’t help a smile. “Rōshi and Han are coming with me, and so is the geezer—”

In unison, all four of the brats pull a face. A suspiciously familiar face, given that Kurama is seeing it mirrored on four different bodies. He laughs, helpless not to, and viciously ruffles Naruto's hair, then Gaara's. Yusgito goes scuttling back to get out of range, and Fū ducks to the side, only to be caught by the back of her shirt and dragged into a hair-scuffing of her own, with extra force for the attempted dodge. Laughing, she tries to wiggle away, and eventually Kurama takes pity and lets her go.
“Brats,” he tells them all, and pretends it isn’t entirely fond. “I’ll have the whole Freak Squad, too, so don’t worry about me. Just keep an eye on each other, okay?”

“Okay, Kurama-nii,” Fū agrees cheerfully, scraping her hair back into some semblance of order. There’s a pause as all four of them trade glances, and Kurama narrows his eyes warily. Fū beams at him, bounces to her feet, and crows, “Jinchuuriki pile!” as she launches herself right at his face. At the same moment, Gaara latches onto his arm like a monkey, and Naruto slams all of his body weight into his chest. Kurama yelps, tottering dangerously, and—

With a war cry, Yugito tackles him from the side, and Kurama goes down, buried under squirming children.

“Munity!” he calls, trying in vain not to laugh. “You little rats, I’m going to string you up by your toes, get off—”

“Nope!” Naruto tells him gleefully, flopping out across his chest.

Kurama rolls his eyes, tries to work an arm loose from under either Gaara or Fū, and fails entirely. He lets his head thump back into the grass, putting on his best aggrieved expression, and demands, “What the hell did I ever do to deserve the four of you? Goddamn brats.”

“Something fantastic,” Fū tells him, grinning. “We’re your reward, Kurama-nii! Aren’t you happy?”

She’s expecting him to make a joke, grumble, brush it off. But Kurama just looks at them for a second, at Yugito on his legs and Naruto on his chest, Fū on his left arm and Gaara on his right, and just…can’t do it.

(It’s his Naruto’s fault. All that sappy sentiment must have rubbed off on him, and now Kurama’s suffering for it.)

With a burst of effort, he manages to raise his arms, tips Yugito forward onto his chest, and wraps all four of them in a tight hug. “Yeah,” he says gruffly. “I am. Thanks to you guys.”

He pretends very firmly that he doesn’t hear any sniffles as he extracts himself and sits up, tumbling children off him to either side. They don’t try to grab him when he stands up, though it looks like Naruto at least wants to. Kurama hesitates, but he knows that if he lingers any longer he won’t want to go at all, and he can’t let Bee die. With a soft sigh, he shakes his head, leans down to kiss Naruto’s forehead, and he tugs gently on Yugito’s braid as he pushes to his feet, stepping away.

“Be good,” he tells, them, and then heads back for the house, his steps as steady and firm as he can make them.

It probably shouldn’t be a surprise that Kakashi is loitering on the porch, watching the interactions and not doing much to hide it. He crinkles his eye as Kurama comes up the low steps, wiggling his fingers in offhand greeting, and Kurama heaves a sigh that is both exasperated and—slightly—exaggerated.

“Are you always creepy?” he complains.

That makes Kakashi’s eye crinkle even more, hidden smile widening—or he’s faking it; Kurama honestly can’t tell. “Maa, maa,” he protests mildly. “Kurama, don’t be mean.”

Kurama scoffs, loudly and pointedly. “Are you a shinobi or a hothouse flower? Deal with it. I’m sure you deserve it anyway.” His irritation isn’t quite enough to strangle the feeling in his chest, and he
glances back one more time, watching the four children and one teenager. Naruto sees him looking and waves with a bright smile. It’s another of the ones that don’t reach his eyes, but honestly, Kurama doesn’t feel all that much like smiling right now, either.

Still, he forces a small one, lifts a hand, and steals one more glance before he heads back into the house. There are eyes pricking on the back of his neck, a weighing gaze, but Kurama doesn’t look back. Yagura is waiting by the door of the kitchen, arms folded across his chest and fingers tapping with what’s either nervousness or impatience.

“Ao will take you to Frost Country,” he says, tipping his head towards where the blue-haired jounin is waiting. “I’ve also sent a request for the closest fishing village on the far side of the country to ready another boat so you can get to Moon Country. They’ll wait to bring you back as well.”

Kurama refuses to contemplate a scenario in which that won’t be necessary. “Thank you,” he answers, inclining his head to Ao, who nods back. Another glance around the small house, taking in the sight of Kakashi’s team hovering by the door, Han and Rōshi waiting patiently. Jiraiya leaning back against the wall with his arms folded, all of them clearly ready to go, and he breathes out. He opens his mouth, ready to chivy everyone out the door, and—

Claws sink into the fabric of his pants as a small, furry body launches itself up. A paw on his arm, a jump, and Momiji scrambles onto his shoulder, curling around his neck. Fuji, looking distinctly unhappy, leaps up to the windowsill and crouches there, hunkered down with her ears flat to her skull. “Be careful, Kurama-sama,” she orders. After a pointed pause, she sniffs and adds, “And you too, Momiji. I suppose.”

Momiji gives a high, gargling snarl. “Thanks, little sister. Don’t fall in a ditch without me here to watch your tails.”

Because Fuji is a dignified summons with the power of almost three hundred years of life, she makes a face at him in response and flips her tails.

Kurama looks between them, meets two pairs of stubborn eyes, and gives up with a disgusted huff. Apparently he has absolutely no say in who’s coming along on this disaster of a mission. “Fucking fine. Can we just hurry up and go?”

(He doesn’t brush his fingers down Fuji’s back as he heads for the door. He doesn’t. Nor does he put up a hand to brace Momiji as he takes a long leap off the front porch and lands on the other side of the gate.)

“Another adventure?” Momiji asks with good humor, tails curving over Kurama’s chest and claws digging lightly into his shoulder as he resettles himself.

“Something like that,” Kurama agrees, listening to the nearly-inaudible scuff of shinobi sandals behind him. The gate swings open, but he doesn’t look back, strides quick but steady as he heads back towards the main part of the village.

The fox huffs, dropping his chin to rest on Kurama’s shoulder. “We’ll be back soon enough,” he says, because he’s a lot more observant than is good for Kurama’s peace of mind.

They will, Kurama tells himself, and pretends he doesn’t feel the roll of trepidation in his gut.
Sasori is sulking again.

Orochimaru would be amused, but mostly he’s just bored. Bored out of his damn mind, because Pein has no tolerance for any sort of experimentation unless it directly benefits Akatsuki, and Kisame is more than happy to enforce Pein’s rules even when the leader isn’t present. *Don’t draw attention to us,* Pein keeps saying, but Orochimaru is very close to washing his hands of this whole business.

This isn’t the life he wanted, becoming a missing-nin. Perhaps Jiraiya always filled his head with too much of the nonsense literature he loves so much, but Orochimaru hadn’t thought the whole ordeal would be *dull.* It’s enough to make him miss his labs back in Konoha, bright and clean and built to his every specification. Danzō was good for that at least.

Of course, thought of Danzō is more than enough to sour Orochimaru’s mood. He tosses aside the treatise on cellular manipulation that he’s been attempting to occupy his attention with—the author is a fool, and his beliefs are obviously deeply flawed, but at least it’s entertaining for Orochimaru to mock him in his head, since he no longer has an audience who appreciates such things—and rises to his feet. The underground base is cool, but Orochimaru finds the cloud-covered robe appallingly tacky, and leaves it where it lies as he stalks out of his room.

Pein is elsewhere, and Konan with him—a mission, which is frustrating in that they didn’t deign to offer it to anyone else. Sasori is, of course, holed up in his room, brooding over his puppets, and Kakuzu is sulking just as much over the recent loss of all four of his hearts, and the destruction of two more in short order. Kisame is of no interest unless he can be goaded into a fight, and odds are he can’t be right now, since he’s occupied playing leader. That leaves “Madara” to entertain him, and Orochimaru has a strong enough sense of self-preservation that he’s not about to go poking that particular sleeping dragon. No matter how many doubts Orochimaru is nurturing regarding the man’s real identity, he’s still dangerous, and has proved it quite thoroughly. Even Danzō fears him, and it makes something vicious and satisfied curl in Orochimaru’s soul. Danzō’s fear is something to be cultivated at every opportunity, after all.

Orochimaru doesn’t like people holding more power than him, especially when they’re holding that power *over* him. For that alone he’d gladly remove Danzō from play—permanently, if at all possible.

He paces restlessly through the halls, debating with himself whether it’s worth aggravating Sasori into starting a fight, so that Pein won’t be able to blame him for the resulting chaos. Likely it’s a foolish idea—Sasori is a cunning, clever little bastard, though hardly as clever as Orochimaru himself—but then, Orochimaru grew up listening to foolish ideas and going along with them anyway.

Perhaps Jiraiya has rubbed off on him more than he had thought, because now simply knowing it’s foolhardy isn’t quite enough to make him stop.

Another thought, niggling and irritating, is whether it’s worthwhile remaining with Akatsuki, at this point. They’re all irritating, the other members, and Pein’s disdain for Orochimaru in particular is clear. Orochimaru is aware that it’s likely because he once suggested Jiraiya kill the brat and his two friends, but can he be blamed? The world would certainly be a lighter place if Pein and his dreams of world domination were gone from it.

Orochimaru has no interest in a peaceful world, no desire to rule mankind. All he wants is power, and not even political power at that. *Personal* power, what he can learn himself and use and hoard, growing his base of knowledge until he surpasses everyone who’s come before.

And maybe, just possibly, once he knows everything worth learning, he’ll know the secret behind reincarnation as well.
His hands curl into fists, hidden behind the drape of his sleeves. Kakuzu had laughed at him, when he heard Orochimaru mention it, offhand and out of context, to Sasori. Sasori had looked derisively amused, and that fight Orochimaru had truly started, bluntly and without regret. He refuses to be looked down upon by anyone, but especially little brats who should understand his position better than anyone.

(He had thought to find kindred spirits here, once. But just as he was never a true part of Konoha, so too is he an outsider here, driven by lust for knowledge rather than a grudge against humanity. It aggravates him to no end, the thought of Jiraiya's smugness, or Sarutobi's, should they learn.

Let them laugh. Let them feel he’s proved right all their suspicions and misgivings. Orochimaru will outlive them all, and prosper just for the sake of spiting them. He is nothing if not a petty bastard, after all—in that at least Jiraiya was absolutely correct.)

They are discouraged from leaving the base, but as comfortable as Orochimaru is dwelling underground, he also craves sunlight and warmth. Easy enough, then, to slip out one of the side passages and onto the slope of the closest mountain. The wind has teeth this far north, and Orochimaru curses quietly at the lingering winter, all too ready for spring.

Maybe, once spring comes, he’ll strike out on his own. It’s not as if any of those here can stop him, after all. “Madara” and Pein may outclass him where sheer power is concerned, but Orochimaru is a snake, more than capable of twisting in their grasp and striking out with poisoned fangs.

Perhaps he’ll conveniently forget to take along the logs of his spy network and let Sasori believe he’s stolen it, only to turn it against Akatsuki as a whole. Yes, Orochimaru rather likes that idea.

The weak winter sun is barely enough to warm his face when he turns to it, but Orochimaru makes do, settling himself on an outcropping of stone and trying to soak up as much as he can. Soon Pein will return, and with him will come his many rules, his iron-fisted control. If it weren’t for his fascinating Rinnegan, Orochimaru might have tried to kill him long ago. It’s equal odds whether its powers or its rarity has kept Orochimaru from striking until now—both are equally likely, and he can't otherwise decide which his motivation to remain draws from.

It is, he supposes, enough of a research opportunity just observing the Rinnegan in use, even if he can't directly conduct his tests and trials. Perhaps, if he manipulates things with enough subtlety, he can arrange—

Something rustles in the bushes, and Orochimaru stills, eyes flickering carefully over his surroundings. He rises silently to his feet, prudently braced so that he can move in any direction at a moment's notice, and takes a step forward. There's no response, so he takes another, and then another, slipping around the edge of the rocks and towards a stand of wind-gnarled trees.

Another rustle, and the branches of a shrub tremble faintly.

Orochimaru narrows his eyes. No shinobi worth their registration number would allow such a tell, which banishes the vague thought of it being Kabuto, come to give an urgent report. Not Pein, either—he’s far from subtle in that walker of his.

(A thought: does Pein know of Danzō’s involvement with the ambush that left him crippled? And if he does, is he aware that “Madara” has been in contact with Danzō, if irregularly? Perhaps a good way to test the limits of the Rinnegan without interfering directly, and the resulting chaos would certainly be interesting to watch.)

Warily, he searches the darkness, checking for any movement or inconsistencies in the patterns of
shadow. And—

There. Off to one side, tucked back and only half-visible, even to Orochimaru’s eyes. Darker than the shadows, black enough to be distinct but still blurred at the edges, it’s a familiar sort of shape, offset by wary and entirely unusual violet eyes. Orochimaru crouches down, and from this angle the fox is clearer. Large, much larger than he would expect from a fox at the end of winter, so high in the mountains, and that’s almost curious enough to make Orochimaru call a snake, catch the beast and see if there’s anything else unusual about it beyond its eyes and size.

“Hm,” he says instead, regarding the fox with interest. “Feeling bold, are we?”

Triangular ears prick up, then swivel, and the fox twists around. It stares off to the side, then turns sharply and disappears into the brush with the flash of a white-tipped tail. Orochimaru turns as well, looking in the direction of whatever spooked the creature, and spots a familiar head of ash-grey hair moving up the incline.

Kabuto, as if summoned. There’s a reason Orochimaru is fond of the boy.

“Orochimaru-sama,” Kabuto says in faint surprise when he reaches the outcropping where Orochimaru has resumed his seat. “I expected to find you inside.”

“The wildlife seems to be better company than my supposed allies,” Orochimaru says, offering him a smirk. “News, then?”

“My team has a few days off,” Kabuto confirms. “I thought to deliver this news in person. There’s been a Kage Summit called regarding the threat of Akatsuki.”

So much for not drawing attention, Orochimaru thinks, wickedly amused. Pein will be so displeased.

“Tell me everything,” he orders, and Kabuto gives him a sly smile.

“Of course, Orochimaru-sama.”
The forest around the Mountains’ Graveyard is silent, still, and entirely devoid of life.

Kurama was expecting creepy, given that this is Madara's personal lurking spot. He honestly wasn’t expecting this much creepy, though.

“There's nothing moving here,” Momiji says quietly, padding along at Kurama's side with his tails all bristling and his ears pressed flat against his skull. Kurama can see a hint of bared teeth, but doesn’t say anything. He’s pretty sure his own are showing, too. “Not even carrion birds.”

“Thank you so much for being a ray of goddamn sunshine,” Shisui mutters, following close behind with Sharingan activated and ready. Knowing those eyes are directed at his back is not helping, Kurama thinks sourly, but he’s not about to tell the kid to put away one of the few weapons that can match Obito just because it’s making him twitchy.

Momiji huffs and pointedly flicks his tails, smacking Shisui in the face. The Uchiha yelps, not expecting it, and stumbles backward. Tenzō catches him with a roll of his eyes, shoving the younger boy back to his feet.

“Can't you at least pretend to be a skilled shinobi?” he complains quietly. “Keep crashing around and everyone will know we’re here.”

“I'll give you pretend, you little—”

“Can it,” Kurama growls, and the words resonate in his throat, deeper than he intends them to be. There's a sharp click as two mouths snap shut, but Kurama can't spare the brain space to be grateful for the renewed silence. His nerves are strung tight, all but twitching, and he just wants to move. No more sneaking, no more planning, no more time away from Naruto wasted with caution instead of actually doing something, because this is it.

This is what his Naruto sent him back for.

He’s almost done.

Kurama has no idea how to feel about that. The thought of accomplishing the task Naruto set him should be a relief, should be a happy thing, but—once that’s finished, what next? There will be no driving force, no best friend’s dying wish, no guiding hand. Just a life without any purpose but the one Kurama himself decides to give it.

It’s been a hell of a long time since Kurama chose his own path. It’s not that the idea scares him, it’s just…strange.

Of course, they’ve still got a lot to do before that becomes an option, Kurama knows, turning his attention back to the landscape. Massive bones, from creatures as big as or bigger than his bijuu form, are scattered across the valley, and Kurama can vaguely remember Kabuto leading Naruto to a handful of secret entrances to Madara's base in the cleanup after the Fourth War. Hidden under the bones, mostly, and given the way Shisui is shying away from them finding that out is just going to...
make his day.

Kurama is totally definitely one hundred percent not being petty about Shisui almost using his
Sharingan on him. Even if it’s slightly conceivable that he could find one of the other entrances.

“Impressive,” Kakashi murmurs from next to his left elbow, casting one assessing glance back at his
now-silent team. “Can you teach me to do that?” The tone of his voice and the slant of his eye says
amused, while the line of his shoulders and the careful, calculating sweep of his gaze both say wary.

Kurama snorts a little, touching a hand to this throat and the human vocal cords that shouldn’t be able
to produce such a sound. How the hell he even manages, he’s got no clue, but chakra and willpower
are pretty much the go-to explanation in the shinobi world. “I don’t think it’d work for you,” he
answers. “Just set your dogs on them or something.”

For a moment Kakashi actually looks goddamned wistful. Then again, Kurama can understand it—
two days with this team and he’s about ready to drop-kick them off something high. Hell, he was
ready to do that halfway through the first debate about which shinobi division would win in a fight,
factoring in blackmail and underhanded shinobi styles of winning. They kept it up until Rōshi
decided to make them drop it with force, but Kurama now knows more about the personal lives of all
the jounin and tokubetsu jounin than he ever, ever wanted to.

“Too noisy,” is Kakashi’s regretful verdict, after a long moment of consideration. He casts a look
ahead of them, towards the looming bones of something big with a lot of teeth, and asks quietly,
“Have the others found anything?”

Kurama huffs, annoyed. “We’re not radios,” he snaps. “It doesn’t work like that. But I’m sure if Han
and Rōshi find anything, they’ll let me know.”

“Maa, maa, Kurama, it was just a question.” One eye crinkles in a smile that’s only about fifty
percent likely to be genuine, and Kurama snorts, looking away. Bastard.

“The kid’s going to be fine,” he says gruffly, speeding his steps a little. “He’s a scary little bastard,
and he’s got two jinchuuriki and the perverted sage with him. Worry about us more—we’re not just
playing distraction.”

It’s probably too much to hope for, that Akatsuki will split their forces evenly, leaving half in the
base and half out trying to capture Han and Rōshi. Kurama really doesn’t want to hope the members
all go after the other team, even if it would make his job a hell of a lot easier, because there’s no way
even two jinchuuriki, the Toad Sage, and Itachi can stand against them for long. The kid might be a
genius, but he’s only eleven, and he doesn’t even have his Mangekyo yet.

Annoyingly, Kakashi keeps pace with him, even though the length and speed of his steps doesn’t
appear to change. He hums lightly, studying the bones ahead of them, and then raises his voice
slightly to say, “Shisui, why don’t you jump to the top of—”

“No!” Shisui hisses back, looking for all the world like a cat who’s just had his fur stroked in the
wrong direction as he bristles. “Those are giant bones, Captain! Do you want to offend the spirit of
something that big? With that many teeth?”

Tenzō sighs, pressing a hand over his face. “You are superstitious at the strangest moments,” he
complains, then glances between Kakashi and Kurama. “I can—”

“No need.” Kurama cuts him off. “We’re not going over them, we’re going under them.”

“Oh, fantastic,” Shisui grumbles, giving a theatrical shiver even as he eyes the skeleton warily.
“Don’t mind us, giant flesh-eating monster, we’re just going to dig up your resting place—”

Kurama growls again, letting it rumble through the eerily still air in clear threat, and adds pointedly, “Stop. Talking.”

It only partly works this time, but Shisui’s follow-up grumbles are quiet enough that only Kurama’s hearing lets him pick them out. “Someday. Someday that will not be terrifying, and I will forget that you once threatened to eat my corpse, and then. Then, Uzumaki, it will be on.”

Kakashi muffles a cough that’s definitely a laugh, and Kurama glares at him. Bastard.

Momiji snickers, too, and bounds ahead, nose close to the ground. He circles a section of ribcage that’s mostly standing, leaping lightly over a bit of spine that’s easily twice as tall as Kurama, and then reappears on the far side. “Over here,” he calls. “This part smells like people.”

“He’s right,” Kakashi agrees, and the tenseness slides out of his body. It’s the exact opposite of relaxation, though—this is a veteran shinobi’s readiness, the ability to move in any direction the moment it becomes necessary. A few quick steps have him in front of Kurama, following a scent trail, and he joins Momiji, crouching beside the weather-worn vertebrae to inspect the ground.

Kurama doesn’t need to scent the air to know that several people have passed here recently—probably Obito and Kisame, since they’re the ones who would need it. Zetsu has other ways to get around, and this is one of the more obscure entrances, so Pein and Konan likely used a different one.

“I hope you’re not feeling squeamish,” he tells Shisui with no little amusement, eyeing the way the bone is half-buried in the ground. “Makes a convenient tunnel, don’t you think?”

The way Shisui blanches is the most entertaining thing Kurama has seen since the last time the kids trussed Jiraiya up.

Tenzō is staring at Shisui a little disbelievingly. “I’ve see you gut a man,” he says, as though he’s been personally betrayed. “With a stiletto heel. Why is this a problem?”

Shisui makes a face at him. “These are bones,” he protests. “I didn’t kill them, and they’re a hell of a lot bigger than me, and I really don’t want to spend my afterlife explaining to a giant monster why I desecrated its bones, okay?”

“You’ll be fine. I’m sure they won’t eat you more than once,” Kurama says without sympathy, stepping up to the edge of the tunnel made by the center of the vertebrae. Momiji slides past him in a brush of fur, shrinking down to the size of a regular fox, and disappears into the darkness. Since he’s clearly gone to scout, Kurama stays put, ears trained for any sound beyond the faint click of nails on bone and then the pad of paws on packed earth.

“Who are they likely to leave inside when Han and Rōshi start up?” Kakashi asks, almost too softly to hear.

Kurama glances at him, then back to the darkness of the tunnel. “Tobi,” he says, and…well. Not telling Kakashi that Tobi is actually his not-dead best friend turned insane puppet out to conquer the world seemed sensible back in Kiri, but right now that decision is looking a whole lot more questionable. Still, this Kakashi isn’t the one who’s already been exposed to Team 7 and gone through a lot of adjustments. This is the version still reeling from Rin and Minato’s deaths, broken to the point where he avoids Naruto completely. Kurama can’t predict how he’ll react to knowledge like that. And the odds of them unmasking Obito during a hit-and-run attack are fairly low.

A shiver of foreboding slides down Kurama’s spine, and he closes his eyes and curses silently to
himself. Sage take it all. He just jinxed them, didn’t he?

The clatter of claws draws his attention back, and he straightens as Momiji trots back out of the darkness, once more full-sized. “No one I can see,” he reports. “And there aren’t any voices, I think, but the tunnel branches off, so sound carries strangely.”

Fantastic, that’s exactly what Kurama wanted to hear. He swallows a sigh, shoving his hair out of his face, and checks the position of the sun. They still have about half an hour before Han and Rōshi start up their distraction, so he sinks down to sit on his heels, trying not to tense up. He can’t sense Bee’s chakra anywhere, and Gyūki hasn’t tried to contact him again, so he’s assuming they’re not here.

Either that or they’ve already started the ritual and Gyūki can’t reach him because he’s been stuffed into a statue and Bee is dead.

Kurama runs a hand over his face and orders himself to stop thinking.

With a quiet hum, Kakashi sinks down next to him. “Just Tobi?” he asks, and it takes Kurama a second to remember the earlier question.

“Zetsu too, probably,” he admits. “Maybe Kisame as well. Kakuzu almost beat Han by himself already, and Orochimaru will probably go along just because it amuses him. If they think it’s just the two jinchuuriki, and don’t see Itachi or Jiraiya, they might think it’s an easy win for them.”


Shisui makes a noise of agreement, entirely disbelieving, and Kurama just shrugs. “This is what Akatsuki is for,” he says. “Hunting and capturing jinchuuriki is pretty much their thing. Pein is the best at it, but the others aren’t exactly terrible.”

“You seem…weirdly calm,” Shisui points out, eyeing him a bit warily. “I was expecting more growling and breaking things?”

Kurama glares at him. “What I want to break,” he says slowly and clearly, “is that goddamned statue at the end of the tunnel. Your head takes close second, though.”

Shisui scowls right back, opening his mouth to respond, but before he can Tenzō slaps a hand over it. “No,” the older teenager says firmly. “He’s bigger than you, and your mother asked me not to let you pick fights with people like that if at all possible.”

With a grunt of effort, Shisui peels Tenzō’s hand of his face and glares. “You need to stop collaborating with my mother,” he hisses. “That is not fair, you bastard! And I’m like ten centimeters taller than him, so it doesn’t count!”

“Yes, but he has about ten times as much chakra and has already kicked your ass twice,” Tenzō points out with a ghoulish smile, faux-reasonable and entirely too cheerful at the memory. “That makes him bigger than you.”

“Oh, be still my heart,” Kurama says dryly. “Just what I’ve always wanted: a brat defending my honor.”

Tenzō huffs, clearly offended, but Kakashi snorts softly. “You’d better get used to it,” he says dryly, eye crinkling in a smile that Kurama suspects is, for once, entirely genuine. “Now you’ve got four to do it, at least.”
Kurama rolls his eyes, but can't quite suppress the faint smile that comes along with it. He misses the kids, and even though he’d expected to, it’s…surprising. He’s spent so long with only Naruto precious to him, and now that number has expanded so sharply that it’s all but left him reeling.

“I’ll leave it to the other jinchuuriki in the future, then,” Tenzō says, crossing his arms over his chest. A pause, and with a wince he adds, “Momochi, too,” as if it physically hurts to say.

It would be more offensive if Kurama weren’t so amused. He snorts loudly. “Kid, if my honor ever were in danger, Zabuza’s the one you’d have to defend it from.”

Momochi snickers, hunkering down next to Kurama's thigh. “Not the right mate to settle down with,” is his opinion, probably at least a little for the way the word makes Tenzō grimace. A press of a cold nose against Kurama's knee, and he adds judiciously, “He made you happy for a little while, though.”

“Can we change the subject?” Kurama complains, burying his fingers in the white-tipped black fur that makes Momochi look a little like he’s covered in frost. “I’m not taking relationship advice from someone who hasn’t even thought about it for himself yet.”

Momochi huffs, black ears pressing flat to his skull, and chitters a quiet warning. “Just because I only have five tails so far—”

“Fox summons aren’t born with multiple tails?” Shisui interrupts curiously, eyes on the reynard. “I thought it was just a thing, like hair color.”

Kurama and Momochi both shoot him disbelieving looks. “Like hair color?” Kurama repeats incredulously. “Foxes gain tails with age and power. It’s a sign of status.”

“And technically I'm just a kitsune right now,” Momochi adds, ignoring the way Kakashi's eye narrows slightly at the term. “Kurama-sama didn’t summon me, or my sister either. We decided to help him on our own.”

“I was wondering about that,” Kakashi says mildly, though his gaze is sharp. “That first fight—you were just as surprised to see the fox as we were.”

“Foxes,” Kurama corrects shortly, looking away, though he doesn’t stop stroking Momiji’s fur. “There was a little red fox, too—he’s the one that led Fuji to me in the first place. Considered it payback, since I’d helped him out of some thorns.”

There’s a moment of silence, and when Kurama glances up, a little confused, two and a half sets of eyes are staring at him with visible disbelief. “What?” he demands grudgingly.

With a low groan, Shisui buries his face in his hands. “We’ve been chasing a fairy tale hero,” he complains. “Oh my god, is that even a thing that happens? You rescue a helpless little creature and it repays you in your hour of need? Should I go around putting birds back in their nests and helping snakes across rivers?”

Kurama rolls his eyes, entirely unimpressed with the theatrics. “Go ahead,” he says dryly. “It’s not like the only special animals are the ones that talk like humans. Chakra isn’t unique to shinobi—there’s natural chakra in everything, and animals have a lot of it.”

“Fairy tale hero,” Shisui repeats, and even Tenzō is shaking his head in disbelief. “That’s it, I give up. We never had a hope of catching you, did we?”

Momochi gargles an eerie fox-laugh, licks Kurama's hand, and pushes to his feet. “You never did,” he
agrees, adds, “I’ll go watch the path back,” and then stretches long and low and bounds away, vanishing into a thicket of bushes. Kurama snorts, watching his silver tail disappear, and—

A flicker of chakra, dark and subtle, approaching fast. Kurama reacts without thinking, hurling himself forward into Kakashi and knocking him right into the bone tunnel as he snarls, “Move!”

For all his joking, Shisui is still a shinobi good enough to make ANBU when barely into his teens. Green chakra flares, leaves whirl, and suddenly he and Tenzō are high up, crouched on a protruding rib bone. In the same moment, thick vines burst through the ground, grasping like tentacles, only to find nothing.

“Zetsu,” Kurama growls, rising back to his feet. His fingers curl like claws, nails ready to rip and tear, and he can feel a snarl rumbling up through his chest.

Another flicker of green, and too fast to follow Shisui is suddenly beside them, chakra starting to gather like a thundercloud edged with fire. “Go!” he orders, settling himself squarely in the center of the tunnel. “We’ll hold him here, just finish quickly!”

Kurama freezes, torn, because below them is the Gedō Mazō but it’s Zetsu rising from the ground like a twisted Venus flytrap, already grinning.

“What’s this?” he mocks, and it grates along Kurama’s nerves like a saw-toothed blade against bone. “A little nest of vermin gathering on our doorstep? How unfortunate.”

This is Zetsu, the manifestation of Kaguya’s will, her desire to destroy given form. Kurama doesn’t think he’s ever wanted anything as much as he wants to throw himself right at the construct and tear Zetsu into tiny pieces.

Before he can move, though, a strong hand grabs his wrist. Kakashi turns and dives deeper into the tunnel, dragging Kurama after him, and the earth rumbles. A Doton jutsu that’s heavy with Tenzō’s chakra rises to block the path after them, and an instant later they hit a branching tunnel.

“Which way?” Kakashi demands, and without hesitating Kurama takes the left one, leading down. He snarls, pointless, ineffective, undirected, and swears to himself that if Tenzō and Shisui leave any bits of Zetsu behind, he’s going to crush those pieces into paste and set them on fire.

Before he can get far, though, Kakashi uses the grip on his wrist to pull him to a halt and then around so that they’re face to face. “The others?” he asks, and this isn’t the slightly distant, lighthearted man who plays tricks on his subordinates and reads porn in public. This is the jounin shinobi with more ANBU missions under his belt than most people twice his age. When Kurama snarls at him in frustration, he growls right back, and Kurama is so startled that he stops trying to pull away, blinking at the man.

Kakashi takes a breath, centering himself, and then repeats, “The others? We can't barge in there when we don’t know whether the entirety of Akatsuki is waiting for us.”

That’s unfortunately true. Kurama grinds his teeth, fighting down the urge to just throw a bijūdama down the tunnel and see how much of a distraction that proves, and closes his eyes, leaning back to brace his shoulders against the wall. The world wavers, sliding towards the blackness of the bijuu’s shared mental plane, but Kurama doesn’t dive all the way in, lingers on the borders so that he’s just close enough to feel the crackle and snap of Son’s lava raging like a tide beneath the moon. They’re fighting, definitely.

“Well, someone is out there with them,” he says, opening his eyes and pushing away. “That
enough?"

For a brief second, Kakashi looks like he’s going to argue before he finally inclines his head. “I don’t see a better option,” he agrees, still wary, and casts a look down the tunnel they’re in. “Where will this come out?”

Kurama doesn’t want to talk, he wants to bolt back to the surface and sink his claws into Zetsu. He wants to kill Zetsu, destroy him utterly and completely, break Kaguya’s will because she killed Naruto, this is a piece of the woman who murdered his best friend—

A deep breath, another, and Kurama forces himself not to move, not to run. He stays where he is through sheer force of will and tries to think back to when his Naruto followed Kabuto down here, wary and braced for treachery, to clear out the remainders of Madara’s hideout.

“The labs,” he says, fairly certain that he’s correct. “Beneath the main area where the Gedō Mazō is. There’s…” A wall of creepy stolen Sharingan in tanks, he almost says, but that’s not right. Not yet. Those were the eyes that Obito stole after the Massacre, and here and now, the Massacre is nothing but a dark possibility born of Danzō’s whispers.

“Yes?” Kakashi prompts, eye narrowing faintly. Suspicion, and not a suspicion that the truth will help.

“A door,” Kurama finishes, and it’s not a lie, even if it’s not what he was originally going to say. “Hidden in the wall. It should take us up to the main level. I don’t know where Tobi will be, or if he’ll be waiting, but if he is, that’s probably where he’ll try to ambush us.”

Kakashi makes a noncommittal but faintly unhappy noise, not that Kurama blames him. No shinobi likes walking into an ambush, especially when they know it’s coming—it’s against every trained instinct they have not to avoid it, turn it around on the ambusher. Unfortunately, Kurama doesn’t know of any other ways to get to the Gedō Mazō short of blasting a hole in the floor; his memory’s decent, but it’s not as if he’d thought to memorize the layout of this place last time he was here. There had been no reason to—as far as he knew, he’d never have to set foot in it again after they cleared it out, and even if he did, Naruto was there as well, and it was his responsibility to pay attention anyway.

Clearly, Kurama needs to stop making assumptions where anything about Naruto is concerned.

“Let me go first,” he orders, pressing past Kakashi in the narrow tunnel. At least he’s had experience fighting Obito-as-Tobi before. Whatever Kakashi remembers of the cheerful chūnin who died is so outdated as to be laughable, and of no use. Not that he even knows he knows anything, and Kurama’s going to stop that train of thought right there.

“If you insist,” Kakashi agrees, mildly amused, but there’s a spark of something that crosses his face too fast for Kurama to name it. He’d waste more brain power trying to figure it out, but four square inches of uncovered skin doesn’t exactly give him a lot to go on.

Besides, there’s a dart of light from the end of the tunnel, catching on the wall ahead of them, and when Kurama rounds the curve of the passageway he can see—

And feel. Malice out of nowhere, a surge of it thick and heavy enough to choke on, full of rage exquisitely contained, hatred directed at everyone and everything but somehow undiluted, undimmed for the vastness it encompasses. The sudden, heady surge of power is almost enough to make Kurama stagger, and he has to catch hold of the wall and breathe through the rush. Like a drug, like a shot of adrenaline straight to his heart, and there’s only one person in all the world that it could
possibly be.

“Oh! Oh! Oh my, intruders in the labs!” a light voice cries, complete with the sound of flailing arms and flapping cloth. “Oh, I have to alert an Akatsuki member! You might be here to steal stuff!”

Oh yeah. Kurama had forgotten about the acting-like-a-moron bit.

It’s really fucking annoying.

It’s also a little disconcerting, because the fury and malice don’t abate at all, and Kurama has to practically wade through the force of it as he pushes ahead, stalking out the mouth of the tunnel to the sight of a familiar masked figure. Not the orange mask from when Obito infiltrated his own organization, but also not the white Sharingan-patterned mask from the war. Purple, instead, with a smooth white spiral curving out and away from the single eye-hole. Akatsuki robes, though, and that’s enough to have the growl building in Kurama's chest again.

“Tobi,” he snarls, so low and sharp it almost hurts his throat.

Obito freezes, long sleeves flapping over his hands, and tilts his head. “Tobi?” he repeats, sounding bewildered. “Oh, are you talking about me? Is that my codename? You gave me a codename? I'm so flattered!”

Fuck. Apparently he’s not using that name yet, and that’s going to be a fun one to explain when they get out of here.

“Get out of my way and I won't tear you to bits,” he threatens, hoping that will be distraction enough.

“Uwah! Scary!” Obito cries, flailing his arms again, and really, Kurama is getting a damned headache trying to deal with the disassociation between how he’s acting and how he’s feeling. It’s creepy. “Please don’t hurt me! I'm just an errand boy around here!”

Kakashi slides up to Kurama's side, one eye trained on Obito. “This is the one who’s an idiot?” he asks. “Maa, Kurama, I think we can take him.”

“I said he acts like an idiot,” Kurama retorts, because really, with Obito that’s definitely a distinction that should be made. He takes a step forward, every muscle ready to move, and adds, “Get out of the way, or I'm going to make you.”

Naruto might have been of the opinion that Obito's death redeemed every last one of his actions in life, might have said he died a hero, but honestly, Kurama doesn’t give a damn. Right now, Obito is the biggest threat to little Naruto, to all the jinchuuriki. He’s the one who’s going to be responsible for Madara coming back, for Kaguya breaking free, and Kurama isn’t about to let that happen. Not in this lifetime.

Never, ever again.

Obito skitters back a few steps, then stops and braces himself. “But Kisame-senpai will be mad at me if I let you through!” he bleats. “Kisame-senpai is scary! I can't let you go, sorry!”

Well. It’s not as though Kurama expected to do this the easy way, not with Obito standing right in front of them. He slides into a ready stance, curling his claws, and breathes in the seething hatred Obito wears like a second cloak. It’s like a lightning-strike to his senses, lighting them up, and he soaks in the power, the press of it.
“Fine by me,” he growls, and hurls himself forward.
My internet is finally working! Life complications, oops, but since it’s still Tuesday most places I hope it’s forgivable.

Also! Several people have expressed their wishes to see certain characters die. I’ll say now, for those unaware, Obito and Orochimaru are among my absolute favorites in Naruto, and I have no plans to kill off the vast majority of characters in this fic. The major character death warning applies to the rewritten future, not the present. I am, at heart, an unrepentant fluff-monster with an unabashed fondness for happy endings, and I won't apologize for it.

[lochetic /lɒˈkɛtɪk/, waiting in ambush; lying in wait for prey, especially of insects. From Late Greek lochētikos, from lochan “to lie in wait” from lochos, lochus “ambush) + -ikos “-ic” .]

“Fucking stand still, damn it!” Kurama snarls, taking another swipe with his claws.

Like the maddening, frustrating little twerp he is, Obito bounces back with a showy windmilling of his arms, making Kurama miss completely even though it looks entirely accidental. There’s a lot of distressed wailing going on, but Kurama hasn’t landed so much as a single hit yet.

The bastard hasn’t even pulled out his Kamui and Kurama already wants to pound him into the ground.

Better than most at judging weak spots, Kakashi sweeps in from the left, kunai slashing down, but Obito trips over his own feet, falls on his ass, and rolls out of the way, screeching as if in fear. The idiot act would be impressive if it weren’t so damned aggravating, Kurama thinks, coming to a halt and gritting his teeth instead of trying to press Obito further. It’s not as if they’re managing to do anything as it is.

Well. Naruto did always tell him he talked too much when he fought, and regardless of the fact that there was so much hypocrisy in that statement that it should have made Naruto turn blue and choke to death, maybe that’s the right idea here. They're not managing to hit the bastard, and Kurama can't pull out all the stops without bringing the entire hideout down on top of them. It’s a possibility, but definitely not Plan A this time. Not with Kakashi in here with them.

“You're a slippery bastard, aren’t you?” he asks gruffly, coming to a halt in front of Obito as the man scrambles upright. “Learn that from your master?”

The masked head tilts, even as Obito retreats several paces to keep both Kurama and Kakashi in view. “Master?” Obito parrots. “I don’t have a master, I have a senpai! Kisame-senpai is really strong and brave! He said I should be an Akatsuki member, 'cause they're shorthanded! Isn’t he nice?”

Sage, just that voice alone makes Kurama want to punch him in the throat. He takes a breath, wrestling his temper under control, and forces his voice above a growl as he says, “Sure you do. The
way I count it, you’ve got three of them. But you’d only know about the one, wouldn’t you?”

Obito’s head tilts back in the other direction, waving arms falling still. The ridiculously long sleeves flutter down to cover his hands, and he immediately brings them up again, waving quickly. “I—I’m really sorry, but I don’t know what you mean! Some people say I’m a bit of an idiot, heh. Can you try explaining it slower?”

“Only some?” Kakashi mutters from where he’s holding himself braced and ready, visible eye wary. Kurama debates letting Obito kick his ass once, just for that, because he warned the bastard about underestimating Tobi. It’s Kakashi’s own fault if he lets himself get fooled by a mask.

Pointedly, Kurama ignores the snark, taking a step closer to Obito even as he calls his chakra up in a slow, steady trickle. One moment of complete shock or distraction is all he needs, and knowing what he does about Obito’s backstory, that should be easy enough to provide. It would be a hell of a lot easier if Kakashi wasn’t also standing right here, but Kurama can’t exactly ask him politely to turn away and plug his ears. Getting past Obito without having him bring out his Sharingan—either of them—is worth all the questions Kurama’s methods of doing so might raise.

There’s absolutely nothing Kurama wants less than to let this little Madara imposter steal his free will yet again.

“Such a nice old man, wasn’t he? You’d hardly know he was a missing-nin,” Kurama taunts, keeping his tone light, and has to smirk a little at the way Obito goes still again. His mind is racing, trying to plan for when Obito does get serious, because that’s not really something Kurama can rule out. He hopes that he can hit Obito hard and fast enough to take him out, or at least send him running, but there are no guarantees. There isn’t a lot Obito wouldn’t do to keep his plan intact at this point. Just the fact that he’s here, talking about “Kisame-senpai” means he decided there was a big enough threat for him to come out in the open and fill one of Akatsuki’s vacancies.

“There’s a lot of missing-nin around here!” Obito says, cheerfully confused. “Do you mean Pein-sama? He’s pretty old!”

The humor isn’t anywhere close to enough to hide the way the malice surrounding him darkens, deepens. Kurama breathes it in like the smell of fine wine, can’t be bothered to swallow the grin that comes. He’s getting to Obito, pissing him off, and maybe that’s not the best idea, but Kurama existed for centuries on hatred and rage before the damned Uzumaki Clan and their insane princess came along. A source as strong and steady as Obito is practically turning his head.

“Personally, I was thinking older,” he says easily, stepping forward again, and this time Obito slides back a pace. Still not preoccupied, even if he’s wary. “Been kicking around under here since he left Konoha the first time. Or rather, he was. Died so you could take his place like a good little puppet, didn’t he? About time.”

There’s no cute head-tilt this time, no exaggerated gestures of confusion. Settled stillness creeping up instead, more of a tell than any before. Kurama wants to laugh, because there’s no reasonable way he could know all of this, and Obito knows that as well. Only a little more, Kurama thinks, and he’ll have an opening. He takes a step to the side, another, careful and telegraphed as he paces a slow circle around the Uchiha. No need to put him any more on the defensive yet.

One easy way to do that, and maybe Kurama should feel guilty for it, but he remembers being dragged out of Kushina’s soul, remembers those eyes in the darkness, and can’t even begin to summon up that particular emotion.

“It’s getting pretty hard to hit you,” he says, and tries to keep it pleasant, but there’s a rumbling growl
beneath the words that turn them furious and hungry. “We’re going to need to take drastic measures pretty soon. I’m thinking I should bring the roof down. Maybe a Doton jutsu or two. Compress the rock. Who knows? Someone down here might end up buried alive.”

Across the eerie stillness of the lab, Kurama can hear Kakashi’s breath catch, can see him falter out of the corner of his eye. He’s not the only one; Obito twitches like he stopped himself from looking over at the last moment, and the rise of his chest isn’t quite as steady as it was a moment ago.

“No old man to pull you out this time, Madara,” Kurama hisses, half a testing step forward, and Obito’s head jerks back towards him but he doesn’t otherwise move. Perfect.

“No missing-nin to give you back something you lost,” he says, quiet, like it’s a secret. “Or to put that seal right on your heart.”

A tiny falter. It’s not even a step back, just a shift of weight, but it’s enough. Swirling chakra condenses at the tip of Kurama’s finger, purple and black and spinning like a hurricane, and he slams more chakra towards his feet as he leaps. Obito reacts, but it’s slower than it should be, shocked, caught up in the past and secrets and all the things a stranger shouldn’t know, and the miniature bijūdama flies right at his chest—

And passes through.

His momentum too great to stop, Kurama can’t do anything to get out of the way as Obito reappears behind him, whirling around even before his body is fully materialized. There’s a spark, a flash of heat, but it’s enough of a warning for Kurama to grab for his power, wrap himself in it as the fire hits him.

“Kurama!” he hears Kakashi shout, and there’s a crackle, a furious clatter like a thousand birds chirping. Kurama hits the ground and spins, his chakra eating up the flames around him, and is just in time to see the idiot hurl himself headlong at Obito, Raikiri wreathing one hand.

Sage damn it. Doesn’t he idiot have any other jutsus?

Kurama made a point of mentioning Obito’s weakness, as Tobi. Intangibility, but an inability to attack while he’s using it. Kakashi is doing a good job keeping him on the defensive, but it can’t last long—at some point Obito is going to get fed up with his Tobi act and counterattack, and right now Kakashi isn’t strong enough to face him. Whatever use he can get out of his Mangekyo, it won’t be enough to stop Obito before Kakashi kills himself with chakra exhaustion.

Taking a breath, Kurama goes low, skidding across the smooth stone and rising to his feet right underneath Obito as he phases through Kakashi and solidifies again. There’s no time for anything fancy, but Kurama doesn’t need it. One hard burst of chakra, wreathed with the fire that’s second nature to him, fueled by as much anger and frustration as he can put into the blow, and it connects.

Obito’s head snaps back as he’s caught under the chin, and he goes flying.

“That’s for Kushina,” Kurama says, cracking his knuckles as he straightens, and suddenly Kakashi is entirely focused on him, attention snapping away from Obito as he pushes himself up off the floor. Both of them are watching him, which is not the greatest, but—

Maybe the time for keeping who and what he is a secret has passed. Against Obito, once he gets serious, Kurama’s not going to have much of a choice anyway.

“Kurama, what are you talking about?” Kakashi asks, slowly and carefully, even as he reaches up to push his hitai-ate out of the way. “The Kyuubi killed Kushina.”
The words send a flicker of guilt through him, not so much for Kushina’s sake—because he never knew her as anything but a jailor, an adversary—but for Naruto’s, and for the fact that he grew up without ever knowing his mother, has at this point never even seen her before. Still, Kurama’s hardly the only culprit here. “Yeah, not quite,” he growls, watching Obito whine and flail to his feet, though that mask doesn’t move from where it’s staring at him. “Who do you think pulled him out of her? The seals didn’t break during the birth. He took advantage while they were weakened, and he was the one to turn the Kyuubi on Konoha.”

Kakashi takes a step forward, then stops, his entire body freezing statue-still. A sound is wrenched from his throat, low and harsh and pulled from somewhere deep inside of him, and he presses a hand over his face, takes a breath that rattles audibly, and then lets it drop. “That’s why Minato-sensei had to sacrifice himself? Why Kushina died?” he demands, and the words break halfway through, though with all of Obito’s malice in the air Kurama can’t tell if it’s with grief or anger. “You?”

That masked face glances in Kakashi’s direction for a brief moment, turns away from Kurama to look at the Copy-Nin as he hunches forward under the sudden weight of revelations, and Kurama moves. More chakra, balanced and spinning, small enough not to kill them all in a cave-in but strong enough to blast through flesh, and he hurls it forward like a shuriken, aiming to decapitate.

A warping spiral eats it out of the darkened air, and Obito says very sharply, “You shouldn’t know about that.”

No more Tobi-voice, no more flailing. A guttural tone with an edge of fury, laced with contempt, and that’s all the warning Kurama gets. Obito whirs, snatching a gunbai out of nothingness as he turns, and hurls it. Kurama leaps over the battle-fan, twisting with his claws bared as he comes down, but Obito turns with him, yanks the gunbai back by its chain to grab the handle. Kurama’s claws slam into the spirit-tree wood but don’t so much as scratch it, not that he expects them to—he’s seen this same fan block one of Naruto’s bijūdama without taking any noticeable damage.

Even in a human body, though, Kurama isn’t actually human. His chakra is different, his mind is different, and he has a very, very long time using purely natural chakra behind him. Not ninja techniques, not what anyone in this world is taught, not something even Uchiha Obito can match. With a whirl of speed, Kurama sweeps past the man, starting low and rising as he calls his fire without any hand signs or the constrain of a jutsu, unformed and raw. It erupts like a geyser of flame around him, around Obito, as hungry as Amaterasu’s black flames, and dark cloth catches like tinder.

There’s no pause, no hesitation. Obito dumps his burning robe as he passes through the blaze, snapping back into this dimension as he flings the gunbai again. It slams into the ground where Kurama was standing as he throws himself aside and rolls, coming back to his feet as another figure leaps out of the shredding smoke. Kakashi runs right up the taut chain, perfectly balanced, and leaps, tantō swinging. Obito jerks back, releasing the gunbai in favor of Kamui, but Kakashi doesn’t let up. He turns when Obito phases through him, keeps attacking in a blur of speed and lightning dodges every time Obito tries to reenter this dimension, and it gives Kurama time to get his feet back under him.

He slides in as Kakashi drops to the side, and Obito snarls in frustration. The air twists, spins, and a flurry of shuriken propelled at impossible speeds rain down. The first one cuts deep, scoring the meat of his bicep, but Kurama drags the cloak of his chakra around him and shoves through the deadly rain, eyes on the Uchiha. In the same moment, Kakashi twists away from his previous course, leaping back in with a kunai in hand as Kurama grabs for Obito’s throat, and they only just miss hitting each other as Obito vanishes completely into his Kamui dimension.

There is nothing, Kurama thinks furiously, as absolutely fucking frustrating as an opponent you can’t
hit.

“Stay and fight?” Kakashi asks, pulling up short before he can stab Kurama in the face. His eyes sweep the area around them, appropriately paranoid, but a quick, veiled glance at Kurama says very, very clearly that he hasn’t forgotten what Kurama knows but shouldn’t.

“Fuck no,” Kurama growls, and heads for the door in the wall at a run. Obito will probably ambush them the second there’s an opening, but anything that gets them closer to the Gedō Mazō is an advantage right now.

All the power of the oldest bijuu doesn’t mean a thing when they may as well be fighting a damned ghost.

Three quick hand-signs from Kakashi make the air around them explode into thick, choking mist, heavy enough to dim the lights to almost nothing. For a moment Kurama thinks about protesting the resulting lack of visibility, but then he remembers the particulars of this jutsu—the mist is filled with chakra, and if Obito emerges anywhere in it, Kakashi will sense him.

Unless he’s intangible, of course, and fails to disturb the mist. Really, if Kurama could lay a hand on the bastard, he’d gouge that fucking eye right out of his head.

They’re barely ten feet from the doorway when Kakashi hisses out a curse and lunges sideways, bowling Kurama over the gunbai slices through the air. They roll and come back to their feet to find Obito between them, gunbai in hand, and Kurama takes the hit because there’s no way to avoid it. He slams into the cave wall, head cracking painfully against the stone, but shoves away from it, lunging for Obito with a bijūdama whirling to life in his palm. His hand slips through, can’t touch, and Kakashi’s fireball passes him from the other side. Obito just stands there, malice blazing like a trapped sun, and—

Another warping spiral in the air, a shift, and fire blooms. It blazes out, twisting along the path of Obito’s Kamui, and Kurama grabs Kakashi by the back of his flak jacket and leaps clear as the mist is violently burned away. It itches at him, surrendering ground even momentarily, but he sets his teeth, swallows a snarl of pure fury, and drags them both deeper into the muffling darkness.

“I hope,” Kakashi says as he straightens, faintly winded, “that you have some way to actually hit him?”

Kurama hesitates, wavers, but against Obito using Kamui it’s not like there’s a choice. This could go on until he and Kakashi have burned through every last bit of their chakra while Obito just dodges and offers up lazy counters, waiting for them to tire. Kurama’s reserves are vast, and it’ll take a while, but against Kamui he has no doubt it will happen eventually. With the others fighting, they just don’t have the time.

“I don’t,” he says, and lifts his head, catching the red-black of Kakashi’s open eye and holding his gaze. “But you do.”

Kakashi catches his meaning instantly, and his eye goes wide. He stiffens, shifts his weight like he’s about to take a step back, but catches himself before the sound of a careless footfall can give them away. Then his gaze narrows sharply, mind running all the implications in a rush, and he takes a breath and nods.

“More secrets?” is what he asks, voice dry with an edge of bite.

“Not for much longer, apparently,” Kurama counters, huffing, and if he has to scrape broken pieces
of Copy-Nin up off the floor when this fight is over he’s going to be very displeased. “Can you do it?”

“Once, maybe.” Kakashi takes a deep breath. “Twice if we’re desperate.”

Kurama thinks of Obito waiting by the door, the Gedō Mazō above them. Thinks of Bee and Gyūki, of Shisui and Itachi, Han and Rōshi, Itachi and Jiraiya.

For a hit and run mission, this is turning into a miniature war.

“Believe me, we’re desperate,” he says gruffly. Obito hasn’t quite pulled out all the stops yet, hasn’t really tried to kill them—in all likelihood, he’s waiting for Zetsu to finish with the others, or Kisame to appear. Fighting Obito alone is hard enough; add in another person and it’ll be impossible. Even before Obito became the Juubi jinchūriki in the Fourth War, he was able to face Naruto, Gai, and Kakashi without suffering more than a scratch before Kakashi's Kamui came into play.

“One of us—?”

“Me.” It’s the best choice—Kurama can survive a lot more than a regular human, and if things go wrong and it takes a while to get him back out, he at least won’t die of thirst or starvation in the meantime. “Just keep hitting him, and that’ll give me all the openings I need.”

Kakashi nods, then pauses. His gaze flickers past Kurama, towards the door, and then slides back. He steels himself visibly and says, “He’s using that eye.”

Kurama hesitates. For all that the truth seems to be spinning out in strands and streamers, little bits weaving into a whole, this is one secret he doesn't have the luxury to tell. Not right now, with Obito waiting and the mist clearing. Not in the middle of a fight when there's absolutely no way Kakashi can take it well. The pieces are there, waiting to be picked up, and—

Kurama pauses, eyes narrowing as a thought strikes him full-on. They're doing this the wrong way. Obito can't know what they're here for; even if he’s been to Konoha recently, picking up rumors and spying on the Hokage, even if he’s listened in on the situation in Kiri, Kurama made sure his plan stayed just between the jinchūriki and their immediate allies. No one else is aware they're going after the Gedō Mazō. Obito probably thinks they're here to rescues Bee.

Using Kakashi's Mangekyo to toss himself into the Kamui dimension with no certain way to come back is stupid. Trying to beat Obito right now is stupid—this is still a hit-and-run attack, even if they were ambushed halfway to the goal. Obito is a threat, and a massive one, but Kakashi doesn’t have the necessary chakra reserves to use Kamui against him, and that means they can't beat him.

They can distract him, though.

Ignoring Kakashi's wary attention, Kurama lifts his head, squinting through the dissipating mist to see the ceiling above them. The Gedō Mazō is one level up, and unless Kurama's sense of direction is failing him, it’s almost directly above the door Obito is lurking by.

Perfect.

“How likely are you to collapse into a ball of angst and issues if I break the cave?” Kurama asks.

There's a long moment of silence. Kakashi side-eyes him very warily, but gamely reaches for a kunai. “I think I can hold off on that until we’re outside. You have a plan that doesn’t leave one of us probably stranded in an alternate dimension?”
Kurama bares his teeth, and it’s almost a grin. Time to stop thinking quite so much like Naruto—Kurama can’t wear idiot anywhere near as well as his jinchuuriki could. Devious fox bastard really suits him so much better.

Now this is interesting, Orochimaru thinks, smirking as he watches his former teammate try to unbury himself from a pile of hissing vipers.

Movement catches his eye, just a flash and not quite fast enough to worry him, and he leaps to the side as a tantō slices through the air. One whirling sweep, a twist of his hand, and blades of wind drive the little Uchiha back, surprisingly steady in his grace for such a young boy.

“My, my,” he purrs, ducking underneath a spinning ball of lava that slams into the tree beside him. “Konoha must have such high opinions of our operation, sending the Uchiha’s greatest prodigy after us.”

“Oi, bastard! Stop being creepy!” Jiraiya snaps, and a surge of flame crisps Orochimaru’s snakes without mercy. He sidesteps Jiraiya’s lunge, familiar with his former teammate’s moves even after seven years as a missing-nin, but he knows the threat that Jiraiya poses all too well, and reluctantly abandons his quest to get a reaction from the boy. He turns instead, blocking a punch with one arm, twisting away from a hard kick, leaping lightly over the sweep of a foot and flipping in the air as he comes down behind Jiraiya. A hand-sign, a flare of chakra, and Jiraiya’s handful of kunai slam into an earthen wall.

Somewhere in the forest, Kakuzu screams, for once more pain than fury, and Orochimaru strangles an irritated sigh, all too aware of what Pein will say if he lets the fool die when they’re supposed to be partners. He has little interest in the jinchuuriki, though—their abilities he can’t copy or recreate, and facing them doesn’t serve Orochimaru in any way. He wants to see Itachi’s eyes, wants to see how the genius’s Sharingan must be different from any other. And, barring that, it’s always entertaining to drive Jiraiya into a fit of rage through frustration alone.

The entertainment of staying here is well worth the possible punishment if Kakuzu dies.

Decided, Orochimaru lets the Doton jutsu drop back into the earth without using it as cover to retreat. Itachi is stalking forward, tantō in hand and Sharingan spinning, and Orochimaru can’t fight a smirk, doesn’t even try. “Oh? All that power just to face me? How flattering.” Deliberately he feeds more chakra into the air around him, doubles down on the abrasive, unsettling edge to his power that’s a legacy of his now-vanished clan, and is impressed despite himself when Itachi doesn’t even falter.

Even Copy-Nin Kakashi froze when hit with that power. But not this boy. How interesting.

Another blow from Itachi’s tantō, blurred with speed, and Orochimaru laughs wickedly, drawing Kusanagi. It comes easily to his hand, fits his grip so well, and when he turns it so the edge of his blade meets the flat of the Uchiha’s, it sheers right through the metal as if it’s fine cloth. Instantly he presses his advantage, lunging close, but Itachi hurls the stump of the sword in his face and ducks, and a spray of senbon fly over his head as Jiraiya presses back. Orochimaru blocks a kick, sidesteps a punch, returns a knife-hand strike only to have it caught. A hard wrench on his captured hand and he gives ground, retreats and leaves Jiraiya with nothing but an empty cloak in his hand. It earns him a curse that makes him laugh, dark and amused, but while he’s distracted Itachi whirs in behind him, hands striking like the snakes Orochimaru loves so much.
It’s textbook-perfect, Orochimaru thinks, surrendering his advance in favor of testing the genius everyone says outclasses even him. But there’s none of the restrain the phrase implies, none of the limitations. Itachi adapts, advances, fits what he knows to the situation, and those eyes let him take advantage of even the smallest opening.

For the first time in many, many years, Orochimaru can feel himself losing.

It would be more infuriating if it weren’t a curiosity, if it didn’t prove a theory Orochimaru has been curious about since the first time he’d seen the Uchiha prodigy. He laughs, sidesteps a kick that’s so perfect it could decorate taijutsu instruction manuals, and says, “They were right about you, little boy. What potential you have, just as I did once. Are you curious about what you’ll become? Do you want to know the limits of that beautiful power you wield?”

Cool, steady eyes meet his, and it’s a true disappointment when Orochimaru has to drop his gaze or risk getting trapped in a genjutsu. He can’t afford such an opening. It makes him remember, though, years ago now, he’d watched the boy practice. A child then, but…incredible.

“You used to watch me train,” Itachi says, and Orochimaru can’t help looking back at his face in faint surprise. He hadn’t known the boy had noticed him.

Red-and-black eyes meet his, unwavering, and Itachi draws a kunai. Orochimaru flicks a glance at it, remembering the kunai trap, the empty room, two dozen kunai in the air and headed for Itachi on all sides. He’d thought it was some kind of idiocy in an overconfident boy. Instead, it was grace in motion, perfect control of every limb and all surroundings.

(Had he forgotten that? No power at all, no Sharingan, hardly any more chakra than a genin might use. Genius indeed, and the thought itches at him oddly, somewhere very deep and distant in the back of his mind.)

“Curiosity,” he defends lazily, twisting Kusanagi in an easy loop. No real reason to be defensive, but he feels the edges of it even so. “Did you expect me to ignore a prodigy, Uchiha Itachi?”

Those pinwheel eyes don’t waver. “You were going to save me, that time, if I was in danger.”

Orochimaru’s grip tightens on the hilt. Not quite annoyance, but—close. Close enough to count, certainly. “Much has changed, and that has no bearing any longer,” he points out, and pretends he doesn’t feel the absence of the hitai-ate on his brow. He’s still not used to the lack after so many years wearing it, that’s all. “Power offers no temptation for you, boy? What about glory? Or are you the incorruptible paragon of your clan, as so many seem to think?”

Something almost dark slides across Itachi’s face before it’s buried again. Itachi doesn’t answer, but lunges, kunai leading. It’s sloppy, if only a little, and Orochimaru feels a flicker of disappointment at having so clearly gotten under the boy’s skin even as he swings—

Kusanagi takes off his head, and with a whirl of smoke, the clone explodes into a flock of screeching crows. Orochimaru leaps back, swearing, but it’s not far enough. All he can see is inky feathers, obscuring wings, hiding any movement around him. Footsteps thud against the ground, too light for an eleven-year-old, and he throws himself to the side in a burst of speed. Jiraiya’s jutsu scorches across his cheek, leaving the smell of burned hair behind as he puts distance between them, and sheer instinct has him bringing Kusanagi up just in time to deflect two kunai aimed at his throat. A twist, a step, another burst of fire avoided, and Orochimaru decides that maybe this is indeed the best time to see if Kakuzu requires assistance. He dodges, swift in his retreat—

The earth shudders violently under his feet, throwing him completely off balance, and in the distance
a plume of what's either dust or smoke rises. Not from Kakuzu’s direction, but behind them, from the base.

Ah. Of course gallant Jiraiya and brave little Itachi would volunteer to play bait.

When he manages to get his feet under him, Jiraiya is on one side, Itachi on his other. “Leaving so soon, bastard?” Jiraiya demands, dark eyes full of old hurt and deep-seated anger in equal measure.

No hate, and Orochimaru knows very well what hate looks like on Jiraiya, but he still can’t pick it out. Always the fool, this man. So naïvely hopeful. So disgustingly kind.

(Orochimaru had seen him once, caught between three much older, bigger bullies. Not Jiraiya’s bullies, because he was popular, friendly. Orochimaru’s tormenters, despised for their pettiness and inferiority, their childish cruelty. And Jiraiya had faced them, yelled at them, defended Orochimaru even where there was no need, when the matter never touched him directly, when they were older and won, because they outnumbered and outclassed him.

Orochimaru doesn’t understand. Maybe once he did, but—sentiment. Foolish, weak, useless sentiment.)

“You don’t get to run away this time, Orochimaru,” Jiraiya says, implacable. Itachi doesn’t speak, just watches him with those fascinating eyes. “Not from this.”

Well. Orochimaru’s fingers tighten on the hilt of his jian. Suddenly boredom doesn’t look all that terrible in comparison to the frustration of this.
Chapter Notes

I am officially moving updates to Wednesday, because I cannot deal with Tuesdays right now and I’m just setting myself up for disappointment trying. So! **Wednesday updates until further notice, thanks for your patience with me!**

Also, somehow the Shisui-Tenzō bits turned into Shisui/Tenzō-ish stuff? Idk, I swear it didn’t feel that shippy while I was writing.

[incommode / inˈkəʊd/; to inconvenience or discomfort; disturb; trouble; to impede or hinder. From French incommoder or Latin in commodare, from in- ‘not’ + commodus ‘convenient.’]

Shisui presses himself back against a ridge of bone, trying very, very hard not to think about how they’re currently crouched inside of a giant skeletal skull. He’s already going to have plenty of nightmares about today as it is. There's no need to invite more.

“I hate plants,” he says fervently, closing his eyes and trying to catch his breath. “I hate plants so much.”

From where he’s pressed right up against Shisui's side, Tenzō makes a quiet noise of agreement, peering cautiously around the edge of an eye socket to check for movement. “This one in particular I’d gladly set on fire,” he mutters, touching the dented edge of his hitai-ate.

Too close for comfort, Shisui thinks, and can't fight a scowl. An inch over and Zetsu would have taken out Tenzō’s eye. The creature is dangerous and slippery, and even Tenzō’s Mokuton can't get a reliable sense for where he is.

Apparently not spotting anything outside, Tenzō lets out a tired breath and sinks down to sit again, tilting his head back against the bone behind them. “At least,” he says, more to himself than anything, “we’re not facing Orochimaru.”

Shisui’s fingers tighten on the hilt of his kunai, and it takes effort not to grit his teeth. Tenzō doesn’t talk about his nightmares, never mentions just what it is that brings him shuddering awake in the darkness with his face a mask of horror despite his eerie silence, and Shisui has never asked him.

Even so, he’s more than able to guess from what little snatches of cries he’s heard, and that alone is enough to make him want to use Kotoamatsukami on the snake bastard and compel him to jump off a cliff. Preferably into a volcano.

“There's that,” he agrees, lightening his tone until it’s back to cheerful, with no hint of the thoughts beneath. Tenzō flicks him a sideways glance that says he isn’t fooled, but that’s fine. Shisui wasn’t expecting him to be. He peers around the other boy, glancing out at the boneyard around them, but can't spot any sign of their opponent, either. “This guy is a plant, right?”

“Something like that,” Tenzō agrees, a little wary was he studies Shisui. Shisui would be offended, except Tenzō has just as many insane ideas as he does; he just manages to look more serious pulling
them off, so no one notices. Really. Like that time in Yugakure—that was all Tenzō, but since everyone was dressed like a cheap prostitute all the fingers were automatically pointed at Shisui. How is that fair?

Corralling his wayward thoughts, Shisui glances over at his partner in crime. “I know Kurama didn’t exactly give us a lot of information in between all the brooding and growling, but how far do you think you’d get using Mokuton against him?”

“You know I can’t sense him reliably,” Tenzō retorts, bristling a little. “Shisui, if I could don’t you think I would have by now?”

Really, the lack of faith in his brilliance is criminal. Shisui scoffs, grabbing the hand Tenzō is waving expressively and dragging it back down. “Not to sense him,” he corrects. “But do you think you could pin him in place, or even just slow him down for a second? He keeps sliding back into the ground every time I get close, but if you can buy me even a fraction of a second I can hit him with something devastating.”

Tenzō’s eyes widen, and surprise shifts into determination. “We’ll have to draw him out,” he says, which Shisui takes as confirmation that he can do it, or will at least give it a try.

“Like that will be hard,” Shisui scoffs. “All we have to do is stop hiding. Ready?”

Taking a breath, Tenzō nods. He brushes his long hair out of his face, closes his eyes for a moment, and then opens them and rises to his feet. One gloved hand is offered up, and Shisui takes it without hesitation, their armor-covered knuckles clicking together as Tenzō pulls him to his feet.

“If we die horribly, I’m blaming you,” Tenzō says, sounding almost cheerful as he draws his tantō.

“Hey!” Shisui complains. “If you fail to control the sentient plant with your magic plant jutsu, I think you should be the one to take the blame, jerk.”

Tenzō’s ghoul-smile used to be scary. Shisui wonders what it says about his sanity that it’s now mostly just an endearing quirk. “Your plan, your fault.”

“Or my victory, bastard,” Shisui retorts, gripping just a little tighter around Tenzō’s long fingers before he lets go. “When we win I’m taking all the credit, just for that.”

Tenzō opens his mouth to answer, but his eyes go wide. Not needing any more of a hint than that, Shisui lunges forward, grabbing him around the waist, and activates a shunshin. In a whirl of confusing motion they’re suddenly on top of the skull, spinning leaves around them, but Shisui can see vines stabbing upwards through the empty eye sockets like deadly hands and jumps again. The air blurs with speed, howling in his ears for a fraction of a moment before they touch down hard.

Instantly, Tenzō leaps away, hands coming up in a familiar sign around his sword hilt, and Shisui spins in the opposite direction, fire already building as he shapes the necessary signs.

Flames blaze blue-white, all of Shisui’s chakra shoved into them, and the smell of burning greenery fills the air. There’s a snarl, full of anger more than pain, and as the smoke sweeps away in the rising wind Zetsu emerges, stalking forward. One hand is already turning to branches, the ends in dagger-sharp points, and Shisui has a flash of those stabbing deep. He takes a breath, drawing his own blade, and grabs a length of ninja wire with his other hand, just in case.

There’s no need to talk, no need to draw Zetsu’s attention to what they’re planning. Shisui takes another breath, feeds chakra into the wire, and lets his Sharingan spin back to life. Everything gains crystalline clarity, an edge of predictability that Shisui has never quite managed to adjust to, and he
moves with all the speed he can gather. A blur around behind Zetsu, a sweeping sword-stroke to drive him back, and in the same moment Shisui flings his other hand out, curling the wire. The weighted end arcs around, fire already sparking down its length, and the twist to it means not even Zetsu can dodge fast enough to escape it fully. He jerks back, too slow, and in the same moment Tenzō cries, “Now!”

Shisui doesn’t hesitate. He lunges, shoving as much raw chakra as he can into his tantō, and doesn’t let himself slow as he collides squarely with Zetsu. There’s a tearing crunch, a sickening squelch, and with the barest shove backwards the creature collapses. Shisui staggers back a step, grimacing, and tries not to look at the massive hole blown in the creature’s torso. There’s thick white ichor on his blade, gross and dripping, and he shakes it off as best he can.

“Burn the body,” Tenzō advises tiredly, stepping up to his side. His face is slightly pale, and Shisui can't help but wonder how much effort it took to hold Zetsu back even for a moment. “I don’t think we should take any chances with what he can and can't do.”

“Good idea,” Shisui agrees, and concentrates for a split second. Fire sparks along the ninja wire still holding Zetsu, and half a beat later flesh catches. With a blue-white blaze the flames spread, devouring the body quickly, and—

With a cry of alarm, Tenzō lunges, tackling Shisui out of the path of a massive sword that comes streaking down at his head. Long-honed instincts keep Shisui moving, and even as they roll and come upright again he sweeps Tenzō off his feet and leaps back up on top of the vine-choked skull, the shunshin’s swirl of leaves dispersing around them as they land.

With a low, rumbling chuckle, Hoshigaki Kisame wrenches his sword out of the ground and slings it up over one shoulder, grinning up at them through pointed teeth. "Well now. Looks like he underestimated you, didn’t he? No worries, kids. I'm not about to make the same mistake."

“Joy,” Shisui mutters, carefully releasing his hold on Tenzō.

The other boy slides back to his feet, bracing himself on the curved bone with a bit of chakra, and spares just enough thought to send a withering glance at Shisui. “A princess carry? I'm only an inch shorter than you!”

“I was in a hurry!” Shisui squawks, outraged. “I’m sorry that my automatic reflex offended your delicate sensibilities, Tenzō. Should I politely ask the mass-murdering terrorist if we can go back down and try that again?”

Tenzō sniffs, pointedly looking away. “Just don’t let it happen again. I’m your senior, both in age and ranking. You keep forgetting that and you shouldn’t.”

Kisame laughs at them. Of course he does. “Come on, kids,” he mocks. “I won't bite. Unless you like that kind of thing.”

Shisui wrinkles his nose. “I wouldn’t go for Zabuza, so I definitely wouldn’t go for you,” he retorts. “My sexual preference is not fish.”

“That’s hurtful!” Kisame protests, looking wounded. “I can't help the way I look!”

“Shisui,” Tenzō hisses, kicking him in the ankle. “You're here to beat him, not sleep with him! Let's go!”

“Going, going!” Shisui defends, leaping lightly off their perch and dropping down to face the former Kiri nin and his chakra-eating sword. Shisui isn’t exactly weak where taijutsu or kenjutsu are
concerned, and his pain tolerance is impressive even among career ANBU, but he’s a little doubtful about his ability to hit Kisame hard enough and enough times to actually do much damage.

Of course, that turns out to only be half their problem, because just as his feet hit the ground Zetsu groans and sits up, the hole in his body filling with that same white ichor. It hardens into flesh or something like it, and the creature pushes to his feet, turning to give Tenzō a wide-mouthed grin.

“Don’t think you’re going to get away with that again, kid,” he threatens. “I’ve got your measure now.”

With a muttered curse, Tenzō leaps down, landing in a crouch next to Shisui. “Rock paper scissors?” he suggests, wearily wry, as he pushes upright again.

“And winner gets who, exactly?” Shisui wants to know. “Because our choices are sentient plant monster and walking shark. I don’t know about you, but I’m not excited for either one of those.”

“Point,” Tenzō concedes, hands coming together in a seal again. “Try it out my way, and trade if we have to?”

“Why not,” he agrees, and there’s a burst of chakra. A thick beam of solid wood hurtles out of the ground and slams straight into Kisame’s ribcage, throwing him back. In the same moment Shisui triggers a shunshin, leaping forward in a blur that’s too fast for even the Sharingan to register well. The afterimage, solidified with a touch of chakra and will, goes the other direction, lunging straight at Zetsu. Its sword drives deep even as Zetsu spins to grab it, and Shisui takes the opening, swinging hard. His chakra-reinforced blade cuts into Zetsu’s neck, but before it can cleave all the way through the creature is gone, vanished back into the earth.

With a curse, Shisui sheathes his sword, flips in the air, and comes down in a low crouch, eyes scanning the battlefield. Tenzō is thoroughly occupied trying to trap Kisame in his chakra-suppressing wood, so there’s no way to predict where Zetsu will surface next, and Shisui isn’t a sensor. Kurama would be pretty freaking useful right about now—

There’s a rumble, a tremble in the earth, and Shisui leaps automatically, a burst of chakra carrying him high. In the same moment the ground ruptures like an avalanche in reverse, stone and soil blasted into the air with more force than Shisui can fathom. He changes courses instantly, snatching Tenzō out of the path of falling stones and Kisame’s sword alike, then hurling them both behind the cover of a massive scapula halfway buried in the ground. As soon as they’re steady Shisui throws himself over Tenzō’s upper body, trying to shield his head and neck from anything that might get through as things crash and tumble around them. It sounds like the world is falling apart, and Shisui can’t do anything but hang on and pray that Kakashi and Kurama both survived.

Silence falls slowly, full of the lightening patter of small stones clattering down, and Shisui slowly leans back, wary. He needn’t have worried, though, he sees with one glance around them; there’s a solid wooden dome over their heads, just starting to retract, and he laughs before he can help it.

“I thought I was supposed to be the fast one,” he protests, and relief makes the words brighter than they really should be. “Clever, though.”

“Thanks.” Tenzō gives him a smile as Shisui pulls him to his feet, straightening his faceguard as he looks around through the choking dust. “What are the odds that Kisame and Zetsu both just died tragically without any effort from us?”

Shisui snorts. Yeah, no way their luck is that good. “Slim to none. Odds that the captain and Kurama weren’t the cause of that little eruption?” The look Tenzō gives him is both dry and eloquent, and
Shisui laughs. “Yeah, same. Come on, let’s go get jumped by insane terrorists.”

“I hate this mission,” Tenzō says almost wonderingly, but he follows Shisui out into the dust even so. “I really hate this mission so much. Chasing a rogue jinchuuriki with rabid mother bear tendencies was bad enough. I never signed up to face shark-men and walking Venus flytraps.”

“It was in the fine print of the ANBU contract,” Shisui tells him without sympathy. “I know the captain offered to get you out last year. That makes this your own fault for still being here.”

Tenzō makes a face at him. “Momentary insanity,” is his pretty terrible defense. “Besides, Kakashi-senpai was still in it. I wasn’t about to leave him alone.”

It takes effort for Shisui not to roll his eyes. Kakashi-senpai this, Kakashi senpai that. Shisui will be the first to admit that Kakashi is pretty great, but Tenzō’s near-adoration is a little aggravating for some reason. “Whatever,” he huffs, scanning the scattered boulders for any sign of life. “Can you sense anything?”

Tenzō gives him a curious look, but shapes the Snake Seal and takes a breath, eyes falling closed. It’s not a true sensing technique, Shisui knows—Tenzō has lectured him on this often enough—but Mokuton has a resonance with natural chakra that most other styles don’t. Especially when one of their opponents is partially a plant.

Then, without warning, Tenzō’s eyes fly open. He grabs Shisui’s arm and orders, “Shisui, get us down there! They both went after Kakashi and Kurama!”

Damn it. Shisui loops an arm around Tenzō’s waist and asks, “Is that tunnel still clear?”

A moment of concentration, a flare of chakra, and Tenzō huffs in quiet satisfaction. “It is now.”

That’s good enough for Shisui. He takes a breath, aims them towards the center of the mass of rubble, and moves.

“I’m starting to have second thoughts about this idea,” Kakashi says on the tail end of a coughing fit, waving dust away from his face.

“Fantastic,” Kurama grouches, putting a touch of chakra into it as he shoves a boulder away from their tiny Doton-made cave. “This is the perfect time to mention it. Good job, Hatake. You’re definitely a genius.”

“I didn’t think you would miss,” Kakashi protests mildly, pulling himself up and out of the press of rocks. “Really, how hard is it to hit one human-sized target?”

Kurama scoffs. “I’d like to see you do better. Besides, I could have hit him, and you’d just never know it! That damned eye of his is a fucking menace.”

Kakashi makes a politely skeptical noise, but offers Kurama a hand up nonetheless. With a glare, Kurama ignores it, jumping up onto the rocks by himself. They shift dangerously under his feet for a moment before they steady, and he breathes out noiselessly in relief. Exploiting Obito’s past trauma or not, he really doesn’t want to end up buried in a damn cave. Especially one that reeks of Uchiha.

There’s no sign of Obito, though, and it takes effort for Kurama not to let his eyes immediately stray
to the newly formed hole in the ceiling. They need at least one more glimpse of Obito to sell the act the way Kurama wants to, though if he doesn’t turn up within the next minute or two Kurama’s going to take what he can get.

“Anything?” Kakashi asks him quietly, uncovered Sharingan scanning the cave around them for any sign of rippling air.

Kurama thinks about protesting—again—that he isn’t a radio or something, but gives it up with a roll of his eyes. If he’s learned anything by now, it’s that Kakashi’s stubbornness can’t be compared to anyone else’s but Naruto. “How should I know?” he demands. “You’re the one with the matching eye.”

The look Kakashi gives him says he very clearly is not about to drop this subject a second time, now that they have some breathing room. “About that,” he starts, deceptively mild despite the faint narrowing of his eye.

It’s almost a relief when the air warps, and a vortex spits Obito out right in front of them. Kurama doesn’t pause, just lunges with another bijūdama twisting into being at his fingertips. Ducking beneath it, Obito whirls to follow, then kicks him in the back, and Kurama only just manage to flip over the blow at the last second. A turn, a swipe with his claws, and a shockwave ripples through the air to slam into the ground at Obito’s feet, driving him back.

Kurama doesn’t think he’s imagining the slight flinch the Uchiha gives when pebbles from the shattered ceiling clatter down on his shoulders.

“Stand still,” he snarls, darting in, trying to get closer as the bijūdama gains power. One step back, a long leap, another step—almost, he thinks, somewhere between desperate and viciously satisfied. Almost, almost, you bastard—

A hail of shuriken drives him to the side, but instantly Kakashi is in his place, sword slicing through the air with deadly intent. He deflects a kunai, another, ducks and rolls under a blaze of fire, and throws himself down as Obito ghosts right through him. Not about to let up on their advantage, Kurama rises to counter, checks briefly to be sure that Kakashi is far enough away, and slams the bijūdama in his hand upward with all the force he can muster.

Kamui whirls Obito away, and the tight knot of spinning chakra sails through the hole in the ceiling above. There’s one moment for Kurama to feel vicious elation as he tracks its path, sees the statue right in the line of fire, and then Kakashi bowls him over. There’s a cry, helpless and pained, and even as Kurama hits the ground the smell of hot blood blooms around him, spattering across dusty stone.

Kakashi takes a shuddering breath, his eyes fixed on Kurama’s face as color leeches from his skin. Kurama stares back, horror eating through his chest like acid, the metallic tang of Kakashi’s blood on the back of his tongue, filling his mouth, but he can’t move, can’t think, can only remember a familiar body falling, golden hair and empty eyes and—

With a jerk, the purple-scaled sword withdraws in another wash of crimson, and Kakashi makes a breathless, agonized sound as he collapses on top of Kurama. Kurama has a quarter of a second to feel the tremble of uneven breaths against his throat before that familiar sword is sweeping down again, and he wraps an arm around Kakashi and hurls them out of the way, rolling to the side.

His entire arm is soaked, wet-sticky-hot with blood, and frantically Kurama tries to recall just how much blood a non-jinchūriki human can lose before they die, how much skin Kisame’s damned sword shaves off with each pass. Kakashi's chakra is fading too, eaten up by his Sharingan, and it’s
an unwelcome reminder that before Naruto's trip with Jiraiya Kakashi had had to use it—and use it up—against Zabuza. No damned wonder he can't manage more than once with Kamui in a desperate situation.

“Hey now,” Kisame says, sounding disappointed as Kurama leaps back to his feet and steps fully in front of Kakashi, a low growl rumbling up from the bottom of his chest. “If Konoha's infamous Copy-Nin can't even take more than one hit, I should get the satisfaction of putting his overinflated ego to rest.”

Kurama snarls, deep and powerful and furious, and lashes out, sending a warning shockwave at the former Kiri nin that makes him stagger. “Try it and I rip your damned face off,” he threatens, then spins to catch a handful of branches as they stab down at him. A twist, a wrench, a heave, and Zetsu goes flying over his shoulder, colliding with Kisame. They both tumble back, and it’s not much time, but it’s enough.

Like a hurricane, like a hammer, the full force of Kurama's chakra unfolds around him, doubles and redoubles and surges forward, heavy and hot and full of the malice that’s his greatest affinity. Glutted off Obito's hate, edged with Kisame's slow-burning anger, reinforced by Zetsu's bitterness, it thunders across the wrecked cavern, shattering rocks and sending Kisame staggering. There's a blur somewhere behind him, familiar voices, but Kurama can't spare them the attention. He sweeps in, too fast to see, grabbing Kisame's wrist the swordsman tries to get his blade up again.

A hard wrench and something snaps in his arm, making him cry out, but he jerks around, tossing the sword to his other hand and trying again. Samehada flays Kurama's skin, shears it off in a wash of blood, but it heals as fast as it hurts. Kurama snarls, shoves forward until a burst of roots and branches drive him back, trying to swallow his chakra. He has enough to spare, for Zetsu and Samehada both, is ready to prove it with another wash of fire—

A flight of kunai reinforced with chakra scatter across the shroud of his power, skid away like misdirected stars to bury themselves in rent earth, and Kurama takes it as a warning. Even as the air twists into a vortex, he summons his fire, shaping it without pause, without hand-signs. It leaps for Obito as he emerges, meets another wave of fire as the Uchiha slides into intangibility. Kurama lunges anyway, fury bitter like ashes on his tongue, and turns to catch the blow the Obito aims at his back as the man passes through him. Claws up, bared, scratching across dark cloth as they come down sharply, and the shockwave sends Obito flying.

He slams into the cave wall, and maybe it’s the furthest thing from smart, but Kurama slams a bijūdama into the ceiling directly above his head. Everything shakes, trembles, and there's a sudden surge of something that rests on Kurama's senses like the very edge of debilitating terror as the rocks start to fall.

No time to waste. Kurama leaps for Kakashi, snatching him up in his arms as best he can, careful of his back as he leaps with all the force of his chakra. Clearing the edge of the gaping hole in the ceiling is simple, and he shifts his grip on the slack Copy-Nin as best he can, hanging onto him with one hand as another bijūdama whirs to life in the other.

“Kurama!” Green chakra shimmers, blurs, steadies, and Shisui throws himself in the way of another burst of dagger-pointed branches, tantō slashing down with a wave of fire. From beside him, Tenzō dives forward, his own Mokuton rising in answer to meet Zetsu's, and the echo of them colliding is almost enough to drown out Shisui's voice when he shouts, “Go!”

Kurama couldn’t ask for a better opening. He spins, hurling the bijūdama at the already cracked and cratered statue with all the force he can put behind it, and a wordless, guttural bellow of pure fury accompanies the sound of shattering stone.
Forty chapters. How the fuck did that happen. Almost 200k words. How is that possible, fuck me.

So! There’s a bit of folklore introduced here regarding foxes, and it’s mostly intact from the myths, but I have twisted it a little to fit the Naruto ‘verse. Another twist has gone into the Rinnegan, specifically the Rinne Tensei, because canon contradicts itself and I’m going with the more convenient option, and the first mentioned.

Also ignored: anime fillers as canon. Sorry. Kind of.

“Fucking hell!” Shisui curses, almost a shriek, and leaps for the top of a protruding boulder. “What the fuck is this stuff?”

Not quite as maneuverable with an unconscious Kakashi in his arms, Kurama stays where he is, but flares his chakra. It burns through the thick white ooze that’s spreading out across the cavern, and the smell that rises is almost enough to make him gag, somewhere between decaying flesh and rotting plant matter. The White Zetsu clones that were trapped in the Gedō Mazō, he realizes with a grimace. Infinite Tsukiyomi’s previous victims, their stasis shattered along with the statue, and Kurama wants to feel pity or relief for them, but all he has space for right now is a tension-tight knot of worry filling his chest to the brim.

“Ichor,” is all he says, and it’s true enough, if not entirely correct. Sakura had told Naruto once that ichor was the blood of the gods, and Kurama can’t think of a better description for this mess. Not Kaguya’s blood directly, but the blood of her twisted plans. Gone now, and not a moment too soon, honestly.

Perched atop a pillar of wood, Tenzō makes a face, though his eyes are flickering over the rest of the cave, scanning for any sign of movement. “I feel like we should take advantage of this brief opportunity to run.”

That’s the best advice Kurama’s heard in a long time. “Make an exit,” he orders, and when Shisui blinks at him he glares at the kid. “Or I can do it and bring the rest of the cave down on our heads.”

The two jounin exchange glances for half a second before Tenzō gives a determined nod. “Right,” he says, bringing his hands together in a Snake Seal, and the post he’s standing on rises, even as earth rumbles and shifts above him.

“Is the captain going to bleed to death before we can stop again?” Shisui asks, leaping lightly into the
cleared space around Kurama. One eye is trained on the space where they last saw their opponents, half a second before the explosion, and Kurama can't blame him for his caution. He’s got every sense straining, trying to find Obito at the very least, but there's nothing. Kamui, probably, he thinks in disgust.

Unfortunately, there are more pressing things to worry about. Kakashi, for one, and Kurama has been trying not to think about the sheer volume of blood dripping hot and wet down his arm. “Let’s hurry instead of waiting around to find out,” he bites out, getting an arm under Kakashi's knees and leaping for Tenzō’s pillar. A touch of chakra gives him traction on the vertical surface, and he follows it up towards the slant of sunlight where Tenzō is pushing through to the outside world.

At the very edge of the hole, his feet finally on solid ground, Kurama turns. Positive and negative chakra swirl together in his palm one more time, probably overkill, but even with the Juubi’s husk shattered into pieces he’s not taking any chances. “Go,” he snarls at Shisui and Tenzō, and hurls the full-sized bijūdama back the way they came.

With a groaning rumble, the entire side of the mountain starts to cave in.

Taking three long leaps towards the edge of the treeline, Kurama pauses for just a moment, looking back. It’s with vicious satisfaction that he watches as the Juubi’s vessel—Kaguya’s vessel—is buried beneath several hundred tons of rock and earth. If the goddess goes looking for a way back to earth, she’s sure as hell not going to find one there. And—maybe that’s not a guarantee that she never will, because she’s damned creative and Zetsu is definitely not dead yet, but it’s the best guarantee that Kurama can put on things. However things play out now, they’re not going to end the way they did the first time around.

“Kurama-sama!” a familiar voice calls, and with relief, Kurama turns to see a silvery shape wriggle out of the undergrowth. Right behind Momiji comes another fox, even larger than he is, but solid black except for the white tips on her seven tails.

“Momiji,” Kurama says, crouching down, and buries his free hand in the reynard’s thick ruff. “There you are. I thought you’d gotten caught or something.”

Momiji huffs, ears pressing flat against his skull in offense. “Never, Kurama-sama. But I found Ran!”

“Was she missing?” Kurama asks with faint amusement, nodding to the vixen. She bounces a little in place, ears up and tails fanned out, and gives him a happy fox-grin.

“I don’t go back to Mount Inari very often,” she says, and her voice is incongruously light for her massive size—as big as a bear, and much broader across the chest proportionally than either Momiji or Fuji. “I’m sure he thought that I was lost. It’s very nice to meet you at last, Kurama-sama. Momiji has told me so much about you.”

“Uh, not to interrupt this charming little meet-and-greet,” Shisui cuts in, “but is the horizon supposed to be on fire?”

Kurama jerks his head up, twisting around as best he can without jostling Kakashi, and curses. The southern edge of the forest is burning, right next to where Rōshi and Han were supposed to stage their distraction. “Sage. I think Rōshi lost his temper. We need to get over there.”

“We can take you,” Ran volunteers, and when Kurama glances at her in surprise, she shyly ducks her head, but offers, “I’d be happy to help, Kurama-sama. Those people in the big den have always felt bad. I'm glad you're getting rid of them.”
To anyone sensitive to natural chakra, bad is probably an understatement. With Kakashi bleeding out in his arms, Kurama's not about to argue, so he nods and pushes to his feet. “I need bandages,” he tells the other two shinobi. “Any you can spare, unless one of you is hiding a talent for medical ninjutsu.”

Instantly, they both reach for their pouches. “Jiraiya-sama might know some,” Tenzō offers, mouth pulled tight as he watches Kurama lay Kakashi out on the ground. Shisui has his back to them, keeping watch on the approach, but the line of his shoulders is tense and worried.

Given the fact that Kakashi isn’t stirring even as Kurama peels shredded, blood-soaked cloth away from his flayed back, they’re right to worry. Samehada is a vicious sword, shaving skin off more than cutting it, and between that, its chakra-drain, and Kakashi’s use of the Sharingan, the Copy-Nin is looking paler than his hair. He doesn’t make so much as a sound when Kurama presses a wad of cloth against the long, wide stripe of skinned flesh, trying not to hurt him but also trying to stop the bleeding.

Shisui makes a short, sharp sound in this throat. “Someone reported hearing that Tsunade-sama was seen near the Lightning Country border,” he suggests. “I know she can’t stand blood, but…”

But flaying is a slow, painful form of execution, and Kakashi’s back is currently missing half its skin. There’s no way that Kurama knows of fixing that with a low-level medical ninjutsu. They need a medic-nin at the very least, and Lightning Country’s border is a hell of a lot closer than dragging themselves all the way back to Water Country.

But—

Naruto and the rest of the kids are in Kiri, on their own, and while Kurama trusts that Zabuza will do everything he can to keep them safe, against someone like Obito that isn’t a hell of a lot of help. Even Kisame might be too much for the swordsman to handle right now. Kurama would be more than happy to just bolt back to them as fast as possible and get rid of that risk entirely.

Kakashi took that blow for him, though. Kakashi pushed him out of the way, as stupid and foolish as the gesture was, and Kurama isn’t about to let him die for it. Naruto taught him better than that.

“Help me get him up,” he tells Tenzō instead of answering, and the teenager slides over to lift Kakashi’s torso carefully, letting Kurama wrap more bandages around his chest to hold the makeshift pad in place.

“Movement,” Shisui reports sharply, and Ran rises to her feet with a high, snarling growl, moving to stand next to him. Shisui flinches a little—she’s eye-level with him, massive and intimidating, and given the last time Konoha faced a giant fox Kurama can’t quite blame him—but doesn’t move away, simply reaching for a coil of ninja wire.

It’s Han who emerges from the trees, though, supporting a limping, cursing Jiraiya who has a hand on the jinchuuriki’s shoulders. Rōshi is right behind him, looking incredibly unhappy and with half of his beard charred off, and Itachi is bringing up the rear, his face streaked with soot but looking otherwise untouched.

“Itachi!” Shisui says with clear relief, leaping forward to meet his cousin. “You're okay?”

Solemn, Itachi nods, dark eyes flickering over the older jounin. “I’m fine. Were you hurt? We saw the explosion.”

“Not my fault!” Shisui protests, as though his pride has been wounded by the mere implication.
“Talk to the trigger-happy twosome over there.”

A sharply indrawn breath says that Jiraiya at least has noticed Kakashi’s state. The Toad Sage hobbles over, clearly favoring one knee, and crouches down with a wince to check Kakashi’s pulse. “Damn, kid,” he mutters. “He’s not looking so hot.”

There’s a faint huff of breath, a tightly contained groan. “’M always hot,” Kakashi protests vaguely, not even opening his eyes.

Kurama rolls his eyes, even as relief bubbles up in his chest. “Yeah, yeah,” he says, making it as patronizing as possible. “Shut your damned mouth, Hatake. I don’t know what the hell you were thinking. That was just about the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen someone do, and that’s saying something.”

“Mm.” Kakashi opens his grey eye, peering up at Kurama as he secures the bandage over Kakashi’s ribs, and says with perfect mildness, “Automatic reflex. Cave-ins do that to me.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Kurama hadn’t thought of that, hadn’t paid attention to the parallels. Sage damn it, he’s acting as dumb as Naruto right now, but even Naruto wouldn’t ignore a blaring signal like that.

He takes a breath, pretending it doesn’t shake a little, and growls. “And now you’re missing a third of your skin,” he snaps, but keeps his motions gentle as he slides a finger beneath the wraps to make sure they aren’t too tight. “I could have healed myself, Hatake.”

“I realize that.” It would be lazy if not for the edge beneath the words, or the way Kakashi’s fingers curl around his wrist, white-knuckled for half an instant before he controls the tell and pushes to his feet. One sideways glance, and he adds without inflection, “Now.”

It takes effort not to curse aloud as Kurama follows him up, but he manages to trap the words behind his teeth and turns to Jiraiya. “The rest of Akatsuki?”

“Kakuzu is out of hearts. Again,” Rōshi offers with a pleased grunt, folding his arms over his chest. “Slippery bastard staged a retreat before I could torch him, though.”

“Yes,” Han says dryly, offering Jiraiya a hand back to his feet. “We noticed that you missed. The massive wildfire was rather conspicuous.”

“Partly my fault,” Itachi puts in, and when Shisui opens his mouth he narrows his eyes in obvious warning. “Orochimaru confronted us, and we nearly managed to capture him, but Sasori arrived with his puppets and we had to retreat.”

Han hums, sounding unhappy. “Bee’s close,” he reports. “Kokuō can feel him. But I don’t think we can afford to face a united Akatsuki.”

Well, if their goal was taking out Akatsuki, they failed miserably. Thankfully, Kurama thinks with some amusement, their bar for success was set a lot lower. Now that the Gedō Mazō has been thoroughly shattered, Akatsuki is without any way of sealing the bijuu. Madara's grand plan is completely upended, and Obito's as well. They're ineffectual now, aimless, and once things are a little more settled Kurama will be overjoyed to pick them off one at a time without the threat of sealing.

Taking a breath, Kurama drags his thoughts back to the matter at hand. Akatsuki is, at the moment, still a threat—Obito's probably regrouping right now, but he’s not going to take the loss of the Gedō Mazō well. Bee is close enough for Kokuō to sense Gyuuki, and likely Nagato still has him wrapped
up with chakra rods. They're short on time, a little battered, and need to get Kakashi help before he bleeds to death. This isn't the time for a confrontation, but maybe…

“Shisui,” Kurama says, and the Uchiha twists away from where he's checking Itachi over and looks at him questioningly. Kurama gives him a smile that might have a few too many teeth to be polite, and asks, “How are you at hit and run attacks?”

Shisui's eyes widen, then narrow sharply. “Very good,” he says, grinning back, and it looks dangerous. “We're going after the Raikage's brother?”

“Might as well,” Kurama agrees. “Since we came all this way.”

“I'll take you,” Ran volunteers eagerly, then pauses, her ears folding back in embarrassment. “Ah, if you don’t mind, Kurama-sama.”

Kurama huffs a brief laugh, scratching behind one of her ears. “Thanks,” he says, and lets her dart a quick, shy lick at his wrist without pulling away. “Come on, Uchiha, we’ve got a jinchuuriki to rescue.”

Shisui grimaces, but gamely follows Kurama as he twists his fingers in Ran’s ruff and swings onto her back. “Thank you,” he tells her awkwardly, and Kurama rolls his eyes, grabs the teenager by the back of his flak jacket, and pulls him up as well.

“Relax,” he orders. “She might be black, but Ran’s a myobu, not a nogitsune. You're as safe with her as you are with any kitsune.”

“There's a difference?” Shisui asks, then yelps as Momiji huffs and snaps his teeth at his bare toes. “Hey! That’s really not helping with the relaxing thing.”

“Nogitsune are field foxes,” Momiji informs him pointedly. “Wild fox spirits not sworn to a service. They're more dangerous. Myobu are celestial fox spirits, like summons, with a purpose and a figure to serve.”

Itachi, at Shisui's knee, makes a quiet sound of interest. “The Kyuubi was a nogitsune, then?” he asks.

Momiji gives a yipping, delighted laugh, and Ran chuckles, amused. “No,” she says. “Not in the least. Kyuubi-sama has nine tails—he’s our god as much as any other. He’s neither, because he’s greater than either title can encompass.”

“Okay, folklore lesson is over,” Kurama says hastily, giving Momiji a sharp look. The reynard grins back at him, showing a flash of tongue before he snaps his teeth and sits down, wrapping his tails around himself. “You’ll start heading back?”

“As best we can,” Jiraiya agrees with a faint grimace, testing his leg.

Han snorts quietly, but meets Kurama’s eyes squarely. “We’ll be fine,” he assures him. “And if we’re not, we’ll inform you immediately. Go save Bee. We’ll meet you back by the ship. Ao should still be waiting.”

Kurama can't help a quick glance at Kakashi, who’s still standing, even if he does look like he really shouldn’t be. Reading the question Kurama can’t quite bring himself to ask, Kakashi crinkles his eye in a bullshit smile even as he pulls his hitai-ate back down. “Maa, Kurama, you should go. We have a conversation to get to later.”
Well, that’s a cheerful thought to leave on. Kurama makes a face at him, orders, “Hang on,” though he can’t tell if it’s for Shisui’s sake or Kakashi’s, and curls his fingers into Ran’s dark fur. The vixen immediately gathers herself, and in a surge of sleek muscle and long legs she leaps forward, heading south.

“Can you smell them?” Kurama asks, even as he stretches out his senses. Nagato isn’t angry as much as he is driven, but there’s a deeply buried thread of it in him that’s just about as heady as Obito’s.

Ran yips in confirmation, launching herself over a river to the sound of Shisui’s yelp. Kurama has to swallow a chuckle, despite the tension Kakashi’s comment left him with; he wonders how long it will take for Shisui to realize she’s only exaggerating her bounds and jumps to get a reaction out of him. A myobu is still a kitsune, after all.

“They’re approaching slowly, but I can find them,” she says. “It’s the one with all the metal—I’ve seen him before. These are my woods, and I’ve been watching for a long time.”

With seven tails, she has to have been; a few more centuries and enough power and Ran has every chance of reaching nine tails. Not many foxes do, and if she’s staked out Moon Country as her own, it means she’s on her way to becoming a god in her own right.

“Good,” Kurama says gruffly, and pretends he doesn’t see the way her ears prickle up with joy and excitement. “A lot of darkness has settled here. I’m glad that someone as strong as you is keeping an eye on it.”

“Kurama-sama!” Ran’s next jump has an added wriggle of delight. “Thank you!”

“Why the ‘sama’?” Shisui complains, clutching at the back of Kurama’s shirt as they skirt a stand of burning trees and clear a wide fallen log. “And no more wiggling, please!”

Ran grins, chattering gutturally in her amusement. “Kurama-sama is Kurama-sama,” she says cheerfully, and Kurama can’t fight his own grin. Of course foxes would understand trickery and keeping secrets. Then her ears swivel, and she twists around, skidding to a halt at the top of a small rise. “They’re down there. Nine of them, Kurama-sama.”

This close, Kurama doesn’t need to stretch to feel Nagato’s anger. Konan is pretty much invisible to him—she has devotion, not malice, at her core—but he doesn’t need that particular ability to hear the mechanical thud of Nagato’s walker, or to feel the edge of Gyūki’s chakra, fainter than it should be.

“We’re going to have to run,” he warns Ran and Shisui equally. “I’ll distract them, you flash in and grab Bee, and then Ran picks us up and we hightail it for the coast. If they’re still chasing us by then, we’ll keep going through to Frost Country, and try to make that connection to cross back to Kiri. Pein’s range isn’t all that great, though, so it shouldn’t come to that.”

“Great, so, six down. That only leaves us with all the rest to worry about chasing us,” Shisui retorts, but he takes a breath, slides off Ran’s back, and leaps up into the trees. The fire has filled the air with smoke, enough for decent cover, and in an instant Shisui’s concealed enough that Kurama has a hard time picking him out even when he knows where to look.

Kurama only hopes this goes better than the last I’ll-distract-them plan.

Really, though, he’s got the easy part. Taking a breath, Kurama lets his chakra go, lets it flare out in a heavy, choking shroud, and feels Gyūki stir weakly. Nagato pauses, the sound of his walker disappearing between one beat and the next, and Kurama grins, full of enough teeth to make Zabuza proud. He hurls himself forward headlong, already calling up a surge of chakra—not a bijūdama, not
yet, though he’s more than happy to take out one of the Paths if there’s an opportunity. Wind instead this time, knife-sharp blades of it wrapped up in a hurricane, and he snarls viciously as he bursts through the trees, right on top of the group.

Konan shouts a warning, leaping in front of Nagato's walker even as the six Paths shift forward to form a defense. Kurama doesn’t even hesitate; he drops his death-wind on them instantly, and it screams as it tears through trees and rips furrows in the earth. The hidden blades hit second, even as the Akatsuki members are still trying to find their footing, and it’s sheer luck that the Naraka Path takes the hardest hit. He stumbles back, faltering as deep rents slice into his robe and the dead flesh beneath, and the other Paths move as one to defend. Konan and Nagato are falling back, and that’s where Bee is, sprawled completely still across the walker, but Kurama doesn’t let himself look. He meets the Deva Path’s wave of gravity with a shockwave of his own, sweeps beneath an attempt to grab him by the Asura Path’s metal arms, and kicks the Animal Path into the Human Path before summoning a wave of carefully controlled fire.

Even as the Preta Path moves to block it, there's a flash of green chakra. Too fast to see, Shisui flashes through the battleground, snatching Bee practically out of Nagato's lap, and vanishes back into the trees.

That’s Kurama's cue to leave before the Paths manage to outmaneuver him. He drops beneath another of the Asura Path’s weapons and slams a shockwave into the ground, buckling and shaking the earth and raising a cloud of dust, and then leaps up and away. A burst of chakra gives him speed and momentum as he throws himself back the way he came, branches blurring beneath his feet. Rōshi’s fire is closing in, near enough that Kurama can feel the heat of it in the air, and the smoke is even thicker than the dust he raised.

Through it, a dark shape looms. With a quick bound, Ran leaps past him, and Kurama doesn’t wait for her to stop. He grabs the hand Shisui stretches out, jumps, and lets the Uchiha pull him up behind him. Bee is slumped in front, bowed over Ran’s neck, and Kurama had forgotten just what a big man he was, the largest of the jinchuuriki after Han. Hopefully carrying him won't tax Ran too heavily.

“Well, that didn’t go as badly as it could have,” Shisui says, sounding cheerful again as they skid down a rocky slope and race towards the horizon. “Yay team.”

Kurama snorts, trying not to inhale too much smoke as he catches his breath. “Yay,” he agrees dryly. “Can you get any of those chakra rods out of him?”

He halfway expects Shisui to blanch or complain. Instead, the boy nods once, grimly, and asks, “He won’t bleed to death from pulling them out?”

Kurama tests Gyūki’s power, and while it’s diminished, it’s more than enough to keep his host alive. “He’s a jinchuuriki, remember? He’ll be better once they’re gone.”

There’s no response beyond a soft grunt of effort and a sick sucking sound, but a moment later one of the black rods goes flying into the forest. Gyūki’s chakra doesn’t exactly flood back, but Kurama judges that there’s more of it than there was a moment ago. And with every rod pulled out, it bleeds back in, filling wounds, healing burns.

Kurama feels his sibling’s joy and relief, echoing through their shared mindscape, and closes his eyes with a faint smile.
“Hey, that was neat,” Kisame says cheerfully as a warping spiral spits himself, “Madara”, and Zetsu out in the rubble that used to be Akatsuki’s main base. Looking around, he tries to pick out any signs of things that survived, including the squad that attacked them.

The Uchiha hums, the sound all but vibrating with suppressed anger, and reaches up. The mask clicks against reinforced gloves as it comes off, and Kisame tries to be subtle about staring at the face revealed. Younger than he had expected, back when the man recruited him—probably even younger than Kisame, though he hasn’t had cause to ask. The scars are interesting, as are the distinctly different Sharingan eyes.

“The Gedō Mazō is destroyed,” he says, apparently to Zetsu.

“I noticed!” the plant creature snaps back, bristling. His hands are clenched into fists, and there’s fury and frustration in every line of his body. “There has to be a way to repair it! The plan can’t go forward without it!”

Because Kisame is watching, he sees the way the Uchiha’s eyes narrow, the faint flicker of derision that crosses his face. It’s gone in an instant, though, deeply buried, and he bends down to pick up a shard of stone. There’s white goo clinging to one side, and he studies it for a moment, then tosses it away. “We need to relocate,” he says, glancing at Kisame, who raises his brows. “Between the fire and the chakra, I wouldn’t be surprised if Kumo sent squads to investigate.”

“We don’t need to relocate, we need to fix this,” Zetsu hisses, stepping right into the Uchiha’s space. “Find a way, but it has to be done! If you hadn’t underestimated them to begin with, we wouldn’t even have this problem!”

For a long, breathless moment Kisame almost thinks Zetsu is going to get warped away permanently. Red-black eyes narrow, and that cold, heavy chakra gets even heavier. But then the Uchiha turns away, looking elsewhere, and says, “That redhead. He’s the one who’s been taking the jinchuuriki from the villages?”

“Yeah,” Kisame says, figuring he may as well chip in. Orochimaru is their spymaster, but that doesn’t mean Kisame allows himself to be left out of the loop. “An Uzumaki. Konoha’s saying he’s their last jinchuuriki’s brother or something.”

The man turns sharply, staring at him for a long moment, and surprise looks strange on that controlled face. “Uzumaki Kushina had a brother?” he demands.

The fact that he’s an Uchiha means that he’s more than likely from Konoha, Kisame realizes belatedly. And given his age, he likely knew the other Uzumaki as well. “Apparently,” he says, offering up a toothy grin. “This one’s not into letting villages control him, or any other jinchuuriki, though.”

“I felt him free Yagura,” the Uchiha murmurs, almost to himself. “And then just now—he’s got enough raw strength to be an Uzumaki. That…could cause a problem, if he decides to be a nuisance. He knows too much. Things he should have no idea about.”

“When aren’t the Uzumaki a nuisance?” Zetsu demands sourly. “If that pigheaded princess hadn’t sealed the Kyuubi inside herself to begin with, this world wouldn’t even have jinchuuriki.”

The scarred corner of the Uchiha’s mouth tips up, just a little, before he shakes his head and looks back at Kisame. “There’s no doubt he’ll end up back in Konoha. Sarutobi is too crafty to allow him to keep wandering, especially with nine jinchuuriki on his side. We’re going to need to change our strategy if we still want to gather the bijuu.”
Kisame considers this for a moment. It’s not the best idea, but it will certainly be unexpected, and Pein’s chakra rods should be able to hold a jinchuuriki indefinitely. He chuckles, already anticipating the fights to come, and swings Samehada over his shoulder. “Got a plan, boss?” he asks cheerfully, and is pleased to get another faint quarter-smile.

“We go underground,” he decides. “No trace, no trail for the villages to follow. There are several bases we can use across the continent. Then, a distraction for Konoha, and we take Uzumaki. I have several questions only he can answer, and he’ll prove good bait for the jinchuuriki, if they’re truly fond of him.”

“What kind of distraction?” Kisame asks, interested. Those usually involve at least a little fighting, and it’s been too peaceful lately. Well, not today, but for a long time before that, and it builds up.

The Uchiha hesitates, but before he can answer the sound of footsteps makes him turn, gaze snapping to the shattered end of one of the surface passages, and he slides his mask back into place. A bare second later, a familiar figure steps delicately around fallen stones, and Orochimaru says slyly, “If you don’t object, Madara, I believe I may have a…entertaining solution.”

Orochimaru’s been with them for long enough that Kisame knows to be wary of anything that makes him look like that—though, admittedly, the Snake Sannin looks quite a bit more ruffled than usual, and there are definite marks of a fight on him.

The purple mask fixes on him for a long moment before the Uchiha crosses his arms over his chest. “Enlighten us.”

That’s clear displeasure on Orochimaru’s face, the dislike of having to obey an order. Laughably easy to read in comparison to their leader’s careful concealment of everything, and it makes Kisame chuckle to himself.

Orochimaru ignores him pointedly, coming forward to join their little group. “I’ve been studying the possibilities inherent in the Rinnegan, particularly its ability to revive the dead,” he says grandly, as though this is news when Pein and Konan both watch him like hawks for any mention of tests or theories. He’s not quite bold enough to badger them, but Kisame still wouldn’t want to be in their shoes. Though it’s definitely amusing from his.

When no one takes the bait, Orochimaru casts a dark look at the three of them and continues, as if he’d meant to all along, “I also managed to acquire the notes on Senju Tobirama’s Edo Tensei, though it is unfortunately incomplete, and breaks down quickly.”

That’s not news, either—if Kisame is frank, it’s probably one of the main reasons the man was recruited in the first place. He taps an idle finger against Samehada’s hilt, waiting, and takes just a little bit of pleasure in the glare Orochimaru gives him. The scientist huffs, then says as if they’re trying his patience, “The Rinne Tensei can revive the deceased, no matter how long dead. However, the chakra required to both rebuild the body and summon the soul is immense, and not even an Uzumaki would survive for long.”

“My point?” the Uchiha asks, and Kisame is kind of awed at how he can project infinite patience and deadly irritation at the same time.

Even Orochimaru seems to notice, because his eyes flicker over the man, then slide away, and he finishes with slightly more haste than normal, “I propose a combination of the two techniques. Edo Tensei to recreate the body and return to soul, and Rinne Tensei to bind them in life. A control tag on the resurrected should be enough to keep them firmly on our side, and I can’t think of a better way to distract Konoha than finding themselves set against their beloved lost ones.” By the last word, he’s
smirking, sharp and hungry, as much for chaos as he is for knowledge unless Kisame is reading him very wrong. “It will only work on a handful, but that should be more than enough to put the village on edge and have them jumping at shadows.”

The Uchiha stares at him, still and silent, and then chuckles humorlessly. “Uzumaki seemed close to the Copy-Nin,” he says, darkly idle. “Distract one and it might work to unsettle the other. And I know *exactly* who to use.”
Foreigners in Konoha aren’t exactly rare, but they aren’t usually this common.

Tucked away in the corner of the ramen stand, Iruka absently drags his chopsticks in lazy circles through the broth, watching from his peripheral vision as tight knots of unfamiliar shinobi pass, more of them than he’s seen at one time since Konoha last hosted the Chuunin Exams. It’s not as if they're loitering, or even acting suspicious—he might even go so far as to say they’re on their best behavior—but just the fact of their presence itches at him. Judging by the increase in twitchiness in every Konoha shinobi he’s come across, Iruka isn’t the only one to feel that way.

“We’ve been invaded,” a lazy voice says, and the stool next to him scrapes faintly as it’s pulled out.

“You shouldn’t joke about that,” Iruka reproves, but he’s been jolted out of his reverie enough to set his chopsticks aside, half-turning to look at his companion with a frown. “I heard you were hurt. Should you be walking around?”

Genma waves a careless hand, sharp eyes fixed on a trio of Kumo nin lingering in front of a trinket stand. “Just a bump on the head, Iruka. Hana got me all fixed up. But that’s a mighty deep frown to be wearing while eating ramen. Something on your mind?”

Iruka knows better than to believe that particular lighthearted tone, especially when coupled with an expression like a wolfhound just waiting for the leash to slip. Unfortunately, Genma's hardly the only shinobi in Konoha with a grudge against one of the groups present, and that’s one headache Iruka is more than happy to leave in the Hokage's hands. His class of children is bad enough, and they don’t come with three wars’ worth of resentment, mission-based grudges, economic competition, and clan feuds that stretch back well before the village was founded.

“Are you allowed to talk about it? Your mission?” he asks, and then has to clamp his mouth shut to keep from demanding more immediately.

Genma just looks at him for a moment, hazel eyes uncomfortably sharp, and then smiles a little, crooked and wry. “Yeah,” he says, waving a friendly hand at Teuchi, who waves back. “Uzumaki Kurama’s been pardoned, and they’re planning to head back here as soon as a mission up north is done. I don’t think the Hokage will string me up for letting a few things spill.”

Carefully not mentioned is all the other Kage currently in the village, but Iruka knows very well just how big Genma is on loyalty, and how much of it he’s given to Konoha as a whole. He’d hardly start to bow to other Kages now.

Besides, Genma's allegiance is hardly what's on Iruka's mind right now. He twists his hands together in his lap, staring down at the uneaten bowl in front of him, and tries not to think of the times he’s seen Naruto in this stall. Tries not to think about all the times he could have come in, sat down next to the boy, and just smiled at him. Maybe then—

“Naruto,” he blurts before he can let darker thoughts distract him. “I heard you fought Kurama. Did you—was Naruto there?”
There's a sudden, suspicious lack of cooking sounds from the kitchen area. Teuchi doesn’t quite lean around the edge of his workspace and stare at them, but with two shinobi present he might as well be doing just that.

Genma's eyes flicker towards the chef, then back to Iruka, and he pulls the senbon from his mouth. “Thought you weren’t a fan of the kid,” he says, utterly mild, even though his gaze is intent.

It takes effort for Iruka not to flinch. “He’s my student,” he retorts. “And he was kidnapped by a madman—”

“Nah,” Genma interrupts, something softening in his eyes as he leans back in his chair. “Kurama's not a madman. Not in the least. Just…family.” He smiles a little, fond and wistful, and twists his senbon through his fingers. “He’s a lot like Kushina, really. It’s kinda nice. I didn’t think Naruto would end up knowing anything about her, but I think Kurama will tell him. Kid looks happy either way.”

It’s a little startling, sometimes, to realize that while Iruka was a scared little boy during the Kyuubi’s attack, Genma was already a tokujo. Already a bodyguard, fighting to give the Yondaime time to reseal the beast. Genma knew the Yondaime, knew Uzumaki Kushina, and his connection with Naruto is even deeper than Iruka's, for all that Genma isn’t a part of Naruto's life. With that in mind, Iruka hesitates, not quite knowing how to phrase what he wants to know, and finally manages, “You knew her, but you're not…?”

Thankfully, Genma seems to understand what he’s getting at. The tokujo’s smile pulls to the side, even more crooked now, and he tilts one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. “Couldn’t. No one with a connection to Minato was allowed near him, in case it tipped other villages off as to who he was. ‘Course, then word got out to the civilians what Naruto was and that was useless. Still an order, though. Did what I could from behind a mask, but don’t think for a second that I believe Minato and Kushina won't kick my ass in the afterlife for not doing more. Damn good reason to stay alive right now.”

Iruka's heard the rumors about Namikaze Minato and Uzumaki Kushina, saw them together a few times when he was a child. It’s not inconceivable that Naruto is theirs, especially given the way he shares the Yondaime’s coloring, and with as many enemies as Minato made Iruka can understand the attempt to hide Naruto. He nods, twisting his fingers absentely, and drags himself back on task. “So you saw him? Naruto?”

Genma hums contemplatively, looking from him to Teuchi’s silent workspace and back again. A glance at the street outside shows it mostly clear for the moment, and he calls quietly, “Join us, Teuchi-san. Standing hunched over like that can't be good for your back.”

With a faintly sheepish chuckle, Teuchi steps out from behind the partition, wiping his hands on a rag. “Sorry, sorry,” he apologizes quickly. “I don’t hear a lot of news here. Forgive an old man for eavesdropping.”

Easily, Genma waves that away. “Yeah, I saw him,” he answers Iruka. “Seemed happy enough to climb all over Kurama like a monkey, and he hadn’t been hurt. Kurama loves him. Hell, Kurama adores him. He was grumpy and testy, but the minute he picked Naruto up he was happy, too.”

Which pokes a few rather large holes in the report Iruka glanced over, claiming Genma and Kurama fought, but given what Genma is currently saying Iruka isn’t about to bring it up. He has shinobi training too, after all. Instead, he sighs in faint relief, rubbing his scar as he dueks his head, feeling a little like he’s going to float away. Naruto is fine. Naruto is safe, and coming back to Konoha, and Kurama isn’t going to hurt him.
“And the other children?” he asks, because there's absolutely no way he can stop himself.

“Fierce,” is Genma's assessment, coupled with a smile that’s back to being warm. “Two little girls and another boy. The girls were about ready to come after me before Kurama got there. They’re all fine.” His grin takes on a teasing edge, and he adds, “I’d put good odds on them ending up in your class sooner rather than later, Iruka. Brace yourself.”

Teuchi laughs, and Iruka groans, burying his face in his hands. *More* Narutos are not what he needs. Though…possibly he’s not as opposed as he might have been a month ago. Apparently absence really does increase fondness.

“Gen,” a familiar voice says worriedly, and the hanging are brushed aside. Iruka looks up to see Raidō step in, eyes immediately going to his partner. “I thought you were getting takeout. Do I need to help you hide the bodies?”

Genma laughs like that’s not a legitimate concern with him, accepting the hand Raidō offers and letting the big man pull him to his feet. “Sorry, Rai, I got distracted. *Talking,*” he adds exasperatedly, seeing the way Raidō’s frown doesn’t abate. “No dead Kumo nin, I promise.”

With a tired sigh, Raidō leans into Genma's side, curling an arm around him. “I’m very surprised no one’s died yet,” he admits, eyes flickering towards the street, where a tight clump of Suna chuunin are hurrying past. “There have been too many world wars for anyone to be happy about shinobi from this many villages all crammed into an enclosed space.”

With a low hum of agreement, Genma closes his eyes. “Lots of bad memories,” he says mildly. “All the generations but the youngest have lost someone in the fighting. Makes me wonder how long until the next war happens. We’re about due, if history is any marker.”

“Don’t be depressing, Genma,” Iruka chides, though the thought sits like lead in his stomach. He thinks of Ino, of Sakura, of Kiba and Naruto and all the other bright, happy six-year-olds in his class forced to graduate as fast as possible, sent out to battlefields with little chance of ever coming back, and has to swallow down his nausea. Shinobi don’t live long lives—it’s part and parcel of the job—but to have them cut that short…

Iruka can’t even stand the thought of it.

“Some good food will cheer you up,” Teuchi says, determinedly upbeat as he steps away from the counter. “The usual, I take it?”

“Yes, please,” Raidō agrees, flicking a worried look down at Genma. “With an extra egg on the Shōyu, if it’s no trouble.”

With a soft snort, Genma rolls his eyes, though he doesn’t move away from Raidō’s hold. “You're a sap.”

“And you’re all tense,” Raidō retorts. “Any tenser and you’re going to snap. If you kill a squad of Kumo nin and have to go on the run, I'm holding it over your head forever.”

“But you’d come with me.” Genma grins at him, dirty enough that Iruka kind of wants to cover his eyes and plug his ears, even if they aren’t actually doing anything. It’s one of Genma's talents. “And *that* would be what makes you a sap.”

Raidō heaves a long-suffering sigh, though he can't quite hide his smile as he leans down to kiss Genma on the forehead. “Yes, fine, I’m a sap. But I’d rather be one in Konoha, rather than on the run as a missing-nin, so let’s get our food, go home, and not think about work for a night.”
“Stop!” Iruka protests, even as Genma opens his mouth. “That’s more than enough information, you're in public.”

Genma laughs, which was more or less Iruka’s goal, and reaches over to ruffle Iruka’s ponytail. “Sorry, Iruka, I forgot there were virgin eyes present.” Ignoring Iruka’s mortified squawks of protest, he starts digging for his wallet, and asks cheerfully, “So when is Anko going to make an honest man out of you? Or at the very least make a man out of you.”

Iruka doesn’t need a mirror to know that his ears are very, very red right now. “How do you even know these things?” he protests. “And that’s private, thank you!”

Raidō chuckles. “He’s an evil genius where gossip is concerned,” he says, and when Genma raises a brow at him he just smiles. “You know it’s true, Gen.”

“Even Kakashi admitted to it, so it probably is,” Genma agrees easily, apparently unconcerned with the label. He trades a handful of bills for the bag that Teuchi passes over, then waves to Iruka and turns away. “Keep your chin up, Iruka. This isn’t the end. Might even be a decent beginning, with enough work.”

Iruka blinks, caught off guard by the sudden shift in tone, and can't think of a single thing to say to that.

With a fond smile, Raidō pats him on the shoulder, repeats, “Evil genius,” and follows Genma out into the street.

By now, Kurama's spent a lot of time traveling in a multitude of ways. Most of it’s been on foot, but through Naruto he’s encountered enough variety to know that anything traveling by water is very much not his cup of tea. He doesn’t get seasick, the way a very unhappy Itachi seems to be verging on, but he’s a creature of fire and wind. The deserts of Suna and even the forests of Konoha suit him far better than the open ocean, especially when he’s been dropped squarely in the middle of it. The size of the ship isn’t helping much, either; being trapped in a space this small is giving Kurama unhappy flashbacks to a hundred years spent chained up and stuck in a tiny cell, barely able to spread his tails out.

Of course, Kurama could probably head above deck if he wanted more room—the ship is small, but Ao’s crew is even smaller, and it’s not as if there isn’t space for him to stand by the rail. But Kakashi is in the one tiny private room, sprawled out on his stomach and sliding in and out of consciousness. Jiraiya knows enough minor medical ninjutsu to burn away infection when it sets in, but not enough to actually fix him. As the closest thing they have to a sensor, Kurama's taken it upon himself to keep an eye on the Copy-Nin, just in case he takes a turn for the worse before they can find Tsunade.

It’s stupid, Kurama thinks, stretching his legs out as much as the confined space will allow and wishing futilely for some sort of window. It was Kakashi’s own choice, dumb as it might have been, to take Kisame’s blow. He shouldn’t feel obligated to watch over the man now.

Except he does, because he was the one who brought the cave down on top of them, who led them into that trap, who dragged Kakashi and Obito's shared trauma out and rubbed it in their faces. He may not have physically forced Kakashi to jump in front of that hit for him, but emotionally—well. Emotionally there's no other way to view it.
“Your bedside manner seems stuck at grumpy,” a drowsy voice says, making him glance over in faint surprise. One grey eye is fixed on him, sharper than it has been since Kurama first climbed down here and settled in to his watch. There's no fading haze of fever, and Kurama thinks—probably a little ungraciously—that the idiot's finally recovered from dragging his bleeding carcass all the way back to the ship without accepting help while Ran, Shisui, and Kurama led Sasori and Konan on a merry chase across Moon Country.

“Awake?” Kurama asks, not deigning to acknowledge Kakashi's statement. “Or are you going to start babbling about blue pugs again?”

His visible eye crinkles. “In my defense, that was a legitimate memory, not a hallucination.”

Kurama blinks, feeling his brows climb, and can't contain a huff of amusement. “I bet Shiba loved that, gave Pakkun all the grief.”

There's a pause, strangely heavy, and when Kurama looks back at the bed, Kakashi has his head turned to stare at him fully. The mask is still pulled up, and his hitai-ate pulled down, but his expression is intent enough that his face may as well be bare. “See,” he says, and despite his expression his tone is falsely, perfectly mild. “You keep doing that.”

Unease curls in Kurama's gut, cold and snakelike, and he sinks back a little further in his chair. “Doing what?” he asks, and there's a testy edge to it that he can't fully curb. Cornered foxes bite the hardest, and human body or no, Kurama's feeling rather trapped at the moment.

With a muffled grunt of effort, Kakashi levers himself up on his elbows, even though doing so makes his face go about four shades paler. Before Kurama can swear at him for being so fucking stupid, he pins Kurama with a sharp look. “My dogs aren't named in the Bingo Book, and I only introduce them to my teammates. So how is it that you know Shiba?”

Fuck.

Still, it's easy to see that Kakashi isn’t done. The Copy-Nin stares at Kurama for another moment, and when no easy answer is forthcoming, he nods like Kurama's given something away. He takes a breath, and concludes without inflection, “Tobi is Obito.”

Kurama eyes him a little warily, but at this point there's really no use denying it. “Yeah,” he confirms quietly.

Kakashi's breath rattles in his lungs as he exhales, his eye slipping closed. He bows his head into the curve of his braced arms, hiding himself for just a moment as his shoulder tremble. Inhale, exhale, inhale again, and he twitches in a tiny nod.

Yet again, Kurama has absolutely no idea what to say or do. The first time, Kakashi learned all of this in the middle of a war, with no time to dwell, to linger and obsesses. Right now he’s already had almost a full day to do just that. There's no distraction in sight, nothing but fever-dreams to divert his attention if they can't keep infection away, and Kurama isn’t about to hope for something like that.

“I take it,” Kakashi says lowly, dragging Kurama out of his thoughts, “that this has something to do with why your siblings all have the same names as the bijuu?”

Kurama breathes out, slow and careful, and tries not to calculate just how much force he’ll need to give a bijūdama to tear through the ship’s hull for a quick getaway. “…It might,” he allows, and finds he can't look at Kakashi's bent head anymore. Safer to focus on the claws curled in his lap, the hands with their familiar-foreign scars. And really, damn Kakashi for actually remembering a
throwaway line to a scared little girl. Why does the man have to be a genius?

He thinks, just for a moment, of getting up and walking out. It’s not as if Kakashi can chase him in his current state, and Kurama doesn’t particularly want anyone to find out why he knows what he does. That just complicates things.

Except—

Except Kurama said what he did in the hideout knowing there was no way it could pass unnoticed. He accepted then that getting to Obito meant letting Kakashi in on some part of his secret, and he’s still willing to accept that price for accomplishing what he did. The Gedō Mazō is shattered, and Kaguya’s way to earth just got a hell of a lot more complicated. For that, Kurama is more than willing to make a few concessions.

With a huff of frustration, Kurama leans forward in his seat, dragging his hands through his hair and trying to shove it out of his face as he gets his thoughts in order. There’s…so much. Too much, really, now that he’s trying to lay it out. He almost wants to say I don’t know where to start, but that’s a cheap cop-out.

“You ever thought about whether the bijuu could be…tamed?” he asks instead, tilting his head just enough to look at Kakashi without moving from his hunch. Sporadic eye contact will definitely be easier for a story like this.

Kakashi eyes him a little warily, but looks like he’s considering the question all the same. “From what I’ve seen the last few days, probably,” he finally allows.

Kurama swallows, and—putting it into words is hard. Actually speaking those words is harder. “Good. Because everything starts with a little boy, who was stupid enough to believe that he could make friends with a monster. And the fucking hilarious part? It worked. He took a creature that was centuries old, who’d only known hate and fear for a long, long time, and reminded him about love. And when the world went to shit, he trusted that a monster could be a hero, and died so that the monster could come back in time and stop everything before it happened.”

There’s a long, endless minute of silence, broken only by the creak of the ship and the ocean outside. Kakashi is watching him, but Kurama can’t meet his gaze, scrubs a hand over his face so that he doesn’t have to think about doing so.

Then—

“Define ‘shit’,” Kakashi says, a thread of entirely inappropriate amusement in his voice.

It’s startling enough that Kurama barks out a laugh before he can stop himself, sitting up a little and looking at the Copy-Nin. “Ancient evil goddess got mad at humans using chakra and wanted to take it all for herself, so she started killing anyone with a functioning chakra system and any bloodlines that could possibly produce them, which was all of them. Then she took the bodies, used their chakra systems like puppet strings, and made ’em into her army. Got to the point where you could count how many shinobi were left on one hand, and how many humans were left on two.”

“All right, ‘shit’ is appropriate,” Kakashi allows. A pause as he studies Kurama, and he says carefully, “You don’t look much like a bijuu.”

“Human body,” Kurama counters, waving a hand. His claws catch the light, and he has to grimace. “Well, mostly. The idiot knew a human mind couldn’t survive a trip back, so he sacrificed himself. I’m…learning.”
Kakashi's eye crinkles, just a little. “Zabuza certainly didn’t seem to object.”

“Keep your damned nose out of that,” Kurama retorts, rolling his eyes. “Unless piranha teeth turn you on?”

With a snort, Kakashi twists carefully, levering himself up. He braces a shoulder against the wall, and asks, clipped and nearly desperate, “Obito?”

“Is a deluded asshole,” Kurama concludes, and when Kakashi gives him a look he huffs. “Fuck off, it’s true. He’s trying to create that perfect world I told you about, with the moon. I haven’t lied about anything. The first time around, he got some sense beat into him, and stopped being an ass eventually. Not sure if we can manage it this time.”

Kakashi’s head bows a little, his eye closing, and he nods briefly. “Then what you said was true?” he asks quietly. “He’s the one who killed Minato and Kushina?”

Kurama nods, watching him closely for any sign of a breakdown. There's another stretch of uncomfortable silence, thick and weighted, Kakashi breathes out raggedly, rubbing a hand over his face.

“Who saved him?”

“Uchiha Madara,” Kurama huffs, and there's a name that deserves to be spat out like something nasty. “Leeched off the Gedō Mazō like a parasite to stay alive all these years. He put some kind of seal on Obito's heart to keep the bastard from betraying him, but I don’t know exactly what it does, or how far its influence extends.”

Without looking up, Kakashi nods. “You're the Kyuubi,” he says, and it’s so quiet Kurama can hardly hear it. “The foxes, why you took Naruto first—you're the Kyuubi no Kitsune.”

Kurama could deny it, avoid the question, turn it back on how Naruto changed him. He doesn’t. “I didn’t grab Naruto because of my past self. I grabbed him because he’s family, and he’s mine, and I wasn’t about to let him keep suffering like he was.”

Kakashi makes a sound, far too broken to be called a laugh. “Out,” he says, and it’s fractured around the edges.

Kurama doesn’t wait for him to ask twice. He rises from his chair, reaching for the door, and pauses with his hand on the latch. “Nothing’s changed,” he says, tries, but it doesn’t come out with the certainty he planned it to. “All I want is Naruto safe and Akatsuki gone. If I have to do that alone, I will. But—that stupid kid? He taught me a lot about having friends, and how strong it can make you.”

Kakashi doesn’t answer. Kurama takes one more quick glance at his half-slumped figure before he turns, stepping out the door and pulling it gently shut behind him.

Skulking on the deck sounds like a damned good option right about now.

Kakashi’s hands are shaking, and he knows that if he looks at them there will be blood covering them, the same as the night that he killed Rin, the same as so many nights after. Rusted-red and thick and clinging, drying tacky and stiff on his fingers and across his palms. No way to wash it off so that
it won't come back, no way to get rid of it.

Obito—

No.

He can't think about Obito right now.

The Kyuubi no Kitsune just sat across from him, laughed with him, talked to him. The monster that destroyed Konoha six years ago—that was directly responsible for Minato and Kushina dying—looked at him with hurt red eyes, and smiled with such helpless fondness when he talked about the boy who sent him back.

The biggest monster Kakashi has ever faced showed more care and love for Naruto than Kakashi himself has ever managed.

Box up the monster, wipe off the blood, paste on a smile and no one will ever know anything’s happened.

Do it in reverse, and the monster is suddenly all that’s left.

But what do you do when the monster is a better person than you’ve ever managed to be?
I thought Kakashi was hard. I forgot I had to deal with Itachi at some point fml why do I sign myself up to write characters I hate?

On the matter of Itachi, I am borrowing themes and bits of canon from his novel, which is where Uchiha Izumi comes from. You know, the girl who loved him who he deliberately hunted down to murder first during the massacre. I’ve tried to keep it light, though, so it should be understandable with no knowledge of the book/filler.

*prognosticate / präˈɡnästə, kät/ *, to forecast or predict (something future) from present indications or signs; prophesy; . Late Middle English, from medieval Latin prognosticat-, from the verb prognosticare “make a prediction”.*

The port town that falls almost exactly on the border between Frost and Lightning Country is unexpectedly busy for its size. Kurama watches the crowds bustle from the doorway of the large inn, not quite ready to push out into the street just yet. He has a mental list of bars to visit and reports from both Kiri and Konoha informants that agree Tsunade is somewhere in the village, but there’s an itch of uneasiness in the back of his skull. Nothing blatant, nothing obvious, but—unsettling.

“The captain is comfortable,” Itachi says quietly from behind him, and Kurama doesn’t allow himself to twitch. “Shisui and Tenzō agreed to stay with him.”

Not the best protection available if Obito decides to pop in and finish the job, but Han and Rōshi are both back on the ship, since busy towns make both of them even tenser than Kurama. Rōshi had muttered something about setting the last one on fire, and when Shisui flinched and nodded his fervent agreement Kurama had decided he didn’t even want to know. They’ll keep an eye on Bee while he recovers, though, and Shisui and Tenzō will at least be able to raise a fuss if Obito turns up, so Kurama doesn’t have an excuse to put this off any longer.

“Then you're with me, huh?” he asks gruffly, and pulls his haori a little higher around his throat. As the name would imply, Frost Country is cold, and Kurama still isn’t all that used to the feeling of it.

“I am,” Itachi agrees, watching him a little warily, but Kurama ignores that. He takes a breath, lets it out in a gust of white, and then heads down the three wide steps into the street. Silently Itachi shadows him, sandals entirely soundless on the packed earth beneath them, and he’s so small that Kurama is having a hard time thinking of him as the emotionless asshole who shoved a crow with a Sharingan eye down Naruto’s throat. Which, for the record, might have been a chakra construct but still tasted disgusting, and Kurama would very much like to hold a grudge.

It’s…difficult, though. This Itachi keeps darting glances at food carts, or trinket stands, and his eyes linger for a long moment on a teahouse two blocks down from the inn, like he wants to stop. A wallet shaped like a tomato gets a tiny smile out of him, and his gaze is quick and alive and the furthest thing from the dead, emotionless stare Kurama remembers seeing through Naruto. Also, he barely comes up to Kurama’s elbow, and there’s something so wrong about that.
The man who drove Sasuke insane and pushed him down a path of ruthless revenge shouldn’t look and act like a child. Even now, before the deed is done. But—Kurama watches Itachi study a display of adventure novels with interest, and has to look away.

Thankfully for Kurama's peace of mind, the first bar is just down the block, sandwiched between a clothing store and a tightly shuttered building. It sounds loud, even from on the street, and Kurama pauses outside the door, grimacing. Naruto frequented a few of the bars back in Konoha, solely because that was where the rest of his friends gathered, but those were shinobi bars. The patrons were a lot quieter, either looking to unwind or get quietly shit-faced, and tended to be fully aware that if they started a bar fight, they’d have an entire patrol up their asses as soon as chakra started flaring.

Civilian bars, it seems, are a hell of a lot different.

“Can I go in, if you want,” Itachi suggests, faintly dubious if the way he’s eyeing the building is any tell.

Kurama glances down at the eleven-year-old dressed in civilian clothes and rolls his eyes a little. “Not happening, kid,” he huffs. “Civilians, remember?”

Comprehension flickers lightning-quick across Itachi’s face before it slides into eerie blankness, and he says quietly, “Oh. Of course. I forgot to account for that.”

It’s said like a rebuke aimed at himself, pointed and a little frustrated, and Kurama sighs. Freak Squad, he reminds himself, and drops a hand firmly on top of Itachi’s head. They have to live up to their name somehow.

“Come on,” he urges, shoving Itachi lightly in the direction of the bar as he starts forward. “I don’t think our luck is good enough for this to be the one, so let’s get this over with.”

Itachi gives him a slightly confused glance, but trots obediently alongside him, stretching to keep up with Kurama’s strides. The door swings open with a hard push, and one step inside makes Kurama wrinkle his nose. It smells fucking awful, and judging by the faint expression that manages to escape Itachi’s control, it’s not just Kurama’s overly sensitive nose that’s talking.

Pushing through the packed tables, Kurama heads for the bar without hesitation. Behind it, a blonde woman with sharp eyes is mixing drinks, and as Kurama approaches she glances at him, then down at Itachi, and smirks faintly.

“Something I can do for you boys?” she asks, dropping a pair of glasses on a waiter’s tray and elbowing him back out into the main room. She pauses, eyes sweeping over Kurama from the top of his head and down as far as she can see, and she raises a brow at him, smirk deepening.

Unlike his previous jinchuuriki, Kurama is not as dense as a particularly dumb bolder where matters of attraction are concerned. He wasn’t even before he had a body of his own, and now that he does have one, and experience to boot, the meaning of her look is clear. A little creepy, but clear. “We’re looking for someone,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest. “Short, blonde, looks like she’s in her twenties, and drinks like a fish. Likes to gamble and always loses.”

The barkeep snorts, leaning forward to set her elbows on the counter. “Sounds like someone I would definitely remember,” she says, amused. “But I haven’t seen her, sorry. New in town? Staying long?”

Kurama pauses, studying the look in her eyes. Assessment is outweighing the flash of interest, and
that’s something he can use. “Us or her?” he asks, watching her in return, and knows she catches it when her smile shades towards something a little more genuine.

“Both, I assume,” she says, tilting her head a little and looking at him through a sweep of smoky lashes. “But I meant you. If you’re here for a few days, I’ll keep an eye out. Let you know if your mystery lady turns up.”

Kurama’s seen more than enough interactions like this one in the shinobi world to know what happens next. He pulls a few bills out of his pocket and sets them on the counter. “Thanks,” he says. “We’re at the Black Gull. Ask for Uzumaki.”

“Uzumaki,” the barkeep repeats, drawing the name out, and raises a brow at Kurama. “Is that you, handsome?”

“Can we go now, Dad?” Itachi asks suddenly, tugging on Kurama's sleeve. Startled, Kurama blinks down at him, and is a little disconcerted to find that the expression on the boy’s face is actually convincing.

At that, the woman outright laughs, deep and throaty, and pushes back upright. “Kid,” she says, thick with humor. “No way in hell is he your father, or I'm your damned mother. If the man doesn’t want to flirt, I'm hardly going to make him. Try the act on someone else, and get out of my bar. I’ll let you know if I hear anything about your girl.”

“Thanks,” Kurama sighs, and puts his hand back on top of Itachi’s head, steering him towards the exit. He glances down to find the boy staring straight ahead, and on anyone else Kurama might say that expression was blank, but for Itachi, that’s probably a hell of a lot closer to embarrassment. Feeling the eyes on him, Itachi darts a quick glance up, and Kurama arches a brow at him.

“Want to explain what that was about?” he asks.

Itachi waits until they’ve emerged into the cool air of the evening, and then says quietly, “She was making you uncomfortable.”

Kurama rolls his eyes a little. “Yeah,” he says dryly. “Flirting tends to do that when you’re not interested.”

“Momochi Zabuza’s flirting just irritated you,” Itachi points out, not quite stubborn, but…maybe closer to curious.

If Kurama had ever made a list of conversations he thought he’d have in his life, up until thirty seconds ago this wouldn’t have even occurred to him as a possibility. He stares down at Itachi, at a loss for how to explain, and Itachi stares back, patient and mildly enquiring.

“Zabuza and I had already had sex,” he finally says, not entirely sure how to put into words something he’s barely experienced himself. “We know each other. And—I wasn’t really irritated, or believe me, I would have fed him his dick. We were just bickering. It’s…amusing.”

Itachi nods and looks content to mull that over for a few minutes, so Kurama quickly checks the street signs and heads left, towards the gambling den that’s next on the list. It’s further back, off the main street, and it’s a bit of a relief to leave the majority of the crowds behind them.

Unfortunately, Kurama's head is stuck on Itachi’s question and all the damned implications that go along with it. He wants to ignore it, but—

Sage, he thinks, a little bewildered. Hasn’t the kid ever seen regular people interact before? Doesn’t
he knows how people act, and react, and talk to each other? He reads Kurama's body language in the bar well enough to know that Kurama didn’t care for the barkeep’s flirting, but—his reaction was like a shinobi undercover on a mission, not one person getting another out of an awkward situation.

Kurama is an ancient chakra beast created from an alien tree that crash-landed on earth whose fruit was consumed by a crazy princess-goddess, and he’s been stuffed into an unfamiliar body, sent thirty years into the past, and given a mission to save the world by the first friend he ever made who was murdered right in front of him, and he still understands more about everyday human interactions than a genius shinobi eleven-year-old. That’s a pretty terrifying thought.

The gambling den, as a pleasant distraction, is mostly empty, and the manager is easily convinced to send for Kurama if he sees Tsunade when Kurama mentions unpaid gambling debts. He looks a little horrified, actually, and Kurama is almost certain that he’ll send a runner—maybe even come himself—if Tsunade does turn up. A little irritated, Kurama checks that one off his mental list as well, shoving his hands in the pockets of his haori as they step back out into the cold. Maybe they should hit all the inns as well, he thinks, turning his eyes up towards the heavy clouds covering the sky.

“It’s going to snow,” Itachi says, following his gaze.

Naruto would love it, Kurama thinks wistfully, and he misses the brat so much it’s like a physical ache. He’s probably never seen snow before at this point—Konoha only gets it rarely, and while the first time around Kurama was sleeping for most of Naruto’s childhood, he was still fairly in tune with the nature chakra all around them. Weather patterns have their own force, and he doesn’t recall it snowing.

A new experience, he thinks, smiling a little to himself. He can teach Naruto how to build a snow sculpture. And Gaara has definitely never seen snow before. Maybe not even Fū has. He and Yugito can give them a crash course.

“Yeah,” he agrees, and it comes out lighter than he intends, almost bordering on wistful. “It is.”

Itachi flicks a glance at him, expression unreadable, and asks quietly, “How many bars altogether?”

Back to reality, Kurama reminds himself, pushing into motion again. “Four,” he answers, avoiding the main street and turning down a narrower side street instead. “And one more gambling den. If we can’t find her there, we’ll start checking the inns. Ao and Jiraiya both seemed pretty certain she was still here.”

With a nod, Itachi falls into step, and there’s half a moment of quiet before he says, “The girl who likes me—she doesn’t ever act like you and Zabuza do, even though she knows me.”

It takes effort not to sigh aggrievedly. Kurama closes his eyes for a moment, reminds himself that he can’t just ditch Itachi and finish on his own, and says little wearily, “Somehow, brat, I don’t think she knows you at all. You ever had a real conversation with her?”

Itachi blinks at him, clearly confused. “We talk frequently.”

Staring back, Kurama tries to push down the absolute, certain knowledge that somewhere in an alternate afterlife, his Naruto is laughing himself sick right now. “You mean she talks,” he says, and if it’s a little dry he thinks he can’t be blamed. “Name three things that you’ve actually straight-up told her about yourself.”

The blank look he gets is more than answer enough.

“You at least know her name, right?” Kurama asks, on the edge of true despair.
Faint offense flickers over Itachi's features. “Uchiha Izumi.”

Well, at least there’s that. He probably thinks it’s a failure as a shinobi not to know a person’s identity, though, so Kurama doesn’t think it counts for much. With a sigh, he scrubs a hand through his hair and says, “Do you like her? As one person to another, is she someone you appreciate?”

Another long pause, which probably isn’t a great sign. Itachi looks down at the packed earth beneath them, expression considering. “She confuses me. She’s weak and sentimental, but she awakened her Sharingan before I did, and she refuses to give up on her ideals even though they're useless and foolish.”

Oh boy. Kurama spends a moment trying to wrap his head around that, decides he’d rather jump off a bridge than understand that kind of Uchiha logic, and huffs in disgust. “Well, then she’s obviously not weak, right?” he points out. “If she won’t give up, she’s going to get stronger, no matter what, especially if she’s got ideals driving her.”

“I made her cry,” Itachi says, sounding faintly bewildered by this. “It would be better if she chose a different goal, because as she is she can’t help people the way she wants to, but she was hurt.”

People are clearly not Itachi’s strong point.

“Look,” Kurama says, fairly desperate to get this conversation back on track. “Even if she confuses you, would you save her if she were in danger? Do you like her as a person enough to put yourself in harm’s way for her?”

“She’s a citizen of Konoha, and a member of the Uchiha Clan,” Itachi tells him very seriously. “I couldn’t do anything else.”

Kurama is so very done with all of this. “Look, kid,” he says sharply, coming to a halt and turning to face Itachi. “People connect to other people. It’s what they do. Every single person you have ever met—they have a dream, and they have reasons for what they do, and maybe you don’t understand them. Maybe you never will. But if you can look at someone you know, who’s trying to make a connection to you, and completely write them off? That’s bad. You’re not seeing people anymore. You’re seeing duty, a job.”

The edge of a growl in the words takes Kurama by surprise, and he has to stop himself, step back, and take a breath to get his temper back under control. “Sage,” he says, rubbing a hand over his eyes in frustration. “If you only ever look at people like that, like they’re your mission, you’re going to make the wrong choices. For you and for them. You can’t break things down like that. This girl—Izumi. You said she wants to help people. Save her because of that, or because she has a nice smile, or because she wants to know you. Don’t save her because there’s no other choice. She’s a human being, not your duty as the perfect son.”

Itachi stares up at him, wide-eyed and clearly caught off guard, and Kurama narrows his eyes right back, opens his mouth—

“You know,” a woman’s voice says, just this side of icy, “where I’m from it’s not all right for an adult to bully a child.”

Kurama stiffens, every muscle suddenly tense, and turns swiftly as heeled sandals click across the street. Senju Tsunade is just emerging from the overhang of a darkened shop, and her expression is focused and sharp. Shizune is a few paces behind her, looking worried with Tonton clutched in her arms, but Kurama can’t quite look away from the woman he last saw having her soul consumed so that Kaguya could wear her body like a festival mask.
“Yeah?” he asks gruffly, the memory of his Naruto's shattering grief for her just a little too clear for comfort. “Well, since you abandoned it I don’t think you have any claim to its morals anymore, princess.”

Her sharp steps falter, and Tsunade comes to a halt, narrowed eyes sweeping over him carefully. A glance down at Itachi, taking in the fact that he can’t be mistaken for anything but an Uchiha, and she shifts her weight back on her heels, suddenly wary. “You're from Konoha.”

Kurama snorts, crossing his arms over his chest. “Looking for you,” he confirms. “One of the idiots I'm traveling with got himself half-skinned. I need you to fix him.”

Tsunade blanches visibly, taking half a step back. At the same moment, Itachi reproves, “Uzumaki,” like that’s actually going to make Kurama hold his tongue about anything. He looks down at the boy, raising a brow, and the expression Itachi returns is one Kurama's seen most often directed at Shisui.

Well. At least it’s better than that eerie dead look.

“Uzumaki,” Tsunade repeats, making Kurama glance back at her. Her expression is conflicted, caught between two emotions that Kurama can't quite identify. “You're an Uzumaki?”

“Yeah. So what? What do you want me to say?” Kurama asks, irritated. “Hello, cousin? Nice of you to stop in and visit your one remaining relative after her entire village got wiped out? Nice to know she could count on you to look after her kid?”

Bristling, Shizune takes three quick steps and puts herself between Kurama and Tsunade. “Leave her alone,” she orders warningly, one hand reaching for whatever's up her sleeve, but before she can pull it out Tsunade reaches up and catches her wrist.

“You don’t know anything about Kushina,” Tsunade says, flat and challenging. “I don’t appreciate the accusation from a stranger.”

“I know everything about Kushina!” Kurama snaps, and it’s only when Itachi glances at him sharply that he remembers he hasn’t actually told the rest of the Freak Squad the truth, and Kakashi seems to be keeping it to himself as well. Kurama's not overly invested in anyone else finding out, so he takes a breath, drags his temper back down a few notches, and says more or less civilly, “We're—closely related.”

Not a lie, technically, given the body Kurama's currently in. It also means that even if Tsunade does end up in Konoha again, there's no risk of her taking Naruto to raise him herself.

Tsunade studies him for a long moment, then sighs softly, stepping forward again until she’s only a few feet from him, looking up into his face. “I never saw Kushina grown up,” she says, and Kurama has to wonder if it’s his own projection that makes her voice sound wistful. “Do you look like she did?”

“A lot like her, yeah,” Kurama acknowledges gruffly, and dips his head a little when her hand comes up to cup his cheek. He lets her touch him, doesn’t flinch away, because if there was ever a mother figure in Naruto's life, it was this woman. Only Kakashi's and Sasuke's deaths could rival the sheer depth of grief that Tsunade's inspired. He never got to say goodbye to her before Kaguya erased her existence, and he always regretted it. Kurama isn’t Naruto, could never be, but—it’s just a second of closeness. He doesn’t mind too much.

“You weren’t in Konoha when Uzushio fell,” Tsunade says, curious and assessing. “I would remember if another Uzumaki made it there. A survivor?”
Kurama grimaces, even though he doesn’t pull away. “Do we have to talk about this?” he complains. “Kakashi got himself hurt. Can you help him?”

“Hatake’s kid?” Tsunade hesitates, then glances back at her wary apprentice. Shizune seems to understand what she wants, because she nods quickly, and Tsunade offers her a smile. “Shizune will help. I’m not fond of blood.”

For a moment, Kurama just looks at her, wavering between decisions, but—he knows what Naruto would have done. “The old pervert-sage needs some help, too,” he says, watching her eyes widen. “He fucked up his knee in a fight. No blood, unless he pops a blood vessel at the sight of you.”

That makes Tsunade snort softly, and she pulls back, letting her hand drop. “I’m not going back to Konoha,” she says stubbornly. “There’s nothing left for me there.”

Kurama isn’t Naruto. He can’t convince her to come back through stubbornness and determination and his resemblance to Nawaki. However, he’s a nine-tailed fox with a millennia of cunning to fall back on and no compunctions about manipulating people to get what he wants. “I won’t make you,” he tells her, even as he tries to think up a bet that she’ll be certain she’s going to win. Trap her in a deal, make her keep her word, and he can get her back to Konoha and let Naruto convince not all dreams are doomed at the start. She might hate him for it, but Kurama doesn’t particularly care.

“Let’s get this over with,” Tsunade says, mouth tightening, and steps away. “Where is Hatake?”

“Black Gull Inn.” Kurama matches her pace, letting Shizune and Itachi bring up the rear. The kid is very quiet, expression withdrawn, but Kurama doesn’t look back; he’ll either sort out whatever is in his messed-up head right now or he won’t, and Kurama will have to try again.

The silence lasts right up until the inn is in sight, and Kurama is already fishing for his key when Tsunade asks quietly, “She had a child?”

Kurama blinks, distracted from his search, and—he’d forgotten that, actually. Tsunade left Konoha as the Second Shinobi War was coming to a close, before Jiraiya even returned from training the Ame orphans. Minato and Kushina wouldn’t even have graduated from the Academy at that point. “Yeah,” he confirms, and can’t help but smile a little. “With the Yondaime, Jiraiya’s student. Little blond brat, too loud for his own good. He got pretty much all of her temperament.”

Tsunade smiles a little, too, but it falters a bare second later. She takes a careful breath, glancing up at Kurama, and questions, “Does he…take after her in other ways?”

Kurama blinks quietly, distracted from his search, and—he’d forgotten that, actually. Tsunade left Konoha as the Second Shinobi War was coming to a close, before Jiraiya even returned from training the Ame orphans. Minato and Kushina wouldn’t even have graduated from the Academy at that point. “Yeah,” he confirms, and can’t help but smile a little. “With the Yondaime, Jiraiya’s student. Little blond brat, too loud for his own good. He got pretty much all of her temperament.”

Tsunade smiles a little, too, but it falters a bare second later. She takes a careful breath, glancing up at Kurama, and questions, “Does he…take after her in other ways?”

For a moment all Kurama can feel is confusion. Then, in a flash, he realizes just what she’s referring to and confusion jolts sideways into irritation. “He’s a jinchuuriki, if that’s what you mean,” he says flatly. “Another thing that runs in the family, isn’t it? But he ended up the Kyuubi’s host after it all but wiped out Konoha. People didn’t care so much when it was Mito and Kushina. But Naruto? I don’t think anyone had ever given him so much as a fucking hug before I found him.”

“Found,” Shisui says dryly from the doorway of the inn, where he’s leaning against the frame with his brows practically touching his hairline. “Is this some obscure Uzushio dialect synonym for stole? Because I seem to remember the mobilization of four of the five Great Nations to hunt your ass down and a headlong cross-country pursuit with you being a misleading asshole the whole time that says differently.”

Kurama rolls his eyes and doesn’t deign to answer, pointedly ignoring Tsunade’s amused and faintly disbelief glance from beside him. “Is the idiot still alive?”
“So far,” Shisui confirms, pushing the door open for their group and slinging an arm around Itachi’s shoulder as the boy passes. His tone is flippant, but his eyes linger on Tsunade with clear relief. “Tsunade-sama, thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Tsunade says flatly, taking Tonton and waving Shizune on. She folds her arms around the little pig and sinks down in one of the chairs off to the side, telling her apprentice, “You’ll be fine.”

For half an instant, Shisui looks like he’s about to protest vehemently, but before he can do more than open his mouth Kurama catches his eye and gives him a look. His mouth snaps shut, and Kurama grins toothily, then turns to Shizune. “This way,” he says, leading her down the hall to Kakashi’s room. “Need anything?”

Shizune takes a breath, pulls a hair tie from her pouch, and ties her hair up in a short tail. “I’ll be fine, but thank you,” she answers with admirable composure, then lifts her chin, squares her shoulders, and heads into the room.

Kurama could leave, go back into the main room and talk to Itachi again, keep an eye on things, try to bring Tsunade around. What he does instead is sit down against the edge of the door, his back to the wall, and tip his head back to rest against the wood. There’s a window at the end of the hall, within his line of vision if he tilts his head, and he can see the iron-grey sky through the dirty glass.

It’s snowing, he thinks, and closes his eyes.

He wonders what Naruto is doing right now. If he’s happy, if he’s sad, if Kiri is as hostile as Konoha. But even if it is, it won’t matter nearly as much. Naruto has Gaara and Fū and Yugito, Utakata and Yagura, maybe even Zabuza and Haku. He’ll be fine until Kurama can make it back.

That doesn’t mean Kurama misses him any less.

There’s a box on the table of Orochimaru’s lab, wooden and beautifully crafted, looking like the nesting silk should hold a pretty piece of jewelry rather than the pair of vials it does. Orochimaru taps his fingers against the tabletop, regarding the glass tubes, and is pleased all over again that he thought to scoop up the treasure Danzō had so carelessly thrown away. Kabuto has proven his worth many times over.

More’s the pity that Orochimaru didn’t find him in time to save the other one, the woman from the orphanage. She could have been useful as well. And she was…like a mother, perhaps. Not that it has any bearing, he supposes. Not anymore.

Regardless, the genetic samples have been recovered, a new lab has been secured, and Nagato has been pressed, however reluctantly, into service. He won’t be required for several hours—the process is intensive, and while Senju Tobirama may have been able to use it in battle, on the move, Orochimaru has had to recreate it from scattered notes and Sarutobi’s recollections. Even once the souls have been recalled and bound, Orochimaru will need a week at least craft personalized control seals. Letting either of these two particular shinobi run rampant in their base is most certainly not a good idea if they wish to keep it from looking like the old base.

On a whim, Orochimaru picks up the white-wrapped vial and turns it over in his fingers, studying the name marked out in Kabuto’s neat hand. A familiar name, a man he met and fought with before
everything changed. A tragedy for Konoha to lose him, and a greater one for them to face him now, woefully unprepared.

Orochimaru cares little for worlds of truth and political power. He’s doing this to prove he can, because it’s the best way to ensure Nagato’s aid. Because it’s interesting, and Orochimaru is never anything less than interested where strange chakra and obscure rituals are concerned. Because he has his own dreams, and there’s the chance that this can bring him closer to them.

Because if death can truly be undone—

Well.

Carefully, gently, Orochimaru sets the vial back down and turns to the items he’ll need to recreate Edo Tensei. Scrolls, samples, ink, seals, two bound sacrifices, restrained with every binding seal and unsolvable twist of robe Orochimaru has learned in forty years as a shinobi. He crouches down beside them, checking their breathing, and then rises again. Kakuzu had found them, minor missing-nin with small bounties on their heads, wanted dead or alive. Simple enough to arrange—Kakuzu got the money, and Orochimaru gets the bodies.

It’s almost time. Things are very nearly ready. Orochimaru smirks to himself, picking up a bottle of ink and a brush. On the far side of the room, his partner raises his head, narrowing his eyes, but Orochimaru ignores Sasori with the ease of practice. The puppeteer is only present as insurance, a way to overwhelm and subdue the revived shinobi if everything works as Orochimaru hopes it will but they manage to break free.

The first line of ink falls like a sweep of midnight against grey stone, and Orochimaru smiles, imagining the storm that’s sure to come.
XLIII: Quaintise

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is late, but work got in the way. And on that note, **NO UPDATE NEXT WEDNESDAY**. Possibly not the Wednesday after, either, though I'll try my best there. Sorry, but RL has to come first.

**[quaintise /kwænˈtɪs/; craft; subtlety; cunning; elegance; beauty. Thought to be from Old French cointise "wise, skillful, elegantly dressed".]**

Given who he's sharing a room with, Kurama honestly probably should have expected to wake up with someone looming over him, one hand on his foot and the other clutching a shinobi sandal with clear mischief in mind.

Automatically, no fool after so many years of sharing headspace with Konoha's resident trickster, Kurama kicks out hard. Shisui goes flying backwards with a high-pitched yelp, slamming into the wall, and Kurama snarls as he rolls out of bed and to his feet.

"What the **hell** do you think you're doing, bastard?" he demands, glaring at the Uchiha and half-tempted to actually **set him on fire**.

"Shoe," Shisui wheezes, waving the sandal he's still holding, and the idiot is actually **laughing**. He's laughing so hard he can't even breathe, and Kurama hopes he really does choke on it. Damn it, **one night** of peace, is that too much to ask?

A quick glance out the window shows no signs of morning being anywhere close to arriving, and Kurama growls, low and rumbling. It's tempting to kick Shisui out of the room and dive right back into bed, but Kurama is fairly certain Shisui follows his Naruto's train of thought in regards to pranks —if it doesn't work the first time, try again. Try **harder**. And regardless of the irritation he causes, Kurama knows Kakashi won't be all the pleased with him if he **actually** murders the little brat.

Thought of Kakashi is enough to make up Kurama's mind. He snatches up his blankets and pillow, shoots Shisui a look that promises retribution, and stalks out of the room, pointedly slamming the door behind him. It gets another burst of laughter from the Uchiha, who is clearly **insane**, but as long as Kurama is out of the line of fire he doesn't give a damn. Three rooms down on the left and he slams through that door too, not in any frame of mind to be polite.

From the bed, there's a jerk, a twist, and Kakashi surfaces from the depths of his mattress, kunai in hand and Sharingan spinning. Half an instant before he can lunge out of bed his gaze catches on Kurama and he aborts with an awkward jerk, almost spilling over the edge.

"Kurama?" he demands, clearly bewildered.

"Put that damned thing away," Kurama tells him grumpily, throwing his blankets into an empty corner and following them down. "That Uchiha bastard is a **menace**, and I'm not sleeping with the creepy kid. Deal with it."
There's a long pause, and then Kakashi rubs a hand over his eyes. "Shisui. Will I need to put 
pranked a bijuu on his death report? Because I'd like some advance notice so I can leave the 
village before Sarutobi sees it."

Kurama barks out a laugh, stretching out on his makeshift bed and shoving his pillow into shape. 
"Not yet, but if he tries to stuff sandals on my feet again, I make no promises."

"Or you could wear sandals like the rest of the world," Kakashi offers, dry as dust.

"Fuck off," Kurama huffs. "It's not like a damn pebble is going to hurt me, so why should I bother?"

Kakashi opens his mouth, but freezes for a long moment. He says in a peculiar voice, "Shisui tried to 
make the Kyuubi no Kitsune wear shoes."

"I'd eat him," Kurama agrees helpfully, grinning to show teeth, "except in this body you've kind of 
got to cook your food first, and that's a hassle."

There's another long pause. Finally, Kakashi snorts, lowering himself back down onto the mattress. 
"The amusing thing is that you're not the first person I've heard threaten to eat him. I'm also fairly 
sure you won't be the last."

The face Kurama makes is somewhere between offended and disgusted. "If it was Tenzō, keep it to 
yourself. I don't want to know anything about their sex life. Ever."

Amusingly, Kakashi's expression twists to almost match his, and he makes a quiet sound of deep 
denial. He doesn't quite pull the pillow up over his head, but the thought is definitely there. "Stop. 
My team members are all innocent and pure as the driven snow. It's just banter."

The last time Kurama saw someone look at someone else the way Shisui looks at Tenzō, it was Ino 
looking at Sakura two weeks before she finally jumped her. Still, he's not about to burst Kakashi's 
bubble just now, not when doing it later offers a hell of a lot more chances for amusement. 
"Whatever you say," he offers instead, snorting softly.

Kakashi doesn't quite look at him, but the feeling of his attention fixed on the side of Kurama's head 
doesn't waver. Not really interested enough to push, Kurama counts down from sixty in his head, 
and just as he reaches ten Kakashi says quietly, "You're…very human."

That's definitely not what Kurama was expecting to hear.

For a long heartbeat, Kurama keeps his eyes fixed on the ceiling, steady and unwavering. Then, 
slowly, he breathes out, closing them and trying not to think of Naruto—his Naruto, lost to him— 
pulling him back to his feet. "I had a good role model. Probably the best."

"The one who sent you back?" Kakashi's voice is lazy, but there's a thread of sharpness buried 
underneath it.

"You really want to do this now?" Kurama asks, faintly annoyed.

The question gets him a quiet sound of amusement. "You're the one who decided to camp out in my 
room."

"Yeah, to escape your pet idiot," Kurama snaps. "Not for an interrogation."

Another pause, carefully pointed. Kurama glances over, not quite able to help himself, and meets 
Kakashi's firm stare. "Convince me," Kakashi tells him, as mild a summer morning. "Give me a
reason I shouldn't turn you over to the Hokage the second we get back to Konoha."

Kurama bristles. "Besides the fact that you can't?"

Kakashi weighs that, then inclines his head, surrendering the point. "Then convince me you're not a threat," he says instead.

Without any remorse, Kurama bares his teeth at the man. "Fuck you, Kakashi. I'm the biggest threat you've ever faced, and if you forget that it's your own damn fault. I could level your precious village in less than hour."

"But you won't." Kakashi is still watching him, unmoved by the show of temper. If anything, there's almost a spark of amusement in his eyes.

Damn the man, Kurama thinks, deflating just a little, and he huffs and rolls onto his back again. "I won't," he agrees sourly. "My best friend loved the fucking place, and all of this is for him. That's not going to change."

"Weeks of chasing," Kakashi laments dryly, dragging the blankets up over his ears. "And we could have skipped all of it."

"Hey, asshole, I'm not the one who tried to drive a Chidori through someone's chest because they went in for a hug," Kurama snaps.

"I apologized," Kakashi points out, sounding entirely unbothered by the accusation. "Your best friend?"

Kurama sighs, deliberately put-upon, but can't help a small, faintly crooked smile. "Yeah, he's the one who sent me back. Kaguya was almost on us, so he and Sa—and his friend did the ritual. She found them right at the end and killed them, but she was too late. And I'm going to make sure she never has another chance." A breath and he drags his thoughts away from darkness and blood-stained chakra rods, towards sunshine and brighter days. "The Sage created the nine of us, but—it wasn't until him that I really felt like someone."

Kakashi's eyes are on him again, like a physical weight in the dimness. "Do you regret it? Attacking Konoha."

The snarl that tears from Kurama's throat is involuntary but instant, edged with the malice he's so familiar with. "I didn't want to attack Konoha in the first place. Obito has Madara's eye, which can control bijuu. He's the one who broke the seal on Kushina and forced me into the village. You really think I'd have chosen to stick around a village full of people with fuinjutsu training? That was just asking to get sealed away again." A pause, and maybe it's that thought of little Naruto is so close, but he adds more quietly, "I regret that Naruto had to grow up without parents because I was there, even if I didn't choose it."

Kakashi doesn't say anything, but that's fine; he's not the one Kurama was saying it for in the first place. It's something he never told his Naruto, though he's fairly certain it was understood by the end. Still, it's one small bit of regret that itches at him, and Kurama thinks that he understands so much better now, what Naruto meant when he lamented all the things he would never say to Sasuke.

"You loved him," Kakashi says, only directed at Kurama as an afterthought. "Your friend." He shifts a little, almost sitting up, but turns his face away at the last moment instead. "How does someone teach a monster how to love?"

Kurama laughs a little, entirely unable to help it. "It's not something that you can teach, idiot. I
learned on my own and taught myself. It's finding someone who's worth learning for that's the hard part."

There's no response to that, only silence. Kurama waits another handful of heartbeats for the conversation to continue before he decides that Kakashi's more or less dropped it, and closes his eyes, evening out his breathing.

As he drops down into sleep, he thinks of Naruto, young and old. Thinks of learning, and a hand in his own, pulling him up.

He dreams of sunlight and laughter and a warm wind fit to lift him right off the earth and into the sky, and sleeps peacefully through the night.

(\textit{Teach yourself,} Kakashi thinks, listening to Kurama's steady breathing in the darkness.\)

It sounds so simple, phrased like that, though he knows it couldn't have been. But—

But Kakashi knew once, what it was like to move on, move forward. He thinks of Minato, his words after Kakashi's father, after Obito, after Rin—Minato always talked about holding on to the past but not letting it be a chain, using it as a catalyst instead of allowing it to become a lead weight around your neck.

After his death, after Kushina's, Kakashi supposes there wasn't anyone left to remind him of that.

It's a small thing, just a few words spoken before a memorial, and in the scheme of things it's perhaps little wonder that Kakashi forgot. And yet—

And yet.

He wonders at Kurama, just a little. Kurama loves so deeply, and Kakashi has seen evidence of it with Naruto and the other jinchuuriki children, with the scattered mention of the best friend who sent him back in time and died to do it. Devotion, Kakashi thinks, and the word is strong but it doesn't feel like he's overstating things. Devotion to a person, a memory, a cause, bound up with determination and that rough, ragged-edged love that appears so much like desperation from the outside. And maybe it is—Kurama has lost absolutely everything once already. Kakashi suffered the same and shut himself down, locked all his bits of humanity away. But Kurama—

Kurama did the opposite, didn't he? He was so desperate to find something to hang on to that he took Naruto, took Gaara and Fū and Yugito, ran to the ends of the Elemental Countries to keep them safe from anyone that might think to harm them. And he \textit{did} hang on to them, wrapped them up in love and kindness left to him by a dead man, taught to himself after an existence of destruction and hatred and being a calamity that people the world over feared for its ferocity and mercilessness.

\textit{Everything starts with a little boy, who was stupid enough to believe that he could make friends with a monster. And the fucking hilarious part? It worked. He took a creature who'd only known hate and fear for a long, long time, and reminded him about love.}

The irony is so thick and stark that Kakashi wants to laugh. He would, but the darkness is heavy and soft, only broken by the lights of the town outside filtering through the mostly-covered window. Kurama's breaths are soft and steady, and Kakashi can see his outline beneath the window, sprawled out on his back with an arm tossed over his eyes. Red hair is shaded to plain grey in the darkness, but
Kakashi looks at it and thinks of Kushina's, thinks of her vivacity, her brisk kindness, her sharp humor. And—it's not a memory of Minato, clear and wrenching the way it is each time he looks at Naruto, but maybe that makes it easier.

He loved Kushina, too, but thinking of her is quite a lot simpler. She's a happy memory, even where she intersects with Kakashi's darkness. Wise, he thinks, and it's impossibly amusing that the bijuu pretending to be her brother is more like her than anyone Kakashi has ever met.

*It's not something that you can teach, idiot. I learned on my own and taught myself. It's finding someone who's worth learning for that's the hard part.*

Someone. Kakashi hasn't thought of another person as being someone to him in years now.

He wonders, a little drowsily and distantly, if this is where the learning could start, if he wanted to try.)

He remembers waiting, the steady constancy of it, unending and unchanging. Remembers a campfire in the darkness, night all around—achingly familiar, when he could bring himself to think about it. Ame, just a few minutes from its border with Suna and the outpost there. The mistake of a lifetime ago that he can never quite be certain was really a mistake at all.

It's a clear memory, well established. He hasn't known anything else for a long time, hasn't tried to move in any direction. Better to wait, heavy with guilt and regret, desperate for some last bit of repentance that would likely never be accepted.

It is, therefore, something of a surprise to wake up to soft light, filtering in through heavy iron bars. He's on his back on a futon, a blanket beneath him and a pillow under his head, and—

He's hungry. There's a tickle in his throat, an itch on the bridge of his nose, the uncomfortable bump of his ponytail under his skull.

He can't remember the last time he felt physical discomfort.

With a low groan from the lingering ache in his muscles, Sakumo levers himself up on his elbows, then pushes all the way up to sit. Leaning forward, he braces his arms on his knees and drags his hands over his face, fighting the fuzziness of chakra-assisted sleep even as he surreptitiously takes in his surroundings. Somewhere underground, he thinks, by the musty earth-smell in the air, though it's traced with an edge of chemicals that speaks of a lab nearby. There's a lingering edge of green tea, slightly over-steeped, and clean citrus. Something familiar, though he can't quite place it.

The room outside his cell is devoid of anyone else, though a desk cluttered with notes and scrolls implies a frequent occupant. The chair is halfway out, clearly abandoned in a moment of haste or distraction, but the door beyond it is shut tight, a second cell at a right angle to his own is empty, and the cell itself is locked with a seal Sakumo knows is practically impossible to break from the inside. He eyes it for a moment, assessing, and then files that option away for a last resort. He might be able to smash through it, though the veteran shinobi in him laments the lack of finesse, but for the moment he doesn't even know who's holding him.

Or, he thinks a little grimly, pressing a hand against his stomach, why he's alive when he very clearly remembers dying, even remembers lingering like a sad ghost in the space between worlds. There's no doubt his suicide was successful—he knows very well how to drive home a killing blow. But this
certainly isn't any afterlife he's ever seen mention of. Not by a long shot.

A faint rasp against the stone of the floor draws his attention down, to a small shape curled near the bars. A snake, deep blue with a red-tipped tail and a red head, rears back slightly to regard him, and Sakumo stills, trying to remember if it's a venomous species or not. The coloring makes him want to say yes—nothing that beautiful is ever entirely harmless.

"Here to keep an eye on me?" he asks it, not raising his voice much beyond a murmur.

The snake flicks its tongue out at him, then curls away, sliding across the floor and out through the crack beneath the door. Sakumo watches it go, a touch of concern rising, and pushes the rest of the way to his feet, working the kinks out of his muscles. Six long steps take him to the bars, and he ghosts a hand through the air a few inches from them, feeling the warning hum of chakra curled around the metal. Twelve more steps to the end of the cell, solid rock inscribed with more seals to dampen and absorb chakra, and Sakumo studies them, looking for weaknesses. There are none that he can find at first glance—whoever drew these knew very well what they were doing, and there isn't so much as a hesitation in the lines.

Not many people practice this kind of fuinjutsu anymore. Sakumo can only think of a handful, and even if he's well beyond the time he remembers, he can't imagine the number has grown all that much. Uzushio was the center of learning for the sealing arts; with its destruction the knowledge is withering, fading. Senju Tobirama knew it, because the Nidaime was always one to utilize any weapon at hand, but beyond him few have ever had the precision and dedication required to learn it fully.

Maybe it won't be quite as simple as Sakumo thought to just tear down the seal.

The quick-sharp click of footsteps on stone draws his attention away from the markings, and he turns just as the door opens. The snake is the first in, whoever is behind it pausing long enough that the reptile can make it through without worry of getting stepped on, and it slithers right up to the table and curls around one of the legs. Sakumo glances down at it, then back up, to the fall of thick black hair against a pale robe, sharp-edged, abrasive chakra that weighs like lead as the figure carefully closes the door. His eyes widen, and he reaches for the bars automatically, only just stopping himself from touching them in time.

"Orochimaru," he says, mixed relief and delight. "Your timing is perfect. How did Konoha know to send you? There's a six-point barrier seal, if you can take it down we can—"

But Orochimaru isn't turning towards him, simply standing at the door, unmoving. Sakumo has three seconds to suffer his confusion, the brief flare of panic that this isn't Konoha's resident Sannin at all and he's actually mistaken—

"Hatake," Orochimaru says evenly, turning at last, and eerie golden eyes catch Sakumo's bewildered stare. "Any stiffness or lack of response in your limbs?"

Clearly there are pieces to this picture that Sakumo is missing. Likely a lot of them, it seems. He takes half a step back, eyes flickering over Orochimaru, and his gaze lands on the heavy signet ring around Orochimaru's finger. Not something he's ever seen before, and while Orochimaru has always appeared fond of jewelry, this doesn't seem quite like his usual.

"Not that I can tell," he says, and keeps his voice as light as he can. "Let me out and I'll do some stretches. That should make any problems easier to spot."

"I'd forgotten," Orochimaru says, stepping close to the bars. There's a faint tilt to his lips that reads as
amusement, but somehow that doesn't make Sakumo feel all that much better. "You always played the humble fool so well."

The words sting, just a little. Sakumo's last memory of Konoha is hatred and mockery, depression and betrayal and grief sitting heavy on his shoulders. *Fool* was perhaps the kindest of the things they called him, and *humble* certainly never factored in.

"You're not going to let me out," he says evenly, watching the younger man's face for any shifts. "Is this even in Konoha?"

Slyness overtakes amusement, though there's still plenty of that as well on his face. "Konoha and I have...parted ways. You of all people should remember how quickly their good nature can turn."

Another twist in his chest, small but sharp, and Sakumo lets out a slow breath. "My dishonor has nothing to do with—"

"On the contrary, Hatake, it has *everything* to do with this." Orochimaru's eyes narrow and he leans forward, just barely beyond the range of the seal. "I am a powerful man, and you will never meet anyone who disagrees. My former teammates are strong as well. But you—your fame outpaced the Densetsu no Sannin's. You were Konoha's very *best*. The Second Shinobi War lasted years, and you were the village's single greatest asset throughout it. And then, in the very last moment, you made one mistake, following the tenants of a village built on teamwork and loyalty, and they cast you out for it."

A breath, short and edged with an angry hiss, and Orochimaru turns away in a swirl of pale cloth and dark hair. *Overdramatic as ever*, Sakumo thinks with the part of his brain not numb and frozen.

"You were a cautionary tale, Hatake," Orochimaru says, not looking at him. "You were a warning I should have heeded, but didn't. Past service comes to nothing. *Orders* come to nothing. There is no room for explanation, no space for mistakes. No thought given to the outcasts and the useful undesirables." He laughs, low and unnerving, and presses a hand over his face. "Tell me, don't you feel the same?"

"I have never given Konoha any less than my full loyalty," Sakumo says, as steadily as he can manage, but—for one fraction of a heartbeat he can feel the press of a blade against his stomach, the feel of flesh giving way to a spill of blood. For one instant he can remember the mocking jeers when he failed a simple mission, weeks after the Suna mission ended in disaster, and the way Kakashi had turned his face away, ashamed.

This time when Orochimaru turns back to face him, all humor has vanished from his face, replaced with the stirrings of a dark anger Sakumo has only ever seen from him on the battlefield. "Wrong," Orochimaru says, as silken as a dagger sliding into his back. "You gave your comrades your loyalty, even over the good of the village." When Sakumo stiffens, he smiles, entirely unamused. "Precisely. Loyalty to your teammates was returned with ridicule, near exile. You were faithful to them, and they betrayed you. But now I work for a world without lies, a world where only truth and peace exist. Will you help create it? Your strength and will would be invaluable to us."

His fingers trail across the bars, light and deft, tracing the outline of a seal Sakumo has seen before. Sakumo follows their path for a moment, and doesn't look up as he asks, "You're working for someone? I never imagined you as another person's pawn, Orochimaru."

The words earn him a bitter laugh. "Clearly, Hatake, you know nothing about me. I am a dangerous, convenient pawn, and so many have made use of me. What's one more, in the end?"
"Confusing," Sakumo answers, and when Orochimaru casts him a veiled, faintly wary glance, he manages a smile, as genuine as he can possibly make it. A step forward brings him right across from Orochimaru, and he reaches out, mirroring his hand in the air. "I remember you, Orochimaru, during the war and after. Jiraiya and Tsunade—they abandoned the village with no indication they would ever return, but you were always there, always working. What happened to the man who was responsible for half of our advancements, for so many of our victories?"

Orochimaru doesn't look away from his face, but Sakumo can't read more than the basic outline of his emotions. Manipulation, entreaty, an attempt at understanding in preparation to cut down the opponent in this argument—it’s the first step of turning an enemy against their own cause. Not a system that Sakumo had ever thought to use on a comrade before, and he's doubtful of its success against a genius of Orochimaru's level. Even so, nothing has ever been lost by trying.

"That man?" Orochimaru says quietly, derisively. "He stepped off a path, and the jaws of reality snapped him up and devoured him. Something you should be very familiar with, Hatake. After all, it killed you in the end, did it not?"

Sakumo sucks in a breath, not quite started enough to step back, but from the grim, thin-lipped smile Orochimaru gives him it's all too clear a tell. Orochimaru turns, and this time when he crosses the room his steps are swift and unhesitating. "I won't do you the disservice of attempting to convert you to our plans again, Hatake. It fails to matter in the end. In seven days you'll follow Madara's orders whether you want to or not."

His hand hesitates on the latch of the door, and without looking back he says quietly, venomously, "Konoha may as well have held the blade that killed you. Will you really give your life for them again, White Fang?"

The door falls shut behind him with a heavy thud, and there's the sound of a bolt sliding home. Sakumo breathes in, careful and controlled, and closes his eyes.

"Well," a light, feminine voice says, unexpected enough to make him jump. "He's gotten even creepier, you know."

The other cell isn't empty at all, though Sakumo can see in a glance why he thought it was. There's a woman perched on a tiny stone ledge near the ceiling, and only now that her legs are dangling down is she easy to spot. The waterfall of red hair, at least ankle-length, is even more obvious.

"You've met?" Sakumo asks, trying to place her face.

With a rude snort, the woman—clearly a kunoichi—drops down to the floor and straightens, smacking her fist against the seal that mirrors Sakumo's. It flares with a sharp crackle, and she winces, drawing her hand back to study the raw skin. "Orochimaru's from Konoha. Of course we've met. Though I was a lot shorter."

"Uzumaki," he realizes with surprise, because last he remembered she was barely even a genin, for all that she held the Kyuubi inside of her. Uzumaki Kushina grins at him. "Nice to see you again, Hatake, especially since we're both supposed to be dead. Want to help me bust out of this joint? I'm in the mood for an explosion or two."

Sakumo laughs a little, entirely despite himself, and looks down at the air where Orochimaru traced that seal. It means something, he's sure of it—Orochimaru's not the type for meaningless fidgeting. Well. There's space enough to figure it out right now.
"We've got a week," he says, and Kushina's grin is as vicious as the beast she hosted.

"All the time in the world, you know," she answers, bright and wicked, and Sakumo smiles back.
“Not going to wander in to gloat?” Kisame asks, amused, as he steps out of the deep shadows near the hallway’s bend.

The Uchiha doesn’t look away from Orochimaru’s retreating figure, his entire body almost eerily still. “They’re puppets,” he says, not quite dismissive but certainly close, and Kisame's grin widens. “There's no use grandstanding in front of dolls.”

With a low chuckle, Kisame braces a shoulder against the stone of the wall and looks down at his leader. His long hair is pulled back in a tail today, thick and spiky, and Kisame idly wonders if it feels as rough as it looks. Hopefully not, or the man will have more in common with Zetsu's cactus imitation than is good for anyone. “You don’t trust the snake man,” he says, more statement than question.

The Uchiha snorts softly, finally turning his eyes back to Kisame. “Of course not,” he answers. “Orochimaru is planning something, and he has his own agenda. He’s only been following ours because it suits his purposes.”

Kisame doesn’t have to ask why the man recruited him, if that’s the case; Orochimaru is a genius, incredibly knowledgeable in almost every area of study, and lacks the morals that might trip up another man. He’s likely one of the most valuable, useful shinobi in the Elemental Countries, his personal goals aside. The fact that Konoha chased him out kind of makes Kisame want to scratch his head, because the sheer strategic value of a man like Orochimaru has to outweigh a lot of flaws. Then again, Kisame's always found Konoha a little bewildering to begin with. Kiri might not have been the nicest of places, but at least on the whole they never pretended to be anything but what they were.

“I'll keep an eye out,” he volunteers, even though the Uchiha likely already has that covered. An extra set of watchful eyes can never hurt.

The offer gets him a faint tip of the Uchiha’s head, partway between silent thanks and acknowledgement. “Check the control seals he’s building as soon as you get the opportunity,” is all he says, however. “Uzumaki Kushina was one of the best Fuinjutsu Masters in Fire Country. If there are any holes, intentional or otherwise, I want them covered.”

Which is the perfect lead-in to something Kisame's been wondering about. “Quite the powerhouses you picked to bring back,” he prompts, not quite expecting an answer to the unspoken question but
wanting to hear one anyway. Emotional sabotage is one thing; resurrecting two of the most famous shinobi Kisame's heard of is another entirely. Reputations like the ones the White Fang and the Red Hot Habanero have don’t just fall out of the sky.

There's a careful pause, and then the Uchiha reaches up, pulling his mask off. “Old wounds can run the deepest,” he says, turning the porcelain over to look down at the pale purple front. His mouth pulls tight, as if he’s remembering something unpleasant. “Hatake Sakumo’s death sent ripples across the whole world, and changed his son drastically. Konoha's disgraced hero coming back to destroy them? I can't think of a better distraction, personally. They'll be too busy jumping at shadows to realize what’s happening under their noses.”

Kisame can accept that, and he’s more than able to remember the way Uzumaki Kurama stood over the Copy-Nin, as defensive as a wounded bear. There's some kind of relationship there, whether of friendship or something more, and Kisame can believe that something capable of breaking Hatake will thoroughly distract Uzumaki. Still. “Seems like the girl's a bit of a risk when the White Fang alone would be enough,” he rumbles, and wonders if he’s pushing his luck too much.

But there's no warping spiral, no hammer-blow of cold chakra. The Uchiha glances over at him again, assessing and maybe a little wary, and snorts faintly. “Believe me, Kisame, I'm well aware of Uzumaki Kushina's capabilities. But her brother loved her enough to defy the strongest Hidden Village to get to her son, and whether they were close or not, they're Uzumaki.”

That’s explanation enough, Kisame supposes. After all, when Kiri went after Uzushio, they knew from the start that they’d have to utterly destroy the entire village and wipe its shinobi out, practically to the last man. If they hadn’t, if they missed even a handful of survivors who managed to band together, well. There probably wouldn’t have been a Kiri at all within a few months.

“Interesting technique,” is all he offers, though. “Big implications.” Because those two people in there are alive, not simply the resurrected corpses Orochimaru has experimented with raising before. It’s not a genjutsu, not some parlor trick that’s quick to break down. Life, and out of all the crazy and twisted things Kisame has seen, that’s…unique. Kind of mind-boggling, too.

The Uchiha’s eyes drop back to his mask, and where he’s holding it his knuckles turn white from the force of his grip. “Interesting,” he repeats, grimly amused, and just for a moment he looks—torn. Shattered. Kisame watches his expression bleed into something so very much at war with itself that he almost takes a step back. The man’s mouth forms a word, or maybe just a sound, but it’s silent, and he closes his eyes as soon as he’s done it, letting out a breath that’s nearly a sigh. For a moment his shoulders dip, his head bows, and he seems nothing less than weary.

Kisame studies him for a minute, then shifts his weight and bounces Samehada a little on his shoulder. “Got a name I can call you?” he asks, because it’s been itching at him for a while now, and offers up a grin when red-and-black eyes open and dart towards his face, then narrow.

“Madara,” the Uchiha says flatly. “Call me Madara.”

That rouses a flicker of something that’s heavier than irritation, but not quite full-blown anger. Kisame stares back, feeling just the bare edge of his chakra sharpen, and says as cheerfully as he can manage, “For someone trying to create a world of truth, you're building a pretty big lie right there.”

That gets him anger, sharp and clear. The Uchiha’s shoulders stiffen, his head comes up, and he takes a short, challenging step towards Kisame, almost into his personal space. “It’s not a lie,” he says, and there's a thread of danger in his tone. “I don’t need any other name for what we’re doing here. It’s a placeholder, a misdirection.”
“A lie,” Kisame repeats, and his heart is speeding up in his chest, beating faster, the excitement and anticipation he always feels before a fight, even though he shouldn’t hope that this turns into one. He’s pretty much indestructible, and the Uchiha is as well. It would be like throwing Kakuzu against another immortal and trying to see which one outlived the other. “I’m asking you for your name. You trusted me enough to show your face, didn’t you? Why?”

The Uchiha is never unmasked. Even with Zetsu he keeps it firmly in place, and Kisame’s spent a lot of time thinking about that moment in the cave when the Uchiha removed it the first time. It was a show of trust that was unprecedented, something Kisame rarely got even back in Kiri, after the incident with the Cypher Squad. There were words, empty statements of loyalty, but they were lies. This—this was action, something given only to Zetsu and Kisame.

For a long, endless moment, the man just stares at him, eyes narrowed, expression faintly hostile. Then, slowly, the aggression leeches out of him, and he looks away. His fingers tighten on the mask again, holding tightly enough that the knuckles turn white. “Because besides me, you’re the one closest to this cause,” he says, his tone aiming for flat but falling short when it comes out faintly rough. “You’re the one who shares my vision of a world where all dreams are possible, and no one has to suffer for them. Anyone else could betray me at any moment, but you won’t.”

Trust. Kisame was right, and it curls in his chest like a small victory. “Don’t lie to me,” he says, and it’s not chiding, closer to a promise without the actual words having to be said. “Any of them, if you have to.” A tip of his head takes in the rest of the base, the other members of Akatsuki. “Just don’t try it on me and I’m with you until the end. That world you see—I want to see it too.”

“You will,” the Uchiha promises, quiet but steely, and glances at the door of the room where they’re keeping the resurrected shinobi. A breath, a faint tightening of his mouth as he comes to a decision, and his looks back at Kisame, expression set. “Uchiha Obito. That’s who I was. You can use it if we’re alone.”

*I’m trusting you,* he doesn’t have to say.

“Obito,” Kisame repeats, and watches the emotions flicker over Obito’s face at the sound of it. He wonders how long it’s been since the man heard anyone speak it aloud. For half a heartbeat he thinks of thanking him for the trust, but—it goes both ways. No thanks needed for that kind of thing. “I’ll steal a glance at the seals while Orochimaru’s occupied, then.”

Obito doesn’t thank him either, doesn’t tell him to be careful. He doesn’t need to, though, because that’s not how it works between them. With a short nod, he slips his mask back on and vanishes straight through the wall, only a fading flicker of chakra to mark his presence.

Kisame stares after him for a long, long minute before he bounces Samehada again, chuckles a little to himself, and goes to track down Orochimaru’s notes without getting caught.

Captivity is boring. It’s one of the things Sakumo always forgets in the rush and press of the aftermath, the adrenaline of later. But in the moment, as it’s happening? Being a prisoner is nothing short of tedious.

It’s helpful that Kushina doesn’t look any happier with their situation, pacing along the bars of her cell with an expression that’s more suited to a caged tigress than a petite kunoichi. They’ve little to do, and with Orochimaru’s little red-tailed snake coiled watchfully under one of the chairs, they can’t
even discuss what they can do to escape. Sakumo is fairly certain that the seal Orochimaru sketched in the air means something, but he doesn’t want to bring it up with one of the man’s summons right there on the off chance that it was an absent, unconscious gesture. Better to wait until they’re certain to be alone.

“I can’t believe he’s this much of a traitor,” Kushina mutters, making a tight turn that swirls her long hair out behind her. It’s precisely the same shade as fresh blood, and Sakumo can’t help but remember his infrequent trips to Uzushio as a child. It was a common color there; much less so in Konoha, unless something has changed drastically.

“He wasn’t when you…?” Died, Sakumo doesn’t want to say, because just the word makes something ugly twist and roil in is stomach. He’s managed to stop pressing his hand over the spot where his tantō slid into his skin, but more through decades of practice to keep from giving away tells, rather than any sort of actual adjustment. Shinobi are good at faking mental and emotional stability, but far worse at actually achieving it.

“Died?” Kushina has absolutely no hesitations stomping right into delicate territory and setting up camp. “He was creepy, but he was still loyal. I don’t know what could have happened. He seemed okay with Minato being the Yondaime, even if he wanted the position at first.” She turns again, then throws herself down to sit cross-legged on the bed, hands on her knees and a scowl aimed right at the snake summons. “Well?” she asks it waspishly. “When do we get dinner? I’m starving! You’d better have ramen, you know!”

Sakumo doesn’t quite hold his breath, but he watches the snake from the corner of his eye, waiting for something to happen. There’s a long, long pause, a flicker of its tongue coming out to taste the air, and then the snake uncoils and slides towards the door. Brows rising, Sakumo looks from the snake to the door to Kushina, and watches the satisfied smile spread across her face.

“It’s a test,” Kushina says, cheerful again, when she catches his eye. The angle of her grin still has a vicious edge to it, though. “Orochimaru’s never done this before, so he wants to make sure we’re all in working order. Hunger’s a good sign that we’re alive, you know?”

It’s easy to remember Orochimaru’s questions about whether all his limbs were working. Even easier to feel the faint pangs of hunger in his own stomach, proof that he is, against all odds and his very best efforts, very much alive.

Breath catching in his throat, Sakumo slowly copies Kushina, sinking down on the futon. He can't quite help the urge to curl his arms around himself, a fractured defense against the feeling that his hands should still come away wet with blood and bile.

Sakumo had had no doubts, when he made the choice to die. He had dishonored his village, his clan, his son. The decision he made had brought ruin and war and death upon Konoha, and he hadn’t been able to withstand the condemnation, the stiffness in his son’s face every time they walked the streets together. Kakashi deserves better, he had thought, coldly, utterly certain. Better than the legacy Sakumo was leaving, better than a father who was a joke and disgrace, better than a lifetime trying to escape the shadow of a man who may as well have betrayed his village.

And, of course, he had done it for himself. Done it to escape, because he couldn’t stand seeing those who had been his friends, his comrades, shinobi he had saved and worked with and fought alongside, all turning their backs on him because he had valued lives over the good of the village.

You were a cautionary tale, Hatake. You were a warning I should have heeded, but didn't. Past service comes to nothing. Orders come to nothing. There is no room for explanation, no space for mistakes. No thought given to the outcasts and the useful undesirables. Tell me, don't you feel the
What limits are there to loyalty? Sakumo has never been entirely sure. When does loyalty cost the same as betrayal, and how does one find the line where it turns? What does loyalty to the whole matter if it isn’t given to the individual?

They're questions Sakumo never managed to answer, once he started asking them. Questions that ate at him, and bored holes right down to the center of them, and the escape from them was almost a relief, no matter what it otherwise meant.

“I wonder how long it’s been,” Kushina says, startling him. He glances up, eyes seeking, and finds her looking away pointedly, twisting a lock of hair around her fingers like she can't be bothered to pay attention to anything else. “Orochimaru looks kinda different, I think. Maybe? But not a lot. So…not too long.”

Sakumo just manages to force out a quiet sound of acknowledgement. “Several years,” he offers, because it felt like at least that, waiting in between the worlds. Besides, Kushina is far beyond the little girl he remembers. She must have been…sixteen or a little older, when he made his choice. All gangly limbs and red hair, attached at the hip to the Uchiha girl from her genin team. She’s in her twenties now, probably twenty-four, and Sakumo can't help the immediate slip sideways in his thoughts, because Kakashi would be ten years younger, fourteen when she died, and—

He doesn’t have any right to ask, not after the way he left his son. Better for Kakashi in the end, not to be weighed down by his failure, but Sakumo doesn’t fool himself into thinking it was painless for Kakashi either.

Very firmly, he shuts those thoughts away, turns his attention elsewhere. “Kushina,” he says, and pretends the words don’t rasp as they emerge, rough against his vocal cords. Kushina looks up instantly, purple eyes landing squarely on him, and he mimics the seal Orochimaru traced for him. “Do you recognize that?”

“Do it again?” When Sakumo obliges, Kushina watches his fingers with a faint frown. She sketches it herself, across the floor of the cell, and stares down at it for a long moment. “Maybe…some kind of control?” she offers eventually, scratching her head. “It’s on a base of Uzumaki mental modifiers, but I’ve never seen this variation before. You swipe something from the snake man?”

“He gave it to me,” Sakumo admits, because he’s fairly certain that’s what really happened.

Kushina's frown deepens, and her eyes flicker down to the seal again. Suspicion crosses her face, then wariness, and finally reluctant admiration. “If these changes do what I think they do, then it’s definitely some kind of control, and it would probably take a week to adapt to our chakra so that we couldn’t break it. It fits, you know?”

It does, unfortunately. With the timeframe, and the fact that Orochimaru said they would be following the group’s plans whether they wished to or not. To be used against Konoha, no doubt, and the thought makes Sakumo's hands tighten into fists. He put them all in danger once; that Kushina is here, older, says that the village likely didn’t end in the war he brought upon their heads, but Sakumo won’t allow himself to be the cause of more death. He’s caused enough harm already.

“We have to find a way out,” he says, pushing back to his feet. He paces along the edge of the bars, testing them with his chakra for the tenth time today, searching for any gaps he might have missed before. “If we can get to Konoha and warn them…”

Kushina doesn’t point out that two previously-dead shinobi walking up to Konoha’s gates and
spouting dire warning will be more likely to cause chaos than avert it. Then again, she’s an Uzumaki; Sakumo likely shouldn’t have expected her to. All she does is stretch a little, settle into her spot, and start sketching out designs on the floor of her cell. “This would be easier with ink,” she complains, though she doesn’t pause. “Let’s see, counter for a control…we’ll have to boost our own chakra. Maybe fluctuate it to keep the seal from aligning itself properly…”

Clearly there’s nothing Sakumo can do to help on that front. He’s a good shinobi, knows without giving himself airs that he was one of the best jounin before the disastrous mission at the end, but his grasp of seals is sketchy at best, especially compared to an Uzumaki’s.

He’ll leave that to Kushina now, and focus on the part he is good at—people. After all, if Orochimaru is working devotedly for those who resurrected them, he has no reason to give them pieces of the riddle that will free them. There’s also little doubt that they can free themselves, once they start trying—they wouldn’t be jounin otherwise.

So. A plot within a plot, it seems. Orochimaru must have his own aims, or he’s not as much of a traitor as he says he is.

But that last thought curls uncomfortably in Sakumo's gut, not quite settling. Orochimaru’s anger at Konoha was genuine, his derision of Sakumo's loyalty unaffected. It didn’t quite strike a chord, didn’t quite hit home when Sakumo heard those words, but—

But.

There’s a sliver of understanding, as much as he hates it. Recognition of just how Orochimaru could have fallen to that mindset, even if Sakumo knows nothing of the actual story.

He takes a breath, turns on his heel when he reaches the wall, and listens for footsteps beyond his own. All the while, his mind turns the question over, seeks out the angles, judges the flaws.

Kakashi isn’t the only genius in the Hatake clan, after all. And if Sakumo has to match his genius against Orochimaru’s much-lauded intelligence, so be it. He’ll win.

There’s really no other choice.

Between Jiraiya's sulking, Bee’s rapping, Rōshi’s pouting, and Han’s exasperation, Kurama manages maybe an hour on the ship, waiting to see if Ao’s had any messages from Kiri, before he tells the Kiri jounin to send a messenger if he does get one and gladly heads back to the dock. It’s snowing harder that it was that morning, and there’s already a thick covering on the streets. Kurama grimaces at it, not fond of the way the cold stings his bare feet, but trudges back to the inn regardless.

The town is quiet, most people keeping indoors and only a few of the most devoted merchants out on the street. Pulling his haori a little more tightly around himself, Kurama heads up the stairs, trying not to let his worry over what’s happening back in Kiri get any stronger. They're on the border between Frost and Lightning Country, and any news passing north would likely stop here, so if anything happens in one of the villages, Kurama will hear about it. Naruto is fine right now; they’ll be on their way back to Water Country by tomorrow morning if Shizune clears Kakashi to travel, and that means they’ll be in Kiri by the morning after that if the wind is with them.

Two more days, Kurama tells himself, and it’s ridiculous, hilarious that the last few days without Naruto have felt like some of the longest in his existence, even though he once wanted nothing more
than to escape the brat.

The door of the inn swings open an inch away from his nose, startling Kurama out of his thoughts, and he blinks as Tsunade marches through, Kakashi a few paces behind her. The woman blinks right back, then sighs and orders, “Out of my way, shortcake. If I’m going to put up with this squad of clowns I need a damn drink.”

Kurama’s eyes narrow. “Shortcake,” he repeats flatly.

Kakashi eyes him and slides sideways, deliberately out of the line of fire.

Of course, Tsunade just raises a brow at him, entirely unimpressed, though there’s an edge of wicked humor in the slant of her mouth. “Like strawberries,” she explains sweetly, tipping her chin at the top of his head. “Especially suitable since you’re vertically challenged.”

“Fuck you,” Kurama spits, bristling. “You’re the tiny one, hag!”

Tsunade’s smile turns dangerous, a vein all but throbbing in her temple. “What was that, brat?” she demands, grabbing Kurama by the collar and pulling him down a few inches so they’re eye to eye.

Kurama growls at her, opens his mouth to tell her that at least he isn’t horizontally challenged and can fit through doors without his rack scraping wood, and is suddenly hit by the perfect solution to his problem. Challenge plus bar plus Tsunade and a bet she’ll be certain she can win could only mean— “At least I’m not a wimpy lightweight,” he snaps, and Tsunade growls right back.

“Lightweight?” she demands sharply. “That’s it, kid, get your ass to the bar. I’ll have you under the table before sunset.”

“I bet you won’t,” Kurama retorts.

“And I’ll bet you that I can!” They both ignore the sound of Shizune’s protests as she staggers out the door, still pulling on her sandals, and Tsunade narrows her eyes at Kurama's smirk. “What odds?”

“Five favors,” Kurama offers.

“One,” she counters, giving him a shake that makes him snarl. “Do I look like an idiot, shortcake?”

“Keep calling me that and you’ll look like half of one,” Kurama threatens, but allows, “Fine, four.”

“Two.”

“Four.”

“Three.”

“Deal.”

Shizune makes a despairing sound behind the press of her hand over her face, while Kakashi just looks mildly entertained. Tsunade gives her apprentice an exasperated look, then turns back to Kurama and challenges, “First one to hit the floor loses?”

“Agreed.” Kurama tries to bat her hand away from his collar, but all she does is shift her grip and drag him back out into the street. Kurama yelps, almost missing his footing on the ice-slick steps, but hops awkwardly on one foot to turn, gets his balance, and falls into step with her.
“You're going to tear my damned shirt,” he complains.

Tsunade snorts. “Shortcake, I could hardly make it look worse. Those things you're wearing are about three sizes too big and twenty years out of fashion.”

“They were a gift.” Kurama pries her hand off as best he can, and when she turns with a glare, he sends one right back. “From a lady in Uzushio, one of the first people to actually help me instead of just trying to cut off my head.”

Kakashi makes a quiet noise of protest and is summarily ignored.

Tsunade pauses, staring at him, and Kurama thinks he sees her eyes soften. She sighs, but lets go of his shirt and instead tucks her arm through his. When Kurama tries to shake her off, she clamps her fingers around his forearm and eyes him warningly. “Easy, shortcake,” she says. “You’ll be too drunk to even pretend to be a gentleman pretty soon. Enjoy it while it lasts.”

With a snort, Kurama looks away, hoping she won't see his smirk, and catches Kakashi watching him. He quickly rearranges his expression into a scowl and demands, “Aren’t you supposed to be on bed rest?”

“No,” Kakashi says easily, his visible eye crinkling, and Kurama can't tell if it’s a real smile or a faked one. “I was told to walk a bit and loosen my muscles.”

“Well, walk somewhere else,” Kurama huffs, because if anyone can call bullshit on this bet, it’s Kakashi. He doesn’t want to have to go to the trouble of thinking up another one when this is already a pretty damn perfect way to get the results he wants.

“Maa, maa, Kurama. Someone has to protect your virtue from Lady Tsunade,” Kakashi protests, and when Kurama gives him an incredulous look—because really, what the hell?—the crinkles just deepen. The bastard is laughing at him.

Still, implying that Tsunade is going to get him drunk is the exact opposite of blowing his cover, so Kurama forces himself to relax a little, though it doesn’t stop him from eyeing the Copy-Nin warily. “Fuck you,” is the response he finally settles on, because it’s fantastically multipurpose that way.

Predictably, Kakashi ducks his head a little, a familiar orange book coming up to hide what little of his expression is usually visible. “I didn’t think I was your type,” he parries without missing a beat, and Kurama is so startled he almost whacks his head on the doorframe as Tsunade hauls him into a familiar bar. She raises an eyebrow at him, but Kurama is too busy checking for a mind-control seal or something on their silver-haired shadow to pay attention.

What the hell happened to convince me you're not a threat and all the posturing that went on last night? Kurama remembers that distinctly, and he’s pretty sure he didn’t say anywhere close to enough to change Kakashi’s mind about anything, let alone Kurama being a dangerous chakra monster liable to snap at any moment.

Even so, Kakashi flicks a glance up from the page, catching Kurama's gaze for half an instant, and—Kurama's pretty damn certain that was meant to be a smile, or something close to one.

“Uzumaki,” a vaguely familiar voice says, amused, and Kurama turns to find the blonde bartender from the other day smirking at him from behind the counter. “Found your mystery lady, did you? And an extra.” Her eyes slide over Kakashi, halfway between assessment and admiration, and she raises a brow at Kurama. “Something I can do for you?”
“Sake,” Tsunade answers, steering Kurama to the nearest chair and all but dumping him in it. “As much as it’ll take for pretty boy ever here to start kissing the floor.”

“Only if you don’t do it first,” Kurama retorts, and scowls as Kakashi lowers himself into a chair on his left. “Aren’t you supposed to be walking? Get lost.”

Kakashi’s book dips just enough for him to give Kurama a perfectly fake smile over the top of it. “I’ll referee.”

“I second that,” the bartender agrees with wicked delight, dropping into the seat on Kurama’s left.

Huffing, Kurama sinks back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest. “Don’t you have drinks to serve?”

Tsunade takes the chair across from him, Shizune hovering behind her, and her smile is dangerous. “Leave it be, shortcake. If the lady wants to watch you humiliate yourself, she’s welcome to.”

The particularly toothy expression Kurama gives her is almost a grin, much the same way that Kurama is almost human. “I’m not the one who’s going to end up under the table, *hag.*”

Humor flickering into irritation, Tsunade grabs two of the bottles a waiter deposits on the table and shoves one into Kurama’s hands. “Last chance to bow out,” she tells the other woman, though her glare is all for Kurama. “We’re not going to be leaving for a while.”

The woman just laughs. “Perks of owning the place—Kenma gets to watch the bar until I’m bored.” She points at a sign on the back wall that reads *Baichō’s Bar.* “I’m Baichō. Now, round one. On your marks, and *down ‘em.*”

Kurama pulls a face. It’s just slightly possible he should have thought this through a little more, he acknowledges, but doesn’t let the taste stop him from tipping his first cup back.

He just hopes Tsunade isn’t too hungover to travel in the morning. There’s nothing in the entire world that will keep him from setting sail back to Naruto tomorrow, even if he has to find a boat and paddle the rest of the way to Water Country.
It’s still far too soon to catch so much as a glimpse of Water Country on the horizon, but Kurama hasn’t moved from the ships’ railing in hours regardless. The wind and spray are viciously icy and the deck is slick, but Kurama stays where he is even after Ao several times tries to hint that he should go below.

Kurama is tempted to go get Momiji, to ask the fox to fly him the rest of the way so that he can get there first, so that he doesn’t have to wait, but he doesn’t. Not yet. There’s a storm ahead of them, and while Ao says they’ll make it through after it breaks, Momiji would have to detour around it or suffer the winds, and Kurama won’t put him in that position. He’s just…frustrated. Impatient. Naruto is up there, beyond the horizon, and Kurama is utterly, fiercely determined that after this, he won’t let them be separated for this long again.

He rubs a hand through his hair, grimacing a little at the way the tips of the wet strands are starting to freeze, and folds down to rest his elbows on the railing, eyes on the dark clouds. There’s been no word on Akatsuki that he’s heard—no word on much of anything, though Jiraiya managed to get his hands on a report of Kumo nin heading into Moon Country, probably to investigate the Mountains’ Graveyard. And while no news is likely a good thing, it’s also potentially really, really bad. Obito is a tricky bastard at the best of times, and never more so than when he’s been outmaneuvered.

There’s no chance of predicting his movements through what Kurama knows of the future. He might have the basic outline, but all the rest of what he remembers is completely useless now, and has been since he grabbed Naruto and ran. It’s…a little unnerving, not having even the faintest idea what Akatsuki is going to do now.

Just like everyone else in the world, Kurama supposes with a wry smile. Besides, Naruto has a family. Kurama would make any change necessary if it ended in his jinchuuriki being happy.

Over the creak and crash of the ship moving, he hears slightly unsteady footsteps nearing, and turns just in time to see Tsunade collapse over the rail, faintly green. She groans, pressing her hands to either side of her head, and Kurama snorts.

“Keep laughing, shortcake,” Tsunade threatens darkly. “I’m going to remember this.”

Kurama knows better than to take an Uzumaki woman’s threats lightly, even if that Uzumaki woman happens to be half-Senju. He rolls his eyes but doesn’t mock, even when she makes a noise like she’s dying. “Could be worse,” he points out. “I could have asked for something a lot more humiliating than visiting your almost-nephew.”

Tsunade’s expression darkens, and Kurama is absolutely sure that she’s remembering Jiraiya’s cheerful suggestions for her forfeit. Not that he got all that many out before Tsunade punched him hard enough that even Kurama winced. “You,” she bites out, “seem at least mildly intelligent. Don’t ruin my preconceptions by doing something that stupid.” Casting him a narrow look, she sighs and kneads at her temples. “Why the hell aren’t you hungover? I distinctly remember you getting tipsy halfway through the night.”
Kurama just grins at her, all teeth. He’s not about to tell Tsunade that she got enough liquor in him that even his healing got bogged down for a while trying to burn it all off. He managed, and Tsunade was on the floor a little after midnight. That’s a victory in his books.

“You're not going to heal yourself?” he asks instead. “What’s the point of all that talent if you can’t even fix a hangover?”

Tsunade pulls a face. “I promised Shizune that I wouldn’t,” she says. “She seems to think it’s nothing less than I deserve for drinking. Besides, every time I heal myself I cut time off my lifespan. A hangover isn’t worth dying even earlier than I already will.”

It’s tempting to call bullshit; the Tsunade that Kurama remembers was fierce and strong well into her eighties, and no one could ever tell by looking at her that she wasn’t the twenty-something woman she appeared. Still, a promise to Shizune is reason enough, and if Tsunade has to justify it to herself, that’s her problem.

With a soft breath, not quite heavy enough to be a sigh, Tsunade leans forward, bracing herself against the rail and turning her face into the spray. “You’d really spend a favor from me just so I’ll meet Kushina’s son?” she asks, glancing over at Kurama and lifting a brow.

Kurama just grunts. “You’re family,” he says gruffly. “Naruto needs all the family that he can get.” A flick of his eyes, taking in her hunched posture, the lines of weariness in her face that are from stress rather than age, and he turns away again. “I could be wrong, but…you look like someone who needs that too.”

Tsunade's mouth pulls tight, grimness and grief in equal measure, and she blows out a shaky sigh. “Believe me, shortcake. The last thing anyone needs is me getting close to them.” With that, she shoves away from the railing and stalks away, sandals clicking loudly across the deck.

Stupid dramatic shinobi, Kurama thinks but doesn’t say, only just managing not to roll his eyes. He can’t tell who’s worse—his Naruto with his melodramatic sacrifices, Tsunade clinging to her grief, Sasuke in his timeline being a theatrical little bastard, or Obito caught up in his delusions. There are more, too; those are just the ones who get the prize for making Kurama want to roll his eyes the most. Practically everyone else in the shinobi world is a runner-up, though, and some far more than others.

“Driving away your allies already, Kurama?” a dry voice asks.

Speak of the devil, Kurama thinks, amused, and glances over to watch Kakashi take Tsunade's spot, his back to the ocean and that ridiculous book out in front of him.

“Doesn’t that thing have enough stains on it already?” he asks, equally dry.

Kakashi flicks a glance at his book, then at Kurama, and his eye crinkles. “You make it sound so dirty, Kurama,” he protests.

Kurama snorts. “You're the one reading porn in public,” he points out.

“So you’ve read them!” Kakashi sounds caught midway between cheerful and mischievous, and he’s watching Kurama with interest, not even pretending to read.

Kakashi frowns. “You’re the one reading porn in public,” he points out.

“Not on your life, asshole. I don’t need to have read them to know what they’re about. The damn title kind of gives it away.”
Kakashi flips the novel around to study the front like he’s forgotten what it says, then makes a thoughtful noise. “Haven’t you ever heard ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’?” he asks mildly.

“Like meeting the perverted old geezer isn’t enough of a clue what it’s about,” Kurama retorts. “Whatever, keep your porn. But if you try to make me read it I’m stuffing it down your throat.”

Kakashi clutches the book to his chest with a theatrical sound of horror. “Kurama!” he protests. “You would do something like that to an innocent book?”

Kurama rolls his eyes hard. “That book is about as far from innocent as it can get without actually dripping sin.”

Very pointedly, Kakashi slides it into one of the inside pockets of his flak jacket, carefully tucking it out of sight. “Some people,” he says airily, “have no appreciation of quality literature.”

Another eye roll, and Kakashi is rapidly moving up Kurama’s list. He doesn’t bother answering, turning his gaze back to the horizon. The last scattered rays of sun vanish up ahead of them, overwhelmed by heavy dark clouds, and he can’t see beyond them no matter how hard he looks. Kiri is beyond them, hours distant, and the impatience itches at Kurama’s bones, deep and maddening.

“Did you want something?” he asks distractedly. “Other than waving your porn in my face?”

For a long moment, Kakashi looks like he’s struggling not to make the obvious joke, but Kurama’s dark look makes him raise his hands in surrender. “I just had some questions,” he says, mildly enough that Kurama looks up suspiciously, eyes narrowing. Kakashi meets his stare, for once not even faking a smile. “The passenger room is empty, if you want to talk there.”

It’s better than having this conversation out in the open, so Kurama nods once, sharply, and turns on his heel. He leads the way below deck, down a narrow corridor with crew berths on one side and storage on the other, and steps into the tiny room, like the one Kakashi used when he was hurt. It’s a different room, a different ship, but Kurama doesn’t wait to take in the differences. He sinks down on the bed, watching Kakashi take the lone chair that’s bolted to the floor, and crosses his arms over his chest. Kakashi looks back at him, visible brow lifting, and sighs a little.

“You didn’t tell me anything before,” he points out, and when Kurama opens his mouth to protest, he cuts him off with, “Nothing solid. Are you trying not to change things?”

Kurama hesitates, but…wasn’t he just thinking how the timeline he came from is practically obsolete? There’s likely no harm in giving away a few details, now that Kakashi already has so many. Not all of them, but…some will be fine.

“I stopped trying to keep things the same back in Konoha,” he admits gruffly, leaning back to brace his shoulders against the wall. “If they went badly enough the first time that I had to come back, why try the same thing all over again?”

Kakashi hums in what could be agreement or simple acknowledgement, though his gaze stays firmly on Kurama. “That body belongs to an Uzumaki,” he says carefully.

The statement, simple as it is, makes Kurama curl his fingers into fists, jolts across his nerves like an old ache suddenly flaring back to life. He takes a breath, holds it for a moment, and then lets it out. “Yeah, it did.”

“Were there more in your time?” Kakashi asks, and if Kurama weren’t looking for it, he wouldn’t see the faint tightening of the lines around Kakashi’s eyes, as much of a tell as his mask allows for.
Kurama snorts, closing his eyes. “You mean before everything went to hell? Just two.”

It’s very nearly possible to see the pieces falling into order as Kakashi watches him, tiny hints that most people would gloss over or forget clicking together to form a whole picture. Kakashi hesitates, then nods once and asks, “How far in the future?”

“The Nanadaime’s reign.” When he sees Kakashi open his mouth to ask another question, Kurama huffs. “Does it really matter?” he asks, maybe a little testily. “None of this is important anymore. Kaguya’s not coming back without the Gedō Mazō, and we broke it. That already makes my future obsolete.”

“But not your enemies,” Kakashi points out. He studies Kurama for one more moment, then asks, so quietly that Kurama can barely hear him, “That’s Naruto’s body, isn’t it?”

The noise that wrenches itself from Kurama’s through is painful, involuntary. He shoves away from the wall, rising to his feet, and turns away so that he doesn’t have to look Kakashi in the face. “Fuck you,” he bites out, pressing a hand over his face. “Do you think I fucking wanted this? I didn’t even know what the idiot was planning until it was already done. He just—he could have fucking defended himself, but instead he wasted every last drop of his damned chakra, and Sakura’s—she could have saved him—”

Kakashi doesn’t say anything, but Kurama can feel the Copy-Nin’s gaze between his shoulder blades, pressing against his spine like a physical weight. He takes a shuddering breath, ducking his head to get himself back under control, and lets his hands curl into fists, the tips of his nails biting into his palms. Another breath, a third, a fourth, careful and measured, and he finally feels steady enough to pick his head up, staring at the wooden wall in front of him.

“Yes,” he answers tightly. “This is Naruto’s body. He painted the seals on himself so it would travel back, even knowing that the trip would kill him and leave me possessing it, but Kaguya killed him right as he activated it. I healed, but…”

A long stretch of silence from Kakashi, and then he says quietly, “Sometimes the hardest choices to live with are the ones other people make for you.”

Kurama barks out a rough laugh, because he’s never heard anything truer. “Yeah,” he agrees, tired and grim, and slides back down to sit, though he can’t quite bring himself to look at Kakashi. One half a glance, and—

Kakashi pulls out his book, settling back gingerly in his chair, and flips it open with a quiet hum. Before he can stop himself, Kurama laughs, hoarse and a little choked, and scrubs his hands across his face. Of fucking course. That’s just typical.

But…Kurama is kind of bewildered to realize that he doesn’t mind. He breathes, takes in the quiet that’s broken only by the intermittent rustle of pages turning and the odd giggle, and lets his grief and anger fade one inch at a time. Too much still, too strong, but—maybe it’s getting easier to handle. Slowly but surely.

Kakashi doesn’t leave, and Kurama doesn’t ask for solitude. No platitudes, no words at all, but—Inhale, exhale. That’s pretty close to moving forward.

And it’s enough.
They reach Kiri just at dawn breaks, on the last dissipating wind of the storm. The harbor is quiet, only a pair of chunin on duty and a few fishermen setting out, and Ao’s crew steer them safely into their berth. Kurama hardly manages to wait until they’ve started tossing lines before he’s vaulting over the side to land lightly on the dock, Momiji draped across his shoulders like a sleepy scarf. The village itself starts just up ahead, wood and stone giving way to packed earth streets, and he heads for it at a near trot, ignoring the call of his name from behind him.

The sun is rising, casting long shadows across the path and over the faces of the handful of people he crosses paths with, but Kurama doesn’t slow even when Ameyuri waves cheerfully to him. He can feel Naruto’s chakra up ahead, like a sun-bright beacon, and isn’t about to let anything stop him.

“You're a bastard,” Rōshi complains, jogging a few paces to fall into step with him. “Can't you give a body five seconds to grab their gear?”

With a snort, Kurama glances over his shoulder to see Han following behind, expression placid, though he raises a brow when he catches Kurama’s eye. “You were very quick off the mark,” he agrees, though his tone is mostly amused. “They're at Zabuza’s still?”

Kurama rolls his eyes, but turns back around, judging distances. “Yeah,” he agrees, putting one hand up to stroke Momiji’s ears. The fox turns his head into the touch, but doesn’t otherwise stir. “Seems like it.”

Rōshi grunts, hitching his pack up on his shoulder. “Whatever,” he huffs. “Nice to get away from Bee for a bit, so I don’t blame you for rushing. I forgot how aggravating translating everything from rap was.”

Snorting, Kurama turns off the main street, heading down the side road that runs along the coastal cliffs and will take them back to Zabuza’s house, deeper in the forest. He keeps all of his senses strained ahead, feels a whisper of familiar chakra rising to touch his own, and smiles a little, returning Matatabi’s light nudge across the mental plane.

“They're going to be gathering a welcoming committee,” Han says, smiling as he tips his hat down over his eyes.

“More like a mob,” Rōshi retorts, amused, and then casts a glance at Kurama. He hesitates for a moment before he asks, “Got ideas for after this? Going to stay in Kiri?”

Kurama blinks, dragged away from watching the far end of the path where it curves into the trees, and raises an eyebrow a little at the other redhead. “I wasn’t planning on it,” he answers. “The Kage gave me a pardon, so I was going to head back to Konoha.”

Rōshi makes a sound that’s somewhere between confusion and surprise. “Really? I thought you were just telling the Toad Sage that to get him off your back. You want to go back to one of the villages?”

With a faint sigh that says dealing with Rōshi is something he should really be getting S-rank mission hazard pay for, Han lightly slaps his friend in the back of the head. “You’re in a village right now, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“And Kiri is fine, but I sure as hell wouldn’t want to live here for any longer than I absolutely had to,” Rōshi retorts, aiming a kick at armored shins. “Look me in the eye and tell me that you want to be part of a village again, Han.”
Han is silent for a long moment, then tips his hat down even further, trying to hide his face. “Of course I would like to be,” he says quietly. “I’ve spent the majority of my life alone, surviving by myself, never certain what will happen in a day, a week, a year. There is very little I would like more than the chance to rejoin a village and be a part of something larger, grander. What I don’t want is everything that would come with it—the hatred, the fear, the whispers in the street. Being thought a monster for nothing more than something that was decided for me.”

_Sometimes the hardest choices to live with are the ones other people make for you._

It echoes in Kurama's head, too soft for the grim, bitter recognition that it brings, and he smiles crookedly, turning his eyes up to the cloudy sky. Doesn’t say it, because Rōshi and Han already know, even if they’ve never explicitly put it into words before. He thinks of Naruto, of the hatred and resentment buried deep inside of him, curled up in the darkest parts of his soul. It never really went away; Naruto may have accepted it about himself in order to control Kurama's power, but he never banished it entirely, even as Nanadaime. It was always a thought, never quite conscious but held in the very back of his mind. _What if they go back to resentment? What if I choose wrong and they call me a monster again? What if what I am causes me to lose everything for a second time?_

Kurama wonders, sometimes, if he was the only one who ever saw it. Sasuke might have, but—he worshiped Naruto. Naruto was the most precious thing to him, the way he was to Naruto, and love like that might see flaws, but it makes them beautiful instead of emphasizing them. Sakura might have, because she was undeniably brilliant. Likely not Yamato, and definitely not Sai. Possibly Kakashi, but he was busy as Rokudaime at first, and then he was dead. Kurama was likely the only one, and while he stopped trying to draw it out in his jinchuuriki, he always knew it was there.

“Remember what you told me, before we left?” he asks, drawing both men’s eyes to him. He meets Han’s and, seeing only confusion there, has to smile a little. “When you both were being bullheaded bastards in the kitchen. I wanted to leave you behind, and you told me that if we went together, none of us would have to fight alone.” Tipping one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug, he looks out towards the ocean. “I'm going back to Konoha, because I promised the old pervert, and because it’s where Naruto needs to be. Anyone who wants to come—well. Nothing has to change between the nine of us, right?”

“Like a miniature village,” Rōshi says with some amusement, folding his arms in front of his chest.

“Perfectly suited for you,” Han agrees, hiding a smile behind one hand and sidestepping Rōshi’s aggravated kick.

“You damned walking haystack, I’d say pick on someone your own size, but the trees haven’t done anything to deserve you—”

“I don’t know where you're attempting to aim, but that’s my thigh.”

“I fucking _swear_, I will cut you off at the knees—”

“Kurama-nii!”

The sudden cry makes Kurama wrench around, entirely forgetting the spectacle of Han and Rōshi’s argument. Yugito is at the bend of the road, laughing, and a blond blur is halfway to them. His heart trips in his chest, and he takes four long, quick strides, bending down just as Naruto reaches him. The little boy slams into his chest, laughing, and Kurama scoops him up. He hugs him as tightly as he can, buries his face in wild golden hair, and feels small arms wrap around his neck in return, squeezing almost as tightly. There's something wet against his cheek—not his own tears, not this time, and Kurama lets out a quiet sound, sinking to his knees in the dirt and gently rubbing Naruto's
“I’m back,” he whispers. “I’m back now, I promise, and I won’t leave you again. I’m home, Naruto.”

Naruto hiccups, pulling back just a little even though he doesn’t let go of his death-grip around Kurama’s neck. His face is covered in tears and the beginnings of snot, and his expression is scrunched up in confusion. “But this isn’t home, Kurama-nii!”

Caught, Kurama can’t do anything but laugh, leaning forward to tap his brow against Naruto’s. “It kind of is, kit,” he says. “You’re all I need. Everything else is negotiable.”

That makes Naruto screw his face up, clearly trying not to cry any more, and he throws himself forward, cracking his head into Kurama’s jaw. Kurama winces slightly, shifting back—though he’s definitely not anywhere close to wanting Naruto to let go—and looks up again.

Gaara is just getting close, and when he sees Kurama watching, he stops, hesitating. With a chuckle, Kurama stretches his free arm out, and Gaara practically lunges for him immediately, slamming into the left side of Kurama’s chest with enough force to make him grunt. Small hands clutch at his shirt, grip and pull as Gaara tries to worm his way even closer, and Kurama wraps his arm around him, humming softly.

“Hey, squirt,” he says, feeling the boy’s chest hitch. “Missed you, kid. Felt like a lot longer than seven days, didn’t it?”

Silently, Gaara nods, and then asks in a bare whisper, “We’re not negotiable, are we, Kurama-nii?”

“You’re not,” Kurama promises, kissing his hair. “Never, Gaara. The four of you are mine, you got that?”

There’s a choked sound, and an instant later another body is squirming its way into the press. Fū wriggles her way in between Gaara and Naruto, tucking herself up under Kurama’s chin, and gives a happy, if watery, laugh. “You’re ours too,” she declares. “We’re never going to let you go!”

“Damn,” Kurama says, mock-disappointed. “And here I thought I could ditch you all over the ocean. I’ll have to come up with a better plan.” He manages to get a hand free to stroke her hair, then looks up for the wayward final member of their little bureau. Yugito is just within arm’s reach, smiling, and when Kurama looks at her expectantly she laughs and ducks around behind him, throwing her arms around him and pressing herself up against his spine.

“We missed you, Kurama-nii,” she says softly. “I don’t want you to leave again.”

“I won’t,” Kurama assures her, and meets Fū’s eyes, then Gaara’s, then Naruto’s as they all look up at him. He says it again, as firmly as he can manage. “I won’t. Next time we go somewhere, you can bet like hell that it’s going to be together.”

“What he said,” Rōshi offers, leaning against one of the boulders that line the path. When Kurama shoots him a questioning look, he smiles a little wryly and confirms, “All of us.”

Han nods his agreement, standing with his arms folded over his chest and a smile in his eyes. “I’d like to see anyone in the world try to separate us,” he says, cheerful but with a definite edge of darkness. And then— “I have always wanted to see Konoha.”

“We’re going back?” Naruto asks interestedly. “Oh! Jiji is going to be so happy I can do the chains! And the clones! Do you think I can be Hokage now? I’d be good at it!”
The best, I’m sure,” Kurama agrees, not quite sure if he’s being wry or nostalgic. He shifts his grip, and with a theatrical groan of effort he levers himself to his feet, taking all four children with him. “Oh Sage, have you been eating bricks?”

“Kurama-nii!” Fū protests, squirming harder. Momiji gets displaced with a startled, affronted yip, spilling off of Kurama's shoulders in a tumble of limbs and tails, only to have Rōshi catch him halfway down. He claws his way up onto the man’s broad shoulders, then settles down with a huff.

“Sorry, Momiji,” Fū says sheepishly.

The reynard flicks his tails at her, dismissing the words, and leaps down. “I should find my sister,” he says, then bounds away, vanishing into the bushes without a sound.

“And you,” Kurama adds, “need to start packing. One more long trip and we can put down roots for a while, okay?”

“Okay, Kurama-nii!” Naruto says, the cheer back in his voice. He wriggles up until he’s half-draped over Kurama’s shoulder, and asks curiously, “Who’s the old lady?”

Turning, Kurama spots Tsunade and Jiraiya behind them on the path, with Kakashi and his squad following them. Tsunade looks amused as she studies them, and Jiraiya longsuffering. It’s probably safe to assume that Tsunade didn’t hear the ‘old’ comment, then. Healthier for them all that way, Kurama supposes.

“She’s kind of your aunt,” he tells Naruto, and the look he shoots Tsunade dares her to contradict the statement. “Her mom was an Uzumaki, just like yours.”

“Hi, old lady!” Naruto says cheerfully, giving her a happy wave, and this time it’s loud enough that there’s no way Tsunade could have missed it.

On cue, a vein starts ticking in her temple, and she growls, taking a threatening step closer with her fist raised. “What the hell was that, brat?”

Apparently recognizing a sore spot when it’s prodded, Naruto gives a trickster’s grin and repeats without fear, “Old lady! ‘Cause you look like one!”

“Why, you—”

Thankfully, Jiraiya catches her before she get any closer, and drags her back a few paces. “Easy, hime, easy! He’s just a kid, he doesn’t know how to respect a mature woman—ow! What was that for?!”

“For groping me!” Tsunade hauls off and punches him again. “And that’s for calling me old!”

“You perverted idiot—”

“Come on,” Kurama tells his burdens with a roll of his eyes, hitching them up a little higher and heading back towards Zabuza’s house. “Let’s leave them to it.”

“Oh!” Fū cranes her head to keep watching. “She’s amazing! She just split a tree in half with one punch!”

Yugito makes a noise that’s equal parts agreeing and mildly besotted. “Do you think she can teach us
to do that?" she asks, very interested.

It’s maybe just slightly possible that Kurama didn’t think enough of this through. It’s not like jinchuuriki need help to be *scarier*, but Tsunade’s influence won't make them anything else.

Well. As long as they're having fun, he supposes.

“Brats,” he says, and for once he doesn’t even try to pretend that it’s not wholly fond.
XLVI: Tergiversate

Chapter Notes

For those who have asked: Kushina and Sakumo are alive, as it’s stated several times in the text. They will remain that way, because the Rinnegan was behind their return, and yeah, pretty much everyone everywhere is Up To Something, so things will start moving right along.

[tergiversate / tərˈjɪvərˌsæt, tərˈjɪvərˌsæt/, to change repeatedly one’s attitude or opinions with respect to a cause, subject, etc.; equivocate; to turn renegade. From Latin tergiversat- “with one’s back turned,” from the verb tergiversari, from tergum “back” + vertere “to turn.”]

“So!” Kushina says, trying to keep her voice bright and cheerful even when what she really wants to do is swear. “I have a good idea that probably won’t work, or a bad idea that most likely will.”

From where he’s leaning against the wall in the far corner of his cell, ostensibly watching the door—but really, Kushina was friends with Uchiha Mikoto; she knows brooding when she sees it—Sakumo glances over at her, brows furrowing just a little bit even as he quirks a half-smile. “You know, I'm beginning to see the downsides in letting an Uzumaki make the plans,” he jokes.

Kushina pulls a face at him, huffing and crossing her arms over her chest. “I'd like to see you come up with something better,” she protests. “We're a little light on options here, you know!”

Sakumo raises his hands, surrendering the point, but his eyes are still dark, untouched by the humor in his face. Kushina watches him through her lashes as she pretends to concentrate on the seal again, but…she doesn’t quite know what to say. As soon as I'm out of this cell I'm going to punch you for what you did to Kakashi is a little more warning than she wants to provide a veteran shinobi—she’ll be able to land a hit either way, but she doesn’t want Sakumo to see it coming. Better for her temper, because she doesn’t have the luxury of losing it right now.

Stifling a sigh, she leans back against the stone behind her and closes her eyes, trying not to feel the lingering phantom ache all through her body. All her imagination, she knows—it doesn’t respond to movement, and she seems to be healing almost as fast as she did when she was a jinchūriki. If it were real, the pain would be gone.

If it were gone, maybe the tearing ache that’s curled around her heart would be easier to bear.

She doesn’t know how long it’s been since she died, and there’s a vague sense of something in between then and now, even if she can’t recall it clearly. But…it feels too immediate, too close. Her husband is dead, life sacrificed to seal her burden into her son. The Kyuubi she was supposed to contain tore through Konoha and probably killed hundreds. Her child, her son, the baby she was so deliriously excited to bring into the world, was taken before she even got to hold him, used as a pawn in some fight she didn’t even know was brewing. There was only one brief second where she got to hold him, right before she died, and it was amazing. He was so beautiful.

Taking a shaky breath, Kushina curls a hand over her heart, and wonders how old Naruto is now.
His hair looked blond, in that moment she could see him. As blond as Minato's, and the thought makes her smile, though it comes with its own dose of grief. Minato hadn’t survived sealing the Kyuubi, even splitting its power between himself and Naruto. So—did her son grow up alone? Did Mikoto take him in? Did Yoshino or Inoichi or even Hiruzen?

She hopes so. Hopes with all her heart that Naruto never, ever had to face the pain of being a jinchuuriki with the world against him. Kushina knows the feeling of that all too well, and has never wanted anything that painful for her son.

Minato wanted the village to see Naruto as a hero, and Kushina smiles sadly, shaking her head a little. Such an airheaded, optimistic pretty boy. She doesn’t know how he ever got anything done, walking around with his head in the clouds like that.

Maybe Minato was right, and Naruto is a hero to Konoha. But Kushina doesn’t think so. People don’t see jinchuuriki as heroes, they see them as the monsters inside of them. Kushina took up the burden from Mito, and people were wary, but the Kyuubi had never escaped, never harmed anyone in Konoha. Only Hashirama, when he fought it, and he lasted long enough for Mito to seal it within herself. After an attack like the masked man started, with no way to tell people that the Kyuubi wasn’t acting entirely on its own? There’s little chance that Naruto didn’t take at least part of the blame.

“This bad idea,” Sakumo says, making her open her eyes and look over at him. He’s frowning at the doorway, eyes narrowed, and it makes her remember that the White Fang used to outshine even the Sannin where fame and reputation were concerned. “You said it will probably work?”

“Most likely,” Kushina corrects, a little miffed, because she’d hardly risk both their lives on a ‘probably’. Well, usually. Unless it was a really exciting plan.

That earns her a flash of a smile, gone in a moment as Sakumo looks away again. “I’ll take ‘most likely’, then,” he says, faintly wry. “What do you need me to do?”

“Nothing yet,” Kushina assures him cheerfully. “I'm going to draw up a seal. Do you think you can copy it on yourself if you see it on me?”

Sakumo nods, because that’s a basic shinobi skill, and glances at the door again. Orochimaru has left them alone for almost six hours straight without even a summons to watch them, and Kushina is a little worried about what it means. Orochimaru isn’t quite their enemy right now, even if he’s creepy; what if whoever he’s working for figured out that he was dropping hints to them and killed him? Their plans might change, and then Kushina will really have to scramble for a solution.

“Was there another?” Sakumo asks suddenly, and this time he’s very definitely not looking at her. “After I—was there another war?”

Kushina stares at his profile for a moment, the tense line of his jaw, the tightness around his eyes. “There's always another war,” she says, not unkindly. “We’re shinobi. Sometimes I think that fighting is all that we know how to do.”

Sakumo tries for another smile, but this time it comes out wan, hard to see with his face set into lines of tired grief. “And…Kakashi?” he asks, barely a whisper.

The sharpness of a biting retort is on Kushina's tongue, a rant about committing suicide and leaving your eight-year-old son to find your body, but she reins it in. Too sharp for right now, faced with the unsteadiness in Sakumo’s voice, the curled-in posture. Kushina isn’t that cruel.
“He was fourteen, when I died,” Kushina says, and lets herself smile a little. Maybe it’s a touch melancholy, but the fact that Kakashi was even vaguely steady and functional after everything that happened to him was always something she thought of as a miracle, and she loved the brat. Loves him, if he’s still alive, and she’s sure he is. Kakashi is a survivor, no matter what life throws at him. Even if it’s sometimes despite himself. “He was one of the best shinobi in the village, and an insufferable little rat.”

Sakumo chuckles like it’s being pulled up from somewhere deep inside of him, rough but sincere. “Like his mother,” he says, and this time his smile reaches his eyes. “All the various weapons that she carried, and her tongue was always the sharpest one.”

Kushina’s not about to mention Kakashi’s newer habits, showing up everywhere an hour late with the worst excuses—even Obito would have been ashamed to use some of them, honestly. Is she does she’ll have to explain their source, and she doesn’t think she can do it in any way that won’t make Sakumo feel even worse. She needs him at his best for their escape, after all.

“We’ll see them,” she says instead, looking down at where her fingers have curled into fists. “You’ll see Kakashi, and I’ll see Naruto. I’m sure they’ve grown up so much.” Maybe Naruto looks like Minato, she thinks, unable to help it. Minato was so handsome, of course she wants her son to look like him. She loves him regardless, though. Loves him more than she can even begin to contemplate.

“Naruto?” Sakumo asks, still smiling as he watches her.

“Yeah!” Kushina laughs, curling her arms around herself. She’s happy just imaging getting to hold Naruto again, this time without death hanging over them. “He’s—”

“The Kyuubi jinchuuriki,” a low voice says, making them both twist around. Orochimaru glides into the room, carrying two trays balanced on his arm, and shuts the door behind him. His eyes flicker from Kushina to Sakumo, linger for a moment, and then slide back. “An outcast orphan Konoha can’t even manage to keep track of.”

Dread creeps into Kushina's chest with a sensation like her blood has suddenly turned to lead, weighing at her, dragging her down. She freezes, eyes fixed on the scientist, and tries to remind herself to breathe.

“What?” Sakumo asks for her, and that’s enough to jar Kushina into motion. She’s on her feet in an instant, reaching automatically for the bars even though she knows it will only hurt her, but Orochimaru is already turning away to look at Sakumo.

“Surely you of all people can understand Konoha’s black heart, Hatake,” Orochimaru says, coldly sly, and if Kushina wasn’t looking she might miss the faint pull of his jaw, the way his mouth tightens. “Even useful monsters only have so long a shelf life.”

“Naruto is not a monster!” Kushina cries, fury hot like acid in her throat. She slams her hand against the barrier, automatically doubling down on the Kyuubi’s chains because he always tries to take advantage of her anger—

But there’s only an empty space where the bijuu is supposed to be. Only an empty space, because the Kyuubi is in her son, sealed away but still the cause of so much grief.

She regrets, sharply and fiercely if only just for a moment, that Minato didn’t listen to her at the end, seal the Kyuubi back into her and let them both die. Naruto wouldn’t be a jinchuuriki then. Naruto wouldn’t be an orphan. He’d have a father at the very least, and no reason for the people of Konoha to hate him.
“Everyone Konoha can't control is a monster,” Orochimaru says flatly, turning on her, and there’s a rage to match her own deeply buried in his eyes. Four long, stalking steps across the floor and he’s right up before the bars, golden eyes holding hers without blinking, without wavering.

Kushina takes a breath, but she’s not scared of him. She lived a lifetime with a monster in her soul and she’s not scared of anything. “How did you leave, Orochimaru?” she demands. “Why’d they chase you out?”

His eyes narrow, features twisting in something that could be disgust or disdain. Maybe regret, Kushina thinks, and wonders if she’s fooling herself. “Because I followed the wrong orders,” he spits, as venomous as a cobra.

Kushina isn’t stupid; that’s hardly the full story. “And?” she prods, aiming for sore points without mercy. She’s a kunoichi, after all. “Did they yank the Hokage’s hat right out of your hands this time? Did you insult the wrong person? Did people say mean things about you and push you out?”

“I killed children!”

The shout takes her aback, and just for a moment Kushina can't find the words she needs to answer that. Orochimaru glares at her, face full of a rising fury, almost inhuman in the grip of his anger, but just for a moment she can see in his features the grim, solemn man who would walk through the graveyard once a week, pausing before three different sets of graves.

Orochimaru laughs at the look on her face, but he takes a step back, spinning to pace a line between her cell and Sakumo’s. “I killed children,” he says again, and all Kushina can see is the back of his head, but there's an undercurrent in his voice she can't quite pick out. “Tell me, Uzumaki, Hatake. What would you do, given those orders? Given orders that you know will cause deaths. Orphans, abandoned children—all lined up like sacrifices, with a hand on your back pushing you forward. Good could come of it, a way to save every life that’s at risk, and it’s nothing you haven’t done before with prisoners and captured shinobi. These ones—these one you simply don’t ask where they come from.”

Horror twists in Kushina's gut, but she forces herself to breathe through it. Across from her, Sakumo is doing better, his expression set and unwavering. “If, as shinobi,” he says, carefully even, “we target those from our own village, the sacrifices of our comrades become meaningless. Doing something like that—”

Orochimaru snorts, turning on his heel to face Kushina again. “Spare me the sermon, Hatake,” he says dismissively. “Sarutobi Hiruzen was my jounin sensei; I assure you, I've heard every last one your little mind can dream up, but still I remain unconvinced. In the eyes of chemistry, biology, physics, we are all the same. One life has no more worth than any other. Just sentimental attachment created by those who cling too tightly.” With deliberate grace, he sets one tray on the ground and slides it beneath the bars on Kushina’s cell, then steps away.

Before he can pass Sakumo his food, though, Sakumo says quietly, “And who are you clinging to, then?”

Orochimaru’s hands go white-knuckled on the tray. “I beg your pardon,” he says icily, and it’s certainly not framed as a question.

But Kushina's taken the leap as well, Sakumo's words enough of a bridge to follow the logic. “We’re a test,” she challenges, and even when Orochimaru’s dark look snaps back in her direction she just grins at him, all teeth. “You're using us to make sure everything works, and when we get out you’re going to use it as an excuse to bring someone else back to life.”
Judging by the faintly surprised glance Sakumo flicks her, he hadn’t drawn the conclusions down quite so far, but Kushina is confident that that’s what this is all about. It’s the only thing that makes sense, after all.

Orochimaru’s eyes dart towards the door, as if double-checking that they’re alone, and then he lifts his chin, draws his spine up straight, and turns sharply to face her. “It has no bearing on you, Uzumaki,” he says coldly. “Play your part and you’ll be reunited with your son and brother. My plots have nothing to do with yours.”

“Brother?” Kushina blinks at him, suddenly very confused. “I don’t have a brother, you know!”

Orochimaru dismisses that with a flick of one hand. “He never introduced himself to you, but Uzumaki Kurama claims he shares blood with you nevertheless—or half of it, at the very least. You might wait before you deny him; the thought that he is actually Naruto's uncle is one of the only things keeping the Hidden Villages from locking him away forever, given what he’s done.”

Something big, it sounds like, Kushina thinks a little wryly, and if there was ever a sign of an Uzumaki… “Tell me,” she demands, heedless of the sparks that leap at her when her fist slams into the barrier. “If he’s my brother, tell me!”

Before Orochimaru can so much as open his mouth, though, there's a light rap on the door, a pause, and then the click of the lock turning. Orochimaru turns in a swirl of long black hair and black robes, pausing only to shove the tray roughly into Sakumo's cell. As he sweeps for the door, it opens, and a blue skinned man with vaguely shark-like features leans in.

“Leader wants to speak with you,” he tells Orochimaru cheerfully, then yelps and hops back a few steps as Orochimaru sails past him, looking ready to mow down anyone in his way. The shark man huffs after him, sounding offended, but still wanders into the room, his steps deliberately lazy. Kushina glances at the black cloak with red clouds, clearly some kind of uniform, and then up at Sakumo, who looks calm but faintly wary. He holds her gaze for half a second, one hand twitching faintly behind the stranger’s back. The ANBU sign for enemy nin, and in this context it’s easy enough to understand.

“Who are you?” she asks, sinking back to the ground and pulling her meal closer. She fiddles with it, rearranging the wooden bowls, but doesn’t start eating as she keep one wary eye on the man.

“Hoshigaki Kisame,” he answers, still unflinchingly cheerful, but his eyes are on the papers scattered across the table. He sifts through them idly, but the expression on his face isn’t one of a man trying to keep his hands busy; he’s looking for something. “Formerly of Kiri. No need to introduce yourselves—everyone knows the Red Hot Habanero and the White Fang. Or used to know you, I guess it is now.” He laughs like it’s a fantastic joke, and when he looks up at Kushina he’s grinning, showing filed teeth. “Pretty impressive what Orochimaru can come up with, isn’t it?”

Kushina's eyes linger on the slashed hitai-ate, and she wonders a little disbelievingly what it takes for Kiri to make someone a missing-nin. Nothing good, of that she’s certain. “You're second in command here?” she asks, remembering his words about a leader. Not him, then, but...somehow she doesn’t think he’s just a follower.

Kisame pauses, tilting his head a little, and then his grin comes back. He chuckles to himself, rubbing a hand over his hair, and says, “Yeah, I guess I kind of am,” as if it’s a surprise to him. He sets the papers back down precisely where they were before, with no visible sign to show they were moved, and offers a cheerful wave as he turns back to the door. “Enjoy your meal!” he laughs, and the door falls shut behind him, the lock sliding home with a clear snap.
Taking a breath, Kushina tries to ease her shoulders out of their tension-tight posture, even as she twists her fingers in her lap. Too much to think about, even though what she needs is to focus on the seal that will get them out of here. But—

*A brother,* she thinks, still slightly off-balance. *I have a brother.* And Orochimaru implied that Naruto is with him, so even if all of Konoha turned on Naruto, he still has *someone.*

She closes her eyes, breathing carefully, and leans forward to rest her head on her raised knees.

Brother and son. She has a brother and a son waiting for her out there, even if they don’t know her. That’s one more reason to push on, to go faster, try harder.

Orochimaru could be lying. That’s certainly a possibility. But, Kushina thinks—

What if he isn’t?

---

Kurama is awake well before the sun, though it takes him a few good minutes to wiggle out from between Gaara and Naruto, who apparently decided that his bed was more comfortable than theirs. Once he’s managed to get free without waking either of them, he rolls his eyes a little at their immediate gravitation towards each other, pulls his blanket up, and slips out of the bedroom, being careful to pick his way of over the piles of jinchuuriki without disturbing them. Only Han stirs, and he simply opens one eye, grunts, and goes back to sleep.

With a soft snort—because Sage damn it, this was very much not what he intended what he landed here—Kurama takes one look back at all nine jinchuuriki sprawled out on the floor of Zabuza’s main room, shakes his head, and slips out.

To his faint surprise, Haku is already in the kitchen when he walks in, just pulling the kettle off the heat. He offers Kurama a tentative smile, and Kurama can’t help a small smile in return, sinking into the cushioned window seat with a sigh.

“Would you like any tea?” the boy asks politely, reaching up to pull down cups.

“Sure. Thanks,” Kurama agrees, casting a glance out the window. False dawn hasn’t even touched the horizon yet, and there are stars still out, though the moon is hidden behind a ragged swathe of clouds. Kurama can’t quite wait for the day to come; Yagura has a ship ready to take them to Fire Country’s main port, and from there it’s an easy day and a half of travel to Konoha. Since technically this visit is because the Mizukage needs to attend the Summit, the Freak Squad gets to play escort for him and his guards, and Kurama and his ragtag bunch are more or less tagalongs. That’s fine with Kurama—he doesn’t want to cause a stir with Akatsuki still on the loose.

“Here,” Haku says quietly, and Kurama blinks and turns, taking the cup from his hands. The porcelain is warm against the chill of the morning, and he wraps his fingers around it, watching the steam billow and rise from its surface. The cushion shifting makes him look up as Haku takes a seat across from him, perching on the far edge of the window seat and crossing his legs under him, his own cup cradled in his hands.

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“Something on your mind, snowflake?” Kurama asks, because while he knows Haku doesn’t exactly dislike him, he’d gotten the impression that he wasn’t high up on the kid’s list, either.

Haku makes the barest suggestion of a face at the nickname, but keeps his eyes on the surface of his tea. “Zabuza was worried about you,” he says at last. “While you were gone, and especially when
you were late coming back.”

That’s not really what Kurama expected to hear, but…somehow it’s not all that much of a surprise, either. Kurama huffs a little, taking a long sip of tea, and mulls over his responses. There’s only one that seems to fit, though.

“Yeah, well,” he says on a sigh, and movement in the doorway makes him look up with an expression that’s halfway between a smirk and a smile. “Piranha-breath doesn’t seem like the type to have a lot of friends, and I’m not either. ‘Course that would be enough, right?”

“Aw, Red, confessions of friendship? You’re making me blush,” Zabuza says with a chuckle, setting Kubikiribōchō aside and dropping backwards into one of the chairs. He folds his arms on the backrest, looking between Kurama and Haku for a second, and then huffs. “This one’s mine, you know. Tragic backstory and all. I’m not letting you swipe him, so sticky child-snatching fingers to yourself.”

Haku is turning steadily redder between them, shoulders coming up around his ears, and Kurama has to snort. “Like I’d want him,” he retorts. “I’ve got enough of my own, and besides, you’ve probably taught him all sorts of bad manners.”

“Nah, Haku's incorruptible.” Zabuza reaches out with one arm, tilting the chair enough that he can slap Haku lightly on the shoulder. “He hasn’t poisoned me yet, right? Proof enough.”

With a noise that’s equal parts mortification and pride, Haku slides out of his seat. “I’ll start breakfast,” he says, and ducks away.

“Quite the tool,” Kurama drawls, watching the way Zabuza’s eyes follow him, the lack of his usual tension in his face.

Zabuza flips him off, but it’s clear the gesture is mostly for show. “Kiri’s never going to change all that much. Still. Might be nice if we don’t have to be weapons and tools all the damn time.”

Kurama could mock, tease, taunt. Instead, he just hums a little, taking another sip of tea. “Yagura said you're one of his guards,” he offers.

Pulling a face, Zabuza makes a sound of clear disgruntlement. “Fuck. Yeah. And Terumī is the other one. ‘S almost like he doesn’t trust us not to take over his village while he’s gone. He’s leaving Ao in charge.”

With a roll of his eyes he doesn’t even try to hide, Kurama drawls, “Yeah, imagine that. Leaving a loyal dog here over a rabid fish.”

“Fuck you, firecracker,” Zabuza retorts, but there's only amusement in his face.

From the doorway, a throat clears. “Am I interrupting something?” Kakashi asks dryly.

“Only fish-man’s impending death by strangulation,” Kurama tells him, watching as Kakashi makes his way into the kitchen. The Copy-Nin hesitates for a moment, but in the end he takes Haku's abandoned perch on the far edge of the window seat. Eyeing the man, Kurama asks, “Up early for a reason?”

Kakashi’s expression shifts into something faintly longsuffering. “Tenzō and Shisui are arguing about whether it’s more embarrassing to walk in on someone masturbating or two people having sex,” he says, and his tone gets even drier. “Itachi went to train on the beach. I thought I’d come see if everyone was ready.”
Kurama huffs out a laugh, watching Kakashi with amusement. “You know they’re going to—”

Kakashi holds up his hands, fending him off. “Stop.”

Snickering, Kurama settles back a little further in his seat. Before he can answer, though, there’s a clatter of footsteps against the wood, and a moment later Naruto skids around the corner. “Kurama-nii!” he shouts, and throws himself headlong at Kurama. Kurama yelps as he very nearly loses his grip on his teacup, only just managing to save it with the very tips of his claws as he catches Naruto with his free arm.

“Watch it, kit,” he huffs, even as he drags the boy up onto his lap. Naruto has a shadow too, still sleepily rubbing his eyes as he totters over, and Kurama sighs and grabs Gaara by the back of his shirt, hauling him up as well. “You two are supposed to be asleep,” he tells them, exasperated. “We’ve got a long few days coming up.”

“You left, Kurama-nii,” Naruto protests, even as Gaara just tucks himself in tighter to the crook of Kurama’s arm and appears to go back to sleep.

Well, Kurama supposes he can’t fault them, after a week separated. He presses a kiss to wild blond hair and leans back, letting Naruto sprawl over his chest. “Whatever, brat,” he says, and pretends not to hear it when Naruto giggles a little, curling up against him and wedging his head under Kurama’s chin.

Kurama gives Kakashi and Zabuza a look that dares them to say anything. Zabuza just snorts and shakes his head, and Kakashi gives him a look that’s clearly amused.

“Hate you both, assholes,” Kurama mutters, but it’s hard to be all that pissy as he is now. He wiggles his arm up enough to still be able to drink his tea and settles in, watching the sun break through the eastern horizon.

It looks like it’s going to be a beautiful day.
XLVII: Sedition

Chapter Notes

My computer managed to die on me for what is apparently the last time (thankfully right after I backed up my files, because apparently my luck is not wholly terrible), so this was finished on my phone. I apologize in advance for any typos I failed to catch.

\[
\text{sedition} / s\,\text{dəSH} /, \text{conduct or speech inciting people to rebel against the authority of a state or monarch; rebellious disorder. From Old French, or from Latin seditio(n-), from sed- “apart” + itio(n-) “going” (from the verb ire.).}
\]

“We’re not going to have much time to make this work.”

Jolted out of his thoughts, Kisame looks up from the kunai he’s sharpening, eyes finding Obito where he’s leaning over a map. The man’s mask is off, discarded near the door, and the shadows curl interestingly across the deep scars on his face. “You found ‘em?” he asks, and can feel a grin threatening. That sounds promising.

Obito glances at him, and there’s a flicker of emotion in his features that might almost be amusement. “One of my spies in Kiri sent me word that they departed yesterday, on a ship headed for Konoha’s port city.”

Kisame calculates times and the distances involved. His Kiri never did much trading with Konoha, but he visited Fire Country’s main port a few times, enough to know the length of the trip. As long as the jinchuuriki didn’t stop somewhere along the way—and they’d be stupid to, knowing who’s after them—they’ll be landing in Fire Country today, and probably hitting the road right away to camp somewhere when it gets dark. Shinobi don’t tend to linger in cities unless they have to.

Ordinarily, someone wanting to intercept them would have to leave now, cross the majority of two countries at the next best thing to a flat-out sprint, and pray that they could make it before the group hit Konoha. Obito doesn’t look like he’s in any rush to move, though, and Kisame eyes him for a moment, then asks, “You’ve got a way to get us there in time?”

Obito blinks, as though it hadn’t even occurred to him that that would be a problem. “Of course,” he says, and vanishes. Kisame sits back against the wall, mildly startled, but a bare second later the air warps in reverse, and Obito reappears directly in front of him, the Sharingan in his right eye spinning lazily.

“Well, there’s a neat trick,” Kisame says, starting to grin.

The words earn him another ghost of a smile, barely present but still clearly visible now that Kisame knows what to look for. “Distance won’t be a concern,” is all he says, though. “Did you find anything?”

“With the snake?” Kisame checks his kunai, judges it decently sharp, and slips it away. “I found the notes he keeps in his room and checked the ones in his labs and the cell. I’m not the best with seals,
but it looks like that one will work without any gaps.”

Obito doesn’t look entirely convinced, and Kisame doesn’t blame him, because he’s not convinced either. Orochimaru isn’t the type they should trust blindly—should put any faith in at all, really—and just because Kisame didn’t find anything doesn’t mean it’s not there. “I’ll keep looking,” he says, and gets a short nod in return.

“They’ll reach Konoha within two days,” Obito says, turning back to his map. His fingers curl around the edge of the table, knuckles going white, and Kisame studies them for a moment, feeling a flicker of something that’s not quite amusement, but could possibly be close. That’s a lot of anger for one man to live with, not that he doesn’t understand it. The entire world is going to shit, and this is their chance to turn it around. “We need to catch them on the road, so…”

Kisame pushes to his feet and goes to join him, leaning over his shoulder to watch one finger trace a path from the port to Konoha. “You think they’ll take the main road?” he asks, a little surprised.

Obito casts him a look, one brow sliding up towards his hairline. “Ten jinchuuriki,” he points out. “Eight of whom have some level of control, one of whom is the Mizukage, and one of whom managed to beat the Mizukage in a fight. And two of the Mizukage’s guards, four of Konoha’s best jounin, the Toad Sage, and Senju Tsunade and her apprentice. They won’t be worried about an attack.”

Well, put that way Kisame can see why. It’s also kind of disconcerting how fast they’re picking up allies—he’s pretty sure the Sannin Tsunade wasn’t with them when they attacked the base before. He chuckles a little, glancing over to where Samehada is leaning beside the door, and asks, “So that’s when we hit them?”

The look Obito gives him is bordering on amused, though it only really shows in his eyes. “Yes,” he agrees, and reaches out to tap a point on the road. A river intersects the path, with a steep cliff on one side and a forest on the other. “We’ll have to scatter the rest of the party, but the others can take care of that. Uzumaki and Kakashi will likely stay with the youngest of the children, so we bring the puppets there and distract them.”

Kisame doesn’t have to ask what Obito will be doing. The children who can’t yet control their bijuu will be vulnerable, easy targets to snatch away. The Gedō Mazō hasn’t been repaired yet, but a head-start on gathering the jinchuuriki—especially jinchuuriki who won’t be able to fight back and have only a slim chance of escaping—can only give them an advantage.

“And who do I get?” he asks with a grin, more than ready for this fight. It’s going to be a hell of a lot of fun, that’s for sure.

Another half-second of humor, clear enough, and Obito looks back down at the map. “Whoever tries to interfere,” he says, and doesn’t ask can you manage, the way most people would. Whether it’s because he trusts in Kisame’s skills that much or just assumes he’ll be fine regardless—either way, Kisame kind of likes the assumption.

“Another big fight after just a week? You spoil me,” he jokes, and this time the amused tilt of Obito’s mouth is actually visible. Kisame chuckles, inordinately pleased with himself, and says, “A step closer to the dream, huh?”

For a long moment, Obito simply looks at him, red-and-black Sharingan still spinning lazily. Kisame has never had the chance to see one activated before—he’s fought Uchiha a time or two, but shinobi outside of Konoha learn early on that it’s always best to keep your eyes shut when you’re up against one. Obito is an ally, though, and beyond that his Sharingan is always activated. It’s interesting,
Kisame thinks, and then has to chuckle a little at himself. There's a lot that’s interesting about this situation.

Obito glances away, back down at the map, and breathes out, slow and steady. His knuckles have gone white where he’s gripping the table again. “Right,” he agrees, almost soundless, and his eyes fall shut. Just for a moment he looks tired, weary in a way that sleep won’t touch. Abruptly, almost challengingly, he asks, “What do you want to see?”

Kisame doesn’t have to ask to know that he’s referring to the world of truth they’re going to build. He leans against the table, considering it, and then says, “I think the fact of it will be enough. Somewhere lies don’t mean anything, and people can see the truth just by opening their eyes.”

This time Obito’s smile is more obvious, but also far more crooked, touched with the same tiredness that’s in his face. “You should have been one of the heroes of Kiri, Kisame,” he says, and the words are almost wry. “My world is…a lot more selfish than that.”

Kisame doesn’t try to convince him otherwise; he has no idea what Obito wants once the world is better, but if he thinks it’s selfish, he’s probably the best judge. “The good thing about a world like that,” he offers, “is that being selfish once in a while isn’t going to hurt anyone. You just can’t dress it up as if it’s for the good of everyone.”

Another short, careful exhale, and Kisame pretends not to hear the way it shakes as it leaves Obito’s lungs. He watches silently as Obito presses a hand over his face, and wonders if he notices that he automatically covers the scars before anything else. There’s something that still seems so torn about him, something deep inside, and Kisame wonders if anyone else has ever had the chance to see it.

“This reality is broken,” Obito says, and Kisame can’t tell if it’s to himself or meant for other ears. “It’s warped and twisted and not as it should be. We have to fix it.”

He hesitates for a moment, but…why not? It’s hardly the most dangerous thing he’s done, so he claps Obito lightly on the shoulder and tries not to think of the bodies of his comrades, thick upon the ground, and the way it felt when he killed them. Killed them because of a traitor’s lies, a traitor who Kisame then killed as well. Too much killing, all of it pointless, and Kisame is all for a good fight, but—loyalty, once given, should never be a lie.

“We will,” he says, and lets go again, pretending not to see the way Obito turns, watching as he goes to collect Samehada.

“Orochimaru has twelve hours to finalize the seals,” the Uchiha says, and Kisame is more than happy to follow the change of subject. “After that, I’ll start moving Akatsuki into position.”

“I’ll let the others know,” Kisame agrees cheerfully, shouldering his sword. He glances back, holding Obito’s dangerous eyes for one more moment, then nods and leaves the room.

“What do you mean, our jinchuuriki’s been kidnapped?” Hisen demands, not quite in Hiruzen’s face enough to earn a punch, but also quite certainly too much so to even be bordering on polite.

“You haven’t noticed?” Rasa asks, quite clearly unimpressed as he folds his arms across his chest, watching Taki’s headman bristle without so much as a trace of wariness. Hiruzen can’t quite blame him; Hisen might be headman of the only village outside the Five Nations strong enough to be granted a bijuu, but the man is quick to anger and arrogant about the strength that Taki’s Hero Water
Hiruzen shoots him a dark look, but finally steps away from Hiruzen’s desk. “The girl knows her duty,” he says sharply. “She may leave to wander, but she always returns.”

Taki’s jinchuuriki is his granddaughter, if Hiruzen remembers correctly, and he can’t quite hide the faint grimace that crosses his face. Thankfully, Hisen’s back is already turned, but Hiruzen catches A’s flash of amusement at his expression. If he knew its source, Hiruzen suspects he would be far closer to offended; after all, even though Kumo treats its jinchuuriki better that doesn’t exactly mean it treats them well, and the fact that the Nibi’s host ran straight to Kurama rather than her village says quite a lot.

Not one country in all of the Elemental Nations has treated their jinchuuriki anywhere close to how they should, and Hiruzen rather expects that they’re about to feel the backlash of that decision.

“And two dead jounin aren’t enough to convince you that you’ve lost her loyalty?” Rasa asks, grimly amused.

Hisen scoffs. “Unrelated,” he insists. “This rogue jinchuuriki may have killed them, but Fū wouldn’t have.”

“And the fact that you can’t find her?” Rasa raises one red brow, and when Hisen only glares without a word, he nods as if that’s answer enough. “Regardless, a summit has been called, and you accepted the invitation. If you’re still doubtful, wait for the Kage to gather and you’ll get your evidence.”

“Ōnoki has been convinced to drag himself out of his mountains,” Hiruzen interjects before the offense on Hisen’s face can spark another argument. “He will arrive tomorrow, and Yagura the day after. Kusa’s Headwoman informed me they are also on their way, though I have no estimation for their arrival.”

Left unsaid is who exactly will accompany Yagura’s party, but Hiruzen feels no need to share that information with Taki’s leader if he can’t even be bothered to believe his jinchuuriki is well and truly gone. And Hiruzen is certain that she is—Kurama’s influence is likely there to stay, and he for one owes Naruto too much to try and take his uncle away from him. The younger jinchuuriki’s collective uncle, if Tenzō’s last report is to believed.

All the jinchuuriki except for Bee are likely gone, Hiruzen thinks a little wryly, taking a long pull on his pipe. Even Yagura and Kiri’s other jinchuuriki can likely be included in that count, after recent events. None of the nations will be gaining their loyalty any time soon, that’s for certain.

“If she’s?” A rumbles, leaning back in his chair. “That message have anything about him in it?”

Hiruzen glances at the scroll one of Itachi’s crows left on his desk. Written in Tenzō’s hand, and signed by him, which would already be a decent indicator that Kakashi was injured enough that he couldn’t manage it, even if the report hadn’t said as much. Kakashi likes to act as if he’s irresponsible, but he’d never leave a direct report to the Hokage for his second-in-command if he had a choice.

“Injured but recovering,” he says, instead of voicing his worries. “They were planning to stop briefly in Frost Country to find a healer before continuing on to Kiri. Several of them received injuries, but Tenzō was optimistic about their chances of recovery.”

A inclines his head in silent thanks, not asking anything more. “Akatsuki will be moving soon,” he
says instead. "The attack was a setback, but it won't last forever." He meets Hiruzen’s eyes across
the room, and Hiruzen can see they're sharing a similar thought: for all that the various countries will
be very unhappy with it, having all the jinchuuriki in one place might be for the best. At least that
way they’re easily defensible. And defense is most certainly what they’ll be playing now; the statue
Jiraiya described, the one Kurama was in such a rush to destroy, sounds like it was something
integral to Akatsuki’s plan.

Hiruzen knows better than most that cornered rats fight the hardest.

The thought makes his fingers curl just a little more tightly around his pipe, and he pushes to his feet
before he can think better of it. Excusing himself with a murmur that doesn’t quite make itself clear,
he steps out the door of his office and shuts it carefully behind him. The guards they had earlier
ejected from the room are here, hovering warily and not quite mingling, but Hiruzen is just glad they
haven’t started another war yet.

Stepping forward, he catches Genma’s eye, tipping his head just faintly. The tokujo’s brows lift, but
he slides off his perch on the windowsill next to Raidō and wanders over, hands in his pockets and a
casual slouch to his shoulders. Between Genma’s lazy demeanor and Raidō’s sheepish smile,
Hiruzen has to wonder how many of the other guards have managed to overlook the fact that these
are two of Konoha’s deadliest assassins. Most of them, he assumes; Genma and Raidō are well-
practiced at appearing harmless.

“Hokage-sama?” Genma asks, pulling the senbon out of his mouth as he inclines his head.

“Genma,” Hiruzen returns, managing a faint smile. “I have a mission for you.”

Hazel eyes sharpen, and without otherwise moving Genma gives the impression of a wolf coming
alert, ready to hunt. “Do I need to go get my mask?” he asks, perfectly mild.

Hiruzen considers for a moment, then nods. “You’d best,” he confirms, and watches the hunter
surface further. Half a glance around them and he knows it’s as private as they're likely to get—
disappearing to go somewhere more secure would just increase suspicions at this point. “I want you
to make very certain Danzō isn’t planning anything,” he says quietly.

Genma’s eyes narrow, and one hand curls ever so faintly, not quite forming a fist even if the thought
is there. “You worried about treachery?” he asks, so softly that it’s almost soundless.

If there’s one thing Genma hates more than Kumo nin, it’s traitors. Hiruzen might feel bad for taking
advantage of what he knows is a sore point, but it’s his entire reason for choosing Genma in the first
place; there’s absolutely no chance of him being won over or bought off, and if there’s even the
faintest hint that Danzō is doing anything but basic work for the council and village, Genma will
never give up his investigation.

“I think that access to ten of the most powerful shinobi in the world—four of them young children—
is quite a lot of temptation for a man who once trained children to be the perfect weapons,” Hiruzen
admits. It’s not the entire truth, but it is most of it, and the rest—well. His show of trust in Fugaku has
already helped bridges start to mend, and Shikaku’s visits to the Uchiha compound to strategize have
helped as well. He doesn’t want to believe his old teammate is behind those whispers blaming the
Uchiha for the Kyuubi, but he also would not put it past him.

Thankfully, Genma isn’t the type to overlook something like that if he comes across mention of it,
and he’s subtle enough that he likely won't get caught. If Danzō is planning something, if he’s
already done something, Genma will find it.
“Hokage-sama,” Genma says formally, dipping into a bow, then steps back, turns on his heel, and heads down the stairs at a trot. Raidō watches him go, concern shading across his features, but other than a quick glance darted at Hiruzen he doesn’t move.

From behind the heavy door to his office, loud voices erupt, not quite shouting but certainly close. Hiruzen sighs, rubbing his forehead, and goes back in to do damage control.

Tsunade truly regrets attempting to intervene when she saw an adult spitting harsh words at a child.

Well.

She mostly regrets doing so, because she knows now that the man was Uzumaki Kurama, grouchy mother hen to anything that stands still long enough for him to fuss at it, and his words were almost definitely meant to help, seeing as they were directed at the most emotionally-stunted little boy she’s ever had the horror of coming across. Even Orochimaru wasn’t as bad as Uchiha Itachi is.

So she regrets that part, seeing as Itachi most certainly didn’t need her defense. She doesn’t regret that Shizune was able to save the Hatake brat, though, even if most of her feelings come from knowing the man’s father. Nor does she regret the chance to meet Kushina’s son, who is every bit as bright and vivacious as his mother once was. Or her sort-of-nephew, because Kurama is, as she’s coming to realize, entirely someone worth knowing.

Of course, she could have done without the bet that left her sleeping off one of the worst hangovers in her life, and she definitely could have done without the three favors she now owes Kurama. One of which was going to Kiri to meet Naruto, and the second of which was accompanying them back to Konoha.

It is…vaguely conceivable that Tsunade could get out of it if she wanted. Kurama is certainly powerful—he moves with the ease and assuredness of someone fully aware that they can level mountains if they need to, and even Jiraiya treats him with grudging respect, to say nothing of the nine jinchuuriki in their party—but he looks like he’s just barely into his thirties. Tsunade has a good twenty years of experience on him, and if she wanted to slip away, she could.

She doesn’t want to go back to Konoha. That much she knows without hesitation. It holds too many memories, too much darkness. It’s the place that Nawaki and Dan died for, gave their lives to protect, the place where she failed to save them. And—

There was another war, after she left.

There’s always another war.

When word reached her, she was so close to going back. Fighting broke out, Iwa invaded Kusa with the intent to reach Fire Country, and Tsunade, caught on the border, had had her things halfway packed and her sandals on before she realized what she was doing. Before she realized what going back would mean. Shizune had been with her, young and stern but still so soft, and Tsunade had looked at her and seen Dan in her features, in her future, had seen her apprentice bleeding and broken on the ground as war raged around her.

She’d unpacked her bags and hidden herself away in a bar for the next week straight, then headed for Tea Country the moment she could walk in a straight line.
That, she thinks, is one of the biggest sources of her ever-present guilt. She’s the granddaughter of the Shodaime, the grandniece of the Nidaime, the student of the Sandaime. Maybe she can't save everyone, maybe she can't save anyone as the world has so handily proved, but—something inside of her is horrified that she wasn’t there, that she didn’t go back. It’s the same bit that feels relief right now, that someone is forcing her to return against her will.

Dan and Nawaki are still open, tearing aches. There's no cure for them, no fix. Tsunade will always have failed to save them, will always remember their deaths as the twin moments where her world came tumbling down around her. But—

“Kurama-nii?” a small voice asks, and Tsunade lifts her eyes from the dirt beneath her sandals to watch the redheaded man pause, looking down at the tiny shadow tugging on the hem of his shirt.

“What, squirt?” Kurama asks, using that tone he probably thinks is supposed to sound gruff. Tsunade can see through him like he's made of glass, though, and she can't fight a faint smile as she watches Gaara reach up, solemn and quietly hopeful. Kurama takes one look at his expression and sighs. “Don’t you want to stick with Naruto?” he asks, even as he bends down to scoop the little boy up onto his hip.

Gaara glances back past Tsunade, to where Naruto and Fū are letting the Raikage’s brother toss them around like rubber balls. A pause, as if Gaara’s searching for the words, and then he wrinkles his nose a little and says, “He’s loud.”

Tsunade snorts, because after several days on a boat with Bee, she can say with certainty that that’s an understatement. At the same moment, Bee bellows something cheerful and sort of rhyming and chucks a happily screeching Naruto straight up in the air. Fū, clinging to Bee’s back like a very small monkey, whoops with laughter, and Kurama winces, very pointedly not looking back.

“Yeah,” he says, a little tiredly, and reaches up to ruffle Gaara’s hair. “That’s a pretty good description of him, squirt. All right, you can ride with me for a bit.”

Seemingly content, Gaara puts his head down on Kurama’s shoulder, hands still fisted in his shirt, and Tsunade can feel her smile softening. That’s…a pretty cute image. Especially since Suna’s jinchuuriki is supposed to be batshit crazy. She suspects Kurama has something to do with the change, and for the little boy’s sake, she’s overwhelmingly glad.

For the sake of all the jinchuuriki, she corrects herself, glancing from the two Bee is manhandling to the slim, dark-haired teenager walking with the other little girl, who’s carrying a pair of foxes with multiple tails. Then her eyes move on, to the Mizukage with his guards, and the mismatched pair walking head of him, joking with each other. There's an ease to them that she wouldn’t have expected of jinchuuriki, especially given that several of them were previously on the run, and it makes her happy to see. Happier still that there's some kind of support, some kind of family tie between all of them; it will serve them well in the long run, especially if they're going to be facing down the villages that created them.

Kurama probably needs all the family he can get, she thinks a little bleakly, glancing over at the man. Uzushio is gone, Mito is gone, Kushina is gone—practically every last Uzumaki, as far as she knows, is years dead. All Kurama has left is Naruto, and if what Jiraiya told her is true, he likely has spent the majority of his life either wandering alone or haunting the ruins of Uzushio like a ghost.

Her shoulder bumps Jiraiya’s as they walk, and she glances over automatically, but he just gives her a companionable smile and goes back to his conversation with Kakashi. And…it’s a reminder, Tsunade thinks, a little sadly. A reminder that even after Dan and Nawaki died, she could have turned to the rest of her mismatched family, could have leaned on them. Jiraiya and Orochimaru and
Sarutobi at the very least, and—she hadn’t.

Kurama lost far more than she did, lost everything, and still manages to find it within himself to be so painfully kind to lost children.

With one quick glance back at Shizune, who’s happily chattering at with the Kiri kunoichi, Tsunade lengthens her steps just a little, quickly drawing level with Kurama. He turns to her with some surprise, brows lifting, but Gaara shifts in his arms and distracts him before he can ask her anything. Tsunade watches him resettle the little boy, offering him a winter-stunted apple he’d picked up in the port city’s market, and when he finally looks over at her she just smiles.

“You’re something else, shortcake,” she says, mostly for the pleasure of watching the face he pulls at the nickname.

“And you’re an old hag,” he huffs, not even trying to dodge the fist Tsunade thumps against his shoulder. It’s only enough to make him stagger, but he’s holding a kid. She’s hardly about to go all-out.

Keeping her eyes ahead, she matches her steps to Kurama’s and asks lightly, “Did you ever get to meet Kushina?”

Kurama hesitates, and she can feel his gaze on her, searching. Finally he says, “Not…really. Not in any way that mattered.”

That’s about what Tsunade expected; Kushina never mentioned a brother to her, when she was mourning her lost village. A mother, an aunt, all of her friends, but no brother. And it’s clear enough that Kurama has some other blood in him as well. A Kumo-nin mother, Jiraiya said, and given how Kumo tried to kidnap Kushina when she was still in the Academy, it makes sense to Tsunade.

“But you saw her from a distance?” Tsunade prods.

“Yeah,” Kurama admits, clearly grudging. “Why the hell are you asking?”

She doesn’t look at him, keeps her pace steady and measured as they walk. “Because I know what it’s like to have your family at a distance, and then to lose them entirely,” she says simply, thinking of Orochimaru. Wondering, sad and a little resigned to her own guilt, whether she would have been able to save him.

(Shes doesn’t need to wonder; she already knows she would have. Just one more failure to lay at her feet, isn’t it?)

Gaara is watching her, when she glances over. She offers him a small, slightly wan smile, and he doesn’t quite smile back—all of his smiles are reserved for Kurama, Naruto, and the other jinchuuriki, she’s noticed—but he doesn’t immediately duck his head and hide his face, which is more or less an improvement.

Kurama breathes out, rough and a little shaky, and it’s clear her words struck some sort of chord. “Yeah,” he says, turning his face away. “That’s…something I’m used to. The first part. I’m still getting used to the second.”

It’s been almost twenty years since Uzushio fell; that’s a hell of a long time to mourn. But Tsunade is hardly one to throw stones when her whole world is made of glass. And beyond that, she remembers something Mito once told her after Hashirama died, and again after Tobirama was killed.

*Everyone grieves in their own time, my dear. Some cope by moving forward. Others hold on, even*
when the world tells them to let go. *It doesn’t mean they're broken; it just means they hold on a bit harder than most.*

Kurama, Tsunade thinks with a touch of wry sadness, is very much the type to leave claw marks in anything that slips from his grasp.
XLVIII: Suscitate

[suscitate /ˈsəsəˌtāt/, to rouse; to excite; to call into life and action. From Latin suscitatus, past participle of suscitare, “to lift up, to stir, to rouse”.

It gives Kushina a sense of vicious satisfaction that it takes three large men to drag her out of her cell.

She screams and snarls, thrashing against their hold, fighting back with every ounce of the strength left to her by the seal-etched manacles they managed to wrap around her wrists. No chakra, not that she can reach, but she slams her elbows into vulnerable kidneys, kicks at fragile knees, slams her legs up into crotches whenever her captors are distracted. The masked and hooded missing-nin, with his scratched Taki hitai-ate, is swearing at her in a loud, steady stream, face still pale with the pain of a blow that connected, and the emotionless, purple-eyed redhead on her left is limping faintly. The shark-man who rifled through Orochimaru’s papers is still chuckling as he shoves her down onto her knees and helps pin her there, and if Kushina still had the Kyuubi—

Well. She’s never been tempted to let him loose before, but this is severely testing her self-control.

“Get off of me!” she rages, trying to throw them off, but she doesn’t have a jinchuuriki’s physical strength right now, can't even augment her natural strength with chakra.

“Stop struggling, my dear,” Orochimaru tells her, crouching down in front of her with a bottle of ink in one hand and a brush in the other. “I'm doing you the favor of not using a paralysis seal, but if you make this any harder than it has to be, I’ll gladly change my mind.”

Kushina glares up at him through a veil of red hair, so furious that she’s almost tempted to lunge forward and bite him. “Bastard,” she hisses. “What do you think you're going to do with that?”

It’s only because she’s looking for it that she sees the faintest flicker of amusement in golden eyes, an edge of appreciation that means he definitely intended to give Sakumo that control seal, and can recognize that she’s acting right now.

She’s not acting that much. Kushina will gladly take a chunk out of his perfectly straight nose if he gets even a centimeter closer.

“Don’t worry,” Orochimaru tells her, and there's a strange intensity in his face that anyone else might mistake for victory, a light in his eyes that manages to be both eerie and encouraging. “I'm going to put a seal on you, and you're going to go to sleep. And then—well. Then you'll wake up, and that's when the fun begins.”

Kisame chuckles, soft and barely audible, and Kushina tears her eyes away from Orochimaru, glancing over his shoulder to where Sakumo is braced in front of the bars of his cell, looking torn between panic and fury.

Bad idea, she reminds herself, dragging in a breath that shakes. Bad idea that will most likely work.

Fuck, but she has some of the worst ideas.

“Do your worst, snake;” she spits, and the rapid flutter of her heartbeat high up in her throat adds a vicious bite to it.
Orochimaru smiles, small and wicked, and raises the brush.

Cool ink sweeps across the base of her throat in a curving line, etches out a familiar symbol Kushina has drawn over and over for the last few days, and she has to close her eyes so none of the shinobi watching will see her expression.

_Naruto_, she thinks, and then blackness crashes down on top of her like a wave and all she can feel is a long, long fall.

Kurama's bad feeling is back with a vengeance.

He tries not to let it show, because everyone else seems relaxed enough, but there's a faint, biting sort of insistence that says they're being watched, that something's coming, that something's waiting for them, and it's making it hard to focus. Tsunade gave up on talking with him after a few conversations he dropped halfway through in favor of paying more attention to their surroundings, and Kurama can't particularly say he minds.

The countryside is quiet. Early-morning frost has given way to pale sunlight in between a scattering of dove-grey clouds, and the handful of people they've passed on the road have all been civilians. The only flicker of malice Kurama can sense is from a pair of magpies in the winter-bare trees, fighting over an acorn. There's no conceivable reason Kurama should feel tense, but he can't fight the creeping sense of impending doom.

“You're quiet today,” Kakashi observes from beside him, even though his nose is buried in his book.

“You say that like I'm normally loud,” Kurama retorts, folding his arms into the sleeves of his haori and pointedly not looking over.

Kakashi glances up anyway, eyeing him with a very obvious edge of amusement. “Mm,” he hums, noncommittal, and when Kurama turns to glare he just crinkles his eye cheerfully. “But you normally say more than ten words to people who aren’t your kids.”

“They're not _my_—” Kurama catches sight of Kakashi's raised brow and breaks off, scowling at him. “Fine, they're my kids. You overacted the first time when I tried to get to Naruto, so why the hell are you taking this so calmly now?”

There's a pause as Kakashi flicks a glance around them, judging distances, but they're at the very back of the group, and the only ones in front of them are the four youngest jinchuuriki, sprawled out on top of Momiji and Fuji and apparently enthralled in whatever story Yugito is telling. Kakashi's gaze lingers on them for a long moment, and then he says quietly, “Your future—Naruto trusted you enough to give his life for you.”

It still aches. Kurama halfway suspects it always will, to some degree, but—

Naruto laughs, bright and happy, as Yugito smiles back. In his memory, Kurama can hear a faint whisper, that last bit of comfort his Naruto left with his chakra impression when he sealed Kurama's power. _Bye, Kurama. I love you, and I'm so proud of you._

Maybe it's not the goodbye Kurama had wished for, but…it helped. It helped a hell of a lot.

“Yeah,” he agrees, and it comes out softer than he intends. “I wasn’t lying when I said he was my
best friend. He was just another jailor at first, and I loathed him for it, but—Naruto's not the kind of person anyone can hate, even if that's all they think they know."

There's another shadow of a smile crinkling Kakashi's eye, though he doesn't look up from his book again. “That's why,” he says simply, as though it explains everything. Flipping a page, he glances up for half a heartbeat to meet Kurama's gaze, and then adds as if he recognizes the confusion Kurama is feeling, “You always tell Naruto he's a lot like Kushina. I trusted her judgement.”

That is—

That is just about the worst logic Kurama has ever heard, and he was privy to the logic behind every single one of Naruto's terrible, always questionable choices.

He doesn't quite groan as he presses a hand over his eyes, but it's a close thing. “You're an idiot,” he tells them man with some disbelief. “How the hell did you ever become a jounin. How.”

Kakashi makes a sound that's definitely amusement. “I'm very, very good at killing people,” he says mildly, turning to another page. “Natural talent, I think.”

Someone else might flinch away from that remainder, but Kurama knows very well what it means to be a shinobi—after her marriage Mito might have been more or less a non-combatant unless forced to be otherwise, but Kushina clocked almost a thousand mission in the fourteen years she was an active shinobi, and Kurama saw pretty much all of them through her eyes. He might have been muzzled, chained down, and never allowed free, but he was still aware.

(Sometime he thinks it might have been easier, waiting that hundred years, if he hadn’t been, but—well. It’s over now, and he'll never be bound like that again.)

“A good teacher, too,” Kurama says, and can practically feel the sudden stiffness as Kakashi's steps falter slightly. For half a second, he debates leaving it at that, but then decides fuck it, he’s changing everything he can, but that doesn’t mean some things can’t stay the same. “You taught Naruto a hell of a lot about being a shinobi. Gave him a reason to keep going through the darker parts. Those who break the rules are trash, but those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash. He lived by that.”

It’s only because he’s listening that he hears the faint hitch in Kakashi's breath, though the book in front of his face doesn’t waver. “I’m…glad,” he says at length, and the rough rasp of it is something close to bone-deep relief. “Glad he could learn that. They gave him to me?”

“Yeah,” Kurama confirms, watching Fū teach Gaara a clapping game. She’s laughing, and Gaara is smiling, and it makes Kurama smile too. “Him and two other brats—Haruno Sakura and Itachi's little brother.”


Kurama bristles, opening his mouth to snap, and Kakashi quickly raises one hand, cutting him off. “Not like that,” he says, meeting Kurama's angry glower steadily. “Most villages make jinchuuriki single apprentices, rather than putting them on a team. Puberty and the power to level whole towns isn’t the safest mix.” A hesitation, so brief that it’s hardly noticeable, and he adds, “The Uchiha—there were rumors, when the Kyuubi attacked. Shinobi who’d survived getting close said that its—his eyes had the pattern of an evolved Sharingan.”

A little sourly, Kurama wonders just how many of those survivors were Root members. Most of
them, probably, and they likely disappeared conveniently after setting the rumor off. “Yeah, well, I can tell them exactly who’s responsible for that,” he growls, feeling it reverberate slightly in his chest. “That should put an end to it.”

Probably predictably, that doesn’t ease the tightness from Kakashi’s expression. “Well,” he says, and there’s an edge of something that’s not quite wryness to it, but not quite bitterness either. “At least no one will suspect a widespread conspiracy, if you do. Obito was…not well-liked.”

Kurama remembers that, vaguely. All of his knowledge about Obito comes from the conversations during the war, and what little Kakashi mentioned in the years before it, but his memory of it is clear enough. “Why?” he asks, watching Kakashi a little warily. The Copy-Nin brought it up himself, so Kurama assumes talking about it isn’t going to make him curl up in a catatonic ball, but then again Kakashi’s sense of self-preservation has never been his strongest point.

Another pause, this one considering, and Kakashi answers carefully, “I’m not sure. He always said it was because he couldn’t awaken the Sharingan.”

“But you don’t believe that.” Kurama studies his face, what little he can see of it between the mask, the hair, and the hitai-ate.

Kakashi glances at him, then away. “The Uchiha Clan is one of the largest in Konoha,” he says. “Only the Hyuuga outnumber them. And unlike the Hyuuga, only a small percentage of their members ever end up in the kind of situation that will activate their Sharingan. It’s not a common thing. There are lots of Uchiha shinobi who don’t have it.”

“So Obito was average,” Kurama reasons, trying to follow his logic.

With a soft hum, Kakashi flips his book closed, then back open. “Obito was good,” he corrects. “I finished the Academy in one year, and I could keep up with jounin when I was still a genin. It’s why they promoted me so quickly. Obito could hold his own against me, and he was clever, even though he tried to hide it.” A breath, and then he sighs, just a little. “I never paid close enough attention to him to figure it out, and by the time I realized, it was too late.”

Kurama doesn’t bother telling him that there’s still time now, because Kurama isn’t Naruto; Obito is a threat, and if Kurama gets an opening, he’s going to take it and get rid of the threat, preferably for good. He’s grateful that Obito saved Naruto’s life in the original timeline, is grateful that he took that blow for Kakashi too, but he’s also one of the main reasons Naruto was in danger in the first place. Madara’s pawn, Kaguya’s pawn, but still an enemy and a menace in his own right.

“Madara must have noticed,” he says, and when Kakashi raises a brow he just shrugs. “You really think it was coincidence that the one Uchiha who’d have a big fucking reason to turn his back on Konoha had his would-be girlfriend kidnapped by a bunch of Iwa nin in the middle of nowhere on a secret mission? The smart thing to do would have been to kill you and Obito, then grab Rin so they wouldn’t have had to worry about rescue, but they didn’t even touch you. And backup appearing just when you were about to get out, without any word being sent? I believe in coincidences, but not that much.”

One grey eye goes wide, and Kakashi stops dead. Kurama pauses as well, turning to look at him curiously, but there’s a mixture of shock and horror sliding over Kakashi’s face and he doesn’t even seem to notice. “You—it wasn’t a coincidence,” he repeats, and the words come out half-strangled. “That night—”

Right. Kurama had forgotten that he’d left that part out when he was trying to rattle Obito. There hasn’t exactly been a good time to drop that fact into the conversation, either. “Madara,” he confirms
quietly. “He was controlling the Kiri nin from the start, and he put Obito there just in time to see how things ended.”

Another hitch of breath, just a little more audible than before, and Kakashi closes his eye, dipping his head until Kurama can’t see his face. “It was all planned,” he echoes, and the words hurt just to hear them, jagged-edged and laced with a relief that may as well be poison. “And Rin realized half of what was happening, but not the rest, so she…”

He trails off, but at this point it hardly needs to be said. Kurama doesn’t answer, just waits, watching Kakashi try to piece the fragments of his composure back together. He knows from experience, now, that there’s no way he can make the pain better. Kakashi, Obito, Rin—they were all manipulated, all played like puppets for the sake of Kaguya’s revival. Just three more casualties in the grand scheme of things, but that won’t help the scars left behind.

And then, just faintly, Kurama hears something. He spins, head coming up and senses reaching, but the only sound is that of their group further ahead, approaching the mouth of a narrow canyon that follows a winding river. The rest of the land is quiet, the sparse forest on either side of them still without so much as a wind to knock the bare branches together. Kurama's eyes narrow, and he turns, taking a deep breath of the crisp air. At his side, Kakashi has come alert as well, and when Kurama glances over at him he shakes his head.

“If there’s something there, we’re upwind,” he says quietly, sliding his book back into his weapons pouch. He doesn’t question Kurama's instincts, though, scanning the trees in a careful sweep. Then his shoulders go stiff, eye locking onto something deeper into the forest, and Kurama turns to follow his gaze.

All he sees is a bush swaying, independent of any sort of breeze, but the expression on Kakashi's face is that of a man who just saw the world crumble before his eyes.

“Kakashi?” he asks, bordering on sharp, and casts a glance back down the road. Naruto is with eight other jinchuuriki, though, not to mention Tsunade, Jiraiya, Zabuza, Mei, Haku, and the rest of the Freak Squad. He’s probably the best-protected person in the Elemental Nations right now.

“I thought…” Kakashi starts, but the words trail off, even though his gaze doesn’t move from the shadowed undergrowth. A breath, and he steps forward, drawing a kunai. “Go ahead, Kurama. I’m going to check.”

“Idiot,” Kurama huffs, falling into step with him as he moves off the road and leaps up into the branches. A half-second of effort and Kurama joins him, crouching on one of the wide limbs and ignoring the surprise on Kakashi’s face. It’s quickly overwhelmed by amusement, and the Copy-Nin’s eye crinkles.

“Maa, Kurama,” he says, verging on laughter. “Careful or people might start to think you care.”

“Their mistake,” Kurama retorts, then leaps lightly to the next tree over and uses it as a springboard to keep going. “What did you see?”

There’s a beat of silence, and Kakashi huffs quietly. “A ghost,” he answers helpfully, and then sketches out the ANBU sign for silence. Kurama rolls his eyes, but complies, minding his footfalls as he slips to the side so that he’ll come at the moving bush from a different direction. He stretches his senses out, feeling for any ill intent, and there’s a whisper of it, pale and buried under other feelings, that makes him frown in consternation. That feels…strange. Tattered, almost, and strangled by something he can’t make out. Not rage, not malice, but—
Oh, *fuck.*

He flares his chakra, loud and bright like a warning, and slams his sudden surge of panic and desperation into his siblings’ minds, even as a streak of red and black crashes headlong into him and knocks him right off the branch.

The dizzying, twisting lurch of a fall is too brief, too confusing for him to get his feet under himself, and he hits the ground hard on his side, feeling his ribs creak from the impact. There’s no time, though, and he instantly rolls to his feet, staggering upright as his attacker does the same.

Long red hair, red-violet eyes, and a trickster’s wicked grin, all wrapped up in a black cloak with red clouds.

Kurama takes a breath that slides out as a growl, and tells himself that he probably should have expected this.

“Kushina,” he says, more to see if it will get a response than any real desire to greet his former jinchuuriki.

The smile stays fixed in place, and she doesn’t even blink. None of the eerie changes of Edo Tensei, but Kurama has absolutely no doubt that Kushina isn’t in control here. That was definitely Obito he felt earlier, malice almost completely covered by his determination. It makes Kurama remember Kakashi’s theory in the war, that the reason Obito turned everything into an impossibly complex game was because there was a piece of him that knew it was wrong, knew that he shouldn’t and fought for control every step of the way.

Sage, but Kurama hopes that piece is feeling particularly strong today.

Still. Still, Obito made a mistake here, and a big one. Kurama knows *intimately* how Kushina fights, every last one of her jutsus, even the ones she keeps in reserve. He knows her tactics and her tricks, and beyond that, he’s a bijuu and she isn’t even a jinchuuriki anymore. Uzumaki are always dangerous, and Kushina more so than most, but Kurama can handle her. Especially since Kakashi is —

“Dad.”

The word is choked, horrified. Kurama's head snaps up and around, towards where Kakashi is standing on the wide bough of an oak. There’s another man across from him, dressed the same way as Kushina, and even if Kurama hadn’t heard what Kakashi called him he wouldn’t be able to miss the resemblance. Hatake Sakumo is a little broader, a few years older, but he still looks very much like his son. And damn it all, but that’s probably just about the last thing Kakashi needs, seeing another person come back from the dead only to turn up as an enemy.

Sakumo doesn’t say anything, face set in stern lines. He reaches up, pulling a tantō from its sheath on his back, and drops into a swordsman’s stance. Kakashi takes a step back, but Kurama can see him wavering.

Another blur of red is all the warning Kurama gets, but it’s enough. He spins, leaps hard with a touch of chakra to his feet, and snatches Kakashi right off the branch as Sakumo lunges. Kushina almost lands on top of him as she follows, and they have to scramble not to collide. Taking advantage of the two-second opening, Kurama bolts for the road. He doesn’t want to lead attackers back to the rest of the group, but fighting in the close quarters of the forest isn’t going to do them any favors. They’ll just wreck it if they cut loose.
“If you're catatonic I swear I'm going to beat your ass,” Kurama snarls as they touch down in the path. He hovers for one moment, making sure Kakashi can stand on his own, then reaches for his chakra and slashes down hard. The shockwave reverberates through the air, slamming into the treeline just as Kushina and Sakumo appear, and they go flying back under the force of it as trunks splinter.

The sound that tears from Kakashi's throat is somewhere between horror and pain. He snatches Kurama's wrist, pulling his hand down, and starts, “Don’t—”

“Don’t fight back? Don’t hurt them?” Kurama demands, annoyed, even as he lets Kakashi drag him away. “If you hadn’t noticed, they're trying to hurt us!”

“And I'm sure they’ll be very sorry about it once this is over,” Kakashi answers, though his gaze is locked on the two figures pulling themselves upright. His grip on Kurama is white-knuckled, and he doesn’t seem to be in any hurry to let go. “And on that note, what the fuck.”

Between Nagato and Orochimaru, Kurama is honestly not surprised in the least that this happened. Playing god is par for the course with them—literally, in Nagato's case. Easy enough to guess how two formerly-dead Konoha shinobi ended up in the middle of nowhere, right in their path.

“The Rinnegan and mad scientists should never fucking mix,” Kurama says succinctly, then grabs Kakashi's wrist in return and dives to the side, pulling the Copy-Nin with him. A dragon made of water crashes down right where they were standing, and Kurama rolls and comes to his feet, then lunges. Behind him, Kakashi shouts something, but Kurama ignores him and tackles Kushina full-on, slamming her into the ground. She doesn't so much as hesitate, driving upwards towards his throat with a kunai, but Kurama manages to grab her arm and force it to the side.

“Snap the hell out of it, Tomato,” he snarls, right in her face. Kushina snarls back, and a knee slams into Kurama's gut, jolting him up and over her head. It's a move he knows, and as Kushina flips over with a hard push he rolls out of the way. She lands on all fours, kunai stabbing into the road, and Kurama lunges for her again, bringing a shockwave with him.

There's a cry of pain as it hits, Kushina jerking her arms up over her face even as she’s hurled backwards, and Kurama doesn’t waste time, calling up his chakra and throwing a hand out. Wind screams past him, following the gesture, and carves a deep furrow between Kakashi and Sakumo as the latter slashes down. It slows the tantō enough that Kakashi can slide out of the way, ducking to the side and retreating to put his back against Kurama's.

“Ideas?” he asks, slightly winded.

Rolling his eyes, Kurama jerks him around, then reaches up to yank his hitai-ate straight. “Yeah,” he snaps. “Get your damned head in the fight and don’t let your father kill you.”

Kakashi stares at him for a long, breathless moment, stunned silent, and then tears his gaze away, the lazy spin of his Sharingan locking on Sakumo as he approaches, stone-faced. A glance to the side takes in Kushina, shaking her head as chips of stone clatter out of her high ponytail. A breath, another, shaking faintly, and he says with all the desperately strangled pain their fight against Obito left no time for, “I can't.”

Kurama snarls with exasperated fury, swinging around to kick Kushina out of the air as she lunges for them. “Fucking move,” he shouts. “You're a good shinobi? Then fucking knock him out, no one said you had to kill him!”

With a jolt, Kakashi moves, but Kurama can't spare the time to turn and check on him. There's a
wind jutsu forming between Kushina's hands, as sharp as blades, and in the distance Kurama can feel the sudden lash of chakra rising like a sudden spring flood—Rōshi’s with Son’s behind it, Kokuō and Han, Utakata and Saiken, Yagura and Isobu, Yugito and Matatabi. Kurama's breath catches, because all of them reacting can only mean a big attack.

This is the distraction. The real danger is to Naruto.

There isn’t even a moment to hesitate. Kurama slams another wave of force at Kushina, then bolts, grabbing Kakashi as he passes. Kakashi yelps as Kurama drags him along, heels practically skidding in the dirt, but he gets his feet under him in a moment and paces Kurama without asking questions. Distantly, Kurama is thankful, but he can't waste the breath to say it. A burst of speed sends him hurtling down the incline where the road dips to enter the canyon, and he has half a second to take in the scene before he’s crashing down right on top of Kakuzu as the bounty hunter reaches to pull his cloak off.

The missing-nin practically shrieks in fury, his thick threads erupting around them, but Kurama uses his back as a springboard, flipping up and over to land between him and Fū. There's a vicious snarl tearing though his chest, a current of anger like a riptide through him, and he lunges in a blur, claws bared. Kakuzu curses, leaping back, and Kurama’s claws slice through air instead of skin.

“Kurama-nii!” Fū cries, relief in her voice.

“Are you all right?” Kurama demands, straightening, though he doesn’t take his eyes off Kakuzu.

“I’m fine,” she says determinedly. “Fuji and Momiji took Naruto and Gaara to hide, but I can help!” Kurama hesitates, because it’s dangerous, but—she can. Especially since Pein is here, all six of his Paths filling the air with their identical chakra signatures. He takes a breath, then orders, “Chōmei, get her in the air. Fū, those bastards with the orange hair—if you can blind them without getting too close, do it.”

The hum of Chōmei’s chakra surges, and there's a rapid clatter of swiftly beating wings. Fū laughs, bright and astonished, and Kurama tips his head just enough to see that she’s sporting the six wings of her Version Two form, lifting her up above the battle. From within a mass of puppets, there's a cry, and Yugito bursts through with a cat’s furious snarl, claws on her hands and feet. Matatabi’s power limns her in ghostly blue, and she crashes into the wooden soldiers, tearing through them like they’re made of paper.

Reassured that both of the girls are fine for now, Kurama turns his attention back to Kakuzu and flexes his fingers with a toothy grin. “All right, asshole,” he growls. “You’ve picked a fight with me one too many times. Now I’m going to rip you to goddamn pieces.”

Kakuzu laughs at him, sharp and mocking. “Little boys shouldn’t run around making threats like that,” he taunts. “What’s your sister going to say?”

A rush of movement, and it’s just enough of a warning for Kurama to drop to his stomach, red hair and black cloth passing inches over his head. He curses viciously, rolling out of the way as a handful of kunai stab into the ground, and then gathers his feet under himself and leaps. A wind jutsu slices through the space he just occupied, and Kurama lands lightly, then flings himself forward, ducking under the punch Kushina throws and grabbing her elbow. She tries to headbutt him, but Kurama dodges, using his grip to drag her forward and flip her over his shoulder.

In the same moment, there’s a cry of warning. Kurama is tangled up with Kushina, though, can't move without giving her an opening, and he can't do anything but brace himself—
The blade of a tantō slams into another, and Kakashi shoves his father back.

“Thanks,” is all Kurama has time to say before Kushina lashes back, kicks him in the stomach, and rips herself out of his hold. She turns, hands coming up, and in the same moment Kurama can feel Sakumo’s chakra rising, gathering like white light around the blade of his sword. The shimmering golden chains appearing around Kushina’s slim form are a hell of a lot more pressing, though—Kurama knows all too well how they can bind even him, and he tenses automatically, torn between the urge to run and the knowledge that there’s no way he can leave Kakashi to face both Kushina and Sakumo by himself.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Kakashi says dryly, shoulders bumping Kurama’s as they turn back-to-back. “Maybe if we survive.”

Kurama kind of wants to scoff at the ‘if’, but he eyes the way Kushina’s Adamantine Sealing Chains are surging forward and doesn’t bother.

And then, from the corner of his eye, he catches a flash of yellow, and Naruto shouts, “Kurama-nii!” as he throws himself between Kurama and Kushina.
XLIX: Encumbrous

Chapter Notes

Again, written on my phone, which thinks English is yucky. Sorry in advance for any stupidity I failed to catch.

[encumbrous /ˈənˈcomˌbrŭs/, worry; strain; stress; of pertaining to, or causing an encumbrance; cumbersome; troublesome. From Old French encombrer, from en- + combre, “to hinder”.

The world goes still.

It’s like being back in that darkened clearing, like watching his best friend fall all over again. There’s no time to hesitate, no time for memories that are still too fresh, but for that one heartbeat before he can drag himself back under control, Naruto’s death is all Kurama can see.

But this time, Kurama isn’t a ghost. He’s not a formless spirit without the ability to move, trapped and watching his jinchuuriki fall. A bare moment of hesitation is already too much time wasted, but Kurama isn’t about to let that lost future repeat here and now.

He lunges forward, ducking under the first of the chains, and gets one desperate hand on cloth. A twist, a wordless shout, and Kurama throws all his bodyweight into the turn as he hurls Naruto back towards Kakashi. Not safe, not really, not with the White Fang bearing down on him, but better than dying from Kushina’s Chains. Naruto goes flying, skids across the ground only to slam into a burst of sand that curls over him, and Kurama has one half of a fractured heartbeat to feel a surge of mingled exasperation and relief because of course, of course Gaara would—

The pain isn’t a surprise.

This isn’t like taking Kakashi’s Raikiri to the chest—that was a simple blow, easy for his healing to fix. It’s a drain, a sudden bleed on the chakra he knows he should have, and Kurama staggers. Sheer stubbornness keeps him on his feet, even as he brings a hand up, futilely trying to stop the warm-hot flood of blood down his chest. Air doesn’t come easily, and he has to cough even though it aches all through him.

“Fuck,” he hisses, getting a hand on the chain that’s piercing through his chest. Half a second to brace himself and he wrenches it out, the motion tearing a scream from behind clenched teeth. There’s a sound behind him, then hands on his elbows, holding him up. Kurama forces his eyes open, trying to breathe evenly, and meets Kushina’s stare.

Something is different about her, just vaguely, but Kurama is certain of it.

“Sage damn it, you idiot Tomato,” he hisses, and at his shoulder Kakashi makes a sound like he doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“Kurama?” he asks instead, dragging Kurama back a handful of steps.

Kurama ignores him, turning to look for Naruto. There’s bright gold on the edge of his vision, easy
enough to find, and Naruto cries, “Kurama-nii!” even as he struggles against the hold Utakata has on both him and Gaara. Bubbles whirl and twist around them like a shield, and Saiken’s chakra is a bright, acid-edged cloud keeping the mass of puppets ringing them at bay.

“I'm fine,” Kurama snaps. “Naruto, don’t fucking do that!”

Blue eyes harden, a small chin tilts with all the mulishness that Kurama is unfortunately so familiar with. “Kurama-nii, she was going to hurt you!”

She’s your mother, Kurama almost says, but stops himself at the last moment. That’s for later, when he can figure out a way to break whatever’s controlling Kushina. Until then, better not to say anything at all.

“I'll be fine!” he insists instead, and it’s sheer luck that he sees the whirl of movement out of the corner of his eye. A hard shove knocks Kakashi back, and Kurama goes with him, all but tackling him to the ground and rolling them out of the way. Long fingers cup the back of Kurama’s skull as they tumble, almost taking out Sasori as he tries to keep a distance from Rōshi, and Kakashi manages to turn them so that he slams into the canyon wall first, impacting with a grunt.

“For someone who’s fine that’s a pretty big hole in your chest,” the jounin says, slightly winded. He sits up, eyes on Kurama for half a second before they flick up and harden.

Kurama coughs and forces himself to ignore the breathless ache that’s spreading through his entire torso. Pushing partway upright hurts a lot more than he expects, but it’s fine, he can keep going. He will. “And for someone in the middle of a fight, you talk too fucking much.”

Kakashi pointedly doesn’t answer, but springs over Kurama, drawing his tantō as he goes. White light gathers around the blade, matching the one that comes sweeping down at them, and the clang as they come together sets Kurama’s teeth on edge. He uncurls himself in a rush, kicking Sakumo hard in the chest and knocking him back, and then slashes down at Kushina as she lunges for them.

“Her chains?” Kakashi asks, casting another momentary look at him before he turns back to his father.

“Fucking hurt,” Kurama bites out, rolling his eyes. He studies Kushina as she picks herself up, trying to find another glimpse of that change he could swear happened, but—

Just in time, he drags Kakashi out of the way of a water jutsu and sends a blade of wind right back with a snarl of deep irritation. “Snap the hell out of it, or I’m going to change your name to Tomato on the ninja registry!”

It’s impossible to tell whether the scowl Kushina gives him is because whatever control there is on her is weakening, or if it’s just because her hatred of the nickname goes so deep that it doesn’t need conscious thought to get a reaction.

She’s not a jinchūriki, though, Kurama reminds himself, gritting his teeth as he straightens. Maybe it’s a bit of a mixed blessing, because it means the Sharingan isn’t behind this and Kurama can’t snap her out of it the way he did Yagura, but it also means that even her reserves have a limit. Worst comes to worst, Kurama can just outlast her in a fight.

With a low growl, Kurama dives into a roll, letting a flight of kunai pass harmlessly over his head, and comes up right beneath Kushina’s guard, throwing an uppercut at her face even as he twists. She ducks back, dodging the blow, but trips over the foot Kurama gets behind her. Calling fire up in a blistering surge, Kurama goes for her throat, but Kushina turns her fall into a handspring, almost
managing to kick Kurama in the jaw as she flips out of range. A dodge, the edge of her sandal whistling past his cheek, and Kurama lets his fireball go, big and showy enough to blind. Right behind it, Kurama lunges, meeting Kushina head-on as she darts to the side and lashing out with his claws.

Deceptively fast, Kushina skips back, but she’s not quite quick enough. Kurama’s nails catch in the dark fabric of her Akatsuki cloak, and it shreds beneath his grip. With a noise of frustration, Kushina rips it off and tosses it to the side, and—

*Oh.*

The seal is large and stark and sprawling against Kushina’s throat, curling lines that disappear under the neckline of her shirt and trace out a pattern Kurama has never seen before. He’s decent with seals, knows more than most from his time with Mito and Kushina, but this one doesn’t look like any Uzumaki fuinjutsu he’s ever seen, too sharp-edged, too roundabout.

“Nice tattoo,” Kurama mocks, looking up to meet Kushina’s purple eyes. “But what would your husband say?”

There’s a pause, just a little too long for Kurama to miss it. A blink, long and slow, Kushina’s lashes fluttering a little as if she’s fighting sleep—

With a crash and a cry, Sakumo bowls her over, and Kakashi skids to a halt next to Kurama, coiling a length of ninja wire back into a loop. “What is it?” he demands, eyes still on the resurrected shinobi.

“Seals,” Kurama says, and the thought is working, reaching. “They have seals to control them.”

But Kushina wouldn’t be caught by a seal, even one laid on her at the very last moment. She’s an Uzumaki, was taught fuinjutsu the way Konoha children are taught tree-climbing, and Kurama can’t believe—

“Fuck,” he mutters, shoving one bloody hand through his hair. Even now his chakra is corrosive enough that he could try to burn it out of her system, erase it from her skin, but in all likelihood it won’t work. Kushina was his jinchuuriki from childhood; only Mito and his Naruto have more familiarity with his chakra. That leaves trying to undo the seal himself, which isn’t Kurama’s strong point, or hoping that Kushina *did* manage a counter-seal and it’s just—

“We need to buy time,” he blurts, and ignores the faintly incredulous look Kakashi turns on him.

“This is going to end terribly,” Kakashi tells him flatly, but he tosses Kurama his ninja wire, then a pair of kunai, and while Kurama’s hands are mostly full he leans over to shove a folded Fūma Shuriken into his sash.

Snorting, Kurama tucks the other weapons away as well. “Careful or people might start to think you care,” he mocks.

Clearly remembering the moment earlier, Kakashi makes a noise of faint amusement, then takes a breath. “Switch?” he suggests, quietly enough that only Kurama hears.

For half a moment, Kurama considers it, but he shakes his head. “Only if we have to,” he says, and just catches a flash of movement from the corner of his eye. Yellow makes his heart stop with a jarring jerk, but when he whirls around it’s the Yugito’s hair, not Naruto’s. He curses at himself, too slow as he turns, and sheer instinct makes him leap.
Kushina’s ready for it. She catches his ankle, leans back as he tries to kick her in the face, and with a heave she knocks him back to the ground. Kurama hits hard, jarring his chest, and scrambles upright and away. Kunai in hand, Kushina comes at him, but Kurama knows this sequence. Leap, step back, dodge right, duck in—

Her guard slips just the faintest bit, and Kurama slams an elbow into her stomach, grabs her by the shirt, and hurls her over his shoulder. A blur of white comes at him, even faster than Kushina, and Kurama wastes no time slamming a wave of force into the ground between himself and Sakumo, letting a spray of earth and shattered stone drive the White Fang back towards Kakashi.

Too much of a pause, though, and an instant later he has to leap away from a knee to the spine, springing over to land in a crouch facing his former jinchuuriki. Better to stay at close quarters, he decides—Kushina’s more dangerous at a distance, with her Chains and her ninjutsu. A step brings him in, claws slashing, only for Kushina to grab his wrist and force his hand down. More golden chains spring up around her, the air between them glowing as they form a barrier, and Kurama curses.

He lets his chakra slip free as he retreats several paces, lets it rise like a seething cloud of red-edged darkness, but burning gold beats it back. Familiar—all too much so—and Kurama snarls with something that’s too close to fear for his taste. No one is going to bind him, not again, but if anyone can come close to succeeding it’s Kushina. He doubles down, throws more power into the air until he hears a cry, another. Somewhere close behind there’s a thump, a grunt like Kakashi was just forced to his knees, but Kurama can’t look away, can’t waver. He keeps his furious stare on Kushina’s Chains as they fight his unformed and undirected chakra, trying to push through it. She managed to hold him once, but—

Something stirs, cold and hungry and bitterly familiar.

It’s malice with an afterscent of blood, killing intent writ large across the most instinctive parts of the mind and given physical form. Kurama breathes it in like a drug, beautiful and intoxicating, breathes out like he’s finally coming awake after so long—

No, he thinks, dragging formless hunger to a halt, burying old instincts beneath a flood of adrenaline and horror and fear as he spins. Sealing Chains slam into the ground on either side of him, but Kurama is already moving, bolting across the open ground.

Naruto, he thinks, and feels the Kyuubi open his eyes.

He knows that Kurama is the Kyuubi no Kitsune, Kakashi thinks, a touch wry as he staggers back to his feet. He knows right up until he knows, until he can feel the flare and lash of power like Minato’s Rasengan trapped in his hand, like the air tasted that night in October. It’s all sensible, logical, right up until the gruff, grumpy, caring man Kakashi has spent the last week and a half with—the man who carried the Daimyō’s daughter for hours at a time, who braids Yugito’s hair, who boosts Fū up on his shoulder, who treats Gaara with such care and Naruto with such devotion—suddenly burns with chakra so bright and heavy that Kakashi can’t even stand beneath the weight of it.

There’s deep laughter from off to his right, laced with killing intent, and Kakashi’s head snaps around automatically, even as he keeps a portion of his attention on the form of his father, struggling to pull himself up from where he’s half-buried in the ground. It’s the missing-nin who tried to skin him and nearly succeeded, Hoshigaki Kisame, and his eyes are fixed on the one of the knots of fighting in the
“Impressive,” he says, and the unnerving thing is that he means it. His eyes are intent and interested, his smile sharp even without the filed teeth to give it a macabre edge.

His opponent laughs too, very nearly matching him for sharpness as he grins right back. “You think that’s neat? Should see him in bed,” Zabuza retorts, guard unwavering as he keeps his attention on the other swordsman. He’s battered and bloody, breathing hard, though Kisame hardly seems to have a scratch on him. Probably to be expected—Zabuza is good, but he’s not S-rank.

“Oh?” Kisame’s smile gets wider and even more interested. “Do tell.”

Kakashi considers chucking the last of his kunai at them to be sure he doesn’t. Not only is that something he doesn’t need to hear, he’ll have to put up with Kurama gutting Zabuza later and all the flirting that will doubtless go along with it, if they all manage to survive this.

Thankfully, Zabuza just hums, then tips one shoulder up. “Find out yourself,” he challenges, and something in his face turns feral. There’s a whirl of sub-zero air, an explosion of chakra, and a dome of ice mirrors hardens into place around the Akatsuki member.

Deciding that Zabuza will be fine without backup beyond his apprentice, Kakashi turns back to his own fight. Sakumo is still fighting the earth jutsu as it drags him under—it’s a particularly nasty one Kakashi learned in the war, and he’s good with Doton jutsus no matter how he hates them—and Kushina is just…standing. Staring. Her eyes are trained on the direction Kurama ran, and as much as Kakashi wants to follow the man, he wants to let Uzumaki Kushina, currently an enemy, out of his sight even less.

It aches. It aches and stings and tears at something inside of him, seeing her again, seeing them again, but Kakashi locks it all down, shoves it away where it can’t touch him. He doesn’t think of all those nights in front of his father’s grave, all the days staring at Kushina’s name on the memorial. Can’t, because if he does right now he’ll never be able to do anything.

There’s a loud war-cry from above, sudden enough that Kakashi spins, and he’s just in time to see Fū drop out of the sky on iridescent wings. Something sparkles in her hand, and Kakashi’s heard enough of Jiraiya’s grumbling about getting his ass kicked by a handful of kids that he ducks and covers his eyes on instinct. There’s a blinding flare, and when he looks up again his father is staggering. Kakashi takes the opening instantly, biting into his thumb until he tastes blood and then slamming a hand down onto the ground. The earth rumbles, and all eight of his ninken leap up to sink their teeth into flesh.

Kakashi shuts out his father’s cry of startled pain as he’s pinned in place, flips a kunai around in his hand, and lunges. Sakumo’s eyes land on him, and just for the briefest second before Kakashi strikes he thinks he sees something like recognition in them.

Then the hilt of his kunai slams into Sakumo’s temple and the man collapses, dropping limply to the ground.

“Boss?” Pakkun asks sharply, working his teeth free of the black cloak and spitting out stray threads.

He shouldn’t be breathing this hard, Kakashi realizes distantly. He’s almost panting, chest heaving, not quite able to register his surroundings. There's been a strange half-daze to everything since he first saw that familiar shadow in the forest, and—

The heavy, corrosive chakra lying across the battlefield doubles.
It’s been a very, very long time since even the strongest killing intent made Kakashi falter—not since Orochimaru defected and Kakashi tried to stop him in the forest—but the force of this practically knocks him off his feet. He staggers like it’s a hammer-blow, tries to straighten and can barely manage it.

He was wrong, Kakashi thinks distantly. *This* is the Kyuubi. This seething hatred, this anger, this clear desire to crush the world underfoot—there’s no mistaking it. This is what Kakashi felt six years ago, and it’s enough the bring a cold sweat to his skin. In contrast, Kurama is a star, overwhelming but on the kinder side of neutral, while this is the monster under the bed, lurking in the shadows and all too willing to tear out your throat.

“Somebody’s grumpy,” he says to Bull, who’s looking up at him nervously. The big dog whines softly, and Kakashi puts a hand on his head. He opens his mouth to offer something like a reassurance, but Shiba barks once, high and sharp in warning, and Kakashi spins. There’s no time to get out of the way, no chance he’d leave his unconscious father and all of his ninken to take the hit as a Suiton jutsu barrels across the canyon at them.

Kakashi rushes through the necessary hand signs faster than he ever has before, hoping that muscle memory won’t fail him, and slams as much chakra as he dares into the technique. It blazes to life, a high, wide wall of crackling electricity, and the blinding flash and snarl when the water strikes it is enough to make Kakashi duck away, covering his ears. From somewhere on the other side, he hears Kushina scream, and grits his teeth against the horror that sound invokes.

*Get your damned head in the fight and *don’t* let your father kill you.*

Kakashi assumes Kurama would say the same about letting Kushina kill him, and he reminds himself of that, reaching up to touch his hitai-ate. Kurama had grabbed for it without hesitation, started him right in the eyes when both were revealed, and now that Kakashi knows Kurama’s history with the Sharingan it’s…different.

Not even Kakashi’s best friend, not even those who have known him since he was a child, have ever done something like that. His Sharingan, his scar—they’re reminders, to those around him, of how broken Kakashi really is.

Not to Kurama, and every time he notices Kakashi can’t quite decide how to feel about that.

When the light clears and the sounds fade, Kakashi straightens up warily, taking in the battlefield. Kisame and Zabuza are gone, apparently moved on to a quieter section of the fight—or, knowing them, deeper into the fray. He and Kurama ended up fighting close to the mouth of the canyon, where it opens up around the lazy curve of the river, and from a quick glance Kakashi assumes the rest of Akatsuki is gathered deeper in.

Kushina is on the ground, entirely unmoving, but Kakashi doesn’t want to dwell on the splash of red that marks her crumpled form. He knew when he picked a Raiton jutsu that the possibility of a backlash against a Suiton jutsu was high—with any other enemy that would be the *reason* he picked it.

Any other enemy isn’t Kushina, though.

Taking a deep breath, Kakashi turns away. Problems with the Kyuubi mean something’s happened to Naruto, and that takes priority.

He leaps down the incline without looking back and throws himself headlong into the fight, eyes searching for a head of red hair and chakra like a misplaced star.
The press is thick as he fights his way through, dodging stray jutsus and weaponry. There are none of the white clones Kurama warned them Akatsuki might manage to create, but Sasori of the Red Sand seems to have brought out every last one of his puppets in an attempt to overwhelm them.

It might have worked, if not for the jinchuuriki.

The amount of chakra Kakashi can feel in the air right now is on par with some of the largest battles in the Third War, fought with thousands of each village’s best shinobi, all the powerhouses and strongest fighters in one place. Here and now, with less than twenty people on their side and nine on the other, it feels like an all-out war.

The only ones Kakashi can directly see are Rōshi and Yugito, the latter tearing her way through puppets like she’s enjoying it. To former is facing Sasori directly, teeth bared in what’s certainly not a grin and the vague image of a cloak of rippling chakra covering him like a shroud. A shattered puppet is discarded nearby, half-melted and still burning a little, and Sasori looks deceptive young, though the cold expression on his face removes any possibly thoughts on his innocence.

Beyond them, Kakashi can just make out the surge and retreat of Tenzō’s Mokuton, the flare of Shisui and Itachi’s fire. Nerves a little more settled, he follows the heavy chakra towards the riverbank, slides down a slope—

His vision bends and warps, bleeding into the image of another place. The canyon, but definitely not what Kakashi is looking at, and it’s almost enough to throw him off before a hand with painted fingernails comes into the not-his line of vision, stooping to pick up a gunbai that’s leaning against a rock. Kakashi misses his footing, has to grab onto the gnarled trunk of a small tree to stay upright, but his mind is racing, putting the pieces together. Obito’s hand, Obito’s weapon, Obito’s eye—Kakashi is seeing what Obito is seeing.

Things are starting to bleed through.

This has never happened to Kakashi before, not that he can remember. So either that was a deliberate warning, or something with Obito is different today.

Before he can think on it any further, small hands grab the leg of his uniform pants and tug sharply. Kakashi looks down, startled, to find a wide pair of aquamarine eyes staring back at him.

Dangerous and unstable, that’s what Baki called Suna’s jinchuuriki. Right, Kakashi thinks, warily crouching down so that Gaara doesn’t have to look up quite so much. I definitely believe that.

“What is it?” he asks, trying his best to mimic the tone Kurama uses with his children. Gruff, not pandering, not brisk. For not knowing quite what it actually is, Kakashi doesn’t think he does too badly.

Even so, the look Gaara gives him says very clearly that he wouldn’t be interacting with someone like Kakashi if the situation hadn’t forced his hand. (Or maybe Kakashi’s just reading too much into his expression.) “Kurama-nii is unconscious,” he says urgently. “Naruto’s glowing and Kurama-nii said that’s bad. And Mo—Shukaku is being really loud. I think he’s scared.” A wince, like the demon in his head just yelled at him—Kakashi thinks he’s kind of brave for not twitching away at that, even if he’ll never actually say as much—and Gaara looks distinctly unhappy. “Utakata helped last time, but I can’t find him.”

That, at least, is not a mental and-or spiritual plane battle with a chakra demon and likely something Kakashi can actually help with. A little relieved, he stands up, wavers for a moment, and then tells Gaara, “I need to pick you up if we’re going to find him.”
Gaara casts one quick, solemn, worried look back down the hill, to the source of a good portion of the chakra in the air, and then nods. Kakashi scoops him up, praying he won't do anything terrible like drop him, because then Kurama would definitely use his head as a football. “Which direction?” he asks the kid, and Gaara hesitates for a moment, eyes searching seemingly empty air, before he points.

“There. He chased away the guy with the big mask things.”

Masks means Kakuzu, and Utakata could likely use some backup anyway. Kakashi looks down towards the river, where the curve of the slope hides Naruto and Kurama from view, and then steels himself and nods. “All right,” he says, then forms a clone to keep watch and leaps back up towards the main battle, praying that they can find Utakata before anyone comes along.
FIFTY CHAPTERS CAN I DIE NOW PLEASE??

But seriously, this massive, ridiculous fic is the longest thing I’ve ever written and quite possibly the longest thing I will ever write, and thank you so, so, SO much to everyone who’s offered encouragement and kindness. I love and appreciate you all, and you’re completely fantastic.

[autonomy / ˈɔːtənəmə /, the right or condition of self-government, especially in a particular sphere; freedom from external control or influence; independence. From Greek autonomia, from autonomos “having its own laws,” from autos “self” + nomos “law.”.]

The return to consciousness comes with a heavy pulse of pain, tearing through her nerves with short, hard shocks she can't quite manage to ride out. Kushina squeezes her eyes closed and groans, pressing one hand to her chest. Electricity, she thinks, forcing herself to sit up, and can't tell if the memories are blurry from the shock or the control seal. A bit of both, probably—she can remember bits and pieces and blurred impressions from beforehand, but then she thinks of bright light and…

Nothing.

The pass looks like a dozen others in Fire Country, so there's no help orienting herself there.

The battle going on doesn’t help much, either, though Kushina recognizes some of the assholes from earlier. Orochimaru isn’t immediately visible, though she’s not sure whether that’s a good thing or a bad one.

Mixed blessing, Kushina tells herself, and pushes to her feet. One step, unsteady and wavering, and she grits her teeth, forcing her legs to hold her up when all they want to do is buckle. Another tremor runs through her, muscles spasming and almost driving her to her knees, but she staggers and then forces herself to straighten.

Naruto, she thinks, and pushes forward.

“Hey,” a gruff voice barks, and she stops, looking around. Someone close, but—

“Hey,” the voice repeats, miffed, and there's a sharp bark. Kushina turns, sweeping a look over the surrounding area.

A small brown pug is watching her warily, seven other dogs of various sizes grouped behind him. In the midst of them is Sakumo, unconscious, which given what just happened probably means they're allies rather than enemies.

“Something I can help you with?” Kushina asks a little warily, studying the pack. Konoha hitai-ate, she realizes belatedly, and capes. It’s cute, but unless something has changed it’s definitely not Inuzuka standard. Inuzuka ninken can’t talk, either, which means that these are summons.
The pug studies her for a moment, then turns to the massive black bulldog sitting with his paws braced on Sakumo's back. There's a moment of wordless communication, and then the pug asks, “You going to attack Boss again?"

Another muscle tremor shakes through her, and Kushina grits her teeth to ride it out, sinking to one knee. A breath to steady herself, and she tries to think back, tries to remember what just happened. She can remember lightning, and fire, a Konoha flak jacket and a furious snarl, but everything else is scattered. “The seal broke,” she tells the pug, instead of asking who he means. “The only people I'm going to attack are the assholes who put it on me.”

That gets her a sound like a bark of laughter, gruffly amused. “Boss’ll be happy to hear that once he gets done with things.”

*Things* leaves a lot of options, given the battle taking place further into the canyon. There's no one close that Kushina recognizes, but she closes her eyes and digs her fingers into the seal that's still splayed across her throat. A grimace, a moment of concentration, and she summons what bits of chakra leak through the weave of it. It's swallowing her power right now, draining her even though the mental control array is broken, and she isn’t a jinchuuriki anymore; she doesn’t have enough to overload it. But…

A touch of finesse, a sharp tug, a surge of effort, and Kushina tears the whole thing out by its roots.

The flood of her chakra returning is a dizzying rush, but with it comes something else entirely.

“The Kyuubi!” she cries, staggering to her feet. He’s awake and raging, thrashing against loosened chains, and Kushina knows just how strong he can be when he’s angry. Half of his chakra died with Minato, but Naruto—

Naruto is his jailor now. Naruto is a *child*, and Kushina has to help him.

There's a quick flurry of voices behind her, and then the pug is bounding past her ankle. “This way,” he orders. “Boss went there, too. I’ll bring you to him.”

Kushina doesn’t waste time telling the summons that right now, she could find her way to the source of that chakra blindfolded and half-dead of blood loss. She knows the Kyuubi’s power better than anyone but Mito, after all, knows his rage and his cunning. Forcing herself forward, she stumbles into a run, ignoring the lingering ache. Kumo nin have always been fond of Raiton jutsus, after all, and she’s fought them before. This isn’t any different. Given enough time, the pain will fade. It always does.

It’s so stupid, though, she thinks, dodging an auburn-haired woman directing a wave of lava at a woman with blue hair. She’s so stupid. There was supposed to be time for her counter-seal to work, travel time and preparation time, but she didn’t expect them to be dropped right into a battle like this. How close to where they were being held does this have to be? The seal she created only needed an hour to start working, if even that. How the hell was she supposed to know that the fight was apparently happening right outside their door?

Ahead of her, the pug disappears over the lip of an incline, and Kushina bounds after him, skidding across loose rocks as she slides towards the river at the bottom. The Kyuubi’s chakra is to their left, around an outcropping of stone, and Kushina hits the riverbank at a run, outpacing the pug in an instant. She leaps the rocks in one hard bound, touching down lightly on the other side, and—

Her *son*. 
He looks like Minato, she thinks in that one frozen moment. Blond hair, a tendency to tan, the way his hair falls in an uncontrollable mess around his face. Kushina takes a step towards him, hardly able to breath, and reaches out—

“You're not going to be able to save them,” a quiet voice behind her says.

Kushina spins, grabbing a kunai automatically, but it practically slips from nerveless fingers as she realizes who’s standing behind her.

“You,” she snarls, sharp and vicious. It’s not the same mask, and he has shorter hair, but he’s familiar enough for her to know. The masked man who attacked them that night is right in front of her, wearing the familiar black cloak with red clouds and carrying an Uchiha gunbai as if it weighs nothing.

Behind her, the Kyuubi’s chakra flare and thrashes, caught within the fragile confines of her son’s body, and Kushina's breath catches in her throat with the force of the unwelcome memory.

Kisame gives a low chuckle from the man’s left. There’s a massive sword slung across his back, and he’s holding a terrifyingly familiar figure by the throat. Kakashi casts her a desperate glance, trying to wriggle out of Kisame’s hold even when the former Kiri nin is hanging onto both of his wrists and his throat. He looks older, almost her age now, but he’s still Kakashi.

“Let him go!” she snarls, slamming her chakra into golden links, and her Chains shimmer into being around her. They surge forward in a devastating rush, the air shimmering with power, and just for a moment Kushina allows herself to think it will work, to hope.

The masked man ghosts right through them, the way he did before, and Kisame leaps out of the way. He lands lightly, then drags Kakashi forward, grabs his chin on one big hand, and jerks his head around to break his neck with one vicious twist. Kushina lunges, a cry of desperate fury caught in her throat, ducks under the arc of the masked man’s gunbai—

With a puff of smoke, Kakashi vanishes.

A clone. A damned clone, Kushina thinks, and the horror-rage-hurt that courses through her like a wildfire is enough to bleed viciousness into her snarl, into the kunai she drives towards Kisame’s throat. He jerks back, sword practically leaping into his hand as he blocks her next strike, but instead of pushing forward he steps away, lets the masked man slide in to take his place.

“Kisame,” the masked man says, and Kushina can see his Sharingan eye begin to spin, slow and hypnotic. “Deal with the traitor.”

Kisame laughs, low and rumbling, and offers a cheeky salute. “Consider the snake dead and gone,” he promises, leaping up the bank and disappearing over the edge.

Kushina feels a pang, halfway between guilt and regret, because Orochimaru is the reason she had enough warning to craft a counter-seal. She’s not about to go after Kisame, though. She can't. Naruto is here, and the masked man is a greater threat than the swordsman.

“Tearing my family apart once wasn’t enough for you?” she hisses, and her grip on the kunai is white-knuckled. “What the hell do you want with us, you goddamn bastard?”

The masked man snorts, quiet but mocking. “You’re collateral,” he says simply, winding the gunbai’s chain around his fist. “What I want is the Kyuubi no Kitsune. Step aside and leave it to me and I won’t care what you do.”
“That’s a lie! You didn’t have to turn the Kyuubi on Konoha! You didn’t have to threaten Naruto and try to kill Minato! I was the one you wanted, so you should have focused on me!”

A pause, as if he’s weighing the accusation carefully. “Konoha is a den of lies and petty sins,” he says, and this time there’s an edge of anger in his deep voice. “The Kyuubi would have turned on the village eventually. I simply gave it more reason to do so.”

Kushina breathes out, ragged and furious. She was ANBU; she knows better than anyone what Konoha hides in its shadows. It’s not perfect and it never has been, but it’s been her village since the day Uzushio fell. All of her happiest memories are there, all the things she loves best of all, and she’s not dead, not a ghost, not some shade. She’s alive, and if the masked man was the one to pick her to bring back he just made the biggest mistake of his pathetic life.

“I’m going to kill you,” she growls, and her chakra is rising, bleeding golden into the air around her and making her hair swirl like it’s caught in a breeze. “You’re the reason Minato died. I’m going to kill you for that, and for the way you threatened Naruto, and for the way you turned my burden on my village!”

She lunges, teeth bared, kunai arcing towards his throat. Leaping back, he swings the battle-fan around to block, and her blade strikes with a clang of metal on petrified wood. With a snarl of frustration, Kushina drops, kicking out at his legs, but he flips over her, lashing out the moment his sandals touch the ground. Kushina gets her feet under herself, launches up and over his head even as she brings her hands together, and the river surges. Plumes of water rise, shifting and morphing into a whole host of dragons, and they crash towards the masked man like a wave breaking. Kushina’s will keeps the water contained, keeps it thundering down on the masked man again and again while Naruto stays safe and dry, but she already knows it’s not enough.

Simultaneous full-force jutsus are practically impossible, the chakra required too great for even most jounin to manage, but Kushina is an Uzumaki; the impossible is just another challenge to be overcome, and she defeated this one a long time ago. Half of her attention still on the Suiton jutsu, she brings her hands together again, carefully shaping the seals. Wind is less familiar than water, but this is a simple technique, and one she’s used frequently. She lets it build, thinks of her timing, and moves.

In an instant, the water arcs back towards the river, and Kushina spins. A hard leap forward, right to where the masked man is just emerging from thin air, and she slams a punch into his side. The knife-edged wind wrapped around her fist cuts deep in the half-second before he leaps back, but Kushina follows, fists swinging. Left, left again, a hard punch from the right, a roundhouse kick, and none of them connect a second time, but she’s pushing the bastard back towards the slope, away from her son, and that’s all she cares about.

With a whirl, the man turns and slides out of her path, bringing his gunbai up like a shield and then throwing it out like a weapon the moment her blow connects. Kushina dodges around, chakra keeping her feet steady as she slides across the earth, and with a jump and a hard twist she throws herself over his head, landing behind him and lunging. He disappears completely, and in the same moment a flight of shuriken are launched out of the warping spiral of air that whisks him away.

With a curse, Kushina rapidly retreats, deflecting one blade with her kunai and letting the rest bury themselves in the ground around her. She catches the one she blocked as it rebounds, slams her chakra into it and doesn’t bother to watch as the seal carves itself into the metal. Sloppy, her teacher in Uzushio would have said—always better to draw a seal than to simply picture it and create it, because no human mind is flawless—but Kushina doesn’t have time for precision. She can remember Minato’s fight with the masked man, what she managed to see of it. He’s too fast, too
clever, entirely unpredictable.

It’s a good thing Kushina is more cunning than her husband ever managed to be.

The moment the air starts to warp, she turns, the shuriken leaving her fingers in a blur of black metal. She follows it, summoning a wind, and hopes that between herself and the jutsu the shuriken will go unnoticed. The masked man ducks out of the way, but doesn’t try to catch it, and Kushina laughs viciously, whirling in and stabbing upwards towards his chin. He hops back, gunbai swinging around with enough force to break bones, but Kushina vaults over it, kicks out at his kneecap, and then ducks the loops of chain that follows.

One hand on it, coated with chakra to negate the force as it moves, and Kushina drags the chain down, gets a foot on its length and pins it to the ground, driving her kunai through the links. The masked man snarls, pulling, but before he can rip it free Kushina throws herself at him, uncaring that she’s bare-handed now. A hard punch in the ribs, right where she grazed him earlier, and while he’s trying to retreat she snarls and spins, using the force of it to drive a roundhouse kick into his gut.

It’s with a vicious feeling of success that Kushina watches him tumble across the ground.

She gets her feet under herself, pushes up straight, and she’s breathing hard but not tired at all. The muscle spasms are gone, buried under the thunder of her heartbeat, and this feels like redemption for the night Naruto was born. She couldn’t help then, not against the masked man, and she couldn’t seal the Kyuubi by herself, sparing Minato. Now, though, she’s not half-dead from having the bijuu extracted, not weakened by childbirth. She’s Uzumaki Kushina, jounin of Konoha, mother and fighter, and no one is ever going to touch her family again.

Leaning down, she pulls two more shuriken from the dirt, smooths her thumb over them like all she’s doing is wiping the dirt off, and covers the flare of her chakra as she inscribes the seals by summoning her Chains.

Slowly, the masked man pushes to his feet. There’s blood darkening his cloak, a wet patch that’s growing steadily, and he presses a hand over it as he eyes her Chains. “You tried to use those once,” he says mockingly, “and look where they got you. Are you so eager to try again?”

Kushina bares her teeth at him. “Try me, asshole. I’ll show you just what an Uzumaki can do!”

A low laugh, derisive and taunting. “I’ve fought an Uzumaki before. I fought your brother, and sent him running with his tail between his legs.”

*Her brother.* Kushina's breath catches in her throat and she twitches, wanting to look behind her, to glance at the other figure she overlooked in favor of her son. Is that him? Is that the rogue Uzumaki they brought her back to face?

“However,” she manages, though the words are hard to force out, “I don’t think that’s quite what happened, you know.”

The one visible eye narrows. “Believe what you want,” he tells her, sharp and cold. With a flick of his wrist he unbolts the cuff holding the gunbai’s chain in place and lets it fall. “I’m through wasting time with you. Move, or I will move you.”

Kushina laughs outright at that, vicious and all but vibrating with angry tension. She hefts the shuriken in her hand, listening to them clink, and grins at the masked man in the way that used to make even Minato falter. “Not even in your dreams, bastard.”

“You have no idea what I dream,” the masked man growls, and a hail of kunai launch themselves
out of the warping air, headed right for her.

He smells stale air and stagnant water, wet stone dripping in incessant rhythm into the pool below, and opens his eyes to the sight of a prison he’d thought himself well rid of.

This isn’t like the time Kurama went looking for Matatabi’s chakra and followed it right to Yugito. Then the door of the cage stood open, the seal torn right down the center, and Kurama had stepped out the way he had when Naruto had finally befriended him.

Now Kurama is on the other side of the bars that are still sealed tight, staring at the huge, hulking form of his past self.

Red eyes are narrowed, assessing, but Kurama gives them a single look and heads for the tiny figure just pulling himself upright. “Naruto, you okay?” he asks, picking the little boy up.

“Kurama-nii!” Naruto throws his arms around his neck, squeezing tightly, and says, “I’m lost, Kurama-nii! I don’t want to be here but I don’t know how to get back!”

He’s fine. He’s fine. Kurama repeats that to himself, gently rubbing a hand over Naruto’s back, and gives his former self a dark glare over the boy’s shoulder. “You’re okay, kit. I found you. I’ll always find you. And it’s not your fault that this asshole dragged you here.”

“Kurama-nii?” Naruto lifts his head, staring at Kurama quizzically, and then cranes his head around. There’s a low, rumbling laugh, full of a malice that makes Kurama’s head spin, and the Kyuubi rises slowly to his feet. “He means me,” the bijuu growls, stepping forward out of the shadows of his prison and dipping his head. His jaws loll open, showing every last tooth, and he grins when Naruto squeaks and burrows tighter into Kurama’s arms.

“Back off,” Kurama warns darkly, putting his own growl into the words.

Red eyes shift to stare at him, narrowing cautiously. “You,” the Kyuubi says. “Another Uzumaki, come to seal me away for good? Are you the one who inherited the other half of my chakra?”

The question pulls Kurama up short, surprise and then incredulity flooding him. All of his siblings recognized him—even Shukaku, half-crazy and in the middle of a temper tantrum, managed to recognize him—but his old self just…doesn’t?

It’s the most hilarious joke Kurama has ever heard, and he’s the punchline.

Damn you to hell and back, Naruto, he thinks, and can’t make it anything but fond.

He laughs, not bothering to hide the amusement or the mockery that make it up in equal parts. “I don’t have half your chakra, bastard, I have all of it,” he retorts, and raises a hand. Power curls, tasting of malice and anger and fire in the wind, and Kurama smirks at his old self.

The Kyuubi rears back, indignation and fury growing on his face, and snarls like he wants to rip Kurama’s head right off his shoulders. The bars creak faintly as his chakra builds, but they don’t budge. “That power isn’t yours,” he growls. “You don’t have any right to it!”

Strange, now, to remember a hundred years of imprisonment, impotent and angry. A hundred years
pinned down, caged, used, all because the humans believed him a danger. Because a human stole his will and turned him into a weapon, turned him against Hashirama, and rather than simply free him Mito had torn him out of his physical form and trapped him in her soul like a firefly in a child’s jar.

Easy, now, to remember the anger that came with his bonds, the fury and helplessness it took Naruto at his brightest to finally lift.

A hundred years a prisoner, and Kurama is so recently come to the change that he can sometimes hardly believe it himself.

Taking a breath, he lets it out slowly, allows Naruto to slide down until the boy is braced on his hip instead of clinging to his neck like a monkey. “I think you need a change,” he says, as evenly as he’s able. All it takes is a touch of will, a familiar memory, and the air around them bleeds away the darkness. Trees spring up around them, great trunks that dwarf even the Kyuubi, and green branches spread out high above them. The seal remains, plastered to one of the closest trunks, but the bars fade, the rock melts, and in a moment they’re standing in the Sage’s clearing.

The sound of the Kyuubi’s indrawn breath is loud in the silence. “How—” he demands, rising to his full height, but there's bewilderment creeping in beneath the fury.

“My name is Kurama,” he says quietly. “It was given to me by the Sage of Six Paths a very long time ago. I think you remember the moment.”

“Impossible!” the Kyuubi snarls, lunging, but the seal crackles and yellow light forces him back. The roar that tears from his throat practically shakes the trees, making Naruto flinch, but Kurama squeezes him gently and doesn’t give ground.

“Very possible,” he says coolly, meeting furious crimson eyes. “Time travel’s really so hard to believe?”

There’s a long pause, and then a disgusted snort. “And you end up looking like that,” the Kyuubi sneers. “Pathetic. That little worm—is it yours?”

Kurama bristles, and here in their mental world the swirl of his chakra is fiery red, traced with black, and curls around him like a shroud as it rises. The Kyuubi stiffens at the feel of it, and that tears an ugly laugh from Kurama’s throat.

“Pathetic?” he repeats, and this time when he bares his teeth it’s definitely not a grin. “No. I have all of the chakra I need. I remember the Sage’s words to me. I know my power, and I know my goals. But you—you’re the pathetic one here, scrabbling for a foothold, trying to corrupt a child because you can’t pass the time any other way. You—”

“I want to be free!” the Kyuubi snarls, lunging at him again. Golden light forces him back, but he digs his claws into the earth and holds, looking down to level a fiery, furious stare right at Kurama. “You know. You understand. Six years since she pinned me with those seals, drove them right through my body and called them love. You’ve been corrupted, but—”

Kurama takes a breath and slams his chakra down like a hammer-blow.

The Kyuubi reels under the force of it, staggering back, and Kurama carefully sets Naruto down on the ground, steps past him until he’s right up at the edge of the seal. “Mito and Kushina chained me,” he agrees, low and dark. “I spent a hundred years wanting nothing more than to break free and destroy every last human. But hate got me nowhere. Every time I tried to get loose, they added more chains, and every time it got harder. I remember exactly how you’re feeling right now. But the only
way to break free is to accept help. Kushina didn’t want to be our jailor. Naruto didn’t either. It was decided for them. Kushina chose the same path as Mito, but Naruto is different. He’s special. Like the Sage."

The silence is disbelieving, incredulous, but Kurama doesn’t let his gaze waver. The Kyuubi stares back at him, still bristling, but he hasn’t tried the seal again. At this point that’s really all Kurama can ask for.

“Kurama-nii?” Naruto asks again, and a hand fists in the leg of Kurama’s pants.

Kurama leans down and picks him up, balancing the boy on his hip. He turns to his past self almost defiantly, putting a glower behind it, but—

The Kyuubi is staring at Naruto, rather than at him.

Naruto looks up at Kurama, then back at the Kyuubi. His fingers find Kurama’s shirt, but he keeps his gaze locked on the fox, and asks with only a faint thread of wariness, “Kurama-nii said somebody bad made you attack Konoha. Is that true?”

For a moment Kurama thinks he’ll have to prod the Kyuubi into answering, but instead he lowers his head, and even though his teeth are still slightly bared he’s making no move to lunge at them again. “It is. An Uchiha stole my free will and turned me into a damned puppet for the second time. And like before, he’s not the one who took the blame, I was. Because I’m the monster, and I will never be anything else, little worm. Your pet version over there might have gone soft, but I never will.”

Kurama rolls his eyes. He doesn’t even have to spare a glance at Naruto’s face to know that he’s about to—

“Then I’m gonna be your friend!” Naruto declares firmly, and his grin is wide and bright. “And I’ll protect you so that doesn’t happen again, and when we’re friends you can meet all of my other friends and they’ll protect you too!”

“I—what?”

The Kyuubi sounds absolutely bewildered, and Kurama gives in to the urge to laugh, long and loud. He buries his face in Naruto’s spiky hair, shoulders shaking with the force of it, and hold the little boy tight.

If his cheeks are just the littlest bit damp, if his eyes are slightly wet, well.

Just this once, Kurama thinks he can be forgiven.
NO UPDATE NEXT WEDNESDAY OR THE WEEK AFTER. I’m moving internationally and probably won't have time for any writing until we’re settled in, unfortunately. Thanks for your patience with me!

Also! Some people have asked how many chapters reverse will be, and I don’t have an exact outline, but probably around 75-80 chapters, as far as I can predict. Thanks so much for sticking with me! I really, truly appreciate all the wonderful support you give. It makes writing this story a blast. ^_^

[compunction / kənˈpəNG(k)SH(ə)n /, a feeling of uneasiness or anxiety of the conscience caused by regret for doing wrong or causing pain; contrition; remorse; any uneasiness or hesitation about the rightness of an action. From Old French componction, from ecclesiastical Latin compunctio(n-), from Latin compungere “prick sharply”, from com- (expressing intensive force) + pungere “to prick.”.]

Things are not quite going to plan.

Orochimaru is less than pleased with the current state of things. Jiraiya alone is a headache and a half, but facing him as well as Tsunade? While Orochimaru might have moments where his logic is less than stellar, he’s fully aware that going head-to-head with Tsunade is on par with trying to swim against an avalanche.

“Perhaps we can discuss this like—” a boulder just misses clipping his head as he ducks. “Like adults!”

Tsunade scoffs, loud and derisive, and straightens up, cracking her knuckles. “You’ve been doing too much talking, Orochimaru. That was always your problem, wasn’t it? Too many plans, too many plots, and not one of them ever works out the way you want it to.”

Indignation is a hot-sharp burst in his chest, and Orochimaru has to grit his teeth against it. The greater part of the offense, he knows, comes from that fact that Tsunade is right.

Tsunade is always right, and he’d forgotten how much he hated it.

Hissing, he straightens, and the sharp edge of his temper gets the better of him. “Why are you even here?” he challenges, and it’s the most tempting thing in the world, the idea of calling Manda, letting the snake deal with Tsunade while he plays on Jiraiya's overdeveloped sense of guilt to win a bout between them. If he calls a summons, though, Jiraiya and Tsunade will call theirs. Manda is a vicious bastard, but even he can’t face Katsuyu and Gamabunta at the same time.

Tsunade’s eyes narrow, and despite her fear of blood Orochimaru can see the threat in them. “What was that?” she asks, far too sweet to be anything but deadly.
“Ooooh, teme,” Jiraiya heckles cheerfully from the rock where he’s seated, safely out of range of their battle. “You're going to get your ass kicked by a girl.”

“Shut up, idiot,” Orochimaru snaps.

“What he said,” Tsunade agrees, glaring pointedly. “Or you're going to be next.”

Jiraiya raises his hands in surrender, but it would be a lot more convincing if he weren’t laughing. Rolling his eyes, Orochimaru curls his fingers a little more tightly around Kusanagi’s hilt, a good portion of his attention on Tsunade. He’s fairly certain that Jiraiya won’t attack him from behind unless Tsunade is in real danger of losing, and beyond that, Tsunade is the more dangerous one regardless. Jiraiya is a puppet of his conscience; Tsunade will do absolutely anything to win if she feels she must.

She’s watching him right now, narrow and assessing, hardly paying attention to the battle around the curve of the road. Orochimaru can feel the anger sparking down his spine. Here and now she’s on her way back to Konoha, but she was the one to leave it, to vanish in the middle of the night like a criminal about to be found guilty. When he returned from training those brats in Ame, Jiraiya had been devastated.

Perhaps he isn’t one to wear his heart upon his sleeve, but Orochimaru was little better.

“Why,” he demands, and the remembered anger leeches venom into the words. “Why return now, Tsunade? Why not keep running like a coward with your ghosts at your heels? That was a much better look for you than this halfhearted resolve.”

Tsunade’s mouth pulls into a tight line as she tips her chin up. “What would you know about bravery, Orochimaru?” she snaps, and there's her own dose of poison in the words. “Experimenting on children, fleeing the village, joining a mercenary group looking to take over the world? You don’t get to lay accusations of cowardice at my door, you bastard. At least I still have some connection to reality.” A breath, and the steadiness in her eyes should be its own warning. “Tell me, Orochimaru. What do you think Nawaki would say if he saw you now? His beloved teacher, trying to destroy Konoha? He’d be heartbroken.”

Orochimaru hisses with fury, throws himself forward with Kusanagi leading. Kenjutsu is easy, second nature after all this time, but the blow feels sloppy and out of control, and Tsunade sidesteps it easily. She throws a punch, fast and devastating, and Orochimaru slides beneath it with a boneless twist, whirling to kick her back. She's not as out of practice as he expected, though, moves faster than he’d thought she would, and she catches his ankle in one hand, drags him forward and right into her fist.

If Orochimaru didn’t move with the blow, if he were an ounce less practiced at taking her hits, it would have cracked his skull. As it is, he recoils instantly, and though his jaw aches he’s fairly certain nothing is broken.

It does nothing to damn the rising tide of utter rage, though.

“Don’t you dare,” he snarls, slashing down at Tsunade's hand to make her release him. “Don’t you dare use him against me!”

There is, surprisingly, something close to sympathy in Tsunade's eyes as she lets him go, watches him leap back to put space between them. “When Jiraiya told me what you’d done, that was all I could think of,” she says, and it’s more tired than it is cruel. “And then I wondered how well a child
with Mokuton would have survived the trap that killed him.” She holds his gaze, and the grief in her eyes is old, but still strong. “You can't tell me it was a coincidence that you chose our grandfather’s ability to experiment with, Orochimaru. If Nawaki had been able to awaken it—"

“He wasn’t,” Orochimaru answers, the words sharp on his tongue, and knows he’s betraying far more than he cares to, but he can't help it. Just for a moment, the briefest of seconds, he wavers. Tsunade will see it, but—

There are three vials waiting in his lab at the base. Three vials Kabuto stole from midnight graveyards and delivered into his hands. No one but Orochimaru needs to know that.

“I know.” It’s soft and sad, and so is Tsunade's smile. “I was so caught up in grieving for him, and then in pushing forward and leaving my grief behind, that I forgot his jounin sensei would be grieving as well. That was my mistake, Orochimaru.”

His fingers are too tight on Kusanagi’s hilt; if he has to swing it, he won't have enough mobility. Even so, he can't quite bring himself to loosen his grip. Tsunade knows all of his weak points, because she herself shares many of them, and Orochimaru should have remembered that before he sought her out to fight.

“Humans are such—fragile beings,” he manages, and the words are more to himself than Tsunade. He remembers it even when he doesn’t want to, Nawaki slipping away from his hand and running ahead, and then—

Light, and fire, and a crystal on a chain that clattered at his feet.

That was the start. The corpse, unrecognizable, of a child he once knew.

*What does it matter?* he had asked when Tsunade had tried to push past him in the village, rushing to see Nawaki, and he’d meant it all too fiercely. *She won't be able to recognize the body.*

Jiraiya had shouted at him for those words, but Orochimaru had spent the entire month in a haze, and can hardly remember now what the oaf had said. But—it was a start, a foot along a new path, an idea that had taken root and festered.

But there's no reason to tell Tsunade that she’s right.

Her crooked smile seems to say that she knows she is regardless, though there's nothing of victory in it. Sadness, mostly, and a grim sort of acknowledgement. Tsunade takes a step forward, her fists lowering, her stance easing. Orochimaru takes a step back, not quite able to help himself, and the expression she’s wearing softens further.

“Orochimaru—” she starts, and Orochimaru can recognize that start of a plea for reform when he hears one. He snarls, Kusanagi coming up—

“Hey,” a darkly cheerful voice says from behind him, and Orochimaru moves on instinct as Tsunade's eyes widen. Leaping forward, he almost knocks her over and back as he spins, Kusanagi deflecting a bone-jarring slash to one side.

“Kisame,” he says narrowly, even as he puts more space between them. “Shouldn’t you be playing the leader's faithful little dog?”

Kisame's grin shows too many teeth for comfort. “I don’t like dogs much,” he admits easily. “Too yappy. They never seem to like me, either. But snakes, now—those I like. Their skins especially.”
There's no proof, Orochimaru reminds himself. None at all of his wrongdoing, though he should have expected the suspicion. Kushina and Sakumo must have managed to stage an escape, and it's better timing than he could have hoped for.

“If you’re threatening me,” he retorts, “let me remind you that no one else has the full version of Edo Tensei, and your cause suffers if I leave.”

Kisame hums thoughtfully, even as the bandages on Samehada start to unwind themselves. “Well,” he says easily. “I’d probably take you at your word, but our leader doesn’t like to be lied to so much. I can’t say I appreciate it either, you know? Killing traitors is something I’m good at, though.”

That grin is dangerous, a clear threat, and Orochimaru can all but feel his plans crumbling as he curses inwardly. Madara’s suspicions were supposed to turn on Kushina—she’s the fuinjutsu master here. And it sounded as though he had experience with her; there’s no cause for him to immediately turn on Orochimaru, unless he’s suspected something from the very beginning.

Those vials in his lab—if Orochimaru loses this chance, he might never find anyone capable of using the Rinnegan again, and they’ll be doomed to stay vials. Orochimaru can’t accept that.

Just for a moment, Orochimaru curses his propensity for complicated plots; had he known this was going to be the outcome, he would have substituted the vials in halfway through the process the first time around and disappeared with the revived bodies. Madara can rot for all he cares. There’s no attachment to the ideal of a perfect world in Orochimaru, just a desire to learn, to advance.

(To return, though he’s never admitted it, even to himself.)

“Traitors?” Jiraiya asks suddenly, and there’s a thump as his geta hit the ground. Orochimaru doesn’t quite dare take his eyes off Kisame, but he’d glare if he could. His old teammate butting in is just about the last thing he needs right now. “What are you saying?”

Kisame’s grin stretches further, full of bloody mirth. “Oh? So not a traitor for your sakes. I had to admit I was wondering. Seems like the perfect cover, fleeing Konoha and ending up with us. Getting the White Fang and Red Habanero resurrected would have been a nice touch.”

Jiraiya sucks in a breath, sharp and obvious. “Resurrected?” he chokes.

Tsunade doesn’t speak, doesn’t move. Her eyes are wide, lips parted in surprise, and Orochimaru can practically feel the moment that comprehension clicks over in her mind.

This is just about the last thing Orochimaru needs, the two of them and Kisame on top of it. With a low hiss, he turns Kusanagi in his hand, pushes forward with a sweep of the blade aimed to decapitate. Kisame laughs even as he ducks underneath it, Samehada whirling to meet the next blow. All too familiar with Kisame’s hungry sword, Orochimaru aborts the swing, twisting bonelessly around the huge man and kicking out at his kneecaps. Kisame stumbles, and with a surge of vicious victory Orochimaru stabs Kusanagi straight down at his neck.

With a twist and a sharp turn, too fast for a man of his size, Kisame gets his feet under him and spins to meet it, still grinning. “Come on,” he mocks. “Aren’t you going to use a jutsu? I’ve heard you know more of them than anyone else alive.”

Orochimaru knows a goad when he hears it, and he snarls wordlessly, not about to let the man feed off his chakra. “A jutsu would be too dignified a death for a dog like you,” he retorts. “You should be put down with a blade, like any rabid animal. But then our leader would be sad, wouldn’t he? Loyal pets are so hard to find, and I wouldn’t want him disappointed in me.”
With a low chuckle, Kisame shakes the last of the bandages away from Samehada and takes a step closer, his amusement only growing as Orochimaru retreats towards the full battle down the road. “Still playing like you’re innocent, Orochimaru? He’s the one who gave me the order. There’s no mercy for traitors here.”

Damn. Orochimaru breathes, mind working furiously. He can’t just cut and run, which would be his first choice of action. But there’s little chance of convincing Madara that he’s loyal without giving up what he’s been working towards, and that’s also unacceptable.

*Between a shark and a whirlpool, aren’t I?* Orochimaru thinks, viciously amused. He lunges to the side to avoid another blow by Samehada, feels cloth give the same way his flesh would have had he been a moment slower. From behind them there’s a shout, doubtlessly Jiraiya with his blasted nobility, but Orochimaru can’t spare him even a moment of attention. He whirs in, three sweeping slashes making Kisame pull up short and counter, but it buys enough time for Orochimaru to leap back, diving for the cover of the battle still raging in the pass. He’s seen Kisame fight before—if he stops moving for even a few moments, Kisame will summon water from the river, changing the battlefield to give himself an advantage. Or, if he’s particularly pressed, trapping Orochimaru with him in a Suiton dome, and forcing Orochimaru to fight entirely underwater.

Snakes might be largely amphibious, but Orochimaru isn’t all that optimistic about his chances in a situation like that.

Of course, he can’t be all that optimistic about his chances right now, either. A retreat towards the canyon’s mouth would have been better—the battlefield is crowded and hectic, too many powerful shinobi fighting in close quarters—but Jiraiya and Tsunade would have followed more quickly then, and been a complication. Like this, Orochimaru might be able to—

Samehada swings, and at the same moment roots with a will of their own grab Orochimaru’s ankles.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a flash of long brown hair, a silver faceplate with a stylized leaf as Tenzō ducks away from one of the Paths, and the utter irony of being felled by his own creation almost makes Orochimaru want to laugh. There’s no time, however—Samehada is too close to dodge even if Orochimaru could manage to free himself in time to do it. He only just manages to turn, dropping his head and lifting an arm to cover his face, and then—

Pain. Orochimaru has never particularly wondered how it feels to be skinned, to have flesh shaved off by hungry scales and his chakra devoured in the same instant, but now he knows. A cry is wrenched up from his lungs, pain too great to keep it in, and hot blood is a sudden wet flood down his side. Orochimaru chokes on a breath, just manages to bring Kusanagi up to deflect the next swipe, but it’s a weak blow. His muscles are screaming, and he’s already growing dizzy from blood loss.

If he survives this, that experiment to augment his physiology and healing factor is going to be the very first thing on his to-do list.

Kisame chuckles, and Orochimaru brings his head up to glare at him, trying to ignore the agony in his arm and shoulder. The Kiri nin just grins at him, showing filed teeth. “You know, this is almost disappointing. I expected more from you, Orochimaru. Maybe Konoha just inflated your reputation to make themselves look better, huh?”

Orochimaru snarls in his face, furious at the slight. Kisame is quite possibly the worst opponent he could face, though; jutsus are useless against him, and as much as it rankles he’s the superior swordsman. Orochimaru is fast and cunning and can usually win at hand to hand, but Kisame outweighs him by quite a bit, and he has the constitution of a jinchuuriki. Orochimaru’s taijutsu isn’t
quite strong enough to pierce his hide. That would require a Maito, very likely, and as good as Orochimaru is he’s certainly not on that clan’s level.

His head is spinning, and his vision is growing dark around the edges. Orochimaru doesn’t have much time if he’s going to get away, get back to base and…do something. Anything.

He wrenches at the roots holding his feet, but there’s no give. Mokuton gives them a strength normal wood doesn’t have, and Orochimaru would laugh at the bitter irony here if he could spare the breath. Instead, he turns his sword, makes the clear decision to leave an opening as he sweeps the blade down. No fool, Kisame takes it, and the feeling of Samehada shaving through flesh drags a scream from Orochimaru’s throat even as Kusanagi’s blade cuts through the roots. He staggers back the moment he’s free, feeling more sticky wetness flood down his back and side, and a single step is enough to drive him to his knees.

Pure desperation has him bringing his hands together, shaping signs around the hilt of his sword, and Samehada drinks the chakra even as he calls it, but there’s some left. Enough, just enough, and Orochimaru hisses out the name. No room for weakening, so he doesn’t even try to shape it without words or seals regardless of his mastery.

The flood of white snakes that pours from his sleeves is smaller than it should be, but even a handful have enough poison to kill a normal man. Against anyone else it would be enough, but Kisame isn’t normal, and these are summons with physical bodies comprised mostly of chakra; they won’t last long against him. Still, the Kiri nin leaps back with a curse, and Orochimaru staggers to his feet, ignoring the blood that’s scattering over the ground in thick streams. Away is his only thought, but there are no allies here, only enemies. Not one person on this battlefield will even attempt to lend him aid, and in one stuttering heartbeat Orochimaru finds that he—

Regrets.

The realization is enough to make him want to laugh.

No time for a medical jutsu, no strength left for shunshin, no way to distract Kisame long enough to summon a clone and misdirect. For the first time in very many years, Orochimaru is facing a fight that he isn’t prepared for, that he’s at a disadvantage in, and which he has very little chance of winning. Jiraiya and Tsunade might save him, if they can reach him in time, but there are other enemies between them and they have no reason to rush to his side.

The ache in his chest is growing. Orochimaru thinks of days long past, of old potential that exists now as a regret rather than a promise of a bright future, and steels himself for Kisame’s next blow to be the last.

His head swims, and he staggers. Another jutsu leaves his fingers, scything wind that he already knows will be too weak to harm Kisame, and he can feel the moment Samehada swallows it down.

Blood trickles down his arm. Kusanagi’s hilt is growing wet with it, slippery, and his grip is weakening. He can hear Kisame chuckling, low and amused, as footsteps near. There are spots of darkness blooming in his sight, spreading rapidly, and he wonders how much blood he’s lost already.

Too much, if the haziness overtaking him is anything to go by.

It’s the blood loss that makes him try for a Katon jutsu, always his weakest, but against Kisame, in this situation, Orochimaru can’t think of anything else. He shoves his chakra into it, a jutsu learned watching Uchiha children attempt it again and again, and his fingers are clumsy around the signs, sloppy as he pours chakra into the spark of it without control.
And then—

A hand, rough and callused, closes over his, presses against his fingers in the other half of the necessary sign. Someone else’s chakra curls around his own, adds power and a finesse he’s never had with fire jutsus, and heat crackles over his shoulder. Kisame curses, reeling back from the blaze even as Samehada swallows the fire, and in the same moment arms curl around Orochimaru’s waist, hauling him up over a broad shoulder. He almost faceplants in messy white hair that’s scattered with sandy earth and smells of autumn leaves, and chakra surges.

With a hard leap and a whirlwind of leaves, they’re moving, leaving the battlefield behind. Up to the top of the cliff, then past it in a blur, and when Orochimaru’s feet hit the earth again there’s winter-sparse grass beneath him.

“Orochimaru,” Sakumo says, sharp and insistent, and Orochimaru realizes belatedly that this isn’t the first time he’s said it. There’s a hand on his cheek that he doesn’t remember being placed there, wide grey eyes in front of him, and he can’t help but laugh even as his vision greys out and slowly, slowly fades back in.

“Such a fool,” he rasps, and has to close his eyes to keep the dizziness at bay. “Haven’t you learned your lesson about saving ungrateful comrades yet?”

There’s a shaky breath, not quite a sigh or a laugh but certainly close, and Sakumo tips Orochimaru forward to lean against his chest as he sinks down to his knees, tugging tattered cloth away. Orochimaru hisses at the faint scrape, at the way hot blood cools in the winter air, but can’t manage a protest, even when Sakumo gathers his hair up and pulls the blood-soaked strands out of the wounds. Parts of it are dramatically shorter, sheared off by Samehada’s scales, and it rouses a flicker of anger that Orochimaru doesn’t quite expect.

“You know what they say about old dogs,” Sakumo tells him, but he sounds distracted, a grim thread to his tone beneath the forced lightness. “This looks…bad.”

That’s quite the understatement, Orochimaru is sure. He most definitely needs to look into that accelerated healing as soon as possible, assuming he has the chance.

But, in case he doesn’t…

He curls his fingers around Sakumo's wrist, belatedly realizing Kusanagi it gone, that he must have dropped it when he started his last jutsu. “There’s a clearing,” he tells Sakumo, slowly enough to be sure the words will sort themselves out on his tongue instead of tangling the way they want to. “North of here, maybe five minutes running. Nagato is there, unprotected, and as long as he’s controlling the Paths he won’t be able to fight back without breaking his hold on them. Take him far enough away and he’ll lose control of the resurrected bodies.”

Sakumo hesitates. Orochimaru can see it in his face, his eyes, and he has to laugh, just the faintest edge of mocking in it. “Go, fool,” he insists, holding Sakumo's gaze. “Incapacitate one of their most powerful members and Konoha will welcome you back with open arms.”

It is, perhaps, the thought of Tsunade’s words that makes him say it, the memory of Nawaki so close. What do you think Nawaki would say if he saw you now? His beloved teacher, trying to destroy Konoha? He’d be heartbroken.

The loss he feels, even as a faded memory, is still a bitter, burning thing. Better forgotten, but he’s never quite managed that as fully as he would like.
Hearts are a hard thing to carve out, even with almost thirty years of practice.

Sakumo's hands are wet with Orochimaru’s own blood, tacky against his skin as Sakumo touches his cheek, studies him with eyes full of something Orochimaru can't begin to name. A breath, a nod, and Sakumo leans away.

“All right,” he says, determination in his expression. And then—

An arm around Orochimaru’s waist again, safely below the gaping wounds. Orochimaru hisses in pain as he’s carefully pulled upright, and when his knees buckle under his own weight Sakumo lifts him bodily into his arms, one hand on Orochimaru’s nape to steady him against his shoulder.

“I get the feeling,” Sakumo says with weary humor, “that if I leave you here, your chances of surviving this are even worse than if I move you. Can you concentrate enough to stop the bleeding?”

Orochimaru isn’t sure he can—his abilities aren’t nearly on par with Tsunade’s or even Kabuto’s, more useful for slow, deliberate cuts and tiny adjustments at the genetic level than anything immediate. But it’s also clear he has no choice; Sakumo isn’t going to leave him behind, no matter how stupid the decision is.

It’s only belatedly that Orochimaru remembers just how well Jiraiya and Sakumo used to get along.

“Past that oak,” is all he says, closing his eyes and drawing up the dregs of his chakra, all the last little bits that Samehada didn’t devour. “That’s Nagato’s direction.”

Sakumo leaps forward into a run, careful enough that his steps don’t jar, and Orochimaru lets the outside world fade, focusing on his wounds.

Even if he doesn’t come out of this as whole as he’d prefer, he’ll make sure that Akatsuki doesn’t, either.

One shuriken left to plant.

One left, Kushina tells herself, breathing hard and nursing a wide, blistering burn across her left arm. The masked man is still favoring his side as blood soaks his robe, but he’s fast and merciless and can phase through her Chains in a way that really, really pisses her off. Placing the last seal requires an opening, and Kushina hasn’t managed to create one yet.

Getting the chance to finally kick his ass is nice, but Kushina's son and brother are right behind her, right there, and she can't even look at them with the masked man harrying her.

With a warping spiral, the man disappears, and Kushina spits a curse, turning in a tight circle. Mito's ability to sense malice would be really helpful right about now, as would her jinchuuriki healing, but there's no helping it. She just has to predict—

Her kunai slams into the blade of a katana in a spray of sparks, and she shoves the masked man away from Naruto's still form. “Don’t even think about it, bastard!”

The masked man growls right back, just as done with their bout, and ducks around her, ghosting through her next blow. Kushina ducks and rolls out of the sword’s reach, comes to her feet with a Water Bullet jutsu already bursting towards him, and feels a surge of irritation when it passes straight
through. She spins in a follow up blow, aiming for his throat, and the masked man blocks, blocks again, slips into intangibility and passes right through her. Quickly, Kushina dives sideways, familiar with the move already, flips off one hand and sends a Fuuton blade sweeping across the battlefield. Water pools beneath their feet, puddles and mud making the footing treacherous, but it gives her an advantage too. She drags the liquid up, dragon mouth opening to eat her opponent whole, and when he passes through it she lunges to meet him as he turns solid again.

“Last chance to surrender,” he growls at her, the blade of his katana forcing her kunai back.

Kushina laughs in his face, snaps her head forward and headbutts him hard enough that she actually hears his mask crack under the force of it, feels the impact against his nose and hopes like hell she managed to break it. “That was more impressive ten minutes ago,” she taunts, even as he goes reeling back with a curse. There’s a trickle of blood just sliding out from under the mask, enough to make her grin viciously, and—

“Hey, asshole,” a male voice snaps, and there’s a whirl of chakra that’s both familiar and foreign. A blur of red hair and dark skin darts past her, and she just manages to catch sight of an orb of spinning chakra that looks almost like Minato's Rasengan, only made of black and deep violet light. It hurtles at the masked man only for a warp to steal it away, but the redheaded man doesn’t even pause. Winter sunlight flashes on dagger-tipped claws as he throws himself headlong at the masked man, who goes intangible at the last moment.

In the same second, he goes stiff, and cries out like something just hit him. Staggering sideways, he hits the ground hard, tangible again, but this time his cloak is in tatters and there’s more blood everywhere.

The redheaded man pulls up short, whirling around, and red eyes meet purple. Kushina stares at her own face on someone else, at hair the same shade as hers and a gaze full of clear wariness that shades to surprised relief, and knows exactly who it is.

By the vicious curl of the grin overtaking Kurama’s face, he recognizes her as well.

Kushina laughs before she can help it, the sound wild and reckless as it rings through the air, and she tosses the last shuriken up, catches it deftly and spins it around her fingers, and knows that at least part of her meaning comes across when Kurama’s gaze snaps back to the masked man.

“Look at you,” he taunts, and tiny orbs of black and purple chakra start to spin at the tips of his fingers. “Having a hard time here, aren’t you? What, one on one is too difficult for you?”

The masked man pulls himself to his feet, stripping off his Akatsuki cloak and the dark blue robe beneath. The right side of his body is already healing, deep gouges filling with strange white material that hardens into flesh, but his left side is bleeding and bruised. He hisses out a breath as he drags himself upright, but once he’s there he doesn’t waver. “You’re becoming a nuisance, Uzumaki. But no matter. I’ll take your bijuu as well, since you’re so close at hand.”

Bijuu? Kushina's breath catches in her throat, and she eyes the man who’s supposed to be her brother again. That familiar chakra says—

But, she thinks, bewildered, that’s not a bijuu’s chakra. It’s his. She knows the difference better than anyone.

Kurama snorts, dismissive and amused in the same moment. “Right,” he says. “Go ahead and try it. Let’s see how far you get.”
Kushina has to laugh, despite the suspicion that’s rising in her. She flips her kunai around in her hand, showy and eye-catching, and when the masked man glances at her she takes a step forward. “I kinda thought you had to catch someone to rip their bijuu out, you know?” she says, faux-thoughtful. “But you’re not really doing that great of a job.”

Kurama’s smile is all teeth, and all too familiar, even if it isn’t directed at her. “What she said.” His eyes dart to Kushina for the briefest of seconds, but it’s enough of a signal, and she twists her grip on the shuriken, subtly shifting until she’s able to see where she needs to drop it.

The masked man scoffs, then makes a gesture. The air twists, a spiral of fire erupting out of nothingness, and Kurama leaps forward, right through the blaze. In the same instant, Kushina lets the shuriken fly, covering the motion as she summons her Chains again. They surge right after Kurama as the masked man dodges him, stab through the bastard’s body as he phases, and then disappear as Kushina slams her hands together with a cry and a splash of blood.

A seal writes itself across the ground in deep red ink, spiraling out from the three shuriken she planted, and Kurama throws himself clear at the very last moment. With a cry, the masked man crashes down to land on his knees, one hand snapping up towards his eye, now plain black instead of twisted through with red.

“How’s it feel to have someone seal away your chakra, fucker?” Kushina pants, and success is heady on her tongue. “Should I slap a control seal on you while I’m at it?”

Kurama laughs, just as viciously satisfied, and Kushina meets his gaze across the seal, something very much like joy bubbling up in her chest. Red eyes stare back, appraising and assessing, and he nods to her just once, respectful and agreeing and amused all at once.

She has a **brother**, Kushina thinks gleefully. And it doesn’t matter that she’s fairly certain she knows just how he came to be, why the Kyuubi’s chakra curls around and through him, why he has her face. From the edge of the river there’s a cry of, “Kurama-nii!” and Naruto scrambles up the bank, throwing himself at Kurama without hesitation, and for Kushina that’s enough.

She’ll get her answers later. For now, she watches Kurama lean down and scoop Naruto up, dragging the little boy into his arms to hug him tightly, and that’s all she needs to know.
Chapter Notes

I sincerely apologize for the late chapter, but my father had a heart attack and I’ve been in a complete daze the last few days, to the point that I forgot Wednesday was even a thing that happened. This last month has been hellaciously stressful, but hopefully it mellows from here on out. I’ll do my damndest to keep from missing another update. Sorry again for the delay.

[rapacious / rəˈpæʃəs /, given to seizing for plunder or the satisfaction of greed.; inordinately greedy; predatory; extortionate; (of animals) subsisting by the capture of living prey; predacious. From Latin rapax, rapac-, from rapere “to snatch” + -ious.]

Hiashi has had far too much to drink, and he knows it all too well. He’s also lost the vast majority of his dignity, seated on the cold ground with his legs crossed under him and a sake bottle beside him. But, given the location and the circumstances, for once in his life he can’t be bothered to care.

“You’d be laughing at me right now, wouldn’t you?” he asks his brother’s grave.

There is, of course, no answer. There never has been, and Hiashi smiles humorlessly, picking up his sake bottle and lifting it in silent toast before he takes a swig. It burns going down, because it’s the truly awful stuff Tsume gave him on his birthday years ago, which he’s never had the stomach to break out before. The other two bottles are with him as well, ready to be opened, and Hiashi can’t quite decide if he wants to actually give himself alcohol poisoning or just didn’t want to leave two thirds of the set behind.

After all, he knows precisely how it feels to be the abandoned portion of a set.

“I thought,” he tells Hizashi conspiratorially, “about throwing the mission. Maybe guiding us on a different path, or pretending there were people after us and making Tsume and Shibi find a longer route.” Another swallow, and this one makes him grimace. Truly awful. He can’t understand how Tsume drinks this swill on a regular basis. “After all, there was no need for us to find the Raikage’s brother, the same way there was no need for him to kidnap my daughter and then demand my head for killing the kidnapper.”

The thought sits heavy and bitter in his gut, or maybe that’s the alcohol. He sets it aside, rubbing his hands over his face with a tired sigh, and looks at Hizashi’s grave, feeling just as tired and worn-down and full of grief as he did when they buried Hizashi.

“I hate you sometimes,” he confesses, and it aches in his chest like shattered ribs, but isn’t anywhere near as easily repaired. “There was no need to volunteer like that, you noble bastard. I could—you would have—”

Been fine.

It’s true. Without the Caged Bird seal, without the Branch House, Hizashi would have made Clan
Head as easily as breathing. He was always better with people, after all. Always kinder without trying.

He snorts, picking up the bottle again, and swallows another mouthful of the veritable paint thinner. “By all rights, I should have thrown the mission,” he tells his twin, grimly amused. “I wanted to. I wanted to so badly, Hizashi, you can't even imagine.”

All he can think of right now is Hizashi catching him, lowering him to the ground with gentle hands even as Hiashi lost consciousness. Lost consciousness so that Hizashi, his twin, could be sent to Kumo in his place, guaranteed to die. To die for the older brother who had hurt him, sent him away, sealed his son’s potential and his own potential and refused to bend.

Gods, but it’s so hard to look in a mirror these days. He sees Hizashi staring back at him instead of his own reflection, and it hurts.

“Why would you choose your fate like that?” he demands, and his voice breaks. He buries his face in his hands, sake dropping unheeded to spill and soak his robes, but he doesn’t care. He aches inside like he’s been hollowed out, even three years later, and he doesn’t think it will ever fade. Doesn’t think it should, because it’s his own fault this happened. His fault Hizashi felt the need to be the better brother one last time.

“Of all the times to overcome your hatred,” he whispers through his hands. “Why then?”

“Because all of us are stupid for love,” Tsume says, and Hiashi startles, raising his head to find his two teammates picking their way through the graveyard. “And despite what you may think, Hizashi loved you quite a lot, Hiashi.” Tsume is carrying a bouquet of red camellia and peonies, and she limps past Hiashi to lay them gently on the stone. Standing up, she almost overbalances, but Shibi catches her arm and Hiashi grabs her belt, and together they carefully help her sink down to sit.

“Should you even be out of the hospital?” Hiashi demands. “I thought they weren’t releasing you for another three days.”

Shibi makes a face that could probably be interpreted as longsuffering as he settles on Hiashi’s other side. “She escaped,” he says, but rather than belabor the point he picks up one of the bottles of sake, studies the label, and then gives Hiashi a pointed look.

“Tsume gave it to me,” Hiashi defends himself instantly. “I was saving it for a night I wanted to get spectacularly drunk.”

Tsume snorts a little, glancing up at the sun that’s still high above them. “Well, you managed to get halfway there,” she says with clear amusement, but a moment later she leans over, gently bumping Hiashi’s shoulder with her own. “Hey. You know we couldn’t have refused the mission without starting a war, right?”

Good humor draining away, Hiashi snorts, mouth pulling into a tight line. “The mission we failed anyway?” he reminds her, and doesn’t mean for his tone to be quite as biting as it is. Pulling back, he sighs, rubbing a hand over his unmarked forehead, and says warily, “Yes, I’m aware. The same way we couldn’t have refused to hand my brother over to those bastards without starting another war. Sometimes, Tsume, I wish that the Sandaime wanted peace at any cost a little less and the protection of Konoha’s citizens a little more.”

Her expression sobered, but Tsume doesn’t argue. Instead, it’s Shibi who says, “When only one party is trying to prevent a war, it is inevitable that they take the weaker position.”
Hiashi laughs, and it’s a bitter thing. “He died to save my life,” he says, and he’s just drunk enough
that when Tsume leans over to rest her head on his shoulder, he grips her fingers tightly in return.
“Not to save Konoha. Not to preserve the peace. Hizashi died saving me, saving Neji. And I can’t
even tell the boy his last words. I can’t, because it’s my fault Hizashi died.”

“He chose it,” Shibi says softly, and uncorks the second bottle. He offers the rescued one back to
Hiashi, who takes it gratefully, and with some reluctance sets the third in the hand Tsume waves at
him.

“He did,” Hiashi allows, and his voice cracks. He covers his face with a hand, hiding, like always,
but Tsume and Shibi don’t move away.

“Konoha shinobi helped save Bee,” Tsume points out after a long stretch of silence, her wild hair still
brushing Hiashi’s cheek. “In the end, it was a victory for our village. A is a bastard and a
warmonger, but he has no excuse now. And a Hyuuga was part of the reason why he can’t even
threaten war. That feels pretty good.”

Hiashi laughs a little, and has to admit it does. He raises his bottle, toasting Hizashi wherever he is
now, and his teammates do the same.

“To bravery,” Tsume says.

“To loyalty,” Shibi echoes.

“To family,” Hiashi whispers, and takes a drink.

It burns going down, like before, but this time he thinks it’s just a little bit more bearable.

(Behind his back, Tsume cocks a brow at Shibi, not quite glancing at the small shadow that was
already lingering among the graves when they arrived. Shibi shakes his head, the barest twitch of
movement, and Tsume rolls her eyes but doesn’t say anything.

Damned emotionally constipated Hyuuga, she thinks, and doesn’t look back as Hiashi’s nephew
ducks away, heading towards the compound.)

Of all the many, many things that have happened to Kurama since he landed back in the past, this
has to be one of the most surreal: standing across from his second jinchuuriki, his third in his arms,
with the man who killed the former and saved the latter helpless on the ground between them.

It’s not a state of affairs he trusts will last very long. Obito is a slippery bastard at the best of times,
and with potential allies all around, they need to get him pinned down permanently.

“Think you can switch that seal around and attach it to him?” he asks Kushina, because he knows
seals, but Kushina is brilliant at them.

Kushina’s mouth pulls tight, but she nods, and Kurama is more than experienced enough with her
moods—even from the outside—to recognize the fury that she’s keeping tamped down. Before, he
would have reveled in it, strained against the seal just to make her angrier, hoping for her to slip just
once—

It isn’t like that anymore.
“You really think this is going to be enough?” Obito rasps, rough and derisive. He pushes himself up, onto his knees, but Kurama can see how much that simple movement costs him. The seal is easy enough to recognize as the one Kabuto used on Anko during the war, only undirected this time. Obito’s chakra is bleeding out into the air, leaving him on the very edge of chakra exhaustion, and Kurama is certain it couldn’t happen to a more deserving asshole.

His one visible eye is plain black again, and Kurama relishes the lack of Sharingan more than he has anything in a while.

“Well, then,” he allows, tightening his grip on Naruto, who glances up at him, one hand fisted in Kurama’s shirt. And, Sage, like that it doesn’t matter; to keep Naruto safe, Kurama will fight Obito to a standstill again, and again, and again. He might complain about it, but he’ll do it without hesitation. “But you’re sure as hell not a threat right now, you bastard.”

Obito snarls, full of fury, pushing upward like he’s going to rise. In the same moment, though, Kushina makes a sound of victory, hands snapping together as her chakra flares. The seal beneath Obito’s body twists, then bleeds upwards like it’s being pulled onto Obito’s skin. With a cry, he tries to jerk away but fails, and Kushina’s mouth takes on a vicious slant as she lowers her hands.

“There we are,” she says, bright and cheery, and that smile is so very much the Naruto Kurama left in an undone future that he feels it like a blow. He laughs, because it’s either that or cry, and Kushina slants a grin his way, violet eyes full of merry mischief and an undercurrent of contained violence.

Maybe, Kurama thinks, allowing himself half a second of optimism, this won’t turn out as badly as he’s been imagining.

In that same moment, there’s a shout. It sounds like Rōshi, and it sounds like victory. It makes Kurama’s teeth curl back from his lips in satisfaction, even as he feels the other jinchuuriki in the pass redouble their efforts. Someone just got taken out, and he’s willing to bet it wasn’t someone on their side.

Judging by the fury suddenly snapping in Obito’s visible eye, he assumes the same, and it makes Kurama laugh, a low and vicious rumble in his chest as he stalks forward. “You could pick them off one at a time when they were alone,” he challenges. “But together? Yeah, you’re fucked, bastard. And now that they’ve seen what they can do together, their first instinct is always going to be to run for each other now. Even if you could rebuild the Gedō Mazō, you’d never get the jinchuuriki to power it.”

Obito growls, but there’s something very much like desperation rising in his gaze. He heaves himself up onto one knee, clawed fingers aimed at the seal, and Kushina makes an aborted noise of protest as nails dig in and tear. Blood splatters the ground, but it’s useless; the seal repairs itself with Obito’s skin, and he makes a noise that’s pure fury. “No! It’s not going to end like this!”

“It’s already over,” Kushina tells him, sharp and grim and angry, and flips the kunai in her hand around. She lunges, and even though Obito tries to hurl himself back, to dodge, there’s no use. Kushina slams the hilt of the kunai into his temple with a loud crack, and the man collapses in a heap.

For a long moment, Kushina looms over him, eyes fixed on his mask. She takes a breath, tucks the kunai away, and reaches down, her intentions clear.

Kurama catches her wrist before she can even start to pull the mask off. “Not yet,” he says quietly. “I’ll tell you who he is, and then you can unmask him.”
Kushina’s gaze darts from Obito to Kurama and then to Naruto, still settled on his hip. The hesitation is clear, but after a moment she nods, pulling back, and offers them a smile. “I guess that means I know him, right?”

Of course she’d figure it out—Kushina isn’t stupid, and never has been, no matter what Kurama liked to say to insult her when she was his jinchuuriki. Still, Kurama’s pretty sure she’s not ready to have the man who might as well have killed her husband and murdered her be the cheerful chuunin she used to want her future son to be just like. Soon, maybe, but…not yet. Let her deal with actually having a son first.

“Kurama-nii?” Naruto asks, tugging a little on his shirt. “Kurama-nii, is everything okay now?”

There’s something like wonder suffusing Kushina’s face as she stares at Naruto, or maybe something like grief. She starts to reach out, only to abort the movement at the last moment, and—

It reminds Kurama of his first glimpse of Naruto in Konoha. Maybe not quite the same, but close enough to count, definitely. Close enough to see the sudden flare of hope and fear all mixed together.

Kushina was his jinchuuriki, and he hated her. He spent twelve years pinned down, chained up, and seething with hatred for every moment of it. Naruto may have changed most of that, but this isn’t going to be easy for either of them, especially when he tells her who he is. There’s no way to avoid that, either—if anyone can recognize him by his chakra and temperament, it’s Kushina.

Besides, this is Naruto’s mother. If Kurama regrets one thing above all concerning his part in her death, as much as it was against his will, it’s that Naruto didn’t get to grow up with family.

“Yeah, kit,” he says, and watches Kushina dart a glance up at him at the nickname. “That’s the guy who was after you and the other jinchuuriki. Isn’t your mom the best? She totally kicked his ass.”

The realization takes a breathlessly long moment to dawn. Naruto stares at him for a long moment, uncomprehending, and then as the words sink in he snaps his head around to stare at Kushina, who looks just as startled by Kurama’s words. But there’s a fearful sort of hope growing on her face that Kurama remembers all too well, and even though something in his chest is tight and uncertain he gives her a crooked smile. Not that either sees it; they only have eyes for each other.

“You’re—you’re my mom?” Naruto asks, and his voice quavers. “You’re really my mom? But—you were trying to hurt Kurama-nii!”

“Not her fault,” Kurama tells him. “The bad guy was making her do bad things, but she’s not being controlled anymore.”

Blue eyes widening, Naruto glances from Kushina to Kurama and back again. “My mom?” he repeats, like he still can’t quite believe it.

Kushina smiles at him, helpless and wondering in equal measures, and holds out her arms like she just can’t stop herself. “Yeah,” she says, and laughs a little. “Yeah, I am. Oh gods, look at you, Naruto. You’re so handsome, just like your dad.”

Naruto wriggles desperately, already reaching out for her. Without hesitation, Kurama sets him down on the ground, lets Naruto bolt right out of his grip even though opening his hands feels like it tears something inside of him. He stuffs that feeling down, stomps on it viciously until it’s no longer threatening to well up and drag at him, and half-turns away from the mingled laughter as mother and son collide for the very first time.

Blaming Obito, crumpled and unconscious, for the growing bite in his chest is a little too easy, but
Kurama indulges anyway.

Three steps away from where Naruto is proudly telling Kushina about his Chains and Kurama takes a breath, refocuses on the here and now. There's still a battle going on above them, but he’s reluctant to get that far away from Naruto right now, no matter what. Besides, he can still feel each of his siblings distinctly—and himself, darker and angrier but still stewing in bewilderment, which is by turns confusing and amusing as fuck—and he has faith they’d call for him if they needed him, even if their jinchuuriki couldn’t.

Besides, if this is a shogi game in its early stages, Obito is the gold general, the most valuable piece even if he doesn’t hold all the power. Zetsu might by Kaguya’s king, but one wrong move will be enough to topple him, so right now Obito is his greatest chance at advancing the game. As soon as he figures out that Obito has been captured—

Stones clatter down the embankment, and Kurama jerks, spinning even as he raises his claws. It’s Utakata, though, not Zetsu, and the boy blinks at him in clear surprise as Kakashi appears behind him. “Hatake said—” he starts, and then snaps his mouth shut, closes his eyes, takes a breath. Golden amber eyes slide open, and he says determinedly, “I'm glad you're all right.”

All of Kurama’s attention, however, is on the man behind him, and there's a laugh caught in his throat. Because Kakashi looks exactly the same as he did when they parted ways, if slightly more battered, but there’s a miniature human perched on his hip and clinging to his flak jacket.

It takes a good portion of Kurama’s effort not to laugh at him, and the only reason he succeeds is because Kushina is currently cooing over Naruto, and it makes him want to hit something. “Don’t,” Kakashi tells him blandly as they pick their way down the hill.

To Kurama’s vast amusement, Gaara is the one to level an entirely unimpressed look at his bearer before he says firmly, “Put me down.”

With a roll of his eye that he doesn’t even bother to hide, Kakashi swings him down and sets him on his feet. Gaara doesn’t pause to say thank you, but skids the last few feet down the slope and practically teleports to Kurama’s side. Before he even has to reach up, Kurama is already crouching down, pulling the little boy into a hug.

“Hey, squirt,” he says gently. “I thought I talked to all of you about staying out of danger.”

Gaara glances at him, then over his shoulder at Naruto and Kushina, and then back at Kurama’s face. For one heartbeat Kurama thinks he’s going to ask, but instead Gaara tells him solemnly, “Kakashi isn’t as useless as I thought.”

Oh, Kurama is never letting that one go, he thinks wickedly, glancing up, and even with the mask he can see the offense writ large across Kakashi’s face. Grinning, he asks, “Oh really? He actually helped?”

“He did,” Gaara allows. “He can dodge fine.”

Utakata is clearly covering a grin with one hand as he approaches, pipe and bottle of bubble solution in his other. “Gaara held Kakuzu down with his sand until I could burn through his Earth Grudge Fear,” he says, and lets his hand drop enough for Gaara to see his kind smile. “Saiken and Shukaku work well together, don’t they? Just like us.”

Gaara nods seriously, but Kurama has to stifle a snort. If anyone is able to work with Shukaku, who is both light on sanity and heavy on malice, it would have to be Saiken, who manages to be the most
accepting of the bijuu and also very, very good at cheerfully ignoring things. The sheer aggravation to Shukaku was always worth the fits of rampant destruction it sent the tanuki into afterwards, Kurama remembers.

“The bastard is done for, then?” he asks Utakata, who nods.

“I’m absolutely certain he won’t be hunting your heart any longer,” the boy tells him, tone deceptively light, and he and Gaara share a look that’s full of satisfaction.

Kurama doesn’t even want to know at this point. He rolls his eyes, ignores them both, and turns to Kakashi, whose gaze is fixed on the pair behind them. Or possibly on the unconscious form of his former friend—Kurama doesn’t particularly want to turn around and check. “Your old man?” he asks gruffly.

Kakashi blinks, glaze flickering back to Kurama’s face. It takes him a heartbeat to process the question, but then he grimaces and looks towards the mouth of the canyon. “I left him unconscious. If Kushina is free…”

They can probably hope that Sakumo is as well, though Kakashi doesn’t voice the thought out loud. Getting knocked out may have reset her brain, so there’s no reason to think it wouldn’t do the same for her fellow prisoner.

“Aren’t you going to go say hello?” he asks, and is a little surprised when something close to panic shades across Kakashi’s face.

“I’ll wait,” Kakashi says firmly, and the forever, preferably is only implied, but strongly so.

Kurama raises a curious brow, because he remembers just how close Kakashi was to Kushina, especially after the rest of his team died, but he’s not going to push. Instead, he glances down at Gaara, hesitates for a moment, and then offers, “Want to stick with me while I rig up some more binding seals?” Now that Kushina's done the hard part of creating the array, he should be able to copy it without a problem, and it’s probably the best way to contain the rest of Akatsuki.

Assuming any of the others survive a head-to-head fight with some of the most powerful shinobi in the Elemental Countries.

“Yes, Kurama-nii,” Gaara says firmly, and allows himself to be put down, though he stays right next to Kurama’s knee as Kurama heads over to take a closer look at the seal Kushina altered.

The changes are simple enough, though not done in a way that Kurama would have thought to switch things around. He’s a little unhappy it’s not more complicated, honestly; right now, like this, it’s all too easy for his eyes to drift over to Naruto and Kushina. The woman is on her knees, Naruto in her lap, and her face is…glowing. Kurama can't quite see Naruto's expression, but he’s not entirely sure he wants to.

Naruto is his, he very carefully doesn’t think, and there's a thread of anger growing in his gut, undirected, formless, and all too familiar.

Very firmly, he buries it, focuses on the way Gaara's small hand fists in his shirt. “Did you see any of the others on your way here?” he asks, because just sensing their chakra is fine, but it leaves out a hell of a lot of information. Like wounds. Kurama really fucking hopes that none of the kids ended up hurt, but he’s not optimistic enough to believe it.

Gaara thinks about it for a moment, considering carefully. “Yugito-nee was getting tired, I think,” he allows. “Fū-nee was still laughing, though. She was throwing lots of glitter.”
Between Chōmei’s wings and her Scale Powder, Fū is probably *gleeful* about this fight, Kurama thinks fondly. She likes to be in the thick of things, and this definitely counts. Yugito will probably need assistance, because she’s the type to dive headlong into something even if she’s going to be in over her head, but Rōshi sounded fine just a second ago, and wherever he is Han is probably close by.

Kurama *should* leave, now that he knows the chakra suppression seal. He should find the others and help them, but it’s—hard. Hard to tear himself away, even if Kushina and Naruto are still caught up in each other.

Gaara catches his hand, tugs gently as he asks worriedly, “Kurama-nii?”

Behind them, the winter-swollen river surges like it’s suddenly in flood.

Utakata shouts a warning, but Kurama catches the motion out of the corner of his eye and is already moving, snatching Gaara off the ground and lunging right over top of Obito on his way to Naruto. Kushina has him, though, is already leaping back with Naruto under one arm and her fingers twisting into a hand sign for the beginning of a Suiton jutsu. The wave isn’t hers, doesn’t taste like her chakra, and Kurama practically slings Gaara into Kakashi’s hold as he spins, his own chakra rising as the wave crashes down.

A shape rises from the murky darkness of the water, breaking the surface first with a jagged fin and then broad shoulders, more monster than man. Kisame, Kurama realizes, even as he moves, darting across the surface of the flood. Kisame fused with Samehada, chakra entwined and completely identical, a grin on the former Kiri nin’s twisted, barely-human face and clear purpose in his eyes as he lunges for Obito.

Kurama meets him halfway in between, catches one rough-skinned hand and tries to throw him. Kisame matches even his greater-than-human strength, though, drags against it and nearly pulls Kurama off his feet before he can let go. One arm edged with a razor-sharp fin lashes around, slices right through Kurama’s shirt and into the skin beneath before he can get out of the way, and he snarls even as he leaps back. One hand lashes out, a shockwave rippling from his fingertips, but Kisame plants his feet and ducks one shoulder down to meet it, the force sliding him back and bruising his skin but not breaking through the heavy hide. With a sound of fury Kurama grabs for him again, claws bared, but webbed hands snatch his own, even as another vast shape surfaces from water that should be far too shallow for it.

The shark summons snaps its teeth shut where Kurama’s head was a second ago, dives into the water and vanishes again, but Kurama knows better than to think it’s gone. He leaps up, breaks the grip on his wrists as he flips over Kisame’s head in an attempt to keep the man from pinpointing where he’ll land, and grabs for the length of ninja wire Kakashi gave him earlier. Fire comes swift and simple to the forefront, familiar from Mito and Sasuke in equal measure as he hooks a kunai to the end and lets it fly. The loop curls around Kisame’s waist, even though Kurama would much prefer to go for the neck—not an option here, when Kisame barely even has a human torso at all. One touch is enough, though, and fire leaps hungrily down the length, blooming into a contained inferno the second it touches skin.

Kisame roars, hooking one hand around the blazing wire, and wrenches hard. Half a heartbeat is all it takes for Kurama to let go, but that’s too long. He’s within grabbing reach again, too close, and when he tries to dive sideways the prehensile end of Kisame’s tail curls around his ankle and yanks him straight down.

He falls into water that’s as drowning-deep as the ocean, dark like it’s never seen the light. There are sharks everywhere, circling menacingly, but all Kurama can see is the faint, paler shapes of them
against the gloom. He takes a breath without conscious thought and chokes as water fills his lungs, feels the waterlogged cloth of his haori and shirt dragging him down. The moment of struggle it takes to shed them has the sharks turning, heading straight for him like a hunting pack, and it’s only then that Kurama notices the blood in the water from the gouge in his chest, already closing but not quickly enough.

There’s movement above him, a shadow on the surface, and Kurama looks even though he doesn’t have the second to spare. Kisame’s shape, twisted and all too recognizable, diving down with a wide grin full of teeth. No way Kurama can face him here, in his own battlefield, where both of Kurama’s elements are practically useless. He snarls silently, baring his teeth right back, and slams a shockwave at the first of the sharks as it arrows straight for him. The force hurls him back more than it affects the beast, but it gives Kurama space and he takes it gladly, kicking for the surface as hard as he can. Chakra to his feet for force, not quite able to gain traction below the surface, but if he can just break through the water——

Kisame slams into him, impossibly fast. Clawed hands latch onto Kurama’s shoulders even as teeth snap at his neck, sink into his skin, and Kurama lets out a cry that escapes as a stream of bubbles instead of sound. He’s running out of air, can feel the ache of it in his chest, but he lashes his claws into Kisame’s face, aims for his eyes and only just misses. Blood clouds the water around them, and Kurama can feel movement behind him. No need to guess what; if Kurama can’t get out of Kisame’s hold the sharks are going to do the missing-nin’s work for him. The thought of those teeth, that hunting hunger at his back makes Kurama thrash, struggling harder even as his lungs ache.

Kisame laughs, clear and mocking, and his hands tighten. There’s movement in the water, and his eyes dart there, full of a satisfaction whose origins Kurama doesn’t have to wonder at. He can’t do anything but brace himself, though, even as he struggles. There’s a surge of chakra, a shadow he only just catches from the corner of his eye, and——

A shape breaks the surface of the water far above, plunging down.
In defense of this chapter, Naruto is ridiculous shounen and no one ever uses logic. I tried to divorce my brain from reality to that degree and couldn’t manage it. Therefore, you will notice people fighting dirty, ganging up on other people, and using logic to fight. I’d be sorry, but…yeah. I’m really not.

For the barest fraction of a heartbeat, Kisame glances up.

Desperation surges in the moment of the opening. Kurama throws himself backward, bringing both feet up hard. One slams into Kisame’s gut as the other plants right between his eyes, and Kurama kicks off with all the force he can muster. Suspended in water, it’s faster than he expects, and he ends up summersaulting deeper into the darkness, spots starting to swim in his vision from lack of air. The shark that was lunging for his spine almost slams into Kisame, who dives out of the way, and Kurama kicks hard while he’s still recovering, arrowing for the surface.

Far above, there’s a light, broken by the shape of a human descending rapidly. A dart of color against the surrounding darkness, a flicker—

Kurama very nearly loses his breath on a startled sound, even as brilliant light sparks.

Kushina’s Sealing Chains erupt around them, turning the murky water golden in a sudden rush. She pulls up, floating suspended even as her chains whirl out to grab at summons, a handful aiming for Kisame directly. If there’s anything that can hold him, it’s those, so Kurama doesn’t waste even a moment of his remaining air, stroking desperately for the surface.

One hard kick, another, and his head finally breaks free of the water.

“Kurama-nii!” Naruto shouts, and a half-second glance at the shore shows him in Kakashi’s hold, reaching like he’s going to dive after them given half the chance.

Like hell, Kurama thinks fiercely. “Stay there!” he shouts back, then takes a huge breath and ducks under again.

Thinking is easier without the dire need to breathe pressing at him. As he dives he calls up his bijūdama, lets his chakra condense at levels even Kisame and Samehada won’t be able to absorb. Tighter and tighter as it spirals, past Kushina as she focuses on the summons, straight for Kisame with his eager grin, and—

Impact.

The world shatters.
It’s like being caught in a vortex in reverse, like the being jerked up and away and out by some vast, careless hand. Kurama loses his air in a yelp, but it hardly matters, because with a stomach-turning lurch the jutsu breaks and he’s suddenly on dry land. One staggering step, the sudden shift too jarring to leave him with anything close to his normal balance, and in that blistered second there are hands on him. Something drags at his chakra, cruel and ravenous, and Kurama snarls but he’s at a disadvantage. He turns, tries to punch, tries to kick out a knee, but Kisame overwhelms him, sucks his power down like it’s a meal.

“Fucking get off of me,” Kurama growls, trying to grapple, but the angle is wrong. He can’t get any leverage, can’t manage to move as Kisame redoubles his hold and drags him back towards the water.

There’s a low, rumbling laugh right next to his ear. It makes Kurama try to jerk an elbow back reflexively, but Kisame's got him in a stranglehold and all he manages to do is flail a little. “Sorry,” Kisame says, entirely insincere. “Boss’s orders.”

Which, of course, just makes it better, because Obito wanting him captured is predictable, aggravating, and will absolutely lead into something Kurama does not in any way want to be part of.

Since physical attacks aren’t working, he grabs for his chakra and slams it into Kisame like a weapon. He’s already heading towards tired from using so much against Kushina, but this he can manage.

And it’s enough. Kisame staggers, missing his footing, and the fraction of a second is just enough for Kurama to slam his head back into Kisame's face, then kick him in the balls and tear out of his grip. Half-shark or not, Kisame wheezes, and his face goes pale.

In the same moment, there’s a burst of bright laughter, and an arm hooks through Kurama’s, dragging him back. The familiar chakra is enough to keep him from tensing, so he goes with it, and Kushina pulls him up onto solid ground. They’re both soaking wet, dripping massive puddles on the bank, and Kushina at least looks like a kappa’s victim, hair plastered to her face and wrapped in soggy hanks around her throat. Her grin is unflagging, though, especially when she tells him cheekily, “Nice shot.”

It startles a laugh out of Kurama, even though it shouldn’t, and he smirks in return, even though most of his attention is still on Kisame as he pushes himself fully upright. “Thanks,” he answers. “Fighting dirty is our specialty, isn’t it?”

Kushina's grin gains teeth, and for half a heartbeat Kurama wonders, stunned, if she knows he doesn’t mean Uzumaki in general, but them in particular.

There’s no time to ask, though; with a snarl Kisame takes a step forward, clawed fingers curling into fists, and Kurama catches the bunching to thick muscle just in time to hurl himself and Kushina out of the way. Kisame plows into the space where they just stood, but instead of stopping—

“Fuck,” Kurama snarls, and the moment he gets his feet under him he lunges right back at Kisame, because the former Kiri nin wasn’t aiming at them, he was reaching for—

Kisame dodges the lash of Kushina’s Chains as they slam into the earth around him, shakes off the shockwave Kurama drives into his back, and scoops Obito up in his arms. From the other side, a stream of Utakata's acid-filled bubbles whirs towards him, but a wave of water swamps them before they reach. Another step, faster, and Kurama almost reaches.

The river surges again, cresting like a misplaced tidal wave, and Kurama has to leap back or be swamped. When the water recedes, Kisame is gone.
“Fuck,” Kurama repeats, letting himself straighten slowly. He glares ineffectually at the river as it rises once more, naturally this time, and halfway considers picking up a rock and hurling it into the water, just because. But that’s childish, and moreover it won’t make Kurama feel anything but more frustrated, so he buries the impulse as two more figures appear at the top of the slope and slide downward.

“Is everyone okay?” Jiraiya calls, eyes flickering to Naruto first and Kakashi second. Allowable, Kurama supposes, and shoves his sodden hair out of his face as he turns to—

“Kurama!” Kushina cries joyfully, and there’s a blur of soggy red out of the corner of his eye. He turns on instinct, and somehow finds himself with an armful of former jinchuuriki as she wraps her arms tightly around him, burying her face in his neck. Not to tear his throat out, the way he halfway expects, but…a hug.

“Kushina?” he asks warily, able to see Jiraiya gaping at them out of the corner of his eye, and Tsunade with her brows rising towards her hairline.

“Play along,” Kushina insists, quiet but fierce. “You’ve been telling everyone you’re my brother, you know? So act like it!”

Well, he’s hardly about to argue with that, especially in front of Sarutobi’s students. ‘Kushina’s brother’ is still a hell of a lot more likely to let him stay close to Naruto than ‘Kyuubi in human form’, so if Kushina is willing to run with it even when she knows it’s a lie, Kurama will too.

Instead of protesting, he hugs her back, and they’re both wet and cold and a little bloody, but—

It almost feels like that last hug Naruto gave him, back when everything started. Kushina is strong and steady against him, and she presses her cheek to his and whispers, “Thank you for taking care of Naruto.”

There’s a lump in Kurama’s throat, and he’s only ever felt the most passing fondness for Kushina before, but…this is all right. For Naruto, and also, just maybe, a little bit for himself.

“Kurama-nii!” Naruto cries, right on cue, and an instant later he slams into Kurama’s leg. It makes Kurama snort, and he reaches down, grabbing Naruto by the back of his shirt and hauling him up.

“What, brat?” he asks, but can’t quite make it as gruff as he’s aiming for.

Naruto stares at him for a long moment, wide-eyed, and then throws himself forward, wrapping small arms around Kurama’s neck. “I was scared! You were gone and there were sharks and then Mom went after you and she was gone—”

Hands tug at his pants, and Kurama can’t quite manage to look down when Naruto’s got his head under his chin, but he hardly needs to.

With a laugh, Kushina crouches down, then stands back up with Gaara in her arms. He immediately reaches for Kurama, and she snorts. “This one is yours too, I take it?” she asks, and that grin means trouble.

Kurama rolls his eyes at her, but he takes Gaara as well, letting the little boy bury his face in Kurama’s shoulder and cling tightly. “Oh, stuff a sock in it.”

Kushina, of course, ignores him. “You look like an Uzumaki, you know?” she tells Gaara cheerfully, ruffling his hair and making him glance up at her warily. Meeting his eyes, she gentles her smile, and adds, “That’s a good thing, kid. Kurama and Naruto and I need more family.”
Aquamarine eyes go wide, and Gaara stares at her for a long moment, then glances up at Kurama.

Kurama just tips one shoulder in as much of a shrug as he can manage at the moment. “Don’t look at me,” he defends. “You signed on to this crazy caravan the second you decided to come with us. No getting out of it.”

Gaara promptly buries his face in Kurama’s shirt, even as Naruto cheers. “Yeah!” the blond says excitedly. “Me an’ Gaara can be brothers, and Fū-nee and Yugito-nee are our sisters, and we’re a family.”

Smiling softly, Kushina reaches in to gently pinch his cheeks, then kisses him on the forehead. “We are,” she agrees, and glances up, including Kurama in the slant of her smile. “Definitely.”

Kurama has absolutely no idea what or who she thinks he is, beyond not actually her brother, but he lets himself smile back, just a little, because—Naruto ran to him, not Kushina. Kushina included him, rather than pulling Naruto away. And maybe that’s a sign that things won't be changing all that much, even if Obito did manage to get away.

The relief is dizzying, and Kurama takes a careful breath, burying his face in Naruto’s hair.

“You're all wet,” Naruto protests, wriggling a little. “Kurama-nii! It’s cold!”

It really is. There’s a winter wind picking up, sharp enough to cut through to the bone, and Kurama grimaces. He’s carrying a sealing scroll with the extra clothes Anzu gave him, and…there might be some that will fit Kushina. Enough to get her something dry, at least.

“Right,” he says, pulling back with a sigh. “There’s a fight we need to finish first, though, and I’m pretty sure we don’t have time to stop and change.”

“Go,” Utakata says, crossing the empty stretch of flooded bank and stretching out his arms, a clear offer to take both six-year-olds. “I’ll watch them. More closely this time, I promise.”

Kurama really doesn’t want to let go, but Kisame is gone, and Obito still has Kushina’s seal on him. He won’t be getting out of it easily, and Kurama’s pretty sure Kisame won’t leave his side before he has. Naruto and Gaara should be safe, and beyond that, he needs to make sure Yugito and Fū aren’t hurt.

“Come on, brats,” he chides, dropping his arms a little so Utakata can grab them. Kushina is still smiling, soft and a little wondering, but when he raises a brow at her she just grins.

“We’ll be right back, you know?” she says reassuringly, patting blond hair, then red. “We’re going to kick everyone’s ass and win the battle, and then we can all go back home, okay?”

“To Konoha,” Kurama clarifies, when Gaara’s eyes widen with clear horror. He meets the little boy’s stare, and says with as much conviction as he can put in the words, “We’re your home now, Gaara. Stop forgetting that, squirt.”

Gaara gives a quick nod, reaching out for Naruto, who grins broadly. “Go, Kurama-nii! Go, Mom!” he cheers.

Kurama snorts, but gives him a quick smile as he turns away. A swift step, then two short leaps, and he lands next to Jiraiya on the hill, crouched and waiting. “Well? Were you coming down here for a reason, old man?”

Jiraiya gives him a narrow look, then tips his head. “I felt the Kyuubi’s chakra,” he says. “Contained?”
That gets him a grin with an edge of teeth, full of humor at the memory of the Kyuubi's bewildered expression. “For the moment, yeah.”

When nothing else is forthcoming, Jiraiya rolls his eyes, then jerks a thumb over his shoulder. “Fighting’s winding down. Most of the puppets are gone, and Kakuzu’s pretty much a puddle of ooze. Orochimaru skipped out, I think, and Terumī and Rōshi have cornered Sasori. Nagato's Paths are still fighting, but Han, Bee, Yagura, and Zabuza are over there right now. Tobi?”

“Escaped with Kisame, the bastard,” Kushina says, cheerful and malicious in equal measure as she pauses next to Kurama.

Jiraiya looks at her like she’s a miracle, and when he goes to speak his voice shakes. “Orochimaru—he implied that he brought more than one person back to life.”

Kushina's eyes soften, and there's something boundlessly sad in her eyes as she reaches out, touching Jiraiya’s hand gently. “Hatake Sakumo,” she says. “He was the other. Not—”

*Minato*, she doesn’t have to say.

Joy flares, twined together with disappointment and grief and hope, and Jiraiya presses a hand over his face.

“We’re wasting time here,” Kurama says gruffly, and steps away, meeting Tsunade's grim eyes. “The Paths are the ones we need to deal with first.”

“Right,” Kushina agrees, and if Kurama didn’t know her quite as well as he did, that tone might fool him. She cracks her knuckles, then glances at Kurama with a grin that’s only just barely forced. “Well? Are we splitting them down the middle, or just taking them as they come?”

With a roll of his eyes, Kurama leaves her behind, leaping back up onto the road and heading towards the last of the fighting. There are destroyed puppets everywhere, and the majority of them look like they were used as scratching posts for a cat with pyromaniacal tendencies. Apparently Matatabi and Yugito were both having fun.

He finds the girl herself a little further on, seated on a puppet that’s still mostly intact, but lifeless, frowning at her scratched hands. “Kitten,” he calls, and she glances up immediately, relief spreading across her face.

“Kurama-nii,” she says happily, and when he reaches for her she takes his hands and tumbles forward to hug him tightly.

Her chakra is lower than it should be, he judges, looping an arm around her shoulders. But, despite it being depleted, she doesn’t look like she’s been hurt, and Kurama runs one hand over her dusty hair. “Nice work,” he tells her, and Yugito makes a noise that she definitely learned from Matatabi.

“I’m a good kunoichi,” she says without hubris. “They weren’t even real.” Her eyes dart back, over his shoulder, and she tenses a little. “Kurama-nii—”

Kurama glances over his shoulder to see Kushina giving him an arch look. He makes a face at her, which makes her grin, and then tells Yugito, “She’s fine.”

Yugito doesn’t look like she fully believes him, but she allows it with a nod, pulling back a step. “Are we still going to head for Konoha, Kurama-nii?”

“Of course, kitten. Be a shame to come all this way just to back out now, wouldn’t it?” Kurama tugs
lightly on the tip of her braid, then asks, “Would you go help Utakata keep an eye on Naruto and Gaara? I’ll send Fū your way too, if I see her.”

She takes another wary look at Kushina, but nods regardless. “I won't let anything happen to them,” she promises solemnly.

Sage, this kid, Kurama thinks wryly, but he lets her go. “I know you won't.”

Yugito smiles at him, sidles around Kushina, and hurries back towards the riverbank. She’s not stumbling yet, Kurama assesses, watching her move with a faint frown, but she’s definitely tired. Better to get her doing something without a lot of stress so she can wind down.

“Come on,” he says to Kushina, because she looks like she’s going to make a smart remark.

Thankfully, she saves it for later, though Kurama has no doubt that this is just a delay in hearing it. Instead, she says, “They're all jinchuuriki, aren't they?”

“Why do you think they're with me?” Kurama retorts, and—

“Incoming!” a cheerful voice calls, just as a shape comes flying at Kurama’s face. He lunges to catch it on instinct, and finds himself with an armful of green-haired little girl with wings.

“Fū,” he says, somewhere between testy and relieved. “What exactly do you think you’re doing?”

Fū gives him her best innocent smile, then points over his shoulder. “Following Yugito! I can't help against Pein anymore—there are too many people, and I just keep blinding them instead of the bad guys.”

Kurama snorts, swinging her down to stand on her feet as the wings fade away. “Smart, sweetheart. Anyone I need to punch for you?”

The question is considered for a moment, Fū wrinkling her nose thoughtfully. Then, with a faint huff, she says, “The guy with the gravity. He almost knocked me out of the air a couple times.”

That makes Kurama’s eyes narrow, but when he looks her over he can't see any sign of wounds. “Will do,” he agrees. “Yugito headed for the others by the river up there. You're good?”

“I'm good,” Fū confirms cheerfully. She gives Kushina a bright smile, then ducks past at a quick jog. “Cute,” is Kushina's verdict. She casts a sideways glance at Kurama as they start forward again, and asks, “Yours too?”

Kurama pointedly doesn’t answer, because they’re coming up on a curve in the road, and beyond it the sound of fighting is clear. “Ready?” he asks instead, and Kushina laughs.

“Of course! Let’s teach those bastards a lesson!” she agrees, and plunges head, leaving Kurama behind as she throws herself around the bend.

“Sage damn it, Tomato,” Kurama hisses, but not quite loud enough for her to hear him. He goes after her, immediately throwing himself the Deva Path as it aims at Han. It sees him coming, of course, turns at the last moment and makes Kurama dive aside from the ripple of gravity. Without pausing, Kurama rolls right back to his feet, summons a bijūdama, and slams it full-force at the Naraka Path, who's stationed in front the King of Hell.

There's not enough warning, even with their shared vision, for the Naraka Path to do anything but
brace for impact.

The dust clears in a whirl, showing nothing but an impact crater left behind, and in the sudden silence that’s fallen over the little battle, Kurama straightens with a feral grin. “That’s one for me,” he tells Kushina mockingly.

“Oh, we’re making this a competition now?” she returns, but she’s grinning. “Fine, we can do it that way. Don’t come crying to me when you lose, though!”

Kurama scoffs, then lunges left as Kushina goes right. Zabuza and Haku are working in tandem to harry the Asura path, so he leaves it to them, aiming instead for the Preta Path. Without the Naraka Path, it’s the main defensive power. Take that out, and—

Han’s chakra flares, and a moment later there’s a sound of impact. The Deva Path goes flying past him, colliding with the Human Path where it’s facing off against Yagura, and the heartbeat of confusion allows Kurama to slide to his feet, a shockwave rippling right at the Preta Path. The Path grounds itself, ability blooming in a sweep of pale blue, but Kurama keeps going anyway. Another shockwave directed at the ground makes the canyon walls tremble as it raises a wave of dust, and there’s a sound like a gong as it reverberates off the barrier.

Then there’s a rush like a thousand birds all chirping at once, a meaty thwack, a heavy thud. The winter wind whirls the dust away, and Kakashi steps away from the Preta Path’s corpse, his face a little pale but otherwise steady as he shakes out his arm.

“Thanks for the cover,” he says mildly.

Kurama snorts. “You finally decided to stop sulking?”

“I,” Kakashi says primly, “would never sulk.”

That’s so patently untrue that Kurama laughs in his face.

Kakashi, of course, shoots him a wounded look, then pointedly says, “That felt too easy.”

“Their ability to work together and their shared line of sight is the big threat,” Kurama says with a roll of his eyes. “Take that out and with enough people, we can take them down. Especially with a surprise attack.”

“Well, I did say I was very good at killing people.” Kakashi gives him a crinkle-eyed smile, then brings his hands together and vanishes in a whirl of leaves.

If that’s how he’s planning to play it, Kurama can work with that.

He takes a quick look over the battlefield judging where he’ll be of use. Han is advancing on the Human Path, who’s visibly retreating from both him and Yagura, and the Animal Path is crumpled on the ground, from the state of its wounds looking like Yagura and Zabuza tag-teamed it. The Asura Path is still facing the swordsman and his apprentice, and that just leaves—

Golden chains catch the light, and Kushina snarls, “Going to try and hold me down again, asshole?”

(No, Kurama thinks, and there's a faint, niggling worry in the back of him mind. This isn’t everyone. There should be…what?)

The Deva Path leaps aside, ducking around behind Han. It waves a hand, and the big man stumbles, almost falling to his knees. The Human Path takes advantage of the opening, spinning in, and
Kurama kicks it back, slamming it into the wall of the canyon.

“You're not the only ones who can work together,” he tells it viciously, and this is the weakest Path, the one Nagato readily sacrifices when he needs to, but it’s still one of his Paths. Even if they can't manage to get to Nagato himself, if they can take out all of his Paths, it will take him time to make new ones.

He summons one small bijūdama, lets the positive and negative chakra whirl into an orb at the tip of his finger, and lunges. The Path tries to dodge, but it’s hemmed in by the cliff walls, and Han is waiting right behind him; there's no getting around both of them. It reaches out, a ghostly glow gathering around one hand, and Kurama can easily recall Naruto’s memories, the bodies of friends with their souls dragged out of them, but without touch the ability won't work.

Kurama pulls up just out of arm’s reach, and lets the bijūdama fly from his fingertip.

“Thank you,” Han says as the dust disperses. He straightens his hat, and then adds, “I'm beginning to owe you quite a lot, aren't I?”

Rolling his eyes, Kurama waves that off, even as he turns to look for Kushina and Kakashi. The former, at least, is easy to spot, hounding the Deva Path back towards an outcropping of stone, and the fact that he can't see the latter means that he’s probably fine. “Fuck off. It was just—”

Something clicks.

“Did you see a woman?” he demands, rounding on Han. “Blue hair, no expression, usually with the Deva Path?”

Han blinks, then frowns. “No,” he says. “No, I don’t think I saw her at all after Terumī engaged her.”

Damn it. No Konan means she headed for Nagato, and that likely means the bastard is about to make his escape. Or she’s going to try to grab the jinchuuriki herself, but she’s never struck Kurama as quite that dumb.

Kurama grits his teeth, forces himself to breathe out, and says, “They're going to try to stage with a retreat soon. We need to pin them the fuck down before they get away. I'm not leaving Tobi with any soldiers at all if I can help it.”

Han nods, turning back to the battle. A hesitation, and he says, “Help with the Deva Path. I'll assist Momochi and Yagura.”

That’s the best division of labor, so Kurama doesn’t bother replying, just ducks around the big man and heads for his former jinchuuriki at a run. She’s visibly getting frustrated, Chains not quite enough to hold him, but the Path isn’t managing to advance, either. It’s a stalemate, and without the five other Paths to share line of sight, the Deva Path is just a resurrected corpse with the ability to toss gravity around.

In a matchup like that, Kurama’s money is honestly on Kushina.

Still, there’s nothing saying he can't speed things up a bit. Launching himself up and over Kushina’s head, he drops down between the Deva Path and the cliff, balanced lightly on top of the rocks. An instant of will and fire curls around him, shaping itself into a dragon, and Kushina laughs, bright and vicious. Her Chains stab forward, like they’re aiming to tear right through the Deva Path’s chest, and in the same moment Kurama sends his jutsu whirling out, curling around Yahiko’s body to cut off all avenues of escape.
“You interfere on the path to peace,” the Path says, deep and warning. “This world tears itself apart, and the only way to halt it is—”

“What, listening to a man whose face you’ve never seen?” Kurama mocks. “Following the orders of a man with his own agenda? Yeah, you make a convincing argument, all right. Tell me, you ever choke on all that hypocrisy?”

Kushina giggles, incongruous against the backdrop of her bloodthirsty grin. “I don’t know, little brother,” she muses. “Maybe he’s used to it by now. Still, that’s a big mouthful, isn’t it? Kind of makes me wonder—”

“Stop right there,” Kurama cuts in almost desperately. “Sage, that is not something I fucking want to hear. Keep your dirty jokes to yourself.”

Kushina blows him a kiss and gives him a wink. “I didn’t say anything! That was all you.”

Kurama gives her a dark look, shoving down the flicker of amusement in his chest. “Focus. And—who the fuck said I was younger?”

If the Deva Path had expressions, Kurama is fairly certain he’d look exasperated right about now. As it is, he takes three quick steps to the side and raises his hands. “If you can’t be convinced of our task, I have no further need of you,” he intones, and Nagato is always a dramatic asshole, but Kurama’s pretty sure that this takes the prize, because there’s no way—

Oh.

“Shit,” he snarls, and throws himself at Kushina, grabbing her around the waist and hurling them back towards the others even as the Deva Path brings his hands together in a ringing clap. He spreads them, palms opening, and a sphere of impenetrable darkness rises, drifting up to obscure the sun.

“Chibaku Tensei,” the Deva Path says, and presses his hands together.

The world trembles, shudders—

Cracks.
LIV: Surquedry

Chapter Notes

You get this two days early, since I’m leaving on a brief vacation on Tuesday. Hopefully I’ll have some time to write and will manage to get the next chapter up, but it might be delayed, sorry!

[surquedry /ˈsɜrkwɛdri/ Overweening pride; arrogance; presumption; insolence. From Old French surcuidier “to presume” from sur “over” + cuidier “to think”, from Latin cogitare “to think”.]

“That’s…Nagato?” Sakumo asks, faintly skeptical, but his hands are still gentle as he lets Orochimaru slide to the ground, good shoulder braced against the trunk of a tree.

Orochimaru gives the man a halfhearted glare, annoyed by the doubt. “I assure you, Hatake, even if he’s crippled, he will still be one of the most dangerous enemies—”

“It’s not that,” Sakumo interrupts, though he keeps his voice low. His eyes flicker back towards the clearing, almost out of sight from their position. “He’s bleeding from the nose and mouth. Any other shinobi, I’d say they were too close to chakra exhaustion to survive for more than another hour or so.”

Eyes narrowing, Orochimaru runs through all the situations he knows of that might lead to Nagato overexerting himself to that extent. Not Rinne Tensei—that would wither Nagato as he completed it, feeding on his life if he tried to preform it without the necessary chakra. All of his other abilities are channeled through the Paths, though, and Orochimaru doesn’t have a complete knowledge of them anyway. He had attempted to find out, because the Rinnegan was the biggest draw as far as joining the Akatsuki was concerned, but Nagato was unforthcoming.

“I don’t know what he’s attempting,” he confesses, and it’s bitter. Orochimaru hates little more than not knowing something. “It will likely not end well for those fighting him, however.”

Sakumo doesn’t waver, simply nods and rises to his feet, drawing his tantō from its sheath on his back. He weighs it in his hand for a moment, then says, as if it’s an afterthought, “Thank you for recreating this. I’d feel naked without it.”

Orochimaru snorts, but keeping his eyes open is too much effort at this point. He lets his head drop to rest against the trunk, and says, “I had hoped it would jog your memory if Uzumaki’s seal failed. Willpower has never been something you’ve lacked, Hatake.”

A wry, bitter smile twists Sakumo's face, just visible under the veil of Orochimaru’s lashes, and he doesn’t answer. “How far?” he asks instead. “You said I needed to remove him, but what's the minimum necessary distance?”

That, at least, is something Orochimaru has had more than enough exposure to judge. “Over a mile at least. More, if you want the Paths to collapse rather than simply lose their abilities. I’d recommend
more, as otherwise he’ll simply call them back to him.”

Sakumo nods, takes a breath, and reaches up as if he’s going to touch the hitai-ate he’s no longer wearing. His fingers freeze, curling ineffectually, but he shakes himself and asks, “You’ll be all right?”

“Go, Hatake,” Orochimaru hisses, exasperated, and it makes Sakumo cast him a crooked, sideways smile before he leaps forward with a flicker of blazing white chakra. There’s a surprised cry, a clang, a burst of chakra that sends heat washing over everything. Orochimaru is in no position to see anything, unfortunately, but when the sounds abruptly cease with a scatter of whirling leaves he leans his head back against the trunk, grimly satisfied.

The bleeding from his wounds is slowing, even if he doesn’t have quite the skill necessary to regrow skin. If he had even slightly more mobility, this would be the perfect chance to escape; there are no eyes on him, no enemies close by. Everyone is an enemy now, though Orochimaru supposes not all that much has changed. The masks have been stripped away, that’s all. He’s stopped playing, and it makes him angry, furious—so close to his goal, so painfully close, and now it’s turned to dust a heartbeat before his fingers can close around it.

He’s just about to close his eyes when the ground starts to shake.

No time for dwelling, he tells himself, getting a hand on the trunk and taking a careful breath. Shinobi can only run so fast—even if Nagato isn’t fighting back, which he undoubtedly is, it will take a few minutes for Sakumo to get him out of range. And in the meantime, whatever jutsu he was attempting will be more than powerful enough to—

Stones are rising, slow and stately, towards a black sphere that blots out the sun.

The fact that Orochimaru isn’t aware of the nature of this technique doesn’t keep him from recognizing that it’s likely a devastating one. Moreover, a delay of this long in using it…clearly Nagato has been holding it in reserve. Which means that it’s a final play, either an endgame or a last resort, and seeing as Madara’s aim is to capture the jinchuuriki, it’s almost certainly meant to assist in that.

Damn it, Orochimaru thinks, curling his fingers into the bark. Painfully slow, carefully deliberate, he gets first one knee under him, then the other, and cautiously pushes to his feet. The lightning bolt of pain the motion brings with it almost drives him back down, breathless and dizzy, but he forces himself upright anyway.

For a moment, he considers hiding himself, waiting out the result of this battle and seeing which way the wind turns. Between two Uzumaki and Uchiha Madara, he can’t quite say who will win, but if he simply lets them have it out, he can react accordingly when the dust settles.

Of course, that doesn’t account for the fact that Madara considers him a traitor, or that Sakumo might not have told Kushina about how he got the control seal to begin with. That’s likely no longer an option, no matter how tempting the idea of sliding back into place so easily might be.

(What do you think Nawaki would say if he saw you now? His beloved teacher, trying to destroy Konoha? He’d be heartbroken, Tsunade whispers in his head, and in that moment he hates her more than he has since she disappeared into the night and left Konoha—left him—behind.)

Well. Looking at things logically, there’s only one real choice. You’ve set your feet on this path, so keep going, Jiraiya always told him when he faltered learning a jutsu or a kata. Unhelpful advice, aggravating, but…strangely useful now, Orochimaru will admit, and he lets go of the tree, takes one
wavering step forward, and doesn’t fall. There’s little chance he can reach Sakumo in time to warn him, to stop Nagato’s jutsu, but trying loses him nothing but time.

Running footsteps, incautious with haste, make him freeze in his tracks.

Before he can so much as turn, Konan bursts into the clearing, dark cloak flaring like wings behind her. She falters when she sees him, eyes flickering over his ragged hair, his blood-covered skin, the gaping wounds he hasn’t managed to close. Comprehension is just a moment behind, with contempt on its heels, and she draws up, expression deadly with implacable intent.

“Are you going to make me go through you, Orochimaru?” she asks, bland as if she doesn’t care about his answer either way.

“Are you in a hurry, my dear?” he counters, and the flirtatious lilt he gives the words is carefully practiced, engineered to unnerve.

It makes Konan's lip curl faintly, though after so many months together she must realize it’s only for show. “You’re not going to be able to stop me,” she says, eyeing his wounds, and Orochimaru very carefully doesn’t grimace. She’s right, unfortunately; any fast moves at all will reopen them, and he’s not arrogant enough to think he can fight Konan without quite a lot of effort. Nagato might outshine her on the battlefield, but she’s one of the world’s most dangerous kunoichi, and Orochimaru isn’t about to forget that.

Thankfully, Orochimaru hardly needs to fight her himself. He tests his chakra, finds bits of it trickling back. Not much, not enough for the massive and destructive jutsus he usually favors, and Konan can probably sense that. But…enough. Maybe.

Orochimaru is willing to stake his life on it, since he has to.

He lets his power rise, just a trickle, and pools it in his hands as he raises his arms. A wince almost escapes as torn flesh pulls, but he forces it down and gives Konan his best sly smile. “Would you care to test that theory, little girl?”

Buried indignation surges, and Konan's skin seems to fracture, paper peeling away to swirl around her. “Move,” she snaps, and the papers fold themselves into shuriken and hurtle forward.

It’s as simple as breathing to shove all of the gathered chakra into the tattoo on his left arm as he drops, and Orochimaru slams his palm against the ground with all the force he can muster. Manda is going to eat you one of these days, Kabuto always tells him, entirely unimpressed, but he doesn’t know the snake summons like Orochimaru does, hasn’t spent years training beside him. Orochimaru doesn’t fear his oldest summons, and never will.

Manda is vicious, undeniably a bastard, but then, so is Orochimaru. They’re a matched set in all the ways that matter.

The bloom of thick, ash-white smoke is enough to cover the massive snake’s first lunge, but Orochimaru can feel it in his bones as Manda moves, can track his smooth slide as he snaps his head forward, mouth open and fangs bared. There’s a cry, startled and lost to movement, and in a rush the smoke shreds, a flurry of knife-edged origami scattering it. Orochimaru laughs a little to himself at the sight of Manda bearing down on Konan, even as he slumps back against the tree again, strength spent.

The world spins, and he closes his eyes to block it out. Other senses are more trustworthy right now, so he focuses on those, on the pull of Nagato's jutsu in the sky, on Manda’s chakra, on Konan’s.
Humans are unevenly matched against summons, even skilled humans, so he doesn’t worry. Besides, this is more of a distraction than an actual fight.

“Hey, hey! That’s one damn big snake, made Bee do a double-take!”

Oh, lovely.

The cavalry.

Even if he wasn’t the Akatsuki’s spymaster, Orochimaru would be well able to recognize the Raikage’s brother and Kumo’s elder jinchuuriki. Killer Bee is distinctive, and not just for the way he talks. Gritting his teeth, he forces himself up again, and snaps, “Get the girl, not the snake, fool! She’s with Akatsuki!”

“Watch your words, ‘cause I’m no fool! Not worth much coming from Akatsuki’s tool!” Bee tells him, dodging Konan’s paper kunai, then slamming his hands together. The Hachibi’s chakra crashes over them in a wave, settling like a cloak around Bee’s body, and he grins. “Got a hunch and followed her here. They’re up to something, that much is clear.”

Orochimaru has a headache, and he’s fairly certain it’s not solely from blood loss. “Then stop rapping and finish her. There's no time!”

“Are you helping him?” a new voice demands, and in a blur of green chakra an Uchiha boy lands just behind Manda, pointing at Orochimaru like he can’t believe his eyes.

It takes effort for Orochimaru not to roll his eyes. “Clearly,” he snaps, and that ridiculousness, so much like Jiraiya’s, is familiar enough to spark recognition. Uchiha Shisui, graced with one of the most powerful manifestations of the Sharingan, a very clever mind, and all the composure of a particularly frazzled ferret.

There’s a reason Orochimaru always gravitated towards Itachi, even beyond his brilliance.

“I’m so confused,” Shisui laments, even as he pulls a length of ninja wire out.

This time Orochimaru really does roll his eyes. “The jinchuuriki has her,” he says sharply. “In the forest—Hatake Sakumo has Pein's main body. Help him before that jutsu completes!”

“Like hell,” Shisui spits, and in a whirl of leaves he’s gone, too fast for any eye to catch. Konan appears briefly, leaping away from Bee, and fire sparks. Shisui shimmers into view in the midst of the blaze, sweeping it around him like a tide before the moon, and it crashes into the kunoichi with nearly as much force. Bee calls something bright and enthusiastic, but Orochimaru doesn’t catch it, even as heavy-hot bijuu chakra surges.

Instead, all of his attention is on the second figure in an ANBU uniform, who drops into view barely three paces from him.

Tenzō stares at him for an endless second, dark eyes full of something that Orochimaru can’t quite identify. Fury, maybe, or fear, or perhaps something else entirely. Then, deliberately steady, he asks, “Which direction?”

How unnerving, Orochimaru thinks, distantly bemused, and smiles a little to himself as he resettles his shoulder against the tree, letting it take his weight. His mouth’s mocking slant is entirely self-directed as he remembers the roots that held him down in front of Kisame’s sword. Revenge, then, or perhaps something akin to dark justice.
Orochimaru has no illusions that his chances of making it out of this battle alive are anything but exceedingly slim. This is just further confirmation.

“Three degrees northeast, then straight ahead,” he answers, and when there’s a sharply indrawn breath he opens his eyes again to find Itachi at Tenzō’s side, regarding him warily. “Oh, don’t bother, Uchiha. I want to see Pein stopped just as much as you do, especially since we’re all in range of that jutsu at the moment.”

Tenzō turns away, glancing back towards the battle, and then takes a breath. “Let’s go, Itachi,” he orders, and heads for the large oak at a run. Itachi gives Orochimaru one more wary glance, and just to be spiteful Orochimaru summons most of his remaining strength and flutters his fingers at the boy like one of the dreadful heroines in Jiraiya’s novels.

“You heard the man,” he says, half-mocking.

“He is,” Itachi says, and the words are flat but full of conviction. “He’s a man, not an experiment.”

Orochimaru’s eyes widen, and he blinks, caught off guard. Seeing that, Itachi nods once, apparently satisfied by his reaction, and quickly follows Tenzō.

A quick glance shows that Manda is still intact, that Bee and Shisui are pushing Konan back, so Orochimaru allows himself to slump. His head is spinning, and he doesn’t bother to fight it. Too much blood loss, and even medical ninjutsu can’t replenish that great an amount so quickly.

He chuckles a little to himself, a rasp of sound deep in his throat. “What a naïve child,” he says to no one in particular, and casts a glance to the orb of fractured earth forming in the sky above them. Hollow, he thinks, just able to make out the bloom of heavy chakra that can only belong to jinchuuriki. A hollow creation of stone and chakra to trap the bijuu and their hosts, and any enemies that might be remaining. There’s no use in saying Nagato isn’t clever, is there? It’s a plan worthy of Madara himself.

But it’s not going to succeed.

Orochimaru presses his palm against the winter-green grass, sends just a trickle of chakra into his summoning tattoo. The whirl of smoke that rises is smaller, easily dismissed amidst all the dust the others are raising. The snake that appears to curl around his hand is deep tan with a pattern of broken chevrons edged in black, and a darker brown head. She’s small enough to be overlooked, and Orochimaru runs a light finger over her skull.

“Go carefully,” he tells her. “A handful of bites should be enough with you, my dear.”

The snake slides around his wrist, between his fingers, and drops to the ground. She’s almost invisible against the earth, and Orochimaru chuckles. He thinks of Konan, dry-paper-dust-flowers-rain to his senses, and the taipan flicks her tongue out as if she can taste the same in the air. It must register, because she turns and vanishes into the grass, and even Orochimaru can’t mark her passage when he looks.

Shinobi, he’s come to realize over the years, always underestimate the dangers of the world around them, as if they’re the most dangerous creatures in existence. Hubris, and Orochimaru certainly isn’t immune to that, but it’s still amusing to witness.

There’s chakra raging beyond the cliff, weighty and harsh and corrosive, and a part of Orochimaru wants to go and look, study, observe. Jinchuuriki fighting is something unusual, and sure to be interesting, even if they’re only fighting the pull of a jutsu. He’s tired, though; what little bits of
chakra he managed to gather are all but exhausted now, and all the scraps remaining he’s pushed towards healing. The tree is starting to creak and shudder, fragments of earth and stone pulling out of the cliff on either side of them as the orb above grows. There’s no one to shout a warning to, no way to move in time unless he calls Manda back and orders the snake to take him to safety.

The thought is tempting. So very appealing, given Orochimaru’s goals, but—

He’s petty. He’s petty and angry and thwarted, and if his snake can kill Konan, if Nagato can be captured, if Madara can be undercut here, Orochimaru will be viciously glad and spitefully satisfied. And for him, that will be victory enough.

“Well, fuck,” Zabuza says, drifting up past Kurama. He’s upside-down, sword in one hand, Haku tucked under his other arm, and looks vaguely affronted to find himself in the grips of the new planetoid’s immense gravity.

Kurama rolls his eyes, even though no one is looking. Behind him, Kushina is cursing, trying to get away from the pull, but the entire section of earth she was standing on it rising. Her Chains thud into the ground, only to immediately lose their grip as that starts to rise as well. Even Han looks a little perturbed, hanging on to his kasa as he’s dragged up off the battlefield.

Chibaku Tensei is a village-ender when Nagato uses it, though, or a trap at best. It’s nowhere near on par with the Sage’s, or even Sasuke’s version of the technique. Naruto beat it once without full control of his power, and Kurama’s hardly about to do any less.

“You think this will do anything?” he snarls at the Deva Path, who doesn’t waver as it meets his eyes. “You really think this will hold me?”

Rinnegan eyes narrow, and the Path takes a step back as the ground before him fractures. “It will hold,” he says simply.

Kurama laughs, and if there’s a bitter edge to it, it’s from the memory of the last time he saw this technique up close. Naruto had almost broken then, had still been reeling from the destruction of Konoha and the deaths of those he loved. Kurama had goaded him, pushed and pushed and prodded until Naruto had reached for the seal himself, ready to tear it down and allow Kurama free rein.

Minato’s chakra impression was the only thing that stopped him, then. A return of conscience, a slap to the head, and he’d ended up making Nagato an ally even with so many deaths between them.

Kurama isn’t Naruto and never can be. He isn’t about to lay out a welcome mat to those who hurt him, not without a lot of other incentives, and he’s definitely not about to hold back for fear of hurting his enemy.

Turning, he leaps from the spur of rock beneath him, but rather than trying to jump back to the ground, no matter how much he wants to pound the Path’s face in, he aims upwards. A strong push, aided by the gravity, and Kurama reaches.

It’s harder to channel the same amounts of chakra that he used to as a bijuu, now that he’s in this body. Human chakra pathways simply aren’t designed for the load, and while Naruto’s body has hosted him since birth and is better for it than most, it’s still an effort.

Not enough of one to stop Kurama, though.
He pulls and twists, molds and balances. Eight parts positive black chakra, two parts negative white, and they swirl together in the air before him. Kurama doesn't make any attempt to contain it to a hand gesture, doesn’t try to keep it small because of collateral damage. He focuses all of his power on the bijūdama, lets it build until it’s taller than he is, a seething warp of chakra ready to destroy. The strain of it is noticeable, and this might be his body now but that doesn’t mean he can use it like he would his old.

One blow, he tells himself, and snarls, “If you're in my way, move.”

Five seconds for anyone in the path to hear, another three for them to get away, and Kurama takes a breath. No way to internalize this bijūdama, not at his current size, but that’s fine. Some of his siblings have never bothered, and he follows their example, hanging on until the moment he’d have swallowed it before, and then letting go.

Naruto was able to interrupt Sasuke's Chibaku Tensei as it formed with a Rasengan. Nagato's hasn’t finished yet, the black-glowing orb still visible, pulling everything into its orbit. The bijūdama is no different; Kurama doesn’t even have to aim for the core. All he does is release it, and it flies upwards in a streak of violet-black, arrowing straight for the center.

The impact is like a detonation, like a sun imploding. Light flares, magnesium-bright, and destruction ripples out like a wave to shatter stone. The force of it hits like a hammer, throwing Kurama back to slam into the fractured wall of the canyon, and stones rain down on top of him. A hard leap carries him to the side, out of the path, and he doesn’t bother pausing. Breath comes hard, his lungs tight with spent effort, but wherever Nagato is he’s likely in far worse shape. Any more, and—

“You're more powerful than I anticipated,” the Path says darkly, and ducks Kurama’s claws as they swipe at his face.

Kurama bares his teeth, leaps to the side of a ripple of gravity, and takes advantage of the five seconds Nagato needs to recharge the technique to shove his way in and slam an elbow at the body’s throat. “You have no fucking idea how powerful I am,” he snarls as the Deva Path reels away, clutching his throat. Another bijūdama, this time small enough to fit in his palm, but he thinks of Naruto's Rasengan and lets it spin, faster and faster as he thrusts his hand forward and slams it into the Path’s chest.

Dead flesh ruptures, and in the same moment all fragments of Nagato’s power disappear from the piercings with their black receiving rods. Yahiko’s body crumples, devoid of all traces of life, to sprawl at Kurama’s feet.

For a long moment, the only sound on the battlefield is the clatter of stones falling like light rain. Kurama feels his breath rasp in his throat and pulls back, coughing to clear it. There's no blood on his hand, because long-dead corpses don’t bleed, but it’s satisfying regardless. An enemy beaten, and if not the way Naruto would have then at least Kurama’s way, and that’s good enough for him.

Shinobi sandals crunch lightly over the new layer of gravel on the road, and Kurama glances up, shoving his hair out of his eyes to find Kakashi approaching. He doesn’t look all that much worse for wear, though he’s definitely a bit more ruffled than before, and he glances down at Yahiko’s body with cool assessment.

“Is he going to get back up?” he asks, and the words are wry but the tone is serious.

Kurama snorts, then leans down to press a finger to the chakra receivers. They’re truly dormant right now, though, not a trace of power in them beyond the faintest echo, so he shakes his head. “Not going to be a problem. Either Konan grabbed Nagato and got the hell out of here or someone
managed to kill the bastard.” With a faint grimace, he considers burning Yahiko’s body, but Jiraiya will probably take offense. Still, he doesn’t have to be stupid about it. He looks for Kushina, who managed to land in a tree, and calls, “Hey, Tomato!”

Behind him, Kakashi winces.

“Fuck you,” Kushina calls back, though she sounds cheerful enough. “What do you want, little brother?”

Kurama wants to punch her. Instead, he very carefully unclamps his jaw and growls, “Can you seal this body like you did Tobi’s? I don’t want Pein trying to use it again.”

“Isn’t he dead now?” Kushina asks, but she drops down from the branches and comes over, quickly enough that it’s clear she recognizes it as a possibility.

“He was dead before,” Kurama tells her dryly, then takes stock. Zabuza and Haku are on the far side of the canyon, with Zabuza bent over Haku and offering a hand. Yagura and Han both ended up along the other cliff, Han in a crater and Yagura on top of a fallen shard of stone, and all around them the canyon is now much less narrow pass and much more new valley.

No one’s dead who wasn’t like that already, though, so that probably counts as a success.

“I’ll find the other ones too, then,” Kushina says, wrinkling her nose a little as she surveys the field. “Well. I’ll try.”

Green light sweeps over the edge of the cliff above them, then drops, and Shisui appears, touching down in front of Kakashi. One staggering step and then he steadies himself, and says brightly, “Captain! You’re still alive! That’s awesome. I hate changing commanders halfway through the year.”

Kakashi doesn’t quite roll his eyes, but it looks like he wants to. “Shisui. Where exactly did you go?”

Shisui gives him a cheerful smile, though there’s something dark beneath it. “Killer Bee took off after Konan, so we followed, thinking she’d lead us to Nagato. Orochimaru intercepted her and tried to kill her, though, so we ended up helping with that. She got bitten by a snake and then managed to get away—she can make some kind of camouflage with her paper that even the Sharingan can’t see through.”

“Nagato?” Kurama asks sharply, stepping around Kakashi’s shoulder to glare at the Uchiha. “Did he get away too?”

“No,” Shisui answers, meeting his stare without flinching. “Hatake Sakumo, Tenzō, and Itachi got him. He doesn’t look overly healthy at the moment, though. And by that, I mean he looks like the next heavy breeze is going to make him start coughing up blood again and die.”

*Good riddance*, Kurama doesn’t say. It does offer the problem of how they’re going to cart Nagato in his walker all the way back to Konoha, though. They could just kill him here, or take his eyes, but somehow Kurama doesn’t think Jiraiya will allow either of those things. It makes him scowl, considering options.

“Shisui?” Kakashi asks quietly, before Kurama can say anything.

Apparently understanding what he means, Shisui tips one shoulder in a shrug. “I can do it if you want me to, Captain. We’d have to wake him up again and that’s definitely a risk, but he’s a captive, and all I need is a few seconds of eye contact.”
“What?” Kurama asks, faintly mystified. “All respect to your magic eye jutsus, but I don’t think a genjutsu will—”

“Yeah, normally,” Shisui agrees cheerfully, and his eyes slide into scarlet and midnight, spinning slowly in a way that raises every hair on the back of Kurama’s neck. He takes three steps back before he can stop himself, and has to swallow the growl that bubbles up in his throat. Shisui blinks at him for one moment, then rolls his eyes, and says, “I'm not going to use it on you. Kotoamatsukami means I can turn Pein into an ally just by telling him he doesn’t want to fight Konoha anymore.”

That really doesn’t help put Kurama at ease. He remembers all too clearly the first time he faced the Freak Squad, Tenzō dragging him to his knees and Shisui about to use his Sharingan on him. Only Fuji’s appearance had saved him from that, and to find out that it wasn’t just basic control but actual fucking brainwashing—

Kurama takes another two steps back and feels no shame in it.

“Fuck,” he growls. “Fair warning, Brainwash Boy, you activate those near me again and I’m going to fucking pull them right out of your skull, got it?”

With a yelp, Shisui leaps out of possible grabbing range, all but ducking around behind Kakashi as he puts the older shinobi between them. “What? Hey, no, come on, you were done being terrifying to me, that is not fair!”

“That is totally fair,” Kurama counters, bristling. “I've warned you, and I hate the Sharingan more than any other fucking manifestation of chakra, got it? Don’t use it near me.”

“And here is where I remember yet again that you threatened to eat our corpses,” Shisui complains with a theatrical shudder. “I've met other jinchuuriki now, and Han is seven feet tall, so why the hell do I feel like you're still the scariest one?”

Kurama bares his teeth right back. “Because sometimes you actually have sense, Uchiha.”

Kakashi sighs a little bit. “Maa, maa,” he soothes as he steps fully between them. “You're an ally, Kurama, so it’s not a threat to you. Shisui, how likely is Pein to stay unconscious?”

A little warily, Shisui straightens, though he keeps one eye on Kurama. “Between the near-chakra exhaustion and your dad hitting him with a paralysis seal, pretty likely.”

“Then we have time to decide,” Kakashi concludes, though his expression goes minutely tighter at the mention of Sakumo. “Guard him, and if he wakes up, take any necessary measures to suppress him.”

“Yes, sir.” Shisui salutes, then disappears in a blur.

Kakashi doesn’t quite slump, but it’s close. His eyes close for half a second, and then he reaches up and pulls his hitai-ate back down over his Sharingan. Kurama studies him for a second, then looks away, back over his shoulder.

Crouched down by Yahiko’s body, Kushina is watching them—watching Kakashi in particular, her expression equal parts determined and sad. She rises to her feet and takes a step forward, then another, reaching out.

“You grew up, Kakashi,” she says gently, and Kakashi visibly flinches. Kushina ignores it, curling a hand around his shoulder and tugging a little, and as if she’s an irresistible force Kakashi turns.
Slowly, reluctantly, he meets her gaze, and Kushina says lightly, “I should punch you, you know. I saw Kisame kill that clone and I thought it was you.”

“I'm good at surviving,” Kakashi says, equally light, and Kurama wonders if he’s the only that can hear the thread of despite myself that’s buried under the words. Kakashi pauses, though, clearly debating something, and glances up. He looks at Kushina, and then at Kurama, and takes a breath.

“I'm sorry,” he says quietly.

Kushina blinks, drawing back a little, and frowns at him. “For what? Kakashi, if you're blaming yourself for not saving us, or for what happened that night—”

“No,” Kakashi interrupts, and then winces faintly. “Not just—that isn’t what it’s for. I—for Naruto. For what I should have done for him, but didn’t. I abandoned him, even though I knew you would have wanted me to—”

“You were fourteen, brat. I would have liked to have you raise him, but I wouldn’t have expected it,” Kushina huffs. “Just being around him…” She must catch something in Kakashi’s face, because she trails off, eyes narrowing. “Kakashi?”

“He doesn’t know,” Kakashi says, and that tone might pass for bland to someone who doesn’t know him, but Kurama can hear the strain beneath the surface. “Until two weeks ago, he didn’t even know my name. A month ago he didn’t even know yours. Or Minato-sensei’s. Naruto didn’t even know he was a jinchuuriki until Kurama found him.”

“Hey—” Kurama starts, taking a step forward, because he knows exactly how this is going to end. He’s not nearly fast enough, though.

Before he can even get another word out, Kushina rears back, balls up a fist, and punches Kakashi square in the nose.
LV: Furibund

Chapter Notes

There have been mixed reactions to Kushina punching Kakashi in the last chapter, and that’s cool. Your opinion is your own. I will say, in my opinion, Kakashi has very few excuses for the neglect he showed Naruto. Hokage’s gag order aside, Kakashi is a genius shinobi, which implies a certain amount of cunning. He also had multiple chances to even act friendly to Naruto later in the timeline, with few, if any, consequences, but he didn’t. I’m not a fan of his actions, as much as I love his character. Of course, he’s not the only one, and that will absolutely come up.

[furibund /ˈfyʊərə, ˈbɛnd/, full of fury; rage; anger; choleric, irate, having the propensity to be furious. From Latin furibundus, from furō, “rave, rage” + -bundus, from Proto-Indo-European *bʰuH-, “to become, to grow”.]

Kurama is surrounded by children.

It would be fine if that simply referred to the four jinchuuriki who have yet to hit puberty, but unfortunately, it’s expanded to include pretty much all of the other people around him as well.

Case in point: Kushina and Kakashi are both sulking.

It’s conceivable that Kurama could take the initiative here and act like an adult. He could possibly step in, continue Naruto’s legacy of sticking his nose into anything even vaguely resembling a problem, but to be completely honest, Kurama would rather eat mud. If they want to dance around problems and ignore them and stew in their own angst, it’s none of Kurama’s business anyway.

“Humans are stupid,” he says with conviction.

Fū, who is currently sprawled out with her head on his thigh, giggles a little. “Does that mean you think we’re stupid, Kurama-nii?” she asks, curious rather than offended.

Kurama rolls his eyes at her. “You don’t count. Chōmei might be an overgrown bumblebee, but she’s a bijuu. She’s got at least a little common sense, and it’s infected you by proxy.”

“Me too?” Naruto wants to know, leaning forward where he’s perched on Kurama’s shoulders, hands fistled in Kurama’s hair. He pulls a little, and Kurama grunts at him in warning. Instantly, he loosens his grip, though he doesn’t stop trying to peer at Kurama’s face upside-down.


Naruto cheers happily, slipping a little to the side in his enthusiasm. Since this is hardly the first time it’s happened, Kurama catches him with ease, pushing him back upright without disturbing Gaara, who’s asleep in the crook of his arm. Naruto doesn’t appear to notice, letting Kurama shove at him as he says cheerfully, “I like being like other people! Kurama-nii, when we get back to Konoha we should build a big house so we can all live there, me an’ you and Mom and Yugito-nee and Fū-nee and Gaara and Fuji-nee and Momiji!”
Yugito smiles up at him, even as she drags Fū’s brush through her long hair. “It would be nice to share a house,” she says a touch wistfully. “I’ve never done that before.”

“Me neither,” Naruto agrees. “The guy with the creepy face says he can make houses with his jutsus! We should ask him to do that for us!”

Kurama assumes he means Tenzō, and he has to snort softly at the name. Some things really never change. “Your mom might not go for that,” he says, and the thought twinges, but he shoves the feeling down. “She might want you all to herself, kit.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then Naruto huffs. “Well, she can’t have me,” he declares, and the hands in Kurama’s hair tighten a little bit. “You’re my Kurama-nii, so she needs to share.”

That’s heartening to hear. It would be more heartening if Kushina agreed, but then, Kushina is currently brooding under the cover of trying to redesign a chakra suppression seal that Orochimaru won’t be able to wriggle out of and isn’t paying attention to their conversation.

(Kurama kind of wants to tell her it’s futile; they might have managed to capture Orochimaru when he was half-dead of chakra exhaustion and blood loss, but Tsunade fixed the latter in a fit of panic, and the hours since their fight have gone a long way towards fixing the former. Besides, the Orochimaru he remembers managed to survive three World Wars and a good portion of Kaguya’s apocalypse, and slither out of any sort of justice at all over the solid eighty years he lived.

Besides, Kabuto is still definitely a player in this game, and that’s one game piece Kurama is going to make a point of waving in front of Orochimaru’s face the moment Jiraiya stops hovering over his old teammate and goes back to mourning over Nagato. Favors owed by one of the most powerful shinobi in the Elemental Countries are nothing to sneeze at, and Orochimaru is going to be a hell of a lot more useful out of Konoha with one ear to the ground.

Besides, Kurama may have had no love for Sasuke, but…Naruto did. And for all the Uchiha brat had an unfailingly complicated relationship with his mentor, Orochimaru was still his teacher, and in the end Orochimaru managed to help them more than anyone thought he would, for Sasuke’s sake. Maybe it doesn’t have any bearing here and now, but Kurama can’t just forget about it.)

“We’re not going to let anyone take us away,” Fū says, just as stubborn as Naruto, wrapping her arms around Kurama’s elbow as if daring the world to drag them apart. “Even you can’t make us leave, Kurama-nii!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kurama grouses, shaking her off and ruffling her hair. “You say that like Chōmei wouldn’t make my life living hell if I let you out of my sight.”

Fū laughs, bright and happy. “Did you see me fly?” she asks enthusiastically. “She let me borrow her wings! It’s so cool! I don’t mind being a jinchuuriki if I get to fly like that.”

Kurama smiles a little, crooked even if he really does mean it. He’s glad, but at the same time it makes him want to find everyone in her village and punch them in the face.

And, on that note…

Kakashi is ostensibly patrolling the perimeter of the camp with Tenzō and Itachi, keeping an eye out for Konan and Sasori, who managed to escape Mei and Rōshi at the last moment. It’s a fancy way of saying he’s brooding in the trees, though, at least in Kurama’s opinion. Tsunade keeps staring hawkishly at his black eyes and spectacularly bruised nose, but he’s already waved off her offers of healing twice, and Kurama’s fairly certain he’s not going to change his mind any time soon.
Humans are really stupid, he thinks, exasperated.

Of course, Kakashi isn’t the only one who’s going to end up punched, or worse. Kushina is likely going to go on a damned rampage the moment she learns what Naruto's childhood was like, or Kurama doesn’t know her at all. The Sandaime in particular has an avalanche thundering down at his skull, and he doesn’t even know it yet.

In Kurama’s opinion, Kakashi deserved it. Naruto might never have mentioned anything in the last timeline, but Kurama was privy to his innermost thoughts; he always wondered, in the very darkest, loneliest moments, why Kakashi had never said anything, never approached him, never changed anything even when he was Naruto’s jounin instructor. Kurama understands grief, now, even if he didn’t before; he can see Kakashi’s reasoning, but that hardly means he has to like it, or even agree with it.

Kakashi at fourteen, having just lost absolutely everyone he loved, was in no fit state to have anything to do with a newborn infant. Kakashi at twenty, though? Kakashi the ANBU captain with a solid team and certain loyalties? Even if the Hokage discouraged it, even if it had to be done in secret, he should have approached Naruto. Should have made some effort to befriend him, if only in the memory of his parents and the kindness they gave Kakashi when he was orphaned. That would have been a good stepping stone, had Kakashi done it.

But he didn’t. He stayed in the shadows, drowning in memories and grief, and Naruto was the one to suffer for it.

Naruto is worth more than an existence as a shadow of regret and guilt.

Taking a breath, Kurama drags his irritation back under control. Of course, even if he tried to stop her punching Kakashi, Kurama will have no compunctions about sitting back and laughing his ass off when Kushina turns her wrath on the rest of Konoha. Kakashi might have deserved it, but they sure as hell deserve it a whole lot more.

“Kurama-nii?” Yugito asks, watching him with sharp eyes. Kurama blinks out of his thoughts, meeting her gaze, and offers a reassuring smile.

“I'm fine, kitten. How are those scratches?”

Yugito glances down, distracted, and sets the brush on her knee so that she can study her hands. The chakra-infused wood from Sasori’s puppets managed to scrape off a bit of skin, but with the number she decimated, Kurama isn’t surprised. Still, she flexes her fingers without a problem, and says reassuringly, “I'm fine, Kurama-nii. It was just superficial. Matatabi fixed it in a few minutes.”

“Good.” The word comes out a little gruffer than Kurama intended, but Yugito doesn’t seem bothered. She hesitates, weighing her options, and then offers him the brush a little shyly.

“Would you mind?” she asks. “I like the way you braid it.”

It’s easy enough to shift Gaara to his lap instead of the crook of his arm, and Fū is mostly out of the way already. Kurama takes the brush as Yugito twists around to put her back to him, and pulls the blonde strands free of her shoulders. He doesn’t point out that she’s done most of it herself, and hardly needs his assistance, because he’s finding that he really doesn’t mind.

Somewhere, somewhen, his Naruto is definitely laughing at him.

“When are we going to get to Konoha?” Fū asks, one orange-gold eye cracked open to watch the slide of the hairbrush, the other closed. When Kurama’s elbow glances past her nose, she huffs and
squirms back, shoving her head back into his stomach.

Kurama grunts, more because it neatly doubles as a sound of annoyance than because she’s knocked the wind out of him. “Probably tonight, if Fuji and Momiji don’t mind carrying the invalids.” All of whom are enemies, so he doesn’t think the other shinobi will object to a couple of fox spirits keeping an eye on them.

The pile of fur on Kurama’s left heaves. There's a yelp, an annoyed snarl, a shriek, and Fuji wriggles out of it with a bright, “Of course we don’t, Kurama-sama!”

Momiji, looking a great deal more annoyed and a lot more tired, struggles partly upright from where Fuji knocked him, narrowing his eyes at his sister. “Keep your enthusiasm to yourself,” he huffs. “Some of us were actually useful at banishing the Animal Path’s summons and need to rest.”

“Some of us are credit hogs,” Fuji retorts, her tails bristling. “I totally helped! You can't cast an illusion to save your hide, so I had to save it! More than once!”

“Distraction,” says Momiji primly, “is not the same as banishment.”

With a high, warbling snarl, Fuji lunges for Momiji, crashing into him and bowling him over backwards. Kurama rolls his eyes as they devolve into a wrestling match, and tells Fū, “Probably tonight.”

She laughs at him, because she has no sympathy for all the crap he has to put up with, and nudges her head into his stomach again as he starts braiding Yugito's hair.

“You’ve had practice at this,” Tsunade says, amused, as she settles against one of the trees beside their spot. When Kurama glares at her, she just raises one brow, tips her head at Yugito's braid, and says, “Can it, shortcake.”

Kurama’s glare turns into a scowl, and he ties off the plait with a huff. “Shut up, hag. Are we leaving yet?”

Tsunade's smirk says she sees his offense and finds it amusing. “Soon. Orochimaru is fine to travel now, and there's nothing I can do to help Nagato without shoving a good portion of my chakra into him, which I'm not about to try while he’s an enemy, no matter how many times Jiraiya asks.”

Sensible people make Kurama happy, even when they come wrapped up in annoying packages. Forgiving an enemy is one thing, and he’d gotten used to it over the years with Naruto, who was positively idiotic about some of his opponents. (Though, of course, Kurama probably doesn’t have much of a leg to stand on there, seeing as he was one of the brat’s enemies.) Tsunade is reasonable, though; it’s one of the reasons she made such a good Hokage, and Kurama appreciates it a hell of a lot right now. Not that he’s going to tell her that.

“You're okay with bringing the snake back?” he asks, testing. “Kind of confusing, that you’d overcome that deathly fear of blood for him, and then turn around and shove him at Konoha to be executed.”

Tsunade's mouth tightens, and she looks away. “Orochimaru made his choices,” she says, and it’s halfway to a sigh. “Besides, Sarutobi is wily, and Orochimaru is valuable because of his skills. I doubt it will come to execution.”

It won’t, Kurama is sure, if not for the reason she thinks. Humming a little and hoping it sounds noncommittal, Kurama touches Yugito's arm and tells her, “Done, kitten.”
Against his shoulder, Gaara makes a sleepy noise and curls closer. It takes a minute to adjust him more comfortably, and when Kurama looks up, Tsunade is watching him with a soft sort of amusement. Unsure what else to really do, he glares, and she snorts indelicately.

“Go talk sense into your sister,” she tells Kurama, rising to her feet. “The Hatake brat might have neglected the kid, but Jiraiya and Sarutobi are even more at fault. Make sure she remembers that.”

“Why bother?” Kurama asks crankily. “Once we get to Konoha she’ll realize the list of people she needs to punch is about four feet long and snap out of it on her own.”

Tsunade rolls her eyes at him. “Of course she will, but if you’re dragging me back to that damned village I’d like to be sure it’s going to remain standing for longer than a day, at least while I’m inside it. You might have the temper of a mangy fox with its tail caught in a trap—”

“Excuse you?” Kurama splutters, deeply offended.

Without seeming to notice the interruption, Tsunade breezes on. “—but Kushina's is ten times worse, even for an Uzumaki. So talk to her, shortcake.”

“I hate you,” Kurama tells her, baring his teeth at her. “You're an ugly old hag and when Sarutobi forces you to take the hat, I'm going to laugh at you.”

Her expression shifts from smugly amused to pissed in an instant, and Kurama can see quite clearly in her eyes that she would absolutely be taking a swing at him if he wasn’t covered in little kids.

“Just for that, shortcake,” she growls, “if I ever do go braindead to the point of accepting that damned seat, my first act will be making you my pet jounin. I hope you like running errands for the rest of your life.”

Somehow, as she stalks away she manages to make the snap of her heels across the dirt sound like the beats of a war drum.

“I hate her,” Kurama reiterates, though this time it’s little more than a grumble, and ignores the fact that Fū is laughing, and even Yugito looks suspiciously amused.

“Does that mean you could be a jounin instructor?” Fū asks brightly, and Kurama huffs, putting a hand over her face and gently shoving. It doesn’t stop the laughter, but it should definitely be the thought that counts here.

“Like I want more brats to deal with,” he grumps. “Sage, no.”

“That doesn’t look like talking, shortcake!” Tsunade shouts, warning in her voice.

“Fucking crone!” Kurama snarls back, but he puts a hand on Naruto's foot, resettles Gaara a little more securely, and rolls his eyes. “Sweetheart, I'm going to need that leg.”

Fū huffs a little, but she lets Yugito take her hands and pull her to her feet so that Kurama can stand.

“But I was comfortable,” she protests.

“So was I,” Kurama mutters, and glances up at the boy sitting on his shoulders. “You want to stay with Yugito and Fū, kit? It’s going to be boring unless someone takes a swing at me.”

Naruto makes a face, sliding to the side like he’s going to leap down on his own. “Can you teach me a jutsu, Yugito-nee?” he asks enthusiastically, even as Kurama catches him by the back of his shirt.

Yugito flushes a little, clearly pleased, but glances around them. The makeshift camp is on its way to
being packed up, and they're probably not going to be here much longer. “How about a new punch?” she compromises. “If you add chakra to it, it’s really strong.”

Those are the magic words where Naruto is concerned, and he cheers happily as Kurama sets him on the ground. “Yeah! I'm gonna be the best at it, Yugito-nee!”

Fū laughs, catching Naruto around the waist and lifting him right off his feet, then heaving him over her shoulder. “Then let’s go,” she agrees cheerfully. “Onward to bestness!”

“I don’t think that’s a real word,” Yugito says a little doubtfully. “Why not just greatness?”

“Because greatness isn’t bestness. We definitely want to be best.”

Naruto is squirming, if halfheartedly. “Put me down! I can walk, I can walk!”

“Nope! You’ve been captured!” Fū skips a step. “I'm the evil bandit queen, and you're my prisoner now! You can't escape until the good cat princess teaches you an awesome punch to defeat me.”

Yugito looks very pleased by her new title, and Naruto stops wriggling. “I’ll save the cat princess!” he declares. “And then I’ll be a hero!”

Kurama watches them go, not quite able to fight a smile, and glances down. Gaara is awake, watching him solemnly, but it doesn’t look like he’s in any sort of hurry to let go.

“Sure you want to stay?” he asks. “I might end up yelling.”

“You're not scary, Kurama-nii,” Gaara says gravely, and doesn’t budge.

For a moment, Kurama can't decide whether to be flattered or insulted. Finally, he settles on rolling his eyes, hitches Gaara up higher, and heads for the patch of dirt Kushina is moping all over. There's a seal in front of her, and to Kurama’s eye it looks complete, so he feels absolutely no guilt looming over her and saying, “You're an idiot.”

Kushina gives him a narrow-eyed glare, leaning back and dropping her brush to cross her arms over her chest. “I am not,” she huffs, but it lacks the venom it would normally sport.

Kurama just stares at her, unimpressed. “You punched Kakashi. So what?”

The look Kushina gives him is sour. “So I shouldn’t have had to do it in the first place!”

For a moment, Kurama just stares at her. Then, with a sigh, he sinks down, settling Gaara in his lap, and favors his first jinchuuriki with a flat look.

Kushina glares right back. “You were the one to find Naruto,” she says, and there's a thread of stubbornness to it. “Was he happy?”

It’s easy enough to remember Naruto beneath that tree, perched alone on the swing with his head bowed and his shoulders hunched, blue eyes dim. Kurama’s grip tightens on Gaara before he can really help it, and he refuses to meet Kushina's gaze, not wanting her to see his reaction. “What do you think?” he snaps, and it comes out sharper than he intends.

There's a long moment of silence, and then Kushina lets out a sound that’s a mockery of amusement, without any actual humor behind it. She pulls her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them, and hides her face behind a spill of dusty crimson hair.

“I didn’t want Minato to be wrong,” she says, and her voice is something very close to small. “I—he
said everyone would see Naruto as a hero, for holding the Kyuubi at bay, and I knew, but I wanted him to be right. Just once. Just once I wanted people to see—” She breaks off with a sound of aggravation that’s entirely self-directed, and curls in tighter on herself.

Kushina was a jinchuuriki for more than half of her life. Maybe it was better, because the villagers didn’t yet fear the Kyuuubi’s capacity for destruction with the fervor of those who had experienced it first-hand, but she was still other. An Uzushio kunoichi, hastily coopted into Konoha’s ranks, with an angry sort of grief still riding her and a monster inside of her—it took years and a several dozen ranks for people to stop regarding her like an explosive tag about to go off.

Maybe Kushina doesn’t know what Naruto faced, after the attack, but she can still understand.

Kurama sighs, and when Gaara wiggles a little closer to tuck his head under Kurama’s chin, he doesn’t protest. “Well, he wasn’t,” he says bluntly, and watches the line of Kushina’s shoulders tense. “There were still other factors, though.”

Kushina makes a sound of fury that’s only just contained, though she doesn’t look up. “I had friends,” she hisses, and it sounds like a threat. “Mikoto, and Yoshino, and Tsume—even Minato’s guards. Raidō could have—or Genma—” She curls her arms over her head, twisting her fingers into her hair like she’s going to wrench at it. “We asked Jiraiya to be his godfather. Why doesn’t Naruto even know who he is?”

The pained bewilderment in Kushina’s voice is harder to hear than any sort of anger; this is Kushina hurt and lost and trying to find reasons. Kurama snorts a little, unamused, and looks away. “The pervert was off chasing Orochimaru, and then Akatsuki,” he says, and Kushina lifts her head just enough to look at him. “Kakashi buried himself in ANBU. Rumors started up that the Uchiha were the ones who brought the Kyuubi down on the village, so of course the Uchiha Clan Head’s wife couldn’t take in a human container, and the Guard Platoon were told not to get to close, so that no one would figure out Naruto was the Yondaime’s son and the jinchuuriki. The order was never rescinded, even after someone spilled the information.”

“There aren’t reasons.” There’s a building fury in Kushina's voice, sharp and heavy and as threatening as an avalanche poised to fall. “They're excuses, Kurama. People only have excuses when they know they’ve done the wrong thing and don’t want to be blamed for it!”

Kurama gives her a grin that’s all teeth and no humor. “I never said I accepted them, I just know them.”

That makes Kushina huff out something that’s almost a laugh, and she sits up a little, shoving her hair back behind her ears. Her eyes drop, and she closes them briefly, breathing deeply. “It hurts,” she confesses, and some of her bewilderment is back. “Minato and I tried to be a family to Kakashi after Sakumo killed himself. We did everything we could not to let him grow up alone. Why couldn’t he do the same for Naruto? Jiraiya knew we wanted Naruto to be happy, and he doesn’t even have the excuse of being a grieving teenager. He could have taken Naruto with him if he really wanted to. Sarutobi could have raised Naruto, too—he didn’t have to leave my son to grow up completely alone!” She snarls in barely-contained fury, and slams a fist down into the ground.

Kurama eyes the small crater, then his former jinchuuriki. “Tsunade wanted me to talk you out of leveling the village when we get there,” he says, and lets a little bit of his amusement at the order show.

Kushina blinks, then laughs. “She didn’t figure out that you're going to be leveling it, too?” she asks. “I think she’s been drinking too much, you know?”
Snorting, Kurama shifts Gaara a little, checking on the boy, and sees his eyes closed again, his breathing slow and steady. Another glance around them shows that there's no one close enough to eavesdrop so long as they keep their voices low, so Kurama takes a breath and says, “You're playing along. I…didn’t think you would.”

For a moment, Kushina doesn’t say anything. Then she hums, carefully careless, and offers, “Minato split the Kyuubi’s chakra in half, you know? He was the best with seals after Mito died, but there was lots of stuff going on. Half went into Naruto, but the rest…” A pause, and when she looks up she’s smiling, just a little. “It’s kind of cool that you look like an Uzumaki, and if you want to be one, I'm okay with that. I'm Clan Head now, and if I say you're my little brother, no one can say you're not, you know?”

Kurama stares at her for a moment, trying to wrap his brain around that, and…as far as explanations that avoid time travel go, that is absolutely the best he’s heard. Not quite a jinchuuriki, in an Uzumaki body, with chakra suspiciously similar to the Kyuubi but not the Kyuubi—Kushina is a genius and she doesn’t even know it. That she believes it is even better.

Clearing his throat, he glances away, very carefully not responding, and says gruffly, “So, who’s next? Sarutobi or Jiraiya?”

Kushina laughs, bright and happy, and sits up all the way. “Sakumo,” she corrects, glancing over at where the older Hatake is hovering in the shadows, trying to surreptitiously watch his son. “I want to hear Sarutobi’s explanation first, you know? More satisfying to punch him afterwards, once I've got all the information.”

And it will show Kakashi that, punch aside, Kushina still considers him family. Kurama snorts, because it’s exactly like Kushina to cover up clever manipulation with a veneer of cheerful violence, but he’d hardly expect anything different at this point. “Need me to distract him?” he asks.

Kushina actually thinks it over for a moment, but ends up shaking her head. “I'm good,” she says brightly, and climbs to her feet, cracking her knuckles. “All right, here goes!”

Well, Kurama thinks judiciously, watching her march across the road. At least she’s not moping anymore. He very carefully doesn’t glance over towards Tsunade, who’s giving him a poisonous stare, clearly guessing what Kushina is planning. It’s not his fault that the hag forgot Kushina’s default reaction to a problem is to hit it until it’s not a problem—that’s a standard Uzumaki tactic, and Kurama knows all too well that even Mito defaulted to it, poise aside.

There's a thud, a loud yelp, and an even louder, “That one’s for abandoning Kakashi, you jerk! Thanks for helping get us out, but I'm still mad at you!”

In the trees on Kurama’s left, Kakashi trips over a branch and almost falls flat on his stunned face. Kurama laughs at him, and doesn’t bother trying to hide it.

Hiruzen's headache is already in full force.

On the edge of the roof next to him, Itachi’s crow shuffles a little, one beady eye trained on the road beyond the gate, which is a sure sign its summoner is close. Hiruzen isn’t sure whether he wants the group to move faster or slower at this point; either one is more than likely to make his headache...
worse, given the way A looks ready to storm out and track down his brother by himself. Even Rasa isn’t quite as collected as usual, balanced on the balls of his feet and staring down the road as if he can make the group appear just by willing it.

Hisen looks sour and stubborn, but that’s hardly a change from the usual, so Hiruzen feels just fine ignoring him.

Ōnoki, standing two paces behind and to the side of the rest of the Kage, has far more of Hiruzen's attention. The man arrived yesterday, full of snarling anger at being pried out of his mountain, and it hasn’t faded much. Hiruzen can recognize the brooding sort of darkness to Ōnoki’s temper, though; two of the jinchuuriki traveling with Kurama are originally from Iwa, even if they apparently abandoned it years ago.

Hiashi was the one to pick up that information as he shadowed the Iwa contingent, and Hiruzen is honestly rather astonished to see the Hyuuga Clan Head acting like a regular jounin again, something he hasn’t done since well before Hizashi’s death. Tsume’s been looking particularly smug, though, so it’s easy enough to assume she has some hand in it. Hiruzen certainly isn’t about to complain; Hiashi is a very good shinobi, even beyond his Byakugan.

Besides, watching Fugaku stew and huff and then finally drag himself out of the Uchiha compound in his jounin uniform, wearing a look that dared anyone to comment on it as he reported in, is more than enough to keep Hiruzen entertained. He likely shouldn’t be celebrating the resurrection of that old rivalry, but it’s honestly rather heartening to see it; the fact that things with the Uchiha had gotten bad enough to bury Hiashi and Fugaku's eternal competitive streak is a sign of just how far things had crumbled without Hiruzen really noticing.

Still, matters right now are all centered around the ten jinchuuriki approaching Konoha, and Hiruzen can’t let his attention stray. Ten shinobi capable of leveling villages individually, two of them having abandoned their village, two of them Kiri nin, one without any current affiliation, and four of them young children—only Bee’s loyalty is certain, and even he was more than happy to wander off in the middle of a crisis just to meet the others.

Not for the first time, Hiruzen wonders a little despairing just what possessed Mito to decide that this was the best solution to bijuu running around the continent.

Then again, Mito was an Uzumaki; this sort of logic is par for the course in their clan.

Trying to strangle a sigh, Hiruzen rubs at his brow, wishing for his pipe. The sun is setting, and it’s getting late. Something delayed the group, if they're only getting to Konoha now, and Hiruzen hopes it was nothing worse than an impediment on the road. He hasn’t received any reports, which is either a good sign or a very bad one; if those coming fear that even a summons might be intercepted, something very serious indeed happened.

Hiruzen is tired of this. All of this. If even one more piece of ridiculousness lands on top of the already weighty pile, he’s going to—

With a rush of wings and a croaking caw, the crow explodes into flight. Hiruzen watches it swoop down the road, towards the curve where Konoha's great trees lean over a bend in the path and hide those approaching from sight. Shadows are separating from the treeline, and he squints faintly, wishing futilely that advancing age didn’t mean having to rely on the younger generations even to see. It’s a large group, though, and the figure at the front is carrying a familiar hook-ended staff. No one but Yagura has ever used such a weapon that Hiruzen can remember, so he steps forward, ready to greet the Mizukage as soon as he’s close enough.
Red hair catches his attention before he can even open his mouth.

It’s not simply Kurama, though he’s part of it. Not Rōshi of the Lava Release, either, because he’s further back in the line. Long red hair, almost ankle-length, framing a laughing, teasing face he hasn’t seen in six years. A face he watched be buried, in the aftermath of the Kyuubi attack. A face he mourned like a lost daughter, and—

“Oh gods,” Hiruzen says faintly, but absolutely out loud, because the entire collection of Kage and headmen behind him needs to know how very screwed they’re about to be.

“Sarutobi?” Rasa asks, concerned, and there's the faint sound of steps behind him.

Hiruzen resists the urge to tell them he’s retiring then and there. And really, if anyone was able to come back from the dead to display just how misguided some of his choices have been, of course it would be Uzumaki Kushina. He’s not even sure why he’s surprised.

And—

That is absolutely uncontestably Tsunade walking right behind the Uzumaki siblings.

Hiruzen wonders if there’s a word in any language to encompass the strange mix of joy and overwhelming horror he feels right now.
LVI: Grith

[grith / grĭth /, Protection or sanctuary provided by Old English law to persons in certain circumstances, as when in a church or traveling on the king's highway; peace, security, or sanctuary imposed or guaranteed under various special conditions. From Middle English, from Old English, from Old Norse gridh “domicile, asylum”.

They’ve only just come into sight of Konoha's walls and Kurama can already feel himself starting to bristle.

Kakashi, who had moved up to walk next to him as soon as Kushina decided to go heckle Jiraiya—who’s sporting his own bruised nose, and bruised balls as well from where Kushina kneed him—eyes him sidelong around his book. “Should I get the Sandaime to start an evacuation?” he asks dryly, and flips to the next page.

“Are there going to be random bouts of stupidity like last time?” Kurama growls, not quite able to bring himself to loosen his grip on Naruto. The little boy has tucked himself into the curve of Kurama’s left arm, while Gaara is in his right. Fū and Yugito are so close they’re practically walking on his heels, and Kurama can feel at least one hand fisted in the back of his shirt, but he’s not about to say anything. Not given the way Fū is watching the sour-faced man with white hair around the protection of Kurama’s body.

Kakashi doesn’t move his head, but his eye flickers up, assessing the way Yagura is greeting the Hokage, and then sweeping left, then right. “Not on my part,” he says mildly. “I think you might find it a little harder to bolt with four children rather than one, though.”

“Then it’s a good thing there are three other adults as well,” Utakata says politely, though he’s watching Yagura greet the other Kage closely.

Kurama makes a face at the boy. “I did the running thing once already and ended up with eight tagalongs. No more, thanks.”

“Did you hear that, Han?” Rōshi asks dryly. “We’ve been upgraded. I’m so proud.”

The big man chuckles faintly, tipping his hat down over his eyes. “Quite the accomplishment indeed.”

Rōshi makes an absent sound of agreement, though most of his attention is on the short figure of the Tsuchikage, who’s glaring in their direction. “They must have turned over a hell of a lot of rocks to find old Ōnoki,” he says, and there’s a thread of bitterness beneath the humor.

“For all the good it will do them,” Kurama says, faintly sour, and takes a step to the side, putting himself in front of Rōshi. Han in pretty much a lost cause, seeing as he has almost two feet on Kurama, but it’s the thought that counts.

Rōshi just snorts, and doesn’t protest. “Between the politics that are going to be happening and Akatsuki, there's no way they could have left him out.” He folds his arms over his chest, eyes narrowing.

“No,” Han says firmly, dropping a hand on his shoulder. “Whatever you're thinking, it's a bad idea.”
“You don’t even know what I’m thinking!”

“I don’t have to. I know you.”

Under the cover of their bickering, Naruto tugs on Kurama’s shirt and leans up to speak into his ear, looking faintly worried. “They’re not going to make you leave, are they, Kurama-nii?” he asks insistently.

“They can try,” Kurama says, unimpressed.

With a quiet huff, Kakashi flips his book closed and tucks it back into his weapons pouch. “They’re not going to,” he cuts in firmly. “Your uncle goes where you go, right, Naruto? Hokage-sama knows that. He won’t try to separate you.”

Kurama arches a brow at the Copy-Nin, surprised by the show of faith. Though maybe he shouldn’t be—after all, Kakashi is close to the Sandaime, for reasons Kurama’s Naruto was never privy to. He opens his mouth to ask, but before he can Yugito nudges him forward, and he glances towards the gate to see that Yagura, Mei, and Zabuza have headed into the village, leaving the way clear.

Sarutobi is waiting, eyes fixed on him, hands clasped before him. Like the last time Kurama met him, his chakra is a ripple deep beneath the surface, strong enough to drown but tightly contained, and his smile is wry.

“Uzumaki Kurama,” he says, as Kurama stalks up to the gate. Sharp brown eyes dart over Naruto, then Gaara, and flick down to take in Yugito and Fū. “It’s been a while. Perhaps this time your stay in Konoha can be more peaceful.”

“I won’t start anything if you don’t,” Kurama agrees, baring his teeth in mockery of a friendly smile.

If anything, that makes amusement spark in Sarutobi’s face, though it’s quickly buried. He opens his mouth—

“Gaara,” a sharp voice snaps out, and the Kazekage elbows his way past his guard, already reaching. “Come here, and—”

Gaara flinches, burying his face in Kurama’s shoulder and clinging like it’s going to take a crowbar to pry him off.

No hesitation. Kurama snarls, jerking back, and if he didn’t have a child in each arm Rasa would already have lost his hand. “Don’t you fucking dare,” he growls, and it rumbles low and warning in his chest. “Gaara is mine, and you don’t get to touch him if you want to keep your fingers, asshole.”

Sarutobi presses a hand over his face and mutters something inaudible and very deeply aggrieved.

“You?” Rasa demands, puffing up like he’s getting ready to yell, and Sage, Kurama invites him to try it. The bastard’s gold dust against the Kyuubi no Kitsune’s power—Kurama knows precisely which his money is on in that matchup. “That’s my son—”

“Not anymore,” Kurama snarls. “You lost your chance when you tried to have him assassinated. He stays with me.”

There’s a shaky breath against his neck, the curl of small hands in his shirt. Red hair tickles Kurama’s jaw as Gaara raises his head, and says, “I’m staying. I’m staying. I’m staying with Kurama-nii.”

The ground shakes, sand sliding up from between the stones to swirl around Kurama’s feet, and
when Gaara looks up his eyes have bled to black and gold, full of fear and determination in equal parts. Kurama can feel Shukaku beneath the surface, feeding power, but the tanuki can't slip past the repaired seal to overwhelm Gaara's mind. This is all Gaara talking right now.

Rasa’s eyes go wide at the sight, and there’s a shout. Baki grabs the Kazekage by the arm, wrenching him back out of range, and Rasa lets him. Dark rings shimmer into existence around his eyes, even as a glittering cloud of golden dust streams into the air, and—

A blue of dark blue and silver, and Kakashi lands directly between Kurama and Rasa, hands raised, even as Sarutobi thunders, “Enough!” with all the force of forty years as Hokage behind it.

Kurama steps back, more because of Kakashi’s sudden presence than Sarutobi’s command, and boosts Naruto up enough that he can get one arm around both of the boys. At the same time, Fū presses forward, her hand already full of Chōmei’s Scale Powder, while Yugito fades back, sharp eyes marking targets as ghostly fire sparks.

“Jiji!” Naruto says loudly into the crippling tension. He wriggles in Kurama’s tight hold, but thankfully instead of trying to escape he simply waves. “Jiji, Kurama-nii found my mom! And Gaara and Yugito-nee and Fū-nee too! We’re going to live in a big house together, the tree guy with the creepy face said he could build one for us!”

Tenzō, halfway hidden behind a wary Han, makes a sound of quiet despair. “I told him my name, that’s not—that’s not even accurate—”

Shisui coughs. It sounds suspiciously like “completely accurate sorry”.

Sarutobi puts a hand on Rasa’s arm, steering him back even further, and when the younger man opens his mouth to protest the Hokage levels him with a steady stare. “So I see, Naruto. It’s something of a surprise, considering I had been sure your mother passed away six years ago. And I see other lost faces as well. You must have been busy.”

Muscle by muscle, Kurama forces himself to ease back, just a bit. Kakashi is watching him, carefully intent, but when Kurama meets his gaze he nods once, dropping his hand and stepping to the side. Unfortunately, it leaves Kurama with a clear view of Rasa, who looks very unhappy, and Gaara doesn’t like that at all. He hasn’t gone back to burying his face in Kurama’s neck, but given the whiteness of his knuckles where he’s gripping Kurama’s shirt and the tension in his body, that would probably be an improvement.

“Rule one,” Kurama growls, and it rumbles through the still air. “First one to lay a hand on the kids gets their whole arm fed to them, and everything that’s attached if I’m feeling testy. Understand?”

“I think,” Sarutobi says firmly, catching A by the elbow and tightening his grip on Rasa, “that we can come to something of an understanding.”

“We’re going to need more than one understanding, you know?” Kushina puts in, pushing her way to the front of the group with Sakumo right behind her. There’s a promise of pain in her face, and teeth right beneath the curve of her smile.

Kurama can actually hear the sharp breath Rasa pulls in, and even if he couldn’t, the way Baki physically puts himself between his Kage and the White Fang would speak volumes by itself. “You,” the Kazekage says dangerously. “You’re supposed to be twelve years dead. Did Konoha lie about—”

“Konoha has never had a reason to lie about such things,” Sarutobi cuts in, sounding faintly
annoyed. “I assure you, this is as much a surprise to me as it is to any of you. And it is a surprise I would very much like answers to.”

“Answers kind of seem like they're in short supply right now.” Kushina elbows past Kurama, casting him a surreptitious wink as she goes, and bounces right up to the Hokage. “Uzumaki Kushina, reporting for duty! We come with prisoners in tow, though Orochimaru isn’t saying anything about how he managed this.”

Sarutobi sighs, looking as if he wants to rub at his temples, but doesn’t quite dare release the other Kage yet. “Orochimaru. You captured Orochimaru?”

“How about we trade answers?” Kushina asks cheerfully, and maybe someone else would be fooled by that sweet tone, but Kurama most definitely isn’t. And neither, apparently, is Sarutobi, because he looks incredibly wary. “I’ll tell you all about how Sakumo and I woke up in Akatsuki’s cells, and you can tell me why you and Jiraiya decided to leave my son an orphan.”

“My mom,” Naruto confesses in a loud whisper to Kurama, “is really scary.”

Kurama very carefully doesn’t laugh. “She is, isn’t she?” he agrees, and watches A gather himself, easily marking him as the next sacrificial offering to Kushina’s wrath.

“Speak to your Kage with some respect,” he huffs, pulling free of Sarutobi’s hold and crossing his arms over his massive chest. A moment of squinting at her, and his eyes narrow. “You—you’re the wife of the—”

Kurama laughs, Sarutobi winces, and Kakashi groans, but by then it’s already too late. With a cry, Kushina throws all of her weight at A, even as she slams her sandal into the tendons of his leg. He yelps loudly, stumbling back, and with a sharp pivot and a heave, Kushina neatly hurls him right over her hip to land in the dust.

“I’m Uzumaki Kushina, the Red Hot Habanero!” she snaps, leaning over to level a finger in his face. “I’m an elite jounin of Konohagakure and head of the Uzumaki Clan, not just someone’s wife, you know!” Stepping back, she huffs, tossing her long hair over her shoulder, and regards the gaping A archly. “And if Minato hadn’t kicked your ass, I would have!”

“Kurama-nii,” Yugito whispers, tugging at the hem of Kurama’s shirt. Her eyes are very wide, and it looks like there’s a blush climbing up her cheekbones. “Kurama-nii, I want to be just like her.”

“Me too!” Fū insists, stretching up on her toes to see around Kurama’s elbow. “Kurama-nii, she’s amazing!”

The last person they said that about was Tsunade, and Kurama supposes that at least this way they aren’t going to be strapped for good role models. “You could do worse,” he allows, and doesn’t even attempt to hide the way he’s smirking as he curls his free arm around Yugito’s shoulders.

“Kushina,” Sarutobi sighs, one hand pressed over his face. Ōnoki actually looks amused, though he’s about the only one of the Kage besides Yagura who does. Rasa is still gaping, and the sour-faced headman looks a little faint.

The woman crosses her arms over her chest, entirely unrepentant, and meets Sarutobi’s stare when he raises his head. “My son,” she says again, incredibly pointed, and Sarutobi concedes the point with a tired breath.

“Let’s move this to my office, shall we?” he asks, and the sweep of his eyes around the gate area is subtle, but not enough so that Kurama misses it. But this is Konoha, he thinks, a little confused, and
Danzō.

Here and now, Danzō is just as big a threat as Obito, and one that Kurama hasn’t had the time or opportunity to deal with. Moreover, given the ages of the jinchuuriki, he’s a particular threat to them, and Kurama isn’t going to let that stand.

Orochimaru is going to prove useful sooner than Kurama had expected, it seems.

“You okay, squirt?” Kurama murmurs as Sarutobi ushers the others deeper into the village. He keeps his gaze on Gaara, ignoring Kakashi hovering next to him, and waits until aquamarine eyes rise to meet his. Gaara hesitates, but nods, though he doesn’t release his grip on Kurama.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” he says, so softly it’s almost inaudible. “I got angry but I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Not even the person who probably deserved it,” Kurama agrees, ruffling his hair. “That was a good job, squirt.”

Gaara ducks his head, but he’s smiling, and Naruto laughs. “You were really cool, Gaara!” he agrees. “Kurama-nii, can you make your eyes go all weird like that?”

Kurama rolls them instead, flicking Naruto’s ear lightly. “I don’t need to, brat. I’m scary enough all on my own.”

Fū giggles, then tugs on his shirt hem. “Kurama, can you carry me, too? Please?”

He makes the distinct mistake of glancing back into wide orange-gold eyes, and sighs loudly to cover Kakashi’s huff of amusement. “Whatever. Fine. If you’re going to make that face over it, why not?”

With a cheer, Fū scrambles up onto his back as he crouches down, locking her knees around his sides, and leans up, looking around interestedly. “The view’s not as good as when Han picks me up,” she says brightly, but before Kurama can do more than splutter in offense, she wraps her arms around his neck and adds, “But that’s okay, because I like you better, Kurama-nii.”

Naruto is laughing, Yugito is giggling, and even Kakashi looks amused. Kurama shoots the Copy-Nin a dark look, because he’s the only one it might actually have an impact on, and huffs. “Brats,” he complains, but shrugs Fū up a little higher, resettles Gaara and Naruto, and lets Yugito curl a hand around his elbow. “Can we go now, or do you want to keep making fun of me?”

“But you make it so easy,” Rōshi says dryly, and when Kurama glares at him he snorts, raising his hands in surrender. “Han and I will keep an eye on the prisoners. You go deal with politics. Yell when you’re ready to flee the village and go on the run again.”

“Please don’t,” is Kakashi’s nearly plaintive contribution as he follows them into the village. “The Hokage will probably send us after you again, and no one wants that.”

Kurama huffs, watching the knot of Kage and Kushina vanish around the corner. He’s not in any hurry to catch up, though. “Why? It seemed to work out just fine the first time.”

“All right, you,” Shisui huffs, half-hanging off of Itachi’s neck. “We took maybe five breaks over almost two weeks. That’s torture.”

Itachi sighs and doesn’t try to fight the hold, though he does give his cousin a flat look and peel his arm away enough to breathe.
“Just because he can, Kurama bares his teeth at Shisui in a quasi-smile. “Who said I was talking about anybody but me?”

“Why do you do that?” Shisui complains, though he very noticeably doesn’t get so much as a step closer. “Just when I think we’re finally getting along and that you’re not going to eat me, you go and pull something like that! Captain! I want to be reassigned!”

“I hear bathrooms in the ANBU barracks are in need of cleaning again,” Kakashi says mildly. “You even have experience with that, don’t you, Shisui?”

“I,” Shisui says with great dignity, “don’t need to listen to any of this. You’re all traitors and I am above your petty ways. Tenzō appreciates me, so I’m going to go and walk with him.” He unglues himself from Itachi, sticks his nose in the air, and practically flounces back to throw himself at Tenzō. Tenzō very visibly rolls his eyes, but when he goes to pry Shisui off of him Shisui catches his hands and gives him a smile that’s probably intended to be charming. The older boy gives him a deadpan look, twists his fingers together, and starts sprouting branches like a tree.

Kurama turns away to the sound of Shisui’s loud yelps, not even trying to hide his smirk. There’s amusement in the crinkle of Kakashi’s eye as well, and Naruto is watching over Kurama’s shoulder and snickering. He leans back to look Kurama in the face, far enough that he’s almost in danger of tipping over backwards, and asks, “Kurama-nii? Can we go get ramen? I haven’t had ramen in weeks.”

It’s an exaggeration, definitely—Haku and Utakata fed the kids ramen at least twice while Kurama was gone—but Kurama still hesitates. He looks at Naruto, and then at Gaara who’s still paler than normal. A glance back at Fū, and the girl shrugs, still smiling. “I could eat,” she says cheerfully. “Yugito? You liked the kind we had, right?”

“Yugito-nee hadn’t had it before,” Naruto tells Kurama solemnly, like it’s a very grave matter. “She had never had ramen.”

“My teachers said it wasn’t healthy,” Yugito says quietly, but when Kurama glances down at her, she looks back at him steadily, offering up a smile. “I liked it a lot, though. Fū and I had it with roast pork.”

“What about you?” Kurama asks Gaara, not quite trying to keep his voice gentle, but still keeping his tone even. “What kind did you get, squirt?”

Gaara blinks for a moment, then says shyly, “With egg.”

“Not narutomaki?” Kurama teases. “You weren’t even tempted to eat naruto?”

Solemnly, Gaara shakes his head, even as Naruto protests loudly, “Kurama-nii, don’t be mean! Gaara wouldn’t eat me!”

Kurama snorts, but lets it go. He casts one more glance after the others, but given a choice between sitting in room with a bunch of old men who want to treat the jinchuriki like useful things and having lunch with the kids, he’d pick the latter any day. “All right,” he agrees. “We’ll go get ramen.”

Naruto cheers, and it makes Kurama chuckle. When he looks up, Kakashi is watching him, hands tucked in his pockets and a contemplative look on the triangle of face that’s visible. Catching Kurama’s eye, the Copy-Nin gives him a smile that has equal odds of being complete bullshit and asks, “Room for one more?”

Kurama considers, but…well. It won’t hurt anything, to have him along, and he can remember how
the Kakashi from before used to go to just about any lengths to get out of political maneuvering. It stands to reason Kakashi would want to avoid this meeting, too. “Why not?” he huffs, and though it’s still hard to tell, he thinks this time the smile is a little closer to genuine. “Rōshi, Han, Utakata, you coming?”

“Not much of a fan of ramen,” Rōshi says judiciously, ignoring the offended squawk Naruto gives. He tugs on the tip of his beard, then shakes his head. “No, I’ll stick with the prisoners, give Fuji and Momiji some backup.”

Han makes a sound of amused agreement. “Alas, food stalls are rarely built to accommodate someone of my size. Rōshi and I will find you later, once Orochimaru and Nagato are secure.”

Utakata glances from Han to Kurama, then smiles and shakes his head, folding his hands into his sleeves. “I’ll stay as well. Saiken’s abilities are well-suited to containment, and I don’t need to eat quite yet.” He hesitates, flicking a quick look around the quiet street, and then adds more quietly, “It…might be better if we aren’t all in one place. Not alone, but also not all together.”

Of course Utakata would be the one to realize that—Kurama, Han, and Rōshi might all be used to living on the run, but Utakata is the one who grew up in a village controlled by what might as well have been a dictator. Not that most Kages are democratically minded, but Obito used Yagura as a tyrant.

“Good thinking,” Kurama says gruffly, and it makes Utakata smile faintly. “Stick with the others, then, all right? Yagura will be fine, since fish-face and Mei are with him, but—”

“We’ll be fine, Kurama,” Han cuts in, amused but indulgent, and he just laughs when Kurama narrows his eyes at him. “Go feed your brood.”

“Fuck you,” Kurama returns, hitching Naruto up a little higher as he turns away. A flash of silver draws his eye before he can make it more than a handful of steps, though—not Kakashi this time, but Sakumo. The older Hatake is still hovering at the edge of the gate, out of the way of Fuji and Momiji with their prisoners and the Konoha shinobi moving to take charge of them as Tenzō, Shisui, and Itachi direct. His eyes are fixed beyond the village, watching the spread of color from the sunset as it stains the sky.

Kurama pauses, not sure whether he should call out, but—

Kakashi catches his elbow, keeps him turning. “Come on,” he says quietly, and he doesn’t look back at his father.

“You’re going to have to talk to him someday,” Kurama points out, but the words don’t come out nearly as irritated as he intends them to. “Just because you managed to avoid him the entire trip here—”

“He’s going to visit my mother’s grave,” Kakashi says simply, though he doesn’t loosen his grip on Kurama’s arm. “It was always the first thing he would do when he got back from a mission.”

Kurama grimaces a little before he can help it. “And you’re not going to warn him that he’s going to wander over his own grave while he’s there?”

Kakashi just hums noncommittally, eyes fixed on the road ahead of them.

_Stupid emotionally-stunted shinobi geniuses,_ Kurama thinks, deeply annoyed. Sage, he can understand awkwardness after parting on such poor terms, but really, if he had another chance with his Naruto, or even with his Sakura or _Sasuke_, damn it, he’d _take_ it. If Kakashi keeps wasting
chances, Kurama is going to have to step in, and he’s pretty sure that no one wants that.

“Kurama-nii, this way’s faster!” Naruto crows, right next to his ear, and Kurama winces. When the boy starts to wriggle, Kurama sighs and lets him slide down to the ground.

“Easy, kit, easy. I’m sure the ramen isn’t going anywhere.”

With a stubborn huff, Naruto just sets his feet and starts tugging at the arm Kakashi helpfully relinquishes. “The ramen isn’t, but we aren’t, either! Come on, Kurama-nii, let’s go!”

Clearly Kurama was wrong to expect logic with ramen on the line. He hides his amusement, even as he allows Naruto to tow him down an overgrown side-street and out into a busier square. Several heads jerk up, turning to watch the procession, but Kurama ignores them pointedly. Kakashi’s presence should keep away anyone who wants to start trouble, and even if it doesn’t, Kurama is all too happy to break heads.

Over his shoulder, Fū laughs a little, digging in with her knees so that she can lean further forward. “What’s the big rush, Naruto?” she asks, grinning. “Is this ramen place special or something?”

“Old man Teuchi’s ramen is the best!” Naruto insists. He slows a little now that the hangings of the stall are in view ahead of them, and beams back at Fū. “An’ he doesn’t care that I’m a jinchuuriki, so he shouldn’t care that you are, either!”

Fū’s eyes widen, and she almost loses her grip on Kurama. He catches her just in time, managing to get an arm under her thighs and hoisting her back up with a grunt. She doesn’t even seem to notice, leaning forward again to demand, “A civilian? A cook? He doesn’t care?”

Yugito is just as startled, and Kurama can feel a trace of claws in the hand that’s gripping his arm. “Really?” she asks, glancing up at Kurama for verification.

“Really,” Kurama confirms, and then grunts. “Sweetheart, I can’t walk if I can’t breathe.”

“Oops. Sorry, Kurama-nii.” A little sheepishly, Fū unwinds her arm from around his neck, settling more securely against his back. “There wasn’t anyone like that in Taki, though. Not anyone. At least, not that I ever met.”

“People can be surprising,” Kurama tells her, and can’t fight a faint smile, thinking of his Naruto, of this one. Innate nature, a lot of it, but… Kurama’s pretty certain some of it was learned, too, pulled in from Teuchi and Iruka and Sarutobi at his best, Jiraiya at his most hopeful. It was always easy to tell the people who had the most influence on Naruto, because he took on their brightest aspects.

Kakashi glances at him, almost as if he can read Kurama’s thoughts, and then brushes the hangings aside so Fū doesn’t have to duck as Kurama carries her into the stall. “That they can,” he agrees, as mild as a summer sky, and when Kurama regards him warily he just crinkles his eye, then raises his voice and calls, “Are you done for the night, Teuchi-san?”

There’s a clatter of dishes, the sound of running water, and a moment later the ramen chef’s cheerful voice proceeds the man out of the back. “Hatake? I haven’t seen you pass through in a…while…” He trails off, wide eyes on the six of them, and then asks disbelievingly, “Naruto?”

“Hey, old man!” Naruto says cheerfully, hauling himself up onto a stool. “This is my Kurama-nii! And that’s Gaara and Fū-nee and Yugito-nee! They’re my family!”

Teuchi blinks at Naruto, then at Kurama and the rest. His eyes settle on Gaara, who’s watching him cautiously, and drift up to Fū, who’s practically falling over Kurama’s shoulder again as she cranes
her head to look at the menu. A long pause, and—

“Good to see you again, kid. First round is on me,” he says with a wide smile, leaning over to ruffle Naruto's hair lightly. “What can I get you? It's a good day for some ramen, isn’t it?”

Kurama chuckles a little, letting Fū slide down to the ground and taking a stool of his own. Gaara looks between the empty stool between Kurama and Yugito, then very plainly decides to stay where he is, and Kurama doesn’t protest. Kakashi takes the empty seat, with Fū at the far end, and it feels...

Well. They're back in Konoha. Last time may have felt like old wounds reopened, but this—

This time it doesn’t feel too bad.
LVII: Sibylline

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

{sibylline / 'sɪbəlɪn, 'sɪbəˌlɪn/} coming from, characteristic of, or relating to a sibyl, i.e. a female prophet; prophetic; oracular; making pronouncements or predictions as if by special inspiration or authority; having a secret or hidden meaning; obscure; mysterious; cryptic. From Latin Sibyllīnus 'pertaining to a sibyl' from Greek Sibulla.} 

The Hokage’s office hasn’t changed much at all, Kushina thinks with amusement. She’s the first one through the door, the rest of the Kage still on the stairs behind her, but she isn’t about to slow herself down for their sakes.

She’s not about to do anything for their sakes, honestly.

It’s hard not to stare at the picture of Minato hanging in place of pride on the wall, stately in his Hokage robes but mischievous in the curve of his smile. To Kushina, he’s barely a week dead, and it hurts like something torn open, like the shock of coming to life again. Naruto is her newborn baby, but he’s also six years old. Itachi is eleven. Kushina herself is technically thirty.

She can still see the scars in the village where the Kyuubi tore through. She can mark its path in the minutes before she and Minato stopped it, and it makes something go cold inside of her to see the evidence so long after it happened, clear in the light of a fading day.

But the Kyuubi—or part of it—was the first person to actually care for Naruto the way she hoped someone would. And in the face of that, there’s only weariness.

Jiraiya should have taken Naruto. That’s the entire reason they named him godfather in the first place. It would have been nice if Mikoto or Inoichi or Tsume could have raised him, but it was Jiraiya’s duty. It was what he promised them, and Kushina tries not to dwell on the sharp sting that’s almost like betrayal.

Of course, ignoring painful emotions is something she’s had a wealth of practice at. With a quiet huff, Kushina ignores the sounds of approaching voices and looks for the perch she used when she was ANBU. It’s still there, a little ledge above one of the windows that juts out just a bit further than the rest, discovered in a fit of utter boredom. Kushina leaps for it, catching the edge of the wood easily and twisting. It burns faintly in her muscles as she flips herself up with little momentum to help her, but she remembers the trick of it well, and by the time the door swings open under Sarutobi’s hand Kushina is sitting high enough up to watch the Kage file in.

To someone who knows him, the sharp flicker of Sarutobi’s eyes as he scans the room for her is obvious, and Kushina gives him a toothy grin when he spots her at exactly the moment she expects. He’s remembering.

Sarutobi doesn’t say anything to her, though the faint roll of his eyes is already eloquent. He simply collects his pipe from his desk and turns to face the others. “Thank you for coming, Yagura. You’ve had a long journey.”
Yagura arrumphs, passing his staff over to Mei and tipping his head at the door. Her mouth pulls unhappily tight, but she bows and retreats towards the other guard without a word. “It ended up being rather more of a trial than we predicted,” the Mizukage says, folding his arms across his chest.

A, who has one eye on his brother and whose expression says it’s going to be that way for the near future, makes a sound of skeptical amusement. “That why you’re turning up with prisoners in tow?”

“Akatsuki,” Yagura clarifies. “The Paths of Pein have been nullified, Kakuzu of Taki is dead—”

“You think Taki had some part in this?” the headman blusters, pushing past the Kazekage to loom over Yagura. “Lies and slander—”

Purple eyes narrow, and Yagura takes a breath. “Step back,” he orders, low and sharp. Chakra sudden boils around him, like being dropped into a drowning sea, and a faint blue-white glow limns him. “I don’t care if your village can rival the Five Great Nations. My patience is as short as it’s ever been and I warn you now, testing it will have consequences.”

Taki’s headman takes four rapid steps back, face going as pale as his hair.

There’s a long moment of tense silence before Rasa snorts softly. “I see Uzumaki Kurama’s influence has invaded even the Bloody Mist.”

Kushina bristles, because if he’s going to say the name of her clan it had better be in a more respectful voice than that, but before she can even open her mouth Yagura beats her to it.

“The only influence in my life before Kurama reached Kiri was the Sharingan of some rogue Uchiha with delusions of world conquest,” he says sharply, and even though he’s the shortest person in the room for a moment it feels like he’s looking down his nose at all of the other Kage. “Kurama removed that. So tell me, Kazekage, just what influence you’re talking about.”

Mei, just barely in Kushina’s line of sight through the open door, groans and starts thumping her head against the wall. The Kazekage’s main guard gives her a look of pained sympathy, and if their leaders weren’t about to go for each other’s throats, Kushina is pretty sure he’d pat her on the shoulder in commiseration.

“He’s starting some—some sort of jinchuuriki rebellion!” Rasa splutters. “We have every right to be concerned! The balance of power—”

“The balance of power—” Kushina puts in helpfully, and laughs when the Taki headman and A both twitch in surprise and spin to look for her. She leans forward to smirk at them, hands braced on the window frame beneath her, and catches Rasa’s eye, though her words are for all of them. “How many times did you use the Ichibi when you were at war with Konoha?”

Rasa blinks, though he takes a step back so he can look at her more easily. Yagura regards her as well, and she can tell by the slant of his expression that he knows precisely where this is going. Kushina is glad; it’s something she’s spent years thinking about, across corpse-littered battlefields and beside weak campfires in the dark.

Mito might have had the edge of being the first jinchuuriki, but Kushina was one of the first born to it. She knew right from the beginning that it was her duty to take up the burden when Mito died, and it might have scared her, but that just made her consider all the angles. Kushina doesn’t like being scared of things, and she likes even less being scared because she doesn’t understand.

Now, years and an entire lifetime away from where she started thinking, and the only answers she’s ever managed to find aren’t nearly good enough.
“We never used the Ichibi in the war,” Rasa says, as if he’s offended by the very question. “If we had, Konoha would have…”

He trails off, as if remembering who he’s talking to, but Kushina just gives him a toothy smile and claps her hands together. “Right!” she agrees cheerfully. “They would have used the Kyuubi.”

Ōnoki scoffs, giving Kushina a dark look as he leans back against the wall. “Exactly why Konoha kept the Kyuubi for themselves,” he says, biting derisively. “Your Shodaime acted the saint, parceling the bijuu out among the other villages, but he only did it because he knew that one way or another they would try to follow Konoha's footsteps. His way he could control precisely how strong each of his enemies were.”

“Senju Hashirama,” Sarutobi says dryly, “was a great many things, and a wise man among them, but he was not some sort of cunning manipulator, I can assure you.” He takes a long pull at his pipe, sinking down into his chair, and glances up at Kushina with a raised eyebrow that prompts her to continue.

Kushina offers him a tip of one shoulder in reply, halfway between a shrug and an unvoiced sigh. “Means it didn’t work, right? If jinchuuriki are supposed to keep villages at about the same power level, it failed, and if they're supposed to keep the villages from fighting, that didn’t work either.” When A opens his mouth, she narrows her eyes at him. “You don't get to have an opinion, Mister My-Village-Tried-to-Steal-a-Third-Jinchuuriki.”

A pauses, staring suspiciously at her, and then his eyes widen. “You’re the jinchuuriki girl my father tried to kidnap?”

Kushina wiggles her fingers at him, smiling sweetly.

Sarutobi is very conspicuously not laughing, though she can see the faint tip to the corner of his mouth as he regards her tolerantly. “What you’re saying is that having jinchuuriki as a threat to keep the peace is useless, so a ‘rebellion’ matters little,” he extrapolates, used to piecing through her logic (Probably from having to do the same in her mission reports. Kushina’s style tends to run towards “Stuff happened. I did other stuff, and then celebrated with ramen!”, which is really not her fault. Reports are boring.)

“Exactly!” Kushina tips forward a little more, red hair swinging around her, and the sight of it makes her smile even if the expression is a touch bittersweet. She doesn’t look at Minato's portrait on the wall, even though she wants to.

Damn it, but she misses the airhead so much, and every single damn thing in Konoha is always going to remind her of him.

Determinedly, she pushes down in the ache in her chest, thinks of Naruto, and takes a breath.

“That logic is flawed,” the Taki headman tells her sharply. “The Hachibi’s jinchuuriki remains with Kumo, and the Kyuubi’s jinchuuriki remains with Konoha, which means they will also control the next hosts. I won't stand for—”

“Hisen,” Sarutobi says, in that particular patient tone that means he’s about to stop being patient and start breaking open skulls instead. “Do you see any jinchuuriki except for Bee and Yagura in this room?”

“Not part of your plan, but they're all on the lam!” Bee agrees cheerfully, ignoring the dirty look A shoots him. “Might think they're from your villages, but they're really just Kurama’s kids!”
Rasa looks especially grim at that bit of wisdom, and Kushina can't help laughing, though there's only dark humor in it.

“Yeah,” she agrees. “Naruto loves his uncle, and Gaara's such a cuddle-bug, of course he’s going to stick with my brother. Fū thinks he’s the best thing ever, and if Yugito gets any more devoted we’re going to start finding shrines. They're all definitely Kurama’s. I think you suckers lost your chances.”

Three faces turn sour, and Ōnoki scowls. Sarutobi presses a hand over his face and sighs, “Kushina,” but it’s not the kind of tone that means stop so Kushina just grins and opens her mouth to—

“Let me—please, I just want to get through really quickly—no, I know there’s a meeting going on, but—five minutes, that’s all—Protocol? I know the protocol, but just this once—look. No. No. Damn it, I was ANBU at fourteen, I know the damned protocols! But you’re going to let me through anyway or I’m going to show you why I was ANBU’s best interrogator for seven years, you imbecile!”

Kushina almost falls off her perch.

It’s a voice she knows just as well as her own, or Minato’s. The cadence, the tone, the words, the threats—they’re all familiar, and before she can even think about it Kushina is leaping down, bolting across the room and out the door. At the top of the stairs, a wary ANBU guard is backing away from a small woman with fire in her eyes and fury on her face.

Seeing her feels like home, familiar and safe in a way not even Naruto is quite yet. It’s like no time at all has passed, and to Kushina, six years out of time in a way that has no cure, it’s a balm she hadn’t even known she needed.

“Mikoto!” she cries, and practically trips over her own feet as she lunges for her best friend.

Mikoto’s head snaps around, and in a blur she’s shoving past the startled guard, running to meet Kushina, and they collide in a tangle of limbs and hair, hugging viciously as they cling to each other in the middle of the floor. Kushina can’t tell if she’s laughing or crying, or even which she wants to do; all she knows is that Mikoto is here, she’s fine, she wasn’t killed when the Kyuubi broke free. Because Kushina knows Mikoto—as soon as the village was in danger, retirement or not she must have been out on the front lines, holding the Kyuubi back and protecting her home. She wouldn’t be Mikoto if she’d tried to do otherwise.

“You're alive, you're alive, you're alive,” Mikoto breathes in her ear, and her arms are impossibly tight around Kushina. “In the market—someone said they’d seen you but I couldn’t believe—but it is you. Oh, Kushina.”

Kushina laughs a little, even though she doesn’t try to let go, either. “Shinobi gossip worse than washerwomen,” she huffs, and it’s a familiar complaint that makes Mikoto laugh too, watery but warm.

“I'm so glad,” Mikoto says, pulling back just a little. She frames Kushina's face with her hands, then leans forward, dropping her forehead against Kushina's shoulder and letting out a shaky breath. “Gods, Kushina, you died and I didn’t—I couldn’t—I couldn’t even say goodbye, and Naruto was there but I couldn’t do anything, not as an Uchiha, and he had a guard so I couldn’t even sneak close, and—”

Kushina's heart aches, just a little. She remembers what Kurama said, listing everyone’s excuses. Rumors started up that the Uchiha were the ones who brought the Kyuubi down on the village, so of course the Uchiha Clan Head's wife couldn't take in a human container. She had scoffed inwardly
at the time, because surely things couldn’t be that bad, but…

They are, and it hurts that things could have fallen this far.

Even so, she smiles, wraps her arms around Mikoto's shoulders and holds her tightly. “I'm here now,” she reminds her. “I wish Naruto could have grown up with you, and I'm definitely going to kick someone’s ass for that, but Kurama found him and he’s happy now. He’s happy and we’re back and we’re not going anywhere, Mikoto. I promise.”

Mikoto takes a breath that shudders like a sob, shaking in Kushina's grasp. Her hands fist in Kushina's shirt, then ease, and she says in a voice that’s only a little choked, “Don’t make promises like that, idiot. Just—just stay, all right?” Another breath, steadier this time, and she straightens, shoving her hair back out of her face but ignoring the tear-tracks that streak her cheeks. A pause, and then she asks, “Kurama?”

“My brother!” Kushina says brightly, just for the long, slow, baffled blink that has always been Mikoto's expression of bewilderment. “My baby brother,” she adds gleefully, just because she can, and makes a mental note to use that phrase around Kurama at the next available opportunity.

A slow shake of her head, and then Mikoto laughs, rueful and relieved and warm and wonderful. “Only you,” she says fondly, and it’s a phrase Kushina heard from her at least once a month from the time they were Academy students. She has to grin, and Mikoto smiles back, and entire world worth of things in her eyes that she doesn’t need to say aloud for Kushina to hear.

Behind them, Sarutobi pointedly clears his throat, sounding like this isn’t the first time he’s done it, and Mikoto instantly flushes a little. In the same heartbeat, though, she squares her shoulders, sidesteps Kushina, and bows to the Hokage without a single ounce of remorse on her face.

“Forgive me, Hokage-sama, I was overcome with joy,” she says, managing not to sound apologetic even as she apologizes. It’s a talent Kushina has always envied.

“So I see,” Sarutobi agrees mildly, but he sounds indulgent rather than annoyed. “Kushina, were it any less urgent I would happily let you go, but I believe there are things beyond your half-brother’s wisdom that we need to discuss.”

“I’ll wait,” Mikoto says firmly, before Kushina can do more than open her mouth. She hugs Kushina one more time, then steps back, strides past the wary ANBU, and takes a seat in one of the simple chairs like a queen ascending her throne.

Innate Uchiha dramatics, Kushina thinks fondly, grinning to herself, and lets Sarutobi lead her back into the office and close the door.

“Kurama-nii, where are we gonna go now?” Naruto asks, tugging on Kurama’s sleeve. “Can we go to the park? I want to swing!”

Kurama rolls his eyes, but before he can answer Kakashi says, just a little despairing, “You ate seven bowls of ramen, don’t you want to sleep now?”

Kurama snorts. Loudly. “Right,” he says dryly. “You’ve clearly never dealt with children.” Whereas Kurama has technically been one twice now, or at least been in the backseat for two childhoods. “Come on, kit, we'll go run it off.”
Naruto cheers, then grabs Gaara's hand and tugs him out of the ramen stand. “Later, old man! Thanks for the ramen!”

Teuchi laughs as they go, waving after them. “I haven’t seen him this happy before,” he tells Kurama, and his smile is warm and just faintly grateful. “It’s good to see my favorite customer doing well.”

Kurama gives him a crooked smile in return, letting Fū hang onto his hand as she slides down from her stool. “Thanks,” he answers, and means for more than the cook’s words and the ramen.

Waving him off, Teuchi disappears into the back, and Kurama glances around for anything that’s been abandoned. Well, besides them, since Naruto and Gaara are both a good distance down the road and don’t appear to be stopping. Yugito follows his gaze, then hurries after them without Kurama asking, easily catching up and falling into step. She leans down a little, listening as Naruto chatters at her, and Kurama couldn’t fight a smile if he tried.

“Konoha is in for a lot of readjustments,” Kakashi remarks. He’s also watching the three jinchuuriki, but his expression is closer to wry than anything else.

It takes effort not to say they deserve a hell of a lot worse, but Kurama manages it, if only barely. Not that he cares, but if they’re going to be living here it’s probably better not to throw all of his hostility out in the open immediately. Sliding his hands into his sleeves, Kurama snorts quietly. “Even if they don’t, Naruto isn’t going to care. Not as much, anyway. He’s got the other kids now, and Kushina.”

“And you.” Kakashi gives him a sidelong look, then pulls out his dogeared copy of *Icha Icha*, flips to a random page, and determinedly buries his nose in it.

Just for a moment, Kurama contemplates snatching the book and setting it on fire. Too much effort for too little payoff, he concludes, though. Kakashi likely has other copies, and it will be a temporary inconvenience at best. Still, a thought for later, “later” being the next time Kakashi pisses him off. So about ten minutes or so from now.

“Can I have another piggyback ride, Kurama-nii?” Fū asks, hanging off of his elbow and looking up with a wide, pleading gaze.

Kurama lets her see him pointedly rolling his eyes, but sighs in surrender. With a bright laugh, Fū scales his back like it’s a mountain, wrapping her arms around his neck and leaning forward to see over his shoulder. “You’re the best, Kurama-nii!”

“You only say that when you get your way,” Kurama grumbles, but he hooks an arm beneath her thighs to give her a little more stability and doesn’t do more than sigh when she kisses his cheek.

Kakashi says nothing, very loudly, as he holds the hangings aside for them to step back out into the street, and Kurama glares at him.

“Hey, hey, it’s the dastardly villain who laid me low,” a voice full of lazy amusement says before they can take more than a few steps, and Kurama turns in surprise to find a familiar figure behind him, one hand raised in greeting.

“Shiranui,” he returns dryly, pretending not to notice the way Kakashi has gone stiff beside him. “Your head still in one piece?”

Genma grins, tapping one temple. “Raidō tells me I’ve got the hardest skull in Konoha. I’m fine.
You're looking a little less stressed, though. That's good.”

Kurama’s a little distracted by the fact that Genma is in his ANBU uniform, however, even if he has his tiger-painted mask strapped to his belt rather than covering his face. One brow arching, he pointedly looks Genma over, then asks, “You here to take me in?”

The amusement deepens, and Genma shakes his head, tipping his chin at Kakashi. “Sorry, we’ll have to have fun with handcuffs another day. Kakashi, the Hokage wants your report on the fight immediately.”

“The fight? Which one?” But despite the dry words Kakashi is already moving, sliding his book away and turning towards the Administration Building. Two steps and he realizes Genma isn’t following, glancing back with faint suspicion as he pauses. “Genma?”

Genma waves him off. “I'm just playing messenger, not your babysitter, Kakashi. Even you can manage to make it to Sarutobi's office without getting sidetracked. I'm about to go on duty.”

Another fractional pause, and there’s something like wary apprehension growing beneath Kakashi’s careful stare, but instead of making something of it he just inclines his head, says, “If you get another concussion it’s your own fault,” and offers a lazy wave as he walks away.

All three of them watch him go, and then Fū says, “He didn’t notice that you helped us in Whirlpool?”

The smile that Genma gives her is crooked and full of wry humor. “I'm a pretty good liar, when I need to be. You're Fū, right?”

Not Taki’s container, not the Nanabi jinchuuriki, and Kurama hadn’t really expected either of those titles, but he’s still glad Genma didn’t use them. He can see by the cheer of her grin that Fū is, too. “Yeah!” she agrees brightly. “I used to be Fū of Taki, but now I'm Fū of Kurama-nii’s kids!”

That gets a laugh from Genma, even as Kurama rolls his eyes, and the tokujo winks at her. “Nice to officially meet you, then, Fū. Shiranui Genma.” A quick, quasi-casual glance at Kurama and he tucks his hands into his pockets, then asks lightly, “You headed somewhere? I'll walk with you for a bit.”

It’s clear he wants to talk about something, so Kurama nods, setting off after the fading traces of Naruto's chakra. “Did the Hokage really want to see Kakashi, or did you just want to get me alone?”

“I wouldn’t lie about that,” Genma protests halfheartedly. “Too easy to get caught. And I really do have a mission, but I can put it off for a few minutes.” He pauses as they turn down another side street, casting a careful glance over the craggy, greenery-covered buildings around them, and when he’s certain they’re alone he says very quietly, “You need to keep an eye on Naruto and the other kids, okay? The Hokage has me looking into some things, but if I don’t catch something in time…” He grimaces around the senbon in his mouth.

Between the Hokage prompting this, the jinchuuriki kids being in danger, and Genma acting paranoid in his own village, Kurama doesn’t need three guesses to figure out what this is about. “Danzō,” he growls, just as quietly. “You're looking into him?”

Genma blinks, long and slow, and pulls the senbon from his mouth. “…Yeah,” he acknowledges, eyes narrowing. “Do I want to ask how you knew that?”

Kurama ignores that, because saying time travel will cause more problems than it solves. He digs into old memories, focusing on the things Sai once told his Naruto, and stops walking for a moment
as bits and pieces trickle back. Sai even went back to one of the old bases, long after Danzō was
dead and burned to ash, to find all the records from Root’s operation in the hopes of locating all the
members once the fallout from the war had settled. Naruto hadn’t gone with him, but Sakura had,
and she and Naruto had talked about it over drinks afterwards.

Those are old memories, half-faded from alcohol and everything that’s happened in between then
and now. Still, hoping he’s remembering correctly—because Sai was one of Naruto's precious
people, too, and just because Kurama hasn’t thought about him yet doesn’t mean doing so doesn’t
hurt a little—Kurama takes a breath and says, “You know the tunnels in the Hokage Mountain?”

There’s a moment of silence, and then Genma snorts, clear amusement in his face. “Of course you
know about that, too. Yeah, I'm familiar with them. That’s where ANBU headquarters is.”

Kurama nods, because he knows that, too—Naruto might not have been ANBU, but he was
Hokage, and even beyond that he visited Sasuke down there enough times for Kurama to remember
them just as well as if he’d actually been a member. “Past the southern end of the barracks, there’s
another tunnel that leads out into the forest. One of the Nidaime’s old labs is nearby.”

“I've been past there,” Genma confirms, hazel eyes steady on Kurama’s face. “Pretty place, right?
Lots of trees, peaceful and good for relaxing, since no one ever goes there.”

Message definitely received. Kurama snorts faintly, but feels a bit of the tension ease out of his
shoulders. “Lots of flowers,” he agrees, dust-dry.

It makes Genma laugh, even as he pulls the mask from his belt. “Well, braiding flower-crowns is the
best cure for workplace stress, isn’t it? With all the Kumo nin wandering around, I think it’s about
time I take it up again. Eyes open, Uzumaki.”

“Same to you,” Kurama returns, but before he’s even finished speaking Genma has his mask on and
is leaping for the nearest cluster of hanging roots. He scales them easily, swinging up onto the
rooftops in a few easy motions, and vanishes from sight.

Fū cranes her neck to look after him, expression thoughtful. “You like him, don’t you, Kurama-nii?”

“Sensible people make me happy,” Kurama says, which is more or less an answer. He hitches her up
a little higher with one arm and keeps walking, following Naruto's trail. It meanders a little, avoiding
big crowds, but it’s definitely headed for the field outside the Academy, right where he met Kurama
for the first time.

Still leaning forward over his shoulder, Fū hums. “Konoha is a lot bigger than Taki,” she says
thoughtfully. “And it looks nicer, too. Are we going to find a house here?”

Honestly, Kurama has no idea. Kushina and Minato's house is gone, destroyed in the Kyuubi attack,
and the tiny apartment Naruto used to live in is too small for all five of them—seven, even, if Han
and Rōshi really do end up sticking with them. At this point, Naruto's idea of getting Tenzō to build
them one is looking like their best bet.

“We will,” he promises Fū, because there's not really any other choice. He’ll try to corner the
Hokage before it gets much later and find out, since they finally have the opportunity not to sleep on
the ground and he’d like to take full advantage of it.

“Okay,” Fū agrees, as cheerful as ever, and wriggles out of Kurama’s hold. Dropping to the ground,
she slides around him, then heads for the knot of blond and red heads at a run and flings herself at all
three of them with a war cry.
Kurama chuckles a little, watching the four go sprawling on the grass with loud complaints and challenging shouts as Fū starfishes out on top of them. There's a wriggle, a twist, and Yugito gets both feet in Fū’s stomach and heaves her away, rolling upright only to be tackled by Naruto. She goes down with a cry that sounds like “Treachery!”, and Naruto drags Gaara along with him to pin the older girl. It works right up until Fū comes back, scooping the two boys up with a whoop and hauling them off. An instant later, Yugito sweeps her legs out from underneath her, and all four of them hit the ground again.

Ignoring the free-for-all wrestling match, Kurama sinks down under the tree with the swing, leaning back against the smooth bark and scanning the descending darkness. It’s an eerie sort of parallel to his first sight of Naruto in this time; even the weather feels the same, fading sunlight and a touch of cool breeze swaying the branches.

This time, though, the sound of laughter and children’s voices is all he can hear, and he can't fight a smile as he watches them try and grind each other’s faces into the grass. It’s probably a little rougher than most Academy-age kids would be, but they're jinchuuriki and they're not afraid to use their strength.

Kurama is glad. He’s glad they’re happy, glad they can be themselves. All of this started because he couldn’t leave Naruto on his own, but…it’s grown from there. Now, in the same situation, he knows full well that he wouldn’t leave any of them like that.

From the tangle of bodies, Yugito surfaces and scrambles upright. She’s breathless with laughter, eyes bright, half of her hair falling out of its braid, and she bolts for Kurama, diving down on his far side. Instantly, knowing exactly what’s about to happen, Kurama yelps, shoving her away, but it’s already too late. With a round of battle cries, Fū, Gaara, and Naruto hurl themselves at him, tackling him bodily to the ground, and Yugito joins in, laughing like Kurama hasn’t heard before.

Kurama struggles, growls, tries halfheartedly to shake them off, but there’s laughter bubbling in his chest, and actually escaping is pretty much the last thing on his mind.

None of them feel the eyes on them, or see the small figure tucked back into the shadow of a doorway, watching their tussle with wide eyes and leaning forward to get a better look. They don’t feel the touch of chakra that sparks, hear the very quiet, “It’s pretty and warm,” that’s lost to the night’s breeze as it swirls spiky hair around a pale face.

From somewhere deeper in the building, there’s a call, short and faintly annoyed, and in an instant the watching eyes are gone.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone feeling the lack of KakaKura, there's a random reverse drabble set in the future with lots of flirting and some flailing Shisui over here.
Happy Valentine’s Day! I have very little romance to offer up, but I do have family fluff, which hopefully makes up for it?

Also! I’m using several Kusa characters introduced in the Blood Prison movie, but otherwise disregarding it because it was mostly a dumpster fire. If you see a familiar name, that’s probably why.

[luciform /ˈlʊsəˌfoʊrm/, like light; having, in some respects, the nature of light; resembling light. From Latin lux, lucis, “light” + -form, from -fōrmis, “having the shape or type of”]

Kurama leaves the kids playing hide and seek in the dark with Utakata to watch over them, and heads around the edge of the Academy. The door of the Administration Building is standing open, and there are several squads worth of shinobi with different hitai-ate milling around the ground floor. A few of them eye him with contained hostility, but Kurama ignores the stares and heads for the Hokage’s office. He can’t think of many people who would be stupid enough to pick a fight, but if someone does, he’ll handle it.

The room right outside the office boasts even more shinobi, these ones a lot more alert and aware than those downstairs. Guards, Kurama thinks, recognizing Namiashi Raidō and Uzuki Yugao hovering by one of the windows. Mei and Zabuza are across from them, Zabuza leaning against the wall and looking amused, Mei pacing in a tight circle and clearly annoyed.

Between talking to the assassins he most vividly remembers dying for his Naruto and talking to the Kiri nin he more or less knows, Kurama picks the latter. He pushes through the suddenly even warier stares and comes to a halt next to the swordsman, arching a brow at him.

“Something entertaining, shark-face?” he asks dryly.

Even through the bandages he can see Zabuza’s smirk. “Terumī doesn’t trust out half-sized Kage not to set off the next World War is she isn’t behind him playing censor.”

“Of course I don’t trust him!” Mei hisses, though she keeps her voice low enough that she can at least pretend she’s being mindful of propriety. “It’s Yagura.”

“Half-sized?” Kurama asks dryly. “Aren’t you being a bit generous there?”

The smile Zabuza gives him in response is wolfish, and he straightens to his full height, pointedly looking down. “Firecracker, the only way you’ve got the high ground to say that is if I get you a box.”

Fuck him, Kurama decides, and with a sharp growl he body-slams Zabuza back into the wall, sweeps his feet out from under him, and dumps him on his ass. “You fish-faced fucker,” he snaps, stalks past a laughing Mei, and heads for the office. His own fault for expecting anything like intelligent conversation from a man who thinks the piranha look is attractive.
“I’ve got a room at the inn to myself, Red!” Zabuza calls after him, sounding like he’s grinning as he pushes back to his feet. “You’re welcome to stop by any time, you know.”

“I thought you said no encore!” Kurama growls right back as he shoves through the doors and into the meeting room. “Fuck off!”

Five Kage, three Village Heads, Kakashi, and Kushina all turn to stare at him, and Kurama wonders if it would be reasonable to march right back out and punch Zabuza in his stupid smug face.

There’s a long moment of silence, and then Yagura sighs, exasperated, and folds his arms across him chest. “Please don’t take him up on that. I’d hate to have to kill my own guard for being insufferable tomorrow.”

“Not a problem,” Kurama bites out, and the glare he casts around the room dares anyone else to comment. Kushina especially, because she looks practically gleeful. Disturbingly gleeful. He narrows his eyes at her, and she grins right back.

“Kurama,” Sarutobi says politely, and he’s the only one beside Kushina up on her perch and Ōnoki in a chair by the wall who’s currently sitting, seated behind his desk with his pipe in his hand. “I was just about to send a messenger for you. Do you have a moment?”

Kurama hesitates, but…the kids will be fine with Utakata, and the teenager had said Han and Rōshi were on their way, so it’s probably all right to linger. Besides, he needs a favor, as far as finding a house is concerned, so he might as well do what he can to get on the Sandaime’s good side. “Sure. What do you need?”

Sarutobi gives him a faint, tired smile and pushes to his feet. “Let me introduce you to the newly arrived. Tamaryō, Headwoman of Kusa, and Yone, Headwoman of Tani. Tamaryō, Yone, Uzumaki Kurama.”

“A pleasure,” the tall, white-haired woman with a Kusa hitai-ate says, and even though her expression is stern Kurama can read the amusement in her eyes. “Especially given that my village has no jinchuuriki for you to steal.”

The other headwoman laughs, light and airy as she flips a fan open to cover the bottom of her face, though her dark eyes are sharp. Except for the eyes, she has Fū’s coloring—dark skin, pale hair, if in a shade of blue instead of green—and a stocky build with obvious muscles beneath her fishnets. “I couldn’t agree more. The amount of trouble you’ve managed to stir up in less than two months is impressive, Uzumaki.”

“Charmed,” Kurama says without an ounce of sincerity, and gives Sarutobi a narrow glance. The smile Sarutobi returns is wry. “Other introductions are not needed, I assume?”

It’s not like he’s going to forget who the Kage are, especially when he more or less made off with all of their jinchuuriki. Kurama gives Sarutobi the look that question deserves, and the old man raises his hands in answer. “As I assumed. We have several outstanding questions, though, if you would care to answer them.”

Well. Someone’s going out of their way to be polite, Kurama thinks, leaning back against the door and eyeing that peaceable expression warily. He doesn’t trust it at all, and even if Sarutobi has Genma investigating Danzō, he doesn’t trust that Danzō won’t get his hands on the information somehow. Feeding that freak news about Akatsuki, Obito, or the jinchuuriki in general isn’t exactly high on Kurama’s to-do list. He conspired with Madara once already, after all; there’s no saying he
“…Fine,” he allows, because there’s clearly no getting out of this with anything short of a temper tantrum, and as tempting as it is to wreck things and entirely divert the leaders’ attention, it’s just slightly possible that Kurama will need their good will at some point in the near future. He’d rather earn it this way than make the kids think he’d force them to play nice.

Kakashi’s watching him, close and careful, but Kurama pointedly ignores his gaze. The Copy-Nin is hard enough to read on a good day with his hitai-ate up. Like this, still wrapped up in his uniform, half-hidden in shadows, with other eyes on him and something to hide, Kurama doesn’t have much of a chance at all.

“My brother says there’s—”

“Nine plus one makes things more fun,” Bee chimes in before A can finish. “Like I said, now there’s ten bijuu in my head.”

With a growl, A drags Bee into a headlock, shaking him lightly. “That’s all that’s in your head, idiot! Be quiet!”

Over the sound of Bee’s somewhat-rhyming protests, Rasa says sharply, “I want to know why you didn’t simply inform the villages of the threat to begin with. If we had known, we could have taken precautions and protected—”

Kurama scoffs, and doesn’t bother to hide it. “You’re acting like I took the kids to help you,” he retorts. “Fuck no. It was for them. How many fucking assassins did you send after Gaara before I got there? He’s six.”

Yone’s fan snaps shut with a suspiciously metallic sound, edges glinting. She looks Rasa over carefully, like she’s sizing him up for a coffin, and says politely, “Come again?”

Rasa doesn’t waver, dark eyes still pinned on Kurama. “His seal is flawed, and there’s nothing to be done about it. The Ichibi has too much access to his mind, and my village holds more souls than just my son, Uzumaki. I don’t have the time to waste on sentiment. Not when acting saves lives.”

“You asked his own uncle to kill him!” Kurama snarls, disbelieving. “He loved Yashamaru!”

Rasa’s expression goes blank with shock, then instantly shades towards fury, and he takes a step forward. “How do you know that?” he demands sharply. “That was a top secret mission, known only to myself and Yashamaru, you shouldn’t—”

“But I do.” Kurama gives him a grin, all teeth and threat. “Does it make you wonder what else I know?” He sweeps a glance around the office, meeting stares that are a mix of wary and hostile, and it’s mostly an empty threat but they don’t know that.

“This,” says Sarutobi quietly, “is not the point.” He taps his pipe sharply against the edge of the desk, then takes a long pull as all eyes shift to him. A stern look, and he adds, “We are wasting time looking at the past when the future is of much more immediate concern. Kurama. Will Akatsuki try again?”

Kurama hesitates, not wanting to drop the topic, but with the weight of both Kakashi and Kushina’s eyes on him he gives a grudging tip of his head. “Tobi’s a dramatic asshole, but he’s determined. He’s not going to stop trying until we take away all hope of his plan working, and for that we need to kill Zetsu.”
“The plant one,” Ōnoki clarifies, and when Kurama nods he huffs disgustedly. “Like Senju Hashirama—what a coincidence. Are you telling me there's no connection there? Konoha is not to be trusted—”

“Listen, asshole,” Kurama growls, and he’s irritated enough that it rumbles through the air like the precursor to an earthquake. “Madara making you shit your pants that one time doesn’t mean anything except that you're a coward who can't let go of things, so unless you’ve got something helpful to contribute you should shut up before I make you.”

Ōnoki goes white, eyes widening, and his mouth snaps shut.

Kusa’s headwoman glances at Ōnoki, brows rising, then at Kurama, and then back at Sarutobi, who looks equally startled. “Uchiha Madara?” she asks. “What does Konoha's first missing-nin have to do with this?”

“Zetsu used him to start all of this,” Kurama answers gruffly. “He’s a bastard, and I wouldn’t spit on him if he were on fire, but he didn’t pull his delusions of grandeur out of thin air. Zetsu’s trying to get his creator, the real leader of Akatsuki, released from her seals, and Madara was his catalyst for doing that.”

“Madara can’t be behind this,” Hisen says, but the Taki headman looks a few shades paler than before. “He’d be almost a hundred years old at this point.”

“Tobi was his student,” Kakashi puts in unexpectedly, and when Kurama raises a brow at him he crinkles his visible eye in a bullshit smile. “He’s trying to pass himself off as Madara, but he’s too short.”

“And Madara is dead,” Kurama adds. “I’d like to keep it that way, personally.”

“Well, with Orochimaru sitting in a jail cell it should be fine, you know?” Kushina’s smile is cheery with just a hint of blood behind it. “He’s the one who brought us back.”

“Which doesn’t make Tobi any less of a pain in the ass,” Kurama counters. “We’ve fucked up two thirds of their plan, but he still has Kisame helping him, and Sasori. Konan, too, if she managed to survive the snakebite.”

A makes a sound of great annoyance, finally releasing Bee and letting him straighten up. “How do you even know this?” he demands. “Were you part of Akatsuki?”

This time the snarl that tears from Kurama’s throat is the very farthest thing from human, and he lunges before he can remember why that’s actually a bad idea. Kakashi darts forward and grabs him before he can claw A’s face off, and it’s only because Kakashi is something like a friend that Kurama doesn’t just go straight through him to get to the Raikage.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” he hisses, and A is startled but defensive, already puffing up to yell right back. “Kaguya murdered my best friend! She destroyed every fucking thing I know, and she’s behind everything I’ve lost in my life! You think I’d fucking help her?”

Kakashi’s hands close just a little more tightly around his biceps, and he pushes lightly at Kurama, urging him to step back. “Maa, maa,” he murmurs, and Kurama has never wanted to calm down less but doesn’t try to resist. “I think Raikage-sama understands that now, Kurama. It was just a mistake.”

Kurama growls, but allows Kakashi to haul him back towards the door, though he doesn’t try to make it easy for him. “It was a dumb-ass mistake. Just like your ideas to turn children into weapons.”
Kushina laughs, bright and cheery, though it doesn’t reach her eyes as she leans forward a little on her perch. “I’m not too fond of that part either, you know?” she agrees. “Otouto, you made it so all the jinchuuriki are friends with their bijuu, didn’t you?”

A jerks around to glare at Bee, who looks equally surprised, but Kurama ignores the byplay with a tip of one shoulder. Crossing his arms over his chest, he leans back against the door again and gives Kushina a grumpy look for the title. “Naruto only just started talking to the Kyuubi, and Rōshi’s relationship with Son is still kind of rocky. Han hasn’t mentioned anything about Kokuō, either. But the others? Yeah, they’re doing okay.”

Rasa makes a choked, disbelieving sound.

With half a glance over at Kurama, Kakashi hums in agreement. “Gaara and Utakata were the ones to kill Kakuzu,” he says almost lightly, as if unaware of the impact of the words. “Apparently Saiken and Shukaku work well together.”

Kurama watches the expression that cross the Kage’s and Headman’s faces, and can’t restrain a snort. “Harder to control a weapon that isn’t fighting itself, isn’t it?” he says, and when A, Ōnoki, and Hisen all turn glares on him he grins without humor, showing teeth.

Sarutobi sighs, rubbing a hand over his face, and raps his knuckles against the desktop. “Kurama, as hard as it may be to believe, I did not ask you here to debate claims on the jinchuuriki or the morality of their creation. Akatsuki is a far greater threat right now, given what happened to Kiri.”

“Always the peacekeeper, Sarutobi,” A mutters, and it’s more than a little sour.

There’s a moment of tight, tense silence, and then Yagura takes a breath. “Hatake told you most of it,” he says, and if there are lines of strain in his face he hides them well, leaning back into the shadows where his expression is mostly indistinct. “After the Sanbi resurfaced in Kiri, it was captured and sealed into me, and shortly afterwards I was appointed Mizukage. I was ambushed in my own home by a man with Sharingan eyes, and my next clear memory is Kurama and Utakata breaking the genjutsu I was under.”

Kurama half-expects them to ask how Madara could have laid a genjutsu like that if he was dead, but no one does. Reasonable, probably—it wouldn’t be the first time a Sharingan eye got passed on to a non-Uchiha, and everyone here knows that, largely because they’ve all tried to get their hands on them at one time or another.

Instead, Tamaryō makes a quiet sound of agreement and inclines her head, pulling herself up a little straighter. “I agree that Akatsuki should be our focus right now. If anything has to be done about the situation of the jinchuuriki, we need to be alive to do it, and it sounds as though Akatsuki will not give us that luxury easily. I for one would prefer not to test whether this Tobi’s eyes can control normal shinobi just as easily as jinchuuriki.”

“Madara was dangerous enough on his own,” Ōnoki rumbles, looking both grim and faintly sour. “With allies sharing his goals…I second the decision. You say you destroyed their base?”

“Thoroughly,” Kurama confirms, and it’s easier to feel the dark satisfaction of shattering the Gedō Mazō here and now, without having to worry about surprise attacks or Kakashi bleeding out in front of him. “It wasn’t their only one, but I don’t know where the backups are located. Probably close to Ame, since Pein controls it.”

“Which is another problem,” Rasa points out. “We’re technically holding the headman of another village right now. As soon as Ame gets word of it, they’re going to want him back.”
Kurama hesitates, because that’s a good point, and turns it over for a moment. “They’ll probably use Konan to come at things politically,” he says, and it takes effort not to grimace. “Provided she survives. She’s second in command there, and the people love her.”

Hisen huffs, casting him a narrow look. “Easy enough to stall her,” he dismisses. “This Pein has never declared himself beyond his borders—as far as any other country is aware, it’s still Hanzō in charge of the village. We ask for proof, and once she provides it we stall again.”

“As little as I enjoy red tape, it has to be good for something.” Sarutobi sounds amused. “Better to use it here than military might. Thank you, Hisen. A neat delay until we can reach a solution.”

Kurama has his own ideas about how to talk Nagato around, so hopefully they won't actually need one when it gets to that point. He wasn’t planning to bother when Nagato was just another enemy, but with him captured and conveniently close, he might as well. His Naruto always regretted not being able to save the man, after all, and Kushina probably won't mind adding another Uzumaki to her clan.

The two headwomen trade glances, and Yone flicks her fan open, then closed again. “I put my village on alert before we departed,” she says lightly. “And brought along several squads of my best shinobi. If Akatsuki aims to capture the jinchuuriki, Konoha is likely our best place to mount a defense.”

“The wards here are the oldest of any village,” Tamaryō agrees. “I assume your barriers can be fine-tuned to pick up this Tobi, even with his ability?”

Sarutobi inclines his head. “Tobirama-sensei’s seals are still some of the strongest in existence,” he says, and there’s a note of tired pride in his voice. “Now that all of you have arrived I’ll have the barrier squads reactivate them immediately. Shall we reconvene tomorrow to distribute our forces?”

A snorts, grabbing his brother by the back of the neck as Bee tries to slip away towards the door. “If you’re feeling your age already, Sarutobi, appoint a successor or leave things to—”

“He had a successor,” Kushina cuts in, and her voice is like the crack of a whip as she leaps down to land with menacing grace just out of A’s reach. Kurama knows her well enough to recognize the grief on her face, even if it’s mostly buried, knows that one misplaced word is all it’s going to take to turn that grief into rage. “Minato gave his life to save Konoha, you know! He was a great man and a great Hokage, and if you’re going to forget that he existed I’ll—”

Kurama catches her by the shoulder, and when she spins to grab him in preparation for a flip he blocks her hand, grabs her elbow, and pulls her away. “No one is forgetting Minato,” he tells her, and if it’s sharp it’s because he knows precisely how to catch her attention. “But there’s no way to bring him back, and right now Sarutobi is Hokage. Focus, Kushina.”

Kushina stares at him, and for a moment there's rage boiling right beneath the surface, tangible and tempting. A lifetime ago Kurama would have reached for it, fed it, used it—

And, just as she would have then, Kushina contains it, strangles it, forces it down and takes a breath. For all her temper, she’s one of the best Kurama has ever met at controlling her emotions, even if it doesn’t seem like it at first glance. She reaches out for him, drops her head against his shoulder and sags against him with a weary sound, but the moment of vulnerability doesn’t linger. Before Kurama can do more than touch her back, she’s pulling away, shoving her hair out of her face, and she turns on her heel. “Come on, otouto, let’s go! I’m bored!”

Kurama growls after her, even if it doesn’t make her so much as twitch, and ignores Sarutobi’s
muttered prayer as he steps out of the path of the departing Kage and village heads. There are no more protests regarding the jinchuuriki, which is good, because Kurama’s patience is at the very end of its tether.

“Yes, Kurama?” the Hokage asks, faintly weary, as he rises from behind his desk and turns off the lamp. “I assume you had something to discuss?”

“Yeah.” Kurama folds his hands into the sleeves of his haori, glancing back at where Kakashi is hovering. The Copy-Nin has his nose buried in his book, though, and is pretending not to pay attention. “The kids are going to need somewhere to sleep, and I think Rōshi and Han at least are going to stick around.”

Sarutobi pauses, frowning faintly, and tips his head in agreement. “Indeed. And it seems a bad idea to send eight, possibly nine jinchuuriki to a civilian-run inn. Hmm.”

Kurama snorts, because bad idea doesn’t even begin to cover it. He watches Sarutobi cross to one of the large file cabinets lining the walls and rocks back on his heels, content to wait for a moment.

“Minato and Kushina's house would have been the perfect solution,” Sarutobi says, mostly to himself as he riffl-es through papers. “A shame it was destroyed in the Kyuubi's attack.”

Kurama winces, because Kushina probably has no idea but she’s going to find out, and he can already guess that it’s not going to be pretty. Not that it was precisely his fault, but that’s probably not enough to save him. Damn it.

“However,” Sarutobi says with a note of cheer in his voice, oblivious to Kurama’s sudden trepidation, “the idea is a sound one, and an actual house will likely make all of you more comfortable. Ah, there it is.” He surfaces with a handful of forms and returns to his desk, fumbling with his glasses as he switches the light back on. “Here we are. There’s an empty house just past Training Ground 7 that used to belong to a small clan, which died out in the Second War. It’s stood empty ever since. Seeing as the Uzumaki Clan is currently landless because of an attack they helped repel, it will be simple enough to deed it to Kushina.”

There are perks to living in a place that’s entirely under military rule, Kurama thinks, faintly amused. He forgets, sometimes, just how much power the Kage have over their villages, and how little say anyone else has in matters.

“Thanks,” he says gruffly, taking the papers as Sarutobi passes them over. “I’ll hand these over whenever she wanders back around.”

Sarutobi’s smile is wry as he slides his bifocals off and sets them aside. “Kushina is many things, but careful with paperwork is not one of them. Get her signature, then file those with the records office tomorrow, and it will be uncontestable. Good night, Kurama.”

The clear dismissal irks a bit, because Kurama definitely isn’t used to being dismissed by anyone, but he tamps down on his anger, tucks the papers away, and heads for the door. Kakashi falls into step with him as he starts down the stairs, not saying anything, but Kurama gives him a sideways look anyway.

“You,” he says dryly, “really need to stop jumping in front of me when I’m pissed. At some point I’m just going to go through you.”

Kakashi gives him a smile that’s probably eighty percent bullshit. “I think I can survive,” he says lightly, but as they step down into the main building a subtle tension slides through his frame, and his
attention darts to something ahead of them.

A little surprised, Kurama turns as well. The Kusa headwoman is still present, expression just as stern as in the meeting, but there's a small figure next to her, barely older than Naruto, who’s practically vibrating with contained energy.

A familiar figure, Kurama thinks, looking down at a miniature Uzumaki Karin, who’s staring up at him with wide eyes behind her glasses.

Before he can speak so much as a word, Karin whips around to tug at Tamaryō’s pantleg, hissing, “Tamaryō-sama, his chakra! His chakra is really bright and warm!”

“Karin!” another girl—several years older, and a chuunin, judging by her uniform—hisses, this one sporting the same long white hair and pale grey eyes as Tamaryō. She catches Karin’s arm, pointedly tugging her away, and adds, “Be polite.”

There’s contained exasperation in the headwoman’s face as she meets Kurama’s gaze. “Uzumaki. There’s someone I think you should meet.”

Without acknowledging her, Kurama crouches down to get on Karin’s eye-level, and offers her a crooked smile. “Another Uzumaki, huh? I’d recognize that hair anywhere.”

Karin freezes in the older girl’s grasp, glancing between her captor, the headwoman, and Kurama with something that’s very close to desperation.

“Let her go, Ryūzetsu,” Tamaryō orders, though her tone is closer to amused than sharp. To Kurama, she adds, “This is Uzumaki Karin. Once she heard your name and why we were coming here, she threatened to run away and find you herself. I thought it would be best to bring her to you directly, given the alternatives.”

As soon as Ryūzetsu loosens her grip, Karin bolts towards Kurama, coming to a sharp stop right in front of him. She pushes her glasses up, then says firmly, “You’re an Uzumaki too!”

It’s not exactly a question, but Kurama nods anyway. “I am. Uzumaki Kurama, nice to meet you.” He casts a careful glance over her, and has to swallow a low growl. Karin already has bite marks showing under the sleeves of her shirt, large and stark against the thinness of a child’s forearms.

Karin looks him over closely, like he’s something she’s going to buy in the market, and then tips her chin up and says, “My mom died healing people and I don’t want to do it anymore. Your chakra is nice, so I’m going to stay here.”

That’s not a question either, but Kurama hides his amusement as he glances up at Tamaryō, arching a brow.

The headwoman snorts faintly. “Clearly, I have no say in this,” she says dryly, answering his unspoken question. “Karin and her mother were both valuable as medics, but while we had an agreement with her mother to give her refuge in return for healing, that doesn’t extend to Karin herself. If she wants to leave, I would rather it be with my blessing than after you invade my village with eight jinchuuriki in tow and simply take her.”

Kurama rolls his eyes, because that’s absolutely an exaggeration and definitely not something he would do, and ignores Kakashi’s low chuckle from behind him. Instead, he looks at Karin, sees the faint hint of wariness deeply buried beneath a stubborn shell, and doesn’t allow himself to sigh. “Well, we wouldn’t be family if I said you couldn’t stay, right? Come on, firebrand, you should meet the others if you’re going to be sticking around.”
“Ah,” Kakashi murmurs in a tone of enlightenment. “A nickname. It’s decided now—you’re never going to let her go.”

“Fuck off, bastard, no one wants your opinion,” Kurama tells him, rising to his feet. He hesitates, then glances down at Karin, and Sage but she’s a hell of a lot shorter than the last time he saw her. Still definitely Karin, though, there’s no doubt about that. “Want a ride?” he asks.

“I can walk,” Karin informs him tartly. “I’m seven, not three.”

Oh, she and Kushina are going to get along like a house on fire. Kurama’s pretty sure he remembers his former jinchuuriki saying those exact words at one point or another. “I know that,” he answers, and it comes out more patient than he actually feels. “But you don’t have to, is what I’m saying.”

“I’ll walk,” Karin decides, though she at least mulls it over for a moment. She grabs the hem of Kurama’s haori, which apparently means she’s not about to let him get away, and looks up at the headwoman. “Goodbye, Tamaryō-sama.”

“Goodbye, Karin,” Tamaryō answers, and there’s nothing of regret in her tone, but…maybe a little sadness. “You are welcome back in Kusa any time you wish to visit your mother’s grave.”

For a moment, Karin’s firm expression wavers, nearly crumples. Kurama can feel her trembling just a little where she’s practically pressed against his leg, and her hand is white-knuckled in his haori. She doesn’t say thank you, doesn’t acknowledge the offer in any way, and from where he’s standing Kurama can see the mark in her skin again.

It makes him want to break something. Tamaryō’s face, preferably, though he honestly isn’t all that picky right now.

“Come on,” he says again, and drops a hand on top of her head. “The others are by the Academy. It’s not too far of a walk.”

“I know,” Karin says, and though her voice cracks on the last word she forges on without acknowledging it. “I saw you playing earlier. Is it true you’re all jinchuuriki? Is that why your chakra is so bright?”

“Jinchuuriki have a lot more chakra than normal shinobi,” Kurama confirms. He steals another glance at her as they head out the Administration Building’s doors, then asks, “You okay?”

Karin pauses, and even though she doesn’t look back at her former headwoman she’s tense like she would bolt if she only knew what direction to run. “I think,” she says clearly, with only the faintest tremble to it, “that I changed my mind.”

Kurama doesn’t have to ask what about. He scoops her up into his arms, and instantly Karin presses her face into his shirt, glasses digging into his shoulder. Splaying a hand over her small back, Kurama steps back into the shadows of a dense climbing vine, letting Kakashi loiter in the street like a lookout.

“They’re the reason Mom is dead,” Karin says, half-muffled but still clear enough to make Kurama close his eyes and swallow down his anger. “There was an attack, and she kept healing, and she told them she was tired but they kept saying that being able to heal like she did was the only reason we could stay, and—” She breaks off, and it’s not a sob, but her breath hitches, and her grip on Kurama tightens just a little. A moment, and she raises her head, face set in mulish lines. “I don’t want to die for them,” she insists. “Mom did, but I won’t.”

“You won’t,” Kurama agrees, and when Karin gives him a sharp look he holds her gaze steadily. “If
you don’t ever want to heal again, that’s fine. I know someone who’d be overjoyed to teach you to fight, if you’d rather do that.”

Karin hesitates, scanning his face like she’s looking for a tell, and Kurama remembers then that Karin’s sensor abilities are strong enough that she can tell at a glance when people are lying. After a moment, she apparently decides that he’s being truthful, because she nods, turns her face away, and says, “I want to.”

“Kushina will be overjoyed,” Kakashi says, and when Kurama starts moving again he joins them.

There’s still laughter coming from under the tree ahead, and Kurama makes for it without hesitation. “That’s what I was thinking,” he agrees, and has to smile a little at the thought of Kushina's face when she realizes there's another Uzumaki around. One who isn’t a mass-murderer, this time.

The hulking shape of Han is clear in the moonlight, and when he catches Kurama’s steps he turns, tipping his hat back. A pause, clearly startled, and then he laughs, loud and entirely amused.

“What?” Kurama demands, bristling, and that’s enough to make Rōshi look up from where he’s showing Naruto a Katon jutsu. The instant his eyes land on Karin, he snorts, rising to his feet and giving Kurama an amused look.

“Another one?” he asks dryly. “Is this a bloodline I don’t know about, or do you just have the worst luck of anyone in the Elemental Countries?”

“My luck is fine,” Kurama growls, crouching down to set Karin on her feet. “And it’s not like I fucking collect them. Extenuating goddamned circumstances, okay?”

Rōshi laughs in his face, very pointedly.

“Monkey-brained asshole,” Kurama snaps, then glances up at the four curious faces watching him—five, if he’s including Utakata. “Hey, kit, come here. This is your cousin, Karin. Karin, Uzumaki Naruto.”

Naruto's face lights up, and he practically bounds forward. “You're my cousin?” he asks enthusiastically. “You're just as pretty as my mom!”

Karin flushes red, and shoves her glasses up her nose in a halfhearted attempt to hide it. “My mom was pretty too,” she says, as if daring him to contradict her. A pause, and she glances up at Kurama and then back at Naruto. “…I'm seven, and I like okonomiyaki and perfume, and your chakra looks like sunshine.”

“You can see chakra?” Naruto bounces closer to grab her hand and tug her towards the other jinchuuriki. “I'm Naruto, and I'm six, and you should meet Fū-nee and Yugito-nee and Gaara! And Utakata! Have you ever ridden a fox before? Fuji an' Momiji can teach you! They’re Kurama-nii’s summons and they're really cool!”

Karin looks slightly overwhelmed by the flood of words, but she doesn’t resist Naruto's pull, and when Fū gives her a bright smile and a cheerful greeting she tentatively smiles back.

“Should we put bets on when he picks up the next one?” Rōshi asks, not even trying to keep his voice down.

Han chuckles, and offers, “Four days?”

“Three,” is Kakashi’s verdict, and when Kurama shoots him a sour look he just smiles back and
wiggles his fingers in a mocking wave.

“Really?” Rōshi asks, and he’s grinning, the bastard. “Clearly you two can’t pick out patterns. A hundred ryō on the next one turning up before sunset the day after tomorrow.”

“Deal,” Kakashi says.

“Agreed,” Han adds.

“I hate you all,” Kurama growls, and goes to collect the kids.
This chapter did not go at all in the direction I intended, but I think it works well regardless. There’s also lots of headcanons regarding shinobi politics in here, most of which has canon basis but is largely extrapolation on my part. Therefore, if you see something glaringly wrong that I overlooked, feel free to yell at me and I’ll adjust.

Hiruzen has had too little sleep and too many hours of worrying. His back is one whole crick, his eyes ache, and there’s a persistent pressure beating against the inside of his skull as he slumps over his desk. With a sigh, he slides his glasses off, rubbing the bridge of his nose, and thinks longingly of his bedroom at home. There’s nothing to be done, though; he sent Shikaku and Fugaku home hours ago, back to the families that will look for them. His own won’t bother. Too many nights absent, too many days gone, and he’s hardly a part of their lives at all beyond a name and a face on a mountain.

There’s a quiet rap on the door, carefully even, and Hiruzen tries his hardest to stifle a sigh. Whoever wants his attention now is just one more stone atop a pile that’s threatening to cause an avalanche, and Hiruzen honestly wonders what will be left of him after it spills.

“Come in,” he calls regardless, because there’s nothing else he can do. Tobirama always put the village first, put his people first, and Hiruzen thinks of that night in the forest again, his teacher, so wise and strong, disappearing into the darkness because he believed the next generation could be better.

Hiruzen pushes down the lance of old grief. He’s always suspected that Tobirama made that sacrifice in part so that the legacy of the Clan Wars could end with him, and under the belief that children raised in the village would be more likely to lead Konoha into a time of peace.

For all his genius, Hiruzen thinks, wryly sad, Tobirama always had a strain of idealism to him that proved he was very much Hashirama’s brother.

There’s a moment of hesitation that draws his attention, because that means it’s clearly not another Kage or village head on his doorstep—confidence is not a trait any of his fellow leaders lack. He frowns a little, about to rise, and the door swings open.

“Dad,” Asuma says, hovering in the doorway as if unsure of his welcome. His hair is too long, to the point of being shaggy, and he’s still wearing that battered old jacket with the fur-lined collar, the sash marking him as one of the Twelve Guardian Ninja tied around his waist. It’s been years since Hiruzen saw him last, and his glasses slip from nerveless fingers, clattering down onto the desk as he pushes sharply to his feet. All at once his back decides to protest, and he winces as muscles knot but
pushes through.

“Asuma,” he answers, and can’t tell if the wonder is clear in his voice. It likely is; he’d half-thought that he’d never see his son again, that Asuma would simply stay in the capital for the rest of his life, their disagreement running too deep to allow him to return.

“Have you been here all night?” There’s an edge of well-remembered exasperation in Asuma’s voice, but it’s not as sharp as it once was, isn’t angry, and Hiruzen feels a tension he hadn’t even recognized slide out of his frame.

“Not by choice, believe me,” he answers, and it comes out more wryly than he intends. He puts a hand to his back, straightening more slowly this time, and takes a breath. “Are you on leave, Asuma?”

There’s a hesitation as Asuma looks him over, carefully assessing, and then says, “No. Back for good. I heard about the excitement and wanted to make sure you hadn’t had a heart attack.”

Hiruzen snorts softly, casting a glance over the surface of his desk, piled high with scrolls and papers and files he hasn’t had a chance to put away yet. “Do you think that will get me out of my next meeting?” he asks wistfully. “I’m sure I could trigger one if I just thought about the situation for a little too long.”

There’s a startled moment of silence, and then Asuma chuckles. “Not yet, please. I only just got home.” He pushes the door open further, checking the room for any other occupants, and then tips his head. “Come on, I know you haven’t eaten breakfast yet, and I only just got in. Let’s get something to eat.”

It is about that time, Hiruzen supposes, and if they’re quick—

He stops himself before he can finish that thought, pressing a hand over his eyes. No. No, because this is his son, finally back from the capital, and their last words were shared in anger and frustration. Hiruzen has never been a good father, because his duty has always been to Konoha first, and Biwako married him knowing that. It gave him rather more leeway to leave his family to their own devices than he truly deserved, and that’s one of Hiruzen’s biggest regrets. No time for his son and daughter and grandson, no time for his wife, no time for Naruto even when he should have made time.

It’s not a mistake he’s going to make again.

“I could eat an ox,” he says decisively, straightening one last stack of papers and stepping around the edge of his desk. A moment of inner debate and he leaves the hat where it lies, strips off the heavy robes as well and drapes them neatly over the back of his chair. When he looks around, Asuma’s brows are high with surprise, and Hiruzen meets his gaze with a tired smile. Three steps past him, out into the main room, and he catches Izumo by the elbow as the chuunin staggers up the last of the stairs with a load of papers. “Izumo, if you’d be so kind as to leave those on my desk, and then send a messenger to the other Kage to let them know the meeting is rescheduled for ten? Just tell them something has come up.”

Izumo blinks, glancing between Hiruzen and Asuma, and then smiles brightly. “Of course, Hokage-sama!” he agrees. “I’ll let anyone who comes looking know that you’ll be back later.”

“Thank you.” Hiruzen pats him on the shoulder, then turns to looks expectantly at his son.

There’s a long pause, and then Asuma chuckles. “Neglecting your work, old man?” he asks, but
there's a warm sort of humor in his voice, and he falls into step down the stairs.

Hiruzen thinks of Tobirama, so devoted to the next generation. Thinks of Kurama, so desperately willing to sacrifice anything at all for those he loves. Thinks of Kushina and Sakumo, returned from the dead to the families that have needed them so sharply. It’s a good reminder, he thinks, and feels for the weight of the hitai-ate in his pocket. Not worn anymore, but carried. Tobirama was the one to hand it to him, the day he, Homura, and Koharu passed the bell test.

Well. For a given value of ‘passed’. They never had a hope of getting even one bell off the Nidaime Hokage, but they’d given it their best shot.

Maybe, in the end, it’s the effort that counts the most.

“I’ve recently been reminded,” he says, and the words are light but the meaning behind them is anything but, “that all things in life require a certain amount of balance. And besides, I believe I’ll be returning to retirement before the year is out.”

And won't that be a surprise to the replacement he has in mind.

Hiruzen would be lying if he claimed that wasn’t one of the perks.

Morning in Suna is one of the few comfortable times to walk the streets, and Rasa tries to make a habit of it whenever he has the time. That habit makes him restless now, far from his village in a place with too much green and too many people, but he isn’t about to drag his guards out and into the streets. They're very close to enemies here, with the last Shinobi World War so recently passed. It’s only been a few years, and shinobi have a long memory for grudges.

He paces the room instead, trying to keep his mind off the tight quarters of the room he shares with his children. His remaining children, and the thought has teeth, but he can't allow himself to dwell on it. The Uzumaki siblings have made it clear that he has no say in his youngest son’s life any longer.

Rasa will deny to his dying day that a part of him is relieved. Gaara outside of Suna ceases to be a problem that has to be dealt with through force. Gaara capable of channeling and controlling Shukaku is only a political problem, and Rasa might be many things, but blind isn’t one of them. There’s no way Kurama will allow Gaara to be used as a weapon, and that means Rasa can focus on Kurama’s loyalty, Kurama’s abilities, Kurama’s threat.

He doesn’t have to kill his son anymore.

Stopping beside the sole window, Rasa stares out over Konoha, but he doesn’t see the greenery-covered buildings. Instead, it’s his brother-in-law most clearly in his mind, Yashamaru with his kind smile and gentle eyes and all the hate he held for Rasa. So fiercely protective, just like Karura, but—

A wound of the heart is different from a flesh wound. Unlike flesh wounds, there are no ointments to heal them, and there are times when they never heal at all.

It was something Yashamaru said to Gaara, but Rasa had overheard. Overheard and dismissed it as nonsense from a medic-nin who was too soft, too kind to a boy who needed to be stronger.

If he’d been stronger, Yashamaru would still be alive, Rasa had thought after that disastrous mission, furious and far too caught up in his grief to consider who was truly at fault. If Gaara had managed to
control himself, the last remnant of Karura would still exist, dozens of Suna’s citizens would still be alive, and Rasa wouldn’t be facing an out-of-control monster instead of a little boy.

Except—

*I’m staying with Kurama-nii.*

Gaara had used Shukaku’s power without being consumed by it, and if the Copy-Nin’s words are to be believed, it’s not the first time. Kurama’s closeness with the boy Rasa could write off—if the Uzumaki really is the tenth jinchuuriki he likely has little reason to fear the Ichibi’s power—but that moment…

Rasa scrubs a hand over his face and tries not to let his regret creep up on him. He did what he had to for the sake of his village, and Uzumaki Kushina’s taunting words don’t change that.

*How many times did you use the Ichibi when you were at war with Konoha?*

*If jinchuuriki are supposed to keep villages at about the same power level, it failed, and if they’re supposed to keep the villages from fighting, that didn’t work either.*

Suna is already the weakest of the Five Great Nations, kept as one of the Five by history more than anything. Even Taki rivals them in size, and Wind Country’s economy doesn’t look to be improving. Their defeat in the last war left them vulnerable, incredibly weakened, and reeling from the loss of so many high-level shinobi. Sealing Shukaku into Gaara right before the end of Karura’s pregnancy was supposed to be the last resort, a last line of defense to keep Suna from being overrun by the next Kage searching for a soft target to expand their empire.

Rasa knows his fellow Kage, his fellow Nations. Konoha is largely peaceable, because they have no need to be otherwise. The village rests on fat coffers, more missions than its shinobi have time for, more resources than it could use in ten years of famine. Iwa is isolated, proud and aggressive, and Rasa trusts only that Ōnoki will always look out for his village and his pride before all else. Kiri is too far away to worry about overmuch, and has enough internal strife even now to keep Yagura occupied. Kumo—

Kumo makes Rasa wary, and he knows it’s a sentiment most of his fellow Kage share. A, like his father, is arrogant, and Kumo is stronger than Iwa. Strong enough to make their military might a constant threat, and more than ready to snatch up any and all power that crosses their path. Rasa remembers hearing about the Hyuuga incident, barely three years ago—the first time he was briefed on the circumstances, he was absolutely certain it was going to lead to war. So utterly certain that that was what A was aiming for, because there was no other option in the face of such a blatant attack. He’d readied his shinobi, shored up his defenses, and waited for Sarutobi to call Suna, as a reluctant ally, to come to Konoha’s aid.

Sarutobi hadn’t, though; Konoha simply accepted the attack, the insult, the death of a prominent jounin from a main clan, and Rasa still can’t quite tell if he thinks it a weakness or a strength.

Konoha has a lot of moments like that, he’s noticing.

He’s just about to turn away and start pacing again when there’s a light tug at his sleeve. He glances down in mild surprise, not expecting any company this early, but Temari’s wide, dark blue eyes are staring up at him, wide awake and faintly plaintive.

“Yes, Temari?” he asks.

Temari looks at him for a long moment, painfully similar to Karura when she had a weighty
question, and then glances out the window. “Is Gaara really here?” she asks, achingly tentative, and Rasa can't tell if the expression on her face is fear or something else entirely.

The sound of blankets shifting draws Rasa’s attention, and he glances over to see that Kankuro is awake as well, sitting up on his futon and watching warily. They’re both waiting for an answer, but Rasa knows that the answers he has aren’t ones they're going to want to hear. Hearing that any family, no matter how distant, has picked a near stranger over blood—

“He is,” Rasa says, as gently as he’s able.

Temari chews on her lip for a moment, weighing her words. “Is he coming here soon?” she asks.

Rasa looks at his daughter, who tried so hard despite her fear to love her youngest sibling. At his son, terrified and tentative, who nonetheless always stuck by Temari's side when she tried to approach Gaara. And he thinks, tired and a little pained, of the way Gaara curled in Kurama’s arms, unwilling to let go.

A wound of the heart is different from a flesh wound. Unlike flesh wounds, there are no ointments to heal them, and there are times when they never heal at all.

“No,” Rasa says, and the truth of it stings in his throat like regret. “No, Temari, I don’t think he is.”

The sound of laughter wakes Sakumo from his daze, and he lifts his head, searching for the source of it on instinct. The sun is already rising, which is a surprise, and not entirely a pleasant one; he’d thought he was done losing time this way, standing before cold graves.

The sound of happy children is a balm, though, and sorely needed. His bones are chilled through, and he wonders how long he’s been standing here, staring at the lilies left on his own grave. Kakashi’s hand, he’s sure of it—there's likely no one else left who would bother.

He turns away, forcing down the thought of his son still leaving flowers at his grave, looks towards the road in time to see a flash of crimson. Kurama is on the path, two children with him. The youngest two, if Sakumo recognizes them. One is Kushina's son, and the other is the Kazekage's, but there's little difference in the way they adhere to the man, the redheaded boy in his arms and the blond on his shoulders, clinging to hanks of Kurama’s hair like reins. It makes Sakumo smile, just a little and very much despite himself, and without conscious thought he finds himself moving, drifting towards the road in time to intercept them.

“Good morning,” he offers lightly, breaking into an argument about whether ramen is acceptable breakfast food. It sounds like Kurama is losing, anyway, and Sakumo knows exactly what it’s like to be out-argued by a child. Kakashi got his mother’s attitude, and it was always simultaneously Sakumo’s greatest joy and his biggest headache.

“Old man,” Kushina's son chirps, sounding just like her. “Hi! You look like Kakashi!”

“I think it’s more that Kakashi looks like him, Naruto,” Kurama says dryly, but he nods to Sakumo easily enough, and doesn’t protest when Sakumo falls into step with them.

“Ehh?” Naruto asks in confusion, craning his head to stare at Kurama upside-down. “Why’s that, Kurama-nii?”
Kurama rolls his eyes, but his voice is still patient as he answers. “Because he’s Kakashi’s father, kit.”

“Really?” Naruto twists back around, staring at Sakumo’s face like it’s a puzzle. “But you don’t act like Kurama-nii does!”

Ouch. From the mouths of babes, Sakumo thinks with a wince, though he tries not to let his smile falter.

“I’m not your father, brat,” Kurama says crankily, apparently completely unaware of the fact that that’s exactly what he looks like right now. When Naruto just laughs, though, he huffs out an irritated breath, nudges the blond back upright as he starts to slide, and glances over at Sakumo with unnervingly sharp eyes. “Well?”

Clearly he isn’t getting away without some sort of answer. With a rueful smile, Sakumo drags a hand through his hair, looking away, and says, “Clearly he doesn’t want to talk to me, and I’m not about to force my presence on him after what I did.”

The footsteps beside him stop. Surprised, Sakumo turns, and then almost wishes he’d kept walking. Kurama is staring at him, fire in his eyes and something like buried fury in his expression, and that crimson gaze is hot enough to hurt. With a low growl, he stalks forward, and jabs Sakumo square in the chest with one talon-tipped finger.

“What the fuck?” he demands sharply, and when Sakumo opens his mouth to respond Kurama steamrolls right over him. “No. No. Fuck that, you asshole, you didn’t take Kakashi’s opinion into account before you went and killed yourself, so why the fuck should you do it now? What the hell has changed? You left him alone when he was barely even self-sufficient, and you fucking broke him. Take some goddamn responsibility, bastard, and man up and talk to your son. And if you hurt him anymore than you already have, I’m going to feed you your spleen.”

With a snarl of pure rage, Kurama gives him one last withering look, grabs Naruto's ankle, and leaps for the nearest tree. In an instant, the only trace of his presence is Naruto's fading whoops, and the red of the other boy’s hair peeking over Kurama’s shoulder before they vanish completely into the shadows.

Feet frozen where they are, Sakumo slowly reaches up to rub at the neat hole Kurama’s sharp nail left in his shirt. There’s a dot of blood beneath, but—

Well. Sakumo is absolutely certain he deserves much worse at this point.

He closes his eyes, fighting down the knot in his throat that tastes of bitter cowardice. He’s been hiding, and there’s no use denying it. Hiding beside his own grave, and gods, but how low can he sink? All night he’s been staring at the evidence that Kakashi has mourned him, the flowers carefully placed, and surely, surely almost thirteen years is long enough to move on. Maybe Sakumo can't remember all of it as clearly as he’d like, and maybe the sting of betrayal is still fresh in his heart, but…

But Sakumo made the wrong choice once already, and it must have been wrong, if Kushina and Kurama and Kakashi’s own distance are to be believed.

Maybe the root of that decision was cowardice, too. Escape, a final, irreversible way of hiding from his shame, and—

Sakumo has had enough of hiding.
He turns, heart beating too hard in his chest, ready to call up a summons and find his son, and stops dead for a second time, eyes widening.

“Dad?” Kakashi asks, just as startled, and takes a step back that looks more automatic than conscious. And—it hurts, seeing that, but Sakumo can't blame him.

“Kakashi,” he says, and tries to make his smile fit his face the way it’s supposed to. It’s difficult, because the Kakashi in front of him is so incredibly different from the little boy he remembers, but at the same time there's no way Sakumo would ever mistake him for anyone else.

There’s a thread of faint wariness in Kakashi’s eyes, and he takes a step to the side, uncovered eye flickering over the road. “I thought Kurama came this way. Have you seen him?”

Sakumo chuckles before he can help it, faintly sheepish, and rubs a hand over the back of his head. “Yes, I saw him. I see you're still good at making friends with unique characters, Kakashi. I'm glad.”

Kakashi freezes, looking like he’s torn between reactions. “…Friends?” he finally says, and it’s very nearly tentative.

Sakumo gives him a wry smile, and this one at least comes more naturally. “Well, people don’t threaten to rip out other people’s spleens for just anyone, if I'm remembering correctly. He must be very fond of you.”

A peculiar look slides over Kakashi’s face and is quickly buried, but not before Sakumo catches it. “He threatened you,” he repeats, faintly disbelieving.

Sakumo looks at him for a moment, and regardless of whatever he feels about Konoha, regardless of the faint traces of resentment he can't quite seem to shake for the way things turned out, he still can't fight a very small smile, because none of that is aimed at Kakashi. Kakashi was the reason he lasted as long as he did, skills growing worse as his belief in himself faded, as the village whispered venom and mocked and blamed.

Maybe it wasn’t enough, in the end, as Sakumo's self-loathing and guilt and shame grew too deep, but without Kakashi he would have fallen on his sword so much sooner. And in the end, so much of his decision was for what he thought was Kakashi’s sake, sparing him the dishonor of growing up in the shadow of Sakumo's disgrace.

“Of course he did,” he says gently, and takes a breath. Steels himself with every last ounce of the courage he can scrape up in the depths of his soul, and tells his son, “Kakashi, I know that—that forgiveness isn’t something I have any right to ask for, and that what I did can't be made right, but —”

“But it has been,” Kakashi interrupts, and he isn’t quite looking at Sakumo, but he hasn’t turned and walked away yet, either. “You're alive.”

Sakumo hesitates, but he can't do anything except shake his head. “No. Making it right would be never having done it in the first place. I can't change what’s already happened, or what my decisions did to you, as much as I wish I could. As useless as the words are…I'm sorry.”

There’s a long moment of silence, and then Kakashi reaches up, closing his fingers around the plate of the slanted hitai-ate he wears. Sakumo can't see his face, can't make out any part of his expression, but he can hear it when he says, quiet but clear, “I understand now, why you chose what you did on your mission. You made the only decision you could live with, and you made it for the sake of everyone in Konoha. You put your teammates first, and—that was a legacy I learned to be proud
It feels like a hand closed tight around his lungs, like hot pressure against the backs of his eyes. Sakumo takes a breath that shakes, and can't quite let it out for fear of it shattering into a sob. He presses his hand over his eyes, too much vulnerability on display for him not to, and tries not to think for a handful of seconds.

He doesn’t hear footsteps, but a hand settles on his shoulder, hesitates, then squeezes gently. “The house is still open,” Kakashi says, and his touch falls away. “I…didn’t move anything, afterwards.”

There’s a ripple of wind that smells of leaves, and Sakumo doesn’t have to look up to know that Kakashi is gone.

That’s all right, though. For the first time since he opened his eyes in a new world, Sakumo doesn’t feel like this life, too, will end in tragedy. Maybe it’s only a spark of hope, but—

A spark is all that’s ever needed to set a wildfire to blazing.

It turns out that Kurama’s ability to track a weak, half-remembered chakra signal across the bustle of Konoha at mid-morning is pretty much shit.

With a sigh of frustration, he stops at the edge of the closest training ground, eyeing the bank of the river balefully. He could have sworn—

“Are we exploring, Kurama-nii?” Naruto asks cheerfully, halfway draped over Kurama’s head. “I like looking at things from so high up!”

Well, Kurama is glad at least one of them is having fun. He glances down at Gaara, raising a brow, and the boy offers him a smile.

“I like walking, Kurama-nii,” he agrees.

“Only because you're not doing any of the actual walking part,” Kurama grumbles, but when Gaara just gives him wide aquamarine eyes he sighs and boosts him up a little higher. “Yeah, yeah. Okay, give me a second here. We should be going…”

Fuck. Kurama doesn’t have a clue.

“Are you lost?” a polite voice asks, faintly curious, and Kurama jerks around. One look at the newcomer, perched up on the limb of a tree with a medical textbook, and he’s ready to curse. Of course he would end up stumbling over the brat without even noticing.

“Naruto, why don’t you and Gaara check out the river?” he suggests, and Naruto cheers like this is the best idea he’s ever heard.

“Come on, Gaara!” he urges as Kurama sets him down on his feet. “It’s really pretty under the bridge! Lemme show you!”

Gaara glances up at Kurama, and when Kurama gives him a crooked smile he nods solemnly, taking Naruto’s hand and letting the blond tow him towards the bank. Kurama watches them for a moment to make sure they don’t fall in, then turns, and with a quick leap lands lightly on the bough a handful
of inches from their observer’s sandals.

“I was looking for you, actually,” he says, meeting cautious dark eyes as evenly as he can.

“Me?” Kabuto says, and the surprise in his voice only just manages to cover up the wariness. “I'm afraid I don’t understand, sir—”

“Can it,” Kurama says shortly. “I know you're Orochimaru’s spy, and I can help you get him out as long as he agrees to owe me a few favors.”

Something like fear slides into Kabuto’s expression, but he doesn’t let himself waver. “I'm afraid I don’t understand—”

“Bullshit,” Kurama says impatiently. “You weren’t found in a pass after a battle. You were one of Danzō’s recruits from an orphanage near Konoha, and Orochimaru offered you a way out after your only real family tried to kill you. You’ve been spying for him for years now.”

Kabuto looks like he’s hardly breathing, staring at Kurama with wide eyes.

With a sigh, Kurama sits back on his heels, studying the kid narrowly. “Well? Do you want to get him out or not?”

There’s a hesitation as Kabuto looks him over carefully, then sweeps a glance over their surrounding area. Finally, satisfied that they’re alone and Kurama isn’t about to bolt for the Hokage, he takes a breath and closes his book.

“Why?” he asks, and his eyes are too intelligent for the fourteen-year-old he’s supposed to be. “Orochimaru-sama is your enemy.”

Kurama watches him for a moment, turning various answers over, and then says, “Why don’t you trade me answers? Tell me why you follow Orochimaru and I’ll tell you my reasons for letting him go.”

Kabuto accepts the deal with a single nod. “Orochimaru-sama helped me find out who I was after Danzō and Root took that away from me,” he says, and his eyes don’t waver from Kurama’s. “He’s building a home for me, for himself, for those like us. That’s why.”

Otogakure, Kurama thinks, and the fact that the timeline matches up to his hopes is a relief. “I might not like the snake bastard, but he’s powerful. I need a few favors, and he’s more useful outside of Konoha. You go with him, and both of you leave Konoha alone, okay? You need something, information or whatever, send me a message.”

“That’s all?” Kabuto asks, faintly suspicious. “A favor?”

“Three of them,” Kurama corrects, giving him a grin full of teeth. “One for giving you the keys to the seals on him, one for getting you into where he’s being held, and one for not turning you over to the Hokage right now.”

Kabuto’s hands clench tight around his textbook, and he looks like he can’t decide whether to throw it at Kurama or accept the deal.

“Look, kid,” Kurama says, and he’s starting to lose his patience. “If Orochimaru stays in Konoha there’s every chance Sarutobi gets rid of him permanently. The Sandaime’s old, but he’s smart. He’s not going to leave someone that dangerous alive, right?”
He almost feels bad for the way Kabuto pales, eyes widening. The boy looks down at his hands, still white-knuckled around the textbook, and then nods. “All right,” he whispers.

Kurama blows out a breath, then reaches out and gruffly ruffles his hair. “Don’t look like it’s a death sentence, kid. Now you don’t have to pretend to be someone you’re not. It might help you figure out more of who you are.” He ignores the wide-eyed blinking Kabuto is doing and drops from the tree, heading towards the river to collect his two charges. “Naruto, Gaara, come on! Let’s go home before Kushina and the girls level our new house in the name of training.”

Naruto laughs, scrambling up the bank with Gaara right behind him, and he launches himself at Kurama’s knees with dangerous force. “Kurama-nii, up! An’ it’s okay! If they break stuff the creepy-face wood guy can just make us a new one! Shisui said so!”

Kurama snorts, scooping them both up in one go and boosting Naruto up onto his shoulders. “Did he now? But I like it as it is, so let’s try not to break it just yet, okay?”

“Oh, Kurama-nii,” Gaara agrees, and when Naruto pouts Gaara tugs pointedly on the leg of his pants.

“Okay,” Naruto huffs, almost a whine. “But it would be really cool to see a house get builded!”

“Built,” Kurama corrects with a roll of his eyes. He glances up at Kabuto, still watching with wide, wary eyes, and says, “Tomorrow.”

The teenager hesitates, but before Kurama can push he nods. “I’ll be waiting here,” he agrees.

“Bye!” Naruto calls cheerfully, waving to him as Kurama starts down the road. Once Kabuto is out of sight, he grabs Kurama’s hair again, and asks, “Can we get ramen now, Kurama-nii? I’m hungry!”

“You’re always hungry,” Kurama complains halfheartedly, but he turns his steps towards the village regardless. “Just don’t tell your mom, okay? She’s going to torture me again for going to Ichiraku without her.”

“It’s a secret!” Naruto agrees brightly. “I won’t let my mom beat you up, Kurama-nii!”

“Brat! The only one getting beaten up would be her, so watch your mouth.”

Naruto laughs, Gaara giggles, and Kurama rolls his eyes, steals a small sandal so he can tickle Naruto’s feet, and holds him steady as he squirms and shrieks for mercy.
LX: Optative

[\textit{optative} / \textipa{ˈäptədɪv} /, \textit{a mood expressing a desire or wish; expressing a wish or choice; of, relating to, or being a mood of verbs in some languages, such as Greek, used to express a wish; designating a statement using a verb in the subjunctive mood to indicate a wish or desire, as in Had I the means, I would do it. From French optatif, -ive, from late Latin optativus, from optat- “chosen,” from the verb optare “choose, wish.”}]

Sasori is as blank-faced as ever when he steps out of the room, but there's less blood on him than the last time he came out, at least.

“Well?” Kisame rumbles, leaning back against the wall across from the makeshift infirmary.

“She'll live,” Sasori says without inflection, rinsing and drying his hands briskly. A glance back through the door, briefly resting on the sheet-covered form, and he snorts. “For whatever good it will do when she wakes up and finds Pein captured.”

Personally, Kisame is a lot more worried about Konan charging straight at Konoha in a head-on assault rather than turning suicidal, but he knows Sasori won't give a damn about that. Sasori doesn't give much of a damn about anything but his puppets, and he’s seething over how many their enemies managed to destroy. “How soon will she wake up?”

“A day. Possibly two, if she received a larger dose of venom than I thought. I have no information on Orochimaru’s summons, so I can't be sure.” Sasori sounds entirely disinterested, but he nods to Kisame politely enough before he vanishes down the hall to the room he’s claimed as his own.

Kisame glances once more at Konan, paler than ever and breathing shallowly, and turns away. The makeshift base is deathly silent, far removed from anything and hidden beneath the ground, and the shadows are thick everywhere the lights start to fade. Kisame doesn’t particularly mind it; it’s just a temporary bolt-hole, and they’ll be leaving it as soon everyone remaining can walk again.

Of course, the fact that they're down to only five members isn’t a good sign—four, even, when Kisame stops being generous. Zetsu is still absent, furiously and so far futilely researching to find a way to repair the Gedō Mazō, and of the remaining members only Sasori and Kisame are mobile. Orochimaru, their spymaster, is a traitor and captured; Pein has been taken; Kakuzu is dead. Their main base is in ruins, with every shinobi village on high alert. As things stand now, they’ve got very little chance of managing anything except a suicidal last sally.

Of course, that’s assuming they try a blatant frontal attack, and Kisame is pretty sure they’ve exhausted their opportunities for those. It’s time to think like stealth-trained shinobi, and act accordingly.

Quietly, he lets himself into his own room and sets the bolt behind him, but doesn’t pause, crossing to the full-length mirror on the far wall. He regards his own reflection critically for a moment, rubbing a finger over his blue skin with a huff, and then swings the mirror out like a door and slips through the opening revealed.

The room behind is smaller, with barely space for a futon. Kisame steps over the edges of the mattress carefully, leaning down to check for breathing. Like Konan's, it’s a bit too shallow for
But when Kisame pulls back one black eye flutters open, and Obito looks up at him wearily.

So strange, to think that he’s already so used to the Sharingan that seeing it gone is a shock, Kisame muses, even as he offers Obito a toothy grin. “Hey. Still alive?”

Obito’s mouth curls into a crooked smile, even as his eye falls shut again. “Despite the Uzumaki siblings’ best efforts,” he says, and it’s a bare rasp in his throat but still manages to sound wry.

Kisame snorts, dropping down to sprawl against the cold stone wall, sandals almost brushing the bottom edge of the futon. He doesn’t bother saying we need to get that seal off of you as soon as possible, because they both already know it. Not just for the sake of their goal, either; Kisame is sure that it’s only Obito’s impressive endurance that’s letting him exist with his chakra levels so dangerously low. Kisame has seen shinobi drained of their strength like this, but he’s never seen one last more than a handful of hours without a medic. Obito’s three days should be impossible.

Then again, it’s looking like a lot about Obito should be impossible.

“Konan’s fine,” he says, which is something of an exaggeration, but true enough to pass. “I’ll show Sasori a copy of that seal in the morning, see if he can counter it.”

Obito grimaces, unhappy and frustrated, and with visible effort his eye flickers open again. “We don’t have time. The longer we give Konoha, the more prepared they’ll be.”

“Maybe it’ll lull them into a false sense of security?” Kisame suggests, but even he doesn’t believe that bout of optimism. They don’t have any spies in the villages at the moment—or rather, they do, but only Orochimaru knew them—so immediate, accurate information is too much to hope for, but word from the surrounding countryside puts most of the Kage and Village Heads in Konoha right now. The jinchūriki are probably there too, along with Uzumaki Kurama and his vast and inexplicable knowledge of Akatsuki’s movements and members alike, so their element of surprise is entirely gone.

Instead of lingering on false hope, Kisame chuckles, rubbing a hand over his short hair, and suggests, “We could start hiring again?”

That gets him a shadow of a rueful smile, but rather than gracing the suggestion with a response Obito says, “There might be a way. If I can get to the outskirts of Konoha quickly enough, and arrange a meeting—”

“I’ll go.” It’s not an offer Kisame has to consider for even a moment; as little as he likes the idea of leaving Obito vulnerable with only people who have never seen under his mask for protections, this is a path, a step towards their goal. Kisame can hardly even imagine a world without lies, but he wants it. He wants it so very desperately, and Obito wants it the same way. If he has a way to win, even now—

When he glances up, Obito is watching him, gaze exhausted but almost fever-bright. He holds Kisame’s stare for a long moment, unmoving, and then nods once, just faintly.

“You’ll have to deal with a traitor,” he warns, and the mere fact that he would think to do so makes Kisame grin in a way that’s only about forty percent bloodthirsty.

“I get to kill him after we use him, right?” he asks cheerfully.

Amusement mellows that knife-sharp stare for just a brief instant. “Of course.”

Kisame chuckles, and if he had Samehada close at hand he’d pat it fondly. “Then it’s not a problem.”
“He’s dangerous. But he can be blackmailed.” Obito hesitates, then grimaces and slowly, painfully rolls himself over before pushing halfway upright to lean back against the wall. Kisame doesn’t try to help, just watches closely, but though it takes several long moments Obito eventually slumps against the stone, breathing hard, and opens his eyes to look at Kisame. “You’re going to have to move fast.”

Kisame nods agreeably, already planning his route. The Nakano flows right through Konoha, and even if he avoids going into the village itself, it’s too direct a route to waste. His sharks can get him there by tomorrow morning if he leaves soon.

Apparently reading that on his face, Obito nods, tilting his head back, and manages a faint shadow of something that might be a smile. “Good. Now listen closely.”

Enough time as a shinobi, enough sensitive missions, and memorizing information is no problem anymore. Kisame props his elbows against his knees, slouching comfortably, and if a part of him is already planning the death of the traitor he’s being sent to meet, well.

He said it to Obito once before, didn’t he? Loyalty, once given, should never be a lie.

Of all the people Kakashi expects to see at the Memorial Stone in the new dawn, Kurama isn’t one of them.

He pauses by the three posts, watching, but Kurama doesn’t look up if he notices him at all. The redhead is crouched in front of the stone, clawed hands dangling between his knees, and the first edges of the rising sun have turned his hair to blood. From this angle, Kakashi can just see the quiet expression on his face, the edge of old grief buried by something like peace, and even though his instinct say to leave Kurama to his moment and not intrude, he steps forward anyway.

“Aren’t they all alive right now?” he asks, but though it’s an attempt to light the mood it falls flat.

Kurama huffs, but his eyes don’t waver from the blank areas of the Stone, and Kakashi has to wonder just how many names he’s seeing there. “That doesn’t change the fact that they died,” he says, and it’s quieter than Kakashi expects. “I’d have thought you would figure that out.”

Because of his father. Because of Kushina. Because of Obito. And—Kakashi should have. The deaths had impact, and the fact that they’ve now been undone changes very little.

Very little, but—maybe not nothing.

“Your chicks aren’t around?” he asks instead of lingering on the topic.

That gets him a distinct roll of Kurama’s eyes, and a faintly narrow-eyed glance from beneath messy red hair. “They’re not my chicks,” he says grumpily, but it’s a very mild sort of cranky, something that even Shisui would likely be able to breeze past without a heart attack. “And they’re sleeping in. Kushina kept them up late.”

Kakashi’s not quite sure how to take that. Not quite sure how to take anything about Kurama and Kushina being close enough that they can grab each other, lean on each other, tease each other. Kushina was friendly, before, but she didn’t cling to people she didn’t know, and Kakashi can’t believe that she’s changed. Kurama, too, is hardly a limpet, though Kakashi supposes the argument could be made that he attracts them, given how the children cling.
Before he can say as much, Kurama sighs and rises to his feet, casting one more glance at the blank stone of the Memorial. Before he can stop himself, Kakashi finds his mouth opening, spilling words, and he says, “They won't die again.”

Slightly startled, Kurama turns to him, and the winter sunlight catches on his face, his hair. Like coals banked but ready to burn, and the stubborn conviction in his eyes is very much the same.

“Eventually they will,” he says, holding Kakashi’s gaze. “All of you do, in the end.”

You, rather than us. So strange to remember yet again, abrupt and faintly unnerving, that Kurama never used to be human. Could still count as something different, if one looked at the situation a certain way. Kakashi doesn’t quite know what to say to that, but before he can even think of a possible response, Kurama is glancing back at the Stone, mouth curving in a wry smile.

“But,” he says, and it’s slow, like he’s weighing each word, “they're not going to be killed. Not this time.”

That’s all the difference in the world, Kakashi knows. It lightens things, or maybe that’s the way the wryness slides out of Kurama’s face, leaving humor and warmth behind.

“Naruto would laugh at me,” he says, and the look in his eyes—Kakashi’s seen it before, but only in passing. In the darkness of a Frost Country inn, when he said you're very human and Kurama paused for a long, breathless moment before he answered I had a good role model. Probably the best. And then on the ship, days later, when Kakashi asked him just whose body he was wearing. When he said Sometimes the hardest choices to live with are the ones other people make for you, and Kurama laughed like something was cracked inside of him, rough and slightly wild. But under the grief there was something else, and it’s not buried at all right now. On display, as far as Kakashi is concerned, and…

It’s something to admire, he thinks, and that’s too weak a word but he doesn’t have another.

“For what?” he asks, because it’s clear they're not talking about the six-year-old asleep in a dusty house, but a man who lost his entire world, who sacrificed himself and put all of his faith and hope in the tangle of malevolence and sentient chakra that had been his veritable prisoner for decades.

Kakashi can't quite imagine what kind of person would be able to do that, but…he thinks, sometimes, when he looks at little Naruto, that he might be willing to find out.

“Everything,” Kurama says dryly, raking a hand through his hair to shove it out of his face, though the bright strands fall back in front of his eyes after barely a heartbeat. He glances back towards the rest of the village, towards the house and the children, and his expression is amused but faintly bittersweet. “The brats, the way I bolted, Zabuza, you—”

Kakashi isn’t entirely sure what's laughable about his presence in all of this, but he’s willing to take Kurama’s word that the Naruto from the future would find it that way. “Would he survive the laughing?” he asks dryly, because he’s seen how Kurama reacts to being mocked, and explosively is an understatement.

Kurama blinks at Kakashi like he can't understand the question, but the moment it clicks he rolls his eyes and looks away. “Maybe,” he allows grudgingly. “There wasn’t exactly a lot to find funny, at the end.”

It goes unsaid that Kurama would have made him laugh whenever it was possible. And Kakashi—

*How does someone teach a monster how to love?*
It's not something that you can teach, idiot. I learned on my own and taught myself. It's finding someone who's worth learning for that's the hard part.

Kakashi thinks about the Kurama he first met, barely able to interact with other people, full of heavy, dark, destructive grief. Tries to compare him to the man he sees now, brash but steady and full of warmth. He tucks his hands in his pockets, watching Kurama turn away, and the thought surfaces in his mind like someone who’s drowning and finally manages to come up for air.

Could I—

Remembers Kurama again, meeting Naruto for the first time. Remembers his father, old and tired but still smiling, saying I can't change what’s already happened, or what my decisions did to you, and then his face when Kakashi told him he understood why he’d chosen the way he did.

For the last twelve years, Kakashi has existed by looking back, by living on regret and self-destruction only barely channeled into his work. He’s mourned and regretted and lingered, and—

Of course Kushina punched me, he thinks, and the smile that accompanies the thought is wry as he presses a hand to the bruise on his jaw. I wanted her to. Of course she resented me for leaving Naruto when I already resent myself.

There’s no changing what’s been done, and it will always exist.

Aren’t they all alive right now?

That doesn’t change the fact that they died.

Change in the present doesn’t mean change in the past. Outside of time travel, as Kurama clearly shows, that’s impossible. But change in the future? Moving on, moving forward, refusing to let the past drag like a stone around his neck?

I can.

Nothing is changing around him. Kurama is still walking away, straight and steady, and the Memorial still bears its heavy load of names. Kakashi doesn’t feel the world shift, or the stars realign, or his memories become lighter. They’ll always be there, and there’s no getting rid of them, but—

It’s just—a spark. A flicker like embers finally catching the tinder, the flame leaping up for one brief moment. And maybe it isn’t instant salvation; maybe there’s no such thing. It’s some small bit of light, though. A dark tunnel is only a series of steps, he thinks, and it’s easier with a flame to lead the way.

For the first time in years, Kakashi believes he might be able to come out on the other side.

Genma likes to think he’s a pretty simple guy. He doesn’t have any high-flung aspirations, personal vendettas, or dark secrets, and his backstory is sad but probably doesn’t qualify as tragic. He’s just another shinobi, talented in a handful of ways and content with where he is in life.

That said, Genma also knows he tends to be a little bullheaded when certain situations make themselves known.
“Genma,” Raidō sighs, staring down at the absolute disaster that is their kitchen table.

Genma makes a noise of absent acknowledgement but doesn’t look up from the stack of mission logs he’s leafing through, because something isn’t adding up but Genma can’t actually figure out what it is.

“Genma,” Raidō repeats, a little more forcefully this time. “Food.”

“In a minute.” Math has, admittedly, never been Genma's strong suit outside of plotting trajectories, but he’s pretty sure these numbers don’t make sense. After the Second Shinobi War, with the way outright hostilities eased, ANBU enrollment plateaued, and—

The papers are dragged out of his grasp, and even though Genma grabs for them, Raidō knows him far too well and intercepts his hand halfway, shoving a bowl into it instead. “Eat,” the big man says with clear exasperation, setting a plate of broiled mackerel down with a pointed thump. “Genma, I haven’t seen you get up in almost six hours. What are you doing?”

Knowing this is an argument he’s not going to win, Genma bolts down the rice as fast as he can, ignoring the narrow-eyed stare Raidō is giving him for it. “Mission,” he says between mouthfuls. “From Sarutobi-sama.”

Raidō doesn’t ask for details, because he was ANBU as well and knows exactly how such things work. He just frowns a little, collecting the dirty dishes that mean Genma entirely missed him eating in his distraction. “Well, I'm sure the Hokage wouldn’t want you neglecting to eat for days on end,” he says, brushing Genma's shoulder as he passes. “Gods know you need a lot of energy on ANBU missions, or even just training for them. I've seen you put away a whole rack of fish in one sitting after you got back, remember—”

Genma drops his bowl.

“Fuck,” he says, and then “Fuck,” as he lunges for one of the merchant manifests he’d borrowed from Accounting without explicit permission. Raidō dives to save the remaining mackerel, but Genma hardly notices, flipping through pages to find the list from last week. He hadn’t been overly picky about the records he swiped, going for anything with Danzō’s name attached, and now he blesses the foresight. He checks the list, sets it aside, and goes further back. Danzō accepted the last supply delivery to ANBU headquarters. Ten days before that Danzō had accepted another order, and six days before that, and then nine days before that—

It’s a pattern in that it’s not a pattern. Danzō still visits the ANBU barracks every few days, overseeing training or checking on missions, and no one’s ever really marked it. He’s an Elder of Konoha, and the Sandaime’s former teammate. Of course he’ll assist the organization he was one of the first members of, whether that means advising on strategy or signing for deliveries of food or weapons.

But sometimes those deliveries are just slightly larger than they should be. Shinobi tend to need a lot of food, after all, especially when they're training or out on missions, but—the mission logs prove that the number of occupants in the barracks was always below the normal levels, not above.

Right under their noses. Logical, simple, easy.

There was a delivery just a few hours ago, Genma knows. What are the odds that it was one of the big ones?

“You're a genius,” he tells Raidō, kisses him soundly, and grabs his mask.
“Gen?” Raidō says with some bemusement, watching him strap his flak jacket on, but confusion gives way to alarm when Genma heads for the sealed cabinet in the living room. “Why are you getting those? Is there war starting I don’t know about?”

Genma rolls his eyes a little, sorting through bundles of poisoned senbon with practiced care. “If I assassinate the Raikage I promise to give you at least ten minutes warning,” he offers dryly, and when Raidō makes a noise of abject despair he glances up with a crooked smile. “Cool it, Rai, it’s the mission. I think I figured something out.”

Raidō watches him pick three bundles, each marked with a different color of ribbon, and his frown doesn’t abate in the slightest. “Those…”

Genma just smiles, even as he tucks the majority into his weapons pouch and slides a few extra needles into the seams of his clothes. “Better safe than sorry,” he says lightly, and it’s only mostly a lie. Pushing to his feet, he closes the cabinet, watching until the seal flares and locks it again, and then turns to give Raidō a smile. “Look, I need to go. Don’t wait up.”

There’s not even an attempt to argue, because Raidō knows the job as well as Genma does. “Just be careful,” he says quietly, and when Genma leans in Raidō wraps him in a tight hug. For a moment Genma lets himself linger, breathing in the warmth, but—

He doesn’t have time.

“Later, Rai,” he says, pushing away, and then makes for the window as he drags his mask down over his face. A hard leap carries him out and across the gap between buildings to land lightly on the next roof over, and from there getting to ANBU headquarters is practically rote.

Genma doesn’t bother with stealth as he drops into the tunnels, because one more ANBU is hardly going to raise an eyebrow here, and heads for the storage rooms. It’s been a week since the last time Danzō accepted a shipment, but the next one doesn’t come in for another week, and none of the gaps between Danzō’s orders are longer than twelve days.

It might mean nothing at all, and Genma could be jumping at shadows. But it’s odd, and he doesn’t like that. ANBU enrollment never fluctuates much outside of open warfare, and for incoming shipments to show variation that mission rosters and current occupation can’t account for…

Well. Genma doesn’t like it much. He’s a simple man, and unexpected variations in otherwise consistent patterns make him twitchy.

The main storeroom is dark and completely silent when Genma eases through the door and locks it again behind himself. The lockpicks go back under the plate of his hitai-ate, and he leaps up onto the top of the shelf along the wall. The order is piled neatly in the middle of the open section of floor, waiting for the small kitchen staff to put things away. ANBU are encouraged not to leave the base while on duty, in case they’re called up on emergency missions, so the food’s always decent enough to compensate, and the cooks know what they’re doing. They’re not shinobi themselves, though, and they probably never think to check for marks of other people in the room.

Carefully, Genma tucks himself away in the darkest parts of the shadow, where he won’t be seen even if someone turns the lights on. He doesn’t think they will—that would be fairly noticeable against the dark hallway—but he didn’t get to be the youngest-ever member of the Hokage Guard Platoon by being careless.

He doesn’t like this. Doesn’t like it at all, the thought that Danzō could be a traitor. The Hokage might not have said it outright, but…
But Kakashi, one of the most stubbornly self-destructive people Genma has ever met, dropped out of Root right before it was quietly disbanded, and never gave a reason why.

_I think that access to ten of the most powerful shinobi in the world—four of them young children—is quite a lot of temptation for a man who once trained children to be the perfect weapons._

Root is supposedly over and done with, stripped of power and personnel by the Hokage's order, but really, what else could be happening to the disappearing supplies? They aren’t for the regular ANBU members, because their numbers don’t change enough to require the extra, so logic says the surplus food ends up elsewhere.

Easy enough to find out where. All Genma needs is a little patience, and he’s got that in spades.

The wait gives him time to consider how to handle things if he does uncover evidence of Root being reestablished. Danzō is Sarutobi's old teammate, so Genma can't exactly toss accusations around without plenty of proof, even if the Hokage was the one to assign him the mission in the first place. The manifests are a good start, but—

Something heavy scrapes across stone.

Instantly, Genma goes perfectly still, quieting his breathing until it’s completely inaudible. His internal clock says he’s been waiting for several hours already, but apparently it’s paid off, because a section of wall swings out like a door, and two figures in dark clothes ghost in. They’re alert but not wary as they lay out sealing scrolls and start shifting part of the stack of crates onto it, but Genma doesn’t allow himself to relax.

There’s no way of knowing what’s in the tunnel beyond, but he’s also not about to miss his chance to find out; odds are there’s no way to unseal it from this side, since the pair left it standing open. They’re distracted, though, and Genma takes the opening, crawling across the ceiling with slow, easy intent. No fast motions that could get him noticed, and even after all this time as an assassin instinct says to bolt for cover, but Genma doesn’t listen. He eases his way down the wall, sticking to the heavy shadows cast by the tall shelves, and as soon as both shinobi have their backs to him he drops to the ground, takes a breath, and slips into the tunnel.

No other shinobi are waiting, which is a relief and one of the things Genma wasn’t allowing himself to worry about. Collecting extra groceries doesn’t seem like the type of thing anyone would bring backup for, but then, Danzō’s a paranoid bastard on a good day.

The passage isn’t too long, thankfully, and there aren’t guards at the far end, either. The cavern it opens onto is empty, bridges of stone stretching across the chasm in the center and branching off to meet other openings in the walls. Genma can't hear anyone behind him yet, but the pair in the storeroom will probably be finished shortly, and he can't linger. He picks a doorway at random, more for proximity than anything else, and pads down the worn stone hall, hearing straining to pick up any hint of voices.

Several minutes in, just as he’s about to turn around and pick another corridor, he catches a low, deep murmur from up ahead.

Eyes narrowing behind his mask, Genma channels a touch of chakra into his hands and feet, leaping up to cling to the stone ceiling like a spider. It’s high enough that there's little risk of being seen unless he moves too fast, and he crawls towards the source, as quiet as he can make himself. The sound is coming from beyond the tunnel’s exit, where a whisper of cold breeze carries the smell of the open forest, and when Genma leaps lightly down his feet hit grass.
moving up your training,” a familiar man is saying, and Genma’s heard Danzō more than enough times to recognize him even without seeing the man. He doesn’t try to, but darts for the forest and quickly scales one of the larger trees to hide himself among the leaves. Despite his age, Danzō it too good a shinobi to miss the feeling of eyes on him.

“Yes, sir.” That sounds like a child’s voice, young and light, and—

Genma fingers one of the senbon in the cuff on his shirt, debating with himself. Danzō is good, but Genma only needs to score a glancing blow with this particular batch of poison. The Hokage will definitely object, but once an assassination is done, there’s no way to undo it.

Still. No need to jump to conclusions. Better to have all the information so he can accurately counter any attempt to undermine the mission.

“Do you understand your mission?” Danzō asks, and it’s not the fatherly tone he tries to take with the regular ANBU. This is something cold and hard, as unyielding as iron. “Your partner has already accepted.”

A faint hitch of breath, almost inaudible, and the child says, “I am to kill Shin before he can kill me.”

“The survivor will be assigned a very important mission for the good of the village.” Rough steps, not quite even and identifiably Danzō’s. “Report to me when you succeed.”

“Yes, sir.” Another hitch, just enough to make the title crack faintly. There’s no other movement for a long moment as Danzō reaches the passage, steps echoing on the stone, and then—

The sound of a sword sliding out of its sheath.

“I don’t want to kill you, Sai.” Another boy, sounding a little older but also heartbroken.

“It’s what Danzō-sama ordered.” The younger boy again. “There’s a mission. We serve the village of Konoha and Danzō-sama.”

Well. Genma takes a breath and closes his eyes, thumps the back of his head lightly against the trunk in self-directed aggravation, but—

You always have to be the hero, don’t you, half-pint? his sister used to ask him as she slapped salve on his bruises. Genma would roll his eyes, but keep starting fights anyway. For himself, for Gai, for Ebisu, for anyone who got picked on, and—

Genma’s a pretty simple guy. But betray a fellow Konoha shinobi? Use your power against someone who didn’t earn it? Yeah, then Genma will start to have problems.

Two kids killing each other in the name of someone operating behind the Hokage’s back? Danzō’s probably going to end up choking on all the poisoned senbon Genma shoves down his throat at the next available opportunity.

He opens his eyes, reaching up to pull his hair back into a stubby ponytail and secure it with a rubber band, then undoes his bandana and tucks his hitai-ate away. It’s a clan tradition to wear it that way, and Genma isn’t about to offer any hints as to his identity, just in case this goes south. Danzō’s probably watching from somewhere hidden, but Genma doesn’t have the time to check. He can hear the ring of blades, a soft cry, and there’s no room for even a genjutsu. He leaps from his tree to the next, then over, and down—

One tantō skids against the bracer on his left arm, while the second clangs against the reinforced
guard on the back of his right hand as he knocks it away. They're young children, he takes in as he turns to face them both, the grey-haired boy probably nine, the younger dark-haired one barely seven. They're both staring at him with wide eyes, clearly startled, but Genma doesn’t have a chance to reassure them.

“We need to move,” he says sharply, and the way they both stiffen means they know a command when they hear one. “Your mission isn’t authorized—”

“Danzō-sama authorized it,” the older boy says. “This is the last test before we finish training—”

Instinct more than sound has Genma spinning, senbon already in hand, and the masked shinobi aiming a kunai at his throat stumbles past him instead. Genma doesn’t waste time on regrets or hesitation; he flips a senbon through his fingers and stabs it down hard in the back of the attacker’s neck, and the man crumples.

The other two Root members appearing out of the trees don’t give their fellow shinobi so much as a glance.

Fuck, Genma thinks, palming another five senbon. Three that will paralyze, two that will kill, and Genma doesn’t want to kill shinobi who might as well be comrades, but—

But there are two little kids behind him who were ordered to kill each other, and Genma isn’t about to let them do it.

“You come with me and you both get to live,” he tells the boys, though he doesn’t look away from the advancing shinobi. Danzō likely won’t be far behind, and his presence will drop Genma’s chances of getting out of this from poor down to abysmal.

The younger one makes a sound, quiet but desperate, and says, “Shin—”

The Root members move, and Genma dives for the woman even as he hurls three of his needles towards the man. She swings her tantō at him, almost too fast to dodge, but Genma's been sparring with Raidō, an even better swordsman, since they were genin and rolls beneath the blow. He comes up hard with his shoulder leading, catching her in the stomach, and the force is enough to throw her back, even as her sword scores a deep line across the top of his shoulders.

A kunai stabs down at Genma's head as he twists to his feet, ignoring the burn of torn skin, but he knocks it aside with his armguard and slams a senbon tipped with paralysis mixture into the muscle of the man’s thigh. The woman is already back on her feet and lunging, but Genma leaps clear over her, last senbon in the air even as he lands in front of the kids, and she hits the ground hard, already convulsing.

“Coming?” he asks the boys, carefully lighthearted, and they trade glances even as a flare of chakra announces someone activating a jutsu. Genma flies through the familiar hand seals, then slams his palm down, and the earth shakes as a wall of stone rises.

“I’m not going to kill you, Sai,” the older boy says, and grabs the younger’s hand. He manages a smile, though it wavers a little, and adds, “You still haven’t finished that picture you were drawing me, right?”

Apparently that’s all he needs to say. Sai curls his fingers around Shin’s and nods, and if Genma had time for a sigh of relief he’d take it.

“Come on,” he says instead, and grabs both boys. In the same moment, a second flare of fire strikes the Doton wall, making it tremble, and Genma curses. No way to counter, but—
The wall shatters with a deafening crack, but when Danzō steps through the only thing remaining is a whirl of leaves that’s already dispersing.
LXI: Paraenesis

Chapter Notes

As ever, I did not mean for this to happen and yet it did. I am only vaguely sort of sorry. Also, slightly early update, since I’ll be working all day and won’t otherwise have the time to post.

[paraenesis / ˈpəˌrēnəsɨs /, an address or communication strongly urging someone to do something; advice or exhortation, particularly of a moral or religious nature; a warning of impending evil. From late Latin paraenesis from Greek parainein “to advise,” from para- + ainein “to speak of, praise, advise” from ainos “speech, fable” + sis.]

“Fucking damn it,” Genma huffs, bracing himself against the trunk of a tree. His back is on fire, and they’re not out of the woods yet—literally, in this case. There’s still a good stretch of forest left between them and the village, and squads of hostile shinobi excelling in stealth and tracking on their tails.

At least the kids have decent training. Genma can’t imagine doing this with two civilian kids.

As if hearing his thoughts, Shin offers quietly, “I can go scout.”

“Or I can,” Sai adds immediately, then pauses. A brief hesitation, and he bites his lip. It’s definitely more emotion than he’s supposed to show, and Genma is unspeakably grateful for it. “My ink animals might be noticed, though. Danzō-sama knows what I can do.”

“Better not risk it either way,” Genma tells him, trying to make his tone comforting. It’s harder from behind an ANBU mask, but he can’t chance Danzō figuring out who he is. That’s probably the only hope these kids have of actually staying free. If he can just get them into the village without being followed—

A blur of movement, and with the darkness, the lack of moonlight, the heavy shadows, anyone else would probably miss it. Genma was Namikaze Minato’s bodyguard from the time he was fourteen, though, and he sparred with the man more than enough to hone his reflexes beyond what most shinobi can manage. He spins in front of the boys, senbon already halfway to their destination, and doesn’t allow himself to hesitate even when the attacker dodges.

The woman steps right into the path of the second handful he threw a split second after the first, and collapses with long needles in most of her vitals.

“You’re very good,” Sai says, in something close to awe.

“Way too much practice.” Genma tips one shoulder in half a shrugs, though most of his attention is on the area around them. If any more Root shinobi are waiting, though, they’re better at hiding than he is at finding them. “Come on, this way.” From here it’s a short run to the Forest of Death, which most shinobi avoid whenever possible. Heading that way might throw their pursuers off the trail, and
Genma trained there enough times with Kushina and later Anko that he isn’t too worried about navigating it, even at night.

“You guys ever use the standard training grounds?” he asks.

Shin shakes his head, following barely two feet behind him with Sai’s hand still in his grip. “Lord Danzō prefers us to use the grounds under the mountain.”

Of course, because if they didn’t someone might catch a glimpse of them and start asking questions, and what a tragedy that would be. Genma firmly stomps on his urge to say so, because it’s not helpful, and nods. “Then stay close. We need to move fast.”

A faint buzz sounds, low and heavy in the darkness. In summer, Genma probably wouldn’t even think about it, but it’s the dead of winter right now. The only insects are—

“Fuck,” he hisses, and it’s a dumb thing to do but he grabs for an exploding tag. Grabbing Shin, he drags him closer to hiss an address in his ear, then orders, “Go, get there as fast as possible. I’ll hold them off.”

Shin doesn’t waste time arguing, though Sai’s eyes are wide and he looks ready to protest. Still hanging on to him, the older boy takes off at a flat run, disappearing into the trees as Genma throws the tag and dives to the side. It detonates, and the kikaichū are blasted away in a surge of bright flame.

Damn it. How the hell did Danzō get his hands on clan children?

The explosion is more than enough to give his location away, so Genma turns and heads the opposite direction of the boys, dodging a flight of shuriken and leaping out of the way of a Fuuton justsu. A flash of movement and he spins, a single senbon driving into the shinobi’s neck, but the pause lets the others catch up to him. Two men, two women, and one kid with a full-face cloth mask and spiky black hair, almost definitely an Aburame.

“Don’t suppose you guys would be interested in talking this out?” Genma asks lightly, eyeing the five of them. Damn, but he wishes he could use the Hiraishin on his own right now—that would solve a hell of a lot of problems. But, unlike Minato, all he’s got going for him is his aim.

A paralysis jutsu crackles through the air, and Genma leaps over it, flipping and coming down hard on top of the man who used it. He ducks a stab with a kunai, slams an elbow into the man’s kidney, and while he’s wheezing drives a senbon through his throat. The Root agent goes down, but Genma grabs him before he can hit the ground and turns, jerking his body up like a shield. Three shuriken slam into it, and Genma lets go, leaping up and over. He slams feet-first into the woman who threw them, bowling her over, but before he can get a senbon in her vitals the second woman hisses out another wind jutsu.

No time or space to dodge, so Genma goes right through it, feeling cloth rip and armor dent, the skin beneath splitting. She counters his punch, spins to throw an elbow at his throat, but Genma ducks down to let it glance off the side of his mask and uses the opening to flick a kunai at her bare shoulder. It sinks deep, and barely a second later she collapses.

The first woman is just climbing to her feet, wiping a few splatters of Genma’s blood off her skin, and the second man steps up to join her. Genma retreats another step, most of his attention on them but a good portion on the kid as well. He hasn’t moved, is still hanging back in the shadows, and Genma can’t quite decide whether that’s hesitance or if he’s being held in reserve for some kind of last-ditch attack.
“I guess that’s a no to talking,” he says lightly, palming the last of his paralyzing senbon in his left hand and three more of the deadly ones in his right. He doesn’t want to kill the kid if he doesn’t have to; the older shinobi have definitely been through Danzō’s training already, but the boy can’t be much older than Shin and Sai, so there’s a chance of getting through to him still.

“You are ordered to surrender,” the woman says, drawing her tantō. “You are outnumbered and trapped. Give up. You are accused of treason against Konohagakure.”

Well, if they wanted to find the magic words to make Genma lose his temper, those ones are a pretty good bet. Genma doesn’t get angry easily, hasn’t lost his composure since the day his sister’s squad had their movements betrayed by a fellow Konoha shinobi and were killed by Kumo nin. But being called a traitor by the very proof that Danzō has betrayed everything Konoha stands for?

Yeah, Genma’s not overly happy about that.

“Sorry,” Genma tells her, and keeps it cheerful, just a little bit dry. “I’d love to come with you and get disappeared for all eternity, but I kind of took responsibility for those kids. Can’t let ‘em go hungry and all that now.”

There’s a pause like the woman is trying to work out whether he’s serious. “The trainees will be returned and reconditioned,” she says after several seconds.

“Not,” Genma says, losing a good portion of his humor, “ever going to happen. They were supposed to try and kill each other. They’re friends. Anyone who’d make friends murder each other is the worst kind of scum.”

The Aburame boy stiffens just enough for it to be noticeable.

“In Root, you have no name. You have no feelings. You have no past. You have no future. There is only the mission,” the woman repeats, like it’s rote.

Genma flips the senbon through the fingers of his left hand, showy and distracting. “Then Danzō’s taken away all the meaning behind being a Konoha shinobi,” he tells her. “I’m going to regret killing you before you find out what it’s really supposed to mean.”

It’s true, not just bravado. Genma regrets lots of the kills he’s made, whether they were other shinobi like in the war or civilian targets on missions, and he’ll likely regret this one more than most. It’s never stopped him before, though, and it won’t make him hesitate now. Right and wrong are big concepts, and a little too complex for a simple guy like him, but Genma’s got the my village and not my village parts down pretty well. Root might have been founded by Danzō, but they’re not working for Konoha in any way that matters. That makes them enemies, and enemies have to be dealt with in any way possible.

Besides, these guys are good. If he’s going to make it back to explain to Raidō why they suddenly have two kids staying in their apartment, he’s going to have to be ruthless.

It’s not the woman who makes the first move, it’s the man, who goes low and comes up with a fire jutsu shaped like a dragon. Genma curses, throwing himself backwards and out of its path even as he feels the heat scorch his mask. He rolls, twisting to his feet the second he’s clear, and knocks the woman’s tantō to the side with his bracer. She recovers instantly, stabbing up like she’s going to gut him, but Genma gets one hand on her wrist and kicks off, flipping up and over her head. As he comes down he kneels her hard in the back, throwing her off balance, and shoves a senbon into the pressure point on her neck.
She dies without a sound, but right now Genma doesn’t have time for the regret he promised her. That’s for later, when he has the luxury for it.

The man whirls in, another fire jutsu twisting from his fingers, but Genma’s had enough. He flashes through hand signs and takes it back, returning the surge of flame with a stronger one that scorches flesh and makes the man cry out. Ducking under his guard, Genma shifts out of the way of a kick, dislocates his knee with a hard blow from his elbow, and brings the heel of his hand up hard as the attacker falls. His neck breaks with a dull crack, and Genma lets him crumple as he comes smoothly to his feet.

The boy has one glove off, and is just making to remove the other.

“Don’t,” Genma tells him, fingers closing a little more firmly around the paralyzing senbon in his hand. “It doesn’t have to go this way.”

The kid’s eyes are completely covered, no hint to his expression showing there, but his mouth pulls just a little tight in clear hesitance.

“You ever met Sai and Shin?” Genma asks, keeping his tone light.

Another long pause, before the kid nods once, sharp and wary.

“I thought so. Trainees have to stick together, right?” One half-step forward, and when the boy doesn’t move Genma allows himself a faint flicker of hope.

“Fuu and Shin are…friends,” the boy says slowly. “They play shogi. Strategy games are encouraged.”

Genma's first thought upon hearing that name is the little jinchuuriki girl who’s pretty much always clinging to Kurama’s back, and gods, but he can't even imagine what Kurama would say in that situation. Or what he'd destroy. Since Konoha is still standing and Danzō hasn’t been turned into mincemeat just yet, though, Genma's going to assume the kid means someone else entirely.

“I can get Fuu out,” he says quietly. “And you, too. Sai and Shin aren’t going to have to fight anymore. Don’t you want something like that?”

“Danzō-sama—”

Genma snorts. “Danzō-sama isn’t going to be around much longer, kid. The Hokage will see to that, and if he doesn’t, I will.” Danzō might be more powerful than him, might be older and wiser and more experienced, but poison, Genma has come to find, is the great equalizer, and even Danzō can’t check every last thing he comes into contact with. Genma's poisons are the best in Fire Country, and he’s got motivation on his side; there’s no way Danzō is getting out of this unscathed.

Another long, breathless hesitation, and the boy takes a breath. “Danzō-sama will just take more of us,” he says, and it’s full of something like grief.

Genma recognizes that tone all too well.

“We can keep them safe,” he says gently, crouching down so he’s closer to eye-level with the kid. “Whoever you're protecting, I give you my word as a Konoha shinobi, they won't be harmed.”

The boy stares at him, weighty and weighing, for a long moment, and then nods. He reaches up and carefully pulls his mask off to look Genma in the eye. “I am Aburame Torune,” he offers, like it's a choice, and Genma knows that it is. “Danzō-sama would have taken Shino if I hadn’t volunteered to
go with him.”

Shino. _Aburame_ Shino, as in Shibi’s son? Gods, but what has Danzō been fucking *doing*? Genma shoves down the outrage, the anger, and rises to his feet, slipping his senbon away. “You should come with me,” he says. “If you want, I can go back and get Fuu, but if you think it can wait a day, that might be safer for everyone.”

“Fuu is one of the most promising trainees,” Torune says. He pulls his gloves back on, then his mask, and adds, “He is on a mission for Danzō-sama right now.”

That gives Genma time, at least. He’d have gone back to the Root base if Torune had wanted him to, but he wouldn’t have done it happily so close to his last break-in. Better to give things time to settle down again, and then hit. Maybe with backup. Actually, *definitely* with backup. Aoba could probably be convinced to assist, even if the Hokage refuses to let them go; as a career interrogator, he’s probably in the best position to deal with long-term conditioning anyway.

“Are there any other squads out here?” he asks, even as one part of his brain is busy plotting a route back into the base. That tunnel Kurama mentioned—that has to be connected, given its proximity, and he doubts it will be well-guarded. Maybe Tenzō could help them find an entrance, or create one.

Torune shakes his head. “Not in this direction.”

“Fantastic.” Genma picks up a loping run, the kid right behind him, and maybe it’s stupid, trusting that he’s thrown off his conditioning so easily, but...kids are resilient. Genma knows that as well as anyone. And beyond that, Torune has someone to protect—two people, even. That speaks to still having a will of his own, and he obviously hasn’t had all of the emotion drilled out of him yet. Genma’s willing to take the chance.

They don’t meet anyone else as they slip out of the forest near Training Ground 9. The buildings of the village proper start just a few yards on, and Genma leads Torune through the twisting back streets until anyone not familiar with them would be lost and turned around regardless of their sense of direction. He’s betting on the Root members not getting a lot of time in Konoha itself, since Danzō’s trying to keep them hidden, and since no one seems to be following them it looks like it’s paying off.

“Are there safehouses in this area?” Torune asks a little warily when Genma pauses, checking the street in all directions.

“Something like that,” Genma says wryly, and before Torune can ask anything else he leaps up the side of the apartment building, using the branches of a willow growing off the edge of someone’s balcony for cover. The windows on the fifth floor are all tightly closed and locked with the curtains mostly drawn, the way he expected, so he perches on the sill beside Raidō’s hyacinths and raps his knuckles lightly against the glass. It’s the same rhythm he and Raidō used to use on the Guard Platoon, and Iwashi is the only other person who knows it.

There’s a pause, a flicker of chakra as the traps on the window are deactivated, and then the curtain pulls away. Raidō looks him over, and Genma grins lazily and flashes him a victory sign. Rolling his eyes pointedly, Raidō drags the window open, letting Genma slide through. As soon as his feet hit the floor, he turns and waves Torune in, and the boy follows him quickly.

“I take it this wasn’t just reconnaissance?” Raidō asks dryly.

Genma laughs, freeing his hair from its tie and pulling his mask off. “What can I say? It’s the rebel in me. Never can stick to a plan.”
“Kushina’s influence,” Raidō informs him, and when Genma grins crookedly at him—because that’s the very furthest thing from an insult—he steps forward, dragging Genma into a tight hug. “Damn it, Gen, they came in the window and told me you were playing distraction. I about had a heart attack.”

“Sorry, Rai.” Genma leans in, resting their foreheads together, and breathes out all of the tension that’s been gathering in his spine. “It was…pretty bad.”

Raidō pointedly doesn’t call him on the clear understatement, just pulls back enough to kiss Genma on the forehead. Then he turns to Torune with a friendly smile, because Raidō is quite literally perfect in every way that matters. “And you’d be another rescue, then?”

Torune blinks at him, as if he can’t quite parse the question, and glances at Genma with confusion.

“Aburame Torune,” Genma tells his partner, and watches his eyes narrow in understanding. At Raidō’s sharp look, he nods briefly. “Danzō tried to take the Aburame Clan’s heir, and Torune volunteered to take his place.”

Comprehension is quickly followed by horror. Raidō comes from an established clan, and while it’s small, it’s still large enough to have all the weight of tradition behind it. Taking a family’s heir is like taking their future. It’s not the kind of thing that can be forgiven.

“Shino wouldn’t have done well in Root,” Torune says, like that’s explanation enough. “He needs to make friends, not isolate himself.”

“Root,” Raidō repeats, and Genma can see him adding the pieces together. A pause as he takes a careful breath, and then he nods. “Shin and Sai are in the spare bedroom,” he tells Genma, before glancing back at Torune. “Would you like something to eat? Tea?”

Torune looks like he can’t quite figure out how to react to the offer, and Genma carefully slips away before the urge to break something—preferably Danzō’s face—gets too strong. He pauses in the doorway of their spare room, getting his slow-burning temper under control, and then knocks softly.

“Shin? Sai?” he calls.

There’s a scuffle, and then the door is yanked open with surprising speed. “You’re all right,” Shin says with poorly hidden relief, and Sai, poking his head around the older boy, offers Genma something that’s almost a normal smile. It’s a good effort, though, and Genma returns it, propping his shoulder against the doorframe.

“Settling in okay?” he asks. “I’ll talk to the Hokage in the morning—well. Later today, I guess.”

Shin nods seriously, glancing back at Sai for a moment before meeting Genma’s eyes. “We haven’t finished training, so we don’t have seals yet,” he says. “We can tell you anything we know.”

“We only get seals when we start being sent on missions,” Sai adds, and sticks his tongue out as if presenting evidence.

Seals on their tongues to bind them. How logical, Genma thinks, and it’s cold, dark, deadly, the same way he might calculate a dose of poison for a family he was sent to assassinate.

He takes a breath, perfectly steady because he can’t allow himself to lose an ounce of composure or he’ll risk losing all of it, and asks, “There any chance you know what mission Danzō wanted you for?”

Sai and Shin trade glances. Shin shakes his head, but before he can say anything Sai offers, “I think
it was an infiltration mission, in the village.”

Genma's not that much of a gambler, but if Danzō was pushing their training up, if he specifically wanted children for it—

What are the odds that it wasn’t Kurama he was targeting?

Iruka’s hands are shaking. He’s sweating, almost trembling, his heart pounding in his chest and breath coming too short and fast, but he pushes on anyway. One step after another, the stones of the path scattering in front of his feet as he tries to turn his nervous shuffle into a stride.

There’s a house at the end of the long, curving path, the roof just barely visible through the trees. Old, a little weatherworn, in need of a good amount of cleaning judging by the state of the exterior and the overgrown garden, and Iruka keeps focusing on the details so he doesn’t have to think about why he’s here.

Naruto is in that house, Naruto and his mother and eight other jinchuuriki just like the demon fox that killed his parents.

Gods, but this is the very last thing he wants to do, and he’s doing it anyway.

*Marks for bravery,* his jounin instructor used to tell him, rolling her eyes. *I just wish you could tell when it was stupidity.*

Iruka hadn’t been offended, because he’d wished so too. Rushing in without thinking about things was pretty much all he did as a genin, and the only way he made chuunin was learning how to stop and think.

He’s not thinking now, though. Or, at least, he’s not thinking about *stopping,* and that’s probably about the same thing.

He can’t stop, though, not really. The whole time Naruto was gone he felt sick to his stomach, nauseous and uncertain and so unbearably guilty, because he meant to be friendly to the boy, was trying to work up the courage, but he hadn’t managed it. And then Naruto was gone, and possibly never coming back, and Iruka had sat in his bedroom and stared at his shaking hands and hated hated hated himself for feeling the way he had. Because a six-year-old boy was alone with the man who kidnapped him, and all of Sarutobi and Genma's assurances that Kurama was a good person just weren’t enough.

So Iruka has to see Naruto with his own eyes, has to meet Kurama and the other children before he’ll be able to even vaguely relax, but—

That’s a lot of destructive force contained inside four children.

A bare-branched cherry tree is the last barrier between Iruka and the house, and he wants to hide behind it, hesitate and wait and linger until this insane idea just goes away. He doesn’t, though. One deep breath and he steps forward, and—

Laughter. A woman’s laughter, loud and bright and unconstrained, undercut by the sound of children laughing too. A little girl shouts, and a boy shouts back, and the lower voice of a man snaps something testy. Another man laughs, deeper than the first, and the woman calls something Iruka
can't quite make out. He steps around the screen of trees, looking for the source of the noise, and then heads towards the back of the house, bright and lit with morning sun.

He’s just poked his head around when someone yells, “Duck!”

Months of teaching young children to throw pointy objects has Iruka flattening himself to the ground before the speaker has even finished the word. Something sails over his head, and Iruka automatically twists to watch it land. Whatever it is, it looks sticky, and when it hits the ground it splatters with an unnerving squelch, casting ridiculous amounts of glitter into the air.

Iruka blinks at it for a moment, then rolls to his feet and looks in the direction it came from.

“Sorry!” a little girl with green hair says, bouncing up to him. There’s a teenager behind her, Iruka’s age, with pretty amber eyes and dark hair, and he gives Iruka a faintly sheepish smile.

“We thought that would be a safe spot to test it,” he says apologetically.

“Test?” Iruka repeats, glancing back at the oozing glitter bomb. If he’s not entirely mistaken, it’s currently eating into the ground like acid.

The green-haired girl beams. “For a practical joke!” she says brightly. “Kushina-nee is teaching us! But Utakata made acid, not his sticky stuff, so we have to try again.”

The teenager sighs, though he looks faintly embarrassed. “I told you, Saiken was too busy laughing to listen to me. We might want to wait.”

“Aww.” With a pout that’s at dangerous levels of cute, the girl wraps her arms around his elbow, hanging off his arm like he’s a jungle gym. “We need to try again, though! I want to get my grandfather with it.” She’s about to add more when someone yells, and she twists around, leaps away, and bolts back around the corner of the house.

The teenager rolls his eyes, but offers Iruka an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry about that. Fū can be a little overwhelming.”

Honestly the acid still cheerfully eating its way into the ground is the overwhelming part, but Iruka smiles back anyway. “It’s not a problem,” he says. “At least there’s only one of her. I teach a class with almost twenty.”

Amber eyes widen as the boy blanches faintly. “I can’t even imagine,” he admits, and then inclines his head politely. “Utakata, of Kiri.”

“Umino Iruka,” Iruka returns, a little abashed that he forgot to introduce himself so completely. Then the name registers, and he feels himself go cold as he jerks back a step. “I—the Rokubi’s jinchuuriki?”

For one fraction of an instant something like hurt flashes across Utakata’s face, only to be quickly buried by a mask of polite calm. “Yes. Forgive me for not mentioning it sooner. I forgot.”

But—

But something an awful lot like guilt is churning in Iruka’s stomach, a potent as the acid in the test glitter-bomb. He steps forward again, reaching out, and can’t manage anything except, “No, wait, I’m sorry. It was just a surprise, I didn’t—”

I forgot, and gods, but isn’t that a heartbreaking thing, when he thinks about it? A house full of
jinchuuriki who don’t have to hide from each other, who don’t have other people look at them with fear, and maybe Iruka doesn’t know what that’s like, but he does understand loneliness. He knows the feeling of standing apart while everyone else walks together, and he doesn’t want anyone to feel that way, regardless of who or what they are.

Thankfully, the warmth is rising in Utakata’s eyes again, and it’s only with its return that Iruka realizes it had vanished completely. “That’s all right,” he says, more gentle than Iruka has a right to. His fear has a reason, but that doesn’t stop it from hurting other people even so.

It’s so hard, when the monsters from his nightmares are so very human. He needs to stop letting himself forget that.

“I came to see Naruto, if he’s here,” Iruka says, trying to salvage some of his composure. “I—I was his teacher, and I didn’t know if he was going to come back to class, but I wanted to make sure he knew he could.”

That earns him another faint smile from Utakata, though this one is several degrees happier than any of the previous ones. “I’m glad,” he answers, and takes a step away. “I think he’s still playing with Gaara and Yugito, if you’d follow me.”

Iruka nods, falling into pace with him as they head in the direction the girl disappeared. The silence is thick, and Iruka wonders how much of the awkwardness is his own projection.

“I really am sorry,” he blurts, when it finally feels like too much. “It was just unexpected.”

Utakata doesn’t look at him, tilts his head just slightly forward so that sleek dark hair falls to hide his face. “A lot of people feel that way, when they see us. We don’t look like the bijuu, and I think people are always surprised by that.”

Iruka winces, because that’s a little too accurate for comfort. And—he feels like he owes Utakata an explanation beyond the usual. He owes it to Naruto as well, but…he’ll wait until the boy is older. That’s far too much to drop on a six-year-old’s shoulders. “The Kyuubi killed my parents during the attack,” he says, and it’s still so hard to get those words out, to speak them evenly.

This time Utakata glances over at him, far too lovely to have a monster inside of his soul. Though that’s the point, Iruka supposes; there’s no telling what’s inside someone, and sometimes even if there is it doesn’t matter what they are in the face of who they are. Naruto and his aching loneliness have proved that to Iruka again and again.

“I’ve met old men with nothing to lose who are less brave than you’ve been in coming here,” Utakata tells him, and it’s something close to gentle again. “Thank you.”

He quickens his pace, leaving Iruka gaping after him as he turns the corner. From around it there’s a cheer, a yelp, and the thud of a body hitting the ground, and then a man snaps, “Damn it, Tomato, get off of me.”

A woman laughs wickedly. “But otouto, you let the kids do it all the time!”

“She’s right, Kurama-nii!” the little girl from before chimes in. “You’ve got to be fair!”

“I have to do no such fucking thing,” the man snaps. Kurama—that’s Naruto’s uncle, Iruka thinks, and it’s enough to jar him back into movement. As he hurries around the corner, though, he stops dead in surprise, because—

Because Utakata is flat on his back on the ground, play-struggling with Naruto and a little redheaded
boy who are sitting on his stomach. The green-haired girl is sitting on the shoulder of the biggest man
Iruka has ever seen, giggling, while a blonde girl perches in the tree beside them. In the center of the
lawn, a dark-skinned redhead is swiping at the familiar woman clinging to his back, expression set in
an offended scowl as she laughs loudly.

“Well, I certainly didn’t expect to see you here, Iruka,” a voice drawls from approximately three
inches behind him, and Iruka yelps and jerks around to glare at just about the last person he expected
to see here.

“So, Kakashi! Don’t do that, or I’m going to make you wear a bell!”

Kakashi’s eye crinkles in an amused smile. “How kinky. I suppose I could be convinced—"

Iruka very pointedly doesn’t warn him that the pair of redheads are coming up behind him. He
simply takes a step back as the woman gathers herself, Kurama supporting her feet to give her a
steady platform, and flings herself at Kakashi like a spider monkey. He hears her whoop too late and
goes down with a yelp, and Iruka takes several hasty steps back so as not to get caught in the
crossfire.

“Smart,” Kurama tells him dryly, joining him a safe distance from where the woman is grinding
Kakashi’s face into the grass. There’s a pause, and Iruka glances over with some surprise to find
Kurama watching him, expression thoughtful. Then, without any other hint as to his thoughts, he
turns away and calls, “Hey, kit! Someone’s here to see you.”

That, Iruka thinks a little dazedly, is not the reaction he expected to get from a possessive serial
 kidnapper with anger issues. But, as Naruto leaves off harrying Utakata to beam excitedly at Iruka
and bounce to his feet, he forgets the trepidation, the uncertainty.

He smiles back, because that’s the only possible response, and says, “I’m glad you’re back, Naruto.”
LXII: Dolent

Chapter Notes

I did not remember until well after writing this section that Ino's mother appears in the anime, being mostly a manga fan. Rather than rewriting, since it’s not really going to affect the plot, you can just consider this an AU as far as she’s concerned. Sorry for any confusion!

Also, NO UPDATE NEXT WEEK. Sorry, but work is a little backed up and I’m hoping to give myself some extra breathing room.

[dolent /ˈdōlənt/, sad; sorrowful; painful; causing suffering and pain. Middle English, from Middle French, from Latin dolent-, dolens, present participle of dolère “to feel pain, grieve”.]

Konoha is beautiful in the morning, Hiruzen thinks with a faint smile, watching the light spread across the village as the sun rises. He’s seen too many mornings from here, more than he ever should have, but it’s still one of his favorite sights.

The Sarutobi Clan was one of the first to join Konoha after its founding. Hiruzen himself was one of the first children born within the village’s walls, and he’s watched it rise from a handful of streets and houses to become what it is now, a thriving village full of souls. He loves it, and he would give his life for it in a heartbeat.

That doesn’t mean, however, that he’s the right person to control its fate.

Behind him, the door clicks open, and someone takes three steps into the office and then stops.

“Sensei,” Tsunade says, even in the way that means she’s being pointed about not yelling. Hiruzen smiles, almost despite himself, because that’s a painfully familiar tone. “I hope you didn’t call me in to tell me you’re dying. If you’re feeling dramatic, save it for Jiraiya.”

“Maybe just a little dramatic,” Hiruzen admits, turning away from the window to give his former student a smile. “Jiraiya is brooding and avoiding Kushina, though. I wouldn’t want to disturb him.”

Tsunade snorts, but there’s an amused curl to her mouth as she crosses the space between them, throwing herself down in one of the chairs across from him. Her eyes flicker over Rasa's desk in one corner, A’s in the other, and she shakes her head. “So you’re disturbing me instead? Much appreciated.”

Hiruzen smiles tiredly, pulling out his chair and sinking down slowly. “Kotetsu said you were with Orochimaru. How is he?”

Tsunade's expression does something complicated, like she doesn’t know whether to laugh or rail or cry, and she sighs, rubbing her hands over her face. “Complaining about his hair,” she says wryly, “since I had to cut the rest of it short. But health-wise he’s all right. The lack of chakra isn’t hurting him just yet, and he’s healing normally.” A hesitation, and she looks down at her entwined fingers
for a long moment before meeting Hiruzen’s eyes again. “What are you going to do with him?”

The heart of the matter, Hiruzen thinks, a little wistful. Tsunade’s always been so good at cutting through the fog and getting right at things. Honestly, for all of Dan’s charm and charisma, Hiruzen would far rather have given Tsunade his seat.

Then he lost two potential successors in a handful of years, under circumstances that were perfectly explainable but nevertheless ever so faintly suspicious, and was suddenly very, very glad that he’d never put Tsunade’s name forward as a candidate. He lost her regardless, after Dan’s death, but…at least it wasn’t permanently.

“That,” he says precisely, “will very shortly no longer be my decision to make.”

Confusion crosses Tsunade’s face, bleeds into outright alarm as she jerks back, rising to her feet and taking three steps away. “No,” she snaps. “No. if you called me here to tell me I have to take that damned hat—”

“I called you here,” Hiruzen interrupts gently, “to explain to you why I’m not going to give you the hat.”

There’s a heartbeat of perfect silence. Tsunade stares at him, brown eyes wide, and then laughs. She presses a hand over her face, sinking back down into her chair, and leans forward to brace her elbows on her knees. “Oh, thank hell. Gods, sensei, why would you feel the need to explain that? Shouldn’t it be obvious?”

Hiruzen smiles sadly at her bowed shoulders. “Because if I were to die, you are listed as my first choice for replacement,” he says. “The Daimyō knows and has already agreed. But dramatics aside I am not dying, and there are other choices available. Once I would have handed you my position without a second thought, but I think right now you aren’t ready.”

“Ready?” Tsunade demands, and it cracks down the middle. “I’m never going to be ready. That’s Dan’s dream, Nawaki’s dream, not mine. If I hadn’t made that damned bet with Kurama I’d still be running.” She takes a breath, looks up, and the expression on her face could wound Hiruzen at a hundred paces. “Half the time I wish I was.”

Hiruzen feels old. Old and tired and frail somewhere deep inside of him, watching what should have been the brightest star of the next generation fold in on herself, wrapping her arms around her body. It’s been years, but he understands that some blows crack things that can never quite be mended.

Whether it is fortunate or not Hiruzen couldn’t say, but he’s suffered such a blow. Biwako’s loss, Asuma’s departure, his son-in-law’s death—none of them hurt him so deeply that he couldn’t go on. The village has always come first, because the whole matters far more than one old man.

“The village is kinder with you in it,” he tells Tsunade, blatant truth. When she looks up at him, features drawn, he musters a smile, and it takes more effort than it should. “Truly, Tsunade, I’ve missed you. Everyone has. Your heart is as strong as your grandfather’s, and Konoha needs it just as dearly.”

“Not as Hokage,” Tsunade tells him, and it’s partway to a plea. She casts a glance at the hat sitting on the edge of the desk, and her mouth pulls tight. Shaking her head, she holds Hiruzen’s gaze and says, with a shadow of sharpness, “If you want me to work for the village, I’ll manage. Whatever it is, I think I can stand to stay here, looking at what Nawaki and Dan died for. But it will hurt, every day until I die.” A breath shakes her, and she presses her hands over her face.
“I want to get better, sensei,” she says, and it breaks. “I don’t want to hate Konoha for what it took from me. I want to be able to love the village the way they did, without reservations, but—I can’t yet. So please—”

Ignoring his bones’ protests, Hiruzen comes around the desk to kneel beside her chair, taking one of her hands in his own. “I would like that, too,” he says, and doesn’t think he’s ever meant something more. “I miss your smile, Tsunade. I’ve missed you. And I realize what I’m asking is hard, but I only ask because I know you can. Stay in the village. Head the hospital. See how Konoha can become better.”

Tsunade laughs a little, squeezing his fingers, and there are tears on her cheeks but her heart and will have always been what made her so incredible. “You’re an incurable optimist, old man,” she accuses, but it’s at least a little fond.

Hiruzen smiles at her, pushing painfully to his feet. “I simply have faith that the younger generations will be better than I have ever managed to be,” he tells her, and it’s sad but honest. Hiruzen himself has made so many choices, turned his eyes from so many things he shouldn’t have. With age comes wisdom, but never soon enough, unfortunately. If he had this life to do over—

But he doesn’t, and a knock at the door reminds him of that more sharply than usual. “Come in,” he calls, waving Tsunade back to her seat when she starts to rise, and aims a welcoming smile at his visitor. “Kushina, my dear. Picking up Kurama’s habits now, are we?”

The red-haired girl clinging to the leg of Kushina’s jounin uniform harrumphs like an old woman, pushing her glasses up her nose. She gives Kushina a meaningful look, and Kushina grins back, full of teeth and the terror of an Uzumaki on a mission.

“I kinda like this one, you know?” she says cheerfully, tossing herself into the remaining chair and letting the girl scale her leg to sit on the arm. A glance at Tsunade, careful and calculating, and she asks, “Is she here to fix your face when I’m done breaking it?”

Tsunade rolls her eyes, and Hiruzen can’t fight a wry smile, even though he knows she’s entirely serious. It’s certainly deserved, given the way Naruto grew up. Instead of answering, though, he meets the girl’s stare and says gravely, “I don’t believe we’ve met. My name is Sarutobi Hiruzen. May I ask yours?”

“Uzumaki Karin!” she says instantly, and he likely should have guessed, given the hair and the chakra he can feel. “I’m going to be a fuinjutsu master like Kushina.”

Kushina beams proudly, and—Hiruzen’s first instinct is to grimace, because he lived through Tsunade, Jiraiya, Minato, and Kushina all teaching themselves sealing, and that was more than enough. Except, very shortly, it won't be his problem any longer, and the relief of that thought is so great he almost feels lightheaded.

“An impressive and worthy goal,” he agrees. Karin gives him a suspicious look, like she can’t tell if he’s patronizing her, but lets it go with a determined nod.

“We were training,” Kushina says, flipping a kunai from hand to hand. It’s less of an explanation for the girl’s presence and more of a dare for him to protest it. “You wanted to see me, Hokage-sama?”

“I did indeed.” Taking a seat again, Hiruzen steels himself, then meets deep violet eyes the same color as Mito’s. “Seven years ago, I had three choices when I was looking for a successor. Minato was the one I picked, because Orochimaru was unstable and you were a jinchuuriki and considering taking leave to start a family.”
Kushina’s eyes go wide, and the kunai slips, tumbling through the air to slam into the floor. She jerks around to look at Tsunade, but the older woman scoffs and raises her hands. “Don’t even joke about that,” she says firmly. “He already conned me into being head of the hospital. That’s more than enough for me. If you want the position, I’ll support you.”

Not unexpected, but also not an easy offer to brush off, seeing as Tsunade is the last direct descendant of Konoha’s founder. The expression on Kushina’s face says she knows that, and her eyes flicker from Tsunade to Hiruzen and then to the portrait of her husband on the wall.

Whatever she sees in his painted smile, it must be enough, because Hiruzen watches the joy and glee and wonder flood her expression. She bolts to her feet, all but vibrating with contained enthusiasm, to brace her hands on the edge of the desk, hair spilling around her like a tide of fire, and cries, “Me? You want to nominate me for Hokage?”

Hiruzen chuckles, holding her wide-eyed stare, and says, “I would like nothing better, my dear.”

Kushina laughs, twisting around and grabbing Karin’s hands. She pulls the girl into a tight hug, bouncing on her toes, and then whirs back to face Hiruzen. “Just like that?” she demands. “You’re just—making me a candidate?”

“Well, perhaps a little more complicated,” Hiruzen allows. “Given the circumstances, you’ll need to submit yourself to a full evaluation by Inoichi, and Jiraiya will need to find out the details of the technique used to bring you back, but it shouldn’t be too difficult.” He meets her eyes, smile going faintly weary. “I retired for a reason, Kushina. My judgement is…not what it once was, and there are many mistakes that I no longer trust myself to correct. This situation has made that especially clear.”

Kushina just looks at him for a long moment, expression softer than it might otherwise be, and smiles just a little. “I've always wanted peace,” she says. “I've wanted it more than anything, but I’ll fight if I have to. You know that, right?”

Hiruzen smiles back at her. “Of course. It is one of many reasons you are my first choice. I believe the village will do well in your care.”

The Daimyō was skeptical, when Hiruzen first proposed Kushina as successor. A shinobi not born in Konoha, a former human container resurrected by their enemies, a mother with a small child—every doubt he brought up was reasonable, but none of them apply in the face of who Kushina truly is. Minato was not the only hero of the Third Shinobi War, and he wasn’t the only one who dreamed of a better future for the village as a whole.

If it’s required, Hiruzen has no doubts that Kushina will die to defend Konoha, but he’s also entirely certain that she’ll also do everything in her power to find another way.

(There's a logic problem, in the Academy, that’s presented to students in their last year. You’re drinking with someone who might be an enemy, and they serve you tea that could be poisoned. What is the correct response?

Hiruzen reads the answers every year, because they never fail to amuse him. Most say one should cause a distraction and switch the cups. Minato’s response was that he would take an antidote beforehand, just in case.

Kushina said she’d knock both cups off the table to even the field and apologize afterwards, because an offense was correctable but death wasn’t.

Hiruzen remembers sitting back in his chair when he read it and thinking of Mito, thinking of how,
for the first time, he could see the similarities between Mito and Kushina in more than their hair and their status as jinchuuriki. He still sees it, here and now, and he thinks that Mito would be overjoyed at seeing her niece become Hokage.

“Thank you, Hokage-sama,” Kushina tells him, and the joy is fierce in her face. “Thank you.”

“No, my dear,” Hiruzen says with absolute sincerity, laying his hand over hers. “Thank you.”

“Daddy, door!”

Inoichi curses, almost dropping the onigiri for Ino’s bento as her shout echoes from the top of the stairs. “Finish getting dressed!” he calls back, rinsing his hands quickly. “Do you need help?”

“I’ve got it!” Ino ducks back into her room, and Inoichi hurries to get the door. It’s likely Mebuki coming to pick Ino up, except since Ino is the one who had to wake him up this morning neither of them is ready yet. He hates making the woman wait, but they’re running behind this morning, since he had an interrogation yesterday that lasted well into the early hours.

Tripping over the sandals he had simply kicked off in a haze of exhaustion, he staggers, catches himself on the doorframe, and drags it open with a harried smile. “Mebuki, forgive me, I’m still—oh.” Not Mebuki. Definitely not Mebuki.

“Nice apron,” Shikaku drawls, looking him over from the top of his crooked ponytail to the tips of his mismatched house slippers.

Inoichi rolls his eyes, though he makes no move to take the offending pink apron off. Shikaku has seen him in far worse states. Stepping aside, he beckons his friend in. “There are days I regret deciding that I wanted an heir without the complications of a wife,” he says wryly. “This is likely one of them.”

Shikaku snorts, following him back to the kitchen and leaning against the doorframe as Ino leaps down the stairs. She waves, calling, “Morning!” and when he smiles back at her, she bounces over to peer at Inoichi’s handiwork. “Daddy, you made pandas! Those are really cute!”

“I’m glad you like them.” Inoichi closes the bento box and wraps it in cloth, then passes it to her. “You have your books? Any tests today?”

Ino takes it with exaggerated care, balancing it in one hand and her bookbag in the other. “I don’t think so. Iruka-sensei didn’t say anything yesterday.” Another knock sounds, and she brightens. “Sakura’s here! Bye, Daddy!”

Inoichi presses a kiss to her forehead, bends enough to let her kiss his cheek in return. “Have a good day, Ino. I love you.”

“Love you too!” Ino gives him a bright smile, then heads for the door at a run. Inoichi can hear it swing open, then Ino’s happy greeting and Sakura’s reply, Mebuki’s more even tones, and the thud as it falls shut.

It’s always strange, just how quickly the house starts to feel empty without Ino’s presence. Inoichi sighs, slumping against the counter and reaching up to pull his hair into a more secure tail now that he has a spare moment. “I’m sorry about that, Shikaku. Is something wrong?”
Shikaku waves him off. “I wouldn’t have disturbed your morning for no reason,” he says, smirking faintly. “I know how you get.” When Inoichi makes a face at him, he snorts and adds, “Shibi is waiting outside.”

“And you didn’t invite him in?” Inoichi asks, exasperated. “Shikaku—”

“We’re not staying,” Shikaku interrupts. “And he’s under a henge.”

This is definitely not a social visit, then, though Inoichi likely should have expected as much, what with Shikaku voluntarily getting out of bed before noon. He studies his friend for a moment, then pulls the apron off. “I take it we’re going to leave the same way?”

“If you don’t mind.” Shikaku watches as he pulls on his flak jacket and grabs his weapons pouch. “I got a message from Shiranui this morning. He requested a meeting with the major Clan Heads at his apartment, as secret as we could make it.”

That’s…rather alarming, Inoichi thinks, and can tell by the slant of Shikaku’s mouth that he feels the same way. “All of us?” he asks, a little disbelieving, though it doesn’t stop him from pulling his sandals on.

Shikaku just offers a shrug. “That’s what the message said. Choza says Genma’s not one to overreact, so I’m inclined to think it’s not a stunt.”

Since Choza was the man’s jounin instructor, Inoichi is willing to trust his assessment. It’s not usual for all the clan heads to gather except before the Hokage, though, and that makes this especially odd.

“My bedroom window is open,” he tells Shikaku, who nods and heads up the stairs. A moment of concentration and Inoichi forms a shadow clone, then henges himself into one of the stray cats Ino has taken to feeding. The clone opens the front door, making a show of shooing the cat out, and then closes it again firmly once Inoichi is outside. He doesn’t bother waiting for Shibi or Shikaku, but slips into the shadows as he heads for the south end of the village.

Thankfully, Genma's apartment building is set well back from any main streets, in one of the areas where the vegetation is thickest. It’s no trouble at all to slip inside and make his way up. As an ANBU assassin, Genma's a regular for evaluations and assessments, so Inoichi has seen his file enough times to remember his apartment number well. He sheds the henge, since the hallway is empty, and knocks lightly on the door.

There’s a brief pause before it opens, and Genma gives him a friendly smile. “Morning, sir. Thanks for coming.”

“With all the mystery, how could I resist?” Inoichi asks dryly, and holds the door open behind him for a beat longer. Shibi is the first in, Shikaku a beat slower as he checks the hallway before stepping past Inoichi with a nod of thanks.

Genma waits until the door is shut and locked again before he glances at Shibi. “I found something I need you to take a look at before everyone else gets here,” he says lightly. “Just…don’t do anything reckless, okay?”

That gets him a faintly incredulous lift of Shibi’s brows over his dark glasses, but the Aburame Clan Head simply nods. For a moment, Genma just looks at him, then takes a breath and tips his head towards the living room. “In there. I’ll give you a second.”

Shibi pauses, studying the tokujo, but curiosity wins out over caution. He heads for the other room with quick steps, rounding the corner, and—
A sound, like a half-muffled cry, has Inoichi moving before he can even think about it. He rounds the corner at a run, Shikaku just behind him, and practically falls over Shibi where the man is crouched on the floor, arms tight around an Aburame boy a little older than his son.

“Torune,” Shibi gets out, and the name is half-strangled, rough with emotion Inoichi has never seen the other man show. “Where have you been?”

“I'm sorry,” the boy says, though his voice is faintly unsteady as well. “I thought—he said—”

“Root,” Genma cuts in, watching the reunion with an unreadable expression, far different from the easygoing cheer Inoichi is used to seeing on him. He looks away, glances up to hold Inoichi's gaze, and asks quietly, “The name Yamanaka Fuu mean anything to you?”

Of course it does. The Yamanaka Clan is large, but not that large, and Inoichi knows every member. “It does,” he says, and between the grip Shibi has on Torune, the darkness in Genma's eyes, and Root—“I take it,” he says, and only his training as an interrogator keeps his tone even, his expression steady, “that he did not just wander into the woods and disappear, then.”

Genma's smile is crooked and dark. “Not quite.”

Root can only mean Shimura Danzō. The Foundation was that man’s pride before Sarutobi had it disbanded, and Inoichi feels faintly sick at the thought. At least two children belonging to clans—not simply small clans with a handful of members, but some of the founding clans of Konoha, its very bones—and logic says that where there are two there can only be more as well.

All too clearly, Inoichi can remember Orochimaru’s banishment, sixty children dead. Can remember the horror of those labs, the small bodies, the unanswered questions that lingered long after the Sannin fled. How had he gotten so many subjects? Where had they come from? How had he taken so many without being noticed?

The pattern of disappearances in Konoha didn’t change even after Orochimaru was gone. Children vanish, never in large enough numbers to cause a stir, but...Inoichi has seen the reports, passed on by the Military Police. It happens frequently. He’s always thought it one of the dangers of living in a Hidden Village, of being a shinobi—children go missing. They try jutsus they aren’t ready for, stumble over traps carelessly left in training grounds, venture into the Forest of Death without knowing it, and their bodies are never found. He’s never looked at the reports too closely, even if he hugs Ino a little tighter each time one crosses his desk.

But, if Root is active, if Danzō is taking children and they aren’t simply vanishing—

Fuu was a cheerful, friendly boy. Inoichi knows his mother, better at undercover work than anyone he’s ever met, and he remembers how she fell apart when her son disappeared. They found no trace of him, though, no sign, and it was just another disappearance no one could solve.

He takes a breath that shakes, leaning back against the wall and folding his arms tightly across his chest. How easily could it have been Ino, if even a boy so close to Shibi could be taken?

“You're not taking this directly to the Hokage?” Shikaku asks, and he sounds unaffected but his expression is lined, his eyes touched with a darkness that’s fit to devour.

Genma offers him a smile, rueful and just barely hiding a matching darkness. “Danzō is one of Sarutobi-sama’s best friends,” he says lightly, as if he isn’t practically accusing their Hokage of colluding on this. “Thought it might be best to let some people who are a little less expendable than me in on the secret, just in case.”
He’s an assassin, Inoichi thinks, cold right down to his bones. Assassins are killed on missions at easily twice the rate of other shinobi, especially ANBU assassins, and they’re frequently called up on missions without warning or the knowledge of anyone but the Hokage. If any shinobi in the village could disappear easily, it would be Genma. It’s solid reasoning, and Inoichi doesn’t want to think it’s necessary, but—

But.

The quiet sound Shikaku makes is one of approval, and his eyes flicker past Genma, down the darkened hallway. Inoichi turns to look as well, and spots two small figures hiding in the shadows, watching the assembled adults warily.

“They’d just been assigned a graduation test when I found them,” Genma says, perfectly mild, as he follows the direction of their gazes and offers the two boys a smile. “Danzō set them to kill each other even though they’d been raised as brothers. Root shinobi aren’t allowed to have emotions, and that’s apparently how he forces the kids to suppress them.”

It could have been Ino so easily. She’s the brightest in her Academy class, already learning the clan techniques, a promising kunoichi with an excess of power and intelligence. Inoichi shudders before he can help himself.

“I will take this to the Hokage myself if I must,” Shibi says, rising to his feet, though he keeps one hand on Torune’s shoulder as if scared to let go completely. There’s a cold fury in his face, and Inoichi can feel an echo of it in himself. “Torune was a member of my immediate family. Even if Sarutobi-sama authorized Danzō’s actions, he had no right.”

It’s more than Inoichi has ever heard Shibi say at one time before, more emotion than he’s seen him show, and all too understandable in the face of these revelations. “I will as well,” he agrees immediately, and looks at Genma. “You weren’t able to get Fuu out?”

“He was on a mission,” Torune says, glancing up at his clan head. “Return estimated as tonight if no delays.”

“I was planning to grab Aoba and see if I couldn’t get to him,” Genma says, as if it’s as simple as picking up milk. When Shikaku raises a brow at him, he smiles, ever so faintly wicked, and tips one shoulder in a shrug. “I could always take Uzumaki Kurama instead.”

Inoichi has heard plenty about the man, and more than enough to make him truly consider the idea. Before he can say as much, though, Shikaku gives him a pointed look and says dryly, “I think I want enough left of the base to get some kind of proof. Take Yamashiro. Maybe a sensor, too.”

“I’ll go,” Inoichi offers immediately, and when Genma blinks in surprise gives the tokujo a thin smile. “You’ll have command of the mission, given your familiarity with the situation, but Fuu might react better to a familiar face, and I’m the strongest sensor in the village. I’m coming.”

“Yes, sir,” Genma agrees, though he doesn’t look as though he minds in the least. “Glad to have you.”

There’s a loud knock on the front door, and in the sudden, tense silence Inoichi hears a loud hiss of, “Are you trying to break their door, Inuzuka?”

“Oh, pull that stick out of your ass, Hiashi,” Tsume retorts. “You were doing so well, too—”

“Restraint,” a man who is unmistakably Uchiha Fugaku huffs, “is not the same as—”
“She’s fine!” Hiashi snaps. “Tsume is an excellent kunoichi, and she has no need to play into your preconceptions of—”

“Preconceptions? That she not disturb the entire building?” Fugaku splutters. “Shiranui asked for stealth.”

“And a fine job you're both doing of providing it,” Tsume says dryly. “And for the record, I defend my own honor, thanks. Without sounding like a stuck-up bastard.”

Without moving any facial muscles at all, Shibi somehow conveys rolling his eyes in longsuffering exasperation.

Chuckling, Genma pushes upright. “Let me get that,” he says over the squabbling.

Before he can take so much as a step, Hiashi and Fugaku's voices rise dangerously, and Tsume makes a noise that perfectly echoes Shibi’s non-expression. “If you two don’t shut up right now I'm going to have Kuromaru sit on you!” she yells.

“Tsume—”

“Don’t you dare—”

A yelp, an offended cry, a scuffle, and then the double thump of two bodies slamming into the floor. Kuromaru lets out a satisfied woof, low and amused, and Tsume cackles.

“Who’s the best dog ever?” she coos over Hiashi and Fugaku's protests, to the sound of the nin-dog’s tail happily slapping the floor. “Ooooh, you are, yes, you definitely are, my strong, handsome boy.”

There's a pause, and then an awkwardly cleared throat. “Did I miss something?” Choza asks politely, and despite the situation Inoichi can't help but laugh.

As colorful a collection of personalities as Konoha's Clan Heads may be, he has faith that they're all good people. And, together, their clan members make up the vast majority of Konoha's shinobi. If they stand together, the Hokage won't have any choice but to let them at Danzō, and Inoichi is more than ready to get his pound of flesh.
When Kurama wanders into the kitchen early in the morning, it’s to find all of the kids already present and Kushina in the center of the huddle. There are pots of water boiling on the stove, and Fū and Karin are carefully dropping balls of dough into them, while Gaara and Naruto roll more and Yugito meticulously threads cooked ones onto skewers.

“Isn’t it easier just to buy dango?” Kurama asks, eyeing the mess a little warily.

“But this is more fun!” Kushina protests, waving a spoon covered in sweet soy sauce at him. “Don’t be a stick in the mud, otouto!”

“Whatever, Tomato.” Kurama rolls his eyes, even as he drops into one of the chairs at the kitchen table. For a second he thinks about commenting on the fact that they’re going to be eating dango for breakfast, but decides the pouts Fū and Naruto will give aren’t worth it. Instead, he leans back in his chair, watching Fū giggle with Karin, Naruto proudly showing off a misshapen cube, Gaara with his tongue poking out from between his teeth in concentration. Kushina has turned her focus to Yugito, who’s smiling shyly up at her, and…it’s pretty good.

“I’m going to be with Sarutobi-sama all day,” Kushina tells him without looking up from laying out a bowl of the mitarashi sauce.

“Does that mean we get Kurama-nii to ourselves all day?” Naruto asks enthusiastically, craning around to beam at Kurama. “That’s so cool!”

Kurama snorts, trying to shove down the bright flicker of warmth that rises in response. “Yeah, kit, you can stay with me.”

And…that’s actually perfect for what he needs. Absolutely perfect, with the added advantage of fulfilling at least three different goals at the same time. Kurama’s a fox, and that’s his favorite kind of plan.

“If you’re up to it,” he says, perfectly casual as he inspects his claws for nicks, “we could always play tag.”

There’s instant silence as five pairs of eyes snap up to look at him. “Tag?” Yugito asks, very interested. “The six of us?”

Kushina laughs, dumping the empty pot in the sink. “That sounds like even more fun than dango! Playing on teams might be cool, you know?”

“Every jinchuuriki for themselves!” is Fū’s protest. Then she grins at Karin, who’s just opening her mouth with an offended expression, and adds, “You count, Karin-chan. You’re an honorary..."
“jinchuuriki, just like Kushina-nee!”

Mollified, Karin nods once. “I like tag,” she decrees. “And I don’t need a team to win.”

“I want to be on Kurama-nii’s team,” Gaara says, quiet but firm.

“Me too!” Naruto agrees immediately. “Or Kurama-nii can be it, and you can be on my team, Gaara! It’s the most awesome team ever, especially if you’re there too!”

Gaaraflushes and ducks his head, and Kurama snorts, amused. “Temporary alliances only,” he proposes, “and other than that it’s a free-for-all.” He has a flash of Hisen glaring at him, A staring narrowly at Yugito, and doesn’t bother to swallow a malicious grin. “Points for collateral damage while we’re playing. The higher-ranking the shinobi you prank or catch, the more points you get.”

Fū beams like this is the best thing she’s ever heard. “We can take out other people while we’re running? That’s so cool!”

“It is,” Yugito agrees, and she’s wearing the expression of a cat planning its way out of trouble. “Kurama-nii, can we use the whole village?”

“Of course.” Kurama assesses, but…it will be easy enough to steer the game if he has to, and more suspicious if they're actively avoid an area. “Maybe not actually inside the Administration Building, but anywhere else you can get to inside the walls is fine.”

“Let’s go!” Naruto insists, already sliding down from his stool.

“Oh, no.” Kushina catches him by the collar of his shirt and pulls him back up. “We’ve got to finish up here first, Naruto! I can't teach you sealing if you can't finish what you start, you know?”

Naruto looks appropriately horrified by this threat and hurriedly gathers up dough for another ball. “I can finish stuff!” he protests. “I'm good at finishing!”

“I’m sure you are.” Kushina loops an arm around him in a tight half-hug, then lets go. “Is that second pot boiling yet, Karin-chan?”

“It is,” Karin tells her. “And these ones are starting to float.”

“Count to sixty and then fish them out,” Kushina says cheerfully, turning back to the two girls. “One more batch and we’ll be done. Kurama, you could make yourself useful and start washing up, you know?”

Kurama scoffs. “I did the dinner dishes last night by myself because someone was too busy bouncing around the house like a deranged monkey.”

“I'm going to be Hokage!” Kushina glares at him. “I get to be excited about that!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kurama waves a hand, brushing her off, but…it’s hard. He spent a good twenty years listening to his Naruto make that same declaration, and it’s difficult, now, to hear it from anyone else. He’s glad it’s Kushina getting the hat—among other reasons, he was absolutely certain Tsunade would have followed through with her personal gofer jounin threat—but some things it takes time to let go of.

Naruto drops the last of the dough on the waiting plate and wiggles down from his seat, then immediately throws himself headlong at Kurama. “Kurama-nii, Kurama-nii!”
With a theatrical grunt, Kurama pries the boy off his leg and hoists him up into his lap. “What, kit?” he asks.

Beaming, Naruto throws his arms around Kurama’s neck, hugging him tightly. “I just wanted to say good morning! Good morning, Kurama-nii!”

Kurama’s breath hitches a little in his throat, but he covers it, shoving down the flicker of warmth that rises. “Morning, Naruto,” he returns, and no force on earth could stop him from burying his nose in blond hair and hugging him close.

There’s a tug at his pant leg, and without having to look Kurama reaches down and pulls Gaara up to join them, looping his free arm around the redhead. “Good morning to you, too, Gaara,” he says, amused. “You going to be okay playing tag, squirt?”

Mutely, Gaara nods, face tucked into Kurama’s shirt. There’s a pause before he glances up, and then he says carefully, “I can be on a team with anyone.”

Well, that’s definitely progress. Kurama gives him a smile, ruffling his hair lightly, and offers, “I know you can, Gaara.”

“We can be on a team!” Karin says, even as Fū helps her down from her perch. “We’d be the best team, and your chakra is nice too. It’s really big and warm.”

Instead of hiding his face again, Gaara gives her a small but happy smile. “Okay,” he agrees.

“I want to be it!” Fū bounces over to throw herself at Kurama, half-sprawling over his knees. “Kurama-nii, can I be it?”

Yugito makes a noise of protest, abandoning her brush to join the press by grabbing Kurama’s sleeve. “I want to be it first.”

The two girls eye each other for a moment before Fū turns wide, pleading eyes on Kurama. “Kurama-nii, pick!”

“Yes,” Yugito agrees, tugging lightly on his arm. “Kurama-nii, which one? Please?”

Sage, Kurama thinks, glancing between two pairs of entreating eyes. He’s not getting paid anywhere near enough for decisions like this. “Rock paper scissors?” he suggests, a little desperately, and shoots a snickering Kushina his best surreptitious glare.

“All right,” Yugito agrees instantly, turning to Fū, who sticks her fist out agreeably. Kurama can practically see Matatabi and Chōmei tensing in competition under their skin. The Nibi and Nanabi have always been friendly for the most part, but Kurama remembers more than a few knock-down fights between them.

“Why don’t we get the others first?” he proposes, gently shaking Fū off so he can stand. “Yugito, can you grab Utakata?”

Interest kindles in Yugito’s eyes, making her look like a cat dropped into the middle of an aviary. “I think he was out by the well,” she says, and darts away. Kurama hears the back door slam carelessly, and has to shake his head in amusement. The Yugito he first met would never have been childish enough to do that, and it’s a good sign that she can be now.

There’s been lots of changing going on, and not just in the timeline. Kurama can’t help but think that his Naruto would approve.
“And I’ll wake up Rōshi and Han!” Fū volunteers cheerfully, bouncing on her toes.

With a huff, Kurama ruffles her hair, then warns, “Dodge carefully.”

Fū’s grin brims with cheery mischief as she salutes, then bolts in the direction of the bedrooms Han and Rōshi claimed.

Karin takes Yugito’s spot at Kurama’s elbow, one hand fisted in his sleeve, and asks, “Do we get a prize for winning?”

Kushina laughs, dumping a load of dishes in the sink, and proposes, “How about the winner gets to pick what takeout we get tonight?”

“Ramen!” Naruto says immediately. “I’m gonna win and pick ramen!”

“Barbeque,” Gaara counters, and ducks his head a little at Naruto's betrayed expression. He’s smiling, though, so Kurama doesn’t worry.

“And you’re going to pick okonomiyaki, right?” Kurama asks Karin, amused.

Karin flashes him a startled look, as if she hadn’t expected him to remember even when she said it so clearly, and then nods, a flush rising in her cheeks. “Yeah!” she says determinedly. “It’s the best food, so of course I will.”

Naruto flails and nearly falls off Kurama’s lap, only saved by Kurama snatching the back of his shirt just in time. “But—ramen,” he squawks.

“Then you’d better win, right, kit?” Kurama tugs him back to a slightly safer position.

“I’m definitely gonna win!” Naruto insists, still looking horrified. “Then we can have ramen and I’ll prove it’s the best.”

“Sushi is better,” Yugito puts in as she reenters the kitchen, Utakata just behind her. She glances up at Kurama and asks, “We get to pick if we win?”

“I like that idea!” Fū agrees, and Utakata yelps as she flings herself up onto his back, making him stagger a step forward.

From the hallway, there’s a very loud thud, a groan, and a crash like a bookshelf falling over. Someone yelps, and Rōshi’s muffled snarl of, “Damn it, Kurama, control your spawn,” makes Fū giggle happily. A moment later, Han emerges, dressed but looking slightly bleary-eyed, with Rōshi a step behind him. The shorter man is covered in dust and glitter in equal measure, and he narrows his eyes at Fū pointedly.

Fū, of course, just beams innocently. “We’re going to play tag in the village! And we get to take out shinobi for points!” she says excitedly.

Rōshi gives up on his glaring, instead casting a speculative look at Kurama. “In the village?” he grunts, and there’s something like a smirk trying to hide under his beard. “I can't imagine that will make the Kage happy.”

“It’s just a game,” Kurama drawls, and he doesn’t try to hide his grin, even though it’s all teeth.

Han makes a quiet sound of amusement, reaching out to pluck Fū off of Utakata and set her on his own shoulder. “I take it we’re invited to join in?” When Kurama nods, he chuckles. “I can think of
far worse ways to spend a morning.”

Kushina laughs. “I’ll keep the Hokage occupied!” she volunteers, filling the sink with soapy water and rolling up her sleeves. “Give me twenty minutes to finish up here and then you’re good!”

Suspicion makes Kurama study her closely for a moment, but her smile is completely innocent in a way that Kurama can’t peg as either bullshit or sincere. Deciding that it won’t matter either way in the long run, he nods, and says, “Kitten, sweetheart, why don’t you pick who’s it, and then give the rest of us half an hour to scatter?”

“All right!” Fū leaps lightly down from Han’s shoulder and whirs with a flourish to present her fist to Yugito. “Kurama-nii, you’re the referee, okay?”

“On the count of three,” Kurama says, bemused and entirely reminded of how competitive Sasuke and Naruto used to get as Yugito copies Fū’s pose. “One. Two. Three!”

Yugito makes a sound of victory, allowing herself a single contained bounce and a bright smile as she steps back. “I’ll help with the dishes until you’re ready, Kushina-nee,” she says, glancing at the clock. “The person who’s been caught the least with the highest points is the winner?”

“That works,” Kurama agrees, rising to his feet and hauling Naruto and Gaara with him. “Good luck.”

As far as distractions go, Kurama honestly can’t imagine finer. And if the kids get a fun morning out of it, all the better.

Naruto whoops and wiggles in his grasp. “Tag is the best!” he crows.

This morning is the worst, Iruka thinks, tripping over a stone in the path and only just managing not to drop the stack of graded tests in his arms. He’s fifteen minutes late to the early-morning staff meeting, only halfway through grading yesterday’s homework, without any lunch for later because he forgot his bento in the fridge, and without breakfast because he fell asleep on the couch last night and entirely missed hearing the alarm in his bedroom go off. There wasn’t a chance for a shower, either, and the only hair tie he could find was completely stretched-out and practically worthless. He hasn’t even had his coffee yet.

Iruka takes the corner too fast, still struggling to get a more secure grip on his papers, and feels with a flash of horror the exact moment his sandal slips. There’s a moment where he tries to decide whether to drop the tests and save himself, or hang on and hit the ground hard, and—

Deft hands catch him and pull him back upright even as they tug him around, spending momentum. Iruka staggers a step, then catches his balance, and is almost tempted to cry in sheer relief.

“Thank you,” he says sincerely, turning to face his savior, and almost swallows his tongue when Utakata smiles back at him, warm and calm.

“It was no problem,” the jinchuuriki assures him easily, folding his hands in his wide sleeves. “Are you all right? You look a little—”

Amber eyes go wide, and Utakata leaps back in a blur. One of the younger jinchuuriki—the girl from Kumo, Iruka thinks even as he yelps and stumbles back; Yugito, that’s her name—hits the
street where he was a fraction of a second ago, makes a sound like a discontented cat, and lunges faster than Iruka’s eyes can quite follow. Utakata slips past her reaching fingers, ducks when she flips to kick at his head, and pulls a pipe out of his sleeve. One breath from it and iridescent bubbles fill the street in a whirling rush, forcing the girl back.

Yugito twists, lunging left, but in that moment Iruka can already feel an arm close around his waist. There’s a lurching rush of speed that he recognizes as a shunshin, cloaked in another burst of bubbles, and then the world refocuses. They’re a good distance from where they were, close to the Academy, and Utakata lands lightly on the grass with a relieved breath.

“I always forget how fast she is,” he says, almost a complaint, and Iruka realizes all over again that Utakata, for all his poise, is a year younger than even Iruka. He might be a jounin and a human container, but he’s still fifteen.

“Are you…training?” he ventures a little cautiously, because just about the last thing he wants to do is show any wariness of the jinchuuriki again after the time he spent with them yesterday, but if two of them are fighting in the streets it’s probably a good thing to know.

Utakata makes a noise of amusement as he untangles himself from Iruka. “It’s just tag, but Yugito is ruthless when she wants something, and Kurama promised her sushi if she won.”

Iruka laughs before he can help himself, because the girl’s expression was one he’d more readily expect on a jounin in the midst of an A-rank mission. A handy reminder that for all the bijuu inside of her, Yugito is a child too.

Thankfully, Utakata chuckles as well, scanning the streets around them before he tucks his pipe away again. “I don’t mean to hold you up,” he says apologetically.

The staff meeting. Iruka groans, gathering his papers against his chest. At least he’s a good six blocks closer now; he’s terrible at the shunshin on his own, and hadn’t wanted to risk having one go haywire if he used it. “You’ve saved me at least ten minutes,” he says, waving off the apology. “I appreciate it.”

With a smile, Utakata inclines his head, then steps back. “Have a good day,” he offers. “I hope the others and I don’t disturb your class.”

“They disturb themselves plenty, so don’t worry about it,” Iruka assures him, and watches the Kiri nin take three steps and leap into the trees, vanishing from sight almost immediately.

His hair tie picks that moment to snap with a quiet pop, sending strands of barely-brushed dark hair cascading into his eyes, and Iruka groans. Utakata's appearance might be a bright spot, but this morning is still awful.

Shisui’s first hint that something terrifying is happening is the glitter bomb that smashes into his face the moment he steps out of the Military Police Building.

With a loud shriek, he ducks away from what his ears tell him is a second projectile, even as he claws at the powder already in his eyes. There’s a thud of feet in the dirt, a war cry, and a loud, “Ha!” from somewhere close by, and then hands grab his shoulders to use him as a springboard.

Small hands.
That’s probably the only thing that keeps Shisui from lunging for a kunai, which is fortunate, because if he accidentally stabbed one of the jinchuuriki kids he’s pretty sure Kurama really would eat him. Probably alive. And definitely not in the fun way.

(Not that Shisui wants him to, per se, but Shisui is also fifteen and Kurama’s kind of pretty even when he’s ripping people up with his claws. He can't be blamed for his hormones getting terror and attraction mixed up. He feels the same way about Anko most of the time.)

“Aargh, you little brats,” he says, ducking back towards the cover of the building as he scrubs at his eyes. Getting Fū’s Scale Powder off probably won’t change the fact that he’s been blinded by the flash of it, but he has to make some attempt. There’s the faint sound of a scuffle from the street, and Shisui really freaking does not want to be trapped anywhere near a jinchuuriki fight.

“Sorry, sorry!” Fū calls, failing to sound sorry at all. “I wasn’t aiming for you, I promise!”

“Tell that to my eyes,” Shisui complains, and tentatively blinks them open. His vision is mostly spots at the moment, and this is probably a really bad time to think just how devastating Fū would be against a squad of dojutsu users. He knows she helped against Pein in the canyon, but…that’s something entirely different from the way his brain is now labeling the image of a cheerful, bubbly ten-year-old as abort abort abort do not fight.

And that’s not even her using more than the most basic of her jinchuuriki abilities.

Squinting through the spots, Shisui narrows his eyes and focuses just in time to see Yugito snatch Fū out of the air like a cat catching a bird, a loud sound of victory escaping her. Immediately, she adds, “Tag, you’re it!” and then leaps for the nearest building, scrambling straight up the wall and over the roof.

“Oh, drat,” Fū huffs, picking herself up out of the dirt and brushing off her skirt. She gives the spot where Yugito disappeared a dark look, then shakes it off and turns to Shisui with a bright smile.

“Sorry again,” she says, though she doesn’t sound any more sympathetic this time, either. “But you were worth way too many points to pass up an opportunity like that.”

“Points?” Shisui splutters. “I—you—what?”

Fū beams. “You’re a jounin!” she says cheerfully. “Jounin are, like, ten points if we can catch them in the crossfire. Chuunin are five, genin are two, and civilians are one. Oh! And Kage or Village Heads are twenty!”

“I hate you,” Shisui groans. “This was Kurama’s idea, wasn’t it?”

That gets him a laugh, and Fū leaps up, chakra blooming around her like a flower. It settles and condenses, and just as she reaches the height of her leap and flips over, iridescent wings shimmer into existence, immediately shifting into a blur as they start beating. “I’ll never tell,” Fū declares, but she grins at Shisui in a way that says it was absolutely Kurama’s idea.

“I’m going to go home and hide under my bed,” Shisui decides. “That sounds like the safest option here.”

Fū giggles like he just complimented her. “I don’t mind! That means no one else gets to use you for points.” With a cheerful salute, she soars up, heading for the market district.

Hiding, Shisui thinks as he casts a wary glance around himself and then makes tracks for the Uchiha Compound, definitely sounds like the best idea ever.
Mei is faintly bored, a little annoyed, and largely out of sorts. Yagura is cooped up with the rest of the Kage and made it very clear that he didn’t need either her or Zabuza hovering, and Zabuza is having fun pitting himself against that sickly-looking Konoha swordsman he probably scraped up from under a rock. She’d contemplated trying to go a round with Zabuza’s apprentice, but her lava and Haku’s ice probably wouldn’t mix well, and she’d rather stab herself in the eye than have to listen to Zabuza bitch at her about hurting his student. Not that she wants to hurt Haku at all, but the guilt of doing so would very quickly be outweighed by the annoyance.

So instead, Mei is calling this a morning off. Konoha is pretty enough to be a distraction, even though the lack of thick, ever-present mist and the resulting excess of visibility is a little bewildering. Fire Country is a lot larger than Water Country, and the market makes the difference obvious; there are a lot more goods and merchants than she’s used to, and the array of colors is almost dizzying.

A display of silks catches her eye, and Mei stops in front of the stand, eyeing the draping fabric a little wistfully. The white would be perfect for a wedding dress, she thinks, running a light finger over it. Though the blue is pretty was well, and the embroidery on the red is lovely—

“There’s a very talented seamstress a few blocks over,” a woman says from behind her, and Mei turns in surprise. The dark-haired woman who burst into the Hokage’s office the other day smiles at her, then nods a polite hello to the cloth merchant. “Her rates are very good, and she specializes in shinobi clothing. In case you were interested.”

“Thank you,” Mei returns, casting another glance at the blue silk. “I don’t know how long we’re going to be here, though.”

The woman nods in understanding. “Uchiha Mikoto,” she offers.

“Terumī Mei.” Mei smiles back, taking a step away from the stall, and Mikoto falls into step next to her. “You’re a friend of Uzumaki, then?”

“Yes.” The expression that flickers over Mikoto’s face is one of fierce joy all tangled up with relief and old grief, and her fingers tighten on the basket full of vegetables she’s carrying. “Kushina, at least. I’m afraid I’ve never met the other one.”

Mei snorts. “He’s a spitfire,” she says, amused, “with terrible taste in men.”

Mikoto looks startled for a moment before she laughs, raising a hand to hide it. “Just like Kushina, then,” she agrees, dark eyes dancing. “You’re acquainted with him, I take it?”

“We tried to overthrow the Mizukage together,” Mei says breezily, waving a hand as if it’s of no account. When Mikoto’s expression shades towards shock, Mei laughs. “The shrimp deserved it, don’t worry. And it got him back to normal, so everything ended well.”

The Uchiha doesn’t look like she quite knows what to do with that, but before she can decide on a reaction there’s a flurry of screams from somewhere behind them. Both Mei and Mikoto jerk around, looking for the source, and—

“Woah!” Rōshi almost lands on them, springs aside, and flips out of the way of Utakata’s lunge. A blurring-quick hand seal and a spur of rock slams up out of the ground, catching the teenager in the gut to hurl him back. From above, a shape with blurring wings drops, and Mei’s had enough experience watching Fū fight that she jerks away, pulling Mikoto with her, just as an explosion of
light blinds everyone still facing that direction.

Rōshi laughs, more carefree that Mei’s ever heard him before, and sweeps a showy bow for the two of them. “Allow me to wish a spectacular morning to a pair of particularly lovely ladies,” he says grandly. As he straightens, he tosses Mei a wink and a smile that makes her breath catch, then turns to high-five Fū. They take off running together, and a moment later Utakata follows at a sprint, shedding glittery Scale Powder, rock dust, and bubbles in equal measure.

There’s a long moment of silence as the screams die down.

“Yours?” Mikoto asks finally, casting an amused glance at Mei and then back over the market. Mei looks too, and it’s certainly more chaotic than it was five minutes ago. Several people are stomping out small flames, at least one is struggling upright out of a pile of goo, and more than a few are trying to shake glitter off their clothes.

Mei smiles helplessly, pressing her hands to cheeks that are surprisingly flushed, and laughs. “Maybe,” she says, and it’s like a spark of hope inside of her. “I think—maybe.”

“Hokage-sama!” Hyuuga Hoheto cries, bursting into the office with a frantic expression, the rest of his patrol behind him. “In the market, there’s—”

He cuts off abruptly, blinking at the seven other patrol leaders in various levels of panic all assembled in front of the Hokage's desk.

Sarutobi sighs, kneading at one temple, and reaches for his pipe. “The market this time?” he asks wearily, shooting Kushina a glare as she hangs onto the back of a chair and wheezes for breath.

“Er…yes sir?” Hoheto glances at his fellow squad captains, some of whom look rather worse for wear. Glitter seems to be a common theme, but one woman looks like a cat used her for a scratching post, while a man drips water all over the floor and another kunoichi’s uniform is faintly singed. One of his fellow clansmen is trying surreptitiously to empty his pockets of sand and amassing a rather impressive pile around his feet in the process.

“You’d better hope,” the Sandaime informs Kushina testily, “that there’s a village left for you to inherit at the end of this.”

Kushina gets her giggles under control and straightens up, grinning at her leader. It’s just slightly possible that there’s a malicious undertone to it. “This is a lot more satisfying than punching someone, you know?” she asks both cheerily and pointedly.

Sarutobi’s face does something complicated, and then he sighs in clear resignation.

The office door slams open, and an Inuzuka staggers in, looking like she got dragged backwards through a hedge, with three other kunoichi behind her. “Hokage-sama, the jinchuuriki are fighting in…um?”

Sarutobi leans forward to rest his face in his hands, muttering something that Hoheto is fairly certain he doesn’t want a translation to.

(The other Kage, he notices, all look like they’re just realizing how big of a Fuuma Shuriken they managed to dodge, and can’t be anything but grateful for it.)
Itachi is in the village, but he still isn’t around, Sasuke thinks morosely, judging the distance between himself and the target and then tossing his kunai halfheartedly. The Academy’s training ground is empty, since all the other students are eating lunch, but it’s not helping Sasuke’s concentration.

Itachi was supposed to help him with his katas this morning, but he never showed up.

It doesn’t help that their mother was more cheerful than Sasuke had ever seen her before as she packed his bento, practically dancing in the kitchen as she worked. Their father had left just as Sasuke was getting up, the way he’s been doing so frequently lately, with a distracted murmur about meeting some of the other Clan Heads. It’s nice not to have him asking questions about Sasuke’s training and comparing him to Itachi, but—

It’s been a while since they all sat down together like a family, and Sasuke misses it more than he had thought he would.

From somewhere close by, there’s a giggle.

Sasuke blinks, turning to look around himself. Iruka-sensei is strict about not throwing kunai where other students might wander into the path of them, and Sasuke feels a flicker of annoyance that someone might be interrupting him. Slightly unfair, maybe, given that he’s not really doing anything at the moment, but it’s like feeling upset that Itachi has to leave, even when Sasuke knows he has duties as a high-ranking shinobi. He opens his mouth to call out, and—

“Shh!” someone hisses loudly, and the bushes rustle. In a rush, a small figure darts out, grabs him, and hauls him back towards their hiding spot. Sasuke gets smacked in the face with branches, gets a mouthful of leaves that he splutters around, and then he’s dropping into a cave-like hollow in the hedge, the branches twisted together above them tightly enough that only a few shafts of light get through.

“Shh,” the blond who grabbed him warns again, and the redhead at his side nods solemnly. “We’re hiding from Utakata ‘cause he’s it. You can’t tell, okay?”

Utakata? Sasuke doesn’t know any students by that name, but then, while he remembers seeing the blond before he doesn’t know the other boy at all, either. They definitely weren’t in class that morning, though.

“Who?” he asks, as quietly as he can.

“Utakata!” the blond says cheerfully, like he should immediately know who that is. “He’s the jinchuuriki of the Saiken!”

“Of the Rokubi,” the redhead corrects, and…Sasuke’s heard people mention jinchuuriki before, though mostly in hushed tones and sharp whispers. It doesn’t seem to be a good thing, but if that were true, this jinchuuriki probably wouldn’t be playing a game with two children.

“Do you want to play too?” the blond asks excitedly, still hanging on to Sasuke's hand, and wide blue eyes stare at him entreatingly. “It’s a lot of fun, and me an’ Gaara are on a team together so you can be with us!”

Gaara looks at the boy, then looks at Sasuke, and nods decisively.
“I don’t know who you are,” Sasuke says a little helplessly, because no one’s ever just…grabbed him and invited him to play before. He spends most of his time training so he can be as good as Itachi, or at home helping his mother.

That gets him a smile, bright and welcoming. “I'm Uzumaki Naruto!” the boy declares. “Jinchuuriki of the Kyuubi!”

“Sabaku no Gaara,” the other boy offers, if more quietly and slightly warily. “Jinchuuriki of the Ichibi.”

They're jinchuuriki too? But, Sasuke thinks in faint bewilderment, they can't be bad. “I'm Uchiha Sasuke,” he says, glancing between them, and hesitates for a moment before asking carefully, “It’s okay?”

“Yeah!” Naruto nods enthusiastically. “You can throw kunai really good, and Gaara's got his sand, and I have my Chains, so we’ll be the best team ever!”

“Aha!” someone says loudly, from right outside the bushes, and Sasuke doesn't even think; when Naruto and Gaara bolt for the tunnel on the other side, he’s right on their heels. An arm reaches into the hedge, grasping blindly, and then they're spilling out into the sunlight.

A huge man, bigger than anyone Sasuke has ever seen before, straightens up, laughing a little. “There you are,” he says, and takes a step towards them.

“Han's it now!” Naruto shrieks, and golden chakra gathers around him, bursting into the air in the form of chains. Han dodges them with startling speed, but trips, and a whirl of sand sweeps out from under his feet to curl around Gaara like a friendly snake.

“Come on!” Naruto cries, grabbing Sasuke's hand again. Gaara only hesitates for a moment before he takes the other, and together they haul him towards the street.

Sasuke should probably care that lunch is about to end, that his father will be disappointed in him is he skips school. But Naruto is laughing, they're running flat-out, and Sasuke can't seem to fight a smile as he lets them pull him along.

Kurama lurks in the shadows outside ANBU’s holding cells, eyes on the small glass orb on a beaded chain that he’s fiddling with. He promised Fuji a star-ball, after all, and it’s about time he delivers on his word. She’s earned it a thousand times over.

The seals are simple enough to etch into the glass with the tip of one claw, so most of his attention is on his surroundings, ears straining to catch any sounds of people approaching. The lone remaining guard is unconscious, though, thanks to one of Kabuto’s jutsus, and all the rest of the ANBU are scrambling to keep an eye on the game of tag that’s happening. Kurama will have to get back to it shortly, before his absence is noted, but everything’s in chaos and he’s got more than enough time to spare.

From within the cells, there's a heavy clank of a metal door opening, and then staggering footsteps. Kabuto appears a moment later, one of Orochimaru’s arms slung across his shoulders and he supports the Snake Sannin. Orochimaru looks pale, made all the more apparent by the fact that his wealth of hair has been chopped short just above his shoulders to even out Kisame's ragged cuts, but golden eyes still lock onto Kurama with the intensity of one predator facing another.
“Uzumaki,” he says silkily. “Now this is a surprise.”

Kurama snorts, straightening, and drops the star-ball into his pocket. “Orochimaru,” he returns evenly. “You accepted the terms?”

“Three favors,” Orochimaru agrees, sounding faintly displeased, though his gaze doesn’t waver. It’s like he’s trying to see right through Kurama to get at his motives, his secrets. Kurama wishes him the best of luck, but he’s absolutely certain Orochimaru will never manage to get it right. *Time traveling bijuu in human form sent back from an apocalyptic future* isn’t exactly a logical conclusion. “I assume this is the same reason Tsunade is with you? She always was a sucker for a bad bet.”

Kurama bares his teeth at the scientist. It doesn’t look much like a smile, and isn’t meant to. “Look at that, you really are a genius.” He shifts his gaze to Kabuto, and warns, “Remember our deal. No more spies in Konoha. If I find any I’m sending them back to you in pieces. And if either of you even *consider* harming someone I care about, I’ll end you immediately.”

Fury flashes across Orochimaru’s face, but it fades into resignation, and is quickly replaced by weariness. He sighs, pushing upright as best he can, and inclines his head. “Agreed. May I presuppose that you’ll know where to find me, should you need to call in a favor?”

“I’m pretty good at sniffing out snakes,” Kurama allows, showing teeth.

Orochimaru doesn’t look particularly reassured.

“Thank you,” Kabuto says unexpectedly, and when Kurama glances at him in surprise, he inclines his head in a motion that’s nearly a bow. He doesn’t say anything more, but really, just that is more than enough.

“Get going already,” Kurama says instead of answering, uncomfortable with the gratitude. He tips his head towards the smaller, branching tunnel that leads off to the left. “Three rights, middle fork, two lefts, then right again. Follow that passage to the end and you’ll come out on the far side of the mountain. Most ANBU don’t know it, so you should be safe for a while.”

Without waiting, he turns around and heads back the way they came in, stepping over the unconscious guard. There’s no sound behind him, but when he reaches the first doorway and glances back, Orochimaru and Kabuto are gone.
LXIV: Complect

Chapter Notes

So this is a chapter a very large number of people have been waiting for, and I very much hope you enjoyed it, because I was so fucking stoked to finally write it. :D

(Early chapter again, whoops. Too much to do, but update days are still technically Wednesdays.)

[complect /ˈkæmˌplekt/ , to embrace; to join by weaving or twining together; interweave; to be woven or interconnected. From Latin complectē “to entwine, encircle, compass, infold” from com- “together” and plectere “to weave, braid”.]

Kakashi wanders back to Konoha sometime in the midafternoon, pleasantly tired and satisfied with a morning spent running through his most commonly used jutsus out in the forest. His head is agreeably empty, and he feels perfectly calm and at peace with the world.

So, of course, it stands to reason with the way the world works that the first thing he finds inside the gates is a war zone.

Coming to a dead stop, Kakashi blinks at the maze of streets, where people are moving like they're about to get a fireball dropped on their heads if they're not under cover as soon as humanly possible. There are signs of destruction littering the area, including claw marks on some of the buildings, and several places are liberally dusted with what looks like Fū’s Scale Powder.

“Get out of the open!” someone hisses from above his head, insistent and close to frantic. “Are you trying to make yourself a target?”

Kakashi blinks, long and slow, and raises his head to find Aoba perched high up in a tree by the guardhouse, clinging to the branches with something like desperation. Another careful sweep of the area and Kakashi tucks his hands into his pockets, then leaps up to land in an easy crouch on the branch. “Something wrong, Yamashiro?” he asks mildly.

Aoba gives him a faintly wild-eyed look. “You mean other than the village turning into ground zero of the kiddy-game version of the apocalypse? Oh no. Everything’s just peachy.”

One leg of Aoba’s uniform is covered in a familiar sticky goo. Kakashi eyes it for a moment, because he’s never seen Utakata be anything but polite and amiable even in the midst of their fight with Pein, and if he’s attacking Konoha’s jounin now… “Game?” he repeats.

Aoba makes a sound of abject despair. “We’re worth points! Poor Tenzō, he’d have gotten hit by three of those monsters at the same time if Shisui hadn’t grabbed him.”

By those monsters, Kakashi is going to assume Aoba means the jinchuuriki, and that since he’s still breathing he hasn’t referred to the children like that in Kurama’s earshot. Though, to be fair, Aoba probably means it in a different way than most, since Kakashi’s heard him refer to pretty much all children like that.
“That bad?” he asks dryly, and wonders if he should pull his hitai-ate up. The Sharingan could probably save him a lot of grief if something’s happening between the jinchuuriki.

Aoba’s shudder speaks for itself.

“They go for tokujo and regular jounin first,” he warns darkly. “Keep to the shadows and you might be safe heading back home.”

Kakashi looks him over for a moment, then decides that he’d much rather face things head on than spend all day cowering in a tree. “Right,” he agrees, mild as milk, and drops back down to the street. “Have fun hiding.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you!” Aoba calls after him, a note of dire caution in his voice. “I did! I did explicitly!”

Kakashi waves over his shoulder, rounding the corner without looking back. A portion of his attention is on his surroundings, but not that much more than normal; the jinchuuriki kids probably aren’t banking on stealth, and Kakashi has no doubt he’ll be able to hear them coming.

It’s enough to make him wonder, though, if Kurama planned this game in order to get the other village leaders to back down in their arguments about separating the jinchuuriki, or deciding where they should end up. After all, Konoha has a reputation in the Elemental Countries for being slightly left of center when it comes to power levels and what’s considered normal. Even after the Kyuubi attack, Konoha is probably the best place, at least as far as shinobi are concerned, to stick a bunch of resentful, over-powered children who have no intention of conforming to normal human limits.

If Konoha managed to deal with Kushina, Minato, Jiraiya, Tsunade, and Orochimaru, not to mention Kakashi himself, all going through their teenage years, and have the village remain standing, they’ll probably survive Kurama’s bunch.

Hopefully.

With a little luck.

A squad of chuunin hustles past Kakashi, moving like they’re in enemy territory, and Kakashi watches with amusement as they go, automatically reaching for his Icha Icha book. It’s hard to look less impressed with anything than he does when he’s wandering the streets reading tastefully erotic literature, and Kakashi does have a reputation to maintain.

(Friend-killer Kakashi, that’s what they used to call him. There were points where Kakashi would have done anything to rid himself of the name, but actually doing it was as simple as reading in public. Kakashi appreciates the irony there, and he’d much rather be thought a perverted bastard than a murderer. So it’s just slightly possible that he plays things up, in the name of actually being able to choose his own nickname. Not that anyone else needs to know that.)

He considers, for a moment, going back to his apartment, but it’s a nice day. The air isn’t too cold, and the sun is out, and there’s a promise of chaos that’s sure to be entertaining. Decided, he tucks his nose into his book, flips to one of the dog-eared parts, and turns his steps towards the center of the village.

Barely three blocks and there’s a sudden screech of pure delight.

Aha, Kakashi thinks, and chooses that moment to stub his toe on the cobblestones. “Whoops,” he says out loud, tipping forward for a moment before he can get his balance back. Something flies bare centimeters above his head, and Kakashi straightens back up and keeps walking without looking up
from his book.

There’s a moment of stunned silence, quickly followed by rapid footsteps and a startled squawk. A blur of motion in red and blue signals the offending parties getting closer, but Kakashi just keeps up his meandering pace, giggling a little at a particularly…ahem, robust passage. He sways out of the path of a swing that goes wide, long cat-claws just missing his cheek, and then hops over Rōshi’s lunge as Yugito flips out of the way. The former Iwa nin is definitely not trying to keep from hitting him, Kakashi thinks, landing lightly, and tucks one hand into his pocket just to increase the taunt.

“Oh my,” he says, pitched just loud enough to carry without seeming intentional. “A little breezy today, isn’t it?”

One step around the corner and he tucks himself back into an alley, lowering his book just in time to see Yugito come skidding past the turn, looking like she’s out to murder someone. Before she can make it more than a handful of steps, though, Rōshi is there, already bearing down on her. Yugito hisses, then claws her way up the side of the building, leaps to the next, and vanishes into a thicket of rooftop trees.

“Damn it,” Rōshi huffs, then catches sight of another flash of blue back the way he came, spins, and bolts after Utakata. The teenager yelps, then raises his pipe. A flicker of vast, effervescent chakra curls around him, and silvery bubbles fill the street. Rōshi tries to stop in time, but a flash of gold Chains whirl out from under a willow’s trailing branches to hit the redhead man in the back. He slams face-first into the wall of bubbles with a curse fit to blister, and they pop with a vast sound that echoes through the district. Goo flies, and despite himself Kakashi winces a little.

He definitely doesn’t envy whatever genin teams get put on cleanup for this mess. In fact, he’s pretty sure that falls under the heading of fates worse than death.

“Come on! There's another tunnel over here!” a vaguely familiar voice says, and three small shadows separate from the willow, stumbling into the street. Kakashi blinks, then raises a brow, because if he’s not mistaken that’s Itachi’s little brother tugging Naruto and Gaara along. Huh.

“I see it,” Gaara says, even as Naruto offers a cheery wave to Utakata at the other end of the street. Utakata waves back, looking like he’s grinning, and takes off running again.

It proves to be a smart choice, because a moment later there’s a hiss of steam and a smell almost like burning sugar, and Rōshi drags himself free of the sticky field, lava creeping over his skin. Drops splatter the cobblestones, melting them into pockets of slag, and Rōshi shakes his head like a dog emerging from a river. Of hell, probably, given the molten rock pooling around his feet.

“You,” he growls, taking a threatening step towards the three children.

In unison, all three of them shriek and bolt, Gaara turning just enough to throw up a wall of sand behind them before they scramble over a low wall and disappear into someone’s garden.

With a sound of exasperation, Rōshi abandons his pursuit, heading back the way he came instead of following.

A little incredulous but mostly amused, Kakashi eyes the deep craters in the street, the pool of slime, the handful of un-popped bubbles floating like innocuous toys when they’re really dastardly traps, and reminds himself not to piss off the Hokage for the next few days. There's no way he wants to get stuck on the cleanup crew.

This is definitely Kurama’s way of getting the Kage to agree to leave the jinchuuriki in his custody.
Kakashi is absolutely certain of it, and he has to admire the sheer cunning behind the idea. Truly beautiful.

Deciding that it would be a little too over the top to whistle cheerfully, Kakashi wanders back out into the street, heading towards the river in order to avoid the apocalyptic wasteland the other end of the alley has turned into. There’s a familiar chakra signal up ahead, and Kakashi offers Raidō a carefree smile as he approaches.

“You might want take another street,” he says, and can’t help but eye the four large bags of groceries the man is carrying with interest. “Planning a party?”

Raidō blinks, glancing down at his shopping like he’s never seen it before, and then manages a weak, slightly hunted smile in return. “Oh! No, no, of course not. Genma’s just—hungry! Genma’s been really hungry lately.”

Given that Genma survives on coffee, questionable humor, and whatever sustenance more attentive people can shove down his throat, Kakashi finds this slightly doubtful, but he doesn’t call Raidō on the lie. Just hums, faintly pointed, and watches Raidō start to sweat and fidget before he drops his gaze back to his book.

“I’m glad he’s finally started eating spinach. Lots of nutrients in it, right?”

Raidō’s slightly horrified gaze darts to the bunches of spinach, the one food Genma has always loathed unconditionally, that are spilling out of his shopping bag, then blurts, “Have to go! Bye!” and vanishes in a desperate swirl of leaves.

Well. Clearly Genma and Raidō are up to something. Knowing Genma as he does, though, Kakashi is going to assume he has everything under control until proven otherwise. Genma’s good at asking for help when he needs it, too; if he gets in over his head, he’ll say something.

Taking a hopping step forward, Kakashi neatly dodges the burst of Scale Powder that hits the wall behind him, then sidesteps Fū herself as she slams down onto the stone, swipes at his leg, curses when she fails to grab him, and scrambles up the side of a store as Rōshi makes a triumphant noise. Seeing the older man coming out of the corner of his eye, Kakashi substitutes a mannequin from the clothing shop he’s passing for himself, and reappears at the end of the block as he casually flips to the next page.

With a sound of inarticulate rage, Rōshi crashes into the mannequin, tumbles back to his feet, and shoots Kakashi a nasty look before leaping after Fū.

This is much more entertaining than lazing around his apartment, Kakashi thinks, hiding a grin.

“You’re a bastard, anyone ever told you that?” someone asks dryly, and Kakashi casts a glance up to find Kurama perched on a balcony railing above. He gives the man a crinkle-eyed smile, twiddling his fingers in an idle wave, and turns to the next page.

“I’m absolutely certain no one has ever maligned my character like that,” he lies shamelessly.

Snorting, Kurama drops down to land lightly beside him, and when he catches Kakashi eyeing him, expectant and assessing, he waves him off. “If I was going to take you out, dog boy, you wouldn’t even see me coming. Relax.”

“I am relaxed,” Kakashi says in perfectly mild protest. Up ahead of them, there’s a flurry of movement, a slew of vicious curses, and a burst of steam that’s strong enough to make Kakashi sway on his feet, and he prudently picks a side-road to turn down. He still hasn’t forgotten how Han was
able to move faster than even the Sharingan could catch and knock him through the air like a twig, and it isn’t something he wants to repeat.

Kurama’s huff of laughter is quiet, but still entirely amused. “Yeah, you are,” he agrees, casting Kakashi a sideways look. There’s something like a grin tugging at one corner of his mouth, even if it isn’t fully apparent yet. “You know the kids just upped how much you’re worth, right? I think it’s almost as much as a Kage.”

“I must not be trying hard enough,” Kakashi laments. “A few more misses might do it, don’t you think?”

To his faint surprise, Kurama laughs. “Yeah,” he agrees, and nudges Kakashi sideways, down another alley half-choked by trees, as running footsteps approach. Kakashi just has time to glance over at him before he’s gone, vanishing into the twisted branches, and then the ground is shifting under his feet.

Without even looking down, Kakashi hops over the patch of sand that tries to grab his ankles, pointedly raising his book again. He idly ducks a lash of Chains that almost take out a tree, and catches a kunai that comes flying at his covered eye with impressive aim. For a moment he turns it over in his fingers, then shrugs and pockets it, never pausing. There’s a sound of outrage from behind him, and children’s half-clumsy steps closing in. Half an instant later, though, there’s a flurry of yelps, a crow of victory from Fū, and Han’s deep laugh. Naruto, Gaara, and Sasuke beat a hasty retreat, chased by Han, and Kakashi raises a brow at Kurama as the redhead slides back out of the shadows.

“Shinobi tag,” Kurama says, and there’s a spark of mischief in his red eyes. “Stealth’s totally an allowable tactic.”

Kakashi casts a glance back at the main street, the screeches and cries clearly audible and interspersed with flashes of light, bursts of sand, and flying Chains and kunai, and then turns a bland stare on Kurama.

“I said allowable,” Kurama reminds him, “not typical.”

Kakashi accepts the correction with an agreeable hum, scanning the next page for any particularly interesting bits. Lots of heaving bosoms in this part, but not much else. Kakashi’s in the mood for something a little less work-safe. “Quite the game,” he says.

Kurama’s smile is faintly fond. “They're having fun.”

Which does not preclude terrorizing the village, Kakashi thinks but doesn’t say. He’s pretty sure Kurama doesn’t give a damn. Instead, he tips his head to avoid another burst of Scale Powder, sidesteps Yugito as she goes bolting past with Karin on her back, and sways out of the way as Fū takes another swipe at him as she follows at a sprint.

When he glances over, Kurama is back in the trees and mostly out of sight, leaning against the wall of the building and watching him with a sly grin, and Kakashi can’t let that stand. He follows Kurama, ducking under a low-hanging branch, and joins him in the little alcove. Sunlight slides in through an opening in the branches, making Kurama’s hair glow like garnet held up to the light, a sharp brilliance in counterpoint to the warm color of his skin.

“You keep avoiding them,” Kakashi says mildly, and the space is tight enough that he’s definitely inside Kurama’s personal bubble, though thankfully the claws haven’t come out yet. “Someone less clever might think you didn’t want to play.”
Kurama gives him an unimpressed look and doesn’t move. “Good thing you’re clever, then,” he says dryly, and it’s the most insulting compliment Kakashi has ever been given. To be expected, probably, given the source.

Kakashi hums. “They don’t need you to play to be terrifying,” he says, testing. “Especially to the village leaders.”

Red eyes narrow faintly. “I don’t know what the hell you think you’re implying—” he starts testily.

At the same moment, there’s a high-pitched scream from somewhere close by. “Run! Run run run!” a familiar voice shrieks, and a second later Shisui and Tenzō book it down the alley. Shisui’s looking like he’s seen better days, covered head to toe in Scale Powder with most of his uniform in shreds. Tenzō’s hand on his pants seems to be the only thing keeping them up, but the Mokuton user isn’t exactly as fresh as a daisy either. One sleeve is smoking and the bottom of it is charred, while his hair looks like that one time he got in the way of Kakashi’s Raiton jutsu, stuck up in some of the most gravity-defying tufts Kakashi has ever seen, even in a mirror.

As they bolt, Tenzō’s free hand twists into the Snake Seal, and Kakashi’s eyes widen. He shoves Kurama to the side as the ground surges and the tree beside them comes to life, growing with a groan and a crash to fill the alley completely. The buildings shake, the earth trembles, and the remaining trees sway madly as cobblestones shatter and go flying.

In the dust of the aftermath, Kakashi coughs a little, pushing away from the thankfully unbroken building, and says blandly, “I’m going to put them on D-ranks for the next year.”

Startlingly close, Kurama snorts, and a hand touches Kakashi’s chest. “Do it tonight,” he advises, then glances up and—

Stops.

Equally startled, Kakashi looks back at him. There’s maybe three inches between them, pressed up against the wall by a half-fallen tree and a chunk of stone as they are. Kurama’s palm is almost precisely over his heart, but for the first time in years that particular touch isn’t a threat. It’s warm, and Kakashi can feel the heat even through his flak jacket, can feel Kurama’s breath against his cheek in the sudden stillness.

“Oh,” Kurama says, but it’s distant, distracted.

Kakashi can’t even manage that much.

He leans in closer before he can help himself, one hand braced against the wall and the other falling automatically to Kurama’s waist. That’s warm as well, and Kurama smells of something that’s a little musky and a little sweet, traced through with a subtle bite like new spring growth.

His fingers curl against cloth with firm skin beneath, and Kakashi feels his gaze dropping from wide crimson eyes, watching the brush of darker red lashes against Kurama’s cheek, falling to lips as they shape his name without a sound, and—

He wants to kiss Kurama, Kakashi thinks, and that one realization, so objectively small, is nevertheless overwhelming.

Flicking a glance back up, he catches Kurama’s gaze, watches something like mingled surprise and interest kindle there. Kurama is thinking about kissing him too, and that’s somehow even more astonishing to consider.
“Oh,” Kurama says again, and then his hand is on Kakashi’s face, startlingly hot, and nails lightly scrape his cheek as fingers slide back to bury themselves in his hair. A touch, a tug, light enough to be more suggestion than request, and the fingers of Kurama’s other hand skim the edge of his mask where cloth meets skin. It’s a question more than anything, and there’s nothing in Kakashi’s head but heat and the friction-spark of unfamiliar skin against his own. He leans into Kurama’s touch, leans down until their noses brush and the entire world seems made up of dark skin and bright eyes and crimson hair and the heat of Kurama’s breath.

Kurama’s the one to close the last hair’s-breadth of distance between them, to pull Kakashi’s mask down, to press up and fit his mouth to Kakashi’s. The taste of him is as startling as that realization was, would be enough to knock Kakashi back on his heels except then he’d have to stop kissing Kurama.

He really, really doesn’t want to.

Kissing Kurama isn’t a fight or a competition, the way Kakashi might have expected if he’d thought about it. It’s exploration, curiosity, a touch of teasing that draws him in. It’s a scrape of teeth that’s just enough to make his breath catch, a hint of heat and banked fire and the trace of deadly claws against his scalp. Kurama makes a sound against his mouth, caught partway between amusement and interest, and Kakashi slides his hand up along a lean waist, traces up the line of his back to get his fingers in Kurama’s hair. It’s silken-soft, feathery in his grip, and he likes the way a slight tug makes Kurama’s breath hitch. Likes how Kurama pulls him in, deepening the kiss as he leans back against the wall, how Kakashi’s faint groan at bodies colliding makes Kurama laugh a little, only to have the sound stolen as their mouths meet again. Likes the way Kurama traces a thumbnail down the nape of his neck, following the line of his spine, and makes a light shiver run through him.

When they part, just enough to look at each other, Kurama’s breathing is unsteady, and Kakashi can’t remember feeling more victorious about anything in his life.

There’s a pause, a moment, and then Kurama offers up a grin even as he pulls Kakashi one step closer. “Maybe you should try that again,” he suggests. “I’m trying to decide if you’re better than piranha-breath and I need more evidence.”

Kakashi would be offended if he weren’t quite so on board with the idea of ‘again’. “Clearly you weren’t paying attention if you haven’t already made up your mind. Trying again is probably a good idea.”

Kurama’s amused huff is obvious so close. “Yeah, well, can’t let it—”

A shriek like a demon dragged up from hell shatters the air, and Kakashi twitches back automatically, grabbing for a kunai. The scream dissolves into curses a moment later, though, and wings buzz above them as Fū passes overhead. Kakashi follows her path a little nervously, because he just kissed Kurama and gods, if the kids saw—

He just kissed Kurama.

He kissed Kurama.

“Kakashi?” Kurama asks, sounding faintly amused, and takes a step forward. Kakashi’s brain is too busy stalling out to register it, though, and he takes a step back. Then another, because retreat seems like the best option while every last scrap of logic starts gibbering madly. Because Kurama is Kurama, but Kurama is also the Kyuubi no Kitsune and Kakashi just had his tongue in the Kyuubi no Kitsune’s mouth and he enjoyed it.
Moreover, he wants to do it again.

In this situation, there's only one course of action.

“Later,” Kakashi says, and calls up a shunshin. His last clear image is Kurama rolling his eyes with an expression of sheer exasperation before the world blurs, and he staggers across an open rooftop.

Somewhere behind him Fū makes a sound of victory, but that just makes Kakashi think of Kurama pressing up against him, and he uses kawarimi on instinct, substituting a log for himself and immediately throwing himself into another shunshin.

Kakashi is absolutely running away, but he can't even begin to bring himself to care.

Sakumo catches the scent on the wind as he pauses on a small rise, and he turns his face up, trying to get a clearer idea of it. Something floral, almost like vanilla but with a sharper, greener edge and a trace of dry leaves and scales beneath.

He might not have Kakashi’s nose, not quite, but that at least is familiar.

Frowning faintly, Sakumo picks up an easy, loping run, careful to keep his footfalls nearly silent. The far side of the Hokage Mountain is generally empty—one of the reasons that he picked it for his wanderings. Konoha feels like a chokehold, and though most people seem to have forgotten their old animosity in the face of his and Kushina's resurrection, Sakumo hasn’t forgotten.

It’s almost impossible to look at the faces of former neighbors, teammates, comrades, and not think of their derision and fury and contempt. After all, for all the vague awareness of his time spent dead, for Sakumo it still feels like the events that drove him to take his own life happened mere weeks ago.

It’s not a comfortable feeling to have, and for all his new peace with Kakashi—maybe especially because of his new peace with Kakashi—Sakumo can't simply forget.

Thinking in the quiet of the forest is easier. He’s more readily himself here, more easily able to remember just why he made the choices he did. And maybe none of them were good choices, or the right ones, but they were still his. Some of them, at least, he knows he wouldn’t change.

The quiet is broken now, though; not by much, and not alarmingly, but there’s a scuff of shinobi sandals against grass and stone, a murmur of voices trying to stay inaudible. Sakumo listens and slows his steps, slipping into the shadows of the mountain’s rocky outcroppings as he approaches.

“Just another moment,” a boy says, distracted but intent. “I—these are more complicated than I’m used to, I'm sorry—”

“Breathe, Kabuto,” a familiar voice interrupts, edged with a weariness that’s bone-deep. “We have time for you to concentrate. We do not have time for a second try.”

“Yes, Orochimaru-sama,” Kabuto says, and then lapses into quiet mutters that are definitely to himself. Sakumo takes another step forward, eyes on the last tree that separates him from Orochimaru, and then goes perfectly, precisely still.

“I won't let you hurt Orochimaru-sama,” a child says, clear and cold, and the kunai resting against his spine doesn’t waver.
From around the tree, there's instant silence, and then quick steps. A moment later a boy with grey hair and dark eyes appears, bristling, with scalpels made of chakra braced between his fingers and a dangerous light in his eyes.

*Hatake coloring*, is the only thing Sakumo can think, and he suddenly finds that he can't quite breathe.

But...there are no Hatake left outside of himself and Kakashi, and surely, surely if anyone he was with had gotten pregnant they would have told him.

*(Unless, a little voice in the back of his head whispers, you were dead and couldn't be told. And who would want a child whose father brought such shame on the village?)*

“What do you want?” the boy demands. There's ink smeared across his cheek, a hastily capped bottle of it spilling from his weapons pouch, but he doesn’t seem to notice as he comes to a halt, watching Sakumo like he's the enemy.

Sakumo supposes that in this case he really is.

“To repay a favor,” he says, before he can even consciously consider the words, but—but they're absolutely true. Orochimaru helped them against Akatsuki, even when he was a member. He gave them the means to escape, and…

Sakumo can't quite forget his expression when he confessed to killing children.

*(Can't overlook the way Kabuto looks like he could be a Hatake himself, and how he’s clearly devoted to Orochimaru if he’s helping him escape.)*

Kabuto's eyes flicker away from Sakumo, to the child behind him, and then narrow. He opens his mouth, an edge of something vicious in his face, but before he can say it Orochimaru says clearly, “Let him through, Kabuto.”

Kabuto looks like he would much rather stab Sakumo in the throat, but he still shifts back, even if he doesn’t release his jutsu. Sakumo steps past him without much concern, ducking a low-hanging bough and stepping into a small clearing right outside a narrow crevice in the rock. A tunnel, probably, given the way it smells, but that’s for later consideration. Orochimaru is seated in the grass, one arm held awkwardly across his lap to keep the ink on it from dripping. His hair has been chopped short, and the change is almost jarring against Sakumo's expectation, because that hair was the first thing he recognized about Orochimaru, back in the cell. Strange, now, to see him without it.

“I'm sorry,” he says, dropping to one knee in front of the Sannin and reaching out to touch the slightly ragged edges before he can stop himself. “I should have moved faster.”

Something strange flickers over Orochimaru’s face, too fast to read, and then he makes a sound of derisive amusement. “Only you, Hatake. I'm sure I've called you a fool before.”

“You accused me of playing a humble one,” Sakumo parries, and glances down to take in the outline of a seal on Orochimaru’s pale skin. “That—?”

“Will undo Jiraiya’s handiwork, since he sealed my chakra.” Eerie golden eyes narrow as Orochimaru studies him. “What now, Hatake? Will you go running back to Konoha like a good little dog and tell them I've escaped?”

There’s a sharply indrawn breath from behind him, and Sakumo twists to look at the child who threatened him. It’s a young boy, likely under ten, with red clan markings around pale green eyes
and dotting his forehead. Red beads clasp white hair, pulling it back from his face, and despite the faintly sickly cast to his skin he looks all too ready to throw himself at Sakumo in defense of Orochimaru.

That’s something of a theme, Sakumo is realizing.

“For a morally lacking evil scientist, you don’t seem to have any problem inspiring loyalty in your followers,” Sakumo says wryly, glancing between the two boys and then back at Orochimaru.

“Children are easily led,” Orochimaru says coolly, ignoring the fact that both boys can obviously hear him. “Kimimaro, I believe you were instructed to stay in the base.”

Kimimaro squares his shoulders and faces the reprimand without wavering. “Forgive me, Orochimaru-sama. Kabuto requested assistance, and I wouldn’t allow them to leave me behind.”

“I was hardly about to break you out on my own, without backup,” Kabuto adds, faintly tart, and pointedly pushes past Sakumo to pull out his ink and brushes again as he reaches for Orochimaru’s arm.

“I’m not going to report you,” Sakumo says, watching the careful strokes of Kabuto’s brush. The decision is absolutely spur of the moment, and probably idiotic on top of that, but…that doesn’t mean it can’t feel right. Konoha certainly hasn’t, since he got back, and even if Kakashi is in the village, even if it’s the village and the people Sakumo would have given his life for, and nearly did—

It’s not easy to look anyone there in the face, but Orochimaru is something a little different.

He glances up to hold Orochimaru’s gaze, and allows himself a smile, relieved now that the decision is made, and glad to have done it.

“I’m going to come with you,” he finishes, and has the pleasure of watching honest shock flash across Orochimaru’s face, unable to be hidden.

“Going to keep me in line, Hatake?” It’s sharp-edged and biting, even as the startled expression fades, but Sakumo can practically see the thoughts racing behind Orochimaru’s angry façade.

He tips one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. “If you want to see it that way, you could. But you’re leaving, and…” His smile turns rueful, and he knows Orochimaru can see the shadows in it. “I think I need to get away.”

Orochimaru stares at him for a long minute, as still as a snake, barely blinking. Then, deliberately, he looks away, down at the seal as Kabuto finishes inking it, and they both watch as the lines flare golden and then go dark. In an instant the sense of Orochimaru’s presence floods back, chakra as abrasive and unsettling as ever, like a cobra sliding over your foot. Not preparing to bite, just there, but always with the possibility that it could.

How fitting, Sakumo thinks a little wryly. A shinobi who feels like all shinobi should, were the outsides to match the insides. No wonder the civilians have always been so afraid of him.

Orochimaru rises smoothly, only swaying a little bit once he’s on his feet, and immediately steps away once he has his balance. In a heartbeat Kabuto and Kimimaro are both behind him, and the Sannin doesn’t pause.

“It’s a long walk to the border,” he says, not quite over his shoulder, but it’s close enough to an invitation for Sakumo.
He hurries to catch up, and when he falls into step Orochimaru only casts him a careful, curious look before turning away.

It’s enough, Sakumo thinks, and for the first time since he came back to Konoha, the knot in his chest is finally unravelling.
I am almost sorry for where this chapter ends.

Almost.

[numinous /ˈn(y)oʊmənəs/, of, pertaining to, or like a numen; spiritual or supernatural; surpassing comprehension or understanding; mysterious; arousing one’s elevated feelings of duty, honor, loyalty, etc. From Latin nūmin- (stem of nūmen), “a nod, command, divine will” or “power, divinity”; akin to nūtāre, “to nod the head in commanding or assent”.]

“Not really the best place to hide, kid.”

Shisui shrieks, loud enough to make Kurama wince, and tries to scramble out of the nook between two trees where he’s managed to wedge himself. Before he can bolt and give Kurama away, though, Kurama catches him by the arm and tugs him back into the shadows with a roll of his eyes.

“Sage, you’d think I was murdering you. Shut up and sit down.”

Shisui glares at him, clutching his wrist to his chest like Kurama broke it. “You! Can't you make noise when you move? Damn it, are you trying to kill me?”

“Shisui,” Tenzō says reprovingly, stepping out of the tree behind him, and Shisui yelps, practically throwing himself behind Kurama in a blur.

Tenzō stops, blinking at the wheezing Uchiha as he clutches dramatically at his chest, and then shares a look with Kurama. Instead of commenting, he asks, “I thought all the jinchuuriki were playing tag. Aren’t you, Kurama?”

With a glance back down into the square to make sure everyone’s fine, Kurama nods, then drops to sit cross-legged on the edge of the building, a fall of branches mostly hiding him from view. He’s not too concerned about the kids finding him, as long as Shisui contains himself; Fū is chasing Utakata, and Yugito and Karin are skulking around the edges of the square below, probably waiting for jounin to ambush. Rōshi and Han are sharing a companionable bottle of sake, seated on a slightly scorched wall off to one side, while they keep one eye out for Fū. Kurama’s pretty sure he saw Naruto and Gaara hunkered down in someone’s garden a short ways away, too.

The fact that they’re congregating will make the next part of this easier, and it keeps Kurama from having to round them all up individually. He’s definitely in favor.

“I played,” he says with a shrug. “This is for them, though.”

Tenzō comes to join him—also carefully out of sight, and a bit more thoroughly hidden than Kurama—as he pulls Fuji’s star ball out of his pocket, and dark eyes study the glass orb curiously, though he doesn’t ask. Shisui, apparently recovered from his frights, has no such qualms, however, and he throws himself down to lean against Tenzō’s leg and immediately questions, “What’s that supposed
Kurama raises a brow at him, glancing up, and it takes effort not to tense when he sees Shisui's eyes have spun to red and black as he studies the charm. Those eyes especially, and Kurama growls before he can quite help it.

“Eyes away,” he snaps.

“No,” Shisui retorts, just as sharp, and it's enough to draw Kurama up short. He blinks at the teenager, only to find Shisui glaring right back. The sight of the Sharingan is enough to raise all the hairs on Kurama’s neck, and he bares his teeth, but Shisui doesn’t waver.

“No,” he repeats. “Look, I get that you don’t like the Sharingan, and I know that as a concept Kotoamatsukami is horrifying, but this is who I am. My best friend died in the Third War, and she’s the reason I have these eyes. I'm not going to pretend I don’t have them to make you feel better.”

Kurama narrows his eyes, studying the kid. Shisui is tense, like he’s ready to bolt, and Kurama can see how his breath is quick and slightly unsteady. He’s scared, but it means enough to him that he’s standing up to Kurama anyway.

Like Naruto, Kurama thinks, or Sasuke. Even Iruka, in the darkness of the future. And that kind of thing—

Well. He might not like the Sharingan, might hate it regardless of who bears it, but…Shisui’s all right, he supposes.

“You know anything about kitsune?” he asks instead of acknowledging the statement, and though Shisui gives him a wary look, he agreeably lets the previous topic drop.

“Only what that black fox said in Moon Country. Nogitsune are rogue foxes, and myobu are the summons. Oh, and tails are a sign of status, not like hair color.”

That’s so close to wrong that Kurama has to roll his eyes. “Not quite. Nogitsune are just foxes who haven’t sworn themselves to something, and myobu have. Some myobu are summons, but not all of them. Some nogitsune cause trouble, but most of them just want to be left alone.” There’s an interested noise from Tenzō, who leans in slightly to see what Kurama’s etching into the glass, and Kurama shifts a bit so it’s more visible. “Both kinds of kitsune gain tails as they gain chakra, though. Enough power and they can choose to put it into a star ball. Makes the chakra more accessible, but there’s the risk that someone could steal the star ball and leave the kitsune to die without it.”

“That’s where the wish thing comes from,” Shisui says in realization, tipping his head as his eyes narrow thoughtfully. “You’re supposed to be able to get a wish if you take something precious to a fox.”

Kurama snorts, mostly at the thought of a human managing to steal a star ball and then keep it for any length of time. “Yeah, that’s it. Take a kitsune’s chakra and they’d do whatever you wanted to get it back. Though they’d probably make sure you have a nasty accident right afterwards.”

“This is a star ball, then?” Tenzō brushes his hair back, squinting at the seals. “Those are for containment, aren’t they? You’re going to put chakra into it?”

Lifting the glass up to the light, Kurama checks his seals one more time, then calls up his chakra. Negative and positive swirl into a tight vortex at the tip of his finger, and Kurama touches the bijūdama to the glass, holding his breath. It doesn’t explode into shards the way he was half-expecting, though; with a shiver of air and a ringing chime, high and sweet, the bijūdama winks out,
then reforms inside the sphere, spinning like a trapped galaxy of violet and black.

“Okay, now that was really cool,” Shisui says in awe, leaning in until the tip of his nose is almost touching the glass. “That’s so much chakra, it’s like looking at the sun. How can it just—stay there? And can I have one?”

“No,” Kurama says firmly. He eyes the star ball for a moment, but it’s still not exploding and the seals are holding steady, so he drops it back into the pocket of his haori. Fuji’s probably around here somewhere—she and Momiji have been exploring the village practically since they arrived, and they seem to be having fun. Kurama’s certain they’re getting a kick out of the game of tag. “I promised this one to Fuji for helping me for so long. Make one of your own.”

Shisui huffs, crossing his arms over his chest with an expression suspiciously like a pout. “Oh, come on! I can’t make those spinny things, so that’s not fair.”


Tenzō snorts, hiding his grin behind one hand when Shisui glares at him. “I thought I saw Fuji earlier,” he says. “Though I was slightly distracted at the time; Kakashi-senpai came flying past like there was a demon right behind him. I haven’t seen him move that fast in years.”

Ah yes. The fabulous disappearing wonder. “Bastard,” Kurama mutters automatically, though he can’t exactly say he was surprised when Kakashi bolted. Emotionally stable and in touch with his feelings the man is not.

When he glances up, though, two pairs of dark eyes are fixed on him, both with varying levels of accusation. “What?” he demands grouchily.

It’s slightly possible the word comes out more defensively than he’d intended.

“You know why the captain was running,” Shisui says suspiciously. “You didn’t threaten to eat him or something, did you?”

We hadn’t gotten that far yet, Kurama almost says, but he’s pretty sure Shisui wouldn’t take it the way Kurama intends it. Instead, he huffs and snaps, “If me threatening to eat Kakashi made him bolt, he’d have done it weeks ago.”

“That’s true,” Tenzō says judiciously, though he’s still watching Kurama carefully. “But something happened, didn’t it?”

They’re not going to drop this, Kurama judges with an exasperated sigh. Both of them are stubborn bastards, and it’s clear they care about Kakashi. “I kissed him,” he says flatly.

There’s a long moment of silence as Shisui and Tenzō both digest that.

“…Okay,” Shisui allows. “Of all the things I was expecting, that wasn’t one of them.”

Tenzō’s sound of agreement is faintly confused. “So Kakashi-senpai…didn’t like it?” he asks cautiously.

Shisui pulls a face. “Okay, you know what? No. No, we should definitely change the subject—”

“Well, since his tongue was in my mouth I don’t really think he objected,” Kurama says dryly, ignoring Shisui’s flailing. “Drop it, kid. I’ll go find him when he’s had a chance to think things through.”
Tenzō is quiet for another moment, then smiles a little. “You know how he works,” he says, and it’s a bit warmer than normal. “I’m glad. Just…be careful.”

“Or,” Shisui adds with a grimace, “we’re going to be forced to try and kill you in the name of defending the captain’s honor, and I don’t want to die a virgin, okay?”

One eyebrow rising, Kurama watches color flood Tenzō’s cheeks, though Shisui is busy making faces and doesn’t seem to notice. “Right. Well, I think you’ve probably got options there,” he says, and Tenzō gives him a look like a deer frozen in the path of a bijūdama. Kurama just smirks back, but takes something like pity on the kid and finishes, “I’m pretty sure there have to be some people in the village who still think you’re cool. Maybe if they’ve been living under a rock.”

“Slander,” Shisui protests. “You are maligning my good name, okay? I am very cool, I am the coolest, right, Tenzō?”

Thankfully for Kurama’s sanity, a loud screech cuts Tenzō off before he can respond. Kurama glances down at the square in time to see Hisen duck as Yugito goes flying over his head, dodging her claws. He’s not nearly as lucky with Utakata’s ooze, though, which splatters across his robes with a loud squelch. Yagura, on his left, neatly sidesteps the other Kiri nin as he sprints past, though that leaves A directly in the line of fire as Fū dumps a large amount of Scale Powder on the Kage and Village Heads.

“Oh, fuck,” Shisui says softly, but with feeling, wide, horrified eyes fixed on the scene below.

Really, Kurama couldn’t have planned this better if he tried.

As the burst of light clears, Ōnoki leaps back, whipping furiously at his eyes, and snaps, “You little hooligans, I’m going to—”

A burst of molten rock just avoids taking his head off.

“Oh,” Rōshi says, very loudly and very, very insincerely, twisting to miss the Tsuchikage as he follows Utakata. “Sorry, watch your step, coming through—"

“Hey!” A roars, straightening to his full height as he sheds Scale Powder everywhere. Whatever he intends to follow up with, though, he doesn’t get the chance; Karin gives a war-cry as Han goes barreling past with her on his shoulders, and a burst of water all but knocks the Raikage off his feet.

To be fair, Kurama thinks the jutsu was probably directed at Gaara, who’s a few yards behind them with Naruto nowhere to be seen, but Kushina’s still teaching Karin the basics, and her aim is sketchy.

Sarutobi, at the rear of the group of Kage with the Tani Headwoman beside him, puts a hand over his eyes like he’s contemplating the sweet release of death, and Kurama can’t help but grin a little vindictively. The old coot might have been close to his Naruto, might be close to this Naruto, but he’s definitely not free of fault in letting Naruto grow up alone, could even be considered the cause of it.

Holding grudges is something Kurama’s still pretty good at.

“How nice of them to all stand in a group like that,” Kurama says dryly. “It’s like bowling or something.”

“Please don’t say that,” Shisui says weakly. He’s peeking from between his fingers as if a narrower view will reduce to horror of seeing a bunch of jinchūriki accidentally-on-purpose attack the village leaders. “I’m pretty sure this is how wars start and I’ve already lived through one, okay? That’s more
“If anyone wants to start a war, I’ll end it,” Kurama retorts, unimpressed, but seeing Yugito almost take off Rasa’s head on her next pass, he decides it’s probably about time. Still, he takes his time standing up and heading for the far corner of the building, right above the Kage. It gives Fū plenty of time to gleefully drop three more of her and Utakata's sticky-ooze-and-glitter bombs on the village heads, ostensibly aiming for Gaara as he tries to corner Rōshi.

Dodging a sweep of sand, Rōshi laughs as it takes out the Taki headman, then jumps over Naruto’s Chains. There’s a very large ball of dripping mud on the end of one of them, cleverly held together with twisted grass, and it whirs past the older man and pulls up short. The mud goes flying, and slams into the face of a familiar shinobi just turning into the square with a loud squelch.

From the direction where Naruto’s Chains originated, there’s a sound of horror, and Kurama grins at Itachi’s frozen, wide-eyed figure, now dripping thick black mud.

Deciding that’s enough amusement—and collateral damage—for one day, Kurama leaps lightly down from the top of the building and lands a few feet from the Kage, then puts his fingers to his lips the way Sakura used to do when Sasuke and Naruto were being especially annoying and lets loose an ear-piercing whistle.

“Okay, brats,” he says, pitched just loud enough to carry. “Pack it up. Let’s go eat.”

Instantly, Fū drops back to the stone, wings fading, and Yugito unlatches herself from the side of the building she was scaling, flipping neatly in the air and landing in a crouch. Han comes to a stop, steadying Karin with one hand as he grabs Rōshi by the back of his robes with the other. Utakata stops, bracing one shoulder against a streetlamp as he catches his breath, and Gaara pulls back the curl of sand he just tripped Rōshi with. On the other side of the square, Naruto wriggles out from under the cover of a leaning board, but before Kurama can catch more than a glimpse of him there’s a sound of pure fury.

“Uzumaki!” A thunders, staggering back upright. “What the hell is this about?”

“Tag,” Kurama says with a mean smile. “Can’t you tell?” Then, dismissing the Kage, he turns, counting heads. “Everyone manage to keep track of their points?”

“Three hundred and forty-five!” Fū cheers, leaping for Kurama and throwing herself onto his back, then wrapping her arms around his neck. “This was so much fun, Kurama-nii, we have to do it again!”

“Three hundred and ten,” Yugito says, sounding pleased with herself. She lets her claws fade, shaking her fingers out lightly, and smiles up at Karin as the little girl leans over to look down at the others. “What about you, Karin-chan?”

“Two hundred and twenty-three.” Karin pushes her glasses up, her smile shy but happy. “I had fun, too.”

Han chuckles, patting her knee. “That’s the most important part,” he says. “Two hundred and eighty-seven, I believe. Rōshi?”

“Hah.” Rōshi bats Han's hand away from his collar, then crosses his arms smugly. “Three hundred even.”

“A hundred and ninety for me,” Utakata puts in, faintly abashed. “I think I mostly caught the rest of you.”
There's a chorus of giggles, and small bodies slam into the backs of Kurama’s legs, making him stagger. “Watch it, brats,” he complains, steadying Fū as she laughs and trying to turn to see the culprits, but they match him as he turns to stay behind him and he gives up with a roll of his eyes. “And you two?”

There's a whispered conference, heated and tense, and then Naruto announces, “Lots!”

With a sound of amusement, Han adds, “I took the liberty of keeping track. Three hundred and twelve, I believe.”

“Plus ten,” Gaara says, quietly insistent.

Yeah, Itachi definitely got caught, Kurama thinks, eyeing the eleven-year-old as he gingerly wipes the mud off.

There's a slightly guilty giggle from behind Kurama that he can't place, and then small hands tug at Kurama’s haori. “Kurama-nii, up!” Naruto insists.

Kurama sighs dramatically, even as small bodies latch onto his arms. “Fine, fine,” he huffs, and crouches down to scoop them up. At the same moment, Fū laughs and presses her palms over his eyes, and Kurama makes a sound of irritation, pushing to his feet with—

Wait.

Shaking his head to dislodge Fū’s hands, he raises a brow at the three small children in his arms. The new addition is familiar enough to make his breath catch, watching him with slightly uncertain dark eyes, but…

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Naruto is gripping Sasuke's hand, and Sasuke is holding it in return, and it’s clear that Sasuke got dragged into the game as well. Probably at Naruto's insistence.

“Either my counting skills are worse than I thought,” Kurama says, raising a brow at the boy, “or you're new.”

Rōshi is laughing, very loudly, but Kurama sadly doesn’t have a hand free to flip him off.

“I'm Uchiha Sasuke,” the kid says, somewhere between solemn and tentative. “Naruto and Gaara are my friends.”

Well, there’s a head-start on countering that particular problem, Kurama thinks with amusement. “It’s nice to meet you, Sasuke,” he answers. “Good job, all three of you. And Karin, too. You guys are pretty damn sneaky, getting that many points.”

Naruto beams, while Gaara flushes and Karin smirks. Even Sasuke looks very pleased, before he leans over Kurama’s arm and says, “I'm sorry, aniki. You were worth a lot of points, though.”

Somewhere over Kurama’s head, Shisui is laughing so hard he’s practically crying.

Itachi brushes off the last of the mud, shoots Shisui a dark look, and turns a smile on Sasuke. “That’s all right,” he assures his brother. “It was a clever trap, Sasuke.”

“Naruto and I made it,” Sasuke says proudly. “And Gaara was the distraction.”

With a chuckle, Itachi shakes the traces of dirt from his hands. “The three of you make a good team.”

“We do.” Sasuke says it like it’s entirely self-evident, then immediately turns back to his new friends
when Gaara tugs on his sleeve. Kurama shifts, trying to balance the three of them a little more securely, and then hesitates. But…

“Come on, kid,” he tells Itachi a little gruffly. “We’re all getting dinner. And you two idiots, get moving already or we’ll start without you!”

There’s a brief tussle, and then Tenzō and Shisui are leaping down to join them as well. Shisui drapes himself over Itachi, ruffling his hair, and grins as he sheds Scale Powder onto the younger Uchiha. “Hey, look, we’re both victims! How many times did they get you?”

“Once,” Itachi says, faintly dry, and eyes Shisui like he might be contagious. “I see you weren’t quite so successful at dodging.”

Tenzō snorts, though really, he doesn’t look all that much better than Shisui. “He wasn’t,” he says, over the sounds of Shisui’s offended protests.

“Neither of you has any room to talk.” Fū’s voice is full of cheerful mischief, and she drops from Kurama’s back to throw herself at Shisui and climb him even as he flails in a halfhearted attempt to get away. “We got you both a bunch of times.”

Kurama pointedly ignores Sarutobi attempting to soothe the Kage and village heads as he leads the way out of the square, boosting Naruto up to sit on his shoulders. “Then unless anyone’s hiding points somewhere, I think Fū won. Sweetheart, do you know what you want?”

“Aerial advantage,” Fū says cheerfully, over Yugito's huff and Naruto's plaintive cry about lost chances for ramen. “Can we have sushi?”

Yugito perks up at that, giving Fū a shy smile, and she winks back.

“It’s your choice,” Kurama says, amused. “I’ll put in an order and get some of everything.”

“Thanks, Kurama-nii!” Fū grins at him, then turns her attention to Shisui as she flops forward to cross her arms on top of his head. “You can share mine, Shisui! You’re one of the reasons I won, you know. If you were better at dodging I wouldn’t have gotten as many points!”

Shisui mutters a curse and gives her the evil eye, but doesn’t try to argue.

Sasuke giggles at that, wriggling to be put down. Kurama pauses to set him on his feet, then holds still as Naruto tumbles after Sasuke and Gaara hurries to follow the other boys. “Do you want to race to that tree?” Sasuke asks, pointing ahead.

“Yeah!” Naruto agrees brightly, all but bouncing in place. “Yugito-nee, can you be our judge?”

Yugito smiles, touching his hair and nodding. “On your marks, get set—go!”

Kurama chuckles as the boys bolt forward, stumbling over each other, and tugs lightly on Yugito's braid in wordless thanks. She leans into the touch, then bounds after the youngest three, passing them easily and landing at the finish line.

“How disappointing,” Rōshi says, though he’s grinning. “It’s been five days, right, and you only picked up another kid just now. No one won the bet. I guess that bad luck is swearing off, Kurama.”

“My luck is fucking fine,” Kurama retorts grumpily. “Don’t make stupid bets in the first place. I’m going to get the food.”
“We’ll get them back to the house and washed up,” Utakata volunteers with a smile, and grabs Karin when she reaches for him, then lets her slide to the ground. There’s a yelp from Shisui as Fū scrambles to follow, flipping right over the Uchiha’s head, and in a moment they’re both bolting towards the quartet under the tree.

“How they have so much energy left I’ll never know,” Han says in wry awe, pulling his hat back on and shaking his head. “I’m ready for a nap.”

Kurama snorts. ‘They're children, and they're jinchuuriki,” he points out, then raises a hand in a halfhearted wave and turns off down a side street.

Kakashi’s probably stewed long enough, he thinks, tucking his hands into his sleeves. Time to set his head on straight again.

After all, the kiss might have been unexpected, but…Kurama definitely didn’t mind it. And Kakashi isn’t Zabuza, and Kurama isn’t on the run, desperately seeking scattered moments of peace to rest and regroup. They’re in Konoha now, and hopefully after today the Kage won’t bring up any idiocy about separating them. Kurama’s more or less settled, and Kakashi isn’t the type for a one-night thing.

Kurama’s okay with that, he thinks.

Kisame isn’t overly fond of sitting around, especially when the situation could be considered fairly dire as far as their goal is concerned, and the fact that this Konoha nin has kept him waiting for several days now, doing nothing but kicking around the small room he was led to after his arrival, isn’t exactly doing anything to endear him to Kisame. Not that there was much of a chance of that to begin with, given what he is, but still.

Still, Kisame is a shinobi, and he gets it. Sudden disappearances in the midst of a normal schedule are suspicious, and they’re best served trying to avoid that kind of thing. He can wait, if he has to, especially since it seems like Konoha isn’t making any move beyond fortifying its defenses. He was only just able to sneak in via the Nakano River before the barrier went up, which was cutting things just a little too close for comfort, but it doesn’t look like they’re mobilizing.

He flips a kunai from hand to hand, wonders not-quite-idly if Sasori managed to get that seal off of Obito. The former Suna nin is skilled with seals—that’s a good half of what puppetry is, as far as Kisame’s been able to figure out—but he’s not an Uzumaki. He’s not Uzumaki Kushina, more to the point, because Kisame remembers hearing stories about her in the war. That she was the Kyuubi jinchuuriki was almost an afterthought compared to her ninjutsu and her seals, the way she used a sword.

Namikaze Minato might have been Konoha’s hero of the Third Shinobi War, but Kushina was one of its pillars.

Kisame doesn’t like sitting here, not knowing anything. Obito could be dead, or on the verge of it, and while Kisame has more faith in his fortitude than to consider that as the first option, it’s been a long few days without any way to contact the outside world.

Chuckling faintly at himself—because really, look at him, a few short weeks of actually feeling like he has a comrade again and he’s getting all goopy—Kisame flips his kunai up, counts how many
times it spins before he has to catch it, and then repeats the motion.

*You should have been one of the heroes of Kiri, Kisame.*

The remembered echo makes him pause, studying the blank stone of the wall beside the door. It tears another chuckle from his throat, but this one is faintly bitter, touched with an old regret that Kisame doesn’t usually allow himself to feel.

What would have happened if he’d stayed in Kiri, never joined the Cypher Squad, never had to kill Fuguki? He’d been loyal but never overly ambitious, powerful but content in his place. It’s possible the Sandaime could have picked him as a successor, assuming Kiri hadn’t had another of its frequent civil spats. The Kage’s seat is pretty much every powerful shinobi’s dream, and as a child Kisame felt the same. Being one of the Seven Swordsmen was enough, but he’d probably have gotten bored of that eventually, discontent. Probably would have risen in rank, if only for something to do. Kisame’s good at following orders, but it’s hardly his only skill.

He tries to picture it, for a moment. A world where truth is already a common thing, where shinobi don’t betray their friends. Imagines a world where things are better, easier, and—

Maybe he’d have met an Uchiha boy with knife-sharp eyes, somewhere along the way. Obito’s the one who gave him a purpose, after all, who rescued him as he drowned in betrayal and lies and the murky darkness that shouldn’t exist, even in a shinobi’s world. That doesn’t seem like the kind of connection that would change, regardless of how the world reshaped itself.

The thought comes with its own dose of regret. There's been a shared, unspoken understanding, right from the very first, that Obito and Kisame aren’t going to be a part of the world they’re working to create. Either they’ll sacrifice themselves to bring it into existence or they’ll die at its hands afterward; no matter how it happens, though, there isn’t going to be space for people like them in it. Maybe, if they’re lucky, they’ll get to see it, but—

Kisame has no illusions that people will thank them for stripping the falsehoods from the world. Eventually, people will be happier, the world will be better, but at first no one is going to adjust well. Kisame’s assassinated enough daimyos and leaders spilling their lies to know that people like that will always default to dishonesty if they’re given the option, or if they think it will benefit them. And without those people, with everyone’s dreams within reach—

Chaos will give way to peace, to truth, and even if Kisame isn’t there to see it happen he’s absolutely certain it will be beautiful.

Someone knocks on the door, brisk but polite, and Kisame rises to his feet, catching the kunai in one hand as he slings Samehada over his shoulder with the other. “Yeah?” he asks cheerfully, and the room is small enough that he barely needs to take two strides to pull the door open.

There’s a young woman in a black-and-red jacket and blank mask standing there, and she bows to him. “If you would come with me, sir?”

The deference is amusing enough to make Kisame chuckle, but he follows the girl as she heads down the tunnel. They’re deep underground, but Kisame can feel that there’s running water close by, and marks its location carefully in case he ends up needing an escape route. People tend to assume the only way out in this kind of situation is up, but Kisame knows better.

Four long corridors east and two shorter ones north, and the escort stops in front of an open archway and bows again. With a friendly wave, Kisame wanders through, hiding his careful sweep of the bare, shadowed room behind a casual stretch. There’s a man waiting for him in the center, leaning on
his cane beneath a skylight shadowed by trees.

“Shimura,” Kisame says cheerfully. “Finally managed to shake your tails?”

Danzō doesn’t look impressed by his friendliness. “There have been several minor disturbances that required my attention. Your message said you had a request to make of me?”

“More like a deal.” Kisame chuckles, rubbing his fingers over Samehada’s hilt. “I’ve heard there are a couple of jinchuuriki running around your village. Wouldn’t it be a shame if the other villages just…misplaced theirs?”

The old man’s attention sharpens, even as his mouth pulls into a frown. “You would leave Konoha defenseless as well, Hoshigaki. Your master wishes to have all nine bijuu to himself.”

Kisame waves that off. “We need them all together to activate a ritual. Afterwards you get back any of them you want.” Not that he’ll live long enough to appreciate it, but it’s technically not a lie, and besides. Kisame feels no guilt lying to a traitor.

There’s suspicion in Danzō’s face, but also the faintest stirrings of greed. “Sarutobi likely suspects me of undermining him,” he says flatly. “Getting close to the jinchuuriki would be next to impossible, especially given Uzumaki Kurama’s presence.”

With a low, rumbling laugh, Kisame pats Samehada fondly. “I don’t need all the jinchuuriki,” he says easily. “Just Kurama.”

Danzō’s expression pulls into a grim smile, but at the same moment there’s a soft sound from the shadows. It’s barely more than an indrawn breath, and if he hadn’t spent the last handful of days in what was practically solitary confinement Kisame would have missed it entirely. Danzō seems to have, because he startles back when Kisame turns suddenly, three kunai already in the air.

The darkness shifts, breaks, and a black-clad figure in a tiger-painted mask dives out of the way of Kisame’s throw, rolling back to his feet in a quick-smooth motion that sends brown hair swaying.

“Well, well,” Danzō says darkly, and his cane taps against the stone as he steps forward. “You’ve found a rat. And a familiar one, I see. You made off with two of my recruits, child.”

The only answer is a low curse, and the ANBU dodges sideways like he’s going to bolt for the door. Kisame is already moving, though, one hand flashing into the snake seal. He takes a breath, chakra surging, and lets it go as a tidal wave that pours from his mouth and races towards the intruder, swamping him even as he tries to cry out.

At the same moment, something pricks Kisame’s skin, and he looks down to find three senbon clustered with impressive accuracy right over his heart, stabbing through his Akatsuki robes.

The water recedes like the tide going out, sweeping away, and the tiger-masked ANBU tumbles from the wall where it pinned him to land on his hands and knees, coughing desperately. He gets his feet under him with impressive speed, staggering mostly upright even as he tries to catch his breath, and there are more senbon in his hands. Kisame can see the flicker of satisfaction in his body language when he realizes his senbon hit, and—

Kisame laughs, low and amused, and reaches up to tug the three needles out of his skin. Poisoned, he assumes, since the ANBU didn’t throw them with enough force to actually pierce his heart. It’s a bit of a shame on the stranger’s part, because that was truly fantastic accuracy, and while poison might not be enough to so much as dent Kisame’s strength, a senbon through the heart probably would have done it. At the very least it would have made things more interesting.
“I’ve been itching for a good fight,” Kisame says cheerfully, letting the senbon fall through his fingers to disappear into the ankle-deep water covering the cavern. “Put up a struggle, all right? I’m bored and I want to have some fun before I kill you.”

The ANBU is staring at him, frozen with disbelief, and Kisame chuckles, bringing Samehada around. “Come on,” he offers. “I’ll even let you have the first move. It’s only fair, right? Since you’re going to die anyway.”

Finally, the man moves. He takes a breath, squares his shoulders, and pulls a length of ninja wire out of his weapons pouch. “You’re not going to kill me,” he says, and it’s quiet, but determined. “Trust me. You’re the pawn of a traitor and you don’t want to mess with a Konoha shinobi.”

He’s so very wrong that Kisame can’t help but laugh, no matter how angry it makes him to be called a traitor, even indirectly. “I guess we’ll see,” he says lightly, and feels Samehada stir, hungry and eager.

_Time to feed_, Kisame tells the sword, and brings it around in a sweeping slash.
LXVI: Pertinacious

Chapter Notes

More meetings, early update again, please keep your pitchforks to yourself after you hit the ending of this chapter. I'm...kind of sorry.

[per\-ten\-əs/, adhering resolutely to an opinion, purpose, or design; stubbornly resolute or pernicious; extremely or objectionably persistent. From Latin pertin-\-\-, pertinax, from per- “thoroughly” + tenac-, tenax “tenacious”, from tenēre “to hold, occupy.”] 

Retreating to the Memorial Stone is more instinct and habit than anything else at this point, though today it has the added advantage of being far enough outside the village to avoid the game of jinchūriki tag.

In his own defense, Kakashi thinks a little wryly as he passes the three posts, he wandered the village for a little while before ending up here. It was easy enough to figure out where the jinchūriki were with a bit of attention, and that had worked well to keep Kakashi from having to actually think about any of this.

Except he can't forget the feeling of Kurama’s skin under his fingertips, the quiet, pleased sound he made when Kakashi kissed him back. Can't forget the feeling of silky hair against his skin or the flicker of heat in his gut when Kurama grinned at him, eyes warm and inviting.

Kurama is beautiful, and Kakashi hadn’t realized.

It’s understandable, he tells himself. They were something like enemies up until recently, and then there was Akatsuki to focus on. And then—

How beautiful can someone be, if they have a monster under their skin?

Except, Kakashi thinks bleakly, pressing a hand over his hitai-ate, Kurama is the least monstrous person he knows. One of the least monstrous he’s met, and Kakashi has had to deal with that revelation already, every damned day since he realized just why Kurama took Naruto first, why foxes helped him and he knew so many things he shouldn’t. Kurama is the Kyuubi no Kitsune, and every time Kakashi thinks that the knowledge shakes him to the very bone.

Except—

“My Eternal Rival!” a bright voice says, sudden enough to make Kakashi blink and raise his head.

It’s always a surprise to find Gai in front of the Memorial Stone. Kakashi knows, intellectually, that Gai lost his father too, lost him to a battle against Kiri’s swordsmen when he was still a genin, but Gai is so cheerful and enthusiastic that Kakashi can’t quite look at him and think grief.

Then again, by now Kakashi is well aware that not everyone grieves the way he does, and that the world is probably a much better place for it.
“Gai,” he answers, though the silence has stretched too long. That’s one of the best things about Gai, though; he doesn’t judge people for things like that. Kakashi would say he doesn’t notice, but that isn’t true. Gai notices a lot more than anyone has ever given him credit for, Kakashi included.

Gai gives him an enthusiastic smile, if slightly more subdued than normal in deference to their location. “Today is a lovely day, isn’t it, my Eternal Rival? The finest of seasons is approaching—springtime is the Time of Youth!”

Really, Kakashi thinks, Gai needs someone who can share his bizarre enthusiasm for all things youthful, seeing as most people just sort of edge away from him. Kakashi likes Gai enough—though he’d never admit it out loud—that he’s mostly immune, but he also can’t appreciate it the way someone else might.

“It will be nice when winter is over,” Kakashi agrees, in lieu of anything else, though he doesn’t honestly have all that much of an opinion.

With a smile that says he knows full well that Kakashi is just humoring him, Gai flashes him a thumbs-up and steps back from the Memorial Stone. “I look forward to sunshine and longer days so I can train more!” he says cheerfully. Then, as he looks Kakashi over with a hidden sort of sharpness that Kakashi never appreciated when he was a child, he adds, “Your mask is crooked! Have you decided to reveal the mystery of your face to me, my Rival?”

Trust Gai to approach the topic like that, Kakashi thinks wryly, reaching up to straighten it out with a light tug. He had belatedly remembered to pull it up as he fled, but apparently he’d been more distracted than he thought. “Not today,” he answers, keeping his tone light. “Unless you want to kiss me too.”

Oh. He hadn’t quite meant to add that.

(It’s just slightly possible that Kakashi is more bewildered about this whole situation than he’d entirely like.)

Gai, of course, doesn’t even blink. “I’ve never had an interest in such things,” he says easily. “Have you finally found someone who has caught your eye, Rival?”

Have I? Kakashi wonders belatedly. A moment of contemplation, and…it’s possible. Likely, even, given the way he’s been watching Kurama since the very beginning. Easy enough to call it caution, or wariness, but—

Kakashi watched him, and didn’t look away. He’s been focused on Kurama since the redhead crashed headlong into his life, and the tension between them was easy enough to write off as animosity when they were enemies, but it’s been a very long time since someone’s words hit Kakashi as hard as Kurama’s always have. A very long time since Kakashi looked at someone else and considered them the way he does Kurama.

Kurama is the Kyuubi no Kitsune, responsible for the deaths of Minato and Kushina. He’s a bijuu in a human body, a force of nature trapped under a thin mortal skin, and he’s gruff and foul-mouthed and violent, sporting a temper like a fox with its tail caught in a trap. But he’s also one of the most devoted people Kakashi has ever met, impossibly kind to those within his orbit. There’s a self-awareness to him that is slightly terrifying in its scope, but also in the pieces he manages to overlook.

You ever thought about whether the bijuu could be…tamed?

Everything starts with a little boy, who was stupid enough to believe that he could make friends with
And the fucking hilarious part? It worked. He took a creature that was centuries old, who’d only known hate and fear for a long, long time, and reminded him about love.

Kakashi thinks about Naruto, Minato’s hair and eyes and Kushina’s smile, the smile that Kakashi rarely ever saw before Kurama appeared. Thinks of what kind of person the grown Naruto must have been, to inspire such love and loyalty in Kurama that he changed himself so much. Kakashi isn’t a stranger to changing because of another person’s influence—he’s had far too much experience in that vein, actually—but the sheer scope of Kurama’s change is bewildering.

It’s not as if Kakashi is simply going to forget what Kurama was; given Kurama’s chakra, his ferocity, the way he sometimes seems like a hurricane and a wildfire wrapped up in the thinnest veneer of humanity, that would be entirely impossible.

But…

Maybe Kakashi can think of him as someone different from the Kyuubi, the same way he can think of himself as someone different from the boy who watched Obito walk away from him and only thought that the Uchiha was trash for breaking the rules.

Leaves rustle, and there’s a light thump as someone drops from the branches of a nearby tree. Kakashi doesn’t have to look up to know who it is, but he does anyway. He likes looking, he realizes, and it’s a faint surprise, but not entirely unwelcome.

“Hey,” Kurama says, faintly cautious as he eyes Kakashi. Then his gaze flickers to Gai, and something like respect edges into his face as he nods politely. “Maito Gai, right?”

Well. Kakashi is almost offended by that. He certainly didn’t get any respect from Kurama the first time they met.

Gai’s face lights up, and he beams. “I am indeed! And who might you be?”

There’s a faint, almost fond smile pulling at Kurama’s mouth. “Uzumaki Kurama. It’s nice to meet you.” A hesitation, and then he says, “You know, there’s a kid at the orphanage who could almost be your double. Any relation?”

Gai blinks, startled, and Kakashi turns to raise a brow at Kurama, who ignores him masterfully. “I am unaware of any,” Gai says, a touch of confusion in his face. “The Maito Clan has only ever been a single family, since well before Konoha’s founding. We are few in number, but make up for it in the ferocity of our Youthful Vigor!”

Instead of edging away from Gai, the way most people start to after realizing what he’s like, Kurama just snorts softly. “Yeah, well, Lee looked like he could use some youthfulness, if you ask me. If you’ve got any time, you might want to meet him.”

“Yosh!” Gai strikes a pose, enthusiasm kindling in his expression as his grin becomes truly blinding. “Someone who will appreciate the Springtime of Youth so precious to a shinobi? I will go immediately! Farewell, my Eternal Rival! Farewell, kind soul!”

In a blur, he’s gone. Kakashi eyes the dispersing dust cloud, then Kurama, and raises one brow.

“Y’re really going to inflict Gai on an impressionable child?” he asks dryly.

Kurama smirks, tucking his hands into the sleeves of his haori. “Believe me, nothing I could do would change things. I’m just speeding up the timeline a bit. Lee will be over the moon to meet Gai.”
Kakashi pauses, considering how to phrase things without sounding petulant—especially after his first instinct when Kurama kissed him was to bolt—and says as evenly as he can, “You were more polite to Gai than to most of the Kage.”

It also brings up memories of his faint discomfort with Kurama and Zabuza’s antagonistic form of flirting, Kakashi realizes, and wants to makes a face at himself. He hadn’t known Kurama was the Kyuubi then, but he’d still felt…awkward. Easy enough to put that down to the way they flirted, but maybe there was already a trace of attraction there. As reluctant as Kakashi is to admit it, he probably wouldn’t have noticed at all if they hadn’t ended up in such close quarters a few hours ago.

Kurama hums, eyes flickering to the Memorial but not lingering. “The Kage are assholes and don’t deserve it, but Madara ended up coming back to life in the other timeline. Gai was the only one able to match him. He kicked Madara's ass, and it was beautiful. If he liked that stuff, I’d kiss him square on the mouth.”

Kakashi tries to imagine Gai facing off against Uchiha Madara, and he can admit it’s not as hard to picture as he would have thought. Gai’s probably among the top five jounin in Konoha in terms of strength, and Kakashi only outstrips him in reputation because of his work in ANBU. Gai’s not the type for that kind of darkness, but if he were he and Kakashi would probably be sharing the top spot.

“Is that what turns you on?” he asks dryly, watching Kurama out of the corner of his eye. “Martial prowess?”

Kurama rolls his eyes. “Well, it’s definitely not emotional stability,” he retorts pointedly.

Ouch. Kakashi winces slightly, because apparently they’re not avoiding this topic anymore, and glances away. “You're the Kyuubi,” he says evenly.

There’s a pause as Kurama clearly weighs responses. “I was before you kissed me, too. And during. I've been the Kyuubi since the second you met me, asshole.”

Which is…actually a much neater summary of Kakashi’s thoughts than he managed, with a neater conclusion as well. Trust Kurama to dispense several hours of frantic soul-searching down to three sentences and an insult.

“You have,” Kakashi admits, and it’s almost a sigh. He studies the Memorial for another moment, gaze automatically falling on his teacher’s name, and adds quietly, “You killed Minato-sensei. And a lot of other people that night.”

The silence stretches, somewhere between considering and wary. Then Kurama tips his head, not quite agreement but also not refusing the statement out of hand. “The only times I ever attacked Konoha, I wasn’t in control of my actions,” he says. “Minato and Kushina—that was a little different. But Kushina was my jailor, and Minato was trying to seal me again. I hated them both for it. They tried to take away my freedom, and make me an animal in a cage. And they did. I love Naruto, but I spent sixteen years as his prisoner, too, and…it took a long time to be all right with what happened. With the fact that none of us really had a choice after Mito sealed me the first time.”

Kakashi can't say he'd really thought about it like that before, which was likely a mistake. He considers it now, a being who’d spent centuries free suddenly bound and contained, and…he can understand why Kurama would have been murderous, when the seal broke.

Besides, Kushina has clearly forgiven Kurama for his part in her death, and in Minato's. And if she has, Kakashi doesn’t have much of a right to hold grudges.
It probably helps a bit that Kurama is watching him with steady red eyes, his hair falling into his face, and Kakashi can remember the heat of his breath, the softness of his lips.

“So,” he says, aiming for lightness, though it comes out a little more roughly than he intends. “Have you decided yet?”

Kurama blinks, confusion sliding across his features. “Decided what?”

Kakashi reaches out, slow enough for it to be obvious, and brushes crimson strands back behind one ear. “If I'm better than Momochi.”

Confusion gives way to surprise, then clear amusement, and a clawed hand curls into the front of Kakashi’s flak jacket. “Are you going to run away like a bastard again?” Kurama asks, stepping closer, but the annoyance can't quite hold up before the intensity in his expression.

Giving in to the urge that’s been itching at him since he first saw Kurama again, Kakashi cups his jaw and brushes his thumb along the sharpness of Kurama’s cheekbone. He really is beautiful, Kakashi thinks, and it’s still surprising. But maybe it’s a little easier to look at Kurama now, to fit Kyuubi no Kitsune into one of the facets of this strange, intriguing, always surprising man, and see it as a part of the whole rather than his entirety.

“Are you going to give me the chance to?” he returns, and can't fight the curve of a smile he knows is visible in his eye.

With a snort, Kurama tilts his head into the touch for a moment, then pulls away. He doesn’t go far, though, drags Kakashi in another step and then curls his arms over Kakashi’s shoulders. There’s a brush of claws through his hair that should probably not be quite as hot as Kakashi finds it, but when red eyes flicker up to him Kakashi decides he really doesn’t care at all.

This time he’s the one to lean in, to pull his mask off, to use the hand on Kurama’s cheek to tip his head just enough to deepen the kiss immediately. The way Kurama hums, pleased and warm, is enough to spark a flicker of pride, and it coils alongside the building heat in Kakashi’s veins. One of Kurama’s hands slides down the nape of his neck in a lazy stroke, then back up, and Kakashi shivers lightly.

He wants this. He wants this quite a lot, wants to see what Kurama looks like after they’ve been kissing for an hour, flushed and breathless and dazed. Wants to know what he looks like when he’s aroused, when he’s blind with lust, when he’s falling over the edge. He wants to get his hands on Kurama’s skin and not have to let go, to find all the places Kurama likes best, to watch Kurama find all of his favorite places and commit them to memory.

It’s different this time, a little. No sudden surge of attraction to blindside, no furtive kiss in the shadows. Kakashi walked into this knowing it was going to happen, and…

He’s all right with it. More than all right. He doesn’t want to stop at all, actually.

Another kiss, slow and lingering but still deep, and then another that’s brief and teasing. A fourth that falls closer to the edge of Kurama’s lips because he’s laughing, just a little, and Kakashi can't entirely fight a smile in return. Doesn’t even want to, because there’s a light feeling in his chest that’s almost buoyant, dragging contentment to the surface.

“If you’re laughing I can't kiss you,” he says, and immediately proves himself a liar by kissing Kurama again anyway.

Kurama kisses back, careless but thorough, and only pulls away enough to start, “Like you could
stop me, bastard—” and it’s such a clear challenge that of course Kakashi steals the words from his lips, presses in deep to chase the faint, intriguing taste of Kurama back into his mouth as Kurama moans. The hand against Kakashi’s neck curls, nails scoring lightly over his skin, and it’s enough to make Kakashi shudder, to make him wrap an arm around Kurama’s waist and pull him up harder, tighter against him.

Kurama’s grinning when they separate, cat-smug but flushed and breathing hard. His hair is tangled around Kakashi’s fingers and falling messily around his face, and gods, but Kakashi can’t recall a single time in his life when he’s wanted someone more.

“We’re having dinner,” Kurama tells him, even as he pulls Kakashi down again. “You’re coming too, got it?”

At this point Kurama could say he was going to the moon and Kakashi would probably just pack his bags, he thinks, smiling a little at himself. Not that he’d say that. “I don’t know,” he muses, faux-thoughtful. “What’s in it for me?”

Kurama rolls his eyes and kisses Kakashi again.

It is, Kakashi reflects, a very convincing answer.

Aoba hasn’t heard from Genma in almost twenty minutes, and he’s starting to get worried.

This whole mission is worrying, really; Aoba wasn’t quite sure what to expect when Genma and Inoichi both came to pick him up for a hush-hush ANBU mission that Shikaku and Inoichi had both authorized but Genma was leading. It definitely wasn’t this, though.

The nine-year-old Yamanaka boy, sprawled out unconscious on Inoichi’s back, is not helping convince Aoba that the day is going to get better.

It’s not that Aoba is particularly squeamish about children being shinobi, though he knows some civilians have strong opinions about it. He was a teenager in the last war, after all, spent the majority of his time on the frontlines even when he was a genin. But he wasn’t brainwashed into doing it, and he knew full well that, live or die, he was fighting to keep Konoha safe. If he had died, it would have been with the understanding that it was his own choice to be there, that he could have taken off his hitai-ate at any time and just walked away. Not that he would have, but the choice was implied every time he put it on. It was what let him keep going, keep fighting.

Fuu didn’t get that option.

Casting a careful glance down the next hallway, Aoba leans back, beckoning Inoichi forward. The Clan Head’s mouth is pulled into a tight, unhappy line, his grip on Fuu very close to desperate, but he pauses next to Aoba and asks quietly, “Genma?”

It says something about the man that he can still be so concerned about his teammates, even with a newly returned clan member to worry about and years of service in the torture and interrogation unit. Aoba’s always admired him for that.

“There’s nothing yet,” he answers, equally soft. He’s been waiting for any sort of sign from the other tokujo, from a senbon hitting the wall next to his nose—one of Genma’s favorites, because he’s a jerk—to screams. Hopefully not the latter, but anything is possible in this kind of situation.
Aoba considers for a moment, turning their options over, and then says quietly, “Sir, I think you should go ahead. Get out as fast as you can. I’ll find Genma and follow you.”

The sharp look from Inoichi says he knows as well as Aoba does that it won’t be anywhere near that easy. “I’m not leaving either of you—” he starts.

“With all due respect, sir, I’ve been in the field more frequently than you,” Aoba interrupts, trying to keep his tone even. “And your clan member needs you right now. If you can pinpoint where Genma is, that will help, but the kid is our priority—”

Chakra practically crashes down on top of them, heavy and thick and strangling, and Aoba staggers. He gets his feet under him in a moment, though, grabs Inoichi’s arm and, ignoring the man’s rank, gives him a hard push in the direction of the exit. “Go!” he orders, then spins and bolts towards the source of the power.

The odds that that wasn’t Genma getting in over his head are so poor that Aoba doesn’t even both considering it.

Skidding around a corner, he almost crashes headlong into a pair of white-masked shinobi just emerging from a room. With a curse, Aoba ducks low, grabbing for his short sword, and rolls out of the path of a Katon jutsu. In the same movement, he stabs a kunai into the calf of the second, flashes through hand-signs as he comes to his feet, and lets a pulse of chakra into the knife paralyze the shorter one as he turns to parry a blow from another tantō. The taller one tries to kick him, but it’s a move Genma loves to pull and Aoba is too accustomed to it to have to put any effort into dodging; he leaps out of the way, then launches himself forward, getting around the man’s guard in a twist of limbs and slamming him bodily into the tunnel wall. A knife-hand blow to the back of his neck makes him drop, unconscious, and Aoba lets him fall.

Training and experience both say to keep the paralyzed one pinned with his jutsu, to interrogate him for information, but after a brief hesitation Aoba knocks him out, too. There's no time, and besides, the sounds of a fight are all the direction he needs at the moment.

The waist-high wave that nearly knocks him off his feet is a pretty good hint, too.

Staggering back upright, Aoba heads in the direction it came from, already pulling up chakra. He’s like Genma, more an assassin than a head-on fighter the way Kakashi is, but he can manage in a pinch, and this definitely counts. Another wall of water nearly catches him, but Aoba leaps it, lands, and spins to knock out another Root member as they try to grab him.

In the same moment, there's a strangled cry that echoes down the corridor, and Aoba feels his blood run cold.

Genma.

Aoba goes right over top of the next opponent, barely pausing long enough to flick one of the poisoned senbon he swiped from Genma at the woman. There's an opening in the wall ahead, an open arch without a door to block it, and judging by the amount of water on the floor, whatever Suiton user Genma tangled with is inside.

Genma's probably still in there too, so Aoba doesn’t allow himself to hesitate. He flies through another set of hand-signs, and crows burst into existence around him. A sweep of his hand sends them through the door, and Aoba slides in under the cover of their shadows, low to the floor and moving fast across the top of the water.
The room is wide, with a skylight high above. Water is almost knee-deep across the floor, and there's a man in the center, blue-skinned and broad. His hitai-ate is scored with a deep scratch, almost obscuring Kiri’s symbol, and there's a scaled sword in one hand. The other is locked around Genma's throat, limp body dangling from his grip, and even though the man is studded with senbon in practically every square foot of skin, he’s not even wavering.

Aoba can’t feel even a hint of Genma's chakra signature, and the spike of fear that bolts through him is almost crippling.

There's a low, rumbling chuckle as the swordsman glances over at Aoba. He makes a lazy gesture with his sword, and the water ripples around Aoba's ankles. Spinning automatically, Aoba leaps back, further into the room, to put space between himself and the massive shark summons that surfaces to snap its teeth. A flicker of chakra gives him traction on the water's surface, and Aoba doesn’t stop moving, bringing one hand down in a quick slash. The circling crows drop, aiming for the missing-nin’s face, and Aoba swears under his breath, prays for luck to whatever trickster god presides over suicidal assaults, and lunges.

He's good at taijutsu. Maybe not Gai’s level, but it’s one of his best areas, and when he strikes Aoba is used to connecting. The man’s big, too—when Aoba aims for his wrist where he’s holding Genma, it’s a large enough target that he should be able to hit it.

The shinobi moves faster than Aoba can follow and slaps him out of the air with his sword like he’s a particularly annoying bug.

It hurts. Cloth splits, skin shaves off, and Aoba can’t swallow a cry, hitting the surface of the water hard. It’s only a hastily-formed shroud of chakra that keeps him from dropping under the surface, which is definitely more than the knee-deep it looks if there are *fucking sharks* in it, and when he scrambles back to his feet raw skin pulls painfully, making him swallow a whine.

“Just as planned,” Aoba says. Well, *wheezes* is probably more accurate. He brings his hands together, concentrates, and—

The exploding tag he left on the missing-nin’s sword entirely fails to go off as the activating chakra is sucked away.

*That was not* part of the plan.

The swordsman laughs genuinely, turning to face Aoba with a grin that shows sharpened teeth. With a flash of terror, Aoba finally has enough time to connect him to his Bingo Book profile, and curses profusely to himself. Hoshigaki Kisame *is not* someone he can handle, even if Genma was conscious and fighting with him. The man’s S-rank for a reason, and gods, if Aoba manages to get out of this he’s going to lock himself in a bar for the next *week* to celebrate the unlooked-for good luck of surviving.

“You’re pretty clever,” Kisame says cheerfully, Genma still hanging limply from his grasp. Not dead, Aoba tells himself a little desperately, because otherwise Kisame would just have dropped him. “Maybe you’ll be more of a challenge than this one.”

It takes effort not to spit at him, but Aoba nudges his sunglasses up a little higher and manages a smile. “Ah, sorry, but it’s been a while since I was out in the field. You should probably just let us both go right now and save yourself the disappointment.”

Kisame chuckles, then tosses Genma over his shoulder like a sack of rice and levels Samehada at Aoba, never losing his grin. “Well, I'm sorry to hear that. You might still manage to be useful,
though. Two hostages as bait are better than one, right?”

Bait is bad. Also good, in that Kisame will probably try to take Aoba alive, but bad, because taking Aoba alive will leave no one to warn the village. Taking Aoba alive means that one of them becomes disposable, or useful in sending a message, and as bad as it is to be a prisoner, it’s worse to be one of two. If Aoba bolts now, he might be able to get away. The skylight looks promising, and Aoba’s pretty good at vertical leaps.

But, of course, bolting means leaving Genma behind, in the grip of a man known for his mercilessness, and Aoba isn’t about to do that no matter how slim his chances or how bad the outlook.

He’s a Konoha shinobi, Genma is his friend, and he’s not about to run.

Taking a breath, Aoba calls himself an idiot in as many ways as he knows how and casts around desperately for a plan.

…Well. The skylight looks promising.

“I don’t suppose we could talk about this?” he asks, keeping his voice light as he raises his hands and steps back. A subtle twitch of his fingers has two of the crows breaking off from the circling flock, but their shadows are going to fall right across where Kisame is standing and Aoba really needs a distraction.

It’s a good thing Genma isn’t awake right now, because otherwise Aoba would never live this down.

“Talking can be good, right?” he says, taking careful steps back towards the door to keep Kisame’s eyes on him. “You know what? Talking sounds great. I could buy you a nice dinner, we could get to know each other, maybe share some sake…”

There’s a long moment of stunned silence as Kisame stares at him. Aoba doesn’t really blame him. He’d stare at himself, too. That was really bad.

“Are you…asking me out on a date?”

Aoba risks a glance to see how fast his death is approaching and promptly almost falls through the surface of the water, because Kisame is blushing. There’s a flush on blue cheeks, and he looks flattered.

“Yes?” Aoba squeaks, and the only plus in this whole damn situation is watching the crows sweep up through the hole in the roof and then out.

“Well,” Kisame says bashfully, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “No one’s ever thought I was handsome enough to do that before.”

Aoba isn’t entirely sure whether it was the blue skin, the filed teeth, or the status as a deadly rogue shinobi that did it, but he sure as hell isn’t about to ask.

“I guess that makes it my first time turning someone down, too,” Kisame adds before Aoba can think of something to say, and he honestly sounds so apologetic Aoba almost feels bad for the semi-lie. (It wasn’t a complete one, because if taking Kisame out on a date would get him out of playing bait he would in a hot second, without a doubt.) “But I’ve kind of got other plans, you see.”

“Bait kinds of plans,” Aoba says with a sinking feeling. There’s a shadow under him in the water that he really doesn’t want to look at too closely.
“Yeah,” Kisame agrees, chuckling a little. “I'm not the type to break a promise, and I did say I’d make sure this thing worked out. No hard feelings, all right?”

“Oh, fuck that—” Aoba starts but the shadow in the water surges up, and with a yelp he throws himself into a high flip, coming down all but on top of Kisame as he makes a desperate grab for Genma. The crows descend in a flurry of blinding wings and raking claws, but a single pass by Samehada consumes practically all of them, and the sword skims Aoba's shoulder as he vaults over Kisame's head.

The surge of chakra leaving his body is dizzying, sickening. Aoba hits the water hard, almost falling, and it takes far too much effort to force himself upright again. A breath to steel himself and he hurls a kick at Kisame's face, redirects into a flip over Samehada’s blade, and slams an elbow into Kisame's kidney. The man grunts, but doesn’t even have the decency to stagger as he spins, and Aoba curses even as he pulls a kunai. One of Genma's senbon is still in Kisame's skin, close to his liver, and Aoba doesn’t bother trying for a stab; he slams the kunai’s blade against the point of the senbon, aiming to drive it deep.

Samehada slams into him, shaving off skin and devouring his chakra with a greedy rush, and Aoba screams. He throws himself backwards, but there's too little chakra to even stay on the top of the water anymore. Plunging through the surface is an icy shock, but far worse is the sight of a summons coming right at him, a mouth full of ferocious teeth gaping wide.

There's no way to escape. Aoba can only hope that it’s putting him in a pocket dimension rather than its stomach as it swallows him whole.
Kurama wakes from scattered, uncertain dreams to a dark house, dawn still hours off. For a moment, he lies where he is, staring up at the shadows of the ceiling, then curses quietly and sits up, rubbing a hand over his hair. No use going back to sleep when every nerve is humming with undirected tension, caught up in scattered images that make no sense.

He dresses quickly, then slips out of his room. The only sounds from the other bedrooms along the hall are regular sleep-sounds, no one else stirring, and Kurama doesn’t pause to check on them. The kids will likely be out for hours more, and if the older jinchuuriki get up any time soon it will only be for training.

Even the younger members of the Freak Squad have yet to stir, sacked out on the couch in the main room. Shisui is sprawled out with his head on Itachi’s lap, while the younger Uchiha has wedged himself into the corner and is asleep sitting up. Tenzō is curled into a ball at Shisui’s feet, long hair covering his face as he mumbles to himself, and Kurama snorts softly, though he minds his steps a little more as he heads for the front door.

He’s not entirely certain where he’s going beyond out. The village will be quiet, this early, shinobi patrols and early-morning workers the only ones about, and Kurama doesn’t want to interact with either of them. For a moment he contemplates the Memorial Stone, but…Kurama isn’t Kakashi. He doesn’t have any need to linger there. All of his ghosts travel with him at this point.

Instead of towards the village, he turns the opposite way, towards the training grounds that ring it. The Hokage Mountain looms to his left, and it’s automatic at this point to bare his teeth at the massive stone face of Hashirama, at the absence where Naruto’s should be, but there’s less resentment in him than there used to be. Easier now to—

Something flickers at the edge of his awareness. A spark, and Kurama stops dead in the road, breathing in. Not a physical sense, not something that can be measured, but familiar all the same. Malice, malice and rage, caught up together and twisted into something heady and dark, and Kurama weighs it carefully. This isn’t a civilian squabble, or a petty grudge; this is something deep-seated and long nurtured, secreted away out of the light to grow and twist and send out poisonous roots.

He’s felt this exact flavor of malice before, if nebulous and nowhere near as clear.

For a moment, Kurama debates whether to stay where he is or go after the source. It’s—
“Kurama?”

In an instant, his grip on the thread of hate and fury is gone. Kurama growls, turning to face the man who interrupted him, and only just manages not to snap. Instead, he nods curtly, and says, “Hokage.”

Sarutobi smiles at him, wry and a little tired. “You’re up very early, Kurama. Trouble sleeping?”

Kurama just tips one shoulder in a shrug, not willing to touch on dreams of Naruto’s laughter interspersed with dead-grey hands dragging at his limbs. “I could say the same to you,” he retorts.

One greying brow slides up. “I seem to have found myself with an excess of paperwork regarding the rebuilding of entire streets,” the Hokage says dryly. He must see the way Kurama starts to bristle, because he raises a peaceable hand. “I’m glad the children enjoyed themselves, and I’m thankful that the other village heads no longer seem quite so interested in insisting that they should be the ones to host the jinchuuriki. Truly a clever tactic.”

It takes effort not to smirk. “I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about, sorry.”

Humor sparks in Sarutobi’s face, though it’s quickly smothered. “Of course. A happy coincidence, then.”

Kurama shrugs, looking away. “You guys were idiots for even thinking about separating them,” he says bluntly. “They’ve finally found somewhere to be normal. Taking that away from them would just make them hate you more.”

Sarutobi sighs, just a little, and inclines his head. “I believe,” he says slowly, “that anyone in the position of Kage should be able to weigh strengths and weaknesses, and prioritize the wellbeing of the majority. ‘For the good of the many’ has become a dirty phrase, but it’s a necessary one. But… I’ve been reminded that that isn’t the only way to look at things.”

“Danzō’s always been a bad influence on you,” Kurama says, begrudgingly allowing that. It’s not an excuse, which is the only reason he isn’t trying to take Sarutobi’s head off.

The words get him a sharp look, and there’s a pause as Sarutobi clearly weighs responses. Then, with a sigh, he inclines his head. “Danzō and I have differing ideas that are built on the same framework, and it makes overlap far too easy.”

That’s a polite way of putting it, Kurama thinks, unimpressed. “Maybe that was the case forty years ago,” he says sharply, “but right now you’re Hokage. Danzō’s already pushing boundaries and you keep looking away. At some point you’re going to realize what he’s aiming for, but it will already be too late to stop him.” The stupidity is so frustrating Kurama has to grit his teeth to keep from snarling, the image of Sasuke as a child all too close, so different from the broken boy who only managed to piece himself back together after decades of effort and Naruto’s love.

Kurama has no fondness for any Uchiha, but that’s not something he can ignore. For Naruto's sake if nothing else.

He takes a breath, shakes himself, and says, “The Third Shinobi War lasted longer and was fought harder than you thought it would be. You ever stop to think why that was?”

Sarutobi blinks, caught off guard, but Kurama’s done with this conversation. He turns and stalks away, no destination in mind, just the urge to leave. After the Fourth War, Sasuke and Sai had made absolutely certain that they went through every last one of Danzō’s records, ferreted out all the lies he’d told, all the identities of the Root agents he’d sacrificed in the name of furthering wars. To hear Sarutobi even vaguely defending the man turns his stomach.
“You know a lot of things you shouldn’t,” Sarutobi says to his retreating back, so mildly that it can’t be anything but a threat. “Would you happen to know why there are now ten bijuu by Killer Bee’s count, rather than nine?”

Of course they know that—Bee would have told A, and A would have told the other Kage. Kurama curses as he comes to a stop, turning around more out of a desire to see the attack coming than because he wants to face Sarutobi.

“Do you really fucking think that matters right now?” he demands. “In the face of everything?”

A familiar hand closes over Kurama’s shoulder, tugging him back a step. “With all due respect, Hokage-sama,” Kakashi says mildly, “I believe Kurama’s origins are less important right now than Akatsuki’s whereabouts. Besides,” a note of humor touches his voice, “it’s rather hard to imagine one of the villages trying to stake a claim on him, isn’t it?”

Sarutobi’s expression passes through horror and terror and settles on looking like he needs a very large drink. With a sigh, he waves a hand and concedes, though he warns, “The question will come up eventually, you know.”

Kurama gives him an unimpressed look, though the Hokage ignores it. He nods to both of them, then turns and heads for the Administration Building with a quick step.

“And how long were you listening for?” Kurama asks, rounding on Kakashi. “Didn’t I tell you stop getting in the way when I’m—”

“Bait the Hokage on your own time,” Kakashi tells him, still with that spark of amusement, even if the rest of his expression is serious. “You know about Danzō?”

Kurama blinks, but eases back a little. “Yeah. He engineered the Uchiha Clan Downfall and pushed Itachi into massacring the entire clan. Sasuke killed him for it when he was seventeen.”

Kakashi’s face goes blank for a moment, and Kurama belatedly remembers that while Kakashi knows, he doesn’t exactly know everything. The massacre of an entire clan by his subordinate who’s currently eleven years old is probably not the easiest thing to swallow.

“For their eyes?” Kakashi asks blankly, even though the line of his shoulders is about as tense as Kurama has seen it.

“The bastard’s good at multitasking.” Kurama snorts derisively. “He wanted their eyes and he wanted them gone. He ended up with one of Shisui’s eyes, enough extra to keep him alive through almost anything, Itachi as a missing-nin, and Sasuke the only other Uchiha left.”

There’s a long moment of silence as Kakashi digests this, and then takes a slow breath. “He ordered Tenzō to kill me for my eye,” he says, inflectionless. “And he tried to have me assassinate Sarutobi for letting the Kyuubi attack happen.”

Even Orochimaru got run out of Konoha before he used up as many chances as Danzō has gone through. Add in Root and the way Danzō killed its members whenever he needed bodies to disguise as enemy shinobi in order to keep the wars going, and Kurama’s pretty sure the guy needs his teeth punched in. With a bijūdama, preferably.

“You can have first dibs,” he proposes.

Kakashi blinks at him for a startled moment, then laughs. “Should I take that to mean he’s the next one in your crosshairs, then?”
Giving him a disbelieving look, Kurama crosses his arms over his chest. “Child soldiers? Child jinchuuriki? I don’t trust the bastard further than I can spit, especially not with the brats. Why? You going to defend him and—”

“It saves me some time,” Kakashi interrupts mildly, and when Kurama narrows his eyes at him he says, “I think there’s something you need to see.”

Their destination is an innocent apartment building back from the main streets, with willows growing off many of the balconies and a verdant garden on the rooftop. Kakashi leads Kurama up to the roof, then down the far side of the building, wary of being seen even at this hour. Kurama follows closely behind him, slipping down the wall with the assistance of trailing branches more than chakra. Clearly Kakashi doesn’t want to be noticed by whoever is inside the apartment they’re approaching.

“You know,” Kurama says, not precisely grumpy but playing at it anyway, “if this is supposed to be a date, those crappy books didn’t teach you anything.”

“My books are perfect,” Kakashi protests, looking unperturbed. “This is less of a date and more of an outing.”

Kurama snorts. “For their first date Minato took Kushina to kill things. I expect nothing less.”

Kakashi’s eye crinkles, even as he drops into the railing of a balcony. He glances up at Kurama, who perches in the twisted branches above him, and says, “Well, with standards that high I might as well quit while I’m ahead. Maybe you should plan it, then.”

“Lazy bastard,” Kurama retorts, following Kakashi’s gaze as it drops to the apartment below them and to the left. There’s a window, though the curtains are mostly drawn. “I’m assuming you dragged me all the way here for a reason?”

“You say that like you had better things to do,” Kakashi protests mildly, though when Kurama gives him a look he smiles innocently. “Maa, maa, Kurama, have patience. I’m getting there.”

“You’re being a circumspect jerk, is what you are,” Kurama huffs, but he follows Kakashi’s gaze and watches shadows pass behind the curtain. Three people at least, all fairly large, he thinks, and his eyes narrow faintly.

Kakashi hums lightly, not objecting to the label, and says quietly, “I ran into Raidō yesterday while you were all playing tag. He was acting strangely, so after I left last night I just…checked up on him.”

“You mean spied on him,” Kurama correctly dryly.

Waving that off, Kakashi offers an airy, “Semantics. Can you get the seals off that window without anyone noticing?”

Kurama’s brows rise, but he obligingly drops lower. Natural chakra like his has less chance of triggering seals and traps, though he doesn’t know how Kakashi learned that. And if there’s a sensor inside—which Kurama assumes there is, given their method of sneaking—he’ll be less noticeable unless they’re actually paying attention.
The seals are decent, but nowhere near Kushina's level. Kurama studies them for barely a minute before he reaches out, hand wrapped in chakra, and delicately scratches out one of the inner matrixes with the tip of his claw. Redrawing the erased section is just as simple, and Kurama completes the curving arc of the new section with a bit of a flourish. The seal hums quietly, sparking with chakra for half a second before it goes dark, and Kurama slides back up to sit on the railing beside Kakashi. When the other man glances over at him, Kurama tips one shoulder and murmurs, “I disconnected it from the rest of the seals. They're now under the impression that this window doesn’t exist. It’ll block any noise we make, too, rather than amplify it. You’re good.”

Kakashi’s fingers skim his cheek, lightly brushing his hair back behind one ear. “I’m taking you on every observation mission from now on. How useful,” Kakashi tells him, amused, and then tips forward, hooking a knee around the railing so he can hang upside-down above the window. Deft hands carefully ease the pane open, then twitch the curtain back just enough to see into the apartment.

It’s a corner window, set above a reading nook and halfway blocked by a potted tree, which means far less of a chance of being seen. Kurama leans forward and down, trying to get a clearer view, and feels his brows rise sharply when he sees who’s inside. That’s definitely not what he was expecting.

Kakashi waves a hand at him, and Kurama catches his fingers, providing an anchor as the Copy-Nin pulls himself back up to sit beside him. “I haven’t seen this many clan heads in one room since Minato's appointment,” he murmurs, one grey eye tracking Choza’s path around the room. The Akimichi has clearly been pacing for a while, and he doesn’t look to be stopping any time soon.

Kurama casts a glance down at his hand, Kakashi’s still curled around it, and snorts quietly, even as he turns his palm over to lace their fingers. His Naruto and Sasuke used to be mildly obsessed with holding hands, and…maybe Kurama can see why they liked it so much that they did it whenever the opportunity presented itself. It’s nice, not that he’ll ever say as much out loud.

“They don’t exactly look like they're just here for an early breakfast, either,” he points out. Shikaku is just within their field of view, tense as a coiled spring even if he’s slumped in his chair. The person across the table from him is mostly hidden by the tree, but given the glimpse of hair he can see Kurama’s willing to bet it’s Raidō.

From somewhere to the left, a familiar voice says, “They're both fine. Inoichi is on the edges of chakra exhaustion, though—he must have encountered heavy resistance on his way out.” A moment later, Hyuuga Hiashi crosses the room, headed for the kitchen, and the sound of running water follows.

Raidō makes a quiet sound that’s mingled grief and fury, but doesn’t say anything. The figure standing next to him pats his shoulder. “Genma and Aoba are two of the best,” Tsume says, gruffly trying for comforting. “They’ll make it out, I’m sure.”

A subtle tension slides through Kakashi, making Kurama glance over at him. The look on his face is blank in a slightly unnerving way, a focused intensity that says predator as loudly as anything Kurama could manage with bared teeth. If Kakashi feels Kurama’s gaze, he ignores it, all of his attention on the room, but his fingers tighten ever so slightly.

“We have all the proof we need, don’t we?” That’s Fugaku, and even if the sight of the Uchiha coming to stand on Shikaku’s other side makes Kurama want to growl, he holds it in. “We can bring this to the Hokage and force him to do something about it.”

Kurama blinks, glancing at the Uchiha and then over at Kakashi again. Kakashi still doesn’t look away from the meeting, but he says softly, “When I followed Raidō, Tsume and Hiashi were just
arriving. They were talking about Root."

And Root will never mean anything except Danzō. Kurama’s eyes narrow, and he takes another look at those assembled. Grim faces all around, and—

Almost-silent footsteps, and a boy slips around the corner of the kitchen. A familiar boy, even if this is just about the last place Kurama would have expected to see him. Black hair, black eyes, pale skin, and a sketchbook clutched in one hand—there's no way Kurama could mistake him for anyone else. Even more surprising, though, is the older boy a pace behind him, with dark grey hair and dark eyes. Kurama’s only ever seen portraits of him before, sketched by a careful hand, but it’s unmistakably Sai’s brother, Shin.

“You know them.” It’s not a question, and Kakashi has turned his attention to Kurama, sharp and steady as he watches him.

Kurama nods, though he can’t quite look away from Sai. The last time he saw the brat, Sai was shoving Ino out of the way of Kaguya’s forces, detonating a devastating self-destruct jutsu to give Naruto’s group time to retreat. The loss came so close on the heels of Sasuke’s death that Kurama had almost thought it would be the end of everything. He’d never felt Naruto so close to the edge, before that or after it.

“The black-haired one—he was on Team 7,” Kurama explains, even though his throat feels tight. Not his own grief, not really, but…Naruto’s, and all too close because of it. “He was one of Danzō’s plants, at first, but you all infected him with your teamwork bullshit within a few weeks and then he was beyond saving.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then Kakashi’s fingers squeeze again, much more deliberately this time. “I’d be offended,” Kakashi says lightly, “except you were clearly infected with the same bullshit, and I think I like it a lot more than the alternative.”

“You would,” Kurama says, rolling his eyes, but he doesn’t shake Kakashi off. They watch the clan heads argue for another moment before Kurama says, “They must have had a run-in with Danzō and learned he was taking children. And that them being clan children didn’t stop him. Genma was looking into Danzō—he’s probably the one who told them.”

Kakashi hums in agreement. “Inoichi might have been on the mission too. He doesn’t get chakra exhaustion easily.” He casts a sideways look at Kurama, one brow disappearing under his hitai-ate in a silent question.

Kurama taps the back of Kakashi’s hand with his claws, lightly enough that he doesn’t even dent the skin. “This date is boring,” he complains. “You never take me anywhere interesting, asshole.”

Clearly understanding what Kurama means, Kakashi smiles, his eye crinkling. “I'm sure we can spice it up if we try,” he offers whimsically. “As long as you can fit through that window, of course.”

Scuffing, Kurama elbows the bastard and gathers his feet under him. “I'm not the one who was lazing around on bed rest for most of the last three weeks,” he retorts, then swings down, shoves the window all the way open, and drops through.

Fugaku yelps, stumbling backwards, as Tsume shouts and Shikaku surges to his feet. Kurama ducks a flight of kunai, hoping Kakashi isn’t directly behind him, and dodges to the side to miss the nin-dog’s lunge. There’s a confusion of clan heads practically falling over themselves to ready their jutsus, and then a loud, obnoxiously cheerful, “Yo!” as Kakashi drops to the floor at Kurama’s heels.
Silence falls, broken by a loud, irritated sigh. “Kakashi,” Shikaku says, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Can't you ever _knock_?”

“I figured this was more expedient,” Kakashi says easily, beaming a bullshit smile at the jounin commander. He shuffles aside as Kurama ducks back to close the window and carve another seal into the lintel to negate his alterations to the other one.

“Don’t let him bullshit you, he just wanted to be an ass,” Kurama says over his shoulder, ignoring the prickling sensation of stares on his back as he lays the last line, then watches it hum to life.

“Maa, Kurama, don’t pretend you weren’t the first to jump when I suggested it.” Kakashi waves to a pale-faced Raidō, and adds, “Sorry, we couldn’t help but overhear.”

“Through a warded window?” Raidō says, dry as dust. He doesn’t linger on the question, though, immediately looking at Kurama as he turns around. “Genma said you were a friend.”

Kurama hesitates over the term for a moment, but…it’s close enough. He might have only ever had Naruto as a friend the first time around, but clearly he won’t be able to get away with the same thing here.

“Yeah,” he says, and it comes out more gruffly than he intends as he crosses his arms over his chest. “Genma helped me out in Whirlpool. I owe him a couple.”

Kakashi’s gaze snaps to Kurama, one brow rising, but he doesn’t ask even though it’s clear he wants to. Instead, he glances over towards the couch where Inoichi is sprawled, pale and still, and asks, “They went after Danzō?”

Tsume glances at Shikaku, tipping her chin in question, and when he inclines his head with a grimace she huffs. “Inoichi, Aoba, and Genma went in to get one of the Yamanaka children back and see what information they could collect. Inoichi made it out—said Aoba went after Genma and told him to go ahead. He got to safety, but there were too many Root agents after him to go back in.”

Which likely means that Danzō has both of the tokujo, Kurama thinks, mouth tightening. Assuming they’re not dead yet.

“He’ll be expecting a rescue attempt, most likely,” Hiashi says dispassionately, but there's something very much like fury in his pale eyes.

Not to be outdone, Fugaku immediately adds, “And should we go to the Hokage there's no guarantee Danzō won't simply go underground. He has the resources to start a civil war in the village if he feels cornered.”

Shikaku is watching Kurama, quiet but intent, fingers steepled in front of him. He looks so much like the Shikamaru from Kurama’s past, contemplating odds, that it sends a flicker of quickly-buried emotion through him, but he meets the Nara’s dark eyes squarely and asks, “Well?”

Shikaku blinks once, as if surprised to be addressed. “Well,” he echoes, “I suppose that depends on your ability to hold a henge.”

Kurama looks from the jounin commander to Inoichi, unconscious on the couch, and feels himself start to grin, full of teeth.

“I might be able to manage something,” he drawls.
This idea is going to be either fantastic or terrible, and Utakata can't see a lot of room for anything in between.

“A whole class?” Fū repeats excitedly, practically bouncing next to him. On her right, Yugito looks far more skeptical, though she hasn’t said much of anything yet. Thankfully, Gaara and Naruto seem to have stalled on the “spend all day with Sasuke” portion of Utakata’s explanation, and missed the “at school” part.

But really, he caught Fū and Yugito facing off for another round of rock-paper-scissors in the hopes of restarting the game of tag, and while Utakata certainly enjoyed himself yesterday, he’s also rather cautious of wearing out their welcome in Konoha.

“Yes,” he tells Fū, for what is probably the third time. “Though you might want to stay with the older children, since you already know what Naruto and Gaara will be learning.”

“All right,” Fū agrees, bright and cheerful, and takes a skipping step as the Academy comes into view. “And you get to stare at that teacher the whole time, right?”

Utakata chokes and very nearly trips over his own feet. He’s absolutely certain that Fū didn’t see more than his very first interaction with Iruka, so he turns on the only possible person who could have told her and protests, “Yugito!”

Yugito looks supremely unrepentant. “That’s the only reason he’s making us go to class,” she says disdainfully.

Utakata contains a despairing sigh and corrects, “You’re going to class because Kurama is doing something, Rōshi is having breakfast with Mei, and Han is taking care of the shopping. I can’t watch all five of you by myself, not all day.”

“All six!” Naruto interjects happily, looking up from where he, Gaara, Karin, and Sasuke are plotting something Utakata most certainly doesn’t want to know about.

“Six,” Utakata agrees wearily, because Naruto is right; Sasuke is now one of them just like Karin is, even if they’re not jinchuuriki.

“Yugito and I can watch ourselves,” Fū says, apparently just for the sake of argument. “And even if we couldn’t, Shisui could have!”

Utakata rolls his eyes. “Shisui is terrified of you. You’d spend all day doing nothing but harassing him, and that doesn’t help our case if we want to stay with Kurama.”

At that even Yugito looks slightly more accepting of the decision, which is good, because the Academy doors are right up ahead. Iruka is even waiting, looking slightly flustered as he taps a pen against his clipboard. When he spots Utakata and the herd of children around him, he breaks into a smile, not even twitching when Karin and Naruto practically barrel into him.

I like him, Saiken trills in Utakata’s head, and Utakata is very, very glad that he’s never blushed easily, because it lets him return Iruka’s smile without hesitation.

So do I, he confesses to the sea slug, and it sends a little thrill through him, as bright and effervescent as a spray of bubbles. He’s really cute.

Saiken laughs at him, though kindly, even as Utakata pulls Fū to a halt before she can bolt into the
building and says politely, “Good morning, Iruka-sensei.”

Iruka rubs at his scar, faintly bashful. “Good morning, Utakata. I was glad to get your message.” He casts a smile down at Gaara, Naruto, and Sasuke, and says warmly, “Are all of you ready for class?”

“I'm not six, I'm seven,” Karin points out, before the boys can answer. “Can I be in the same class?”

Iruka doesn’t even hesitate. “If you want to, Karin, but there’s a group your age as well, and I think you’d get along well with them.” He glances up, looking around, and waves behind them. “Tenten, I’d like you to meet someone!”

“Iruka-sensei?” A little girl with her brown hair up in buns trots up to Iruka, expression curious until her eyes fall on Karin. Then her face breaks into a wide smile. “Hi! Are you a new student? Are you going to be a kunoichi too?”

“I'm going to be a great kunoichi,” Karin says, as if daring her to disagree.

Tenten beams. “Me too! I'm going to be as good as Tsunade-sama someday, so I need to work hard! We can work together if you want!”

Karin flushes slightly, but she doesn’t protest when Tenten grabs her hand and tugs her forward.

“Moto-sensei will take care of you,” Iruka assures her gently, and then turns his smile on Fū and Yūgito. “Most genin graduate at twelve, so the last class would fit the two of you if you wanted. Yūgao-chan is just heading in.” He points at a girl a few years older than Yūgito with long purple hair, at the door of another classroom, and adds, “She’s helping Gokudo-sensei teach a unit on kenjutsu today, I think.”

Yūgito’s eyes brighten at that, and she’s the one to tug Fū in that direction, the younger girl laughing. Yūgao hears them coming and pauses, watching with slightly wary curiosity as they join her, but one of Fū’s bright grins is enough to have her leaning in to introduce herself.

“I know the way to the classroom,” Sasuke says before Iruka can offer anything else, and he tugs at Naruto's sleeve. “This way!”

Naruto follows with a laugh, catching Gaara's hand as he goes, and the three of them bolt down the hall at a flat-out run. Iruka watches them go with some amusement, and then turns his smile back on Utakata again. “Thank you,” he says sincerely. “For bringing them. I wasn’t sure Naruto would ever come back, but I'm glad he's willing to.”

“You say that now, before you’ve had to deal with the three of them all day,” Utakata returns, but he can't help but smile as well. “I hope you don’t mind if I stay? It’s probably a good idea not to leave the six of them completely without jinchuuriki supervision.”

It’s gratifying that Iruka doesn’t tense even at the explicit reminder of just who he’s going to be teaching. “I’d be very glad to have you,” he says quickly, and then flushes to the roots of his hair. “I—I mean have you in class! Not have—not that you need it, I mean! But for help!”

Utakata hides a laugh behind the sleeve of his yukata, hoping Iruka won't think he intends it to be cruel when that’s the furthest thing from the truth. “Thank you, Iruka-sensei,” he says, meeting dark brown squarely. “I appreciate it.”

Iruka is still bright red, and he rubs his scar again, though he doesn’t look away from Utakata. “It’s no problem,” he demurs, verging on bashful. “You're—you're welcome to come any time you want.”
He’s really cute, Utakata tells Saiken as he follows the older boy towards the classroom, and gets the slug’s best impression of a double thumbs up in response. It makes him muffle another laugh behind his sleeve, those effervescent bubbles curling through his stomach once more.
LXVIII: Sagacious

Chapter Notes

We are on track! Sorry for any confusion regarding me more or less suspending my ff.net account - I didn't mention that I was continuing updates on AO3 because I didn't want any trolls to follow me to this account, but I will continue updating weekly here.

Thanks so much for being awesome - all of you have really sustained my faith in the kindness of this fandom. <3

[sagacious /ˈsəɡəʃəs/, having or showing keen mental discernment and good judgment; shrewd; keen of scent; caused by or indicating acute discernment. From Latin sagac-, sagax, from sagire “to perceive keenly”, akin to sagus “prophetic”.]

Kisame's getting kind of tired of Konoha.

He’s specifically getting kind of tired of Danzō, who’s hovering and glowering and issuing orders to his subordinates in dark, hushed tones Kisame can't quite make out. As far as Kisame's been able to tell, he wants to get back the children the tiger-masked ANBU stole, but he can't find them and it’s putting him in a pissy mood.

The last time Kisame had to deal with a pissy person who thought they were his boss for an extended period of time, it was Fuguki, and Kisame killed him and took his sword.

He still hasn’t gotten any news about Obito, either.

Chuckling softly and a little wryly at his own foolishness, Kisame checks their prisoners again, testing the ninja wire their hands are tied with and making sure they’re actually unconscious and not just faking it. Their chakra levels are a little low, but they’ll survive, and even if they’re just tokujo Kisame isn’t about to take chances. He knows desperation when he sees it, and these two were verging on it.

Loyalty, Kisame thinks, is a nice thing to find even in his enemies. Of course, it’s slightly offset by Danzō, but the guy with the glasses did risk a lot to try and help his friend, even when he could have tried to get away.

(And he proposed a date. Even if it was a distraction, or mostly a distraction, Kisame is still flattered. It’s not the first thing most people think of when they look at him, as experience has long since proved.)

Danzō’s frown is growing deeper, verging on a scowl, as the Root member in front of him gives her report, and Kisame decides he should probably chip in. The tokujo are secure, after all, and he’s got little else to do until the rescue attempt happens.

“Everything working out?” he asks easily, straightening up and shifting Samehada where its slung over his back.
Danzō’s expression is displeased. “Jiraiya is lurking somewhere my agents cannot find him. Beyond that, Orochimaru has escaped from his cell and Sakumo appears to have gone after him. That’s three of the strongest shinobi in the village unaccounted for. I do not like this.”

Kisame knows about the Sannin and the White Fang—everyone knows about the Sannin and the White Fang if they’ve learned anything at all about Konoha as an opponent. It’s a village where genius is almost commonplace, and those four were among the greatest. Orochimaru won’t be a problem, since Kisame almost managed to beat him once, and Orochimaru with his ninjutsu is badly matched against Kisame’s abilities, but Jiraiya and Tsunade might be a headache if they get involved. Especially Tsunade; with her strength and perfect chakra control, Kisame would likely be in trouble if he pitted himself against her.

In any other situation, a thought like that might be enough to make Kisame hunt her down just to try it, but he sadly doesn’t have the time. The messenger crow that the second tokujo slipped past them was caught before it could leave the forest, but the third intruder managed to make it past most of the guards, and defeat those he couldn’t evade. He’s probably back in the village by now, and while he has no idea of Kisame’s presence, which gives them the advantage, it means a rescue will likely be happening soon.

Kisame is more than ready for a bit of action. The tokujo were barely enough to get his blood flowing, and the thought of another fight with Kurama, one on one instead of with shifting odds in the Uzumaki’s favor, makes Kisame gleeful. Maybe it won't be a fair fight—Nagato is an Uzumaki too, and even his chakra reserves were pitiful compared to what Kisame can muster—but Kurama is supposedly a jinchuuriki. It’s probably the closest to an even match Kisame will ever find in his lifetime, and he’s looking forward to it.

“Seems like you’ve got a problem with losing track of people,” Kisame chuckles. “Can’t be good for business.”

Danzō gives him a dark look, but before he can say anything another Root member flickers into view in the doorway and signs something in a rush. They're Konoha-specific signs, so Kisame can't follow them, but Danzō’s expression flattens out. He curls his hands around his cane and nods once. “The third intruder was just sighted slipping back into the tunnel system. The scouts are unsure if he’s alone.”

He’s probably not—it’s been a few hours since he escaped, and Kisame can't imagine he’d be stupid enough to return without backup. With a pleased hum, Kisame grips Samehada’s hilt, ready to tug it free and let it start waking up. There's been too much sitting around, and he’s happily anticipating a chance to shake the lethargy from his bones.

“Gonna lead him here for me?” Kisame asks cheerfully. Even if he is alone, more bait to draw Kurama here won't be a bad thing.

“Why not.” Danzō says coolly, and nods to one of the Root members beside him. The shinobi snaps to attention, then flashes a hand seal and shifts into a perfect copy of the second tokujo, right down to the bound hands. He takes off into the tunnel, and the other two Root shinobi give him a handful of seconds’ head start before going after him.

“I’ll be watching from a distance,” Danzō says, half warning and half promise, before he steps into the shadows along the wall and disappears.

He’s pretty confident that the Hokage isn’t going to raise a fuss about his actions, Kisame thinks, amused, as he leans back against the opposite wall to wait. Either that or the Hokage is already aware, and Danzō doesn’t think that pushing boundaries is going to get him in any lasting trouble.
Which is objectively amusing, since it would mean that Danzō isn’t a traitor, technically, in that he’s not betraying the Hokage. But it also raises the question of just when a Kage becomes a traitor to the rest of their village, and Kisame’s never really considered that before. It’s an interesting question.

Something to ponder at another time, though. Right now Kisame has a fight to prepare for, and it’s a rematch he’s very much looking forward to.

Kakashi has something of a bad feeling about this.

Watching blond hair sway in front of him, he slips between shadows, attention carefully split between the passageways around them and Inoichi’s sure steps. The Root tunnels are at least familiar, even if he was only a member of the Foundation very briefly—Kakashi has a good memory, and those days are more vivid than he’d prefer, even if he did spend most of them caught up in grief.

This is a two-pronged attack, more or less, and while Kakashi does wish they had more backup, he also understands why the Clan Heads as a group need to bring this to the Hokage. It’s a show of unity and a threat all at once, a nonverbal promise that if Sarutobi tries to sidestep the situation the Clan Heads will take matters into their own hands, and perhaps end up needing a new Hokage. The measure hasn’t been used anywhere but Kiri, and even then to dubious effect, but it’s one of the reasons Hashirama never objected to the heavy focus on clan loyalty and the creation of the compounds within the village walls. It’s a check to the Hokage’s power, and this is precisely the kind of situation it’s meant for.

Of course, it leave him and his partner in crime with the brunt of the work, but that was probably to be expected. They did volunteer.

There’s no one in the corridors, and the majority of the rooms they pass are dark and still. It’s not overly comforting to calculate the Foundation’s manpower right now, in the heart of their territory as something like an enemy, but Kakashi’s been a shinobi for too long to shut off his brain like that. It’s a constant tally in the back of his head, rising and falling as they pass marks of occupation, sandal scuffs and stray hair caught on rock, traces of old fear and hurt.

But no people, no guards or shinobi, and that’s suspicious.

Inoichi slows, then comes to a halt beside a sharp corner. There’s no sound from beyond it, so Kakashi slips forward to crouch beside him, breathing carefully to filter out the scents.

“This,” Inoichi says darkly, “feels like a trap.”

Kakashi hums in lazy agreement, though it takes effort not to tense at even the low sound of his voice. “No one can account for everything,” he points out, and even he doesn’t know if it’s a warning or a reassurance.

Inoichi shoots him a narrow look, but turns back to face the empty hall ahead of them, assessing it. “Yeah, but it sure feels like we’re the ones missing something here,” he says gruffly, and then pushes back to his feet. “You should—”

A shout from up ahead, panicked and desperate, a rush of footsteps that aren’t even trying to be stealthy. Kakashi jerks back, sliding as much out of sight as he can in the shadows, but the runner never makes it to them. There’s a cry as he goes down, two bodies following, and then a short scuffle
followed by a yelp and then silence. Two people murmur to each other, and then one of them grunts in effort before the footsteps recede.

Inoichi narrows his eyes, but risks a glance around the corner. Kakashi does the same, and feels his breath catch at the sight of Aoba, limp over the shoulder of a Root member, with blood on the side of his face and his sunglasses cracked. No, he thinks, an instinctive and entirely emotional response.

But Kakashi’s been a shinobi too long for that to be his only response. He lifts his head and takes a breath, cataloguing the scents in the corridor, and pulling up a memory of the last time he and Aoba had a mission together. Aoba always smells faintly of dry blood, buried under feathers and ink and very faded herbs from the poisons he sometimes uses. An easy enough scent to mark, and familiar like the halls of T & I.

There’s no trace of it from any of those three shinobi.

Catching Inoichi’s eye, he rocks back on his heels and shakes his head sharply. No need for the Sharingan, not for this; he has no doubt the one with Aoba’s face is simply wearing a henge.

Which means that this is absolutely a trap.

Inoichi pauses, and Kakashi can see him weighing their options. If they take the bait and follow, there’s no saying what they’ll walk in to, but there’s also the fact that they’ll have the advantage of knowing about the trap before it’s sprung. Besides, if they’re using Aoba’s face, chances are good he’s with them, and likely Genma too.

Kakashi arches a brow, somewhere between mild curiosity and a challenge, and gets a grin in return that’s all teeth and threat. One hand flashes up, signing pursuit with only a touch of hesitation behind the motion, and Kakashi can’t help but remember a forest clearing near the northern border, a stranger’s face among the trees.

He never could have known that mission would change his life quite so drastically. But, standing here, he can’t truly bring himself to mind.

I follow, he signs back, haphazard ANBU gestures meant for speed more than easy recognition, but blue eyes catch them without trouble. Inoichi smirks at him, then slips around the corner with soundless steps and hurries after the retreating Root shinobi.

Kakashi keeps to the shadows, keeps in step, and guards his back as they move.

The room is tall and wide, with a small skylight high above and water pooled on the floor. One step in, braced for anything, and Inoichi turns sharply, hands coming up like claws. Kakashi, still hanging back, can see the way his eyes widen sharply, the shock and rage that spread across his features, and he snarls, “You.”

There’s a low, rumbling chuckle, a heavy step. “Me,” a voice agrees, not one Kakashi recognizes immediately even if it sounds distantly, vaguely familiar. He breathes deep, smells salt and metal and the familiar flower-herbal scent of one of Genma’s nastier poisons spread liberally through the air.

Not a good sign, if the blend Genma affectionately calls “Giant-Killer” is that clear but the man’s still standing.

A pause, and then another chuckle, even more amused than before. “That’s a cute disguise,” the shinobi says, inordinately cheerful. “But Samehada and I never forget the taste of such strong chakra, you know? Might as well drop it.”
Damn, Kakashi thinks, and then several stronger curses right after. There's that advantage gone. He
slips around the edge of the door just as Inoichi tips his head up. His form wavers like a heat mirage,
then fades away, and Kurama glares Kisame venomously.

“Shouldn’t you be kissing your master’s ass somewhere else?” he growls.

Kisame laughs like it’s a great joke, even as he sweeps Samehada down and out. “Before the first
date?” he asks. “What kind of guy do you take me for? But I bet if I bring you back as a present it’ll
cheer him up a bit. You don’t mind, right?”

Kurama bristles. “Over my dead body you will, asshole.” Bloody-red chakra flickers, then rises in a
vicious tide, and Kurama lunges like a big cat, claws already slashing.

With a wide, eager grin, Kisame meets him, and the whirl of chakra exploding from the pair of them
is almost enough to make Kakashi stagger where he stands.

He doesn’t have time to linger and watch, though. Kisame might be more opposition than they were
expecting, but they were expecting it. Kakashi isn’t just here to play cheering section, either. While
Kurama and Kisame distract each other, he darts forward, giving them a wide berth as Kurama flips
over Kisame’s head and Samehada just skims his arm as he comes down. Two bound forms are
neatly laid out on the other side of the cavern, scents reassuringly familiar, and—

A flicker of movement sends Kakashi diving out of the way, rolling and coming back to his feet with
a kunai in one hand. The three Root shinobi they followed here land in front of him, weapons drawn,
and Kakashi doesn’t bother trying to reason with them. He reaches for his hitai-ate, pushing it up,
and lets the Sharingan bring everything into painful focus.

Water slams into him from behind, knee-deep and as icy as the ocean in the dead of winter, and
Kakashi staggers one step and then leaps, landing on the surface of it and using the momentum to
throw himself forward. The first Root member crashes into him, tantō stabbing for his gut, but
Kakashi slips around the blow, sweeps his feet out from under him, and dumps him into the water,
where he disappears like it’s far deeper than it looks. The woman in the center hops back, hands
flashing through signs in a practiced blur, and the water ripples and rises like a dragon, mouth gaping
as it grabs for Kakashi.

There’s no way to use a Raiton jutsu, not without possibly taking Kurama down with him, and
Kakashi knows that even if Kurama can shake it off he can’t afford the distraction right now. He tries
for Katon instead, a lash of fire leaving his fingertips to collide with the other jutsu. It sends steam
billowing over them, thick and cloaking, and Kakashi summons a clone as he ducks to the side. One
sharp blow to the back of the neck puts the second kunoichi down, but the first spins, blade flashing,
and darts under the clone’s guard in a blur, stabbing for a kidney. The clone vanishes with a pop, but
the woman doesn’t even slow, twisting smoothly and catching Kakashi’s kunai on her blade.

The blanks mask stares back at Kakashi, emotionless and immobile, and then she’s gone with a twist
and a lunge to the side. Where she was standing, a dark fin cuts through the water, and Kakashi
curses and leaps for the ceiling. The summons skims his sandals, far too close for comfort, but he
turns his leap into a flip and comes down on top of the kunoichi, aiming to knock her out.

He gets a flash of an exploding tag, a burst of chakra, and then she drops through the surface of the
water. The force of the explosion slams Kakashi back into the cavern wall, winded and dazed and
scorched. Impact—

The clone pops.
Kakashi drops from the ceiling to the spot where Genma and Aoba were, takes a breath, and dives headlong into the cold, dark water, searching for his friends.

Master Harusame always discouraged him from interacting with the rest of Kiri, so Utakata can say with absolute certainty that he’s never been around this many children before in his life.

“Your eyes are really pretty!” a tiny blonde girl tells him, tugging insistently on his hand.

“Thank you?” Utakata says, slightly bewildered. He doesn’t want to hurt her by trying to pull away, so he lets her drag him towards an open spot on the hill behind the Academy, where another girl is waving and giggling.

The blonde girl beams. “Come and make flower chains with me and Sakura-chan!” she orders. “Shika’s being mean and won’t do it because he’s lazy!”

The boy at whom this is apparently directed sprawled on his back in the grass, makes a scoffing sound in the back of his throat but doesn’t otherwise move.

A little desperately, Utakata casts a glance back over the group, trying to spot Naruto and Gaara, but they’re still rolling around with Sasuke, lunches abandoned. Iruka is caught in the middle of a squabble between a boy with a tiny puppy on his head and another boy in a high-collared shirt that covers most of his face, so there's no help coming from that direction, either.

“I’ve never made a flower chain,” he says, as much of a protest as he can muster, even as the blonde drops into the grass beside her pink-haired friend.

“Then you should learn!” she declares firmly, and tugs on his fingers. “Come on! Your hair is really pretty and shiny and these asters will looks so nice against it!”

“They’re violet, but they’re not violets. Those are Ino’s flower,” the other girl adds solemnly, though her smile is sweet. “They’ll go with your yukata too.”

Utakata flushes faintly. He’d picked the blue yukata because Saiken assured him it was the best color on him, and this conversation is putting him uncomfortably in mind of that one, which was embarrassing enough. “I—if you really think so,” he surrenders, because he’s fairly certain there’s no way to escape with any sort of dignity. He settles down carefully between the girls as the blonde cheers, and asks them, “Can I know who’s going to be teaching me today?”

“I’m Yamanaka Ino,” the blonde says without hesitation. “My daddy owns the flower shop, and he’s teaching me all about flower meanings! Did you know asters mean patience and elegance and love?”

“I did not, but thank you for telling me.” Utakata offers her a smile, then looks at her friends. “And you’re…?”

“Haruno Sakura!” The girl waves cheerfully. “Ino-chan is my best friend.”

“You seem like very good friends,” Utakata agrees, which apparently the right thing to say, because Ino and Sakura both glue themselves to his side in delight and start excitedly instructing him on how best to turn asters into jewelry.

Utakata listens with half an ear, though he keeps a portion of his attention on Naruto, Gaara, and
Sasuke. There have been no screams of terror from either of the other classrooms, so he assumes Karin, Yugito, and Fū are all surviving their first experiences with masses of non-jinchūriki children, and while he’s still a little wary, he’s fairly certain he can drop his guard at least a little here. The Academy is right next to the Administration Building for a reason—the Hokage is close at hand if anything goes wrong or if there’s any sort of attack, and there are squads of ANBU all around, armed to the teeth and on permanent alert. They’re about as safe as it’s possible to get without Han, Rōshi, Kurama, or Yagura hovering over them.

None of which accounts for why Saiken is fluttering nervously around the mental plane he shares with the other bijuu, unable to settle and more than a little distracted.

Saiken? Utakata asks carefully, even as he lets Ino guide him through twisting flower stems together. There’s such a long pause that Utakata almost abandons the physical world to go and talk to the Rokubi in person, because Saiken’s always talked too much, not too little. Before he can, though, there’s a feeling like a flurry of bubbles bursting, and Saiken says, No no no, stay up there! Everything’s fine!

That’s…not exactly reassuring. Saiken is a lot of things, but good at lying isn’t one of them. Utakata lets the bijuu feel his flood of exasperated skepticism, and gets a sheepish flicker of regret in response.

Nothing’s wrong, Saiken insists, though it’s more resigned than a moment ago. I’m just trying to keep track of everyone! Gyūki is napping but everyone else is moving and it’s hard to keep up.

That doesn’t quite feel like the whole truth, but it’s clear that Saiken doesn’t want to say anything more, so Utakata doesn’t push. You know I can help if something goes wrong, he offers, and before Saiken can protest again adds, Just in case. I’m listening, all right?

Such a strange thing to say so easily, after years and years of shutting his ears and pushing Saiken away on Master Harusame’s orders. But Utakata is happier now. Saiken is friendly and cheerful and kind, about as far from the hungry, malicious monster Harusame warned him of as is physically possible. Kurama’s words, the younger jinchūriki’s ease with themselves and their bijuu—that was all the push Utakata needed to take a chance, and he’s unspeakably glad he did.

Thank you, Utakata, Saiken says warmly, though there’s still a distracted edge to it. He doesn’t offer anything more, turning his attention back to his siblings, and Utakata tries not to frown as he lets the bijuu go.

“Here you go!” Ino says, half an instant before something settles on Utakata’s head. He blinks, reaching up to touch the neat crown of violet asters there, and then offers the waiting girls a smile.

“Thank you. It’s beautifully made. You did a good job.” It starts to slip, and Utakata carefully rights it and adds a touch of chakra to hold it in place.

Sakura flushes happily, while Ino laughs and claps her hands. “You look even prettier now!” she says happily. “Doesn’t he, Iruka-sensei?”

Oh gods. Utakata glances up to find Iruka a few steps away, clearly trying not to grin, and smiles helplessly at him.

“Very, um.” Iruka coughs, a red flush covering his cheeks and the bridge of his nose as he rubs at his scar. “You—er—it’s very—”

UTAKATA.
Utakata startles, practically scrambling to get to his feet even though he knows the voice was only in his head. Sakura and Ino squeak and duck away as he spins, looking for danger, and—

No no no, far away, far away! Saiken insists. It's Kurama! I can't feel him anymore!

His breath tangles in his lungs, even as his heart stumbles over its next beat. “No,” he breathes. “Saiken, no, you have to be wrong. What—”

The sensation slams into him, Kurama burning like a beacon in their shared mindscape, caught up in some kind of fight with lots of power everywhere, and then suddenly gone, leaving a gaping hole where he should be and a ringing sort of emptiness behind.

It can't be true. It can't be. Kurama isn’t dead. There's no possible way Utakata can accept that.

“Where?” he demands, already grabbing for his pipe and turning for the door, ready to run. “Do the others know?”

There's a burble that feels like despair and desperation cut through with an old sort of frustration. They don’t pay attention, they never have. The Sage said family but they don’t try.

Just for an instant, Utakata can feel several hundred years’ worth of loneliness, Saiken’s regular checks to make sure that all of his siblings were still fine, the flicker of aggravation when the touch was never returned. The joy, at long last, when a tiny figure with firebrand hair and achingly familiar chakra stood in front of him, several hundred times too small but unmistakably Kurama, looking for him, wanting to see him.

Best little brother in the world, Kurama had said, and he’ll probably never know just how much those words mean to Saiken.

The cautious touch of a hand on his shoulder makes Utakata jerk, and he turns quickly to find Iruka already pulling back, hands up to show he’s harmless.

“Utakata?” the chuunin asks worriedly. “Is everything all right?”

It’s not, and there's every chance that things will never be all right ever again. Utakata isn’t about to say that, though. “I have to go,” he offers instead, and it twinges to brush past Iruka, but he can't pause, can't look back. Kurama needs help, and Utakata will get it for him. “Naruto, Gaara!” When the boys glance up at him, he says firmly, “Find Karin, Yugito, and Fū as soon as class is done and stay with them, okay?”

“Okay!” Naruto says cheerfully. “Sasuke too?”

Utakata manages a smile for them, even if it’s the last thing in the world he feels like doing. “Of course. And go directly home, got it?”

“Yes, Utakata,” Gaara agrees solemnly, wide eyes watching him carefully, but he doesn’t ask anything. One more distracted smile and Utakata is through the door back into the classroom, then picking up a run. He leaps out the window, landing lightly in the street, and demands, “Saiken, where?”

It’s less of a clear direction and more the brief but vivid memory of a distant beacon, slightly muffled but not impossible to locate. Somewhere to the north, Utakata thinks, and wastes no time heading for it. “Can you tell Son Goku, Gyūki, and Kokuō? And Matatabi and Chōmei, as long as they can convince Yugito and Fū to stay and protect the other children. And if Yagura is anywhere near Kushina, get Isobu to ask her to take care of the kids.”
Of course! There's a pause, and then Saiken adds, I'm sending them to the same place. Rōshi and Han will meet you there.

But Utakata's eyes catch a ripple in the air ahead of him, and he slides to a halt half a second before two figures in black cloaks appear out of thin air in front of him. The one with the white mask immediately disappears again, but Utakata stares into flat brown eyes framed by red hair and takes a breath he won't allow to shake.

Somewhere nearby, an alarm bell starts ringing.

“Sasori of the Red Sand,” Utakata says, and raises his chin.

“Jinchuuriki of the Rokubi,” Sasori returns, cold and knife-edged, his eyes narrowing faintly.

He can't be this close to the Academy for no reason. Akatsuki is making their move, going after the most helpless of the jinchuuriki first, and if Kurama is already out of play…

(Utakata won't think dead. He won't, he can't, there's no way Kurama is anything other than fine.)

“I hope you're not expecting to go any farther,” Utakata tells him, fingers tightening around his pipe and the bottle of solution, and is astonished that the words come out so even and steady.

Disdain slides into Sasori's, laced through with boredom. “Do you really think a child like you will be able to stop me?”

Does he? Utakata has spent his entire life accepting other people’s demands, allowing them to use him and walk over him and set him aside whenever it's convenient. His father did it, Tobi-as-Yagura did it, Master Harusame even did it, but—

The other jinchuuriki never have. He’s one of them, and while it's not a bond he'd ever thought to want or need, now he can't imagine cutting himself off from it. Like Saiken, Kurama needing his help was a revelation, something that planted a warm seed deep down in his chest. He'd been the one Kurama could rely on, and that was something new and entirely foreign but also amazing.

Utakata has allowed himself to be a puppet for so long, but he isn’t anymore. And there's no chance he'll allow himself to be beaten by an actual puppet.

“Yes,” he says, and means it with everything in him. “I will.”
LXIX: Ustulation

Chapter Notes

If you are particularly sensitive to cliffhangers and/or suspense, you, er. Might want to wait a week or two? The end of this chapter is not overly kind. <3

[ustulation / \əs(h)cələˈshən/ˌ, coloring or blackening as if scorched; an operation formerly used in chemistry of expelling one substance from another (as sulfur from an ore) by heat; to burn; to sear; to scorch. From Medieval Latin ustulation-ˌ, ustulatio, from Latin ustulatus, past participle of ustulare “burn slightly, scorch”, from assumed Latin ustulus “slightly burned”, from Latin ustus, past participle of urere “to burn” + -ion-, -io -ion.]

There are screams coming from deeper in the village, and Utakata is starting to doubt that Rōshi and Han will make it to Kurama in any reasonable amount of time. Understandable, given that he can't either, but frustrating. Horrifying, just a little, somewhere deep down inside him where he can allow himself to focus on such things.

A kunai with a tag skims past his head as he rolls to his feet, but Utakata doesn’t flinch, brings his pipe to his lips and exhales, folding chakra into his breath. Bubbles bloom, sweeping out to swallow the cloud of poison gas that pours from the puppet’s mouth and then rising. In the same moment Utakata dives, dodging another flight of kunai. No time for panic, even though there's an instinct to give in to it, no time for thoughts beyond the most indirect for the school behind him and what will happen if he loses control of this fight. He can't afford to let it spill over, can't risk an entire academy with most of Konoha's shinobi children within.

It’s less altruism and more practicality, no matter how much Utakata cares for those inside, but it still leaves him on the defensive, biding his time as he tries to find an opening. Just one puppet, rather than the hundreds they dealt with in the pass, but this one is stronger, with more chakra than just Sasori’s. And—

The ground shifts, just slightly.

With a curse that would make Master Harusame cuff him in the head, Utakata leaps as spikes of metal burst from the earth beneath him, summons a bubble, and redirects off of it, landing lightly on the far side of Sasori and calling a sweep of bubbles down to swarm the puppeteer. Sasori plants his feet, a wall of metal erupting in front of him, and even the detonation of three of Utakata's explosive bubbles one after the other doesn’t manage to dent it.

“You won't defeat me,” Sasori said, and it’s little consolation that he sounds less bored now than he did at the beginning of their fight. “This is my strongest puppet. In life he was the greatest of Suna’s Kazekage, and now he is my favorite piece of art, true art that will linger long into the future.”

Kurama had warned them about Sasori and his human puppets, back in Kiri before he left to destroy the Akatsuki base. Utakata had listened, of course, had memorized abilities and weaknesses because
he was the one left with the younger children, a final defense. Even so, there’s a whole world of
difference between second-hand knowledge and the immediate, chilling realization that he’s fighting
an animated corpse suspended on puppet strings, organs ripped out to make room for weaponry and
chakra systems carefully preserved.

People might laugh at a shinobi using bubbles to fight, but at least Utakata’s jutsus don’t rely on dead
bodies.

Utakata grits his teeth. There are traces of Sasori’s poison in the air, and he can feel his chakra rising,
shoving more force into his healing in order to keep up. His bubbles are mostly keeping it contained,
but if he’s knocked out, they’ll burst. Between the poison and the Iron Sand, which has its own dose
of poison in every microscopic grain, their battlefield is turning into a desolate killing ground, and
that’s not a happy thought with children so close.

He takes a careful breath, makes it measured and calm and even, and straightens. Another sweep of
bubbles curls around him, then scatters itself across the field between them, traps lying in wait. Sasori
eyes them narrowly, but before he can make a move to trigger them Utakata steps forward.

“You're fortunate,” he says, and it’s soft but it still carries. When Sasori’s expression shades towards
incomprehension, Utakata smiles wryly. “I heard that your parents were killed, and you have my
condolences, but at least you knew they loved you.”

Confusion is quickly darkening into hostility. “Don’t say useless things,” Sasori snaps. A faint twitch
of his fingers brings the Third Kazekage lurching back upright, Iron Sand rising to swirl around him
in a dark cloud.

“I don’t think it’s useless,” Utakata counters politely. Inwardly, he reaches for his bijuu, trying to
keep a stranglehold on his chakra to keep from giving the game away. “I grew up with a father, but I
think I was always a weapon to him, rather than a son. I suppose I’ll never truly know, but at least
you did.”

_Daddy and mommy issues like you wouldn’t believe_, was Kurama’s gruff assessment of Sasori. _I
don’t know how much good it will do you to make him lose his temper, but there's no harm in trying
if you've got jinchuuriki healing, I guess._

Utakata usually prefers more elegant solutions to his problems, but he’s short on options and even
shorter on time, so mental manipulation it is.

Lurking just beneath the surface, Saiken burbles an eager agreement, and Utakata can feel the bijuu’s
power rise like a tide through his veins. He takes a breath and lets it out, and it steams faintly in the
cool air. Another, and this time the wave of chakra crashes through him, spreading to every limb and
washing across his skin. Containing it is like trying to hold back the ocean, but Utakata clamps down
on his will, forces himself to steady, and doesn’t bother wishing he had more practice using Saiken’s
chakra. It’s too late for that.

Sasori makes a faint scoffing sound, and says bitingly, “Trying to use those games won’t have any
effect. My heart is just like this body—a piece of machinery and nothing more.”

“If it were, you wouldn’t need to bother saying that.” Utakata takes a step, judging distances and
how long the transformation will take, and pauses as close as he can risk coming. Now all he needs
is a split second of distraction on Sasori’s part. “What is it like, to have the memory of their love, and
waste it on actions like this?”

Something shifts at the very edge of his vision.
There's a pause, tense and careful, and then Sasori’s expression shifts into a small, sly smile, and he lifts his hands. For an instant the chakra threads shimmer into visibility before they vanish again, like a ripple of trapped lightning. “I've told you already that that won't work on me,” he says, and there's dark amusement in his voice. “My parents are dead, but I'm alive and I have no plans to die. Akatsuki allows me the freedom to build my puppets and indulge in my art, and no child will convince me to do otherwise.”

Well. It was worth a try, Utakata supposes. He doesn’t know enough about Sasori to say anything that will make him falter, and there's no use dragging things out and putting himself at a disadvantage.

“All right,” Utakata says, keeping his tone polite. There's no need to be rude, not yet. He twists his pipe through his fingers, then brings it to his lips again. “I'm sorry we can't work this out. You're a strong opponent, and it's a shame I have to kill you.”

Sasori’s eyes narrow, and the Kazekage puppet moves in a blur, poisoned sand sweeping up in a wave. Instantly, Utakata throws himself forward, flipping over the spikes, and breathes out bubbles filled with ink. They spiral through the air, a handful shattering on spikes of Iron Sand, but a flicker of chakra to drive the rest on sends then flying directly at Sasori.

The Kazekage catches them before they can hit, absorbs the explosion without flinching even as the ink-dark acid eats through his robes. A slew of needles forces Utakata down, leaping out of their path as they slam into the ground, but there are too many, too close together. He staggers a step, plants his feet and summons another bubble around himself to block them, and as it blooms into existence realizes his mistake.

The burst of Iron Sand swarms up from the ground, slicing through his robes to the skin beneath. Instantly the wounds begin to sear, and the pain is sudden and crippling enough to drive Utakata to his knees, a hoarse sound ripped from his throat despite the way his lungs have seized. He grasps desperately for control as his barrier shatters, trying to keep the poison-filled bubbles above from bursting, but his body jerks like it’s about to convulse and the taste of metal floods his mouth. Gagging, he tries to stagger back to his feet, to keep from coughing, but it hurts. It hurts more than anything he can ever remember, even when they first sealed Saiken into him.

Utakata! Saiken cries, sounding frantic. Utakata, stop fighting it! It's metals and poisons and I'm trying to get rid of it!

Metals. Metal in the poison, which makes sense given Sasori’s obsession with the Kazekage—that’s likely where he got the idea in the first place. Utakata lets his knees fold again, hits the ground hard and chokes up the bitter, acidic tang that splatters black and viscous from his mouth. His vision swims, and even though his body feels unnaturally hot he can feel the seep of blood from far too much of his skin to be anywhere close to healthy.

“My apologies for making you wait,” Sasori says from somewhere above him. “I decided to end this quickly and complete my mission. In several years you might have made an interesting opponent, and a valuable addition to my collection.” A pause like he’s considering, and then a thoughtful sound. “Perhaps once Madara finishes with you I will be allowed to repurpose your body.”

Saiken, Utakata thinks, and the power is still there, still waiting, but he’s too slow at using it, unpracticed. All of Sasori’s attention is on them, and there's no opening—

I know, the slug answers, fluttery with worry and tension. I know, but we can—

A shadow falls across him, and a familiar voice, trembling ever so faintly, warns, “Don’t even think
about it!” Something drops to the ground, and Utakata has just enough time to catch sight of a strip of paper marked with seals before it starts to glow.

Iruka flashes through hand signs with startling deftness, and cries, “Fūbaku hōjin!”

The seals crackle to life, brilliant gold even in the morning sun, and Sasori makes a sound of outrage, already fighting the barrier’s hold. Utakata knows those seals, knows this formation, and he’s not about to question his luck. He grabs for Saiken’s power and drags it to the surface, staggering upright with an effort, and this change is no more pleasant than the poison. The chakra is corrosive and unstoppable, sweeping over him, and he cries out as he staggers, but—

Pale blue light spreads over his body, condenses and firms into flesh, and Utakata takes a mental step back as Saiken slides into place in his stead. There’s a sensation like a gentle fall, even as Saiken calls up a flood of chakra, and he takes a step into a quiet clearing, empty and still.

With a low groan, Utakata slumps against the bole of a massive tree, just barely hanging on to the bark to stay on his feet, and lets his focus shift sideways until he can see what’s happening outside the mental plane. His head is spinning and he still hurts all over, but there’s a bubble in his chest that’s pure success and joy. It may have been a last, desperate measure, but it worked, and now Saiken won’t have to be constrained by Utakata’s limits. Utakata spent far too much time closing his ears and strangling his power under Master Harusame’s direction, and while he’s grateful to the man for his jutsu, for his knowledge of medicines and seals, that reserve is his greatest weakness right now.

Saiken, though, is managing just fine.

Relieved, Utakata lets himself slip all the way to the ground, legs giving out under him. Saiken can hold his bubble jutsu without struggle, tied into Utakata’s chakra system as he is, and one shinobi, no matter how powerful, will hardly be trouble for a bijuu.

He coughs, tasting metal again, and grimaces even as he lets his head fall to rest against the tree. Blood slides down the side of his face, and when he goes to brush it away his vision swims, his awareness of the outside world fading. For a moment, he tries to fight the pull of darkness, the heavy immobility of his limbs, but Saiken sends a wave of cool, soothing chakra washing over him, edged with reassurance.

All Utakata can manage is a flicker of thankfulness before he lets his eyes slip shut.

Trust, he thinks, it’s the strangest thing in the world to give so easily to a monster he spent his entire childhood being taught to fear.

But Utakata is tired of not trusting, tired of being afraid of himself. He throws open all restraints on his chakra, lets Saiken have every bit of it and gives up all control, and—

It feels, a little, as if all of his strings have finally been cut.

Kurama fucking hates Kamui.

And Obito too while he’s on the subject.

With a furious snarl, he wrenches the kunai out of his shoulder, feels the gaping lack where his
chakra should be rising to heal the wound, and staggers a step. The water sloshes around his knees, retreating as Kisame releases his jutsu, but that's hardly a relief given the situation.

“Fucking bastard,” he snarls at the blank white mask that’s turned towards him, though the man behind it is unmoving.

Kisame laughs, deep and rumbling and incredibly amused, and looks Obito over with a grin. “Hey, boss. Seems like you're feeling better.”

Obito raises a hand, flexing his fingers, and tips his head, faintly mocking. “You aren’t the only one who can use seals,” he says to Kurama, and there's a thread of cool interest in his tone. “Though that seal is meant to contain a bijuu. I'm surprised you're still breathing. That’s interesting.”

A chill slides down Kurama’s spine, because if there's one person in the world he doesn’t want to know what he is, it’s Obito. He doesn’t try to answer, just snarls and hurls himself forward to slash at the Uchiha with his claws, but he doesn’t even score cloth. Obito shifts into intangibility, and it’s an unpleasant reminder that even Minato wasn’t consistently able to hit him, despite using the Hiraishin. It’s not enough to deter Kurama, though; he pivots sharply, sweeps a leg at Obito's feet, then flips over his head and slams bodily into Kisame, nails latching onto skin. Kisame yelps, swinging Samehada to bat him away, and Kurama goes low, flips the kunai Obito stabbed him with around in his hand, and slices a deep cut across the back of Kisame's leg as he moves. With a grunt of tightly controlled pain, Kisame goes down, even as he swings Samehada hard.

About the only upside to a blade that big is the fact that it’s easy to see coming. Kurama leaps up, too heavy and clumsy without the edge of chakra that’s usually in all of his movements, but Naruto's muscle memory is good for something. He ducks his head, flips over the scaled sword, and lands on the balls of his feet as he spins to avoid Obito's flight of kunai. The Uchiha blurs out of sight, and without his ability to sense malice Kurama can't say whether that motion was speed or Kamui. He doesn’t wait around to find out, but bolts for the door. There's no use staying to fight when he can just barely manage what a baseline human can—the damned seal on his chest needs to come off, and now, and then he’ll turn right back around and pummel Obito into the ground.

Except—

There's a gasp behind him as the water washes away and Kakashi surfaces, Kisame's broken jutsu leaving the floor where it should be again. He staggers upright, Aoba over one shoulder and an arm around Genma's waist, both of the tokujo limp in his grasp, and he’s at the far end of the cavern with Obito and Kisame between him and the door. Maybe, maybe he can get out before they stop him, but since it’s Obito the chances are slim at best.

Sage, but living was so much easier before Kurama got infected by Naruto's caring.

He pivots in place just as Obito reappears, hatefully familiar gunbai in one hand, and it’s mostly luck that the fan skims past his head, almost clipping his ear his it passes. With a curse, Kurama dives to the side, tries to grab for any wisp of chakra, any power at all, but there’s nothing. There's not even a trace that he can feed to overpower the damned seal, nothing to corrupt or change. Just emptiness, and it’s even more disconcerting than that first moment alone in his body after a hundred years spent as a passenger.

It really is a seal meant to hold a bijuu, and even if Obito didn’t fully know what he was doing when he burned it into Kurama’s skin, he’s still a clever asshole with far too much luck.

He grabs the chain as Obito hauls the gunbai back, wraps it around his arm and leaps to the side with a sharp wrench, and Obito moves a step. It’s not much of a victory, but it shifts his feet, and Kurama
dives beneath a warp of air that spits out kunai, slides feet-first across the stone and jerks the chain to make Obito stagger. Another step, aborted and heavy, and—

Kakashi drops down behind Obito, flipping his tantō over, and drives it into Obito's spine.

“About time,” Kurama growls, rolling to his feet. He lunges sideways to grab the fan end of the gunbai, flips it up like a shield, and catches the crash of Samehada’s blade against it, gritting his teeth to keep from staggering.

Obito snarls, dragging himself forward and off of the blade. The wound fills with white ooze that hardens into skin, healed in an instant, and he spins to face Kakashi with a laugh that’s bordering on mad. “You missed,” he taunts.

Kakashi eyes him. “No,” he says mildly, with only the barest edge of irritation. “I can safely say I hit what I was aiming for, and anyone else would have felt that.”

With a snort, Kurama shoves the gunbai forward, all of his body weight behind it, and forces Kisame to give him room. He darts away from the next swing, rolls away from a water jutsu, but—

This isn’t going to win them the fight. Kurama needs his chakra if he’s going to have a chance against either one of them.

It grates. Obito is right here, won’t have an easy exit if they can stop him from using fucking Kamui again, and even one bijūdama would be enough—

Obito slides between Kurama and Kisame in a whirl of black cloak, and fire sparks. Kurama curses and drops, a massive gout of flames pouring over his head, and grabs for Obito’s ankle. It’s not a shockwave, but it scores flesh, makes Obito leap back as Kurama comes to his feet, breathing hard.


“A setback,” Obito says coldly, calling the gunbai back to him with a jerk of one wrist. “But I’m more interested in you, Uzumaki. The list of things that you shouldn’t know keeps getting longer.”

Fuck. Just about the last thing Kurama wants is an interested criminal mastermind. He bares his teeth, weighing options, but Kakashi is darting around Kisame to keep his attention, and no help is forthcoming from that side. “I’m nosy, what the fuck is it to you?”

That gets him a low, fractured laugh, threaded through with fury. “Absolutely nothing. This world is going to change whether you like it or not, Uzumaki. Are you sure you don’t want to be on the right side?”

Kurama growls, stopping dead as his hands curl into fists. “Right side? Do you even know what the hell this is all about, you moron?”

Sharingan eyes narrow faintly. “The Eye of the Moon—”

A laugh cracks out of Kurama, rough and derisive and full of loathing. “Fuck you and your naivety. Fuck Madara too, while we’re at it. That plan you’re so devoted to is just a smokescreen. You’re being used. Sage, you’re the biggest pawn in this entire game. Madara set all of this up, and Zetsu set him up. Have you really never noticed?”

Obito pauses, hesitates. His step falters, but before Kurama can take advantage of the opening he turns, facing Kurama squarely. “Explain,” he growls.
Sage, this is the worst idea. But Kurama isn’t Naruto—there’s no way he could talk Obito around, even if he could perfectly recreate the circumstances of the last fight. No way to fight him to a halt without Kakashi’s Kamui at full strength, and that’s still ten years away. But maybe Kurama can just... give him another target.

(This is absolutely Kurama’s dumbest idea ever and he is going to blame Naruto from now until he dies, because clearly he’s been infected.)

Kurama snorts, makes a show of rocking back on his heels like he couldn’t care less about this conversation. “What, things in your life just happen like that? Madara just happens to rescue you from where you’re buried under a shit ton of rocks? It just happens that the one time you can leave the cave, you’re exactly in time to watch your best friend get murdered by your other friend? And here I thought you were good at that twisty thinking.”

Obito is perfectly, completely still. “Kiri killed Rin,” he says, flat and icy. “Kakashi killed Rin.”

“Those Kiri nin were being controlled,” Kurama counters, and he can almost see the cracks forming in Obito’s façade. It’s entirely too satisfying. “Madara was controlling them, and Zetsu got you there just in time to see the trap. You were planning to go back to Konoha until then, weren’t you? Too bad that didn’t fit with Madara's plans. Rin died because Madara wanted you.”

In retrospect, probably not the best wording he could have used. The gunbai whips around, almost too fast to follow, and Kurama leaps back but it’s not fast enough. He’s slammed into the cavern wall hard enough to make his vision black out, collapses in a heap and can’t quite manage to get his feet under him before there’s a whirling vortex of fire spilling into the air around him. Without chakra, there’s no way to absorb it, and Kurama scrambles out of the way, head spinning and vision wavering. Blood trickles down the back of his neck, not healing, and he’s too slow and clumsy.

A hand with black-painted nails catches him around the throat, crushingly tight, and slams him into the stone. Instantly, Kurama snarls, twists his body up, and kicks Obito in the face.

“Kurama!” Kakashi shouts, even as the Uchiha goes reeling back, and Kurama wheezes in a breath, turns, and catches the tantō Kakashi throws to him. A vague salute is as much as he can manage in thanks, but Kakashi is focused on Kisame again, pulling out a kunai and whirling back.

Kurama isn’t a swordsman the way Sasuke was, or Kakashi is. But Kushina was, and he has echoes of those memories, katas preformed day after day for all the years he was tied to her. He sets his feet, brings the blade up, and lunges under a flight of kunai, aiming for Obito’s throat.

The bastard turns intangible, and Kurama stumbles as he passes through his form, almost falling.

Sage, he fucking hates Kamui.

A duck and roll lets the gunbai’s next pass whistle over his head, and Kurama twists, rolls, and brings the sword up as the fan comes down, the full force of Obito’s weight behind it. The impact makes Kurama grunt, muscles straining as he tries to force it away, but he’s at a disadvantage with angle and strength. Above him, crimson and black eyes are spinning, and Kurama wrenches his gaze away, closing his eyes.

“How long do you think you can hold out?” Obito growls, and there's a note of savage satisfaction in it that makes it a taunt. “Until Kisame kills Kakashi? Until Sasori slips into the Academy and takes those children you’ve been protecting so carefully? Until Konan frees Nagato and they level Konoha between them?”
For one breathless, aching moment, Kurama’s heart entirely ceases to beat.

No.

He snarls, but it’s desperate and he knows it. “Leave them the fuck alone! Whatever pathetic plan you think you have—”

“Zetsu,” Obito continues like he isn’t even listening, and it sounds hateful in a way Kurama hasn’t heard from him since he and Kakashi fought each other in the obsolete timeline. “He’ll be watching—he’s always watching. If anything that you’re saying is true…”

He doesn’t finish the thought, but it’s still enough to spark a flash of anger in Kurama’s chest. “And you really think I’m going to let you kidnap those kids?” he growls. “Fuck you, I’m going to tear your damned throat out—”

“No,” Obito says. “You won’t.”

In an instant, the gunbai is gone. Strong hands grab Kurama’s wrists even as he comes up ready to rip through flesh, jerk him sideways and slam him bodily into the wall again, and Kurama grunts as all the air is forced from his lungs. He can feel something creeping over his legs, his arms, vines as thick around as his bicep curling over him to hold him in place, and it gives him a flash of the Freak Squad facing him in the forest. Gives him a flash of Tenzō, and Shisui’s eyes turning crimson, and Kurama’s blood goes cold as he realizes what’s about to happen.

“No!” he snarls, trying to thrash away, but the Mokuton is too tight, unyielding.

Kurama feels hands on his face, framing his eyes, and Obito's voice full of low, rough menace as he growls, “Open your eyes.”

The terror is a mad thing, wild and desperate and strong enough to completely block out all sense. Kurama lunges forward, ready to bite Obito’s throat out if he has no other options, but a hand fists in his hair and slams his head back against the stone with a harsh crack. The cry is torn from Kurama’s throat, stars bursting into blinding brilliance against the darkness as pain explodes, and his eyes fly open of their own volition.

Red and black catches his gaze, spinning lazily, and the light in them is too bitter for triumph.

“I'm going to save this world,” Obito says, quiet and full of aching, blistering fury. “And you’re going to help me.”

The world blurs, and the last thing Kurama hears before everything fades is Kakashi’s desperate cry.

Sage, is his last thought. Please.

Not again.
LXX: Lethiferous

Chapter Notes

Cliffhanger warning again! This one is arguably worse than the last one, oops. I was going to save it for next week, but Holly convinced me to be mean. :D

[lethiferous /ˈlɛθɪfərəs/, deadly; bringing death or destruction; bearing death. From Latin lethifer, lethifer from letum “death” + -fer (-ferous) + English -ous.]

It’s been a very, very long time since the force of chakra alone knocked Shikaku off his feet. The last time, he thinks, was in the Third War, when his battalion was caught in an ambush and Minato saved them. He’d been tired and on the edge of chakra exhaustion, and the sudden appearance of the Yondaime had made him stagger and trip and fall to his knees.

This is absolutely nothing like that.

Instead of a sudden starburst of impact that vanishes quickly, this is the weight of gravity reasserting itself, collapsing down on top of him and making his knees buckle with the force of it. There’s an edge of corrosion to it, a stinging bite like acid against his skin that’s half-buried under a wash of cool, clear chakra, like high-up winds or deep water. Pale blue light flickers across the Hokage’s office, casting dancing shadows even in the brightness of morning, and then steadies. From somewhere close, practically right below them, there’s a startled cry, and the chakra blazes again, more controlled and even stronger.

Shikaku takes half a second to assess his immediate surroundings—Sarutobi is behind the desk, Tsume caught between Shibi and Hiashi as they hold her up, Fugaku on Hiashi’s other side keeping the Hyuuga Clan Head on his feet. Choza has Inoichi, the Yamanaka pale like he’s about to faint again, but everyone’s still conscious, so Shikaku gets his feet under him and pushes up, staggers a step, and practically throws himself at the window to see what’s happening below.

There’s a bijuu in the street.

There’s a bijuu in the street, facing off against a redhead in an Akatsuki cloak, one of the Academy teachers scrambling out of the way as a seal barrier goes dark. Shikaku’s breath catches in his throat, because he remembers all too well what the last rampaging bijuu cost Konoha—two of his good friends, countless shinobi lives, years of rebuilding and pain—and—

“We have to get down there and help!” Tsume says, and Kuromaru rumbles his agreement.

The children in the Academy. Of course. And since an alarm is sounding from the direction of the Barrier Division, it’s safe to say the redhead isn’t the only one to get through the protections on Konoha.

Damn it. Shikaku isn’t prepared to deal with situations this troublesome.

But he has to, because he’s Jounin Commander. Because Minato appointed him, and he swore when he first took up his hitai-ate to always protect Konoha, and his son is down there, right in the line of
“You, Hiashi, and Shibi will be needed elsewhere,” he corrects grimly. “Head towards the prison and make sure Pein stays locked up. If he’s escaped already, track him down and call for backup. Fugaku, the Military Police. Choza and I will contain—”

“All three of us will contain that fight,” Inoichi puts in, flatly, and before Shikaku can even open his mouth to argue he’s pushing out of Choza’s hold and heading for the door at a loping run. Shikaku curses, turning to head after him, and then pulls up short and looks at the Hokage.

Sarutobi’s expression was grim before, when Shikaku brought up Root, though they hadn’t managed to advance the conversation much further than the opening. Now it’s dark and weary in equal measure, and when he feels Shikaku’s eyes on him Sarutobi looks up with a faint smile that has nothing left in it of humor.

“Go,” the Sandaime says quietly. “I believe you are needed. As am I.”

A part of Shikaku wants to hesitate, to doubt. He remembers the desperate way Shibi gripped Torune, the grief and joy in Inoichi’s eyes when Fuu woke up. Thinks of Sarutobi knowing, and Danzō having permission to take their children, but—

But for all his faults—maybe because of them—Sarutobi is the Sandaime, the God of Shinobi, and still their Hokage. Shikaku nods once, short and sharp, and gets a hand on the windowsill. He vaults out, a touch of chakra cushioning his landing, and straightens up as his teammates burst out of the building.

In the same moment, there’s a scream, high and shrill, from within the Academy.

A glance at Shikaku is all Choza needs to know the path of his thoughts, and the man nods.

“Inoichi,” he says, and for once in his life Inoichi doesn’t argue, just shoots Shikaku a look that warns him to stay safe and follows Choza at a run.

Which leaves Shikaku with the bijuu and the missing-nin. Fabulous.

“Troublesome,” Shikaku mutters, and takes a long, swift leap to snatch the Academy teacher—Iruka, sometimes the Hokage’s assistant and one of Kakashi’s friends, of course he doesn’t have the sense to retreat—out of the way of a spray of black sand. A bubble instantly snaps into place around it, then rockets skyward to join the mass high above them, and the Rokubi makes an angry sound and opens its mouth. A cloud of bubbling ooze surges across the earth, and the redhead darts back, that same black sand snapping up in a wall as another man drops down between them.

Shikaku takes one look at him and curses, dragging Iruka back another three steps.

“Want to tell me what the hell the Sandaime Kazekage is doing here?” he demands. “He was supposed to have died ten years ago!”

Now that he has a moment, though, it’s easy enough to pick out the slashed Suna hitai-ate the redhead boy is wearing, the careful movements of his fingers even though what have to be chakra strings are entirely invisible. A puppeteer, clearly, and one with a penchant for controlling human—and probably dead—bodies. It’s enough to spark recognition, would be even if Shikaku hadn’t heard the name from Kurama already.

Sasori of the Red Sand. Because this day didn’t have enough excitement already.

“IT’s poison!” is all Iruka manages to get out as he finds his feet, scrambling back upright. He’s pale
and shaking with more than just adrenaline, but his eyes flicker between the bijuu and the missing-nin with a care that says he’s looking for an opening, not a way to escape. “The sand is poison, and so is the gas. Utakata was trapping it, but—”

But Utakata clearly isn’t here right now, Shikaku thinks grimly, watching as the Rokubi’s acid eats through the Kazekage’s black sand. He casts a wary glance up at the bubbles above them. “The Rokubi took him over?”

“He was hurt,” Iruka says, partway between defensive and worried. “He—Sasori got him, and he was coughing up blood. I think…”

He doesn’t finish, but he doesn’t have to. Shikaku knows the many ways a jinchuuriki’s seal can break, and if the Rokubi took advantage while Utakata was in pain, he could have easily overwhelmed the boy.

Shikaku takes a breath. “We need to contain them both,” he says, opens his mouth to ask Iruka to find the other Kage as backup, loses the thought on a desperate shout. Black sand stabs at them like lances, sharp and too swift to stop, and Shikaku jerks back, already knowing he’s going to be too slow, too late. A hand on Iruka’s arm, ready to throw the chuunin out of the way with the last moment he has, and—

“No!” the bijuu cries, high and something close to desperate as it moves far faster than a creature of its bulk should be able to. Three tails curl around Iruka and Shikaku, shielding them, and as he ducks Shikaku can see the spray of Iron Sand shatter against the Rokubi’s slimy skin. There’s another loud hiss of acid and a gout of smoke, and the Rokubi makes a sound that’s almost mournful.

“You're making me kill the trees!” it berates Sasori. “Utakata didn’t want to break things, he likes it here! You're being careless!”

Shikaku blinks, absolutely certain he heard that wrong. He casts an assessing glance at Iruka to see if his auditory hallucination has carried over, and apparently it has, because Iruka looks wide-eyed and equally disbelieving.

“What,” Shikaku asks, entirely at a loss.

The rampaging monster he’d been absolutely certain was going to wreck Konoha withdraws its tails, sliding forward to loom over the puppeteer. “We’re going to stop you,” it says, and that voice is still incongruously light and almost bubbly, but there’s an edge to it that feels like deep, vast anger and a fractured glimpse of the drowning darkness in the deepest parts of the ocean. “Kurama told us what you want, and the Sage’s mother can’t come back. We won’t let her. This is our world now, not hers.”

It’s little comfort that for a brief moment Sasori looks just as baffled as Shikaku feels. “We are Akatsuki,” he says, eyes narrowing slightly, as if he thinks the Rokubi has mistaken him for someone else.

The slug burbles, faintly sad. “You're pawns,” it corrects. “Just like that body is your puppet, you're the princess’s puppet. Utakata sees it, too. You hurt him, but he still pities you. And so do I. But I've been me for a thousand years now—I don’t want to go back to being the Juubi, and none of the others do, either.”

That is…a lot more reasoning and calm than the Kyuubi ever showed when it attacked Konoha, and a hell of a lot more regard for its host as well. Shikaku pauses, calculating odds, and…maybe. Maybe it’s possible that the slug is genuine in this. It certainly didn’t need to protect them the way it did.
Taking a breath, he shapes the Rat Seal, then the Bird Seal, and focuses. His shadow is touching the edge of the Rokubi’s, and the bijuu’s shadow is more than large enough to make this work. Another moment, judging the extent of the shadows with a thought, and—

A whirlwind of shadows sweeps up, streaks of darkness winding tight around each of Sasori’s limbs, and the puppeteer snarls as the Kazekage puppet jerks but doesn’t manage more than a lurching step. “Take him out!” Shikaku orders, drags Iruka’s shadow into the jutsu and doubles down. He lived through the Third War, fought Suna’s puppeteers in far larger numbers than just one lone shinobi, no matter how brilliant, and there’s no reason the techniques he, Inoichi, and Choza developed in those battles won’t work here and now, even with a more unconventional ally.

Thankfully, the Rokubi doesn’t even hesitate. Thick white goo, far less innocuous than the sticky substance splattered across Konoha after the jinchuuriki’s game of tag, sweeps over the street, hissing and frothing. It slams into the puppet, which collapses with a groan of straining metal and wood, and subsumes it completely as it races forward. Shikaku feels Sasori start to struggle, pours more chakra into the Shadow Stitching jutsu, and doesn’t allow himself to look away, braced for the gut-churning reek of dissolving flesh and—

Metal warps, wood breaks, and with a scream that’s full of aching fury and bone-deep terror Sasori collapses, hollowed-out limbs giving way, torso filled with weapons buckling. Chakra threads wink out of existence, and with a low, rattling hiss the Rokubi’s acid swallows Sasori completely.

Into the silence, Iruka makes a quiet sound, stepping forward like he’s going to bolt across the field of poison and acid without care. “Utakata?” he says, and it shakes a little, but he doesn’t waver even when the Rokubi turns to look at him, eye-stalks swaying.

There’s a pause, and then the Rokubi burbles again, this time filled with humor and light cheer. It slides forward, leaning down almost double to look Iruka in the face, and whatever expression it’s making, Shikaku gets the feeling it’s meant to be a smile.

“Hello!” it says, friendly and warm. “Utakata was very worried about you, but he was happy you saved him, too!”

Iruka looks a little like he’s about to faint, but he manages a slightly weak smile in return. “Is—is he okay?”

The Rokubi pauses for a long moment. “I can’t go back yet,” it says, a little mournful, and casts a glance up at the field of bubbles in the sky. “Can you make a sealing scroll? He’s unconscious, and if I stop holding the jutsu it will be bad.”

“I can do that,” Iruka agrees instantly, and starts digging through the pockets of his flak jacket with nearly-frantic hurry.

How troublesome, Shikaku thinks, eyeing the spectacle of chuunin and bijuu, and pulls a blank scroll and a bottle of ink out of his weapons pouches. “Here,” he offers, waving them at Iruka. “You probably know the seals better than I do.”

Iruka flushes, but doesn’t argue. Most shinobi tend to buy pre-made scrolls for convenience, while Iruka has to teach the diagram to children extensively. It only takes him a moment to sketch the seals onto the scroll, and he sets it on the ground, adds a touch of chakra, and steps back.

In a wave of iridescent light, the bubbles sweep down, pouring into the scroll to leave the sky clear.
The lines of the seal shimmer gold for a moment, then settle into black, and the scroll re-furls itself with a snap, rolling several feet to come to a stop by Iruka’s sandals. The chuunin isn’t even looking, though; his eyes are on the Rokubi’s bulk as it starts to glow cool blue, then fades out like mist disappearing before the sun. The image of the slug vanishes, and in its place a teenager in a tattered blue yukata and an entirely incongruous flower crown collapses to the ground, bloody and breathing unsteadily.

“Utakata!” Iruka cries, and before Shikaku can catch ahold of him he’s scrambling around the dispersing pools of acid to drop to his knees beside the jinchuuriki. His hands hover for a moment, as if he’s not sure where he can touch, but a faint sound of pain and a flicker of amber eyes between dark lashes has him moving again, pulling the jinchuuriki’s arm over his shoulder and wrapping his own arm around Utakata's waist. He heaves them both mostly upright, Utakata limp against his side, and winces when the motion drags another whimper from the jinchuuriki.

Even so, before his eyes are even fully open, Utakata rasps, “You’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” Iruka tells him. “We have to get you to the hospital, Tsunade-sama will—”

Utakata shakes his head. “The others—the children. More puppets—”

Shikaku takes one look back at the Academy, and he’s not a sensor the way Inoichi is, but even he can tell there’s no fighting going on. “Sasori is dead,” he says, which is probably one of the larger understatements of his life. “The Academy is safe. But Iruka is right; if your bijuu hasn’t managed to heal you yet, I think you need a medic’s help.”

The stubbornness that slides over Utakata's expression is something Shikaku has seen on every young shinobi still unaware or uncaring of their limits in the face of teammates still in danger. “No, I can’t—Kurama needs help. I can’t feel him anymore, and he was fighting, but.” He tries to take a step away from Iruka, but his knees buckle instantly, and he collapses back against the chuunin’s side with a sound that’s equal parts frustration and grief.

“Take him to the hospital,” Shikaku orders Iruka, rolling his eyes. “I’ll find the older jinchuuriki and send them after Uzumaki.”

“Yes sir.” Iruka gives him a grateful nod, takes a staggering step, and then finds his balance with another shinobi almost his size dragging like dead-weight. Utakata doesn’t manage much as he coughs hard enough to shake his whole frame, still clearly suffering from Sasori’s poison, but they round the corner without falling and disappear from sight.

Shikaku watches them go, then takes a breath and scoops up the scroll, tucking it away gingerly. There are footsteps behind him, and without turning to looks he asks, “Everyone all right?”

“We stopped the puppets in the hallway,” Choza answers as his shadow falls over Shikaku, and his voice is steady. “You took out the puppeteer before they could make a nuisance of themselves, though. What a drag.”

“I thought we were done with puppeteers after the war,” Inoichi complains, stopping at Shikaku’s shoulder. “How troublesome.”

Shikaku rolls his eyes at his best friends, glancing back. “The kids?” he asks.

Inoichi smiles a little. “The two jinchuuriki girls barricaded all of the younger classes in the practice hall and armed the upper class and teachers to stand guard. They’re fine, but we left them where they are.”
“They’ll be safe with that kind of firepower looking out for them,” Choza agrees. “Where to next?”

Shikaku frowns, considering. If Inoichi was at full strength, he’d take them after Kurama, because the idea of an Uzumaki—and, apparently, a tenth jinchuuriki, though as far as Shikaku is aware Kurama hasn’t confirmed the rumor yet—in severe enough trouble that Utakata was desperate to get to him isn’t overly comforting. But Inoichi is still on the edge of chakra exhaustion, and while Shikaku and Choza can fight without him, they’ll be cutting their power by a third if they try. Even low on chakra, Inoichi is a crafty bastard, and a sensor to boot.

“Everyone is going to be fighting blindly,” he says grimly, casting a glance over the streets before them. The alarm bells mean civilians are scattering, headed for the shelters reinforced with the Nidaime’s seals, so that takes care of at least one problem. The shinobi are another matter, especially with so many foreign squads in the village. Especially with so many Kage, who are an asset as long as they work together, but a stumbling block if they won’t.

A hundred years of competition and war has Shikaku falling on the side of won’t.

“I could—” Inoichi starts.

“No,” Shikaku and Choza chorus, already more than able to guess what he’s going to suggest.

At Inoichi’s glare, Shikaku rolls his eyes. “The Mind-Body Transmission jutsu only lasts ten seconds before you start bleeding out of the nose, idiot. I need more time than that. We should get to somewhere central and start organizing squads for defense.”

“The Jounin Standby Station,” Choza suggests. “Since the Hokage is here, that’s the next most likely place people will gather.”

It’s not perfect, but at least it’s something. Shikaku nods, grabs Inoichi, and calls up a shunshin, vanishing in a swirl of leaves.

It’s possible Konan could have thought this out a little more thoroughly.

“Konan,” Jiraiya says, equal parts grim and tired as he watches her. “Come on. Let him go and I’ll take you back inside, and we can work all of this out later.”

Konan glares at him, fury rising as cold as arctic winds, and doesn’t allow her grip on Nagato to waver. He can’t walk, can’t use his chakra with the way it’s sealed, and the grim slant to his mouth says he knows just how dire things are for them right now.

Changing the world is a dream, something to cling to on long, dark nights, but right now Konan would settle for getting back to Ame. Getting back home.

Braced behind Jiraiya, Kushina and Yagura are both watching them with faintly hostile expressions, anger in the lines of their bodies and chakra sparking around them. Both of them have their reasons to be angry, to hate Nagato and Madara and all of Akatsuki, but Konan wonders if they’ve realized how much she loathes them in return. The Great Nations were responsible for so much of what she and Nagato and Yahiko suffered, and now they’re watching their hopes crumble for a third time, lost to the force of a wayward Uzumaki who thinks a handful of children and tailed beasts matter more than an end of wars.
“You lost any right you had to use that tone with us years ago,” Konan bites out, feels her fingernails dent cloth where she’s holding Nagato’s arm over her shoulders and forces herself to breathe out. “You left, sensei, and you never even looked for us.”

Jiraiya’s faint flinch is all too visible. “I thought you were dead, Konan,” he counters.

It would make Konan laugh if she were an ounce less furious. “And I thought you were a spymaster,” she retorts, and her tone is more cutting than she intended but she doesn’t regret it. “But once you’d written us off we were nothing to you. We should have known, with how you left your team so easily in the first place.”

Anger flickers in dark eyes, just a momentary spark. She remembers Jiraiya’s abilities well enough to feel a dart of fear, but she’s not a little girl folding paper flowers and dreaming of the past anymore. She’s a kunoichi, she’s Akatsuki, and she won’t let him stop her.

(Shes remembers Hanzō, the confrontation in the rain. Remembers helplessness as Yahiko committed suicide and Nagato crippled himself, all to save her, and grits her teeth. She’ll never allow herself to be helpless again.)

A breath in, and she lets it out with a rush of chakra laced through it, will and intent rising. The top layer of paper over her skin separates, swirls up and around as more pieces from her weapons pouch join it, and she shapes a seal with her free hand. The papers twist in on themselves, reform into clones and shuriken and explosive tags, and in the confusion of their sweeping dance Konan leaps back, casts a genjutsu reinforced with origami, and drags Nagato back around the side of the detention center.

“The others?” Nagato manages, letting her shift him to lean against the wall as she stoops to study the seal that’s spread across his body like fractured bands.

“Sasori went after the youngest jinchuuriki, and Madara went to collect Kisame,” she answers, most of her attention on the faint memory of seeing this seal before. At Hōzuki Castle, she thinks, and glances up. “Is it draining you? Reaching for chakra hurts?”

Nagato nods, purple eyes flickering from her to the sounds of fighting around the corner. “Like fire.”

The Heavenly Prison binding technique. That, at least, is one Konan knows how to break, which makes this the first spot of good luck in a string of very bad days.

“Hold still,” she orders, and calls a sweep of water out of the air around them, molding it over the lines of the seal and holding it there as she pours chakra into the jutsu. Jiraiya was likely the one to place it, judging by the strength of the technique, but Konan has desperation on her side. She can feel the moment that it gives, cracking with a burst of heat that makes Nagato wince, and lets the water drop to the ground with a relieved breath.

Nagato flexes his fingers, then raises his hand. Chakra sparks, sharp-edged and warm, and Konan can’t suppress a small smile. “We should—”

“They took Yahiko’s body.”

Her breath catches in her throat. Of course they did. What hasn’t Konoha taken from them at this point? She meets Nagato’s grim eyes, sees the echo of her own feelings there, and hesitates for a long moment before she nods. They’ll get Yahiko back. Konoha doesn’t deserve to be his resting place. Not after they were the ones who helped kill him.

“Jiraiya-sensei will know where he is,” she offers, and Nagato makes a sound of quiet agreement. He
holds out his hands, and Konan takes them in a tight grip, dragging him up to loop his arm over her shoulders again. It's lucky that he's only an inch or so taller than her, and weighs even less, or fighting like this would be out of the question. As it is, she staggers a step before steadying, turns towards the side alley—

Golden chains burst into the air, thrumming with levels of chakra nearly on par with a jinchuuriki, and Konan leaps back, but not quickly enough. They twist around Nagato, dragging him out of Konan's grasp, and she cries out as he's hauled back towards Kushina.

“You're not going to get away with invading my village, you know!” Kushina says fiercely, sliding her katana out of its sheath with her free hand. Her red hair is a cloud of blood around her as she braces herself, one last pull of her Chains wrenching Nagato out of reach—

Blue chakra sparks, covering Nagato’s body with a ripple of power, and like watching time run in reverse his body starts to fill out, wasted muscle rebuilding itself, the holes where the chakra receiving rods stabbed through his body filling out again. He gasps out a sound of pain, even as the Chains flicker out of existence, and collapses to the ground, breathing hard.

“Nagato!” Konan cries, and raises her hands. In an instant, the air is whirling with origami weapons, driving Kushina back even as she snarls, and Konan drives forward, throwing herself between Nagato and the other kunoichi. Jiraiya is behind Kushina, Yagura still in the street and fending off her paper clones, but Konan doesn’t hesitate. She brings every last one of the weapons around her to bear, hurls them at the other nin with all the force of her chakra behind them, and stoops to drag Nagato back over her shoulder.

As they rise, he gets his feet under him and stands under his own power for the first time in seven years.

“Nagato,” Konan whispers, torn between wild disbelief and a flare of hope like she hasn’t felt since Yahiko died.

Nagato's Rinnegan eyes are wide as he stares down at his hands, no longer emaciated and showing every bone too clearly. “I'd forgotten,” he says, and there's something in his voice like awe, like wonder and joy and grief all tangled up together. “It’s been so long since I split my powers that I’d forgotten what it feels like to have them all so close. So strong.” Glancing up, he meets Konan's startled gaze and smiles for the first time since Yahiko's death. “Konan, I can feel him. He's close.”

“Yahiko’s body?” Konan catches a flash of movement and leaps aside, whirling Nagato behind her and calling more paper out of her skin. It blurs into a tornado around them, then lashes forward, folding into shuriken and spears as it flies. Jiraiya curses and dodges, a gout of fire attempting to knock the weapons aside. Konan reinforced her origami long ago, though—Konoha is known for its Katon users, after all—and there's no effect.

Slender fingers catch her wrist, pulling her around to look at her partner, and with a blaze like hope in his eyes Nagato says, “Not just his body.”

Konan's heart trips over itself, breath tangling up in her throat, and she smiles in return. She pushes Nagato back to let him brace himself against the building, and then steps away. Easy enough, with those words ringing in her head, to summon every last bit of the chakra she usually holds in reserve, to bring it sweeping up around her with a wave of paper spinning through the air. “Do it,” she agrees, fierce and all but choking on the ephemeral promise of joy. “I'll guard you.”

“You always do.” Nagato's fingers squeeze hers gently before he sinks back, eyes closing and brows furrowing in concentration as his familiar chakra sparks and leaps, a flame catching dry tinder.
Konan breathes in, breathes out, and turns to face the three enemy shinobi, letting her Akatsuki cloak slide off her shoulders and crumple to the ground. There's no lake made of papers here the way there is in Ame, no way to trigger her greatest jutsu, but she’ll make do. Nagato is counting on her. Yahiko is counting on her, and she’ll never let herself be used against them ever again.

“Konoha stands in the way of peace,” she says, and her form shatters into sheets of paper that fill the air like snowfall. “So I will remove you from our path.”

Kakashi can remember with painful clarity every time in his life he’s felt true fear. His father’s death, Obito’s, Rin’s. When Minato didn’t return from facing the Kyuubi. Orochimaru in the forest, killing intent brought to bear.

And now, watching Obito step back, Mokuton sliding away to let Kurama drop to his knees.

It’s too still, too silent. Even Kisame has paused his relentless advance, watching with something close to glee as Kurama’s head bows, red hair tumbling to hide his face. Clawed fingers scrape the stone, and he’s breathing hard, practically gasping for air, but he doesn’t move. Kakashi’s tantō is a handful of steps away, but Kurama doesn’t lunge for it, doesn’t make any move to attack even when Obito crouches down in front of him.

“Up,” Obito orders, cool and expectant.

Kurama should snarl, should slash at him, try to feed him his own heart for that presumption. Instead, a shudder wracks Kurama’s frame, and then he pushes up, gets his feet under him and rises. His head stays down for one more moment, long enough for Kakashi to hope—desperately, urgently, madly—that it’s some kind of ploy to catch Obito unawares, but—

He takes a shuddering breath and raises his head, and pinwheel eyes stare back into Obito's face.

Without a word, Obito reaches out and passes a hand across Kurama’s chest, making the seal there shatter and fade. He steps back, turning away, and says, “I’ll return for you later.”

Kakashi wants to shout, to rage, to throw himself at Obito and tear through him for this, but his feet are frozen, his throat is too thick with something like terror to make so much as a sound. He stares at Kurama, standing there without so much as blinking, and watches black-edged red light fracture and spark across his skin.

“Boss?” Kisame asks, and when Obito keeps walking he takes three long steps and catches the Uchiha’s arm. “Obito,” he repeats, tone losing its lightness.

Obito pauses, though he doesn’t turn. “I have to go, Kisame,” he says, low and dark.

Kisame casts a glance at Kakashi, still braced for a fight, and then slings Samehada over his shoulder. “I’m coming,” is all he says, as easily as if he isn’t abandoning a fight.

That makes Obito turn, mask tipping up to look at the swordsman for half a heartbeat before Kamui whirs them both away.

As if Obito’s departure is a trigger, Kurama finally makes a sound, low and thick and rough, and Kakashi’s eyes snap back to him. Kurama staggers a step, shoulders hunching, and he lets out a snarl that vibrates through Kakashi’s bones, through all the portions of his brain that still know how to
look at something and mark *predator* in a single glance.

“Kurama?” he asks, despite how every instinct is blaring a warning. Kakashi’s always been good at ignoring those sorts of instincts, though; he takes a step forward, then another, until he’s only a handful of feet away. “Kurama, you can break a genjutsu, I know you can—”

Kurama screams. He hunches forward, curling in on himself, and human skin tears. His entire form convulses, shifting like something is moving inside of him, and Kakashi’s blood crystalizes to ice within his veins.

Oh no.

Black-edged red chakra boils out to saturate the air around him, fills the cavern and drives Kakashi back to where he left Aoba and Genma. Within the mass Kurama lets out a long, low cry that deepens into a snarl too vast for a human throat, and his body wavers like a heat mirage. In the same moment, the chakra brightens, firms, and bloody-orange fur rolls across it like a tremor. A huge form shifts into tangibility, almost too large to be contained in the room, angled ears pressed flat against the ceiling. Nine tails lash the air as sword-sharp teeth snap shut on a sound of pure, malevolent rage, and black-streaked eyes slide open to reveal a spinning Sharingan.

As vast as a nightmare, burning with malice, the Kyuubi no Kitsune turns his head to look at Kakashi and grins.
LXXI: Spero

Chapter Notes

Okay, the cliffie at the end is very small this time. Very small and on a hopeful note, so if you stopped reading for the last two you should be safe now. <3

{spero /ˈspē rō/, to hope for; hope; I hope; I await; I fear, am apprehensive; I assume, suppose. From Latin spes “hope” from Proto-Indo-European *speh- “to prosper, to turn out well”.

Konoha hasn’t suffered a true invasion in years. They’ve been attacked, dealt with spies and double agents and lone enemies, but even when those enemies have gone so far as to snatch children from their beds Konoha itself has never been forced to repel an invasion.

That’s very much what this feels like, however.

Hiruzen traces the flares of familiar power, distantly assessing. Here for a moment is Kushina, burning like a firebrand in counterpoint to Yagura’s cold flood. There is Fugaku, shining like a beacon as he rallies the Military Police to defend the borders. Beneath Kushina's power is Jiraiya, steady and stalwart. Here is Itachi, Shisui, and Tenzō, fighting together against a flood of Mokuton. A and Rasa, too, points of light as they lead their shinobi to sweep the streets.

The barriers are down. The majority of the chuunin are streaming towards the walls to assist the Barrier Squads, leaving the handful of enemies within Konoha to those already fighting them, while the jounin start a search for any remaining intruders. The genin are with the civilians who managed to retreat to the shelters, a last line of defense should things end badly, hoep for the future if everyone else is defeated, and Hiruzen is quietly relieved that everything has moved so smoothly, emergency plans followed without hesitation. Tobirama would be proud to see his contingencies working well.

But not so much, perhaps, of the other things that cling to his legacy.

Hiruzen waits, patient like he never managed to be as a young man, beneath the shadows of the trees outside one of the shelters known only to a select few. It’s never been used, but one of Hiruzen’s missions as a genin was to carve the seals into its walls so it would stay hidden, and he can remember complaining about the task to his unsympathetic friend.

How ironic, that that moment of uncomplicated friendship should play out into something like this, so many years later.

The approach of footsteps makes him raise his head, and he turns a level stare on Danzō as his old teammate emerges from the shadows, flanked by a pair of ANBU. Root, undoubtedly, and Sarutobi should likely feel betrayed or offended or angry, but all he can manage is weary.

The Third Shinobi War lasted longer and was fought harder than you thought it would be. You ever stop to think why that was?

He hadn’t, not before Kurama asked it of him. War was war, unpredictable and fraught with losses beyond those he could predict, and he’d been so tired of the constant conflict by that point that he
had failed to look at things as closely as he should have.

Perhaps the most horrifying thing of all is studying the records now and seeing just how obvious everything is. A few hours of looking at more than just the most superficial aspects and the picture comes clear.

Hiruzen has never hated himself more than he does right now for not seeing it before a complete stranger pointed it out.

“Danzō,” he says mildly. “What a surprise to find you all the way out here.”

Danzō pauses, studying him carefully, and flicks a hand. His escort fades back into the trees, too late to avoid being seen but out of immediate sight, and with a flicker of resignation Hiruzen recognizes that Danzō probably assumes it will be enough to make him drop the matter. It always has been before, after all.

“Hiruzen, my old friend,” he returns, though there's nothing friendly in his expression. “Does that armor still fit after all this time?”

Hiruzen doesn’t allow himself to respond to the taunt, hardly even wants to. He hates to have been pushed to this point, even if it is almost entirely his own fault. For too long now he’s turned his face away at every opportunity, let things slip past him for the sake of keeping the peace, and…

Maybe Danzō was right in that much, that Hiruzen clings too hard to a veneer of peace. But he’s lived the majority of his life at war; is it truly wrong to want to halt it at any cost?

Almost any cost. Some things push even Hiruzen past the point of breaking, and what he’s found of the Third War has done just that.

Taking a breath, he sets his staff against the ground and meets Danzō’s narrowed eye squarely. “I found something interesting in the casualty reports,” he says quietly. “From the Third War. Several dozen Root shinobi were reported killed in action on the same mission, but their bodies were never recovered, and the mission has no records attached to it. You signed off on it without alerting me.”

Danzō’s face is an immovable mask. “It was time-sensitive and very risky. I couldn’t afford to wait, and when the mission ended in failure I didn’t wish to flaunt Konoha’s loss. It grieved me.”

“Perhaps,” Hiruzen allows, because he had been distracted then, too busy in a hundred different ways to check for emotional reactions in his old teammates. “However, the same thing happened again. Three times. Twice more with missions to the border of Iwa, and once on a mission to Ame. So many bodies, my friend, and you never recovered a single one of them. And at the same time, we have reports from our spies within Iwa. The Tsuchikage found the bodies of Iwa shinobi in the passes and blamed Konoha, even though no missions had taken place in those areas.”

Danzō’s chin lifts, his mouth firming into a hard line, and Hiruzen looks at him and wonders how long he’s been missing that cold, derisive light in Danzō’s gaze.

Too long, clearly.

“I have never asked for an accounting of your actions,” Hiruzen says, almost gently. “I never truly wished to know, and that’s my own mistake. But today my clan heads assembled before me, and they asked me if I had given you authorization to recruit clan children—the Clan Heads’ own children—for your division. They wanted to know what else you had been involved in, and why I would allow Root to continue under my nose. And I had no answers for them, Danzō.”
Something almost like a sneer curls Danzō’s mouth, twists his face into a mask of cool contempt. “A ceasefire would have gutted Konoha’s strength. Iwa would have taken advantage of your foolishness and crushed us. A few lives sacrificed prevented far greater tragedy, and kept Konoha strong.”

The admission aches. Hiruzen hadn’t quite expected it to come so easily, or to strike him so hard. He doesn’t quite dare close his eyes, but he wants to, wants to shut out the lack of remorse carved into every line of Danzō’s being. “Iwa’s refusal of the ceasefire kept us at war for another three years. Do you know how many Konoha shinobi were killed over that time?”

Hiruzen does. Hiruzen remembers every name marked down on the memorial during his time as Hokage, every last fallen shinobi. He takes a breath, doesn’t press a hand over his face in mourning because he can’t risk it, and gods, when did they get to this point, the two of them? Weren’t they friends once?

“They fell in the name of Konoha—”

“No,” Hiruzen interrupts, and his gnarled, age-worn fingers tighten around the staff. “They died for your arrogance, and my willful blindness. I should have realized, when you were willing to sacrifice all of those children for a chance at one with Mokuton, or when you tried to have Kakashi kill me because you thought me too soft. But that ends now.”

Danzō makes a sound of cool amusement. “And what will you do, old friend? Lock me away for the rest of my days? You have no proof—”

“I am Hokage,” Hiruzen retorts. “As you so frequently remind me, it’s time I acted like it. I don’t need proof to deal with you, Danzō. Just a spine.”

Danzō’s eye narrows sharply, and Hiruzen brings Enma’s staff form sweeping up to level at his old teammate. “You should be grateful Tobirama-sensei died before you fell to these levels,” he says quietly. “He would have hated you more than anything for twisting his dreams this way.”

That jab, out of all of them, is the one that strikes true. Anger flashes across Danzō’s face, and one hand comes up, flickering through a hand sign for a Fuuton jutsu that’s devastating in its power.

But no matter how good Danzō is, Hiruzen is better. He always has been.

When the first buffeting blast of black-edged chakra hits them, Son Goku goes grimly silent inside Rōshi’s head, and he’s absolutely certain that’s a very bad sign.

Beside him, braced against the malevolent wave, the tokujo who accompanied them here raises an arm to shield his eyes, scarred face pale. “That’s the Kyuubi’s chakra,” he says tightly. “It’s even stronger than I remember.”

Even with all the resentment in the village, it’s easy to forget that here the Kyuubi is less the specter of a possible threat, the way the bijuu are in other villages, and much more an immediate and traumatic memory. Rōshi sees Han grimace, and it takes effort not to mimic the expression.

“We have to keep him here,” Rōshi says, without looking away from the open hole in the earth that the chakra is radiating from. When Han shoots him a sharp look, he twists to glare right back.
“Konoha can handle a half-power invasion by an understaffed Akatsuki. They can't handle the Kyuubi flattening their village again.” He offers up a wry grin. “Nine tails and four brains between us, how hard could this be?”

Perched on his shoulder, short claws scrabbling at the fabric of his shirt as she tries to find a better position, Fuji makes a rough, rumbling sound, her ears flattening back against her head. “Kyuubi-sama,” she says, full of trepidation. “He's really angry.”

That’s exactly what Rōshi wants to hear. He grimaces, glancing from the vixen to her brother, who’s wrapped around Han's neck like a very unhappy scarf. “Are you two going to be all right?” he asks.

Momiji’s ears are flat against his skull, but he’s not moving. “We’ll help,” he says, though he doesn’t sound entirely thrilled about it. “I don’t know how much help we’re going to be, though. If Kurama-sama lost control…”

Yeah. That. Rōshi’s been trying not to think about what could have made Kurama quite so angry, because none of the answers are good.

“We should—” Han starts.

Already knowing precisely what he’s going to say, and that they don’t have time to indulge in the plans and contingencies and backups that he wants, Rōshi snorts, gives Son a questioning prod, and braces himself as fire-red chakra settles over him like a shroud. “Get in there and kick his ass back down to normal? Exactly what I was thinking.”

“Rōshi—” Han starts, sounding annoyed, but Rōshi ignores him pointedly, taking three quick steps and diving head-first through the hole. He flips over in the air, already shoving chakra towards his feet to cushion the blow, and—

“Oh holy fuck.” A burst of chakra changes his direction in midair, and he just barely avoids the massive, sword-sharp teeth that attempt to snap him out of the air like a bug, tossing Fuji off his shoulders. Within him, Son roars in offense, surging to the surface in an overwhelming flood, and for once in his life Rōshi doesn’t even try to fight it. He takes a mental half-step back, just far enough to cede most of the control to Son, but he can still feel the impact as the massive gorilla catches the nine-tailed fox by the snout. The ape dodges the snapping teeth, and with a roar he throws all of his strength into a twist and a heave.

The huge fox slams into the wall, shaking the cavern hard enough to crack the ceiling, and Son bellows his victory.

“That’s Kurama?” Rōshi demands, entirely incredulous.

Son rumbles an affirmative. “Someone broke the seals on him, and it dragged him out of his human form to make him as he was.”

Rōshi had known, honestly, that Kurama was somehow the Kyuubi no Kitsune in human form—no details as to how, maybe, but it was hard to miss when he spoke with such familiarity to the bijuu and called them his siblings. Son had said something about the Kyuubi’s chakra being split into its Yin and Yang halves, and so Rōshi had assumed that was the cause, but to see it like this…

“Will we be able to get him back to normal?” Despite the handful of weeks since they met in Ame, Rōshi can’t even imagine a world without the other man at this point, and he sure as hell doesn’t want to be the one to break the news to the brats if they can't.

“Normal?” Son scoffs, even as he watches Kurama stagger back to his feet, shaking his head. He
braces himself for the next lunge, chakra curling around him in a deep crimson wave. “This is normal, fool. Kurama has spent the last thousand years like this.”

That’s definitely not the good news Rōshi was hoping for.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches sight of Han dropping down, face grim where it’s visible between his armor and his hat. Momiji immediately leaps free, landing and growing to the size of a horse, and the tokujo follows. He makes a sound that’s equal parts concern and fear, and cries, “Genma!”

“Hey, Rai.” The ANBU mask is titled up, pushed away from his face, and he’s pale but standing, halfway hidden behind Kakashi’s more readily upright form. The Copy-Nin has another man braced against him, another tokujo, this one with dark hair and shattered sunglasses dangling from one ear. The man doesn’t seem to have noticed, though; all his attention is on the barrier he’s holding, and though he’s pale and the barrier is more fractures than whole, he isn’t wavering.

This time, it’s Son’s turn to give Rōshi a mental jab, and he pulls his attention away from the other shinobi to watch Kurama shake himself and turn. His eyes narrow at them, full of an anger that’s far more malicious than Rōshi has ever seen in Kurama before, and instead of the familiar crimson there’s a pinwheel of black and red.

“Fuck,” Rōshi repeats, a sinking feeling in his stomach. The aftermath of Yagura being controlled was bad enough, but at least he was a jinchuuriki, and the Uchiha had to suppress Isobu and Yagura at the same time, splitting his power. Kurama, with no jinchuuriki and the power of the Kyuubi right beneath his skin?

This is bad.

Son growls, low and furious. He plants his fists against the floor, bracing himself in front of Kurama, and tells Rōshi, “At the very least, we know the Sharingan’s spell can be broken.”

Rōshi forces himself to take a breath. That’s true. It’ll be like breaking a genjutsu, only the one under the influence is a twenty-story-tall chakra construct with a taste for rage and hatred.

Well. It’s a good thing Rōshi has never backed down from a fight.

As long as he’s been a jinchuuriki, he’s kept careful watch on the borders between Son and himself, minding his power, never letting things bleed through. Now, with a grim certainty that they’ll need every last ounce of strength that’s between them, he lets those walls drop.

“One more fight to get through, eh, Son Goku?” he asks lightly, and feels the flicker of the ape’s surprise, the warm wash of his amusement.

Son Goku chuckles, chakra redoubling as it cracks the earth around them. “One more fight to win, Rōshi,” he corrects, and throws himself forward to meet Kurama’s charge head-on.

“That idiot,” Han says, weary with familiarity, and glances at the four Konoha shinobi behind him. Kakashi meets his eyes, sees the resignation there, and nods.

“Go,” he says. “I don’t think anyone else will have much luck facing him.”
Surprise chases across Han's face, quickly followed by quiet thankfulness, and he smiles. Turning to face the fight as the Yonbi body-slashes Kurama and practically knocks him off his feet, he nods as if to himself and says politely, “Kokuō, I believe that’s our cue.”

White-gold chakra sweeps up around them like a warm wind whipping past from across the water, and it shimmers, condenses. Like with Kurama and Rōshi, the cloud obscures Han's form, solidifying and growing, and with a low, thrumming croon, the Gobi plants four golden hooves on the stone and shakes itself like it’s waking from a long sleep. The massive horned head tips the light, four gold-tipped horns catching the light, and with a burst of speed that even Kakashi’s Sharingan can't follow it leaps forward, slamming into Kurama and knocking him back before he can savage the Yonbi with his teeth.

Kakashi tries not to think that it’s Kurama they're fighting, tries not to picture the curl of his smile and the warmth of his skin as the nine-tailed fox snarls and snaps at his new enemy. Before he can manage to catch Kokuō, though, the Yonbi drags him back, and in the same moment Kokuō darts in for another ramming blow as they harry him away from the more human targets.

Behind Kakashi, braced against the wall, Genma coughs, makes a face, and says, “Kill the Sharingan user and we break the control, right?”

Kakashi doesn’t let himself wince, but it’s a near thing. Obito, he thinks, and it’s not his friend, not anymore, not in any way that counts. But the history is enough to drown in, regardless. “He got away,” he says, and drags his hitai-ate down over his eye to preserve what chakra he can. His Sharingan isn't going to be much help against a bijuu. “His eye lets him teleport, so there’s no telling where he went. Kurama was yelling something at him, but I was too distracted to hear it.”

Aoba's barrier finally shatters all the way, and he slumps heavily into Kakashi’s hold, pale and sweating. “I don’t think that's our biggest concern right now,” he points out, stumbling slightly as Kakashi helps him back towards the wall. A fight between three bijuu isn’t something any of them can afford to get caught in the middle of, and Kokuō and the Yonbi don’t seem like they have all that much attention to spare for bystanders.

“We have to keep this from spilling over to Konoha,” Genma says, and he gives Raidō a grateful smile as the big man offers him a shoulder to lean on. Catching Raidō’s arm, he gets his feet under him and staggers upright, and despite the faint wobble in his step his eyes are sharp as he assesses the three of them. “Aoba, do you think you can manage to start a Four Flames Formation?”

Surprise is quickly followed by calculation, and then Aoba nods, short and sharp. “We’ll need to be at equal points around them,” he says, and pulls away from Kakashi to stand on his own. “Snake seal, one clap, and leave the rest to me.”

Genma chuckles, even though the humor doesn’t quite make it to his eyes. “All those times Ibiki gave you punishment assignments on the Barrier Squads are finally coming in handy.”

Aoba flips him off. “Just as planned, asshole. Now you're playing the helpless damsel and I look cool.”

“You're both cool, I promise,” Kakashi cuts in, dust-dry. “Move out.”

They don’t waste time on more words, but leap apart, spreading out around the fight. Kokuō and the Yonbi seem to have the same thoughts about keeping Kurama close, because every time he snarls and goes to leap away, one of them is always there to intercept or distract. Kakashi remembers Kurama saying that the Kyuubi is the strongest of the tailed beasts, but thankfully there hasn’t been an opportunity to prove that yet. Between the close quarters and the uneven odds of the fight,
Kurama hasn’t had a chance to simply level everything around him.

Something about that thought niggles, itches uncomfortably, and Kakashi frowns even as he shapes the snake seal and brings his hands together sharply. There’s no time to dwell, though; purple flames spark, then erupt, leaping from Kakashi to Genma, Genma to Raidō, and Raidō to Aoba before they curl back around to close the seal. The roof of the cavern shatters into dust under the force of the barrier, but violet light curls in and over to cover the top. Kakashi can see Aoba stagger, then braced himself again, doubling down on the seals that ring his feet.

An instant later, Kurama crashes sideways into the barrier, thrown by Kokuō, and though the force shudders across the wall, the seals hold.

“Thank you,” the Yonbi rumbles, staking past where Kakashi is standing, his attention fixed on how Kurama is pulling himself up again. “This will not be a short fight, though, I warn you.”

“I hadn’t expected it to be,” Kakashi answers, and it’s everything he can do to keep his tone even, to look at the massive fox demon shaking off the impact of Kokuō’s speed and not imagine a much smaller human form taking the same hits.

*That’s Kurama, the man you were kissing less than four hours ago,* his brain whispers, but if Kakashi considers that too hard right now he’s going to have to put his head between his knees and take some deep breaths, so he shoves the thought down to gibber over later.

The Yonbi harrumphs, reaching out to catch Kokuō by the horns as the dolphin-horse goes sprawling, knocked by a sweep of Kurama’s tails. “Will that barrier hold a bijūdama?” he asks. “Kurama’s always been fond of them, the bastard.”

Kakashi thinks of the way the Gedō Mazō exploded, the force of the bijūdama Kurama let loose when they were fighting, the massive one that shattered Pein’s Chibaku Tensei, and has to consciously keep from swallowing. “No,” he says blandly. “Probably not—”

The thought connects. Kakashi’s eyes widen, and he straightens up, opens his mouth, but the Yonbi is already moving with a roar loud enough to drown him out, hurling himself at Kurama with a swinging punch.

“Wait,” Kakashi says quickly, before Kokuō can dive back in as well. The Gobi turns to look at him curiously, red-ringed eyes entirely unhostile.

“Yes?” he questions, polite and calm. His horns are each as long as Kakashi’s body, though, and they taper to unnervingly sharp points. The courtesy isn’t exactly going to put Kakashi at ease, no matter how appreciated it is.

“Kurama hasn’t used his chakra yet,” Kakashi tells him.

Kokuō blinks, head tipping to the side, and glances back at where Kurama and the Yonbi are struggling, heaving against each other. “No,” he agrees, though his tone says he doesn’t quite understand why Kakashi is pointing this out. “Beyond what he normally cloaks himself in, he hasn’t.”

Kakashi meets those massive eyes and asks, “What if he can’t?”

Kokuō’s head comes up sharply, and he turns, tails flaring out behind him. Chakra gathers between his horns, and with a cry he flings himself at Kurama with blurring speed, bijūdama swirling into existence. The Yonbi snarls a curse, diving out of the way just in time, and the impact is a burst of chakra and shattered stone that whirls up inside the barrier.
It’s a little confusing, wondering whether Kakashi should hope it works or not.

“Kokuō!” the Yonbi snarls, “what are you doing—”

Kurama snarls, loud and furious, and though there's motion from within the dust cloud it’s slower than before. Orange tails lash, parting the cloud, but this time when Kurama comes into view he’s crouched defensively, malice in his red-and-black eyes, sides heaving. He levers himself upright, teeth bared, but he doesn’t immediately lunge, shakes his head like he’s brushing off cobwebs and takes one step that isn’t quite as steady as the last few have been.

Hope sparks sharp and hot in Kakashi’s chest, and his breath catches.

Kurama’s fighting the Sharingan’s hold. Obito might have stripped him of his human form and reduced him to an attack beast once more, but he’s fighting it.

“Calm down, Son,” Kokuō says, backing up with careful steps. “If we can put him on the defensive and make him use enough chakra for a bijūdama, it might break the dojutsu’s hold over him.”

Son laughs, purple and black chakra gathering in the air in front of him. “A plan I can get behind, finally!”

Behind Kakashi, there's a scrabble of claws on stone, then paws that hook into the leg of his uniform. Half a heartbeat and white fur curls around his shoulders, three tails flicking over his arm. “Dog-man,” Fuji says, insistent and urgent. “Dog-man, what’s that?”

Kakashi blinks, looking down at her, and at that moment the barrier shudders so hard he’s almost knocked off his feet. He staggers, sees Genma collapse to one knee, watches Aoba waver. Raidō grits his teeth, eyes closing as he suddenly takes the brunt of maintaining the seals, and Kakashi steadies as fast as he’s able to, bringing his concentration back.

“Fuji, now isn’t the best—”

“It feels like Kurama-sama! Like our Kurama-sama!”

What?

Kakashi turns, following her gaze, and spots a small glass orb on a beaded chain, lying just within sight along the closest wall. There are seals etched into the surface, and within it, positive and negative chakra swirls like a galaxy, trapped and spinning endlessly.
Cliffhanger warning again, sorry! It's a little mean this time. ^^'

Also! **NO UPDATE NEXT WEEK** (probably). I'm leaving for a conference tomorrow and I probably won't have time to write. Hopefully I'll manage something, but it's rather doubtful. Sorry!

\[\textit{in\textsuperscript{staur}}\textsuperscript{a}\textsuperscript{tion} / \ '\textit{inst}^{\text{o}}\textsuperscript{r}\text{SH(ə)n}/, \textit{renewal; restoration; renovation; repair; an act of instituting something; establishment. From Latin instauratio(n-), from instaurare 'renew,' from in- 'in, toward' + staur- (a stem also found in restaurare 'restore').}\]

“I think Kurama-nii is in trouble,” Gaara whispers.

Naruto blinks, pulling his gaze away from where Fū and Yugito are arguing in low voices to look at his friend instead. Gaara's expression is torn, and there's an inattention in his eyes that means Shukaku is talking to him.

“Shukaku thinks so?” he asks, quietly enough to keep either of the girls from noticing. Karin doesn’t, either—she’s next to the girl with her hair up in buns on the other side of the training hall, their heads bent together. A boy with a long braid of black hair is bouncing with nervous energy next to them, trying to interject, and that’s distracting Karin enough that she doesn’t even look their way.

Curling his fingers through Naruto’s, Gaara nods solemnly. “He didn’t want to tell me, but he keeps talking to the others and I can kind of hear it.”

Naruto bites his lip, because not wanting to tell probably means it’s something really bad, like why the Hokage never wanted to tell him what made all the civilians angry at him. And if Kurama, who’s strong and smart and brave and good, is the one in trouble, that has to make it really big trouble. Especially with how worried Fū and Yugito look.

“Do you think he’s going to be okay?” Sasuke asks quietly, looking from Gaara to Naruto and back again.

“Kurama-nii’s really tough!” Naruto says, more cheerfully than he feels. “He’ll definitely be okay! ‘Sides, he promised he’d always come back, so he has to.”

(He isn’t going to think about how many people break their promises, or have in the past. Kurama isn’t like that. He wouldn’t do that.)

“Your big brother?” a quiet voice asks, and Naruto turns quickly, to find Sakura a few steps behind him. She looks worried, the way she has since Fū burst into their classroom and told them to hurry up and get to the practice hall, but she still offers them a slightly shy smile when they all look at her.
“Kurama-nii’s the best!” Naruto agrees. And—that’s enough to make him decide, because he and Gaara have saved Kurama before, and if they stay here, they won’t know if they need to. He jumps to his feet, tugging on Gaara's hand, and says, “We have to find, him, Gaara!”

“Shh!” Sasuke warns, but he’s standing, too, following Gaara up without hesitation, even as he casts a look at Fū and Yugito. “We’re not supposed to leave.”

“Fū-nee and Yugito-nee are in front of the doors,” Gaara adds, logically, though he’s more stating a fact than arguing.

Naruto gives Sasuke a stubborn look. “Kurama-nii’s in trouble,” he repeats. “Me an’ Gaara can help him!” When Gaara nods in solemn agreement, he grins triumphantly. “You can stay here, but we need to find Kurama-nii.”

With a roll of his eyes, Sasuke grabs Naruto’s other hand. “I’m not staying behind,” he says, almost a challenge, and flushes faintly when Naruto beams at him.

“How do you know he’s in trouble?” Sakura asks, taking a step closer to their huddle. She looks over at where the teachers are talking in low, concerned voices, then back, and hesitates before adding, “The teachers didn’t say anything. I would have seen.”

Gaara goes tense, like he always does when other people talk about the bijuu, and Naruto stops what he was about to say, meeting his eyes. For a moment, Gaara seems to shrink in on himself, like he’s about to curl into a ball, but he takes a breath and nods, just once.

Taking that as permission, Naruto turns back to Sakura with a smile. “Because we’ve got big creatures living insides of us!” he says proudly, ignoring Sasuke's muttered “Inside.” “Gaara and me have one, and Fū-nee, and Yugito-nee, an’ Utakata, an’ Rōshi, and Han! Even Yagura has one! They can talk to each other, too. Gaara can hear Shukaku, ‘cause he’s really strong.”

Gaara flushes, ducking his head down again, but this time it’s not unhappy so Naruto doesn’t mind. He just smiles at Sakura, even though he halfway expects her to flinch back the way the civilians do. Thankfully, Sakura doesn’t. She pauses to consider, but nothing else, simply nodding and taking the declaration at face value. “Does your brother have one too?”

“Kurama-nii’s my uncle,” Naruto says, in the name of accuracy.

With a glance at him, Gaara looks up enough to meet Sakura's gaze. “Rōshi and Han are with Kurama-nii, but they stopped talking to Shukaku,” he says quietly, and tugs on Naruto's hand. “We should go.”

Which just leaves them the problem of getting out. Yugito and Fū haven’t moved, and that’s the only door. There’s no way to get to the high windows without being noticed, and—

“We’re not going to be able to sneak out,” is Sasuke's verdict.

“There's a door to the outside in the basement,” Sakura says, like she’s surprised they don’t know. “The teachers put all the extra practice weapons down there.” When they all stare at her, she flushes. “I helped Iruka-sensei carry some shuriken down there the other day.”

“You’re the best, Sakura-chan!” Naruto cheers. Quietly, though—Karin just looked their way before her two new friends reclaimed her attention. “Can you show us?”

“Should you really sneak out?” she asks worriedly. “Moto-sensei said we should stay in here until
the Hokage says we can leave.”

“Kurama-nii is more important,” Gaara says, just beating Naruto to the words. His voice is firm and steady, without a hint of waver, and his hand is tight around Naruto’s. “He saved us. We can save him too, if we all work together.”

“Just like when we beat the geezer!” Naruto agrees. “An’ this time we’ll have Sasuke too!”

“And me.” When Naruto blinks at her, startled, Sakura curls her hands into the hem of her blue shirt, but doesn’t look away. “You—you need me to show you the way, don’t you? And if someone catches me sneaking back in they’ll know you’re gone. And I—I want to help.”

The last part is much quieter, almost tentative, and Sakura’s expression says she’s braced for them to yell at her, to taunt her. Naruto has heard what the other children say about her sometimes, the way they mock her forehead and her shyness. Less now that Ino is her friend, but…it hurts, because it’s so familiar.

“It’ll be dangerous,” he warns, because if Kurama is in trouble, if it’s something even he can’t handle, that’s not a good sign.

Sakura doesn’t waver. “Ino’s really good with kunai and she’s been teaching me. If—if it was my brother, or my mom, I’d want to help them, so let me help right now.”

It’s Sasuke who makes a quiet sound of approval, nodding. “Me too,” he says, and offers Sakura his free hand.

Sakura beams at all three of them, and takes his hand in her own.

He wakes to bone-deep cold and darkness, made darker still by the fabric pressing down across his eyes. *Blindfold*, he thinks, with a surge of panic that’s deeply ingrained, and jerks forward.

But the bonds he expects aren’t there.

With a cry, he goes spilling off what feels like a hard platform, tangled in more cloth, and even shinobi reflexes don’t give him time to land in any sort of dignified way. He crashes to the cold floor in a heap and groans quietly at the impact, but doesn’t waste time as he claws his way free of the—

The white sheet, loose and delicate, that comes away easily in his hands.

Yahiko blinks at it, then down at himself. He remembers Ame, and Hanzō, and betrayal in the rain. The last thing he can call to mind is Nagato’s face, full of horror, and the tears on his cheeks, the way Konan screamed as the pain in his chest swallowed everything. It’s a stark, disconcerting contrast to this darkened room that smells sterile and is both empty and silent. He expects to see his bloody Akatsuki robe, but instead there’s a white kimono, perfectly neat and unmarred.

A kimono that’s been folded right over left, because—

Because Yahiko was *dead*.

He knows it without hesitation or doubt. That’s true. He died, killed himself on Nagato’s kunai to save his two best friends, and it was a stupid move, a *desperate* move, but there were strange shinobi
ringing the valley and Hanzō in front of them, and Yahiko hadn’t been able to think. So he’d given in, done what Hanzō had wanted, and broken Nagato and Konan’s hearts in the process.

But Hanzō hadn’t realized. Hadn’t known. Yahiko might have been Akatsuki’s leader, but Nagato was its hope. Konan was its drive. Take him out of the picture, and the two of them would forge ahead twice as fast without him.

Too fast. Always, always too fast, too reckless, the pair of them. Set to give Yahiko white hairs before he hit thirty, without a doubt. Gods, but even if it feels like it’s only been a handful of minutes since he died, he’s missed them.

Of course, that doesn’t mean that whatever they did to bring him back wasn’t monumentally stupid, because Yahiko has no doubts that it absolutely was.

Fighting his way free of the sheet that was apparently covering his formerly dead body—and wow, hello, creepy—Yahiko pushes himself upright, feeling his head spin faintly, and catches himself on the edge of the metal table he was lying on before. He’s not a sensor or anything close to it, but there’s a shiver of anxiety running down his spine, a flicker of adrenaline and urgency pushing him on, like something crucial he used to know and has mostly forgotten. He needs to go, to move, to find Nagato and Konan no matter where they are, because there’s no one else who could be responsible for this. It has to have been the Rinnegan, one of those powers even Jiraiya knew nothing about and could only say would change the world.

Resurrection of the dead? Yeah, Yahiko thinks they can safely call that world-changing.

The one high window in the wall lets in enough light for him to find the door, and it opens easily—no need to lock in a corpse, after all. Outside is—

Well. Konoha, Yahiko guesses, from the stories Jiraiya used to tell them. Not that he’s ever been to the village before, but the stylized leaf on the hitai-ate of the shinobi gaping at him is all too familiar.

“Hi?” Yahiko tries.

The violet-haired girl closes her mouth, narrows her eyes, and demands, “Who the hell are you?”

At the same instant, there’s a deafening explosion of chakra, a wave of force that shakes the village and nearly knocks Yahiko from his feet. Blue-white and cold, with all the power of a tsunami, it curls around them in an eddying tide and then retreats to more manageable levels. Yahiko catches himself on a tree growing out of the side of the closest building and turns to look for the source.

A surge of paper whirls up above the tops of the buildings, then crashes down.

Oh gods.

“Sorry!” Yahiko blurts, and takes a running leap before he even thinks to wonder if he can still use chakra. It sparks, though, catches easily, and he bounces from a balcony railing up to the roof, then across to the next building. There’s no time to stop, no room to think why Konan and Nagato would be attacking Konoha, no time to grab a weapon in case he needs to defend them. Only action and reaction, the surge of adrenaline that carries him across two streets and through a tightly-spaced jungle of trees and vines—and really, who has a jungle on top of their house, Konoha is ridiculous—and then out into the open air.

Shit, is his first thought when he lays eyes on the fight, a split second taken to wonder if he’s miscalculated and Konan and Nagato aren’t the ones attacking, because there’s a bijuu in the street. He’s never seen one in person before, but there’s nothing else it can be—how many giant three-tailed
turtles with ridiculous amounts of chakra does the average person come across? But then the image of it flickers and fades out, and an ash-blonde child is left behind, whirling a hook-ended staff around in a sweep of water to block a burst of paper bombs. Jiraiya is a few paces away, bristling with spiny armor as he knocks away one of Konan’s clones, and there’s a woman with hair even redder than Nagato’s harrying what’s probably the actual Konan.

One more look around is enough to spot Nagato, slumped over against the side of the building, ghostly pale in a way that means he’s still recovering from whatever ridiculous thing he just did, with his legs sprawled out awkwardly in front of him. And—

An identical image of the red-haired woman is closing in.

There’s no need to think. Even if Nagato and Konan are attacking Konoha, they’re Yahiko’s best friends, and he’d do anything to save them. He doesn’t pause, just throws himself down to the street and brings his hands up into a familiar sign, a burst of water exploding from his mouth like a dragon.

There’s a loud yelp and then a sheet of stone leaps up to shield her, but Yahiko doesn’t wait. He lunges forward, calling up more water to shape into a pair of clones, and they split, lunging around opposite sides of the barrier. Yahiko himself goes over the top, twists around a golden chain that stabs through both clones, and lands heavily, one arm coming up to block the woman’s kick.

“What the hell?” the woman hisses, violet eyes bright with fury as she brings her sword around. “I sealed you, you know!”

“Yes?” Yahiko offers, then ducks her chains, goes low, and tries to sweep her legs out from under her. Instead, she kicks him in the face, flips over his shoulder, and slams a whip-fast lash of water into his back, throwing him face-first into her Doton wall.

“Yahiko!” Konan shouts over the sound of his groan, and in a whirl of origami weapons Konan drops into the fight, another clone splitting off and lunging for the other kunoichi. The redhead spits a curse and dodges, but the clone drives her back, blocking each attempted hit with a sweep of paper weapons.

“Konan?” Yahiko manages, still faintly dazed. He blinks up at her as she pulls him up, and wonders if it’s the concussion that makes it look like layers of paper are splitting off from her skin. “Did you—did you turn yourself into paper?”

For a moment Konan doesn’t look like she knows whether to laugh or cry. In the end she does neither, but hauls him back to his feet and drags him around the edge of the rock wall, heading for Nagato at a run. He’s struggling to get up, but his legs keep folding under him like he’s lost all the muscle in them, and he’s painfully, horrifyingly thin.

“Yahiko!” Nagato cries as soon as he catches sight of them, and there’s no surprise in his face, just relief and bottomless joy. He reaches out, and—

Ame, betrayal, knowing that his choice was going to destroy his friends but hoping, hoping that if he could at least buy them time they could get out of the ambush alive and whole and keep living—

Yahiko hooks an arm around Konan’s waist and drags her with him as he drops to his knees, reaching out with his free arm to catch Nagato by the elbow. A light tug has Nagato spilling forward, colliding with his chest, and Yahiko wraps his arms around both of his best friends and hugs them with all of his strength.

“You’re alive,” he breathes, and it shakes with wonder.
Konan laughs, rough and almost wild, and she’s clinging to him so tightly it’s hard to fill his lungs. “We could say the same.”

Nagato doesn’t speak, but he buries his face in Yahiko’s chest, hands white-knuckled where they grip his kimono, and his shoulders tremble like he’s fighting off sobs.

Yahiko curves his hand around the back of Nagato's skull, holding him gently, and kisses the top of Konan's head. “What are you even doing here?” he asks, bewildered. “Why are you fighting Jiraiya-sensei?”

Nagato tenses in his hold, sudden and almost violent, while Konan stills. They don’t look at each other, but they don’t need to; Yahiko knows guilt on them when he sees it, and something in his chest feels like it’s sinking down into his stomach.

“Konan?” he asks. “Nagato?”

There’s another flood of overwhelming ocean-vast chakra, filling the street with blue-white light, and then the heavy clack of familiar geta across stone.

“Nagato,” Jiraiya says, tone flat in a way that sends a shiver down Yahiko’s spine. “Stop this. Let him go. Haven’t you dragged that body around enough already, ruined Yahiko’s memory making him do your dirty work?”

What?

In his grip, Nagato makes a small, desperate sound, and chakra sparks, the preparation for something vast. But he’s still pale with exhaustion, and before he can start the jutsu Yahiko drags his fingers through his hair, one soothing pass, and loosens his hold. He pushes to his feet, and both Nagato and Konan let him go, don’t try to stop him as he turns to face their old teacher. He can hear them moving behind him, Konan pulling Nagato to his feet and holding him up, but he doesn’t glance back, just meets Jiraiya’s dark eyes squarely.

“Jiraiya-sensei,” he says, and doesn’t try to make it lighthearted the way he normally would. “You got old.”

Shock flashes across Jiraiya’s face, closely followed by disbelief. “Yahiko?” he demands, flicking a glance back towards Nagato. “You're—how?”

Yahiko just shrugs, because beyond the Rinnegan, probably he doesn’t have all that much of an idea. It’s not really important, anyway—he’s here, he’s alive, all that’s left is to move forward. “Why are you attacking us?” he counters. “Weren’t we your students?”

With a contained snarl, the redheaded woman makes like she’s going to launch herself at him, only to have Jiraiya stop her with a tight hand on her shoulder. “Attacking you? They're the ones who invaded the village, you know! Akatsuki are the ones who’re trying to take over the world!”

It feels like someone wrenched the ground Yahiko is standing on sideways, like the world has abruptly been upended around him. “What?” he asks numbly, and turns to look at his friends, Konan is blank-faced, even though her eyes are burning, and Nagato won't look at him, mouth tight with something that’s either regret or anger.

It’s strange, unnerving. Yahiko’s never had a hard time reading either of them before.

“What?” he repeats, waiting for the denial, the explanation that doesn’t come.
At last, Nagato looks up, and his Rinnegan eyes catch Yahiko’s and hold them without wavering. “We were following our dream,” he says. “Like Jiraiya-sensei told us. Sometime pain and personal suffering is the only way to protect people. If we can control the world, there will be no more war—”

“Nagato!” Yahiko protests, cutting him off sharply. “We thought that when we were children! Akatsuki was supposed to bring peace!”

“We are.” He’s never seen Konan look so cold, so emotionless. It’s almost eerie. “Peace through negotiation only brought betrayal. We couldn’t—” She breaks off, and just for a moment there’s an overwhelming, aching loss in her eyes before she shuts it away and buries it again.

“We couldn’t lose anyone else,” Nagato finishes for her, lifting his chin as if he’s daring Yahiko to protest. “Madara—”

Yahiko’s blood chills. “Madara? I told you! He couldn’t be trusted. He was going to use us! Please, please tell me you didn’t go along with him.”

“You were dead, Yahiko!” Konan snaps, shifting like she wants to put herself between him and Nagato. “You killed yourself and we had to watch, and when everything was broken Madara gave us a path to our dream. The dream all three of us shared. Your way got you killed. So we tried another way.”

Yahiko’s stomach turns, guilt and grief and horror in equal parts. They’d used to joke about taking over the world, ruling all the nations and using that power to keep the peace, but. But those were just jokes. They were kids.

“Nagato,” Jiraiya says firmly. “Give this up. There’s no way out right now. Let us put the seal back on, and we can sort all of this out later. You aren’t going to win, and you can’t escape. It’s time to face the other villages and answer for what you’ve done.”

Nagato closes his eyes, takes a careful breath. “Answer for what I’ve done?” he asks quietly. “What about what they did? What about Konoha and Iwa, Suna and Kumo? They destroyed Ame and never gave us a second thought. Their wars ruined our country, our village, our families. They’ve never answered for their crimes, sensei. Why should we, when the scale is so much smaller in the end?”

Yahiko swallows against the memory of their childhoods, their country. Ame was still a shattered land when he died, and he wonders how much of that has changed. Not much, likely. Even if Akatsuki survived, in whatever form, a handful of years wouldn’t be nearly enough to fix things.

Konan makes a sound of quiet agreement. “You should understand,” she says, but instead of looking at Jiraiya, her gaze is on the redhead kunoichi, whose eyes narrow warily at the words. “You’re an Uzumaki, aren’t you? What happened to Uzushio—Kiri never answered for that, did they? There was no one to hold them accountable. Even Konoha’s only thought was how they could use you, one of the last survivors. Your village was destroyed, and no one cared.”

The woman’s mouth tightens into an unhappy slash, eyes shuttering, though she doesn’t look away. “Konoha and Uzushio were allies,” she says. “And they honored that. They couldn’t get to Whirlpool Country in time, you know? I’ve made my peace with it.”

“You shouldn’t have had to,” Yahiko says before he can stop himself, and this—is this the reason for Akatsuki. Because Ame and Kusa and Tani and all the other small countries that aren’t considered Great Nations—they’ve never been given a say in anything. There’s no way to band together, no power that can make them equal to Kumo, Kiri, Suna, Iwa, and Konoha. Akatsuki was the push to
give them that, the hope that a small country could make its voice heard for the first time. The belief that one boy with Rinnegan eyes and a small group of dreamers could change the world.

He can see the hope that rises in Konan's eyes, the way Nagato looks up at him, and—

Maybe Konan and Nagato have forgotten the details, but Yahiko will remind them. He'll drag them both back onto the right path and out of this madness.

Gods. Gods, Yahiko loves them both so much. Even hearing this, even seeing them here, in the middle of a battle like this, would never change that. Whatever they've done, he won't leave them at Konoha's mercy.

Long experience has proved that the large villages don't have any to begin with.

Out if Jiraiya's sight, he flicks his fingers in a familiar signal, and he can see the moment Konan catches it. Her grip on Nagato tightens, amber eyes narrowing faintly as she subtly gathers her chakra, and Yahiko turns to fully face Jiraiya and the Uzumaki kunoichi, shifting to put himself between the Konoha shinobi and his friends without looking as if he's trying to.

"None of this has ever been fair," he tells Jiraiya. "You have to see that. Just because our countries are smaller doesn't mean we deserve to be fodder in other nations' wars. Nagato and Konan were wrong in what they were doing, but the facts have never changed."

Jiraiya looks old and tired and a little angry. "Yahiko, nothing in life is fair—" he starts, as if he doesn't realize that that's the perfect way to spark every last bit of the fury that's been driving Yahiko since he was a child.

When did their teacher turn into such a fool?

With a growl, Yahiko flashes through hand seals he would know half-dead, alters them with a flicker of chakra and the addition of the ram seal on the end, and focuses. Four pillars of water surge up from the ground, encircling Jiraiya and the kunoichi and closing in in a rush. In the same moment Yahiko leaps back, feels familiar arms wrap around him, and then with a whirl of paper and the heavy beat of wings Konan's clone is lifting him, carrying him up in a dizzying burst. The real Konan is on his left, rising in tandem with her arms locked around Nagato's thin chest, and beneath them the green and brown of Konoha is falling swiftly away.

Yahiko closes his eyes against the rush of the wind. "Let's go home," he says, almost too soft to hear, but he can feel Konan's grip on him tighten faintly in response, the way she tips her wings towards the northern horizon.

Let's go home, and then we can fix things, he doesn't say, but he's absolutely certain that they understand anyway.

There's a lot of work to be done, and it's about time they get started.

This is just about the worst idea Kakashi has ever had.

"You're sure this will work?" Momiji demands, watching the way Kurama and Son are wrestling with wary eyes.
Not a clue, Kakashi doesn’t say, although he wants to very badly. Before he can come up with a better answer, though, Fuji huffs. She flips a leaf onto her head, and with a puff of smoke a girl appears, white-haired and dressed in red with three tails peeking out from under her kimono.

“Thumbs!” she says triumphantly, and snatches up the orb with one of Kurama’s bijūdama trapped inside, unclipping the beaded chain and pulling it off. “Stop being a stick in the mud, Momiji, I don’t see you coming up with any better ideas!”

“You want an idea how to deal with Kyuubi-sama?” Momiji huffs. “I have one—the best one! We should run!”

Fuji ignores him, leaping up with the orb in one hand and scrambling back to Kakashi’s side, practically throwing herself under his arm as he tries to split his focus between the kitsune girl and the barrier. “Here, dog-man, I think this is the seal that’s keeping it stable!”

Kakashi doesn’t flinch back, even as the chakra equivalent of several hundred explosive tags is waved under his nose. “We’re going to need to get close,” he says, and wow, this is such a bad idea, and Kakashi feels that if he’s the one saying that, it should mean something.

Momiji groans loudly, but starts to grow again, and in an instant he’s the twice size of a horse, planting his paws on the stone and shaking out his frost-tipped fur. Foxfire flickers around him, an aurora of icy colors, and his mismatched eyes open. “I’ll guard you,” he offers. “Don’t let my sister get eaten, all right?”

That’s easy enough to agree to, since Kakashi doesn’t plan to let anyone get hurt. He pauses, watching the fight, and feels small hands curl around his elbow as Fuji follows his gaze, amber eyes wide.

“It will work, won’t it?” she whispers, glancing up at Kakashi’s face.

Kakashi crinkles his eyes at her, trying for a smile he doesn’t feel. “Maa, maa, it’s like breaking a regular genjutsu with a ram seal. Cause a fluctuation in the chakra and it disrupts the entire system enough for the genjutsu to shatter.”

“It’ll be the same, even with the Sharingan?”

Hopefully, but Kakashi doesn’t say that, either. This is a long shot, and if it doesn’t work—

Well. Kakashi just really, really hopes it does.

“Raidō!” he calls, over the crash as Son and Kokuō both go tumbling back. “Get Genma and Aoba out of the way!”

“What?” Raidō demands, but he’s already too late. Kakashi steps out of the barrier formation, feels it shatter even as Momiji goes surging past him with lightning crackling over his fur. Like Fuji did the first time she came to Kurama’s rescue, he skids to a halt, plants his feet, and spits a lightning bolt straight at Kurama’s face.

Kurama snarls, high and sharp and furious, and lunges with his teeth bared, but Momiji leaps out of the way, just barely jerking his tails to safety before massive jaws snap shut. Before Kurama can try again, Kakashi steps in, flickering through hand signs and sending earth surging up Kurama’s legs to drag him down into the stone floor. Throwing his weight to one side, Kurama manages to wrench one foot free, but before he can pull the others loose Momiji lands on his face with all four paws, snarling and swiping at his eyes. There’s a scream of pain and Kurama tosses his head wildly, flinging Momiji off only for the smaller fox to catch himself in midair with a burst of foxfire.
At the same moment Kakashi goes low, Fuji practically running on his heels, and calls up a twist of water that drives at Kurama’s head. It knocks him sideways, just a step, but he roars with fury, red and black eyes opening as he turns on Kakashi, mouth opening in a wide, angry howl.

“Fuji,” Kakashi says, not quite able to tear his eyes away from the teeth that look as long as his whole body. “Fuji, now would be very convenient, thank you.”

“Almost!” the vixen cries. “One minute, I’m almost——”

Sand whirls up, hardening around them like a dome, and an instant later something massive—likely Kurama’s face—slams into it, and there’s another sound of rage. The sand sweeps away, but chains of golden chakra catch Kakashi’s eye, tangled around Kurama’s head and neck and dragging him back.

Naruto, Kakashi thinks, and the sheer terror of Naruto being here, right now, with Gaara at the very least, is almost crippling.

“Gaara, run!” he snaps, bolting past the six-year-old to throw up a Raiton barrier and block the sweep of Kurama’s tails. There’s a flash of blond hair off to the side, and with it a dark head and a pink head, and Kakashi curses, slides under a swipe of Kurama’s free foot, and sends a pillar of stone slamming up into the underside of Kurama’s jaw. He snarls, shaking it off, but the Chains take advantage of one moment without him fighting to pull tight, dragging him down to his knees. The nine-tailed fox hits the ground hard, snarling in a way that rattles Kakashi’s bones, and—

“Here!” Fuji shoves the glass orb into his hands and disappears into a puff of smoke, leaping out as a fox almost as large as Momiji’s current form. She lunges for the children, snatchng Gaara up by the back of his shirt as he runs, and slides sideways to plant herself in front of them as foxfire flares. They vanish completely, even to Kakashi’s nose, but there’s no time to worry. He takes three steps, judges the distance, and shouts, “Kurama! Isn’t it about time you went back to being short and grumpy?”

Massive teeth snaps, and with a roar and a heave, Kurama surges to his feet, Chains shattering as chips of stone go flying. He turns on Kakashi, lunging for him without pause, and Kakashi doesn’t hesitate either. He flips the altered star-ball over in his hand, feels the chakra within it shiver like the precursor to an earthquake, and hurls it straight into Kurama’s mouth as the Kyuubi tries to grab him.

There’s a burst of violet-edged darkness, an explosion of chakra fit to blind, and then Kakashi knows nothing else.
LXXIII: Luminary

Chapter Notes

No cliffhanger this time! You're all good. ;)

[luminary /ˈloʊməˌnerə/, a celestial body, as the sun or moon; a body, object, etc., that gives light; a person who has attained eminence in his or her field or is an inspiration to others; of, relating to, or characterized by light. From late Middle English luminarye or Mediaeval Latin luminaria “lamp”, from luminare, from lumen “light”.]

In the heart of overwhelming nothingness, a single spark.

Consciousness fades back in gradually. It’s a whisper from a distance, a half-covered ember cracking through the ash. The first sensation is pain, a tearing ache all through him, traced with a deeper, throbbing sort of hurt. He takes a breath and it rattles in his lungs, shakes through him like it’s the very first or the very last, and he curls in on himself with a quiet groan, trying to shut out the pain.

Somewhere very, very far away, he thinks he might hear his name.

Beneath him is something cold and hard, like stone, cracks running through it like a spider’s web. The edges are rough and sharp, but he can't bring himself to shift off of them, to move enough to get comfortable. Too much pain, and with it an exhausting heaviness in each of his limbs.

There's something that he should be doing, he thinks, but can't quite bring himself to care, or even remember what it is.

And—

There are fingers in his hair.

Light and gentle, easing carefully over his scalp and then sweeping down to brush his shoulders, repetitive and soothing. He focuses on that for a long moment, confused and faintly wary, and with painful slowness more details fade in, one piece at a time. Cotton underneath his cheek, and something firm; the smell of wind through a forest, light but traced with pine and oak and the scent of fire beneath; soft, tuneless humming, absent and careless but still comforting. It’s a voice he knows, bone-deep and as familiar as anything in the world, and he takes a shuddering breath that's almost a sob, curling inward with a helpless noise.

Warmth engulfs him, covers him. The hands leave his hair and arms wrap around him instead as someone leans over him, halfway to a hug. “Shh,” that familiar voice whispers. “Shh, Kurama, you'll be okay. It’s been so hard, I know, but you're okay.”

Kurama sinks clawed fingers into black cloth, pressing his face into Naruto's thigh, and can't make himself open his eyes. His last image is of Obito's Sharingan, a wash of red blocking out the world, and—
He can't. He can't face that, the loss of control that comes with it. Can't face the idea of what Obito could have made him into, made him do when there are so many things newly precious to him in the village.

"Naruto," he rasps, and it hurts his throat. "Naruto—I—"

"Shh," Naruto says again, warm and full of affection. "Come on, Kurama, open your eyes. It's okay."

It's not, Kurama wants to say, but even as he thinks it his eyes are sliding open, because Naruto is his best friend, his lifeline, was the first person beyond the Sage that Kurama would have done absolutely anything for. Naruto's death hasn't changed that in the least.

The sight of a red-washed world almost makes him wish he hadn't.

"No!" he snarls, and it breaks apart in his throat, comes out rough and unsteady and so full of rage he can taste it like blood on his tongue.

Naruto makes a quiet sound, still leaning over him, and shaggy, roughly-cut hair turned Sharingan-red surrounds Kurama's face as Naruto presses their foreheads together. "Kurama," he says, somewhere between gentle and stern, and Kurama physically can't do anything but open his eyes again and look at him. In the shadows between them it's dark enough to ignore the tint of scarlet, and Naruto's face is lined and sad but he's here.

Kurama takes a shuddering breath, reaching up to curl his fingers in Naruto's hair, and forces himself to keep breathing.

"Good," Naruto tells him, warm and fond, and presses his hand over Kurama's. "Focus, Kurama. You're okay. You're here, the Sharingan hasn't gotten all of you."

The next breath comes easier, because that's true. Kurama doesn't remember anything like this from the last few encounters with the Sharingan. That had just been...mindlessness. Now it's like some part of him is trapped, while the rest is under Obito's control. There's hope in that, because Kurama has never, ever stopped fighting, not once in his long life, and he refuses to let Sage damned Obito be the one to make him.

He takes another breath, loosens his grip on Naruto's hair, and pushes himself up to sit. His muscles ache, and even as he moves a new bruise blooms against his arm, wide and dark before it fades again.

That's good. That means someone is fighting him, someone strong, and he's not just wreaking havoc on the village.

Kurama drags a hand through his hair, steadies himself, forces his brain to work at more than a sluggish crawl. Bruises mean the power to hit him and make it stick, no matter how briefly, which probably means it's not just Kakashi fighting him. One of the other bijuu, maybe, or one of the Kage. That's even better, because they can take care of themselves and won't be in as much danger. Kurama may dislike every one of the Kage except Yagura, but they wouldn't have their positions if they weren't strong.

If this is anything like what happened when Obito first attacked Konoha, he probably planted just enough of a suggestion with the Sharingan to make Kurama furious, and then turned him towards the village. With any luck, someone stopped him before he could get there.

"How are you still here?" he asks, lifting his head to look at his jinchuuriki, and his voice cracks but
he powers through it regardless. “I thought—after breaking that seal with Yagura—”

Naruto grins at him, mischief and humor in his face. “I told you, bastard fox. I wanted to be with you, even just as a chakra impression. I wanted to see you become the hero I know you are. And you did. You did.”

Kurama closes his eyes, but this time it’s with relief, something close to joy, because Naruto spent far too much time around him, apparently. When he’d asked if he’d see this Naruto again—his Naruto again—

“Who knows,” he repeats, faintly disbelieving as he remembers Naruto’s parting words to him last time. “You asshole, you knew!”

Naruto laughs, and it’s beautiful, uncomplicated happiness even when his face is washed with bloody red. “I didn’t know,” he protests, raising his hands to block the irritated slaps Kurama aims at him. “You could have defeated Obito and Madara and Akatsuki without ever ending up back here and then I wouldn’t have!”

With a rude snort, Kurama crosses his arms and glares. “Yeah, well, someone managed to infect me all of their bad ideas, you little bastard. If you hadn’t spent the last thirty years spouting all of that friendship crap and smearing your ridiculous niceness all over everything, I could have been done a month ago.”

He is not getting choked up. There’s no lump in his throat, no tightness in his chest. He’s fine.

Naruto laughs regardless, and his grin is nearly blinding. He leans forward, wrapping Kurama in a tight hug, and Kurama can’t even pretend not to lean into it. “I knew you’d do it,” Naruto tells him, burying his face in Kurama’s shoulder.

Something close to panic flickers, though Kurama shoves it down and buries it deep. “I haven’t finished yet,” he says gruffly, though he doesn’t let go of Naruto’s shirt. “I—I don’t know if I can, Naruto. Obito—his Sharingan—he took control—”

One blue eye opens, and Naruto looks up at him. It’s the same expression he used to give to Gaara, or Sasuke, or any one of the people he managed to save just by being himself. Sitting back, he reaches up to catch Kurama’s hands, wrapping his own around them and gripping tightly.

“Kurama,” he says, and this is sharper, laced with a fierceness that Naruto never lost, even in the worst moments. Maybe especially in the worst moments. “Kurama, look around you.”

“I am, you ass!” Kurama snaps. He tries to fling a hand out, to gesture, but Naruto won’t release his hold on his fingers. “It’s all—red! This is the Sharingan, and just like fucking last time, with Madara and fucking Obito and how they used me—”

“Kurama!” Strong, callused hands catch his face between them, and Naruto stares directly into his eyes, fierce and focused the way he only ever gets in battle, ready and willing to overturn worlds if he has to in order to keep his precious people safe. “Are you going to give up, then? Are you going to stay here?”

“What else can I do?” Kurama snarls, right in his face. “I’ve never been able to beat the Sharingan! They always just—they turn me into their fucking puppet and then when everything’s over I get to scrape up all the pieces of who I was and try to put them back together—”

“Are you going to give up?”
"Why the fuck does it matter? I've probably killed everyone in that room already, how the fucking hell am I supposed to go back to that, Naruto? Fucking tell me——"


"NO!" The shout tears at Kurama’s throat, aches all the way through him and leaves him shaking faintly, but he doesn’t drop the glare he’s leveled at those unwavering blue eyes. “Fuck you, I never give up, you asshole. Thirty-six fucking years with you and I clearly lost my damned mind, so no. I'm not going to fucking give up!"

With a bright laugh, Naruto leans forward and kisses him on the forehead. “Good,” he says fiercely, and twists to his feet, grabbing Kurama’s elbows and pulling him up as well. He frames Kurama’s face with one hand, and for a heartbeat Kurama is back in another time, another place, meeting Naruto's eyes levelly for the first time. He reaches up without even meaning to, curls his fingers around Naruto's wrist, careful of his claws, and——

A seal blooms beneath their feet, like a flower’s petals unfurling in the dawn. Lines both familiar and foreign, massive in their complexity, traced with power that makes the very air vibrate. The Hiraishin components Kurama recognized the first time have been stripped away, and instead he can see the lines for containment, for form. A breath of relief he hadn’t expected shakes through him, and he looks from the seal back to Naruto's face.

“I thought——” he starts, but can’t finish, and—maybe a large part of his grief was knowing that even if he found some way back, managed to break the Sharingan’s hold, he’d lost Naruto's original body. But this——

Naruto smiles at him. “That’s what brought you here this time,” he says, lightly pressing his palm to Kurama’s cheek. “Sasuke thought this might happen, so he made sure you’d be able to go back if it did. I don’t know how many times we can use it, though, so take it easy on the shapeshifting, okay, bastard fox?”

Sasuke. Kurama can’t help but laugh, and it’s not even bitter, because of course the paranoid brat would have a plan to cover every possible eventuality that could end in Naruto’s body being destroyed. It was their only commonality, the desperate desire to keep Naruto in one piece, but it was also one that Kurama never really minded sharing.

“Did you——” he starts, and then pauses, because he doesn’t know quite what he wants to say.

Thankfully, Naruto has always read him better than anyone, even the Sage. He smiles, full of hope and light, and tips his head. “I’m a chakra impression, you grumpy fluffball. But the real me? I’m sure he got to see Sasuke again. I bet they're watching over you right now and laughing at all the bad choices you’ve made.”

“Idiot,” Kurama huffs, and pretends it isn’t even grudgingly fond, though he’s pretty sure he fails miserably. “All of my bad choices can be traced back to the moment I thought what would Naruto do and immediately fucked myself over. It’s all your damn fault, bastard.”

Naruto laughs delightedly, leaning forward to rest their foreheads together again. “Good,” he says on a breath, and his eyes are the blue of a summer sky. “Because, Kurama? You're the best hero I've ever met. You’ve done so much, and come so far, and I love you, okay? I love you so much.”

Kurama isn’t going to cry, he’s not. His eyes are hot, and he closes them, but—he can’t resist the sight of Naruto’s aged face. This might be the last time he sees it for a long while, after all. “I had a shitty teacher,” he manages, and lets out a shaky breath. “I—you too. I love you too. Always, I’ll——”
Naruto smiles like he knows the ending of that sentence, even when Kurama himself is uncertain. “Good,” he says again. “Kurama, be happy. No matter what, okay? Obito might have controlled you, but you’re strong enough to keep going and face him again, I know it. You’re strong enough that no one will ever be able to stop you.”

“Not now,” Kurama tells him, “not anymore.” And—that means just as much as saying I love you, in a way. Maybe more. Naruto turned him onto this path after centuries of hate, and he won’t allow anyone to drag him off of it, Sharingan or not. No matter how long Kurama lives, he’ll carry this piece of Naruto with him until he disperses into chakra for the last time.

The world shudders, hard and sudden, almost enough to knock Kurama over. He grabs Naruto’s arm to steady himself and looks up, and—

The wash of red over the world flickers. The seal beneath their feet sparks with violet and black. The cracked ground heaves like something massive is taking a breath, and Naruto laughs. For half a moment he’s brilliant with color, orange and gold and blue, and he seizes Kurama by the shoulders.

“Kick his ass, Kurama,” he says, and there’s echoes of that expression Kurama saw on his face right before he went back in time, the implacable determination Kurama is so familiar with. Blue eyes are like steel, and his smile is the one that still makes Kurama impossibly, unwaveringly certain that there’s no way things could end without some sort of victory. “I know you can do it.”

One hard push, and Kurama is falling down down down through endless darkness. No terror this time, no grief, and he closes his eyes and reaches for that thread of fierce resolve that was Naruto’s last gift to him. There’s red around the edges of his vision, a tide trying to surge back over his head and drown him for the last time, but Kurama gathers his chakra up and lets it spin around him in a hurricane. A breath, another—

He thinks of Naruto, his old Naruto and the child Naruto. Thinks of Sasuke drawing safeguards, Sasuke clinging to Naruto and Gaara’s hands. Thinks of Fū and Yugito and Karin, of Kushina and their newfound peace. Thinks of Kakashi, the way he looks after a kiss, the crinkle around his eyes when he smiles, the will that keeps him moving no matter what.

He lets it fill his mind, not a distraction but a push, urging him on. The Sharingan’s hold is like steel cables wrapped around his limbs, holding him tight, but Kurama breathes out fire and wind and fury, wraps himself in the power of what he’s found, what he’s built, and with a cry of rage that rips at his throat he tears the bonds holding him into a thousand motes of spinning dust.

Impact, and—

Light.

Kakashi wakes to the sensation of being dragged, his flak jacket choking him uncomfortably, his back scraping over the ground. It’s a familiar sensation, since his ninKen lack hands and are less than mindful of his comfort when getting him out of danger, but he doesn’t remember calling them, doesn’t feel the faint pain that would come from drawing the necessary blood to summon them. There’s an ache all over, but it’s the ache of a bruise, not a cut. Confused, he opens his eyes—

A massive black-masked face peers down at him with odd-colored eyes, and Momiji spits out the
collar of Kakashi’s flak jacket, letting Kakashi drop all the way back to the floor. “Oh good,” he says. “You're awake. Now we can all see death coming for us.”

That doesn’t sound promising.

Ignoring the pain in the back of his skull that speaks of repeated impact with the ground, Kakashi scrambles to his feet, slotting the last few seconds before his unconsciousness back together in his mind. The star-ball, Fuji, getting Kurama pinned long enough to get close, and then—

Detonation.

He turns, desperate for some sign of success.

Kurama is still standing in the midst of the rubble, hunched down like he’s in pain. His head is bowed, breath clouding in great gusts that are hot enough to mist in the air, and his sides are heaving. As Kakashi watches, he shakes his head like he’s trying to get rid of cobwebs, and his eyes are still superimposed with that horrifically familiar Sharingan, but…

But he’s not moving, his claws dug into the stone like he no intention of doing so, and the lash of his tails is contained, tight like it’s an unconscious reaction to pain. Blood trickles from between his teeth, splattering the ground, and Kakashi has one horrific moment of wondering if that was enough to kill Kurama, if Kakashi murdered him accidentally—

Chakra sparks, not red or black or violet but blue. As blue as a summer sky, traced through with flickers of white, and Kurama’s eyes fall shut with something that looks like relief. His head bows, and a ripple runs through his body. There’s a long, low whine, pained in a way that makes Kakashi’s stomach twist, but then—

Shard by shard, bit by tiny bit, the vastness of the Kyuubi’s bulk starts to fade away into white brilliance. Kurama keeps his eyes closed, his head bowed, even as his own form starts to vanish like shattered stars, like fireflies in the moonlight. The outline of his body fades, and within it Kakashi catches sight of something much, much smaller, dark skin and crimson hair and tattered cloth.

He’s moving before he can even think of taking a step.

Fragments of bright chakra whirl around them as he drops to his knees in front of Kurama, reaches out, then hesitates, unsure if he should touch. If Kurama is hurt, or if Obito is still controlling him, or—

Crimson eyes slide open, several shades darker than the messy hair that falls to frame them. Kurama lets out a breath that shakes with exhaustion, but he raises his head, and those familiar eyes catch Kakashi’s, full of steady, stubborn will and an edge of vicious victory. He smiles, bloody teeth and all the treacherous, dangerous beauty of a hurricane, a wildfire, and Kakashi’s breath tangles in his throat. His hands find Kurama’s shoulders, then his face, and he leans in.

Kurama meets him halfway, kisses Kakashi just as desperately as he slides his fingers into silver hair. His mouth tastes of his own blood, of fire and ash, but it’s the most perfect kiss Kakashi can ever remember, and he loops an arm around Kurama’s waist to drag him closer, right up against his chest and into his lap. Kurama gasps, fingers winding tighter, and nails scratch over Kakashi’s scalp but there’s no time or space within him to care, because Kurama leans down and kisses him again, an edge of teeth behind the softness of his lips, the heat of his mouth.

Kakashi hadn’t allowed himself to think gone when Kurama’s human form burned away, hadn’t given himself any moment at all to mourn the loss, but. It had been there, the idea of it, eating away
at his thoughts from underneath. One more thing taken from him, one more loss, only it wasn’t.
Kurama is here, and fine, and free, and Kakashi thinks he’ll be forgiven if he never lets go of him
again.

(Well. Kurama might take umbrage, but honestly that’s half the fun.)

He wraps his arms around Kurama’s lower back, clutches him tightly, and when they break to
breathe he leans forward, presses his forehead against Kurama’s chest and tries to even out his
breathing, to let go of the adrenaline still singing through his veins.

Those claws in his hair really aren’t helping all that much.

“Kurama-nii!” a voice shouts, and Kakashi can feel Kurama lift his head, though he doesn’t let go of
Kakashi either.

“Kit, squirt,” Kurama rumbles, and his voice sounds like he’s been screaming, rough and almost
ruined. He reaches out with one hand, and an instant later there's impact, two small bodies thudding
against his sides. Both of Kurama’s hands detangle from Kakashi as he drags Naruto and Gaara
close, clutches them to him just as tightly as Kakashi is holding him, and then stretches out a hand
again. “Sasuke, you too? And a friend? Thank you. You were so brave, coming to help like that.”

More hesitant, Sasuke leans in, and Kurama runs a hand over his hair. “Thank you,” he says again,
more quietly, and Kakashi gets the feeling that it isn’t meant for anyone here. When he glances up,
though, Kurama is smiling, so he doesn’t dwell on it.

“Are you hurt?” the pink-haired girl who accompanied them asks carefully, looking Kurama over
like she expects him to start bleeding profusely.

Kurama shakes his head. “Just a little sore,” he answers, and nudges Kakashi gently. For all his
reluctance, Kakashi nevertheless unwinds his arms from Kurama’s waist and leans back enough that
he can slip to the side, landing on the stone and immediately pulling Naruto and Gaara into his lap.

“Kurama-nii!” Naruto repeats, looking up, and he’s crying, messy and desperate. “Kurama-nii, I
thought you were gone!”

Gaara makes a quiet sound like he’s been kicked, and clings tighter.

Kurama sighs, wrapping an arm around both boys and leaning down to press his cheek against their
hair. “I’m fine,” he says, faintly gruff. “I’m still here, and that’s not going to change. No one
can change that, because I'm here, and that's where I'm fucking staying, okay?”

It does help, actually, to hear that. Kakashi hadn’t thought it would, but if there’s one thing he’s
learned about Kurama, it’s that anyone who tries to make him do something he doesn’t want to is
very shortly going to be in for a nasty surprise. He smiles, feels something inside of his chest unknot
as he sinks back to lean on his hands, and tries not to let the heady weight of his relief wash
everything else away. There are still things that need to be done, battles that need to be fought, but—
Just for now, this is good.

Movement out of the corner of his eye catches his attention, not fast enough to register as a threat,
and he looks over in time to see the forms of the two bijuu waver and collapse in on themselves.
Rōshi staggers a step before Han catches his shoulder, but the big man pulls him back upright and
they turn to look at Kurama, a relief equal to Kakashi’s on their faces.

There’s a ragged breath, pulling Kakashi back around. Kurama is rising unsteadily to his feet, a hand
on Naruto's shoulder as Gaara holds tight to the leg of his pants. “I have to go,” he tells them, gentle but firm. “This is almost over, but there's someone whose face I need to pound into a smear.”

“Are you going to get hurt again?” Gaara wants to know, solemn and faintly scared. “Shukaku says you changing like that is a bad thing.”

“I like you any way, Kurama-nii,” Naruto says stubbornly, “but you give really good hugs like this!”

Kurama blinks at them, like the sentiment is still faintly baffling, even after all of this time. Then he snorts softly, and says, “I'm not going to let it happen again. And even if it does, I know how to get back now. I'll be fine. But the four of you should head back to the village before Utakata, Fū, and Yugito lose their damned minds.”

Naruto makes an unhappy face, but Sasuke nods seriously, reaching out to grab Naruto's wrist. “We will,” he promises, and looks back at the pink-haired girl. She gives him a shy smile, and he adds, “Sakura can sneak us back in.”

“Too late for that, I think, given the way Matatabi and Chōmei are yelling,” Han says dryly as he approaches, but he tips his hat to Sakura and smiles at Kurama. “It's a relief to see you back to yourself, Kurama.”

Rōshi snorts, folding his arms across his chest, and glances down at the children as well. “Han can take them back,” he offers. “You're going after the leader?”

“Yeah,” Kurama confirms, and Kakashi wonders if he means Zetsu or Obito, or even both.

He levers himself to his feet, and says with a mildness that dares Kurama to challenge him, “I'll come with you.”

There's a pause, and Kurama tips his head, regarding Kakashi narrowly. “It's Obito,” he says, testing.

Kakashi meets his stare without wavering. “No, you don’t say,” he drawls, and it still twinges but not so much that he can't be a bastard about it. “I had missed that. Entirely. All the times we've talked about him, and how Kisame said his name, and our shared eyes—”

“Asshole.” Kurama rolls his eyes, but there's a quirk at the corner of this mouth that wants to grow up to be a grin. A breath, and he looks back at Kakashi, red eyes steady. There's fear in them, something dark and desperate and deeply buried, but he lifts his chin and says, “I'm going to kick his ass.”

“I'll help,” Kakashi agrees, cheer in his voice that he doesn't feel, but when he reaches out a hand, Kurama takes it, twisting their fingers together. Kakashi pulls him a step closer, eyes still locked, and that relief is back, bone-deep and desperate. Kurama's here, he's free. Kakashi will do everything in his power to make sure that no one ever controls him like that again.

He doesn't think his heart could handle it.

“Be good, brats,” Kurama says, casting a crooked smile over his shoulder. “Keep each other safe.”

“Okay, Kurama-nii!” Naruto says, and his expression is worried but his voice is steady. “If you need me an’ Gaara an’ Sasuke an’ Sakura to save you again, we will!”

Kurama laughs, and it's still rough, but there's only humor in it. “Let's see if I can't save myself this time,” he proposes, and that grin is all teeth and blood and terror. Kakashi adores it. “But I'll keep it
in mind.”
LXXIV: Siderate

{siderate / 'sidət/, reit/ . to blast or strike down, as with lightning; to afflict with paralysis or other sudden physical disorder; to seize with sudden fear, amazement, etc.; to dumbfound, bewilder. From Latin sideratus, past participle of siderari “to be struck by a star, be sunstruck”, from sider-, sidus “star”.

Shisui is never ever going to disrespect a plant ever again, because this one is kicking his ass and he is somehow far less optimistic about his chances to win than he was when Tenzō was conscious and kicking right next to him.

With a sound of utter frustration, he heaves Tenzō higher up over his shoulder, thanks everything vaguely benevolent that Tenzō is a beanpole and not hefty, and lets a shunshin sweep them out of the path of a spear of branches. Through the whirl of dispersing leaves and wind, there's just enough time to see another surge of choking vines, and Shisui curses, ducks, and leaps for the top of Konoha's wall.

From the mad tangle of greenery beneath them, there's a low, mocking laugh. Branches slide apart, and Zetsu grins up at them, too many teeth and too much dark humor.

“Come on down here, little hummingbird,” he taunts, and that smile is too wide and sharp for anything human. “I’d be happy to take that burden off your hands, you know. We’re going to need him in the near future, so I may as well take him now.”

Damn. Damn, damn, damn. Shisui tightens his arm around Tenzō’s waist, wanting to curse out loud. No wonder Zetsu had targeted Tenzō first, knocked him out barely three minutes into the fight and then tried to drag him underground. Itachi had managed a fireball that drove him away, and Shisui had been able to grab their teammate before he got plant-napped, but Zetsu hasn’t let up on his attempts. Now they’re down their most useful team member in this match, plus a possible hostage, and also plus a deadweight they can’t afford to put down anywhere, because Zetsu is a crafty bastard and spends far too much of his time merged with the ground.

Shisui just hopes the other teams are having more luck than they are.

“There’s not going to be a future for Akatsuki, bastard,” he snaps, and it has to be true. This is a last-stand kind of attack, their weird statue is destroyed, Pein has been captured. How many more backup plans can they have, honestly?

Zetsu laughs, eerie and wavering, and he doesn’t seem at all bothered. “Maybe not,” he agrees, grinning. “But Akatsuki has never meant much of anything to me, I’ll admit. Just a means to an end.”

Well, Shisui wasn’t exactly expecting him to come out and say it, but if this is a last-ditch kind of thing, it’s not really that much of a surprise. Kurama’s implied enough times that Akatsuki had a shadow leader, and Zetsu is slippery enough, has kept out of enough direct battles that Shisui’s money has been on the plant guy being the leader for weeks now. It’s—

Another flash of movement, and Shisui is gone so fast he doesn’t even have time to curse, flashing to the other side of the clearing, leaping through vine-choked trees, and ducking around a burst of dagger-tipped branches to land further down the wall. In the same moment, Itachi sweeps out of the trees, a dragon made of fire swirling around him, and the jutsu lunges for Zetsu without pause. Shisui
moves as Zetsu turns, flips off the wall and flashes through seals one-handed, then raises a hand to his lips and lets a flood of fire loose. Itachi’s smart enough to dodge, and Shisui grabs for more chakra, clumsier this time but just as fast, and a screaming wind hits the blaze and it roars, doubling in size and strength.

Midair, Shisui triggers another shunshin, landing lightly on the wall, and braces himself for whatever comes out of the fire. The smoke is thick, blinding, and maybe that wasn’t the best idea, but it’s not like a clear battlefield is helping them fight anyway.

“ITACHI?” he calls, just to make sure his stupid little cousin didn’t do something inadvisable.

“Here,” Itachi says, materializing beside him in a whirl of leaves. He has his tantō out, stained with sap and dripping white ichor from the few blows they’ve managed to make connect, but they’re both running low on chakra by now, both battered. Nothing seems to stick to Zetsu, Shisui thinks wearily, trying to readjust Tenzō so he’s not quite so off balance. The bastard just shakes off whatever hits they land, and dodges all the rest.

“Fuck,” he mutters, catches the look Itachi gives him, and rolls his eyes. “Whatever. Sorry to offend your delicate ears, I meant fuck this shit.”

Itachi rolls his eyes right back, shaking the goop off his sword. “Tenzō?” he asks, casting a quick, worried look at the older boy.

“It’s just about the only reason they’ve managed to keep up so far, honestly; Zetsu’s more than capable of fighting on two fronts at once, and he doesn’t seem to be holding back at all.

The wall beneath them starts to rumble.

“Oh, fuck you!” Shisui yelps, throwing himself off the ledge and calling up a shunshin that spins him across the clearing. He lands in the branches of a tree, Itachi a few seconds behind him, just as there’s a groaning crack and the stone shatters, roots and creepers tearing it apart from the inside out.

Somewhere in the shredding smoke, Zetsu laughs.

“Come to think of it,” he says, that edge of vicious mockery still all too present in his tone, “I bet I could find a use for your eyes while I’m at it. Yours especially, little hummingbird. That’s an interesting power you have. Just like your grandfather’s, isn’t it?”

Normally Shisui is all too happy to jump on any mention of Kagami, but from this plant creature who’s trying to take over the world? Yeah, pass. He’d much rather badger the Hokage for stories, or his mother. Well, maybe not her. She’s scarier than Sarutobi, since she has access to baby pictures. And Tenzō. And could probably show Tenzō those baby pictures. Gods, now there’s a nightmare.

(It’s just slightly possible that Shisui’s brain is way too talented at entertaining multiple unnecessary trains of thought at one time and in the middle of a crisis. It’s a pretty terrible way to keep from panicking, honestly.)

“Leave Kagami out of this!” Shisui snaps, bristling. “And you can have our eyes over my dead body. It’s not happening.”
Behind him, a spark of corrupted, rot-sweet chakra, and Shisui spins, already knowing it’s too late, he’s going to be too slow. He catches that too-wide grin, the light of victory in Zetsu’s incandescent eyes as he splits out of the tree with grasping hands—

A massive scaled sword crashes down between them, sheering off the bough Shisui is standing on, and a warp snatches him up as he falls. Shisui has a split second to register someplace that’s wrenchingly other, full of darkness and echoing emptiness and square pillars rising from the gloom, and then he and Tenzō and Itachi are all spilling out of another twist of space, landing in a heap on top of a section of wall that’s still standing.

Reinforced shinobi sandals crunch over stone as a man in a white mask steps through the rubble. His tattered Akatsuki cloak sweeps the ground, dropping from his shoulders as he moves to lie crumpled in the dust, and there’s a gunbai in his hand, the long chain looped loosely around his wrist. The air of menace around him is practically a living thing, dark and heavy and crushing Shisui’s lungs like nothing has since he was a new Academy student. With a gasp, he scrabbles for a handhold on the stone, finds Itachi’s wrist, and drags his cousin and Tenzō with him as he retreats right up against a guard tower.

Tellingly, Itachi doesn’t even consider resisting.

With a cheerful chuckle, Kisame slings his sword over his shoulder and leaps down from the stump of the limb he was standing on, landing heavily and then leaning back against a thrust of jagged stone like he hasn’t a care in the world. “You’ve all been having fun out here, huh?” he says easily, grinning like it’s all a grand joke, like he can’t feel the killing intent that’s turned the air to molten stone.

“What's the meaning of this?” Zetsu demands sharply, pulling himself fully from the tree and leveling a glare at the masked shinobi. “Tobi! What do you think you’re doing? I had them!”

_Tobi_, Shisui thinks, and feels a shiver trace down his spine. Kurama had said he played the fool no matter what, acted like the dumbest sort of clown, that they shouldn’t let their guard down around him because he wasn’t really like that, but…

One thing to hear that their opponent put on a mask; even Shisui does that, honestly. Another thing entirely to see him like this, easily twice as threatening as Kurama ever managed to be, even after saving them.

“Had them? For what?” Tobi asks, and his voice is low and dark and threaded through with menace. “The Gedō Mazō is shattered. We need to find another way.”

Zetsu bristles. “No, we need to fix it! The Gedō Mazō will work—the Eye of the Moon plan is all we need!”

The white mask tips, ever so faintly. “You’ve been a friend since the very first, Zetsu,” he says, deceptively mild, but Shisui can feel an incandescent, unearthly rage vibrating through each word, can read it in the set of the man’s body. “Do you remember the first night I believed? Do you remember the moment when I agreed to help you, no matter what?”

There’s a long pause as Zetsu studies Tobi, eyes narrowed like he’s looking for the trap in the words. “Of course I do,” he says, and the frustration and anger have been neatly buried, replaced with sympathy. “Such a tragedy, what happened to that poor girl. But we can fix it. You know that, don’t you? You remember what Madara planned to give this world its happy ending?”

Tobi scoffs, low and sharp. “I remember that you were the one to inform us that Kakashi and Rin
were nearby,” he says, and Shisui goes still, horror and confusion building. Because *Kakashi and Rin* makes him think of Team Minato, and Team Minato makes him think of the third member, lost to the war. An Uchiha, a boy with wild dark hair who always had a smile to spare for Shisui, who babysat and worked and helped old ladies carry their groceries home.

*No,* he thinks, desperate to be proven wrong, but his mind can’t stop, is already cataloguing movement and build and visible features.

**Obito?**

“I wish I had found them sooner,” Zetsu says, and he melts back into the tree, only to rise from the ground in front of the other man a moment later. The compassion in his voice sounds absolutely genuine, but Shisui can see the way Kisame’s eyes narrow, how his grin doesn’t waver as much as it does *sharpen.* Clearly they hear something that he isn’t familiar enough to pick out. “A few minutes earlier and we could have saved her.”

There’s a long, long pause, tense enough to leave Shisui breathless, and Tobi reaches up. He splays a hand over his mask, reinforced gloves clicking against the porcelain, and then pulls it away.

*Obito,* Shisui recognizes, and has to swallow down his horror. *Oh, gods.* It really is him, scarred and furious and cold, an expression on his face that the cheerful boy Shisui remembers would never have worn in a thousand years.

“Yes,” Obito agrees, and it rasps in his throat like the word is almost impossible to say. He lets the mask drop, clattering against the stone, and doesn’t look after it as it rolls to a stop among the tangled vines. “We could have. But that wouldn’t have fit with your plan, would it have? If I saved Rin, there was no reason for me to remake the world. No reason to let Madara train me, groom me to take his place. No reason I should listen to you, or play your games, or abandon my village. And that just wouldn’t do, would it.”

The malice in the air redoubles, grows heavy enough to crush in an instant. Zetsu is still, wary, but not yet running, and Shisui only wishes he were that resilient. If he could stand, he would *absolutely* bolt for the nearest cover, but he doesn’t think his knees would support him right now, let alone allow him to carry Tenzō and Itachi away with him.

He wishes they would. He really, *really* wishes that they would.

Zetsu’s expression wavers for a long moment before it slides into a concerned frown. “Tobi, did that Uzumaki brat start filling your head with lies? Maybe coming back to Konoha wasn’t the best idea —”

“That,” Obito says, as quiet as poison, “is not my name.”

Across the field, Kisame laughs.

Zetsu pauses, studying Obito carefully. “Madara,” he amends, like it’s a meaningless concession, and that brings its own flicker of horror as Shisui tightens his grip on Itachi’s wrist. Easy enough, again, to *hear* that Madara controlled Akatsuki, that the whole organization was a puppet he controlled, but people don’t *talk* about Konoha’s most famous missing-nin, the Uchiha especially. Shisui can remember three times in his life he’s heard that name out loud, and one of them was from Kurama.

To connect that name with the boy five years Shisui’s senior, his *babysitter,* makes Shisui’s stomach turn.

There’s a long beat like Obito is considering this, like he’s weighing it as a choice, but then he keeps
walking without either accepting or dismissing it. “You rarely left the cave while I was recovering,” he says, flat and inflectionless. “Why did you choose that moment to scout? Out of all the spaces for Kakashi and Rin to flee, why is it they ran right past the cave where Madara was keeping me, even though a straight path back to Konoha would have been smarter?’’

_Tactical genius, always thinking ten steps ahead, even when he has to come up with plans on the fly,_ was Kurama’s grudging assessment of Tobi, before they attacked the Akatsuki base. Hard to connect that with the clown Obito played, but easy enough to see it now in this man, laying all the pieces of the puzzle in order. Kurama must have given him the first piece, and now he’s come to get all the others as well.

“Do you really think I have all of these answers?’’ Zetsu asks, annoyed. “Sometimes things simply happen, like how we found you after the cave-in—’’

The ragged sound Obito makes isn’t anywhere even close to a laugh. “Right. The cave-in. On a mission where we weren’t supposed to encounter resistance, where the Iwa nin knew _exactly_ who to kidnap to make me come running straight into their trap. Which I shouldn’t have survived in the first place, but which gave Madara the perfect excuse to carve me open and make me a _better tool_ while he was—’’ He breaks off suddenly and sharply, like something forced him to, and makes a dark, furious sound of frustration.

Zetsu takes one step back, then pulls himself up short. “Madara—’’ he says, the prelude to a warning.

Obito laughs, mad and deadly and wrecked, and his fingers go tight around the gunbai’s chain. “That,’’ he growls, “isn’t my name, either.’’

Space contorts, and between two heartbeats he’s gone. In the same moment Zetsu spins, clearly familiar with this tactic, and starts to sink like the earth has turned to quicksand. It’s already too late, though. The ground rumbles, and even as Obito appears out of thin air with the gunbai already in flight, Zetsu cries out, fighting vines and roots that try to hamper him. The fan end of the gunbai slams into him, knocking him back and right off his feet, and Obito follows without hesitation, a flight of kunai bursting out of his other dimension like they’ve been propelled from a launcher.

Half a second to get his feet under him again and Zetsu spins with a snarl, one hand coming up with a lash of roots following. He twists around the kunai as if he’s boneless, snaps a kick at Obito, and dives for the ground. In a ripple of earth, he’s gone, but the plants around them heave, suddenly surging with life. Obito dodges the first lunge, leaps over the second, phases through a spearing branch as thick around as Shisui’s waist, and flickers through hand signs in a blur. One hand snaps up towards his mouth, echoing Shisui’s earlier motion, but this isn’t a stream of fire, it’s a _flood_. Plants scorch, wood buckles, and in the midst of it something screams. Zetsu lurches up from the rock behind Obito, branch-like fingers stabbing, and Obito cries out.

Blood splatters the ground as he takes a stumbling step, hauling himself off the Mokuton that pierced him, and he collapses to one knee.

“You ungrateful child,’’ Zetsu snarls. “This is your one chance to see that world you dream of. This is the only way to get her back, don’t you realize that? The Eye of the Moon—’’

Obito laughs, wet and rasping, and wipes the blood from his lips. “Get her back?’’ he manages, and bares his teeth in a deaths-head grin. “You never understood a single thing. I don’t want her _back_— she was never mine to begin with.’’

In a surge of muscle and motion, he spins to his feet, yanking hard on the gunbai’s chain. It goes flying in a sweeping arc, the chain almost catching Zetsu before he dives into the ground, and Obito
catches the fan, twists, and throws it again with all the force of his chakra behind it. A dragon made of wood slams into it in an explosion of chips, and Obito ghosts through the aftermath, whirls up, and sends a barrage of shuriken whipping out of nowhere to slice through the grasping branches. He drops down through the aftermath, hits the ground, and slams a kunai straight into Zetsu’s throat as the creature rises from the ground again.

Shisui allows himself a moment to hope that that’s a killing blow, like it would be for anyone else. It’s all too easy to remember the last time he and Tenzō fought Zetsu, though, the way the burning husk stood up and laughed at them, their complete and utter inability to kill him, and—

Zetsu backhands Obito like he’s a child, like he’s not even worthy of the effort of a punch, and wrenches the kunai free. White ichor fills in the wound, smooths out into flesh, and Zetsu laughs just like he did back then, high and cruel and mocking.

“Do you know that this is?” he asks, and it’s the sound of someone delivering a final blow. “You’re betraying us.”

Of all the things Shisui expects watching Obito crumble to the ground like a puppet with cut strings upon hearing those words isn’t even vaguely among them.

He’s on his feet before he can think about the ramifications of it, shaking off Itachi's hand. Below them, Zetsu laughs again, looming over Obito where he’s on the ground, clutching at his heart and as white as snow. “You’re vastly useful, Tobi, even now,” Zetsu says, a patient parent addressing an unruly child. “Stop this idiocy and stop letting other people cloud your mind. I won't end—”

Shisui appears between them in a whirl of leaves, already driving forward with his tantō in hand. The blade slams into Zetsu’s chest with all the force and impact of an exploding tag, as much chakra as Shisui was able to gather behind it, and the plant-man shrieks for half a second before he’s gone in a burst of dirt.

“Fuck,” Shisui mutters, but he doesn’t hesitate to turn, dropping to one knee beside Obito and trying to see where he’s hurt. His identity and Shisui’s possible lingering affections for one of the few other expressive Uchiha aside, Obito has already landed several blows on Zetsu, which is more than Itachi, Tenzō, and Shisui together have managed. If they want to stop him, Obito surviving is their best bet.

But Obito bats his hand aside before Shisui can pull his shirt away. He takes a painful breath that looks too short and shallow to do him any good, and his head falls back, eyes fluttering shut. His mouth moves, as if he’s trying to talk, but it’s nothing Shisui can read on his lips, and the words don’t come.

“Obito!” Shisui says sharply, but there’s no response. With a curse, he wrenches off a glove and presses his fingers to the unscarred side of Obito's throat, searching desperately for a pulse.

Another aborted breath, and on the exhale, Obito rasps, “Heart—seal—destroy—”

His eyes close all the way, and his chest stills.

Fuck.

A seal, Shisui thinks desperately. Some kind of seal triggered by Zetsu’s words, definitely, but—heart. His heart’s stopped, so logically it’s on his heart. Destroying the heart will destroy the seal, but that won’t help with the we need him alive to kick Zetsu’s ass for us thing. And Shisui doesn’t have time for this, because—

A blaze of fire at his back, blue-white with power and hot enough to burn even through his flak
jacket and shirt. Zetsu recoils with a cry, vanishing into the greenery, and Itachi settles on the ground with a light thump, breathing slightly harder than normal but determined.

There’s no chance to thank him, but Shisui doesn’t need to—they’ve always watched each other’s backs. Instead, he turns his attention on Obito, lets his mind skip across ten different scenarios and discards them all. But…

Kurama mentioned Tobi could heal from most things. A destroyed heart was definitely never mentioned, but it’s not like Shisui has a lot of other options right now, and it’s not like it will make Obito any more dead than he is right now. Maybe this will work and maybe it won’t, but it’s their only chance short of translocating a bijuu—one of the bijuu who are obviously busy fighting, going by the chakra flaring around Konoha—to actually kick Zetsu’s everything right out of existence.

Shisui really hopes that whole ‘enemy of my enemy’ thing doesn’t turn around to bite them in the ass, but…

Obito said abandon my village, when he was facing Zetsu. Maybe it’s not anything even vaguely close to repentance, but it’s something, Shisui thinks.

He reaches down to grab his sword again, flicks the ichor off of it, and calls up his chakra. It burns green-white in the air, condensing, brightening as he channels it into the blade. It’s not Kakashi’s Chidori, not even close, but it’s a trick that just blew a massive hole in Zetsu’s chest, and with any luck, it will be enough.

Shisui flips it up, grabs the hilt, and slams the blade down as hard as he can, just as a surge of water sweeps around and past him. There’s no time to look, to make sure that Kisame is going for Zetsu and not Itachi, and Shisui doesn’t try, even though the urge is almost impossible to resist. Instead, he braces himself for detonation, narrows the blaze of chakra into as tight a lance as possible, and stabs Obito in the heart.

(For a long moment, there’s nothing at all. No light, not even darkness. Just…emptiness, and it’s the most terrifying thing he’s ever felt.

“Really?” a voice says, close to his ear, though he can’t see anyone, can’t feel the whisper of anyone’s breath or hear any sound of movement. She sounds…disappointed, though. Angry, and he knows he deserves every last bit of her hate, but—

He’d never really thought he would have to face it in person.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. It’s one of the first things he’s said in years that hasn’t been a lie.

“I know you are,” she tells him, sad but steady. She always was the strongest of the three of them. “But sometimes—sometimes sorry isn’t enough.”

His throat burns. His eyes are hot. It’s been so long since he felt the need to cry, like the heat of the rage inside him dried up every last tear.

“I don’t know what else I can offer,” he tells her. “I’m dead.”

He knows that if he could see her, there would be that twist to her mouth again, the one she always wore when he’d done something more stupid than she expected. It hurts, not being able to see it, but
that wound is seven years old now, and the edges have scabbed over, even though he’s never done
anything to help them heal.

The nothingness shivers, and green-white light reverberates through it like the ripples of sound from
a struck gong.

“Enough for you to end up here,” she agrees, voice firm, “but not enough to stay.”

That doesn’t seem fair. Doesn’t seem right, and he opens his mouth to say as much, but before he
can there’s a palm over his lips. Even if he can’t see her, he doesn’t need to in order to know she’s
giving him that same determined glare she always wore so well.

“Don’t be an idiot,” she says fiercely. “Don’t you dare. I didn’t die so you could unmake the world. I
died to protect it. You killed our family, and I don’t know how I’m supposed to forgive you for that.”

He’s never expected forgiveness, but hearing it straight out like that still twinges. Gently, carefully,
he reaches up, closing his fingers around a child’s thin wrist, and really, how painful to think now
about what could have been, what might have happened if the world was kinder.

“You wanted to see peace,” he says, and it’s not any sort of defense or explanation, but it’s a
thought. An idea, buried so completely so long ago, but he remembers now.

“I did,” she agrees, sad and quiet. “But no war for peace will ever accomplish anything. I thought
you of all people would understand that.”

Maybe he did, once, but it got lost somewhere along the way, buried under the hate and rage.

“They killed you,” he says, and it feels like breaking. “They killed you because of me.”

“I killed myself,” she tells him, as brutally honest as always. “It was my choice. You have to respect
that.”

It hurts, he wants to say, but he remembers that image of her beneath the bloated moon, blood on her
lips and a hole in her chest. She’d been scared, and he’s seen the image of her terrified eyes reflected
in his dreams each night. But…she’d been brave, too, so achingly, horrifically, beautifully brave, and
somewhere along the line he’d forgotten that about her. Her bravery was always one of the things he
loved about her best.

“I didn’t,” he admits on a breath, and he folds down, pressing his forehead to her thin shoulder as her
arms come up to wrap around his head.

“I know,” she says into his messy hair, and this at least is warmer. “You’ve always had a habit of
forgetting the important things when you get angry.”

That green-white light flares again, brighter than before, and he can feel her sigh against his cheek
Don’t stop until the moment you end up here again. I’ll be waiting, and we’ll talk again.”

Obito takes a breath that smells of her, feels the cotton of her dress beneath his cheek, the soft brush
of her brown hair. “All right,” he agrees, and this is one promise he’ll definitely keep.

“Good,” Rin whispers in his ear, and she kisses him on the cheek and hurls him back into his body
as his heart restarts with a blazing, shuddering beat.)
Shisui probably should have expected this part of things.

“No no no!” he cries, ducking the sweep of the massive sword and flickering out of the return swing. At the same moment, a spear of earth leaps up, and he curses, changing direction at the very last moment. Rock scrapes his sandal as he disappears, but he doesn’t faceplant into Zetsu’s jutsu, thankfully.

It probably says something about Shisui’s life that this feels like a fairly significant win.

“You don’t understand, I was trying to help!” Shisui protests, landing on the branch of a tree and stumbling one step. Itachi fends off a burst of Mokuton with a Katon jutsu, and Shisui spares half a second of attention to chuck a Raiton in the same direction before he’s bolting out of Kisame’s range again.

The tree gives a creaking groan and spits down the middle, cleaved perfectly in half by chakra, and Shisui hates his life.

Kisame chuckles, but there's no amusement in the sound at all. “Looks to me like you were taking advantage of an enemy being down to finish him off,” he says, and he doesn’t glance back at Obito’s still, still body, a gaping hole carved into his chest, but there’s a tension to his neck and shoulders like he wants to and won’t allow it of himself.

Shisui will admit that’s very much what it looks like, but it’s not. “He said there was a seal!” he protests, and a series of shunshin whirl him across the clearing just in time to slice through a spray of branches that almost stab Itachi in the spine. Itachi leaps over him, intercepts Zetsu’s grab with three perfectly placed kunai, and flings an exploding tag into the plant-man’s face. Well-practiced in this move, Shisui grabs him and lets another shunshin sweep them away even as the tag goes off.

In the smoke, Shisui can just make out the flash of a sword, the wooden wall that leaps into place to deflect it.

Well. At least Kisame isn’t only targeting them.

Shisui can’t help a glance of his own at Obito’s body, can’t help the curl of regret and horror all tangled up together that fills him at the sight of an oozing hole in the other man’s chest, but he strangles it down, shuts it away. No time for that—no time for anything, since one of Zetsu’s clones explodes from the earth, vines in a tangle around him. They wrap around Shisui, drag him down even as he throws Itachi clear, and he hacks at them desperately. The clone makes a sound of pain, and the vines pull tight in a rush, wrenching at Shisui’s limbs like they’re going to draw and quarter him. He only has one hand free, but he slams his tantō down as hard as he can, trying to cut through the thick creepers. The wood chips, but holds, and Shisui curses vehemently.

Itachi ducks back in, driving the clone away with another exploding tag, a high kick that would have caught it in the face if it were even a second slower, and the vines don’t go slack, but they’re at least
not getting tighter. For half a moment Shisui contemplates just setting everything on fire, but while his pain tolerance is probably enough to let him keep fighting even with severe burns, they’ll effect his range of motion too much for it to be worth it. Which leaves hoping that Tenzō wakes up—important, but not productive—or making like a lumberjack.

His poor tantō, Shisui thinks, already mourning the effort it’s going to take to re-sharpen the blade.

A flash of movement catches his eye, and he jerks, instinct telling him to lunge in and put himself behind his cousin to take the blow. There’s no chance of moving, though, not like this, and he shouts, “Itachi!”

Itachi leaps backwards over Kisame's sword, kicks off the big man’s shoulder and knees him in the face, then flips, lands, and sweeps a length of ninja wire around Kisame's legs. In the same moment, Zetsu lunges at him from the other side, and Itachi vanishes at the very last second, leaving the two (former?) Akatsuki members to collide in a tangle of limbs and curses.

It takes effort not to laugh as Shisui goes back to trying to free himself. Itachi is such a clever little shit, no matter how much he plays up that poker face of his.

One of the creepers finally cracks, and it’s just enough give for Shisui to wriggle free, unwinding his arms and legs as best he can. At least they weren’t thorny vines, he tells himself, dropping to the ground, but there’s no time for that either. He’s moving as soon as his sandals touch earth, lunging in to skip off the flat of Kisame's sword and knock it off course as it swings at Itachi’s head.

As far as ideas go, Shisui’s had better. Samehada immediately sucks at his chakra, makes him yelp as his vision goes fuzzy. He drops, scrapes together just enough instinct and brain power to turn it into a roll and then twist back to his feet even as he brings his tantō around, one hand on the hilt and the other braced on the flat of the blade. Samehada slams into the much smaller weapon, and only a desperate burst of chakra keeps Shisui on his feet. Behind him, Itachi dodges Zetsu’s branches, lets a dragon made of fire drive the creature back, and follows without hesitation.

It takes effort not to turn and watch Itachi, to make sure he’s all right. Itachi’s one of the best in Konoha, but he’s eleven. Shisui’s pretty certain that most people—up to and including Fugaku and Mikoto—forget what that actually means.

Still, the massive looming shark-man pushing him towards the ground is a little more urgent, and Shisui grits his teeth, braces himself, and tries not to let his feet slip. The bastard is strong, and Shisui knew that, looking at that giant sword he swings so easily, but he hadn’t really understood the sheer muscle mass, especially in comparison to his own.

“Why are you trying to kill us?” Shisui demands, and he can feel himself giving ground, the way the dulled blade of the tantō is carving its way through his glove and into the skin beneath, but he can't let up, even for a second.

Kisame’s grin is all sharp teeth and slow-burn anger. “Did you know?” he asks, and the tone is light but the look in his eyes is terrifying, all broken edges and cracked pieces held together with a deep-set rage. “He told me his name.”

Fuck, Shisui thinks, a little weakly. So Obito had something unspecified but clearly meaningful with Kisame, and Kisame just watched a Konoha nin—nominally the enemy—stab Obito in the heart. Awesome. Perfect. Fantastic.

Yeah, Shisui’s probably not getting out of this one with all of his limbs intact.
“There was a seal!” Shisui tries again. “On his heart, okay? He said—and it was the only thing I could—” He breaks off with a hiss as more of Kisame’s weight falls on Samehada, and Shisui’s arms almost buckle. Half a heartbeat to throw all of his force into holding that massive sword away, and Shisui just manages to find enough breath to snarl, “He’s family, damn it! I wouldn’t—”

A surge of dark, malicious chakra nearly flattens them both.

_Obito_, Shisui thinks for one fraction of a breath, releasing his tantō entirely as he leaps back in Kisame’s moment of distraction. But it’s not; Obito is still a body on the ground, and this chakra is older, sharper, darker even than his was. As it rises, the plants around them start to writhe, the ground buckles and cracks, the stones tremble. Automatically, Shisui looks for Itachi, finds him lunging out of the way of a snarl of greenery that’s falling like an avalanche, and triggers a shunshin before he can even think of moving. The world blurs, and the Sharingan is just enough to let Shisui keep things straight as he reappears, snatches Itachi up, and vanishes again in a whirl of leaves.

They reappear at the foot of the wall where Tenzō is lying, just as trees and vines and roots come alive, breaking through the surface of twisting and starting to move. In the midst of the mass, Zetsu straightens, several long cuts across his body sealing shut. His grin is wild and unnerving, splitting his face all the way across like he’s about to unhinge his jaw and swallow them all whole.

“I’m getting tired of you brats,” he says, full of malice, and the world around them quivers, just waiting for his signal to lunge.

“Brats?” Shisui demands, because his mother and Tenzō are probably right about how not knowing when to shut up is going to get him killed someday. “You’re throwing a hissy fit because we broke a statue and we’re the brats?”

Zetsu’s expression darkens, and he glares at Shisui with all the force of someone wanting to literally set him on fire. “Centuries,” he snarls, hands curling into fists. “I’ve been waiting centuries for circumstances to align, for all the pieces and all the pawns to take the board. And in the moment things come together for the first time, that little brat of an Uzumaki waltzes in and ruins everything. But no matter. If you’ve pushed me this far, I may as well keep going and bring her back myself, right?” A laugh, unamused and full of threat, and he steps forward. The earth cracks around his feet, a burst of greenery writhing up out of it like a nest of snakes, and then surges forward in a wave.

There’s no way to escape it; Shisui tries for a shunshin, but even as he disappears the spot where he was aiming to land is swallowed up, and he swears, changing course at the last minute. It’s too late, though; in that split second of hesitation, something tangles around his leg and drags him down, and Shisui only just manages to snap, “Itachi, go!” as he’s pulled towards the mass.

Itachi doesn’t argue. There’s a foot on Shisui’s shoulder, a brush of chakra, and Itachi leaps clear, landing on top of the wall.

For a moment all Shisui can see is green, but he calls up a spark of fire that turns to a whip of flame, scorching the vines holding him, and manages to claw his way back to the surface.

“Get Tenzō out of here!” he orders, and puts all of his authority as ranking shinobi into the tone, because Itachi chooses the worst moments to remember he has a spine and a will of his own. Then there’s no time to worry, because he’s being dragged back under, buried by roots that curl around each of his limbs like they’re going to rip him apart. They catch his right hand, and Shisui recognizes what’s going to happen in just enough time to brace himself before the root wrenches tight.

Shisui’s fingers break with an audible crack, and Shisui’s breath is punched out of him on a ragged cry.
Gods, that hurts.

Still. Shisui is a shinobi, he can handle this. He can survive. A breath, another, ragged and ruined, and he doesn’t let himself think about the way his hand feels like it’s been dipped in acid, the throbbing agony where it’s all he can do to shut it out. A third breath, and he reaches for his chakra, grabs for fire and tries to get his other hand free. There’s half a heartbeat when he thinks it’s going to work, the first flicker of relief—

Rough bark catches his fingers, wraps around them, and Shisui can’t do anything but grit his teeth and brace for more pain.

And then the drowning green around him shudders, goes still. It’s trembling faintly, and—

A hand is thrust down into the press, scarred arm and dark glove and pale skin, and fingers close around Shisui’s elbow even as the roots and vines start to wither. There’s a sharp jerk, a hard pull, and then Shisui is surfacing, stumbling into the hold of the man who saved him.

Obito doesn’t look up at him, face set in sharp lines of concentration and intent, and the spark of chakra in the air becomes a flood, heavy and tasting of sharp-sweet sap in the back of Shisui’s throat. He sucks in a full breath, cradling his hand against his chest and ignoring the drip of blood that means bone has broken the skin, focuses instead on the neat hole torn in Obito’s robe with smooth skin underneath.

“It worked,” he manages, and relief and trepidation are a heady mix. “You—it worked.”

One corner of Obito’s mouth pulls down, and it’s an expression so far from the boy Shisui knew seven years ago that he can’t even begin to interpret it. “You’re an idiot,” is what Obito says, though he still doesn’t look at Shisui. “You had the chance to get rid of an enemy. Didn’t the Academy teach you anything?”

Shisui wants to laugh, not quite relief and not quite victory and not quite bitterness but caught somewhere between the three. “What do you think I was doing?” he retorts, and it’s so weird to know this is Obito, his Obito, the boy who first showed him how to rig a trap. Weird to look down at him, since Shisui is a good bit taller, weird to see the scars, the darkness in his eyes, the age in his face.

Eerie and incredibly unsettling to know that Obito is the tactical genius Kurama warned them about so sharply, that Obito is the enemy, or was.

That, at least, gets him a look, still unreadable, but with an edge of exasperation that’s all too familiar. An arm wraps around Shisui’s waist, and the air warps. There’s an instant of vertigo where Shisui can’t quite figure out which way is up, but then their feet hit stone. Obito lets go of him, takes two steps to the edge of the wall to look down on the battlefield, and the hatred in his expression is incandescent, almost inhuman.

“Stay here. Zetsu is mine,” he tells Shisui, barely above a growl, and with a step off the edge he vanishes in another twist of air.

“Right,” Shisui agrees belatedly, and winces when a step back jars his hand. “I’ll just let you handle the insane plant thing. Cool.”

Zetsu screams, fury and thwarted rage, and the trees tremble. Obito flickers into existence in the air, a long staff already swinging, and around him shuriken sweep forward, propelled with more force than a human hand could give them. The weapons sweep through the reaching vines, and Obito dives
between them, sharpened end of the staff stabbing down and driving through Zetsu’s chest with a sickening, wet thud. Zetsu makes a sound of fury, more dagger-like roots stabbing up, but Obito opens his mouth and breathes out flame, then leaps back up and disappears into thin air.

There’s a roar from somewhere in the mass of green, and a momentary surge of water that’s quickly reburied. But an instant later Obito appears above the spot, dropping down through the roots like a ghost. A pause, and Shisui can’t quite help holding his breath, bracing for anything—

An explosion of flames and distorted air, a vortex of fire that burns away the covering greenery, and Obito hauls Kisame up out of the smoking rubble and burning vegetation. The big man staggers a step, but Obito catches him by the arm, pulls him back upright, and the look on Kisame’s face almost makes Shisui want to turn away.

“You’re alive,” Kisame says, fierce and nearly disbelieving. He slings Samehada over his shoulder, reaching up with his free hand, and his fingers sink into Obito’s loose hair where the wild strands spill past his shoulders.

Obito’s smile is faint and crooked, but still definitely present as he glances up at Kisame. He doesn’t touch Kisame in return, but he doesn’t move away, either, and his eyes meet Kisame's squarely as he says, “If this is the foundation of Madara’s world without lies…”

Kisame grins, all teeth, and in a surge of movement he whirls around Obito, Samehada sweeping out to carve a path through a wooden dome that tries to surround them. Drowning-dense chakra shatters the jutsu, tears through creeping branches, buckles the ground, and Shisui is suddenly, vividly reminded that Kisame’s nickname is the Tailless Tailed Beast.

Even after hanging around the majority of the jinchuuriki for the past few weeks, and seeing them use more chakra offhand and without thought than Shisui has probably used in his entire life, Kisame still manages to be terrifyingly impressive.

“Oh, but we never lied to you, Kisame,” Zetsu says, poison-sweet, as he rises halfway from the ground. “The boy was weak, mindless without those lies to lead him, but you—you’re full of resolve. Together, we can still save this.”

Kisame’s expression darkens, but before he can answer, Obito snarls, phasing right through Kisame’s covering bulk to slam the staff he’s holding into Zetsu’s throat. It’s the move that practically got him killed ten minutes ago, but this time, instead of pausing, Obito leaps, using his grip to drag Zetsu up and out of the earth. In the same moment, Kisame’s chakra redoubles, the scales covering Samehada fluttering, and he brings his sword around in a sweeping slash that carves right through two-toned flesh.

Zetsu screams, wrecked and wavering, and his form splits. Long creepers wrench closed around Obito like a flytrap snapping shut, but Obito drops to the ground, intangible, and then drives a kunai up into Zetsu’s jaw. The creature reels back, and Obito spins, slamming a kick into his gut and launching him backwards.

As smoothly as if they’ve been fighting together all of their lives, Kisame steps in, bulldozing straight through a thicket of stabbing branches and going in for another shredding sweep of Samehada’s blade. Zetsu splits around it, flicks a hand and catches Kisame in the chest with a pillar of stone that bursts from the ground, and then turns sharply to intercept the flurry of kunai Obito sends spinning at his head. Shards of wood fly, and Obito phases through them, drops to the ground, and flashes a hand sign. The air warps, and fire streams out in a vortex, given momentum and force. It slams into Zetsu with a smell that’s somewhere between burning plant matter and scorched flesh, and it takes effort for Shisui not to gag.
Still, he’s seen Zetsu shake off too many blows to think that’s the end of it.

And, as is entirely expected by now, there’s a ripple of flesh that moves like that bubbling ichor from the Mountains’ Graveyard, and Zetsu drags himself back together with an angry hiss.

“‘A useless little traitor like you can’t even begin to harm me,’” he snarls. “Give it up now and I might kill you before I rip that eye of yours out of your head.”

Shisui winces. If there’s any threat that will move an Uchiha, it’s that one, and surely even Obito isn’t exempt from that.

Obito’s scoff is cold and derisive. “Kamui is why you kept me alive in the first place, isn’t it,” he says, and it’s not a question.

The laugh Zetsu gives is high and sharp. “Strains of the Sharingan run through family lines. But you—you came from a family that had never manifested the Sharingan before. Two civilians, one not even full Uchiha, and yet here you are, carrying one of the most powerful manifestations I’ve ever seen. Only the boy up there rivals you, did you know that?”

This is not a conversation Shisui wants to be part of, especially since it started with ripping out eyes. He doesn’t take a step back, though, despite how much he wants to; he hadn’t known that Obito’s parents weren’t shinobi, that one of them was only partly Uchiha. It doesn’t really explain the way people looked down on him as a child, the derisive whispers in the clan, but it certainly explains some of it. The Uchiha don’t tend to like anyone who muddies their gene pool.

Though, Shisui thinks with wry amusement, they just lost one of their main arguments against it in Obito. There’s no way having mixed blood has weakened him at all.

Before Shisui can find the appropriate words to tell Zetsu to keep his scummy hands off Uchiha eyes in general, and his in particular, Obito takes half a step forward, drawing Zetsu’s gaze again. There’s cold fury in his face, something deeply buried and clearly not new. “You’re not going to get any more Uchiha to go along with your plans,” he says darkly. “It’s over, Zetsu.”

Zetsu laughs. “I’m sure you think it is,” he says mockingly, “but I’ve been doing this for longer than you can even imagine, traitor. One setback is hardly going to stop me, and Konoha is just rife with ambitious brats who can be so easily twisted. What about that child, the clan head’s younger son? So far under his brother’s shadow, passing unnoticed, never good enough—I’m sure he could fit our needs nicely.”

Sasuke, Shisui thinks, feeling sick. He means Sasuke, bright and cheerful and adoring of Itachi. And…maybe it’s because Shisui has been a shinobi too long, seen too many people fall to darkness, but it’s not unimaginable, to think of Sasuke in Obito’s place, driven to destroy the world in the name of saving it. People are corruptible; that’s the tragedy of them.

All someone needs is the right trigger, in the end.

Obito looks mostly unmoved by the threat, which is probably understandable—Itachi was too precocious to need his attention as a babysitter, and Sasuke wasn’t even born when Obito’s mission went to hell. He doesn’t know either of them, but he does flick a glance at Shisui’s face, no doubt taking in the horror there, before he turns back to Zetsu.

“No more,” he repeats, flat and cold, and disappears in a ripple of air. In the same moment Kisame lunges as well, laugh rough but intent, and before Zetsu can retreat he has to duck Samehada’s edge, the a whirl of branches from Obito as he reappears, practically on top of the creature. The Mokuton
puts Zetsu off-balance, gives Kisame enough of an opening to flip Samehada up and bring it crashing down right on top of Zetsu’s head.

There’s a spray of ichor, a wild eruption of plant life that makes the ground look like it’s boiling, and Zetsu screams.

A heartbeat later, a spiral of air spits both Obito and Kisame out on top of the wall, a handful of paces from Shisui, and Obito makes a quiet sound of tempered rage as he stares down at the writing vines.

“We need to find a way to stop him healing,” he tells Kisame. “Like this, it won’t matter what we do—he keeps shaking it off.”

“I think Kakashi and Kurama were saying the same thing about you, after the fight in the pass,” Shisui says, forcing cheer into his tone even as he’s gingerly dropping into a crouch. It’s less to make himself a smaller target, and more because his head is spinning from a mix of adrenaline, pain, and blood loss.

Obito blinks once before his eyes narrow. “A seal on his chakra,” he says, making the leap in an instant. For a moment, he mulls it over, but then shakes his head. “I’m not an Uzumaki.”

Kisame scratches his nose bashfully, nodding his head. “I almost failed my sealing unit in school,” he agrees sheepishly. “I haven’t improved much since then, either.”

Lovely. Shisui’s pants at fuinjutsu as well, so there’s that idea gone. He grimaces, shifting his hand a little, and tries not to pay attention to the way his vision wavers and goes white around the edges. Opening his mouth, he glances up at Obito——

A flash of crimson, of black-edged red like a hungry mouth gaping wide, and Kurama slams into Obito with all the force of an avalanche, knocking him clear off the wall. They tumble over the edge, Kurama wrapped around Obito and swinging with his claws bared, and Kisame has time for a startled shout and a step before Kakashi hits him from behind, hurling him back in the opposite direction. An instant later Kakashi is passing in a flash, just slow enough for Shisui to catch his captain’s glance at him, the cold determination in mismatched eyes.

Oh gods. Of all the things Shisui forgot to account for, this seems like the biggest and most important.

He scrambles to his feet, almost trips and falls headlong off the wall as his vision whites out, and feels fur against his hand half a second before there's a sharp jerk. The vertigo is still making him woozy, but he catches sight of snowy fur and bushy tails, and gasps out, “Thanks, Fuji, you're a goddess.”

Fuji, the size of a pony and rippling with foxfire, makes a pleased sound as she hauls him back by his flak jacket and dumps him on a more secure patch of stone. “Well, in six tails I will be,” she allows proudly, and crouches down next to him, eyeing the steady drip of blood from his broken fingers with concern. “Maybe you should save the jumping around for later.”

Later. Later implies that Kurama and Kakashi won't be so distracted kicking Obito's (admittedly deserving) ass that they let Zetsu jump them and die in an embarrassing and mostly preventable way. Not that Kurama will die easily, Shisui is sure, but still. Why take chances?

“No, no, no,” he says, scrambling back to his feet with slightly more care this time. “I have to get down there, it’s not what they think——”
While Obito is distracted trying to fend off one of Kurama’s force waves, Kakashi sweeps in under his guard, knocks him back with an elbow to the throat, and punches him square in the face hard enough that Shisui can hear the crack of bone from all the way at the top of the wall.

Fuji makes a deeply skeptical sound. “You really want to get in between Kurama-sama and that guy?” she asks doubtfully. “Because I might not be Momiji, but even I can still think of better ways to die.”

A good point, Shisui allows with a grimace. But he’s not about to stay up here and let them duke it out while Zetsu is still conspicuously absent. There’s no time, and—

Obito said he wasn’t an Uzumaki, and he couldn’t seal Zetsu’s chakra. But Kurama is, and Shisui’s willing to bet that he can come up with something.

“This is stupid,” he says, closes his eyes, and takes a breath. “Okay. I am stupid, oh gods, I'm an idiot and if I make it out of this in less than three pieces I'm going to kiss Tenzō. I'm going to kiss Tenzō on the mouth.”

Fuji blinks at him, cocking her head quizzically. “Do all human kiss each other after a victory?” she asks. “The dog man kissed Kurama-sama, too. Is it a tradition?”

Kakashi kissed Kurama? Shisui really doesn’t want to think about that right now. Or, well, he does, which is the problem. Especially since Kurama and Kakashi are both down there and Shisui's going to have to look them in the face in about three seconds.

Shisui hates being a teenager. He particularly hates being a teenager surrounded by scary, pretty people with far too much power and the ability to flatten him if they decided to put a bit of effort into things.

“I’ll tell you later,” he promises, dragging his brain back under control, pictures kissing Tenzō how he’s wanted to in a lowkey, angsty, I’m-too-dignified-for-pining-oh-wait-I’m-not way ever since they shared a room in Frost Country, and straightens. His hand is still throbbing, but it’s ignorable, unimportant. More important is the way Obito just cried out, the vicious tear of a bijūdama through flesh, and Shisui opens his eyes in time to see Obito go staggering back, landing on one knee on the ground with Kurama looming above him.

Shisui’s known as the fastest shinobi since Namikaze Minato for a reason. His use of the shunshin is unparalleled, unbeatable, instinctive at this point. He can do it half-dead or half-conscious or entirely drunk, managed to get halfway across Fire Country before running out of chakra once.

This is nothing.

A breath, a flicker of green-white chakra, and a whirl of leaves sweeps him off the edge of the wall, the world blurring with the speed of his passage. The field they're fighting on is large, but Shisui's across it in the space of a heartbeat, knocking Kakashi’s tantō to the side as he reappears in a burst of wind, braced in front of Obito. Kurama’s in front of him, spinning orb of black and purple light at his fingertips, and Shisui watches it fly towards his face with a grim sense of horror, thinks This is how I die, isn’t it, and—

Kurama pulls up short, chakra spinning like a contained hurricane three centimeters from Shisui’s nose, and growls.

Yeah, Shisui thinks with a sinking feeling in his chest. This is definitely how he’s going to die.
Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! One of my older brothers hit a rough patch and came for an unexpected visit to get away from things, so I didn't have as much time to write as normal.

**[salvific / ˈsal ˈvɪfɪk /, having the intent or power to save or redeem; leading to salvation; having the ability to rescue. From Late Latin salvicus, from Latin salvus “safe.”]**

Shisui feels a little faint, and he doesn’t think it’s from the blood loss this time. Words have scattered to the deepest corners of his brain to hide, but Shisui drags them back into the light as he retreats one staggering step, raising his hands.

“>Oh gods, okay, that is—you are terrifying, have I told you this? Because *wow*, I thought so before, but right now—”

“Shisui,” Kurama snarls, and his chakra boils across the clearing like a living thing, as hot as fire and rage. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t just go through you.”

Terror bolts down Shisui’s spine, and he takes another step back, almost tripping over Obito where the other Uchiha is still crouched on the ground, one hand pressed against the slowly-filling hole in his shoulder.

“Because he’s helping,” Shisui says, and put like that it sounds stupid and pathetic, but Shisui still meets Kurama’s furious crimson eyes as steadily as he can, and belatedly hopes his Sharingan isn’t active. One thing to make Kurama face his dojutsu on a calm day when Kurama’s in a good mood; another entirely to make him do it now, in the middle of a fight where Kurama has a grudge against this Uchiha in particular.

The fury in Kurama’s face doesn’t abate, and Shisui can hear Kakashi take a step closer as well, not a threat just yet but a definite possibility of one.

“He’s a monster,” Kurama growls, the words vibrating with barely-leashed fury, and Shisui only just catches the indrawn breath from behind him, the soft but sharp sound that’s somewhere between pained amusement and anger.

Shisui opens his mouth—not to argue, because he *can’t* if everything Kurama has told them is true—but before he can there’s a hand on his elbow, his shoulder. Obito hauls himself to his feet as a swirl of water falls apart to reveal Kisame a few paces away, and Shisui doesn’t quite want to take his eyes off the furious jinchuuriki (or something? Shisui isn’t quite clear on what Kurama is, precisely, beyond hot and terrifying in no particular order) in front of him but he turns his head just enough to check that he isn’t about to be decapitated from behind.

He’s really, really not, because Kisame doesn’t even look at him, just grabs Obito by the elbow and
helps pull him upright. Obito leans into the hold, pale and splattered with blood, and drags the back of his wrist across his mouth, smearing crimson over his scars before he looks up. His Sharingan is still spinning, and Shisui doesn’t have time to say bad idea before Kurama is already snarling, furious and ferocious. One step forward, claws bared, and Obito jerks Shisui out of the way, spinning him around so he ends up halfway behind Kisame as Kurama advances.

Startlingly, Kurama pauses. Red eyes narrow, lips pull back to show sharp teeth, and then—

Then his eyes widen, swift and sudden, and he snarls in a way that makes the air around them practically vibrate with rage. “No. No! Fuck you, no, you don’t get to fucking do this, you bastard!”

Shisui has absolutely no idea what’s going on.

“Uh?” He looks from Kurama to Obito and then over at Kakashi, who has one brow lifted in quiet confusion. “What are you even talking about?”

The sound Kurama makes is pure malice and frustration, and he takes a step towards Obito like he’s going to start swinging. Probably with a bijūdama, knowing him. Or several. “You don’t get to fucking change sides and pretend that wipes out everything you’ve done,” he snarls, and clawed hands curl like a threat.

Rage kindles in Obito's eyes, and he straightens up, lips pulling back from his teeth as if he can rival Kurama for sheer predatory menace. “You think I don’t know that?” he growls. “Zetsu—he wants to bring someone back. That’s all he wants. Everything I’ve done, everything I thought was for the sake of a better world—all of that is destroyed! I was used!”

“Good! Now you fucking know what it feels like!” Kurama takes another step forward, looming more than someone of his stature should be able to, and glares at Obito with more bloodlust than Shisui has ever seen from anyone before. “Twice now you’ve turned me into a Sage-damned puppet and I’ll destroy you for it!”

Fury slips sideways into confusion, and Obito blinks. He takes a step back, running up against Kisame's bulk, and frowns deeply. “Twice,” he repeats, not quite a question.

Off to the side, Kakashi closes his eyes and mutters something that they're probably all better off not hearing.

There’s chakra rising again, dark red edged with black, and Kurama growls, low and rumbling. “Six years ago,” he says, almost a taunt. “Remember that night? You did it again just a few minutes ago. Everything I am, all the anger inside of me—you take it and you twist it, turn me into a glorified wrecking ball. Just like Madara showed you, right?”

Six years ago. Six years ago, and anger, and the Sharingan—

Oh gods.

All the many scattered pieces of Shisui’s common sense throw up their hands and surrender, while his much-maligned self-preservation curls into a ball and starts gibbering quietly. Kurama, hot, powerful Kurama who Shisui tried to glue shoes onto, is implying that he’s the Kyuubi no Kitsune.

Suddenly a couple of those fantasies Shisui was not entirely able to resist are a hell of a lot more terrifying and very, very much more awkward.

Apparently Obito gets it too, because his eyes go wide, and Kisame stiffens, free hand coming up to curl around Obito's shoulder as if he’s bracing him. “You—” Obito starts, then stops short, shakes
his head, and closes his eyes for a moment. “Of course. Too much chakra for a newborn, so Minato
had to split it. You—you're the other half?”

Kurama doesn’t answer, just growls, but he doesn’t need to. Suddenly a hell of a lot more things are
making sense, even if Shisui kind of wishes that they weren’t.

At least Kakashi doesn’t look even mildly surprised, Shisui tells himself. So there’s that. Someone
knew, and thankfully it was the guy playing tonsil hockey with—

With the Kyuubi. Yeah, okay, no, Shisui is not going there. As it is, he’s never going to be able to
look at his captain the same way ever again.

“You okay, kid?” Kisame asks, amusement clear in his voice as he eyes Shisui.

Shisui realizes belatedly that he has his good hand in his hair, pulling like he’s trying to tear it out
along with those horrifying thoughts, and he whimpers. “No,” he says. “I am not okay, this is—this is
—I have images in my head and they aren’t even nice images. Captain. Captain, I can’t. You—the
Kyuubi—You’re fucking the Kyuubi!”

Obito’s head snaps around, expression twisting into shock and no little horror, and he stares at
Kakashi like he’s never seen him before.

Kakashi blinks once, long and slow. “In my defense,” he says mildly, as if he is in any way
defensible at all, “he kissed me first.”

The noise Kurama makes is nothing short of rude. He’s still glaring, but this time irritation has beaten
out the rage, and it seems more directed at all of them in general than Obito in particular, though
there’s still an edge of that as well. “Fucking really?” he demands. “This is what you bastards are
focusing on?”

Shisui flails an arm at him. It would be more dramatic and impactful with two arms, but even he’s not
dumb enough to flap the broken one around like that. “It’s a legitimate concern, okay? You are—and
he is—and I want to know how it works but at the same time oh my gods please don’t tell me.”

Kurama stares at him for a moment, then groans and kneads at his forehead. “Fucking
Uchiha,” he says with no little disgust.

The snort of amusement Obito gives is entirely unappreciated, in Shisui’s opinion. When he offers up
a glare at the older Uchiha, Obito ignores him completely, though, and instead meets Kurama’s gaze
squarely. “I want Zetsu as dead as possible,” he says, precise and sharp, each word a knife that’s
bright with poison. “As soon as possible.”

Kurama stares at him for a long, long moment, eyes narrowed, fists clenched. “Agreed,” he says
tightly, and then adds with an edge of a snarl, “When this is over, I'm going to fucking rip your
throat out, bastard. I don’t want Kaguya having any paths back to this world, but that doesn’t
fucking mean we’re allies.”

Obito’s expression has a matching darkness, the line of his mouth a tight slash that says he isn’t going
to give up without a fight, either. “Fine. Seal his chakra. I’ll rip him apart.”

That, at least, gets a sharp grin from Kurama, all teeth and vicious agreement. They’re both
horribly terrifying, and would be even if Shisui didn’t know that one of them was a bijuu in
human form, Shisui decides.

“You’re insane,” he says, not sure if it’s directed at Kisame or Kakashi. “So crazy. How do you even
survive.”

Kakashi gives him a look that might as well come with subtitles, the *hello pot, I'm kettle* is so clear. Because he’s a mature jounin and totally an adult, Shisui makes a face in return, pointedly tips his nose in the air, and says, “One problem with your plan: finding Zetsu. He’s not exactly here right now.”

Kurama’s lip curls, like he’s smelling something nasty. “Oh, he’s here. And I bet learning that he has *two* chances to snatch the Kyuubi just made his little black heart turn over in his chest. If the fucker hasn’t given up yet, he isn’t going to.”

There’s a low, wavering laugh from somewhere beneath their feet, and Shisui twists on instinct, reaching for a kunai with his right hand before realizing at the last second what a bad idea that is and aborting. He’s a little clumsier with his left, but the weight of a weapon is reassuring, grounding. Even if it probably won’t do much of anything against Zetsu, being armed is a definite comfort.

“Guilty,” Zetsu says, and makes it mocking, a taunt that echoes from everywhere. Obito and Kurama both turn, not quite putting their backs to each other even as they survey opposite sides of the field. There’s chakra rising, dark and oppressive, with a feel like rotting greenery and darkened swamps. “Especially because I don’t need to go after the others if I have you, Kurama. They’ll come running, won’t they?”

Kurama bristles, the force of his explosive chakra shattering the earth beneath him, sweeping out like a whirlwind to tear through the plants around them as they start to shift. “Fuck. That,” he bites out, short and precise, and rears back. Power gathers, spins into an orb of black and violet light, and he slams it down into the ground with a snarl.

Shisui has just enough time to register something snapping tight around his waist, a weightless jerk that rattles his teeth, before he’s yanked off his feet. He yelps, grabbing for his chakra, for a shunshin, but the thick vine around his waist doesn’t tighten any further. It lifts him into the air and drops him back on top of the wall, then slides away, and Shisui staggers a step and almost collapses with relief.

Then there’s a hand on his elbow, another at his wrist to help support his broken hand, and long brown hair tumbles over his arm. “Shisui!” Tenzō says, and there’s concern writ large in his features. “Are you all right?”

Shisui’s legs practically give out, because Tenzō is here and *fine*, missing his faceplate and sporting a streak of drying blood down one side of his face but conscious and clearly functional. “Tenzō,” he says, and not even the morass of terrifyingly strong chakra below them can stop him leaning into Tenzō’s solid warmth. “I think I should be asking you that.”

Tenzō gives him a look, reproachful and worried in equal measure, and loops his free arm around Shisui’s waist. “You’re the one bleeding heavily, idiot. What did you *do*?”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Shisui protests, the words a knee-jerk response at this point, and is treated to Tenzō’s quiet snort as the older teenager hauls him back and away from the edge of the wall. “Hey, no, we can’t leave, I can’t leave yet. My Mangekyo—”

“Won’t be of any use if you faint from blood loss,” Tenzō finishes for him. “Shisui, if I don’t get you to a medic soon, they might not be able to fix your hand completely. Itachi’s fine, he went with Sasuke, but you—”

That thought settles like lead in Shisui’s stomach, but he waves it off nevertheless. “Then Mom and I
can have matching prosthetics. This is more important.”

Tenzō’s mouth tightens, but he doesn’t argue any further, clearly recognizing that it’s futile. Instead, he says, low and sharp, “You worried me, idiot. Itachi just told me that you’d ordered him to leave, to take me away, and—” He swallows, fingers tightening on Shisui’s hip.

Oh, Shisui thinks, and even in the middle of a battle it sings through his nerves like elation, like joy. He curls his good hand around Tenzō’s elbow, tugs until the other boy looks at him, and holds his eyes with all the intent that’s inside of him. “I’m okay, Tenzō. Thanks for pulling me out of there.”

Dark eyes warm, and Tenzō shakes his head, a shadow of a smile on his face. Reaching up, he twists his fingers into Shisui's curls, then pulls his head down. Shisui has just enough time for a surge of jubilation like champagne bubbles in his blood before Tenzō’s mouth is slanting over his, tasting just faintly of blood and warm, so warm that Shisui just wants to curl up inside his bones and live there forever. It’s sweet and quick and less thorough than he wants it to be, not chaste or anywhere close to perfunctory but cut short by circumstance, and as they pull apart Shisui catches his breath and just—looks.

Tenzō glances down, a flush rising on his cheeks, and reaches up to push his hair back behind one ear. He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out, and for a moment he looks like he’s going to bolt right down into the thick of things just to avoid having to look at Shisui.

That’s definitely not going to stand, so Shisui leans in, reaching out to tip Tenzō’s chin up and kiss him again, still too brief but heady enough to make him ache deep down at his bones. He tries to put everything he’s feeling into the kiss, tries to tell Tenzō without words just how much he wants this, how happy even one kiss makes him, and—

A cry from below startles them both, makes them turn to find Kakashi being dragged under by grasping roots, and in an instant they’re both moving. Tenzō shaping the Snake Seal and dropping to his knees at the edge of the wall. His eyes narrow in concentration, and just for an instant the Mokuton-animated plants tremble, slow. In the same moment, Shisui shapes a fireball and lets it fly, small but pinpoint accurate as it slams into the largest of the roots. The plant recoils, and an instant later Kakashi is gone, twisting out of the restraints and diving back in to block a surge of stabbing branches aimed at Kurama.

Tenzō lets out a breath, drops the seal, and instantly reforms it. The vines pulling Kisame down struggle against his hold long enough for Kisame to slice through them, and he waves a cheerful thank you as he shakes plant matter off Samehada’s blade.

Taking a breath, Shisui crouches down next to Tenzō, only partially to stop his head from spinning. He hesitates, but the urge is too great to resist, and he presses a hand over Tenzō’s thigh even as he determinedly keeps his eyes on the fight.

“After this,” he says, and pretends for the sake of his dignity that his voice doesn’t crack, “do you want to go on a date with me?”

The look Tenzō flashes at him is fond and exasperated and amused. “Shisui. Are you more nervous about asking me on a date than you are about the sentient plant trying to destroy the world?”

“Uh.” This is probably one of those questions that has no good answers. Shisui seems to run into a lot of those. “Maybe?”

Tenzō’s hand closes over his where it rests on his leg, and he scoffs, “Idiot.”
Shisui beams at him. He’s never been so glad to be insulted in his life.

Breaking shit feels great.

Granted, Kurama would much, much rather be breaking Obito's face right now, but he’s willing to admit that Zetsu’s takes close second—a close second that’s getting closer every time the bastard manages to wiggle out of the path of a mortal blow.

“Just fucking stand still!” Kurama snarls, shaking chips of stone off his sleeve as he whirls to follow the dart of malice that slides beneath his feet, heading for an open space. Kakashi is there, fending off more reaching branches, and it’s hardly the first time Zetsu has tried this tactic but it still makes Kurama furious. And the anger isn’t much helped by the realization that Zetsu fights like Obito.

Or, Kurama thinks, grimly amused as he tracks that streak of malice with another bijūdama gathering, maybe it’s more that Obito fights like Zetsu, considering the asshole pretty much spent years with Zetsu wrapped around his body. They both use the same tactics, though—spend most of the fight out of reach, appear just long enough to land a hit, and then vanish completely again. And —

The ground erupts as Zetsu bursts up underneath Kakashi’s feet, grabs his limbs in a tangle of thorny branches as he starts to drag him under like some sort of trapdoor spider. “Kurama!” Kakashi shouts, jerking his head up just before it’s pulled under, and his eyes go wide with betrayal and shock as they land on Kurama above them, bijūdama spinning as he crashes down.

Impact, and wood chips fly. Zetsu shrieks and vanishes fully into the earth, ichor bubbling behind him, and Kurama curses viciously, landing in a crouch in the crater. “Cute,” he says sourly, waving away the smoke from the popped clone and giving Kakashi a dark glare as the bastard drops his chameleon jutsu.

Kakashi, of course, just gives him a bullshit smile and says, “Ma, ma, I was trying to go for realism, Kurama.”

“You’re a terrible actor,” Kurama informs him, sidesteps, and sends a wave of force at a brace of stabbing tree limbs. They crumble, and in the explosion of sawdust and kindling, Obito flickers into view, gunbai abandoned in favor of a long chain that he whips out in an arc, wrapping around Zetsu’s arm as the creature resurfaces. Planting his feet, Obito hauls back, pulling Zetsu off-balance, and Kurama takes the opening without even thinking about it, lunging low and fast.

There’s a curse, a wrench at the chain, but Obito holds fast, and Kurama slams full-force into Zetsu with a snarl, bowling him over and slashing with his claws, leaving deep gouges that bubble and fill. Zetsu hisses right back, body losing its form, stretching and splitting like he’s going to wrap Kurama up in his dark form, the same way he did to get Obito to resurrect Madara in the Fourth War. That thought is more than enough to get Kurama moving, calling up his chakra in one hand as he pictures the seal Kushina used on Obito, on Nagato afterwards. One hand slammed into Zetsu’s chest and Kurama can feel it shiver, starting to form—

Zetsu's body splits into a thousand shadowy streamers and dives back into the ground, and Kurama swears viciously, hitting the earth on his knees and driving a fist into the dirt in pure frustration.

“Bastard,” Obito mutters, shaking blood off his left hand where it’s trickling down from the deep
wound in his shoulder. He drags the chain back, coiling it carefully as his eyes scan the field, and his mouth is set in a deep grimace. “Still nothing?”

It stings every last trace of pride Kurama has to have to shake his head, pushing back to his feet. “He shifted. Again. How the fuck am I supposed to slap a seal on a liquid?”

Kisame laughs, though his eyes are still sharp as he steps up behind Obito. “I think we need a really big bottle,” he jokes. “And a cork.”

One corner of Obito’s mouth pulls up in faint amusement, but he doesn’t answer. “Can you lay the seal on the ground, like Kushina did?” he asks instead.

Kurama makes a face, because does the bastard really think he hasn’t considered that? They’ve been playing what amounts to pin the seal on the blob of shadows for way too long now, and Kurama’s considered pretty much every alternative. “You fucking think I haven’t, asshole? If I put it on the ground, he’ll just go under it.”

“The two of you must be related,” Kakashi tells Obito pointedly. “You’re both the worst.”

Obito rolls his eyes, shifting back onto his heels. “This isn’t working,” he says.

“Yeah, genius, I think we fucking got that,” Kurama says sourly, and checks for any trace of Zetsu lurking. The bastard’s gone deep, though, and shoved all of his chakra into the plants around them; it’s almost impossible to get an accurate bead on him. “Don’t look so eager for this to be over. You’re still getting a bijūdama to the face as soon as Zetsu is dead.”

“At this rate, by the time he’s dead we will be, too—of old age,” Obito retorts, scowling. “If you could just seal him like you’re supposed to—”

Kurama snarls, rounding on the bastard with every nerve prickling and fury like lightning in his chest. “Fucking excuse me? You’re supposed to hold him! How is it my fault you can’t even manage that?”

“I was holding him,” Obito bites out. “But you have all the subtlety of a cannon, so it’s no surprise you can’t hit him.”

“This coming from the bastard who wants to use the moon to take over the world?”

“Wanted, and that’s on me, but—”

Kurama’s tenuous hold on his temper snaps. “No! No, fuck you, you don’t get to say but and pretend it never happened! People are still dead, Naruto would be an orphan if you hadn’t wanted to manipulate me, you killed people who were your friends, your followers, you brainwashed me and tried to turn me against the village again—”

Kakashi grabs him, and the wrench of a shunshin carries them up into one of the few standing trees, even as Kisame slams Samehada down in front of Obito like a shield, covering the Uchiha’s back with his own bulk. The wind jutsu that tears through the field is enough to slice deep grooves in the stone, to make the tree groan and shake and nearly topple, and it’s only chakra that lets Kurama keep his footing. He snarls, impotent but furious, but the wind’s too strong to push through to get at Zetsu.

“Maybe,” Kakashi says in his ear, “standing and arguing in the open while he prepares jutsus isn’t the best idea.”

“Tell that to him,” Kurama retorts, stabbing an accusing claw at Obito as the jutsu dies away. He
leaps down, landing lightly and narrowing his eyes as he searches for any trace of Zetsu's malice. It’s not like there isn’t enough to track, but Zetsu is filling the whole area with it, and he’s hard to pinpoint.

Kisame wrenches Samehada out of the ground, stepping to the side and revealing a grim-faced Obito watching them. His eyes linger on Kakashi for a moment, then flicker to Shisui on the wall, then drop to rest on Kurama. Thoughts are racing behind his blank expression, that same look of calculation and assessment that Kurama once saw him wear fighting Kaguya, and Kurama loathes it, but—

But maybe it’s something to use. Just another weapon to defeat Zetsu with, and then Kurama can pound his face in the way he’s itching to.

He crosses the space between them in a few long leaps, landing lightly beside Obito, and murmurs quietly enough that no one else can hear, “Buy you time?”

Obito closes his eyes, looking torn, and then jerks his chin in a short, sharp nod. Resolve slides across his expression, dark but firm, dagger-edged, and he steps back. “Kisame?” he asks, glancing back, and Kisame meets his eyes steadily.

“Whatever you need,” the big man agrees.

No more hesitation, no more debate. Obito steps back, closing his eyes, and says just loudly enough to reach the three of them, “As much time as possible.”

Kakashi hums thoughtfully, then moves over to beside Obito. He flips a kunai up, catches it by the hilt as it comes down, and says lightly, “You two do the most damage to him. I’ll keep anything from skewering Obito when he’s not looking.”

Obito flashes a startled look at Kakashi before the expression shifts into a grimace. He looks away, eyes falling shut, and doesn’t answer, but…

The line of his mouth looks almost like regret.

“Be careful,” Kurama tells Kakashi. “Don’t die like an idiot or I’ll laugh at your funeral.”

Kakashi’s eyes crinkle, and he leans in, using the cover of Kurama’s tangled hair to tug his mask down enough for a brief, burning kiss before he’s pulling back again, mask in place. “Same to you,” he says, and the tone is airy but his eyes are serious. “I’m too young to be a widower.”

“You’d have to actually be married first for that,” Kurama retorts. “And I haven’t hit my head that many times.”

“So cruel to me,” Kakashi laments, and—

Kurama spins, catching a burst of Mokuton with a shockwave that shatters them completely, and drops into a crouch. Teeth bared, he faces Zetsu as the creature rises from the ground, and tells Kisame, “Hit the fucker hard.”

Kisame laughs, shaping a hand sign around Samehada’s hilt, and water bubbles up out of the ground, pooling around his feet and starting to swirl. “I’ll try and leave a few pieces for you,” he answers cheerfully, and brings his sword up, dragons made of water bursting into the air and crashing towards Zetsu with a roar like a waterfall.

Kurama goes high, leaping for the top of the wall, then flipping across the gap to land on a thick tree
branch, a shockwave rippling out beneath him. It shatters roots and crushes vines, cracks the ground as Zetsu brings up a barrier of wood to block Kisame. There's an opening there, small but more than enough for Kurama; he takes it in an instant, throwing himself down to land hard, one foot lashing out, and he calls up the chakra for a seal so Zetsu will assume they're still stuck on that plan.

Zetsu bends around his hand like he’s boneless, snaps back into form and slams a thick column of stone into Kurama’s side. Kurama feels ribs shatter as he goes flying, grits his teeth against the pain as they reform and twists hard, hitting the wall feet-first and flipping off of it to land in a crouch. A bijūdama detonates the moment his hand hits the root-covered earth, and dust and smoke sweep over the battlefield, obscuring everything.

Underneath the cover of it, Kurama calls up his fire.

It’s not Amaterasu, and for a brief, mad moment Kurama wishes that Itachi already had his Mangekyo, that he could burn Zetsu out of existence. This is the next best thing, though, and it comes without the insanity that is Itachi off the rails, so that’s a definite plus. And maybe it isn’t Amaterasu, but this fire burns white-hot as he shoves a good portion of his chakra into the simple jutsu, curls around him like a friendly cat as he shapes it with a touch of will and want.

Within the cloud, there's a snarl, one of Kisame's blows hitting home. The swordsman’s chakra flickers, ducking away, and Zetsu's malice is clear, sharp like a beacon. It’s more than enough.

Kurama shapes his flame and lets it go, a blue-white wave that scorches the very air. It hits the edge of the cloud that’s dust and shattered wood in equal measure, and there’s a low, ear-popping *thwump* as the wood-dust catches. Fire flashes across the field in a supernova, almost slamming Kurama off his feet with the force of the backdraft, and in the midst of it Zetsu *screams*.

Kisame's dome of water pops, hissing where it hits the steaming earth, and he straightens with a low chuckle. “Clever,” is his verdict, and he brings Samehada around with a grin stretching to show sharpened teeth. Nearly everything around them is burning, but he looks unbothered, sandals crunching across scorched wood without care as he advances on the hunched figure in the middle. “That makes it my turn now, right?”

Kurama snorts, catching himself with one hand on the wall as he wavers, and risks a glance up at Fuji, Shisui, and Tenzō to make sure they're all in one piece. Fuji’s out of sight, hopefully cloaking herself in another illusion like he told her to, and Shisui and Tenzō are both wide-eyed but unharmed. He turns back just in time to see Samehada practically carve off Zetsu's arm, the creature in the middle of healing the burns and unable to evade, and that shriek is just as satisfying as the last. Kurama cracks his knuckles, flexes his claws, and advances with intent. Maybe this time—

The shadows boil, and the earth shakes. More roots and vines surge up, predatory in a way no plant should be, and Zetsu takes a staggering step and straightens. His mouth stretches in an inhuman grin, too wide for the body he’s wearing, and the bubbling ichor smooths back into skin. “Too weak,” he mocks, and the ground swallows him whole. Kurama has just enough time to catch the directed edge of malice in him, then brace himself, and the creature bursts up in front of him, branches like daggers, hands grasping. He splits into threads of darkness that tangle around Kurama’s limbs to drag him down, and Kurama snarls, slashing at the strands, summoning positive and negative chakra as he fights his way free.

“You’ll be useful,” Zetsu croons in his ear, horrible and taunting. “What jinchuuriki would fight someone wearing this face, after all? You're the perfect weapon against them, and with you I can drag all of them right back to my mother. The Gedō Mazō will be rebuilt, and the Juubi will be reborn. Aren’t you tired of living like this, with so many worries, so much anger? Don’t you want it to just *stop*?”
Kurama growls, sharp and furious, and raises a hand, five compressed bijūdama spinning at the tips of his fingers. “Yeah, I fucking want it to stop—and if I tear you to shreds, it will!”

The explosion rattles his bones, knocks him back, but there's a howl that doesn’t come from his throat, and suddenly he’s free. Zetsu recoils, already healing but still hurt, and—

The air warps, bends, breaks. Kurama hits the top of a squared-off pillar on his knees and instantly bolts to his feet, but he’s not alone. Zetsu is writhing on another column, and Kakashi and Kisame are falling out of thin air to land with him.

One last warp, and this one parts around Obito as he steps out, head high, Sharingan spinning lazily. There’s a massive surge of chakra inside of him, every last bit of his reserves gathered and held at the ready, and the fury on his face is bone-deep and burning. Kurama breathes it in like oxygen, feels it vibrate through him like a gong struck too close, and can't help the vicious smile that bares his teeth.

This is the Obito who faced down four Kage and the strongest shinobi in the world, who put the entire Alliance on the defensive and would have conquered the world except for his change of heart. Kurama remembers this exact flavor of anger, this hatred that burned right through him, and it’s a heady thing watching it be turned on someone else.

And Sage, if there was ever a deserving bastard, it's Zetsu.

Obito casts them one brief look before he turns back to Zetsu, and his voice carries eerily across the echoing darkness. “I didn’t mean for you to get dragged along with me. Kakashi, if this works, you’ll have to open the way back.”

Kakashi stills, only the faint widening of his eyes showing that he heard Obito at all. And—

That expression, Kurama thinks. It’s hazy, Naruto's memory of the moment, but he can recall a flicker of an image, a barren world with gravity that crushed like a vast hand, Naruto and Sasuke on the ground without a chance of moving, and Kakashi and Obito stepping in front of them. Obito taking one last look at Kakashi before the air warped, and the blows that should have killed both of them only killed one.

Oh, Kurama thinks, remembering Kamui, the way Obito could cross dimensions with Sakura's help. Without a chakra source like that, it will be too much—complete chakra exhaustion is the only possible outcome, even if Obito succeeds, and Kurama could say something, could stop this, but…

He doesn’t.

“Obito?” Kisame asks, taking a step, and his voice is wary, his body braced as if for a blow.

There’s a pause, a breath, and Obito looks back, catches Kisame's eye and smiles. It's bare and a little crooked, but warmer than any expression Kurama’s seen on his face before.

“Thank you, Kisame,” he says, “for giving me back my name.”

Kisame's eyes widen, but before he can move Obito looks away. He turns to Zetsu, just hauling himself up, and the chakra spinning just beneath his skin surges. Every molecule of air in this separate dimension shudders, and then—

Space warps, and splits, and there's blood sliding down Obito's cheeks, dripping from his eyes as he bares his teeth. With a lunge he slams bodily into Zetsu, carries him right through the hole in reality, and is gone.
I'm early this week, it's a *miracle* would you look at that.

[leal / ˈlēl/, steadfast in allegiance or duty; loyal; faithful; true; honest. From Middle French, from Old French leial, leel, from Latin lēgālis “legal”.

“Send me after him,” Kisame says, and the usual lightness is gone from his tone as he wheels on Kakashi, eyes hard. “You have his other Sharingan, don’t you? Wherever he went, send me there.”

Kakashi finally tears his gaze away from the spot where Obito disappeared, and Kurama can’t even begin to read the expression on his face right now. “I can’t,” he says carefully, precisely. “Mine is a transplant. I don’t have the chakra to even *begin* to know what he did, let alone recreate it and throw you across dimensions.”

“Not that it matters,” Kurama puts in, crossing his arms over his chest and meeting the glare that Kisame turns on him without flinching. “That bastard doesn’t have the chakra either. With how his Sharingan was bleeding, he had a few minutes left at most before it overloaded.”

Hopefully it does, Kurama thinks, a touch grimly. He can remember all too clearly how Zetsu used Obito’s Rinnegan against his will to resurrect Madara in the Fourth War, and he could conceivably do the same thing here, using Kamui to jump back across dimensions. If Obito doesn’t have any chakra left, that means Zetsu’s chances of managing it are slim, but it’s not a chance Kurama wants to take. He’s staying right here until long enough has passed that it’s not a concern.

Kisame growls, a deep sound that rumbles up through him like thunder, and grabs Kurama by the collar of his shirt. “No,” he says, the denial as sharp as the crack of a whip. He drags Kurama forward a step, up on his toes like he’s going to shake him, and Kurama might indulge anyone else, in any other circumstances, but not Kisame. Not over fucking *Obito*.

He grabs Kisame's wrist, pries Kisame's fingers loose from the cloth, and knocks his hand away. “Fuck off. He was trying to turn the world into a giant house of mirrors—”

The sound Kisame makes is halfway to a laugh, halfway back from a snarl. “You really think he would have sacrificed himself like that if he still felt that way?” the swordsman asks, and Kurama would almost feel better if it was a demand, if it was Kisame losing control. But this is just—sad. Resigned. He chuckles a little, no humor in the sound, and turns away to hide his face. “He said that’s on me. He took the blame for his part, and this is how he’s paying. Obito knew what he did. His goals changed when he reclaimed his name. You don’t get to put *everything* on him.”

“Only most of it,” Kurama retorts, in no mood to be corrected. But—well. Once is a coincidence, but maybe two times is the start of a pattern. Obito betrayed Madara and Zetsu again, even without Naruto’s influence in this timeline, and maybe that counts for something. Something tiny and almost insignificant, given everything he’s done, but…still there. No matter how much Kurama wants to deny it.
It’s not enough for Kurama to go out of his way to save the bastard, though, especially so soon after his last encounter with the Sharingan.

Kisame doesn’t answer, so Kurama turns away, moves to where Kakashi is still staring, frozen, at the point where Obito vanished. He isn’t certain whether the contact will be welcome, but Kurama still gives in to the urge, reaches out anyway to curl his fingers around Kakashi’s elbow. Kakashi startles a little at the touch, jerking around, but when he sees Kurama standing there he manages a smile, small and crooked and just enough to touch his eyes.

“Hey,” Kurama says gently, and the adrenaline from the fight is still high, too much to be cut off by something as simple as Zetsu vanishing, but he keeps his voice soft regardless. “You okay?”

Kakashi pauses, gaze drifting back to the other column, and then shuttering. He smiles, reaching up to tip his hitai-ate back down, and says, “I would have killed him, if we weren’t fighting someone else. Or at least I would have tried to.”

“He would have deserved it,” Kurama tells him, and Kakashi hums, but not like he believes the words.

“You knew he was capable of changing sides.” Kakashi still isn’t looking at him. “This happened before, didn’t it?”

Kurama shrugs. “You and Minato and Naruto talked him around eventually. But then Zetsu hijacked his body and everything went to hell anyway.”

Another pause, but this time Kakashi looks back at Kurama, meets his eyes and doesn’t try to hide the wryness there. “I’m not sure whether that makes it better or worse.”

Kurama could tell him that the first time around Obito died taking a blow for Kakashi, but he doesn’t. Kakashi doesn’t need to hear that, right on the heels of Obito’s second sacrifice. Besides, the outcome that time was probably just about the best for Obito—he’d died without having to face the Nations’ justice, and while it was a noble gesture to die for his old teammate, Kurama has always sort of wondered if it was deliberate.

After all, Obito should have been able to warp both of Kaguya’s rods out of the way—that was just about the least Kamui was capable of. That he hadn’t, that he’d then left Kakashi his eyes to finish the fight and disappeared, has always struck Kurama as a man finally choosing his own fate, rather than one pushed on him. And while Kurama can respect that, he’s not exactly feeling inclined towards kindness where Obito is concerned, either. The bastard is a pain in the ass on a good day.

“It happened,” he says instead. “Now we need to stick around until we’re sure Zetsu's gone for good. If he steals Obito's body and teleports back, he’ll have to pass through this place.”

Kakashi takes a glance around the emptiness of the Kamui dimension, then nods. “The more chakra I can gather to get us back, the shorter a stretch I’ll be unconscious afterwards,” he says, almost cheerful, “so I don’t mind waiting a bit.”

Right. Because this isn’t the Kakashi who’d mastered the Mangekyo; this Kakashi can hardly use it at all. Kurama makes a mental note to bully him into training once Zetsu's definitely dead, and rolls his eyes at the idiot. “Don’t sound so happy about it, bastard. Unconsciousness is bad, if you hadn’t figured that out by now.”

“Really?” Kakashi feigns complete surprise. “Ma, suddenly the way all the doctors yell at me makes more sense.”
What the hell is Kurama supposed to do with a man like this, honestly.

Whatever expression Kurama is wearing must be particularly amusing, because Kakashi chuckles. He reaches out, gently tugs Kurama into his arms and wraps him up in a loose hug, burying his nose in Kurama’s hair with a sigh. Through the mask, Kurama can feel lips against his temple, breath against his ear. It’s…not objectionable. Not objectionable in the least, really, and Kurama leans into the warmth, the sturdiness of him. One hand finds Kakashi’s hip, claws just barely denting the fabric there, and he breathes out, slow and careful.

There’s still a faint flicker of trepidation, buried deep inside of him, that every time he blinks he’ll open his eyes to a red-washed world, but with Kakashi so close, something he’d never, ever thought to want, it’s an easier fear to dismiss.

“I’m tired,” he says, too quietly for Kisame to hear even in the echoing darkness, and it’s only when the words have passed his lips that he realizes how true they are. He’s used more chakra today than he has in a very long time, between facing off against Obito and Kisame, changing forms, and fighting Zetsu. Seeing his Naruto, even just a chakra impression of him, lends its own emotional weariness, and so does the Sharingan. So does all of this, honestly; Kurama had thought they were done with this changing sides bullshit in the Fourth War, and he’s not a fan of it reappearing now. Though it’s probably better, objectively, than having to fight Kisame, Obito, and Zetsu to a halt on their own.

A gloved hand tugs the mask down to Kakashi’s chin, and he presses a kiss against Kurama’s hair. “A bed sounds good right about now,” he agrees, innocent enough that it’s absolutely meant as something dirty, and Kurama snorts and kicks him in the ankle.

“Bastard,” he mutters, and means it. But…maybe not as much as he could.

There’s a long pause, though Kakashi doesn’t let go and Kurama doesn’t make him, just stays pressed against Kakashi with their hands on each other. Then, on a breath that feels like trepidation, Kakashi asks almost inaudibly, “What now?”

Kurama closes his eyes, not entirely sure himself. If Obito's plan works, if Zetsu is gone—

That’s it. He’s succeeded. He’s won. What Naruto sent him back to do—he’s finally managed it.

He remembers what Naruto told him in that red-washed world, moments before the Sharingan’s hold broke and the color flooded back. Kurama, be happy. No matter what, okay? And…maybe it isn’t a goal he’s ever had before, maybe it’s not as clear-cut and obvious as keeping Kaguya from coming back, but it’s something he’s willing to put his effort into. Something he’s willing to live for, to focus on. Happiness, when for so long he’s just been. But now, with Naruto and Gaara and Fū and Yugito, with Kakashi and Karin and the older jinchuuriki and even Kushina—

Well. Maybe that’s what he’ll try for, if this is really the end of his quest.

“I,” he says, muffled where his forehead is pressed to Kakashi’s shoulder, “want ramen. I’m starving.”

There’s a moment of startled silence, and then Kakashi laughs. It’s soft and warm and genuine, and Kurama can feel it shaking through him, bone-deep and sweet. “Naruto and Kushina will approve,” he says, and Kurama can feel the smile against his cheek.

A little regretfully, he untangles himself from Kakashi, pulling back, and can’t help a snort at Kakashi’s sound of protest. “Hands to yourself,” he says, though he doesn’t quite mean it. “If Zetsu
comes bursting back in here I don’t want to end up tripping over your lazy ass.”

“So cruel,” Kakashi laments again, but he doesn’t let go completely, letting his hand slide down Kurama’s arm until he can tangle their fingers and squeeze gently. “I hope you know I’m still trying to recover from the trauma of you attempting to eat me.”

“I’ll make it up to you later,” Kurama promises dryly, glancing over at where Kisame is standing, back turned to them, Samehada slung over his shoulder. Honestly, Kurama doesn’t give a damn about the swordsman either way—he used to be an enemy, now he’s mostly not, and if he goes back to being one Kurama’s only feelings will be concern over how to defeat him without Gai around. But…

Loss is a familiar feeling, and as much as he’d rather not, he can understand that.

“Kiri’s a different place now,” he tells the swordsman, and means you could go back if you wanted.

The rumble of Kisame's laugh is viciously amused. “I’m sure it is,” he says, still not looking back. “But nowhere in the world is as different as I want it to be. Not yet. Wherever I end up, with the shinobi world as it is, there's always the chance they’ll ask me to kill comrades. To lie. I won’t do that again.”

It’s true, and Kurama can't argue. His Naruto was trying to better things, working towards change and an end of conflicts between the Hidden Villages at the very least, but Kaguya had risen again before he could manage it. It was a promise he had made as a genin, spoken before Zabuza and Haku’s graves, and he never forgot it, even in the very darkest moments. That was a world Kisame would have wanted to see, Kurama thinks.

This time around, it might not happen, and Kurama knows it’s selfish, but he honestly doesn’t care. This Naruto is already happier than the one Kurama knew before, and he wouldn’t change that for anything. If that keeps the world a little darker, a little harsher, well. Kurama’s not going to complain.

“You're just going to keep being a missing-nin?” Kakashi asks, and the tone is mild but the words are cool. “A mercenary?”

Kisame chuckles. “I’ve killed just as many people as Obito, you know,” he tells Kakashi lightly, turning, and his sharpened teeth are an unnerving flash of white in the gloom. “Konoha’s Yellow Flash probably killed more. I bet your Red-Hot Habanero’s count is up there, too. We all dress it up as following a higher order, so what makes us the criminals and you the good guys?” When Kakashi doesn’t answer, he chuckles again, though his eyes are dark. “Yeah, exactly. Just the fact that you won. We were misled, and lied to, and we own the deaths and pain we caused because they’re our fault, but this whole world’s filthy. I'm not signing up to stain myself with more filth, even if you think saying I'm fighting for something you approve of will make my hands cleaner.”

Kakashi is stiff at Kurama’s side, but Kurama tugs at his hand a bit, makes him glance over, his tension slide down a notch. “That’s your choice,” he says carelessly. “You coming or staying when we go back to Konoha?”

There’s a long, long minute of silence as Kisame clearly weighs his options. “You don’t have enough chakra to come back for me,” he says finally, more statement than question, but Kakashi tips his head in confirmation regardless. Kisame’s mouth pulls tight when he sees it, and he reaches up to rub at the back of his neck, ducking his head to hide the expression on his face. “Leave me here, then. You're worried about Zetsu coming back? I’ll make sure he doesn’t.”

Kakashi glances at Kurama, one brow lifting, and Kurama looks back with a frown. That’s…not
something he’d have thought Kisame would pick. And while it’s a solid way to make sure Zetsu doesn’t pull anything, it’s also pretty much a death sentence phrased like that.

“I can come back for you in—” Kakashi starts.

“No,” Kisame interrupts, and he keeps his face turned away, but the flicker of his chakra is resigned and resolved in equal measure. They’re not going to be able to change his mind. “You don’t have to do that. If nothing happens—well, at least Samehada won’t end up with a second-rate swordsman. She deserves better than that.” He pats his sword’s hilt, and his laugh almost manages to be convincing.

“You’re not going to end up jumping on board with Zetsu, right?” Kurama asks, watching the man closely. He doesn’t think so, but—

The flare of Kisame’s chakra is almost as heavy as a bijuu’s, dark with fury and edged with a hatred that Kurama is willing to bet is directed straight at Zetsu. “No,” Kisame growls. “Not in this lifetime or any other. Traitors all deserve what they get.”

Fair enough, Kurama decides, and there’s very little chance Kisame could fake that kind of emotion. He nods, ignoring Kakashi’s startled glance, and steps back. “There’s no way to let us know if you change your mind,” he warns.

Kurama’s smile is wry, even if it’s edged with teeth. “I won’t.”

Kurama nods, pulling Kakashi along with him as he retreats towards the edge of the column. “All right,” he says, as much of a goodbye as he’s willing to offer, and watches as Kisame turns away again, putting his back to them before he sinks down to sit cross-legged, Samehada at his side. And—maybe it’s the most fitting end for him, when he was so loyal to Obito in life. He died for him the first time around, and now he’s choosing to do the same again.

Apparently, even all of Kurama’s changes so far can’t erase some parallels. He’s kind of getting sick of it.

Kurama closes his fingers a little more tightly around Kakashi’s, takes a breath and lets his chakra start to bleed into the air, into Kakashi’s veins. Sakura used this technique often enough, in that ruined future, to keep Sasuke and Naruto going when they hit the edges of even their reserves. Simple enough to call it up after seeing it so many times, and Kurama might be tired but his reserves are still ten times greater than Kakashi’s.

A deliberate look is flashed his way, but Kakashi doesn’t say anything, doesn’t point out that he could have helped Obito survive this way. He just grips Kurama’s hand in return, reaches up to pull his hitai-ate straight, and lets his chakra gather. His Sharingan spins lazily, and around them the air warps, the world twists—

Their feet hit stone, and Kakashi staggers, knees buckling. Kurama catches him on instinct, but he’s off-balance, not quite ready, and Kakashi’s weight pulls him down. They land hard on the top of the wall, Kurama on his knees with Kakashi half-collapsed over his shoulder, skin suddenly clammy and sheened with sweat, and Kurama sighs as the ripples in space fade.

“Idiot,” he mutters grumpily, pressing his nose against Kakashi’s jaw. One breath and he makes a face, though he still doesn’t move. “And you reek. You need a bath, dog boy.”

Kakashi chuckles, groping at his hitai-ate for a moment but not quite managing to get a grip on it. Kurama does it for him, tilting it back down to cover the transplanted eye, and Kakashi slumps as the
drain to his chakra immediately eases. He’s not quite unconscious, but it’s close. “Want to share?” he asks, giving Kurama a cheerfully lecherous smile that would be a lot more flattering if his eye wasn’t drooping. “I believe you promised to make things up to me.”

Kurama punches him lightly in the ribs. “Perverted bastard. Try that again when you’re not swooning in my arms.” He staggers upright, hauling Kakashi up with him, and grabs him around the waist when he nearly face-plants in the stone again.

“Ugh,” Kakashi mutters, gripping Kurama’s arm. “Human limits. I thought those were for other people.”

With a roll of his eyes, Kurama steadies them, then takes a testing step. Kakashi follows him gamely, if with less grace than normal, so he keeps moving. “Today is just a learning experience all around, isn’t it?”

“Kakashi-senpai!” The cry makes Kurama and Kakashi both glance up to see Tenzō hopping across the tangled vines and roots below, Shisui behind him and moving a bit more slowly. One long leap and Tenzō lands right in front of them, hovering like he doesn’t know whether to take Kakashi’s other arm. “Senpai, are you okay?”

“Yo.” Kakashi gives him a lazy salute and a smile that crinkles his visible eye, though his gaze flickers over first Tenzō, then Shisui as the Uchiha joins them. “I’m all right, just tired. You two?”

“Shisui needs a medic,” Tenzō reports promptly, and ignores the way Shisui squawks in offense. “I have a minor concussion, but I’m fine.”

“Having a concussion means you’re not fine,” Kakashi says, with the air of someone repeating an oft-made point. Kurama gives him a disbelieving look, because hello hypocrisy, but Kakashi ignores him regally. “To the hospital, both of you.”

“Yes, sir,” they chorus, and there’s a brief scuffle as they decide who’s going to lean on who.

“Really?” Kurama mutters, and then growls. It carries through the air with a heavy rumble, and Shisui squeaks and practically trips over himself scrambling away. Tenzō looks between him and Kurama, faintly mystified, but before he can ask, Kurama says pointedly, “Go.”

Shisui blinks at him for one second before his eyes widen, all the color draining from his face. “You, You threatened to eat me, oh gods. That was—that—you’re.” He catches the darkening of Kurama’s expression, just daring him to say it, and all but swallows his tongue as he flails his unbroken hand. “You—that—threat?”

“Not a threat,” Kurama tells him, unimpressed, and curls a lip to bare his teeth. “A promise. Now get.”

Shisui goes ghost-pale for a beat before every inch of visible skin suffuses with crimson, and he groans long and loud and turns to bury his face in Tenzō’s chest. “No,” he says plaintively. “I know now, you don’t get to still be hot. This is not okay.”

Kurama rolls his eyes, unamused. “Get.”

“Getting!” Shisui squeaks, grabs Tenzō, and vanishes in a whirl of leaves.

“He has a point, you know,” Kakashi says mildly, and when Kurama glares at him he blinks innocently. “You are very hot.”
“I’m glad you think so,” Kurama says dryly, and pulls him up a little straighter. “But I'm still not sharing a shower with you.”

Kakashi pouts. Honestly, Kurama has no idea why he likes this man.

With a growl, he grabs Kakashi by the collar and backs him up against the watchtower, then hauls him into another kiss. It’s not sweet or gentle, but full of teeth; he scrapes Kakashi’s lip, bites at his mouth until he opens, then pushes in, kissing him hard as he fists a hand in silver hair. Kakashi makes a sound of surprise that turns into a groan, gets a hand on Kurama’s hip and drags him up with a leg between his thighs. It’s startling enough to make Kurama gasp, jolting in Kakashi’s grip, and in an instant Kakashi has twisted and flipped them, pushing Kurama up against the stone as they slide downward. Kurama isn’t entirely certain if Kakashi’s legs can’t hold him up or if he just wants them on the ground, but either way he lets it happen, keeps kissing Kakashi, desperate and furious, and Kakashi answers it, meets him halfway.

“So hot,” Kakashi breathes against his mouth, then presses back in, gets one of Kurama’s lips between sharp teeth even as his hands slip under Kurama’s tattered shirt. He drags his fingers over skin, pushes up with his knee, and Kurama gasps and arches into the touch. The sound Kakashi makes in response is low and hungry, and he kisses Kurama again, all teeth and tongue and intent.

They part and Kurama can’t help but laugh roughly, curling his fingers and gently scraping his claws over Kakashi’s scalp just for the full-body shiver it gets him. “You’re not so bad yourself,” he answers, and Kakashi chuckles against his throat, pressing a kiss beneath his chin and then letting his mouth slide down. He pauses, setting his teeth to the skin, and makes a noise that’s halfway to a question.

Kurama’s been in the passenger seat for this way too many times, because Sasuke and Naruto were both possessive bastards. It shouldn’t even be hot anymore, because watching two teenagers suck on each other’s necks was anything but attractive. Common sense means nothing at all, though, in the face of Kakashi’s hot breath on his skin, the scrape of teeth, the clutch of his hands, tight and grounding against Kurama’s ribs.

“Fuck yes,” he manages, more breathless than he’d intended to sound but unable to care about it, and his fingers tighten in Kakashi’s hair as Kakashi bites gently at his throat, laves the caught skin as he runs his fingers up Kurama’s chest. It sends shivers through Kurama with each touch, and he groans, free hand finding the back of Kakashi’s flak jacket. He pulls once, hard, and Kakashi breaks away, surging up to kiss him again, messy and perfect.

“If you could keep that from healing,” he says between slanting kisses, “I’d be much obliged.”

Kurama laughs, curls a leg over his hip and drags him closer until their chests are pressed together. “Fuck that. You’ll just have to give me another one.”

The sound Kakashi makes is dark and interested, and he crushes their mouths together, tasting, pressing up and in—

And overbalances, almost face-planting in the wall behind Kurama’s shoulder.

There’s a moment of absolute silence before Kakashi groans, and it’s definitely not sexy this time. He slumps down, and Kurama unwinds himself enough for Kakashi to drops his head onto Kurama’s shoulder with a sound of despair.

“Poor bastard,” Kurama says, and doesn’t even try to keep the amusement out of his voice. “The mind is willing but the body is suffering from borderline chakra exhaustion, huh?”
Kakashi bats at him ineffectually. “I can't tell if my head is spinning from kissing you or because I'm about to pass out,” he complains.

“The latter,” Kurama decides, and nudges Kakashi back so he can get to his feet. He hauls one long arm over his shoulder and pulls Kakashi up as well, then calls, “Hey, Fuji, you still around?”

From the tangle of greenery below, there’s a scuffle, and an instant later a white shape is bounding up the broken stone and skidding to a halt in front of them. “Kurama-sama!” the vixen says brightly. “Did you win?”

Kurama laughs, because they did. Zetsu is gone, trapped in another dimension, and even if he possesses Obito's body and makes it back before Obito's eyes burn out completely, Kisame is waiting, ready to avenge his partner. They won, and now Kaguya has no way back into the world. It’s finished. The last request Naruto made of him has been fulfilled, and there's no way for that dark future to happen again.

“Yeah, Fuji,” he says, and the words crack just a little in his throat. “We won. It’s over.”

Fuji gives him a fox-grin, all dagger teeth and lolling tongue, and turns sideways so they can slide onto her back. “Good for you, Kurama-sama. Did the dog man get hurt again?”

“I take offense to that,” Kakashi says mildly, but the effect is spoiled by the fact that he almost slides right over Fuji’s back to land in the dirt. Kurama only just catches him in time, sliding on behind him and wrapping an arm around his waist.

“Yeah,” he agrees dryly, ignoring the pout Kakashi aims at him. “He did. If you could take us to the hospital, that would be great.”

Kakashi protests, but Fuji is already moving, leaping forward in a surge of sleek muscle that carries them over the side of the wall and into the streets beyond.

It’s cold and dim and quiet, empty of any noise beyond Kisame’s own breathing. He evens out each breath, makes them deliberate and careful as he lets his mind slip into the half-watchful, half-meditative state that can stand in for sleep in a pinch. It’s been a long day, and he’s tired, but—

That bastard doesn’t have the chakra either. With how his Sharingan was bleeding, he had a few minutes left at most before it overloaded, Kurama had said. A few minutes isn’t much, and Kisame knows it. Knows the odds, or can guess them, but he still can't bring himself to regret his choice. Kurama and the Copy-Nin are gone, and he hopes they have a happy life, but for him, this is the best option.

Maybe Yagura would have welcomed him back to Kiri, but Kisame has felt the bite of that betrayal once already. He’s endured being hated for following orders, endured finding out that killing his comrades was nothing but a falsehood built on a traitor’s lies. Obito was the one who shared his vision, who wanted a world where that couldn’t happen, where children weren’t soldiers too, and the strength of their desire for that made them blind. Zetsu took advantage of them, twisted their goals, and Kisame hates it with a low, burning wrath that’s settled deep in his bones.

They did so many things in pursuit of their goals, and Kisame didn’t regret them at the time, but now —
The ends no longer justify the means.

Kisame is a man used to regrets. He’s had so many of them over the course of his life, and when Obito had approached him in Kiri he had believed they were done with. Too much to hope for, apparently.

And what does it say about him, that he still doesn’t regret meeting someone like Obito, someone he can give his loyalty to and not have it casually betrayed?

Another breath and he opens his eyes, takes in the dimension created by Obito's Sharingan, and wishes he had moved fast enough, been wary enough to follow Obito when he knocked Zetsu into the portal. He hadn’t expected it, hadn’t even known it was a possibility, but one look at Obito's face had told him that the other man didn’t expect to make it back.

*Thank you, Kisame, for giving me back my name.*

There's no reason in the world for Kisame to stay here, except that there’s *every* reason. He has nowhere else to go, and even if he did—

Well. This isn’t such a bad way to die, if his hopes come to nothing in the end. Loyalty is built on faith, though. And Kisame's faith is telling him that this isn’t the end.

A flicker of chakra curls through the air, and Kisame raises his head.

Another flicker, just a touch, and he gets to his feet, gathers Samehada up and wakes her with a thought. Another moment stretching out into a minute of nothing at all, but Kisame holds steady, watches the empty air of this strange world and—

Space warps in a tight spiral and a form falls through, missing the column. Kisame lunges, as fast as he’s ever moved before, and sweeps the battered body out of the air, clutching it to his chest before he lands lightly on the next pillar, careful not to jar his burden. Probably some level of stupid to get so close without checking, but Kisame knows the taste and feel of this chakra, has spent years close to it at this point. He knows who he’s holding.

Carefully, gently, he crouches down, letting Obito slip from his hold to settle on the ground. Pale fingers clutch his cloak, desperate not to let go, and Kisame doesn’t make him. He puts a hand on Obito's cheek, tips his head back enough to see his face, and feels a flicker of concern at the wide, dark streaks of tacky blood down both of his cheeks.

“*You okay?*” he asks, brushing at one of them with his thumb. It smears, not yet dry but at least not fresh, and Kisame's just grateful the bleeding’s stopped. He’s decent at first aid, but something like that would be beyond his skill.

Sharingan eyes stay closed, even when Obito raises his head and turns his face towards Kisame. A hand curls around Kisame's wrist, gentle but firm, and Obito rasps, “*I have enough chakra for one more jump. Where?*”

There's an offer implied in the words, one that makes Kisame smile despite himself. He brushes his thumb across Obito's cheek again, less to get rid of the blood and more for the feel of scarred skin beneath the pad of his finger, and the answer is as easy as breathing. “*Wherever you want to go, boss.*”

Obito pauses, and Kisame can practically see him gathering his arguments. Another moment, and he says, “*Kisame, I promised Rin—I said I’d try to—to atone—*”
Kisame tips one shoulder in a casual shrug, knows Obito can feel it since they're so close. “Seems like that’s the kind of thing I should be doing, too. Might be a bit easier if we’re together.”

For a moment he thinks Obito is going to keep arguing, has all of his rebuttals lined up and ready, but Obito stops short before the words can escape. He takes a shuddering breath and leans forward, his forehead falling to rest against Kisame's chest, says nothing at all. With a quiet chuckle, Kisame slings Samehada over his back, then wraps an arm around Obito's shoulders, slides the other beneath his knees, and rises to his feet with Obito in his arms.

“Where to?” he asks, and keeps his voice light. It’s far, far easier than it would have been a few minutes ago.

“Wind Country,” Obito says, and an instant later the heat hits Kisame like a vast hand. His sandals sink into a sand dune as a burning breeze twists past him, carrying a wash of fine dust with it. There’s a formation of rocks behind them that cast long shadows against the sand, and Kisame makes for the small opening he can see between the spires of stone. Behind them, the warp vanishes, but Kisame pays it no attention, ducking into the relatively cooler shade of a tiny cave before he sinks into a crouch again.

“Here,” he tells Obito, who slides down to sit on the sandy floor, carefully unknotting his fingers from Kisame's cloak. Dark eyes drift open, but they don’t focus, even when Kisame reaches up to brush his hair back from his face.

(Just like he thought during the fight, when Obito came back to life and pulled him out of the Mokuton’s strangling grasp, it’s soft. So much softer than it looks, and Kisame has to smile at the feel of it sliding through his fingers.)

“You're blind,” he says, though it’s probably not the sort of thing that needs to be voiced.

Obito’s smile is small and crooked. “My eyes couldn’t handle the strain of using them like that. It’s fine. I’ll survive.”

“You will,” Kisame agrees, but keeps the I’ll make sure you do to himself, unsure if it would be welcome. He hesitates, and then asks, “Zetsu's gone?”

This time, the curl of Obito's smile is almost vicious. “I left him in a world with extreme gravity and no life anywhere, not even plants. He’s going to rot there for the rest of eternity.”

Kisame chuckles, entirely pleased with the thought, and settles down next to Obito, leaning back against the wall of the cave. “Good,” he says. “So what next, boss?”

Obito gropes across the floor for a moment before he finds Kisame's knee, follows it up to his hand. He squeezes Kisame's wrist, then presses something into his hand. A kunai, Kisame realizes, glancing at it.

“Please,” Obito says quietly. “Use my name?”

Warmth curls in Kisame's chest, and he catches Obito's fingers in his own, pulling his hand up to press a kiss to the back of it. “Of course. Obito.”

Obito smiles, and this one isn’t wry, or sad, or mocking. It’s real, warm even if it’s small, and he sits back. “You’ll have to help me cut my hair short,” he tells Kisame. “We’re going to give the people here places to grow their own food. I can't have it in my face all the time.”

Terraforming, Kisame thinks, almost delighted, and has to laugh. But really, between Obito's
Mokuton and his strength with Suiton, they're perfect for the job. And with a bit of economic help, maybe Suna won't be in such a desperate situation.

It’s not a method of saving the world he would have thought of himself, or ever considered before, but where they are now, it looks like a small gesture that could nevertheless help turn things around. And maybe, in the end, that’s what the shinobi world needs. Not grand changes, but…small ones. Differences that start with the people, where the means are more important than the end goal.

“My pleasure,” he says cheerfully, and flips the kunai through his fingers as the shadows stretch long outside.

It’s a good place for a fresh start, he thinks, and smiles.
LXXVIII: Monstrum

[monstrum / män , strům /. From Latin, a sign or portent that disrupts the natural order as evidence of divine displeasure. The word monstrumis usually assumed to derive, as Cicero says, from the verb monstro, “show” (compare English “demonstrate”), but according to Varro it comes from moneo, “warn.” Because a sign must be startling or deviant to have an impact, monstrum came to mean “unnatural event” or “a malfunctioning of nature.” Suetonius mentioned that “a monstrum is contrary to nature [or exceeds the nature] we are familiar with, like a snake with feet or a bird with four wings.” The Greek equivalent was teras. The English word “monster” derived from the negative sense of the word.]

“Kurama-nii!”

Kurama turns just as the door flies open, and he drops down onto one knee, catching the small body that comes flying at him. Naruto wraps his arms around his neck, clinging desperately, and Kurama lets out a long breath, sinking back on his heels and hugging Naruto tightly to him in return.

“Hey, kit,” he says gently, burying his face in golden hair, and thinks I did it, I saved you. No more Pein, no more Obito, no more Žetsu or Kaguya. He stopped that terrible future before it could happen, saved Naruto before he was even really in danger, and—

It’s good. It’s amazing. He feels warm all through, right down to his bones, and the feeling doesn’t seem like it’s going away.

Naruto pulls back to look up at him with wide blue eyes, and says solemnly, “I’m glad you’re okay, Kurama-nii. Gaara said Shukaku couldn’t feel you for a little while, so he started to get worried.”

Shit, right. Kamui uses a separate dimension, so of course the other bijuu wouldn’t be able to feel his presence while he was there. Hopefully Shukaku didn’t lose what sanity he has left fretting like the idiot he is.

“Where’s—” Kurama starts to ask, but a small hand tugs on his sleeve, and without having to look he leans over and scoops Gaara up in his free arm, settling the little boy on his lap. “There you are, squirt. Everything okay?”

Gaara nods, though his eyes are a little wider than normal, and he tips forward to hide his face in Kurama’s shirt. “I’m okay if you are, Kurama-nii,” he says, muffled but audible.

Kurama chuckles, ruffling first crimson hair, then blond. “Yeah, I’m fine. No casualties except the bad guys, so we’re good.”

On the hospital bed where Tsunade stuck him—complete with dire threats about what she would do to him if he left it—Kakashi makes a sound of protest, pushing up on one elbow to give Kurama a look that he probably learned from his nin-ken. “How cruel, Kurama, forgetting my valiant sacrifices in the name of you safety—”

“You’re tired, asshole, not dying.” Kurama rolls his eyes. “Shut the hell up and sleep and you’ll be fine.”
Kakashi huffs at him, but flops back down, wincing a little when the movement jars the IV in his arm. “I’m feeling hideously underappreciated,” he tells the ceiling woefully. “If only I had a hot redhead to coddle me and feed me grapes. I’m sure it would help me get better much faster—”

“Kurama-nii, Kurama-nii, I can go get Rōshi!” Naruto volunteers brightly. “He’s got red hair an’ he’s got that hot rock stuff—”

“Lavo,” Gaara tries.

“Lava,” Kurama corrects, ruffling Gaara’s hair and hiding his growing grin.

“—that he can spit, so he must be really hot all the time!” Naruto finishes triumphantly.

Kakashi groans, low and pained, and drags a pillow over his face. “No thank you,” he says, muffled. “I think I just rediscovered my will to live on my own.”

“Are you sure?” Naruto asks, insistent. “Mei will probably let you borrow him if you ask nicely.”

Mei, huh? Kurama raises a brow, because that’s not what he expected, even if it is massively amusing. With a snicker, he shifts, settling on the floor and crossing his legs under him as he leans back against the side of the bed. From above, there’s a hum, a rustle, and then fingers sliding through his hair and rubbing lightly over the back of his neck. Kurama leans back into the touch a little, though all he says is, “Don’t encourage the bastard, kit. He’ll be fine.”

“Okay!” Naruto accepts that cheerfully, then grabs Kurama’s hand, tugging on it. “Kurama-nii, can Sakura-chan come over and play? Can she have ramen with us? She’s really cool!”

Apparently Team 7 is going to be getting an early start this time around, Kurama thinks, smiling, and it’s a little bittersweet, but he thinks of his Naruto and Sakura, brother and sister in every way that mattered, shoring each other up and giving their lives for the chance at a better world, and nothing in existence would make him say no.

“Of course,” Kurama tells him, looping his arm around Naruto’s waist and smiling down at him. “I was planning to get some ramen after this. You’re going to come, right?”

“Yeah!” Naruto cheers, and grabs Gaara’s hand. “Gaara, Gaara, you’re gonna come too, right? We can find Sasuke and Sakura and Yugito-nee and Fū-nee and everyone! We can all eat together an’ it’ll be like a big family.”

Gaara smiles a little, looking up at Kurama and then back at Naruto. “It is a big family,” he says quietly, but doesn’t protest when Naruto drags him up out of Kurama’s lap and to his feet.

“I’ll meet you there,” Kurama promises when they both look back at him expectantly. He tweaks Naruto’s nose, unable to fight a smile, and says gruffly, “Go on, go make trouble for someone else, okay?”

Naruto beams, throws himself back in to hug Kurama tightly, and cries “I love you, Kurama-nii! I’m glad you’re okay!” Then he’s bolting out the door, running flat-out with Gaara scampering to keep up, and Kurama chuckles as he watches them go.

The fingers resting on the nape of his neck squeeze gently, then fall away, and Kakashi sits up. “I could go for ramen,” he says cheerfully, pulling his IV out and swinging his legs over the edge of the mattress.

Kurama eyes him a little warily, then blows out a breath in an exasperated sigh and gets to his feet,
hooking an arm under Kakashi’s and tugging him fully upright. “You realize the old hag is going to crush your skull like a melon, right?” he asks.

“You’ll just have to protect me,” Kakashi tells him blithely, and to his credit he’s mostly standing under his own power, even if he isn’t quite as steady as normal.

“From Senju Tsunade?” Kurama demands, and he takes a step back, watching warily as Kakashi balances on his own. “Fuck that, I’d rather face Zetsu again.”

Kakashi pauses, considering, and then winces a little. “Fair enough.”

No power on earth could keep Kurama from rolling his eyes at that. “And you’re still going to test her temper?” he demands, following Kakashi’s mostly-steady steps out of the hospital room. “You're a moron.”

“You’ll just have to do something nice for me before I die,” Kakashi tells him, as innocent as a summer sky.

Sage, Kurama hates his stupid face.

He’s just about to open his mouth and tell Kakashi that when there's a commotion at the far end of the hall. Kotetsu and Izumo are shouting for assistance, staggering into the ward with a body slumped between them. Kurama stiffens, the smell of drying blood almost overwhelming, and takes a step back as a familiar figure bolts out of one of the neighboring rooms.

Tsunade gasps out a strangled, “Sensei!” and then she’s moving, flying down the hall with her hands already starting to glow green. She presses her fingers to Sarutobi's chest, relief immediately suffusing her form, and orders sharply, “Get him on a bed. You, find Shizune and send her here. What happened?”

“We found him in the forest while we were doing a sweep for enemies,” Kotetsu says, helping Izumo maneuver the Sandaime onto a stretcher. “Danzō was there, too—it looks like they were fighting, and Sarutobi-sama must have killed him. He’s, uh. Really dead.”

Tsunade goes still, and Kurama can't quite see her face, but the line of her back is stiff. “Shimura Danzō?” she asks.

Kotetsu blinks, and he and Izumo share a confused look. “Yes,” Izumo says after a moment. A shaky breath, and then Tsunade nods. “His chakra system has been overloaded,” she says, dragging herself back to the task at hand. “And his heart is failing. I can save him, but he’s going to be recovering for a long time. Find Kushina—she’s going to need to take up her duties sooner than expected. And get word to the Clan Heads, she’ll need their support with the other Kage.”

“Right away, Tsunade-sama!” Kotetsu vanishes out the nearest window in a blur, and Izumo heads down the hall at a run.

Kurama flicks a glance at Sarutobi, still and pale and bloody against the sheets, and then slips into the room behind him. Kakashi is already there, lounging casually against the wall like he isn’t hiding from the woman outside, and from the bed Hayate is giving him a wary look.

“She’s distracted, asshole,” Kurama tells Kakashi, mostly amused. “Sarutobi will definitely live, which is more than I can say for you.”

Relief bleeds into the line of Kakashi’s shoulders, but he tips his nose up and says airily, “I wasn’t
worried. Tsunade-sama is the best."

"Which is why you're running away from her," Kurama retorts, but he drags the window open and leans out. Open street beneath them, even if it’s a little busy, and that’s good enough for him. It’s a shinobi village, anyway; people are used to shinobi dropping out of the sky anywhere and everywhere. "You going to die of pneumonia if I leave the window open?" he asks Hayate.

The tokujo flushes a little, but he doesn’t cough. "It’s fine. I'm only in here for some follow-up tests," he says. "Kakashi, you look—"

"As blindingly handsome as always?" Kakashi cuts in, beaming his bullshit smile. "Thank you, I think Kurama agrees."

Kurama huffs. "No, I don’t agree. You look like a half-price zombie without the common sense to just die," he retorts. "Maybe you should have just stayed in bed like you were supposed to."

Because he’s an bastard, Kakashi just hums, politely skeptical. "You're the one who couldn’t keep your hands off of me," he points out. "That kiss on the wall—"

"Shut up and jump out the window." Kurama gives him a pointed shove, waves absently to Hayate, and follows Kakashi down to the street. There’s no one around who will immediately run to Tsunade and report Kakashi’s jailbreak, thankfully, and Kurama turns towards Ichiraku, tugging his rather tattered shirt a little more closely around him. It’s a lost cause, scorched and stained, but it’s still winter and better than nothing.

"You're very hard on clothes, aren’t you," Kakashi muses, eyeing him sidelong. "It almost makes me wonder why you bother with a shirt at all."

"Because it’s cold," Kurama retorts, glaring at him. "And you don’t get to talk. You're the one who destroyed my first set of new clothes, you know."

Kakashi winces faintly. "I could go an entire lifetime without remembering that I stabbed you with a Chidori, thanks."

Given what other memories that must bring up, Kurama doesn’t blame him. "I gave you a concussion in return, didn’t I? That makes us even. It’s pretty much the same if you count how fast I heal."

Judging by the expression Kakashi is wearing, that wasn’t quite as reassuring as Kurama intended it to be. With a sigh, he reaches over, catching Kakashi’s wrist and then sliding his hand down to interlock their fingers. And yeah, okay, he could get used to this hand-holding thing. Even if it is bullshit that he had to suffer through far too much of with Naruto and Sasuke the first time around.

Kakashi gives him a mildly startled glance, then makes a sound of amusement, curling his fingers over Kurama’s hand. "You're adorable," he says, like it’s a revelation.

"Fuck you!" Kurama retorts instantly, bristling. He goes to yank his hand away, but Kakashi doesn’t let go, and... maybe he doesn’t try as hard as he conceivably could. "I am not fucking—I'm a son of the Sage and a monster of mortal nightmare, you fucker!"

"You should give in and accept it," Kakashi advises him breezily. "It will be much less painful in the long—ow."

"Bastard," Kurama mutters, removing his elbow from Kakashi’s ribs.
There’s a light chuckle from behind them, and Kurama turns sharply, pulling Kakashi with him. For one fractured heartbeat he thinks it’s Kisame, but of course it’s not. It’s Raidō, smiling at them, with two familiar shapes half-hidden behind him.

“You two look friendly, for a shinobi and a monster of mortal nightmare,” he says, casting a glance at their hands, but it’s said kindly, and his happiness looks genuine. The slant of his mouth when he looks up at Kurama is only faintly cautious, weighted far more towards friendly, and Kurama doesn’t know if it’s because he tried to save Genma or because Kakashi accepts him, but either way he’s grateful.

“We get by,” Kakashi drawls, still rubbing his ribs like the overdramatic ass he is. Kurama hadn’t hit him that hard. “I thought you’d be with Genma.”

Raidō waves a hand at the small bodies behind him. “I was, but since everything’s over with I had to get the kids. They want to see Genma too.”

Sai leans around Raidō just enough to wave solemnly at Kurama, while Shin regards them with sharp, careful eyes for a moment before he nods.

“Hey,” Kurama says, crouching down to meet their eyes, and—it’s still a faint ache, the memory of the Sai from the future, another friend who’d died for his friends, but it’s offset by the fact that Danzō is dead and Shin is alive. Things are a hell of a lot better now than they ever were before. “You two picked a pretty brave guy to tag along with. Genma’s a good shinobi.”

Sai looks at Shin for a moment, then back at Kurama. “He faced Danzō-sama alone,” he says, like this is the highest mark of bravery he can imagine. “And Raidō said we could stay even though Danzō-sama is gone now.”

Raidō flushes a little, rubbing a hand over his hair. “Genma would put me out on my ass if I didn’t,” he says, chuckling. “And he’d keep you two instead. I like it better this way.”

“Genma wouldn’t do that,” Shin informs him, faith absolute. “He loves you too. You're his weakness. If you were killed he would be vulnerable.”

And there’s the creepy factor coming out, Kurama thinks, rolling his eyes. Raidō is clearly at a loss for words, not entirely sure what to say to that, so Kurama offers, “Next time leave off the last part, kid. Most people don’t advertise the fact that they think in logistics and leverage.”

Shin blinks, looking faintly bewildered. “Oh. I'm sorry.”

That, at least, makes Raidō smile and shake his head. He pats Shin’s shoulder reassuringly, pushing lightly to steer him towards the hospital. “No harm done, don’t worry. We’ll work on it. Come on, Genma’s waiting, and he’s only patient when he wants to be.”

Kakashi hums quietly, watching the three of them disappear through the main doors. “Tenzō’s lucky he got out,” he says.

“Lucky that you convinced him to get out,” Kurama corrects, and when Kakashi shoots him a startled look, he just shrugs, turning towards Ichiraku again. “He used to talk about it to Naruto, to help him deal with Sai. Last time around, there wasn’t a Genma to snatch them up.”

Kakashi winces a little, but there’s humor leeching back into his tone when he says, “I don’t think you have any right to talk about child-snatching, Kurama.”

“Fuck you,” Kurama grumbles, but can’t really bring himself to mean it. “I didn’t snatch them—for
the most part they came to me.”

“Mm.” Kakashi sounds far too amused, and he catches Kurama’s elbow when it comes in for a second hit. There’s a pause, and then he asks, without ever quite looking at Kurama, “And now what?”

“What the hell do you mean?” Kurama asks, confused.

Kakashi’s gaze is very determinedly on the end of the street. “You’ve gotten rid of Akatsuki, taken care of Obito, seen Zetsu defeated. There’s no threat to the jinchuuriki anymore—”

Half a second more and Kurama gets it. “No threat from Akatsuki,” he corrects, and comes to a stop, pulling Kakashi around. He meets one visible grey eye as steadily as he can, and says, “They’re jinchuuriki. Opportunistic idiots are always going to think they’re a good target. And besides, I just got settled here, asshole. What makes you think I’d leave Konoha? There’s nothing out there for me. Everything I want is right here.”

Kakashi stares at him, wide-eyed and silent, and then takes a breath. His eyes falls closed for a long moment before he lets out a quiet huff that’s almost a laugh and says, “And you said I can’t call you adorable.”

Kurama kicks him in the shin, though not as hard as he could. “Shut the hell up, bastard. I never said you.”

Kakashi chuckles, but he tightens his grip on Kurama’s hand, pulls him close and lets their shoulders bump. “That’s true,” he agrees. “But it’s simple oversight, I’m sure. At the very least, you never said you didn’t.”

With a roll of his eyes, Kurama pulls him forward again. “Whatever makes you feel better about yourself, bastard.”

The Copy-Nin opens his mouth to answer, but before he can get so much as a word out there’s a flare of orange-gold wings and Fū drops from the sky practically on top of them, hooking her arms around Kurama’s neck and making him yelp and stagger as her full weight hits him. “Geh! Sage damn it, sweetheart!”

“Sorry, Kurama-nii!” She doesn’t sound it in the least, but she’s grinning, wide and bright as Yugito slips out of an alley to loop her fingers into the hem of Kurama’s shirt. Leaning over, Fū eyes Kakashi and Kurama’s linked hands with interest. “Oooh, this is new! Why didn’t you tell us you were dating the Copy-Nin, Kurama-nii?”

Kurama snorts, but he shifts so she can lock her knees around his sides a little more easily. “Because I wanted to at least get him into bed before you brats chased him off.”

Kakashi chokes.

“Aw,” Fū bemoans, leaning forward to give Kurama a look that’s eighty percent wounded eyes and twenty percent bloodthirsty mischief. “We wouldn’t do that, Kurama-nii. He’s not Shisui, you know.”

“Thank the Sage,” Kurama mutters, then raises his voice again. “Paws off. You can torture Shisui all you want but this one’s mine to torment.”

Yugito giggles, leaning into him, even as Fū makes very sad, very despondent noises over his shoulder.
“My hero,” Kakashi says, dry as dust.

“You can thank me later,” Kurama tells him sweetly.

Kakashi opens his mouth instantly, retort ready, before his gaze falls on Fū’s grin and Yugito's knife-sharp smile as they both stare at him. He swallows and closes it again determinedly.

Well, at least they're having fun, Kurama thinks with a snort. He taps a claw against Fū’s kneecap and asks, “You two are okay? I heard Sasori hit the Academy.”

“We’re fine,” Yugito says immediately. “Utakata and the jounin commander took care of him. And the boy Utakata has a crush on helped them, too.”

“Yeah!” Fū says cheerfully, throwing her weight forward and half-over Kurama’s shoulder and ignoring how it makes him stagger. “He’s kinda cute, and I'm pretty sure he likes Utakata back.”

“Naruto went to find them,” Yugito adds. “He thought they might want ramen, too.”

Kurama hums. He’d seen Utakata on his way out of the hospital when he was dragging Kakashi in, and the Kiri nin had been politely obstinate about leaving, much to Tsunade's ire. He’d seemed fine, and clearly been on his way to find someone, so Kurama had thrown Kakashi at her as a distraction.

“Good,” he decides. “Rōshi and Han?”

“With the lava lady,” Fū says, and with a twist she flips over Kurama’s shoulder, lands lightly in the street, and then spins around to grab Yugito's free hand, swinging it happily. “They were helping the Barrier Squads, I think. And Karin went with them, because she wanted to see them too!”

Which is pretty much everyone accounted for, Kurama thinks with faint satisfaction. Akatsuki hadn’t had enough members to do much damage—even Nagato and Konan had bolted before they caused more than a few blocks’ worth of destruction—and the one big battlefield from the miniature invasion is the new stretch of jungle right outside the walls. It’s a hell of a lot better than the last Akatsuki invasion Kurama witnessed.

“Good,” he says again, reaching out to smooth down blond hair and then ruffle green. “You two did great, you know? I heard you got everyone out of harm’s way. That was quick thinking.”

Yugito smiles, quietly pleased, and her grip on Kurama’s shirt tightens just a little. “I think the class likes us now,” she says, almost wondering. “Yūgao said we could spar with her whenever she’s free, too.”

It’s all too easy, sometimes, to remember that the jinchuuriki have spent an entire lifetime apart, never accepted, simply because of what other people made them. Right now, looking at Yugito’s hopeful face, the light in Fū’s eyes—all Kurama can see is wonder, and it aches in his chest a little, though he can't tell if it’s in a good or a bad way.

“Maybe she’ll be able to keep you brats out of trouble,” Kurama huffs, and rolls his eyes when two pouts with varying degrees of severity are leveled at him. Yugito's still mostly unpracticed at the expression, but Fū must have been taking lessons from Naruto. “Yeah, yeah. Why don’t you go save some seats for me and the half-price zombie over here.”

“Maa,” Kakashi protests mildly, even though his eye is crinkling with humor.

“Half-price? Does that mean you bought him, Kurama-nii?” Fū asks, mischief in her smile. “You know you can't return discount stuff!”
Kakashi chuckles, twisting his fingers further around Kurama’s. “See? Now you're obligated to stay and look after me.”

“I didn’t buy you,” Kurama retorts. “No one in their right minds would pay money for you, asshole.”

“Does that mean you stole him, like you stole us?” Fū’s expression is perfectly innocent, which means the question is anything but.

Growling, Kurama swats at her, and she skips out of the way with a laugh. “Go,” he orders. “Be a brat somewhere else.”

With a bright giggle, Fū darts in, wrapping her arms around his waist and hugging him tightly before she dances away, tugging Yugito with her. “Naruto!” she shouts, just as a blond head rounds the corner. “Naruto, Kurama-nii is dating Kakashi!”

“Say it a little louder, why don’t you,” Kurama grumbles. “I think a couple people in Tea Country might have missed that.”

Fū beams at him, then takes a running leap, hits the side of the building in front of them, and launches herself higher into the air. Chakra sparks, and with a whoop she flips over, orange-gold wings blooming. She swoops down, catching Yugito's outstretched hands, and pulls the other girl up into the air with her before they soar away.

“Chōmei’s created a monster,” Kurama says with amusement. “I think Fū’s going to forget how to walk before she’s twenty at this rate.”

Kakashi chuckles lightly, but lets go of Kurama’s hand so that Kurama can catch the two small bodies that come flying at him, though Sakura and Sasuke are slightly more reserved.

“You’re dating, Kurama-nii?” Naruto cries, clinging to his shirt, while Gaara takes hold of several hanks of red hair and settles against his shoulder like a hurricane wouldn’t budge him. “You’re dating the Freak Squad guy?”

“Maa, I have a name,” Kakashi objects. “A famous name, even.”

“Does that make Shisui family too?” Gaara asks, sounding like he’s not entirely sure about the idea.

“He can be the obnoxious pet,” Kurama proposes, smirking.

Kakashi eyes him, then snorts softly. “He might even agree to that, if you stop threatening to eat him.”

“If I ate an Uchiha, I’d probably get indigestion.” Kurama makes a face, lets Naruto wriggle down from his grasp, and sidesteps him neatly when he almost bolts underfoot.

“Ramen!” Naruto cheers, catching Sasuke's hand. “Come on! Let’s beat Fū-nee there!”

“We can't beat someone who can fly,” Sasuke protests, but he breaks into a run nevertheless, letting Naruto pull him into a side-street for a short cut.

Kurama snorts quietly, watching them disappear behind a fall of flowering vines, and then glances down at the six-year-old still walking with them. “Not in the mood to run?” he asks Sakura.

After a moment of hesitation, she shakes her head. “I'm okay walking. Is—is it really okay if I come, too?”
Right. This Sakura has Ino and no one else, with too many bullies and not enough confidence to fill a thimble. “Of course it is. Naruto invited you, didn’t he? He wouldn’t do that if he didn’t mean it,” he says, looking down at Gaara, who’s suddenly looking back.

Wide aquamarine eyes blink, and then Gaara says very firmly, “I want to walk with Sakura.”

*Good choice,* Kurama almost says, but decides to let the two of them sort out a friendship all on their own. Crouching down, he sets Gaara on his feet, and the redhead stumbles a step before he latches on to Sakura’s sleeve.

“You can sit with me when we eat,” he says determinedly.

Sakura blinks at him, eyes wide, and looks down at her hands. For a moment Kurama almost thinks she’s about to cry, but when she looks up, there’s no trace of tears. She’s beaming instead, bright and happy and thankful, and she says, “Thank you!” like it’s everything she ever wanted just handed to her.

Damn these kids, Kurama thinks with an inward groan. Naruto is definitely laughing his ass off in the Pure Land, fuck it all.

On his left, Kakashi chuckles softly, taking his hand again and dragging his thumb over Kurama’s knuckles as they start walking. “Another one?” he asks, amused, and when Kurama growls halfheartedly at him he just offers up the beaming, bullshit smile Kurama will never admit he wears well. “Maa, it’s an honest question. If I’m going to be around I want to know which children to dodge first.”

“The jinchuuriki,” Kurama informs him, without hesitation. “Unless you *want* to end up wearing your ass for a hat. They’re good kids, just—overenthusiastic.”

“They’re each capable of leveling a village with a temper tantrum,” Kakashi corrects blandly, though the way his eye is crinkled shows he’s fighting a smile. “I was an overenthusiastic child. *They’re* ridiculous.”

“Monsters.” Kurama shrugs, looking away, because it’s true. He’s never denied it, not for himself or the jinchuuriki. They have power, enough to terrify everyone around them, and they’re learning that they don’t have to be scared of themselves. Pretty soon, nothing and no one is going to be able to stop them, and honestly, Kurama looks forward to the day when everyone else realizes that.

Kakashi’s humor doesn’t waver, though by all rights it should. “If that’s the case, I picked the prettiest monster of all.”

Kurama scoffs, but he curls his fingers a little more tightly through Kakashi’s. “Even after what happened?”

There’s a quiet hum. “You’re going to have to be more specific. A lot has happened in the last few weeks.” When Kurama levels a look at him, unamused, he raises his free hand in surrender. “Even after you turning back into a twenty-story fox and attempting to eat me and three of my friends? Yes.”

*Turning back,* he said. Not *turning into,* not *becoming,* but... *back.* Because he knows what Kurama used to be, knows what’s still lurking right under his skin, and even so, his answer is still yes.

“You seem to be forgetting that I kissed you first,” Kurama manages, and pretends there isn’t the faintest waver in his voice. “If anyone did the picking, it’s me.”
Kakashi pauses, looking at him for a long moment, and then tips his head a little, the smile clear even though it’s covered by the mask. “And? Are you happy with the monster you picked?”

Sage, this man.

Stopping short, Kurama uses his grip on Kakashi to pull him around, to look at him where he has no choice but to see it. To see the way Kurama looks at him, the expression on his face, the way every emotion is written out. “Monster?” he repeats.

Kakashi smiles again, a small, crooked thing. “Box up that part of yourself, wipe off the blood, paste on a smile and no one will ever know anything’s happened. Do it in reverse, and the monster is all that’s left. I’ve lived that way for a long time, Kurama.”

Kurama takes a breath, and…it’s fine. It is. There’s one way forward from here, and they’re both going to walk that path. Together, even, and it isn’t something Kurama had thought to want, but he does.

“Yeah,” he says, and meets Kakashi’s eyes without wavering, without a hint of hesitation. “I’m happy. The monster I picked is fucking perfect for me, and if anyone says otherwise I’ll kick their teeth in. You included.”

Kakashi yanks his mask down, stepping in and kissing Kurama hard, hands in his hair and mouth hot and desperate. Kurama surges up into it, kissing back, returning every ounce of fierceness twofold. It’s a kiss like a storm breaking, scattering lightning across Kurama’s nerves and curling through his veins with hurricane winds to leave him breathless and dazed.

“You,” Kakashi says against his lips, and kisses him again, short and hungry. “You’re going to kill me, Kurama.”

Kurama laughs, hooking his fingers in Kakashi’s pants pockets and tugging him even closer until their chests are pressed together. “But what a way to go,” he murmurs, and Kakashi’s breath audibly catches.

“Kurama-nii! Kurama-nii, come on! Ramen!” Naruto wails, and they break apart, Kakashi’s sound of disappointment clear. “If you don’t hurry up, me an’ Karin are gonna eat all of it!”

“Not an idle threat, coming from two Uzumaki,” Kakashi murmurs, tugging his mask back up with a faintly rueful smile. He drags his fingers through Kurama’s hair before he lets go completely, and Kurama shivers a little at the feeling, then leans in. He kisses Kakashi through the mask, quick and filthy, and turns away.

“Hang on, brat, we’re coming,” he calls, and tugs Kakashi along as he heads towards where Naruto is waiting.
Kushina shows up halfway through lunch with no explanation beyond an Uzumaki’s sixth sense for ramen—which, Kurama supposes, is explanation enough. She’s wearing the topmost layer of the Hokage’s robes without the hat, red hair pulled up in a high tail and sword still over her back, scratched and bruised but cheerful even so. With a friendly grin at Teuchi, she slides into the seat on Kakashi’s right, then promptly steals Kurama’s bowl.

“Hey!” Kurama snaps, even though he’s already waving for Teuchi to bring him another one.

“Too slow, little brother!” Kushina taunts, and promptly stuffs as many noodles in her mouth as will fit. It’s a lot of noodles. Kurama sees many, many big mouth jokes in her future.

“I earned that!” he protests, but Kushina just grins, all teeth, and he has to roll his eyes, unwilling to be soothed by the stroke of Kakashi’s thumb against his thigh. “Fucking Tomato."

Mouth still full, Kushina flips him off, spends a few seconds struggling to swallow her bite, and retorts, “I’m the Hokage, show some respect!”

“Officially?” Yugito asks, raising her head from whatever destructive plot she and Fū are giggling over. “Are they going to have a ceremony?”

“Probably not.” Kakashi is the one who answers, and there’s a faint, wry slant to his smile, though his hand doesn’t move from where it’s curled over Kurama’s leg. “When the Hokage changes during a time of conflict, there isn’t usually a celebration. Though since Sarutobi is still alive, they might change that.”

“The stubborn old bastard will be fine,” Kushina says firmly, then leans around Kakashi to wave at the street. “Yagura! And—oh.”

The tone of that makes Kurama look up from his new bowl of ramen, and his eyes immediately narrow at the sight of who is approaching. Not just Yagura, who has stripped off his Mizukage robes and all signs of office, including his hitai-ate, but the Kazekage and—

Oh indeed, Kurama thinks, eyeing the blond girl clinging to Rasa’s hand, the dark-haired boy half-hidden behind him.
Gaara, one chair down on Naruto's far side, makes a startled, almost scared sound, and glances at Kurama like he’s judging the best path over to his lap.

Thankfully, Rasa stops at the very edge of their group, next to Kushina, and doesn’t try to come any closer. “Uzumaki,” he says with a polite nod, and gently extracts his fingers from Temari's grasp. “Why don’t you two go say hello while I speak with Uzumaki?” he tells his children, and Kurama feels his brows rise. That wasn’t what he was expecting.

“All right,” Temari says, all fierce determination, and she grabs Kankuro by the sleeve, towing him over towards Gaara. Fū, on Gaara's other side, leans in to smile at them, and Naruto waves cheerfully. Gaara looks between his two fellow jinchuuriki, then at his siblings, and visibly steels himself before he offers a tentative smile.

Temari’s steps falter, just a little, and her eyes widen, but then she smiles back, bright and relieved. Deciding that they’ll be fine, Kurama shifts his attention back to Rasa, turning around on his stool and leaning back against the counter to level the Kazekage with an entirely unimpressed look. “If you think a few minutes of making nice with his siblings is going to be enough to get Gaara to go back to Suna with you—” he starts, a clear warning in his tone.

Rasa raises a hand, expression tired, and shakes his head. “Believe me, Uzumaki, that’s the last thing on my mind.” He reaches into his robes and pulls out a sheaf of folded papers and a pen, offering both to Kurama. When Kurama hesitates warily, he snorts softly and says, “Go ahead. They're adoption papers. I'm formally waiving my rights as Gaara's father. Suna isn’t the place for him, but it seems as if he’s found a place of his own regardless.”

A little stunned, Kurama takes the papers, then opens them and checks them over. It’s the truth: they really are adoption papers, already bearing Rasa’s signature and stamp, just waiting for Kurama’s own. When he glances up, faintly incredulous, Rasa just shakes his head again.

“I would have asked Gaara's opinion, but I believe he already made that clear,” he says quietly. “And despite the fact that I caused it, I didn’t want to look into my son’s face and watch him choose someone else. One more moment of cowardice, I'm afraid.”

There's a cutting answer on the tip of Kurama’s tongue, but...well. This is a decent peace offering, as long as Gaara never has to set foot in Suna until they realize he’s more than the monster they made him into. Instead, he bites the words back, adds his own signature to the line, and hands one set of papers back to Rasa. “Thanks,” he says gruffly, because Rasa could easily have been far more of an asshole about this, but for the first time he put Gaara’s welfare over his value as a jinchuuriki, and since he’ll be out of their lives shortly, Kurama can take that as something of a bridge being mended.

Rasa's expression is rueful beneath the shadow of his hat, but he inclines his head and steps away. “Temari, Kankuro, be back at the inn before dinner time,” he says sternly.

“Yes, Father,” Temari agrees, then hesitates, looking from Rasa to Gaara. “We—can we stay for a little while?”

“If you’d like,” Rasa agrees. He stares at Gaara for a long moment, regret and resignation foremost on his face, then turns away. “Goodbye, Gaara,” he says, and without waiting for a response he pushes through the hangings and heads back the way he came, leaving Baki to linger a few stalls down, one eye on Kankuro and Temari.

Gaara watches him go, eyes wide, but a moment later Naruto tugs on his sleeve and he turns back, a smile breaking over his face again. Sasuke and Sakura are leaning in as well, with Naruto chattering
cheerfully at Temari and Kankuro, and despite the way Gaara's siblings are still a little tense, a little further from Gaara than is really necessary, they don’t look actively scared, so that’s probably an improvement.

Well, Kurama thinks, folding the adoption papers and running a finger along the creases. That was a hell of a lot less explosive than he’d expected any meeting about Gaara’s future to be.

“So now you're officially a father,” Kakashi says mildly, and when Kurama turns back around to finish his meal, their thighs brush. Kakashi doesn’t move away, just smiles at him. “One down, three to go. Or is it seven?”

Kushina scoffs. “He can be Naruto's uncle, but he’s stealing my son over my dead body, you know!” she declares, jabbing her chopsticks at Kurama threateningly.

“Like I’d need to steal him,” Kurama retorts. “He’d come with me willingly.”

“So—”

Yagura makes a sound of mixed impatience and amusement, and asks pointedly, “Is there room for one more?”

Still scowling at Kushina, Kurama jerks a thumb at the stool on her other side. “Yeah, sure, but you have to sit next to the harpy.”

“I think I’ll risk it,” Yagura says, dry as dust, and pulls himself up onto the seat. “One of your tonkotsu, please,” he tells Teuchi.

“Of course, Mizukage-sama,” Teuchi says easily.

“It’s just Yagura,” he corrects, and Kurama blinks, because Yagura is about fifty percent defensive anger over his age and fifty percent pride in his position. Raising a brow, he leans around Kakashi to level a look at the jinchuuriki, and Yagura rolls his eyes faintly in return.

“Terumī will be carrying the hat back to Kiri when the delegation returns,” he says. “I told her that she and Momochi could wrestle for who got to wear it, but I believe Momochi bowed out almost immediately.”

Faced with Terumī Mei and the Mizukage’s seat in question, Kurama doesn’t blame Zabuza for staging a tactical retreat. Mei’s probably overjoyed, and Kurama remembers enough about what kind of Mizukage she was to be glad she’s back in the position. Kiri needs change, and given the way Obito controlled him, Yagura isn’t the best person to implement it. There’s always going to be some level of doubt about where Obito’s control ended and Yagura began, but Mei’s one of the people who stepped up to stop him. People will follow her gladly.

“So when you ask if we’ve got room for one more—” Kurama starts, amused.

Yagura gives him a look, but concedes with a tip of his head. “I was hoping you wouldn’t object to one more jinchuuriki occupying your house. And that the Hokage would allow me to stay in Konoha a while longer.”

“That’s fine!” Kushina tells him cheerfully, through another mouthful of noodles. She swallows, and adds, “There are still a bunch of extra rooms, so just pick whichever one you want.” Downing the last of her bowl, she checks the time, and pushes to her feet. “Okay! Time to go tell the council
they’d better keep their damned noses out of things if they don’t want me to kick them out on their asses. I’m not as nice as Minato was, you know!”

She’s really, really not, and knowing how Homura and Utatane supported everything Danzō did, Kurama really can’t think of better people to aim her at. He grins, showing teeth, and says, “Don’t get blood on those robes. It’ll be a bitch to scrub out.”

Kushina laughs, gives him a cheeky salute, and drops some money on the counter before she waves a cheerful goodbye to all of them and disappears down the street.

Leaning into Kurama’s shoulder a little, Kakashi chuckles. His fingers leave off tracing lines of heat across the inside of Kurama’s thigh, and he slides his hand down Kurama’s arm to lace their fingers together before he asks a little whimsically, “Plans for the rest of the day?”

“I can keep an eye on the children,” Yagura proposes before Kurama can even open his mouth. Catching the raised brow Kurama gives him, he levels a look of amusement right back. “Everyone else has done their time, and seeing as I’m not Mizukage anymore, I don’t have anything else to do. Maybe we can play tag again.”

Kurama laughs, leaning back a little to survey the four jinchuuriki and four shinobi children where they’re all starting to huddle. Plans are being made, he’s sure of it, but he’s also sure he’s probably better off being able to claim ignorance, so he doesn’t listen in. “Yeah, if you want, but I think they’re coming up with ways to keep themselves occupied. Good luck.”

Yagura smiles, lavender eyes a little softer than Kurama has seen them before. “I’m a jinchuuriki as well, in case you’ve forgotten,” he says, but there’s no heat in the words. “Every urge they have to make their presence obvious and impossible to ignore, I assure you, I’ve had the same.”

Yeah, Kurama is more than willing to believe that. Yagura probably didn’t have much choice, either, when it came to having Isobu sealed in him. In fact, Kurama can't think of a single jinchuuriki who asked to be one—even Mito made the decision because it was either that or watch Hashirama get his head ripped off, trying to fight both Madara and Kurama at the same time.

Well. Maybe the next generation will do better, after seeing what jinchuuriki can be. Or maybe they’ll let the bijuu out at the end of their lives, set them free and let things go back to how they should be.

“Have fun,” Kurama tells him, and gets a lofty smirk in response. Oh yeah, Yagura is definitely going to be taking advantage of the newfound freedom of being just another shinobi. Kurama wishes him the best of luck.

Turning back to Kakashi, he leans in, free hand tracing a line up the man’s thigh, and nips lightly at the curve of his ear. “No plans,” he says, practically against the skin, and feels the shiver that rocks Kakashi’s entire body.

“I might be able to come up with a few,” Kakashi manages after a moment, and casts a sideways glance at Kurama. He raises their hands to his mouth, and through the mask Kurama can just feel the edge of teeth as he nips at Kurama’s fingers, then drags his lips down them.

Fuck, Kurama thinks, and his breath shouldn’t catch at that simple gesture, but it does. “Going to swoon again?” he asks, and despite his best efforts it’s rough and a little hoarse.

Kakashi chuckles, expression faintly wicked as he presses his mouth to the pulse-point of Kurama’s wrist. “Maybe I’m just planning to have you do all the work.”
Okay, that’s just about all the teasing Kurama can stand. He pushes to his feet, pulling Kakashi with him, and nods to an amused-looking Yagura. A hesitation, but he doesn’t want Naruto to worry, so he sidesteps Temari and Kankuro and leans in to muss golden hair. “Hey, kit, be good for Yagura, okay?”

“Okay, Kurama-ni!” Naruto says cheerfully. “Are you taking Kakashi back to the hospital?”

“No, I’m going to take him home and put him to bed,” Kurama answers, which is probably technically the truth. At least, he hopes there will be a bed in their near future; if they don’t get that far today, he doesn’t mind, but it would be nice. “Squirt, you good?”

“I’m fine,” Gaara says with certainty, and judging by the way he doesn’t seem to mind Temari at his elbow, he’s telling the truth. Of course, it probably helps that Naruto is pressed close on one side, with Sakura tight on the other, and Sasuke at their backs.

Kurama kisses him on the forehead, tweaks Naruto’s nose, and waves at Fū and Yugito, who are just out of reach. “Behave. No eating anyone, okay, brats?”

“We’ll try our best!” Fū promises, though by her grin she means it about as much as Kakashi would a promise to give up his porn. Yugito nods, too, and her lips are curled in a small but cat-smug smile that means the lack of verbal agreement was absolutely deliberate.

Kurama just rolls his eyes at the two of them, leaves money to cover all of their meals where Teuchi can reach it, and joins Kakashi outside the stand. Instantly, an arm winds around his waist, pulling him close, and Kakashi drags him into a deep, careful kiss. It draws a low, hungry sound up from Kurama’s chest, and he hooks his fingers into Kakashi’s pockets, kissing back as deeply as he can. Behind them, inside the stall, there’s the sound of laughter, Naruto and Fū talking loudly, undercut with Yugito and Gaara and Sasuke. Sakura is laughing, and Fū is giggling, and Naruto’s presence is bright and steady and unwavering. It makes the breath catch in Kurama’s throat, makes him lean into Kakashi more, kiss him harder, because—

Well. He feels good, all the way down to his bones. He’d been a creature of malice and rage and hatred for so long, with nothing else, and his Naruto helped turn him from that path, pull him towards a brighter future. But Kurama had to reach that future on his own, by himself, with one final push from his best friend, and now he has. None of this would have happened if he had stayed a ghost of chakra trapped in someone else’s soul, and for all the grief that came before, Kurama is happy. He can’t remember ever being this happy before.

Kakashi eases the kiss down, scales it back until he’s just slanting his lips over Kurama’s, dragging them to the side to press a careful kiss to the edge of his mouth, and then whispers against his skin, “So where are we going?”

“If you try a shunshin you’re going to crash us into a wall or something,” Kurama huffs, and dredges up the memory of Kushina using one. It’s still clear, simple enough, and Kurama takes a breath—

Kakashi catches his chin with one hand, kisses him again with the curve of a smile all too easy to feel this close, and says, “My apartment is two blocks away. I can manage that far.”

There’s no time to protest before a whirl of leaves spins them away, and an instant later they’re landing on a narrow windowsill three floors up, with a quieter street below them. Kakashi flares his chakra and then slides the window open, tugging Kurama through into a small bedroom.

“Still fully conscious?” Kurama mocks, and Kakashi growls softly, kisses him hard, and pulls him
down. They sprawl on the bed, half-collapsed against the pillows with Kurama partway on top, and Kakashi steals the laughter right from Kurama’s mouth. Long fingers cup Kurama’s face, and it feels a little like that kiss under the Hokage Mountain, full of desperation and affection, traced through with relief.

He breaks apart just enough for words, curls his hands in silver hair and leans in to press his lips to Kakashi’s eyelid, his forehead, his cheek. “Hey,” he says into the heat between them, “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Kakashi looks up at him for a long moment, then carefully pushes his hitai-ate up to look at Kurama with both eyes. He holds his gaze, and…

Kurama doesn’t want to flinch away. There’s no urge, no hesitation. He knows that eye and knows what it can do, just faced the horror of it a few hours ago at most, but this is Kakashi. This is the man who came to him the moment the genjutsu broke, who defended him against Zetsu and Obito and Kisame alike. He’s the one person in this time who knows everything Kurama is. They’ve pushed at each other, sniped and snarled and fought and come to an understanding, and Kurama couldn’t think of him as an enemy anymore if he tried.

It’s freeing in a way he doesn’t remember ever feeling before. Not freed from someone else’s chains, but from chains of his own creation. No more fear. Not of Kakashi or anything about him.

Leaning down, he kisses that eyelid as well, the scar that cost Kakashi his original eye, the curve of Kakashi’s smile as he pulls Kurama in again. One hand strokes down Kurama’s side to curl around the back of his thigh, squeezing lightly, and Kakashi sighs into the kiss. “I guess you’re not,” he says, and the words are halfway to joke but the look in his eyes is the furthest thing from it. “There goes my grand plan to get rid of you and reclaim my peaceful life.”

Kurama scoff. “Bullshit, asshole. You just like pushing boundaries.” But he kisses Kakashi again anyway, nips lightly at his tongue for the way it makes Kakashi’s hand tighten on his leg, and shifts until he has a leg on either side of Kakashi’s hips before he pushes up. Kakashi blinks up at him, rumpled and flushed with his mouth kiss-bruised, and the sight of him makes heat curl around Kurama’s bones. He unzips the heavy flak jacket, gets his hands under Kakashi’s shirt and pushes up to run his fingers over tight muscles.

Kakashi’s breath catches, eyes going heavy-lidded as he watches Kurama ease the fabric up even further, and he asks lightly, “Do you want to fuck me?”

Kurama can’t stop the way his grip tightens at that, the unconscious roll of his hips as his claws tear through cloth, and he growls softly, lurching forward to kiss Kakashi roughly. “Yeah,” he admits, and it’s hardly recognizable as a word, shaped around the edges of a snarl. He takes a breath, drags himself back under control, and tries to shake off the heat that’s building inside of him. That kiss had more teeth than normal, and he knows his own limits well enough to recognize that. “I’m bleeding chakra right now, pulling it in from around us. My reserves are so low that it’s instinct. If my strength gets out of hand, things could get messy.”

There’s a quiet hum, like Kakashi finds this interesting but ultimately trivial information. “I trust you,” he says easily, the warmth in his eyes is softer than Kurama knows what to do with.

Sage, Kurama wants him badly. He growls, kisses Kakashi again, short and desperate, and presses his mouth to skin to admit, “I’m not going to last long.”

Kakashi chuckles, and the hand around his thigh slides up to cup his ass. “That’s all right,” he assures Kurama, and his expression is full of mischief and naked desire in equal measure. “Once
you're done with me, I get you.”

The thought shivers down Kurama’s spine, and he groans, rocking back on instinct. The thought of fucking Kakashi until he comes, then rolling over and letting Kakashi have him while he’s loose and sated, is way too fucking sexy. He wants it with an ache that twists through him, makes breathing difficult and his blood hot.

“Fuck yes,” he manages, and ducks to press his mouth against Kakashi’s stomach, scraping lightly with his claws. “You’re going to have to get yourself ready,” he says, a little regretfully, as he eyes the sharp tips to his nails. Maybe he’ll file them down, at least on one hand, if this ends up being something regular.

Kakashi chuckles, tugging him up to taste his mouth, deep and heady enough to make Kurama’s head go fuzzy. “I’m sure you can entertain yourself while I do, Kurama,” he breathes, taking one of Kurama’s lips between his own and scraping lightly with his teeth.

Kurama hums agreeably, finding the button on Kakashi’s pants. “I might be able to come up with a few things.” He undoes the zipper, then pushes them down, sliding with them until he can pull Kakashi’s sandals off and relieve him of his pants completely. It leaves him at eye-level with the curved cock straining Kakashi’s underwear, and with a hum of interest he leans forward to mouth at it. Kakashi makes a bitten-off sound, hips bucking up in an aborted jerk, and his hand fists in Kurama’s hair.

“If you do too much of that,” he warns, “this is going to be over a lot sooner than planned.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want that.” Kurama casts him a look from under the fall of his hair, then very deliberately eases Kakashi’s underwear down. He leans in, letting his breath ghost over sensitive skin, and makes sure his hair brushes Kakashi’s cock as dips his head to press a teasing kiss to Kakashi’s groin.

“You’re terrible,” Kakashi laments, letting his head fall back against the pillows as he groans.

Kurama laughs, cupping Kakashi’s balls in one gentle hand to feel the weight of them and admiring the way it makes Kakashi jerk, breath stuttering. “Isn’t there something you’re supposed to be doing?” he says pointedly, and rubs the tip of his finger down the perineum.

Kakashi cries out at that, knees locking tight around Kurama’s shoulders, and he uses his grip on Kurama’s hair to tug him back. Pushing himself up, he leans down to kiss Kurama hard, and orders, “Get undressed.”

For a moment, Kurama considers feeling miffed at being denied the opportunity to play, but Kakashi is fumbling for something in the crack between the mattress and the headboard, and Kurama decides he’ll get as much opportunity as he wants in the future. Right now, he wants to fuck Kakashi too badly.

“Next time,” he promises, sliding to his feet beside the bed, “I’m going to blow you so hard you black out when you come.”

The sound that tears from Kakashi’s throat is high and sharp and desperate, and he yanks his vest off, drags his shirt up and tosses it to the side. His gloves follow it a moment later, then his hitai-ate, and the snap of a tube opening sounds sharp against the tension. Kurama muffles a curse, stripping off the remains of his old shirt, and he can feel Kakashi’s eyes for him as he undoes his pants and lets them fall.
When he glances up, Kakashi is staring, pupils blown wide and expression all the compliment Kurama needs. He puts a sway in his step as he moves back towards the bed, gets a knee on the mattress and crawls forward, getting his hands on Kakashi’s thighs. He pushes them up and apart, presses his mouth to pale skin and scrapes his teeth over it. Kakashi’s moan is deeply satisfying, as is his sudden fumble with the lube, but he squeezes it out over his fingers even as he shifts.

Kurama lets him roll them, keeps his grip on muscular thighs as he’s suddenly pinned to the bed, Kakashi straddling his chest. That tempting cock bobs in Kurama’s face, and he doesn’t even try to resist the urge to reach out, cup it in his hand as he leans forward to drag his tongue up the soft skin. Kakashi gasps, hips bucking, and grabs Kurama’s hair even as he reaches behind himself with his slicked hand.

There’s too many things to pay attention to, Kurama thinks, a little irritated, because he wants to watch Kakashi finger himself, wants to see him opening himself up, but he also doesn’t want to take his mouth off of Kakashi. Each noise he wrings out of the man is perfect, makes the arousal tighter, hotter in his gut, and he closes his mouth over the tip, tongues the head and feels a yank at his hair that doesn’t quite hurt but urges him on. There's movement over his head, Kakashi adding more lube before he reaches back again, and Kurama can feel the buck of his hips as he adds another finger.

With a satisfied hum that makes Kakashi cry out, Kurama seals his mouth over him again, slides his tongue over veins and delicate skin and relishes the shaky gasps above him. He tugs lightly on Kakashi’s thighs, because like this he can’t control much of the depth, and there’s a curse before Kakashi grips his hair tighter, rocks forward into Kurama’s mouth and then back onto his own fingers, and the strangled cry makes Kurama moan. He’s achingly hard, with no way to get friction, but he arches up anyway, feels Kakashi’s cock slip deeper and tastes bitterness on his tongue—

With a gasp, Kakashi pulls back, chest heaving, eyes on the verge of wild. He slides down Kurama’s chest, throws himself into a kiss the moment the angle is even vaguely close to right, and it’s all teeth and want, hot enough to make Kurama whine deep in his throat.

“Up,” Kakashi urges breathlessly, and he’s the most gorgeous thing Kurama’s ever seen, hair falling around his face and his eyes hot-dark. He kisses Kurama again, mouth slack, messy and urgent, and then slides away, catching Kurama’s elbow and urging him along.

Kurama moves with him, rolling up onto his knees and leaning over Kakashi as he sprawls on his back. A leg hooks around the backs of his thighs, pulling him in, and Kakashi chuckles, low and warm. “I’d ask if you’re still going to respect me in the morning,” he drawls, “but seeing as between the two of us I’m not the one who slept with Momochi Zabuza…”

Kurama rolls his eyes pointedly, planting his hands alongside Kakashi’s ribs and scraping his teeth lightly over a nipple. It makes Kakashi groan, makes his hand tighten on Kurama’s hips, and Kurama hums in victory. “I can't still respect you when I never respected you in the first place,” he retorts, only to lose his next words on a stuttering gasp when a slick hand wraps around his cock. The touch drags a whine from his throat, makes his head fall forward as he tries hard not to buck into Kakashi’s hand.

“Lies,” Kakashi says cheerfully, and he’s deliberately, agonizingly thorough as he strokes every inch of Kurama’s cock, watching with hooded eyes and a wicked smile as Kurama’s muscles tremble. “If you didn’t respect me, you would have killed me the first time we met.”

“Kakashi—” Kurama bites out, unable to focus on the teasing, only on the want that’s beating a tattoo through his veins.

With a soothing hum, Kakashi tugs him forward, uses the hand on his cock to line him up. “Come
on,” he murmurs, kissing the shell of Kurama’s ear and using his free hand to brush crimson strands back from his face.

Kurama groans, pressing forward, and it’s slick and hot and tight, scatters every last thought beyond that breathless heat as he sinks in, Kakashi’s body opening around him. It’s so good, every nerve singing, every muscle pulled tense in a way that has nothing to do with violence and everything to do with giving in.

There’s a quiet, breathless noise from beneath him, Kakashi’s body arching up into his, and Kurama grits his teeth and forces himself to stop, biting back a whimper. Instinct wants him to shove forward into that heat, to fuck and overwhelm and kiss Kakashi until they’re both dizzy with it. But Kakashi trusts him, and the last thing Kurama wants is to hurt Kakashi, so he makes himself pause, raises his head to see Kakashi with his head thrown back, expression tight.

“Kaka—” He breaks off, grits his teeth and whines, sliding forward another inch as he tries to brace himself, and Kakashi groans. The leg around his thighs pulls tight, and Kakashi presses back, a clear enough sign. With a sound of relief, Kurama presses in, bottoms out with a bitten-off cry and pauses there, checking Kakashi’s face for pain.

“Kurama,” Kakashi says, strained and rough and strangled. “I’m about to flip us over and do all the work myself. Please.”

His first thrust wrings a gasp from Kakashi, and the second a rough moan. Legs hook tight around his hips as Kurama slides in, pulls back, and each movement winds the desire tighter, builds the heat. He gasps out a fractured version of Kakashi’s name, finds Kakashi’s mouth and slants a messy, graceless kiss over his lips. Kakashi’s body clamps down around him, blindingly tight, and Kurama hisses, feels fingers in his hair and gets a hand on Kakashi’s hip, hitching his body up.

Another thrust wrings a cry from Kakashi’s throat, makes him shudder, and his hands go tight, dragging Kurama’s head down. More than willing to comply, Kurama nips at his throat, kisses his jaw, feels the mind-numbing surge of pleasure washing over him. He tries to gasp out a warning, tangled around Kakashi’s name, and Kakashi presses an open-mouthed kiss to his temple.

“Again, again,” Kakashi groans, and Kurama shifts forward, pulls up, hears the cry that says that’s the right angle. Kakashi’s body clamps around him, painfully tight, and Kurama can’t hold back anymore. Three hard thrusts and he’s coming, a breathless cry that might be the beginning of Kakashi’s name torn from him. He slumps, head spinning, feels Kakashi’s cock caught hard between their bodies, and pulls back as carefully as watery muscles will allow.

Kakashi rolls with him, sprawls over him and kisses him deep and hard, and Kurama kisses back as best he can, uncoordinated and hazy.

“Can I?” Kakashi asks against his lips, hips jerking, and he sounds wrecked, wild. It’s too soon for much, but that tone sparks through Kurama’s blood, makes him whine against Kakashi’s mouth, and he rolls over onto his stomach, spreading his legs. Kakashi slides between them, breaths loud in the still air, and he kisses down Kurama’s spine as he finds the lube again, fumbles it open, and then two fingers are sliding into Kurama’s hole, pushing slick into him, pulling back so Kakashi can add more.

It’s wet and feels strange, but tingles across overwrought nerves and forces a sound from Kurama’s throat. He doesn’t know whether to push back into it or pull away, except then there’s another finger, more stretch, and oh, that makes the sensations sharper. Kurama shivers and groans, spreads his legs as sharp teeth skim his spine, and he twitches, instinct screaming predator even as he thrusts back, pushes into the weight of Kakashi’s body on top of him.
“Perfect,” Kakashi breathes in his ear, sprawling over Kurama’s back with a hand on his hip to keep him still. His other hand pushes forward, drags a low, needy sound from Kurama’s throat as the fingers spread wide, and then they’re gone. An instant later Kakashi is pushing into him, thick and heavy, and it feels like he’s dragging over every single nerve in Kurama’s body, pleasure on the very edge of pain. He gasps, curls his hands in the sheets as Kakashi curses, breathless. There’s a hand on his back, splayed across his spine as Kakashi pushes up, pushes all the way in in one smooth slide until his hips are flush against Kurama’s ass. He’s so hard, the press of him making Kurama shiver, and it feels like an invasion but it’s so good he can’t bring himself to care. There’s only the stretch, the sparks across his nerves that light up each shift of Kakashi’s body, the weight on top of him.

Kakashi gives it one more second before he pulls out, slow and careful, and then slams forward with a snap of his hips. Kurama snarls, jerking, pushes back because that was everything he needed and he wants more, and Kakashi gives it to him, braces his knees against the slippery sheets and fucks him hard, one hand pressing Kurama down, the other locked around his side. Each thrust shudders up Kurama’s spine, makes spots of color swim behind his eyes. He rocks back as best he can, and he can feel the coiled tension in Kakashi, the desperate way he’s chasing his orgasm, each snap of his hips enough to slam him home. There’s a low ache building, but it makes the pleasure sweeter, makes Kurama gasp and fight the weight on him and push back for more.

Kakashi growls, low and sharp, and his hand slips off Kurama’s sweat-slick skin. He pitches forward, and inside of Kurama his cock shifts, drives home deeper, and Kurama shouts. Kakashi’s chest is against his back, pressing him into the sheets, and Kurama isn’t hard but that almost makes it better, lets him focus everything on way Kakashi if fucking him. A mouth on his neck, a ragged sound against his skin, and then teeth, sharp canines biting down. Kakashi slams into him, shudders and gasps and goes still, and Kurama shivers as aftershocks of pleasure slide up his body. The panting breaths against his shoulder turn to a kiss, sloppy and tired, and Kakashi strokes his hips with long, slow sweeps, in no hurry to pull out.

“You okay?” he asks roughly.

“Mm.” Kurama shifts a little, more to feel Kakashi inside of him than any sort of impatience. He’s softening, but the weight of him is still strange, still good. “Fuck, we’re definitely doing that again.”

Kakashi chuckles, and his grip is something close to possessive as he presses kisses across Kurama’s shoulder blades and then down his spine. “No argument from me,” he murmurs. After another long moment, he groans and pulls out, flopping down next to Kurama and tugging pointedly at his arm. Without complaint, Kurama goes, curling up against his chest and letting his head rest on Kakashi’s collarbone. Fingers trail through Kurama’s hair, soft and soothing, and Kurama hums.

“I really, really don’t hate you right now,” he says into Kakashi’s chest, and feels him chuckle.

“Good,” Kakashi tells him. “Because I don’t hate you, either.”

Kurama hums again, entirely pleased with that knowledge, and lets his eyes drift closed.

He’s rather less pleased when four jinchuuriki kids, five shinobi children, Rōshi, and Yagura storm the bedroom several hours later, shouting about rescuing red-haired princesses and defeating evil porn-reading dragons. Kakashi groans very loudly and drags a pillow over his head, while Kurama mutters vicious curses at the ceiling and gives Rōshi a glare that just dares him to tug on the sheet his hand is inching towards.
“Kurama-nii, Kurama-nii, we’re here to rescue you!” Naruto cheers, clambering up onto the bed, and Kurama groans and catches him as he starts to slip, dragging him into his lap.

“Yeah, kit,” he sighs, and buries his face in sun-gold hair to hide his smile. “I noticed.”

Somewhere, he’s absolutely certain, his Naruto is laughing.

Works inspired by this one:
Kurama, caretaker by BlackhawkIris, Kurama-nii and I by ayawanderlust, Aftermath by Quiet fox (Poots), Relatively small fox companions by Quiet fox (Poots), FanArt for Reverse by OyajiMurakami, FANArt for Reverse by Jaki, Ambedo by Quiet fox (Poots), reverse fanart by DevinePhoenix, Hot Damn Kurama by BlackhawkIris, Forever And A Bit by roymustang (SpicyReyes), "You're a little hard on clothes" Fan Art for Reverse by blackkat by OftheValkyrie, reverse [PODIFIC] by Opalsong, hugs by BlackhawkIris

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